



# **CIRCE'S RECRUITS HALE**

**Marie Harte**

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# **Circe's Recruits: Hale**

## **Marie Harte**

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## Chapter One

*Avalon, New Jersey*

"This is insane." Hale Rogers scowled. "We've got better things to do than search for a woman who doesn't exist." He'd been looking forward to visiting Nina and her hot friend again. The things they'd done the last time they'd met definitely called for another go-round. So why was he freezing his ass off in his truck on a brisk Friday night?

"Suck it up, Hale." Roane Weston, Hale's best friend and squad leader, sat beside him looking bored. "Doc thinks this woman is his long-lost niece. It's worth a look."

"Don't you mean *another* look? This is the fifth 'Paige' we've visited in the tristate area over the past three months. Do you really think Doc's niece lives this close to us? And come on. Elliot Pearl was a dick, but even he wouldn't experiment on his own daughter."

He paused, not needing Roane's look of disbelief to correct himself.

"Okay, so maybe he would. But he's dead. Why are we still fucking around with Pearson Labs? Let's just torch the place and call it a done deal. We've dealt with this asshole for eight years. Enough already."

Eight years ago, Pearson Labs had worked with the government to create Circs — humans genetically altered to be the world's first super soldiers — under the umbrella of Project Dawn. Except something had gone horribly wrong. Of the seventy-eight men initially injected with the Circe serum, only five men now remained — Circe's Recruits. Empowered with enhanced abilities and incredible strength and now civilians, Hale, Roane, Derrick, Zack, and Ace fought rogue Circs bent on destruction. Regrettably, Elliot Pearl had never known when to quit. The newest batch of rogues — the mutants — barely resembled anything human. And they were twice as lethal.

"I'm with you," Roane said. "With Pearl dead, you'd think rogues would no longer be an issue. But we both know someone else, someone higher up, is running the project. My question is, where the hell has the PPA gone? I haven't seen one damned agent since we got Sabrina back."

He had a point. The PPA, the Project's Protection Agency, did Pearson Labs' dirty work. Normally, they did their best to screw with Circe's Recruits, trying to save their labs' new experiments for further study, disregarding the damage their monsters did to innocent life. Hale was tired of watching rich assholes get away with murder in the name of science. Pearl and his kind needed to be stopped.

His inner beast roared his fury, and Hale gave over to the frustration seething just below the surface, accepting a slight change to his body chemistry. Unfortunately, the minute his hormones surged, he caught scent of Roane's needs. Roane had a huge sexual appetite—one Hale's beast liked sharing. The familiar itch to *change* burned beneath Hale's skin. Being a Circ had its perks, but this incessant need to mate bugged the shit out of him. He glared at Roane, the source of these current, out-of-control pheromones. "I swear, you're as bad as Derrick around Sabrina. They're newly mated, so I get the constant horniness. What's your excuse?"

"Sorry, man." Roane flushed. "Kelly's pregnancy is pushing Caitlyn's hormones all over the place, which have the strangest effect on me. I can't help these surges of...need."

Hell, Kelly's hormones had thrown all of them out of whack. Her mates didn't know if they were coming or going and would surge into uncontrollable rages at the drop of a hat.

"You're not the only one with problems. This morning I made the mistake of saying hi to Kelly. Ace almost ripped my arm off."

Roane sighed. "Yeah, well, thank God you're not mated yet. Caitlyn's been all over me lately. I'm not complaining, but sometimes when she looks at me... It's like I'm a piece of meat."

Hale snickered. The dark look Roane shot him made the comment that much funnier, and he laughed even harder. "Thanks, man. I needed that."

"Glad somebody's happy about my shredded ego," Roane muttered. He shifted in the passenger seat of Hale's 4Runner, his scent both comforting and familiar...and laced with Caitlyn's musk. *Shit*. The woman was ovulating. *I should tell Roane, but then he'll want to know how the hell I can know that.*

Ever since his meeting with that prick McKinley, Hale's sensitivity had skyrocketed. When *changed*, he could see, smell, hear, and taste things a mere human never could. But lately, his keen senses flared supernova even in human form. Which was to say nothing of those odd dreams he kept having.

He glared out the window at the small house on the edge of the beach. Damned woman. What were the odds he'd dreamed about a blonde named Paige, and she just

happened to be Doc's formerly presumed-dead niece? Something odd was going on, and it had McKinley's name written all over it.

"Earth to Hale." Roane elbowed him hard in the side. "I said, pass the coffee." He sighed. "So much for an early spring. Fucking ice on the ground in the middle of March."

Hale shoved the thermos at him without taking his gaze from the woman's house. "This is bullshit. No one's home. I'm going in. If this Paige Masters is Subject 31 and Doc's niece, I'll find proof of it inside."

Hale left the truck before Roane could tell him not to go. He jogged around to the back door, facing the beach, and had just put his hand on the black box housing the alarm system when Roane yanked him back.

"Wait for me, you little shit."

Excited at the prospect of some action, *finally*, Hale grinned, exposing the tips of his extending canines. "Sure thing, boss."

Roane mumbled under his breath as he located and disabled the house alarm. At his nod, Hale used a set of tools to unlock the door and pushed his way inside. He automatically adjusted to the darkness, his preternatural vision turning everything brighter as he moved through the small kitchen toward a spacious living room.

The place looked lived in. Bookcases, a couch and side chair, a small television set, and a few other odds and ends decorated the living room. Nothing on the walls, which Hale found strange. Women usually liked to decorate. At least, all the women living at their compound did. Even Sabrina, as cool and bitchy as she could be, had put a vase of flowers in the room she shared with Derrick.

Roane motioned to the stairwell. Hale nodded and walked up the stairs, being careful to be quiet, and continued his search through the small cottage.

He didn't smell anything odd, nothing to alert him to intruders. He also found little with which to identify the resident of the house. A strangeness in itself. No pictures, frames of loved ones, or saved correspondence with anyone. Just bills and the occasional magazine. A few entertainment rags, a women's style issue, and...a *Popular Mechanics*? A sudden mental image of McKinley appeared in his mind's eye, and he threw up an internal shield on the off chance the freak showed. He had no reason to suspect as much. Nothing tied Doc's niece to the man. And after barely escaping from Pearson Labs several months ago, Hale hadn't seen McKinley since.

Still... Something about this empty house smacked of that dickhead. Hale's curiosity about the male irked him to no end. Unlike the other rogue Circe at Pearson Labs, McKinley didn't fit the mold. He hadn't *changed* into a giant human with thicker, harder skin. His flesh hadn't darkened, and he'd remained normal looking, if somewhat huge, even for a human. The guy had to be close to seven feet. Hale hadn't seen him but for that one time, but he couldn't forget him. Short black hair framed a masculine face, hard and unforgiving. But those eerie, inhuman yellow eyes with elongated pupils proclaimed McKinley's differences even more than the occasional glimpse of his fangs

or claws. A real freak of nature with as much strength as a true Circ, McKinley had even put Derrick on his ass, and Derrick was a monster when *changed*.

Uncomfortable that McKinley dwelled as often in his mind as the blonde woman did, Hale swept through the rest of the upstairs, noting nothing out of the ordinary. A partial sense of relief filled him. This Masters woman was simply another Paige who didn't fit the profile. Good news for him, bad news for Doctor Evan Dennis.

Hale wished he had better news to give Doc. First, Doc's boyfriend had turned traitor. Then, learning his only sibling had died, despite the fact that Elliot Pearl had been an evil genius, had to be a bitch. Doc rarely smiled anymore. The man was grieving. So to find out he might have a surviving relative? Hale understood Doc's need to cling to something good in his life. After dealing with a psychotic half brother and a lover who'd turned on him, who wouldn't want ties to a seemingly normal woman, one who might be the last in a familial line?

Still, Hale didn't buy Doc's idea of proof. An e-mail from Elliot Pearl, sent automatically *after* he was dead, couldn't be substantiated. Just one more way for the asshole to screw with Doc. And now Doc wanted them to find his niece, Paige. So they'd find the woman. That her name and face happened to be the same ones he'd dreamed about didn't make a lick of sense. An odd coincidence, no more. *I'm not psychic, and this Paige Masters is another nobody* –

A sudden punch to the head took him to his knees. He instinctively rolled to his side and stood, needing to face the threat on his feet. Shoring his mental wards, Hale called on the *change* and shifted into his beast. His skin hardened, and he expanded as the enemy attacked.

Dodging an enlarged fist, Hale snarled and raked a set of claws down the mutant's belly. The Circ was tar black and strong as hell. Red eyes stared out of a monster's face, and the forked tongue that swiped at the thing's lips told Hale he had no recourse but to kill it. There was no reasoning with Pearson Labs' new mutants. The old rogues at least resembled Circs and could reason. These things were rabid killers that understood death and dismemberment. Nothing more.

Having shredded through his shirt and shoes, Hale's bigger body strained against his elastic-waist pants as he butted against the rogue. They locked arms, pushed, and pulled, until Hale purposefully shifted his weight back. He sank to the floor, placed his feet on the rogue's belly, and shoved.

The mutant hit the wall behind him, and something shattered all over the floor. Roane's bellow signified trouble, probably more mutants in the house. Knowing how strong the fuckers were, Hale didn't hesitate to run past this one down the stairs, though he knew it would follow him.

He found Roane under attack, two normal-looking rogues circling him. Roane too had *changed* and now stood a head taller, thicker, and a hell of a lot angrier than he had been several minutes ago.



"Not the right Paige, eh?" Roane snarled at Hale, then broke one of the rogues' arms and shoved him into the other before defending himself from the one behind Hale.

Hale immediately leaped onto the downed pair, slicing claws across the top one's throat before gouging his eyes. Thankfully, the combination of Hale's and his bleeding opponent's weight pinned the other one down, effectively putting him out of commission for a short while.

The Cirs beneath him howled and fought, but Hale wouldn't let up. He continued to pound the rogue directly under him, his increasing speed addicting. His hands a blur, he hit harder and faster, rapidly turning his opponent into a mess of bloody flesh and bone. He registered the sound of a subtle *pop*, recognized it as Roane's specialized silencer, and continued to work, giving his buddy time to take on any more comers. The sheer pleasure of the battle consumed him, and Hale willingly gave control of the fight to his inner beast.

Having worked through one of the enemy, he concentrated his efforts on the pinned one and heard a few more muffled shots.

"Hale, enough," Roane growled before dragging Hale back. "Snap out of it."

Hale trembled, adrenaline pumping through his system, sending him into overload.

Then he froze. Something...in the air. He lifted his head, opened his mouth, and drew it in, a faint taste of cherry that lingered on his tongue. Sweet, sensual, and enthralling. Hale couldn't get enough.

He turned to follow the captivating scent into the kitchen, toward a locked door he hadn't yet explored, when a fist rammed into his face. Pain centered in his nose, then his neck, ribs, and groin. It took him a minute to realize someone—or something—dragged him deeper into the kitchen. The sound of more rogues alarmed him. He needed to help Roane, to protect his alpha, his friend. Struggling though the pain, he gained a bit of ground by digging into the walls to stop his progress.

A sharp prick to his neck made him wince, especially when his airway began to close.

To his surprise, the scent of cherries intensified. He automatically relaxed as layers of warmth enveloped him.

Minutes or hours later, he heard Roane's muffled voice.

"Out, now," echoed in several pitches throughout the room, the voices of half a dozen or more of the enemy. Rogues? Mutants? Cirs? Or had Pearson Labs sent their agents, the PPA? He tried to understand as he listened to the fading noise around him.

Bodies scrambled. Something scratched—the sound of claws finding purchase in the scarred wooden floor. Windows broke, glass shattered, and footsteps stampeded through the small house.

"Hale? Shit. Is that all your blood?" Roane pulled him to his feet, which refused to support him without help.

Hale found himself staring into the fun house glass of Roane's eyes. Caitlyn appeared in her mate's dilated pupils, looking sexy, angry, and hungry for another bite of her "meat." "Dude, she has you whipped, big-time." Hale grinned, sure of himself. "Not me. Never gonna happen."

Between one breath and the next, Hale suddenly stared at Roane's ass, then at the grass under their feet. His vision alternated between pitch-black and a subtle glow of moonlight that covered everything. "Wh-what? Where we going?"

"I can't understand you." Roane muttered something. "You're slurring your words, playboy. Looks like I'm driving." Roane set him down gently. *In the backseat of the truck?* "I don't know what they hit you with, but at least your pretty face is back to normal. You're healing superfast, my friend. And I think Doc is gonna want to know why."

As Roane started the vehicle, Hale let the haze envelop him and licked his lips, testing the air for another taste of that sweet, sweet smell of cherries.

The minute the vehicle pulled away, Paige Masters picked up the phone. She dialed with shaky hands.

"Yeah?"

"Robbie? He was here."

Silence filled the line. "You sure?"

She swallowed around a lump in her throat, staring at a trail of blood that led from a small puddle on the floor, across the living room, and over the ledge of her broken bay window. Bloody handprints littered the floor and her walls. Some of it had been *his*.

"Paige, you okay?" The gruff voice gentled. "I'm coming over."

"No." What if the others were still out there? She lifted her head and inhaled deeply. She concentrated, then let out her breath. "No, I'm okay now. They're gone." But they'd be back. And one of these days, she wouldn't be able to contain them all. Especially now that she'd sensed not one group of Circs, but two. Paige didn't know what the others wanted — what *he* wanted — but she'd smelled their differences. Another batch. Good or bad, she couldn't say. The fact they were Circs spoke volumes. Just one more strike against Elliot Pearl and his damned experiments.

"I hate him, Robbie. I really, really hate him." It made her sick to think of Elliot Pearl as her father. She wiped angrily at the tears on her cheeks, hating the pain from sharpened teeth slicing through her gums. *Control it, or it owns you.*

"Easy. It's okay, Paige. It'll all be okay." Robbie sighed. "I have to take care of something here. It won't take long. Pack a bag and meet me. You know where."

"But —"

"You know where," he repeated in a low voice, brooking no refusal, and then hung up.

Paige put down her phone.

She stood still, in the center of so much destruction. A few Circs had died here tonight. She smelled the stench of death in the air, between the cracks of the wooden floor beneath her feet, staining the broken glass all over her furniture. More violence, a never-ending pool of rage that followed her, no matter where she went.

"I'm glad Pearl's dead," she murmured, wishing she meant what she said. That she didn't only increased her upset.

Hurrying upstairs, she packed enough to last her several days. She wheeled her suitcase down the stairs, picked up her car keys and cell phone from the kitchen counter, and left out the back door. After throwing her bag into the trunk of her car, she ran back inside to grab her purse...and came face-to-face with one of *them*.

One of the wrong ones.

Its black skin glittered under the darkness of night, moonlight highlighting the blood spattered on its face. Mottled red-and-black eyes stared at her hungrily, yet it made no move to approach. It flexed its clawed hands by its sides and snarled silently, showcasing long, lethal fangs. When it cocked its head, greasy black hair hung limply over the space where one of its ears should have been.

They regarded each other in silence. As she stared at the pitiful mutant, she couldn't stop herself from reaching out. Her mind, her hand, her *beast*, sought to comfort this creature that should not be.

"I want..." it croaked, before turning to bound away through the broken window.

Paige stared, unmoving, and slowly lowered her hand.

## Chapter Two

*Cape May Courthouse, New Jersey*

"Ow, cut it out." Hale tried to pull his arm away from Doc and his incessant prodding. "I'm fine, Doc. Shit. That hurts!"

"What a baby." Sabrina Torrence, Derrick's mate and fiancée, watched Doc with interest as he leaned over Hale on the exam table. "Is it always this hard to treat them when they've been dusted by the PPA?"

"I don't know that I can classify this attack as PPA," Doc answered, fiddling with his glasses. His blue eyes looked tired, and he'd lost weight. But then he smiled, and Hale saw the familiar scientist who had saved their asses time and time again. "But if they encountered rogue Circs at Paige Masters's house, I think we can determine she's the one we want."

*The one you want*, Hale wanted to say but didn't. He liked seeing Doc smile again, so he'd save his bad attitude for... "*Derrick*, you ass. Come and drag your bloodthirsty little leech out of here. This isn't the circus, honey," he said with a glare at Sabrina.

She flipped him off, causing Derrick, who'd just entered the lab, to laugh.

"No kidding. This is more like the zoo," she muttered. "No offense, Doc."

"None taken." He shook his head at Hale. "And what have I told you? 'Leech' isn't very nice. Sabrina's a top-notch technician. A phlebotomist, if you want to be technical about it. There's a science to taking blood and assisting with scientific progress." Doc removed the large syringe from Hale's forearm, not bothering to stop any leftover bleeding, since Hale's skin immediately mended.

"Yeah, yeah," Hale muttered, just glad to be done with Doc's prodding. "Can I sit up now?"

Derrick shoved him flat on his back when he tried to rise. "Not yet, playboy. What else you need, Doc?"

"Just one more thing."

Hale groaned and tried to move, but Derrick wouldn't lift his huge-ass hand.

Derrick sneered. "Stop being such a pussy." He looked over his shoulder at Sabrina and cleared his throat. Turning back to Hale, he gave an insincere smile. "I mean, relax and take it easy, buddy."

Hale scowled. Sabrina called her mate a teddy bear in a grizzly bear's clothing. As if. The large African American glaring down at him resembled nothing as soft as a razor. And Derrick absolutely hated when Hale made fun of Sabrina's pet names for him.

"Hey, *Teddy*, how about you go play footsie with your fiancée and get off me?"

Derrick grinned, showing very sharp teeth. "Aw, it's okay, Hale. I know it's the pain talking." He leaned close and released a familiar pheromone that turned Hale's dick into a rock. "Pain can make you say all kinds of things, right, Hale?"

"*Fuck*. Yeah, the pain," Hale gasped. "You horny bastard, back off," he whispered, groaning when Derrick put his hand over the front of Hale's crotch. The sweatpants he wore did nothing to protect him from that large, callused palm.

Terrific. Roane might have been an isolated incident. But Derrick acting like this with Doc in the room meant a mating heat loomed near. And only a Circ could satisfy another Circ. His beast didn't give a damn about gender. Thank God they'd finally found female Circs. Given the choice, Hale preferred a woman.

Sabrina shook her head. "Honestly, Derrick. Hale just had a run-in with some rogues hours ago." She glanced at Doc standing across the room by the centrifuge and lowered her voice. "He's not ready for that."

Derrick grinned. "But you are, aren't you?"

She blushed. Hale would have praised her distraction had she not interrupted Derrick's hand over his erection. Derrick kept one hand on Hale's chest but laced the fingers of his other hand with Sabrina. Leaving Hale aching and frustrated.

"Sorry, princess. I'm just trying to take his mind off it," Derrick murmured.

"Off what?" Hale asked, watching as Doc crossed the room again. "Off the pain — shee-it, Doc! What the fuck was that?" Whatever it was cured his desire in a heartbeat.

Doc pushed the plunger down on the syringe he'd jabbed into the meaty part of Hale's shoulder. "A little insurance that whatever's inside you won't hurt you."

"What do you mean, 'whatever's inside me'?"

"The sedative they injected you with is different from the last one we cataloged. This one not only depresses your central nervous system, but it's interacting with some of your Circ cells in a way needing further study."

"Great." Could his night get any worse?

As if he'd asked for it, "worse" walked through the door.

Rounded and glowing, a pregnant Kelly Malloy preceded Zack and Ace, her mates. Roane and Caitlyn followed close behind.

Talk about feeling on display. Hale was half-naked, sore, and confined to a damned lab table. At least Doc and Sabrina had cleaned him up so he was no longer encrusted in blood. His bruising and scarring had all but vanished. If not for the effects from the mating heat, Hale would have said he felt fine. To his relief, Derrick finally backed away, taking Sabrina with him.

"How are you feeling?" Caitlyn asked, her green eyes full of concern.

"I'm —"

"Oh, Hale." Kelly leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

To his relief, her mates didn't punish Hale for the small sign of affection, and he remained in control of his libido.

"I'm so sorry you got hurt." Kelly straightened. "Ace is sorry for what he did this morning. All you did was say hello," she reiterated, glaring at her mate.

Ace sighed. "Sorry, man. Kelly's driving me nuts."

"You and me both," Zack muttered and shrugged at the look she gave him. "Sorry, baby. But your pregnancy has us all on edge."

"Yes. Isn't it fascinating?" Doc said, excitement in his voice. "After Roane and Caitlyn mated, we thought the mating heats would cease for joined couples. Turns out we were wrong. That anomaly lasted only until Kelly became pregnant. Now, not only Hale, but the rest of you will continue to experience the mating heat. It's probably worse now because of Kelly's hormonal surges. And speaking of which, Kelly? I'll need you to sit down with me for some more tests after I'm done with Hale."

"I'm done, Doc." Hale sat up and swung his legs over the table. He looked around for his shirt, wanting to cover up. He'd never admit it, but the way Caitlyn stared at him made him uncomfortable, like a helpless rabbit waiting to be eaten by the big bad wolf.

"Told you," Roane said under his breath as he handed Hale his shirt.

"Is it hot in here, or is it me?" Kelly asked, fanning herself.

Just when he'd willed his erection away, Kelly spiked the room with her scent. The others groaned, caught in the grip of a genetically enhanced desire.

Doc waved them away with a blush. "We all know what's going on. Kelly, I'll see you later. Hale, let me know if you feel any aftereffects from what happened last night."

Everyone filed out of the lab in a hurry. Zack, Ace, and Kelly left the house for their smaller cottage a few hundred feet behind the main house. Derrick and Sabrina headed for Derrick's room on the third floor, next door to his own. Hale wanted some space, to get away from this cloying sexual desire. He wasn't mated and had no need to procreate. He tore away from the others and hustled to his room, determined to escape

the chaos of feeling invading his body. Because as much as the lust hit him, an odd craving struck him numb.

His beast wanted that woman. *Paige Masters*. And with Paige came remembrances of the recurring dream he couldn't stop having. The one where she rode him hard while another male took her from behind. Only it wasn't just another male. Hale struggled to ignore the truth, needing an escape more than ever.

Sweating and trying to fight his need, Hale shut himself in his room. Ignoring the moans and groans so close, he hurriedly packed a bag and exited the house at a run. Though he'd never before gone without Circ-induced satisfaction, he didn't want to join any of the other mated couples because he *had* to. Hale wanted to dominate his inner beast when it came to sex. To be in control of it all, just once.

Focused on getting to his vehicle and driving the hell off the compound, he didn't notice Roane and Caitlyn until it was too late. The transformed couple, naked and writhing on the cold, hard ground, entranced him. Without realizing it, he dropped his bag, shed his clothing, and *changed*.

Roane and Caitlyn lay on the ground, fucking like animals. The larger male covered Caitlyn as he thrust into her, over and over. She clawed at him and moaned, her *changed* form so beautiful, Hale could only stare. Her hair had grown, strands of brown and gold weaving with the lighter wheat color. Her nails scored Roane's arms as she clawed toward her own orgasm. She cried out just as Roane stiffened and moaned, tensing between her powerful thighs.

Fully aroused, Hale approached them. Roane clearly wasn't done, because he began pumping again.

"You need more? I'll give it to you," he growled at Caitlyn when she squirmed in his hold. "But you remember who's in charge." He glanced up at Hale and motioned him closer. With a grunt, Roane pulled out of Caitlyn and forced her onto her hands and knees. "Suck him off, hellcat."

Hale hissed as she pulled him closer by digging her fingers into his thighs. The pain only enhanced his pleasure, and he hurried to his knees. The minute his cock was close enough, Caitlyn settled her hot, wet mouth around him. She sucked him balls deep, accommodating his girth with ease.

"That's it," Roane crooned and slammed into her from behind. "Swallow all of him, mate."

Caitlyn moaned but didn't disobey. Hale loved watching Roane master her and knew the two got off on their power plays. He didn't mind. The squad knew their pecking order. Roane led them, and Hale seconded his leader. Bonded to Roane and the others through violence, blood, and sex, he would do anything for his friends.

Having sex with Roane and Caitlyn was a joy, despite his beast's frustration that all wasn't as it should be. Not the right pair. Not the right blonde, not the right male...

Forcing himself to stop thinking about a woman he didn't even know and a man he didn't *want* to know, Hale closed his eyes and threaded his fingers through Caitlyn's hair.

"That's it. Let it go," Roane commanded, and though Hale didn't know who Roane spoke to, he obeyed, easing into the moment. Caitlyn moaned and sucked harder.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Roane's face contort into pleased agony, his eyes shuttered, his fangs exposed as he gasped for breath. Coming again, he gripped his mate's hips and jerked. The joy of Circ sex—the ability to go for hours without tiring. Even in human form, Hale could perform again and again without rest. But with Caitlyn, he didn't have to soften his libido.

On the verge, Hale gripped her head tighter and began fucking her mouth.

Roane pulled out and stood up behind her, watching Hale take his mate. "Good, playboy. Now come inside her."

Hale moaned, not needing Roane's order to push him over the edge. The light press of Caitlyn's teeth over his sensitive crown shot him into orgasmic bliss. She swallowed all of him, even as he inwardly cursed himself for wishing she were someone else.

Finally spent, Hale withdrew. *That took the edge off. Now I can get the hell out of here before —*

Roane shoved him on his ass and glared.

"Wh-what?" Hale asked, trying to catch his breath.

"You're not right. Something's off with you." Roane walked over him, until Hale looked up at the underside of Roane's rising dick. "Get up."

Knowing what his friend intended and for once not in the mood, Hale shook his head. His beast confused him. The damned thing wouldn't stop thinking about his dream couple. Paige Masters and that fucker, McKinley. *God, please let that be a nightmare and not a preview of things to come.*

Caitlyn stared, glued to the byplay.

"I said, get up." Roane held his dick, waiting for Hale to assume the position. Roane loved him but wouldn't tolerate disloyalty. To reassure his beast, he had occasionally fucked his men into submission. But since the others had mated, they'd become much less problematic. As far as Hale knew, Roane only fucked him to fuel Caitlyn's desire. Hale had never before questioned Roane's right as alpha. Until now. For the first time since the mating heat had initially struck, a foreign part of him rejected their sexual association.

Confused and a bit worried, Hale didn't give Roane the timely response he wanted. Roaring his fury, Roane flipped him over onto his hands and knees. Wanting to please his alpha despite his uncertainty, Hale didn't fight him. Instead, he groaned as



Roane rammed into his ass. The natural lubricant that coated a Circ's cock made the entry easy, but the tight fit still stole his breath.

Roane gripped his hips as he fucked him. "Come back to me, Hale. Remember where you belong."

"I know, I know," Hale rasped, once again reveling in his alpha's possession. Roane tunneled into his ass, the abrasive intrusion heating into pleasure when he continued to hit Hale's sweet spot deep inside.

Caitlyn murmured something to Roane, and his thrusts grew rougher. Then Hale felt her hands on his back, smelled the mixture of his and Roane's cum all over her, and thrilled at the sense of belonging. Once again, everything was right with his world, and he thanked this pair for giving him back his sense of self. The rapture of possession consumed him, Roane's dominance and Caitlyn's acceptance shooting him toward that pinnacle of orgasm.

When she reached for his cock and pumped him, Hale lost his mind.

"Oh, oh fuck," he shouted as he came hard. His orgasm lasted, coating her hand with cream as she continued to stroke him, and Roane surged once more inside him, filling him with seed.

When Roane finally stopped moving, Hale shuddered, spent and oddly calm.

"You okay?" Roane panted.

"That was so damned sexy," Caitlyn whispered, kissing Hale on the cheek before turning to her mate. As she kissed Roane, he hardened inside Hale once more.

*These two are insatiable.*

Thankfully, Roane withdrew and rose to his feet. "Time to move this inside. You are okay, aren't you, Hale?"

Ignoring the deeper meaning to Roane's question, as in, *what the hell is wrong with you, lately*, Hale stood, aware of the cum sliding down his thighs.

"Shit, Roane. You just fucked me up the ass. How do you think I feel?"

Roane grinned. "Like you need some more?"

"Funny. Have fun, you two. Go make babies," he added, pleased when the smile faded from Roane's face. Hale knew how thoughts of children panicked his best friend, and never wasted a chance to taunt him with it. The guy would make a terrific dad, so Hale thought it his duty to remind him of fatherhood as often as possible. "Later."

He shook out his limbs and stretched, relaxed once more. Leaving his duffel where it lay, he decided to take a quick shower before leaving the compound. Walking unashamedly back to the main house, he entered his room without running into anyone. By the muffled roar through the wall, he figured Derrick and Sabrina would be going strong all night. Like Kelly, Ace, and Zack, and like Roane and Caitlyn.

*But not me. Not yet.*

Hale stepped into his bathroom and lingered under a hot shower, gradually *changing* back into his human form. He liked the fact that his friends had found people

to love. It had taken Ace and Zack years to come to grips with what they meant to each other as well as to Kelly, and now the threesome was inseparable. Roane had his hands full with Caitlyn, and Derrick had finally found a woman to tolerate his gruff attitude in the mean and sexy Sabrina.

Having grown up in a caring family, Hale had nothing against marriage. His parents had cherished one another until the day they died. He didn't have trust issues or an unrequited longing for anyone. When he found "the one," he'd know her. It had been that way for his parents, and he knew it would be that way for him.

Though taking a mate didn't necessarily mean a happily-ever-after, Hale saw the way his friends had taken to their own joinings. Sex and chemistry played a huge part in his friends' relationships, yet all four of his squad mates had found love as well. Even when Caitlyn enjoyed the occasional threesome with Hale, her heart belonged to Roane. Circs handled the physical side of love a lot differently than most people, because they had to. *Nothing like being at the mercy of your hormones every few weeks to make you rethink sexual taboos and labels.* And there was nothing normal or tame about Circs in heat.

Hale slicked his hair back, enjoying the calm he'd been missing for months. He hadn't been "normal" since he'd run into McKinley at Pearson Labs during the winter. *Hell, if I'm honest with myself, it's been longer than that.* As much as Hale wanted to deny the odd dreams he'd been having, his family had a history with the unexplainable.

The Rogers family had always done things no one in their small North Carolina hometown could quite understand. Hale's father predicted the weather, without fail. His mother knew things—where something got lost, when a friend's baby was due, who would call on the phone right before it rang. Flashes of extrasensory ability in his family had always been there. His parents were surprised when Hale showed no signs of anything more extraordinary than his ability to throw a football. And so Hale, an only child, managed to escape much of the town talk, clinging to his proclivity for sports and his popularity with girls.

Joining the military had been the natural progression for a young man taken with physical exertion, discipline, and order. The Marine Corps had treated him well. And then he'd signed up for Project Dawn. Within months, he had become something not quite human, altered genetically, physically, and mentally.

But Hale had little in the way of complaint. He loved being a Circ.

He flexed his arm, enabling a part of himself to *change*, and stared at the tanned, larger hand that ended in blade-sharp talons. Being stronger and faster felt great. With his new abilities, he could jump higher, run faster for longer periods of time, and rebuff the threat of most small-caliber rounds even at close range. His enhanced senses allowed him a perspective on the world most people would never know.

The mating heat took some getting used to. Despite the utter necessity of sex with other Circs, the sexual gratification was like nothing else. Though he preferred women, Hale had come to accept his needs when in that *changed* state. He didn't know what to

call what he'd shared with Roane and the others—hell, what he *continued* to sporadically share with Roane and Caitlyn.

Hale forced his arm to return to normal, comfortable with the gentle slide of muscle and bone as he transitioned back. The water started to cool, so he turned off the shower and dried himself. More muffled noise came through the walls, and he smiled at thoughts of Sabrina taming Derrick.

Another pair in love. As he left the bathroom to dress, he wondered what it must be like to have someone special. To love and be loved, the way his friends did, the way his parents had. Hale had never known a true love like that, and sometimes, he wondered if he ever would. Being a Circ certainly narrowed down the playing field. On the off chance he found the woman of his dreams, she'd have to accept that Hale turned into something less than human, and that he needed to fuck other Circs, be they male or female.

Oh yeah, that'd go over like a lead balloon.

Sighing, he dressed and left the house. Picking up his duffel from where he'd left it, he entered the garage, grabbed his keys from the key rack, and started his truck. He left a short cell message for Doc about needing to get away for a few. If they needed him, they'd call. But for once, Hale hoped they wouldn't.

The others thought of Hale as the easygoing Circ, the even-tempered team member who often settled brawls, as opposed to engaging in them. But he was also the most determined of the bunch. When Hale had a question, he wouldn't rest until he found his answer. Right now, Paige Masters puzzled him. He needed to know exactly what had happened at her house, why he'd dreamed of her, and why the thought of her refused to leave his mind.

His mood darkened as an image of McKinley joined Paige's. Two pieces of a puzzle that didn't seem to fit anywhere. Hale only hoped he could solve this mess, and the sooner the better, because he had the uneasy feeling these two strangers would complicate his life. He had enough on his plate without Elliot Pearl's castoffs taking up his valuable time.

Grunting in annoyance, he pulled out of the long driveway and headed back to Avalon.

## Chapter Three

Paige waited alone in the small park abutting the beach. No one passed by, nor did anyone traipse through the sand, thanks to the chill in the air and lateness of the hour. A small favor to be grateful for on an otherwise hellish night. She still couldn't believe she'd finally seen *him* – the man from her dreams.

The sandy-haired man did exist, and his eyes were even darker green in person. She hadn't known he was Circ, though she probably should have guessed as much. Every damned thing in her life revolved around the unnatural genetics of her blood. Elliot had spared her the ability to *change*. Or at least, she'd thought he had. For twenty-eight years she'd lived with the increased senses, speed, and strength of a Circ. But lately, she'd felt an itch beneath her skin, a need for something more that wouldn't go away.

Robbie would understand, but she didn't want to worry him. Her best friend for years, he'd been there when no one else had. He understood how hard it was to interact with normal people, to accept that animalistic part of herself that needed to dominate, to persevere, no matter the cost to others. Normal kids shared and played nice with each other. Paige had never been happy to share when that inner voice inside her told her she could take by force what she wanted.

Learning to balance human frailties and an inner wildness hadn't been easy. Especially with Elliot Pearl riding her all the time. Her adoptive parents hadn't been cruel, but they hadn't been kind. She thought of them as gentle jailers, feeding Elliot information on a weekly and sometimes daily basis until she'd graduated high school and then college. Finally freed from Elliot, or so she'd thought, until he ripped her brief reprieve away.

If not for Robbie in her life, Paige might have gone insane. With his help she'd been able to tolerate her time at Pearson Labs, as well as hide some of her late-developing abilities from her father. And now with Robbie in place at the labs and with

his contacts, she thought they might just break free from Project Dawn and start a new life.

A subtle sound alerted her of company.

Robbie stepped out of the shadows, appearing from out of nowhere. Black sunglasses hid his eyes, a dark leather jacket and jeans covered the rest of him from his neck to the tips of his black boots. She idly wondered where he found clothes to fit his huge frame. Though she had always thought herself freakishly tall at six feet, Robbie dwarfed her.

"Paige?" he murmured, his voice gravelly with concern. Robbie, a threat to everyone but her.

She ran into his arms and hugged him tight, soothed by his calming presence. As always, just being near him made her feel safe and loved...and aroused. She reached up to brush a lock of dark hair from his forehead. "I'm so glad to see you."

Robbie nodded and tucked her head back against his chest. His heart raced, and his body tensed when she snuggled closer. As he'd once said, he was a man with a man's working parts. His physical response to her meant little compared to the emotional comfort he provided, or so she tried to convince herself.

Paige wanted to strip him down and use him in ways that would make him blush. Thoughts of him made her burn with lust, but when he hugged her tight and she breathed him in, the need eventually dissipated. She'd thought sex might bring them closer together, but Robbie never encouraged it, despite the hunger in his eyes. He never talked about the possibility of intimacy, so she took her cues from him. Scared of hurting the only person she loved in the world, she continued to leave the decision to further their relationship in Robbie's hands.

She sighed. "I always feel so good when I'm with you."

"Me too," he murmured, stroking her hair. He pushed her back to study her face and raised his glasses. Blazing yellow eyes stared back at her, the pupils thin and elongated like a cat's. An anomaly, just like her. "You sure they didn't hurt you?"

"I'm fine."

"Circe's Recruits," Robbie said. "Those dicks didn't do anything to scare you either, did they?"

"No. But Robbie, it was *him*. The man I sometimes see in my dreams. He was there. He was real." She studied him, aware of the telling silence. "You know who he is, don't you?"

Robbie grimaced.

"Tell me." That inner voice demanded to know more, and she felt something ripple beneath her fingertips as she gripped his forearms. "When I close my eyes, I see him. I *know* him, and I've never met him. In my dreams he's there, watching me. But he's watching you too, Robbie."

He blinked at her in surprise. Robbie was never surprised. "What?"

She nodded, knowing this time she needed to tell him the full truth, or as much as he could handle. "In my dreams, that man is there, watching, like he's waiting for something. I can never tell if he's there to help or hurt me. But you're there too, behind me, protecting me."

Robbie drew back and paced like a caged lion. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"What does it matter? They're just *dreams*." She waited to hear him deny it, as he'd done before. But she knew he didn't mean it. Robbie was a Circ, and something more. He could do what the others in Pearson Labs couldn't; he could manipulate psychic energy like a weapon.

Unlike the rogues her father tried to fashion into true Circs, Robbie had been born this way. The rogues turned crazy, psychotic. The newer ones didn't even look human anymore, nor could they *change* into anything other than the deformed mutants they'd become, slaves to their hormones and hungers. She'd seen enough in her excursions to Pearson Labs to know her father would have killed to create Circs like her Robbie.

Robbie didn't have mating heats. He didn't *change*. He retained his strength and abilities in human form, the better to blend into any populace and successfully perform missions for the highest bidder. If her father's bosses had known exactly what Robbie could do, they'd have captured him and never let him go. Smart man that he was, Robbie hid his psychic talent from everyone but her. And something else her father had never known—Robbie didn't blindly follow the orders her father had given him. He had an agenda all his own.

"They're just dreams," he repeated. He shoved his glasses back on and ran his fingers through his hair. To her satisfaction, his fingernails sharpened into claws.

Good, he wasn't unaffected. Far from it.

"Who is he, Robbie?" she asked again.

He must have sensed her determination, because he stopped pacing in front of her and sighed. "You're a pain in the ass, you know that?"

"Oh, please. You're no picnic, you monster."

He grinned, flashing fangs at her. Another part of Robbie she loved. With him she felt free to be herself. They both knew they didn't belong in society, but with each other.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Shit. Okay." Robbie paused and looked around, then focused his attention on her again. "His name is Hale Rogers. He was one of the original subjects in the first Project Dawn. He's second in command of Circe's Recruits."

Hale Rogers. Like a silent click, his name snapped into place within her mind. "What else?"

"What do you mean, what else? The guy was a Marine, and now he's one of Doc's civilians." Robbie's gaze narrowed. "One of Doctor Evan Dennis's men. Your dream man belongs to your uncle."

She'd been trying her best not to think about the man her father had respected, loved, and ultimately tried to destroy. Would Evan want to know her, or would he want to continue her father's experiments? What would he do if he knew everything she was capable of doing?

Robbie sighed. "Honey, you need to see your uncle. If for no other reason than to get some closure. I might be wrong, but I don't think he's anything like Elliot. Doc seems like a genuinely nice guy. His Circs love him. He takes care of them. And Mike Shields can't say enough about him."

"Mike Shields? You mean, General Mike Shields?"

He nodded.

"I thought Shields hated everything my father tried to do with Project Dawn. He tried to shut down the project."

"He did shut down the project, with Senator Kuntz's help. That, and Sabrina Torrence's cagey sabotage." Robbie smiled. "The woman was a mess. You have no idea how many times I covered for her sloppy detective work."

"But she did it. She stopped them once." Paige held out hope that Robbie and she could finish the job. Petty Officer Sabrina Torrence had at first been like all the rest—oblivious to the reality of what Elliot Pearl was doing to the servicemen who'd volunteered for Project Dawn. He'd cared less about saving lives and helping the country than he had about starting a new evolution of man. He'd known about the problems with his serum, but he hadn't stopped the project. Only a third of his original test subjects had remained clear of mind, while the others turned into raging maniacs. In the course of exterminating the rampaging monsters, only five of Circe's Recruits persevered. And her dream man was one of them.

"You said before that Torrence is now mated to one of my uncle's men?"

"She hooked up with Derrick Packard. He's huge, arrogant, and wears his anger for the world to see. But he's less dangerous than Rogers." Robbie scowled. "Rogers is different. He's faster than the others. And I think he might have some mental mojo." Robbie tapped his forehead. "It took a lot of energy it shouldn't have to put him down before."

"Really?" Paige found any talk about Hale fascinating. He'd been a part of her for so long that she felt as if they were already friends. When she'd struck him with that tranquilizer in the house, she'd felt as if she were betraying him. But her timely intervention had saved him from being ripped apart by the rogue dragging him into her kitchen.

"I don't like the look on your face," Robbie growled. "Rogers is no good. You keep away from him. We don't need his kind of trouble."

Surprised, she considered her friend. She nodded to make him happy, but inside she wondered why Robbie felt so threatened by Hale Rogers. She could see the tension in his frame, the worry in his eyes. Robbie never showed his emotions unless dealing with her. Was he perhaps jealous? He'd never shown signs of it before, not even when necessity demanded she find men for sex, to ease the desires that consumed her every month. He hadn't reacted to those meaningless occasions at all. Yet Hale Rogers had done the impossible. He'd made Robbie nervous.

Paige wanted more than ever to meet Hale in the flesh. *But not right now.* "Oh my God. He's here."

He appeared, much like Robbie had, from the shadows of the nearest building.

"Paige Masters." His low voice sent shivers down her spine, but it was the danger he projected when he glanced at Robbie that quickened her womb and shot her libido into overdrive. "And McKinley. I fucking knew it."

Hale thanked his enhanced vision to see anything through the pitch-black night. He couldn't stop himself from studying the blonde. Same long, straight hair, same whiskey brown eyes, same kick-ass body he'd seen in his dreams. And there, dwarfing her, stood McKinley. A giant with muscles on top of muscles. He looked like he could break the woman in half, yet the protective way he positioned himself in front of her spoke volumes.

Jealousy reared, and then the wind changed direction, literally. The mingled scent of cherries and evergreen hit him hard. Hale glared at McKinley, wondering what the hell the male thought he was doing by releasing his scent. Because damned if it wasn't provocative – an adjective Hale had never in his life thought to apply to McKinley.

"Robbie?" Paige stared at the man with wide eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Robbie?" Hale smirked. "Robbie McKinley? A boy's name for a grown thug. Funny."

McKinley tore his glasses from his face, treating Hale to a fiery glare. Yellow eyes burned through the darkness, glowing under the night sky. "Don't start a fight you won't win, Rogers. You little prick Circe thinks you know best when all you manage to do is screw things up." McKinley took a step in his direction.

Interestingly, Paige moved with him.

When he'd seen the pair talking in the park, he'd questioned his sanity. What were the odds he'd taken an alternate route to her house tonight, only to run right by his quarry? Astronomically high. This had to be some of McKinley's psychic bullshit.

Hale glared. "Look, asshole. You wanted me here, I'm here. Tone down the perfume, and we'll talk." To Hale's shock, McKinley flushed, with anger or embarrassment, he couldn't tell.

McKinley bared his teeth. "I should have taken you apart the last time we met. Instead, out of pity, I let you live."



"Yeah? Well, now's the time to correct your mistake." Hale snarled at him, his fangs and claws automatically pushing forth, breaking skin. He welcomed the pain, welcomed the beast wanting to...play? He stopped in his tracks, confused at the idea that this felt more like a strange dance than a prelude to battle.

McKinley froze the minute he did, studying Hale with befuddlement. "What—How the hell did you find us here?" He glanced at Paige, who shrugged.

"I didn't tell him. The last time I saw him, he was passed out on my kitchen floor."

"I thought you were there." Pleased he hadn't been dreaming that cherry scent, Hale grinned at the sense of vindication. Strange, but he was beginning to enjoy this bizarre encounter. His beast thrilled at being near Paige and McKinley—Robbie. He glared at the male, aware of McKinley's uncertainty. "Is Robbie your real name?"

McKinley stepped back, the spell broken. "It's McKinley. Now turn around and go home."

"I'm not going without Paige. Doc, your uncle," he directed at her, "wants to meet you."

She paled, and a surge of protectiveness for the female overwhelmed him.

"I told you—" McKinley growled.

Hale interrupted, wanting to wipe the grief from Paige's bright eyes. "Evan Dennis is your uncle, Elliot Pearl's half brother. They worked together, until Doc—that's what we call him—found out what Pearl was really up to." Realizing he probably shouldn't say half of what he wanted to say about her father, Hale continued carefully. "Doc tried to get your father to stop the project, but he wouldn't. So Doc left with us and has been helping us ever since. He's an expert in all things Circ." He gave a wry grin, pleased when she returned it.

"He's dying to meet you, Paige. He never knew you existed, had been told you died at birth with your mother." *By that asshole, Pearl.* "Doc's had a hard time of it, lately. He took the news of your father's death hard. And then to find out he has a niece he's never met? He's worried sick and anxious to meet you." Hale turned on the charm, gratified by McKinley's continued silence. "I promise I'll take you to him myself. He just wants a chance to get to know you. He'll help you in any way he can. Doc's a great guy." *He's nothing like your father.*

Paige looked from him to McKinley and clutched her boyfriend's sleeve. "I...I don't know. There are things I have to do."

"So do them. You won't be under house arrest. Doc just wants to meet you."

"No." She shook her head, her hair sweeping her face as the wind increased. "I can't. Not now."

"Yes, now." McKinley shocked the hell out of him by agreeing. "This is the perfect time. You can't keep hiding, Paige," he said softly.

The look on his face was tender. These two had a relationship, of what kind, Hale wasn't certain. Not sure he liked the thought of McKinley and Paige together, he tried to emotionally distance himself from the couple and focused on his reason for this visit.

"He's right. You can't keep hiding," Hale reiterated. "Look, just meet with Doc. Pick any time and place. Just talk to him. Then take off, move to Bermuda if you want, whatever. But give the man some peace. He's a good person, and he'd never try to hurt you. He only wants a chance to get to know you."

He could see her wavering. He almost had her. And then a feeling of wrongness struck. He looked all around him and noticed car lights approaching from the western avenue toward the park.

McKinley swore. "Paige, go with Rogers. I can't be seen. And you can't afford to get caught. Not now. Go. I'll meet up with you later." He pushed Paige in Hale's direction. "You'll be safe with Doc. Go, Paige. *Now.*" McKinley turned those inhuman eyes on Hale. "You hurt her in any way, I'll tear you apart. And then I'll start in on your friends."

"Fuck off, *Robbie*. She'll be fine. But you touch any one of my friends, I'll carve your fucking heart out."

McKinley had the audacity to smile in challenge, and Hale took a step forward, responding to the dare despite the danger fast approaching.

"Oh, for God's sake." Paige pushed between them.

The minute her hand fell on Hale's chest, he stilled. A sense of recognition passed through him, followed by a wave of heat so intense, he nearly stumbled to his knees. His cock was on fire, his senses aflame.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he croaked, alarmed to appear so vulnerable in front of Paige and her monstrous boyfriend. "Fine. Let's go."

He did his best to get himself under control. McKinley darted away from the direction of threat, and he and Paige followed. They rounded the corner of another building and stopped, watching as McKinley raced in another direction. Hale called on his discipline and willed his aroused body back to normal. When she would have touched him again, he jerked away.

"No, don't." *I can't handle this right now. Your scent, the dreams. It's too much.*

"I don't understand." She frowned and moved closer.

"Look, Paige, you touch me again and I'll forget everything but getting inside you. You know about the mating heat, right?" If she was indeed Subject 31, she knew what he was talking about.

She blushed and immediately put distance between them. "I, oh. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," he breathed, grateful she understood. "Follow me, and I'll take you to safety." He didn't wait for her to answer. He turned from the building and began

running, ultrasensitive to her presence right behind him. He'd parked several blocks away, and when they reached his car, he hurriedly unlocked it.

Once they'd both strapped in and were on the move, Hale made several turns, not driving in any particular direction but to avoid the threat he could feel just on the periphery, out of sight. Finally on the road out of town, he turned onto the Garden State Parkway and made a decision. Taking the northern route *away* from Doc's compound, he drove several miles until he found the back road he'd been looking for. Once on it, they continued to ride in silence. Paige's scent wrapped around him. He could feel the heat of her body even though a good two feet separated them. A glance at her showed her just as stiff, just as uncomfortable.

The tension in the truck built, until he couldn't take it anymore.

Hale pulled off the road behind an abandoned shack, grateful for the clouds that covered the moon. He yanked off his seat belt and jumped out of the SUV. Rounding to her side, he yanked open the passenger door, unbuckled her belt, and dragged her outside.

"What are you —"

Unable to wait, he plastered his mouth to hers. The taste of cherries invaded his mouth, his senses. Their parted jackets allowed the press of her breasts against his chest, and her nipples stabbed into him. Surprising him with a sudden aggression, she opened her mouth wider and thrust her tongue into his mouth.

Between one heartbeat and the next, Hale lost his damned mind.

## Chapter Four

Hale devoured her. Ignoring the chill in the air, he focused on the heat in front of him. Paige's height made his reach easy, and he found her breasts underneath her shirt, encased in a lacy bra. Pulling down the material, he pinched her nipples and deepened the kiss. *Yes. Yes! This is what I need.*

She moaned into his mouth, her scent magnified with desire.

Hale pulled away from the kiss to run his mouth over her neck and back to her ear. He nipped her earlobe, then snaked his tongue into the canal.

She trembled and arched into him, pushing her tight nipples into his greedy fingers. "Oh my God. What are you doing to me?" She squirmed, then wrapped her hands around his neck to pull his head closer.

Hale returned to her mouth, wanting to consume her. Her skin felt as soft as he'd imagined, but it was her taste that floored him. The more he sampled, the more he wanted. Never before had he desired anyone on this level. As if she'd injected him with some drug, he was addicted to her.

He continued to fondle her breasts with one hand as he trailed the other down her belly. Beyond any thought of stopping, his beast demanded he take what was his. Hale unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans. He slid his hand beneath her panties, through the soft curls of her mound and between those full, pouting lips protecting her sex. Stunned at the heat he found, he broke from the kiss and stared down at the angel in his arms.

"*Oh, fuck.* You are so damned wet," he breathed. "Paige, I have to... I don't think I can stop." He did his best to warn her, aching to the point of pain in his need.

To his immense satisfaction, she was as gone as he was. "Don't stop." She ground her clit against his palm as he thrust another finger inside her, widening her tight channel. Paige gasped and closed her eyes, moaning his name.

Too far gone to think about what he was doing, Hale released her to free himself from his pants. He hurriedly removed her jeans and underwear. Lifting her ass in his palms, he prodded her pussy with his dick and inched inside.

"Yes," she cried as he seated himself balls deep.

"Christ." He couldn't catch his breath as the need built. Burning from the inside out, he fucked her without mercy. Rough and thorough, he pumped inside her past her orgasm. His beast recognized the female's surrender and still wanted more. He sealed her mouth with his, licking into her wet cavern as he pistoned his hips, wanting to fill every inch of her with his cum. He could easily see her bent over, dripping with his seed from her pussy, her ass. Her mouth wide open as he shot between her lips.

"More," she growled, her voice lower, more sensual, more...*Circ*.

He swelled inside her, swallowed by her warmth. She was so slick, so perfectly tight around him. Then she clawed him, painfully digging into his neck with her growing nails.

"Paige," he breathed as his balls drew tight. He groaned as he spewed inside her. He couldn't stop coming and pumped as hard as he could. She bounced over him with each thrust, taking more and more until she cried out again, squeezing him even tighter.

Hale closed his eyes, nuzzling her neck as bursts of scent drenched him in ecstasy. Though finally done, he continued to stroke inside her, the urgency gone, but not the need.

"Again," she demanded.

He opened his eyes to see hers completely *changed*. She was so damned beautiful, so raw and primal. He kissed her, licking past her lips and tongue as he claimed her once more. His next orgasm was less intense than the last, but it exploded from him just the same. Filling her, he remained joined, unable to move away from her.

As he pulsed, she ground against his pelvis and climaxed. Every ripple of her vaginal walls milked him dry, until he was spent, exhausted, and too worn-out to care that he'd just come inside a woman he'd just met.

"I've been dreaming about this," she breathed, her eyes once again human, her voice an echo of the beast that had just before demanded his all.

Hale blinked down at her, caught in the haze of drugging pleasure that obliterated all else. Yet as he stared, he realized a hard truth.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

\* \* \* \* \*

McKinley didn't like the fact he'd had to send Paige with Rogers, but he instinctively knew the man would keep her safe. As much as McKinley pretended to know little about Circe's Recruits, he actually knew quite a bit.

He raced away from the PPA combing through the park. Wondering just who the bastards were really after, and how they'd found them, McKinley made sure not to be followed as he returned to his car. He did a thorough sweep of his vehicle. Convinced he wouldn't be tracked, he drove back to Pearson Labs, where he needed to check on a few things.

Four months ago, someone, or *something*, had killed Elliot Pearl. At the time, he'd thought Paige might have done it. She had no love for the man who'd made her life hell. Five years ago when he'd first met her, she'd been out of her mind. In pain, wounded, alone. They'd connected, bringing him back from the black hole of depression he'd settled into. Being different had weighed hard on him for years, forcing him into a bleak life on the fringes of society. But Paige gave him a new direction—a goal in life and a chance to right the wrong done to him long ago.

He'd suffered because of Elliot Pearl. He'd lost his family, his life, hell, his face. McKinley stroked his cheeks, still unsure as to how he'd survived the car wreck that had killed his parents. By all rights, he should have died. Instead, he'd woken up alone, in the woods, with a different face, body, and inhuman abilities. His eyes had never returned to their natural green, but at least he didn't have to go through the *change* so many other Circs did.

He used to think of the odd genetic enhancements as monstrous, but after seeing Circe's Recruits in their altered states, McKinley had changed his mind. To his shock, his instincts recognized Hale Rogers the same way they recognized Paige. And he *wanted*, a bad, bad thing for a beast like McKinley.

He viewed sex as a necessity, another hunger to be fed. Except his needs were dark, depraved. He worked hard to hide his sickness from Paige. So good, she lit up his life, taking him away from the daily drudgery of his existence. As long as he sated himself regularly, he could tolerate Paige's nearness. He loved the woman so much it hurt, and not sharing that love physically took its toll. But he refused to harm her.

Leaving her tonight had been his only recourse. If the PPA ever got their hands on her again, she'd wish for death.

He mulled over thoughts of the PPA as he drove back to the place where the nightmare continued—Pearson Labs. Pulling into the underground parking lot, he left his SUV and accessed the private elevators leading to the top floor of the building.

A place very few had access to, the fourth floor housed those at the top of the organization. Now that McKinley knew who was really pulling the strings around here, he could plan the labs' destruction. He rode the elevator to the top and exited, only to run into Simon Dunn. On the surface, the man looked like he had it all. Charm, good looks, a fat bank account. But something was missing inside Dunn. The man had been born without a conscience.

"McKinley." Dunn nodded, guarded yet excited. McKinley could smell it on him. "We've been looking for you. The big man wants to see you. He's not happy."

Dunn's slow smile warned McKinley to tread warily. He said nothing, just stared at Dunn until the man walked away.

McKinley shored himself and strode down the hall. He passed a few promoted scientists, men who tried but could never match Elliot Pearl's genius. For all that Elliot had done wrong, few could match his ability to understand and manipulate genetics. With the recent failure to control the mutant rogues, McKinley had a feeling the big boss wanted a replacement.

Elliot's death had not been planned. McKinley still didn't know who'd ultimately killed the man. At first, he'd thought the killer had been Circ. Elliot's eyes had been plucked out of his head, after all. But the notion didn't fit. He didn't know how he knew, but McKinley sensed Elliot's killer had intentionally staged his death to look as if Circs had done it.

"McKinley, come in," a deep voice called out with authority. The CEO's office door stood slightly ajar.

Opening it, McKinley walked through, stunned to see General Harold Kohl and Senator Richard Kuntz huddled together over something on the large desk. Kuntz had become a regular at the lab. But this was the first time Kohl allowed anyone else to see him in charge. For years he'd been the man behind the curtain.

Months ago, when McKinley had first learned that Elliot's major detractors were in fact behind the funding for the new and improved Project Dawn, he'd been baffled. But now he understood.

Greed motivated even those with the best of intentions.

"Ah, McKinley, come in." Senator Kuntz smiled and straightened. "Have a seat."

McKinley remained standing, satisfied when he scented fear wafting from Kuntz's pores.

"Or stand, if it pleases you," Kuntz murmured, as if trying to prove his command of the situation. But they both knew who ruled Pearson Labs. The stern man sitting behind the desk.

General Kohl fixed his hard gray eyes on him. "Report."

"There's still no sign of Paige Masters, though I think it's evident she's the woman Elliot called Subject 31. The rogues sniffed her out once again." *Nothing the assholes didn't already know.*

"Interesting that they can find her, but you can't." Kohl watched McKinley over steepled fingers. "What would you suggest we do next?"

"Keep an eye on her house. I doubt she's had time to clear out the way she left the last three places. We can find something there to track her. Worst case, find a recently turned mutant, drug it to control it, and let it sniff her out."

Kohl tapped the desk. "Elliot attributed the mutants' odd connection to the woman as a result of their common genetics. He manufactured this last bunch using Paige Masters's DNA, correct, Richard?"

McKinley forced himself to remain stoic. They talked about Paige as if she were no more than a name on a piece of paper. He wanted to rip Kohl's throat out and hand Kuntz his intestines on a platter. But he didn't bat an eye.

Kuntz answered, "Well, that's what I read in his files. It's too bad he's not here to report his findings himself. Then again, most of what we know of the Masters girl, we obtained after his death. Elliot liked to keep secrets, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," Kohl murmured, not taking his eyes from McKinley. After a terse moment of silence, Kohl nodded at the paperwork in front of him. "It's unfortunate that Elliot died before he could see this, but I think you'll be happy to learn we've finally done it, McKinley."

"Done what, sir?"

"We've given birth to the first viable rogue. Though it will take years before the young are grown enough to be useful, I'm sure that given time, our scientists will find a way to speed the maturation process. In the meantime, we'll continue to use our Circs. They now last well past six months. I believe Dr. Eckles has managed to give them a good year before their minds rot. So we no longer need to use the control drug." Kohl paused. "We've decided to scrap the current mutant project. You will, of course, consent to testing."

"Sir?" *Testing?*

"You didn't know?" Kohl smiled. "The control drug is what actually creates the mutants; it turns our Circs into inhuman creatures. Only a select few of us knew the truth. I'm surprised Elliot never mentioned it to you. Granted, the Circs coming from Pearson Labs don't last very long, but while they're Circ, they retain all their faculties and then some. The mutants, as we all know, are nothing but monsters. Elliot thought the mutants, with their incredibly enhanced senses, were the next step in Circ evolution. He wanted very badly to use Doc's men for testing. But I wouldn't let him. Not a good idea, to ruin the only real successes Project Dawn has ever had. Not until that group starts producing offspring, at least."

Kuntz agreed. "We considered Elliot's data. The general doesn't see much of a need for the mutants beyond attrition. And I agree."

McKinley tried to understand all of it but couldn't think beyond the fact that they wanted to use him in some kind of experiment. Kohl didn't make it sound as if he was asking for consent, either. Did they know about McKinley's false loyalties or didn't they? "General, why are you telling me this?"

"I see everything, boy, whether I'm here or not. Consider it a payment for *loyalty* rendered." Kohl showed his teeth in more of a snarl than a smile. *Fuck*. "This information will haunt you, the more you think about it. Dr. Eckles thinks he might be on to something. And given your obvious differences from the rest of our Circs, who knows? You might be the one to break our cursed luck with the drug."

The breeding program was bad enough. He thought he'd ruined enough data that they'd never get that particular program to work. That he hadn't known the truth about



the control drug bothered the hell out of him. How had Elliot kept him out of the loop for so long? Suspicious bastard.

"It's funny," Kohl continued. "Eckles found and read all of Elliot's notes. Did you know he created the control drug using *your* blood in the first place? He had planned to use it on you again at a later date. And then he wound up dead. Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

McKinley's world was spiraling out of control. Fury and a keen sense that warned him disaster loomed near forced him to maintain a facade of calm. He was too close to have to pull out now, but it seemed his cover would no longer hold him. He had to share what he'd just learned, but he had to be careful. There was no telling where Kohl's and Kuntz's influence stopped. Could he afford to trust Diego Santana – his only contact to stopping this mess?

*Remain calm. Don't let them see your worry. Paige needs you. Don't forget about Paige.*

Kohl picked up the phone and called for security, then hung up. "I never questioned your loyalty, McKinley. Not until I learned that after almost four long years with Project Dawn, you still hadn't given the labs one usable blood sample. That, of course, led to other inquiries."

The head man in charge of Pearson Labs should have been occupied by the bigger picture, not with one of his lowly guard's blood work. Who the hell had shared that information? Not Kuntz. Senator Kuntz thought of McKinley as his boy, so to speak. Despite McKinley's refusal to obey petty orders, he did whatever else Kuntz asked, especially because he could smell dissension in the ranks. Dr. Eckles was too new to the upper echelon to be much of a threat. Diego had nothing to do with the labs; he'd been McKinley's source at Doc's compound. And most of the other rogues were too new or too scared to pose any danger to him. Which left just one possibility.

The newly promoted Simon Dunn.

Tamping down his fury, McKinley did his best to sound puzzled. "General, I think you're mistaken. Dr. Pearl never had a problem with my samples."

"You're telling me Pearl worked with you, and none of us knew about it?"

"Torrence regularly took samples of blood, hair, and skin." McKinley shrugged. "I don't know what she and Dr. Pearl did with them. I'd assume they're still in his lab." *With the other blood that asshole stole from me to control Circes, turning them into freaks.*

Kuntz scowled. "You see, Harold? This is why I told you we needed to keep a close eye on Elliot. He wasn't a team player. Who knows what he did with McKinley's workups? And if he had that Torrence bitch working on them, Evan Dennis might even now have that information."

"Maybe it's time I contacted my good friend Doc again." Kohl paused. "Eckles is good, but he's no Elliot. Only one man comes close to that kind of genius."

Hell. Were they planning to kidnap Doc now?

Someone knocked at the door, and Kohl bid them enter. Several unarmed rogues filed inside, and McKinley had a moment of hope. Until he noted the last rogue to enter. Hawkins. *Shit*. And he carried a stunner.

Kohl stood. "McKinley, your escort is here. Once Dr. Frasier is finished with you, you'll report to Simon Dunn, your new squad leader. You'll take all orders from him from now on. You no longer have any clearance within the building, so escape is impossible. I highly recommend you don't try anything. I'd hate to have to kill you before we see just how 'special' you really are." Kohl sneered. "Hawkins, take him to Dr. Frasier. If he tries anything, do what you have to."

Two of the rogues grabbed his arms and pushed him toward the door. Hawkins and the other followed him.

McKinley could have taken out his closest captors. Hawkins, however, was a wild card. Instinct told him the man just might be able to give him a real challenge. From what little McKinley knew of him, Hawkins had been a Navy SEAL before volunteering for the new and improved Project Dawn. Tough to put down as a civilian, even harder as a rogue Circ. In other circumstances, McKinley wouldn't have minded sparring with the man. Having him here now, however, absolutely sucked.

"Move it, McKinley." Hawkins shoved him, and he turned to glare at the bastard. The message in Hawkins's eyes was clear — *don't make me do this the hard way*.

McKinley glanced at Kohl and forced himself to remain cool. "You're going to regret this, Kohl."

"I already do." Kohl swore. "And that's *General* Kohl. Get the hell out of my office, you traitor."

McKinley ignored Kuntz and walked with the men holding him through the door. He moved on autopilot while planning a means of escape. Without an access code, he'd have to resort to brute strength to push past several secured doorways, and he needed to conserve himself for the battle ahead, once he escaped this fucked-up situation.

The guards with him remained oddly silent, not prodding and taunting him the way most of the rogues often did with those who'd turned against the program. McKinley took a closer look at the men and realized all of them were new transfers. All US Navy men, if he remembered correctly.

All too soon, they arrived at the basement level. Just down the corridor sat Dr. Frasier's lab. McKinley tensed, ready to put his half-assed plan to escape into motion — to disable communications and take out these rogues before the fight drew attention to him. *Yeah, right*.

To his shock, Hawkins and the others backed away. Hawkins nodded at the others, who left without question.

"They'll buy us some time with a distraction. Don't fuck around. You have to make this look good." Hawkins grimaced and handed McKinley his stunner.

"Why?" What the hell was Hawkins up to?

"You know why. I didn't sign on for this." Hawkins swore. "Just find us an antidote. Torrence seems to be evening out, right?"

"How the hell do you know that?"

Hawkins grinned, fangs extending as McKinley watched. "I hear things. And I owe my team. They only signed on for this because I was so damned sure it would work. Captain Delancey has a lot to answer for."

McKinley had never heard of Delancey, but he didn't have time to play around. He tightened his hand around the stunner. "You sure about this? I could just as easily beat the shit out of you."

"Thanks, but no," Hawkins said dryly. "We're counting on you to help us out. The way you helped Torrence." Hawkins handed him his ID badge. "Once they sound the alarm, you'll have no more than five minutes before everything goes completely lockdown."

"I know." McKinley stared hard at the large man placing himself at risk, wondering how he knew so much. "Give me a way to contact you."

Hawkins rattled off a number. "Now hurry the fuck up. My beast doesn't like this." McKinley watched a ripple snake under Hawkins's forearms. "It's going against instinct to wait for an attack."

"I owe you."

At the words, Hawkins relaxed slightly, and McKinley struck. As one hundred and thirty-three milliamps of power surged through Hawkins's body, he automatically *changed* into a beast that nearly rivaled McKinley for sheer size. McKinley kept the stunner glued to Hawkins long enough to kill a normal human being, but just enough to knock the rogue out cold.

"I'll be back when I can," he murmured and raced toward the stairwell, his mission now more vital than ever. Paige was counting on him. Hawkins was counting on him. And McKinley, dammit, refused to allow any more injustice to continue. The time had finally come. Now, to put the rest of the pieces into play to exact his revenge and complete his mission...

## Chapter Five

Paige couldn't stop staring at Hale as they drove to wherever it was he'd decided to take her. Never in her life had she felt so content. Even enfolded in Robbie's arms, she'd always been aware of something missing.

*Incredible sex, maybe?* She flushed and turned away before Hale could see her embarrassment. She didn't need to apologize for her weird sex drive, one that flared every month in bursts that made it hard to think about anything but an orgasm. The stretches of lust would build, hit her hard for a day or so, then leave as quickly. Robbie called them mating heats, but he wouldn't say much more than that it was a normal-enough occurrence for people like them. She hadn't anticipated another mating heat until next month.

It had to be Hale Rogers. She could feel him looking at her but kept her eyes riveted on the rural area outside as they passed several green fields and farms, bathed in the glow of her night vision. The area seemed tranquil, as opposed to the tension in the vehicle's confines. Confusion, desire, and curiosity made her want to lash out with anger. She hadn't been this torn since the one and only time Robbie had gently refused to be more than her friend.

Ironical that Hale Rogers, a man she'd just met, was now way more than a mere "friend." Paige wanted to make clear to him that she was choosy about her lovers, despite their recent interlude. But a stubborn part of her denied she owed Hale an explanation. Like most of the other men in her life, with the exception of Robbie and that bastard who'd fathered her, Hale was nothing more than a sexual conquest. Whenever Paige had an "urge," she sated herself with male companionship that meant nothing. It often took her several orgasms to reach a state of rest, and even then, she still ached for something more.

"When a woman's quiet this long, it means trouble," Hale rumbled.

God, even his voice was sexy.

"I should apologize for jumping you," he continued. "But I don't want to. I want to do what we did again. Several times."

She bit her lip, wanting the same thing. "I couldn't help myself," she grudgingly admitted. "It doesn't mean anything." Then why did she care what he thought about what they'd done?

"It does to me," he growled.

She glanced at him, alarmed to see his eyes a bright, vibrant green, the pupils slitted—inhuman—before he turned back to the road.

"Sweetheart, I've been through a lot of mating heats. What we just did was something a helluva lot more. But if it makes you feel better to treat it like scratching an itch, consider me your permanent scratching post."

Her inner beast thrilled at his challenge, but the sane pragmatist that had survived so many years under Elliot Pearl's indomitable will argued. "What about Robbie?" she taunted, wondering why she did so. Hell, she'd been dreaming about Hale on and off for months. Now she'd finally had him, and he was so much more than she'd expected. Why couldn't she just shut up and revel in their shared closeness, even if it was just physical?

"McKinley can kiss my ass." Hale shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. "Why do you call him Robbie?"

"That's his name."

"Robert McKinley?"

"I guess. I've always called him Robbie. My Robbie." Her heart beat faster at the thought of him. But Hale's presence aroused her just as much. A puzzle, but one she had no intention of trying to solve at this point. She needed to concentrate on surviving, one day at a time.

"Your Robbie." He snorted. "He's been working for Elliot Pearl, that pr—" As if remembering to whom he spoke, he broke off midsentence. "Let's just say there's a lot about your boyfriend I don't think you know. Or do you agree with everything your father's ordered done to you and the poor mutants slowly dying from the inside out?"

She glared at him. "I hate Elliot Pearl. He's no father of mine in any sense but the biological. I can't help genetics."

He paused. "You got me there. But you *can* choose who you spend your time with. Robbie's a poor choice, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you." She fumed. It figured she'd have the best sex of her life with a man she couldn't stand as soon as he started talking. "Where are we going?"

He looked relieved at the change of subject. "Ah, I thought I'd take you to the compound. It's a little over thirty acres of private land. There's a main house, a few smaller homes for the others, a gym, a garage, and a few odds and ends for Circes. You'll like it." He must have seen the panic on her face because he gentled his voice. "You'll be safe there, Paige. I swear it."

She didn't know why she should trust him. She didn't like the way he talked about Robbie. But he hadn't hurt her so far. Her beast liked him, and since it had kept her alive this long, she surrendered to instinct. "Fine. But I'm only staying long enough to get the PPA off my tail. An hour or two at most."

"Well, that should be just enough time to introduce you to Doc."

She started at mention of Doc. Evan Dennis. *Her uncle*. She'd overheard Elliot mention him once or twice. Not with hostility, but with respect, which she'd found surprising. Her father didn't hold anyone but himself in high esteem. He certainly hadn't seen her as anything more than a means to further his research. No hugs or kisses, no tender words. Cold hard questions, physical tests, and needle upon needle upon needle. Elliot Pearl had never qualified for Father of the Year. She wondered how Evan Dennis compared.

"Paige?" Hale asked quietly.

She sighed. "Just drive."

They finished the trip in silence, her anxiety growing as they neared the compound. Though she'd spent years avoiding Pearson Labs before her inevitable time there, she kept abreast of her father's doings, unbeknownst to him. She knew Circe's Recruits had no love for her father or Project Dawn. But she didn't know how extreme the group was in regard to managing their own Circs. Robbie wouldn't tell her much. He thought that by keeping her away from other Circs, he was helping her.

And perhaps he had the right of it, because she hadn't been this unnerved in a long time. Even her brush with the mutants in her house hadn't worried her as much as a meeting with her uncle did.

Yet by the time they pulled into a driveway, Paige could barely keep her eyes open. She knew she should be more anxious, but her body refused to acknowledge the tumult inside her. It was as if she'd simply shut down. She didn't stir when Hale opened the garage, nor did she move when he pulled in and finally stopped the car.

Paige felt his hand on her head, his fingers sliding through her hair, stroking with a gentleness that soothed her.

"You've had a long day, sweetheart." He exhaled a long, deep breath. "Let's put off what we should do today until tomorrow." He left the SUV and opened her door. Taking her in his arms, he carried her as if she weighed nothing, no mean feat for a man only a few inches taller than herself.

Strangely content, she snuggled deeper into his embrace, giving over to the strong male carrying her. He smelled right, and when she instinctively licked his neck to sense more, she felt as if she'd come home. Vibrations lulled her into a trancelike state.

"Holy hell, you're purring." He hugged her tighter. "That's it, Paige. Settle next to me. I'll keep you safe." Hale walked with her in his arms and murmured, "God, you smell good."

*So do you.* She nuzzled her nose into the crook of his neck and surrendered to sleep as her worries faded into nothing, her mate by her side.

\* \* \* \* \*

McKinley hadn't come this far to falter because he couldn't keep his hormones under control. He forced himself to ignore a svelte prostitute eyeing him like her next meal. He wanted to take what he needed, to fuck her hard right there against the wall no matter who watched or how much pain he caused. Her tight little ass swayed back and forth as she strutted down the alley being trolled by the darker side of life. By people like *him*.

He adjusted the glasses hiding his eyes and walked faster toward his destination. A quick phone call had guaranteed they'd admit him. Ignoring the dull pain in his ribs and the burn in his thighs, he made several more turns on the off chance anyone had managed to still trail him. He'd run hard these last few miles after ditching the car. But now he was in the clear and able to take care of business, as he hadn't been able to before. He made a left onto a nearly deserted street in this bad section of the city, toward what looked like a dilapidated brownstone.

Christ, he needed a short respite from his iron-hard cock. The urge to thrust into something, to pound and pound until he came, was excruciating. As much as he longed to have Paige in his arms and in his bed, he knew it could never be. Just the thought of taking from her what he needed made him ill. Sweet, gentle Paige would never talk to him again if he did to her what he really wanted to.

*Perverted, unclean, deviant.*

Shaking off his self-disgust, he focused on sating the demon raging inside him. Though he never *changed*, he too suffered from an extreme type of mating heat. Oddly enough, being around Paige simultaneously exacerbated and pacified his hungers. He craved the feel of her pussy gloving him, while he took comfort in just holding her close. His inner beast loved her, recognized her as his, no matter that his body couldn't.

He had recently satisfied his urges, but this last visit by Rogers and Paige had to be stirring him. Add the recent excitement of nearly becoming another mutant at the labs, and it was no wonder his hormones were all over the place. The beast that owned him demanded a cease to the constant struggle for dominance. Sexually, the beast ruled. And McKinley knew better than to delay the inevitable.

He rubbed his aching cock as he ascended the small set of stairs leading to the building he sought. Before he'd reached the door, it opened into darkness.

A huge man encased in leather waited until McKinley entered, then he closed and locked the door behind him. "The basement. Room two."

McKinley had been here before, when too many visits with Paige forced him to desperation. He passed unfamiliar faces, smelled the stench of stale sweat, fear, and blood, and felt more than dirty as he trudged down the stairs. He found room two and entered, closing the door behind him. Three large, naked men stood motionless, their feet shoulder-width apart, their eyes glued to the ground. They were extremely well

hung, clean – a mandatory requirement – and muscular enough to withstand the night's play.

A part of him cried out not to do this, not to degrade himself again with humans who couldn't really satisfy him. But he was too close to temptation. His beast locked on to the sexual prey before him and refused to leave. Time to start the show.

"You three think you can take me? That you can fuck me into submission?" he growled. The challenge.

"Yes," they said as one.

"Show me."

They rushed him en masse. The blond men moved too quickly, their steps jerky as they telegraphed their movements. McKinley would have enjoyed their dance more if he weren't so damned hard. He allowed two of them to hold him while the dark-haired male, the most dangerous of the three, hammered him with blows and stripped him to nothing, including his sunglasses. None of them mentioned his odd-looking eyes, probably used to the fetishes and strange costuming of the men who enjoyed this particular club.

He waited while the others took their turns beating him until he bled. The violence relieved a small part of his hungers, but it wasn't enough. It was never enough.

When the dark-haired male ordered him to his knees, McKinley took action. "No," he growled and shook free of the men on either side of him.

The leader dealt him an open-handed blow to his face. McKinley tasted blood and grinned. "Is that all you've got?"

Angered, the leader motioned to the others and the fight commenced in earnest. Reveling in the brutality he let loose in small starts, McKinley ended the fight all too soon by knocking one of the blonds unconscious. The other lay on the ground moaning, favoring his ribs while he stroked his cock, amped on the pain. The leader's left eye swelled, and he already had bruising on his thigh from a particularly tough hit McKinley had purposefully pulled too late. He also had the hard-on from hell, like McKinley.

"So it's just you and me," the man said, still crouched on the balls of his feet. He studied McKinley, shifting his gaze to McKinley's monstrous cock. "If you think I'm taking that up my ass, you're out of your fucking mind."

McKinley gave him a closemouthed smile, hiding his extending canines. The man's wet cock said otherwise. He'd been stimulated by the aggression they'd shared, and he wanted more. But first, McKinley needed to sate his beast so he wouldn't damage his opponent beyond repair.

Moving quickly, McKinley fainted right and stepped left, hitting him hard enough in the temple to temporarily knock him unconscious. He placed his opponent belly down over a raised table and spread his thighs wide. The table was the perfect height, high enough to reach McKinley's hips. Attaching cuffs to the man's ankles and dangling



wrists, he clipped the cuffs to the chains already mounted on the floor. A warrior's prize, waiting to be tasted.

A groan from behind him took McKinley's attention. Leaving his prize for the moment, he sought the other two. The unconscious blond stirred. Not wanting to deal with him, McKinley hefted him easily over his shoulder. He opened the door to his room and signaled for assistance. In seconds, two of the management arrived to take the groggy male off his hands.

Used to such sights, they left quietly with the man in tow. McKinley returned to the room, his wounds already healing.

"Your ribs sore?" he asked the blond trying to rise to his feet.

"Yeah."

"No, stay there." McKinley tossed a nearby pillow at him. "Kneel on that."

For a moment the man froze, eyeing McKinley's swollen dick. Then he licked his lips and pulled on his own shaft, and McKinley's raging beast receded. Waiting for his conquest to do as ordered, McKinley stood watch. Finally satisfied when the male appeared willing to follow orders, he approached and loomed over him, at one with his dominant nature.

"Suck me. My sac, my dick. Eat it all. I want you to choke on it."

"I will," the man said with a crooked smile. "Shit, man. I've never seen such a huge cock." He opened his mouth and ran his tongue up and down McKinley's shaft. Moaning as he did so, he grabbed hold of McKinley's thighs and held tight, stroking his legs to get closer to his balls.

"Touch me harder." Always harder, never soft, like the press of Paige's lips over his cheek when she greeted him. Nothing loving or tender about this sex. He needed the pain, the intensity of such physicality, to reach fulfillment. And even then the gratification didn't last but a few seconds. The urges would return, though not as strong.

The feel of a softer human hand yanking on his balls pulled a groan from McKinley. The man added teeth along the ridge just under his crown, and he instinctively thrust, shoving his cock past the man's cheek. Shit. It wouldn't take more than a few hard sucks before he lost it.

"Come on. Suck my cock. Put it to the back of your throat. Lemme hear you gag," he rasped as he shoved his hands into the blond's hair. Not as thick or as shiny as Rogers's, nor as long and lustrous as Paige's. But McKinley could stare at the top of his head and fantasize.

When a warm mouth covered his cockhead, he pushed. He rammed his cock past the man's tongue to the back of his throat, conscious that only half of him was inside. Still, to hear the blond choke, to feel the man try to resist, amped his arousal higher.

He shoved between those lips in hard, sharp bursts, pushing faster and deeper. His beast loved the gagging sounds, the helplessness of his prey, who couldn't handle

much more. Letting go of the blond's hair, McKinley wrapped his large hands around the male's throat, squeezing.

McKinley thrust in and out, loving the man's bite as he tried to close his teeth over McKinley's shaft. "Not so easy to make me stop once I've started," he growled, near the edge. "Be a good boy and swallow. Don't worry, you won't drown in it." He laughed on a groan, as his balls drew tight and a climax rushed through him. "I'm going to spew. Swallow it," he rasped as he jetted an enormous amount of seed. He shuddered, coming down the man's throat. He pulled out and continued to thrust shallowly, filling the man's mouth.

He withdrew when he sensed the man on the verge of passing out. Cum dribbled down the blond's lips, and still he swallowed. McKinley noted the precum glistening at the man's slit. Everyone but the male who'd been escorted out would find pleasure tonight. "Good hurt, hmm?"

Once he caught his breath, his opponent rasped, "Shit, yeah. You're so damned big. So fucking fine," the man groaned and rubbed his throat. His eyes widened when he looked down. "Shit, dude. You're still hard?"

"Always." *Always wanting for what I don't have...can't have.* McKinley nodded to the male tied down to the bench. He was rousing and swearing up and down. "Go on. You can have first go at him."

"You're going to watch?"

"Yeah." Only because he needed to get off at least once more. The beast was hungry tonight, thanks to Paige. And Rogers, he hated to admit.

"No way," the dark-haired man argued. "This is bullshit. Only the winner gets to top me. Todd didn't earn it." He pulled against the chains at his wrists.

*I know how you feel.* McKinley watched as the blond donned a condom and put on a minimal amount of lube. "That's it, *Todd*. Don't want to lube up too much. Then it might feel too good for our friend. Let's see if you can make him scream."

Todd laughed. He grabbed a stool to even his height and stepped on it. He angled between the dark-haired man's legs, pulled his ass cheeks apart, and shoved himself deep.

The bottomed male cursed while he suffered a rough ass reaming. It pleased McKinley to watch Todd taking his pleasure, to see him ride the other, stronger male, only because McKinley had allowed it.

It didn't take the blond long to finish. Spent, he withdrew, disposed of his condom in the lavatory, and left the room with a salute to McKinley.

Leaving him alone with his prey.

"That was a shitty thing to do," the man grumbled. But McKinley smelled his arousal, strong and sure. He liked being taken. Being bound and helpless.

"And yet you're going to endure it again. You clean?"

"Of course I'm clean. Adam sent me, and all his boys are clean. He owns the damned house." The man paused. "Wait a minute. I don't do bareback."

"You will tonight."

"Hell, no. I'm not catching anything from you, asshole, not for a lousy grand."

"I don't have anything you can catch." McKinley smiled, his teeth sharp, his gaze centered on a tight, rosy ass now slick with lube. "And there isn't a condom big enough to fit me, anyway."

"Shit," the man moaned and squirmed over the bench.

"Don't worry, stud. I'll even let you come first." McKinley reached under him and jerked him off. Using rough strokes, the slight rake of his claws, and several punishing slaps to his ass, he pushed the pain junkie into a heavy orgasm. Before he finished coming, McKinley pulled his cheeks wide and thrust slowly inside, one inch at a time. Though narrow, the man's rectum stretched more easily than he'd anticipated, as if he was used to thick penetration.

"Mmm, yes. So tight." McKinley closed his eyes, wanting to savor the ecstasy as warmth surrounded his shaft.

At first, the shouts and the begging were for him to pull out and stop. To cease with the burning thrusts splitting the man in two. But as McKinley rocked faster, his lover begged for more. Apparently, his prey liked fisting, and he liked his sex rough, his lovers big and kinky. Eager to fuck and be done with the sense of wrongness in being here, McKinley shoved himself deeper and deeper, until his balls smacked his prey's ass. But as he fucked his way to a second, stronger orgasm, it was Hale Rogers's ass he took, and Paige's face he saw.

## Chapter Six

Hale poured another cup of coffee, his nerves stretched taut. He'd spent the past few hours watching Paige sleep and wondering about her. She'd slept like a baby, which surprised him. After the ordeal they'd gone through, he would have expected a bad dream or restless slumber. But she'd curled up on the pillow and hadn't moved, even when he'd gotten up from beside her on the bed and left his room.

"Yo, Hale. Where've you been?" Derrick asked as he entered the dining area. "You look like crap."

Trust Derrick to tell it like he saw it.

The back door opened, and in moments, Ace and Zack joined them. The pair wore workout clothes and looked way too cheerful for eight in the morning.

"Hale, how goes it?" Zack asked with a smile.

Hale grunted and took a swallow of dark coffee.

Ace and Zack exchanged a glance. "That good, hmm?" Ace took a step closer and sniffed him. "Well, well. I'd say our boy is just fine. I smell female all over him. About time you found some pussy, playboy."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say something mean, when he caught Derrick shaking his head. Since both Zack and Ace weren't the most stable Circs during their mate's pregnancy, Hale decided to save his obnoxious comments for later.

He sighed, and Derrick relaxed. "That's not just any female you smell. That's Paige Masters. We almost had a run-in with some Circs last night."

Roane entered the room just then. "What?"

"I was out driving and decided to go back to Paige's house."

"Under whose authority?" Roane crossed his arms over his chest.

"What do you mean, whose authority? Doc wants to see Paige. I went out and found her."

"Without anyone else." Roane stepped closer, and Hale stood to defend himself. "You could have been hurt or captured, dickhead. You know that area was swarming with mutants and rogue Circs just two nights ago. What the hell were you thinking?"

"That I don't need to ask permission to leave the fucking house," Hale snarled and shoved Roane back.

Everyone stared in shock. *No one* challenged Roane's leadership. They never had, not in the eight years they'd been together. And especially not Hale, Roane's best friend. But Hale couldn't contain his anger. He was pissed that Paige was in danger, that his female hadn't yet submitted more than her body. That she still clung to McKinley... Throughout the night, Hale had been plagued with thoughts of *Robbie* as well. Odd, lustful, violent thoughts that made him hard and made him want to tear into someone.

*He didn't want the creature tied up in front of him. He wanted Paige. He wanted Hale. Not blood and sex, but love. Another burst of ecstasy filled him as he released his seed...*

"Hale, snap out of it, dammit." Roane shoved him into his seat and waved his hand before his face.

"Wh-what?" All around him, his brothers looked concerned. Hale wiped a hand over his face. "What's wrong?"

"You're wrong," Derrick said. "You looked ready to go toe-to-toe with Roane, and then your eyes rolled back in your head, and you nearly cracked your thick skull on the floor. Roane caught you."

"Don't thank me," Roane growled. He poked Hale hard in the chest and sat down next to him. The others sat as well. "You tell me every damned thing that happened last night. *Now*."

"I—"

"Now, Hale," Doc agreed as he entered the room. He grabbed a cup of coffee from the pot on the serving table and joined them. "This looks like a fascinating discussion."

"I'm fine. Everything's okay," Hale began. "Last night, after, well, after that mating heat struck, I needed to get out of here." Thankfully, Roane nodded but said nothing. "I had planned to go downtown. Find a few friends. But instinct told me to backtrack to Paige's house. I took an alternate route to get there and found Paige." For some odd reason, he paused, not sure whether to mention McKinley's presence. He needed to talk to Paige about him first. Not that he planned to keep anything from his family—his friends—but he felt uncomfortable discussing McKinley with anyone else just yet.

"Go on, Hale," Doc prodded.

"Anyway, I met her just as a bunch of PPA were coming after her. We ran, then drove back here." *But not before we stopped to fuck like rabid bunnies.*

Roane's eyes narrowed, as if aware Hale was holding back.

"Wait a minute. You drove back here with Paige?" Doc asked. "She's here? Now?" Hale nodded. "She's sleeping in my room. We had a rough night."

"No shit." Ace whistled. "So Doc's mystery niece is finally found, eh? Good job, Hale."

"Not bad," Zack seconded his mate.

"Is she all right? Does she need medical attention?" Doc sounded nervous.

"She's fine," Hale reassured him. "Just tired." He turned to Roane. "I didn't get any sleep last night either. It's been a rough couple of days. I'm sorry, about before."

"Don't sweat it." Roane pounded him on the shoulder. But Hale had the sense Roane wouldn't let this go. "So you've told us everything, right, playboy? Nothing else we need to know?"

*Shit.* Hale fought the urge to squirm. Roane always could see right through him. "Uh, well. I can tell you she's Circ."

"She is?" Doc should have sounded happier, but instead, he sounded distressed. "You saw her *change*?"

"Not exactly." Hell. This was going to be embarrassing. He didn't mind admitting to sex with a beautiful woman. But this woman happened to be Doc's niece. He swallowed. "See, when we were together, in the close confines of the SUV, there was this chemistry. I'm not sure if it was because of our mating heat last night or not, but another heat struck me out in town. Really hard."

Roane blinked and sat back. He started to smile, glanced at Doc, and muted his amusement. He coughed into his hand. "So you and Paige...?"

"Yeah, me and Paige," Hale huffed, wishing he didn't have to announce the details to everyone. Then again, there were few secrets in this tight group. Where everyone depended on everyone else, lies didn't belong.

"Oh." Doc didn't seem upset, which put Hale at ease. He looked thoughtful. "Did you experience this the other night? A sense of sexual need?"

"Doc," Zack complained. "Do we have to talk about sex before breakfast?"

"Yeah. Sex and Hale before coffee is just wrong." Ace grimaced and stood to grab himself a cup.

"Kind of," Hale answered, glaring at the pair. "There was an attraction to her scent. But nothing as potent as last night. I couldn't stop it. I tried, but it was a powerful thing." And so damned right, he wanted to do it again.

"Interesting." Doc took a sip of coffee. "We have three mated sets of Circs, one expectant female, and one unmated male. Your attraction might be the result of Kelly's powerful pheromones. She's throwing Caitlyn and Sabrina into early ovulation, trying to extend procreation throughout her 'family.' The more babies, the stronger the chance that you Circs will continue. As an unmated male, you're not furthering your 'species,' per se."

"Tell me he didn't just say Caitlyn's ovulating." Roane ran a hand over his face.

"Sabrina too?" Derrick asked, stunned.

"It's not Kelly. It's much more than that," Hale automatically protested, then wished he hadn't.

Derrick nodded. "Has to do with those weird-ass dreams you've been having lately, I'll bet."

"What?"

"You talk in your sleep, hoss. And the name Paige is one you've mumbled a time or two."

"Hale Rogers, you and I need to have a talk." Doc opened his mouth, no doubt to blast Hale with another lecture about full disclosure, when Paige walked into the kitchen. "Paige?" Doc whispered.

"I'm sorry. I'm intruding. I should —"

"Stay." Hale hurried from his seat to intercept her. "Please. Come and meet Doc, so the rest of them will leave me the hell alone."

She regarded him with a curious half smile, and his beast purred with satisfaction. *She's here, and she's mine.*

"Paige, I'd like you to meet Evan Dennis, our Doc. Doc, this is Paige Masters," Hale said. "I believe she's your niece."

Hale had to pull her closer to meet Doc. She ignored the other Circs, her attention riveted on her uncle.

"You know, you look exactly like your mother," Doc whispered. Tears filled his blue eyes, and Hale felt a pang for the mild-mannered man.

"I do? I've never seen a picture of her. They wouldn't let me have one when I asked. And I used to ask a lot."

Doc quickly stood. "I think I have one in my study. Would you like to sit down and talk for a while? Would you mind?"

Paige turned to Hale. To his relief, she didn't seem panicked or upset, just unsure of herself.

"Go on." Hale gently pushed her toward Doc. "He can answer a lot of questions for you. And he is your uncle, you know."

She bit her lower lip, looking at him as if he had all the answers, then turned and followed Doc from the room. Hale watched her go, his heart full at just the sight of her. When he turned around, it was to find his friends staring at him with shit-eating grins.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

Derrick burst into laughter. "Oh man. Playboy's finally fallen. That was priceless."

"What are you talking about?"

"Dude, you were looking at her with that lovesick expression Zack makes when he stares at Kelly," Ace said with a chuckle.

"Ass." Zack elbowed him.

"Doc's niece, hmm?" Roane drawled. "So that's why you've been so different lately."

"I'm not different." Hale cursed them and sat back down again, cradling his coffee, which was growing cold. "Paige needs some help, that's all."

"Oh, I'm sure you're helping her, all right." Derrick smirked. "I bet you *helped* her a helluva lot last night. No wonder you've been moaning and groaning during the night the past few weeks. Wet dreams about a hot blonde, eh?"

"Fuck off, D." Embarrassment seared him. God, he'd been calling Paige's name out while he slept. What if he'd mentioned McKinley as well?

"Man, I don't need to fuck off, not with the hottest mate in the world in my bed."

"Thanks so much for the reference," Sabrina said dryly as she entered the room with Caitlyn and Kelly on her heels.

"Oh, ah, hey, baby," Derrick covered lamely and greeted his mate with a kiss.

Every damned one of the Circ females shot Hale cheeky grins. The torment would never end.

"So, Hale's finally found his true love, hmm? Who is she?" Kelly asked as she waddled to her mates. At only five months, her belly had grown to the size of a watermelon, and Hale wondered if she might be carrying twins.

"She's Paige Masters, Doc's niece. But she's not my mate, my true love, my anything. God, you people are annoying." Hale muttered under his breath and swallowed more coffee. His eyes felt gritty, his head ached, and he felt sluggish all of a sudden.

"You need some z's," Roane said.

Hale turned, unnerved to find Roane's piercing gaze centered on him. "I'm fine."

"You're exhausted. Lemme help you to your room." The threat was there. *Shit*. Hale didn't want to answer more questions when he didn't have any answers. Was Paige Masters his mate? No, because if she was, then McKinley had some part in Hale's future as well. Why had Hale spaced earlier and tried to attack his best friend? He had no idea, and he didn't want to know.

"I said I'm not tired. Besides, I want to be here when Paige is done with Doc. She doesn't know any of you." He glanced around him. "And from looking at you, I can see why she'd be less than thrilled at being surrounded by your ugly mugs. Not you, ladies."

"Thanks, Hale." Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Derrick, is he always this oblivious?"

"Afraid so, princess."

"Hale, you have circles under your eyes. You're still recovering from your injuries the other night. We all know you're Circ. But your body still needs time to finish healing and replenishing itself internally. Go get some rest. Caitlyn, Kelly, and I will make sure none of the guys so much as goes near her without you around."



Hale considered her. Paige wouldn't feel threatened by the women. Especially not Kelly, who looked about as harmful as a round little kitten. "Okay. If you need me, I'll be in my room."

"Dreaming about Paige," Derrick murmured. Zack and Ace snickered, but Roane didn't laugh.

"Come on, playboy. I'll help you to your room."

He dreaded each step, but to his relief, Roane said nothing. Hale opened the door to his room and lay down, expecting Roane to leave. Instead, his friend walked in, closed the door behind him, and stood next to his bed. *Damn.*

"Hale, you're worrying me. Why won't you tell me what's wrong?" Roane sat at the edge of the bed and turned to face Hale. "I'm your friend. I'm not gonna judge you because you had sex with Doc's niece, for God's sake."

"I know." Hale felt like shit because he was holding out. Hadn't Roane come to him when he'd had problems with Caitlyn? Didn't Roane always know how to help him, how to solve all their problems? "Roane..."

"Yeah?"

"Look, you can't tell the others. Not even Doc."

"I won't." And just like that, he wouldn't.

"I, uh, I've been having dreams about Paige for a while. And they're not normal. My family had a history with this kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"Psychic stuff. My dad could predict the weather. My mom knew things before they'd happen. But I thought I was normal. But then a few months ago, I started having dreams, prophetic dreams. I saw Paige with me."

The silence unnerved him.

"Okay. You're psychic. So what exactly have you been dreaming?" At Hale's surprise, Roane grinned. "Come on, Hale. Like I'm not going to believe in ESP? Hell, we turn into giant monsters when the mood hits. That's not exactly normal."

An odd sense of relief filled him, that Roane accepted him. "Well, here's the problem. In these dreams..." He cleared his throat, not sure how to say it. "In these dreams I'm with Paige. But there's always someone else with us."

"By your tone, I'm thinking that 'someone' is a guy."

"I'm not really into men, Roane. I mean, I know we all do things together. But it's different with the squad."

"Look, you don't have to explain it to me. Technically, Circes are bisexual. We do it with anything Circ. Hale, man, you're my best friend. What, you think I'm going to revoke your membership to 'the club' because you're going to be with some other guy?"

"I think the guy is McKinley," he said in a rush, before he could change his mind.

Roane's eyes widened, the shock on his face almost comical. "The same motherfucker who nearly killed you and Derrick a few months ago? The same one who threatened Sabrina if she should ever return to Pearson Labs? Elliot Pearl's old bodyguard, *that* McKinley?"

"Yeah, that one," Hale groaned and threw his arm over his eyes. "Why do you think I haven't said anything? He's the reason I had a hard time with you and Caitlyn the other night. My beast kept telling me to find him...and Paige."

"Damn." Roane drummed his fingers on his knee. "Tell me something, Hale. When you found Paige the other night, was she alone?"

"No," Hale replied, miserable.

"I knew you were lying. Ass." Roane slapped him on the leg, and Hale lifted his arm from his face to see his friend. "Tell me. All of it."

Hale told him about meeting McKinley, about the dreams he'd been having, about the psychic blast McKinley had shot him with at Pearson Labs months ago. He couldn't bring himself to tell Roane how often he thought of the male, but he didn't hide anything else.

As Roane sat there digesting it all, Hale wondered if he'd done the right thing in telling the truth. Circe's Recruits was his family. What if his strange connection to Paige and McKinley put them all in danger? Wouldn't it have been better to learn about McKinley on his own, with no one the wiser, should McKinley be as dangerous as Hale thought he was?

"Well, this is a shit sandwich, any way you look at it," Roane rumbled. "If Paige is already tied to McKinley, and you're dreaming about doing both of them —"

"No, man. That was just me doing Paige. He was just...there."

"With his hands on your ass," Roane snorted. "Get real, Hale. From everything you've described, Paige and McKinley might very well be your mates. What does your beast tell you?"

Damn. Roane would have to ask that.

"You don't have to say anything. I can see it on your face." Roane took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Figures you'd be the biggest pain in the ass finding your mate. Okay. So we have Paige here. You need to connect with her. Work your magic. Even I can see you two together. My beast likes her with you. In the meantime, the guys and I will look for McKinley. How hard can he be to find? A seven-foot-tall freak—sorry, human slash Circ—with yellow eyes, claws, and fangs. And he's got a thing for your girlfriend, so he won't be far."

"Thanks, Roane. You're making this so much easier to deal with." The truth was, Roane had eased Hale's burden just by listening. By accepting Hale for who he was.

Roane grinned. "Hey, it could be worse. You could tell me you're in love with Caitlyn. Then I'd have to skewer you."

"Ah, about that. I don't think I'm gonna be able to, ah, you know, again."

"What? Take it up the ass? Let Caitlyn manhandle you?"

"Jerk."

Roane chuckled. "Look, you know what's between us. It was sexual because we're Circ. It just made us closer." Roane grabbed Hale's thigh and gripped him tightly. "We're family, Hale. We're not gonna dump your ass because you have a thing for Pearl's daughter and his bodyguard. If your beast wants him, he can't be all bad. Can he?"

"I hope to hell he's not. Actually, I hope to hell these dreams are just nightmares. I don't have any proof that he, or even Paige, is my mate. Just because the rest of you idiots mated doesn't mean I have to."

"Didn't you listen to Doc at all?" Roane sighed. "It's hormones, buddy. Your beast wants to procreate." Roane looked ill. "I wasn't going to say anything yet. But I have a bad feeling Caitlyn's pregnant."

"No shit!"

"Shut up," he grumbled. "I'm not sure, but she smells different today. I think last night did it. And if hormones are causing us to spread Circ genes like wildfire, why do you think you'd be immune?"

"I understand basic biology. I'm not Derrick," Hale said with a grin. He might be stressing, but Roane was going to be a father. *Hot damn.*

"Good point."

"Why do you think I'm so drawn to McKinley? I've never been into guys as a rule."

"Look at Ace. He wasn't either until Zack. Being Circ changes us deep inside. Your beast knows what you need better than the man does, Hale. You have to trust what you feel. When you don't, you'll fuck up. And then you can only pray it's not a major fuckup." Roane stood. "Now, get some rest so you can think straight. Caitlyn will take good care of your — of Paige. And we'll see if we can find the big dude." Roane's eyes narrowed. "I'd like to talk to him myself. Time for a face-to-face with the man who thinks he can threaten my team."

"Here we go." Hale sighed. "Try not to kill him before I have a chance to see what the hell he's all about."

"Sure thing, playboy." Roane saluted and left the room.

Hale closed his eyes and went to sleep. He didn't dream, and he didn't worry about tomorrow. It would come soon enough.

## Chapter Seven

Paige stared at Evan Dennis, unable to tear her eyes away. He looked so frail. Her beast felt an immediate need to protect him, while the human part of Paige tried to deny the connection she hadn't expected to feel.

They sat across from each other in his study in two leather chairs facing a coffee table. A box of photographs sat between them. Paige gripped the one of her mother smiling and patting her rounded stomach. The woman had been beautiful, her joy shining through to the camera.

"I do believe Elliot loved your mother, at least at first. I met her when they'd first started dating."

"So you and Elliot were close?" She couldn't bring herself to call Elliot her father, even in front of Evan.

"No. Sadly, though we shared the same mother, we didn't grow up together. Thomas Pearl was a cold bastard of a man. He seduced my mother to produce Elliot, then forced her to give up her child. I won't go into the details, but he nearly destroyed her. A few years later, she met my father and found happiness for a brief time, until he died. My mother was a wonderful woman. She encouraged my study in science because I was drawn to it, just like Elliot.

"We met when I entered college in my early teen years. Apparently, a keen intellect runs in the family," he said with a sigh. "Both of us possess – possessed – high IQs. We became friends, of a sort. But Elliot was such a hard man to know. I felt sorry for him."

"What about his mother? I know Elliot grew up with a woman he called mother."

"His stepmother had too many charities to oversee. Appearances meant more to her than her stepson. So Elliot grew up basically unloved and unappreciated. Until he showed his true genius. Genetics became his religion. Eager to prove my worth to the

man Elliot loved so much, I too studied hard. It was easy to fall into the excitement of science. Hypotheses, the big 'what-ifs' of the world, drew Elliot and me closer.

"Then he met your mother, and we drifted apart again. We corresponded throughout the years, but we were each involved in our own projects. It took me by surprise when he asked me to work with him on Project Dawn."

Paige understood more now. "So you and he really weren't close. I heard rumors about the original Project Dawn. How you would disagree with him. How you were jealous of his successes."

Doc laughed. "Jealous? Hell, I gave Elliot most of the credit for work I did. I didn't want the limelight. I just wanted the science. He gloried in all the talk, the back patting and political nonsense needed to acquire funding. I just wanted to work.

"But when I caught wind of some of his methods, what he intended for the project...I couldn't blindly agree. Using human beings as guinea pigs, when he knew there would be adverse side effects, was just *wrong*. Especially because most of those men had no idea of what was really done to them. Hell, I didn't even know until the fallout hit." Doc shook his head and removed his glasses. He cleaned them with the hem of his shirt. As she stared at his eyes, she saw a glimmer of Elliot there. "But Project Dawn isn't what you asked about. You wanted to know about your mother. My dear, she was beautiful. A genuinely caring woman. She was a reporter, you know. Had quite a nose for news. That was how they met. She did a report on his postgraduate work. Love at first sight."

"Was it?"

"I thought so at the time." Evan put his glasses back on and gave Paige a sad look. "Elliot was so excited when your mother found out she was pregnant. He didn't want anything to hurt her or the baby, so he took her away to a villa in Europe. She was there to relax, he said. I tried to talk to her several times after she'd left the States, but he stopped allowing her phone calls, claiming reminders of home stressed her too much."

"Allowing her calls?"

"I know. It worried me. Especially when no one could get in touch with her, not even her own mother. Then came the news that she had died, and Elliot seemed so hurt, so lost. He told us you'd died in the womb, Paige." Evan pursed his lips, his voice roughening with anger. "He lied to us. And I wish to God I could say he had nothing to do with her death, but I'm not sure. Not anymore. He did so many terrible things, but he was so alone. He never let anyone close. But I tried to be there for him. I tried, and I failed." Doc stared at her, grief stricken. "And now he's gone."

"Yeah." She told herself she wasn't going to cry. Elliot Pearl wasn't worth her tears. "I grew up with a foster family on the West Coast. I used to see him a few times a month at first. They never told me why he'd given me into their care."

"Were they kind?"

"They weren't cruel." She shrugged. "Things could have been worse. There were no cookies and hugs. No birthday parties or Christmases. But I had friends. I think

Elliot wanted me to grow up in what he considered a normal environment, to see if I could blend in with 'humans.'"

"I'm sorry, Paige," Evan said quietly.

"It's okay." She hated that she still longed for someone to love her. No one but Robbie had ever shown her so much affection. Her friends were fine, but they never knew the real her. And after elementary school, she'd retreated into herself, not comfortable with people as a whole. "Like I said, I wasn't abused. I received an education, even a degree from Princeton. I never put it to use because my job, according to Elliot, was to assist him in scientific research. Once I finished school, the few tests they used to give me when growing up turned into extensive physical and mental exams. Like being a living pincushion for a mad scientist," she tried to joke.

She forced herself to bury the memories of watching those poor creatures nearly kill themselves to get to her in the dark depths of Elliot's second home—Pearson Labs.

"So you were never given shots growing up? Never given odd medicines or vitamins?"

"No. Elliot was very careful that I only ate healthy foods. No junk foods, no pills or medicines of any kind. Not that I ever needed any," she murmured, thoughtful.

Evan looked troubled. "Paige, you've never *changed*, have you? You know what that means?"

"I do. And no, I've never *changed*. I'm totally normal. Well, mostly. In the last few years, I seem to have developed several Circ traits that you wouldn't know about unless I told you."

"Like?"

"I'm pretty strong. I can see, hear, and smell better than most people I know." She debated whether to tell him the rest but felt a need to confide in him. It felt right. "And I can control the Circs sometimes. The mutants and I seem to have a special bond, I guess you could say."

"How so?"

"I don't know how to explain it, but I can release a certain scent, and they do what I tell them. That's how I've avoided them for so long since my escape from Pearson Labs."

"Your father actually imprisoned you there?" Evan asked, horrified.

That Evan seemed more passionate about her imprisonment than her abilities soothed a knot of tension she hadn't realized was building. "Elliot never physically imprisoned me. I had a home away from that horrible place. But he threatened to incarcerate me there if I didn't do what he said. You've seen the men working there. I didn't think I had much choice."

"My God, you really are Subject 31, aren't you?"

"How do you know about that, anyway? I thought Elliot's files were totally secure."

"I read things he didn't know I had access to. Elliot was proud of your accomplishments. He thought you were the future of the Circs. But he said you needed tweaking. He said you were too undisciplined, too willful." Evan smiled at her, and she smiled back. "At least he had the sense to protect you from the...unpleasantness there."

"You mean from the beatings, rapes, and torture imposed on the rogues."

He shifted and glanced away from her, his voice a mere whisper. "Yes. A few months ago when I found out I had a niece and that you were one of Elliot's subjects, I was terrified of what he'd done to you. I still am, if you want the truth."

"Hey, I'm still alive. And I'm here."

"You can't know how happy I am about that." Evan gave her a tremulous smile. It slowly died. "There's something else you should know. There's danger out there for you, Paige. From all that I've studied since I realized you were, in fact, alive, it seems Elliot had specific plans for you."

"For his breeding program. I know."

"You *know*?" Evan stood and began pacing. "I wish Elliot were here right now, so I could wring his neck. To treat his own daughter like this... I think it's highly likely that he took your mother away because he wanted her to die. Miranda would never have agreed to what he did to you, Paige. From what you've told me, I believe you were born a Circ. Elliot must have infected your mother, which is how you came to have so many abilities without the problems the Circs in Project Dawn had."

"So how is it your guys are still okay? I mean, from what I know, Circe's Recruits are the only surviving members of the original project."

"I have some ideas, but honestly, I'm not sure why the squad survived the initial failure of the project. But they're not the only ones, you know. Caitlyn is like you. She was born a Circ. Kelly was injected with the serum at a young age. And Sabrina recently became Circ, saved from madness by Derrick, her mate. We're a special group here Paige. Like you."

And McKinley, she thought but didn't say.

"Paige, if you don't mind my asking, how did Elliot realize you'd turned Circ? What was it that first alerted him to your abilities? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. But I have to admit, what you've described doesn't seem to mirror what Caitlyn went through. Elliot had worked with her since she was born. She'd exhibited Circ traits right after puberty."

"I don't know about that." Interesting. Paige had an urge to talk to Caitlyn and the other women, to see what they thought about the men here and about their experiences with Elliot. Her instincts told her that she could learn a lot about herself among those of a like nature. She could be safe here...with Hale.

Shaking off the worrisome thought, she hurried to explain herself to Evan. "I lived a pretty normal life up until the last five years. Before then, in Elliot's eyes, I was normal. A failure. So he left me alone, until I matured and got careless. I was twenty-three when I made a big mistake. I'd just started to notice subtle differences. I'd become

really strong. Small scratches healed within minutes, never leaving a scar. My senses exploded, like I could smell my roommate's perfume minutes before she walked through the door.

"I kept it to myself. I knew Elliot would want to know about it, and it made me feel good to keep that news to myself. It would have pissed him off, big-time."

"Oh, yes," Evan agreed.

"I'd begun dating a nice guy at the office where I worked. I'd never been very interested in the opposite sex, but Simon was nice, handsome, and fun to be with. Until one night when he wouldn't take no for an answer. I put his face through my front door."

"Good Lord."

"You said it." Paige smiled, comfortable enough with him to share parts of her past. She still didn't understand why she felt so at ease with him—a virtual stranger—but he seemed to genuinely care that she'd been mistreated. He knew all about Circs, so she didn't have to hide the truth of what she was. And he'd known her mother. The picture she still held in her hand was priceless.

Evan grimaced. "Let me guess. Elliot had you spied on."

"Yeah. By my boyfriend, it so happened." She shook her head, annoyed she hadn't seen that one coming. Then again, she'd been so out of her mind with lust at the time, she would have nailed anything that moved. She'd been a late bloomer. With no interest in sex, she'd resisted a ton of dating requests. Then she'd met Simon and dated him more to fit in than because she'd wanted male companionship. During the course of their courtship, her libido began a strange rhythm, turning her almost insane with lust. Which made her beast's rejection of Simon so confusing. When he'd refused to back off, her inner beast had reacted. Badly.

"I'm so sorry." Evan reached out as if to touch her. But he kept his distance and put his hands in his pockets.

"It was a long time ago." But the betrayal still hurt. "Elliot had watched the whole thing. He was pretty angry when he learned I'd been keeping things from him. I think my only saving grace is that he feared hurting me would hurt his research. After that, he kept me tied to his experiments. I wasn't a prisoner in the labs, even though I was."

"I understand. Elliot could be devious to get what he wanted."

*Understatement of the year.*

"How did you escape?"

"I had help. A friend of mine made sure guards looked the other way when I left. A lot of computer files disappeared, but enough apparently remained if you knew about Subject 31. I've managed to stay off the labs' radar for nearly a year. All in all, it's not a great life. But I'm free."

"Unless the PPA finds you and brings you back," he guessed.



"There is that." She wondered if he'd suggest she stay here. Or if she should take part in his own experiments with Circe's Recruits. A part of her wanted him to offer her the choice, while another knew it would only make him seem more like Elliot. Using Paige to further science. The story of her life.

"Paige, I want you to know how sorry I am I didn't save you myself."

She hadn't expected that. "How could you? You didn't even know about me."

"I knew your mother was in some kind of trouble. I should have paid better attention." He smiled, and in that moment, she could readily believe that he cared about her. *Amazing*. "Paige, I know we don't know each other, but you're my niece. Whatever I have is yours, no strings attached. If I can help you in any way, just name it. I'm not like your father. Everyone who's here, right now, on this compound, is here because they *want* to be. I won't practice medicine on the unwilling, and I don't play God with people's lives."

She watched him, captivated by the commanding tone of his voice that hadn't been there before.

"The people here are my family. But you, Paige, are blood. I can help you deal with the Circ side, if you want me to, and *only* if you want me to. You can live here or anywhere else I have a home, and I have several. We can protect you from Pearson Labs until we finally bring them down. It's been slow going, but I have no doubt what the end result will be."

"So you're trying to destroy Pearson Labs?"

"When I left them years ago, I pledged myself to help the men affected by the Circe serum. My men are good people. We've taken care of many of Elliot's mistakes, and we've been trying like hell to bring Pearson Labs down. They have contacts that are difficult to uncover. Sabrina brought us some files that have been instrumental in helping us. But there are a few mystery people in the organization who might give us trouble."

"Like who?" She wanted to help Evan destroy the labs. Hell, it was her sole mission in life.

"Do you know who's in charge? I've been hearing that it's a top government official, but security there is incredibly tight."

"That I don't know. But I've seen Senator Kuntz at the labs. I know he and Elliot never got along, so I thought it odd that a United States senator had anything to do with Pearson Labs after Project Dawn disbanded years ago."

Evan started. "Senator Richard Kuntz?"

"He's the only bigwig I know."

"Kuntz," Evan said again. "Well, well." He studied her with a smile. "I can tell this is going to be a productive day."

"I think so." She wouldn't trust him completely, not just yet. But she'd definitely thawed in her attitude toward her uncle. "So, um, would it be okay if I called you Evan? Uncle Evan seems a little childish. Or do you prefer Doc?"

He smiled. "Either is fine. I'm just happy to have you here to call me anything." He crossed to her and waited while she stood. Then he shocked her by stepping into her personal space. He moved slowly, giving her every opportunity to rebuff him, but she didn't. He pulled her close. She was a few inches taller than the slight man, but the powerful comfort in his hug brought tears to her eyes. "I'm so glad you're okay, Paige. So very, very glad." He quickly stepped back, his eyes glassy and his cheeks flushed. "Now tell me. What would you like for breakfast, Niece? I don't know about you, but I'm positively starving."

\* \* \* \* \*

McKinley waited and watched. It was late afternoon, and still no sign of Paige. Several of Circe's Recruits had come and gone. Roane Weston and Derrick Packard had just left in a dark SUV. A pregnant Kelly Malloy walked between her mates into a smaller house behind the main one. Caitlyn Chase, Hale Rogers, and Doc remained unaccounted for. Now might be the ideal time to check the main house. He could handle two Circes and one older scientist without too much trouble.

Just as he rose from his crouch in the woods surrounding the small compound, Paige walked out of the main house with Doc by her side. Relieved, he hid himself again. Paige grinned at something Doc said. Evan Dennis glowed. He looked as if he'd just been handed a gift, and with the introduction to his niece, he had.

At least Paige seemed safe and happy. Doc guided her toward another smaller home next to the one Kelly and her mates had disappeared into. They walked onto a covered porch. The door opened, and Paige spoke softly to someone inside. He listened hard. The name Caitlyn rang a bell: Roane's mate. As soon as he thought about the picture he'd once seen of her, a splitting headache assailed him. Immediately, he centered himself and focused on breathing.

*Shit.* He hadn't had one of these attacks in years. Standing on enemy soil left him vulnerable in more ways than one. He didn't need to lose his faculties now. Swearing to himself, McKinley decided to make good use of his time.

He shook off his headache and quickly loped in the direction of the main house. Having earlier disabled Doc's piss-poor security system, he moved along the grounds and entered the house without setting off any audible alarms. He wasn't sure about the whole of the interior, however, so he had to move fast.

A quick study of the house showed him an open floor plan. A large kitchen overlooked a family room on one side and a dining area on the other. A doorway to the left led to a hallway, which he entered. There, he cautiously allowed himself to open his senses.

The scent of Hale Rogers stood out, and he followed it, unable to help himself. When the corridor branched off into another hallway, he stayed the course. Down the hallway and up the steps, past a second floor to the third. The damned house was huge, and this level had three doors.

He smelled traces of Packard and Sabrina at one doorway. Past that, he noted a bathroom, and then another closed door that smelled like vanilla and made him instantly hard. He twisted the knob quietly, tense because he knew what he'd find. Opening the door, he took in the dim room before him with Circ eyes, narrowing on the unmoving figure in the middle of a king-size bed.

Closing and locking the door behind him, McKinley moved on autopilot. His beast quickly seized control as he stared at Hale Rogers, soundly sleeping. His dick hardened to the point of pain, and McKinley studied the male, wondering what to do next. His beast wanted to fuck Rogers, to take what it thought it owned. McKinley fought for control, clenching his fists tight as his claws lengthened and bit into his palms.

Where the hell was this hunger coming from? Apparently, his forays into rough sex the night before had been for naught. His balls ached, his shaft twitched, and it was all he could do not to flip Rogers over and mount him like a dog in heat.

Sweating, McKinley wiped his forehead and took advantage of Rogers's state of unconsciousness. A blanket covered him from his waist to his feet, exposing a broad, muscular chest and meaty arms. Though smaller in size and build than McKinley, Rogers still would tower over most humans. *And he'd fit Paige just right.* Confused that instead of the jealousy he should have felt, his desire increased, McKinley tried to step back, but his beast wouldn't let him.

Lust consumed him once more, and McKinley concentrated on observing, not touching, as he itched to do. What the hell was it about this man that grabbed McKinley by the balls and wouldn't let go?

Rogers had sandy-colored hair, a shade darker than Paige's. He kept it cut short, framing a hard face. Women would find him handsome. McKinley found him...intriguing. In sleep, Rogers looked softer, more human. Though McKinley had yet to see Rogers in his other, *changed* form, he knew he'd find Rogers appealing.

And that bothered the hell out of him. He would have preferred women if given a choice. The only reason he'd had sex with men up to this point was because he didn't have it in him to harm a smaller female. The large men he used could tolerate pain as well as dish it out. He couldn't imagine trying to ram himself inside a smaller female like soft, sexy, desirable Paige.

He loved her so much. Everything about her called to him. Why then, did he feel the same pull for this male? And why had it felt so right to give Paige into his keeping? Knowing what he did about General Kohl's fondness for Doc, McKinley should have insisted that Paige stay with him. Yet he'd all but pushed her into Rogers's arms, guided by the need to protect, by instinct.

Frustrated, he sat in a chair facing the bed and studied this enemy, who was not, exactly, an enemy. All the while, his body hungered, throbbing for release.

He'd come to check on Paige and reassure himself about Circe's Recruits. Paige seemed safe here, and she'd finally met her uncle. A sense of closure, in some respects, but also a chance at a new beginning. One thing McKinley could say about Doc, he took care of his Circs. They didn't suffer for anything with him around. From everything Diego had told him, Doc considered them family.

"Mmm, yeah," Rogers murmured. He shifted in the bed and released a torrent of pheromones into the air. The blanket over Rogers seemed to grow—right between his legs. McKinley stood and took several steps toward the bed, like a puppet on strings. He watched in horror as his hand lowered to Rogers's chest. The feel of such tough yet smooth skin burned into him, and he drowned in desire.

Rogers took him by complete surprise. In seconds, he turned from dead to the world to violently aggressive, shoving McKinley across the room into the wall. Shocked he hadn't seen that coming and dazed by Rogers's brute strength, McKinley needed a moment to get his bearings. When he looked at Rogers again, he found a beast only a head shorter than himself. Darker skin covered the creature staring at him with glowing green eyes. Rogers's hair had thickened and lengthened, and he resembled a barbarian of old clothed in *nothing at all*.

McKinley growled with need, frustration, and sheer hunger. *This male belongs to me. This male I can take.* He looked forward to burying his cock in that ass, to even taking that thick, dusky shaft in his own mouth.

"McKinley. I knew you'd come." Rogers growled and flexed his arms, his biceps tight with packed muscle. His cock rose, as large as McKinley's. So powerful, this Circ wouldn't break easily, if at all. The notion overjoyed him.

"I saw Paige. She seems well."

"She's good." Rogers opened and closed his fists, showcasing lethal claws. When he spoke, his fangs appeared, and the thought of him biting into McKinley's flesh made McKinley quiver with desire. "Excited to see me?" Rogers nodded at McKinley's obvious arousal.

The jeans he wore didn't disguise his massive hard-on straining at the seams. "I should ask you that." McKinley licked his lips, delighted by Rogers's scowl.

"Fuck it. You came here for more than a fight. I can smell it." Rogers cupped his balls and stroked himself. "We both know you owe me for that psychic bullshit from before. Hell, I'll call it even. You want it? Come suck it."

"I'll take what I want, when I want." McKinley felt the familiar desire and anticipation he'd felt the other night. In the park, when they'd started toward each other, his beast hadn't wanted to hurt Rogers. He'd wanted to play with him, to demand a show of strength. "You owe me one, Rogers. Bend over the bed, and I promise not to hurt you."

Rogers bared his fangs and smiled. Lust uncurled in McKinley's body, his sole intention to conquer and claim this male, *his* male. And then Rogers hit him full force, and the fight was on.

## Chapter Eight

Despite McKinley's yellow eyes, claws, and fangs, he resembled a man, if a freakishly large man. So Hale was unprepared for the toughness of his skin. Punches glanced off his belly and chest. McKinley caught his last blow and wrapped Hale in his massive arms. Braced chest to chest, Hale should have locked his lips around McKinley's jugular and ripped his throat out. With his mouth almost level with the man's neck, it was the perfect weak point to exploit.

But Hale couldn't think past the desire exploding through his body. His beast thrilled at the sensation of this male against him. Just as he'd been with Paige, Hale wanted nothing more than to take McKinley and fuck him. But McKinley wouldn't accept anything less than Hale's submission. He instinctively knew that, but he didn't know what to do about it.

McKinley threw him to the ground and they rolled over, each scrambling to be on top. Hale ended up on the bottom and sucked in a breath when McKinley deliberately became deadweight. *Shit*. The bastard weighed a ton, and in the time it took Hale to catch his breath, McKinley had leaned down and taken one of his nipples between his teeth.

Stunned at the feel of this male's lips on him, Hale froze.

McKinley groaned and closed his eyes, sucking on the nub like a starving man. "So fucking good," he murmured and licked, bit, and teased until Hale wanted to explode.

The scent of evergreen appeared out of nowhere, drawing Hale deeper into McKinley's web. *Too easy. Not right. More, need to fight*. His beast raged at him to fight back, now, while McKinley's attention was distracted.

Forcing himself to obey, Hale thrust McKinley from him and regained his feet. He crouched, waiting to spring into action. McKinley rolled to his feet quickly, but he had to be in pain. His jeans stretched tight across his crotch.

"My house, my territory, my rules," Hale growled. "Make it easy on yourself. Submit."

"In your dreams, Rogers. But I'll make it as fair as I can for you." McKinley threw his jacket to the floor. He tore off his shirt and kicked off his boots. Clad in jeans and nothing else, the man made Hale want to check for drool.

"Holy shit." Hale stared in fascination at McKinley's body. Hell, he was even bigger than Roane. Which made Hale wonder if he was as big all over. Unconsciously, his gaze sought McKinley's crotch again. Mindless with desire, he stood and gripped himself, locked in pure need.

The asshole took his moment of weakness and turned it to his advantage. McKinley caught Hale in the middle with his shoulder. He took him down like a linebacker and pinned him to the ground. Their bare chests rubbed together, the slight pelt of dark hair over McKinley's pecs throwing Hale past rational thought.

"Fuck. If I don't come soon, I'm gonna go crazy," Hale breathed, staring into McKinley's eyes. Up close, they looked like cat eyes, slumberous, seductive, conniving. As he stared, McKinley's pupils dilated.

"I hurt," the big guy rumbled. "I ache all the time." He rubbed his jean-clad hard-on against Hale's cock, and the movement nearly broke him.

"Mating heat," Hale managed and licked his lips, eager for a taste of McKinley's salty skin. "You need another Circ. I can smell it."

"No. I need *you*."

When Hale would have reached up to touch McKinley, the Circ caught his hands and pinned them to the floor above his head. It was the most erotic thing he'd ever experienced. With Roane he willingly submitted. McKinley forced him to acknowledge his place. The beast accepted him without pause, even as Hale struggled to come to grips with what sex with McKinley might mean. He tugged at his hands, but McKinley tightened his grip.

"McKinley, dammit, let go."

"No," he breathed. "God, you feel so good. I'm burning up. Never felt...like...this."

Hale stared at him in surprise. "Not even with Paige?" he rasped, forcing himself not to turn and bare his neck, to feel the male's hot breath over his skin and throat.

"Afraid...to hurt her. No sex." McKinley moaned and suctioned his mouth to Hale's throat.

The pleasure was more than Hale could bear. To his astonishment, his dick swelled, then pulsed under McKinley. He cried out as he came hard and long without wanting to.

McKinley sucked harder, then let go. He lifted his head, and Hale saw drops of his own blood clinging to the male's lips. "You taste so good," the Circ said thickly, then plastered his mouth to Hale's. The kiss was rough and dominating, and so damned right that Hale sighed into McKinley's mouth. *My surrender is yours.*

McKinley froze and pulled away, his beast no doubt sensing his triumph. He stared down at Hale, and whatever he saw must have satisfied him. He quickly backed away and stood, stripping off the rest of his clothing. In seconds, he knelt over Hale with that enormous, slick cock.

"Finally. Gonna take what I really need," McKinley growled. "Give you what *you* need. Spread your legs."

Hale regarded him with a hint of challenge, knowing what his mate — *this male*, he corrected his beast — really needed.

McKinley swore and knelt between his thighs. "Little bastard. You know you're mine. I said spread your fucking legs." Not giving Hale a chance to disobey again, he put his hands on Hale's thighs and moved them himself. In the process, he slid his hands over Hale's seed. On a groan, he lowered his head to Hale's cock and took a good, hard lick. Then he sucked Hale's dick into his mouth until he had Hale hard and willing once more.

*Need to come again, to mark my mate. Mine. Mine and hers,* his beast growled.

McKinley wouldn't let him climax. He let go of Hale's cock and leaned over him. "Now, you're going to accept me, aren't you, Hale?"

Hale couldn't refuse, though he wanted to. He groaned as McKinley positioned himself between his legs. Moving Hale's legs over his shoulders, McKinley prodded for entrance and slowly pushed himself inside. Even *changed*, Hale felt the intrusion burn through his ass. But the need only grew.

"Yes," McKinley moaned, his eyes wild as his scent filled the room. "God, yes." He sank his entire length, then began pumping. "Can't stop. *Can't stop*," he breathed as he pistoned like a madman, seeking that respite only a Circ could give him. Fire blazed in his eyes as he stared down at Hale, locked in a lover's rough embrace.

Hale accepted the stronger male's taking, the discomfort only heightening his pleasure each time McKinley fucked him harder. "Mark me," he whispered.

"I will. Shit, ah." McKinley moaned and stilled as the scent of cum filled the air. After a moment, he continued to move, sliding in and out of Hale's ass with an ecstatic expression on his face.

Hale had never seen a man so beautiful, so raw. McKinley's orgasm made his dick ache. He was just as hard as before, needing to come. *To mark my mate.*

When McKinley finally allowed Hale to lower his legs again, Hale groaned and tried to reach for his cock, needing relief.

"No. Mine." McKinley withdrew from Hale's ass and swallowed Hale's cock to the back of his throat.



Archling into that hot, wet mouth, Hale tried to fuck as deeply as he could. Then McKinley's tongue stroked him, licking away, increasing his pleasure. A finger prodded his ass, this time shoving deep to brush against his prostate.

Hale cried out as he came, shuddering when McKinley massaged his balls with an expertise that shocked him. The giant Circ was the best fuck Hale had ever had, and he'd topped Hale with little effort.

Instead of feeling dominated and taken, Hale felt at peace.

Glancing down at the male still licking him clean, his beast found a kinship with McKinley's wild side. Solid, warm contentment settled over him, and he reached for McKinley without thinking about it. Giving in to his beast, Hale rolled the male onto his back and stretched out over him like a blanket.

He lay there, listening to McKinley's racing heart. Content to lie there forever, it was a moment before he realized McKinley's arms had circled his body, and that he'd *changed* back without thought.

Sighing at the perfect moment, Hale rubbed his cheek against McKinley's chest and closed his eyes, trying to keep the rest of the world at bay. The PPA, Pearson Labs, McKinley's part in working for the enemy, Paige... At thoughts of his missing mate, Hale's beast woke and demanded they find her. *Get our female. Tie her to us. Bring her here. Need to fill her with seed.*

"Shit, not now."

"Huh? Problem?" McKinley sounded less than concerned, his voice thick, as if he teetered on the verge of sleep.

When Hale made to rise, McKinley wrapped his arms around his waist and tightened his grip. Hale's cock brushed his new lover's, and he groaned at the answering heat between them. Damn, but this joining had been as hot as his turn with Paige, which brought into question how she'd react to this news.

As much as Roane might advise Hale to go with his dreams and instincts, Hale knew none of them were ready for McKinley, including him. He didn't know if he could trust the male, but he did know Paige loved him. The jealousy that should have been there at that thought didn't come, and Hale worried even more. Because he wanted Paige to see them. He wanted Paige to join them. Right here. Right now. Paige and McKinley and Hale. What a mess.

McKinley could only lay there, staring at the ceiling in shock. His arms had moved of their own accord, his beast not willing to let Rogers—*Hale*—escape. *This* was what he'd been missing. This complete and total sense of inner peace. His and Hale's scents had merged, and now a pleasant aroma of vanilla and evergreen lay over the room. The only thing missing from this scenario was Paige.

He stroked Hale's back, surprised and overjoyed that the man didn't try to leave again. If anything, he moved his ear closer to McKinley's heart. A rumbling moved through Hale into him. Dear God, he—they—were *purring*. He'd heard about a few

instances of such in the labs, but he hadn't believed it to be true. Circs purred when content, and most of the rogues in Pearson Labs were anything but.

Hale sighed, his breath stirring McKinley's left nipple into a hard nub. Though the desperation to claim Hale had faded, his arousal seemed to be rousing again. Amazed that instead of an aching lust, he felt a sense of pride and tenderness toward Hale, once again smaller than himself. McKinley didn't know what to think.

"We need to talk," Hale murmured. His palm drifted over McKinley's broad chest, and he toyed with one taut nipple.

Heat streaked through him. "So talk. And move your hand, while you're at it," he grumbled. *Unless you want another load in that fine ass.*

"Sorry." Hale removed his hand as if burned. On a sigh, he tried to slide away.

"It's okay. Stay." He hoped Hale wasn't looking at his face, because it felt hot. Embarrassed that he wanted to maintain contact, McKinley wasn't sure how to act. He'd never in his life felt so confused about anyone, with the exception of Paige.

Hale settled back onto him but levered himself on his arms to look down. Their gazes caught and held. "For someone so ugly, you make me awfully hard."

Startled at the teasing note he hadn't expected to hear, McKinley grinned back. "Back at ya, playboy."

Hale frowned. "How did you know they call me that?"

And so the "honeymoon" ended. He groaned. "Maybe you'd better get off me so we can talk. Circ to Circ." He coughed and reached for his jeans. "And maybe we'd better cover up." *Before I fuck you again.*

"Good idea." Hale flushed and turned away. He reached in a drawer and threw on a pair of shorts.

Once standing and facing one another, McKinley started. "I've been working for Pearson Labs for three years."

"Yeah, as Pearl's bodyguard."

"That's what he thought."

"Oh? Oh... So you're telling me you killed Pearl?"

McKinley scowled. "What the hell kind of leap in logic is that? No, I didn't kill Pearl. I wish I knew who did. I'd hang a fucking medal on him." *Or her.* He thought of Paige. "I work for someone else interested in what the labs are up to."

"You're kidding. So you aren't one of Pearl's boys? But you're Circ. How do you explain that?"

"I don't, not yet. Hell, even Paige doesn't know everything about me." *Even I don't know everything about me.* Anytime he tried to remember, the headaches and the attacks started.

"But you tried to kill me and Derrick. You threatened Sabrina."

"Come on, Hale. If I'd wanted you idiots dead, you wouldn't be sitting here right now. And yes, I threatened Sabrina, because she'll get herself killed if she goes back to the labs. Pearl had ugly plans for her. For all of you, eventually." Hawkins's gruff request for assistance replayed in his mind's eye. "A lot of people are depending on me to stop Pearson Labs."

"Hey, I'd like nothing better than to burn that place to the ground. For some reason, they've let us be for years, and Doc's ordered us to leave them alone. I used to think it was because he didn't want to put us in danger. Then I thought it was because of his ties to Elliot. You know they're half brothers."

"I know. What Doc probably doesn't know is that Pearson Labs wasn't under Elliot's control for the last two years. New management's taken over."

"Yeah, we figured that out. But we don't know who it is."

McKinley smiled and felt his fangs rip through his gums at the prospect of hunting down and killing Kohl. "I do. And when I'm done with him, he'll wish he'd never laid eyes on me." Knowing he needed to fill in Doc and the others, and not wanting to go through it twice, McKinley sighed. "You think I could tell you all at once? And I'd like to see Paige."

Hale nodded. "Good idea. Why don't we—I mean—you can shower first, if you want." He blushed again, and McKinley grinned. "Fuck off, you monster."

The insult rolled off his back. From Hale, the word "monster" sounded like an endearment. And Hale's blush contradicted the gruff warrior McKinley knew him to be.

"Monster, huh? You mean my monster cock, don't you? That big shaft that has you aching to suck it whole? You like my cum, don't you, playboy?" He could smell Hale's arousal, and he ached to take him again. "Sure you don't want to share the shower?"

Hale's shorts tented in front of him. "Dammit. Leave my hormones alone. Take your shower and clean up. I'm going to have a helluva time explaining you after bringing Paige home when she and I, ah..."

McKinley froze. "When you what?"

Hale met his gaze. "Damn it. We had sex, okay? We couldn't help it. Just like with you and me," he muttered and ran a hand through his hair. He faced McKinley as if facing a firing squad. "I'm sorry. I tried to resist her, I did. But then her scent hit me in the SUV. That small, cramped space filled with the sweet scent of cherries. All that Circ need, just the two of us... I lost it."

The image in McKinley's mind turned him on more than it should have, but he kept his cool. "Did Paige enjoy it?" he asked softly.

Hale swallowed. "Yeah, we both did."

McKinley nodded, turned on his heel, and entered the bathroom alone. The beast inside him purred again. His mates, together, so close... But the man felt hurt. The woman he loved had been with Hale, another Circ. Somehow, when she'd had sex with

human men, he'd been able to disregard it. She needed, and he couldn't give it to her. But Hale could; he had.

Wishing he could wash away the confusing hurt as easily as he washed away the grime over his body, McKinley took his time in the shower. Rationally, he understood what had happened. If Hale had felt an inkling of what McKinley had for him, then he couldn't have denied himself with Paige. Still, he needed to do something to vent his anger. He took longer than necessary to rid himself of the need to maim Hale. Once washed and dried, he held a large towel around his waist.

When he passed Hale on the way out to wait in his bedroom, Hale stopped him with a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry. I know she loves you, and I get the sense you love her right back. I feel like shit, and it's not my fault," he said through gritted teeth.

McKinley sensed regret, arousal, and an odd ache. *He hurts because I hurt.* Amazed, he regarded Hale with less upset and less rage. "You want to make it better?"

"Yeah." Hale warily stepped back. "I do."

McKinley dropped his towel and gripped his erection. "Get in the shower."

"Shit. This is gonna hurt, isn't it?"

"Yes, it will. For one of us."

Hale looked like he wanted to argue. He clenched his fists, frowned, and blew out a breath. "Dammit. I knew you were going to be trouble. My beast won't answer me. What the hell did you do?"

"Nothing. Probably your guilty conscience at work." McKinley couldn't have been more pleased. The rare times a Circ had failed to call forth his beast at Pearson Labs, Elliot had tied the instances to emotional, not physical, wounds. Hale honestly regretted hurting McKinley. The jerk *cared*.

Hale groaned. "I am so fucked."

"Yes, you really are."

## Chapter Nine

Simon Dunn stared at the pictures of Paige Masters and Hale Rogers on his desk. Paige looked as pretty in her photograph as she'd been five years ago when they'd dated. Rogers looked like a wild beast, his eyes glowing, his body inhumanly large and brutally strong. Elliot had hoped to breed the two. Something about Rogers's background appealed to Elliot, but damned if Simon could make heads or tails of his notes.

Punching several numbers into his phone, he called for Dr. Eckles. While waiting, he glanced from Paige's photo to the rest of his spacious office. So far, so good. His plan to climb the ranks in Pearson Labs had finally paid off. With Torrence gone, Pearl dead, and McKinley now missing, he had only two more major hurdles before he could take control of Pearson Labs: Kuntz and Kohl.

Senator Richard Kuntz wouldn't be a problem. The pussy loved the thought of being in charge, but he didn't have the stomach to do what needed to be done. Killing mutants and indoctrinating new Circs took a special hand. Simon considered himself perfect for the job. Though he had a less than stellar track record, he'd still done more to advance Pearl's agenda than any other PPA operative had.

Because of Simon, they'd captured Kelly Malloy. Through his efforts, they'd learned that Sabrina Torrence wasn't who she'd said she was. The bitch had actually sabotaged the initial Project Dawn. Incredible. And this latest piece of news, that McKinley wasn't a star performer, but one of Elliot's pet projects and a traitor at that, had made Simon a star.

General Kohl, his toughest obstacle, now treated him like a favored son. Though *Harold* didn't trust anyone, he called on Simon for more and more help. Playing it cool, Simon did whatever Kohl demanded with a keen attention to detail, which the general appreciated. Simon also took the initiative to further his own agenda.

In order to successfully run Pearson Labs once he eliminated Kohl and Kuntz, Simon needed a top science department in his pocket, as well as rogue Circs in his control. The strongest team, led by Hawkins and Hayashi, promised success. Especially since they knew they owed Simon for saving their asses after they'd lost McKinley.

Simon burned at thoughts of that freak on the loose. Though he didn't believe McKinley to be in league with Doc and his men, something about McKinley didn't fit. More than his abnormal Circ appearance and attributes, McKinley had an ability to look through a person and instill fear that Simon envied. Still, admiration for the male didn't mean McKinley wasn't disposable. If anything, his strength and apparent loyalty to Kuntz would have been a problem, had McKinley still been in the labs. Grateful that Kohl had taken care of that problem, at least, Simon set into motion the next part of his plan.

Dr. Eckles knocked at his open door.

"Come in, come in." Simon gestured for the man to enter.

Eckles did so, closing and locking the door behind him. He carried a small bag filled with Simon's weekly injection.

Simon tilted his head to the side and waited, pleased at the fear he could now smell wafting from Eckles like a cologne. The serum Eckles had perfected worked nearly as well as Elliot's. Too bad Elliot hadn't approved of Simon taking it without his permission. As if Elliot had any right to caution a willing test subject on the dangers of experimental gene therapy.

Simon waited for the ungodly pain to hit.

Eckles pushed the plunger into his neck, then quickly withdrew it. He leaped back from Simon, cautious after that last belt in the face.

Simon swallowed his pain but couldn't help the tremors that shook him. He wiped the red tears from his eyes and the inevitable nosebleed. For a moment, his vision swam with darkness. And then it vanished, and he felt ten times stronger.

"May I take a few notes?" Eckles asked meekly.

Simon nodded. "Go ahead. And while you're at it, tell me if you've heard anything more about Subject 31."

Eckles took Simon's temperature, blood pressure, and asked several questions about Simon's state of health. After jotting down his notes, Eckles tucked away his notebook and sat across from Simon's desk. "Subject 31 is still nowhere to be found. Our mutants haven't traced her scent, nor have our PPA and rogue Circs seen her. There's been little movement at the compound, but we can't be sure about Circe's Recruits' involvement. From what I've gathered from Elliot's notes, however, I doubt Subject 31 would go there."

"Why is that?" Simon still got hard remembering Paige's loveliness. He'd been more than willing to have sex with her all those years ago. Elliot had thought she might finally *change* if introduced to enough stress, while Simon had prayed she wouldn't. The thought of fucking not only a beautiful woman, but Elliot's precious daughter, had been

too much of a temptation to resist. Elliot had been overjoyed when Paige displayed Circ tendencies. So much so that he'd overlooked Paige's accusations of attempted rape. Simon had countered that she'd been in heat, and that she'd aggressively tried to challenge him. Elliot had bought the explanation, that or he hadn't wanted to acknowledge how cold he was to offer his daughter to a bastard like Simon.

The sheer genius of Simon's plan sat in his mind, his alone to savor. Oddly enough, Simon found himself missing his old partner and friend, Vincent Hoff, who'd died six months ago. Vincent had had the same appetites as Simon. Unfortunately, he'd been torn apart by a rogue Circ. Ah, well, at least he'd gone out swinging.

"Mr. Dunn?"

"Sorry, Eckles, my mind wanders a bit after the drug. Must be McKinley's rebellious blood at work." He smiled, pleased at the irony of the situation. The control drug that turned Circs into mutants turned humans into supermen. If Kohl and Kuntz weren't such pussies, they'd have realized the applications and tried the control drug themselves.

"As I was saying, I don't think Subject 31 will attempt to see Dr. Evan Dennis. While undergoing treatment here, Elliot often spoke of his half brother. He seemed to like the man, and if you consider how much Paige Masters loathed her father, it would only be natural that she hated anyone he particularly liked. To her, Dr. Dennis probably seems like an extension of Elliot."

"Hmm, good point. But we can't be too sure of anything." Dreamily, Simon imagined capturing the Circ females he'd once lost. Caitlyn Chase, Sabrina Torrence, and Paige Masters. He envisioned them chained in one of the subbasement cells, waiting on their knees to serve him. God, the things he would do...

Eckles gasped. "Tilt your head back."

Something pressed to Simon's face. "Hmm?"

"The nosebleed is back, and it's heavy. Nothing to worry about, but it wouldn't be a bad idea for me to take a few samples for tests."

"Whatever." Simon struggled to regain his wits. He had a meeting with Rojo, a liaison to several stateside and South American drug cartels in need of better security. Simon would deal with this man the way he'd dealt with several others, in secret and for a ton of cash. Untraceable dollars to increase his growing base of power. Already one team of rogues he'd farmed out had made him a hundred thousand, and they'd only lost one Circ in the process. They'd recovered police-confiscated drugs worth millions.

Kohl and Kuntz had no idea how to use Project Dawn. As military alternatives? Government-contracted business? To barter with other nations on a scientific playing field? Fuck that.

"Sir, I'm going to return to my lab. I'll let you know about the results." Eckles sounded shaky.

"Fine. But buck up, man. Don't be such a spineless asshole if you can help it." Simon snickered. Pearl had been a dick, but he'd had balls. Doc hadn't been easy to work around, but during Simon's time with the first Project Dawn, he'd recognized the misguided integrity in the man. Simon could tolerate assholes as long as they had conviction.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir." Eckles unlocked the door and practically ran from the room.

Sighing, Simon closed the folder before him and locked it away. He took a few phone calls, then walked down the stairs to clear his head. Glad that Kohl and Kuntz didn't need him again until tomorrow, he sought out Hawkins and found him in the lower levels.

Hawkins watched a new set of mutants battling each other in a contained subbasement cell. The ink black monsters barely looked human. One male had two legs as long as his torso, with arms that compensated for his odd height. He walked about on all fours, like a mutant gorilla. His eyes were red, his teeth huge and splitting his lips with every roar of challenge he issued to the other in his cell.

The other mutant stood as large as Hawkins. He looked like any other rogue Circ, except for his black skin and red eyes.

"That's Jenkins." Hawkins didn't turn around. "He just turned this morning."

"Too bad." Simon didn't give a shit. He watched as what used to be Jenkins succumbed to the other thing biting and drooling over him. In seconds the fight turned carnal, and Simon stared, captivated by the bloody sex making a mess all over the floor. "Quite an appetite, hmm?"

Hawkins turned to him, and Simon started at the anger seething in the rogue's gaze. Inhuman rage burned and then was suddenly banked. Simon blinked, wondering what he'd seen. The injection Eckles gave him sometimes muddled his perceptions.

"Mr. Dunn?"

"Oh, right. Grab Hayashi and Tersch and meet me in the garage. We have a meeting on the outside. Keep it quiet."

"Yes, sir."

Simon loved these Navy freaks. He himself had tried to enlist the minute he'd turned eighteen. Unfortunately, his asshole father had talked to someone in *all four* of the recruiting offices he'd visited. And Simon had been turned away. The dickhead had even managed to infect the local and federal police departments before succumbing to a most unfortunate accident, leaving poor Simon Dunn Owen Jr. all alone in the world. Colonel Simon Dunn Owen's way of trying to control his son from beyond the grave. No federal department would hire him, not until he'd joined Elliot Pearl in Project Dawn.

Suddenly enraged at his father's duplicity, Simon's hungers surged. He snapped at one of the techs in a white coat. The male knew what he wanted. Simon was a regular down here. After turning off the camera in a particular cell, the technician directed Simon to his favorite room. The female rogue beyond the glassed wall of her cell ripped



at her restraints and cried out, but Simon could only see her mouth moving. He couldn't hear her beyond the soundproof glass.

"Make sure I'm not disturbed for the next ten minutes."

"Yes, Mr. Dunn." The tech nodded and stepped away, dimming the interior lights.

At the sight, the female opened and closed her mouth, tearing violently at the bands around her wrists. A new Circ, she hadn't quite gotten the hang of *changing*, much to Simon's delight.

He entered her cell and unbuttoned his trousers, more than ready to satisfy his needs. Hawkins and the others could wait. This wouldn't take long. He stared at the blood staining the leather restraints and smelled the tang of copper in the air.

No. This wouldn't take long at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hale had timed his entry well. His squad joked and annoyed one another in the family room, waiting for the women to prepare dinner. Since Diego, their cook and Doc's traitorous lover, had left them three months ago, the women had taken to fixing the meals. Doc helped every now and again, but Kelly liked to dominate in the kitchen. Probably dominated in the bedroom too, if that satisfied look on her mates' faces was anything to go by.

"Come on, playboy. Stop stalling," McKinley rasped in his ear.

Shaking off the uncomfortable desire that swept over him again, Hale prayed his discomfort didn't show. His ass felt like hell, taking forever to heal. The damned monster behind him had fucked him raw, and he hated the fact that he not only deserved the pain, but that he had accepted and even gotten off on it. Shit. No wonder McKinley refused to have sex with Paige. In her human form, she'd break over that thick cock.

And speaking of Paige... She looked right at home smiling and laughing with the women in the kitchen. So goddamn gorgeous, so generous. If Hale didn't know better, he'd swear he was falling in love with her.

"Paige," McKinley whispered, longing in his voice. "She looks good." His hand grazed Hale's as they walked out of the hallway.

The connection settled Hale. Having Paige and McKinley together eased his worries, and he breathed a sigh of relief to feel his inner beast settling back into his skin. To have gone even a second without his beast there guiding him had felt like being blind. He'd lost a crucial part of himself, and while knowing he'd owed McKinley, he hadn't liked being without the wildness that was a part of him.

Roane was the first to spot McKinley, who strangely enough projected no scent of his own. He smelled instead like Hale.

"Shit. I knew it." Roane stood, and the others stood with him as well.

Ace and Zack vaulted over the kitchen counters to protect Kelly. Sabrina swore and took a step back. Caitlyn simply stared, her mouth open.

"Robbie!" Paige cried and flew at him. Hale stepped in front of McKinley to hold his friends back while McKinley accepted Paige in his arms. When no one made a move to interfere, he stepped back to keep an eye on McKinley.

"Robbie?" Derrick looked at Hale. "That asshole has a first name?"

Sabrina answered from the kitchen. "Who knew?"

"Easy, everyone. This is McKinley." Hale cleared his throat when everyone stared at him. "He comes in peace, to serve man," he joked, referencing the monstrous robot from *War of the Worlds*. Unfortunately, no one laughed with him.

"You don't have to protect me, playboy," McKinley growled. He caged Paige protectively in his arms, but he glared at Roane, as if in challenge.

*Terrific. Just what we don't need. A territorial battle.*

Hale snarled at McKinley in a low voice, "Would you tone it the fuck down? We're here for a discussion, not a damned no-holds-barred match."

At that moment, Doc entered through the back door into the kitchen. "Paige?" he called out. "I found a few more photos..." His voice trailed off as he took in the situation.

Hale sighed. "Would you all please settle down? McKinley isn't going to eat anyone, I promise. And Paige? Maybe you and he could sit together over there." He pointed to an overlarge sitting chair in the living room. When no one moved, he tried again. "Look, I'll vouch for him. The rest of you, continue with dinner."

Sabrina narrowed her eyes. "Kind of bossy, aren't you? Anytime you want to peel potatoes, you let me know."

Kelly smirked, totally ignoring McKinley's threatening presence. "Good one."

The men continued to stand, their claws bared, waiting to fight.

"Sit down," Hale yelled, pleased when they shifted their shocked gazes from McKinley to him.

"Easy, playboy." Roane was the first to back down. "We're just a little startled. We didn't realize we had *two* of Pearson Labs' finest."

"Dick," McKinley snarled, understanding the insult even though Paige didn't seem to. Unfortunately, everyone else did.

Hale's rage bubbled perilously out of control. When he would have advanced on Roane, Caitlyn hurried to step in the middle. At the same time, McKinley stepped forward and put Paige behind him. But as soon as he locked eyes on Caitlyn, he blinked hard and fell to his knees.

"Robbie?" Paige was by him in an instant, as was Hale.

"Dammit," Hale swore, pulling McKinley to the chair he'd tried to get the male into earlier. "What's wrong?"

"Let me through," Doc ordered. He pushed his way past the Circes hovering close and would have put his hands on McKinley, but Hale intervened.

"Ah, go easy, Doc. He's not always rational. I don't want him to hurt you."

"Playboy, screw you," McKinley breathed. "Not...gonna hurt...Paige's uncle. Diego's friend."

Everyone froze at mention of Diego, and then the noise grew deafening as they all insisted McKinley explain himself.

"Quiet," Doc yelled, getting instant results. "Now, McKinley, open your eyes."

He did, and Hale was relieved to see them still that pale yellow. His new lover took a deep breath but kept himself from looking at anyone but Doc, Hale, or Paige.

"What happened?"

McKinley growled, but Paige cupped his cheek so tenderly it made Hale want to purr. *Right. Mates together. Good.*

"He has attacks sometimes," Paige answered quietly. "He doesn't think I know, but I do."

"Paige," McKinley rumbled. "Shut up."

"Don't tell her to shut up," Caitlyn said.

McKinley groaned again and leaned his head back over the edge of the chair. "Can someone get that female out of the room?"

"That's a good idea," Roane agreed. "I think all the women should leave."

"Hell no," Sabrina argued. "I'm not about to let that man around my mate. No way."

"Still got your claws, eh, Torrence?" McKinley drawled.

"Hell. Caitlyn, would you please take Kelly to our room for a bit?" Roane asked. "I promise, we'll get you both right back out here. But Ace and Zack are practically foaming at the mouth with the need to protect their mate."

"Then maybe *they* should take Kelly away," Caitlyn snapped.

To Hale's surprise, McKinley formed the semblance of a grin.

"Hellcat, baby, please?" Roane asked again through gritted teeth.

Hale knew he was going easy on her because of the new baby. "Roane, did you happen to mention —"

"Shut the fuck up, Hale," Roane warned, which had McKinley and Paige growling right back at him.

"As entertaining as all of this is," Doc said with a surprising smile, "I think Caitlyn and Kelly should leave for a time. I'll come to retrieve you myself, ladies. Please. We need some answers, answers we're not going to get with you two here. And I dearly want to hear what Mr. McKinley has to say about Diego."

Caitlyn looked like she wanted to argue, but she took a hard look at Doc and nodded. "Come on, Kelly. Let's go."

Kelly muttered under her breath, glared at her mates to behave, then left with Caitlyn.

The minute they disappeared, McKinley raised his head and stared at everyone. He gripped Hale's elbow with one hand and eased Paige over his lap with his other. When Hale moved to rise, the Circ forced him to sit on the arm of the chair, and Hale surprised himself by not arguing.

Roane raised a brow but said nothing about the seating arrangement. "Guys, in here. *Now*." He waited until Zack and Ace joined Derrick, Sabrina, and him on the sectional sofa. Doc sat with them as well, and everyone waited for McKinley to speak.

Paige's hand rested on Hale's thigh, and he subtly moved closer, pleased to feel her body heat and McKinley's so close to him.

"Where do you want me to start?" McKinley muttered.

"Tell me about Diego." Doc hadn't been lying. He really did want to know about his lover.

McKinley sighed. "Diego misses you like you can't believe."

Doc started. "What?"

"He was assigned to watch over you at the beginning of the initial project. But he was never required to fu—" He paused to look at Paige and cleared his throat. "He wasn't supposed to get involved with you. He's in some serious trouble right now because of it."

"Trouble with who?" Derrick asked.

Hale wanted to know that too.

"Right now, you have more pressing problems. General Kohl and Senator Kuntz are running Pearson Labs. Simon Dunn is on a one-way trip to hell, because he's doping with something that Eckles is giving him. They've successfully started the new breeding project, and I'd venture to say that as soon as Malloy gives birth, the labs are coming after you, here, at the compound."

"My God," Doc breathed.

Zack and Ace started swearing, Derrick growled, Sabrina gasped, and Roane glared at McKinley with murderous rage. Hale stared at McKinley, wondering at the even tone that delivered such earth-shattering news.

"Oh, and the new control drug they've manufactured is what's turning Circs into mutants. It's a compound based on my DNA," he said over their voices to Doc.

"Robbie," Paige whispered. "What are we going to do?"

"Yeah, what the hell are you going to do?" Hale asked, angry that his mate—*this male*, he corrected his beast—didn't seem the least bit affected by anything he'd just mentioned. To his surprise, the fury in McKinley's eyes took him aback.

"What am I going to do? Easy. I'm going to destroy Pearson Labs with Diego, my contact, and with General Mike Shields, who's been investigating Pearl, Kuntz, and Pearson Labs since it reopened. This time, the devil's going to get his due."

## Chapter Ten

Evan stared in astonishment at the giant sitting with his niece and Hale. It didn't take a scientist to see that there was much more to this McKinley than met the eye. From what Doc had gathered from Sabrina's, Derrick's, and Hale's comments, McKinley was a puzzle. A Circ who didn't look Circ, but who possessed the capabilities of one.

And he worked with Diego.

Evan's heart pounded at mention of the man he loved like no other. He'd given Diego his heart and soul eight years ago. Love at first sight, an odd reaction for a man of science. But from the first, he'd felt an instant connection. When Diego had betrayed him, he'd felt as bad, if not worse, than he had when he'd learned about what Elliot had done to his Circs. Injecting men with a serum that would forever change them, turning most of them into murdering psychopaths, shouldn't have equated to having one's heart broken, but there it was.

He struggled to focus on the important things McKinley mentioned, yet his pulse raced at thoughts of Diego. *"Diego misses you like you can't believe."*

"Start at the beginning," Roane demanded. "Where the hell did you even come from?"

McKinley shifted, his huge bulk a threat in itself. What intrigued Evan about him, however, was the gentle way he held Paige and the almost proprietary manner with which he regarded Hale. Very interesting.

The large Circ didn't blink, his yellow eyes fastened on Roane. "I was born to two loving people. They didn't know what Pearl had really done to them when they had me. That's another story not relevant to what you really want to know. Suffice it to say, I hold no love for Elliot Pearl. All I am is because of him."

Paige squeezed her way closer to his chest, and Evan watched as Hale rested a hand on her shoulder.

"None of what Pearl's done is Paige's fault. She's as much a victim of his ego as the rest of you," McKinley continued.

"We're not arguing that." Roane glanced at her. "Paige, we're not angry at you, but we hold no love for your father."

"Yeah, well, neither do I," she said angrily.

"Good girl." Derrick nodded. "Yeah, you'll fit in right nice here." He gave Hale a meaningful glance, and Evan understood the team would be behind Hale's mating with Paige. With McKinley, he wasn't so certain.

McKinley explained, "When I joined Pearson Labs, it was after they tore Project Dawn apart. I'd been keeping tabs on Pearl for a while. I didn't know what he'd done to Paige, though. If I had, I'd have rescued you a helluva lot sooner," he said to her.

"I know," she murmured.

"But when I found him outnumbered and nearly brained to death by a few rogues in a killing frenzy, I took a shot and stepped up. I entered Pearson Labs as Elliot's bodyguard, a position he was hoping Hale would one day hold."

"Hale?" Evan saw the confusion on Hale's face and turned back to McKinley. "Why Hale?"

McKinley paused, his eyes on Hale with a tender understanding that stunned Evan. Evan glanced around the room and noted the resigned look on Roane's face and the incredulous expressions on the others.

"Oh, hell no. Come on, playboy. At least Sabrina's good-looking," Derrick complained.

"Oh my God." Sabrina stared, wide-eyed.

"No fucking way," Ace and Zack said at the same time. More and more, the two of them seemed to finish one another's sentences. And when Kelly was in the same room with them, it was a toss-up to see which mate spoke for the other.

"Cut it out," Hale hissed and nudged McKinley's arm. Evan caught the scent of evergreen and watched in shock as McKinley flushed and coughed to hide his embarrassment.

"Fine." McKinley glared, his eyes eerily wild. "Rogers is a freaky psychic, and Pearl wanted to breed him with Paige. Happy now?" he asked Hale.

Hale ran a hand over his face. "Shit."

"Hale's psychic?" Evan frowned. "Hale, you've never said anything about that before."

"Because I wasn't. I mean, my parents were, and a lot of my relatives can do stuff, but it never hit me until...Paige."

"His wacko dreams," Derrick offered. "Hale's been dreaming about her for months."

Paige sat up and stared at Hale. "You have?"

Hale stood and walked away from the pair on the chair. He leaned against the kitchen counter, looking uncomfortable. "Can we get back on topic? McKinley, tell us what you know about Pearl."

McKinley scowled at him, showing a hint of fangs, and Evan itched to study the male. Something about him seemed so familiar yet so foreign at the same time. He wished he could put his finger on it.

"Fine. Be a dick," McKinley muttered. He slid out from underneath Paige and stood, running a hand through his hair. "I took the job with Pearl only after I'd taken a job with General Shields. Mike Shields is a stand-up guy. He always hated the project. He didn't trust it, didn't like the idea of science messing with perfectly good Marines and sailors."

"So when it was under way, he kept a close eye on things from the inside. After everything went to shit, he continued to watch Elliot Pearl. He'd heard rumors of more government interference. The Senate committee hearings that should have happened were swept under the rug. No way the Defense Department wanted to publicize that nightmare."

Evan sighed. "I can well imagine. Rogue Circs murdering innocent civilians would go a long way to ruining careers. With Elliot's money and contacts, it would have been easy to make everything go away."

"Yeah. So he started making new Circs. After a year of going it his own way, he needed more funding. He couldn't get money from investors and continue with his mad science at the pace he wanted." McKinley paused to run a hand over Paige's hair. The instant connection between the pair was obvious. Hale seemed to approve of the casual touching. But when he saw Evan looking his way, he tightened his jaw and hardened his glare.

"Is that when Senator Kuntz got involved?" Zack asked, sitting close to Ace. The pair always sat together, touching more often than not. Like Hale had been with McKinley.

Not sure if he liked thoughts of his niece with not one, but two men, Evan mentally castigated himself. Who was he to judge? He knew better than most that Circs didn't fit into any mold. Instinct and basic necessity played a greater role in Circ relationships than anything science could describe.

McKinley nodded at Zack. "Kuntz jumped at the chance to be a part of Elliot's nonsense. So two years ago, he came aboard. And then General Harold Kohl stepped in." The hatred in McKinley's golden eyes blazed. "The bastard kept it quiet. None of us knew who he was, but we all knew Elliot wasn't calling the shots anymore. Not that Elliot seemed to care. He worked all day and night in his damned labs. The blood work

he'd taken from me, the stuff I thought I'd disposed of when no one was looking, found a way into his research after all.

"The new mutants are a result of using the control drug—generated with my blood—on rogue Circs. At first it worked to delay the inevitable change that turned the rogues psychotic. But then it did more than that. They grew stronger, faster. And then they turned into something monstrous."

"We know," Ace said quietly, probably recounting his own experience with a mutant a few months back. Had it not been for Zack, he might have died under a mutant's sharp claws and teeth.

McKinley looked to Evan. "I need you to develop a cure. More, I need you to find a way to slow the rogue transformation. There are some good men in there who need help. But they can't get it from the labs."

"What do you mean?" Paige asked, her brows drawn.

"I was getting to this. Yesterday, someone ratted me out to Kohl. I'm no longer any use there."

"Do you know who it was?" Hale asked.

"Simon Dunn."

Roane swore. "That shithead? He's still alive? He's been so quiet, I thought Derrick had killed him last time they met."

"We should be so lucky," Derrick muttered. "Asshole tried to kill Sabrina."

Sabrina glared. "Tell me about it."

"And kidnapped Kelly." Ace swore. Zack growled.

"Let's not forget what he did to Caitlyn," Roane added. "Bastard tried to rape her with that creep Vincent Hoff."

Evan watched McKinley's reaction. Caitlyn sparked an odd reaction in the male. The mention and sight of her seemed to pain him.

"Hoff's dead," McKinley said, rubbing his forehead.

"We know. A rogue female killed him six months ago," Roane said in a low voice, the challenge in his gaze as he stared at McKinley impossible to miss.

"I killed him six months ago. The female was already dead. Hoff was—" He stopped to look at Paige and sighed. "Hoff wasn't right. He did bad things, things you really don't need to know about. He died wishing he'd been a little nicer."

"Good," Paige growled, stirring Hale to move away from the counter. The room suddenly smelled like cherries.

"Paige?" Hale and McKinley spoke at the same time. Evan didn't know what to make of his niece, for she suddenly stood and began *growing*.

Her eyes flashed from a light to a darker brown, and her pupils elongated. She didn't quite *change*, but she definitely looked larger.

The others rose from the couch, but McKinley barked at them to stay back.



"Do it," Roane said, and they listened. All but Hale, who continued to approach Paige.

"I'm so tired of hearing about Elliot Pearl. He was a monster who let people like Simon Dunn and Vincent Hoff treat Circs as no more than slaves. They raped and murdered," she cried, her nails sharpening to impressive lengths. Still, she looked normal. Her skin remained an olive gold, her features still proportional and human.

McKinley tried to console her. "It's okay, honey. Dunn's not long for this world. The stuff he's taking is ruining him from the inside out. Eckles and I are friends, and he tells me things."

Evan leaned forward. "What kinds of things?"

"Uh, Doc? I think we might want to hold off on this conversation right now." Hale slowly crossed to stand between Paige and the others. "McKinley, what say we take her up to my room?"

Paige continued to rant. "He did terrible things. He didn't feel, didn't have a heart." She ripped through the chair's bolster, shredding the leather as if slicing through butter. When Roane took a step forward, she growled low, a warning to back away.

"Dammit, Roane. *Please*," Hale breathed. "Let me handle this."

"Let *us* handle this," McKinley corrected in that low, gravelly voice. "Except I'm not asking. I'm telling you to back the fuck up."

Seeing the unnecessary light of challenge in Roane's eyes, Evan suggested an alternative. "Hale? Why don't you and McKinley take Paige downstairs? I've just finished transforming the blue room into a comfortable area. You know, where Kelly, Zack, and Ace will go after the baby's born?"

Hale shook his head, as if trying to process Evan's words through the sweet smell of cherries in the air.

"Yeah, Hale," Roane said in a hoarse voice. "That's a really great idea."

Evan noted the sudden tension in the room that grabbed the others. He felt nothing, thankfully, but the Circs were definitely aroused. Whether pregnancy hormones had subtly affected Paige or not remained to be seen. But if she didn't get out of here soon, Evan feared a bloodbath, because McKinley appeared on the verge of seriously breaking down.

"Hale?" Evan said loudly, to be heard over all the growling. "Take your mates to the blue room. *Now*." He could see Hale fighting the *change*.

"Yeah, right. Blue room," he rumbled, his voice husky. "McKinley, follow me. Paige, come on."

Slowly, the three of them walked away, and Evan breathed a sigh of relief. Then he turned and took a good look at the others. "For the love of... Go find your mates."

With sheepish grins, the rest of Circe's Recruits departed, leaving Evan alone and lonely, and missing Diego once again.

Hale didn't know what to feel. It took most of his concentration to remember the pass codes to the elevator to take them to Doc's underground lab. The three of them fit in the steel-walled elevator, and as they shared the small space, their interlocking scents grew stronger.

So hard he could split wood, Hale wanted nothing more than to pin Paige beneath him and fuck her until she couldn't walk...except he didn't want to turn away from McKinley to do so. The male sparked with sexuality. So large, so dominant. Hale's beast wanted to submit, even as he wanted to dominate. He felt confined and confused and could have cheered when the elevator brought them one level lower.

So different from anything at Pearson Labs, Doc's underground facility had been painted in a cheery yellow with bright fluorescent lights along the hallway. Several rooms with reinforced glass windows lined the corridor, and at the other end of the hall sat an exit stairway that led to a steel-enforced shed aboveground.

The first room on the left would be Kelly's in a few more months. Hale had actually helped Doc to renovate the place, so he knew why Doc had recommended it.

Equipped with a huge-ass bed big enough to hold three large Circs, the blue room had been designed for comfort. A soft love seat, rocking chair, and bolster took up one section of the room, while a small eating area and dining corner took up another. The large bed and crib were, of course, the central focus. And as soon as Paige entered, she stared at the crib, relaxing.

Hale waited until McKinley entered before locking the door behind them. No ordinary lock, entry and exit could only be accessed through the right set of numbers. And the walls were Circ-proof. Hale closed the blinds of the large, reinforced glass window, leaving the three of them in darkness until he turned on the light.

Paige stared at them, her breasts heaving as she panted with confusion. "What's happening to me?"

McKinley stepped forward but stopped when Paige snarled at him. "I don't know." He sounded unsure and worried.

"It's okay." Hale hoped to hell it was. "You're experiencing a need to *change*, I think. We're here to help you." He nodded at McKinley and began undressing, waiting for Paige to do something more.

She stood there, watching his every movement. So, for that matter, did McKinley.

When he stood naked, his cock hard, his hunger obvious, Hale slowly *changed*. In seconds he stood a few inches shorter than McKinley, but still larger than Paige. Even with her new growth, he rose above her.

She licked her lips and stared at his crotch. "I want you to fuck me."

Hale stepped forward, then stopped. McKinley hadn't moved, but his harsh breathing was impossible to miss. He had a hard-on, and he didn't blink as he stared from Paige to Hale.

"I want both of you to fuck me."

Hale nodded even as McKinley shook his head.

"I don't want to hurt you, Paige," he said in a thick voice. "God, I want you. But I can't hurt you."

Hale understood. "Paige, take your clothes off. *Robbie* needs to see what he's missing."

She didn't hesitate, her gaze centered on McKinley.

"Dammit." McKinley tried to shove him in anger, but Hale moved too quickly to be touched. The action sparked an interesting reaction. McKinley swore at him and tore off his clothes.

He refused to glance in Paige's direction, though.

Hale couldn't decide who to look at. Paige stood naked, her breasts full, her nipples taut. Her slender belly quivered, and he could smell her desire, her needs pressing his. To his shock, her pussy was now deliciously bare. When she moved, her scent tempted him to lick her until she screamed.

"Fuck." McKinley stared at her, his cock huge and wet. His massive chest needed a few claw marks to save it from perfection, his muscular thighs as well. Hale had an idea of how to break his mate's stubborn resistance.

*No, not mates.*

*Yes, mine. Both of them, mine.* His beast would not be refused, not now. The scent of lust swirled around them, making the room thick with desire.

"Come here," Hale growled at Paige. When she didn't move fast enough, he leaped to her side and grabbed her. In front of McKinley, he held the female in his arms, despite her struggles, and latched onto her breast with his mouth.

McKinley murmured something he couldn't hear. Taken with his mate's taste, Hale barely felt her claws as she swiped his sides. He rolled her nipple in his mouth, biting hard and soothing the sting with his tongue. Her claws stopped digging into his skin when he took her other nipple into his mouth. Moaning, she ran her hands up and down his back, sharp nails dragging like pinpricks of lust.

He groaned and ground against her slender belly. The oil on his cock made the slide so damned erotic, he fought not to come. Hale sucked hard around her nipple, loving her taste. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw McKinley sweating. The large male stroked his cock, which looked thick and wet.

Hale quickly turned Paige around, so that he stood at her back as she faced McKinley. Gripping her breasts, he held them in his hands as he buried his face against the crook of her neck. Sucking on her hard enough to leave a mark, he didn't bite, waiting for McKinley to come forward. He couldn't help sliding his cock between her ass cheeks, humping her while he kept his eyes on McKinley.

"No, you'll hurt her," McKinley growled and took a step forward.

"Please," Paige moaned and wrapped her hands behind Hale's head, pulling his hair with her strong hands.

The female's tight grip appeased the beast within, needing a strong mate. McKinley's hesitancy didn't work in his favor. Hale could sense Paige's desire to be taken, to be worshipped. And if McKinley didn't have the balls to do it, he was going to lose out on more than a physical joining.

Not able to wait any longer, Hale pulled Paige with him and threw her on the bed. He didn't wait for her to accept him. When he would have slammed on top of her, McKinley grabbed him by the neck and threw him into the wall.

Regaining his feet, Hale snarled at McKinley. "You're too weak to take what's mine. Go sit in the corner and watch." He used his speed to distract McKinley, feinting one way, then attacking from another. He managed a swipe of his claws across McKinley's chest, five long furrows to prove who controlled the situation. McKinley swore at him but didn't counter. Hale noted Paige on her knees on the bed, staring at them in awe. Pleased to put on a show, Hale decided to go in for another strike.

McKinley's eyes gleamed, and Hale could sense the male's fury. Yet he didn't attack, didn't show off his strength. No way to win a female. No way to win Hale's loyalty. Angered that McKinley didn't care enough to try, Hale turned away from him in disgust, more than willing to show Paige he could handle her.

He pushed Paige to her back once more, growling at her to be still. Then he covered her, moving down her body to inhale the sweet scent of her need. He licked at her clit, then sucked the bud into his mouth, drowning in desire. McKinley was all but forgotten.

Paige gripped his head, grinding into his face. Needing her more than his next heartbeat, Hale mounted her, spreading her thighs wide, and poised to thrust deep...only to find himself flat on the floor, dizzy as hell. He blinked through a haze of pain and blood and watched as McKinley bared his teeth, moving closer and closer still.

## Chapter Eleven

Paige ached with need. Her body was no longer her own. The tickle she constantly felt beneath her skin seemed to have vanished, yet the flaring heat between her legs demanded to be soothed. She'd been so close, so sure that Hale would satisfy her. And then Robbie interfered. Always the one to reject her, always the one to say no. Her beast didn't want to hear "no" again.

But she couldn't bring herself to move from the bed. Enthralled by this side of Robbie he'd never let her see, she watched as he picked Hale up off the floor and shoved him up against the wall, face-first. Hale appeared dizzy. He bled from several cuts on his torso and face. The sweet smell of copper drifted to her. Paige licked her lips and studied the pair, hungrier than ever for a climax, to see worthy males fighting for her. But as their scents mingled, she understood her prize wouldn't be just one male, but both of them.

But how to determine which one would have her first?

Robbie threatened Hale with bodily harm, but Hale started to revive, pushing against the wall, against the arms shoving him against it. Robbie wrapped a hand around Hale's throat, pinning his face flat, and nudged his ankles apart.

Paige quivered with fresh desire, knowing what he intended. But she didn't want to wait on the sidelines anymore. She needed to be a part of this.

"You don't hurt her. Don't touch what's mine, unless I tell you to," Robbie growled and shoved a finger between Hale's ass cheeks.

Hale groaned and tried to move. "Fuck you," he breathed. "You don't want her. You don't deserve her."

Robbie swore and angled closer, but he couldn't fuck Hale without releasing his hand from Hale's throat. Paige liked Hale pinned, helpless, and unable to do more than

submit. He might top her, but Robbie owned them both. And perhaps her large mate needed a bit of help. She joined him by his side.

"Let me," she whispered in Robbie's ear, pleased when he tensed. His eyes met hers, bright with desire, with anger. She reveled in his intensity. Grabbing his slick shaft, she stroked him up and down, feeling what belonged to *her*.

Watching her, breathing hard, Robbie didn't even try to stop her. He pushed between her hands with that thick girth, rubbing against Hale's lower back.

"No, Robbie. Put it where it belongs." She gripped him tight and prodded Hale's ass with his cock. Robbie didn't need any encouragement. He pulled Hale's hips up from the wall, an incredible show of strength, especially when Hale tried to escape.

Paige shoved Hale back against the wall, her claws biting into his neck.

"Witch," he groaned, panting. "Fucking do it already," he rasped, then cried out when Robbie thrust hard.

Her body coiled with sexual tension as she stood there, watching Robbie fuck Hale with an exciting brutality. So rough, so violent. The more Hale tried to resist, the more excited Robbie grew, until he saturated the room in his scent.

"You're next." Hale groaned the warning to Paige and nipped at the hand she used to pin him to the wall.

"Promise?" she purred, overjoyed to see Robbie's face infused with lust. For Hale, for her. For his mates.

Robbie stilled finally, his face drawn in agony as he came hard. Hale groaned as well, caught in Paige's grip.

She knew he hadn't found his release, and she couldn't wait to see him come. For that matter, she wanted to watch Robbie too. "Pull out," she said to him. "I want to see it."

Withdrawing from Hale, he continued to spurt. And when she put her hand over him to stimulate more, he groaned and shot another load against Hale.

Hale, now free, turned to face them both. Flushed with need, he looked on the verge of passing out. Paige saw her fingerprints around his throat and began purring. Before she could say anything, Hale left them and returned with a wet towel that smelled of soap. He wrapped it around Robbie's cock, cleaning him, then himself.

"If you're going to keep her, you have to earn it. Take what you want. Like this." Hale grinned at her, an evil expression that had Paige thinking twice about accepting him, while her beast wanted to roll over in exultant joy. He was on her before she could move, while Robbie held that damned towel in a limp hand, looking dazed.

Hale forced Paige to her knees. "Suck me off, you little beast. All of me, yes."

She couldn't help obeying him. He took control of her beast, and she wanted to taste him, as she hadn't before. Too easily, she recalled their coupling, how incredible he'd been inside of her. His thick cock was just as right, just as hard. But this time, he pushed it into her mouth and down her throat. She gagged just a little but soon

accepted him. Her body adjusted to take her mate, and she sucked him hard and fondled his balls, pleased at his groans of pleasure.

"Swallow all of it. Yeah, cream for me, slide those legs together so Robbie can smell your pussy. Give him a show, Paige." Hale gasped as she gripped his balls tight and grazed his shaft with her teeth. His hands grasped her hair harder, pulling at the strands, and she moaned.

When she heard Robbie come up alongside them, she wanted to come so very badly. "Come down her throat," Robbie ordered. "Do it. Make her swallow all of it," he whispered, his voice deep with need.

Hale fucked her mouth, coming on a cry as he shuddered. So much cum. She swallowed as much as she was able before he pulled out and shot the rest of his load all over her chest. *Marking me. Yesss.*

Before she could bask in the pleasure of ownership, Robbie flattened her on her back on the cold floor. He shoved her legs wide and thrust hard.

"Do it. Take her," Hale encouraged and leaned over Robbie.

Paige couldn't see what Hale did to Robbie, but whatever it was had Robbie moaning their names, and he didn't stop taking her. He was so thick, so long, that he bruised her with each push. And she'd never felt so damned good. This roughness demanded more. She scratched him, tried to buck and shake him off. But he only pounded harder, until she couldn't stop the urgency thrumming through her.

With each shove of his dick, his pelvis brushed her clit. Harder and rougher, until she screamed out in sheer ecstasy. Her orgasm pushed her into another state, a blissful entreaty into a sharing so pure, so right, she could lay there in Robbie's arms, accepting his pleased pain.

On a grunt and a growl he came, filling her with so much cum, it dripped down her legs. He kissed her cheeks, her lips, her eyes. Everywhere.

"Paige, honey, look at me," he growled.

When she blinked up at him, he didn't smile. He looked worried and more than a little angry. He pulled out and shivered, and more cum landed on her belly.

"Fuck, that's hot," Hale murmured, his erection thick as he stared down at her.

The sexual tension had eased, but Robbie looked worse than he had before. He stared down at her with puzzlement, but when he turned to Hale, he seemed on the verge of real violence.

"Robbie," she said his name.

When he glanced down at her again, his gaze softened. Love and remorse stole the pleasure she'd seen all too briefly. He helped her up, then left her for the bathroom.

Hale cleaned her up as best he could using the other side of the orange-scented towel and brought her with him onto the bed. When Robbie came back, he found them both smiling at each other. Still, she could sense his unease. Her beast worried, and she saw Hale's grin fade.

"What's wrong?" Hale asked quietly.

"What's wrong?" Robbie snarled. "We just raped Paige, you asshole." When he took several steps closer, Paige sat up. To her bemusement, Robbie's gaze latched onto her breasts, which grew swollen under his stare.

"No one raped me, Robbie. If anything, you took advantage of Hale, though I helped," she tried to tease him.

Robbie blanched. He grabbed his pants and hurriedly put them on. Then he turned to the door, trying to leave.

"McKinley, what's wrong with you?" Hale asked.

"Not McKinley, Robbie," Paige corrected.

Hale smiled at her, and she saw the beauty of her mate clearly. The startling knowledge didn't bother her. Now she knew why she'd been dreaming of him, her sandy-haired stranger. His eye color settled into an intriguing hazel as she watched, and she warmed at the thought of growing closer to Hale, of learning what he liked and didn't like, and finding a haven in his arms. It would be simple to love this man. Her beast had already fallen hard the first time he'd made love to her.

Now if only Robbie would prove as easy...

"Robbie, man, what's wrong?" Hale asked again.

Robbie flipped out. He raged and threw things, focusing most of his anger on Hale. He punched and shoved Hale, breaking his jaw before Hale could duck. Thankfully, Hale's jaw realigned itself. Worried, Paige and Hale exchanged a glance. *What the hell?* With each instance of fury, Robbie seemed to sink further into despair.

"Not supposed to happen to you, Paige. Never with you." Robbie was on the verge of a meltdown. He ranted and raved, and Hale had to protect her from the battered furniture flying around the room. "I didn't want you to see this. Hale, let me the fuck out of here! Do it now!" Robbie's eyes were crazed. He trembled, as if high. "I don't want to hurt you again, Hale. But I will! I'll rip you apart until you bleed."

"No." Hale shook off his pain and stood with his hands on his hips. "You're not going anywhere until we hash this out." He walked over to the counter and reached into a drawer for something before turning back to Robbie. Paige wasn't sure what to do for him. Robbie scared her like this, so out of control.

She gave Hale credit for sheer stubbornness and prayed he would live to *not* regret his decision.

Robbie roared again, in a maddened state. But before he could reach Hale, he faltered. A large dart had pierced his left pectoral, and Paige realized Hale must have thrown it. Robbie took another few steps, then fell into Hale's waiting arms.

He grunted as he caught Robbie's bulk. "Paige, help me put him up on the bed."

She hurried to help him.

"Stay here. There's something I need to get." Hale typed in a code and opened the door, exited, and returned minutes later with several restraints.



She shook her head. "They won't hold him."

"They will." Hale gave her a small smile "These were designed with Circes in mind. As was the bed."

Hale and Paige fastened Robbie's wrists and ankles to the bed's iron spindles, then stood back.

"He's not going to wake up for a few hours. Why don't we take a shower? I think you're still a bit covered in, ah..." He paused and blushed.

Paige thought it a delightful mix of vulnerability and warrior. "In cum?" She wanted to laugh at his expression, but worry for Robbie stole her humor.

"He'll be okay, Paige. And you know why?"

"Why?" Her eyes filled. She knew Hale and Robbie were her mates. They'd accepted her, or so she'd thought. So why was Robbie so determined to reject her yet again?

"Because Robbie has a mate who loves him more than he knows." Hale kissed her softly. "And another mate who will grow to love him just as much. This isn't an easy thing for most Circes. It wasn't easy for me, and I'm pretty open to a lot. I'd never anticipated two mates, and certainly not a male. But I'm in tune with my beast, and he knows what he wants—you and Robbie." He sighed. "We'll make this work, I promise. I think I might have a few ideas as to why our Robbie is so freaked. Come on, let's clean up. I'll feed you, make love to you a few more times, and then we'll wait for the big lug to wake up."

Soothed by what Hale had just admitted, she couldn't help the worry for her other, more difficult mate. "Do you think he'll be okay?" She loved Robbie so much. She couldn't let him come to harm because of anything she'd done. Their loving had felt so right. So why was he so upset?

"I know he will." Hale chuckled her chin. "Come on, *mate*. Let me take care of you, the way Robbie will when he's on his feet again."

She let him pull her into the oversize shower and accepted his embrace. The tears started the minute his hands settled onto her shoulders. But true to his word, Hale cared for her. His gentleness soothed her, his hands and lips aroused her, and his strength of spirit gave her hope. Hale wouldn't let them fall apart. She had to believe. And for once, she had to be strong. Robbie needed her help. She wouldn't let him down now.

Hours later, Robbie blinked his eyes open. It took him a moment to remember what he'd done, but when he did, he wanted to die of shame.

"Hey now, it's okay." Hale's voice pleased him. But the guilt that followed brought tears to his eyes. God, Paige had been right. He'd *raped* Hale.

"I'm so sorry," he said thickly, knowing words could never make anything right. He tried to sit up and found himself unable. Pulling at his arms and legs, he glanced

around and saw what looked like manacles tying him to the bed frame. And who could blame them for wanting the monster out of commission? "Where's Paige?" he forced himself to ask, feeling even worse at seeing Hale in his smaller, frailer human body.

"She's getting us some food from upstairs. She didn't want to leave you, but I made her show the others we're okay." Hale paused, the seriousness in his hazel eyes making Robbie want to weep. Hale was his mate. His to protect, to care for. And he'd hurt him, badly. He dimly remembered the snap of bone and the splatter of blood. But Hale looked no worse for wear in his jeans and nothing else. He looked GQ handsome—his chest, face, and arms perfectly formed. *Thank God for Circ genetics.*

"If you let me go, I swear, I'll never come near you or Paige ever again." Christ, it hurt to say that. "I don't deserve you, I know that. But I can still be of use. Let me infiltrate Pearson Labs. We have a plan in place, one that's coming to an end—"

"Shut up." Hale frowned. "What the hell is wrong with you? We had some really hot sex. You were great. I came. Paige came so damned hard, she got me stirred again. And then you wiggled out."

McKinley opened his mouth but didn't know what to say.

"Tell me why you started trashing the room. What was all that crap about 'not Paige,' 'never Paige,' because she thinks you don't want her."

"No, no. That's...hell." McKinley took a deep breath. "I've loved her for so long." He had to make Hale understand. The male would look out for Paige once he was gone. "I've never wanted anyone else the way I wanted her. And you," he added quietly, not sure about the pleasure that seemed to flare in Hale's eyes. Surely, he'd imagined it. "I hurt you, and I hurt her."

A tear trickled down his cheek, the shame making him feel smaller than he'd ever been in his life. "I took you against your will. I forced Paige to have sex. I thought that by getting it out of my system at the clubs, the ugliness would never touch her. Never dirty her with my perversions," he whispered and closed his eyes.

"Clubs?"

McKinley opened his eyes, expecting to see Hale's disgust. Instead, he saw curiosity. Maybe Hale didn't understand. "The dark places where I go to relieve the ache. I have sex with men I don't know and don't want to know. We hit each other. Blood pain. It's the only way I can get off. But it never helps. I didn't want that for Paige. And I didn't want it for you."

Hale nodded. "Right. No pain for me, because Circs are so damned fragile." Hale rolled his eyes. "You are one stupid ass."

Not expecting that reaction, McKinley could only blink up at him.

"You spent at least three years with Elliot Pearl at Pearson Labs. Didn't you ever learn about the mating heat?"

"Of course I did." McKinley might be a sick bastard, but he wasn't stupid.

"Then you know a Circ can only be satisfied by another Circ. Hell, the first mating heats my squad went through were bloodier and more violent than that little episode we had earlier. It took us a long time before we could contain ourselves, coming without nearly killing each other. The females help tame that. They normally don't tolerate blood unless they're spilling it. Don't get me started on Caitlyn."

At the name, McKinley grimaced.

"Why do you do that? Whenever Ca – her name is mentioned, you freeze up."

"I don't know. It hurts me to think of her. I can't explain it."

"Then explain something else." Hale placed a hand on his chest, and McKinley's whole body eased at the comfort, except for his cock, which hardened noticeably. "Have you ever had sex with a Circ? Besides me and Paige, I mean."

"No." *If you could call what I did having sex.*

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Hale stared at him in amazement.

"No. Neither has Paige. During the times when she needs, she seeks other men. It never bothered me, because I knew I couldn't have her without hurting her. But when she had you, another Circ...I was jealous."

"Holy shit." Hale shook his head. "Now listen up, you monster. Like I said. A Circ can only be satisfied by another Circ. Humans can't fill the need we have to procreate. That's why when you're screwing those men and getting off on the blood, it's because your beast needs to sate a hunger. It can't get the Circ cum it needs, so it uses the blood as a substitute. Damn. That was one of the first things Doc warned us about. Why do you think so many rogues are killing humans when they escape? It's because they can't control themselves. It's a miracle you haven't killed anyone during sex. How long have you had the mating heats?"

McKinley stared, not sure whether to believe him. "Ten years or more. I don't know. I just dealt with it."

Paige suddenly stepped out of the bathroom wearing a long shirt. She stood tall but human, her eyes glassy. "Exactly. You dealt with it. The same way I did."

"You said she was getting us food."

"I lied." Hale smiled, a true expression of happiness. "Dumbass. Of course you would never hurt Paige. It's obvious to anyone with a pulse how much you love her. But didn't you see that little bitch in heat?"

"Hey." Paige glared at Hale, but McKinley sensed an easiness between them that hadn't been there prior to their joining.

"Sorry. But it's true. When Paige was in heat, she didn't want nice. She didn't want gentle. She wanted to be owned, taken. Tell him."

"As arrogant as he sounds, Hale's right." Paige smiled down at him, her expression so sweet, Robbie wanted to crawl into a hole, not worthy of such affection. "Robbie, listen to me. My beast was never happy with those human men I had to sleep with. Hell, I used to go through a good three or four of them just to get a decent night's

sleep where I wasn't crawling out of my own skin. And I was probably as rough with them as you were with your own lovers. But my first time with Hale was so different. I wanted to sleep there in his arms, forever."

Hale threw an arm around her shoulders and hugged her tight, tugging the large shirt she wore, emphasizing her curves. "So did I. It's been a lot easier being Circ with the others here. Sex with them was a necessity, but we survived a helluva lot better than you two did on your own. Jesus, I still can't believe you never even turned to each other."

Paige wouldn't look at him. "I wanted to, but Robbie didn't want me."

Could what they were saying be true? "That's bullshit, Paige. I wanted you then, the way I want you now. I just couldn't stand the thought of hurting you. I'm a big man," he said, feeling his cheeks flush when both Hale and Paige stared at his raging hard-on. "And I'm not gentle. Paige, I didn't want you to see me that way."

"But I needed to. Didn't you feel how right it was? It wasn't dirty, Robbie. It wasn't wrong. I'm not normal, not human. I need more than simple lovemaking." She wiped at a tear. "Am I terrible for that?"

"Hell, no." Robbie pulled at his arms, wanting to soothe her. "Paige, honey, I'm sorry. I don't want you to cry. I just...hell. I don't know. I thought I'd hurt you. Are you telling me I didn't?" He looked to Hale. "I heard your pain when I violated you," he admitted. "And it turned me on. That's sick!"

"No, that's Circ," Hale said with a grin. "Robbie, we're not human, like Paige said. Get your mind out of the notion of labeling everything. There's no gay or straight, no kink or perv. We're Circ, and we have special needs. I like it rough. Paige likes it rough. But we also like it softer. Like when you took me in my bedroom." Paige's eyes widened. "And when I fucked Paige that second time against the car door. Or in the shower stall an hour ago." His gaze was tender as it rested on Paige, then McKinley.

"Do you understand what I'm saying? All of us. Roane, Zack, Ace, Derrick, and me. Caitlyn, Sabrina, and Kelly. Now you and Paige. We all need more than what's considered 'normal.' It doesn't make us bad or wrong. Just different."

Paige joined Robbie on the bed and kissed him on the mouth. "Another thing Hale and I talked about, this—us—is new. It's super intense right now. But it won't always be so powerful when we're together. Well, maybe it will. Hale tells me I'm hell on wheels."

"Damn right," Hale murmured.

"You're perfect," Robbie agreed.

"I liked it when you grabbed my hair. When you showed me your strength and took charge, my beast was orgasmic. I liked it when you topped Hale too."

Hale gave them a mock frown. "I'm not always gonna be on the bottom, Robbie. The point is, what we did was perfect *for us*. Paige is right for you and me. And you're right for us. I won't lie and say we're all in a happily-ever-after. I just met Paige, and you and I don't really know each other. I sure the hell haven't known you as long as

you've known each other. But we're all connected. I'd die for either of you. My beast knows it. I know it." Hale paused. "Don't stop this before it has a chance. I always knew I'd spot my mates when I laid eyes on them. And I did. It's you and Paige."

McKinley lay there, too stunned to move. All that he'd thought about himself came into question. Could he be normal for a Circ? Was he just a man, needing more? He'd grown up mostly on his own. The things he'd seen at Pearson Labs and in those clubs made the sex he needed seem more like a perversion than clean, clear need.

"Let us show you." Paige nodded at Hale.

"Yeah, that's a damned good idea. You've got such a handsome cock. And look at the size of him, Paige. We can't let that go to waste." The sparkle in Hale's eyes told him to be wary. The Circ was trying to charm McKinley into a better mood, and damn, it was working.

"Ooh, you're right."

"As usual."

"You wish." Paige flirted, teasing them both by lifting the hem of the large shirt she wore. Flashes of her pussy had McKinley aching. And the scent of the three of them together made him want to experience it again. "But I'm hungry. I never did get any dinner."

"Good point. Neither did I."

In seconds, both his mates took off their clothing and sat on either side of him on the bed. When they continued to stare at his groin, he swallowed hard and groaned.

"Don't, please. I don't want to hurt you." He tried to resist. But their words circled in his mind. What if they could make it work? What if he could finally find heaven in Paige's body? In Hale's strong arms?

"Shut up and take it like a man," Paige barked. She winked at Hale. "Did that sound right?"

He nodded at McKinley's dick. "Not yet. Why don't we show him what he's missing with all that misplaced guilt? And maybe, if he's really good, I'll show him what it's like to be on the bottom."

## Chapter Twelve

Hale stared through narrowed eyes. Paige licked Robbie like a frozen treat. Holding the base of his shaft, she licked up and down, sucking on the tip of his cockhead.

Robbie groaned and thrust up, but Paige wouldn't be rushed. Damn, she was so fine. Her ass bobbed in the air each time she went down on their mate. It took all of Hale's control not to round on her and shove himself deep inside her.

At the thought, he considered Robbie's tortured expression. The big bastard had to be ready to explode. His balls were so tight, his shaft slick with Circ oil and a good dose of precum. It wouldn't take much to make him spout like a geyser.

"Come on, Paige. I want to watch him shoot."

She purred and began growing, her feminine form delightful as it filled out to Circ proportions while still appearing human. Amazingly, her skin felt just as soft. Her eyes *changed*, but her fingernails turned into talons only when she called on that particular shift.

"Turn around," Robbie ordered harshly. "I want to eat you."

Paige immediately maneuvered and straddled his face. In seconds she was moaning and grinding over Robbie. Hale rubbed his own cock, *changing* as he did so. He ached to climax, but he wanted to show Robbie where Robbie belonged. He had to prove something to the hardheaded Circ, and being forced to accept Hale would be a good first step.

Bucking into Paige's mouth, Robbie was nearly there. She moaned long and loud and shuddered over his face. The suction of her cheeks told Hale she'd found her bliss. Tired of sitting back and watching, he bent low and sucked on Robbie's balls, rubbing the male's tight thighs with claws that drew thin lines of blood. *So fucking sexy.*

Robbie groaned and clenched at his restraints. Paige shifted off his face but didn't stop running her mouth over his cock. Hale met her lips as he licked his way up from Robbie's balls. They kissed and sucked their mate's cock together, along the length of his massive shaft.

"Oh, Christ. Yes, oh yes," Robbie moaned. "You're both so fucking beautiful." His guttural cry pleased Hale to no end. He pulled back to watch as Robbie jetted into the air. Such a thick cock brought forth streams of white cream that landed all over his belly...and Paige's tongue. Watching her lick and swallow Robbie's seed pushed Hale past his need to go slow.

"Paige, move over."

She grinned and lay down beside Robbie. She leaned down and began sucking on his nipples.

Robbie tried to catch his breath as his cock continued to spurt in smaller amounts.

"Now watch me, mate, while I show you where you belong," Hale growled at Robbie.

Robbie swore and thrashed his head. Hale instinctively knew his mate had never been taken before. With Robbie's size, it was a sure bet he did most of the topping—dominant behavior. While Hale recognized Robbie's need, he had to show his mate he was worthy. That no matter what, Hale would take care of him and Paige, just as Robbie and Paige would care for their threesome in their own ways.

Hale levered himself over Robbie and settled between his thighs, delighting in the tension there. "Feel me," he rasped as he prodded past Robbie's firm ass cheeks toward that tight, rosy anus. He started to push, slowly.

"That fucking *hurts*," Robbie's fangs were longer than Hale had ever seen them. His claws bit into his own palms and tore at the sheets.

"Hurts so good," Hale breathed, forcing himself to move at a measured pace. "Robbie. You're so tight. Oh, yes. Push me out to let me in."

Robbie tried to move under Hale, to shift away from the pain. And then the muscle holding Hale back relented, and Hale eased through. As a Circ, Hale was huge. Not as thick or as long as McKinley, but he probably felt like a monster in Robbie's virgin ass.

Paige leaned up from Robbie's chest and stared, her eyes shining. "That is so incredibly erotic. I want to watch you fuck, to see you slide in and out of him."

"Hurts," Robbie hissed. "More. I need more."

Hale grunted and pulled out, then pushed forward once more. The friction was killing him. Robbie's ass gripped him tight, like a lover's kiss. And just as he'd resolved to try and go slow, he felt Paige behind him, fingering his hole. She grazed his sac, and he slammed hard into Robbie.

"Yes, Paige. Again," Robbie breathed.

She continued to fondle Hale and Robbie, rubbing their balls and playing with whatever parts of their shafts she could touch. Until Hale couldn't stop. He shoved hard and fast into Robbie and stayed there as he spurted. Paige moved around them, jerking Robbie until he came again. The smell of cum filled the room, and the sight of Robbie's pleasure all over his belly pleased Hale to no end.

He wiped a finger through it and held it to Paige's lips. When she took his finger in her mouth, Robbie swore.

"Shit. You two are wearing me out. I've never felt this good in my life."

Paige smiled down at him, then leaned over to kiss him. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. I love you, Robbie. Forever."

"Oh, God. Me too, honey. Me too," he whispered.

Knowing he'd accomplished what he'd set out to, Hale left them alone. He took his time showering yet again, allowing them some privacy. He couldn't imagine the pain Robbie must have gone through for so long. To have Paige so near and not love her with more than his heart? To go through the mating heat with *humans*? Unthinkable.

The anger he'd once held toward the giant male no longer existed. He'd be hard-pressed to hide this dopey feeling from his friends, but he knew he'd fallen in love with Robbie. Shit. He couldn't even call him McKinley anymore. It sounded too damned distant. Robbie had eyes that sparkled with gold. A body filled with power, with strength. That cock up Hale's ass had bruised, and it had felt so incredibly right.

And Paige. Her beauty could not be denied, but that tenderness inside of her, that need to love and be loved, captivated him. Hale knew it was too soon to feel this depth of emotion, this *love*. He tried to chalk up his affections to overbearing pheromones, but his beast wouldn't let him. Emotion overwhelmed him as he felt, for the first time in his life, the love his parents had once shared with one another.

It was beautiful. And it was scary. Because the chaos that was Pearson Labs was spreading. All that Robbie had told them, all the information about the enemy that he and Paige might still share, added up to the fact that Circe's Recruits would soon have to mount an attack on that terrible place. With or without Robbie's other friends, Hale knew they had to move soon. Pearson Labs would fall. The question still remained – who would fall with them?

A week and a half later, they were still coming to grips with one another. Hale, Paige, and Robbie grew closer each day. They spent their nights in the blue room in the basement, sequestered from the others. Though they'd reached an understanding with one another sexually, Robbie refused to get even the slightest bit rough with Paige. He'd let her do whatever she wanted, and he didn't hold back as much with Hale, but Hale could tell Robbie didn't feel comfortable totally letting go with them yet.

He'd discussed it with Paige, and they'd decided to give Robbie time. It was enough he no longer flinched at any mention of their first time. So the underground lab



had become their new temporary home. Paige seemed to love the compound. The women took to her right away, whispering things he was better off not knowing. He didn't trust them, especially when he'd walk into a room and they'd suddenly grow quiet, then laugh among themselves when he left. He ribbed Paige about it but couldn't be happier to see her enjoying her newfound friends.

Robbie didn't have it as easy. He didn't like to be too near Circe's Recruits. He tolerated Derrick, Zack, and Ace. He didn't like Roane and avoided Caitlyn like the plague, which worried Hale. Doc, however, seemed fascinated by these glimpses of Robbie.

Sabrina surprised Hale the most with her calm acceptance. She told funny stories about him and Elliot, which to Hale's surprise, didn't seem to bother Paige. It was as if his mate had completely disassociated herself from the man who'd fathered her. She also spent a lot of time with Doc, consenting to whatever tests he wanted. Robbie refused to agree to anything but helping Doc find a cure for the rogues.

God forbid he find help for himself. The "attacks" he supposedly hadn't had for years were coming more frequently. And he refused to talk about them.

Instead, he asked questions about Circe's Recruits, and what they'd been doing since their break from the first Project Dawn. He also spent a lot of time working out, much to Hale's amusement. He'd kicked the squad's collective asses time and time again, except for Roane, who Doc had advised to keep a distance.

Though the others no longer treated Robbie like the enemy, they didn't warm to him either. They couldn't, because their alpha didn't. Roane continued to challenge Robbie whenever they spent more than two seconds together. Their alpha personalities didn't help, nor did the fact that Hale was divided between them. Until Roane came to terms with Robbie, none of his men would.

Hale didn't like the building tension among them, but he didn't know what to do to stop it. Paige had no ideas, and Hale didn't want to distract Doc with his minor worries—compared to developing a cure to save rogue Circes. He didn't want to ask the guys, afraid Robbie might think he sided with them. Nor did he want to discuss his team with Robbie, afraid of alienating men he considered his brothers.

He was caught in the middle with no seeming way out.

Derrick joined Hale in their makeshift gym. "Yo, playboy. We set for that meeting with the G-man?" The G-man. General Mike Shields, Robbie's friend and boss.

Hale set down the dumbbells he'd been lifting and took a swallow of water. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he nodded. "Roane has already met and discussed a few things with him, but meeting anywhere is a risk. You know the PPA monitors us here."

"Yeah." Derrick shoved several plates of iron onto a bar. "You know what gets me the most? That Diego was working for our own government all this time. Hell. He acted like he was tight with Doc, you know? He sat with us, laughed with us. And the whole

time, he was scheming." Derrick slapped another weight on the bar. "If I was Doc, I'd want his balls for breakfast."

"Bloodthirsty, D. Must be why Sabrina tolerates you. God knows, it's not because of your charm."

Derrick grinned at him, told him to kiss off, and began bench-pressing over three hundred pounds with ease.

Hale sat and took another drink of water. He'd wondered about Diego as well after Robbie had shared information about him with the squad. It almost made it worse to think of Diego as a good guy. He played for the right team, and he'd still crushed Doc. Why all the subterfuge? Why couldn't he confide in the man he supposedly loved?

His perfidy made Hale twitchy. What if Robbie was doing the same thing? Hale trusted that his mate—it still surprised him to consider Robbie in those terms—meant none of them harm. But what if Robbie had an agenda none of them knew about? So far, General Shields corroborated Robbie's and Paige's accounting of how things were at the labs. They'd been building a solid case against everyone involved in the new Project Dawn for years, and now that they'd found new evidence, courtesy of Dr. Eckles, a Circ named Hawkins, and Robbie, they were ready to go forward. To take down the labs.

Still, Hale's beast sensed something was not quite right. And his unease had to do with Robbie, not Paige.

"How's your girl doing?" Derrick grunted and set down the bar with a resounding *clang*. "Sabrina really likes her."

"That's a first."

Derrick slugged him in the arm.

He scowled. "What the hell?"

"You starting in on my mate?" D grinned. "Come on, you know 'mean' can be a turn-on."

"You're just saying that because you can be a real dick."

"True enough." Derrick paused a moment, looked around, then motioned for Hale to move closer. He said in a low voice, "Playboy, something's wrong with your man."

"Beyond the obvious?"

"Shut up and listen, smart-ass. McKinley, Robbie, whatever the fuck you call him. It's like he's afraid of Caitlyn. I heard Roane and her talking about it with Doc. They think McKinley may know something he's not telling us, something Caitlyn would know from her years spent being treated by Elliot Pearl."

Hale scowled. "Why haven't they said anything to me about it?" At Derrick's stare, he flushed. "Oh, right. Because I'm screwing the suspect."

"Keep it quiet, playboy. I'm just giving you a heads-up. They didn't say anything to me, Sabrina, or the threesome, either." The "threesome," what the rest of them had begun calling Ace, Zack, and Kelly.

"Okay. Thanks." He went back to his free weights, and after another set, he stopped. "So what do you think of him?"

"Of McKinley?"

Hale nodded.

"He's big. He has eyes that seem to look right through you." Derrick turned on his bench to look Hale in the face. "He kicked my ass that day at the labs. Annoying but impressive. From what Sabrina says, she really thinks he helped her save Kelly. He could have hurt us bad a few months ago, but he didn't."

He'd also been right about flushing Sabrina's system with Derrick's blood. By mixing their Circ cells, Doc had somehow stabilized Sabrina. She no longer had to worry about turning murderous or into a mutant, thanks to the control drug she'd once unknowingly ingested.

"You could do worse."

Hale acknowledged Derrick's approval with a smirk. "I have. I did you."

"Dick." Derrick stood and shoved Hale off his bench.

Angling for a skirmish that didn't involve choosing sides or harming his mates' psyches, Hale threw himself into the brawl.

They made use of the blue mats in the center of the gym, where they did most of their training. They started in human form, fists and feet flying. Gradually they *changed*, their claws and quickened reflexes providing a real challenge. Just as Hale was about to defeat Derrick for the first time ever, his friend sank to the mat, his head in his hands. Derrick groaned and rolled onto his back.

"What the hell?" Hale waited for Derrick to get up and slam into him but grew concerned when he realized this was no ploy. He turned to run for help when he caught sight of glowing eyes in the shadows. "*Dammit*. Robbie, ease up. We were sparring."

Robbie strode forward. He glanced from Hale to Derrick and back again. "Oh. My bad." He narrowed his stare at Derrick, who sighed with relief.

"Shit. That hurt." Derrick glared up at Robbie and said to Hale, "Put a leash on your guard dog, playboy. Because psychic or not, I'm seriously going to kick his ass the next time he tries fucking with my head."

Derrick refused Robbie's hand and stood on shaky legs. He mumbled under his breath as he left, *changing* back into his human form as he went.

Hale turned and *changed* back too. "Well? Want to explain that one, *guard dog*?"

McKinley flushed. "I, ah. I'm sorry. I reacted to a perceived threat." Hell, his cheeks felt on fire. He hadn't planned on screwing up yet again. For the first time since arriving at the compound, he hadn't offended anyone or caused undue harm yet today. He'd intended a harmless session with some weights to relieve stress. Paige was spending time with Doc, and the others were playing cards in the main house. He'd needed a break.

Then he'd seen a larger, stronger male attacking his mate. He hadn't thought about it. He'd simply reacted.

"It's okay." Hale sighed. "You know, as much as it goes against the grain to have one of these estrogen moments, I think we need to talk."

McKinley grinned. Hale had a decent sense of humor. Around his mate, McKinley either found himself laughing or growing uncomfortably hard. "Lay it on me." He took a seat on a nearby weight bench and waited.

Hale raised his arm to run a hand through his hair, distracting him. Damn, the Circ had muscles. Though leaner than McKinley, Hale clearly possessed the strength of a warrior in his normal form. His biceps bulged, his chest heaved as he sighed again, and the sweat beading on his naked chest had McKinley wondering how he'd taste. Too bad he still wore shorts.

"I want to know how you became a Circ."

"What?" He focused on Hale's tight abs, trailing his gaze farther down, centering on the fabric molding to his thick cock.

"Hey, Robbie, my eyes are up here, bud." Hale chuckled. "You know, that would sound much better if I was a chick with huge breasts. You know, like Paige."

They both grinned, before Hale grew serious once more. "Tell me how you became a Circ."

"Why?"

"Because I think it's important. Why shouldn't I know about you? Hell, you can ask me any damn thing you want. I'm an open book."

"Right." McKinley snorted. "So what? You want my life story?"

"Something like that." Hale sat down on the mat across from him, resting back on his hands, his legs stretched out in front of him. Just two guys hanging out at the gym. Talking.

The extreme normalcy of the moment was surreal.

"Shit. Fine. Nosy bastard," he muttered. "My dad was an officer in the Army. He was fed the typical vaccines before going overseas." He scowled. "Except they weren't typical. Pearl fed him the very first batch of EP12, the Circe serum. And the bastard drugged my mother as well. She was full of the crap when she had me."

"Are you serious?"

"I wish I wasn't." He exhaled heavily, missing his family. A throbbing started at his temple that he tried to rub away. "I don't know what Pearl expected, but it wasn't me. I was totally normal back then. Had hair like yours, maybe a shade lighter. Green eyes, normal skin and bone structure. We were a happy family, except for Elliot. My mom didn't like him. Said he used to give her the creeps."

"I can imagine."

"Yeah. Well, a condition of my dad's service was that he have regular checkups with Elliot. My dad wasn't into standard ops. He did some classified work, so he never

questioned his trips to see Dr. Pearl, at least, not at first. But when he started getting faster and stronger, when my mom started developing an ability to see and hear things beyond what was normal, they wondered. And then she...and there was..." Fuck, why couldn't he think?

"What's wrong?"

"I—my head really hurts. I don't know." It felt as if a migraine consumed him.

"What happened to your parents?" Hale asked softly, pushing.

Forcing himself to think about his dad and mom again, McKinley pushed the pain aside. "We were driving. It was such a nice day, beautiful up in the mountains. I loved it there. We had a summer house just outside of Asheville. On our way to, somewhere." The burning in his brain flared again. "They crashed and died. I survived. And turned into this."

"You were how old?"

"Nineteen. Satisfied?"

Hale's eyes narrowed in concern. "What aren't you telling me? What really happened that day, Robbie? Why do you get these attacks when anyone mentions Caitlyn? Why, when I mention your parents, are you getting them again?"

"I don't know." He tried to stand, wanting to get away from the pain, from the questions. Flashes of Caitlyn's face filled his mind's eye, but in them she was younger, laughing, then crying.

*His father drove the car and sang horribly. His mother laughed, chattering with excitement to have her son home from college. Colleen had missed him so much. And wouldn't his sister be so surprised when they all arrived as a family?*

*Worry filled him. If they didn't hurry, they'd be late picking her up and taking him back to school. He had an exam in the morning, but he hadn't seen her in months. Already sixteen. He couldn't believe his baby sister...*

"Can't think. My head," he moaned, falling off the bench to the ground. His beast had suppressed his memories for so long. But McKinley the man struggled to know. *No. Can't risk. Not survive. Can't attack the enemy, not until we're stronger.*

"No, Robbie. Let it out," a softer voice than Hale's said. *Her voice.* "What were your parents' names?"

"No. No more," he rasped, as flashes of their faces struck him with the force of blows. God, he missed them. Missed playing baseball with his father, their fishing trips, the long talks they'd had. He missed his mother's warm hugs, her pride as she watched him throw for a touchdown at school, and the funny notes she'd scrawl into his notebooks. He missed his sister's hero worship. The way she'd sneak into his room at night and demand a story. How she'd steal his toys and try to replace them without his knowing. He loved her so much, and he didn't like it when she met with the strange doctor at that place that set his teeth on edge.

"Remember how pretty Mom's hair was? How strong Daddy was when he'd lift us in the air?"

He knew that voice. Knew her scent buried under that of a foreign male.

"Let it go, Robbie," Hale said, placing a hand over his forehead. Like magic, his mate's touch eased his burden. Safety in solidarity. The ache disappeared, but the pictures of his sister didn't.

"Open your eyes, Robbie. I'm right here."

He looked up at Hale, at Doc and Roane. At *her*. Caitlyn Chase. Roane's mate.

Robert McKinley Chase's sister.

## Chapter Thirteen

Memories rushed in where before pain held sway. Hale and Doc pulled him to his feet, but McKinley couldn't stop staring at his sister.

"You've grown," he said stupidly.

She laughed through tears. "So have you."

Roane held her close, comforting his mate. And something in McKinley eased. No longer just McKinley or Robbie or that freak Circ. He was Robert McKinley Chase. And he had a sister.

He'd always known in the back of his mind the details of his early life, before the *change* that had turned him into what he was today. But the particulars had never seemed very important. He couldn't turn back into a normal male. He'd assumed his family had died, and his beast took care of the rest. His survival had depended upon being strong. A man with no past, and only the future to look forward to, had few vulnerabilities.

Hale gently pushed him forward, toward *his sister*.

"You used to steal my baseball cards."

"And you used to hide my Barbies."

She met him halfway, and in her, he saw his mother. An overwhelming sadness took him by surprise, and he had to blink to clear his eyes. Caitlyn didn't seem to mind the tears streaming down her cheeks as she sniffed and sobbed.

She held her arms out and wrapped them around his middle before he could think to protest. For a man who didn't like being touched, he didn't seem to mind Hale, Paige, and now Caitlyn.

His mind blanked when she hugged him. She felt like home.

"God, I can't believe you're alive! They said you'd all died. That Dad lost control of the car, and you all burned up in the fire."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hale and Doc pull Roane with them. Hale nodded at him and smiled, then walked out the door with the others. He remained alone with Caitlyn.

"Who is 'they?' I remember us driving, being excited to see you again. I'd missed you." He cleared his throat, still holding her. "I was in college, and I hadn't seen you in a while. You were at Elliot's lab, a place I hated. Mom and Dad were going to pull you from Elliot's little program, you know. Except we never made it. Someone rammed us from behind and sent us through the guardrail. Over the mountain."

He didn't remember the tumble, or even getting thrown from the car. "When I woke up, I was like this. Not a scratch on me. But I wasn't Robert anymore. I couldn't remember much more than the accident and vague images of Mom and Dad."

"How did you find Elliot Pearl after all that time? What did you do after the accident? You never came after me."

"I didn't remember you. I don't know why. It took me years before I could leave the woods where I woke up. Look at me, Caitlyn. I can't ever pass for normal with these eyes." He opened his mouth and fingered his teeth. "Even in my 'normal' state, my teeth are pretty sharp, as are my nails. And you can't ignore my size."

She stared at him. "No, you can't." She was quiet a moment. "So what happened? How did you live, where did you go?"

He rubbed a tired hand over his face and stepped back. His head no longer throbbed, but he still teetered on an emotional precipice. God, he had a sister. He loved her, that hadn't changed. But she was here. She was Circ.

*She was Circ.*

"What they did to Mom and Dad affected you too." He studied her from the top of her head to her feet. "You're Circ. I heard Pearl talk about you more than once, though I didn't know it was you he was talking about."

"I don't understand."

"I was nineteen when our parents died and everything changed. I spent two years living in the woods. I ate what I hunted and fished. Dad taught me how to survive, remember?"

She smiled through her sorrow, grief there for their lost parents.

"I admit, I occasionally stole what I needed from the smaller towns edging the mountains. It took time, but I began to remember bits and pieces. I think my inner beast was developing at its own rate. When it was ready, it showed me how to right the wrong done to us. I remembered Elliot Pearl, and I started investigating."

"When I ran across information about you, I avoided it. My beast wouldn't let me sense you. I don't know why, but I never knew who you really were, at least, not until I got here. Whenever I'd think about you or hear about you, my head hurt."



"Repressed memories," she whispered.

"I guess. Before I found Pearl, I made a living doing odd jobs. Mostly security work. I caught the attention of some government folks. Right time, right place, you could say. And there I met Mike Shields. He was a colonel then. A good man. He smelled right," he joked, pleased when she grinned back at him.

"So then what?"

"Then Mike convinced me to join his team. All unofficial. Mike has friends in high places even Kohl can't touch. When Project Dawn started, I was training with his men in foreign countries. I did some work for Uncle Sam. But Mike knew what I was after. He helped me when I needed it, and I helped him right back.

"He managed to hook me up with Elliot Pearl a little over three years ago. I became Pearl's bodyguard and Mike's eyes and ears. We've been trying to take Pearson Labs down for years, but General Kohl and Senator Kuntz were unexpected additions to an already top-heavy organization. Seemed like anytime we thought we had an airtight case, a witness died or evidence disappeared."

"How can you make evidence like that disappear? There are Circes running around committing murder."

"Tell that to a federal judge with hands deep in Pearl's pockets. Or an investigative team who relies on Kuntz's authorized funding to increase their spending. Investigations into illegal activities at the lab were always forewarned. No one ever saw any evidence of wrongdoing, or the hint that a Circ might exist."

"Oh."

"Yeah." He sighed. "But Mike thinks it's time. We're closing in on that hellhole."

She nodded.

They fell into an awkward silence.

"So," they both said at the same time.

"Go on." He waited for her to speak first.

"I was just going to ask you what you think will come next. I mean, I feel like I've just found you. I don't want you to go away anytime soon."

"Oh." He was having a hard enough time dealing with the present. What the future held, he couldn't say. "I, ah, I think I have two mates. I don't think they'd like me to leave just yet either."

She smiled. "That's right. Hale's the best. He won't let you go." After a moment, she blushed.

"You okay?"

"Oh, sure." She shifted, and he caught the full force of her scent.

It was ripe with a subtle sweetness. His sister was pregnant. No longer a young girl, the woman she'd become verged on motherhood. "*Shit*. I have to sit down." He sat in the middle of the mat on his ass, completely floored.

"Are you okay? You want me to get Doc? Roane?"

"Hell, no." He groaned at her crestfallen expression. "I guess I'll have to try harder to get along with Roane now that we're related, huh?"

"Yes. He's really not so bad, once you get to know him."

"Does he treat you well?"

"He loves me." She snapped her fingers. "And that's all I need to do to keep him in line."

McKinley grinned. "Nice. Wish I could say the same."

"I don't know. The way Paige looks at you, she's definitely in love."

He thought about that. Paige had never made any pretense about the way she felt. And she'd been trying like hell all week long to make him see how well they fit together, sexually and otherwise. He felt himself blushing and glanced away. When he caught Caitlyn's eye, he saw her trying to stifle a smile.

"What?" he growled.

"You still embarrass easily," she teased. "God, Robbie. I used to call you that, you know."

"I remember." Probably why it had felt so right when he'd first told Paige to call him that.

"I'm so happy right now. I know we're not out of danger, that until Pearson Labs closes for good, we'll always have to worry. But finding you is just so incredible. It was so hard after the crash..." She started crying again.

They talked for another hour, then two, sharing parts of their lives they'd never told anyone else. Their relationship healed as if it had never been severed. As youngsters they'd been close; as adults, this new intimacy felt like a natural progression.

Caitlyn clearly loved her mate and all of Circe's Recruits. She approved of Robbie, especially of his relationship with Paige and Hale. The way she blushed when she mentioned Hale a few times made him take note to talk to his mate about his past relationship with Caitlyn. It couldn't have been improper, though, not with Roane such a possessive jackass.

He grudgingly admitted his respect for the male, and he promised to make an effort to get along. She also prodded him not to leave without saying good-bye. As if he'd just ditch Caitlyn and the others without a by-your-leave.

He opened his mouth to disabuse her of that notion when Hale rushed in.

"We've got a problem. No one can find Doc, and there's an odd scent in the house. I can't be sure, but I think there's been a struggle in his study. Doc's papers are out of whack, at least according to Kelly. You ask me, the place always looks like that."

*Shit.* McKinley had a bad feeling. He'd known this respite was too good to be true. "I need to make a call. If Doc's not out for a drive and not in his lab belowground, my guess? The PPA has him. Kohl finally found himself a new head scientist."

Paige had no idea what to do. She'd finally felt as if she and Evan had connected. He was so sweet. He went out of his way to make her feel at home. He'd even persuaded her to look at house plans, trying to convince her to stay here with him and the others. *"You'll need a bigger room than Hale's to fit all three of you,"* he'd said without judgment. To Evan, Circ sexuality was merely a part of the whole package.

During the past week, though Paige continued to prod him to do more tests on her, he refused. He wanted her to think about it and not confuse their growing friendship with anything more. Evan was so careful not to exploit her or her feelings that she couldn't help wishing she'd met him years ago. What would it have been like to grow up with him as a father?

Not that Evan didn't have his faults. He regularly missed meals, kept a disorganized study that had Kelly, his assistant, on edge, and could lose himself in his work if no one reminded him to come up for air.

But he was loyal to a fault with Circe's Recruits, the men and women he considered family. Caitlyn had confided how incredibly happy they all were to finally find her. Doc had been misled by someone he dearly loved not long ago. And though he and Elliot hadn't been close, family meant something to Evan. Losing his brother right after that other loss had debilitated him. He'd lost weight, looked unhappy, and spent too much time away from the others. Finding Paige had become a lifeline for him.

Knowing Evan helped fill a huge void in Paige's own life. The need for unconditional familial love was something she'd longed for. Elliot would never help her there. Her mother had died, and she'd had no one else. Or at least, she hadn't considered Evan an answer before Hale had brought her here.

And now he was missing.

She'd been the first to call attention to his absence. He'd gone to his study for just a minute, leaving her waiting for him to finish another story about her mother. The minute turned into several. Instinct told her something wasn't right. When she checked the study, she found him gone. Her senses flared; the scent of unwelcome visitors a foreshadowing of major trouble on the horizon.

She immediately sought her mates and found Hale first. He sat with his teammates playing cards while Sabrina and Kelly argued over the remote control for the TV.

"Hale." She felt instant relief. Just being near her mate soothed her beast.

"What's up?" He drew another card and frowned at his hand. Glancing at her with a distracted smile, he looked back at his cards, then froze. He snapped his attention back to her. "What's wrong?"

Everyone else stopped what they were doing.

"It's Evan. He's gone."

Hale scowled. "Gone? Gone where?"

"I don't know. We were sitting together talking when he left for a minute. That was a good twenty minutes ago. But he's not in the study or the bathroom, and it's not like him to just leave me without at least saying good-bye."

"I sense trouble." Hale stood.

"I'll look downstairs," Ace offered.

"Good, go. Zack, check your house and mine," Roane ordered. "Derrick, check upstairs. Sabrina, can you grab the guest wing? I suddenly have a bad feeling."

Everyone scattered, and Roane turned to Paige. "Paige, can you stay with Kelly while I check out the garage?" He strode to the family room and looked out a side window. "I still see his car in the driveway, but that doesn't mean anything. I'll be right back."

"I'll check out the study," Hale said. "Honey, everything will be fine. We'd never let anything happen to your uncle."

She nodded. "I know." Then she realized Caitlyn and Robbie were gone. "Where's Robbie?"

"Damn. I'll let them know too." He started to say something more, then shook his head. "Robbie's going through some family stuff. He's fine, don't worry," he said, seeing the panic on her face. "But he needs some time alone with Caitlyn."

"Caitlyn?" Her hackles rose at thoughts of her mate alone with another female. The alpha female with Robbie?

"His sister," Hale whispered. "I know, bizarre. I'll explain it when I can. Let me find Doc first."

She watched him leave, stunned. Talk about dropping a bombshell. Robbie and Caitlyn were brother and sister? They didn't look much alike. Then again, Robbie didn't look like anyone she knew. The knowledge settled her beast, at least. Now she could focus her worry on Evan.

"I wish everyone would stop treating me like an invalid," Kelly snapped. "I'm pregnant. I'm not sick."

"Talk about a redhead with a temper," Paige teased and joined Kelly in the kitchen, where everyone seemed to gravitate at one point or another during the day. She sobered at the worry on Kelly's face. "Hey, I'm just kidding. I want to be out there looking for him too. But you know, if someone did take Doc, there's only one group of people I know that it might be. And they'd do anything to get their hands on a pregnant Circ."

Kelly glared, the ice blue of her eyes piercing. "I know, dammit. And I'm not mad at you, Paige. I just... I wish I could do more. I'm only five months along, and I feel like a whale. This is going to be a weird pregnancy all around. I need Doc here. Not just to help me. He's like a father to me, you know?"

Paige did. The time she'd spent with the others had shown her how much her uncle was loved. From talking with them, she'd learned that Kelly had grown up with

Evan, who acted like a surrogate uncle. A friend of her family's, and then her boss, he'd employed her for years. Caitlyn had joined the group just over six months ago, but she thought the world of him. As did Sabrina, who'd recently mated Derrick and left Pearson Labs. Sabrina knew what the men who worked for the labs were really like, and she adamantly stated that Doc was nothing like them. Quite the opposite, in fact. He'd saved her life, and she'd move the moon for him if she could.

The men of Circe's Recruits loved him as well. Paige's beast liked being part of this pack, this group. She still hadn't figured out how she felt about Roane, only because he and Robbie were still at odds. But she trusted Roane on a fundamental level. She respected the men and women here, and she knew she could become good friends with Sabrina, Kelly, and Caitlyn. They treated her like a real person. They knew what it was like to be Circ, human yet not. And they didn't judge her.

If all these people whom she respected loved Doc, how could she question him anymore? Not that she did, but their opinions made her decision to accept Evan so much easier. Even Robbie liked him. And Robbie barely liked anyone.

Except Hale and her. She hid a secret smile from Kelly, half listening as the poor woman ranted about her stubborn mates. Ace and Zack bent over backward for Kelly, clearly in love with her. A most fortunate woman. *Like me.*

Hale and Robbie were incredible lovers. Hardheaded men who pretty much kowtowed to her, though Robbie still controlled the small trio in the bedroom. Evan was right. They'd need more space if they planned to live on the compound. And she wanted a future here, with her new friends. People who finally understood her differences. With her uncle, who seemed to really love her. And her mates. Hale belonged here. Robbie didn't fit in at Pearson Labs. He needed her and Hale, even if he didn't want to admit it.

"Have you heard a word I've said?" Kelly asked, exasperated. But there was a twinkle in her eye. "It's never wise to bait a pregnant woman."

Paige blushed. "Sorry. I'm trying not to think about Evan. And my mind wandered—"

"To the gorgeous Hale and that giant Robbie." Kelly leaned forward. "You know, I think Robbie's hot. Don't tell Ace or Zack. But those muscles of his, whoooo. You are one lucky girl."

Paige laughed, almost embarrassed to feel happy when she knew Evan might be in trouble. "I know. I just hope all this luck holds out. I've just met my uncle. I don't want to lose him."

Kelly patted her hand, the gesture curiously soothing. "You won't. The guys won't let it happen. And neither will the rest of us."

She smiled, pleased at their solidarity, when she smelled them. A lot of them, and they were coming closer. "Kelly, you need to do exactly as I say," she ordered in a low voice. "I'm going to walk with you to the elevator, quietly. Then I want you to find Ace and hole up in one of the labs downstairs."

Kelly's eyes widened, but she remained silent and nodded.

"Quickly." Not thinking about it, Paige began growing. She'd taken to wearing elastic pants and large, stretchy shirts. But she hadn't thought about her undergarments. On the go, she sliced through her bra and ripped under her pants at her underwear. Both garments fell off as she expanded. To her surprise, fangs pushed past her gums, telling her to beware a very real threat.

They reached the elevator. Kelly punched in a code and the door opened. "Come with me."

"No. Don't worry. I know how to handle these guys. I'm not in any danger. But you are."

Kelly gaped at whatever she saw over Paige's shoulder. "Mutants," she hissed. "Paige, please."

Paige reached inside and punched a button. "Go." The door closed. She turned around and stared at half a dozen mutants. Just as twisted as the last bunch she'd seen, and they stirred as much pity. She released her pheromones and drew them closer. "Why are you all here?" she asked, hoping against hope that she wasn't the reason.

## Chapter Fourteen

Robbie, Hale, and Caitlyn raced back toward the house. They ran into Zack and Roane on the way.

"Nothing," Roane said. "Doc's not outside. He's got to be —"

Sabrina screamed, and Derrick roared.

They rushed into the house, *changing* along the way. Clothing ripped and pulled, shoes and socks stretched and popped, leaving a trail of tattered garments along the grass.

Once inside, Hale and Robbie headed after Paige's scent. Hale's beast felt anxious. He knew the enemy had found them. What he didn't understand was, why now? And what had Robbie meant about Kohl needing a new head scientist?

He scented the enemy before they found Paige at the end of the hallway in front of the elevator. Between them and her raged a bloody battle. Rogue Circs fought mutants while Paige fought to steer clear. As he pushed his way into the fray, Hale saw one of the rogues take some damage while protecting...Paige? It didn't make any sense, but he didn't care. He had to reach his mate.

Robbie helped him clear a path. As he moved, opponents starting dropping like flies, grabbing their heads in pain. Hale didn't know how much Robbie could do, but he hastened his efforts and reached Paige with a few minor scratches. The rogue nearest her nodded at him, his light gray eyes almost white against his darker, *changed* skin. Then, oddly enough, the rogue disappeared. The mutants around them continued to press closer but screeched when something slashed at them.

Not sure what the hell was going on, Hale grabbed on to Paige. "Get your ass in that elevator." He turned to kick at one of the mutants that clawed at his leg in an attempt to reach her.

"No." She leaned closer to be heard past the noise. "Kelly's down there. If I open the elevator, they might get by me. I won't chance it."

"Fuck." Hale turned and roared as two mutants tackled him. "Where the hell are they all coming from?"

"Half of them are fighting with each other in the bedrooms. Then they spill into the hallway," said a voice out of nowhere. The odd rogue reappeared over Hale and dragged one of the mutants off him. As they fought, Paige pulled at the other mutant.

"Get back!" Hale tried to bring his opponent with him away from Paige, but the scent of cherries captivated him and those closest around them. Everyone around Paige slowed down, focusing hungrily on her.

"I told you not to do that," the rogue by them growled. "It's not helping."

"But Hale—" Paige said.

"Is fine." Hale yanked the rogue back, relieved when Paige retracted that scent. Holy hell, but she packed a punch. "If you have to, beat them back. But don't attract them to you!"

Robbie fought through a mass of bodies toward them, tossing Circe and mutants back into the rooms they spilled out of. "Hawkins. What the hell are you doing here?"

The rogue next to Hale answered back, "Kohl ordered us to capture your doc. Dunn took off with him and ordered the rest of us here to put an end to Circe's Recruits. *Against* Kohl's orders."

Robbie grinned, his teeth wickedly sharp. "Dissension in the ranks. I like it."

Paige growled low in her throat and swiped her nails across a rogue's jugular when he pushed past Hawkins. Hale wanted to help her, but he had his hands full trying to stay upright amid the bodies piling up.

"This is ridiculous. Paige, come on." He shielded her as they made their way to Robbie. They were forced to step over groaning bodies, the hallway overflowing with the enemy. A stabbing pain hit him in the side, but he ignored it and pulled Paige with him, thrusting her at Robbie. "Take her out of here."

"What the fuck?" Roane roared beyond them and started to charge into the shrinking corridor.

"No, stay back," Robbie said as he caged Paige between him and Hale. He continued to backstep toward Roane and the others now with him. "Take Paige out of here."

"Dammit." Roane grabbed her and quickly pulled her behind him. "She's good. You two, get out of there."

Hale looked over his shoulder, relieved that one of his mates was out of harm's way. His beast nudged Robbie to also move in her direction.

"I *know* you did not just try to push me back there." Robbie punched a mutant in the face, cracking its jaw. "What the hell are you doing?"



"I don't know." Hale felt dizzy but shook it off. "Look. They're just about done." Only two more mutants were actively fighting. The rest littered the floor, along with a few rogue Circs. Three of the rogues remained standing, using stunners and lethal fangs and claws to dispose of the mutants still struggling.

Hale couldn't believe how many bodies fit in the hallway. It was like a living, or dying, carpet. The sight made him queasy.

Robbie swore and tucked Hale under his arm. "You're injured, you idiot."

"I'm fine." Circs healed with amazing speed. Even if he had been wounded, he'd soon be on the mend. Too bad his body hadn't gotten the memo.

"Roane, playboy's bleeding all over the place."

"New venom in the mutants' claws. You'll need to see to that." Hawkins joined them, breathing hard. He was covered with blood, both his and the darker stuff that leaked from the mutants. But as Hale watched, his body healed itself. "We're immune."

"Great. Just when we need Doc. And he's where?" Zack said from over Roane's shoulder.

"Can we get out of this stinking hallway?" Hale tried to push away from Robbie, feeling like a pussy for not standing on his own two feet. But Robbie wouldn't let him go. He glared, and his mate glared back.

"Those guys friends of yours?" Roane asked Robbie, looking at Hawkins and the other rogues with him.

"You could say that."

Roane wiped the sweat from his forehead, and Hale noticed the healing wounds on his forearms. "Come on, then." Over his shoulder, he said, "Derrick, bring Sabrina down here to see to Hale. Zack, make sure every one of these fuckers is dead."

Zack passed Hale, carrying one of Doc's special guns. The ammunition had been doctored to counteract CIRC healing. A bullet to the brain would kill anyone living.

"Zack, Kelly's safe in the lab with Ace," Hale heard Paige say.

"Thanks." Zack started shooting at the ground, one bullet per body. He stopped and reloaded just as Hale left the hallway.

Paige quickly wormed her way under Hale's arm as everyone congregated in the family room and kitchen, where Sabrina stood in a ragged shirt. Her black hair was messed, and a scratch was healing on her cheek. At Hale's raised brow, she shrugged.

"A bunch of rogue Circs took me by surprise upstairs. But Derrick killed most of them."

"Except for the ones Sabrina tagged. A few got away," Derrick admitted.

"Damn." Hawkins leaned against the kitchen counter. "They'll get word back to Dunn about us sooner than I'd hoped." He looked over his shoulder at the other rogues with him. "Fallon, Tersch, take care of our problem, hmm? And tell Hayashi to bring his ass back here when you see him. He's not answering his cell."

The rogues nodded and left on silent feet.

"They're solid."

"Great. Now, who the fuck are you?" Roane snarled. "And why is our house littered with rogue Circs and mutants? What happened to our alarm system? *Where the hell is Doc?*"

"Shit," Robbie muttered. In a louder voice, he said to Roane, "This is Hawkins. He's one of the Circs they tapped at Pearson Labs. A Navy SEAL, right?"

"Yeah." Hawkins looked uncomfortable around the females. "McKinley, please tell me Doc made some headway with our problem. Torrence looks fine." He nodded to her.

She blinked up in surprise. "Julian?"

"Julian?" Derrick echoed, less than pleased. "You know this squid?"

"Hell. What were you? Not Air Force. Army? No." Hawkins sneered. "A jarhead, right? Figures. Marines. All muscle, no brains."

Derrick made a move to go at him, but Roane held him back. "Cut the shit. Hawkins, I want answers. *Now.*"

Hale had to admit, Roane was impressive in a rage. He tried to move to his friend's side when his knees buckled, and he slipped out of Paige's arms to the floor.

Paige knelt by his side, worried. "Hale?"

Sabrina motioned to Derrick. "A little help here. Get me a towel and come here."

Derrick did as ordered, no questions asked.

"Sorry." Hale didn't understand why he felt so weak. "Not sure what happened to my legs."

"Stanch the bleeding," Sabrina ordered her mate, as mean as ever. "Dammit, Derrick. Hold the towel here." She shoved Derrick's hands over his side, and Hale couldn't help squirming to avoid the intense pain.

"That really fucking hurts."

"Shit. Hold on, Weston," Hawkins said to Roane. Hale heard him talking but couldn't see him from his position on the floor. "I called, and this time Hayashi picked up. He's going to bring some antivenom with him. He's at the labs right now." Hawkins paused. "There's some serious shit going down. A special task force just breached security."

"Dammit." Robbie crouched down beside him, staring hard into Hale's eyes. "Mike told me he wouldn't move until I could be there."

"He probably knows you'll try to rip out Kohl's guts. Can't have one of his men up on charges of murder," Hawkins offered.

"Who said anything about murder?" Robbie said through extended fangs. "I'm talking extermination. Plain and simple."

Hawkins chuckled. "Nothing simple about you." Caitlyn appeared in the dining area, and Hawkins stared at her a minute too long. When Roane growled, he cleared his throat and looked away. "About that headway...?"

Robbie answered, "Sabrina, do you know if Doc's gotten any closer to settling the rogue Circs using my blood? Some of the guys manage to last up to a year without going off the deep end. But with all the experimenting Pearson Labs has been doing lately, it's hard to know where the guys stand. Packard's blood helped you a good bit. Maybe it would help Hawkins and his men?"

Hale watched Sabrina and Robbie interact as if watching a movie. Everything seemed dreamy, scripted, and disconnected from him.

"I don't know. Doc speculated that Derrick helped me because we were mated. The nature of a Circ is to keep in tune with his or her own survival. By healing me, Derrick ensured the possibility of a future generation of his DNA. I don't know if the procedure will work for you, Julian. I'm sorry."

"Doc will know," Roane said firmly. "As soon as he gets back, he'll know exactly what to do. And if he doesn't have the answers now, he'll work until he gets them."

"Actually, he's a lot closer than you might think," Kelly volunteered as she ambled into the kitchen ahead of Ace.

"Ma'am." Hawkins nodded respectfully but took a step back when Ace threatened him with bodily harm. Zack entered behind them, equally as wary.

"Ace, relax. My beast doesn't sense a threat. And I'm very sensitive to anything that might harm the baby."

Zack rumbled something.

"Julian Hawkins. Nice to meet you," Hawkins said. "So about this progress?"

Kelly responded. "I think Robbie is the key to a lot of the problems the labs initially had with the Circe serum. I overheard Doc talking to someone on the phone, and I was curious, so I asked him."

"Robbie?"

"McKinley," Hale rasped. "My mate."

"No shit. Found someone who would have you, eh? What about the female?" Hawkins asked Robbie, glancing at Paige.

"She's ours too," Hale answered for him. "Disobedient female who needs a good spanking..." His voice faded as the room went dark.

He heard her calling his name. He smiled, but he didn't open his eyes. He needed the rest. Once he gathered his strength again, he'd teach her not to worry her mates. In just...a little...while...

\* \* \* \* \*

Evan struggled against the ties binding his wrists. The rank office they'd thrust him into was filled with gore. Several mutants had apparently revolted, because scientists, rogue Circs, and the PPA were running all over the place trying to sort out the madness. Simon Dunn had definitely been playing with things best left alone. He had greasy hair and splotchy skin. A foul odor wafted from Simon's body with his every movement. The rogues he'd used to infiltrate the compound and capture Evan obeyed him, but Evan could tell it was only a matter of time before they completely turned.

At home when learning as much as he could about McKinley, Evan had been startled to find several properties in the CIRC's blood that he'd also found in the men of Circe's Recruits. Comparing McKinley's samples with Caitlyn's, he'd discovered a potential method to creating an antigen to combat the viral strains of EP12 that he suspected caused the mental breakdown in Circs. He would have been more active in his discovery were it not for Paige. He wanted her to stay with them, so he'd been using most of his free time to show his niece he wasn't an ogre. He wanted her to trust him, to feel safe. Except she apparently wasn't safe, because he sat bound and gagged in Pearson Labs. He prayed Dunn only wanted him, and that he'd left the rest of those at the compound alone.

The only redeeming thing about his capture was that Dunn's thugs had isolated him from the chaos outside. He sat in an office three floors above the main level. An executive wing, if he wasn't mistaken, hopefully away from the experimental portion of the labs.

The door opened slowly. When Diego Santana stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, Evan's pulse jumped, and his heart raced.

"Damn, Ev. What did they do to you?" Diego's soft voice carried in the empty room. "*Dios*, this is all my fault. I never should have left."

Evan couldn't speak past the gag in his mouth.

Diego slipped a knife from a sheath at his ankle. He wore a white lab coat over dark trousers. Had Evan not known him, he would have assumed Diego worked here. Making short work of the gag and the ropes around his wrists and ankles, Diego knelt next to him. Before Evan could speak, his ex-lover wrapped him in a tight embrace.

"I know you probably hate me. I know I don't deserve a second chance. But let me get you out of here. You can hate me from the safety of the compound, okay?"

Evan squelched the automatic joy he felt just seeing Diego again. *He betrayed you. He put your people in harm's way. He deliberately lied to you for years.* But the sight of the wiry older man sent his heart racing. Those same dark brown eyes that had once regarded him with love now looked at him with concern. Diego appeared tired, stressed, and thinner than he'd been. Dark circles underlined his eyes. But the apparent stress didn't affect the steadiness of his hand, wrapped around that gun.

"Come on, *querido*. Let's go."

Pain lanced him at the endearment, but Evan said nothing. He had to get out of there before he was found. Dunn had plans for him that Kohl, apparently, wasn't aware of. And most of it had to do with keeping Dunn knee-deep in drugs, "freak pussy," and helping him to stage a coup as he tried to become the new CEO of Pearson Labs. Talk about a nightmare.

"I'll follow you," Evan said quietly. *But I won't trust you again.*

As if Diego heard what went unsaid, he gave Evan a sad smile and moved swiftly out of the room. He kept Evan behind him, a hand on his person at all times, his gun at the ready. This lethal side of Diego startled Evan, but he had to admit, it intrigued him as well. Diego had always seemed just on the rough side of dangerous. Now, he all but shouted it.

He stopped suddenly and fired a round. A body hit the floor.

"A tech with a stunner. Not a friend," Diego muttered. They left the hallway via a corner stairwell and descended in a run. Diego shot twice more, killing or wounding Circe, Evan wasn't sure. They didn't stop to check but instead raced toward the basement exit.

"We exit on three," Diego whispered. "Whatever you do, stay behind me, and stay with me."

Evan nodded. To his shock, Diego pressed a hard kiss to his lips.

"I still love you. So much," Diego sighed. He counted back from three, then shoved open the door.

And all hell broke loose.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robbie paced outside under the clear night sky, too full of nervous energy to sit still. Hawkins's announcement that Pearson Labs had been raided shocked everyone. Circe's Recruits, and even Robbie, had always expected to be in on the assault when the labs fell. To sit here on the sidelines, fucking *ordered* by Shields not to interfere, pissed him the hell off.

"Would you sit down?" Roane asked, exasperated.

Roane had pulled guard duty while the rest of the group put their efforts into a general clean up. Hawkins, Tersch, and Fallon labored alongside the squad to clear the dead bodies from the house while the women took charge of sanitizing the place. Everyone remained in shifted form, on edge and needing to feel empowered, Robbie guessed. He always felt like that, so what the hell did he know?

Hale remained unconscious down in the lab in one of Doc's sickrooms with Paige. She worried over him, constantly touching him, talking to him. Robbie had tried to sit with his mates, but after an hour of constant nothingness, he'd lost it. Paige had yelled at him to go work off his rage before coming back.

No one else wanted him in the house because apparently, his attitude aggravated them too. Hawkins had the nerve to threaten him with bodily harm if he didn't leave the rest of them alone. And who the hell put *him* in charge?

*"That's it."*

He glanced up at Roane in surprise, only to feel the Circ's mighty fist slam into his face. The asshole hit him right in the nose, and he was forced to take a moment to clear his watering eyes.

Roane had no qualms about taking advantage. He managed another punch to Robbie's kidney and a kick to his stomach before Robbie got his feet back under him.

*"That's for threatening my men and dicking with Sabrina."*

A small threat that kept her from Pearson Labs. Jesus. "I saved her life. Hell, I saved all of their lives." Robbie grunted and ducked the next punch Roane threw, countering with one of his own. He socked Roane hard in the arm, then kicked his leg out from under him.

Roane rolled back onto his feet, as if he'd meant to hit the ground ass-first.

"Not bad. At least my sister found a mate who can fall with grace." Robbie sneered and moved so fast, Roane couldn't follow. He beat the man again and again, until Roane lay panting on his hands and knees before him. Refraining from kicking the man when he was finally down, Robbie forced himself to calm down. His anger abated, his beast pleased with the skirmish. He reached out a hand.

Only to have Roane grab it, lever his weight, and use Robbie's size against him. The damned Circ pushed upward and threw him into the trunk of a very thick tree. The wind knocked out of him, Robbie took a deep breath and found purchase on the ground, his knees surprisingly wobbly.

*"Better, Weston. Good to know you're not as big a pussy as you look,"* he rasped.

Roane started laughing. The bruises and cuts staining his face faded, and he gave Robbie a sincere grin. "You are such a pain in the ass. It's so fitting you're here for Hale." He snickered. "I told him he'd find his mate when he least expected it. After all the shit he gave me about Caitlyn. Well, now he knows where she gets that mean streak." His laughter infected Robbie.

Chuckling and feeling the tension ease, Robbie leaned back against the tree. "My sister loves you."

*"And I love her."* Roane paused. "You're mated to Paige and Hale. Hale's place is here, and with Doc her uncle, I'd say Paige's place is here too."

*"So?"*

*"So, if you're planning on staying here as well, we need to set some rules."* Roane stood, his power clear to see.

Robbie understood why Hale followed this man, why the rest of them followed him too. Roane commanded by simply breathing. He had an innate ability to instill trust and loyalty in his men. He'd won Caitlyn's heart, which was no mean feat.

"Go ahead," Robbie sighed, needling the man. "Gimme this list of rules I'm not allowed to break, ever, upon pain of death."

"It's almost uncanny how alike you and your sister are. That same sarcasm, that same need to poke fun, when you know you're going to give in at the end."

Robbie wanted to wipe the smug look off his face. "Do you ever shut up?"

"First, I'm leader here." Roane ignored him. "I make the calls. It's not a dictatorship, it's a command structure. You want to stay, you fall in."

"Aye, aye, sir." He flipped Roane a one-finger salute.

"Dick," Roane muttered. "Second, Caitlyn may be your sister, but she's *my* mate. Soon to be my wife, as soon as I ask her. And you're going to be an uncle. You and I need to make peace. Because if we don't, she'll be unhappy. As will Hale, my best friend."

They were in deep. Robbie hadn't realized how tight Hale and Roane were. "Best friend, hmm?" Speaking of which... "So I read a few of Pearl's files. Whatever went on between you and Hale before, it's done."

Roane flushed. "Look, we're Circ. There was a reason for —"

"And so help me, though it makes me ill to think about it, if Caitlyn was ever involved with my mate, it stops there too. There's such a thing as too much sibling love. I'm not sharing," he rumbled.

"'Nuff said." Roane held out a hand, and Robbie moved forward to take it. "This mean you're in?"

"If Doc and you guys are okay with it, I'd like to stay here with Paige and Hale. But I work for General Shields, contractually speaking. I don't know what's next for me, jobwise. No offense, but if I had to take orders from you on missions, I'd probably kill you. My beast won't let me bow to anyone."

"No?"

He remembered the feeling of Hale inside him. "Okay. Just Hale. But that fucker's strong, and fast."

"I know." Roane grinned. "You should have seen the first time he pinned me. Not sexually," Roane hurried to add when Robbie scowled. "When we were testing out our new Circ abilities. I was bigger, and so was Derrick. But Hale moves so fast. One minute you see him, the next you don't."

Robbie's smile left him. "You think Doc can fix him?"

"If anyone can, it's Doc. Hayashi called Hawkins a half hour ago. Said they have another hour to go before they're here. Oh, and he's bringing that antivenom. That'll help."

Relief filled him. "Right. And Diego's coming too, eh? Imagine that." Apparently, Diego had nearly gotten himself killed trying to save Doc's ass. He had a bullet lodged in his leg and another hole in his shoulder. But he'd live. "I bet Mike skins him alive when he finds out Diego disobeyed orders."

"How so?"

"You really think General Shields told *me* to butt out, but he let Diego inside that place, knowing how attached Diego is to Doc?"

"So it wasn't all lies?"

"Far as I know, it wasn't. Diego's been like a sick puppy since Shields ordered him to pull back. Looks like I might not be your only addition."

Roane rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, about that... What do you know about Hawkins and his guys? Fallon, Tersch, and Hayashi? All of them SEALs *and* Circs?"

"Afraid so. Don't tell Hawkins, but my beast likes them. Hawkins set me free when I needed help. He could have made life pretty tough, but he didn't. It's actually because of him and his team that we got Doc back. Hayashi had his eye on the whole kidnapping while Hawkins distracted Dunn, focusing his attention on the attack here with a fake blow by blow on his cell."

"Simon fucking Dunn." Roane shook his head. "Bad enough we can't help rip Pearson Labs apart. I'd counted on gutting Dunn myself." Roane's sharp teeth glinted in the moonlight.

"I know what you mean."

They sat together in the dark, in the silence.

"You hurt my sister, I'll hurt you." Robbie thought he'd reiterate.

"Same goes about Hale."

"Okay." Robbie paused. He didn't want to see his mate lying so still, but he needed to remind himself his mate lived. That his wound was only temporary. "I should check on him." Robbie slowly got to his feet, surprisingly loath to end his time with Roane, a man he could respect and perhaps grow to like.

"I'll check on Caitlyn. God knows, I don't want her pissing off the squids inside. Grown men crying, not a pretty sight." Roane grinned.

Robbie shook his head and followed Roane inside. Before they parted, Robbie grabbed his arm. "Roane? Thanks."

Roane glanced at him over his shoulder and nodded, then yelled for his mate.

And Robbie went to find his.



## Chapter Fifteen

"Ow, dammit. What the hell? I feel like I'm caught in some ugly déjà vu." Hale grimaced as Doc prodded him with a needle.

"And once again, I have to listen to Hale whine." Sabrina rolled her eyes.

This time, Paige stood with him, and Derrick was nowhere in sight. "Baby, tell the mean lady to go away."

"Hale, honestly." Paige grinned. "I'm just so glad you're okay. I can't believe the antivenom didn't work. Robbie saved you. I think you owe him a great big thank-you."

Hale scowled at Robbie, lying with his hands behind his head and his ankles crossed on the huge exam table next to his. Like sunning himself at the damned beach. "Jerk. Thanks."

"No problem, playboy." Robbie tugged at the IV in his arm. "Hey, Doc, when are we done? Because Paige and I need some alone time together. It's been an exhausting evening, waiting for you guys to get back."

"Robbie, for God's sake." Paige flushed a bright pink, and Sabrina laughed at her.

"I think it's sweet. Beauty and the beast."

"Don't start, Sabrina." Paige seemed in such high spirits, and Hale couldn't blame her. He was on the mend, Doc had returned hearty and happy, with Diego practically crawling on all fours for forgiveness. And the way Robbie kept watching her and him, Hale figured they had a good time coming their way.

The damned mutant venom was no match for Robbie's "super" blood. Unfortunately, the damned Circ and his ego made sure everyone knew how superior he was. God, Hale loved him. He couldn't wait to get his hands on Robbie and Paige again. He needed to reconnect with the pair. Desperately.

"Okay, Doc. I feel fine. So fine, I need some time with my mates, right now, if you get my meaning." He moved a hand toward the tape holding the bandage over his wound.

Sabrina slapped it away. "Leave it alone. You need time to heal. Paige," she said, turning to her new best friend. Hell, anymore, the two were as thick as thieves. All the women were. It was a little frightening. "Go easy on him. But have at it with Robbie."

Once Roane called him that, everyone had taken to calling McKinley Robbie, a name incongruous with the beast who could crush them if he put his mind to it. Still, the gentler side of Robbie showed when he looked at Paige. Hale could see the love shining in that bright gold gaze. And then he turned it on Hale, and Hale felt like a goddamn girl, because he wanted to cry. *Has to be my injury, for sure.*

"Oh, all right." Doc sighed. He disconnected the IV from Robbie and collected his blood while Sabrina patched up Hale and moved out of his way. "You three take care. Hale's healing remarkably fast, but he's been through some trauma."

"We all have, Doc," Robbie said in a gravelly voice. "Thanks for taking care of him."

Doc smiled. "You're welcome. Now, I'm off as well. I have a date with a man in need of more groveling."

Everyone laughed as he departed with a spring in his step. Hale had a feeling all would work out between Doc and his lover. They made a fine pair, and God willing, the meals at the compound would once again be edible.

"Just think," he murmured to Sabrina, "no more cooking."

"Don't jinx it." She slapped him on the back, making him wince. "Now I have a date of my own. I'm taking Derrick ring shopping."

Hale blinked at her.

"Yes, ring shopping. He's going to marry me." Her tone dared anyone to contradict her. "There's something in the wind," she said with a wink at Paige. "Rumor has it, Roane's going to propose. And Kelly will soon be Mrs. Zackary and Ace English."

"I thought Ace's last name was Two Bears," Paige said.

"It is. Legally speaking, Kelly can only marry one man. But she's already mated to both of them. You ask me, she just wants to wear a bridal gown."

"It better not be white. The woman's pregnant, not innocent," Robbie muttered.

Paige punched him in the arm, and he frowned. "Watch it, mate. I'm not that innocent, either, and I definitely plan on a white gown."

Hale and Robbie exchanged a wary glance, concerned at the gleam in Paige's eye.

Sabrina chuckled. "Good point, and one we all feel, I'm sure. You might want to treat these two the way I'm handling Derrick. I'd rather him find a ring I like instead of one he *thinks* I'll like. Some men have no taste in jewelry." She eyed Hale and Robbie as

if they were lacking. *Such a pain in the ass.* God, she and Derrick had been made for one another. "Have fun, you three." Sabrina said, leaving with a flourish.

Paige and Robbie helped Hale off the table. The three of them walked down the hall to their temporary bedroom in comfortable silence, until Paige blurted, "I can't wait until our house is built. I chose a plan like Kelly's. We'll need the space."

"We will?" Hale asked, wide-eyed. A house? They needed space? Was she talking about being pregnant already?

Robbie looked just as ill. "Ah, honey?"

"You know. Because you're so big, and Hale and I aren't exactly small. Besides, I'm just not used to being around a lot of people. I need space."

Hale breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

"And then there's the baby."

He tripped.

"What?"

"The baby we're going to have, just as soon as Robbie stops being so damned gentle and *fucks* me." In seconds, she *changed* into her alter ego, a stronger, meaner Circ, and dragged both men into their room.

Paige glared at Robbie, letting Hale off the hook this once. "I'm tired of your *tenderness*. I love you, both of you, dammit." Hale's delighted and surprised grin had her pausing. Did the man not know how much she cared? *Dimwits, the both of them.* She ripped through Robbie's shirt before he could blink, deliberately drawing blood. "I want it rough. I want it hard. No more holding back."

Robbie didn't move.

Hale winked at her. "Oh, man. I can't wait. I'm going to sit right here and heal, fast. Take him, Paige. I know you can."

"That's all you have to say to me?" she shrieked, on a roll. "You nearly died yesterday. I want the goddamn words. Three of them. Think hard. I'm sure it'll hit you."

He winced. Robbie remained frozen, staring at her in awe or fear, she didn't know.

"Hell, Paige. Isn't it obvious how much I love you? And Robbie too?" Hale sighed. "I haven't known either of you as long as you've known each other. I can't explain it, but the feeling's there. I honest-to-God love you. Hell, I dreamed about you both, even when the thought of touching *McKinley* made me want to puke." He smirked at Robbie's glare. "Don't worry, hot stuff. I think you're fine. But you're not as attractive unless you're ripping into one of us. Quit hiding behind that fake softness. Let go and give it to her. She's asking for it, man."

Robbie licked his lips, and Paige wanted to groan. She'd been in love with him for so long. Just once he'd given her his affections without holding back, and then he'd been immediately sorry. She wanted it all. His love, his respect, his *honest* desire.

"But I don't want to hurt her —"

Before he could finish, she attacked him. No more holding back, no more fear of offending Robbie. She raked her claws over his body, her beast only interested in a male strong enough to conquer her. Hale had proved himself. Now, it was Robbie's turn.

Shoving herself at him, she knocked him back onto the bed and bit his nipple hard enough to draw blood. She sucked, relishing his taste. Before she could move to the other one, she felt a firmness prodding her belly. So long and hard; her Robbie wanted her.

"*Fuck*. You want it hard, you got it." Robbie growled low and flipped her onto her back. He tore her clothes off her body and licked, sucked, and bit her all over. When his lips and tongue dug between her folds to caress her clit, she nearly shot off the bed. Robbie's strong hands held her there.

She tried to escape. Paige writhed and squirmed, but he only sucked harder, pushing her into an orgasm. Robbie quickly moved up her body, shoved her thighs wide, and thrust deep. He was so large that even *changed* — as *changed* as she could be — she felt crammed full.

"Yes," she groaned, needing more.

"Take him, Paige," Hale encouraged, his throaty rasp suddenly right by her ear. "Feel that thick cock stroking. He's going to fill that pussy. All that hot cum splashing inside you."

Robbie grunted and fucked her harder.

"Oh, please," she cried, squeezing him tight.

He shouted and unloaded into her, shoving her thighs wider so he could push deeper into her.

Hale turned her head to kiss her, until Robbie gripped her chin and pulled her back to face him.

"My turn." He thrust his tongue into her mouth and took possession of her mind, body, and soul. She submitted everything, overjoyed as he mastered her so beautifully.

He withdrew and pushed her over onto her belly, then pulled her up on her hands and knees facing the headboard. She eagerly looked forward to being reamed, and closed her eyes.

"Not too hard," Hale warned.

"Shut up," Robbie muttered and began inching between her cheeks. Her beast welcomed the pain and opened for him, widening the passage into her anus and past her sphincter. When Robbie groaned her name and began pumping once more, she found heaven.

"Open your mouth," Hale growled.

Paige opened her eyes to find Hale's cock hard, wet, and right in front of her face. She let him fuck her mouth, feeling deliciously used by her mates, who wanted everything she had to give. When she nipped Hale with her teeth and sucked harder, he

groaned and gripped her breasts, which swayed with each of Robbie's punishing thrusts. Hale squeezed and tugged, stimulating her into sucking still harder and harder until he came.

He yelled her name as he spent, his cum dribbling down her chin in her haste to swallow as much of him as possible. Robbie stiffened and clutched her hips with his sharp claws, and she felt him pulse inside her, her body incredibly sensitive when fully Circ. She wriggled, milking as much of him as she could, until both her mates withdrew from her body and collapsed on the bed on either side of her.

"Holy shit. Paige, you can attack me anytime you want," Robbie breathed.

"Ditto for me," Hale wheezed. "God, I'm still coming." He groaned and continued to spew as Robbie reached over her and finished him off.

"This is it, fellas," she felt compelled to say as she purred with contentedness. "This is forever, no matter where we live or what we do." She had plans to go back to school and study genetics, as taken with science as her uncle was. Apparently, brains did run in the family; she was smart enough not to let her mates dictate to her, after all.

"You're the boss," Hale agreed.

"Wait a minute now. Paige isn't—ah, right. Whatever you say, Paige," Robbie said in as meek a voice as she'd ever heard him use. She tweaked his nipple, fully aware of his erection, which never seemed to go away. "Come on, baby. You know we love you."

"We," not "I." Paige lay down, covered in their scent and seed, and hugged them both to her. "That's right. *We*. Now, that was only round one. And playboy, I'm taking off the kid gloves as soon as you're rested. So take advantage of me being nice."

"Nice?" he groaned. "What is it with these violent tendencies you females seem to have?"

"I'll show you some violence," she started, when someone banged frantically at the door.

Robbie rolled off the bed and opened it to find Derrick looking shell-shocked. The big guy didn't even seem to notice Robbie's state of undress as he stared over Robbie at Hale and Paige.

"Sorry, guys, but you're not going to believe this. Simon Dunn just tried to attack Kelly outside."

"Is she okay?" Paige asked as she hurried into a robe, ready to go to Kelly's aid.

"*Fuck*. Tell us she's all right," Hale said on a groan as he rolled to his feet. "Where are my jeans?"

"All right? *The woman took his head off!*" Derrick's broad grin eased Paige's mind. "I'm telling you guys, right now, do not, and I repeat, *do not* make a pregnant Circ mad. Ace said she grew twice as large as she usually does when *changed* and snapped Dunn in half like a twig. Zack's cleaning up his remains as we speak." Derrick faltered as he took a harder look at Robbie. "Oh Christ. That image is going to haunt me for weeks."

Go back to whatever it is you were doing. *Damn.*" He backed away and left, grumbling under his breath.

Paige stared at her mates, speechless.

"Females are the root of all evil," Hale said sadly, shaking his head. Her mates shared a conspiring grin. "It's you and me, Robbie. We'll have to stay strong around Paige. First, she'll go into heat and drive us crazy. Then, she'll be demanding when we go through our stupid wedding ceremony. And you, my friend, are not making me wear a tux all by myself. Then it'll be the pregnancy, babies, chocolates, flowers. Where does it end?"

He and Robbie sat back down on the bed, and the pair of them watched warily as Paige stalked them.

As Hale lay back and continued to lament the woes of his female mate, Paige smirked and settled between her men, where she belonged.

"He's right, you know." Robbie drew her onto his lap. "A bit dramatic, but it's all true."

"I've been told I'm a real animal. Hell on wheels."

"Honey, you are," Hale sighed, looking utterly spent.

She laughed.

Robbie sighed and hugged her close. "Ah, babe, we wouldn't have you any other way."

## Chapter Sixteen

*A week later*

Julian Hawkins grimaced as whatever Doc injected him with burned through his thigh, up his groin, and spread throughout the rest of his body. "You're sure this will do the trick?"

"It'll help, but I'm concerned at how little I actually know, medically, about the four of you." Doc's expression was serious, concerned, and caring. A lot like Dr. Eckles used to be before that Pentagon prick had ordered him to go undercover in a situation way beyond his pay grade. Captain William Delancey...talk about a score to settle. At least Eckles now had a solid position with General Shields's Project Dawn cleanup team, not to mention an around-the-clock therapist. And if Shields was to be believed, Jules and his team had a place in the organization as well.

Jules studied his men, pleased that they *felt* clearer, more together. His beast noted the right color in the energy patterns pulsating around their bodies. *Finally*. Red, the color of health. Fallon, Tersch, and Hayashi had earned the right to leave this all behind and never look back. He himself had no current plans at the moment other than to relax. After seven years in the Navy and a year as a fucking guinea pig to further Delancey's mysterious agenda, he deserved a break.

"I really appreciate the invite to stay, Doc. I might just take you up on it, at least for a little while. I don't think they'll miss me at Pearson Labs."

The others smirked. The tremendous backlash and bad press Pearson Labs received was worth every damned day spent in that shit hole. Publicity dogged General Kohl's and Senator Kuntz's incarcerations. Neither man would ever work in politics, or outside a small jail cell, again. General Shields had made damn sure of that. He'd also

expressed an interest in using Jules and what was left of his small team to do good, what Dawn Endeavor – the Navy’s version of Project Dawn – had been intended to do.

If Doc’s serum could permanently fix the problems with that damned mutated virus that caused most Circs to turn psychotic, Jules would seriously consider taking Shields up on his offer. But he wouldn’t speak for his friends.

“So long as it’s on a contracted basis, and not forever. We get to pick and choose assignments, then I’m in,” Fallon muttered in a low voice.

*Damned telepath.* “Fallon, please.”

Fallon flushed. “Sorry. It’s working again, and it’s hard to turn off. I think the serum jump-started my abilities,” he said low, so as not to be overheard by Doc.

Hayashi tried to contain a grin.

Tersch laughed out loud. “What he said. God, I feel good. I think we need some leave, guys.” The modern-day Viking stretched. “Too many attractive –”

“Mated,” Fallon interrupted.

“ – females here. Besides, my sea legs are tingling. I’m voting Key West.”

“Hawaii,” Fallon suggested.

Just to be difficult, Hayashi chimed in. “I vote Jamaica.”

Jules sighed. “See what I put up with, Doc? Talk about pulling your hair out.”

Doc smiled. “You know, you four remind me an awful lot of Circe’s Recruits. The only difference between you are mates, babies, and McKinley,” he teased.

Jules sensed his men freeze at the word “babies” and sincere panic when Doc mentioned McKinley.

“You know, there’s a great beach right here,” Jules improvised. “Why don’t we check out the bar scene? We’ll road trip it after this serum takes effect. All in favor?”

“Aye,” four voices hurriedly agreed.

As they grumbled and exited Doc’s lab, Jules’s beast told him they had more work to do. But not today, and not now, when they finally had a reason to celebrate and relax. No mates, no danger, just sun, sand, and some hot sex, if he could get it. Female sex, non-Circ sex.

“Amen,” Fallon murmured.

But as they left the compound together, Jules caught sight of Paige Masters and her devoted mates. The love flowing around the pair glowed a deep violet, and he felt a pang of envy he quickly suppressed, but not fast enough.

The air around his small team grew static, and they stopped in their tracks, unable to move until Hayashi had his say.

Hayashi’s black stare crossed his. “Soon, brother. Very soon,” he whispered. He shook his head and cleared his throat, breaking the strange paralysis holding the group still. “I think Tersch is feeling lucky. Atlantic City, here we come.”

“Shotgun,” Fallon called.



Jules pretended a normalcy he didn't feel and forced himself to smile. Time to beat the odds, one day at a time. And maybe, just maybe, they'd get lucky.

 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](http://www.marieharte.com) and check out her blog at <http://www.marieharte.blogspot.com>.