

BELINDA MCBRIDE



**BELLE
STARR**

Loose Id

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Loose Id^(R)
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Dedication

For Logan and Echo, who provided some really good inspiration. Rest well, you two. And stay out of trouble!

Chapter One

Year 2317, CE

Interstellar Coalition Enforcement Headquarters, Prisoner Processing

Kowloon City, Prima Vega

“You’re gonna want to split those bitches up. Maybe put them in insulated cells.” Annabelle “Cowgirl” Oakley stood, hands on her hips, watching critically as the stripped-down droids moved her prisoners into Processing. She had to shout to compete with the rising din in the holding cells.

“We have experience with Matruscan females in heat.”

Did she imagine a tone of condescension in the programmed voice? Nah, just her own fertile imagination. Robots with personalities? Pshaw.

“Listen, they keep masturbating each other. The pheromones are flying pretty hot and heavy...” She winced as a howl went up through the cell blocks. An EurLu had just caught scent of the females.

She shrugged and turned away. What the hell, the prisoners weren’t in here because they were nice. Prisoner Processing here at Kowloon City was just one step short of hell, for the hunters as well as their prey. There was a reason that the prison attendants were robotic; no living species could cope with the noise and the stench of the place.

Well, that was Belle’s opinion. Her nose was quite delicate.

Most of the prisoners were waiting transport for trial. Overall, they were a tough, dangerous lot. They could suffer through a little Matruscan Chanel No. 5. And her fee for the job should be processing even now.

Belle whirled sharply on her booted heel and began the journey to the Quay, where her quarters were located. She rented a berth here at the main headquarters of Interstellar Coalition Enforcement. Nothing fancy, a place to sleep during downtime that contained a bed, a shower, a work space, and a dresser. But the tiny space served her needs. She paid a little extra to stay in the area reserved for the larger species, but it was well worth it. She hated her feet hanging off the end of the bed.

The *Belle Starr* had some rough moments coming into orbit, telling her that the shields were in dire need of realignment. Or something. Belle just flew the thing. She only knew that the old girl had been bucking like a ten-dollar whore lately. The ship was giving her a bit of a crazy ride every time she entered the atmosphere of a planet or spaceport. Now was the perfect time to get her serviced.

"Y'all right, Tucker?" She glanced to her left, noting that her companion was looking over his shoulder, back at Processing. "I don't like it either. Place gives me the creeps." She strode a bit faster, putting distance between herself and the mournful howls of the unfortunate EurLu Were. "It's him, isn't it? He's speaking your language."

Tucker's head bumped her hip, and he sent her a sly doggy smile, almost as though he caught her drift. While Tucker was just a natural wolf, the EurLu were Were creatures from Earth, wolves with Central European origins. With the assistance of science, they had evolved away from their shape-shifting abilities, and they were now able to shift only with the support of the full moon. Out here in space, that could be a bit unpredictable. However, they were still wolves at heart. Sadly, the EurLu rarely attempted their shifts anymore, and within a generation or two, the ability would be all but lost. Personally, Belle thought they were crazy to let go of a skill like that, but who was she to judge?

She had to pity the poor EurLu, with his heightened sense of smell. Her sense of smell was beyond human as well, and the trip had taken a toll on her. He was stuck in a cell, unable to rut, unable to escape. She'd been a full deck away and had the benefit of life-support systems to filter the air.

"You still feeling those females too? I'll have to take you out for a run later, see if you can score some action." She gave a cheeky grin, hoping it covered her own slightly desperate expression.

Two weeks with a pair of Matruscan females on board, both wanted for murder. The bitches had thoroughly disproved the notion that their sexual pheromones were only effective on males. Belle had spent the past two weeks with her teeth gritted and knees clenched as they'd flooded not only her brig, but her entire ship with their lovely fragrance. Sort of like being skunked, but more insidious. She'd spent the past two days wondering if she should cuff herself to the pilot's seat, the temptation to join them had been so urgent.

Even now, her ship languished in dock, not only being serviced, but thoroughly decontaminated. A normal human female might have fared better than Belle, but then a normal human female might also have been helpless against the olfactory onslaught. A male of any species would have been lost, a slave to the whims of the females. Oddly,

the pheromones released only in self-defense, and the Matruscans were sexually incompatible with most humanoids. One of life's little ironies.

No amount of masturbation had helped. As soon as she came, the arousal grew worse because her elevated breathing pumped more of the stuff into her bloodstream. The effect didn't seem to be letting up now that she was docked and away from the source. Her heart pounded, her skin itched, and her pussy was doing a two-step in her underpants. It was damn humiliating. She was now on the prowl, looking for a victim, any size, shape, or sex would do. Hell, Tucker was beginning to look like a good candidate! Somehow, though, she knew she needed a man. She needed spunk deep inside her, taking care of those hormonal blues.

"Hey, Quantrell!" She caught up with the other hunter-tracker, pacing him easily down the hall. He'd been trying to get into her pants for ages. He was about to get lucky.

"Marshal Oakley." He looked up at her curiously, sniffed, and then grinned.

Great, the grapevine was in working order; gossip was already circulating. The stuff wouldn't smell that strong to a human nose.

"Anything I can do for you, Cowgirl?" His light Texas drawl was similar to her own. If she weren't so desperate, she'd smack the damn grin off his face. He was a good-looking man, with wavy blond hair and blue eyes set in crinkly laugh lines. His ruddy complexion spoke of long hours in the sun, probably on horseback. Odd, since he lived in space. He stood a couple of inches shorter than her own six feet three but didn't seem the sort who was threatened by a tall woman.

"You look like you need to be taken out and ridden hard, Cowgirl."

She didn't break stride, not wanting to delay her arrival at her immediate goal. Her bunk. With a man in tow.

"It'll be a hard ride, Bobby. Are you up to it?"

Surprise flared briefly in his eyes. She watched as he looked her over slowly, starting at her curly red hair and ending at her size 10 feet. She could almost read his mind; he'd been wanting to try her on for size for months now. "Of course, if word got out..." She looked at him with a lifted brow. If he bragged to the other hunter-trackers, she could certainly make it an experience he'd regret for a long, long time.

"I'm yours, Cowgirl. Do with me what you will." He gave his patented charming grin. One of his front teeth crossed over, just a tad. It was quite cute. "And it's between you and me."

Belle's skin felt warm and flushed, and her heartbeat accelerated in anticipation. She was already wet and ready for him.

"Oakley. My office, please."

Belle stiffened, her color coming up higher. "Fuck." She whispered the curse, but no doubt Roane Vaine had heard it. She looked at Quantrell, indicated that he should wait at her quarters. She then spun on her heel and followed her boss down the hall.

She didn't like Roane Vaine. Tucker didn't like her either. Too many secrets. But she trusted Roane, and that was good enough for her. They didn't actually end up in Roane's office, but in a vacant space well away from Admin, which she thought was odd until Belle remembered that she reeked of Matruscan pheromones. Roane wouldn't want that lovely fragrance lingering in her private space.

"How'd it go?" Roane settled back into a chair, looking relaxed. The women watched each other warily. Roane's neat tawny hair settled easily to her collar, and those mysterious dark eyes followed Belle as she paced. "You're free to be seated."

She gave a sickly smile and slid into the chair across from Roane. Tucker sat for a moment, his head well above the level of the desk. There was a clear challenge in his eye. Damn wolf knew better than to challenge a humanoid, especially her boss. Belle touched his head and murmured his name. Slowly, very slowly, Tucker lowered himself to the floor, resting a giant head on Belle's foot. Damn if he wasn't suddenly acting dominant!

"Easy job, except for the perfume. I didn't quite expect that."

But Roane had, the arrogant bitch. As she'd recently discovered, the Matruscans had the ability to disarm by smell. A damn pansy-ass defense as far as Belle was concerned. But in its way, it was... Well, it was brilliant. And those two princesses she'd hauled in had been more than a royal pain in the ass. They'd been royalty proper. If Roane had a dick, Belle prayed that it was hard as stone under that elegant skirt.

"But you were able to resist it without too much trouble?"

She laughed at that. "I cuffed myself to the console a couple times, just as a reminder. Right now, I'm about ready to hump any available leg!"

Roane smiled slightly, and Belle's heart dropped to her stomach. Belle groaned in embarrassment. She couldn't believe she'd just said that.

"Well, Quantrell seemed a willing victim. When you're finished with him, though, you might want to seek an outside party. The hormone will take a while to leave your nervous system, and I don't want any fights breaking out among the personnel."

She closed her eyes and dropped her hand to Tuck's head for a moment to steady herself. The image of a mob of hunter-trackers and enforcers going at it made her slightly faint. When she looked at Roane again, her boss looked disturbingly untroubled.

"You knew. You knew this would affect me almost as much as a man. And you didn't see fit to warn me?" She narrowed her eyes in anger.

"I put a bonus in your pay."

"Oh, thank you so much!" She was on her feet, pacing. That made the sensations worse. The stuff wasn't simply affecting her sex organs; it wrapped into her brain, into

her nervous system. She was hot, wet, sweating, and agitated. It was going to take more than a fuck to get rid of this.

"How long?"

Roane shrugged casually. "Depends on you. Most humans would be over it within a day or so, once the hormone is no longer present. I don't know about you."

She reddened even more at the allusion to her genetics. Belle continued to prowl the office, long legs making short work of the space. Her primitive brain was telling her to rush to her apartment where Quantrell was waiting. Against her will, she cast a predatory eye on the handsome woman in front of her. Roane Vaine was half-human, half-Valoran. She wondered if Roane was wholly female, or if she'd inherited secondary male organs, as virtually all Valorans were hermaphrodites. She was striking, with her exotic features and latte-colored skin. Roane's mother had been African, a diplomat from Earth. With an effort, she dragged her attention from her boss's physical attributes.

"In fact, Belle, it wouldn't hurt to visit the med-lab, let them get a measure on how the pheromones are affecting your nervous system. It'd be good information to have on hand." Her cool gaze never left Belle as she paced. "I can see how distressed you are. There are people you can talk to."

"I don't think talking is going to fix this problem, ma'am." Cautiously, she slid back into the chair, her hand dropping back to Tucker's ruff. The soft fur on her fingers was soothing. "Things aren't right with me lately, Roane. Even before I left..." She sighed, meeting the other woman's sharp eyes. "I don't belong. The only time things make sense is on the *Starr*, out in space. Nobody's looking at me out there. I'm not always looking at other people and feeling like such a damned...freak."

Roane continued to watch her carefully; Belle sensed that her boss wasn't entirely comfortable with the turn of the conversation.

"Belle, I can relate somewhat to how you feel; my parents were different species."

"True, and I can see your point. But, Roane, your parents made love and you were conceived. Scientists harvested my mother's egg and my father's sperm. God only knows what they did before I was implanted. I don't even know what I am. And whatever this Matruscan shit did to me is bad; it's totally robbing me of my self-control." She sighed and looked up. Roane's face was shuttered. Obviously, the woman didn't want to hear Belle's personal issues. She sighed and gave up.

"Are we finished?" She shifted in her seat, the arousal once more taking root in her body.

"I can see you're in a hurry to leave, so I'll get to the point. I have another job for you, a rush, from the Niye authorities. Priority." Roane pushed the data card across the desk, without a reader. "I know you've requested time off, but in light of the circumstances, I'd like you to leave once repairs to your ship are complete. Maybe you should take a day or two at New Vegas in the meantime. Of course, ICE will cover your expenses."

Damn her! Was she hiding a smile? Belle exhaled and relaxed, knowing as she did she was flooding the room with her own special pheromones. Mix that with the Matruscan shit and see how the Ice Queen liked it.

Tucker whined, his ice blue eyes rolling to her face. God, even the wolf was reacting to her.

"Why me?" She took her seat again, fishing a reader from her pack. She frowned as she scanned the data. It looked simple enough, until she saw the photo. And the name. "This Barry Kinkaid is a EurLu. And it's a simple bounty, not even a tracking job. Why in God's name do you want to put me on a Were?" With the Matruscan pheromones soaking her very skin, she'd be a walking sex magnet. "God, he's gonna be humpin' my leg the entire trip, and the way I'm feeling now..." She trailed off in discouragement. She did not need to be doing the mating dance with a Were. Belle slumped back in her chair, head hanging backward, looking at the ceiling. She let out an agonized moan. "Animals like me, Roane. I don't know why. Who else do you know that has a wolf following them around? You think I invited Tucker? I tried to set him free! And I can't get near Weres, male or female, without them hanging all over me."

"They must detect your kind heart."

She snorted. "My heart isn't in my crotch." Tucker's head was on her foot again, but his nose was twitching upward. She gave him a warning glance.

"The client requested you specifically, and it really isn't a big job, but important. He's eluded the bounty hunters, so obviously an experienced hunter-tracker is needed. I need you to do this. No questions."

She looked at Roane steadily and then nodded. Belle knew when she was beaten. She rose from her chair and gathered her ready pack.

"I'm on it as soon as the *Starr's* ready to go."

Belle paused briefly, feeling every inch of her six-feet-three frame. She moved to the doorway, her leather duster swirling in her wake. Inhaling deeply, she turned and met the other woman's eye.

Roane's essence had shifted suddenly; the soft musk of femininity had suddenly been replaced by the sharp bite of testosterone. Belle gave her a slow, lopsided smile and stepped outside, closing the door softly behind her.

Nothing pissed off a Valoran more than a loss of control, and Roane Vaine had just come very close to that edge. That was male arousal she'd just scented.

Belle had the feeling that she'd best make herself scarce.

* * * * *

Belle strode down the hall, every footstep echoing her frustration. *Damn, damn, damn.* Why did everyone think that just because she was big and had a wolf, that she was part Were or something? She was from large parents. Her grandparents had been

large as well. It was just genetics. Yeah, genetics, all right. Mix a little of this, a little of that...put it in a petri dish...

"Hey, Cowgirl!" It was Ashley. Belle composed her face into the semblance of what she hoped was a smile and turned to greet the doll-sized Zamoran telepath.

Ashley's pale pink hair was pulled back in a ponytail; she was clearly ready to go on shift. Ashley was the center's quartermaster and, even for her species, was diminutive. When Belle swung around to face her, Ashley faltered. "Uhh...heard you were back in..." Her large eyes grew even wider as she stifled a smile. Belle was clearly projecting her thoughts.

"Oh! Oh...Quantrell?" She said that with a touch of amazement.

Belle leaned back against the wall, arms crossed against her bosom. It never failed to shake her up when the telepath read her so easily. "Do you have any other suggestions? Hey, here's an idea...just spread the word that I'm putting out, see what sort of applicants show. I'm not exactly boy bait, but I'm not in the mood to be particular right now." She looked Ashley over speculatively. *Not bad*. She really hadn't considered the tiny woman, but she preferred a bit more size. Ashley barely cleared four feet tall.

"But then I do have a strap-on..."

Ashley flushed and backed off, giving her space.

"Ahhh...just come see me when you're...finished. I need to know what to stock for Tucker."

"Raw meat, Ashley. As always."

God! Belle looked at Ashley as though the tiny woman were a piece of raw meat; she felt her nipples go erect, rubbing against the soft material of her dress. She could smell her own arousal wafting up from her body, and judging by the look on Ashley's face, the telepath was intercepting her every emotion. She took a deep breath, pulling herself back into control.

Chapter Two

"Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!"

She straddled Quantrell, rocking and bucking, chasing the fleeting orgasm that she needed so desperately. He was crying out to God in release as she tried...tried...

"Oh no...please stop that, Quantrell!" He was pushing and thrusting, crying out with each thrust of his hips. "Goddamn, Quantrell! Noooo!" She wailed as he grew soft inside her sheath, quickly losing his erection once he'd ejaculated. She smacked him on the chest and rolled off, arm over her eyes. "Damndamndamn. *Fuck!*"

He was lying prone, breathing hard from his exertions.

"Oh, damn, Cowgirl...that was just... Oh God, I'm sorry, but that was just so good!" He peeled off the condom and rolled over, nuzzling her neck. "You smell so good. I swear, honey, I'll make it good for you. I'll make you come... Just give me a sec."

He was limp, and it would take more than a minute to wake up little Quantrell.

She reached down and cupped her crotch, trying to soothe the pressure there. She'd tried masturbating, but nothing satisfied like the real thing. Maybe oral? She gave him a sidelong look. Tongue didn't sound right. She needed cock.

"Does he really have to be here while we do this?" Quantrell sounded peeved. She looked over and saw him glaring at Tucker. She could swear Tucker was glaring right back. His silver-gray coat bristled over his shoulders, and his light blue eyes were dilated and lethal.

"What do you want me to do, put him out in the hall? Maybe in the bathroom?" She sat up, anger radiating from every pore. Damn! She hopped out of bed, pacing to the dresser. Quantrell sat up to watch her, admiration and more than a little residual lust in his eyes. Hopefully, the damn pheromones would trigger his recovery, and they could get back to business.

Belle felt a wicked smile come to her face as she selected a toy and some lube. She bit her lip and added a cock ring to the stash. Oh yes, he'd finish her all right, come hell or high water, and he'd finish her the way she needed to finish, with his cock deep inside her, thrusting hard. She turned and tossed him the aerosol condom spray. "Suit up, cowboy. I've got a little surprise for ya." She reached over to her dresser, picked up the white cowboy hat, and popped it on her head.

Quantrell wouldn't know what hit him.

* * * * *

"Look, Quantrell, I was desperate, okay? Otherwise I'd have never fucked you in the first place." He looked stormy, pulling his long-sleeved shirt over tousled blond curls. Odd, he looked really cute now; the blue of the shirt looked good with his unruly hair. Must be the afterglow.

"Oh, come on; don't tell me you've never tried a little ass play before?" He didn't answer. "Don't even try to tell me that hurt. You were moaning and groaning like I've never heard before, especially when I found that special spot. I bet you never in your life thought you'd be able to have multiple orgasms." She was lying on her side, naked and glorious, vibrating anal probe in hand. She clicked it on, then off again. This little toy should ensure that he wouldn't share their tryst with the others. Belle hated being the subject of gossip. Especially when it was true.

"I didn't want a vibrator up my ass, Belle."

Belle felt a slight twinge of guilt; she really hadn't given him any say in the matter. But the outcome had been more than satisfactory! Why was he so damn upset?

She patted the bed, and Tucker hopped up, arranging his bulk in front of her body, shielding her from Quantrell's eyes. She draped a long leg over the wolf's massive body, enjoying the feel of his silky fur on the inside of her thigh. Quantrell glared again, and to her amusement, his cock began to stand at alert once more.

"So...it's okay if you want to put your cock up my ass, but you don't like to take it?" She raised a brow, rolled onto her back, and dug into her bedside table. She pulled out a harness and dildo. "Good thing I didn't come at you with this, then."

His eyes widened and he went red.

"I like my boyfriends to bend over, Robert." She stifled a smile. The harness was really for girl play, but she'd had a boyfriend or two who had liked it as well. Besides, it had been Penny's, and Belle hadn't had the heart to throw it out after her partner's death.

"Gotta admit, though, those gay men are on to something, aren't they? Straights don't know what they're missing." She looked at him impishly. "But you do."

He sat down and jerked on his pants and then his shoes. Quantrell scrambled around, chasing a stray sock and stuffing it in his pocket. His eyes strayed frequently to

where she lay with Tucker, so she allowed her hands to drift over her body, tickling her nipples. If he didn't leave soon, she might have to drag him back to bed.

Belle snuggled closer to the wolf, arm buried in his fur, one long leg over his sinewy body. She rolled her face into the fur at his neck and then peeked up at him; Tucker's cerulean eyes were glowing.

"Thanks, Quantrell, y'all helped a lot, even though we got off to a rough start."

Another little item he wouldn't want the world to know. She looked at him, smiling sweetly, her warm body glowing and succulent. Her accent was sugar coated and honey sweet. She could smell his need. His face was flushed with anger as well as arousal. She knew she'd lost him when his eyes flicked to the vibrator.

Quantrell jerked the door open, trying futilely to slam it in his wake. She smiled and hummed, stroking Tucker's fur.

"I'll give it thirty seconds." Tucker rumbled quietly and let his eyes slip closed. "Why are you so pissy? Are you jealous?" She chuckled as his tail thumped with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

"Okay, about...now."

She grinned at the light tap on the door.

"Belle? Hey, Cowgirl? Hey...listen... I'm sorry..."

* * * * *

"Well, big guy, shall it be the Lost City or Sin City?"

The neighborhood that housed HQ was raw, ugly, and dangerous. Brothels, bars, and drug houses crowded in, often springing from abandoned structures like Terran mushrooms. It had been nicknamed Lost City when the InterSystem Government decided to plunk the main Prisoner Processing Center in the middle of an abandoned section of Kowloon. Belle knew that in another half hour or so she'd be feeling ugly and dangerous herself. Tucker had no opinion; he simply lay on his belly and waved his bottlebrush tail.

Loath as she was to admit it, what she really needed right now was a room for a couple of days and a Were to take care of her physical needs. The Were had the sexual stamina she needed, plus just the right amount of kink to keep it spicy. She couldn't believe Quantrell had been so damn pissy over an anal orgasm! How dare she? How dare he come right when she was getting hot and then pin the blame on her! Typical. She smiled wickedly, knowing that he was probably singing the blues about now; her own pheromones would see to that.

The arousal was coming back, winding into her entrails like an insidious plant, tickling and burning. Moisture, thick and hot, trickled from the mouth of her sex.

"Decide quick, Tucker. The City or Vegas?" The wolf sneezed. "You're right; the planet's probably cleaner, not to mention safer, but the City is a hell of a lot closer."

New Vegas wasn't really a planet; it was an orbiting space station, also known as "the Party Planet." The sex industry was tightly controlled there, and in spite of the abundant vice and debauchery, crime was almost nonexistent. If she could wait, Belle could hire the services of any flavor of Were she fancied, or even more exotic humanoids, such as the wistfully beautiful Somians, who functioned in pairs. The occasional Valoran would show up, though the hermaphrodites drew a king's ransom. Hell, she could bill it to ICE.

But New Vegas was a two-hour flight by shuttle, and she didn't have that sort of patience. Not now.

She swung to her feet and moved to the closet, choosing a tight red leather sheath and a pair of "fuck me" heels. She skipped the underwear. When she threw on her long leather coat, she tucked the spray-on condom into the inner pocket, next to her favorite bowie knife. A girl should always be prepared.

* * * * *

Belle felt all eyes swivel in her direction when she swung into the bar. The lights were dim, but she could see a game of multi-pool in full swing. Patrons sat at various tables, indulging in illegal and dangerous games of chance. Smoke hazed the place, both legal and otherwise. When she saw some of the weaponry, Belle felt seriously underdressed.

Automatically, she glanced to her left, missing the presence of Tucker. As soon as they'd hit the street, he'd dropped his nose to the ground and begun to track, no doubt on the trail of a bitch in heat. Well, she wasn't here to avoid trouble, and having a huge wolf at her side was a deterrent to what she was looking for.

She moved to the old-fashioned bar and nodded to the bartender, ordering up a beer. She didn't particularly like the Earth beverage but didn't want anything stronger, given her already clouded judgment.

There were several possibilities, the first of which was a big dark man at the pool table, with short-cropped hair and a scar on his cheek. His knuckles boasted marks of a recent fight. She preferred a smaller man most of the time. She was a big woman and enjoyed feeling like a big woman. A blond at a game table was looking her over, his eyes hot with want. No Weres, but beggars couldn't be choosers. There were a couple of other good possibilities as well. The air began to crackle with sexual tension as her pheromone cocktail began to drift through the room.

Okay, so the men were in place, now for location. She wasn't normally big on exhibitionism, and Roane had made it pretty damn clear to keep it outside the Quay, so her berth was off-limits. Her cruiser was secured in dry dock; there was no way to access it now. She glanced at the bartender, catching his eye.

"Do you have rooms?" She almost didn't recognize her own voice; it was that husky and sexed up.

The bartender's gaze raked over her body and then shifted up to the next level of the bar. "By the hour and by the day."

She nodded, noting that his eyes were on her lips. A spike of arousal shot through her cunt. She normally didn't think of her body that way, but she was like a bitch in heat and was pared down to her most primal. Part of her wanted to pit the men against each other, winner take all.

Better yet, first come, first served. Line 'em up, Lucky.

Belle paid for three nights and pocketed the key. Her long coat swishing around her ankles, she rose from the bar and headed for the doorway to the stairs, taking her beer along for the ride. Belle turned, leaning in the doorway, surveying her choices. From across the room, she could smell sour sweat on the big dark man. He'd have to shower first, and she wasn't in the mood to wait. Her glance fell on the blond. They made eye contact, and he straightened, setting down his cards. And then he picked them up again, returning to his game. He pointedly ignored her.

What the fuck?

She was so distracted that she missed the movement in the dark hall to her back. An amateur's mistake.

Without warning, a hard body pressed up against hers, a pair of hands circling around to cup her breasts. Warm breath feathered her hair, sending shivers up and down her sensitive flesh. His fragrance was wild and heady, and his cock was hot and hard when he pressed it against her bottom. A Were, fully aroused. Her heart dropped. Her pussy cheered. Her beer slipped from her hand. He caught it, lifting it to take a long drink.

"Slumming, *bébé?*" His voice was gravelly, harsh. His head dipped down to her neck, and he took a deep breath. "Ah...you've been exposed to Matruscan ladies... Their scent has brought your own ripe time. Poor little *bébé.*"

What was his accent? Belle carried a southern American accent courtesy of her family. His was not French, not southern. Cajun? It was a dead culture, but that's what it sounded like.

"You looking for a male to slake your needs?" He was fully against her body now, his hips still pressed against her bottom, moving in rhythm with his hands as he kneaded her breasts through the leather.

She should kill him right now. Spin and plant her knife... God...she could feel the heat of his body through the leather coat! Her eyes fluttered, and lust shot through her system, making her dizzy and weakening her knees.

"I come with you to your room now – forget those ones. They're boys, can't take care of a woman like you." His hands were under the coat, wandering, exploring. She could smell him; he was clean male, his own pheromones calling to hers. Her eyes dropped closed, and her lips parted. Without letting her turn to face him, the stranger walked her backward to the staircase, one step at a time.

He was taller than she, and stronger. The knowledge gave her goose bumps, triggering a primal, thrilling fear. Few men, if any, were stronger than Belle. It was just her genetic code. It was what made her good at what she did.

He swung around behind her, following her up the stairs. She still hadn't seen his face, but his scent was melting her body. She felt her arousal slip from her channel, smearing between her thighs. He stopped her on the stairs and pushed aside the skirt of the coat, pressing his cheek into her buttocks.

"Oh, bébé, you smell so sweet, and it's for me, isn't it?" His hands were up the short skirt, fingers trailing through her moisture. He dropped the skirt of her coat, allowing her to move forward again. A few more steps and they reached the landing. Her hand trembled as she inserted the old-fashioned key card into the door.

He followed her in, placing a hand over hers as she reached to switch on a light. He paused and scented the air. She should have known she'd draw a Were; even on a good day, they seemed to find her. Normally, she'd avoid them, but he was exactly what she needed.

The Were turned her to face him, and she studied him in the filtered light of the room. He was well made, handsome, and strong featured. But the Were generally were an attractive species. What surprised her was his age. His face was youthful but not young, and his hair was silvery white, cropped close to his head, lying in artistic disarray. She wondered how long it took in front of a mirror to create that look. His eyes were vivid arctic blue. And he was tall.

Gigantic. In bare feet, Belle measured six feet three, minimum. Add the stiletto heels she wore, and she towered over most men. She liked it that way, generally preferring men of lesser height. Belle was honest with herself; she was a little more on the Alpha side than not. But this man was looking down into her eyes. His shoulders were not bulky, but much wider than hers. His hard, hot cock rested against her lower belly, where he gently rocked against her, firing up her instincts.

Without a word, he lowered his head to kiss her, hands coming up to the back of her skull, one wandering to her face, stroking her chin. Her lips parted eagerly, and he stroked his tongue inside of her warm mouth, exploring her teeth, coming back out to lick her upper lip, nipping before kissing it gently. She watched his face, seeing the lids drop blissfully over his eyes as he nuzzled into her hair, trailing warm kisses down her throat, up to her ear.

Her legs buckled when he stepped around behind her and found that sweet spot on the back of her neck. Her coat slid to the floor. The dress came next, and she dropped her head back to his chest as first his hands and then his lips explored her arms, her waist, the valley between her breasts.

Without warning, he grasped her arms tightly, raising them over her head, and he bit, bearing down hard into the soft skin of her rib cage. She jerked, moaned, and sighed as he gently licked the spot.

"I'm sorry, bébé. The wolf wants domination. You are very powerful; we want your surrender."

Wolf. She'd hoped he'd be wolf, although she wasn't sure why. He was at her neck again, whispering words she didn't understand that raised goose bumps on her skin. His hands came up, cupping her breasts, circling the nipples into full erection until she cried out with the sensation, her body jerking away.

"You *will* stand still while I touch, bébé." The warning came as a stern but gentle whisper. His head dropped to her neck again, and he pushed her head forward, placing his teeth threateningly over the nape of her neck. He bore down, and the pain was exquisite, bringing a moan to her lips. He suddenly dropped to his knees and bit again, this time on her buttock, causing her to cry out. But she didn't move.

He stood, towering over her, controlling her. His big, rough hand skimmed over her bottom, then around to her belly, pulling her against his groin, grinding his cock between her buttocks.

"I smell another man on you, *chère*. Did he make you feel good? Did he make you feel like this?" His voice sounded like gravel wrapped in velvet. It frightened her. Thrilled her. Took her breath away.

She shook her head, unable to speak.

"Do you want to feel me against you? My skin against yours?"

She nodded.

"I didn't hear you." He pulled her tighter against his body.

"I want to feel you. Please."

Who was that? Surely that wasn't her voice, husky and moaning, pleading.

He pressed his mouth against her shoulder. "Turn around, bébé. Take off my shirt." She swiveled in his arms, slightly unsteady on the heels. He wore a high-necked shirt, skintight. She could see every muscle, every curve and valley beneath the jet-black fabric. The sleeves stopped at the midpoint of his muscular biceps. Belle tugged the shirt from his denims and slipped it over his head. She gasped. His broad, muscular torso was the stuff that dreams were made of. Wet dreams, anyway. A wide scar skated over his rib cage. Another rested low on his belly, near his hip. She wanted to taste it. She wanted to rub her face against it, losing herself in his scent.

"Take off my boots and pants."

She knelt, and he helped with the boots, toeing them loose. She stood again to unbutton the tight black jeans. When she lowered them down his lean hips, his cock sprang loose, hard and ready.

Belle didn't think of herself as a connoisseur of male sex organs, but his was beyond nice. It was beautiful. The head was long and flared gracefully, and his erect cock curved upward to his stomach. It was not quite human. It wasn't straight, it curved, and the thought of what it would do inside of her...

While there was little hair on his body, the nest around his penis was thick and dark, an unusual contrast to the silver hair on his head. Once he stepped out of his jeans, she moved close, letting her fingers trail over his cock, down to his heavy balls.

She was wet. She was ready. She was more than ready...but before they got down to business...

He clasped her head as she settled to her knees, drawing him into her mouth. Belle swallowed him deep, holding for a long moment.

"Ah...bébé...you are so perfect," he whispered as his hand drifted gently through her hair.

She pleased his testicles as much as his shaft while he rocked gently on the balls of his feet, allowing her to satisfy her curiosity about his body. Her tongue swirled and danced over his cockhead, and her hands came around to cup his ass, kneading and massaging. She smelled his body, his arousal, and it was like manna to her poor, tortured body. The taste of his precum spread over her tongue, sating a thirst she didn't know she had.

When his climax grew near, he lifted her to her feet, pulling one long leg to his hip. Even as he nudged her opening, he kissed her, tongue thrusting deep and then pulling back, he pressed his lips to her neck as he surged upward, past the strong muscles of her passage. He then withdrew briefly before pressing deeper into her body. Belle wrapped her leg around his muscular thigh and looped her arms around his neck, and once he settled to the hilt, he lifted, easily moving her to the rickety bed. He was too tall to lay top to bottom, so he settled her comfortably, pulling her other leg to his hip. She felt soft and female and oddly willing to submit to this stranger.

He moved once and then again, and she lifted to meet him. He lowered himself, kissing, murmuring, nibbling her ear as they settled into natural, easy movement.

The bed squeaked and moaned, a harsh accompaniment to their lust. Belle's hands kneaded the skin of his back before dropping to his buttocks to urge him faster. She slipped her fingers into the cleft of his ass, hearing him gasp at the sharp, delicious pain.

The Were rose slightly, grasping her breast, squeezing and then nipping at the peak as he drew it into his mouth. A hand slid under her buttocks, raising her slightly, angling his cock into better position. She gasped as the change stimulated her G-spot, and he groaned as the pressure increased on his sensitive head. He stroked fast this time. Fast and hard, relieving her need.

He was pushing her higher, so Belle let go of her inhibitions. Pulling her knees up high and grabbing him firmly by the bottom, she undulated as she plunged onto him, and every breath that pushed from her lungs ended on a gasp. The gasps rose to cries, and every cry grew louder and louder.

"*Thankyouthankyouthankyou...*" She peaked, then released, and then peaked yet again, finally grinding into his pelvis hard and letting the orgasm take her. She arched her head back, her body stretched, taking his full length and then drawing back, only to come down hard on him again. When she came to a shuddering, delicious finish, he

was still steady, slowing to accommodate her. She stroked his hips with her legs, sliding her feet down the backs of his thighs, then bringing them back up in a caress.

Belle grasped his head in her hands, pulling him down for a long, wet, and enthusiastic kiss; all the while, he still thrust, keeping their tempo.

"Feel better?" She nodded happily, and he smiled in satisfaction. "More?"

"Oh God, yes!"

He rolled them until she lay on top of his muscular body. They shimmied until his shoulders were on the pillows, allowing her to grasp the headboard of the bed as she straddled his lap. She slowly rose and fell, long and wet and slow. He raised his hand to stroke and play with her breasts, and she lowered a bit more, urging him to latch on.

"Stop teasing!" she hissed.

As though driven by an impulse that he didn't understand, he dragged her down to his chest and held her tightly; Belle was shocked that he'd show such tenderness. She was even more shocked that it felt so good. She lay there clasped tightly in his arms as they continued to snuggle, and she found that this position was good for her, giving gentle stimulation to her oversensitive clit. His hands stroked over her bottom, and she sighed, looking down into his handsome face. She'd never seen him before, but Belle felt as though she knew this man, this beautiful Were who was taking care of her.

She didn't kid herself; he was getting as much out of it as she was, but comparing this to what she'd had with Quantrell was shocking. The Were was nurturing her, and in spite of his almost violent reaction to her heat, he was seeing to her needs before his. There were moments of tenderness that felt almost...loving.

For several long minutes, he allowed her to dominate him, but when she felt tension seeping into his hips and torso, she knew he needed more. Warily, Belle pushed upright, allowed him to reverse her position, so that she faced away while he thrust from behind. She sat upright and, to her delight, discovered that she had free access to her pussy where their flesh joined, so she pressed her hand flat on her mons and then explored further, finally laying her hands on his testicles. She pulled lightly and he moaned. She slid her hands under their weight, pulling upward and outward; he moaned again. So as he thrust, she played herself with one hand and teased his balls with the other.

His hands settled hard on her hips, forcing her down as he rose, moving her faster, until finally she had to let go and support herself on the bed. But her climax was already there, taking her over hard and fast. He reached down and pressed hard into her clit, and even as he let out a throaty groan, she came again, riding him hard, arching her back, clasping at her own breasts, and taking him for all he was worth.

* * * * *

She didn't want to come down. The high had never been higher; long moments afterward, he was still semihard, keeping her filled and aroused. His hands wandered

up and down her back, before stroking her hips and circling around to her tummy. Slowly, she rose off his cock, and he carefully helped her settle beside him on the bed where he tucked her against his side. She felt small and feminine. Well, maybe not small, but definitely feminine. He brushed the mass of hair from her face and stroked her cheek, gazing at her from sleepy eyes.

"Good?"

She smiled. "Very."

He raised a brow.

"Very, very good."

He was silent for a moment. "Better than the other man?"

She grinned at his insecurity. "Oh, please. Mr. Two Minutes? He left me hanging; I had to give him an anal orgasm to get him up enough to finish me!" He looked at her in shock. "Hey, a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. Desperate measures."

"He was angry? Sounds...delicious to me." He grinned, showing teeth that were slightly more than human.

She shivered.

"Quantrell's been trying to get in my pants for ages. Pissed as he was, he'll probably try harder now."

A low growl broke from the man's throat, and she looked at him curiously.

"Just a territorial thing, bébé. I want to bite his ungrateful ass."

She lay back and laughed at that. "Did you see the scar on my ass? I rescued a wolf from an illegal hunting preserve, and the first thing he did was bite me on the butt."

He rolled her over to look at the faint marks and bent down to lick them, his tongue leaving a warm, wet trail on her skin. "He marked you. He made you his territory." He ran his hand over her bottom, massaging gently. "This wolf, is he still with you?" He was obviously picking up Tucker's scent.

She nodded. "He's out running; he tends to be independent when we're home. Most of the locals know him and leave him alone. He's probably finding himself a bitch to nail."

He looked thoughtful. "Where would poachers get a wolf?"

"This reserve was smuggling all kinds of animals illegally, from all over the system. Tucker didn't have papers because he was smuggled, probably from Earth. He looks like a North American timber wolf. But I don't know that much about animals; he just seemed to take to me."

"Tucker?"

She leaned down and bit his chin lightly. "Rhymes with the name I called him when he bit me in the ass."

"I think I like this Tucker wolf. I'd like to bite your ass too."

“Just say when, cajun. I’m ready to go.”

To her surprise and delight, she could see that he was ready too.

Chapter Three

Armand. Armand de la Croix. That had been his name. Armand rolled onto his side and ran a hand through his rough, choppy hair. It felt odd, not right somehow. He reached out and pulled one of her silky curls, stretching it and then letting it loose, smiling as it rebounded.

Odd that while lying here beside this magnificent female he would suddenly remember his name. How long had he been without it? Quietly, he rose from the mattress and padded to the bathroom, the floor feeling strange under his bare feet. He looked into the mirror and saw a face that somehow he should know but didn't quite recognize. Was that Armand de la Croix? He leaned forward, closely examining the features that he wore, the odd coloring. Was this right? He looked down at his body, at the scars that marred his skin. How fearsome that he couldn't remember.

He broke open the seal on a toothbrush and paste and awkwardly began to brush his teeth, the act foreign and familiar at the same time. He rinsed his mouth and spit into the sink and then turned to the toilet to empty his bladder before washing his hands. All automatic yet oddly strange acts. He returned to the room where she slept.

In the dim light, her form was graceful and erotic; if it weren't for that other pull, he'd be tempted to wake her again. He slowly pulled his clothing on and then returned to her side, squatting on the floor, looking into her face. She was the one familiar thing that anchored him. She pulled his heart, called to parts of him that hadn't been alive in so very long. He could smell himself on her body; that would be his touchstone, his means of finding his way back. This time he wouldn't become lost. He wouldn't allow it.

That other scent now called; it wafted in the streets, green and wild, luring him onward. As loath as he was to leave her side, Armand knew that he must.

Armand straightened and left the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

* * * * *

Was this heaven or hell? Belle stretched and winced as sore muscles groaned in protest. At some point during the night, they'd given up on the bed and pulled the bedding to the floor. Now she was in a tangle of sheets and blankets, stretched fully across the saggy mattress. Alone.

Sitting up, she pushed the mop of auburn tangles from her face and winced as she looked down at her body. She was peppered with bite marks and hickeys; as her arousal had grown, so had his aggression. She'd left her share of nail marks and bruises.

"Y'all should see the other guy," she drawled while looking around the room.

It was tiny and dingy, but clean. It was large enough to spend extended time in, with a small kitchenette and cool box. One of those places it was good to know about when the time came to disappear.

She hadn't brought her pack, but her coat concealed most of the items she needed, and it was hanging neatly over a chair, along with her dress. She'd abandoned her shoes at some point in the night. He'd liked them on but had gotten wise when she'd barely missed his scrotum with a spiked heel.

Stiffly, she rose, stretched again, and evaluated her condition. She wasn't hurt, just sore. The marks were superficial, just a little too much enthusiasm. No doubt he was feeling hers too.

She shuffled into the bathroom, grimaced at herself in the mirror, and took care of business, smiling when she saw that he'd used the complimentary mouth hygiene kit. She grabbed her toiletry pack from her coat and returned to the mirror, brushing teeth, untangling curls, and finally running the shower as hot as she could bear, washing the night from her body. In the mirror, she saw four small punctures at her collarbone, not severe, but different from the others. They looked more like the fang marks Tucker had left on her long ago. But the EurLu no longer changed shape. Odd.

The towels weren't Egyptian cotton, but then, her own weren't either. She toweled down and grabbed her dress, pulling it on and then turning to the shoes.

"They don't look near so sexy in the morning, do they, Tuck—" She caught herself, laughing and shaking her head. Pretty bad when she was holding a conversation with her absent wolf.

In the kitchenette, she found the makings for some instant java, sighed in disgust, and made it anyway. She flopped into a chair that should have been by the bed; she dimly remembered bending over it at some point in the night. She had the room for a couple more days, and judging by the itch, she'd need it. She only hoped her Cajun wolf would show for the task.

Finally, unable to put off the inevitable return to work, Belle pocketed the key and headed for the door. An unfamiliar lump in her coat hit her thigh. She frowned and fished around in the lining. Quickly, she inventoried her weapons; she'd left the toiletry

pack in the bathroom. She found a long-forgotten meal bar, cuffs, a blacksnake whip, her backup pistol, a leash for Tucker for when they were in formal settings. She also found the slender can of spray-on condom.

“Shit!” She laid her head against the wall, pounding gently. “*Shitpissfuck.*” She slapped the wall with an open hand.

Well, hell, the baby would be pretty.

And damn big.

* * * * *

“Lady, got a message for you.” The bartender looked surly and tired, probably a mirror for her own appearance. Frowning, Belle took the cheap envelope and broke the seal, heading for the back exit. She knew she still smelled like walking sex to whatever boys were downstairs, and frankly, she didn’t want to deal with it. She winced at the smog-filtered sunlight outside and barely reacted as Tucker fell into place next to her, his giant head nudging her hand for rubs.

It was a novelty having a letter written by hand, on paper. The script flowed elegantly across the page, and she had to focus for a moment to read it.

Belle,

The night was beautiful beyond my dreams. I am sorry not to be there when you awakened, but business called me. If your situation has not resolved (and I pray it has not), please return here. I will meet you.

Your servant,

Armand

“Did you tell him my name? ‘Cause I don’t think I did.” She glanced down at Tucker, who yawned hugely. “Are you hungry? I’m hungry. We’ll stop by the kitchens.” They walked quietly, on a high level of alert. Even in daylight, the Lost City was not a safe piece of real estate. She’d stop by the docks first and check on the *Starr*. With luck, they’d need a couple more days with her. Belle needed a couple more days herself.

The *Belle Starr* was a lovely little cruiser, at least she was to Belle’s eye. She’d initially been outfitted for two; Belle and Penny had been the team from hell. They’d ripped from one end of the system to the next, hunting hard, drinking harder. They’d watched each other’s backs. They’d been best friends and occasional fuck buddies if the trip was long. Penny had been as petite as Belle was statuesque, and they’d done some awesome undercover work together.

She’d lost Penny on the illegal hunting planet where she’d found Tucker. A large crew of hunters and enforcers had been dispatched to close the place down, and she and Penny had broken away from the main group, tracking a poacher into a thick stand of trees. They’d thought that all the animals had been confined. They’d been wrong. A Lemoran Bar-tag had burst from a thicket, bearing down on the women.

Before either had the opportunity to react, all hell had broken loose. Belle had been attacked and borne down on from behind, buttock and thigh clamped in a pair of jaws as hard as iron. Penny hadn't been so lucky.

Tucker had saved her life that day and had repeated the favor many times over, whether he was rousing her from a drunken stupor or watching her back in a fight. While she recovered from the injuries he'd inflicted, she'd found a junked med-droid and had it programmed with veterinary data, determined to not allow this courageous animal to die from the wounds he'd received. The poison in the Bar-tag's hollow tusks should have killed the wolf, but he pulled through and had been her side-guard ever since. She'd never even thought to question his silent presence at her left, keeping her right arm free to fight.

For a time, she'd thought he was a Were, maybe a throwback EurLu, but he'd never shown any inclination to interact with her on any level other than lupine, so she accepted him for what he was: a gift, freely given. In return, she offered him safety, respect, and all the freedom he saw fit to take. He also got the occasional meal in the mess hall; nobody had the balls to tell her he couldn't.

And on those nights when she'd lain in bed weeping for her lost partner, he'd offered his silent presence. Without Tucker, Belle knew she'd have eventually followed Penny into death. Maybe through carelessness, or maybe even by her own hand. It wouldn't have mattered. Despair was a vile, toxic emotion, and he'd brought her back from that edge, quietly giving her a purpose to live.

At the docks, she quickly reviewed the data on the *Belle Starr*, satisfied that they were on planet for another day or two. Much as she despised being grounded, those Matruscan bitches had done a number on her. She hated to admit it, but Roane had probably been right to send her on the mission. The stuff would have overcome any man and most women, reducing them to a quivering heaps of mindless lust. It had thrown Belle into standing heat. She'd gotten herself bred; the others might have died.

* * * * *

"Hey, Cowgirl, you feeling better today?" Belle looked up to see the pretty face of the Zamoran across the table from her.

"Hey, Ashley. Sorry if I was a bit crude yesterday." She glanced down and smiled as she saw that Ashley had put down a plate of meat for Tucker. Raw. She returned to her pancakes and eggs. She was grateful they catered to her earthbound taste buds. The petite Zamoran species was strictly vegetarian, but Ashley understood the needs of carnivores.

"No offense meant, no offense taken." She gazed at Belle a long moment and dropped her pastel green gaze to the table, a smile playing over her lips. She was reading her again. Damned impertinent!

"You really do...don't you?"

“Mmmpff?” It wasn’t polite to speak with a full mouth, so Belle grunted.

“You really do have a strap-on.” Belle finished chewing and swallowed. “And I’m willing to bet you used it on Quantrell. He was so damn hot and bothered this morning, he couldn’t get out of dock fast enough. No bragging on his conquest either. Give it up, babe, what’d you do to him?” She raised an eyebrow then. “And don’t tell me he did that to you.” She was looking at the array of love bites on Belle’s almost bare bosom. She hadn’t bothered to change clothes.

“No, Ashley, I didn’t make Quantrell my bend-over boyfriend. He got another of my special treats. And no, he didn’t do this. I went tomcatting last night, caught myself a tiger.” She speared a large wedge of syrup-soaked pancake. “Quantrell might hate me, and he might wish never to see my face again. But he sure as hell never got off like I got him off.” She glanced up to see they’d been joined by Loran, the executive chef. Her short black curls made a startling contrast against Ashley’s pale pink locks. She was only marginally taller than Ashley. They were cousins.

“Man problems?”

“I ain’t got no problems with men, do I, Tuck?” He gazed from face to face and then laid his head down. “Just came in for a recharge, a change of clothes. Then back to the candy store.” The arousal was coming up again; heat was building in her back and belly. Her chest was burning.

The two females looked at Belle’s flushed skin and exchanged glances.

Her eating was becoming mechanical, her gaze fixed on the plate in front of her. How long had it been? Five, six hours since he left? Belle did her best to smother the groan before it slipped out. The damn bar wasn’t even open yet! She rose abruptly and bused her own plate. “See ya later, girls. Gotta grab a shower before anyone else tries to bend my ear.”

Loran looked at her with concern. “Anything we can do, Cowgirl?”

She smiled sweetly at Loran. “Either of you got a penis?” She looked from one to the other. “Didn’t think so.” She gave them a saucy grin as she stacked her dishes on the counter. With a glance at Tucker, they were gone.

* * * * *

Belle rushed into her quarters, grabbed the nearest toy, and brought herself to a quick and unsatisfying orgasm. She then undressed, checked her handheld, and noticed she had an e-mail from home. Well, not really home—her family had fled Earth in disgrace some years before, and her parents had settled on a small postindustrial planet called Modan. The population was largely humanoid, and an unusually sophisticated mix of species was represented there. The Oakleys barely stood out on Modan.

Hey love,

Just a note to let you know all is well. We miss and love you. Word got out about you bringing in those Sand Pirates, good work! You must be the world’s greatest marshal!

Just wanted to let you know that Dad isn't at the factory anymore. He got a job coaching men's b-ball at the university. It's a good position, pay is much better than his old job. I'm proud that he had the courage to apply. It seems the scandal is ancient news, and they didn't think the worse of him for it. They were honored that he applied. He's thrilled with the idea of coaching a mixed-species team!

I'm doing well. I work half days at the local recreation center. I'm coaching an intramural soccer team, as well as a women's v-ball team. Both of us have completed our requirements for teaching credentials, so hopefully, that will lead somewhere.

All in all, life is good, even if it isn't Texas. Take care of yourself, little girl, and stay in touch! Please tell me you'll visit soon; we miss you so much!

All our love,

Mom and Daddy

P.S. Give Tucker a hug for me!

She'd attached a photo of them hugging in front of a beautiful, pink-tinted fountain. They looked like a pair of young newlyweds. A pair of gigantic, unnaturally gorgeous newlyweds. Well, they had the Earth government to thank for their size, beauty, and long, long lives. The sports geneticists had been so successful that they'd bred their subjects right out of the field; none of the Oakleys would ever see competition again. Well, Momma could always find work as a supermodel.

She downloaded the photo into a holoframe and set it on the dresser. A quick stroke to the keypad sent the image to her system on board the *Starr*.

* * * * *

She plastered herself against the wall of the shower, humping what wasn't there. Her showerhead was a good one; she'd named it Tony. While the water cascaded all over her body from the wall jets, she'd put Tony to good use, coming hard and loud, slapping the wet tile with the flat of her hand. She also took the time to curse Roane once again for sending her after the Matruscans.

Belle shampooed her hair and carefully toweled it off, picking the curls apart and then running a sheen through to pick up the color. She followed that up with a slathering of body lotion. She kept her legs and underarms lasered hairless but kept the pubic hair. She wasn't sure why, but somehow, maybe she liked the reminder of the oft-denied animal side of herself. And she liked that her pubes matched her hair. Curly red, top and bottom. She slid into a short robe and sat at her desk, scanning her new job while she could still think clearly.

The gorgeous Were in the holo was wanted for mayhem. No biggie there. As usual, Roane kept the contractor hidden for privacy. Biting her lip, she went to the Were databases and checked the youngster out. Sucked in her breath.

Now the stinky sisters had been a politically delicate catch. They'd been in the lower echelon of the recently deposed Matruscan matriarchy. This young Were was the

only surviving grandson of an Alpha from a pack on Selene, the EurLu homeworld. He wasn't from any old pack, either, but one of the oldest, most respected packs of the EurLu species. Belle shifted in her chair, feeling the itch begin again, rapidly stealing her ability to think clearly.

Belle needed to touch base with Roane again. She was certain that Roane knew the young man's genealogy, but still... Belle was worried.

And horny. She prayed the ongoing need meant she was still unbred and fertile. Or it could just mean a second egg had dropped, and she was going for a litter. Too late to worry about that now. She was on birth control, but it was calibrated for humans, not Were. It might be effective, but then again, it might not. Everything about Belle's body carried a bit of the unknown.

Pushing her chair back, she glanced at the clock, wondering if Armand would be around yet. She had to get out of here. She'd cause a riot if she didn't, and a riot was always more fun on an open street than in a closed facility.

If he wasn't there, she could pick another man...but something in her deepest core wanted him. Armand.

Belle pulled on a long, loose dress and grinned; it was dotted with tiny flowers and looked curiously feminine under her leather coat. He'd like the whimsy. She stepped into her knee-high boots, grabbed her pack, and ran to the kitchen to retrieve the food Loran had packed. And then she was on her way, Tucker darting past her in a black-and-silver flash.

* * * * *

Armand stood in the shadows of the stairs, listening, waiting. She'd come soon. It had been hours, and the next cycle would kick in soon. If it hadn't already. If she hadn't found another male. He leaned his head against the wall and pressed the heel of his hand into his groin, stifling a harsh groan. He was suffering as he hadn't suffered in years. God, she'd come in, grabbed him by the balls with one hand and the heart with the other, and shaken him hard. He didn't remember half the previous night, so deeply he'd thrust himself into mating. She said she was human, but he didn't think so. No human cycled into heat like that. Few humans could survive the sex they'd shared. And he wanted...needed more.

For years he'd watched her from the shadows; she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever encountered, but never like she'd been last night, when he'd finally had her naked and submitting, albeit grudgingly. He'd been amused and grateful that she hadn't recognized him. He'd risked everything to come out and claim her. He hadn't meant to do so, but when he smelled the other man on her, there was no stopping nature. She was his. More to the point, he was hers. She hadn't been aware of what she'd unleashed in that room last night. But he knew.

"So your name is Armand."

He looked up, giving her a long, slow smile. "And you are Annabelle Oakley."

She smiled, looking him up and down, the hunger growing. "Just don't call me Annie, and we'll get along fine."

He reached out and took her hands, pulling her in close to his body. He nuzzled her hair, her skin, smelling the delicious fragrance of her fertility, her willingness to take him. His seed hadn't taken root. Yet. It would live within her womb for days, waiting for the arrival of the egg. She would be more careful this time, but he didn't care. Nature always prepared the way for survival. His kind had hung on by a thread for centuries, yet here he was paving the way for the next generation of his kind. God had been good enough to lead him to this woman. The rest of his kind were on Earth, if they lived still. He didn't know.

"Bébé, if you don't start walkin' up those stairs, I'll have to carry you up." She smiled against his neck. Lord, she fit perfectly.

"If you don't let me loose so I can walk up those stairs, I might just make you carry me."

In answer, he swung her easily into his arms and moved lightly up to the landing, turning her so that she could unlock the door. No maid service here, chaos still reigned from the night before. He set her down, and they stared at one another in the full light of day.

She was beautiful. He'd known that before, with her fiery auburn hair and extravagant height and figure. But standing close, he saw her large, luminous eyes, thickly fringed with lashes untouched by cosmetics. Her nose was straight, and the nostrils had a delicate flare. She had a strong, stubborn jaw and full, delicious lips that curled up at the corners. Her chin was softened by the tiniest hint of a cleft. He bent and kissed that cleft, feeling her smile as he did so. He then stroked an arched brow with his thumb. She was perfect. She fit him.

He stepped back, letting her go, taking her pack and her coat, setting them carefully on a small table. He heard a squeak; she was shifting the bed frame out of the way, situating the mattress more carefully on the floor.

"I would prefer a suite at the finest hotel for you, bébé."

She smiled as she rose gracefully.

He felt slightly sad that she didn't answer. "Belle, I know you think I'm taking advantage of your need, but truly, you are beautiful to me. I am so honored to be with you."

"We weren't careful last night, Armand. I've had my BC shot, but still..."

"The shot can be unpredictable, at best, for one of mixed genetics."

She looked at him with surprise in her expression. "How did you know?"

He reached out and lifted a stray hair from her cheek. "You don't smell human, Belle. You are stronger, more beautiful, more gifted. I don't know what you are, but my guess is that your genes were formulated in a lab, not by breeding."

She turned away, clearly uncomfortable with the conversation. "You aren't like any EurLu I've encountered. Most are of Euro descent. You have a Cajun accent, and that culture is all but gone."

"I'm not like any Weres you've ever met. I may be the last of my kind." His smile was a touch sad. "And you, bébé, are the only one of your kind." He stroked her chin, tilting her head up to his for a kiss, soft and sweet.

"I had a brother..."

"But he's gone now?"

She nodded. "It broke my parents' hearts. Mine as well. He took his own life."

He made a soft sound of sympathy.

"We don't fit, Armand. They made us for frivolous reasons, and it backfired. We don't fit with humans or Weres or anyone else." She leaned into him; Armand sensed her humility and shame. "When Daddy was a young man, he was thought to be a prodigy. An unequaled star in the sports world. My mother as well. Daddy played on the court and field. Momma was on the court as well, volleyball and b-ball. Wyatt was thirteen when they were outed as hybrids. I was twelve."

He stood silently, humbled that she trusted him enough to share her story.

"We were owned, Armand. The scientists took the genetic material from my parents and played with us. When the press showed up, the sports club abandoned us. My parents were completely unprepared to cope on their own.

"They were barred from competition on Earth, and that's really all they knew. The sports club cut them loose. After that, Daddy could only get work in menial jobs. Momma did her best too, but their size set them apart."

She bit her lip. "The scientists managed to stunt my growth, but Wyatt reached seven feet tall by the time he was thirteen. He was just a kid, and the other kids were mean. He wasn't tough enough to take it.

"We grew up the pampered children of celebrities. When we were suddenly thrust into poverty and disgrace, Wyatt couldn't cope. I learned to be tough on the inside as well as the outside."

But Armand could see that Belle's tough shell was no more than a facade.

"After Wyatt died, we emigrated. It took a while to find a place, but we settled on Modan. Things are getting better for my parents now."

"And you became a bounty hunter?"

She hooked a long leg over his hip, thrusting suggestively against his groin, instantly diverting his attention. "Hunter-tracker," she corrected him. "I'm technically a law enforcement official, but when I bring in a skip-trace, or someone with a reward on his head, I collect on that as well. Since I'm a marshal, I have authority in all the Coalition systems."

"Why should you choose such a dangerous existence, Belle?"

"I'm strong, tough, and smart. No place I'd rather be than in my ship, with Tucker at my side, runnin' down the bad guys."

He easily lifted her, laying her down on the mattress, and began slipping off her boots.

"Maybe your true ancestors were the Canadian Mounties." He slid the skirt up her thigh, breathing a sigh of pure pleasure to see she'd not bothered with underwear. Armand lowered his head, nipping lightly at her inner thigh, and then lowered his lips to her cleft, licking lightly enough to bring a shiver to her skin. "Because, bébé, I think you must always get your man."

"Sometimes I get the woman as well."

He snarled at that, sinking his teeth into the soft skin of her thigh and then releasing her with a long, wet lick.

Her chuckle shifted into a groan, and she clasped his silvery hair in both hands, not taking a chance that he'd escape.

* * * * *

As much as he'd played rough the night before, he played gentle with her this time. And it had been play, with laughter and cuddling, tickles and games. At midday, they'd paused, eating the lunch that Belle had brought.

"This wolf of yours, where is he?"

She smiled, popping a morsel into his mouth. "Most men don't like to be watched by an animal while they fuck. I think maybe they feel a bit vulnerable, eh?" She reached down and caressed his lovely cock and balls.

He stopped chewing for a moment, clearly enjoying her ministrations.

"Plus, he's free to roam when we're in port. Wolves shouldn't be owned. He's my companion, not my pet."

She yelped when Armand swooped in and held her tight as he kissed her fiercely.

"You are a very special woman. He loves you. That's why he stays with you." He returned to her lips, savoring her mouth slowly, as though it was the first time. When he pulled back, she released a small breath, her eyes still closed, a smile playing over her lips. He smiled in satisfaction. At some point in the past few hours, her egg had dropped and been fertilized. She was his.

In a few hours, the urgency would leave; she'd continue to percolate in warm sexual need throughout her pregnancy, one of nature's ways of keeping the female at the side of the mated male. She might leave him, but she'd be discontent and would repeatedly seek him out. Armand dipped his head, trailing his tongue slowly up her neck to her ear, and she shivered.

Food all but forgotten, he lowered her to her hands and knees on the mattress. She struggled a bit, not liking this position of extreme submission. He'd claimed her and

now wanted, needed, to put the seal on the claiming. His Belle didn't know she'd been marked for life as his. Of course, he was hers as well, but she might not care for that distinction. Armand needed this as much as he breathed. He'd waited for her for years and was desperate to once again be part of a mated pair. If he closed his eyes, he could almost remember...he could almost see the other one's face...

Armand leaned forward and pushed the hair off her back, loving the tumbling spill as it dropped forward over her shoulder. "I'll take you back here now, little Belle. And if you feel the need, you fuck me the same way."

His voice was harsh and raw with need. She groped on the mattress, coming up with the can of spray. It would hold his seed as well as lube his cock for the hard entry he was about to make. He was painfully hard, his cock pulsing, and as the spray went on, it chilled, causing him to hiss between his teeth.

Armand reached down, felt her pussy so wet and ready. He twisted, lowering himself to breathe her in, and confirmed that he'd indeed claimed her. He then buried his face in her wet slit, feeling the coarseness of her curls, the silk of her thighs. She was strong, powerful, and he groaned, that groan turning into a growl as she moved up and away. A gentle nip to her inner thigh brought her back down to his mouth.

He grasped her hips and began to nuzzle, his nose bumping her clit, his teeth pulling lightly at her petaled labia, and his eyes tracked her breasts as they swayed with her movement. She jerked with frustration, but he didn't want her to come, not yet. He wanted her hot, unable to think as he plundered her body. Her juices ran freely; they pooled forward around her clit, her needy, ignored little pearl. Armand moved away and returned to kneel behind her before reaching around to pull juices from her pussy to her ass and lubing up his finger to begin his invasion. As he teased her anus with his middle finger, she flinched.

"Ah, Belle, you've done this to others, but am I the first for you?"

She nodded, gasping.

"You are very Alpha, aren't you? Always wanting to dominate your companion. Press against me..."

She complied, catching her breath as his finger slid in slowly. She relaxed like a dream. "I've used...ahh...I've used plugs there..."

He stroked her back soothingly as she took over movement, gliding back on his finger. He withdrew and returned with another. When she took that well, he rewarded her by moving to her clit and pumping his fingers into her anus, he smiled as she groaned deeply into a shuddering climax.

"Very good, bébé. So good. Different, eh?"

She nodded, her face buried in the pillow.

He stroked more of her natural lube back, painting it between her buttocks. He then mounted her and thrust his cock forward, not penetrating, but getting himself good and wet.

"I'm taking you there, Belle. Then I'll take your pussy again. And maybe again after that." He was kissing her neck, whispering hot in her ear.

"And you will slide those long fingers of yours into my ass, because I need you to claim me as well. And we'll come together so hard, we'll burn right into the sky."

Then he'd have a surprise for her. One that happened rarely, but he felt it coming, throbbing urgently through his body, taking and pulling away the thin skin of his humanity.

Belle panted, need firing through her body, and she swore she was seeing in colors that were new and marvelous. Her skin tingled and hummed. Every time he dipped his cock, she tensed, waiting for that penetration that she had never before submitted to, but for some reason, she wanted it now. With him. If she moved or disobeyed, he growled, honest to God growled at her, bringing a new wave of arousal through her body.

"God, Armand... Do it!" She knew it sounded like a demand, which it was. She was still unprepared when he slapped her ass sharply and nipped her shoulder. He slapped once again, and there it was, pushing against her star, too large to possibly gain entrance. As she willed her body to relax, to submit, he slipped in, inches at a time, stretching and invading. A light flickered on in her head. She'd resisted, not giving her submission, but as soon as she had surrendered, the penetration had proceeded easily. As a dominant woman, she'd never made that connection before.

He filled her, not to the hilt—he was too long and she was too new at this—but he retreated, almost leaving her body and then surged forward again, slowly. She rocked back to meet him.

"Oh, Belle, it is so good. I want to take you hard...but not yet..." He hissed and groaned, obviously fighting for control.

More comfortable now, she tried to force him to increase the tempo, but he wouldn't.

"I want to do this to you again and yet again before we part, love. I want there to be no pain." She buried her head in the sheets, moaning in frustration. Every time he rocked forward, he moved into her more deeply, more completely, until she felt his heavy balls swinging forward, brushing her pussy, taking her arousal even higher. She pushed back harder, and as though he'd reached the breaking point, Armand grasped her waist, pulling her against his hips harder and faster. He pulled her hair, angling her head back, opening her throat to his view. He snarled and bit, barely missing her skin.

Belle arched her back; to her amazement, she felt him all the way through her vagina, compressing her G-spot, tugging on the root of her clit. She freed a hand and reached back to cup her mons, letting the additional pressure carry her over the top.

"That's it, Belle, touch yourself, make yourself come..."

She obeyed, and the sensation was unreal, her cunt grasping her fingers, her ass clenching his cock. She tried to scream but only succeeded in dragging out moan after moan.

Armand wouldn't allow her to stop. He continued to pound, and she wished she could see his face. She twisted; he was upright, face flushed and dark with his teeth clenched and veins cording in his neck. As she watched, he reached completion, thrusting into her hard and fast, a snarl on his face, his cry matching the force of his release. He froze, back arched, head thrown back, a deep groan ripping from his throat. And then he went loose, still thrusting, wrapping himself tightly around her body.

When he finished, he slipped out of her body, letting himself melt down and carry her to the mattress, where they lay together panting.

She wanted more. Her pussy was clenching and needy; her muscles were cramping with need. Armand slipped the condom off, tossing it carelessly away. They lay for a moment, catching their breath.

"Armand, do you really want me to...?" She lifted a brow.

He returned the expression and brought up the can. "Give me your hand." He quickly sprayed her fingers. The condom was cool and slippery on her skin. It would lube as well as protect him from any calluses or rough skin on her fingers.

She grinned wickedly. "I'm in charge?"

He nodded, giving her permission. "My only rule...when you make me come this way, I must be inside your body. Fair?"

"Fair. Very fair. And Armand...I'm very good at this." He rolled over onto his back, stretching.

"I was counting on that, love." He gasped as her mouth closed around his cock, pumping him to erection yet again.

Belle played there for a time, tongue teasing his cockhead. She swallowed him deeply and then let him go. She had skills, and Belle felt rather smug as she pleased him with those skills. She sprayed the condom onto his engorged cock, and he smiled wickedly. "Armand, are you ready to ride?"

He smiled and nodded, pulling her down for a kiss. "I am ready to be ridden." She nipped his chin and then covered him for a kiss, her tongue sliding into his mouth, stroking and tasting. He was clean and healthy. She liked that. Belle straddled his chest, allowing him to play with her breasts as she tasted his skin, catching his earlobe and worrying it. She moved down his body, finally his cock nudged her bottom as she licked and bit his nipples.

He hissed and was unable to restrain a snarl.

"Do I have to tie you up, wolf?"

He growled in response.

It was an empty threat; she had no restraints, and she didn't have the strength to hold him. "Stay still, and mind your manners." She stroked his other nipple with her tongue, following that with another sharp bite.

This time, his body flexed, but he remained quiet.

She moved to the side, lowering her head to the ugly scars on his abdomen. "What happened here?"

He lifted his head slightly, glancing down. "I have no memory of that." He threw his head back when her hot tongue trailed over the scar on his lower abdomen.

She shivered involuntarily; it was dangerously near an artery. This injury had come a hair from taking his life. Goose bumps spread over his skin. She left the scars and ran her tongue over his belly, circling his navel. "And why is the hair here so dark, while the hair on your head is silver?"

He grinned. "So many questions. Your animal must be feline."

She'd never considered that she might be a feline Were.

"Well, why?" She licked again, her pink tongue dipping into his black curls.

"I suppose that's the color my hair used to be. I don't know why it changed." He spoke gruffly, pushing his hips and straining against his self-imposed bonds. Scars and memory loss. Black hair changing to white. Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice would say.

She pulled his legs apart, drawing up his knees to expose his balls and perineum. She licked his sac, smiling as he writhed slightly. She wiggled her fingers, marveling at how the spray had coated them, yet she had full sensation. She probed gently at his perineum and allowed one finger only to slip in and tease him there. He gasped and clenched.

"So, are you a virgin here?" She stifled a smug grin. "Do you think you can take it, Armand?" He stifled a growl, just barely. She dropped and gave him a long, wet lick.

He gasped. "Yes!" When she glanced up, his cock was hard and straining, almost purple with need. At this rate, he wouldn't last. She made a circle with her thumb and forefinger and grasped him tight at the base until he nodded. She dipped her head as she squeezed, taking his cock into her mouth, amping up his torment. Damn, she wished she'd thought to bring a cock ring.

"I'm going to go in again, and remember, Armand, you can't come. If you need me to stop you, say so."

He nodded, suddenly looking apprehensive. She smiled when she turned away; he wasn't taking to submission well, but he was trying. She slid her index finger in again, slowly, getting him accustomed to the sensation. When she hit pay dirt, his hips flexed, his ass clenched on her finger, and his teeth ground together to suppress a moan. She felt his gland, and something else besides. Must be a Were thing. She slowly slid the finger out.

"Very good. You have very good control." She moved up and straddled him.

"Since you recover so quickly, I'm going to make you come, and the next time when I stroke you there, it'll last longer." He nodded, loosening his jaw and rolling his head. "It's not meant to be torture, Armand."

He gave her a grim smile. "The torture was in not coming, chère." She wasn't being a dominatrix, but she was making him play by her rules. Clearly, Armand found that chafing.

"Stay on your back. Keep your arms above your head, unless I tell you otherwise." He followed her instructions, and she lowered her face to his underarm, dragging her chin back to his chest, her hair trailing over sensitive skin. She rose, spread her nether lips, and made sure he was watching as she lowered, taking him in an inch at a time. She smiled as he struggled against the need to move, the instinct to flip her to drill into her body.

His breath was jerky, his blood pressure probably out the roof, yet Belle took her time. She rose and lowered herself, slowly, erotically.

"Do you want to come, Armand?"

"Yes."

"You can't. Not yet." She surged, her body undulating in long, sensual waves. She rode him that way for long minutes, until he panted with anxiety and need.

"Okay, Armand. When I say come, you come." He nodded, his body quaking and sweating. She was close too, in spite of her casual attitude.

"Armand, come. Come for me..."

He grasped her hips and pushed up, pistoning hard, determined to take her over the edge before coming himself. But it was too late, for as soon as she said the words, he was spilling, and she watched him, glorying in her power over his pleasure. She met him as he rose, leaning over to let her body cover his. As he came slowly to a stop, she urged him to roll, reversing their positions.

"You aren't satisfied, are you?"

"No." It came as a growl. It appeared that he'd been reduced to single syllables. Belle wrapped her legs around his hips, rocking, feeling his erection start again. She was surprised but smiled, shifting her hips to let him hilt himself. He rocked, raising slightly, watching her as she lay spread out beneath his body. Neither was dominant now; they were equals, making love. He urged her forward, pulling her hair out from under her body, spreading it over the pillows.

"You are so beautiful, Belle. I'm so very fortunate." They kissed deeply, tongues thrusting and tangling in imitation of the act, hot and wet. She wrapped her arms around him tightly. They fit so well. He shifted, his cock bumping that spot inside her, awakening her heat again. He smiled against the side of her face, baring his teeth as sweat bloomed over his skin. "Now, Belle, take me."

She nodded, her hand sliding down, searching for his opening. She played him there for a moment before sinking first one, then two fingers into him. He relaxed easily, opening for her naturally. Maybe he wasn't a virgin here after all.

"My kind are made for this, bébé. It's natural." To her surprise, she felt a bit of warmth and moisture, as though he was self-lubricating.

He was silky and tight, and she quickly found his gland. As his strokes against her G-spot grew more insistent, she curled her fingers, expertly massaging, shocking a groan and a curse from Armand. And then she found a gland secondary to the prostate. It was large and flat, extending out to the sides. He clenched around her fingers; the gland was hard and swollen.

"What's this?" She rubbed it gently, experimentally.

"Oh...fuck...oh God, Belle, don't stop that..." He thrust wildly, and she responded, her hips curling up into his. Her hand remained in place through instinct.

"I'm sorry, Belle... I should have told you... Don't be afraid when it happens..." His words were choked off as his orgasm blasted through his body. They wrapped around one another; she cried out in ecstasy, then in shock as he changed. No, not The Change, he didn't grow fur, but something else grew inside her body.

Armand continued to convulse, and she felt his seed flooding her...and yet she'd sprayed him, hadn't she? He was wearing a condom... His extended orgasm brought her once more to the edge, and she howled...howled as her back flexed, taking him deeper and deeper, and then he pounded into her in a rapid series of short, sharp thrusts. A sudden, screaming pressure slammed into her G-spot, bringing her to climax once again. She tried to thrust but couldn't draw back. She was locked in place. Tied.

Armand had ceased movement and was moaning softly, shuddering slightly. They were tied...they were fucking tied! He was a goner; every few moments, a weak groan told her he still lived. Belle wrapped her legs around him, getting comfortable, as she was stuck here for the duration. He'd swelled into a knot and had undoubtedly split the condom. Even more shocking, the muscles at her opening had clamped down, holding him tightly in place. The sensation felt like being held midclimax and was driving her mad. She began to pant, her belly heaving, her heart ready to burst from her chest.

After two or three minutes, Armand shuddered heavily and surged into her, causing a reaction deep inside her body. To her amazement, the pressure increased on her G-spot, and again, she flew into orgasm, warm and wonderful, deep, powerful contractions squeezing the seed from his cock. His cockhead pressed gently against her womb, bathing it in warm semen, soothing the heat and the fire that had been building there. She lay panting and tilted her head back. His eyes were slightly open. He was conscious and aware...the son of a bitch. As another orgasm rocked her, she lost her train of thought.

"How long...Armand?"

"Fifteen minutes...maybe more...don' know..." He shuddered and moaned. She came again. And again.

Eventually, the orgasms came at longer and longer intervals, until they finally stopped. Slowly, his knot reduced and his erection subsided, and she gratefully felt him slide from her body, bringing a wet rush of semen with her juices. Nature's little helper, ensuring the conception of the next generation. His weight collapsed onto her body, limp and wrung out.

"That was special."

Her wry comment drew a grin, but he was unable to respond. At most, he was able to slither off to her side, but only with her assistance. To his credit, he forced his eyes open. No falling asleep for this one! He cuddled against her body, and every fiber of Belle's being melted into the warm fuzzies.

"I'm sorry. I didn't expect it to be so extreme."

"So you knew this would happen?"

He gave a weak grin. "I suspected something like this could happen, if you anally penetrated me. In the old days, when there were many of us, a third partner usually mounted the breeding male, triggering the tie. Generally, an Alpha mounted the female. When he bred, his beta serviced him. While the couple was tied, the beta acted as guard, watching their backs."

"Breeding? Oh...let's not visit that just yet." Anxiety twisted deep in her gut.

"You were already pregnant. From the first night."

His hand feathered her hair away from her face gently. She lay looking at the ceiling. Water stains spread in abstract patterns.

She couldn't blame him on that one, since she'd had the condoms and hadn't used them. Well, it was good that the job paid well. Her parents would be thrilled. A little grin tugged at her mouth.

"So in the old days, it took three to do this. Wouldn't a dildo have worked just as well?"

"Obviously, it would have. It just wouldn't be as fun, would it?" She looked at him in surprise. "Also, a tied couple is very vulnerable to attack. The second male triggers the tie, then acts as guardian to the tied couple. Later, he continues as guardian to the offspring of the mating. A second father. If he was mated, his female was second mother."

"And you, as a very dominant wolf, wouldn't have problems with another male mounting you?" He shrugged, not answering the question. His frown spoke volumes; her question had disturbed him deeply. Had he done this before?

"It doesn't take a tie to breed. I expect the tie is a primitive holdover that evolution hasn't yet eliminated."

Belle moved closer, looping his arm around her neck. "So, if I understand what just happened, you had a twenty-minute orgasm."

He nodded. "Every time I built, it triggered you to come and your orgasm triggered me to ejaculate. As soon as ejaculation completed, the cycle began again."

"Cool."

"So you weren't offended? Disgusted?"

She looked at him in amazement. "Are you kidding? I was just wondering when we could do it again!"

This time when he shuddered, it wasn't with orgasm. By the time she finished laughing, he'd slipped away, deeply asleep.

Chapter Four

The exam room was like exam rooms everywhere, at least those that dealt with humanoid life forms. Belle lay back, listening to the crackle of tissue under her back, looking up at the bland white ceiling as the doctor reviewed her blood work. A human doctor... She'd really come up in the world to have ICE assign a doctor rather than a droid.

"Well, Marshal Oakley, as we suspected, the Matruscan hormone triggered your own hormones pretty much into overdrive. In turn, that activated the dormant Were breeding cycle. It must have been hellish, going through it for the first time as an adult."

Belle sighed heavily. Once she'd found the appropriate partner, it had been anything but bad.

The doctor moved to another page. "It looks like the alien hormones have been completely metabolized. Your estrus cycle peaked a few days ago, with a successful conception." She looked up with a small smile. "Congratulations."

Belle didn't respond. The doctor was up, busily preparing for the pelvic exam. "The sex of the baby hasn't developed yet, but by the time you're in for the next exam, we can tell you that as well, if you wish. Relax...a little pressure..." The exam was over quickly, and the tiny doctor assisted Belle to an upright position.

"So what are your plans, Belle?"

Ah, less formal now. Dr. Howe held a carefully neutral expression. Her primary job involved surgical duties and life-threatening injuries, not acting as an ob-gyn. Belle smelled her tightly repressed emotions. In fact, she was smelling a lot of things lately. Must be a side effect of her pregnancy.

"I was thinking I'd work a few more jobs, maybe till halfway. I've got vacation coming. I haven't thought much past that. Maybe take a leave of absence for the first year."

She hid a smile as Dr. Howe's pretty face relaxed. The doctor had expected her to terminate the pregnancy.

"Can I continue to come to you? For the baby?"

Dr. Howe settled on a stool near the counter, logging the results of the exam.

"Actually, Belle, I'd like that. Given your unusual physiology, it might be a good idea. We're a little more prepared to deal with any complications that might come up. Is the father human?"

"No, Were. And he says he's not EurLu, so it might be even more complicated." Belle hopped off the table and began to gather her clothes. She stepped behind a changing screen.

"Can you bring him in? It would be good if we could get a better idea what to expect. There aren't many Were species anymore. Most have been driven to extinction in the clearances."

Belle bit her lip. Could she even find him? After their last day together, he'd melted from her life. But he'd also said that if she needed him, he'd know. He'd told her to contact him through the bartender. Not a particularly high-tech method of communication.

"I'm heading out on a job this afternoon, doc. It shouldn't take long." She sat and pulled her high boots up under her long skirts. God, she'd have to get maternity clothes. Belle thought briefly of Penny; they'd have shopped together, laughing at the idea of the great Cowgirl Oakley trying to strap her weapons over a pregnant belly. She suddenly felt very alone. She stood for a moment, hand pressed over her eyes.

When she stepped out, Dr. Howe hovered over her comp screen.

"I'm forwarding a new menu to the dining hall computer; it'll customize the food on the *Starr* as well. You'll need extra proteins; the Were usually require a diet higher in proteins and fats. We'll also increase your calcium and folic acid." Belle perched at the edge of the exam table and looked over at the doctor.

"Are you going to be all right, Belle?" She didn't answer for a long moment. Of course she'd be all right; she always was. If she wasn't, she'd go home. Her parents would gladly help with the baby. *Worried? Moi?*

"I'm worried about the genetic engineering. They had to stunt my growth when I was in puberty." She met the doctor's concerned eyes. "I'm worried about the strains of Were in me. I don't know what they used to boost my height. And I don't know if I'm EurLu or feline... Hell, I might even be giraffe!"

The doctor chuckled but continued to listen.

"The father is wolf, but nothing I've ever heard of. He's tall, really, really tall. He said his pack is from the Americas."

"AmWere. It sounds like they aren't as extinct as the Earth government led us to believe."

Belle swung a booted foot, idly bumping it against the padded cabinet. "I've thought about having a child but didn't ever think I could. Or should, for that matter. In all honesty, I don't have a very good support system here." For that matter, she didn't know what exactly she'd bred.

"You know the ICE will take care of you, Belle. We all will. Roane... Well, Roane believes this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't gone on the last mission, so she's willing to commit to anything you might need."

Belle slumped a bit and then took a deep breath. She pushed her hair off her face and straightened abruptly.

"I was thinking about going shopping, for baby things, for clothes... I don't have anyone to go with. No girlfriends, you know. Not since Penny." She gave a weak smile. "Do you think the stores will mind me bringing Tucker into the dressing rooms?" She laughed, tears precariously near the edge of humor. Tucker was sprawled at the door to the exam room, panting gently.

"Belle, nobody is going to stop that wolf from going anywhere he wants. Not even you." The medical teams had long since given up on barring the animal from the exam rooms. "And I think you'll be surprised at how many friends you really have. Babies don't come often to our world. I, for one, am thrilled, and I'd love to go shopping with you. I don't do it often enough anyway." She cast a rueful glance at her own dated outfit.

Belle slid off the table. Tucker was immediately on his feet, knowing the exam had concluded. As always, he was a silent presence on her left. Her hand trailed in his fur, and the soft ruff of his neck comforted her.

"Maybe you should go home, Belle. Be close to your family."

She turned and leaned her hip against the door frame. "I might just do that. After this job." Her face softened into a smile. "Thanks, Doc. You've been grand."

Howe snorted gently. "Thank you, Belle. I'm delighted to be part of this!" She turned and picked up her comp pad. "And if your parents have any medical information..."

"I'll send it on ASAP. We've never really talked about the actual procedures that developed us. They weren't willing participants, you know."

The doctor flushed slightly. "For your sake and the baby's, you need to talk about it. Soon."

Belle idly rapped her knuckles on the door frame. She looked down and nodded. "It's just a short side trip to their home. I'll take a couple days on my way to the next job." She flashed the doctor a smile, a real smile, and she was gone.

* * * * *

From his vantage point on the upper reaches of the Quay, Armand had a perfect view of the dry docks. Odd phrase, given that the ships berthed there would never see

water. He sighed heavily, watching as Belle busied herself both inside and outside of the ship.

He needed to go to her, to beg her not to leave him behind. But the decision wasn't really his, was it? For years now, Armand had been without the freedom to make his own choices. He was just as deeply enslaved now as he'd been long ago. He frowned, chasing the memory, but like the others, it offered only a glimpse and then slipped away.

He rested his chin on the rail, watching as she paused, looking around, probably for the wolf. The damned wolf again! How could she be so attached to the creature? He glanced around, looking for the wolf but not seeing it. But he caught its scent. In honesty, her love for the animal was part of her lure for him.

Armand caught another scent. This one floated on the air, teasingly familiar. Not a new smell, the man who'd made it was long gone, but it caught Armand's attention. This one wasn't like Quantrell, the competition. This wild fragrance triggered another feeling in his gut, a good feeling.

Armand rose to his feet, all thoughts fleeing but the need to follow the trail.

He glanced down at the berth. Belle was no longer in sight, but she was still there. He felt her waiting.

* * * * *

"So, Tuck, how are we going to explain this to the parentals? My job can be dangerous, but pregnancy isn't usually the primary hazard." Belle had engaged the autopilot and lounged in the pilot's chair, feet propped on the empty navigator's seat. She flexed her ankles, looking studiously at the soft leather of her knee-high boots. "You think I can set up a nursery on board? Maybe have a little play area in the galley? I think there's room, don't you?" Tucker lay on his side, eyes open, ear twitching to the direction of her voice. "Or I can get a nanny to stay back at the Quay for when I'm working. Maybe even stay based out of Modan, leave the baby with Mom and Daddy." She could cut back her work schedule. The pay was good, and she had a healthy bank account. Very healthy. She could retire, if she wished. But what then?

She leaned back, mulling the next job around in her head. The Interstellar Coalition was up to something ugly, as usual. Not as ugly as Earth Gov was capable of, but there was something up. Of course, Enforcement was out here doing their dirty work. Belle wondered how dirty her own hands were. When she got back, she was going to keep track of this pickup. She'd follow the trail of the two Matruscan females as well. Maybe follow up on some of her other runners, see what had become of them. There was a pattern developing; she was picking up an awful lot of young people, usually the sons and daughters of old, powerful houses. It reeked of corruption. Someone was looking to the future.

Belle rubbed absently at one of the marks Armand had left, this one on her collarbone. The others had healed and faded. This mark lingered, a livid reminder of

their days together. Just remembering... She shifted, squeezed her thighs together. The raging need had faded quickly, but now a simmering arousal had taken its place. A steady unease. Armand's face was always just at the back of her vision; his smell was always floating in the air, as though it were rising from her own body. She stretched and moaned. Cupped a soft breast, deriving a small amount of comfort as she did so.

"I wish I weren't doing this alone, Tucker." He rolled, lying on his belly, chin between his front paws, his gaze soulful. "It isn't right, is it? When I'm sick, he should be there holding my hair back. He should be around to see my belly grow. Listen to me scream in labor." She grinned at her reflection in a porthole. Tears again. Hell, twice in one day.

"Lord, is this a boring trip or what?" Tucker's eyes blinked once, twice, before settling closed again. She wiped her eyes. Weariness swept over her. She'd expected the fatigue but was surprised it was hitting already. Belle crossed her ankles, folded her arms behind her head, and dozed off.

* * * * *

He recognized it as a dream, a good one. A dream of past times, old times that would never be equaled. Genetic memory, perhaps? Or was it a long-ago time in Armand's own life, so far back that he didn't remember? He rolled and sighed, letting the emotions roll over his body, his mind. In sleep, there were answers. In sleep, he found peace.

He panted hard, his head resting on the soft pillow of her breasts; her hands clasped him tightly, the aftershocks of her orgasm grasping him. His cock was still hard and eager, though he'd only just spilled his seed into her fertile body. He pushed up, his long black hair mingling with hers, the colors almost indistinguishable.

He gazed down at a face that was dear to him above all others, the mate who completed him, the woman who would be the mother of his children. Smiling, she pulled a long strand of his hair from her lips. The smile became a laugh, and soon, he joined in. They'd meant to go home, to mate in the privacy of their own space, but the urgency had overcome them, the need to couple too great to deny.

Above them, the sun crossed the zenith of noon, and birds hopped from tree to tree. Pine needles made a soft cushion for their bodies. Pack members might be nearby, but they'd give the mating couple a wide berth. It was only polite.

He leaned forward, letting the wolf move into his eyes briefly, scenting the air. It was nearly impossible to stay on guard during sex, especially during the fertile times. They'd

been trying for a baby for several cycles, to no avail. Maybe it was immaturity or malnutrition. Maybe it was the fate of their kind, to die out slowly. He didn't know and didn't care while he lay in her arms, wrapped in her love.

A break in the wind and a rustle of leaves alerted him to company. He rolled to his side, his cock sliding from her body. He scanned the forest until he saw the figure in the shadows. The figure faded back, but he knew it was Thorn Greywolf, watching his back. An imperceptible tension left his body, allowing him to relax just a bit more. He looked back into his mate's dark, dark eyes and met the smile there.

Armand could believe she was the personification of some fairy-tale princess, her wavy hair black as night, her dark blue eyes were unusual in their kind, bright, large, and wide, sparkling with laughter. Her skin was fine and fair, betraying her EurLu ancestry, her lips red as the reddest rose. Snow White...that was the one he thought of.

He loved her curvy body; though not petite, she came only to his chest. Her breasts were large and luscious; her tiny waist led into womanly hips. Someday she'd be plump as her mother had been, and thinking of that, he loved her more.

Armand lowered himself and kissed the tips of her nipples; Thorn's watchful eyes burned the back of his neck. Her hand lowered to his head, fingers running through the ebony waves of his hair.

"Did you ask him?"

Armand grinned around the nipple that he clasped in his teeth. He looked up and met her eyes. "'Course I asked him, chère. Just wanted to make sure you're good with it."

She laid her head back, hand still resting on his head as he worried at her breast. "I'm good with it, Armand. No one I'd trust more."

He raised himself on straightened arms, looking deep into her eyes, making certain of her answer.

"You love him, don't you?"

Armand grinned wolfishly, the animal once more in his eyes. "Sure I do, but not enough to let him touch my woman!" He ducked and nipped the soft skin on her neck. "He'll touch me, 'cause that's the way it's done. 'Cause he's my second, and I'm his."

His cock was hard again, straining and ready when he beckoned to Thorn.

Thorn approached them silently, ever watchful, ever cautious. His tongue flicked out to moisten his lips; that was the only betrayal of his nerves. His eyes met Armand's, and Thorn quickly slipped out of his ragged jeans and shirt. His feet were bare. His last pair of shoes had long ago fallen away, and he'd never bothered to replace them.

Thorn's tall body was well muscled, like whipcord. He was young, and like many of their young betas, undernourished. His hair was black, straight, and sleek with a high sheen, almost blue in the sun. His charcoal gray, hooded eyes dominated a face so still it almost appeared to be carved from wood. Gold radiated through the dark irises of his eyes and glowed brighter than usual. Armand glanced at his groin; Thorn's cock was now semihard but imposing. He swallowed down his nerves.

Armand turned to his mate, hands roaming, lips following, aware that Thorn's eyes followed his every move. The presence of the other man heightened the sexual tension. They were a naturally sexual species, reveling in their bodies, in the sharing of pleasure. Mated pairs were generally monogamous but often allowed others into their lovemaking. This was different. They were breeding, and Thorn was going to assist with a long-abandoned ritual. The very idea of the act had Armand's heart racing and blood pulsing into his balls, and unbearable tension gripped his chest.

"Ready?" he murmured into her ear. She nodded wordlessly. Armand reached down, feeling her body. She was hot; the warm juices of her body had begun to flow, carrying his spent seed from her channel. He played there for a time, teasing, pulling gasps from her as his fingers sought out her clit and then ran back to tickle her anus.

He glanced back at his friend. Thorn hadn't moved, his hot eyes following the movement of Armand's hand. Thorn's cock was hard and distended; a pearly drop glistened at the tip, shimmering slightly before it broke away and trickled down his ruddy glans. His dark skin flushed deeply, though his face was still inscrutable. Armand could hear his heartbeat, smell the musk of his arousal. He was hard and ready and hadn't even touched himself.

"Ready?" Thorn's voice sounded thick. Armand nodded, and Thorn turned away and leaned down to pick up his pants,

fishing a tube of lubricant from his pocket. When he turned back to the waiting couple, Armand saw a flash of Thorn's wolf burning in his eyes; his canines distended and then receded. Armand grinned at his friend's slip. He watched openly as Thorn lubed his cock.

When he turned away, she was watching as well, slightly alarmed but very aroused. Armand groaned, the sound moving to a soft growl as he forced her back, parting her thighs with his knees. With little preamble, they joined, her hips moving to his, pulling his cock into her body in one smooth movement. He felt Thorn moving behind them, his skin hot, the fragrance of his arousal mixed with theirs.

Armand came to a stop as Thorn's hand settled on his hip. From there, his hand dropped to the point where the couple joined. Armand's cock jerked within his grasp. Thorn urged Armand to his knees and again let his fingers explore the slick juices of her body, the velvet of Armand's balls. Quickly, Thorn ran lube around Armand's anus, moving it inside with the tip of his finger.

Armand twisted in time to meet Thorn's grim smile. He forced himself to relax as the other man pushed into his body. Deliberately, Armand controlled the penetration, allowing Thorn to enter just a tiny bit at a time. They'd discussed this, deciding the best way for Armand to accept Thorn's invasion of his body. Of the two, his was the more dominant nature. He was on his knees, but upright in a posture of equality, rather than submission.

Thorn shuddered as the tight clasp of muscle gripped his cock. He rocked in a bit, and then a bit more, until his cockhead settled snugly over Armand's prostate. Armand contracted a bit, and he gasped when Thorn finally located the Master Gland. Without words, Armand settled back into the rhythm of his movement, holding Thorn tight within his clasp as he plunged into his mate.

She was close, looking from one man to the other as Thorn entered Armand. They moved slowly, gradually, aware that they were all on the precipice, teetering on the edge of something huge and magnificent. All Thorn's self-possession fled, and his head dropped to rest on Armand's shoulder as an agonized moan left him. One hand clasped his friend's hip, and the other looped around his torso in an intimate embrace. Armand's eyes burned with tears. His hand left his mate's hip as he reached

back to embrace Thorn, stroking his thigh. When she reached up to clasp Armand, she stroked Thorn as well. She knew the rules; she and Thorn were not to touch. But they did, and her fingers slid through his hair as his softly brushed her lips.

Armand struggled in a web of pleasure and pain, driving into his mate and then back onto Thorn's shaft. He was sweating and shaking. From behind, Thorn wrapped his arms around Armand tightly, landing light bites on his shoulder in a threat of dominance. Armand shook as Thorn began to drive harder into his tender passage. White-hot sensation drove up his spine, his balls grew hard and tight, and his cock grew harder and then harder still.

Beneath Armand, his mate was coming. He needed to claim her, plant his seed deeply into her womb, so he drove into her wildly, his climax clasp and grasping, exploding into her even as her hot channel gripped his cock. His ass bore down on his friend's cock, crushing him tight to the prostate, to the Master Gland, triggering a flood of hormones into Armand's body. Behind him, Thorn cried out hoarsely, his face buried in Armand's shoulder as he came, spilling hot seed into his ass.

Pressure built in Armand, and his cock began to burn and ache even as his seed jetted into her body. He thrust sharply, wedging himself into her passage as the knot began to swell, causing him to cry out in ecstatic pain. The muscles of her passage convulsed on him, clasp the base of his cock, locking it in place. Armand cried out again, his body shaking, his seed flooding her body, locked against her womb by the tie.

Thorn drew away. He slipped back into his clothing and melted into the trees to guard the downed couple from intruders and curious eyes.

Minutes passed; except for the soft cries of his mate, the forest had returned to its natural state. Slowly, the shuddering orgasms ceased, and they slipped apart, exhausted and shaken. She cuddled into his side, and with weakened arms, Armand gathered her close. Armand scented the air and detected only Thorn's faint presence. Comforted, he melted back into his mate's embrace, letting the exhaustion take him away.

* * * * *

Armand's eyes drifted open; though he wasn't in the forest, the lingering fragrance of the mountains tickled his nose. He could still feel the sensations of that first

tie; the emotions still had the power to choke him. Clearly, he saw Thorn's stark profile as he settled on top of a large boulder, keeping watch. He felt her soft weight, smelled her sweet fragrance.

But he couldn't remember her name. He remembered her smell, her face, the timbre of her voice. But not her name.

Armand drew a deep, painful breath and released it. Instead of his long-ago mate, he pictured the mate he'd claimed so recently. Belle. Tall and strong, vital. Never passive. She'd possessed him as completely as he'd possessed her. She'd never met her animal, but nevertheless, the animal ruled her. He could sense it so near the surface.

The love of his past met and collided with his current love. Belle was fire, never ice. She was a woman in flowing dresses, taller than most men, but defiant in her femininity. Flowered dresses and leather boots. Perfume and pistols.

In the darkness, with soft cotton sheets cushioning his rest, Armand smiled. He'd never forget his Belle. She was a force of nature.

Chapter Five

"They started with EurLu. On your grandparents." Belle took the wet glass from her mother's hand, quickly running a towel over it. Out the window over the sink, she could see the neat yard. It was all so ordinary, so normal. She set the last glass in the cupboard and turned away, following her mother into the other room.

Sharon Oakley was taller than her daughter by a scant half inch and still had the appearance of a thirty-year-old. Like her husband and her daughter, she'd live well into her hundreds, retaining her youthful appearance. One of the perks of being a guinea pig.

Simon Oakley strode into the room, his wavy red hair wet from his shower, a sheepish grin on his face. Life was growing good again for Belle's parents. They'd managed to outlast the scandal, returning to their careers, teaching and coaching now rather than competing. At seven feet two, Simon towered over his wife and daughter by nearly a foot.

"Belle's doctor wants to know more about the experiments," Sharon said.

His face fell at her words, but he nodded, understanding. "If you'd known more in the first place, maybe they wouldn't have exposed you to the Matruscans." He draped his arm casually around his wife's shoulders. They were still going strong, still madly in love. "We'd have tried for another baby, but the doctors here just don't have the expertise..."

Belle smiled sadly. She'd have grown near seven feet herself if the doctors hadn't stunted her growth early.

"Well, they didn't bring much else into our generation, although there were quite a few of us in the program. Mostly they tinkered with the genetics we were born with. But you and Wyatt..." He paused, clearly uncomfortable. "I don't know this for sure, but there were rumors that they'd located a pack of Were that were native to North

America. Wolves. They were bigger than the EurLu, stronger and longer-lived." An uncomfortable look of guilt settled over his face, and he glanced down at the wolf lying peacefully at his daughter's feet. "They said they harvested them."

Tucker opened one eye and then lazily dropped it closed. Goose bumps rose on Belle's arms.

"Weres are intelligent, sentient beings... They have the same rights as humans."

Her mother snorted. "That didn't stop hunters from driving the EurLu off the planet. The AmWere group was smart. They scattered before the researchers could gather too many of them. They were full shifters; no doubt they merged into the wolf packs up north around the Canadian border. I would guess they followed the EurLu off Earth." Sharon and Simon led the way into the living room, followed by Belle and Tucker. "There were other types of animals as well; that's the main difference between them and the EurLu. Before the clearances, there were various feline, as well as coyote, groups. There may have been others."

Belle leaned back into the deep cushions of the sofa, stretching out her long legs. The house itself wasn't that large, but they'd furnished it with simple, oversize pieces. The built-ins suited their impressive height. Belle studied the pointed toe of her boot. She was wearing the old western style that her father loved so much.

Her mother tweaked her hair. "I like it long like this."

She smiled into her mother's eyes and then leaned over, resting her head on her shoulder.

"Why don't you tell us about the baby, about its father?" Sharon asked.

Belle laughed a bit. She'd already told them about the sudden onset of the Were-type breeding heat. "Well, he said he's a Were, from North America. He's probably pretty old, as far as time goes, 'cause he has a Cajun accent." She listened to their murmured surprise. If he was an AmWere, he was a rarity: a shape-shifter.

"He's tall, not as tall as Daddy, but pretty high up there. Silver hair, blue eyes. His manners are quaint, really old-fashioned. He's got a sweet sense of humor. Real easygoing, but he's definitely an Alpha type." Belle sat up, leaning back into the cushions. "He's got memory loss. He doesn't remember how he got off planet. He's got some ugly scars, doesn't know where they came from. Not good daddy material, I'm afraid."

Simon tousled her hair. "Well, the little one has a wonderful momma, and Grandma and Grandpa are here."

She grinned a bit sheepishly. "I was hoping we could stick around here a bit. The ICE owes me a good chunk of vacation time, plus Roane's giving me maternity leave. She says I can take as much time as I need."

"If you hadn't asked, we'd have come and taken you, darlin'. You need your family."

"We can add on a room..."

"No, Momma!" Belle laughed. "I'm a big girl; I'll get my own place, someplace where Tucker can get out to the forests if he wants to run. You two need your space, and I'll be happy to live in a real house again." She hesitated. "I'll have the *Starr* with me as well. It'll stay at a docking port, but it's somewhere for me to stay till I'm set."

"You're gonna stay with ICE?" Her father was looking suddenly serious. "Can you do something else with them? More administrative, maybe?"

"Maybe you can take on a partner again, like Penny?"

God bless 'em. They'd been in her position, suddenly thrust out of their comfort zone, forced into a world that was strange and hostile.

"I'll talk to the boss again, but I think they'll let me be based here most of the time. I'll have to go in to HQ to deliver prisoners." She turned to face Sharon. "And, Momma, the jobs they give teams are always lots more dangerous. Penny and I landed them 'cause we were partners. I'm not gonna lie to you guys; my job can be dangerous, but you've got to remember I'm smart. Penny died from something completely unexpected, so I've learned to always expect something bad. Daddy, your job at the factory was probably more dangerous than mine. And I bet you two saw lots more casualties in pro sports than I'll see in my life as a hunter-tracker."

Sharon clasped her hands, eyes downcast, and Simon nodded slowly. They didn't like it, but they accepted it.

"So, Ma, you think the baby stores around here will mind if Tuck comes in? I'm thinking we need to do some shopping."

Her mother's eyes lit up, and Simon rolled his in mock dismay.

"Hey, Tucker, you might want to stay here. We men have to stick together. I've got a project going out in the shed. You might want to hang with me." Simon rose to his great height, moving gracefully from the room. To Belle's surprise, Tucker rose and followed, turning and glancing slowly over his shoulder.

"Belle, I think that dog just winked at you!"

"He's not a dog, Mom; he's a wolf." She laughed anyway. The lazy lowering of his silvery blue eye had looked a bit sly. Belle grabbed her pack and waited at the door for her mother. She hadn't been shopping in ages and was anxious to get started.

Work would wait.

Chapter Six

She started in the obvious spot. Home sweet home, the planet Selene. Being female, pregnant, and partly Were, Belle hoped that she could move among the EurLu easily. Wrong. She obviously stank of human enough to draw attention.

She visited her quarry's family home only to have the door slammed in her face. At his place of employment, she found herself escorted forcefully out the door. Known associates? He seemed to have none, at least according to the alleged associates in his file.

Belle finally resorted to a back-alley transaction with an information broker, who just happened to know her target and just happened to know his whereabouts. For a price. Convenient, especially since the snitch had been hovering in her proximity all day, as though eager to sell her some intel. She didn't make a habit of using information brokers but figured it was worth a try.

After less than a day on planet, Belle had hiked up her skirts and gotten herself out of there. From the time she had landed on the green, lush planet, to the time she boarded her cruiser, she and Tucker had been tailed. Only her enhanced senses and speed had kept her out of trouble this time. That, and for some reason, the EurLu were oddly uncomfortable with Tucker. She felt rather insulted, especially given her new knowledge of her genetics and her past associations with the EurLu. They'd always loved her before. She wondered if they harbored some bigotry against the AmWere. No doubt that's how she smelled to them, with Armand's baby growing inside her body.

Her target was a popular young man, the only son of a prominent family. Youthful misbehavior aside, he was undoubtedly set upon a high-profile career in politics on Selene. Same ol' same ol'. Young, up-and-coming leaders.

Something smelled, and this time, it wasn't Belle.

* * * * *

When bad times hit the pack, they hit hard. Armand remembered the early days when they first realized that they were the hunted. The prey. Silent men with eyes as cold as the winter sky stalked them methodically. At first, a child went missing. Then an elder. The weakest and the old. They'd grown cautious, quiet, abandoning their homes, moving up to high ground in the Rockies. Smaller packs began to arrive, silently pleading with desperate eyes for sanctuary. A Were panther trio from Tennessee, a sloe-eyed coyote from New Mexico. They lived rough, sheltered in tents and then, in desperation, caves. Still, the hunters came, covertly at first, and then openly, remorselessly. The pack traveled hard, finally fleeing, taking wolf form, blending with the naturals. But for some, that life was impossible.

Nanette...her name had been Nanette. She'd given him children, twins the first time, a son and a daughter, both with ebony hair and dark blue-gold eyes. The twins were incorrigible from the start. They learned to shift early, and he and Nan had to continually chase down the jet-black pups and bring them back in.

Armand was certain that some of Thorn's essence had manifested in his second son. Black haired, with charcoal gray, gold-shot eyes, he was clearly Armand's blood, but his essence was that of his guardian. The boy had Thorn's impassive mien, disguising a true heart and kind nature. As they had grown, all three pups had gravitated to their guardian, who remained unmated. There were simply no women, and after years on the run, the opportunities were rare.

With a nod of approval from their father, the three would shift and melt into the shadows, learning from the quiet warrior. It wasn't unusual for Thorn to gather up a dozen or more youths at a time and head into the deep woods to teach them how to travel silently and without leaving a trail.

These skills served them well. Thorn's students didn't leave a track, not a broken twig for the hunters to follow. Even the tiniest cub learned his lessons well, and those lessons spared them more than once. The children called him Papa; the orphans leaned on him hard for security. His rapport with the children was heartbreaking and pure, leading Armand to wonder what unspoken tragedies had fallen upon his friend in the years of the clearances.

Armand taught them to hunt and fish, to find food and water in impossible places. He taught them to think, to use their minds as weapons. Both men taught the little ones how to stay warm in the icy evenings and how to scent the air for prey or hunters. Skills that had been easily forgotten in the peaceful times.

When the break in the pack came, it was sudden, unexpected. Horrific.

The pack gathered for a rare fireside meeting. Their Alpha, Stuart, was massive. He'd led the pack for decades, with his beta, Patrick, enforcing his decisions. For months, Armand had watched cautiously as the continued hunt ate away at Stuart's soul.

That night, the Alpha paced in front of the risky fire, its light casting ominous shadows on his face.

"We have to split the pack. Our weakest are growing slower by the day. It's time to think of the future. Of the survival of the pack." His face was harsh, uncompromising. "The strongest will shift to wolf. We will run north and west, eventually to the Alaskan wilderness where we will live in peace."

And the others? The question was heavy in the air, though no one had the courage to ask.

"The pregnant, the very young and old, those who cannot sustain a shift will make for Montana, and eventually to Canada. The survivors can take shelter in the Badlands."

Armand's gut clenched, and he looked at his mate. She was carrying again. Her dark eyes settled on his, a plea to him. His children were striplings, strong and healthy. They would be part of the group that ran. He looked at the resigned faces of the elders, the pregnant females. The EurLu crosses who could only hold form for a limited time. Armand glanced around the clearing at the faces of his pack, his brothers and sisters, and looked for someone to stand against this heartless plan. Nobody stepped forward.

"So it is decided. This night, Patrick will choose those who will run to the north. The rest will continue to the head of the Rockies, and eventually, Montana. We will do our best to draw the hunters with us."

"No." Armand rose, feeling his muscles quiver in anticipation. He kept his eyes averted so as not to issue challenge. "The men who hunt us are not proper humans. What

they did to our brothers and sisters was terrible. They might do the same to those who are left behind." There was a restless shift in the group. "I've heard things... We all have. They experiment on people like us. The government is creating hybrids, monstrosities. We cannot abandon our families, Stuart."

A low growl broke from the Alpha's throat. "Then, Armand, you will stay behind with the weak ones. They will benefit from your protection." Stuart's beta rose to stand next to the Alpha in a show of strength. These past years, Stuart had learned to rule using Patrick's heavy hand. Behind his shoulder, Armand felt the silent presence of Thorn.

The tension mounted in the clearing as mates eyed their mates and friends shifted uneasily. Armand could sense that panic was settling heavy on the weary group, battle lines forming. Stuart's second was a brawny man, heavily muscled and vicious. He was feared by all and loved by none, save his mate. Hell, maybe not even her. She was heavy with his child. He would abandon his mate and unborn.

Thorn's growl drifted softly onto the air, answering Patrick's aggression.

"The pack is only as strong as the weakest member, Armand. They slow us."

"As a pack, a family, it is our imperative to protect our weaker members. That is where our strength lies." Armand slowly raised his eyes, finally meeting Stuart's fully. Fear raced up his spine, but still he spoke.

"Our children run naked and hungry. Our elders walk barefoot on their human feet. Our pregnant mates suffer from lack of food. If we must carry them, we must. But we cannot leave them behind to save ourselves. If we lose our elders, we lose our memories. If we leave our children, we leave our future. Without our mates, we have no hearts. Do not do this, Stuart." His voice was soft but determined.

Armand could smell his own fear. Though he stood taller than the Alpha, he was a young man, greatly outclassed. He was undernourished, his stamina down. Thorn could probably hold his own with either man. He was faster; the finest warriors had raised and trained him. Armand could not hope to win this challenge. He simply lacked the experience. His advantage would be strategy. He had to plan his fight.

Nan was in his line of sight, but he dared not look in her direction. His sons were on their feet, backing out of the range of the battle, making their way to either side of their mother. His daughter was behind him, to the left, standing with him in a silent show of strength. The entire pack began a slow shift, giving way to the challenge. He felt the powerful presence of the pack behind him and Thorn, sending him strength. His skin prickled with the implication of that flow of power.

There was the crack of a twig, a breath of wind, and the betas engaged. Thorn and Patrick collided head-to-head in human form, hitting the ground in a flurry of limbs and dirt and growls. Stuart and Armand glared at one another, looking away only to monitor the fight. If Patrick prevailed, Armand would be forced to back down or take a chance with Patrick. If Thorn prevailed, Armand would step up against Stuart.

In a flash, the men had shifted, coats bristling, long teeth bared. Patrick's wolf was massive, broad-shouldered and muscled, his fur the color of autumn leaves and amber eyes alive with blood lust. Thorn was jet-black, lean, and angular. He could run faster, longer than most in the pack. He could disappear like the wind in the forest. While the red wolf outweighed him, Thorn was agile and swift, and when his jaws locked onto Patrick's throat, he showed no mercy.

Patrick's mate didn't cry out in anguish as he fell. She stood and turned away, head lowered in shame. Nanette stepped up to the new widow, her arms surrounding her with comfort. Others joined them. Pack took care of their own.

Thorn turned slowly, blood on his face, dripping from his foaming jaws, his shredded clothing hanging from his lithe, powerful body. He didn't shift but returned to Armand's side. Stuart continued to stare at his challenger.

"Take your family and your beta. Take those who will follow, Armand. Leave us."

"I will not accept exile, Stuart. Either we stay together as a pack or we fight." Next to him, Thorn was still panting, mostly unscathed from his fight. Armand wouldn't be so lucky.

Stuart dropped to all fours, rippling into wolf form, his coat sable and lustrous. Like Patrick, Stuart hadn't suffered from starvation. He'd never forgone rations; as the Alpha, he needed his strength to protect his pack. Armand growled at the hypocrisy.

Armand snapped into his shift, leaping over the head and body of the charging wolf. He wasn't jet-black like Thorn; his black coat was silver tipped, his eyes were glacial blue. Stuart charged again, and once again, Armand fainted. His lighter body moved quickly, and Armand knew he'd need all the speed and stealth he was capable of. If Stuart engaged him in battle, the Alpha's monstrous jaws would take his life in the blink of an eye.

Armand lowered to the ground, slinking, melding into the shadows, using every bit of stealth he'd learned from Thorn and the true wolves. Unlike Stuart, he'd grown up mostly wild, in the outdoors, weaving among the swamps and bogs of Louisiana. He'd grown smart and savvy, learning to pick and choose his fights. He'd learned to take the advantage where he found it. He used the shadows and the rocks, gliding in and out of their shelter, confusing the eyes of the furious Alpha.

When Stuart broke and charged, Armand was ready, timing his attack for that split second when the Alpha was in the air, soft belly open and unprotected. Armand launched and slashed. A fountain of blood and gore rained down on his head. He rolled away, offset by Stuart's momentum. Turning quickly, he charged again, knowing the wound was mortal, but knowing also that his opponent wasn't yet dead. Stuart caught him fully in the side, and they tumbled, Stuart's sharp teeth locking him into a grip that was painful yet not crippling. Armand went limp, dragging the heavier wolf to the ground with him. They lay, panting, bleeding, Stuart's grip slowly loosening as his life faded away.

Armand lay passive, simply allowing the Alpha the dignity of dying on his own terms. He finally rolled free of his opponent's slack jaws; he stood and shook, tiny flecks of blood and foam spraying the night air. Thorn approached, licking at Armand's jaws, tail tight to his body, ears flat to his head in a gesture of submission to the new Alpha. Wearily, Armand laid his head on the shoulder of his beta. It was a gentle show of protective dominance. Together, they shifted, facing their pack. Armand swayed a bit; the pain from his wound was breathtaking.

"I am your Alpha."

Stunned gazes dropped to the ground. "If you wish to run, you may do so. But you will never be welcome within this pack again." His heart was still pounding, and blood seeped from the

injuries on his ribs. His cock was erect and engorged, roused from battle, yet he and Thorn stood naked and unashamed in front of their pack.

"We will not surrender. We will not submit. We will leave no one behind." Several of the pack had shifted form, compelled by their new Alpha's raw power. "We will burn the bodies of our fallen. We will leave nothing behind for the hunters. We will grieve this night. Tomorrow, we travel." He heard Stuart's mate sob and then howl, joined by Patrick's mate. Men moved to follow his command, dragging the fallen to the bonfire. From the corner of his eye, Armand saw three lupine forms slinking away. Never would they be welcomed to the pack again.

Armand crossed to the edge of the ring where his family waited. The crowd grew, stroking his hair, touching his skin. The pack greeted Thorn as well. The Alpha and his beta allowed the pack the security of touch, the comfort of protection.

Finally, the greetings began to wane, and Armand and Thorn broke away and limped to a small frigid stream to bathe their wounds.

"Well, I hope you have a plan."

Armand dunked his head in the cold water and whipped his hair back in a spray of frigid droplets. "No plan. Any suggestions?"

Thorn shook his head, his naked back gleaming in the moonlight.

"This might sound crazy, Thorn, but I think the men hunting us are hybrids, maybe created from the genetics of our own people. I don't think we really stand a chance." He moved to the bank and sat, at home in his skin. "There aren't enough of us to put up a good fight, and there are too many of us to just disappear into the mountains. I think we need to leave. Really leave." Thorn was looking up at the stars.

"Like the EurLu?"

"They might give us asylum."

Thorn lay back beside Armand, arms crossed behind his head. Armand knew that Thorn couldn't bear the idea of leaving the land of his fathers. But for survival, he'd do most anything, follow Armand most anywhere.

"If they say no?"

Armand rested beside his second, reaching out to grasp his hand. "We'll survive. We'll find a place. We just have to stay alive till then."

* * * * *

It was a merry dance, but she'd followed where he led. He'd taken refuge on a freighter out of Selene and had stayed with them for several jumps. She'd followed the freighter to a small mining colony known only as C5; he'd hopped somewhere en route. She backtracked, growing progressively less patient and more pregnant. Following that little diversion, she tracked him easily through several manned wormholes; the proprietors were only too happy to point her in the right direction.

"Expect the unexpected, Tucker. This whole thing is a little odd, dontcha think?" The wolf was on edge; she was as well. Young Barry Kincaid stayed just a jump ahead, always taking transport that she could easily follow. All this to skip out on a simple charge of mayhem? He'd do less than a year, if he did time at all. Barry had been in a bar in the Niye System, gotten a little too happy, tossed a few miners around. Nobody had died, no major injuries. So why was he running? And where? And why in hell did Interstellar want him so bad?

She got the second answer two weeks out. Belle had set the autopilot so that she could vomit away her morning sickness in peace, when she dropped out of autopilot. Wiping her mouth with a grimace, Belle took the helm and cautiously raised her shields. They were in the Niye System, which wasn't her favorite place, not by a long shot. Barry was in a private cruiser now, much larger than hers, but she doubted that it was as well armed. He was entering the atmosphere above Oris, an overpopulated, disreputable chunk of rock that any sane person would avoid. Judging by the population, there were many insane risk takers in the system. She grinned. There was an ICE outpost there. Reinforcements, if needed. Belle engaged her shields, radioed the surface, and prepped for landing.

As quickly as she could, Belle did a full systems check before entering the atmosphere of the planet below. Oris was a tourist trap in many ways, and its gem markets and public mines masked crime, both organized and random, luring in the unwary with the temptations of greed. Slavers populated the marketplaces, looking for an unwary traveler who they could lure away. Vendors took cash...not credits. The entire place was a den of thieves and their victims. Belle briefly considered masking her appearance with a digi-disguise because a woman alone was a tempting target. A giant woman with a wolf...that might be different.

The private cruiser was planetside by now. She'd have some more tracking to do once she landed, but at least the target was on terra firma. Belle was aching to get solid ground under her feet once more. She strapped Tucker into his modified harness and then buckled herself in.

"Oris, this is the cruiser *Belle Starr*, requesting permission to land." She waited for an answer, getting nothing but static in reply.

"Control...Oris... This is the *Belle Starr*, requesting permission to land."

Only silence. A tight feeling crossed her gut, and Belle acted, immediately swinging the cruiser out of orbital trajectory, back to open space.

Trap! She could feel it, the panic shimmering across her skin. Behind her, Tucker let loose a deep growl.

"Cruiser *Belle Starr*... Prepare to be boarded." The voice was scratchy and tinny. Female.

"Like fuck!" she snarled and began evasive maneuvers, yet the helm was nonresponsive. She was caught in a tractor beam. How in hell had they managed to get this close without triggering her proximity alerts? They'd been on her ass, and she'd been clueless!

Belle flung herself out of the restraints, freed Tucker, and geared up to fight. Ominous clangs rattled the hull of the cruiser, and a hiss escaped as an air lock popped open. They'd be in the hold in just a second. She hit the weapons locker in a panic. Never but never had she considered that she might be boarded. Had the Niye syndicates expanded into space?

Tucker sat quietly out of her way, his hackles extending from his shoulders to his tail. He was both aggressive and fearful, no doubt picking up her panic. Belle paused, breathing deeply. She could take a lot of shit; she had taken a lot of shit in her life, beatings, shocks, some mild laser blasts. She couldn't afford to do that...not now. She was no longer the only one at stake.

Quickly, Belle tossed on her long coat. She knew where her weaponry was, comfortable and familiar. The coat had multiple pockets in the lining, hiding her laser gun, whip, and several knives. She strapped throwing knives to her waist and then fished out a handheld sedative unit, considered it for a moment, and then slipped it back into her pocket. Like all weapons, it could be turned against the user, and she had no idea what the inhaled drug would do to the baby.

Belle heard booted feet in the cargo bay and took an insolent stance against the bulkhead of the cockpit, waiting for her visitors. Three deep breaths put her under control. Tucker crouched behind her, low to the floor, an almost silent growl rumbling from his throat.

Poachers and pirates, she thought when she saw the first scruffy head. A team of three—young, strong, and smart enough to have caught her flat-footed. A dark-haired woman was in the lead.

Her clothing had seen better days, the leather of her pants and boots dull with use but still serviceable. Her short, jet-black hair was wild with curls and probably really cute if it were combed. She wore blast goggles, so Belle was unable to see all of her face, but what she saw was pretty in a grim sort of way. She was tall, nearly Belle's height. Except for her mother, Belle had never met a humanoid female her height.

The male behind her looked similar enough to be a sibling, if not a twin. His square jaw was dark with whiskers; his grim face bore lines of past laughter, of better times. He was handsome and tall, maybe a couple of inches taller than Belle. His leather gear looked a bit fresher than the woman's, as though he tended it better. He wore a leather vest packed with munitions and weapons over a blue jersey shirt. His eyes were deep blue, like a night sky.

The third of the group was also male; his hair was a tawny golden mane that fell over his shoulders, clean, shining, and tangle free. His blue eyes were clear and probably normally friendly. Right now, they were anything but friendly. Like his companions, he wore leathers, but his were tawny brown and darkened with use. He looked younger than the others, a bit uncomfortable in his skin. His face was breathtakingly beautiful and eerily familiar. She didn't want to worry about where she'd seen him before.

"So, you three all do your shopping together? Fetish "R" Us?" Belle raised a brow, raking her gaze over the three. She saw a spark of anger on the face of the female. Good. Easy to rile.

"You guys obviously aren't official, so I assume you're jacking my ship." Good luck with that; the cruiser was completely traceable. These three would have their butts in the proverbial sling for grand theft.

"Marshal Annabelle Oakley?"

She raised a brow at that. So this was a bit more personal? Well, she'd made more than her share of enemies over the years.

"Also known as Cowgirl? Employed by Interstellar Coalition Enforcement?"

Belle looked briefly at the woman and then nodded her head curtly.

"We aren't here to hurt you, so we'd appreciate you putting down your weapons."

Belle didn't move, meeting the woman's hidden gaze steadily. "Darlin', you just immobilized and boarded my cruiser, slick as snot." She let her Southern accent flow, thick and sweet. "Y'all must think I'm silly enough to believe you're just three friendly neighbors, coming to borrow a cup of sugar." Three weapons rose just a bit higher. Belle crossed her arms over her chest and rested her hands near the butts of a pair of laser pistols. She'd love to use her lead ammo but couldn't risk shooting holes in the *Starr*.

"She keeps her weapons on her body. Make her take off the coat."

Belle glanced at the blond man. He was shockingly handsome, his tawny hair flowing around his shoulders and eyes so blue they reminded her of the Caribbean back home. But right now they were storm-tossed, angry eyes.

They'd done their homework. The woman nodded, her weapon not wavering.

"Coat off...but use your fingertips and lay it over the back of the seat."

Belle slowly followed their directions. Youthful as they looked, these three weren't amateurs. She stayed firmly in place, her long skirts keeping Tucker hidden from view. She could feel his tension running up her leg; his aggression fairly vibrated through the atmosphere of the cabin. She spread her arms. She still had knives in her boots and the blacksnake whip up her skirt. Not to mention the garrote in her seam.

"Boots off." She blew out a breath in disgust and bent over, unbuckling the straps that held them over her knees before peeling them down and toeing them off. The knives were hidden in the lining.

"What next? My bra? Garters?" She wasn't wearing either, but they didn't need to know that. She stood, barefoot in her flowered dress, hair cascading down her chest and back. The black-haired man fished out a pair of cuffs and moved forward, staying out of the line of fire. Belle widened her stance, giving Tucker space. She extended her hands for the cuffs.

Like the hounds of hell, Tucker exploded from behind her skirts, taking the man to the floor while the others scrambled away, pistols averted. They couldn't shoot the wolf without hitting their companion. Or maybe they could. The blond man suddenly leveled a small pistol and fired.

"Tucker!" she screamed, her heart dropping. "You fucking sons of bitches, I will so fucking roast you!" Unarmed and barefoot, Belle launched herself at the woman, bringing up a knee to her stomach, her hard fist meeting the woman's harder jaw. She cursed and shook her hand before turning back to the fight. She connected again, and the woman's head snapped back on her neck. Tucker had a death grip on the dark-haired man's throat, and the blond fired another round.

Belle snarled...she *snarled* and tackled the man.

"They're tranquilizers!" he managed to choke out as she took him to the floor. Tucker was still on the other man, who was going still under the wolf's death grip. The woman recovered quickly from Belle's attack and went to the assistance of the downed man. In a flash, Belle found herself pinned on her belly, arm behind her back. Tucker had slid onto his side, jaws growing slack. She'd seen him attack before, but never with such deadly intent. His ice blue eyes met hers, pupils dilated, his irises almost fully black. He whined, a pitiful, fearful sound, his tongue lolling from his mouth.

"Tucker?" Her voice was thready and weak, her body throbbing from several well-placed blows. Impossibly, the man had survived the attack, and blood flowed heavily from his neck. His dark blue eyes were alive with fear, fury...and something else. He looked at Belle with hatred. Whatever this was, it was personal.

Belle twisted, scissoring her legs, almost taking Blondie down. She struck a vicious blow, snapping his head back on his neck. He snarled in anger as blood began to well from his chin. They scuffled for a moment before she took a boot to the ribs. Something snapped and Belle cried out. Another blow slammed into her head. Stars...she saw stars.

"Damn it, Rain! She's human!"

The woman snorted in anger, bending down to give the blond a hand up as Belle writhed on the floor in pain. "She doesn't smell it. No human can hit like that."

Belle lay facedown on the floor, focusing, trying not to vomit. That would be a very bad thing right now. The black spots floating in her vision grew larger and larger, until she could no longer see. The two staggered away, giving her some distance. With a groan, Belle surrendered to the pain.

"Well, try this one on for size, sister. She's pregnant."

Rain whipped to face the dark-haired man. He'd gotten to his feet and was checking the *Belle Starr's* computers. He'd booted up her last log entry. The blood flow from his wounded neck had slowed to a trickle, but his voice was hoarse from the brutal pressure the wolf had used on him.

"Oh shit." Rain quickly pulled a portable med scanner from its docking port. Crouching next to Belle, she quickly ran the device over her body.

"She's got a couple broken ribs, bruises and lacerations, and a minor concussion, but the baby's okay. She's okay too. She'll be okay. Golden, could you come check her?" She hopped back as Belle struck out weakly. "What're we going to do, Storm?" She pulled her goggles up to her forehead, worried eyes directed at the dark-haired man. He stood, gazing down at his sister, and then stepped closer, wiping blood from her nose. It looked broken. In fact, her entire face looked off-kilter. Belle smiled grimly, feeling satisfaction through the red cloud of pain.

"We're gonna get the fuck out of here. Meet the EurLu and pay him off."

"Are you sure she'll be okay alone?" The blond man was now on his knees at Belle's side, running the scanner over her body. Rain returned with the first-aid kit. "Humans just aren't made to take this kind of punishment. I'm worried about her ribs."

"She'll be fine, Golden. Just make sure she can reach whatever meds she needs. And a communicator. She's damn tough." She glanced at Storm, who was now at the control panel. Belle squinted, trying to follow the conversation.

"I've got her in a stable orbit, but, guys, we need to get the hell out of here, like now. We've got places to go, and I want to be clear before she recovers enough to move. Frankly, I don't want this bitch on our tail." The other two rose at that. Golden stood looking at the downed wolf for a long moment. Guilt was clear on his face. "Are you sure it's him, Storm?"

Storm knelt, easily scooping the limp form of the wolf into his arms. "It's him. Though I don't know why he attacked me. God knows what he's gone through these past years."

The wolf's huge head rolled over onto his shoulder, and Storm rubbed his cheek gently against Tucker's furred ruff. "I can smell him." The other two crowded close, their noses lowered to his fur.

"He smells like home." Golden's eyes were bright.

"Time to cry later, little brother. We've got to get him away. Get him to safety." Rain shot another angry look at Belle. "Get him as far away from her as we can."

Golden looked doubtfully back at his sister. "I think she was just trying to protect him, guys. And he was protecting her." Storm and Rain continued to glare at Belle. Through swelling eyes, she did her best to glare back.

"And she's nowhere old enough to be one of the poachers."

"She made him a pet, Golden. She made him crazy and feral. He doesn't even know us. The bitch can roast for all I care." Venom dripped from Storm's voice. "We need to get back. It's a long trip home, and he's not gonna be easy to deal with once he wakes up."

Storm settled Tucker in his arms, leading the way to the hold of the cruiser. He left without a backward look. Rain carefully set a communicator where Belle could reach it when she woke. With a final look, she swallowed hard, looking slightly ill.

They returned to their own ship, slipping silently into space. Belle felt herself sliding into the warm void of unconsciousness. When she woke, they would be long gone.

* * * * *

"Tucker?"

A soft touch to her cheek, a tongue? No, a hand. Soft strokes feathering, soothing. "Tucker?"

"No, bébé."

"Armand?"

"Oui. Now lie back, rest."

Belle tried to sigh but pain racked her body; she couldn't even pull enough air to groan. "Armand, I'm afraid."

"Don't be afraid, Belle. I am here with you. Always."

"Do you promise?" She tried to open her eyes, to pierce the blackness, but even with her eyes open, she could not see. "Armand?"

Only silence answered her call. Tears burned her eyes, and they rolled like rainwater down her skin, to be caught up by a rough pink tongue.

"Tucker?"

She felt silky fur under her fingers, sighed, and fell back into blackness.

She was not alone.

Chapter Seven

“Shit!”

Belle moved slightly, her cheek peeling up from the rivets in the floor. Her head throbbed, and her ribs were in serious need of tending. She lay still, evaluating. No pain in her lower abdomen. Her toes were cold, but they worked. She could see, smell blood, although not all of it hers.

“Tuck? Tucker?” God, she just wanted him to come lay by her side, help her warm up a little. “Tucker?” She heard an edge of fear in her own voice. Surely they hadn’t killed him? She clearly remembered the blond saying they’d tranqed him. Maybe he was still out. She went still. What the hell were pirates doing with tranq guns?

She brought up one knee and then the other, wobbling onto all fours. It was a long, slow process, but she eventually made it to her feet, leaning heavily against the bulkhead. There were emergency medical supplies on board, but she needed her ribs strapped, and her heart would be much easier once she knew the baby was all right. Belle groaned in frustration. Her emergency med kit was on the floor, within arm’s reach of where she’d been lying. Right next to it was a communicator. The floor was looking awfully far away right now. Nice of them to have left it. Fucking punk pirates.

One shaky step after another took her to the helm. She was back in stable orbit around Niye. Another strange behavior for pirates.

Down there, she’d be able to find help. The ICE station was down there, with full medical facilities. Belle checked systems. She wouldn’t be sharp enough to land, and much as she hated to admit it, she needed help.

“Tucker?” With her arms wrapped around her waist, Belle searched the cabin and then checked every space in the ship large enough to hide a wolf. He was gone. They’d taken Tucker.

"Fuck." She settled herself gingerly on a bench in the galley, head in her hands. "Goddamn, son of a bitch. They took him!" Tears burned her eyes, and her very soul felt crushed. She sobbed uncontrollably. The pressure on her damaged ribs further clouded her mind.

She'd pushed herself too hard searching the cruiser. Her hands trembled, and goose bumps ran up her arms. Panic brought her upright, her breath coming in shallow, painful gasps. Belle tasted blood. She tasted her own blood, rising from her lungs. She tasted their blood, imagined it flowing over her hands. She coughed, bringing more blood to her mouth. Her emergency had just become life threatening.

Without leaving the galley, Belle activated the communicator she'd recovered, coded in a secure channel, and sent a broadcast for assistance. They'd have to come get her; there was no way she'd survive a surface landing. She hauled herself to her feet, grabbed a towel, and headed for the helm. She desperately wanted to lie down, to drift off to sleep. Head injury and broken ribs. She needed to stay awake.

"Tuck, I swear, I'm comin' to get you. I'll never let anybody hunt you again." She let her eyes slip closed and then forced them open. Head injury. She needed to stay awake. "Those fucks are gonna pay. They are so gonna pay." She finished on a low snarl. Belle slipped lower in the chair, head tipping to the side. She slid into blackness, the image of Armand rising before her eyes. God, she missed him. She sighed and slept and swore revenge.

* * * * *

Her dreams were not of revenge. Belle dreamed of other times and places, of green trees and harsh young mountain ranges. She was running with a great black wolf at her side...not Tucker. The wolf was another, sleek and lean and so very dangerous. He looked at her, eyes charcoal black against the black satin of his coat. Gold shot through those eyes like the gilded needles of a rutilated quartz.

His eyes widened in surprise, as though he didn't know her; but should he? Belle looked about, seeing through eyes that were not hers. She leaped over streams, bounded over great rocks and boulders, her best and closest friend at her side.

"Bébé, you are here?"

He sounded amazed, bewildered. No more bewildered than she felt, running in a body that was not hers. She looked again at the black wolf, really looked, and in his eyes, saw herself reflected as a great, silver-tipped wolf.

"Tucker?"

* * * * *

"Welcome back."

Belle winced at the voice and squinted against the harsh light shining in her eyes. She groaned and batted ineffectually at the light.

"You had me a bit worried for a while, but things seem to be looking up. In fact, you're coming along wonderfully. Your healing abilities are really phenomenal, Cowgirl."

The light clicked off, and a face melted into view, pale blue hair shimmering around an ageless face. Grass green eyes smiled. Somian.

"You found me."

"That we did. You gave us a good scare. I take it you were boarded?" Belle nodded her head slightly.

"They took Tucker. Pirates. Poachers. They came specifically for him." Tears stung her eyes unexpectedly. Her voice shook with weakness. Anger. "I've got to get him back; he can't go back to another of those places." She squeezed her eyes shut as another thought crashed in. "The baby?"

"It's fine, Belle. Just fine. You have a couple broken ribs; one had pierced a lung. Some abrasions and cuts and a concussion. I take it you gave as good as you took?"

"Hell if I know. It was chaos there for a while. Tucker took one down; I had the woman and the second man. They'll be busted up but on their feet."

She tried to pull herself upright but quit when pain lanced through her ribs. "How long?"

The Somian moved away and then turned to face Belle. She smiled and propped her hip on a counter. She was clearly a mature woman, yet fairly oozed sexuality. But that was the signature of a Somian. Sex times two. Her twin should be somewhere about.

"About twelve hours. You'll need to stay in bed for a few days. But I don't suppose you will."

"They've got a lead on me. It's gonna take some work tracking them. And I've still got that last bounty to take in."

"About that... I spoke with Roane, brought her up to date on your condition. She says the contract was canceled about twenty-four hours ago."

No shit. "The EurLu was bait."

"It looks like they lured you into a trap. Got you as far away from help as possible and snagged their target."

It was lucky the poachers hadn't factored in the ICE station. Or maybe they had. They'd gone to a lot of trouble to minimize the chaos they'd unleashed. Belle shifted uncomfortably as the mattress vibrated slightly. The medical bed had been set to deliver medication to her intravenously. An almost imperceptible hum told her of a new drug joining the mix.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Sera. I'm the ICE medical officer here on Niye. My mate is Trace; we run the outpost."

"Sera and Trace Partain?" She'd heard of them, a very rare twin couple. The Somians were always born in same-sex pairs, who in turn married an unrelated twin pair. From birth to death, a Somian never parted from their twin. In some very rare cases, an opposite-sex pair was born, and they always mated one another. Disturbing as it might sound, when it did happen, the offspring were invariably gifted. Sera and Trace's sons were noted psych-scientists.

"So you've heard of us then?" Sera gave a sunny smile. The Somians were also incredibly beautiful and serene, brimming with casual sexuality.

"You're famous. You're very beautiful." Belle blinked at the slight slurring of her words. "What did you give me?"

Sera remained calm, her eyes steady. "A sedative. You need rest."

"I need to rescue my wolf, Sera." A light, cottony mist began to settle behind her eyes. Belle fought to maintain her anger.

"First, you need to take care of your baby. You'll do him no good going out in this condition, Belle. This will keep you down a few hours, and when you wake up, we'll talk strategy."

"Tucker has a tracking device, it's under his skin. A simple scanner will pick it up." Shit. She sounded drunk.

"Don't you worry, Cowgirl. Things are better than they seem." Sera was standing, stroking Belle's hair back from her forehead. "When they docked with you, the ships' systems were briefly joined. A new tracker virus was downloaded and is working even now. New technology. The *Starr* received it on her last service."

Sera smiled down at Belle as the marshal's eyes grew heavier and began to lose focus. "Rest well, little one."

Belle cracked a smile at that. Sera was nearly a foot beneath her in height.

"Thank you." Her voice was little more than a harsh whisper.

"Thank Roane's tekkies when you get back home. Go to sleep now, Belle."

Belle took a deep breath and slipped away. Those three leather babies were going to pay.

* * * * *

Armand's dreams were bad. He tossed, twisted, reaching for an anchor.

Belle. She was hurt, angry. No, not angry, she was furious and afraid. Something had happened, and he was helpless. It seemed like days now that he hadn't been able to think, to move. Her distress flooded his soul. His mind opened, and memory sat down to keep him company.

That first season he'd been Alpha, times had been hard, but oddly, the hunters had thinned and finally ceased their pursuit. Unfortunately, there had been losses within the pack. Some of

the elderly had begun to fast, refusing food and passing it furtively to the children. Those acts of sacrifice had been noble but robbed the pack of the much-needed wisdom of those old ones.

There had been a loss much closer to home for Armand. He'd lost Nanette. Her labor had been hard, her body weakened by the hardship of their journey and lack of food. She'd delivered a third son to Armand and then slipped away. She never came back. The pack didn't dare send their grieving howl into the sky, for fear of their pursuers. Instead, Armand had taken the fragile babe to his bed, wrapped his warm body around it, and willed strength into his son. Mother's milk was precious, and nursing mothers took turns with him, but Armand's was the hand that soothed him. Armand's love and will sustained the boy through the long, cold nights.

Thorn assigned patrols to watch over their camp until the crisis passed, and Armand often woke to find his beta curled behind him, sharing precious warmth. Armand's children also shared the hard bed, huddling together and hanging tightly to the last remaining piece of their mother. They were teens, almost young adults, devastated by their loss.

Unlike his siblings, this youngest child was fair-haired, defying the dominance of his parents' genes. He cried rarely, seeming to sense the pain and grief that surrounded him. He suffered the touch of his family but settled only when he was in his father's arms.

After ten long days in the temporary camp, Armand strapped the swaddled baby tightly to his body and once again took up his responsibilities as Alpha, supervising the breakup of the camp. That had been the last winter they'd weathered outside, openly hunted, but Thorn still pursued relations with the EurLu on Selene. Armand's pack remained on alert, always ready to run.

* * * * *

"Is he clean?"

Golden turned away from the prone body of the wolf called Tucker. His hand remained in the luxuriant fur of his ruff.

"I pulled a chip from his collar, and he also had one subcutaneous. That was a simple fix." He'd simply clipped the skin and removed it; both chips were now floating in space.

"A collar. My God." Storm shook his head sadly. "How long till he begins to wake up?" Golden frowned up at Storm. A bloodstained bandage stood out starkly against the dark skin of his neck. Golden had sealed the split on his own chin, and it was already healing.

"Couple hours, but we'll need to confine him immediately, just to make sure." He stood, stretching his sore, bruised muscles. Damn if he ever wanted to run into that woman again! "Rain bandaged your neck?"

Storm nodded stiffly.

Golden carefully moved the bandage aside and winced at the damage. "This isn't good, Storm. The lacerations are deep, and you've lost a lot of blood. You were damn lucky." He guided Storm to a nearby bench and opened his med kit.

"Rain has her hands full right now. Besides, you've an easier touch."

Golden felt a tinge of warmth on his cheeks at the compliment. His healing touch was subtle, but his true gift was to ease pain. Rain had probably just slapped the bandage on her brother and called it good.

Golden worked over Storm's neck, sealing lacerations and being careful to minimize scarring. "This hypo will prevent infection." He injected his brother with the antibiotic and then carefully repacked the medical kit. "I'll go to the bridge and take care of Rain. She looks like there're some broken bones in her face."

Storm grimaced, and Golden stifled a smile. His big brother was probably glad he'd fought the wolf rather than the woman.

Storm gingerly settled onto the floor next to the wolf. "I thought he'd remember me. It's been a long time, but still..." He reached out and ran his hands over the wolf's side, feeling the rise and fall of his breath. His expression was bleak as he looked at his brother. "He attacked me, Golden. To kill."

"No telling what he's been through. It's been more than fifteen years, and our information only has him with Oakley for the past seven. I'd say he's been in pretty good hands with her."

Storm snorted rudely. "She made him a pet...put a fucking collar on him!"

"He's healthy, and he only attacked when she was threatened. And she only came after me when she thought I'd shot him." Golden settled on the floor, hands running over the wolf's head, checking teeth and gums. "Rain should probably come down for a visit soon. No telling how approachable he'll be when he wakes up." He was back on his feet, shouldering the medical kit. "I'll take the helm for a few minutes, but I want him confined pretty soon."

Storm sighed deeply. "It shouldn't be this way, Golden. This is so wrong." Golden didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. He watched his brother and the wolf for long moments before climbing to the upper deck of the cruiser and heading for the bridge.

Golden stood and quietly observed his older sister as she hovered over the instrument panel. Hours later, and her hands were still trembling. She was hurt worse than she'd admit. He could smell her grief and pain. Rain played tough, and hard years had taught her to be that way. The anger and despair of the past decade were sitting heavily on her now, compounded by the attack of the wolf they loved so much. Guilt settled over her like a cloud. Guilt for having savagely attacked a helpless woman. A helpless, pregnant woman.

On the other hand, he doubted that Cowgirl Oakley was ever completely helpless. Golden had been a bit awestruck when they'd first met her. She was not only gorgeous, but clearly deadly. Her reputation was not empty. If Rain hadn't jumped in, she might very well have taken him in a fair fight.

"He's gonna be waking soon. You should probably go for a visit." Golden swiveled her chair so she faced him. He checked her eyes, ran a gentle finger down the bridge of her nose. "It's not broken, but the cartilage is damaged. You'll heal up fine."

He gently supported her head in his hands, rotating it, feeling for damage to her neck. So far, so good. Golden then ran a portable scanner over her chest and abdomen. "Looks like you came out the best of us. Slight concussion, but mostly contusions. I want you and Storm to take a rest. Four hours for you, eight for him. Make sure he drinks a lot of fluid." She looked rebellious but nodded. Since when had Rain ever been so compliant?

"How is he?" Her eyes slid away from his, probably hiding the pain she felt at Tucker's rejection. Tucker. Not his name.

"He's healthy, extremely well cared for. She had locator chips on his collar and over his shoulders. I spaced those." He gave her an injection for pain. She turned away, her focus back on the instruments. Golden settled into the copilot's seat.

"She was hurt worse than any of us. I can't believe we left her there."

Ah, guilt.

"I mean, I hurt like shit, but at least piloting isn't out of the question. And there are three of us. She's alone and probably can't even get off the floor. What does that make us, Golden?" Her dark blue eyes turned to his. His big sister, who always had the answers, was looking to him.

"It makes us desperate. And afraid. I don't know about you, but that woman scares the crap out of me. And frankly, she's probably going to chase us down for the rest of our lives."

Rain groaned at the thought. "She's not going to be able to follow for a while, but I'll be able to make us disappear. I don't think we should risk going home, though. I'd hate to have her come knocking at the home planet."

He couldn't agree more. "Did you read the background research I did on her?"

Rain flushed and shook her head. "Some, but not all. Big mistake."

"She's an Oakley."

Rain shrugged, not seeing the significance.

"The Oakleys were a family of athletes on Earth. The government invested several generations of selective breeding in that family. At some point, their organization switched from selective breeding to bioengineering."

"Like the hybrids?"

"Very much so. They were outed, disgraced, and finally left the planet. Annabelle's older brother killed himself. I'm not sure where the parents ended up, but she hooked up with Roane Vaine's group in ICE. She rose through the ranks from street enforcer to Interstellar marshal in record time."

He smiled crookedly as gooseflesh rose on her skin in a primitive display. "Baddest of the badasses, sister. And we took what's hers."

"He's not a pet, and he's not property."

"Matters not. They've been together for seven years, if not longer. Now she's pregnant and pissed. We boarded her ship, beat the crap out of her, and took her wolf. I say we find somewhere to go to ground. She could do major damage if she follows us home."

"Maybe we can hole up somewhere till she's near her due date. She's about two, maybe three months now."

That would mean living rough for six months or more. With a very angry wolf. "Enough talking, Rain. Go below, sit with him for a time, let him hear your voice and catch your scent. He's more likely to respond to you than me." She nodded but didn't leave right away.

"Do you think she's okay?" Her voice was small.

"Baddest of the badasses, Rain. I just pray we can bring him around before she catches up to us." He winked and grinned. "Go visit him and get some rest. I'll call home, let them know what's going on. See what Papa thinks."

"Maybe they've come up with a lead on Forest."

"Maybe. Maybe."

"Give Papa my love, Golden." He smiled and nodded.

Golden turned to the panel, checking systems. Rain rose, looked down on his bright hair, and smiled. She dropped a kiss on his forehead and left without a word.

* * * * *

Time passed, and the pack settled into a cautious yet contented existence. Armand never felt the need to take another mate; he enjoyed the company of women, but never within the pack. The few times he'd done that, emotions ran high as females became competitive, fighting for his attention. He occasionally traveled to the cities with Thorn, finding

companionship with human women. At the same time, he listened to news and gossip. He was content to watch his children grow. Almost overnight, it seemed that his youngest was entering his teens.

Thorn had mated, but before children could come, she had fled to the stars, to Selene, where her parents lived. Valerie had been overwhelmed by the rough existence of the American Were Pack. Personally, Armand thought she'd bitten off more than she could chew with the intense and passionate Thorn Greywolf. His beta rarely spoke of the relationship; Thorn kept the pain of abandonment wrapped tightly to himself. Only occasionally did Armand see sadness in his eyes or scent the fragrance of loneliness in his presence.

Thorn continued with the children, teaching them the ways of the mountains and of nature. He taught the pack to be hunters and trackers, to be able to disappear seemingly in plain sight. Thorn was quiet and stern, yet the children and teens followed him without question, as though he was irresistible.

Armand's youngest was a very young teen when the next disaster came. This time it did not come from hunters or hybrids, but rather from the sky.

Thorn and another beta had taken a dozen children into the mountains for the day, leaving the compound quiet. Lazily, the remaining adults went about their business. Those who held jobs headed to town, while others focused on chores. The smell of baking wafted on the air. Armand could hear women's laughter and gentle gossip, the sounds of Jonas and Murial making love. Murial was the pack's Alpha female; hers would be the only baby born that year. She'd forbidden all other females to breed during her time. She was a strong and effective Alpha female.

Armand and his sons were cutting firewood for the winter. It was only late spring, but wood gathering was an ongoing task. When the cold set in, harsh and frigid, they often gathered and slept in the communal lodge, building a huge fire, sharing warmth, and making memories. They told stories and sang songs, keeping old traditions alive.

He straightened, seeing Thorn and a small group of children on the ridge. Thorn was waving, and something in his posture frightened Armand. He looked around, expanding his senses, trying to locate the disturbance.

Armand caught the faintest hissing sound; glancing around, he looked to see if anyone else heard the noise. Elinor was

straightening near her log, a puzzled expression on her face. His two older sons were dressing a log for lumber; they seemed unaware of anything out of the ordinary.

Armand focused on the sound, trying to locate it, but it had no direction. Instead of growing louder, it grew in intensity. One by one, the Were in the meadow grew quiet and watchful, looking to their Alpha for direction.

“Shift! Everyone shift!” Before the words left his mouth fully, Armand was on all fours, leading his wolves to the edge of the forest. He looped back as his people entered the safety of the trees, scattering and dodging, shedding clothing and shoes, becoming invisible within the embrace of the forest. Their animal forms were agile and fast, making them harder targets. What Armand could not know was that by shifting from human to wolf, he cemented his pack’s fate. As humans, they were curiosities. As wolves, they were targets. And as shape-shifters, they were prizes.

Armand returned to the meadow, catching stragglers, urging his wolves faster. In the forest, he heard the faintest sounds, a yip, a cry of pain. He couldn’t see who pursued them, but their vehicles crashed through the trees, unheeding of saplings and underbrush.

To his horror, people were running to the meadow from their cabins, and he had no way to warn them off, to make them seek shelter. He saw Desdimona, her white-blonde hair glinting in the sun. She was there, and then she collapsed, gone before she hit the dirt. He whirled, his sons were near his side. He nipped their heels, urging them faster. Armand watched helplessly as one went down, he couldn’t see which. Before he could react, he felt a burn between his shoulder blades. He looked up, saw Thorn jerk and fall to the ground. Prickling pain ran down his skin. Armand looked at himself, watching as he faded...faded from his own sight.

The children were huddled together; he could no longer see Thorn. He sent thanks to God that the things were ignoring the children. They wanted adults. The last thing he saw was the look of horror on the face of his son, and then he knew no more.

Chapter Eight

Two weeks. They'd kept her here for two damn weeks! Turned out her pirates had done some tinkering to her cruiser's systems, so she'd been forced to cool her heels around the base. Okay, so she still wasn't feeling tops, but Belle was strongly aware that time was of the essence now and that the pirates were in a faster ship. They'd have made it through at least one system by now. The new virus had downloaded technical data on the ship as well as planting a trace.

Her name was *Wolfsbane*.

Roane had given Belle permission to pursue the poachers with all available resources. She was careful not to classify Tucker as property but stated that the battery on an ICE officer, plus the theft and vandalism of the *Starr* was a violation of law, and the ICE wanted the culprits held accountable. To that end, Trace Partain had dispatched technicians to start on the *Belle Starr* and have her repairs completed with all due haste.

Belle recovered quickly from her injuries but still had lingering pain from the fractured ribs. She'd haunted the physical therapy labs, struggling to recover her lung capacity. She'd always been a good patient and a quick healer, but now it seemed her recovery was on overdrive. It was probably another side effect of her pregnancy and another indication of her less-than-human physiology.

Belle spent time in Oris, using her digi-disguise to create a suitably intimidating presence. Without Tucker at her side, she felt exposed, especially among the ruffians and scalawags that inhabited the city. She'd never felt vulnerable before, and the sensation disturbed her greatly.

Belle visited sleazy bars and upscale restaurants, hoping for information on the poachers. Information was scarce and expensive. There were active poachers on Niye, more than she'd realized. Their poaching wasn't limited to animals, but to sentient beings as well. More than one humanoid tourist had vanished in recent times. Sex-trade workers had vanished as well. Intriguing, but not the information she needed.

Belle finally gave up on the citizens and resorted to doling out bribes to info brokers, hoping for better intel. According to the snitches, the trio had visited Oris, but only for supplies. They had no associates, no known accomplices. They'd briefly met her original EurLu target shortly after the attack, probably to pay him off. Barry Kincaid was now on her short list of asses to kick.

Belle considered hunting the EurLu again and, after hashing out her information with Sera, decided there was no time to waste before her pregnancy was too far along to allow her to track. Her priority was Tucker. Roane had given her three months to report to HQ and take maternity leave.

"Frustrated?"

Belle had spent fifteen minutes on a treadmill and was now panting, arms wrapped around her ribs. Sera hopped nimbly onto an elevated counter, looking improbably young. Belle found herself staring at the woman's celestial blue hair and grass green eyes.

"Time's a-wastin', Seraphina. They've got a two-week lead. It's not a chase anymore; it's a hunt. And I don't have time for an extended hunt."

"We're tracking them."

Belle scrubbed at her face with a towel. "That's true, but what are the parameters of the signal? I know it'll put me in the same system, but will it pinpoint their location exactly? Even if I can track them to a planet, how long will it take to find them?"

Never before had the universe seemed so large. Sera watched Belle with sympathetic eyes.

"It's new technology, Belle, but Trace thinks it'll put you fairly close. Now, my question is, once you find them, what do you plan?"

The hunter frowned. "Roane wants them. I'll bring them in."

"In one piece?" Sera lifted a brow in mock surprise.

"If Tucker is safe and unharmed, one piece. Can't promise much more, Sera. They came at me like it was personal, and so now I've decided to treat it as personal." Belle stepped back on the treadmill and began a slow, relaxed run.

"In what way did it seem personal?"

Belle ran for a moment before answering.

"They knew me, knew my name, and acted like I'd done something bad. They acted like taking Tucker was a rescue."

For long moments, there was no sound but her feet on the treadmill. "They felt bad about leaving me there injured. They made certain the *Starr* was safely in orbit and left supplies where I could reach them. Blondie made sure that I knew they'd just tranquilized Tucker and that they weren't hurting him."

"Maybe they aren't poachers."

"Maybe." She was sucking air again. Belle slowed to a walk. "Maybe they're activists or some sort of vigilantes. But I don't know why they'd come for us. Everyone knows Tuck's with me 'cause he wants to be."

"Everyone who knows you knows that. Nevertheless, Belle, what about people who don't know your history together? Wouldn't they think you're exploiting him?"

"What do you know, Sera?"

The older woman gave an impish smile and crossed her arms.

"There's been a group of emigrants from Earth; they've been busting up hunting preserves, both legal and illegal. The word is they started making inquiries about you a good year or so back. They've apparently been operating for about a decade now."

Belle coasted to a stop and stared at Sera. "These three are too young; a decade ago they'd have been kids." She downed water from a bottle. "But if it's an organization, maybe they're new recruits. Frankly, I can't completely hate them if they're targeting poachers and game reserves."

Sera nodded in agreement. "Nevertheless, Belle, they're very slick and professional. Very dangerous. You took a lot of damage."

"Where's this leading, Sera?"

"It's not leading anywhere, Belle. Nowhere bad, anyway."

Belle snorted. "Spill the beans. You've been talking to the boss, haven't you?"

"Well...put that way..." She winked at Belle. "Since this is an ICE hunt, Roane wants to take care of a little business at the same time. You'll be transporting a passenger back to headquarters. A prospective tracker that Roane wants to meet. If you should need a hand, she'll be there."

"My replacement."

Sera shook her head. "You know it doesn't work that way. Besides, you're irreplaceable, Cowgirl." Sera chuckled. "You keep an eye on her; Vaine's considering this part of her job interview. See how she deals on a hunt."

"You're sending her to babysit me." Belle folded her arms, sweat shining on the exposed skin. "You think because I'm pregnant, I can't deal."

"No, she's Valoran, more brain than muscle, though she's good in a fight. She'll take care of tracking your targets. In fact, she's been the main tech overhauling the *Starr*. You'll find her useful."

"God, Sera, I can't stand the Valorans. They're all so damn arrogant." Plus, the slender hermaphrodites made her feel like an ungainly clod next to their refined elegance. She skimmed a hand over her belly, already self-conscious. "She's female?"

"She identifies as a female, though I'm sure she can switch if need be."

"Great." Frankly, the hermaphrodites confused her. "Just tell her we aren't sharing clothes." That brought a bark of laughter from Sera.

"That won't happen, Belle. Your clothes are *so* not her style!" Belle didn't bother to question that. She'd never met another woman, much less a hunter who shared her penchant for flowing skirts and vintage fabrics. It was amazing what all she could hide under that fabric.

"So she's not gonna want to go get her nails done with me? Or a facial? No girl talk on the ship?"

"Just wait till you meet her, Cowgirl. You might like her."

Or not, Belle thought to herself. Valorans were an acquired taste. Oh well, one more thing to blame on Roane Vaine.

* * * * *

Cali Polis stood quietly amid the humming activity surrounding the *Belle Starr*. She'd already finished her part of preparations for the departure and now waited to meet her new partner. Well, not partner exactly. Traveling companion. Her first assignment, in fact. Vaine had been very clear: Oakley was to make it home safely, as were her wolf *and* his captors.

She didn't fool herself. This was a test, and her future with ICE hinged on her performance. That didn't bother her much; nothing did. Cali was fully aware that her self-confidence smacked of arrogance to the humans, but she was good at what she did. There was no arrogance in that. She simply knew herself.

Cowgirl Oakley was in the midst of the flurry, in and out of the cruiser, hovering over the shoulders of the technicians as they worked. Her urgency was palpable, yet she remained strictly professional, if not detached.

Confused by the nickname, Cali had researched Earth culture and found many references to cowboys and the American West. She even found Cowgirl's namesake, Annie Oakley. Cali wondered if Cowgirl was as good as the original. Her reputation indicated that she was, but reputations out here were often the product of self-promotion. A tracker had a distinct advantage if her quarry was intimidated.

The woman was tall, taller than Cali, and more substantial in body. Her unruly hair was an intense, fiery color and tied back from her face. She was wearing coveralls right now, but under the coveralls she wore an odd dress with long, loose sleeves and flowing skirts. Though Cali had never seen such clothing before, it struck her as feminine. Cowgirl had shown considerable strength, working side by side with the men loading her cruiser, even though she was still recovering from her injuries. She was pregnant as well.

That strength under her feminine packaging was a dangerous surprise. Maybe her reputation was justified after all.

"Damn!" Cowgirl's curse rang through the hangar, turning attention in her direction. She flushed and held up a finger. "Broke a nail." She grinned sheepishly, and the men broke into laughter. Cowgirl headed to an equipment bench and stripped from

her overalls. Cali caught a glimpse of long white legs before her skirts dropped to full length. The hunter was wearing brown leather boots under her skirts. They were sturdy and practical, made for protection as well as function. Cali had no doubt they carried weapons of some sort.

"Cali Polis?" The marshal had caught sight of her and was heading in her direction. Cali stepped forward, gloved hand extended for a polite shake. She was surprised to find her hand in a strong grip. She'd expected a limp shake to go with the feminine exterior. Up close, she could see a tiny floral design on the fabric of Cowgirl's dress, and the bodice laced up the front with silky ribbons.

"How do you work dressed like that?" Cali's question wasn't hostile, but she knew it came off as rude.

Cowgirl stood back, looking at her appraisingly. "You have a blast pistol on your left hip, a jointed whip on the right. A knife on your left arm." She walked in circles around Cali. "Not much else that I can see. The fabric looks good for protection in hand-to-hand, but there's just no mystery in that catsuit, hon." She stood in front of Cali. "What do you see?"

Cali scanned the hunter. She shrugged. "I assume you have knives in your boots." Cowgirl nodded. "I don't think you're armed other than that."

"Good, that's what I wanted you to see." She lifted her hair from her neck. "Long blade at my back. Blacksnake whip inside this panel of my skirt. Blaster in the left panel. Laser blade down the front of the dress. It's got a safety, so I don't do any damage to the girls." She winked at Cali. "Normally I wear a portable tranq unit, but I don't want to risk sedatives while I'm pregnant. Cuffs here." She lifted the skirt, revealing lightweight cuffs. "I don't do thigh holsters, they chafe. Ah...garrote in the seam, darts in the hem."

She lifted her long leather coat from the tool bench. "Lots more goodies in here, but those are my secret." She plunged her hand into the deep pocket of the coat. "Let's see, extra nutrition bars, my reader, communicator..." She frowned in puzzlement and pulled out a can. "Ha! Condom spray! Word of advice, it's not always reliable with shape-shifters. Especially the doggy varieties." Cowgirl looked at Cali's stoic face. "You probably didn't want to know that."

She slipped the coat on in a graceful sweep. "I could probably live out of this thing." Cowgirl returned to face Cali. "Set up to attack me."

Cali nodded, took her stance. Both her kick and strike were easily blocked.

"I'm going to strike you now." Cowgirl just stood there, but Cali was suddenly on her butt. She hadn't seen the other woman move. "Old Chinese martial arts trick. The men wore floor-length tunics to disguise their low kicks. High kicks can be effective, but your opponent can see them coming and prepare, plus, your balance is on one leg. Someone comes at you in a high kick, they're wide open; you punch 'em in the inner thigh or groin." She gave a wicked grin. "You can't see what I'm doing under my skirts. I prefer to keep kicks low, to the knee and under."

Cali rose to her feet and dusted off.

"I'm big and strong, but most people don't look past the dress and hair."

"Their mistake then." She looked the hunter over with new appreciation. "I'd like to spar with you sometime, Cowgirl."

"Sometime, but not now. Maybe after the baby, eh?" She smiled easily, and her blue eyes twinkled.

"The father?"

Cowgirl dropped her hand to her belly. "American Were. He's back on Prima Vega." The hunter sensed Cali's unasked question. "It's a long story, Polis, and we have plenty of time to share. We're several weeks behind the poachers, and their ship is faster. Once we catch up, we still have to find them. My guess is five, maybe six weeks, and my clock is ticking."

Cali nodded.

"Are you packed? 'Cause I want to be out of here soon. Maybe within the hour." They began to walk to the cruiser. Trace was finalizing the preparations, and Cali watched as the lavender-haired Somian gracefully orchestrated the chaos around the ship. He was as beautiful as his sister-mate. Once she'd gotten past her own ingrained cultural taboo regarding incest, the couple seemed so perfectly right together. They had the harmony of a lifetime connection.

Finally, the mechanical scaffolding fell away from the cruiser, leaving it shining and ready to go.

Cowgirl pulled a deep breath in, letting it out slowly. She suddenly seemed taller and more vibrant. She glanced over at Cali, and the look on Belle's face chilled her to the bone. Cali realized this woman was hunting to kill. She was willing to kill for the animal. Cali rubbed her arms, soothing the prickles of alarm.

"You've got the receiver set up?"

Cali nodded, her dark eyes showing no emotion.

"As of now, Polis, you're officially in training. I don't care what Vaine said; this is my mission, and you're under my command. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sir. I like that." Belle took a moment to say good-bye to Sera and Trace, and then she was aboard, all business. Within a half hour, she'd checked all systems, including her cargo area, which now boasted an extra holding cell. She needed the extra space.

Back in the cockpit, Belle patiently waited for permission to lift off. The hangar doors slid open; the cruiser rose, hovered gracefully, and then drifted slowly out into the open. With a nod and a wink to her copilot, Belle skillfully piloted the ship out of the docking bay. The *Belle Starr* was on her way into space.

Chapter Nine

“Bébé.”

“Armand!”

Belle ran and threw herself into his arms, knowing as she did so that this was only an illusion, yet another dream. The odd thing was that she didn't know when they began or ended. Had they really met? Was her stomach really swelling with his child?

She felt girlish and young there in his arms, safe and suddenly calm. He came to her most often when she was on the precipice of despair out there in the waking world.

“I miss you, Belle.”

He shifted the dream, they were no longer in her berth aboard the Starr, but on a deep bed of leaves, gold and red and russet. Over their heads, the sky was cerulean blue; fluffy clouds drifted lazily by. It was Earth, but she'd never been to this place.

“Where is this?” She glanced around, seeing groves of aspen quivering in the breeze, tall grass waving like ripples in a pond.

“The Rocky Mountains. You've never been here?”

“No, it's beautiful.” She caught movement from her peripheral vision, a black shadow that took brief shape and then vanished.

“It's my home. I miss it.” He lifted himself slightly over her body, and now she was nude, her skin creamy white in the sun. “You're so fair, you might burn.”

“It's a dream, Armand.”

His smile spread slowly over his face. "So it is. A very good dream, eh, bébé?"

In answer, she pulled him down to her lips.

He could smell her, taste her, feel the silk of her skin under his. Armand allowed the sensations to drift over his senses, like water over parched earth. These dreams had been his only solace for so long now. The dreams told him she lived, that she was well, though unhappy.

It was the wolf again. Tucker occupied her mind, battling with Armand for dominance over her emotions. They faced off, each snarling at the other. It was his child she carried, his mark she wore. Yet while she craved Armand, missed him deeply, it was Tucker's name on her mind when he visited. Her self-appointed mission was not to return to her mate, but rather to locate her missing wolf. It disturbed Armand, frightened him deeply, down at his innermost core. How had he been so completely replaced by the wolf? An animal?

It frightened him on so very many levels.

And so Armand did the one thing that Tucker could not: He haunted her dreams, and he seduced Belle, made love to her with his body and mind. He took her to every beautiful place in his memory, loving her body, wooing her mind. They made love in the mountains of his home, in a beautiful old mansion in Louisiana. They sat on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, watching the sunset. His memories were all of Earth. He'd peeked into her mind and had seen panoramas and vistas of other worlds, other places that seemed strangely familiar, but he couldn't remember having been there.

And always on the edge of the dream walked a huge jet-black wolf, dangerous and frightening, with black eyes shot with gold.

Armand looked down on his mate. Her creamy skin looked like spilled milk against the bed of autumn foliage, her hair spread out under her body like flame. He watched as his own great, dark body lowered over hers, watched his hands as they moved over her breasts, her neck, her face. He looked down, and her legs parted for him. Fascinated, he pulled back onto his knees, fisted his cock, and angled into that fiery nest of curls. He watched, his own arousal building as his shaft disappeared into

her body, stretching pink flesh, and drew back, wet and glistening with her juices.

“Armand?”

Her voice was low and husky with arousal. He tore his gaze away from the sight of their joined flesh, looked up to her face. She leaned upward, hooking her hand behind his neck, pulling him down.

Once he looked away from their bodies and back at her face, blood rushed through his head in a roar. He smelled her, tasted her, felt her teeth scraping his tongue, felt her sucking at his lips. He growled, braced himself on his arms, arousal, anger, and fear all rushing through his body like a potent aphrodisiac, melting everything before it.

He thrust into her body, hard and brutal, holding tight as her back arched and she gasped.

“Again!”

He drew back and shafted her hard, once more, twice more, and Belle groaned, her entire body trembling with the force of her climax. Her nails bit into his skin, dragging long, burning furrows that bled freely.

Again, Armand dug hard and deep, watching her eyes flutter closed. Once he was certain she'd wrung every ounce from her climax, he began to thrust steadily, long stroking movements that caressed every inch of her body, inside and out. Slick, sweaty skin slipped and caressed. Her blue, blue eyes fluttered open, and she whispered words that he could not hear.

Armand thrust harder. The pleasure of the act rolled over him, pulling tighter and tighter at his groin, thighs, and buttocks. Her hand slipped back, nails digging into the skin of his ass, and he tensed in greedy anticipation.

Do it! he thought he yelled, but his throat was choked tightly closed. Her fingers slid inside his ass, fluttering, playing, never quite where he needed them.

Do it! But she didn't. And when she began to penetrate him further, something called out, another voice.

Mon ami. A haunting scent, the same that he'd caught and trailed back at the Quay. He twisted away from her fingers.

Armand flexed into his orgasm, moaning in frustration, groaning in release. He roared out his agony, his joy, and his pain. And when his heart slowed, tears streaked his face, and his chest heaved with sobs. His arms were as empty as his soul.

* * * * *

The wolf paced relentlessly, as he had for the past months. On the ship, he'd paced within the confines of a large cell. Here, under the surface of a rocky little planet, he paced. His cell was larger, his accommodations more appropriate to his needs, but he still paced and snarled, breaking out into the occasional howl.

"He's grieving." Golden picked up the pan with the half-eaten meat. "He's eating enough to stay alive, but not strong." Tucker paced and then detoured to the boulders in his enclosure, springing from one surface to the next. Looking for a way out.

"This can't be any better than if he were in captivity."

"He *is* in captivity, Rain." They watched carefully as Golden edged carefully into the enclosure. The wolf tolerated his presence, just barely. For the hell of it, Golden shifted, forcing himself see the enclosure through the eyes of the wolf.

"Careful, Golden. You don't know how he's gonna react." Storm was on his feet, ready to intervene. Tucker had gone still as a statue, hackles rising at the tawny wolf in his space. Golden hunkered down in automatic submission, easing the other wolf somewhat. He shifted back to human form, a frown on his handsome face.

"When's the other ship gonna get here?" Golden backed carefully to the opening of the enclosure and waited as Rain released the energy field.

"Last communication said they'd be getting here within the week. Papa had Timber's team pick him up from the compound. They're gonna raid another game reserve. Frankly, he thinks we've got the wrong wolf."

"But he smells right."

"Do you really remember, Storm? After all these years?" Golden watched Tucker as he carefully stepped outside the enclosure.

Rain nodded, agreeing with her twin. "He smells right to me too. You were too young, Golden."

The blond man gazed at the pacing wolf.

"I only sense wolf. Nothing else." It wouldn't be the first time they'd taken a natural, thinking it was one of the lost ones. "I do remember that he had more black than this one. And Tucker here has some old, old scars, like his belly was almost gouged out."

"Oh God, Golden, don't say that... I don't think I could bear another disappointment!" Rain ducked her head and rested it on her knees. Storm sat next to her and threw an arm around her shoulder. She automatically leaned into him, seeking the comfort of his body. Abruptly, she straightened, moving away from her twin. Golden pretended not to see the hurt on Storm's face.

They all jerked in alarm as a shriek came over the comm unit.

“Proximity sensors. Someone’s coming.” Rain was on her feet, followed by the others. Within moments, they were armed and ready. A code crackled loudly, a series of high-pitched tones and clicks, too high for the human ear.

“It’s the *Luna*. They’re requesting further landing instructions.” Rain quickly keyed in the code, relaying their location to the other ship. They’d be here soon, very soon. Papa was coming; he’d know what to do. Golden smiled as he heard the twins take deep breaths almost as one. He followed with one of his own. Competent and assertive as the three were, none was Alpha by nature. Not yet anyway. As their Alpha strode confidently into the caves, Golden grinned and embraced the older man.

Things would be better now.

* * * * *

“Is he in there?” The Alpha gazed into the enclosure. With eyes shut, he tested the air. He gestured to Rain, who let down the force field. Confidently, the man stepped into the enclosure and found a spot where he settled comfortably on the floor. His old friend was in here, traumatized and frightened. He sat quietly for long moments with infinite patience. With a glance, he let the others know that he wanted privacy.

His heart pounded, and with an effort, he calmed himself, pulling the smells of stress and fear back into himself. Instead he chose to project calm. Serenity. He could shift, but if the wolf was a normal, it might trigger a fight. He had the pack power to call a Were into a shift, but not from wolf to man. He closed his eyes, letting the memories of old times wash over him, fighting, mating, fleeing through the mountains. The hours spent hiding from hunters, the plans for the future. The slow normalization of their lives. Decades of personal history together seeped from his pores.

He’d spent the past fifteen years being father not only to Rain and Storm and Golden, but to the entire pack, which the poachers had nearly gutted. He’d been an Alpha without his beta, no male had remained who was strong enough to stand at his back. Tessa was his Alpha bitch. She was strong, but the Alpha role didn’t sit as well with her as it had with Murial.

The tattered remnants of the Colorado Pack had picked themselves up and looked to the sky, opting to dedicate their lives to finding their lost brothers and sisters. The EurLu had taken them in for a time but made it clear that their more earthy brethren needed to adapt and move out on their own. The small pack had settled for a time on Selene, and as they grew more confident, they had begun to move outward. They adapted well to the stars, but by nature, the AmWere needed the feel of the soil under their feet, the forest over their heads. Like packs of old, teams were dispatched to scout for possible places to settle. Other teams moved into the cities around the system, listening and learning, following rumors of illegal hunts and game preserves.

In the end, they’d found a fertile, mountainous planet in the Selene system near their cousins. The small planet was rugged, well suited to their nature. The past ten years had seen the return of several of their lost pack. Four men and two women had

returned to their fold. Nineteen were still missing. Others from other American packs had straggled into space, seeking and finding sanctuary. The pack had grown. But his heart was still heavy and would be until everyone was home.

“Mon ami. Are you there?” His voice was husky and low. “I can hear you breathing. You know me, don’t you?”

Rumors had led the pack to Prima Vega, to the Lost City. He’d located the infamous Cowgirl Oakley, but her wolf had been MIA. He’d gone undercover, lingered around the dangerous city, gathering information and constructing the trap that finally brought her down and rescued the wolf. The wolf that was showing no signs of humanity.

He had sacrificed much to his cause; his name and identity had been left behind on Earth. Now they called him the Padre. He’d adopted a new public identity and often changed his appearance. Unfortunately, he was unable to change his great height and size beyond gaining and losing weight. Every time he revisited an old haunt, he arrived as a different person. Only his pack remembered him as he was. He only saw his real face when he was home, when he switched off the digi-unit and looked into the mirror. In his way, he was as lost as the lost pack.

He remembered the chaos of that day, men’s shouts as they ran, screams that cut off abruptly. He remembered Storm and Forest shifting form and running to the safety of the woods. Forest had fallen, and something had taken him before his body had hit the ground. Just like that, he was there, and then he was gone. They nearly had taken him as well, but Padre had somehow loosened himself from the grip of their transport. Within five minutes, it was over, the pack ripped apart and bleeding at his feet. Most of the strongest males were gone, as well as several of the females. The poachers had targeted the best and the brightest of the pack. Mostly the oldest and the youngest remained. The weak, the pregnant females. A handful of strong men and women remained, and he’d turned to them for strength and support.

They’d gathered in impotent rage, turning their faces to the sky, tears streaming down their cheeks, anguished howls leaving their throats. As a whole, the surviving pack members had faced him, demanding action. Demanding that they take to the skies. No one would be left behind. No one was to be lost. They’d liquidated generations of pack investments, and after years of talk and planning, they finally left the Earth behind.

“They tell me you’re calling yourself Tucker now.” He didn’t open his eyes, but Padre felt the wolf drawing closer. “I changed my name too. I’m Padre. Little Miguel always called me that, and after we left home, everybody else picked it up.” He leaned back against a boulder, a bit of dirt settling in his short brush of hair. “Like my hair? I don’t. I miss it being black more than I miss the length. I always feel like I’m lookin’ at a stranger when I look in the mirror. Sometimes I don’t even remember what I look like.” He peeked open an eyelid to check the progress of the wolf.

“I met that woman of yours, Cowgirl.” He whistled. “I don’t blame you for hooking up with that one. She’s a pistol. Part Were, definitely. She’s pregnant, did you

know that? Of course you do. Can't be with her and not know, eh, mon ami?" He gave a lazy grin. "That's five now. I hope it's a girl. We're damned short on men, but I'm sure we'll find them all. We'll find Forest. He's next. I feel it in my bones. Rain needs a little sister; maybe it'll soften her up. Times have been hard on our little girl."

Padre set his hand on the ground, extended from his body. He kept his eyes closed tightly and smiled when he felt a cold nose examining his skin.

"It's been hard doing this on my own; there's never been a strong-enough male to take my back. Rain and Storm have dedicated themselves to finding you and the others. Golden's really something, isn't he? He was just a kid when you saw him last, but he's grown up good. He's a thinker. Compassionate. We're sending him to medical school on Selene. He's a natural healer." His hand slipped up to run over Tucker's face. "Storm, he's been a handful, got some really strong Alpha tendencies. I'm gonna have to kick his butt soon. But Lordy, he's a good man. Good heart, good soul. And Rain, she's Alpha too. Got a temper. She's really feelin' bad about hurting the woman." He cracked an eye and took a quick look.

"You aren't so black as you used to be. It's gotta be rough being locked in this form. Did she rescue you? Does she have any idea what you are?" A wet nose was exploring his face, and a damp tongue slid over his cheekbone.

"You need to think about your human form. Remember who you are. Come back to us, my friend." The wolf slid to the ground, resting his head on Padre's leather-clad thigh. A huge breath huffed from his lungs. Padre ran his hand through the ruff of fur in a soothing motion. They'd done this hundreds of times before. His eyes grew heavy, so Padre slid to the ground, letting sleep flirt with his consciousness. Before he went under completely, he felt warmth at his side. His friend had shifted. Padre rolled to his side, smiling as the other man's arm looped over his waist, spooning into him tightly.

"It's good to have you at my back again, my brother. *Merci. Merci.*"

Chapter Ten

"There they are."

Polis bent over her screen, frowning at the display. "Scanners indicate a second cruiser, same make as the first. Seven humanoid life signs on the surface."

At last. The trip had been uneventful, but Belle had been simmering in anger and distress for weeks now. She was into her fourth month; a baby bump had sprouted on her belly. Two days before, the butterflies in her stomach had turned out to be the baby moving. She thought of Armand and wondered if he cared. She often saw him from the corner of her eye, but when she looked, he wasn't there. She heard that soft Cajun accent when she took her sleep period. Hot sexual dreams haunted her sleep, dreams in which they twisted and writhed and cried out in ecstasy. She craved him. She craved the sound of his voice, the smell of his skin. His smile.

It was really pissing her off.

Annoyed as she had been to have Cali Polis foisted on her, she was now grateful because Belle was finding a deep need to sleep often. And getting to know the odd woman...er...person... Well, she hadn't had the opportunity before to get close to a hermaphrodite before.

Cali was tall and slender, with dark hair. Her skin was the color of crushed berries in milk, a warm, lovely hue. Long lashes framed exotic dark eyes. In spite of her feminine attributes, she was strong and competent and moved with the confidence of a man. She'd confided in Belle that while she possessed the attributes of both sexes, she identified as a female. Belle wondered how she'd do in the company of the highly sexual Were folk, because after she rescued Tucker, they were making a beeline to Selene and hauling that stinking EurLu in for collaborating with the poachers. Marshal Oakley planned to get her pound of flesh and then some.

"I imagine they have proximity sensors." Polis frowned and worried at the controls of her display. "All right. There's the signal... Let me just..." She trailed off, working over the display while Belle watched over her shoulder. "There. I've disabled their sensors. They won't be able to open communications either." Polis gave a small but infinitely pleased smile. "The virus gave me a back door to the *Woolfsbane*, and that ship gave me the *Luna*."

Belle was pleased. They'd landed about a mile away from the caves the poachers were using as shelter; they'd arrived fully shielded and running silent. She had to admit Polis was worth having; she was meeting every challenge that Belle threw at her with flair.

"Do you think we can move the cruiser any closer?"

Polis bit her lip and nodded. "We can probably move in a bit closer without their hearing us, but it'll be dicey. I'd stay put."

It was probably for the best. She didn't know what sort of enemy they were facing. Human ears might pick up what the sensors would be unable to.

"Okay then, we'll hike in, try to pick them off. I want the main three that boarded my ship for sure. That leaves four others, probably all poachers. It's gonna get tight in the hold."

"Maybe we should fly one of their cruisers and tow in the second?"

Belle grinned. She liked the way this one thought. Clearly an optimist.

They left the cruiser disguised under shielding and set out over the rocky terrain for the hidden caves. Belle had forgone her usual garb and was wearing a one-piece jumpsuit, well accessorized with selected weapons. She'd stashed extra flex-cuffs in her pack. Her boots suited the rocky terrain, yet were flexible enough for running and fighting, with a cunning steel toe to maximize kicks. She wore a push-up bra, not for the stunning silhouette it gave her, though that was always nice, but solely for the fact that it held her ample bosom out of the way when she drew a weapon.

Of course, a great bosom was a weapon in itself. She noted Polis casting glances in that direction. Polis had breasts, small but pretty. Belle ran a hand down her tummy. The baby wasn't visible yet, but the suit was slightly tighter than it used to be, especially through the bust.

The Valoran was in her usual sleek black one-piece; in the full sun, the black muted and ran, adapting to mimic the surrounding terrain. Very cool. She bristled with the usual weapons, plus a Valoran straight sword. Not everyone had the skill for swordplay, but Cali Polis undoubtedly did. She spent hours performing drills down in the cargo bay. Her sword form was a beautiful as dance and as lethal as a rattlesnake.

Every day Belle liked her a little more.

They approached from downwind; Belle's sensitive hearing and sense of smell read the situation in the air. A light breeze masked the sound of their approach. The women took an elevated position behind some rocks, studying the site for a long while, Belle using her binoculars, Polis with her comp display. They both got the same story.

"Okay, two sentries on the cave. Two inside the cave, both male. Three in the nearest cruiser, one in the other."

Belle nodded in agreement. It was eight, not seven. The first three were no doubt her pirates. The others were accomplices.

"Any sign of Tucker?" Her nose was picking him up, faintly. Polis scanned and then shook her head. "Wolves are rare. The computer probably doesn't read him."

He was inside the caves. Odd, she didn't smell any other animals; usually poachers would have assembled with several.

Polis suddenly gave an evil chuckle. "I've taken computer control from both cruisers. They can manually exit and enter, but they can't take off until I release them."

"Too bad you can't lock them in." Belle felt a small smile playing on her lips. Oh well, that would make it too easy. No fun in that!

"Okay, Polis. We'll take down the guards, then the one in the *Luna*. We can use that ship for holding. Hopefully, the other three are having a sleep cycle. At this point, I don't really want to engage them."

Polis nodded in agreement.

"If we take the ship, we can lure the guards into it, then go after the two in the cave."

They crept down the slope, holding position for long moments before advancing. During one of their breaks, Belle brought up the binoculars just as a man exited the cave, speaking to one of the guards. The guard nodded at the man and made for the ship they were approaching.

"Okay, two in the ship now, one on guard."

Belle didn't answer. She was looking at the man as he returned to the cave. Tall, slender but muscular. His black garb fit like a second skin over his well-formed body. Short-cropped silver hair glinted in the sun.

"Armand!" Belle almost dropped the binoculars, her heart racing in her chest.

"You know him?"

She fought down nausea, angry tears burning her eyes. "Sort of. He's the baby's father." Now she remembered all his questions about Tucker. "Son of a fucking bitch." Armand stilled in his tracks, looking slowly over the terrain, hand shielding his eyes against the bright light. Both women went still until he returned to the cave.

"He's Were, but not EurLu. We're in a pickle here, Polis. I don't think I can take him." Her heart raced. She knew damn well she couldn't take him in a fight. He'd clearly demonstrated his physical mastery over her. Even now, angry and tired, her body betrayed her, going wet just at the sight of the tall Were.

"We have the element of surprise, Cowgirl."

Belle squatted there behind a rock, dropping her head to her knees. She wanted to scream, to kick and curse. Instead, she had to go into major stealth mode. She dug into her pack. "We can't afford to fight these guys if he's around. And we might have to

assume some, if not all of the others, are Were as well. God! No wonder they kicked my ass! Here's an extra tranq unit. Just touch this to the skin, and it'll knock 'em out in seconds. Be careful; these are more touchy than the inhalation unit. Do you think you can get on the far cruiser? Deal with the two there?"

Polis nodded.

"Okay, I'll take the guard then. Let's leave the youngsters alone till we get the outside secured. I don't want you going into that cave, Cali. He's way too dangerous, way too slick."

Polis grabbed Belle's arm. "What makes you think you can take them by yourself?"

"I'm part Were, Cali. That evens the playing field a bit." She dropped her hand to her belly. "And no matter what sort of rat bastard he is, he's not gonna want to hurt his own pup. He's going to smell this baby, *his* baby, all over me." Polis looked skeptical. Inside, Belle felt the same way. Some small part of her had believed the vivid dreams she'd had of Armand were real, a shared experience. In the bright light of day, she could see Armand's betrayal for what it was.

But why would an AmWere poach a wolf?

"I want that cruiser locked down tight. After we take the three on the *Woolfsbane*, I'll take the two in the cave. We'll go from there."

"I don't like this, Cowgirl. You're taking on way too much."

Belle smiled fiercely. "Polis, did I ever tell you the story about how I took in the Sand Pirates single-handed?"

"You didn't need to. That story circulated all over the systems. I didn't believe it was true until I talked to Sera."

"Damn straight it's true. When I hunt, I get my man. This one's personal. Don't you worry about me."

* * * * *

The first part of the plan went off without a hitch; Belle stalked the guard and tranqed him cleanly and quietly before he knew what hit him. She'd like to have fought just to take the edge from her anger. Belle hefted his bulk with a little effort and carried him up the gangplank just as Polis opened the hatch. The other two males were unconscious, hands bound in nearly unbreakable poly flex-cuffs. She stood and stared, shocked by their rugged beauty. These men were clearly not human. Nor were they EurLu.

"Any problems?"

Cali shook her head. "They were in the same bed. The brunet woke an instant before I tranqed him."

Belle lowered the third male to an empty bunk, and together, the women stood staring at the three.

“Breathtaking.”

Belle nodded in agreement, slowly coming out of her abstraction. “Can you get us on the other cruiser?”

Polis nodded. They eased their way outside and located a service hatch. Polis had the schematic for the ship in her comp. “They’re in the crew quarters, probably sleeping.” They crept through the ship silently, easily locating the berth where the three rested. Belle quickly tranqed the three poachers. The woman’s eyes flickered open as the needle brushed her skin, and the abject fear in her expression made Belle’s stomach drop. They quickly cuffed the three and moved them to the brig.

“All right, Cali. I want you to give me fifteen minutes, then put these birds in the sky. I’ll bring the other two up on the *Starr*. You’re sure you can do it with the tractor beam?”

“Yeah, it’ll be a rough ride for the other cruiser, but I can handle it.”

“Well, if not, you just take this one. We can leave one ship behind and put the other prisoners on the *Starr*. I want these fucks to stand trial, not die in space. Don’t take any risks.”

“Call if you need help, Belle.”

She grinned fiercely and nodded.

Cali frowned. “I mean it. Don’t you put that baby at risk.”

“Fifteen minutes, Cali. Then clear out unless I tell you otherwise.” She double-checked her comm unit and made sure that Cali did the same. With a wink, she was off, down to the belly of the cruiser and back out the service hatch. She landed on the rocky surface in silence and took cover in the shade.

Cowgirl Oakley was going hunting.

* * * * *

She eased into the entrance to the cave, pausing for a moment to let her senses adjust to the dim light and damp air. Her eyes dilated quickly, night vision kicking in rapidly. She scented the air, smelling the rich, familiar fragrance of Tucker, the green forest smell of Armand, and another scent she didn’t know. The scent was wild and clean, clearly another Were. Silently, Belle slid into the caves.

For some time, the darkness was complete. Finally, as she rounded a bend, light bled out, showing the sandy floor of the cave. The cavern was a natural formation, probably volcanic in nature. She heard the bubbling of water, and the air was humid and fresh. No doubt a spring rose nearby. That was why they were camped this far back. Belle hunkered down to watch. She didn’t have much time; Armand would smell her very soon. Luckily, the draft of air that carried their scents kept her downwind.

He sat near an enclosure. The electric barrier had been disabled, and the walls dismantled. It looked as though they were breaking camp. Inside the enclosure were several boulders and a pair of pallets on the floor of the cave where someone had been

sleeping. Belle silently crept closer, briefly forced into the open where the tunnel widened. She silently took cover in the shadows.

Armand had his back to her, his arms wrapped around his knees as he rocked slightly. He hummed a melody. Good. He wouldn't hear her over his own song. She slid her laser pistol from its holster, checked the charge, and set it on a high-stun level.

"Armand."

Her voice was little more than a whisper, yet he heard it. His body went still.

"Hands behind your head."

Slowly, he obeyed.

She sidled up carefully, pistol in one hand, cuffs in the other. How to do this...?

He moved as quickly as a cat, but she was ready with a warning shot. He again went still, returning his hands behind his head. She expertly slipped the cuffs on and activated them. She backed away, not fooling herself. He was dangerous, even in cuffs.

"So...Armand. Funny meeting you here. Now where's Tucker?" She rounded his body, keeping away from his legs. She quickly scanned for the second person in the cave.

"Armand!" She glanced at him, and her jaw dropped. "You're not Armand!" She moved quickly, putting her back to a wall. The man before her glared. His dark eyes sparked in anger, and his silver hair bristled in the dim light. Not silver, exactly, but blond. Platinum.

"Where's the wolf?" She glanced away, feeling unseen eyes. She smelled Armand but didn't see him. "And where the fuck's Armand? I can smell him." The man didn't speak; he merely glared. Anger boiled, and Belle raised her weapon once again as the man began to rise slowly to his feet. If anything, he was taller than Armand. He advanced on her slowly, prompting her to fire another warning shot, bringing him to a halt.

A low, ominous growl echoed through the cave, raising the hair on her neck.

"Tucker?" She couldn't tell where the growl came from.

"Get the fuck back on the floor." She leveled her weapon at the Were. "The next shot is to the body, and I won't tell you what setting I've got this on."

His gaze darted to the burn mark on the floor. Slowly, the man sank to his knees.

He was clad in black leather that hugged his legs and ass in loving intimacy. She couldn't help noticing the protective codpiece in the front. Very nice. His vest was also black leather, sleeveless, baring muscular brown arms. His resemblance to Armand was superficial; his mouth was wider, grimmer. His coal gray eyes were hooded and flat. His nose was fiercely aquiline, the bones of his face stark and chiseled. Stunning. He looked like a North American Indian.

"I asked you. Where is the wolf? Where is Armand?" She advanced, halting abruptly when the growl again echoed through the cave. Tucker. She turned slowly to

see her friend of the past seven years advancing from the boulders, low to the ground, hackles bristling, teeth bared, ears flat to his head. He was advancing on...her.

"Tuck? Tucker?" A long, low whine broke from his throat, pulling tears from her eyes. "What the hell did you do to him?" She whirled on the man, leveling the pistol. With a suddenness that was breathtaking, the wolf was between them. When the man rose to his feet again, Tucker whirled on him, teeth bared. He dropped back to his knees.

"We seem to be at an impasse, Annabelle Oakley." The man's voice was low and accented, somewhat like Armand's Cajun accent, but different. "He won't let you hurt me, and he won't let me hurt you."

She kept the weapon steady, but as Tucker turned in her direction, her hand wavered. The fire in his eyes was alien and frightening. "Tuck..." Her voice was harsh and frightened.

That low, agonized whine broke from the wolf again.

"Put your weapon away and release me. We have things to speak about, you and I."

"Where's Armand? He was here, but the scent is weak."

The man looked at her keenly. "Armand isn't here right now. He'll be back soon enough. The two of us need to talk. We need to help him. We need to help the wolf."

Slowly, she slid her pistol back into the holster, checking the charge once again. Belle pulled a deep breath into her lungs. "How can I trust you not to attack me?"

The man's eyes flicked to her belly, then to her eyes. "For one thing, the wolf will kill me if I do." He scented the air. "If I'm not mistaken, you carry Armand's child. I would not endanger a child. Especially not the child of my dearest friend."

"Who are you? He didn't mention any friends... He implied that he was the only one of his kind." She moved carefully, deactivating the cuffs and slipping them from his large hands. Belle quickly moved out of reach as he flexed his wrists. There was a sudden disturbance in the air. The man frowned and turned toward the cave entrance.

"That was my copilot moving your ships and crew into orbit."

The man turned and looked at her in amazement, his eyes lingering on her smug grin. "You and your copilot managed to take both of our ships and crew?"

She smiled. "Yup. She's flying one and taking the other on a tractor beam."

He shook his head, letting a grin settle on his face. The expression took years off his appearance. He was amazingly handsome when he smiled. "You're as good as they say."

She lifted a shoulder.

He tried his communicator, got no response.

"They're all sleeping quietly in the brig. Oh, and we've got the computers locked down as well. My copilot's quite the tech whiz. I might have to keep her."

He looked at her in amazement. "You realize we're all AmWere. I can't believe you managed to ambush us!"

She felt quite pleased at his comment.

"We got pretty close. I sent my copilot away 'cause she doesn't have the stealth to stalk a Were."

"I didn't even smell you. And I'm good. Very good."

They were facing off again, Tucker in the middle.

"Back to the topic. Who are you, where's Armand, and why's Tucker all wigged out?" She folded her arms, aware that her posture set off her figure to advantage. He nodded to the rock wall.

"Why don't we call a truce? He'll be better off if we get comfortable." She glanced at Tucker, then at the man. "I'm Thorn. Thorn Greywolf of the Rocky Mountain Pack. Tucker and I go way back." She looked at him in disbelief. "Out here, I'm known as the Padre."

"The Father."

He nodded, gesturing to the cave wall. She glared at his arrogance. Nevertheless, she moved to the wall, sliding down into a sitting position. Thorn lowered himself as well, several feet away from her.

When they settled, Tucker moved between the two, still playing referee. He circled several times before finally settling to the floor and sighing deeply.

Automatically, Belle reached out and sank her hand into his fur. Calm settled over her almost immediately. How she'd missed him!

"I've answered questions. Now answer me this. How do you know Armand, and how did Tucker come to be in your company?" Thorn glanced down at her hand in the wolf's fur.

She glared at him in anger. The man hadn't answered all her questions, but fair was fair, and he clearly wasn't a poacher. "About seven years ago, my partner and I took part in a big operation. We raided an illegal hunting reserve, brought in the ringleaders and several hunters. One of them escaped into the reserve, so Penny and I went after him." She gazed at her fingers in Tucker's lush fur. To her surprise, Thorn was doing the same thing, his fingers sliding through Tucker's ruff. "We thought all the animals had been penned, but a Bar-tag came out of the brush. Before I could react, it had gored Penny and was coming after me. I was suddenly hit from the side as this huge wolf attacked and carried me to the ground. It was Tucker. He went after the Bar-tag and killed it, but nearly ended up dead himself. He saved my life. I returned the favor, and he just sort of hung on with me after that."

Thorn looked off into the distance. "How badly were you two injured?"

"Badly. I have some nasty scars on my ass. Between the wounds and the poison, Tucker almost didn't make it. I took him back to HQ and kept him in my berth for a

couple months, tending him. The hospital let me program an old droid with veterinary software for him."

Tucker was relaxing between the two. She was slightly offended when his head slipped down to rest on Thorn's leg.

"Armand... Well, that's a story in itself." She was flushing.

"I'm listening." He had a slight smile on his face, though he didn't look at her.

"You know about Matruscan pheromones?"

He glanced at her and nodded.

"Well, I was sent on a hunt after two Matruscan females who were both wanted for murder. Both went into full, standing heat. Long story short, they flooded my cruiser with eau de Matruscan. My boss tells me if she'd sent a man, they'd have disabled him. So she sent me. Bitches managed to bring me into heat for the first time in my life."

"You're Were?" His dark eyes glimmered in interest.

"Part. I was sort of manufactured in a lab back on Earth. They used AmWere DNA to enhance me in the womb. Your kind of DNA, if what we believe is true."

He stared at her in shock. "We were hunted for many years. There were rumors of experimentation, of hybrids being created for the military."

"Well, Thorn, we weren't soldiers; we were athletes. Super athletes. My parents were eventually outed and blocked from pro sports. The scandal was ugly." She lapsed into silence for a moment.

"Anyhow, I was drenched with the Matruscan fragrance, and then my own heat started. Finding someone to have sex with became imperative. So I hit the streets. Armand found me. We spent a couple days fucking like bunnies. I got pregnant. End of story."

Thorn frowned. Not the end of the story, if he knew Armand. "He left you? Knowing you were pregnant?"

"I didn't give him much option. This job... Well, the EurLu assignment came in. I guess you people had something to do with that."

He nodded absently, confirming her suspicions. "What did Armand speak of? Did he speak of his people? His family? Did he speak of me?"

"Thorn, I get the distinct impression that he's been here with you. Why are you asking this?"

Thorn looped his hand under Tucker's jaw, lifting the wolf's head to look into his eyes. "As with Tucker here, Armand has long been lost to us. We heard rumors of him being seen with you and of Tucker being with you as well."

"Two days, Thorn. I was with him two days."

"Tell me what he was like during that time."

She leaned her head back against the rock wall. Belle had not expected this sort of conversation to evolve. Strangely, she liked the man and felt the first stirrings of trust. A bit of jealousy as well. Tucker seemed divided. His large head was now resting in her lap, but he was still making contact with Thorn. She rubbed his cheeks and ears, unable to refrain from touching him. Impulsively, she leaned forward and hugged him. The wolf twisted to his side, head upside down in her lap, tongue lolling from his jaws. He looked like he had a grin on his face.

"We were sort of focused on one thing, you know."

Thorn nodded, a smile playing around his lips.

"I got the impression that he'd had a rough time in the past and maybe didn't remember everything. He spoke of the ways of his people but didn't remember specifics. He has scars, terrible scars, but doesn't know how he got them."

"You mistook me for him, why?"

She looked at him in puzzlement. "Your hair is exactly the same. And your general build. You're taller, but not by much. He's heavier through the shoulders. He always wore black. And you move the same."

"Armand's hair was always long and black." He knit his brow in puzzlement. "Mine is colored, part of a disguise." Thorn reached for his belt and thumbed a button. His form shimmered briefly as the illusion dropped. His short platinum crop morphed into black hair, bound back tightly in a hip-length braid. He features remained the same, if somewhat more refined. Thorn shifted from being harshly handsome to downright beautiful.

"You have a digital disguise!" Not many could afford the pricey little gadget. Somehow, the black hair fit better with the dark skin and eyes. "I know you're Were, but you look Native American."

"We all have a great deal of human in our DNA. Mine is Cherokee and Choctaw. Armand is Cajun, which is French and Indian combined."

"You have similar accents."

"Both of us come from Louisiana. Armand speaks French Cajun fluently. I speak just a bit." He shifted impatiently, so she returned to her story.

"So his body hair and his brows are black, but his hair is silver. I asked him about that. He didn't know why it's different. My guess is something really bad happened in his life, 'cause he's still a young man.

"He knew right when I became pregnant. This is embarrassing, but during sex, he..." She cleared her throat. "I...penetrated him..." She waved her finger vaguely in the air.

"He tied?" Thorn's eyes sparkled.

"Yeah. That." She shook her head. "Now that was something. He said in the old days, his people mated as a triad. A second male mounted the first, triggering the tie,

and then guarded the couple as they were helpless. I asked how he felt about being penetrated by another man, as he's so dominant. He seemed sort of confused. Sad."

Thorn shifted, turning to face her.

"Belle, this child you carry, it will be his first conceived without me at his back."

Belle looked at him, wanting to be shocked, but instead felt saddened by the grief in his eyes. "You were his lover?"

He smiled through overbright eyes. "No, his beta. His second. His best friend."

"His beta."

"Yes, Armand was—is—our Alpha. He was taken by slavers. They took nearly half our pack in one devastating attack. We've been looking for our family members for most of two decades now." Belle closed her eyes, the story beginning to come clear.

"Children? How many children does he have?" God. He was married and no doubt had a mate waiting, grieving.

"This is his fifth, chère. You've met the twins, Storm and Rain. And Golden. Forest was taken in the raid, and we haven't yet located him."

"And his mate?" She couldn't help it; tears were beginning to burn her eyes. Damn hormones.

"She died after delivering Golden. We were being hunted, and life was damn hard. She wasn't strong enough to survive after the labor, and we had no medical care. It was a sad time."

Belle let her eyes drop closed and asked the question she dreaded most. "Thorn, how are Armand and Tucker linked?" Her hands gripped into fists, nails digging into her palms. She felt the trickle of blood on her skin.

Thorn didn't answer immediately, waiting for her to open her eyes, to look at him. "Belle, I think you know this already. Tucker and Armand are the same."

Of course they were.

Oh God.

She'd fucked Tucker.

Chapter Eleven

"So, Tucker's here, what's the problem with Armand?"

Belle had tamped down the hysteria. Armand was a man. She'd had sex with a man. Then the erotic memory of draping over Tucker's furry body returned, back on that day she'd seduced Quantrell in her berth. His fur had been warm and silky between her thighs. That seemed so long ago. The remembered sensation brought a surge of moisture to her panties.

Oh God. I fucked Tucker.

"He seems to be locked into wolf form. He shifted briefly many days ago; we were sleeping, so I didn't really see him. He shifted back very quickly."

"Well, he wasn't Tucker when we were together."

Thorn stretched and settled back. "You've never been in heat before?"

She shook her head.

"I imagine your heat drew him out. Tucker is deeply bonded to you; he wouldn't allow another to take the woman he perceives as his mate. He shifted out of expedience. Now you're safely claimed, and he's content to stay in this form."

"Fuck."

Thorn grinned wryly. "That might draw him out. You and I could make him jealous..."

"Not a chance. Not that it's not tempting. Does he understand us? I've always thought he was damn intelligent. We could talk to him."

"That actually might be helpful. If I'm correct, he's been in wolf form so long it's his primary identity now. Armand needs to know about his family, about the pack."

Belle looked down at the huge head in her lap. "So there's no chance we're gonna just go back to our lives, Tucker and me and the *Starr*." It was a statement, not a question.

"You have a baby now, a baby who's pack. That baby has a place with its people and deserves to grow up knowing who she is. The pack needs their Alpha back. We deserve that, and he deserves that." He spoke softly, sadly.

"You've been the Alpha for a long time. Why can't you continue?"

"Belle, Armand is my Alpha. I'm his second. It's our nature. My nature isn't to lead, it's to support. To raise and train our youth in the ways of the pack. I've done my best, but it isn't enough." He sat forward and looked at her intently. "Your child deserves its father, and you deserve your mate. Don't you want that?"

Her voice was hoarse. "Mate? I didn't factor a mate into this pregnancy, Thorn. What about love, marriage, that sort of thing?"

"I think after seven years with you, Armand has stayed out of love for you. And tell me, Belle, in the days you spent with Armand, can you honestly say how you felt about him? What did your instincts tell you?"

Belle sighed, opened her emotions. "On an instinctual level, I knew we were perfect. He was my ideal match. Love? No. But I've needed him, dreamed of him every day in the past four months. Sometimes the dreams are so vivid –"

"That it seemed that he was really with you."

She nodded.

"And he was at your side the entire time. Perhaps that is why you reacted so violently when we took him from you."

"Nah, that's just me when I get pissed off. I didn't know your people were taking him till after the fact. Now violent...talk to my copilot about my behavior while I was tailing those three!"

Thorn laughed. "Truthfully, Belle, you had them shaken. I think Storm's been having nightmares about you castrating him in his sleep, and Rain can barely function knowing she hurt you and left you behind. Golden keeps reassuring her that you and the baby will be all right, but she doesn't believe it."

Damn. She needed to contact Polis, try to salvage the entire situation. Belle activated her communicator.

"Polis here."

"Hey, Cali, how're things?" The connection was raspy, but clear enough to understand.

"The prisoners are awake and unhappy, but under control. We're in stable orbit, and using the piggyback from the *Starr*, we'll lose communication in about five minutes."

"All right, Cali, I'll be quick then." She gave a quick rundown of the current situation. "I want you to stay put for the next twenty-four hours, we'll rendezvous with

you at that point. I honestly don't know if you'll be safe if you let the prisoners loose." She caught Thorn's eye.

"Cali, if you restore communication access to the prisoners and to Thorn here, he can talk to them." There was a long silence, and then Thorn's handheld sputtered to life.

"Padre! Papa!" Six voices babbled into the silence.

Tucker lifted his head curiously.

"Silence on comm!" The voices died away at Thorn's command. "First off, things are under control. We are not prisoners; it seems we're on the same side as Marshal Oakley. We will rendezvous in twenty-four hours, and I will update you at that time. If Marshal Oakley agrees, you'll be uncuffed and released from the brig. Storm, you, Rain, and Golden will take no action against Cali Polis. She will retain command of the cruiser until I return. Is that understood?" There was a loud, raspy silence over the comm.

"But, Papa—"

"Is that understood, Storm?"

"Yes, sir."

"Rain? Golden?" Both gave their assent. "Marshal Oakley and I are going to work together, spend the next day trying to reach Armand; he spent several days with Belle, so I think our chances of reaching him are best if she remains with me." Again, silence.

Belle could just imagine the anger his children must feel. And the betrayal. And the rejection. Thorn gave further instructions to both crews before signing off. The other three AmWere—Timber, Staten, and Regis—would have to hold tight in the brig of the *Luna* until Cali could dock the ships.

"Thankfully, with your systems restored, we can communicate with them anytime. The piggyback from the *Starr* to the cruisers cut off as soon as orbit took them out of range."

He nodded absently, obviously disturbed by the conversation with Armand's children.

"We'll reach him, Thorn. He could easily have killed Storm back then but held back. Somehow, he recognizes his children. And you." It hurt to admit it, but Belle knew he belonged to these people, not to her.

"You look tired, Marshal Oakley."

"Cowgirl...or Belle. Just not Cow Belle."

He nodded, giving her a small smile at the joke. "Belle. You look tired. Perhaps you should rest."

She checked her comp pad. Regardless of planet time, she was well into her sleeping period. Suddenly, her eyes felt heavy and her head was nodding.

"There are sleeping pallets over there. Are you hungry?"

"No, not right now. Just tired." She clambered to her feet and looked at the sleeping pallets inside the enclosure.

"The barrier is disabled. It was unnecessary."

She bit her lip and entered, followed by Tucker. Armand. There was bedding for three or four, well padded and comfortable. Belle unbuckled her boots and plumped a pillow, pulling a light blanket up to her shoulders. She could have returned to the *Starr*, but the hike wasn't appealing right now. Besides, the cave had a strange intimacy. Plus, the *Starr* was Tucker's home; he'd be in his comfort zone there. And maybe they didn't want him in his comfort zone.

Tucker settled next to her, close to her back, keeping her warm and safe. After a few moments, the lights dimmed even further, and she heard Thorn settle on the pallet on the far side of the wolf. He sighed lightly. Tucker echoed that deep sigh, and Belle smiled. It must be a wolf thing. She fell asleep with the smile still on her face.

* * * * *

She came awake with a start, uncertain what had roused her. Belle sat up, looking into the dim shadows of the cave.

"Belle, are you all right?" Thorn rose drowsily, looking across Tucker's body at her.

"The baby. I felt the baby move. It woke me."

He grinned sleepily, reaching across Tucker to rest his hand on her belly. "You're into your fourth month?"

She nodded; he knew exactly where to set his hand. She felt a flutter, and then he smiled, feeling it as well.

"That's a feeling I've missed." He settled back into place.

"Do you have children of your own?"

"No, I've always been the father figure of the pack. A young one used to call me Padre, and it sort of stuck."

"No mate?"

He shook his head. "I mated, but it was a bad match. That was long ago, before we left Earth."

They passed the time that way, spending hours filling in the gaps as best they could, hoping Armand would listen and find a connection. He told her about Armand's children, their adventures as little ones, their accomplishments as adults. The loss of Forest had hit him especially hard.

"I felt that I had an influence on his conception, more so than the others. Forest even resembled me."

"So, when the three of you...mated, he mounted Nanette, and you mounted him."

"Are you shocked?"

She bit her lip and shook her head. "It makes sense, actually, given what we experienced. I triggered the tie, but I imagine it would have been more powerful if you'd triggered it. My finger just doesn't compare to what you have to offer."

He looked to see if she was serious, and she gave him a wink. "And we were both damn incapacitated afterward. If someone had broken into our room, we'd have been defenseless." She rolled onto her side, facing him. "Have you ever done it?"

"Tied? No. Val and I never tried for children. And before..." His face took on a faraway look, clearly remembering other times. Another life, maybe. "The tie isn't recreational; it's a very deep link between mates. I'm impressed that you achieved it without a third."

"I'm damn good, that's why!" She gave him a big grin. "What went wrong with you and Val? You seem amiable enough, and you aren't hard to look at."

"Valerie was a full-blood EurLu. She tried to fit in, but in our pack, even the half bloods have the ability to shift. We are more animal than Val was comfortable with. I frightened her. She felt like an outsider with us."

"I'm sorry."

He smiled. "I am too, but it was long ago. She is with her people on Selene and living a comfortable life. We also are leading a good life; we've found a beautiful planet to live on. Our numbers are rising. Our only grief is the loss of our family. Recovering Armand gives us hope."

"What is your wolf like?"

Thorn sat up and stretched. "Would you like to see it?"

She nodded and then laughed as he stripped naked. "Get used to it. We spend a lot of time naked. Otherwise, we ruin too many clothes."

With a sudden movement, he was shifting, light and energy flowing from his body. He was fast, and she barely saw the bones and muscles of his body reshaping before a sleek black wolf sat at Tucker's side. Tucker sat up, ears at alert as the black wolf dropped low before him, ears back, rapidly licking the other wolf's jaw and mouth.

"You haven't taken wolf form for him, have you?"

Thorn suddenly went still, his dark gray eyes meeting hers. She could see the thought process in his eyes. Tucker suddenly rose high, neck arched, head pressed over Thorn's shoulders in a display of dominance.

She watched in fascination as the two wolves renewed their acquaintance. "I can't believe you didn't do this earlier!" She could swear that Thorn glared at her before he turned, leading Tucker from the enclosure.

Together, the two wolves began to run, occasionally bumping haunches and nipping at one another. They romped hard, gradually accelerating, suddenly tearing off into the tunnels at a full run, leaving Belle alone in the near darkness. They quickly returned and then headed to the tunnel exit, charging off to the topside.

“Have fun, you two!” Her laughter followed them out of the cave.

Belle rose, grabbed the lantern, and began searching for food. She found water and some dried fruit and jerky; with a grimace, she settled down to eat. Afterward, she poked around, finding a spare set of clothing. These must be for Armand. Leather again; this set was new, similar to what Thorn was wearing. The vest had loops and pockets for tools and weapons. A button released the seams for easy access and exit. Very functional indeed. Kinky too. She liked it.

Belle folded it and set it aside. She found a holo album that displayed images of Armand’s family. They’d documented the years both before and after his disappearance. She saw images of his sons and daughter, Golden as a tiny baby cuddled in Armand’s strong arms. He looked different yet the same. In place of raffish silver spikes, his hair flowed in abundant waves, dark and lush. He was thinner, and his face looked grim. Hard times. His wife Nanette had a sweet, beautiful presence, soft, gleaming black hair, fair skin, and blue, blue eyes. Looking at the image made Belle feel like a plow horse. She flipped off that picture after staring long and hard at Armand’s incomparable mate.

There was an image of a young man, similar to Rain and Storm, but more austere, more solemn. His black hair was sleek and arrow straight. He wore a long braid at either side of his face, the back falling loose. He bore an eerie resemblance to Thorn. Belle wondered if perhaps Thorn’s presence at their conceptions really did leave his mark on Armand’s children. Her heart ached to look upon the face of that young man. He was no doubt struggling in a preserve, as his father had been when she found him. If he still lived.

She put the holo device away, hearing the men...wolves arriving in the distance. They swept through, tongues lolling, huge, toothy smiles on their faces. They headed straight to the small spring, and she heard them splashing in the water, lapping it up as they waded, cooling their bellies.

Belle returned to the pallet and settled down, watching the two.

“Don’t you two even think of lying down here! I’m not sharing my blankets with two wet dogs!”

Again, identical grins settled over their features. They shook, fur throwing off excess water, and they clambered onto the boulders, panting like locomotives, to allow the air to dry their fur.

Comforted by their presence, Belle lay back, hand on her belly, feeling butterfly wings brushing her womb. “Armand, your baby’s moving, and you’re missing it.”

Tucker just kept panting, pink tongue lolling out of the side of his jaws.

Thorn rose, shook, and returned to human form. He looked expectantly at his companion, but Tucker remained firmly in control. Thorn jumped nimbly from the rock, heading toward the pallet.

“Clothes, Thorn.”

He grinned sheepishly and wrestled into his pants. "I was thinking maybe we could make him jealous..."

"Right. That sounds like a swift idea. Then he can tear both of us to pieces."

Thorn lay next to her, leaving space for the wolf. Tucker jumped from his perch and started for the pallet.

"Tucker. I said no wet dog in the bed." He sat on his haunches just feet away. "If Armand wants to come join us, he's welcome to. You, my friend, are exiled till you're dry." Tucker whined and turned in a circle, finally settling just feet from her head.

She sighed in defeat, glanced sadly at Thorn, and settled onto her side for a nap.

* * * * *

Belle was awakened by hands...hands on her breasts, rubbing, flicking the nipples. She moaned and then jerked upright.

"Dammit, Thorn!"

He was on his side, jerking awake as she yelled. Armand lay between them, naked and beautiful, grinning as she glanced down at the open front of her jumpsuit. Her full breasts were on glorious display.

"Happy to see me then, eh, bébé?"

She didn't know whether to stuff her boobs back into her suit or hug him. Hugs won out. "God, Armand, we were so worried!"

He caught her and kissed her lustily and loudly, on the neck, on the cheek, finally capturing her lips. "She's most wonderful, eh, mon ami? My Belle is a queen among women!" Thorn was on his knees. Armand turned into him, and they clasped one another hard in an embrace.

Belle took the opportunity to zip her breasts out of sight. She sat back on her heels as the two men hugged.

Thorn grasped Armand's silver hair and tugged. "What is this, Armand? You've not only gone silver, but you cut it all off!"

Armand shrugged sheepishly. "I suppose it had been a very long time since I had last shifted, brother. When I followed Belle down into the City, I shifted, and my hair had grown to such lengths! I stole some clothing and a knife and did the best I could!"

Thorn laughed, tears bright in his eyes.

Belle ran her fingers through Armand's hair; it had grown several inches since she'd last seen him, hanging down into his eyes.

He pushed it carelessly. The waves were charmingly messy. Armand turned back to her, hand on her belly. "How's the little one, Belle?" He rubbed gently. "I'm sorry I didn't protect you better from my children. They didn't know." She nodded, and he glanced around. "I remember some of what you two spoke of, but not all. Thorn, where are my children? I would like to see them."

He was a bit pale; his hands trembled. "I saw the twins, and Golden... He is so grown up! But where is Forest?" Fear. She saw fear in his expression.

Thorn reached out and clasped his hand. "Mon ami, he was taken, don't you remember? You fell, he returned to your side. They took you both. I'm so sorry."

Armand's blue eyes clouded. "I remember now why I chose to remain wolf. The pain..." He swallowed hard. "How many, Thorn?"

Thorn told him, naming names, telling him of those they'd located.

"Thorn, Belle, you bring me such joy and such pain."

Thorn's gaze dropped to the livid scars on Armand's abdomen. His brows raised in shock.

"Those are from the Bar-tag." Belle spoke softly, tracing one long, silvery scar.

"Why, yes, they are. I didn't remember." His voice was a soft whisper.

"You saved my life, Armand."

"As you saved mine. And you gave me my freedom and my sanity. Those years as a wolf are a haze in my mind. I remember little before you." He shook his head in frustration. "Thorn, where are my children? I need to see them."

Thorn rose and moved to the supplies, pulling out the spare leathers. "Your charming mate and her copilot took them prisoner, as well as my crew. And both of my cruisers. They're currently in orbit."

Armand lifted a brow at Belle. "Is this true, bébé?"

She flushed. Nodded.

"Since when do you fly with a copilot other than Tucker? I am hurt."

Thorn laughed aloud and bent to begin packing supplies.

"We're to meet them in three hours, Armand. You timed your return perfectly. We'll hike to the *Starr* and meet them, perhaps a bit early." Belle rose and watched in appreciation as Armand slipped into the tight leathers. Nice. She stroked his ass before bending down to roll up the bedding. He grinned, grabbed her by the wrist, and pulled her close.

"I need to see my children again, Belle. After that, we'll renew our acquaintance, eh?" He bent down and kissed her softly. "And I must meet this new copilot of yours. If I'm to be replaced, I insist on interviewing the candidate." He smiled, but her heart dropped.

"You aren't being replaced, Armand."

He smiled sadly, pulling her close. "But things will change now. For all of us."

She simply nodded and turned away. They had things to discuss, and personal business could wait.

Chapter Twelve

Belle and Polis had gently, delicately joined the three ships, docking the *Belle Starr* to the larger *Woolfsbane* and the *Luna*. Polis had disabled the virus program. At least, she told Belle that she'd done so. Polis didn't trust easily. No sooner had the air lock pressurized than Armand and Thorn had crossed to the pack cruiser. Belle followed in time to see Armand enter the cargo hold and come to an uncertain stop in front of six young Were.

"Daddy?" Rain had shed her tough, bitter veneer and now looked like a frightened teen. Golden grinned while Storm hung back.

"Rain."

No sooner did her name escape his lips than she flew at him, holding tight, arms around his neck. Her brothers quickly joined her. Thorn's three crewmembers grinned and shifted about, uncertain what to do with themselves. Within moments, they were in the mob, touching and patting, stroking their Alpha.

Belle started back to the *Starr*, but Thorn gripped her arm and stopped her. "You belong here."

She shook her head. "He needs time with them, Thorn. The *Starr's* unmanned. I have to get back to the helm."

His hand dropped, but he whispered, "You belong at his side, Belle. Don't doubt that."

She smiled sadly and stepped away, looking once over her shoulder as she crossed the air lock. Armand was laughing, crying, touching his children. Over his shoulder, she caught the eye of his oldest son. Storm's eyes held nothing but hatred for her. She turned her back and walked away.

* * * * *

“Good to have you back, Cali.” Belle leaned back and propped her feet on the instrument panel of the helm. The ships were still joined; they were all to gather aboard the *Woolfsbane* for a conference. Belle grimaced at the thought of facing the angry mob of werewolves.

Polis dropped gracefully into her seat and sat idly for a moment. Beyond monitoring instruments, there was nothing to do.

“I spoke to Vaine. She wants us to bring them in.” Belle dropped her feet to the floor.

“You explained the situation?”

Cali nodded. “They aren’t prisoners, but she wants to debrief Tuck – Armand while he’s still around.”

“Makes sense. We’ve had an ongoing battle against the poachers. There’s a standing bounty on most of them. Maybe we can help the pack.”

Polis nodded in agreement. She leaned back, stretching her long legs out in front of her.

Belle glanced at her companion and then did a double take. “Cali...is that...?” She sat up and stared. “You have an erection!”

Polis flushed delicately but didn’t seem disturbed. “I told you I have both male and female organs.”

“You didn’t say they were all fully functional!” Belle stared at the rapidly disappearing bulge. “Damn girl, how’d you get so lucky? Shit!”

That prompted a chuckle from Cali.

“So what brought that on? And more to the point, your nipples are all pointy too! I should say, who brought it on?” Belle relaxed back into her chair. She grinned evilly as Cali flushed a bit deeper.

“One of the Were, the blond. His appearance is lovely.”

“Ah. Golden. Armand’s youngest son. He’s a sweet one. Can’t say anything about what he’s like, though. Last I spent quality time with Blondie, he was shooting the wolf with tranquilizers and beating me up.” She propped her arms behind her head. “I like that in a man, don’t you?”

This time, Cali snorted delicately. She was gradually loosening up the serious Valoran. Hopefully, by the time they got to back to base, she’d have completely corrupted her. Belle made that her new goal. It beat thinking about Armand flying away with his pack, leaving her and their baby behind.

But the baby was pack. Her belly twisted in panic.

Belle was jerked out of her morose thoughts by a hand on her shoulder. She glanced up in time to take a kiss on the forehead.

“Hey, Armand.” She couldn’t help the smile that greeted him.

“Belle. Can you come with me for a moment, to your cabin?”

She nodded and glanced at Polis.

"I'll take the helm for a while. You've got your meeting as well."

Belle stood and started to follow Armand from the bridge. "Thanks, Cali."

The Valoran nodded and turned to her instruments.

It was a novelty following Armand through the ship; she had to remind herself that he was as at home here as she was. After all, he'd been with her for the past seven years. In all that time, she'd had no idea what a fine ass he had. Belle sighed happily, and Armand glanced over his shoulder as though he'd caught her thoughts. His gait was loose and confident, graceful, and just the tiniest bit arrogant. Pretty much like Tucker.

She followed him into her cabin and pulled up short.

Golden was inside, gazing out the porthole, an array of equipment on her bed. He turned and flushed in embarrassment, his head dropping in a submissive gesture. He remembered their disastrous first meeting as well as she.

"Belle, this is Golden, my youngest son."

She nodded coolly at the handsome young man.

"Golden has healing skills; he functions as medic when he's in the field. I'd like him to check your health. I want to see that you've recovered from your injuries."

She nodded. "It wasn't that bad, and the baby wasn't affected at all."

Why in hell was she trying to smooth this over? Maybe because Golden was looking ashamed and mortified. Oh hell. He looked like a kid who'd wrecked his dad's skimmer. What a rotten deal, get your long-lost father back, then have to make amends for beating up the woman who carries your sibling. Half sibling.

"When we left, I did a quick scan; you had injuries to the rib cage as well as a concussion. I didn't like leaving you like that." He moved to the bed and began assembling a complicated scanner. "I can get a general impression of your health and the status of the baby as well."

Belle gave up and took a seat on the edge of the bed, raising a brow at Armand, who stood leaning against the doorway. Her eyes flicked from father to son, noting similarities as well as differences.

When she had first met Golden, he'd been stunning, not only in his appearance, but his presence had been commanding. Now, next to his father, he seemed to be quite young, with the mannerisms of a teenager. But still, she could see his father, and when she looked closely, she saw his godfather as well. Weird.

She obediently held out a fingertip for temp and a blood sample, and lay back to allow him to scan her for injuries.

"I thought the ribs were only cracked. They were broken, according to this. They damaged your lung."

"I think your sister was wearing steel-toes."

He frowned and moved to her head, running the scanner over her face and skull.

"You must have had a hell of a black eye."

She grinned. "Two, actually. But then, I imagine you didn't look too swift when I was finished with you either."

He fingered his chin. The scar was faint but noticeable.

She reached up and ran a finger down the faint line. "That'll keep you from being too pretty. A man should never be prettier than a woman."

"You did that?" Armand leaned in and looked closely.

"She did. One punch. You should have seen Rain afterward; she looked like she'd tangled with an earthmover!"

Armand chuckled and returned to his post. Golden started the scan on her lower body. "You've healed up really well. I'm surprised that a human could take that and recover so quickly." He focused on his scanner, missing the look that Belle and Armand shared. "Everything's good here. You're what...about four and a half months?"

"That sounds right." Armand leaned forward to peek at the scanner, frowning. Golden looked up at his father.

"How do you know?" Golden looked from Belle to Armand, shock coming over his face. "Oh God. Father. I am so sorry." He looked so deflated that Belle started to feel bad for him. Really bad.

"Father, I didn't know... None of us knew." He reached up and wiped furiously at his eyes.

"Golden, you're young still and haven't developed the senses that would tell you that she was carrying my child. I can understand that you wouldn't recognize my mark on her. You were young when I left." He stood straight, towering over his son. "I find it harder to believe that Rain and Storm were unable to sense that. They're adults and well familiar with my scent. Thorn knew immediately."

"We were frightened, Dad. And it went so bad so fast. I think they were horrified that you didn't know them, that you attacked."

"I was a wolf defending my mate and child. That was my only concern." Armand sank down on the bed, leaning against the headboard. "I'm ashamed that I didn't recognize my own children and that I let the wolf take me so completely, for so long. There's enough guilt and blame to go around, Golden."

The younger man turned back to his scanner and started checking Belle again.

"Your blood pressure is normal, and your nutrition looks good as well. Weight..."

She glared at him, and he winked. "Weight is perfect. Do you want to know...?"

"Yes!"

"No!"

Golden looked from mother to father. "Sorry, Dad. Mother's prerogative." He grinned, a huge dimple brightening up his face. "You're halfway through, and so far,

everything looks great. I'm not a doctor yet, but whatever you're doing, just keep doing it."

Belle sat up, looking in bemusement at Armand's hand as he assisted her upright. Nice.

"Golden, go round up your brother and sister. Thorn too. Have them meet us on the *Woolfsbane* in about fifteen minutes. We need to compare notes, decide where to go from here." He turned to Belle. "Should your copilot come as well?"

She nodded. "She's kept Vaine up to date on what's been happening and has some information we need to share with you. Golden, would you mind letting her know as well?"

He nodded and started packing his equipment. "Belle, do you want me to send Staten to take over your bridge?"

"Yeah, that would be good. We seem to be pretty safe out here, but appearances can be deceptive, eh?" She grinned as he flushed again. What a cutie! Within moments, he was out of the room, pulling the slider closed behind him.

"Alone at last, eh, bébé?"

Armand pulled her to the head of the bed, settling her into his arms. "Four and a half months. It's been too long since I've held you, Belle."

"Yeah, well, you could have done something about that earlier, Tucker."

He lifted a brow in question. "Are you angry?"

She turned into him, looping an arm around his neck. "I'm so relieved to have you back, I haven't had time to feel anything but relief. And from what Thorn told me, you really didn't have much incentive to come back."

He hugged her tightly. "The incentive was there, Belle. Just not the will or the self-knowledge. Tucker is very much the wolf. When I'm me, I have memories of Tucker, but Tucker thinks like the wolf and doesn't remember being Armand. Well, he didn't. Now, he's remembering. When he recognized Thorn's wolf, that was his...my breakthrough." He leaned back again. "Again, Belle...are you angry with me?"

"Hell yes!" Angry tears filled her eyes. "I know the reasons, I know the logic, but how could you just leave me hanging like that? Thinking I was alone? God, Armand, I shared my fears, my deepest feelings with you as Tucker. You must have known!"

He sighed, his eyes growing alarmingly misty. "Yes, I knew, but it was just...simpler to remain the wolf. So much less pain. I could forget. But now I can't forget. At first, I was so confused, switching back and forth. After we left Prima Vega, Tucker began dreaming, remembering. Wolves don't dream, bébé. Not like that."

Still hurt and angry, Belle moved closer, needing to feel him.

Armand twisted a long curl around his finger and let it glide loose. "Now tell me, Belle, why did you look so pleased when you sent Golden to speak to your copilot?"

She grinned impishly. "Cali has a bit of a crush on Golden. I don't think she's had much experience outside her own culture, so I'm just giving her a hard time."

"She's Valoran? A hermaphrodite?"

Belle nodded. "I about died when I saw she had a hard-on and pointy nipples at the same time!"

Armand grinned but pulled her chin to get her to look at him. "Funny as it is to tease her, both you and the Valoran should know that Golden isn't an appropriate man for her attention."

"Why? He's an adult...unless you aren't comfortable with him being with a hermaphrodite?"

"No, no, Cali is fine; she's very lovely and obviously brilliant. But within our culture, Golden's still immature, not far past being a child."

Belle frowned. "He's well into his twenties, at least."

"Yes, Belle, but we age and mature differently than humans. He's still very young; he hasn't begun to mature sexually. While he looks like an adult, he won't be ready for sexual interaction for some time yet. Her attentions would confuse him and be a source of frustration to her."

"Wow." Belle stared at Armand. "You don't look much older than thirty. How old are you really?"

"I'm probably in my eighties now. Eighty-two, I believe."

"Oh God. I'm dating an older man." She sighed dramatically.

"Bébé, you're part Were. How old are you?"

She flushed. "Forty-six."

"And you don't look a day older than Golden. You see why we have to think of age differently than humans?"

"My parents are probably around your age, but they look like they're in their thirties. I tend to forget my own age."

"After a time, we all do. The seasons come slowly to us. Losing our elders is a huge loss; that's one of the few times the pack thinks of time. We tend to think more in cycles rather than linear time."

They lay quietly, all too aware of time ticking away and the meeting they had to attend. Belle lay against his broad chest, feeling the kick of the baby, the stroke of his hand.

"Why did you make Golden come to give me a checkup? Polis is qualified, and she's kept a pretty close eye on me this whole time."

Armand sighed heavily. "I am an Alpha who has been gone far too long. My authority must be rebuilt. It starts with my children." He smoothed her hair back from her face gently.

"Golden is young. I wanted him to feel some level of responsibility for his part in your injuries, but I also want him to realize he could not have known you were my pregnant mate. He needed a gentle hand; his conscience is very tender."

"Rain and Storm are mature adults. When you and I mated, our scents mingled. They should have known at once you were not only pack, but that you were mine. If they didn't, their skills are weak. They were not raised to be sloppy, and they were not raised to be cruel. I could not include Golden in their discipline."

"What sort of discipline?" She sat up a bit, slightly alarmed.

He held her for a few moments, not speaking.

"What sort of discipline, Armand?"

"I haven't decided. I think Rain has punished herself enough. But Storm... Belle, I don't know my son anymore." He sighed heavily, and his breath ruffled her hair. "And I injured him so badly. It frightens me."

It was time to leave, to get up and meet and make plans. Resignedly, Belle shifted upright, but Armand hung on.

"They can wait a few minutes. I need to hold my mate."

"I'm your mate, eh? How exactly did that happen?" Somehow, Belle didn't really feel like fighting the issue.

"As Tucker, I claimed you when I killed the Bar-tag. I claimed you as Armand that first night. You have a mark that didn't fade." Her hand automatically went to her collarbone where his bite mark was still present. "We mated when we tied."

"Well, thanks for sharing that little detail with me. It would have been nice if I'd had a bit of say in my future."

"I'm sorry, bébé, but then, I'm not sorry at all."

"Where does that leave us? What does the future hold for us?"

He raised her hand to his mouth, kissed her knuckles. "The future holds this baby. Beyond that, it holds whatever we wish. As long as we're together, I will be happy."

So he didn't mean to fly out of her life. She felt giddy with relief.

"I suppose there's time for planning. You're the Alpha of your pack, a very important man to many people. Will they accept me?"

"We are a caring people, bébé. We aren't always perfect, and it won't always be easy, but I will enforce what I must and compromise when I can. I've been back only hours. Many in my pack will not know me, many are too young to remember me. But I love you, and my future is with you."

"You love me?"

His blue eyes crinkled at her disbelief. "You're one in a million, Belle. I spent those years with you as Tucker out of love. The few days I spent with you as Armand only confirmed my feelings for you. I love you very much."

"Wow. Love." Belle shifted on the bed, turning to face him and sitting tailor-style. She'd changed back into one of her dresses, and her feet were bare.

"Shall I sing your praises, Annabelle Oakley?"

She leaned in for a kiss. "Not enough time right now. Later, when you're naked in my bed, you can sing away. In fact, you can howl if you want."

He laughed heartily, pulling her close.

"For the record, I've loved Tucker for all these years, never thinking he was anything other than what he was. When I met you, I knew you were my perfect match. My mate. Your face, your voice, has haunted me all these months. I don't want a life without you, so I suppose I love you too."

"Of course you do, bébé. Of course you do." He swung his long legs to the side, placed his feet on the floor, and rose. "Are you ready to go face reality, Cowgirl Oakley?"

She sighed, searching for her boots and stockings. "I guess now's as good a time as any."

Their hands caught and held, fingers linked as they left the *Belle Starr* for the *Woolfsbane*. Reality was waiting.

Chapter Thirteen

They actually had a conference room on the cruiser. A long, rectangular table took up a good portion of the room, and computer screens were embedded in the surface of every table. Polis had her personal comp docked, as did Thorn.

“Look at you, mon ami. You are so comfortable with technology now.” Thorn had been a committed technophobe back on Earth.

Belle slipped into a vacant chair next to Polis; Armand took a seat next to her.

“How do you want this meeting to proceed, Thorn?”

His beta leaned back in his chair, scanning the assembled parties. Storm looked sullen and angry, and Rain looked downcast. Golden, well...Golden moved from his place to sit next to his father. One down, two to go. The other three men looked about the same age as Storm and Rain. Timber, the brunet, and Staten, the blond, sat side by side, surprisingly close, their arms brushing. Regis was more relaxed, idly running his fingertips over the blunt tip of his auburn ponytail.

Good God, man candy all around.

“I think it would be best if you tell your story, Armand. We aren’t clear on your fate following the abductions.”

Armand nodded and began to relay his life over the past fifteen years as best as he remembered it. He skipped the actual abduction, moving straight to his first memories of waking on an alien ship, drugged and restrained. Weeks were spent that way, cold and confused and frightened.

“When we reached our first destination, we were weak; many had expired from illness and neglect. Some of us were offloaded at a space station. It was as dirty and run-down a place as I’ve ever seen. They took us in our cages to a warehouse. We were made to fight in pits while all manner of people watched and gambled.

"They returned us to the ship after that first fight, and they caged me closer to Forest. He was beside himself with pain and fear." Armand broke off, collecting himself. "Being close to one another helped. We could shift and talk a little. Not long after, we stopped again. Forest was taken away then, and I never saw him again." Again he paused, now resting his face in the palms of his hands, overtaken by emotion.

"My keepers were humanoid, but no species that I recognized; their smell was alien and frightening. Since they didn't know what I was, I stayed wolf and watched, trying to find a means to escape. I grew feral, prowling at night, fighting other animals for food. We were always on the edge of hunger, and we became savage and wild.

"I was unable to discover a means of escape. I even shifted, trying to find a way to climb out. During one of my shifts, my hair swung loose and I saw that it had grown longer and turned white. That's when I realized that I was losing my grip on humanity. My sense of time. But the pain... The wolf didn't feel the pain so sharply. Or the burden of failure." The guilt had been the worst. The knowledge that he'd been unable to protect his pack.

"The day came when the wolves were called out to a hunt. We were herded to a corner of the enclosure, and when a gate was opened, we crept out, thinking that perhaps we could find freedom. I stayed back, afraid of snares and traps.

"Six of us left the enclosure, and only three returned. I tried to help them, but they didn't understand. So I stayed by myself, eluding the hunters.

"I don't know how long this lasted, years, perhaps many years. I was the only surviving wolf. Others were brought in, but they didn't last long either. Eventually, I began to hunt those who would hunt me. I made a game of stalking, moving right into their personal space. I maimed many and killed more than a few."

Armand the human had slowly lost himself, finally fading into the wolf, wicked and fearsome. His handlers became fearful of the giant lupine; they sold him to another preserve, one that specialized in extreme games of life and death. As the rules changed, Armand adapted; more often than not, he was the predator rather than the prey. Several hunters would pursue him over a course of days, instead of hours.

"One day, things changed. I smelled fear on the air. All of the animals were uneasy. We heard shouts in the distance, and weapons were fired. The power to the animal compound died, our gates opened, and I ran. I ran into the guest area and then into the manicured parklands."

He'd darted into a dim forest, hearing other animals escaping as well. He had ignored them, but when he heard the sound of an escaping human, his ears perked, and he began to salivate. He crouched, belly close to the ground, holding still as a statue.

A human burst into the forest near him, but not one of *them*, not one of his enemies. The woman paused and then darted forward. Her movement carried her straight into the tusks of a charging Bar-tag. Armand smelled death and blood, and over that, he smelled *her*. His mate.

"The Bar-tag had killed the first woman and was turning on the second when I stopped him. The blood of the first woman was on his fur, on his tusks. I tasted it when I attacked. Even as his life poured out over my jaws and face, I felt his tusks rip into my flesh, the poison burning in my veins. But I couldn't allow him to harm the female. Belle." She kept her head bowed, tears burning her eyes as she heard Tucker's story for the very first time.

As the creature ripped him open amid its dying throes, he watched the woman, saw her lurch to her feet, energy pistol in hand. The wolf released himself from the Bar-tag's neck and rolled away, bleeding and in pain, and watched as she killed the suffering creature.

"I wanted to sleep then, just sink down and let go. There was nothing of Armand left, only the wolf, and the wolf wouldn't allow my death. I watched my female. I tasted her blood in my mouth. Her scent was like perfume. After she tried to save her friend, she came back to me. She saved me."

Belle had knelt at his side. *"You are one bitchin' motherfucker of a wolf. Anybody tell you that before?"*

Her voice had been heavy with grief, thick with tears. His words called up graphic images of that day, the smell of blood, the stench of death. Belle wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

"People came after that, and I felt many hands on my body. They tended my wounds, did their best to keep me alive. While they took care of me, I licked the blood from her wounds, from between her fingers. She sat there, stunned, allowing a savage wolf to wash the blood of her dead friend from her hands."

Armand's head bowed for a moment, and then he looked across the room, eyes settling on his oldest son. "I slept then, and the next time I woke, I was on her bed. She was holding me, crying over her lost friend. She talked to me, coaxed me to eat and drink. She saved my life, and all I had to give her in return was my loyalty."

Belle picked up the story then, telling the listeners of their years and adventures together, ending with the fateful capture of the Matruscan women and her first heat.

"I'm obviously not going to give you all a blow by blow, but I was literally swept off my feet by this mysterious stranger. I didn't know till afterward that my birth control wouldn't work with him. It wasn't until I knew I was pregnant that my parents told me that the scientists had used American Were DNA when they engineered me. I always suspected my brother and I had Were DNA, but he used to joke that it was Were Giraffe." She smiled at the memory.

"Where is your brother now, Belle?" Golden asked.

She smiled sadly at Golden. "Wyatt didn't survive the scandal. We were just kids then, but he'd reached seven feet tall by the time he was thirteen. Wyatt committed suicide when he was fourteen years old."

"I'm sorry," Golden said.

She was too. She smiled sadly at the memory of his fiery red hair and sky blue eyes. He'd grown so fast that he was as ungainly as a newborn colt. Her growing pains had been aching and painful, but she remembered Wyatt in his room, crying softly in the darkness. Bodies weren't meant to grow so quickly.

"If he'd known we'd end up leaving Earth, he might have held on. His peers were cruel, not only because of the scandal, but because of his size. He felt like a freak." She reached out and stroked Armand's hand. "I wish he had been able to meet you. He'd have still been tall, but he wouldn't have felt so different." Armand squeezed her fingers.

"Thorn already told me a great deal about your pack members who were kidnapped. He also told me that you suspected I was keeping Tucker – your father – captive. We don't really need to go over that."

"But we do." The look Storm gave her was pugnacious.

Rain elbowed him. "He's right...sort of. We owe you an apology. I owe you an apology." She darted a look at her father. "I can't criticize Golden; he's too young to remember Father's scent. Golden was the only one of us to think clearly in the situation, and that speaks poorly of myself and Storm. We should have been able to detect Father's mark on you, and we most certainly should have been able to scent your pregnancy. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Her head was down, and Belle could see a tear trembling on her lashes. "I behaved in a cowardly and brutal fashion when I kicked you. I am so sorry, Belle. I endangered you and my unborn brother or sister." She couldn't continue.

Belle looked around the table for help. Armand didn't meet her eyes, and Thorn's face was impassive. She saw guilt behind Storm's angry looks. It was his defense mechanism.

"The whole situation was crazy, Rain. Every one of us took a misstep, myself included. You...all of you set a trap for me, when you could simply have approached me." She looked at Thorn, meeting his eyes squarely. "I'm at the Quay fairly often. You could simply have left a message for me, and we could have met."

"Your reputation, *chère*..."

She glared at Thorn. "My reputation is well deserved. Your kids came onto my ship aggressive and frightened, and they were damn well right to be scared of me. But I'm not so ruthless that I'd have turned down a meeting." She turned to Storm. "I'd have even been inclined to talk when you boarded my ship. I had a pretty strong incentive not to fight."

Slowly, she turned back to the table. "The only reason I didn't go for the kill with these kids is that Roane Vaine wanted them alive. The ICE has a standing bounty for poachers, and since they boarded a marshal's ship and stole a wolf, that's how we classified you. Polis and I could have killed all three of you, gotten paid, and we'd never have known the truth if Thorn hadn't been there."

She slammed a fist onto the table, causing them all to jump. "Do you understand? I came damn close to killing all three of you! You didn't steal my wolf...you took my mate! You took my baby's father! Maybe I didn't know that he was Armand, but I felt it. I sensed it. And I almost killed you!" Belle pushed her chair back, rising to her feet. She strode the length of the room before pulling herself back under control. After a long moment, she returned to her chair. "You can thank Cali, here, for your lives. She kept me together those weeks I was hunting you, and she kept me in line with my orders. You three are damn lucky."

"You're mostly human, Cowgirl. My sister and I could have taken care of ourselves. And Golden."

The look she gave Storm was pure evil. "Keep telling yourself that, little boy. Someday you might believe it."

Cali must've seen the deadly intent in Belle's eyes and figured it was time to change the subject. She cleared her throat. "I think we've cleared the air enough for now."

Thorn took a deep breath, and the atmosphere in the room relaxed noticeably.

"Roane Vaine requests that you all return to Prima Vega with us." She ignored the anger rising in the room. "She invites you as guests and wishes to meet for the purpose of exchanging information."

"What information?" Armand focused on the Valoran.

It was Belle who answered. "I haven't spoken with her yet, but you lost your family to poachers. ICE has spent years taking out illegal hunting operations. From what Thorn told me, you've recovered several pack members. My guess is that Roane wants to join efforts."

Thorn's gaze flicked to Armand. An unspoken conversation appeared to take place between the two before Thorn nodded slightly.

"I am willing to hear what she has to say. Thorn?"

"I agree. We need all available resources."

"Storm? Rain?" The twins nodded in assent. Armand looked around the room, and everyone else agreed to meet Roane. Not a democracy, but not a dictatorship either.

The meeting continued for a few moments longer to make practical arrangements before getting under way. The trip back to Prima Vega would take just over three weeks. After a great deal of bickering, it was decided that Armand would move from ship to ship when possible, getting up to speed on the pack and their new existence. He also insisted that as his mate, Belle was to spend as much time as possible with him, as she was now pack.

In the end, he remained closeted in the conference room with Thorn, learning new faces and places, evaluating the strategies that would help bring lost family home. It was a long, sad meeting, and hours later, Armand laid his head on the table to catch

some much needed rest. He dreamed, but his dreams were of running and hunting and bore no resemblance to the dreams of a man.

* * * * *

“Thorn?”

“Mmm?”

He looked up to see Timber at the doorway to the small cubicle that served as his office aboard the *Woolfsbane*. The dark-haired male was always so silent in his movement that he'd managed to take Thorn by surprise. He swiveled in his chair and turned to face the young pilot.

“It's the Alpha, sir. I think...” He paused, carefully phrasing his sentence. “I think he needs his female. He's been going for nearly three shifts, and he's tired. And very stressed.”

“He's trying to push it, to make up for an awful lot of lost time.”

“And we aren't helping. Every time he gets up to leave, somebody wants time with him.”

Thorn set down the stylus he'd been using, uncomfortably aware that he was one of the somebodies that Timber referred to. There was just always something...

He rubbed his eyes, suddenly aware of the toll that the extended stress had taken on his body, his mind. Even good things could be stressful, and he couldn't imagine how overwhelmed Armand must be after years of living in Tucker's twilight existence.

“Thank you, Timber. I'll see he gets back over to the *Starr*. Frankly, I don't know how he's managed to stay away from her for so long.”

Timber grinned. “She's beautiful. She and the Valoran didn't even wake Staten and me when they took us. He did good.”

“He did, didn't he?” Thorn rose and stretched. “Who's on duty?”

“Rain has the *Luna*, Staten's on the bridge here on the *Woolfsbane*. Polis has another six hours on the *Starr*.”

Thorn nodded. “I'll take care of it.”

Timber nodded and melted away into the dimly lit corridors of the ship.

* * * * *

Armand came to a dead halt in the hallway, suddenly overwhelmed and slightly confused. What was next? Time on the bridge or a meeting with Thorn? He leaned back against the cool metal wall of the corridor, listening to the deep hum of the ship's systems.

Things weren't right with his people, and he carried the guilt. He was their Alpha, and he'd failed them. Storm and Rain were out of balance as he'd been these past years.

Storm was angry and obsessive; unlike the rest of the males of their kind, he shunned the close friendship of another male. Those bonds were often formed during the years prior to sexual maturity, and they'd never formed for him. Storm was rapidly evolving into the proverbial "lone wolf," a male who never made or held pack bonds. In truth, he was a lost soul, and Armand was frightened for his son.

And Rain! His bright little girl had faded, wallowing in real and perceived guilt; she fairly reeked of it. Her relationship with her twin was strained, offset only by odd moments of comfort. She was confident in her skills but sadly lacking in her confidence. Her beauty was dimmed by shoddy clothing and an aura of self-contempt. What had happened to his children?

Staten and Timber? The male bond of affection had clearly gone too far with them. He suspected they were lovers; they'd always been close, but something had clearly developed that wasn't the norm for AmWere society. And he couldn't credit it to evolution since the males were desperately needed to mate and sire children. They'd removed themselves from the breeding pool. He couldn't imagine the chaos that must have erupted among the females at the defection of those two.

He couldn't blame Thorn. The Alpha female should have managed the youth better, but these were the youth who'd matured during those terrible, harsh years. Thorn had told him of Desdimona's fate. The beautiful, brilliant young female had been found enslaved in a brothel barge. She now rarely, if ever, left her home, and her only social contacts were occasional visits from Storm and Rain and some of the others of that generation. She'd focused all her energy on designing the spectacular leather battle suits that his people were wearing. Turned out she'd gone commercial, and that sexy red leather dress Belle had been wearing the first night they'd spent together had been one of Desi's.

Small universe.

Of the group, only Golden seemed unaffected; he'd been too young to have been so terribly affected by the loss of his family and friends. His harsh entrance into the world hadn't crippled him in any way that Armand could see.

And Forest. He laid a hand over his eyes, returning memories of his lost son flooding his soul. The breath he pulled in was more a sob than not.

"Mon ami?"

A hand settled on his shoulder, and then he was pulled into a strong embrace.

"It seems like too much now, doesn't it?"

Armand pulled his hand away from his face and hid his eyes in Thorn's strong shoulder. "Too much, Thorn. It's been too long; I'm fighting the wolf now."

"It's natural, my friend. And we aren't asking you to suddenly take it all on at once. You must step back, Armand. When it becomes too much, step back."

"I can't."

"You must. We cannot afford to lose you to Tucker again. Much as Belle loves him, I suspect that she loves you better as Armand."

He laughed at that. How long? How many sleep cycles had he worked through, always fighting the need to return to her side?

"Now, I'm going to sleep. Everyone else has retired, and you need to be with your mate. It's been too long. I suspect she'll come looking for you before long."

"You're right. I'm tired, and things always look worse with fatigue." Armand straightened, leaning back against the wall.

Thorn moved to his side, leaning back as well.

"It's been hard and lonely for you, hasn't it, Thorn?"

The other man met his eyes briefly and then looked away. "We all suffered, Armand. None came away unscathed." He sighed deeply.

"I'm back, Thorn. You aren't alone anymore."

"And for that I give thanks, Armand. Every moment since I found you in that cave, I have given thanks." His voice was little more than a husky whisper.

This time, it was Armand who held his friend in strong arms.

* * * * *

Nearly two days had passed since she'd seen him. Longer since they'd last had sex. Like...what? Four and a half months?

Belle was getting just a little bit impatient. Just a little.

Cali had relieved her at the bridge, and she was damn thankful for that, because right now they were sitting tight, all three ships connected and in orbit around the rocky little planet below. There was nothing to do on the bridge except stare at the instrument panel and think. And then think some more.

When Cali took over, Belle lay on her comfortable bed waiting for Armand to come, but he didn't. She tossed and turned. She caught about twenty minutes of sleep and then woke, certainly not refreshed, but unable to sleep any longer.

She tossed back the cover and left the bed. She didn't bother dressing; her long cotton nightgown would do just fine.

Barefoot, cranky, and horny as hell, Belle headed down to the cargo hold where the service doors opened to dock with the *Woolfsbane*. Every stinking time she'd radioed over to check on Armand, he had been busy or in a meeting. She knew it was a conspiracy.

With grim determination, Belle headed across the chilly bay floor toward the service doors, only to be thrown backward as Armand burst through. She landed on her ass with a curse and looked up at Armand through a fall of tangled hair. Slowly, she rose to her feet, hands on her hips in anger.

They faced off, and she swallowed hard at the sight of Armand. He was so tense, his body nearly vibrated, and his eyes held the unearthly light of the wolf.

"Bébé."

"Armand."

He stepped forward as she stepped back. Goose bumps prickled over her skin, and her heart raced. Her mouth was dry, and she swallowed hard. What the hell was wrong with her?

He moved in on her once more, and once again she retreated. "Stop that, Belle."

Her mind raced for a witty reply. "Make me."

Oh, now that was brilliant.

He smiled, showing a good bit of tooth.

"Were you comin' looking for me?" The Cajun accent was thick, almost difficult to understand.

Slowly and steadily, he advanced, backing her through the cargo bay.

"No, Armand, I was just checking to make sure everything was secure down here. Don't want any crates falling over when we leave." She forced herself to stand her ground. "Of course I came looking for you! Jeez, you just vanished on me!"

She managed to stay in place until he was within touching distance, and then stepped back once more. He smiled, and she could see the wolf—Tucker—in his eyes. He was close, so damn close to the surface. And under her skin, the wolf she'd never met responded, bowing low on her forelegs, inviting him to run, to chase and dominate.

Without any conscious intent, Belle darted off, around the side of a stack of empty storage containers. She leaped high in the air, vaulting the stack, landing lightly, and headed full speed for the next row of containers.

The access door was across the bay, and she'd have to cross open space to get to it. She knew that in an open run, Armand would easily overtake her.

He laughed, following where she led, a hand brushing her ankle, warm breath on her neck when he drew close.

Belle squealed like a girl, which profoundly disgusted her. She jumped from one stack to another, grabbing a loose cable for balance. A quick glance told her the cable was secure, so she used it Tarzan-like, swinging to the floor while Armand scrambled down the sides of the boxes.

She kicked a large barrel into his path, and he cleared it easily before dodging around the corner of another stack of crates, setting Belle to backpedaling. Slowly, she walked in reverse while he advanced, a devilish grin on his face.

She dodged to the side. This was Belle's ship. She'd supervised the loading of the cargo bay and knew every nook and cranny to be found. Just as she disappeared around a stack of containers, Armand's hand shot out, clutching the flimsy cotton of her nightgown, tearing it from her body.

“Shit!”

She was naked as a baby, barefoot, but she was too warm from the chase to feel cold. Her foot shot out and upended another pile of boxes; in her wake, she heard Armand’s muffled curse and then silence.

Belle continued her escape, creeping around stacks and pallets, finally coming to the end of a long row that put her near the access hatch above deck. She rounded the corner, coming face-to-face with Tucker. Not Armand...Tucker, who looked mightily pissed off to see her.

“Uh...hey there, Tuck...”

She took a careful step backward, not wanting to catch her foot on the raw corner of a wooden pallet. Tucker crouched slightly, advancing, his intent clear in his eyes. “Come on, Tucker... Armand, you aren’t mad at me, are you?”

No, he wasn’t mad, but Armand had spent the majority of the past two decades hiding away in his lupine form. The man could tell the difference, but was Tucker aware of being Armand? Even if he’d forgotten, this was her old friend, her companion. He wouldn’t hurt her.

Would he?

Her back was to the open bay, and Belle tamped down the primitive need to break and run; if she ran, he’d chase, and intentionally or not, he’d likely bite down on something she didn’t want bitten.

Like her ass. Again.

“Come on, Tuck, let’s head on upstairs. I’m beat, tired as all get-out. I’ll let you sleep on the bed.”

What a blatant lie. She was humming with life and energy, and her nakedness did nothing to disguise her arousal. Her nipples were pink and erect, and fluids had escaped her pussy, smearing down between her thighs.

His head dropped lower as he continued to stalk her, pink tongue showing briefly as he licked his jaws. Well, at least he wasn’t snarling! Belle glanced to the side and up, she was that far... Movement caught her eye. The wolf had dropped into a low crouch.

Before she could process his intent, Tucker launched himself through the air, slamming into her belly, taking her to the floor.

* * * * *

“Hello.” She looked up into the silvery blue eyes that were so dear; Tucker hunched over her body, panting. He had her pinned to the floor, and weirdly enough, she’d landed on a pile of quilted shipping blankets. A pile of blankets that had no business being in the middle of the cargo bay floor. “You planned this, didn’t you?”

He didn't answer, of course. Tucker contented himself with methodically licking the sweat from her skin. It wasn't so bad when it was just her chest and neck, but as he began paying special attention to her breasts, she began to squirm.

"Uh, Tucker...a little...too much there, bud..." She gasped as he laved the peak of a nipple. "This really shouldn't feel so damn...good...shit! Oh!" Her back arched as she cried out.

Tucker's eyes dropped half-closed as he busied himself, his rough tongue skating over the tender skin of her breasts. He gave the occasional little delicate nibble with his tiny front teeth, prompting her to squeal. Clearly, he liked that, because his tail began to wave.

"Oh...nonono...you aren't going there..."

His tongue swept across her belly, causing her lean flanks to jump convulsively at the sensation. When she tried to squirm away, Tucker looked into her eyes intently, giving a long, low growl.

"Okay, I get it. Sit. Stay."

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut as he once again began his grooming, busying himself between her thighs, cleaning up the sweat and fluid there. When his nose nudged her thighs open, her eyes flew open and she sat up.

"Oh no, Tucker, you are so not doing that!" But he was, and he was doing a damn good job. Belle drooped back down on the blankets, weight on her elbows. "It's Armand... It's really Armand...not the damn wolf..."

He gave a quiet growl and lifted his head. Slowly, Tucker stalked upward, straddling her body, his face looking directly down into hers. Tentatively, she brought up her hand, stroking through the silk of his ruff. "It is you, Armand. I know that."

A bit of the feral heat left his eyes, and he nudged his muzzle into her soft throat, wuffing at her scent.

She sighed and circled her arms around his neck. "I may love Armand to distraction, but you're my best friend, Tuck. Never, ever forget that."

Another long, slow lick, and then Tucker settled himself over her body, stretching out full length. His tail waved happily in the air.

"Oh, please tell me you aren't really planning... You are, aren't you?" Tucker shifted, and she felt pressure on her pussy. His jaws split in a big, doggy smile. "Damn it all, Tucker!" He pushed, and her labia gave way as he just hovered there, waiting.

"Okay, listen, Tucker"—she made herself comfortable, raising her knees to accommodate him—"Armand. I know that's you and you're yankin' my chain. If you're gonna do it, then do it, but hurry 'cause I've really been missing you. But just bear in mind, you can't kiss me this way."

As though to disprove her statement, Tucker gave her a wet, sloppy kiss across the cheek. As he did so, he thrust into her body, shimmered, and Belle felt Armand take

shape, his hard, heavy cock suddenly manifesting in her passage. He was kissing her fiercely, hiking her legs up to his hips.

"Oh damn..." Her heart was slamming in her chest, partly from fear, partly from arousal. One glance told her that the wolf was still riding him hard. A powerful thrust rocked her from stem to stern, and the blankets slid across the slippery metal floor. Armand scrambled for purchase, unable to find the leverage he needed to penetrate her body as deeply as he wished.

Belle's head came perilously close to a wooden pallet, and she reached up and grabbed the wood, bracing herself against his thrusts. She arched her back, bearing down on him hard, gratified by his feral groan. Her breasts were heavy and achy; he slammed hard between her legs, no doubt leaving his mark for later. His heavy cock kissed her cervix with each stroke, and she arched her hips into his with each thrust, seeking the contact, the deep pressure she needed so badly.

In spite of her considerable strength, Belle was losing the battle against his powerful strokes. She slid closer and closer to the wood, until finally, she scissored her legs and flipped him to his back. Armand grinned in delighted surprise.

"Belle..." His voice was harsh, breathless. Her long legs straddled his hips, and she rode him, hands braced on his chest, suddenly throwing back her head, pounding into a hard climax, stars dancing before her eyes. For a brief moment, Belle thought of the baby, but instinctively she knew it was fine, just rocking along for the ride.

She dropped her head and moaned, feeling his hands wandering her back, down to her bottom, where a wet finger penetrated her back passage. Her ass gripped his finger as her orgasm clenched her body over and over again. Finally, she came to a slow, shaking halt.

"Over, bébé." His voice was grim.

She moved back quickly, suddenly aware of what he had planned.

"Oh no...no way, Armand!" She was back on her bottom, scrambling away quickly, unable to rise to her feet before he was on her once again.

"You ran. I caught you. I win, bébé!"

"No. Fucking. Way."

She was on her feet, but before she'd taken more than a few steps, he lunged forward, grabbing her by one shapely ankle. She landed facedown, squealing as he pulled her along the slick floor.

"Knees, Belle. Bottom up!"

Once again, a wet finger penetrated her anus, spreading moisture and lubrication. She twisted, flipping onto her back, but again, he pulled her back to position.

"Submit!"

"No!"

A loud crack echoed through the bay, and in shock, she froze, feeling the fire of his handprint on his ass. Belle shrieked, Armand laughed, and once more, she flipped and twisted, slipping from his grasp.

Once more on her feet, she made it halfway to the stairs before he caught her, lifting her by the waist. Again, she ended up on the pile of blankets in the middle of the floor. He set her on her knees, arms tightly around her waist.

"Submit, bébé."

"Fuck. You!"

Another fiery hot spank scored her ass, followed by another. She twisted against the sting and then suddenly found herself confronted by another unspeakable torment. Fingers gripped her thigh, just above her knee.

She fought, struggled, and broke into a gale of laughter. "Stop! Oh God, please, Armand!" He quickly moved from her knee to her ribs, and she threw herself forward, trying to escape his tickling fingers. "Armand! Please!"

"Submit?"

"Fine! Fine, I submit! You win. This time."

"Bottom up, Belle."

Still shaking with giggles, Belle positioned herself, allowing Armand to supervise her placement on the musty blankets. Once again, fingers invaded her ass. Armand dragged his cock through her channel, coming away wet and slick.

"You loved that, didn't you? Me hunting you?"

"Fuck you, Armand."

He chuckled, leaning forward to kiss and then nip at the tender skin on her back. With gentle strokes, he ran his hand down her back and around to her belly, cradling the small swell there.

"We won't be able to do this much longer; your body won't accept it."

"Well, boo hoo for that." She gasped when his fingers slipped from her anus to be replaced by the flare of his cockhead, pressing insistently.

"Push out... Relax..."

She took a deep breath and followed his instructions. He was gentle, pressing steadily, only giving what she could take.

He drew back, prompting a groan from Belle. Armand paused, his hand gathering moisture from her channel, keeping himself slick. His own lube was now flowing steadily, and she glanced back to see him pumping his cock, spreading the precum over his length.

Once again he pressed in, finally able to penetrate to his full length. And then he was seated fully. He leaned forward, holding on to her tightly.

"I've missed you, Belle. Every minute of every day. I've dreamed of holding you, loving you. Watching our baby grow."

“Then why did you leave?”

He began to thrust, pumping smoothly into her body.

Belle pressed her forehead into the floor, head rocking from side to side as he dominated her so completely. She couldn't fight, didn't want to fight. The sensation was so completely overwhelming, so completely foreign, yet right and perfect.

He didn't answer, and she didn't care. He pressed her onto her belly as his hips thrust hard; he breathed harshly in her ear. Over and over again her mons was forced into the padding of the blanket, his hard cock digging deep, filling her completely. His hand slipped under her body, giving her more pressure, more resistance. She opened her legs, encouraging him to press harder, deeper.

They panted in counterpoint to one another, finally meeting and matching until they breathed as one. Belle lifted her head, offering her throat, and his teeth gripped, held, the intense pain rolling her over the edge. The pain was so sharp, so exquisite, that she lost her ability to breathe, to think.

As warm blood trickled down her throat, Belle finally found her breath, and she screamed, long and loud. Armand jerked her hips up from the floor, thrusting deeply, frantically. She ground her clit into his palm, and her body writhed, contorted, and froze as Armand cried out, clasping her hips with iron-hard fingers, his voice breathy and strained with his climax.

She didn't stop coming, couldn't stop, the spasms starting deep in her womb, gripping and flexing, clamping down on his cock. Armand groaned, guttural and savage, and pressed into her body once again. Another flood of seed gushed into her ass, slicking her up, soothing the burning pain. No sooner had her climax waned than she was there again, and he rode her to the finish, until she could no longer scream, no longer breathe, all humanity gone. All that remained was the wolf and his mate.

* * * * *

“Armand?” Her voice was lazy and low with sleep. She turned into his arms, pushing her face in his chest and inhaling deeply.

“Sleep, Belle. I only wish to hold you.”

She made a mumbling, muffled noise into his skin, causing him to chuckle a bit. “Crap! I only meant to take a nap, and it's been hours! Cali's been at the helm way too long.” She looked around, only vaguely remembering how she came to be back in her room. He'd carried her over his shoulder while she'd struggled and laughed, drawing a surprised Cali from the bridge. Belle flushed in embarrassment at the memory.

“Relax, Belle. She's fine. We haven't separated the ships yet. I believe Staten is keeping her company. He's picking her brains about some of the tech-ware she's devised for the *Starr*.”

Nevertheless, she pulled herself upright, shaking off the sleep. She checked the time and grimaced.

"Thorn wishes to depart in two hours. He's sent word to the pack that I'm returning, and that we must make this delay. Vaine knows to expect us."

Belle scooted to the headboard, resting against it, feet tucked up under the covers. She frowned, thinking of a communication she'd sent to her parents. A green light winked ominously on her computer, telling her the message had been received and replied to. "Armand, I notice you tend to defer to Thorn a great deal."

He flung an arm up over her shoulder, playing with her hair. "Yes, that is our way. Right now, it's necessary, as he's been running the pack for so long, and I'm unfamiliar with much of what is happening." He seemed unperturbed. "You think as Alpha, I should be calling all the shots."

"Well...yes. I suppose."

"*Non.* On this trip, Golden is in charge of our health. He supervises sleep assignments and work shifts, as well as medical and nutrition. Rain pilots and navigates, while Storm supervises the field missions. The assignments are similar on the *Luna*. Thorn oversees it all."

"Where does that leave you?"

"I'm the final word in all things. The Alpha makes the major decisions for his people, sees to their safety and well-being. On Earth, I decided when we migrated or settled for a season. The pack works as a team, and I am the team leader. Everyone has a role to play. The Alpha female monitors social relations in the pack, stopping births if we grow too large. She also arranges alliances outside the pack."

"And where do I fit in?"

"You are the mate of the Alpha. From there, we will see." Armand rolled off the bed, retrieving a package from the table. The message light on Belle's comp was still flashing, and he tossed that to her.

She briefly read the message and set it aside.

She saw shotguns in her future.

"What's that?" She took the small package from his hands. "Oooohhhh...chocolate. Damn! Real, Earth-made chocolate! Armand, where did you get this?" She scabbled at the packaging and popped a small morsel into her mouth.

"Thorn has been courting. He had a few of these left over."

Her chewing slowed and then stopped. "Just how many women is he courting? And why?" She frowned, setting the box on her lap.

"The EurLu took us in and sheltered us for a time. And they've assisted us in other ways. We must pay for such assistance. Thorn tells me they were holding out for my return, but last year they began to press the issue. Their leaders want a mating of one of theirs with the Alpha."

"Slight problem there. Will your return get Thorn off the hook?"

He gave her a droll look while choosing a candy from the box. "As you put it, slight problem. I have a mate. They may continue to pursue a connection through

Thorn, though I doubt it. Rain told me the eligible females seem to be afraid of Thorn. Those who aren't view him with some...contempt."

"What!" Belle was rigid, her anger ready to flare. "He's a bit intimidating at first, but contempt? What's that all about?"

He shrugged, not understanding it any better than she did. "Perhaps his ethnicity. Or perhaps simply because we are North American and not EurLu. We are shifters; perhaps they feel we haven't evolved."

She lifted an elegant brow. "Your people are bigger, stronger. Your senses are more acute, and your pack has adapted incredibly well to space. Why in hell do they want connections with you if they feel that way?"

"We are only one pack, but now we have unlimited space and resources to expand. Eventually, young Alphas such as Storm and Rain will break away, begin their own packs." His look was serious. "Bébé, how do you think the EurLu feel knowing there is a bigger wolf sitting on their doorstep?"

"Damn. If they can't control you through politics, maybe they'll try to control you through blood."

He nodded. "If enough cross into our pack, they may be hoping to weaken us."

"Without them, you're an awfully small gene pool."

"But we're a diverse gene pool. Thorn and I are completely unrelated. Most of us came together from all over the Americas. There may be more surviving on Earth, and possibly many like you. We are not in a crisis, and I won't allow the EurLu to create one. I've told Thorn that unless he wishes to continue to pursue a mating for personal reasons, he's excused from this responsibility."

Belle lifted the chocolate box. "I guess this is his answer."

Armand grinned. "I have a second box in the locker. He sent chocolate to Cali and Rain as well."

"Silly man, he should have sent it all to me!" She went serious. "He's a very lonely man, Armand. Has he always been that way?"

"As long as I've known him, Thorn has been lonely. He is my dearest friend and brother. He and Nanette were close; she seemed to soothe him somewhat."

"You aren't from the same pack, originally?"

"Non. At one time, the American Weres were plentiful; we spread all through both continents. But time and prejudice took a toll. Before Thorn and I met, there had been a...clearance. His pack was small; they were rooted within a Native American tribe in Louisiana. I don't know for certain, but I believe that Thorn lost someone...perhaps a mate.

"My pack ran the bayous of Louisiana. Both of our packs were decimated, and there were few survivors. Thorn and I encountered one another in New Orleans; we were both very young, starving on the streets, hiding from the hunters. We joined up and eventually found shelter within the Rocky Mountain Pack. It was very large at that

time, and there were actually several packs. Many, many refugees increased our numbers, so eventually, our pack divided into several." He smiled reflectively.

"Nanette was with a small group from Canada. They crossed heavily into the EurLu. I am still surprised she fell in love with a scruffy, poor mutt from the bayou."

She leaned her head on Armand's shoulder. "I'm sorry to bring up such sad memories."

"Not all are sad, and even the hard times had good memories. I've been without those memories for so long, bébé. I wouldn't give them up for anything."

* * * * *

It was odd, having Armand in her bed without the drive of her heat and his lust to carry them along. Belle felt shy, uncertain. That was a first. The very thought made her smile. Armand neatly resolved the problem, his hand floating from its spot over the baby, to her belly, up to her breasts. She caught her breath as his fingertips brushed her sensitive peaks; the pregnancy had made her swollen and tender. He deftly turned to her breasts, his warm mouth soothing and arousing at the same time. She lay back, purring like a kitten, content to allow him to explore her body, her arousal a lazy simmer.

Armand's big hands shaped the small swell of her belly, brushing kisses against it and whispering to the baby in his Cajun French patois. The whisper of his breath on her skin tickled, bringing moisture to her folds, causing her to squirm, wanting more. She couldn't help comparing this sweet lovemaking to the wild scratching and biting that had taken place just hours ago. This was nice. Very nice. There was a time and place for everything, including crazy love.

She pulled him up, tracing the lines of his face, his features. Belle traced the scar on his belly, following it down his lean belly. Armand smiled, watching her clever fingers on his skin.

"So this is where the Bar-tag gored you?"

He nodded.

"You saved me that day, Armand. Even if I'd survived the attack, Penny's death would have crushed me without Tucker."

Armand rolled onto his side, facing Belle. He traced her cheek, her jaw. "And what did you do for me...for Tucker? You pulled me out of hell, gave me sanctuary. My sanity was gone, and you kept me safe while I worked my way back."

He slid his thumb between her lips; the sensation of his rough skin took her breath away. Armand tunneled his hands into her hair, taking her mouth in a kiss. When she moved to his groin, he stopped her, wrists trapped in one hand. "This is for you, bébé. Let me love you."

She lay back, willing to submit now. Armand held her in place as he rained kisses over her body, nibbling her soft places, drawing his raspy tongue up the inside of her

knee, over the soft skin of her elbow. She was wet and needy, but content to let the heat rise.

"Armand. Take off your pants; I want to feel your skin." He complied, blue eyes crinkling at the corners as he fumbled a bit at the fly of his leathers.

"I'm not so used to clothing anymore." He chuckled, letting her unfasten the hooks that held his pants closed. His cock was ruddy and swollen and slid upright when she parted the leather. He stood up, stripping the leather from his body, and rejoined her on the bed. She reached out and stroked him, loving his fat, curved cock.

"The pack makes money by raising herds of cattle that were brought from Earth stock. They export much of the meat and have become skilled in leather crafts. I grew up in shabby denim and ragged T-shirts. Being dressed this way is odd." He looked embarrassed.

"They look good on you. I asked your kids if they shopped for their clothes at Fetish"R"Us. That was mean of me."

He slid over the top of her, resting in the cradle of her hips. They lay still, feeling one another's arousal, but enjoying the intimacy of the moment.

"They tell me the leather is durable and protective. Like a light body armor. But I find it uncomfortably confining."

"You look good confined. But if you want, we can replicate something else for you. I liked that black outfit you wore when we met. It sort of had that 'I'm a Dom, don't fuck with me' look."

He nibbled on her throat and then moved up to her ear. Lower down, their bodies rocked gently, reminding them of why they were here, naked together.

"I stole that black outfit. Before I returned to you as Tucker, I returned it to where I'd taken it from." He reached down, sliding the tip of his cock through her slit, hissing as it came away slick with her fluids. "You are so wet, bébé. I want you so bad."

Never one for self-denial, Belle rocked her hips, trying to capture his cockhead. He pulled back, letting his glans bump gently against her vulva. Every time it thumped her clit she jumped a little, biting her lip and gasping softly.

Not content with that tease, he slid down her body, nuzzling into her fiery curls, tongue seeking, probing, flicking into every hidden fold, every hot spot that she possessed.

She trembled, growing wet and slick. His fingers slipped into her sheath, pressing firmly. Her hips bucked in response, and she found herself riding an orgasm that left her wet and gasping. Armand rose up, lowering himself to her body.

"Reach your arms up and hold me close, Belle. I want you to hold me as we make love."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek into his shoulder. Armand lowered his body, hips pressing slightly forward. He guided himself into her, his eyes closing blissfully as his cock pushed into her warm, wet depths. Belle tangled

her long legs with his, drawing the sole of one foot up to slide down his thigh. So vanilla, but so right.

She felt different. Her body was changing with pregnancy, and as far as Armand could tell, the change was good. Her plush labia were even more swollen and soft; her passage was tight. He pushed into her deeply, and she clung to his cock as he withdrew.

She twined around his body, holding him close, tilting her head back to gaze into his eyes. "You have Tucker's eyes. The very same color and shape."

He let his eyes drop shut momentarily, focusing on words rather than sensation. "Our eyes are always true, whether we are wolf or man." He slid his hand under her bottom, tilting her up a fraction, sinking a bit deeper. They both moaned gently in response. He sped up, thrusting rapidly, feeling her tighten in response. Armand then shifted to slow and deep once more.

"I should have known you were the same."

Armand rose by straightening his arms, feeling her hands drop to his buttocks, stroking and caressing. "You had no way...of knowing..." He was becoming breathless. "After all, the EurLu rarely change shape..." He dropped lower once again, digging deep.

"Armand..."

"Belle?"

"Ohhhhh..." She let out a deep groan, her hips and back undulating into his. "Will you be Tucker again?"

"Bébé, will you please stop talking...just for now?"

In response, she bucked under him once more and began laughing. No, she was giggling. Her body contracted around his, gripping him mercilessly.

"Oh...Belle...tell me what to do, I really don't think I can last..."

"Hard, Armand. Hard and fast..." She tilted her pelvis to meet his thrusts, angling so he went deep. Armand grew just that fraction longer and larger, and he felt sweat blooming on his skin.

Belle threw her head back, arching into the pillow, her face strained as though she was in great pain. Armand wondered if he looked the same way as his lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl.

She strained, and then she arched into him, hands clenching and releasing, legs pulling him tight to her body. "Now! Oh God, now..." She groaned again as Armand began a flurry of short, shallow thrusts only to sink deep as his orgasm hit. He dug and froze and shook again, his seed bursting into her, overflowing out of her. They clung together and continued to fuck, riding the aftershocks as they began to wind down, moving slower and slower. Armand collapsed forward, burying his face in her shoulder, long strands of fiery hair tickling his nose. Belle held on tight, wrapping him

as completely in her embrace as she could, stroking his hair, easing him as they came down together.

They lay quietly for a long time after, no words exchanged, simply touching and stroking. Belle found herself drifting, her thoughts tangled and fuzzy, her body sated and at rest. For the first time in months, she was at peace. Suddenly, she remembered that last question she'd asked Armand. Belle rolled over, opening her mouth to ask again, but before the words came, she felt a pulse of energy; he quivered in her arms, rolling gently.

Belle was suddenly embracing lush fur. It brushed her face, and her hands sank deep. She looked into Tucker's frosty blue eyes and couldn't refrain from smiling. Tucker let out a deep breath and allowed his eyes to slip closed, and together wolf and woman welcomed sleep. Somewhere in the back of her consciousness, Belle felt the *Starr* break away from the other ships. In moments, they would be under way. And then she remembered the message on the comp. She buried her face in Tucker's fur. It could wait a little longer.

Chapter Fourteen

Cali and Belle waited on the observation deck at the Quay, watching as Rain and then Timber brought the pack cruisers in with precision and expertise. She had to give them props; both pilots knew their stuff. She shifted impatiently. Armand had been on the *Woolfsbane* for almost a week now, learning the systems of the pack flagship. She missed him. The continued separation ate away at her confidence. She was fully blossoming with her pregnancy, her need for him greater by the day, her fear of that dependency growing as well. It wasn't natural. Or maybe...it was all too natural.

Belle glanced around the docks, feeling a bit fearful. She'd contacted her parents three weeks ago, letting them know about Armand and Tucker being one and the same. She also told them about her new status as the mate of the Rocky Mountain Alpha.

True to her expectations, her mother was thrilled, and her father...well...he was a father. She was to expect them at Prima Vega; they were arriving to meet her new family. Somehow, Belle had the sneaking suspicion that her father might be hiding a shotgun somewhere on his huge frame. She'd warned Armand, but he'd simply been thrilled that he was finally getting to meet her parents on two feet instead of four.

Soon, the group wound through the Quay to Admin, heading for the conference room where Vaine waited. Belle took the lead, Armand's hand resting lightly on her elbow. It wasn't until they were halfway there that the reactions of passersby began to sink in.

All her life, Belle had stood out; she'd been the giant in the crowd, towering over most men. This past month, she'd been comfortable, completely in her element. Even Cali and Rain were close to her height. She glanced back at the rest of her entourage and grinned at the leather-clad warriors at her back. Rain smiled slightly, obviously catching Belle's amusement.

Belle was tall enough, and her dress and duster loose enough that her rounded belly wasn't noticeable, though she knew the pregnancy must be common knowledge

by now. She'd received a communication to visit the med center as soon as debriefing was complete and to bring Armand along. A second communication came over her comm unit, letting her know that sleeping accommodations had been arranged for the visitors.

She hoped they'd placed the huge AmWere in rooms with large beds and high ceilings.

Vaine was waiting when they arrived, and as usual, she looked grim and starkly beautiful, not at all daunted by the imposing crowd that swept into the conference room. Introductions went around before the group settled at the table. To Belle's relief, this room accommodated some of the larger species they worked with, so the chairs and table suited the pack comfortably.

Belle noted that the pack seated themselves according to rank; Armand took a chair at the round table, opposite Vaine. Thorn sat at one side, Belle at the other. To Thorn's right, Armand's children assembled themselves. Staten, Regis, and Timber were at Belle's left, closing the circle. Cali sat next to Roane Vaine, looking surprisingly comfortable.

Thorn and Rain spent an hour giving Vaine a history of the North American Pack, telling of the survivors as they battled their way to make a new life, always searching for their lost family. That led into the events of the past five months and the near-catastrophic attack on the *Belle Starr*. She listened as each member of the pack told their respective story, followed by Belle and Cali telling of their hunt for the perceived poachers.

When the last of those present had spoken, hours had passed. Belle excused herself twice to visit the bathroom, and her back was beginning to ache from long hours sitting. Vaine finally excused all except Belle, Thorn, and Armand from the room. Belle's rumbling stomach protested, but they all shifted closer together at the table.

"Madame Vaine..."

"Roane is fine."

Armand nodded his silver head. "Will we be long? Belle is fatigued..."

"I'm fine, Armand."

He smiled and continued. "It's been a long day, and she needs food and rest."

"It won't be much longer, Mr. de la Croix."

"Armand."

She nodded at their uneasy truce. "Belle has no doubt told you that the ICE has posted an open, ongoing bounty on poachers and illegal hunters. We have files and data on hunting preserves, lists of known and suspected violators. We've found over the years that this particular subculture is well organized and dangerous. Most of our enforcers and trackers prefer to take assignments that are straightforward and less risky."

Belle was impressed that Vaine kept her legendary cool under the piercing gaze of Thorn, as well as the amused scrutiny of Armand. She hadn't even blinked an eye when she'd met Belle's lupine sidekick in human form.

"From what I've seen, your teams are skilled and well organized. I've been thinking of this situation for some time and would like to propose an offer.

"Marshal Oakley is one of my more skilled trackers. She's also a gifted investigator. With her impending parenthood, we're facing a great loss. I don't wish to lose her for any substantial length of time." Belle felt herself go warm at the praise, though it was odd, coming from Roane. "Your pack has a stake in infiltrating the hunter and poacher networks. I need hunter-trackers who are willing to do the same." Vaine set a data chip on the table in front of Armand. "I would be willing to contract some of your pack members to work specifically in this area. You will have our data available to seek out your lost pack members, as well as the opportunity to bring in their captors.

"Your teams will receive training and the full support of ICE. I would like Belle to act in the capacity of a consultant until she decides if she wishes to reenter the field as a marshal. I will leave the decision to you as to what teams to send and who will coordinate your efforts."

Ignoring the lack of compromise in her voice, Armand reached out and took the data chip, inserting it into a reader. He and Thorn scanned the contents, Armand's brows rising in shock. "You have records here from the reserve I was rescued from."

Vaine nodded. "If you continue to read, you'll find the ship's manifest, including the delivery of a certain blue-eyed male wolf. There is also a bill of sale. I believe that Belle might be able to backtrack this data and discover the fate of your lost pack."

Armand sat back heavily in his chair, and Thorn clasped his hands together. Belle could smell the heat rising from their skin, hear their elevated heartbeats. The men exchanged glances, and Armand answered. "Thorn will coordinate the teams that will be sent. We have six fully trained trackers who can begin training as soon as possible. When I return to my people and have the opportunity to evaluate the status of the pack, Belle, Thorn, and I will begin to train other teams."

Vaine nodded. "I'll need the names and images of your missing pack members to see if we can match them up with our records. DNA samples, if possible. Your teams will enter at hunter-tracker status, bypassing the required service in enforcement. They'll be accountable to me directly. I won't dictate their targets, but those targets must be open warrants."

"I'll have Rain compile all of our data and send it on." Thorn removed the chip from the reader and set it on the table. Vaine indicated that he should keep it.

"I'll have a copy made for you as well, Belle."

Belle nodded and looked at the director in question. Their eyes met briefly.

"Mr. de la Croix, Mr. Greywolf, if you wish, I'll have someone see you to your quarters. For now, I'd like to speak to Marshal Oakley in private."

The two men rose, Armand reluctantly. "I've always remained at her side before..." He spoke half in jest, half seriously.

"I don't think Tucker was paying much attention to our conversations, Armand." Belle winked. "I won't be much longer."

"You need food and rest."

She did but could hold out a bit longer. She gave them a longing look as the two men left the room and then turned back to her boss.

* * * * *

"Give me your take on Cali Polis."

"This was her field test?"

Vaine nodded and began to take notes.

"Well, she's damn brilliant. She came up with tech on the fly that most scientists would spend their careers perfecting. She's coolheaded, good in tight situations."

"Does she follow orders? Take direction?"

Belle nodded. "She kept focused, and frankly, she held me together more than once. She's good with her weapons but could use a bit more help on her hand-to-hand skills."

"Is she ready for the field?"

Belle looked at her steadily. Cali was still fresh; she'd trained with Sera and Trace, but still... "Maybe as part of a team. I'm not sure about solo. I don't know how she'd react if things went bad in a situation."

"One more question, Belle. Do you trust her?"

Belle rose, stretched, and paced the room, working the stiffness from her back. She thought long and hard about the question before answering. "Trust? I trusted her with the *Starr* and with our prisoners. She held my life in her hands more than once." She returned and seated herself across from Vaine. "But frankly, Roane, no. I don't trust her."

Roane sat quietly, letting Belle work her thoughts out.

"Most people give off a scent when they lie. I'm not as good as the full Weres at picking it up, but I can still spot a lie." She looked at Roane steadily, forcing her to be aware of all the times Roane had withheld the truth from her, with Belle's knowledge.

"The thing with Cali Polis...I can't spot it with her. In our line of work, lies come naturally; we often use just the tiniest lies to function. Evasion, anger, fear, they all have their scents. Cali had an attraction to one of the Were. He was much too young for her, and Armand asked that I warn her off. She then denied the attraction, making it much less than it was. She was cool as a cucumber and didn't put off the slightest scent, not of the lie that I know she told, not of embarrassment. She was simply too self-contained. Basically, she has me half-blind, and that makes me very uncomfortable with her."

Roane nodded, her face not betraying any thoughts. "Your concerns are noted. She is Valoran; we have exceptional physical and mental self-control. And Belle..."

Belle paused in the act of standing, looking down into the director's cool, lovely face.

"Your other concerns, about the trend of young adults, young elites being taken...that has my personal attention."

Belle stared at Roane and finally nodded. So much said in that simple sentence. No, she didn't particularly like Roane Vaine, but she trusted her. With her life. "Thank you, ma'am."

Roane nodded, casually dismissing Belle from her presence.

Belle stepped out of the conference room and into the waiting arms of her mate.

Chapter Fifteen

"So, when do you expect them to show up?"

Belle straddled Armand's lap. Both of them were panting and sweating, his head still cradled on her shoulder. He'd been there since a particularly violent orgasm had ripped through his body. To her pleasure, he was still amazingly quick to recover. Armand raised his head. A deep breath steadied his heart. Belle gazed into those smiling blue eyes that she'd so quickly grown to love.

"Tomorrow, maybe. I'm sure they'll be expecting a ceremony of some sort."

Armand lifted her from his lap, pulling her down to lie over his body. They were in the guest suites for the larger species. The giant bed was big enough for a small orgy, and the shower was a multilevel delight.

"Thorn and the children feel that we should wait until we reach New Denver. It would be a celebration not only of my return, but also your introduction to the pack. It would be a celebration of hope."

"I'll be big as a house, but that sounds like the best idea. From the images Thorn has shown me, it's beautiful, so much like Earth. I'll need a maid of honor. Maybe Rain will stand with me?"

"Rain has come to respect and care for you, as has Golden. She'll be honored."

"So I've won over Thorn and two of your children. But not Storm."

"No, not Storm. His pride prevents him from accepting you. You'll have to deal with the situation very soon."

Belle sighed in exasperation. "Okay. I'll kick his ass tomorrow."

Armand sat up quickly, looking at her in surprise.

"What?" She glared at him.

"You will not engage in a fight with him, Belle. In case you haven't noticed, you're pregnant."

"Yeah, I am, with your child, and with Storm's brother or sister. He needs to accept that before we leave, or it'll just grow worse." She sighed gustily. "All right, I'll talk to him first. Then I'll kick his ass if he won't listen. It's about the damn collar. He's pissed 'cause I put a collar on you."

"It's his own worst nightmare, bébé. He had many years of imagining me and his brother enslaved and bound. The collar is a symbol to him."

"Do you feel that way?"

Armand grinned salaciously, trapping her wrists in his hands. "I'll be your willing slave, bébé, your wolf on a chain, anytime, anywhere. But only if you allow me the same privileges with you." She wiggled, trying to free her hands. They wrestled for a time, her giggles growing louder as his growls grew deeper.

"Armand...Armand..." She gasped, her hair falling all over her face. "Did you talk to Thorn about tonight?"

Armand stilled, releasing her hands and pulling her upright. "No, bébé, I did not. I wasn't certain..."

"You thought I'd back out."

He simply nodded.

"But it was my suggestion. Armand, you should have heard the sadness in his voice, seen it in his face, when he realized this was your baby. He feels your children are his in a way."

"And they are. You notice that all of my children have subtle elements of their godfather? Forest in particular resembles him."

"I don't understand how that can be, Armand."

He shook his head. "I don't know either, but I see what is there. I feel the loss as well. I am sad for Thorn, but also for us and our child."

She drew close to him, running her fingers through his rapidly growing hair. It might never be black again, but the lush waves were returning.

"Is it biological? Spiritual?"

He smiled gently. "Maybe magic, bébé. Wild, natural magic." He kissed her nose just as a soft tap came at the connecting door.

"Come in, Thorn." Belle remembered at the last moment to pull the sheet over her breasts. It wouldn't do to frighten him.

Thorn stepped into the room and scented the sex before noticing their nakedness. "I'm sorry... I thought you said..."

"I did, mon ami. Come here." Armand patted the bed, and a gleam entered Thorn's eyes. Thorn settled at the foot of the bed, his vest unfastened, displaying flat,

muscular abs. The lines of his hips and belly rose gracefully from his leathers. Belle smiled to see that as usual, he was barefoot.

"It seems Belle here is a bit...jealous that my older children were blessed by your presence in their making but hers was not."

Belle gasped in outrage before Armand quieted her with a light pinch.

"Is that so?" Thorn looked solemnly at her and then at Armand.

"And while the babe is already conceived, we hoped...you would assist us with a tri-mating, so she won't feel so neglected." Belle's burning cheeks weren't from the blatant proposition, but because Armand was using her as the excuse. But at least Thorn wouldn't feel like they wanted him for a pity fuck. Far from it.

"Belle, do you truly want this?" He was dead serious, seeing through the flimsy excuse.

"Thorn, I don't know what it is about the pack, but long ago, when Armand explained the role of the third in the mating, I knew he missed you and grieved that you weren't there at the conception of the baby. I know you feel the same way. Maybe this will help... I don't know. But what he told me is true, there is a little of you in Rain and Storm and Golden. I see you in the pictures of Forest. It might be too late, but it's the right thing to do."

Both men sat looking solemn and pensive at her speech, the weight of the years hanging over them.

"And I've never done a threesome before. It kinda makes me hot thinking about it."

"Belle!" She laughed as Armand swiped at her with a pillow. "Trust Cowgirl Oakley to take one of our most revered traditions and stomp all over it!" Thorn began laughing, once he recovered from his shock.

"Look, you guys, I know you had rules all the way back then, but tonight, it's my rules. Thorn, you can go for it. Damn if I'm having him in my bed and not touching him." She heard Armand's low growl of disapproval behind her. "Okay, okay, you can't penetrate me. Other than that, it's all good. Right, Armand?" She turned, glaring a challenge at him. "*Right, Armand?*"

He clenched his jaw and nodded.

"And none of this macho shit about touching. If you two want to touch, do it. It's sex; it's supposed to feel good." She didn't really think they had any hang-ups in that area, but wanted them to know that she wouldn't be offended if they took pleasure from one another.

Judging by the hard rod between Armand's thighs, he was aroused as well as angry at her pronouncement. Thorn, well... A hot light burned in his dark eyes, and her eyes dropped to the codpiece of his leathers. God...he was so long already, he was peeking out the top. She wanted to lean down and lick his cockhead. A neat French braid held his glossy black hair from his face, and as he slipped off his vest, smooth

brown skin slid over his sleek muscles. Armand's arms came around her body, pulling her tightly to his chest as they watched him strip.

"God, Armand, he's really something, isn't he?"

He nipped her shoulder with strong teeth and then licked it to soothe the pain. He remembered the last time he and Thorn had come together to make a baby with Nanette. Time had been good to his friend; Thorn was no longer the lanky, half-starved young man. He'd filled out, become more muscular. He moved smoothly up the bed, settling between Armand's legs, his cock hard and long. The men's eyes met briefly; in spite of Belle's amendment of the rules, Thorn would still look to Armand for the limits.

Gently, Armand lifted Belle to her knees, guiding her to Thorn's waiting arms. He rose behind her, arms around her waist, watching as Thorn gently explored her lithe body, fingers trailing over the gentle swell of her belly. She was still flushed and aroused from their last round of lovemaking. Thinking of Thorn's role in the upcoming mating hit Armand like a punch to the gut, making him breathless in anticipation. He dipped his head to nuzzle Belle's neck, and Thorn pressed his lips to her waist, tongue trailing a bit as he moved to her navel.

Belle wasn't a naive innocent—she had quite the reputation—but her actual experience didn't include making love with two men at once. She struggled to keep an adequately reverent state of mind. Armand had reminded her more than once how special and rare an occasion it was to participate in a tri-mating. But when she saw the men converge at her breasts, one dark, one light, Belle's particular brand of evil kicked in. She knew exactly what she was going to do; she just wasn't certain how to go about doing it.

Her brain raced. She knew positions aplenty, many suitable for a threesome, but she needed just the right position. She wanted Thorn in her arms even as he took Armand to trigger the tie. Her racing thoughts were interrupted, and she gasped and moaned as Thorn's sweet mouth began to tickle her clit, teasing her just short of orgasm. Armand further distracted her by kissing her deeply and then lowering his head to join Thorn. Armand rose slightly, gently unbinding Thorn's hair so the silky strands tickled along her belly and thighs.

"I love the feel of his hair," he whispered. "When he's at my back, his hair slips and plays over my skin."

Belle jerked and bucked at his words, her clit growing too tender, too sensitized for direct contact. As though he knew just what she needed, Thorn withdrew, laving her vulva with gentle, soothing strokes. She caught her breath as Thorn rose and Armand licked her juices from Thorn's face and lips. Both men looked feral and wild, their human masks slipping just a bit. Armand grasped the hair at the back of Thorn's head and held him still as he kissed him deeply.

Thorn was surprised but pleased with the gesture. Before, he'd come in when Armand's mate was in full standing heat; the tension, the possessiveness of the other man, was painful. Thorn had always walked a fine line, striving never to offend his

Alpha during the breeding. But now Belle was safely bred, and Armand allowed, approved of, the shared foreplay. Armand gently bit his neck, his jaw, in a mock display of dominance before releasing the other man.

Thorn looked at Belle's body, he ached to cover her, to sink into her and share her with Armand, but that was not his role. It never would be, not with Belle. He rose to his knees and scooted back, making room for Armand to settle over his mate.

Thorn looked around, seeking and finding a container of lube they'd set aside for him. The association brought by the familiar substance made his cock throb in anticipation. In spite of their reverent attitude toward the mating, the eroticism of the act was undeniable, and Belle's look of greedy anticipation fired him even more. He prayed he'd last long enough in Armand's tight passage to trigger the tie.

Armand shifted Belle's thighs apart with his knees, and she suddenly was up, unwilling to let him dictate the position. She pushed him to his back, smiling at his confusion. Then he grinned back at her as he understood her intent. While Thorn would penetrate him, it put Belle in the middle of the two men, enjoying both of them fully. Belle straddled his hips...reverse cowgirl, of course.

With Thorn's assistance, he canted his pelvis, wrapping his legs around Thorn's hips, gasping as the other man slowly pushed his cock into his tight, long-unused passage. "Relax, Armand."

He grunted in response.

Thorn was careful to penetrate only deep enough to gently stimulate Armand's prostate, to cradle himself along the tender Master Gland. Armand began to go soft as he reacted to the penetration, so Belle clasped him with her inner muscles, teasing him back to his erection.

Belle lay back slightly, enjoying the sight of Armand's cock slowly pushing into her body even as Thorn gently entered Armand. He was fully seated, so Belle pulled Thorn forward, urging him to embrace her, his hair brushing her breasts, his breath hot against her neck. She wondered how Armand felt with his cock buried in her body and his ass filled with Thorn. Carefully, she and Thorn coordinated their movements. When he lowered to her body once again, she was certain the two men brushed lips in a gentle embrace. She shivered as Armand grasped her hips and drove into her deeper, holding her flat on her back over his belly.

Above her, Thorn labored, his eyes hot. His gaze flicked from her to Armand, his face darkening with rising arousal as he watched the two that he so completely dominated in this position. His muscles began to tighten, and she could see he was drawing close to his release.

Belle glanced over, saw the lube, then smiled and bit her lip. She reached out and grasped the tube, squeezing a dollop onto her fingers. She rose slightly, bringing a moan from Armand as her body tightened on his cock. His strokes were growing slightly ragged; he was going to come at about the same time as Thorn.

"Thorn..." Her voice was breathy and low. "Lean over me just a bit. I need to feel...ah, yes..." Delicious pressure settled on her clit as Thorn settled his weight onto his hands at her sides. She reached down, gently stroking his balls and then massaging his perineum.

"Oh, Belle...that's too...oh God!" She slipped her lubed finger into his anus, a devilish chuckle breaking from her throat. Thorn looked at her in alarm, but it was too late. She'd found the spot, and his hips began to plunge wildly, sinking him deeply into Armand's passage.

"Belle!" His voice was strangled and thick, and he fell forward, burying his face in her shoulder. A loud, low groan vibrated through the room.

"Thorn...what the hell...?" Armand gasped and bucked suddenly as Thorn's wild movement brought his orgasm, driving him hard into Belle. He drove hard, slamming her down on his cock, and she cried out as his knot wedged firmly into her sheath.

"God, Thorn...what the fuck?" He sounded so bewildered, Belle couldn't help but giggle almost hysterically. "Did you just tie me?"

Thorn had frozen, his cock erupting deep within Armand, his convulsive movements pressing deeply on Armand's prostate, gliding into the snug embrace of the Master Gland.

Armand bucked, his eyes rolling upward as he surged into Belle once more. She wrapped her arms around Thorn's neck as she came, climaxing on a peal of laughter.

"Belle, what the hell did you do to him?" She giggled through her orgasm, causing Armand to moan as her contractions squeezed him hard. "God, Belle, I swear I'm gonna kill you for this!"

Thorn surged into Armand once more, prompting him to yet another orgasm, which then brought Belle again. She milked the seed from Armand's cock as his contractions clamped down hard on Thorn's knot in his ass. Finally, she dropped backward onto her mate, Thorn collapsed on top of her swollen belly, and the three shuddered through countless orgasms, each one kicking off another, from Thorn to Armand to Belle.

Belle was the first freed from the extended tie; she flopped gracelessly off her mate, making a feeble attempt to escape to the bathroom. Armand grabbed her wrist and held her fast. Long minutes later, Thorn slipped free of Armand's body. Both men cursed and moaned as they separated; Thorn splayed out prone on top of his Alpha.

"God, I'm sorry, Armand. I swear, I didn't see that happening..." He rolled to the side, his long hair spread over his face. "I can't move. My hair is in my face, and I swear, I can't move."

Belle giggled again, tugging weakly at Armand's hand. He released her suddenly, and she slipped off the bed with a *thud*.

"I'm okay." Her muffled voice floated up from somewhere on the floor.

Armand rolled his eyes. "What exactly did she do to you?"

Thorn dragged a heavy hand over his face, clearing a bit of hair from his eyes. "Just as I was about to come, she, uh..."

"She put a finger up your ass."

"Mmmhmmm. Sorry, mon ami." He lay there quietly for a moment. "By God, Armand, I hope you two decide to have lots of children. Dozens would be good."

"Fuck you, Thorn."

"Oh, please..."

All three broke into giddy laughter.

"Belle, this was supposed to be a solemn, meaningful moment."

Belle reached up to the bedside table, fishing around till she found the tissue box. This tri-mating was a messy business. "Well, it's still a profound moment. It's..." Her head came up, followed by her weary body. "It was the sacred covenant between the Alpha and his second in command."

Armand's big hand came down over her head, pushing her back to the floor, and she started giggling again. "God, Armand, I wish I could have seen your face when he knotted you!"

Thorn pushed himself wearily to his elbow. "I did, and it wasn't pretty. His eyes rolled up into his head."

"That good, huh?"

Armand grimaced. "I thought I had a bowling ball up my ass."

She crawled back onto the bed, this time into welcoming arms. "You loved it. Admit it, Armand."

"I don't think I've ever come so fucking hard in my life." His grin was reluctant.

Thorn scooted up to the pillows and lay back, arms behind his head.

"Obviously, I'd have wished my first tie to be with a woman, but God. Maybe I should take those chocolates back, Belle. Maybe I need to look more seriously for a mate."

"Well, you need to find someone like me then."

"God forbid."

She smacked Armand's ribs at that. "Someone who'll do that for fun. Lordy, what a waste to only do that for breeding!" She stretched languorously. "It's worth not being able to move afterward."

She glanced over at Armand; his eyelids were at half-mast and dropping. Thorn had an arm resting over his face; he was a goner.

She sighed, then groaned a bit as she rose and headed for the shower. Inside, she let the hot water pelt the sweat and the semen from her body; she soaped well and repeated, letting the heat melt her aches away.

She returned quietly to the bed and gently washed both men with warm cloths, smiling as they moaned. Their normally active cocks were flaccid and quiet. She tossed

the cloths into a sanitizer, grimaced slightly at the soiled sheets, and pulled them off the bed, pushing and pulling around the heavily sleeping men. Belle found a clean duvet and tossed it over their bodies and then climbed into the big bed, opting to sleep in the middle. If there were any blanket wars, she figured she'd be on the winning side if she stayed in the middle.

She tucked her head into Armand's side, smiling as his arm automatically pulled her closer. The smile stayed long after she fell asleep.

* * * * *

"Belle, Dad? We've brought breakfast."

Belle groaned at the incessant knocking on the door. She sat up, looking in dismay at the room. Two big men in her bed, sheets, clothing, and towels on the floor. My, my, they'd had a busy night. She vaguely remembered two more go-rounds; they'd tried pretty much everything a threesome could try. One by one, Armand's rules had dropped away, until only vaginal penetration was off Thorn's menu.

Belle blinked as the door that connected the living area to the bedroom swung open, and Rain entered, followed by Golden and Storm. She collapsed backward and covered her face in mortification.

Armand roused slowly; Thorn was sitting up, looking at the intruders through sleepy eyes, ebony hair cascading around his naked body. Storm and Golden carried steaming platters of food, and Rain carried trays and plates. To her surprise, not one of the three seemed to notice that there was an extra person in their father's bed. She glanced up at Armand, and he simply winked. Granted, the pack was a physically demonstrative bunch, but the room had to reek of sex. To her further surprise, Thorn casually slid out of bed and rescued his pants, pulling them on before heading to the bathroom.

He returned, and Armand took his turn before returning to the room and sliding back into bed. He'd pulled on a pair of loose sleep pants. Thorn was propped against the pillows, lazily watching the others set out copious amounts of food. Belle was more than grateful that she'd remembered to slip into a nightgown before returning to bed last night. She took her turn in the bathroom and washed up.

Rain and Golden were filling plates; Storm was already sitting cross-legged on the bed, plate in hand. He met her eyes, glanced down in embarrassment, and then smiled, handing her the plate. She smiled back, willing to accept his gesture of peace. It was a relief not to have to sucker punch her soon-to-be-son.

A round tray in the middle of the mattress held a carafe of juice and a single glass of milk for Belle. She resumed her place between the two men and smiled up at Golden as he set out a tray brimming with every known form of breakfast food. Someone must have charmed the socks off the kitchen staff this morning. Golden still didn't have a knack for flirting, so she bet it was Storm. She could just see the giant AmWere flirting with tiny Loran.

Rain took her place on the bed with inconceivable grace, given that she had a plate of food in one hand, a drink in the other. There was a tap on the door, and Regis entered, followed by Staten and Timber. Belle noticed that Rain went slightly pink as the males entered the room. Soon, they'd served themselves and were sprawled on the floor. Staten and Timber sat side by side, legs touching, eyes rarely leaving Rain's face. She was blithely ignorant of their attention.

"So, Belle, I checked with some guys at the docks, and they said the shuttle your parents are traveling on should arrive any time now. I was thinking...well, we were thinking that maybe your folks would feel a bit better if you had some wedding plans in place."

Storm snorted through his toast, and Armand simply gave his daughter a smile.

"Wedding... Well, I was thinking that since our mating seems to be official in the pack..."

"She's right, bébé. Your momma and daddy will feel better if there is a ceremony."

Belle rolled her eyes. She'd expected the wedding thing from her parents, but from Armand's family?

"I was thinking it should be held on New Denver, don't you think, Papa? Daddy? We can hold it outside in the square; the trees will make a really pretty backdrop. We can do a traditional Earth-type ceremony. Have you thought about a dress? Attendants? I can call ahead and arrange for flowers, decorations, that sort of thing. I'm sure everyone will be glad to pitch in for food and drink, and Elinor will handle the cake..."

Belle's eyes were wide with surprise.

Rain continued blithely. "We have several musicians, mostly guitarists, and we can arrange flower girls and little boys to hold the rings. Papa, I was going to suggest that you stand with Daddy, but you might want to perform the ceremony." She turned to explain to Belle. "Usually, the Alpha conducts marriages, but since Daddy's the Alpha and Papa has performed so many these past ten years..."

"Rain..."

"I suppose if Papa performs the ceremony, Storm and Golden can be best men. God, I wish Forest were here."

"Rain." Storm settled his hand gently over her arm, directing her to look at Belle, who sat in openmouthed shock. Immediately, Rain looked ashamed, tears starting in her eyes. "God, Belle, I'm sorry. I'm just so excited..."

"No, Rain, it's okay. I just hadn't given it much thought yet. Maybe since you're helping so much, you'll be my maid of honor?"

Rain teared up even more, looking suddenly very young and vulnerable.

"If I guess right, my mother will have a dress for me. Probably an heirloom or something." Belle smiled gently at Rain as she spoke. It amazed her that this was the same woman who'd commandeered her ship.

"If it's all the same..." Belle turned to Thorn, who was looking over at Armand. "I'd prefer to stand as best man. Any of the elders can conduct the ceremony. Is that all right with you two?"

Storm and Golden grinned, relieved at avoiding the duty.

"We'll be musicians this time, Papa," Storm said.

Belle settled back against the headboard, feeling Armand's hand catch hers. It was good.

At a light tap at the door, Golden was off the bed. To her surprise, Belle's parents filled the doorway. Her father slowly took in the cozy scene on the giant bed, and her mother rushed forward, grabbing Belle as she clambered over Thorn, narrowly avoiding someone's oatmeal. Armand was on his feet and around the foot of the bed, still shirtless. As he looked up into Simon Oakley's eyes, he shook his head and grinned. How often did Armand have to look up to meet someone's eye?

"You're Tucker. You really are Tucker." He looked at Sharon Oakley, letting a smile hover on his lips. "I see him in your eyes." Sharon swept him into a rib-cracking hug, laughing all the while. He found his hand in Simon Oakley's crushing grip before he had the presence of mind to begin introductions. Within moments, Rain and Sharon were huddled over a dress bag, casting furtive glances at Armand. Cali Polis had trailed in behind the others, an uncharacteristic smile on her face as she watched the two families meet for the first time. She blushed a bit when Storm pulled her into the room, settling her down with a plate of breakfast.

Belle was relieved to see the blush. She couldn't smell the embarrassment, but she could see it. Maybe the lack of scent tags was simply a Valoran trait.

Belle had furtively moved the soiled bedding into the sanitizer and hoped the myriad scents in the room would confuse her parents' keen noses, but by this point, she really didn't care. Little knots of people drifted from here to there, and in a haze, she heard her marriage organized, her unborn child given a name, and to her ultimate shock, she was convinced that she heard Thorn recruiting her parents to move to New Denver, as the colony was growing and in need of teachers.

She crawled back up to the head of the bed, watching her future unfold right in front of her. Her parents were laughing, strangely at home with the Were, who they were distantly related to. For the first time in her life, she saw her mother and father looking normal in a crowd. Armand had his head ducked to listen to her mother, his eyes glinting with humor, his gaze often catching hers, the love there open and unguarded. Even Storm was laughing.

"Happy?" Cali had settled next to her, those long, slender legs stretched out in front of her, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"Actually, yes. Very. A month ago, Cali, I'd have never pictured this."

Cali looked at the room and chuckled. "A month ago, you were ready to kill several of these people."

"Ah, that's just family for you."

There was an uncomfortable silence, and Belle wondered about Cali's family. She'd never talked about them before.

"Cali, will you come to the wedding? I've asked Rain to be my maid of honor; I'd love to have you as a bridesmaid. And I swear, I won't make you wear anything silly. Although I can't promise that Rain won't dress you in leather."

"I'd be honored. And leather sounds like just the ticket to me."

Belle laughed aloud at that. Cali had picked up some slang.

"Belle, after this is all over, the baby, the settling in with your family, do you think you'll ever return to work?"

Belle twirled a long curl between her fingers as she thought. "Cali, I sort of like being able to let my guard down, and I don't ever want to risk my children growing up without their mother. Vaine's given me a temporary assignment, but eventually..." She sighed. "I don't know. Armand's people need him, and I know he doesn't want me unhappy. I guess I'm saying maybe. Why?"

Cali looked a bit uncomfortable for a moment. "We worked well together. I don't really like the idea of working solo. I think our skills and personalities are complementary."

"You're talking partners?"

Cali nodded. "You are the real thing, Belle. You've got skills, but what impresses me most is that your primary thought is to stay safe, to stay alive. Frankly, I want someone at my back that I can trust. I think you're it."

Belle stared for a long moment, feeling a blush come over her face. She remembered what she had said to Vaine about this woman. She jerked her head toward the door before they quietly slipped outside. The hall was relatively quiet compared to the crowded room, giving both women welcome relief.

"Vaine asked me for an evaluation of you."

Cali nodded, her eyes steady.

"I actually gave you a glowing review, Cali. In fact, I told her I'd be willing to partner with you in the future. But she asked me one thing, and that one thing really gave me a problem." She went quiet, waiting for Cali to ask the question.

"Is it about my sexuality?"

Belle's brows flew up in surprise.

"I've found that many non-Valoran are either titillated or repulsed about my being a hermaphrodite. If so, I understand."

"Oh God no, Cali. Frankly, I have a healthy curiosity about your body and your sexuality, but it doesn't offend me or repulse me in any way. I guess, what I'm about to tell you isn't so weird in light of that."

Cali waited quietly as Belle paced the hall in her long nightgown.

"The thing is, Cali, I can't smell you. I mean, I can smell you, but I can't smell your emotions... Like you were just embarrassed...I couldn't smell that. My sense of smell is part of my ability to communicate, and with you, I feel slightly blind."

Cali leaned her long body against the wall, staring keenly at Belle. "She asked if you trusted me, and you couldn't say yes."

Belle nodded wordlessly.

"I'm sorry, Belle. It's my biology. I'd change it if I could."

Belle stopped pacing and settled against the wall next to Cali. "I like you, Polis, and I respect you enough to tell you this openly. So I guess if I can tell you this, I have some degree of trust in you. I find that if I watch your coloring, your eyes, I pick up cues that I normally wouldn't." She sighed heavily, looking at Cali's downcast eyes. "When I decide to come back to the field, I'll definitely be looking for a partner. Right now, you're the only person for the job. Ya still want me?"

Without looking up, Cali Polis lifted a brow and gave a quirky smile. "Yeah. The offer stays open for you, Cowgirl." She extended a bare hand, and Belle clasped it in a strong handshake.

Her eyes widened as she looked down at their hands in surprise. "I can't smell you, but I can feel you. Through your skin. You're a little hurt, but pleased just the same." Their hands dropped apart.

"Little-known Valoran secret. The truth is in the touch."

"Damn. I guess casual touching is rude to the Valoran."

"Just some of us, and I happen to be one of those. It's a genetic variation. But you know my secret now. Only you."

Cali pushed herself off the wall. "I need to get back to my quarters; they've got me scheduled for some training before I take off for real. I'll be tagging along with another tracker, a guy named Quantrell."

Belle barked out a laugh. "God, good luck. He's a perv. Someday, I'll tell you about the day I took him for a ride he'll never forget!" She sobered quickly. "He's a good hunter. You'll learn a lot from him. Just don't let him badger you into bed."

Cali gave her a grin and nodded. "I've heard rumors about you and him. If I put two and two together..."

"You come up with me, Quantrell, and a vibrating anal probe. I'll say no more, Cali."

The Valoran grinned devilishly, shocking Belle with her beauty. "I've got the equipment built in, Belle. No toys needed here."

Belle reached out and hugged her impulsively. "God, under it all, you're a woman after my own heart!" She released her. "Be safe, okay? Come by later today. I'm sure by then Rain and Mom will have the entire wedding taken care of. I'll tell them to include you."

Cali nodded, waving as Belle slipped back into the suite.

Cali turned and strode the halls, finally entering her own dimly lit room. She glanced at the time glowing softly on the screen on her comp. She sat in the darkness, waiting for the scheduled communication to come.

The screen lit up, and she entered a series of complicated passwords, creating layer over layer of encryption. Finally, a face glimmered onto the screen. She sent a prompt for passwords, and they were quickly confirmed.

"Well, Cali, it's been over a month standard since our last communication."

Cali's eyes flicked to the on-screen camera. "Uncle Hui. It's good to speak with you again. I was in the field."

"On an assignment already? I'm impressed."

"Don't be. It was merely an evaluation. I was there to support another tracker and be observed in action."

He was handsome enough, but cold and stern. "I assume you were successful."

"Yes, Uncle, I was. I begin formal training today and will be in the field within a month."

He frowned in disapproval. "You were to attempt to obtain placement within the Administration, close to Vaine. What possible intelligence can you gather in the field?"

"I'll gather more intel there than here if people don't trust me. Let me do my job, Uncle."

"Cali, the Coalition didn't invest all that training in you to become an ineffectual mole. They will expect results, and they will expect those results sooner rather than later."

"I understand. But again, I'm the one the Coalition trained; you need to have faith in my skills. If Vaine and her organization have a secret agenda, I will discover it." Cali leaned back in her chair, looking pensively at her uncle. "The first item on my schedule is to attend a wedding as a member of the wedding party. After that, I'll be heading out on simple warrants. They are clearly interested in my tech skills, so eventually, Vaine will reprioritize my duties. For now, I will be a good employee and play by the book."

He sighed in frustration. "Don't make me regret taking you in."

Taking me in? Raising me in sterile labs, never to know a kiss or a gesture of affection? Cali suspected that if Belle were in the room now, she'd smell the anger oozing from Cali's skin. Cali smiled sweetly at her uncle. "I'll give you nothing to regret, Uncle. Your employers will be pleased. But this won't be an overnight mission." She glanced at her timer. "I've have to go now. The safe window for the communication is drawing to a close." She rapidly entered a time and pass codes for their next communication. "Vaine and her people won't know what's hit them when I'm finished."

"Good. Good. Don't make me regret this."

She bit her lip and glanced at the familiar face once more. "Give my best regards to Taurean." She felt a brief sense of satisfaction as her uncle's face darkened at the

reminder of his wayward gender-neutral child. Her cousin had been the only bright spot in Cali's childhood and a blight on his father's head.

Cali disconnected the communication, pulling out the tiny chip that recorded the entire interaction. Her stomach churned, and her skin felt clammy and cold.

"Here's the data." She pushed the tiny object across the desk, where a figure sat in the shadows. "Did I get enough?"

Roane Vaine sat forward, taking the chip and stowing it safely in a pocket. "Enough to hang him, but we need more. Names and that sort of thing. This thing is just starting, Cali. Are you up for it?"

She nodded, pressing her lips tightly together.

"We'll take care of you. It'll be hard, but it's the right thing to do."

She sighed, feeling some of the tightness rushing from her chest. She watched the woman rise and slip from her room, taking some of the heavy darkness with her.

Trust. How had she come to trust this dark woman without the benefit of even meeting her? Cali rose and brought up the lights in the room. She was due in the gymnasium in fifteen minutes for some hand-to-hand practice. Belle and Armand had said they'd come down and observe, but from what she'd just seen, they'd be a while.

Cali scanned her cupboard, pulled out an exercise outfit that she usually avoided. The loose sweatpants would hide her dual genitals. She slipped from her clothing, looking critically at her body in the mirror. Compared to Belle, she looked boyish; her breasts were high and small, her waist slender, flaring only slightly into trim hips and a rounded bottom. Her penis tucked neatly into its foreskin, almost invisible. Her testicles were tight to her body. If she'd been oriented male, her genitals would be larger and would hang more like a human's organ. Only rarely did it come into an erection, her arousal being oriented farther back, in her female genitals.

Generally, her appearance pleased her. She'd never felt uncomfortable about her body before. Today, knowing that she'd be in a room of mostly males, human and otherwise, Cali wanted to remain inconspicuous.

She'd seen how people in the Quay had reacted to the AmWere, and later to the Oakleys. She didn't think she was ready for that sort of attention. She slid on the loose clothing and looked in the mirror again.

Shit.

Would Cowgirl dress down, try to hide what she was? In disgust, Cali stripped, pulling her skintight fighting suit from the closet. She'd created the suit herself. The fabric had the properties of camouflage, and it resisted blades and projectiles almost as effectively as armor. Most energy blasts would dissipate over the surface. Cali pulled the suit on, fastening the outfit up to her neck. It showed every contour of her body, every curve, swell, and bulge. In this suit, she'd unabashedly displayed her erection to Belle, who'd taken it in stride. She had to trust these people.

Cali fastened her boots, pushed her hair back, and headed for the door, a small, defiant smile on her face.

Trust.

What a concept, especially for a spy.

Epilogue

The bride had been radiant in the palest sky blue, and her grandmother's flowing chiffon gown had fit as though it had been custom made. Of course, Sharon Oakley had added an underskirt of white to add enough length for Belle, but it only added to the grace of the gown.

Belle and Armand wed under a cloud-studded sky with great, tall evergreen trees providing the backdrop for the ceremony. Armand had been handsome in black; Thorn had conceded to Armand's wishes and performed the ceremony. Both men fought tears.

Storm and Golden brought in the bridesmaids. Rain had resisted the temptation to garb the bridesmaids in leather; instead, they wore simple green shifts.

A tiny boy and girl preceded Belle down the aisle, strewing flower petals. All assembled murmured at her beauty, until the children ran out of petals and promptly transformed into a pair of rolling, wrestling wolf puppies. Belle covered her face and laughed, clutching her father's arm.

After the wedding, Thorn pulled the newlyweds aside, escorting them to their new home. It had been the first house built in the village and had remained unoccupied all these years, waiting for Armand to come home. The house was wooden, constructed using a rapidly growing bamboolike plant that the pack had discovered. The pale wood was not only iron hard, but resistant to flame and gave off a honeyed glow that lit up the rooms.

The furnishings were comfortable, and pictures were lovingly displayed around the room, reminders of the past, some sad, some happy. Armand teared up when he saw a large, old-fashioned photograph of Forest, those farseeing eyes cast outward, a faraway look on his face.

They'd brought in Belle's things as well, knickknacks and artwork she'd collected in her travels. Next to a photo of Thorn with Storm, Rain, and Golden sat a holo of

Wyatt, laughing, his freckles and red hair giving him a boyish look. He had a fishing pole, a tiny fish on the hook. She smiled and shook her head, missing him deeply.

The nursery was completed; the pack had descended on the house, completing the room as the family journeyed homeward. The pack had greeted their Alpha with tears and smiles, kisses from some, humble obsequiousness from others. There had been new faces, strangers who'd joined the pack in later years. They'd looked from Thorn to Armand, their hesitation to submit to the new Alpha clear. Armand had difficult times ahead, but Belle could see he was born to this.

In the weeks that followed the wedding, as Armand began to build the pack into a cohesive whole, Thorn had been thrilled to take the children on romps into the woods. He also began a rigorous training program to prepare new teams to venture out into space.

To her surprise, when Belle was fully eight months pregnant, Tessa, the Alpha female, had crossed swords with Belle over an imagined slight. Tessa found herself in a heap on the ground for her trouble. The woman was humiliated, but Belle couldn't find it in herself to forgive someone who would blatantly attack a heavily pregnant woman. She was tired, her back ached, and she hadn't tried to avoid inflicting injury on the Alpha.

To her shock and mortification, the Alpha had groveled for forgiveness, which gave Belle a clue that something major had occurred. It seemed she was the new Alpha bitch. Fine by her.

On a bright, sunny day, Belle was watching Thorn's newest trainees, offering suggestions in hand-to-hand. She was crabby from a nagging backache, and now, nothing in the world seemed right.

She'd fled her house, where her parents were hovering, trying to convince her to settle down and take a nap. Armand had risen early that morning, and when he came home for breakfast, he'd taken one look, one smell, very wisely agreed with everything she said, and gave her space.

"Follow through!" she shouted at a flustered young woman, finally stepping up and putting her hands over the top of the trainee's, demonstrating what she meant. Belle stepped away, cursing her back, cursing her belly. She even cursed the bright blue day and the laughter of children that carried to her on the wind.

To the side, she saw Armand and Thorn speaking quietly, casting glances at her.

"Padre!"

Thorn stepped away from Armand, returning to the class.

Armand crossed to her, a smile on his face. "Bébé. It's time."

She frowned, wondering what he meant, and then recognized the rhythmic nature of the pain she felt. Labor. He'd known all morning. She didn't know whether to love him or hate him right now. Belle looked up into that handsome, clever face and decided to love him. It was easier that way. They walked slowly to the midwife's house, taking

breaks to wait out contractions. The midwife was waiting, along with Golden. To her surprise, he was no stranger to this. Neither was her husband.

The window was open, and the fresh, clean air carried away the smell of her sweat. She almost didn't catch the smell of fear on her husband, but there it was, mingling with his excitement and pride. Fear for her, fear for his baby.

She gazed at the blue sky between pushes, bearing down with all her strength, distantly hearing the instructions that Golden gently gave her. She looked at the blue sky, and then at Armand's blue eyes as she gave one final push and her son came into the world. While they fussed and cleaned the squirming bundle, the pain struck again, and Armand gave a shout, stepping up in time to deliver their daughter. She grinned through her exhaustion, catching a look from Golden.

"You knew!" she accused.

He only laughed.

* * * * *

As soon as they toddled, the twins began transforming into a pair of rusty red pups, always into trouble, always wandering off. Their grandparents were often stealing them away, carrying them off for hours at a time. Belle was never surprised to find Sky and Sun carted around by their brothers or sister, but most often, Armand had them strapped side by side on his chest as he moved through his day. One day when Belle found them sleeping on top of Thorn, the resemblance hit her for the first time. Her little redheads with the gold-shot, charcoal gray eyes. She shivered with the knowledge. Her eyes met Thorn's, and she knew that he knew as well. Maybe his seed hadn't made them, but his spirit had crossed over and marked them as his. She never made fun of the tri-mating again. Well...not much.

In her search for answers about Forest, Belle eventually untangled the records that Roane had given her. The ship's manifest had led to a bill of sale, which led to a small fleet of Fedoron freighters, which had led to a company, and then finally to a name. Thorn had sent out six of their best hunters, including Storm and Regis, Staten and Timber. Elinor and Tessa would enter the field as soon as their ship was available. Golden had remained behind. He was to travel to Selene to begin medical studies. And Rain's new job was to return to Earth, where a network of AmWere refugees had sprung up, and bring them to their new home in space.

The *Belle Starr* patiently awaited Belle's return. She went often to her ship and sat in the pilot's chair, feet negligently propped on the instrument panel. On one of those days, she sat remembering Cali's offer of partnership. Cali had trained for a time and begun her fieldwork with Quantrell. Their cruiser had been attacked; Quantrell was mortally wounded, and Cali herself had vanished. There had been no word of her since.

At Quantrell's service, she'd met Vaine's eyes, and the other woman had looked back and then glanced away. Had their trust in Cali led to the loss of Quantrell? Belle

rocked her booted foot back and forth, remembering Quantrell's messy blond curls and crooked grin. She smiled when she heard a familiar footstep.

"Hey, Tucker." Her hand dropped, fingers gliding through lush fur. A surge of energy told her that her husband was now sitting on the floor beside her. His hair had never recovered its inky black color, but the silver waves cascaded to his shoulders, shimmering and beautiful. With his tawny skin and ice blue eyes, he was breathtaking. Belle had taken down more than one careless female who'd allowed their hands to wander.

"Missing space?" He scooted to rest his back against the helm, facing her. His nakedness never seemed to take away from his presence.

"A little. I'm thinking about Cali." She sat silently for a time. "I thought maybe she set up the attack. I thought maybe she betrayed Quantrell, that she'd betrayed us all. But I'm just not sure." She crossed her arms, resting her hands where the butts of her pistols would normally be. "Vaine investigated and never found anything definitive. I keep thinking, Armand; what if she was taken? What if she's out there now and nobody's looking for her?"

Her face was white, and Armand leaned forward to grasp her hand.

"It's just eating away at me, Armand."

"Where will you start your search, bébé?" She slowly looked at the magnificent man who was her mate. He didn't even question her. "I find that I miss the hunt as well. I miss our time on the *Starr*. Thorn will stand in for us as needed."

She looked away, chewing on her lip. "I've already started inquiries; I'd like to get out and see what I can hear firsthand. Just short trips."

"I'll have a carpenter set up a nursery in the crew quarters. We'll cover it as a late honeymoon. Spread the word that the *Starr* has been decommissioned."

"Damn, you're good. And damn, you're bare-ass naked!"

He grinned and waggled his brows. He rose gracefully, settling in the copilot's seat. "Come sit on my lap, little girl. I have a surprise for you."

She grinned and straddled his lap. "I have a surprise for you too, big boy."

His hand slid up her bare leg, unimpeded by underwear. "Ah, bébé. You are a wise and wonderful woman." He began to undo the delicate buttons that held her bodice together. She was still nursing, so her breasts were full and tender. He dipped his face and nuzzled her smooth skin. His cock was hard and seeking between her legs, so she rose and then worked herself gently onto his length. She wasn't that wet, and the friction made her shiver.

"Do you think you could do this and pilot the ship at the same time?" He bit his mark, making it tingle, reminding Belle that she was forever his. He was forever hers.

Belle rose and then lowered herself with a bit more force. The dress slipped from her shoulders, her breasts jiggling with her movement. "I could fuck you and pilot this ship through an asteroid field, cowboy."

He spun the chair so that his back was to the view screen, and she had an unimpeded view. She diverted ship control to the comm in the armrests.

“So let’s get busy, Cowgirl. You have some practicing to do.”

Amid their laughter, the *Belle Starr* fired up and lifted off, taking them on a very short and erratic flight through the sky and out into space.

 THE END 

Belinda McBride

Belinda was born in Inglewood, California, but grew up far to the north in the shadow of Mt. Shasta. While her upbringing seemed pretty normal to her, she was surrounded by a fascinating array of friends and family, including a polyamorous grandmother, a grandfather who is a Native American icon, and various cowboys, hippies, scoundrels, and saints.

She has a degree in history and cultural anthropology, but in 2006 made the life-changing decision to quit her job as a public health paraprofessional and stay at home fulltime to care for her severely disabled, autistic niece. This difficult decision gave Belinda the gift of time, which allowed her to return to writing fiction, which she'd abandoned years before.

Belinda's hobbies include soap making, collecting gemstones, travel, and martial arts. She has two daughters, six Siberian Huskies, and an array of wild birds that visit the feeders in the front yard. She supports no-kill animal shelters, and donates platelets twice monthly at her local blood center.

As an author, Belinda loves crossing genres, kicking taboos to the curb, and pulling from world mythology and folklore for inspiration. She is committed to taking her readers on an emotional journey and never forgets that at the end of the day, she's writing about love.

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