

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Doing Thyme

ISBN 9781419918322

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication October 2008

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Doing Thyme

Kate Hill

Prologue

Future Earth

It was against the rules for counselors to fuck prisoners, therefore what Thyme and this irresistible man were about to do would no doubt destroy her career. At the moment, she didn't give a damn.

In the barren therapy room, he sat in a high-backed chair and stared at her with those enormous blue eyes, so deep that she nearly lost her breath from looking at them. His black prison uniform couldn't disguise his broad shoulders and the subtle power of his lean, hard-looking body. An alien crossbreed like this had twice the strength of even the most athletic human male.

Yes, at first glance he appeared human, but there was something about him that marked him as Laetez. That something aroused Thyme so much that her heart pounded with desire. She approached on weak legs, her stiff nipples poking against the fabric of her simple white blouse.

"It's been a long time, Counselor," he said in that deep, smooth voice that spoke to her so often in dreams.

"Too long," she breathed.

"Come." He held out his hand to her and she approached. When she stood within reach, he grasped her wrist and tugged her on top of him. He pulled her skirt up to her waist and Thyme closed her eyes for a moment, sighing with pleasure. Since she wore no panties, his erection pressed against her sensitive flesh. Unfortunately, it wasn't free of his trousers. She'd have to fix that.

Shifting her position slightly, she unzipped his pants and grasped his hot, thick cock. She stroked him and brushed her thumb over the smooth head, spreading the droplet of moisture that had beaded at the tiny eye.

He cupped the back of her head and drew her closer for a kiss. Every sweep of his warm, wet tongue made her clit throb and ache with need. There was no reason to wait any longer.

Unable to control her excited breathing, she raised herself slightly and guided his cock into her lust-drenched pussy.

“Oh, Ross,” she whispered against his lips.

“Counselor,” he said and kissed her again while she rocked against him, her entire body tingling with need. His hands grasped her hips and slid around to squeeze her buttocks.

Then he unbuttoned her shirt and unfastened the front clasp on her bra, freeing her breasts from their lace confinement. He rolled his thumbs over her nipples, sending exquisite ripples of pleasure coursing through her.

Bracing her hands against his shoulders, she tried to keep the moans of pleasure from escaping her throat, but didn’t succeed. He lifted one of her full breasts and bent his head, lashing his tongue over her nipple. This was almost too good to endure.

For years she’d dreamed of this moment—of making love with the most passionate, arousing man she’d ever met.

This man deserved a better life than he’d been born into, the same life that had once sent him down the path to destruction. Now he had a chance and, with any luck, they would be together.

“You have a session in five minutes,” said the computerized voice on Thyme’s desk spec.

She jumped, startled out of her daydream, though her heart pounded from more than just surprise.

This was so humiliating. Seated behind the desk in her office, on the *job* of all places, her entire body pulsed with lust. The urge to reach down and masturbate then and there almost overcame her. Her feelings for a particular inmate at the ACT prison where she worked as a counselor had finally taken over her life.

She couldn’t stop thinking about him, worrying about him, desiring him.

That frustrating ache in her clit was absolutely intolerable. There was no way she could handle a session like this, especially not a session with *him*.

Her face hot with embarrassment and desire, she ducked into the bathroom, slid her hand down her skirt and dipped her fingers into her warm, wet pussy. She withdrew her fingers and rubbed her clit, not bothering to extend her pleasure with long, teasing strokes. She didn’t have time. All she needed to do was take the edge off so she could face him, with his intoxicating blue eyes and that sleek body. He was forbidden, yet she wanted him so, so badly.

Thyme gasped, her pulse racing as orgasm broke over her. She continued rubbing until her climax waned, then quickly washed up before heading to her session.

Chapter One

Ross Lovell stepped into the therapy room and took the seat across from the black glass wall separating him from his counselor.

On the other side of the glass, Thyme Westcott's pulse quickened and her grip tightened involuntarily on the arms of her chair. No matter how she'd tried to curb her desire for Ross, she'd failed miserably. She'd kept the semblance of professionalism and had even convinced herself he meant no more to her than any of the other prisoners assigned to her for therapy. Now she had no choice but to admit her feelings, if only to herself. Ross would be released soon.

Released. She nearly laughed aloud. The life he had chosen for himself was worse than the sentence he'd served. For the past several months she'd tried talking him out of it, but he held firm.

Last year he'd been accepted into a special rehabilitation program offered only to prisoners who passed rigorous intellectual and psychological tests. Placing the wrong personality type in the job he had trained for would end in disaster.

Thyme studied him carefully, knowing this would probably be the last chance she'd have. Tall with a lean, athletic build, he had short, dark brown hair and enormous blue eyes that at first glance seemed icy, but actually displayed a variety of emotions. They blazed when his temper rose or glistened when something amused him. The lines around his eyes didn't detract from him, but made him seem more real, as did the long, jagged scar running just below his left eye to his jawline.

Thyme had never gone for pretty boys, so Ross' rugged, square-jawed looks appealed to her. His hands rested on his long, hard-looking thighs that strained against the heavy black fabric of his prison trousers. Those hands were beautifully formed, the fingers rounded and the nails short and clean. It was difficult to believe those hands were capable of committing the crimes that had sent him to prison.

After counseling him for the past four years, Thyme knew the brutal life he'd led and understood the circumstances that had brought him here. Her job was to help him come to terms with what he'd done and why he'd done it. She needed to ensure that once he was released, he'd not be a danger to society, yet she couldn't help feeling society had damaged him long before he broke the law.

She remembered the first time she'd seen Ross. Angry, closed to everyone and everything, he'd spent more time in solitary during his first year than anyone in the past. He'd been completely uncooperative with the first two counselors assigned to him, but the moment Thyme met him, she swore to be the one to get through.

She'd seen many prisoners during her time as a counselor and had learned to be a good judge of who had potential and who was a lost cause. Something in Ross' eyes told her the man was more than he seemed. Yes, he'd committed crimes but his weren't the eyes of a criminal. A crazy contradiction coming from someone like her, educated and generally sensible.

When she'd met him, she wasn't a naïve girl just out of psych school, but a woman who had been in the business long enough to develop a thick skin and enough cynicism to taint even her personal life. She knew how dangerous a man like Ross could be. How deadly.

In spite of his initial rebellion, he had slowly opened up to her. She'd weaned him off the meds he'd been pumped with to keep him mellow and replaced them with milder drugs proven to keep his particular disorder under control. Eventually, as his mind cleared, he learned to trust her and started to understand who and what he was.

She'd talked him into enrolling in the prison study program. Ross proved to be a fast learner and highly intelligent, two benefits of the experiment that had also cursed him with an unnaturally high aggression level that had sent him down the path of destruction.

Now that he was under control, he had so much potential. It saddened her to think a man like this had wasted half his life. Now he'd be wasting more, at least as far as she was concerned. He'd done his time and had the chance for a new life. Apparently she'd failed in another important part of her job. She hadn't convinced him to forgive himself or at least accept that he had also been a victim, driven to commit his crimes by a force he couldn't control.

She sighed. There was little more she could do to change his mind and it was time for their last session to begin.

"Good afternoon, Ross," she said, knowing he wouldn't hear the true sound of her voice. The filters in the therapy room altered it so the patient couldn't even tell if his counselor was male or female. The black glass prevented him from seeing her. At Bane Isle Maximum Security Prison all therapy sessions were conducted in this manner.

Bane only accepted inmates who were part of ACT—Alien Conversion Testing. It was one of the only prisons in the world equipped to retain and rehabilitate the victims of ACT. The Earth Psych Counsel in charge of ACT deemed it necessary to hide counselors' identities for their own protection. There was the chance an escaped or released prisoner might seek retribution of the system through them.

"Hi, Counselor. I guess this is it. Our last one-on-one," Ross said. His voice was unfiltered and the sound of it, neither too deep nor too high but with an underlying roughness, aroused her more than she wanted to admit.

It was the voice she imagined whispering in her ear late at night when she dipped her hand between her legs and into her hot, wet pussy. She fantasized about his fingers, damp with her juices, slowly rubbing her clit until the sensitive flesh tingled and throbbed with need. His was the voice she wanted to pant her name in ecstasy while he filled her over and over with his cock.

Thyme moistened her lips that had suddenly gone dry. She shifted in her chair, crossing her legs in an attempt to appease the sexual ache summoned by her lustful thoughts over the man she wanted more than any other but could never have—at least not if she wanted to keep her job.

"Yes, Ross, this is it," she said. "You've come a long way and should be proud of yourself."

"I owe you, Counselor."

For four years he'd called her Counselor. It was against the rules for him to know her name. She hated the rules. Rules had caused him so much grief to begin with. They had forced those involved in ACT to keep important information from participants and had spawned a generation of potential monsters.

Rules prevented her from marching into the therapy room, flinging her arms around his neck, kissing his chiseled lips and letting him know she'd fallen in love with him.

"You don't owe me," she replied. "I've only guided you but you've done the hard work yourself. You've let me inside and allowed me to help you and you're the one who put in all those hours of study. Not everyone has the ability to run an entire observation lab on his own. It's one of the most difficult study programs offered here."

“By the end of the week I’ll be putting it to good use.”

“On Observation Lab Jefferson Ten.” She leaned forward in her chair, as if he could see the concern on her face. “Ross, are you sure you won’t reconsider? Choose another post. One with—”

“No,” he said curtly. “I’ve made up my mind. Jefferson Ten is where I belong.”

That particular observation lab, located on an uninhabited planet at the farthest corner of a galaxy called the Amethyst Arc, was completely secluded. Owned by a private company unwilling to pay for more than one caretaker at a time, Jefferson Ten had been on a job list circulated among prisons offering the observation lab study program. Newly released prisoners worked for less pay, since many companies refused to hire them. Thyme thought managers of such companies little better than criminals themselves, seeking cheap labor from desperate people.

“Listen to me,” she continued. “You’ll be completely alone for three years.”

“Exactly.”

“Why do you want to do that to yourself?”

His jaw tightened visibly and he shifted in his seat. “You know why.”

“You’re a different person than when you first came here.”

“I’ve changed enough to realize my limitations. Jefferson Ten is where I belong, Counselor, and it’s where I want to be. It will give me lots of time to think.”

“Or to hide.”

A glimmer of irritation shone in his eyes but he kept it under control. That was probably the most important achievement from their sessions, his ability to regulate his temper. “I’m not hiding. I’m doing what I need to. You’re the one who said a man should know his limitations and his abilities. I work best alone.”

“Work is one thing, but have you thought carefully about what it will be like for three years without the contact of another human being?”

“Yes. I’m a loner. You know that. Less interruptions and hassles that way.”

“What about your emotional needs? I’ve also told you it’s important to take care of those.”

A slight smile tugged at his lips. “I realize you’re trying to point out all the drawbacks, but I’ve considered my decision carefully. I’m going to Jefferson Ten, Counselor. It’s best all around.”

The prison certainly thought so. The warden had been thrilled when Ross had signed on to Jefferson Ten.

“It’s like having him off the streets for another three years,” the warden had said. “With any luck he’ll do a good job and keep signing on. Another freak away from decent people. I’d say in regards to Ross Lovell the rehab program worked great.”

Thyme simply couldn't agree. Not in Ross' case. If anything the system owed him, not the other way around.

"Ross, is there anything you'd like to talk about before you go?" she asked. Those words brought a heavy feeling to her stomach. The idea of never seeing him again was too depressing. Even worse was knowing he'd never had the chance to see her as she'd seen him. If he had, what would he think? Would he be as attracted to her as she was to him?

She shook her head. How had she allowed herself to become so attached to a prisoner?

"No. Just...thanks again."

"You're welcome," she said simply. "You may go."

He nodded and stood. The black prison uniform outlined his lean, broad-shouldered form. Damn, she'd love to see him undressed. She wondered if his chest was hairy or smooth. She knew from his file that he had several scars and tattoos, though she'd never seen them in the flesh. During sessions he'd always worn his uniform. Little in his physical appearance hinted that he carried alien blood in his veins. Instead the side effects of ACT revealed themselves in chemical imbalances, personality disorders and inhuman strength.

Once he left the room, Thyme sat, waiting for her next patient.

This was her life. Sitting in a cold, windowless room listening to horror stories from murderers, rapists and thieves. Each night she left the prison too emotionally drained to do anything except go home, eat dinner, have a workout to relieve stress and vegetate until the next day when the routine started all over again.

She'd had few relationships, mostly because her mind was always at work. Not to mention that over the years she'd become extremely picky about the men she wanted to date. Snorting with laughter, she raised her eyes to the heavens. So she'd gone ahead and fallen for a man most people would consider completely unsuitable, but when had she ever thought like most people?

Her family and acquaintances from school didn't understand why she'd gone into counseling at an ACT prison. They'd expected her to enter a private practice, making easy money helping average people sort out their problems. Thyme wanted to put her skills to truly good use and to her nothing seemed more important than helping men and woman treated as pawns by the government.

Thirty-seven years ago, Earth had entered into experiments originated by their closest alien allies, the Laetez. The secret study had been approved by both governments, promising to cure diseases and strengthen the biological structure of humans and Laetez.

While the Laetez had greater physical strength, humans possessed a quality coveted by them—the ability to exist as individual entities. Each Laetez was made up of two beings—the Re and the Er. The external being, or the Re, communicated directly with others through normal speech and appeared almost human. The Er, or internal being, lived within the brain of the Re. It governed the Re's emotional state, keeping their fierce tempers in check and usually possessed a higher intelligence. The two were forever bound, dependent on each other.

The Laetez hoped that by breeding with species such as humans they could eventually find a way for the

Er to live independently. Humans, on the other hand, would gain the physical power and stronger immune system enjoyed by the Laetez.

Though their theory had never been proven, people like Thyme believed the governments had been searching for ways to build an unstoppable army that would keep humans and Laetez atop the intergalactic food chain.

Men and women were taken from impoverished settlements—places where people desperate for financial security would sell themselves to the government. Few in power cared what happened to those living in poor, high-crime areas.

Only when victims of the experiments began passing on dangerous traits to their children did the authorities admit what they'd done. Forced to clean up their mistake, the government offered treatment to those affected by ACT. For the victims who had already become criminals, they established prisons such as Bane where they would either be housed for life or entered in rehabilitation programs.

Thyme once believed helping victims of ACT put her skills to the best possible use. After a few years burnout set in. She had been almost ready to resign and start a private practice after all. Then she'd met Ross.

She had spent her life searching for something just beyond her reach, an emotional fulfillment that eluded her. She wanted someone to share her thoughts with. Someone who loved and needed her as much as she needed him.

Perhaps it wasn't love she felt for Ross after all, but desperation. In many ways she was living a life as solitary as the one he had chosen on Jefferson Ten. That still didn't explain the hot-and-bothered sensations every time she so much as thought about him. Not only was the man physically attractive, but he'd endured a life that would have destroyed most people. She couldn't help admiring his strength and determination to change. Someone like Ross Lovell came along once in a lifetime. Knowing that, how could she possibly let him go?

* * * * *

Ross sat quietly in the passenger seat of the shuttle taking him to Jefferson Ten. It was a two-day trip from Earth to the observation lab and he used the time to think. Not that he wouldn't have enough time for that over the next three years.

The counselor had been right about one thing, his assignment was lonely. He'd never been a big talker anyway, but it was nice every now and then to hear another voice.

One voice in particular he'd love to hear—the counselor's. Strange how someone he'd never actually seen, who spoke to him through filters, had managed to bring hope and comfort to his crazy life.

For as long as he could remember, rage and frustration had filled him. As a child he had been tied up by his parents to prevent his tantrums from harming people and property. They hated him and he hadn't blamed them. He despised himself. After running away from home at thirteen, he dove into a life of crime, sating his lust for violence as a leg breaker for minor crime bosses.

His aggression and talent as a street brawler led him to underground fighting rings where he soon became a champion. With a mind as quick as his hands, he could have become a boss himself if not hindered by his episodes of blind rage. People feared him but few wanted to work for him. In truth, he

feared himself.

Only when he nearly killed some poor bastard for simply bumping into him at a shuttle station did he realize something had to be done. For the first time in his life he didn't run from arrest. It was only while awaiting trial that he finally learned the reason for his catastrophic life. Testing proved he carried alien DNA. Further investigation revealed that his father had been involved in ACT. The side effects, which caused no obvious harm to him, had instead passed on to Ross.

The insurmountable anger Ross felt drove him deep within himself. He wasn't fully human, but an alien freak with abnormally high aggression, increased strength and higher resistance to disease—a virtual machine for violence. No matter how hard he fought or what he did, that horrible, driving rage would always fester inside him.

Or so he'd thought. The counselor had showed him that he could live a normal life or at least as normal as a man like him could expect. With behavioral modification therapy and medication that evened chemical imbalances, he felt calmer and more focused than he'd ever imagined possible.

Yet fear still coiled deep inside him. Fear that once he left Bane he would once again become the monster he had been. He couldn't tolerate that kind of life. Not anymore. In spite of the meds and therapy, he was a bomb waiting to explode. How could he possibly expose the world to that?

Sometimes he thought execution would have been a more fitting punishment for his crimes. He might have been a victim of ACT but that didn't justify what he'd done, the people he'd hurt.

When he'd sunk to his lowest, contemplating suicide, the counselor had convinced him that he still had something to offer to society. Along with his violence and physical strength came a photographic memory and high intelligence. He flew through the academic programs offered at Bane.

The observation lab training interested him most. He could get paid for living on an isolated station, far away from those he might harm. So much peace and quiet was bound to be good for him and he enjoyed studying space, the stars and planets. He liked the idea of keeping watch over ships traveling in his sector and signaling warnings if necessary.

He certainly wouldn't miss prison, but he would miss the counselor. Just once he'd have loved to look at her. Yes, he knew the counselor was female, even though he'd never seen her or heard her real voice. He sensed her femininity or maybe he just *wanted* her to be female because he didn't want to believe he had *these kinds* of feelings for another man. Was it possible to fall for someone just by talking to them for a few hours a week? Not once had either said anything out of line but he couldn't deny something burned between them.

Hell, maybe he was just being a pathetic fool, getting all emotional over the first person in his life who had ever shown him any real kindness. The counselors before her had given up on him, saying he had no potential for rehabilitation.

Somehow she had understood how angry and hurt he felt. How betrayed. How tainted.

Not that he had anything against the Laetez, but this genetic meddling hadn't improved him. It had made his life almost unbearable. He'd done some research and learned ACT was still in operation but with improved regulations. Not that it mattered. By now many kinks had been worked out of the program, at least the dangerous ones. The government praised ACT for medical breakthroughs and that was great, except for people like Ross and his victims.

“We’re almost there,” the pilot said, not so much as glancing at Ross.

Ross didn’t blame him. He hadn’t exactly been the best company during the trip. Several times the pilot had tried to start a conversation but Ross wasn’t in the mood to talk. The strangest mixture of anxiety and relief had his stomach flip-flopping.

Within the hour he’d be completely alone, with no one to talk to except through messages sent by the main computer to Jefferson Ten’s reception base on Earth. His job required him to feed reports to the base daily and he could signal for assistance in a life-or-death situation. Not that it would matter much. In case of a dire emergency, there was little chance help would arrive in time.

Chapter Two

Moments later, the shuttle landed on the tiny dock behind the lab. A tall, gray building set on a grassy hill overlooking a lake, the lab resembled an old-fashioned lighthouse. The planet’s atmosphere was similar to that of Earth. Heat struck Ross the moment he stepped out of the ship. Squinting toward the sunny sky, he drew a deep breath of clean air, an improvement over the smog he’d lived in all his life.

“I’ll help you unload your supplies, if you want,” the pilot said.

“Thanks,” Ross told him. “Appreciate it.”

The men set to work unloading large containers of food, medicine and other necessities for everyday living. A supply ship would pass through on a bimonthly basis. Other than that brief contact, Ross would be completely alone on the planet.

“That’s it,” the pilot said once they’d unloaded the last of the containers. He hesitantly extended his hand to Ross. “Good luck.”

Ross offered a slight smile and grasped the man’s hand. “Have a safe flight back.”

The pilot nodded and left quickly. In spite of the planet’s natural beauty, it had a desolate feel. An odd sensation chewed at Ross as he watched the shuttle rise from the dock and disappear skyward.

This was it. He was now completely alone.

Sighing deeply, he turned toward the lab and stepped inside. After doing a quick search from bottom to top, he found everything in order. It felt strange knowing he was the only person around, but at the same time he felt free. In this serene place, nothing existed to stir him. There was no one to harm.

And no one to talk to.

Most of the primary monitors were located on the top floor of the lab. He took the stairs rather than the elevator, concerned about possibly getting trapped. Though the elevators were equipped with an emergency communicator, it could take days for anyone to reach him and he had no desire to be stuck in an elevator for that length of time.

He checked all the monitors, scanning the planet and surrounding space. Nothing seemed out of the

ordinary and as expected, there was no sign of humans or aliens, only wildlife.

Ross spent the next several hours making his reports for the day then he had a workout in the gym, ate lunch and decided to do an afternoon monitor check.

He had nearly completed the scan when a red signal beeped across the screen.

Impossible.

Red meant human life. How could there possibly be human life on the planet when he'd done a check only hours ago and found nothing of the sort?

Maybe it was a glitch. He checked again then adjusted the monitor's settings. No change. Someone else was on the planet and nearby too.

His brow furrowed and he took a stun pistol from the weapons closet. This planet had a trespassing field, warning any ships that it was private property. No one was to land except in an emergency. Ross' unwanted visitor was either *in* trouble or *looking* for trouble. Either way he needed to protect himself and the lab.

He made his way outside, both curious and wary. Nearing the lake, he saw a dark-haired person swimming with confident strokes.

"Hey!" Ross shouted. "You in the lake. What the hell are you doing here?"

The person paused in swimming and stared at him for a moment then replied, "What the hell am I doing here? Who the hell are you?"

A woman's voice.

He neared the lake and she swam to shore and stood in the shallow water.

Damn. She was a knockout or at least her body was. Covered in a red swimsuit that hugged her generous curves like second skin, she inspired thoughts that made his cock twitch and reminded him of how many years it had been since he'd had a woman. Her face wasn't beautiful but it was adorable in an elfish way. Large hazel eyes studied him with curiosity and a hint of humor. She had a longish nose and a full lower lip that he'd love to suck.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "This is private property."

"I know. I saw the trespassing field when my shuttle crashed."

"Crashed?"

"A little over a week ago. It sank in the ocean several miles east of here. I barely got out with my life. There's an observation lab but it's locked up tight. I couldn't get in and it seemed to be empty."

"It was. I've just been assigned as manager." He narrowed his eyes at her. "I wonder why I didn't pick you up on my scan this morning."

"I'm living in the caves just south of here. They're filled with a strange ore that might have disrupted your

monitors.”

He nodded. That sounded logical but something about her story didn’t seem right.

“Well, the shuttle that dropped me off can’t be too far away yet,” he said. “I’ll signal and you’ll be on your way home by tomorrow.”

“No!” she said and placed a hand on his forearm. He glanced at it coolly and she dropped her hold. “I mean, I don’t want to go home. Not now. I need some time alone to think. Have you ever just needed to get away from your life? I know it sounds silly but—”

“No. It doesn’t,” he said. Folding his arms across his chest, he sighed and shook his head. “Look, lady, I’m sorry but I can’t let you stay here.”

“Thyme.”

“Huh?”

“My name is Thyme. Like the herb. And you are?”

“Ross.”

“Ross.” She smiled, a flirtatious look in her eyes. “I like that.”

He could not let her get to him, no matter how long it had been since he’d had a mind-blowing, stress-relieving fuck. This was the first legitimate job he’d ever had in his life and he was not going to throw it away for a woman, not matter how gorgeous she was. “Well, *Thyme*, it’s *time* for you to go,” he said, grasping her upper arm.

That was a mistake. She felt firm yet soft and the way her big hazel eyes widened with a hint of fear made his gut twist. She didn’t know who or what he was but she still seemed to sense the danger in him. He released her. “Lady, you need to go. Come on. I’ll call for a shuttle and—”

“Ross, if you could just let me stay for a little while, even a week or two. I won’t get in your way. I’ll be in the cave—”

Was she crazy wanting to stay here?

“I can’t. I could lose my job.”

She cocked an eyebrow and stared at him. “Who’s going to know?”

“I will. Whatever your problems are you can’t run away from them.”

Thyme gave a snort of humorless laughter. “Strange words coming from a man who took a job as manager of a secluded observation lab.”

“I’m not running from anything.” Irritation tightened his gut. This woman seemed too familiar, too—

“Just give me a few days at least,” she said, a pleading look in her eyes. “There’s something here I’m not ready to leave behind.”

“What?”

“It’s an emotional thing. You probably wouldn’t understand. I’m just—I’m not ready to let anyone know where I am.”

“Are you telling me that whatever shit you’re going through is so bad you’re willing to stay on this planet alone with a man you’ve never met?”

“You look safe enough.” She gave a quirky smile and wrapped her arms around her waist, hugging herself. The gesture was probably meant for self-comfort but it pressed her big, beautiful breasts closer together, making them look even more enticing. Ross’ heartbeat quickened.

“Looks can be deceiving,” he warned. She continued staring at him with those luminous hazel eyes. Gritting his teeth, he looked toward the heavens and said, “All right. A couple of days then I’m signaling for someone to pick you up.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “I won’t bother you at all. You won’t even know I’m here.”

Glancing at her luscious curves and the droplets of lake water illuminating her perky face, he thought, *I’ll know you’re here, all right. Damn, will I know you’re here.*

“Where have you been getting food?” he asked.

“I had some in my survival kit and I’ve been fishing and living off the fruit trees. Have you tried the native fruit around here? It’s the best.”

“No. Not yet. I need to get back to the lab. If you need anything or run into trouble—”

“Thanks.” Again she offered a charming smile. What was it about her that was so familiar?

Nodding, he turned away and headed back to the lab.

Thyme watched Ross walk across the meadow, admiring the breadth of his shoulders and the hard curve of his backside. It was good to finally see him in street clothes, well-fitting black trousers and a short-sleeved blue shirt that accentuated his eyes.

She’d convinced him to let her stick around for a few days. Now she had to find a way to spend time with him. After all, she’d risked arrest for trespassing just to have a chance with him. If she was caught it would mean her job as well as heavy fines. Only after she had talked her close friend, Marcie, into shuttling her to the planet and dropping her in the wilderness did she begin to question her decision.

“I think you’ve lost your mind,” Marcie had told her.

“You’re the one who’s been telling me for years to fall in love.”

“With a normal guy. Not some supercharged, half-alien criminal.”

“You don’t know him.”

“And you’ve only known him from behind protective glass. What kind of friend would I be to dump you off on a secluded planet with an ex-convict?”

“The kind of friend who doesn’t want her husband to find out about all the affairs she’s had since their first year of marriage to the present day,” Thyme had stated, feeling a little sick at resorting to blackmail.

The frigid look on Marcie’s face had told her she’d probably destroyed their friendship and Thyme had few enough friends as it was. She regretted taking such desperate measures but her feelings for Ross were too strong to deny.

Marcie dropped her on the planet the day before Ross was scheduled to arrive. She hadn’t lied about staying in the cave or the ore disrupting the monitors. Up until the moment he’d confronted her at the lake, she’d been debating whether or not to tell him the truth about who she was. As the saying went, honesty was the best policy, but she felt that if he knew his counselor had followed him from prison it might freak him out. He needed a chance to know her as a woman, not as a therapist.

Of course she intended to tell him the truth, but not before she knew whether or not he was interested in her. By the way he’d gawked at her in the swimsuit, he was certainly attracted. Or maybe he was simply horny because it had been over five years since he’d had a woman.

He turned her on so much that she almost didn’t care. Even if their relationship went nowhere, she’d have a night to remember him by.

That was a lie. If she went to bed with him she’d probably fall even more hopelessly in love. Could she kiss and caress him, sleep in his arms then walk away? If he didn’t want a relationship with her, she’d have no choice.

She had made the worst mistake of her career. The first rule of counseling is never, never, never fall in love with a patient.

The sky grew darker and an impending storm hung heavily on the air. She walked through the trees and into the cave. Engaging a defensive shield around her camp to protect her from wild animals, she glanced at her bedroll and decided a rest wouldn’t hurt. It would give her time to wait out the storm and think about what her next move with Ross should be.

She removed the wet bathing suit, pulled on a shirt, trousers, socks and boots then curled up on the bedroll. In the stillness of the cave lit only by the glow from her illumination stick, she soon drifted to sleep.

She dreamed Ross was with her in the dim cave, his warm, hard body looming above her. His vibrant blue eyes stared at her with such intensity that her body caught fire.

His mouth covered hers in a deep, tender kiss and she responded with all the enthusiasm she’d hidden for the past four years. He used his knee to part her thighs and she felt his cock rubbing sensuously against the delicate cleft between her legs.

“Ross. I’ve wanted you so much, baby,” she whispered against his lips. Clutching his head, she relished the sensation of his short, thick hair running through her fingers.

“Thyme,” he said in a husky voice and took her earlobe between his teeth. He tugged on it and rolled his

tongue over the bit of plump flesh. “Thyme.”

She moaned softly, clinging to him with arms and legs.

“Thyme!”

A hand shook her shoulder and Thyme awoke with a start, her heart pounding as much from surprise as from her erotic dream.

She stared into Ross’ eyes, noting they were far more beautiful in reality than in her fantasies. It was odd being so close to him. Usually she only saw him from a distance, through the protective glass.

His hair and clothes were wet, as if he’d been out in the rain.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, glancing around her camp. “The defensive shield—”

“I shut it down.”

A hint of fear grew inside her. Had Marcie been right after all? Was she in danger? Of course she was in danger. Like a fool she’d followed an ex-convict to a secluded planet.

“There’s a storm. I wanted to make sure you were safe,” he said. “You were struggling in your sleep. I wasn’t going to shut down the shield but I thought you might be sick.”

“No.” She felt a blush creep into her face as she recalled the dream. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

“It’s getting pretty bad out there,” he said. “My monitors picked up a worse storm heading in. Do you want to come back to the lab with me?”

She nodded and began gathering her belongings. When she finished, he took her bag and led the way out of the cave. An overland sled stood outside. He dropped her bag into the storage bin then mounted the sled. She climbed onto the seat behind him.

“Better hold on,” he said.

“You drive like a drunken monkey.” She smiled, recalling the results of his piloting tests in the study program.

Glancing over his shoulder, his brow furrowed, he asked, “What makes you say that?”

Damn. She’d really slipped with that one. “I... You just seem like the type.”

He shrugged and started the engine. Thyme slipped her arms around his lean waist, little thrills of delight coursing through her just from touching him. He kicked the sled into gear and they shifted forward so fast and hard that her breasts slammed against his back.

She tightened her grip and rested her cheek against his shoulder, closing her eyes to the lashing wind. His delicious scent of rain-dampened male filled her with every breath. His body carried the light aroma of herbal soap. In spite of the storm, she wished the ride would never end.

By the time he pulled into the garage at the back of the lab, the sky was black from the storm, except for

random streaks of lightning. Deafening claps of thunder made Thyme wince.

“Come on,” Ross said, grabbing her bag from the storage bin. “There’s an underground storm shelter. Looks like we’ll be spending the night there. This is going to be a big one.”

“Going to be?” she shouted above the thunder and roaring wind. Even inside it was deafening.

Thyme didn’t usually frighten easily but this was the worst storm she’d ever witnessed.

He turned to her with a roguish grin and winked. “This is only the beginning, doll. Let’s go.”

He took her hand and strode so quickly toward a door across the room that she was forced to jog in order to keep up with him. He took an illumination stick from a holder on the wall and cracked it on. They hurried down three flights of stairs, their boots clicking on the metal and echoing eerily through the reinforced underground chambers.

They passed several doors until he finally paused in front of one and opened it. No sooner had they stepped inside than the lights switched on.

Glancing around, Thyme noted they stood in a spacious room with a large, comfortable-looking bed, a table and chairs and a kitchenette. Through the open door across the room, she saw a small bathroom complete with a shower.

So far below the ground, the storm was scarcely audible, though she knew by looking at the small monitor mounted on the wall it still raged on, stronger than ever.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he said, tossing her bag onto the bed. “I need to check the monitors down here and see if there’s any damage.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Narrowing his eyes, he asked, “Do you know anything about running an observation lab?”

“Sorry.”

“Then do you know anything about making dinner?” He grinned. “I’m hungry.”

She smiled. “That I can do.”

“Good. I’ll be back soon.”

He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Butterflies pounded in Thyme’s stomach and a feeling of warmth wrapped around her. This was almost silly. Rather like playing house, except it was real. Ross was *very* real. For years she’d dreamed of what it would be like to be with him, not as an impersonal counselor but as an equal. Who was she fooling? She wanted to be with him as a lover. Now here they were, alone far beneath the ground, with no one else on the entire planet.

Rather than daydream, she ought to make herself useful. In the kitchenette, she found the makings for sandwiches and fruit salad. By the time she finished setting the table, Ross joined her.

“How is everything?” she asked.

“The monitors are holding up but this storm is a bitch. I’m going to have a lot of repairs to make once it passes.” He approached the kitchen counter where she was cleaning up.

“It’s a good thing you didn’t send for a shuttle for me,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant. Difficult when he stood so close they almost touched. “It wouldn’t be able to land in this weather.”

He nodded, his discerning gaze fixed on her. Looking into those eyes was completely different than viewing them through the protective glass. A woman could drown in those gorgeous blue depths.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, her belly fluttering.

“Yeah,” he said softly, stepping even closer. “Starving.”

Her breath caught and they stared at each other for an intense moment before she cleared her throat and turned to the table. “Let’s eat then.”

They sat and after an uncomfortable moment, began eating and fell into conversation.

“What do you do for a living, Thyme?” he asked, licking juice from the fruit salad off his lips. She studied the tip of his pink tongue, wondering how it would feel against hers.

She’d been hungry earlier. Now she was far too aroused to fully concentrate on food.

“I study psychology,” she replied. At least it wasn’t another lie.

He nodded, the faintest smile touching his lips. He crumpled his napkin and tossed it beside his plate. “Interesting.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Why did you run away from home?” he ventured, a rather teasing look in his eyes.

Irritation rose in her. Was he laughing at her? She curled her lip and said, “I’m a little old to be running away from home.”

“That’s what you’re doing though, right? Hiding out here. I guess a career in psychology is pretty stressful. You must come in contact with a lot of...you know.” He whistled and spun his finger beside his temple.

“If you’re trying to say people with *issues* come to me for assistance then yes, I suppose my job is stressful.”

“So tell me, how do you keep from getting emotionally involved? Or do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Become involved.”

Thyme met his gaze, looking for any sign that he knew who she was. It wasn't possible. He'd never seen her face or heard her voice. In prison he hadn't even been allowed to know her name. All counselors were assigned a number.

"It's not ethical to become involved with patients," she replied.

"We all have a different code of ethics, don't we?"

"Rules are generally established for those in my career. Enough about me. Let's talk about you. What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

"Living by my code of ethics," he muttered.

"You don't seem like the kind of guy who should be alone."

"You can tell that after a few hours? Amazing."

"Some people are easier to read than others."

"Can't argue there." He stared at her for so long and with such intensity that she resisted the urge to look away. Those eyes of his were amazing. She felt as if he was stripping her naked with a look.

Chapter Three

When the meal ended, they cleared the table and Ross excused himself to once again check the monitors. Thyme took her bag from the bed and ducked into the bathroom. Glancing at herself in the mirror, she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

She looked like garbage. Her dark brown hair hung in rain-matted tendrils about her shoulders and she hadn't a bit of makeup on. Not that she could very well plaster on the colors when she was allegedly shipwrecked. Of course she did have the necessities in her "survival" bag—massage oil, contraceptive tablets, lip gloss and mascara.

After all, the entire point of coming to this lonely planet was to seduce the man she'd desired for years. Not only did she admire his strength and determination but how many nights had she dreamed of making love with him? She wanted to let him know how she felt and she wanted him to claim her with his sleek, powerful body. She wanted to know his scent, his touch, not simply fantasize about it.

This was her moment. The one she had been waiting and planning for.

Before meeting Ross, if anyone had told her she would risk her life and her career for *any* man, let alone one most people considered completely unsuitable, she'd have called them crazy. Now it seemed *she* was the one who was crazy—crazy with desire and affection. Crazy because he might reject her completely. Even though she had fallen in love, she was still a stranger from his point of view.

Her stomach flip-flopped when she considered that he might reject her, yet she hadn't let that fear stop her. She'd never imagined feeling this way about anyone and she had to give their relationship a chance.

Placing aside any remaining self-doubt, she washed her face, brushed her teeth and combed her hair.

After applying a bit of mascara and plenty of cherry-flavored lip gloss, she left the bathroom, satisfied that she looked presentable.

She placed her bag on the bed and walked to the wall monitor to check the weather. The storm hadn't let up the slightest bit. If anything it seemed to have gotten worse.

Ross stepped inside, his brow furrowed. He looked deep in thought.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"The lab is going to need heavy repairs," he said then shook his head. "No point in worrying about it now." His gaze swept her from head to foot and back again. "You look..."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"You look nice."

"Thanks."

"I'm going to clean up," he said, jerking his thumb toward the bathroom.

"I'll be here."

He turned and walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Moments later she heard water running in the shower and smiled, imagining how he looked standing there, naked and wet.

With nothing better to do, she poured a glass of lemon-flavored water and sat at the table to drink it then she returned to the monitor.

The bathroom door opened and Ross stepped out, a towel wrapped around his waist, his hair damp. The sight of his sleekly muscled body, his chest, forearms and legs lightly dusted with hair, made her mouth go dry. Lord, she wasn't going to get through this as easily as she'd thought. Beneath her shirt her nipples hardened with desire and the sweet, frustrating ache between her legs was almost more than she could bear.

This man was absolutely beautiful, in a masculine way. Maybe it was a result of the crossbreeding but he was more attractive than any fully human male she'd ever seen. He oozed power. While that kind of strength had proved dangerous in his past, he was different now.

He knew what he was and had full control of himself. If she didn't believe that, she wouldn't have come here, nor would she have signed off on his recommendation to leave Bane. Unlike other criminals, ACT products couldn't be released without approval from the warden, counselor and head of the prison rehab program.

"I forgot to bring a change of clothes into the bathroom," he explained. Instead of walking directly to the chest of drawers, he joined her by the monitor. He shook his head and muttered, "Damn. I'm going to have my work cut out for me when this is over."

"On your first day too."

"Nothing like trial by fire. Besides, I like a challenge."

She turned and glanced up at him. “That’s an admirable quality. Something tells me you have lots of those.”

Their gazes met and she didn’t miss the lustful expression in his eyes. He took a step closer, so near that she could see the droplets of water glistening in his chest hair. She caught his wonderful scent of freshly washed man and resisted the urge to close her eyes to better enjoy it. Instead she gazed at his sleek body.

Several old scars crisscrossed his ribs and a small skull tattoo decorated the muscled curve of his left shoulder. She very nearly kissed it but managed to restrain herself. Though she wanted to let him know she was attracted, she couldn’t very well act too familiar until she was certain of his response.

“You know if this storm lasts the night we might have a problem,” he said, his voice low and rather husky. The look in his eyes told her that he was at least interested. Again excitement darted through her. Four long years she’d waited for him to look at her like this. The reality far surpassed her dreams.

“What’s that?”

“There’s just one bed.”

Thyme’s heart pounded. Was he coming on to her or trying to be a gentleman? What gentleman stood this close to a lady, wearing nothing but a towel? Yet if he was the beast he believed himself to be, he would have taken advantage of her by now. She knew how long it had been since he’d had a woman. About the same length of time since she’d had a man.

“You can have the bed,” he said, though his eyes grew dark with passion.

The man wanted her as much as she wanted him, at least physically. That was a good start, so now wasn’t the time to hesitate. This was what she’d come here for, right? Hell, they’d spent four years talking. She wanted—no, *needed*—a little action.

Standing on her toes, she took his face in her hands and spoke against his lips, “It’s a big bed. I don’t mind sharing if you don’t.”

Thyme kissed him and raw pleasure broke over her. The man tasted and felt more wonderful than she’d imagined. His jaw was rough from the day’s growth of beard and his firm lips were slightly moist.

For a moment he remained stiff in her arms. The horrible realization that he might reject her after all nearly made her pull away, then he wrapped his arms around her, holding her so close that her breasts flattened against his chest and their hearts seemed to beat in unison.

His flesh, warm and damp from the shower, felt so fantastic that she couldn’t resist running her hands over every part of him she could reach. She caressed his broad shoulders and ran her fingers up and down his spine. Moaning softly, she stroked his ribs and traced the ridges of old scars.

While she explored, his tongue gently traced the shape of her lips then slipped between them. Everything about him, his scent, taste and touch, surpassed her most sensual fantasies.

Ross’ palms warmed her back and slid down to cup her buttocks. He lifted her higher off the ground, dragging a giggle from her throat.

The kiss broke and he loosened his hold just enough for them to step back and stare at each other.

“Thyme, as much as I’d love to take this further, I don’t have any contraceptives.”

The corner of her mouth turned up in a lopsided grin and she reached for her bag. She removed a bottle of contraceptive tablets developed by the Laetez. They prevented pregnancy as well as disease in both men and women. Since their invention, venereal disease had been almost completely wiped out.

He gave a snort of laughter. “Do you always carry contraceptive tablets in your survival bag?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” she teased.

“I have to be honest with you,” he said. “It’s been a while since I’ve slept with someone.”

“Me too. Seems like now is a good time for both of us.”

Again he studied her carefully. A smile that could have been teasing or might have been cautious touched his lips and he nodded. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been more sure of anything in my life,” she said with heartfelt honesty.

He swept her into his arms quickly, taking her by surprise. Shrieking with pleasure, she grasped his neck and enjoyed the lift. He carried her to the bed and placed her on it.

Never had Thyme felt this alive with anticipation. Her head spun and she couldn’t seem to control her breathing. One of Ross’ knees rested on the bed while the other leg stood firmly on the floor. The position parted his towel and she got a partial view of his male attributes.

Feeling coquettish, she slipped a finger in the towel and tugged it off, baring a gorgeous, semi-erect cock, thick and well-veined. Its ruddy head with the tiny eye made her long to explore him with hands, tongue and lips. His balls were no less fascinating, heavy and faintly dusted with hair. Moistening her lips, she reached out hesitantly but stopped just short of touching him. Warmth from their skin created an invisible yet emotionally magnetic link between them.

When she glanced up to meet his gaze, his handsome face was taut with passion, his eyes almost glowing. He nodded and she took that as encouragement to continue.

Thyme took two contraceptive tablets from the container. She placed one in her mouth, then held the other out to Ross. His passionate gaze burned into her as he bent and took the tablet, and her finger, into his mouth and sucked. A little thrill of delight shot through her as his warm, wet tongue caressed her finger.

Unable to resist touching him any longer, she trailed her fingers along his staff with slow, feathery touches, then she curled her fist around it and pumped. Savoring his velvety flesh over thick, hard muscle, she stroked faster. His cock swelled and throbbed in her hand, yet he didn’t move. Instead he allowed her to take her time exploring him.

The sight of his engorged staff tempted her beyond her limits. She tugged her finger from his mouth and moved from the bed to kneel in front of him. Claspings him in both hands, she swirled her tongue over his cock head and flicked it along the ultrasensitive underside.

“Damn it, Thyme,” he murmured, his hands roaming over her shoulders and finally burying themselves in her hair.

She felt the tension in him and heard his sharp intake of breath. His hips thrust against her exploring mouth. In spite of his obvious desire, he kept his movements as slow and gentle as possible. He didn’t pull her hair painfully or pump too hard into her open mouth. Her lips slid over the bulbous, velvety crown of his erection and she sucked so deeply that he brushed the back of her throat.

“You’re trying to kill me,” he panted. “I don’t know how long I’ll last if you keep this up. You have the softest, sweetest lips.”

In spite of how he filled her mouth, she smiled. Thyme moved her hands from his cock to his buttocks. The hard globes tightened against her palms as he thrust between her lips. She boldly slid a fingertip along the indentation and caressed his sphincter, feeling it throb and pucker as she explored.

Thyme continued sucking, licking and caressing until she knew by his ragged breathing and painfully clenching muscles he was about to explode.

Pulling back, she gazed up at him. His gorgeous neck—smooth and pale, neither too thin nor too thick—arched. With his eyes closed, the long, dark lashes rested starkly against his face. His finely shaped lips parted, drawing sips of air. The rise and fall of his broad chest and the tightening of his muscle-ridged belly sent her desire off the scale.

She squirmed a bit, her clit aching. Running a hand beneath the waist of her pants, she dipped her fingers into her hot, wet pussy.

Ross opened his eyes, one hand clamped around the base of his cock in an attempt to keep his passion under control. His gaze flew to the stroking hand between her legs and he practically growled, “No way, lady. That’s what I’m here for.”

Before she could reply, he dropped to the floor and gently pushed her onto her back. He looped his thumbs in the waist of her pants and pulled them down, baring her pelvis and thighs.

Thyme hadn’t bothered with panties, so her soft flesh and thatch of dark pubic hair came immediately into view. A hint of discomfort brought heat to her face, but the raw lust in his eyes washed away any embarrassment. It had been a long time since a man had seen her naked and never one as gorgeous as Ross Lovell.

“You’re beautiful, Thyme,” he said, lifting his gaze to hers.

A pleased, yet modest, smile flickered across her lips. “If you say so, I won’t argue.”

Ross pulled off her boots and socks, then removed her pants completely and tossed them aside. Sitting back on his heels, he took a moment to caress her legs. Warm, calloused palms roamed over her thighs and calves. He took one of her feet in his hands and massaged.

Thyme’s eyes slipped shut and she moaned softly. “That feels so good.”

She had almost expected him to claim her fast and hard, sating five years’ worth of lust. Instead, he seemed prepared to take his time and make sure she enjoyed every moment.

He turned his attention to her other foot, his thumbs pressing against the arch before he stroked her from ankle to thigh. Pure delight washed over her, and in spite of his soothing caresses, her pulse raced with anticipation. He stretched out on his side and guided her legs over his shoulders.

“Ross,” she breathed, clutching handfuls of his hair.

For several deliciously torturous seconds, his mouth hovered over her clit, his warm breath teasing it until a ripple of need coursed through her. He licked his lips, then covered her aching, delicate flesh with his mouth. His tongue flicked over her plump little nub and his lips tugged gently.

“Oh, Ross. Oh please,” she murmured breathlessly. The force of her pleasure drove coherent thoughts from her mind and she was no longer fully aware of what she said. She moaned and writhed in an attempt to appease the unbearable tension flooding her body, but Ross’ hands held her bottom firmly.

He continued sucking and licking, devouring her until her legs trembled and her breath came in ragged pants. Except for this irresistible man pleasuring her with the most intimate kisses, the world ceased to exist. Wave after wave of climax broke over her and she arched against him, her hands tight on his hair.

Ross didn’t stop licking and sucking until she lay still and completely spent.

Her eyes closed, she floated in the calming aftermath of passion. A moment later, she felt him move beside her and pull her into his arms.

She opened her eyes and gripped his neck as he lifted her and placed her on the bed. This time he knelt beside her and tugged off her shirt. She sat up, stretching her arms overhead so he could easily discard the garment. While he flung it aside, she removed her bra, then lay on her back, naked and freer than she’d ever felt in her life.

His large blue eyes darted to her full breasts. Cupping them in his hands, he kneaded the soft flesh and brushed his thumbs over the nipples, turning them to stiff, berrylike peaks. Lying beside her, he took a nipple between his lips and sucked. His tongue lashed over it, sending a jolt of pleasure through her. She buried her fingers in his hair and held his face closer.

One of his legs draped over both of hers and she relished the feeling of his hard, hair-dusted thigh against her smooth ones.

He moved back slightly and rolled her onto her stomach.

“What are you doing?” she asked, glancing at him over her shoulder. His firm hand on the back of her head forced her to remain still against the pillow.

He parted her cheeks and she felt his warm breath caressing her ass.

“Ross, what are you going to—”

Drawing a sharp breath, she tried to turn over, but he grasped her bottom and thrust his tongue against her sphincter.

“Don’t, Ross!”

“You don’t like it?” he asked and lapped her again until she squirmed. The sensation of his tongue against her was just too wonderful.

“I do, but—”

“Then enjoy it. I love how you taste and feel, Thyme.”

She moaned, burying her face in the pillow and squirming against the incredible thrills of pleasure darting through her. Every stroke and thrust of his tongue against her throbbing ring of muscle pushed her desire to unimaginable heights. Her ass clenched and she rubbed her clit against the mattress, feeling another fantastic orgasm building deep inside her.

Just when she thought she’d go insane with need, he rolled her onto her back and mounted her, the tip of his cock pushing against her drenched pussy.

Wrapped in a silken cloak of desire, she stared at him. Emotions gleamed in his eyes, the sight nearly stealing her breath. Lust. Affection. Desperate need. Just like she felt.

“I want you, Thyme. So badly. You don’t know how much I want you.”

“Yes,” she breathed, taking his face in her hands. “I do, Ross, because I want you just as much.”

He filled her slowly, his hands braced on either side of her head. Muscles bulged in his arms. His neck arched and his eyes closed halfway, the strain on his handsome face revealing his battle for control.

Chapter Four

Thyme had never felt more alive than she did at this moment. Filled with Ross’ thick, satin-skinned cock, covered by his powerful body that could destroy her with its alien strength, she felt strangely safe. She knew by his extreme tenderness he wanted to please her. In spite of his own consuming lust, he thought of her first.

Then it struck her that he had no idea who she really was. Knowing she’d lied to him sent a rush of guilt through her and nearly soured the moment. Nearly. He began pumping into her and any thoughts except those of pleasure raced from her mind.

“Ross, oh, yes. Don’t stop!” she cried, clinging to him with arms and legs, knowing that no matter how hard she gripped him, she could never really hurt him with her mere human strength.

“Thyme! Hell, lady, I can’t—”

She knew by his labored breathing and the way his sweat-dampened body trembled against hers that he was on the verge of losing control. So was she, for that matter.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped. “It’s all right. I’m here. Just let it go, Ross. Don’t hold back, love.”

With a primal cry, he surged into her, pumping fast and hard, driving her over the edge.

Thyme moaned and writhed in orgasm, her hot, wet sheath pulsing around his cock.

Ross' control snapped and he came so long and hard she thought he might never stop.

Finally he collapsed on top of her, his body nearly crushing her, but she welcomed it.

"Ross," she whispered, languidly stroking his damp back, feeling the last tremors roll through him and the tension in his steely muscles release.

"I'm crushing you," he muttered and turned onto his side.

Thyme purred softly and he pulled her closer, cupping the back of her head and holding her cheek to his chest so she could hear the strong, steady rhythm of his heart.

Thyme sighed with contentment and kissed Ross' chest. Her fingertips swept over his side and along his hip.

"This is one night I'm never going to forget, Counselor," he said and kissed the top of her head.

For a moment, Thyme forgot to breathe. Her eyes flew open and she lifted her head to stare at him in shock. A triumphant smile curved his lips and his gaze fixed intently on hers.

"How did you know?" she demanded.

"Give me some credit," he said. "Did you think that after talking to you for four years, I wouldn't recognize you?"

"But you've never seen my face or heard my voice without filters."

"I know *you*, Counselor. At first you had me fooled, but once we started talking, I knew. What I don't understand is why."

She stared at him in utter disbelief. "I'd think that would be obvious."

"You wanted to go to bed with me?"

"No, I love you, you big moron."

His smile faded and he gently pushed her aside and rose from the bed.

Now she'd done it. She'd moved too fast and he would undoubtedly withdraw. Disgusted over her mistake, she wrapped her arms around herself and watched him pace. Even the beautiful play of muscles in his buttocks and legs couldn't divert her attention from the horrible, sinking feeling in her gut. She knew even though he was rehabilitated, he was still emotionally vulnerable, at least regarding relationships.

"Ross, I didn't mean to upset you. I shouldn't have—"

"Are you crazy?" He stopped walking and stared at her hard, his eyebrows knitted. "What am I saying? Anyone who follows me to a place like this has got to be crazy. How can you counsel others when you need therapy yourself, lady?"

Anger mounted inside her and she stood, pulling the sheet around her. At the moment she didn't want to

face him naked. Arguing while unclothed just didn't work for her. "You don't have to be sarcastic, Ross. I'm sorry for saying I love you. It just came out. I didn't mean to upset—"

"Did you mean it?"

"What?" she snapped, wrinkling her nose.

"I believe you heard me."

Should she reaffirm what she'd so stupidly blurted out? The tension on his face worried her.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Why are you asking?"

He raised his eyes to the heavens. "I don't believe this shit. I came here to—"

"Hide. Just like I said at your last session."

In two long strides, he reached her and grasped her shoulders, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to let her know he meant business. "You might be my counselor, but you have no idea what it's like to be me, to know you have something foreign crawling through your veins. Something that without medication to control it will take you over. You said you love me. Think about what you're loving, if it's even the truth."

"If it wasn't true, then why the hell would I risk my career, maybe even my life, to be here with you?" She pushed away from him and turned her back. Her eyes closed, she tilted her face skyward. Why had she done this? She'd known from the first it was wrong, but she hadn't been able to resist him.

"You shouldn't have come, Thyme."

She spun, glaring at him. "You didn't say that a few minutes ago when you were all over me in bed."

"I said you *shouldn't* have come. I never said I didn't *want* you to."

"What do you want, Ross? You must know in your heart you don't belong alone out here."

"I'm—"

"Rehabilitated."

"Doing time doesn't change what I did or what I am. The aggression, the chemical imbalances, they're in me. I might look human, but you know I have Laetez strength and aggression. The problem is, I don't have the little Laetez man in my head controlling my dark side."

"The meds rectify the imbalances and you've had years of behavioral therapy, so you don't require the 'little man'. It's called an Er, by the way."

"I know what it's called," he snapped. "I made it my duty to learn about my alien side."

"I know," she said softly. "You understand yourself now, Ross. You didn't before. That's why you acted out. It wasn't your fault. When are you going to finally believe that?"

“Don’t you get it, Counselor? It doesn’t matter whether or not it was my fault. You saw my record. The things I’ve done. I’ve maimed people. Killed people. Five years at Bane doesn’t compensate. Not for the things I’ve done.”

“It’s going to have to compensate, Ross, because society says you’ve paid your debt,” she said quietly, her anger fading when faced with his turmoil. He’d come a long way, but the guilt and self-disgust he carried might never fade.

“You still haven’t answered my question.” He glared at her. “Why me? You can probably have any guy you want. You’re smart. Nice. Gorgeous.”

Wow. She never thought any man would look at her like that. Smart? Yes. Nice? Many might think so. Gorgeous? Not with her mousy brown hair and a nose long enough to spear fish.

“Well?” he asked. “I’m still waiting for an answer.”

“Because in my entire life, I’ve never seen anyone try as hard as you have. Because when I look at you, I see someone who really gives a damn. Not only for yourself, but for others. Lots of people in your position have regrets, but for most it’s because they’ve lost their freedom. You’re different.”

“Yes, I’m different. I’m not fully human. No matter what, I will never be human. Nor am I Laetez.. I’m some kind of mutant with the worst of both species festering inside me.”

She sighed deeply. If she had suspected he still had so much self-hatred, she wouldn’t have recommended his release or signed off on his psychological evaluation. Ross had been very convincing, even to a seasoned pro like herself. Or had she allowed her personal feelings for him to taint her judgment?

She loved him and knew that no matter what, he would never return to a life of crime, therefore she wanted him to be free. Had she done him a disservice instead? Was he stable enough to stay out here, alone with his guilt?

“I know you don’t want to see it now, but you did gain some benefits from the genetic tampering. Your photographic memory, your aptitude for learning, your physical strength.”

“Great. Give a psycho added strength. That’s a real benefit.”

“You’ll find a way to use your gifts, if you just give yourself the chance. And in case you didn’t notice, you weren’t the only prisoner at Bane. There are many other victims of ACT there. Not all of them progressed like you have.”

“I don’t need the motivational speech.”

“I think you do.” Thyme reached out and caressed his face. “I love you, Ross. I know you probably don’t return that love, but I wanted to let you know how I feel.”

“God.” He closed his eyes and tilted his face into her hand. “You have no idea how much I love you.”

His words shocked her. She hadn’t expected any of this—him recognizing her and now returning her affection. Their feelings for each other had transcended the barriers between them. That in itself told her

this relationship was even more special than she'd imagined.

Wrapping her in a firm embrace, he buried his face against her shoulder. "I think I've loved you for years, Counselor. I didn't need to see your face or hear your actual voice. The way you talked to me...no one ever talked to me like that. No one ever took the time to look inside me. I thought you were just doing your job."

"I was, but it was more than that," she admitted. "You touched my heart from the first, Ross. The moment I looked at you, I knew you were a good man. The government should have done something about ACT long ago. You and the others affected shouldn't have had to suffer in ignorance."

"Or cause others pain. I wish I could go back and change my entire life."

"You can't." She pushed him away only to stare into his gleaming blue eyes. "But you can decide what to do with your future."

"If I had anything to offer you, Thyme, I'd ask you to share the future with me in a heartbeat, but—"

"You have everything I want," she stated.

He shook his head, a sad smile on his lips. "You're—"

"Crazy? We've already established that. The question is, where do we go from here? Do you want me or not, Ross?"

"I want you more than anything, but—"

"That's all I needed to hear." She slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him, not caring that the sheet fell to the floor.

He responded with long, passionate strokes of his tongue against hers. Groaning with desire, he swept her into his arms, carried her to the bed and placed her upon it. He kissed her forehead, eyelids and the tip of her nose. Again their lips met. His tongue traced the shape of her mouth, then thrust inside before he kissed her chin and neck.

Thyme closed her eyes, soothed, yet aroused as he took his time covering her with kisses. His lips traveled from shoulder to shoulder. Sometimes his touch was feather soft, other times he pressed his lips harder, stirring her passion. When he reached her breasts, he drew a nipple into his mouth and sucked.

A little gasp of pleasure escaped her and she ran her hands through his hair, relishing its thickness and the way the slight waves curled around her fingers. When they'd made love a short time ago, they had been feverish, almost desperate. Now they took the time to enjoy each other more fully. She felt not only his lust, but his affection in every brush of his mouth against her and each stroke of his hands.

This was true lovemaking—a joining of body and spirit that Thyme had dreamed about, but never experienced until now.

He released her nipple and moved to the other one, ever-so gently raking it with his teeth before soothing it with warm, wet sweeps of his tongue. Then he released the taut bud and lapped the ticklish place beneath her breast.

Giggling, Thyme tried to squirm, but he steadied her with his hands on her ribs.

His tongue left a damp trail down her belly that he retraced with kisses. He ran his tongue along the joining of her hip, then lapped her inner thighs.

“Ross, this is too good for words,” she breathed.

“I know. You’re so soft and sweet—”

She grinned. “You make me sound like a slice of cake.”

“Better than any cake I’ve ever tasted,” he said, then spoke so close to her clit that his warm breath fanned the sensitive flesh, “Especially your warm, sweet icing.”

He ran his tongue over her clit, then edged lower and thrust it inside her pussy, swirling and teasing.

She gasped, clutching his head. The wonderfully frustrating tension built inside her and she doubted she’d last long with him devouring her like this. His name became a breathless chant on her lips as he began licking her clit in a fast, steady rhythm.

“Yes, oh yes!” she gasped, arching against him, her heart pounding wildly. A few more licks and she climaxed, her entire body convulsing in pleasure.

She had yet to descend when he moved up her body and entered her swiftly. He thrust his thick, velvety cock over and over, driving toward another climax.

The sensations overwhelmed her and she moaned, thrashing her head from side to side. He trapped it between his hands and covered her mouth in a deep kiss, absorbing her frantic gasps and cries as the most incredible orgasm broke over her.

Somewhere beyond the haze of ecstasy, she felt him come, then he collapsed on top of her. Their hearts seemed to beat in unison and his panting breath fanned her neck.

After a moment, he moved aside, but still held her close.

“I almost forgot the Laetez are known for their sexual appetite.” She smiled, taking his hand and kissing his palm.

“I guess that’s one trait I can’t complain about,” he teased.

“Neither can I.” She gently sank her teeth into the fleshy part of his palm, then licked it.

“You are an incredibly sexy woman,” he said, once again looming above her.

He covered her mouth with his, and for several moments, they indulged in deep, exploring kisses. Their tongues stroked against each other, hot, wet and delectable. She loved his taste and feel. It seemed odd, but she felt as if they’d always been together. Not that she didn’t still have that wonderful, in-lust buzz that accompanied all new relationships, but this was even more.

Her eyes closed, she ran her hands along his spine and cupped his rock-hard buttocks, loving the way the muscles tightened in her grasp. His hair-roughened legs felt wonderful against hers.

As they kissed and caressed each other, his cock stiffened against her.

“Hell, Thyme,” he said between kisses, “I wonder if I’ll ever get enough of you.”

“Feel free to try,” she teased.

He paused a moment and stared into her eyes. “You don’t know how much I’d love to, but I need to check the monitors. We’ll talk more when I get back.”

Thyme nodded and watched with regret as he left the bed. All too soon, clothes covered his sinewy body. He picked up the sheet from the floor and covered her with it, then sat on the bed and stroked her hair. “I shouldn’t be long.”

“I’ll be waiting,” she said, sitting up and slipping her arms around his neck.

He held her tightly, then brushed her mouth with a kiss and left.

Sighing, Thyme closed her eyes and thought how happy she was. After a moment, she rose and walked to the bathroom, where she took a fast shower, then pulled on fresh clothes from her bag.

Moments later, the door burst open and Ross rushed in, his face tense and a frantic expression in his eyes. “We’ve got trouble. The storm has damaged the monitor controlling the power source of the entire lab. It’s Laetez concentrated gas. If I can’t fix the monitor and reprogram it within the next four hours, this entire observation lab, along with half the planet, is going boom.”

“What?” Thyme snapped, unable to keep the panic from her voice. Laetez concentrated gas was one of the strongest power sources available, but if not contained in the right conditions, it was also the most volatile. “Can you fix it?”

“I haven’t got much of a choice, do I? Get your bag and come with me.”

She did as he ordered and they left the underground shelter at a run. Thyme’s heart pounded and her adrenaline raced. The storm had subsided, though wind and rain still beat against the lab.

“Can you pilot a shuttle?” Ross asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“There’s an emergency shuttle on the dock. I’m never supposed to leave, but in cases of life or death—”

“This is life or death!”

“Not if I can fix the damage, but I can’t do that if I’m worrying about you. I want you to get in the shuttle and leave.”

“No way. If you’re staying, I’m staying.”

He glared at her and spoke through clenched teeth. “You’re going to do what I tell you.”

“I refuse to leave this planet without you. Tell me how I can help.”

“You can get off fucking the planet!” he roared. The ferocious expression in his eyes scared the hell out of her, but she stood her ground.

“You’re wasting time,” she said calmly.

His fists clenched, he turned from her and stalked toward the winding staircase leading to the top floor of the lab.

Thyme hurried after him. Upstairs, part of the roof had been blown off and several windows broken. The lights were out, as was climate control, leaving the rooms hot and humid. The communication device, called a spec, still worked, so he sent a quick message to his Earth base, briefing them on the situation.

“As long as you’re here, stay on the spec,” he told her. “If any messages come in, let me know. Also, try to re-plug the memory files on the climate control monitor.” He pointed to the tiny, round chips scattered across the floor. “The monitor is to the left of the communicator and it’s color coordinated.”

She nodded and set to work while he made adjustments on several other panels, then stood by the door leading to the lab’s power source.

“Damn!” he raged, slamming his fist into the wall so hard the plaster cracked.

“What’s wrong?”

“The door is jammed. I need to get in there to start the reprogramming.”

“Can’t you force it?”

He sighed deeply, scrubbing a hand across his face. “It’s reinforced steel with exo-filler. You know that’s tough enough to hang a shuttle off the underside of a friggin’ bridge.”

“Even you’re not that strong,” she stated, then cocked an eyebrow. “Are you?”

“I doubt it. But I’ll give it a try.” Drawing several deep breaths, he closed his eyes and braced his hands against the door. Under normal conditions, it would slide open automatically at a moderate touch.

Thyme’s fists clenched at her sides as she watched Ross struggle to open the door. Muscles strained in his torso as he leaned his full body weight into the door. He pushed until sweat drenched his blue cotton shirt. Finally he staggered aside. Gasping, he leaned a shoulder against the wall.

“You can’t do it,” she said. “We need to get out of here.”

“And let my lab blow up on my first day of duty? No frickin’ way,” he growled.

Chapter Five

Ross strode out of the room and returned with a crowbar. Wedging it against the door, he tried to move it again, but only succeeded in bending the crowbar. The power he must be using to do even that awed her, but apparently even alien strength wasn’t sufficient.

“One more time,” he grunted, bracing his hands against the door. His muscles tightened and veins bulged in his temples and neck.

“It’s useless!” Thyme shouted. “You’re going to kill yourself and the door will still be there.”

“Only for another three hours,” he gasped. “Then nothing will be here.”

“Including us! Ross, you’ve done all you can—” She paused as the door slowly slid open. When he’d forced it enough to fit through, he stepped into the tiny room.

“Bring a light stick, will you, doll?” he called.

She did as he asked, beginning to think there was nothing this man couldn’t do. Inside the room, more chips lay on the floor and a mess of burned-out wires still smoked in the wall.

“Damn it!” Ross shook his head. “This is going to take forever. Thyme, will you please take the shuttle and go?”

“No. I’m here until the finale,” she stated. There was no way in hell she would leave him now.

“Go check the spec.”

She did as he ordered, finding a message from the Earth base. After answering, she hurried back to Ross. For the next few hours, she assisted him by handing him tools and re-plugging chips.

“It’s almost finished,” he said, his voice just above a whisper as his full concentration fixed on the tiny control box where his hands were lodged, maneuvering the delicate tools used to reprogram the system. “What does the time say on the overload scale?”

She glanced at the tiny screen just outside the door that told them how long they had before the Laetez concentrated gas exploded. “Twenty minutes. Still enough time for us to get out of here.”

“We won’t have to. If I can get these last few— Damn, I can’t move my hands off these tools and my eyes are stinging like hell.”

She found a towel in the supply closet and used it to blot sweat from his face.

“Thanks,” he murmured. Moments later, he dropped his hands and stepped out of the room to glance at the monitor. His satisfied chuckle told her everything would be fine. “The scale is reversing. We’re all right, doll. Am I good or am I good?”

He turned to her with a pleased look in his eyes. He had every right to be proud. Few people had the skill—and the strength—to do what he’d done. Not only that, he’d handled a potentially deadly situation, as well as the stress of her refusing to leave the planet to avoid danger, and kept control of himself. His mind, not his temper, had ruled.

“You’re better than good.” She slipped her arms around his neck. “You’re the best.”

Ross held her tightly, then covered her lips in a kiss so deep and tender that she momentarily forgot everything, the recent danger, the unbearable heat and the fact that his superiors now knew she had

snuck onto the observation lab.

“Next order of business is to send a message that we’re fine here. Then I want to fix climate control.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Counselor.” He cupped her face in his hand and held her gaze. “Thanks for believing in me.”

Smiling, she turned and kissed his palm. “You’re welcome.”

“One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“How long can you stay?”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed?”

He grinned almost sheepishly and shrugged. “I lied. Managers are allowed to have up to three family members at this post.”

“I’m not a family member,” she said softly.

“Fiancées are included,” he said, his voice a husky whisper. Was the hesitant look in his eyes because he wasn’t certain he wanted her or because he doubted she’d agree to a permanent union? “I know this is fast, Counselor. Tell me I’m crazy and out of line.”

“After four years, I’d say we should know whether or not we want to spend the rest of our lives together. Why else do you think I came here?”

“Like I said before, I have nothing, but if I do well at this post, I have the potential to be stationed at a bigger lab. The money can be pretty good.”

“I don’t give a damn about money, Ross. All I want is you.” She pressed her body closer to his and cupped the back of his head, running her fingers through his short, damp hair.

Affection glistened in his eyes and he said in a voice rough with emotion, “I love you, Thyme. I don’t deserve you, but I want you.”

For years she’d dreamed of hearing those words. She held him tightly, relishing the feeling of his hard body and rhythm of his heart beating steadily against her.

His mouth covered hers in another possessive kiss. Thyme closed her eyes and clung to him. In spite of what they’d just endured, or perhaps because of it, this was the most exciting moment of her life.

Placing his hands on her waist, Ross guided her backward until her shoulders pressed against the wall. He nuzzled her neck and said, “You know what I need right now?”

“Tell me,” she breathed, arching against him and enjoying the sensation of his warm, moist lips on her heated flesh.

“A good, stress-relieving fuck.”

She smiled, her hands roaming over his shoulders and back. “Sounds fantastic to me.” Her hands slid down to his lean waist, grasped the hem of his shirt and tugged it upward.

Ross stepped back just enough to pull off his shirt, exposing his gorgeous, sweat-slicked body to her hungry gaze and searching hands. She ran her fingertips along his taut abs and over his chiseled pecs then she leaned closer and kissed the skull tattoo on his shoulder.

With a soft moan of pleasure, she continued kissing his arm then his chest. The light dusting of hair on his pecs tickled her lips pleasantly. Her tongue swept over his nipple then she gently raked it with her teeth.

“Pretty little tease,” he said, cupping the back of her head and holding her even closer to his chest as she continued nipping and kissing. After a moment he pulled off her shirt and deftly unfastened her bra, freeing her breasts.

It was so hot that it felt good to shed her clothes. He must have felt the same because they quickly removed their boots, socks and pants, their gazes never leaving each other.

Once they were completely naked, Ross again pressed her against the wall and knelt in front of her, his hands resting on her hips. He caressed them gently and kissed her stomach.

He bent and ran his tongue over her clit. Thyme gasped and wove her fingers through his hair. While his tongue stroked her, making her clit tingle and throb, she closed her eyes and leaned heavily against the wall, her legs weak with desire. Ross kept a firm hold on her, keeping her from squirming as passion grew.

Nothing felt as good as his lips and tongue on her swollen little bud, except perhaps when he filled her with his thick, silken cock.

“I could taste you all day,” he breathed.

Heavens, as wonderful as that sounded, there was no way anyone could endure that much pleasure. Fortunately, his desire overcame him and he stood, his body sliding along hers. She opened her eyes and held his gaze as his cock head pushed against her pussy. In spite of the sexual tension buzzing between them, he filled her slowly.

When he began thrusting, her eyes slipped shut, but he said, “Look at me, Thyme.”

She did as he asked and excitement flooded her. Though it was difficult to keep her eyes open as passion grew, seeing the lust in his eyes as he pumped into her was incredibly thrilling.

Her hands slid over his chest and shoulders before finally clasping the back of his neck.

“Oh, Ross,” she panted, her eyes closing halfway, then she forced them open and continued staring at him. The intimacy of holding his gaze at this moment was almost too much to bear, yet she couldn’t look away. His gorgeous blue eyes held her captive. The pleasure must be almost overwhelming to him as well, since his eyelids fluttered and he gave a deep, impassioned groan that increased her pleasure even more.

He thrust faster and harder, their sweat-slicked flesh sliding together, a perfect joining of bodies and

souls. Finally, Thyme couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. She closed them and held Ross tightly, her fingers biting into his shoulders and little moans of ecstasy escaping her throat.

Ross reached between them with one hand and fondled her clit while he continued thrusting. The pleasure was too much for Thyme and she came long and hard, her clit tingling and pussy throbbing around his cock. This pushed him over the edge and his hips lunged against her, his steely body pushing her harder against the wall. With a ragged cry, he stiffened against her, every muscle tense and straining.

For several moments they stood locked together, their panting breath filling the room.

Ross ran his lips along the side of her neck, then kissed her temple. "I really needed that," he said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Smiling, she stroked his shoulders and back. "So did I."

"Now I've got to fix climate control." He moved away from her and reached for their clothes. He handed hers to her and she accepted them.

"Please do. This is killer heat."

"And you're adding to it." He cast her a roguish grin. "Baby, you're hot enough to melt iron."

"You're pretty hot yourself, handsome." She slapped his taut ass before he pulled up his pants and shot her a teasing glance over his shoulder. She asked, "While you're fixing climate control, would you like me to send the message that we're okay?"

"Yes. Thanks. Hopefully it won't take long to repair."

* * * * *

It took Ross less than an hour to fix climate control, then they were able to start cleaning up the mess in relative comfort.

Once most of the debris was cleared away, Thyme left him to the rest of the repairs while she returned to the storm shelter and took a much-needed shower. After preparing a meal and locating a change of clothes for Ross, she rejoined him.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Could be worse," he said, his gaze fixed on the monitor he was reprogramming. A second later he turned to her with a smile. "Glad you brought something to eat. I'm starving."

"Want to eat by the lake?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Is that a subtle way of telling me I need a bath?"

"Not-so subtle, really," she teased, handing him the fresh shirt, socks and trousers.

They walked to the lake where he shed his clothes. Thyme couldn't keep from staring at his sleek, naked body. By the look he gave her, he enjoyed her appreciation.

He strode into the lake and she watched the play of muscles in his long, hard legs and firm buttocks. Heavens, the man had the best ass in the universe.

Sitting on the grass, she watched him dive, then resurface and shake his head, almost animallike, to get rid of excess water.

He stepped out of the lake and joined her on the grass, not bothering to dress. Reaching for a slice of fruit, he narrowed his eyes at her and said, "Take off your clothes."

"What?"

Gazing at her with lust, he pointed at her with the fruit slice and said, "Shed 'em."

Thyme glanced around. Though she knew they were completely alone, it still felt strange undressing outdoors. She watched him take a bite of the fruit and chew slowly. The tip of his tongue licked droplets of juice from his enticing lips and she recalled how they'd felt on her clit.

Desire shot through her and she slowly undressed. He kept eating, though his gaze never left her, but roamed seductively over her body. Finally she sat, the grass warm and slick beneath her ass and legs. She'd never sat naked on the ground before. If anyone but Ross had asked her to do this, she'd have told them to go to hell, but sitting here with him, unclothed in their own private paradise, she never felt happier.

She reached for a slice of fruit, but he grasped her wrist and tugged her close. Trapped between his muscular thighs, she leaned her back against his chest and smiled. Ross took a fat berry and held it to her lips. She took it, caressing his finger with her tongue. Grasping his wrist in both of her hands, she quickly chewed and swallowed the berry, then guided his finger back to her mouth. She sucked on it, closing her eyes and enjoying every moment as she gently nipped the long, slender digit and swirled her tongue around it.

"I want to lick something else," she whispered, turning around and pressing her hands against his chest.

With a low grunt of desire, he allowed her to push him onto his back. Settling more comfortably between his legs, she clasped his shaft in both hands and stroked him before bending her head and sucking his cock head deeply into her mouth. Her tongue lashed over his velvety flesh while her hands stroked his shaft.

A groan escaped his throat and she felt him tense. Smiling around his cock head, she continued licking and sucking. For so long she'd dreamed of pleasuring this man and it was wonderful to know he finally belonged to her. They belonged to each other.

"Thyme, ah, fuck, you have the best mouth, baby."

She chuckled and he must have enjoyed the vibrations, because his hips shifted upward and he gasped.

Thyme sucked him deeper, her eyes closed as she focused completely on her delightful task.

"Get up here," he panted, grasping a handful of her hair and pulling her head away from his crotch. She mewled in protest, but he said, "Come on. Ride me, Thyme."

That invitation was impossible to refuse. Her heart pounding with desire, she straddled him and guided

this thick erection inside her. Rocking upon him, she moaned with desire.

To make the moment even better, Ross grasped her breasts and squeezed them gently. His long, slender fingers toyed with her nipples, pinching and rubbing until they were so sensitive, his touch became almost unendurable.

Thyme rocked harder. The exquisite sensations would soon overwhelm her and she could scarcely wait. Her head thrown back and breasts thrust into Ross' stroking hands, she surrendered completely to her passions.

"Ross, oh Ross," she sobbed with pleasure, her clit throbbing and pussy clenching hard around his cock. His hand moved to her hips, guiding her motions that had grown wild as she neared her peak. When she exploded, his hips jabbed upward and he gasped and groaned, his fingers sinking into her hips.

Adrift in the aftermath, she sank onto him, her eyes closed and a smile of pure contentment on her lips. After a moment, she felt his hands stroking her from shoulders to buttocks.

"I never—" he began, then paused, as if uncertain of how to continue.

Thyme lifted her head and stared into his eyes. She caressed his cheek and smiled. "Tell me."

"I never imagined something like this was possible for me."

"Sex on the grass?" She grinned.

"No. Having someone like you. Until the day I met you, my whole life was a disaster. A mistake."

"No, Ross." Her smile faded and she kissed his mouth. "You're no mistake. You're a strong, brilliant man with so much to offer. I feel lucky to be with you. The best day of my life was the day I walked into the therapy room and saw you. It was unbearable not being able to talk to you face-to-face and tell you how I felt. I wasn't supposed to get involved, but I couldn't help myself. You just—"

He tilted his head slightly and said, "Yes?"

"You touched me. Even though you couldn't see me or hear my real voice, I felt as if you knew me somehow."

"I did. Thyme, you're a beautiful woman. Gorgeous. I want to fuck you every time I see you, but that's just icing on the cake. I would have loved you no matter what you looked like."

She lifted a skeptical eyebrow.

"It's true," he said. "The times when I felt like I couldn't take it anymore—prison, the anger inside me, I'd think about our sessions and the things you said to me. Where I come from, most people consider counseling a lot of shit, but—"

"It was more than that," she whispered.

Their gazes locked and he brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "I know. The question is, are you absolutely sure I'm what you want? Are you going to be happy with me out here? You have a career."

“And I enjoy it, but you mean more to me than anything, Ross. Without you, my life would be missing something. You and I, we’ll work it out. And of course, when we need it, we can always have a stress-relieving fuck.” She grinned and he gave a snort of laughter.

He stood and took her hand. Together they walked to the lake and waded in. The water was pleasantly cool, especially considering the heat of the day. They splashed and swam until Ross finally took her in his arms and kissed her. Cupping the back of her head with one hand, he reached down with the other and grasped her buttocks. His fingers dipped between the indentation and gently caressed her sphincter.

Passion rekindled and Thyme curled her fist around his cock, stroking him while gentle waves lapped their bodies, keeping them cool in spite of the heat building inside them.

“Beautiful,” he whispered against her lips, then kissed her cheek and temple. He took her earlobe between his teeth and tugged on it, sending a quiver of desire down her spine.

She guided his cock head to her pussy and he bent his knees slightly, filling her with a slow thrust. He used both hands to grasp her ass, his fingers still teasing her pulsing little orifice while his hips pumped against her.

Thyme moaned and clung to him, lifting one leg and wrapping it around his. They held each other tightly, their muscles tightening, hips thrusting and hearts pounding to the same rhythm.

“I love you so much, Thyme,” he breathed.

“I love you too, Ross. So, so much.”

His mouth covered hers, and as his tongue plunged between her lips, his cock pumped into her, driving them both over the edge. Lost in ecstasy, Thyme allowed her handsome crossbreed to support her completely with his alien strength. At the same time, she felt waves of love wash over her, straight from his human heart.

Thyme knew without doubt that she had made the right decision in following him here. She and Ross Lovell were made for each other.

* * * * *

Three days later, a shuttle arrived with supplies to complete the repairs on the observation lab. An inspector also came to see that Ross had done a satisfactory job rebuilding and reprogramming.

Ross explained Thyme’s presence by a slight stretch of the truth, saying that she was his fiancée and they hadn’t believed she could get time off from work to live with him on the lab. The inspector registered her and approved her presence. After seeing the results of Ross’ work, he seemed glad to accommodate him.

Once the inspector left, Thyme and Ross were once again alone. There was something exciting and deeply intimate about being the only two people on the entire planet.

They moved out of the storm shelter and into the manager’s apartment within the lab. It was spacious and comfortable, yet Thyme would always cherish the memory of their nights in the shelter.

It had been a week since the inspector’s visit and Thyme was seated in the office, sending an order for

the next supply shuttle when Ross joined her.

She knew by his distracted expression that something was on his mind.

“I just heard from the CEO of the company this lab belongs to,” Ross said, dragging a chair toward her and straddling it backward. His intense blue gaze met hers.

“Is something wrong? What did he say?”

“He’s offered me a job as manager of his largest observation lab. It’s centrally located on a well populated planet in the Amethyst Arc galaxy.”

Thyme smiled, reached for his hand and squeezed it. “Ross, that’s fantastic. I’m guessing that means a raise?”

“It’s a high-paying job and I’ll have a full staff reporting directly to me.”

“The inspector must have given a glowing and, might I add, well-deserved report.”

“Apparently. According to him, he was impressed with my skill and reliability. I guess in similar situations, he’s had other managers abandon the lab.”

“You’re going to take the job, right?”

“It would be a better arrangement for you. Instead of vegetating out here, you’ll be able to continue counseling.”

“But what about you? How do you feel about it?”

“I want the job.” His eyes gleamed with determination and a hint of pride. She smiled. It was about time.

“Then take it.”

They both stood and she slipped her arms around him. “Ross, I’m so proud of you.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Counselor.”

* * * * *

Several weeks later, Ross and Thyme settled into a pleasant home several miles from his new lab. She opened a private practice in the city and also volunteered as a counselor at a nearby ACT facility.

Sometimes at night, Ross would take her to the top floor of the observation tower where they’d sit beneath the skylights and stare at the stars. Snug in the arms of her alien crossbreed, Thyme knew she was the luckiest woman in the universe.

Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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