

A photograph of a man's bare torso. He is wearing a bright red, long-sleeved button-down shirt that is open, revealing his chest and abdomen. Several red rose petals are scattered across his skin. His right hand is resting on his hip. The background is a plain, light gray.

*O'Shea's  
Love*

ALIYAH  
BURKE





# *O'Shea's Love*

Aliyah Burke

## O'Shea's Love

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*To my parents for the numerous camping trips which taught me to love the outdoors.*

*To the man who showed me what amazing things could be created by hand not machine if you just had a bit of patience and understanding, the one who reminded me to never let the part of my soul which belongs to Éire ever be forgotten or ignored, my Grandpa.*



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Any and all mistakes in this story are mine and not to be blamed on the ones who do this for a living. To my awesome cover artist and editor. Thank you both, y'all are the best!



*McMurdo Station, Antarctica*

The helicopter touched down on the ground, its shiny blue door opening as a tall man, bundled up against the elements, jumped out. He slammed the chopper door closed behind him and headed towards the building that would hopefully offer some shelter against the blasted wind. Sealing the hatch behind him upon entering said building, the man looked around. There weren't that many people in the narrow halls of the bunker, but the ones he saw seemed comfortable in just long sleeves.

He pulled the hood of his parka off his head and continued on towards his destination, his strides sure. Coming to a halt at an end, he spun sharply to the left and walked into what appeared to be a dining area. There were about five people in there, sitting together and chatting. When they saw him enter the room, silence reigned.

"I'm looking for Hummel," he announced.

One of the people at the table spoke up. "Don't believe Hummel is here. I think you should check with Gates; you can find him at the end of this hall."

"Thank you." He moved out silently.

At the end of the hall, he found a closed door. He reached out one gloved hand and knocked.

"Enter," a raspy voice called out from inside.

Pushing open the door, the man stopped and met the gaze of the person behind the desk. "Are you Gates?"

The blond head nodded in response. "I am Benjamin Gates; you can call me Ben. And who are you?" He stuck out his hand.

"My name's Aidrian O'Shea." The man stepped forward to shake the offered hand.

"Right, Mr. O'Shea. You called ahead; something about talking to Hummel." The bearded man gestured to a chair in front of the desk.

"I did. I want the best to teach me. And I heard Xar Hummel was the best." Aidrian's large frame settled easily into the chair.

Leaning back in his own, Benjamin Gates studied the man across from him. Aidrian knew what he saw — a tall man, a few inches over six

feet; a shaved head with eyes so dark they appeared black; a muscled framed with skin the color of dark chocolate stretched over it.

"Jötunn is the best we have. But that isn't going to help you. Jötunn ain't here."

Aidrian caught the grimace before it could cross his face. "I don't care about Jötunn. Where is Xar? I want a face-to-face."

Ben ran his tongue over his teeth before he picked up the phone and pressed a green button. "Gary, where's Jötunn? Okay, thanks." He placed the handset back in the cradle. Putting his blue eyes on the man sitting across from him, he relayed the message. "Jötunn is what we call Xar. You will have much better chance of talking to Hummel with that name as opposed to Xar. And right now, Jötunn is at Station Molodezhnaya, has been for a while, and is about to begin station jumping to get to Australia. Then in a few days, I believe, will be at an airport to leave for Nepal." He flashed a smile. "Sorry."

This time, Aidrian's frustration did show. He'd been held up at the previous station before coming out here now and had missed the person he'd wanted to meet.

*Not that it would've mattered if Xar Hummel's been at another station this whole time.* "Is there any way to get him a message and have him wait for me at this other station? It's extremely urgent I speak to him."

A flicker of amusement crossed Ben's face. Shaking his head, he picked up the phone and placed a call. Three minutes later, he hung up and sighed heavily. "Sorry. Didn't catch Jötunn in time. But the crew radioed ahead from there to Geelong, which is in Victoria. We can arrange to get you out on our next flight, head to Amundsen-Scott and leave from there. Hopefully, the message will find its way to Jötunn in time. Good luck."

Aidrian shook the bear of a man's hand one more time and went back down the cold hallways at a decent clip to the chopper, determined to make this contact. A member of SEAL Team Seventeen, the Megalodons, he wanted to learn all he could about ice climbing and trekking. Checking in with a few people, he'd gotten one name out of the bunch. Xar Hummel was the one to teach him.

He buckled his belt and the chopper took off seemingly seconds afterward. Once he landed at Amundsen-Scott, he was off and running to make it to the one plane leaving for Australia. By some stroke of luck, the pilot heard he was searching for Hummel and held the flight for him.

For the first time in three days, since he'd begun his search, Aidrian felt like he had a chance. Closing his eyes, he drifted off to sleep as the plane hit cruising altitude. He didn't wake up until they were circling for a landing in Australia.

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The bar was dank and dark. The room barely slowed its activity when the door swung open to admit a six-three, solidly muscled black man. A mid-weight jacket hung over his fit body as his pitch-colored eyes scanned the room.

Easy steps took him up to the bar where he leaned up against the scarred wood. The bartender walked up and jerked his head in silent question.

"I'm lookin' for Jötunn," he announced in a deep voice tinged with an Irish lilt, and held out a bill.

Brown eyes scanned over the part of his body they could see, then the bartender lifted a shoulder in a shrug. His brunet head tilted towards a dark corner, and he grinned as he looked Aidrian over one more time.

Aidrian headed in that direction. At the corner table sat two people, both wearing hats and drinking from tall mugs of beer. Standing at the edge of the table, his eyes told him that one was a woman and the other was a man.

"I need a word with you," Aidrian said, focusing on the male.

The man looked startled, and his eyes grew large as they took in the formidable person before him. "Can't it wait, mate?" the man eventually asked, finding his voice. "I'm in the middle of something here."

Tossing down some money on the table towards the woman, Aidrian shook his head. "No. Excuse me, ma'am. I need a private word with Jötunn, here."

The eyebrow rose a fraction before she shrugged and slipped out of the booth in silence, swiping the money he'd tossed at her and shoving it in her thick coat. After a toast to her companion, the woman walked away.

Sliding his frame into the place that the woman had just vacated, Aidrian looked at the man who had an even more confused expression on his face. *Sure doesn't look like much*, Aidrian thought. "I need you to teach me all you know about the ice."

The man had begun to shake his head even before he'd finished his opening sentence. "No way, mate. You've made a mistake."

Aidrian didn't want to hear that. "Look, I'll pay you for your time, but I heard you were the best...why are you shaking your head at me? Will you not even hear me out?" *Damn it! I need this man to teach me!*

"I would love to take your money. But I can't help you."

Slamming his hand down on the table, Aidrian snapped, "Why the hell not?"

The black-haired, brown-eyed man began to chuckle. "Because, mate. I'm not Jötunn."

A string of curses began to form and Aidrian just barely contained them. It wouldn't do him any good to beat up this man for not being Jötunn. Taking a deep breath, Aidrian prayed for control. "The bartender told me you were Jötunn."

The man leaned back and took a swig of his beer. "Nope. I don't like the ice and I sure as hell wouldn't be out on it."

"Who is Jötunn?" Aidrian ground out. "Look around in here and tell me if he is here."

Opening his mouth to say something, the man closed it with a snap and looked around the dim joint. His eyes lingered before meeting the bleak stare of the man across from him. "Jötunn's not here."

A growl emerged from Aidrian's throat. "Damn!" he hissed, his nostrils flaring twice before he pinned the man with eyes that had grown deadly.

"I swear man. Jötunn was here but I don't see —"

"Damn it all," Aidrian cursed. "I'm beginning to think he's more trouble than he's worth." He stood abruptly and loomed over the man. "So, do we have an idea where one may be able to find Jötunn?"

"Across the street is where Jötunn gets a room when in town."

A sharp nod was all Aidrian afforded the man. "I hope to hell I never find out you lied to me." A military spin and he was gone, marching out the door and back into the late afternoon.

"You're welcome, mate." The man hollered after him, seconds before he flipped open a cell phone and placed a call.

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Xar "Jötunn" Hummel walked across the hotel lobby, a trench coat covering khaki pants, a black tee shirt, with only a favorite pair of

hiking boots on Jötunn's feet peeking out. Eyes were framed by thick golden-brown lashes that matched the hair on the head.

A smile formed on Xar's attractive face. After sleeping in bunkers in Antarctica, there were times a nice hotel was a godsend. Not to mention that in two days' time, Nepal would be even closer.

The trip was a long time in coming. Years of saving and research were under Xar's belt. But when the offer came to join an expedition on Mount Everest, refusal wasn't an option.

"Xar!" a hotel employee shouted. "Got some messages for you here."

Aidrian was just entering the building when he heard someone call out for Xar. *Finally!* Hurrying toward the front desk, where he saw a figure in a black trench coat leaning over the counter, he stopped just shy of running into the person he sought.

"Excuse me. I need to talk to you. I've been looking for you," he said in his accented voice.

Within seconds, Aidrian found himself looking into a pair of eyes that made his breath catch. One of his country's most elite warriors, there wasn't much Aidrian faced that made him pause, but this woman's eyes did. They showed and enticed him with their intelligence and independent spirit. Large and green, they looked up at him from under thick, golden lashes. Her skin was smooth, and she had high, exotic cheekbones that framed the small nose of her delicate face. Although pale, he could see the slight tint of a golden tan on her exposed skin.

Her mouth curved temptingly. Aidrian furrowed his brows as his eyes raked over her coated figure one more time, almost as if he could see what treasures lay hidden beneath the thick black material.

"What can I do for you?" she asked as her eyes, too, took in the picture he presented. Aidrian knew she noticed the sturdy build of his body, the way his black jeans hugged his legs so tightly, showing off how muscled they were. Although the coat hid his upper body, it wasn't hard to ascertain it would be as nice as his lower body.

His eyes narrowed in disbelief. "You? You're Xar?"

One half of her mouth curved up in a smile, unaware of the havoc that simple action created in the man across from her. "Yes, I am. Although most call me Jötunn." She held out her hand. "Xaria 'Xar' Hummel, also known as Jötunn."

Aidrian took her hand, noticing how his swallowed up hers. He wished she weren't wearing gloves so he could find out if her skin was as soft as he thought it would be.

"Aidrian O'Shea," he managed to mutter. She was stunning, despite being so covered.

"And again, I ask, what can I do for you?" she questioned as she took her hand back, using it to grab the stack of messages the front desk man had slid toward her.

*A woman? It's a woman I'm supposed to learn from? Wait a minute, she looks familiar....* Aidrian ran his onyx eyes over her and tried to imagine her against the elements. She seemed almost frail next to his powerful body.

When she raised a golden brow in silent inquiry he spoke. "I heard you taught people how to be out on the ice."

Xaria ran her tongue over her lower lip as she glanced down to the papers in her hand. She flipped through them before she answered. "I have been known to do so." Eyes like green ice looked up at him.

Aidrian looked down at her. She stood about five-six to his six-three. "Can we sit down?"

Xaria sighed. "I can meet you in the restaurant here in about twenty minutes, but I really want to get into some clean clothes." Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked away.

Aidrian remained immobile until she disappeared from sight. Then he turned to the man at the counter. "I need a room."

Twenty minutes later, Aidrian sat in the restaurant facing the doorway so he could keep an eye out for his would-be companion. He'd secured a room in the hotel and had changed into something a bit nicer. He swirled his drink before taking a sip. He just about choked when she walked through the door. He couldn't stop his groan of approval from slipping out.

Her hair was loose around her shoulders and it bounced seductively with each step she took. A sweatshirt the same green as her eyes covered her torso, although it couldn't hide her full breasts from his gaze. She wore a pair of jeans that lovingly molded to her form, showing off the assets, and a pair of hiking boots was on her feet.

It was with sure steps that she approached him. Her hand pulled out a chair as she sat. "Sorry I'm late."

Aidrian took his seat when she made it obvious she didn't need him to pull out a chair for her. He picked up on an unusual smell that settled around her. It wasn't anything he'd smelled before, but he found

it very soothing. "No problem," he said, tamping down his body's reaction to her.

A waiter stopped by and asked what they would like. Xaria only ordered a drink. While they waited for Aidrian's food to arrive, she put those damnable green eyes of hers back on him.

"What can I do for you, Mr. O'Shea?" She took a drink of her iced tea.

"I want to hire you. I need to be taught the secrets of the ice. Basic survival skills are a must, but I need more than that." He paused as his food arrived. "I need to know how to discern if the ice is safe or not, and the quickest and most efficient way to build shelter in it."

She placed both her elbows on the table and gripped a wrist as her chin settled upon her hand. "Why come to me?"

"When I looked into the best person, everyone said Xar Hummel." He took a bite of his shrimp.

"And yet, at the bar, you assumed Xar Hummel was a man and excused me like a whore who'd used up her usefulness." There was undisguised bitterness in her tone.

Aidrian was glad she couldn't see the flush of embarrassment that crossed his face. "I apologize for that. No one told me you were a woman."

She finished her tea and nodded. "And you just assumed a woman couldn't possibly help you." At his shrug, she continued. "Well, in this case, you were right. I can't help you. You're going to have to find someone else." Xaria stood, tossed down the money that he'd given her earlier, and walked away without a backward glance.

Aidrian was shocked. He wasn't used to being dismissed like a small child; and yet, that was exactly what she'd done. It was almost as if her mind had been made up even before he told her what he needed.

With a quiet dignity, Aidrian finished his meal, paid, and went to his room. Fuming, he strode back and forth. This was definitely not the outcome he'd been wanted. Or anticipated.

Aidrian unbuttoned his beige shirt, tugged it out of his pants, and let it hang around lean hips. "What the hell am I going to do?" He walked over to a chair and flopped down into it. His feet thrust out in front of him as he closed his eyes and tried to concentrate.

Unbidden, the image of Xaria Hummel popped into his head, of her sitting there across from him at the table in the restaurant and standing there watching him in the hotel lobby. Her eyes were something else; they sparkled with something he wanted to learn a bit more about.

Standing in an abrupt motion, Aidrian grabbed his ice bucket and keycard before stepping out into the hallway. He moved down the red carpet confidently. As he turned the corner, he saw a couple in a heated embrace. Shaking his head, Aidrian walked around them and continued for the ice machine. As he was on his way back to the room, the couple was still there. Only this time, they weren't as loving.

Immediately, he sensed a problem. The woman was emitting little gasps and the man was shielding her body from view. But the vibe in the air was just wrong. Those weren't pleasant moans coming from her.

"Is everything okay?" Aidrian asked, slowing down.

The man visibly tensed, turned his head, and snapped, "We're fine. She's just a bit tired that's all. Mind your own business."

Biting back his initial response, Aidrian hesitated a moment and said, "Ma'am? Are you okay?"

A pair of brown eyes glared at him. "I told you," the man growled. "She's fine. We're just catching our breath before we go back to our room."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd like to hear it from her," Aidrian stated easily, rolling his shoulders as he adopted a more ready stance.

"Tell him, babe. Tell him that you're fine and he can leave," the man ordered, shifting his body a bit.

"Help," she whimpered. "Help me, please."

The man jerked. "I warned you —"

Still holding the ice bucket in one hand, Aidrian plucked the man up off the floor and away from the woman like he weighed nothing. The woman sank to the floor, fighting to find her breath, her beaten condition obvious.

Aidrian shoved the man against the wall, his hand clasped around his windpipe. "That is not how you treat a woman," he growled low in the back of his throat.

The man's eyes began to bulge as Aidrian kept applying pressure. "Not so tough, are you, now that you're dealing with a man who can defend himself." His eyes flashed dangerously. "Don't come near her again." He abruptly released the man and knelt beside the woman still slumped on the floor.

Aidrian reached out for her. "It's okay, ma'am. I won't hurt you." His words were coaxing as he witnessed her shrinking back from him. Although he didn't turn, he was aware the man stumbled down the hall leaving them alone.

Her wide, hazel eyes lost some of their terror before she succumbed to tears. "I thought he was going to kill me," she sobbed.

"Let me look at your throat, ma'am." Aidrian set down the ice bucket and gently moved her hands, exposing the dark bruises that were already visible. *I know I would have killed him if I had seen these beforehand.* "Can you breathe okay?"

The slim brunette nodded. "I'll be okay, thanks to you." Another wave of tears began to fall. "Can you see me to my room? I don't mean to be a bother, but I'm scared he might be waiting for me."

"Of course." He stood in a single flawless motion and reached out for her hand.

She shook as she placed her hand in his, but she allowed him to pull her up. Taking two steps, her knees buckled and she would have collapsed if Aidrian hadn't been there to support her.

As he gathered her close, he could feel her tears on his chest. "It'll be okay. Can you walk?" All she did was cry harder. "Give me your key," he ordered. She did as he commanded, taking it out of her pants and holding it out to him with a trembling hand.

"It's Room 628," she mumbled, not taking her face away from the security of his chest.

Readjusting his ice bucket, Aidrian swept her off her feet and walked down the hall, holding her tightly to his muscled body. His strides were sure and swift as he took this woman to her room.

Soon, he was in her room and walking through it allowing it to close behind him. He moved to the bed and gently laid her upon it. "Here you go, ma'am. I'd get yourself looked at if you have any trouble breathing. But you should report him. You'll be okay?" he asked as he went to the bathroom and got a wet cloth for her to put on her neck.

Tearstained and puffy-eyed, the woman looked up at her savior. "I...I...I don't know if I can. But, I thank you for stopping him. Thank you, so much." She placed her hand on his arm.

"Glad I was there to offer my assistance. Goodnight," Aidrian said softly as he handed her the keycard. Then he silently left for his own room.

Once there, Aidrian fixed himself a drink. Sitting back down in the chair by the window, he sipped his water. The chiming of his cell phone snapped him out of his mental wanderings.

"O'Shea," he said after flipping it open. A grin crossed his dark face as he moved to the bed and stretched out to take this call.

Xaria closed the door behind her. She'd been on her way out when she smelled the exact scent she had the pleasure of inhaling when she'd been with the handsome Aidrian O'Shea. Stepping back into her room, she didn't want him to see her and misinterpret her appearance.

Still, when he'd walked into view, she couldn't stop the gasp or the wave of jealousy that had filled her upon seeing him holding a slim woman in his arms. His shirt was unbuttoned and she'd caught a glimpse of the rock-hard chest that lay beneath it. The woman in his arms was snuggled up against it.

He'd looked so virile, so masculine, and so fucking hot as he strode down the hall. In one hand he had a bucket of ice, and Xaria had shaken her head as he opened a door and both of them disappeared into the dark room.

"No surprise as to what they are doing." Xaria was shocked at her own bitterness. But she hadn't seen a ring on his hand and she didn't understand her own reaction. So instead of leaving her room, she chose to stay in.

She spent a restless night as the image of a man she hardly knew floated around in her head. The man who'd stood before her in the lobby had been tall and proud. His dark skin had shone almost black in the hotel lighting that had seemed to bounce off his shaved head, and his eyes had been as black as the nights in Antarctica. He had a flat nose above full lips, and a clean-shaven square jaw that bespoke of stubbornness and determination. Most of the men she was around had facial hair for added warmth in the cold weather.

And then he spoke with an Irish accent. It was charming. It was sexy. It was *damn* sexy.

When she awoke the next morning, she wasn't in a good mood. "I just need a good workout," she told her haggard reflection as she got dressed.

Entering the gym, she looked around. Movement on the treadmill grabbed her attention. Xaria looked over to her left, doing a double take. It was Aidrian O'Shea.

The man was running on the machine, a fine sheen of sweat covering his body. He wore a pair of workout pants and a cutoff tee shirt that allowed her to see the massive muscles in his arms. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him anywhere and she'd never seen arms so defined.

Deciding to go to the leg press so she could still watch him, Xaria went left. *What the hell is wrong with me?* She stretched and then sat down on the machine to begin her workout.

Xaria had been lost in her movements so when she looked back up, her eyes narrowed in anger. A stunning black woman stood beside Aidrian and they were talking as he drank some water. Her stomach flipped as he flashed that woman a smile and leaned down to whisper something in her ear. He had a brilliant smile and the way his teeth stood out against the darkness of his skin made Xaria's mind go down roads it shouldn't.

*So you're a player, Mr. O'Shea. Figures; all the good-looking men are.*

Forcing her eyes closed, Xaria concentrated on completing her set. When she opened them again, she was treated to the sight of his firm backside as it moved away from her. Unfortunately, that same woman was with him and had her arm laced through his.

Aidrian had seen Xaria enter as he was on the treadmill. He'd watched her stretch in the mirror before him and had continued to observe as she sat down at the leg press and began her workout. He'd

been on his way over to talk to her, when a familiar voice had stopped him.

It was his sister, Affrica Semone O'Shea. She'd called him last night and said she was in Geelong for a day; so, he'd given her the name of his hotel and they'd decided to meet for breakfast. She'd showed up early and had come down to the weight room.

She went with him to his room and waited while he showered and dressed. Together, they headed down for breakfast. They were in the middle of their meal when he looked up and found Xaria entering the room.

"What has gotten your attention, Hondo?" his sister asked in Gaeilge, using his nickname he'd gotten from the SEAL Team.

"Nothing," he snapped in the same language, knowing how his sister could be. He loved her to death but she was a sister. 'Nuff said.

Too late, though, for her eyes had drifted over to where his had stopped and she let a low whistle go. "*Ohhh*, she's cute. Who is she?"

"Affrica..." he warned.

Blowing him a kiss, she shrugged. "Fine, I'll stay out of it."

His onyx eyes narrowed. His sister never gave up that easily. "What are you up too?"

"Nothing." She held up her hands in a surrendering gesture.

"Don't you trust me?"

"No."

Sticking her tongue out at him, she teased, "Sure you don't want to think about that a bit more?"

"What *are* you doing here in Geelong?" Aidrian asked, changing the subject.

"I'm just passing through. I'm going to Melbourne and then taking the train over to Perth."

Leaning back in his chair, Aidrian crossed corded arms over his massive chest. "With whom?" He caught the small tensing of her body. "Affrica?" he ground out. "With whom?"

His sister refused to meet his gaze. She looked everywhere else except at him. Aidrian never budged. He knew he could outwait his sister. When she finally looked back at him, he had one eyebrow raised.

"Promise me you won't be mad..." she began.

That eyebrow dropped and his eyes narrowed. "Whene'er you start a sentence with that, I know I'm not going to like your answer." He clenched his jaw and rolled his shoulders, unaware of the intimidating picture he created.

"Promise me!" she squeaked.

"Affrica," he warned. "Stop playing around and tell me." Her silence and the fact she started worrying her lower lip with her teeth told him the answer. Sitting forward in the chair, he ran a hand over his face. "Tell me it's not him..." His words were almost a beg.

Her face filled with sorrow as her black eyes looked down at the tablecloth. "I can't," she muttered.

Shoving back his chair, Aidrian rose in one motion. "Let's go," he commanded.

Affrica knew better than to push him when he got like this, so she stood immediately. She opened her mouth to speak but shut it at the expression he had on his face.

They strode through the dining area, the scowl on Aidrian's face more than enough to keep people out of their way. As they entered the lobby, his eyes fell upon the woman who'd refused to help him.

"Wait one," he ordered as his steps carried him away from his sister and closer to Xaria "Jötunn" Hummel. Aidrian never checked to see whether Affrica had listened to him; he just expected his order to be obeyed. And it was, for Affrica never moved.

Xaria looked up to see Aidrian gliding toward her with single-minded purpose. She was sitting in a chair in the lobby waiting for a friend. Involuntarily she licked her lips. Raw power was the only thing she thought when she saw him. Well, that and sex. Lots and lots of sex.

Stopping before her, Aidrian cleared his throat. When he met her gaze, his stunning black eyes struck her again. "Ms. Hummel, what would it take to get you to teach me what you know?"

Closing the magazine she'd been pretending to read, Xaria sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. I can't help you. I'm taking a trip and will be out of the country for at least two months, perhaps more. I can give you the names of some *men* I'm sure you would feel better learning from anyway."

Her eyes flashed between him and the woman who was still waiting for him across the lobby. "I'm sure those men wouldn't mind putting up with your extracurricular activities as well. But for me, I find it distasteful."

Aidrian arched a brow at her blatant disgust, shock on his face. "What are you talking about? What extracurricular activities?"

Those green eyes narrowed. "Well, let's see. I've seen you twice since I turned you down and both times you were in the company of a

different woman." She stood and stepped closer to him, dropping the magazine in the chair. "Mr. O'Shea, even if I were inclined to help you, which I'm not, I wouldn't be putting up with this need for women you have. When I teach people I expect their full attention. If they're going to spend time sleeping around, that means they aren't going to be paying attention to me. The ice isn't a playground for amateurs. A man who treats women like you do would have a hard time taking me seriously, and that is something I refuse to put up with."

One side of his mouth lifted into an endearing grin. Aidrian stepped closer, and her nose flared as his scent wafted around them. "I know the ice isn't a playground; however, it seems to me you're the one who wants to keep me at a distance. Why is that? Are you afraid to be alone with me?"

"I'm not afraid of you or any other man," she retorted, holding his gaze, ignoring the way his deep voice purred.

Leaning his head down closer, Aidrian whispered, "Prove it, then. Teach me."

She gulped. This man wasn't like anyone she'd encountered before. "No."

"I'm not giving up. I want you..." he paused, his eyes running over her face, "to teach me what you know."

"Excuse me," another voice interrupted, causing Xaria to spring back from Aidrian.

Both of them looked to see a small brunette woman. Xaria immediately recognized her and knew he did as well. "Yes?" Xaria asked, noting the sharpness to her tone.

The woman put her hand on Aidrian's arm. "Thank you for last night," she began. Xaria snorted her disgust. "I know he would have killed me if you hadn't come along. The cops just arrested him; I'm leaving for home now, but just wanted to thank you for intervening." She reached up, placed a kiss on his cheek, and walked off.

He put his black eyes on the woman standing before him. Xaria was shocked about what had just happened. She'd believed something else had occurred.

"I'm not giving up. Have lunch with me today," Aidrian tempted. "At least let me explain why I want to learn."

"Sure," she said before she could command her mouth to do otherwise.

One more of those brilliant smiles crossed his face. "Great. See you then." He turned away before spinning back around and leaning

back in close to her ear. "And if you were still wondering, that woman over there is mah sister." Then he walked away, leaving her craving something she wasn't sure she wanted to explore.

## Three

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Aidrian said goodbye to his sister and watched her climb onto the bus that was taking her to Melbourne. He hated she was traveling with that man at her side. In his opinion, Miles Horne was nothing but a letch and a danger to his sister, a reporter who often went with Affrica when she went out shooting. She always seemed to find great stories, and not intentionally, either. It just seemed to happen that way for her. And Mr. Horne, in Aidrian's opinion, used her for that, concerned about getting the front-page story and not about his baby sister's safety.

Plus there was the fact the man was constantly hitting on her.

He stopped waving as the bus turned the corner. Most of him wanted to take the next bus and meet her in Melbourne to stay with her. And protect her.

That was what big brother's did. He knew it annoyed her at times, but he didn't care. He only had one sister and there was no way in hell he would face his parents and tell them they'd lost their only daughter.

Despite his apprehension about her latest trip, Hondo still felt excited about meeting Ms. Hummel for lunch. He liked her. A lot. Even despite her initial refusal to help him.

Walking into the hotel, he glanced at his watch and then turned for the dining room. Xaria was in the lobby just before the dining area, waiting for him. She sat in a chair, skimming through a magazine. He knew she wasn't really reading it because her eyes continually looked up and around before flicking back to the page.

Hondo didn't understand his attraction to her. He wanted to needle her to get those gorgeous eyes of hers sparkling up at him. He wanted her to be the one out on the ice with him. For more than one reason.

As if she read his thoughts, her luminous bottle-green eyes flashed up to his. One of her blonde eyebrows rose in silent question. A slight tremble flowed through him at her stare.

She wore jeans and a black sweatshirt. Her golden hair fell in waves around her shoulders, giving her a seductive appearance. He swallowed and bit back a groan. She was beautiful.

She rose in a fluid motion and walked toward him. "I was beginning to think you weren't coming, Mr. O'Shea."

"Dinna know I had a curfew, Miz Hummel; I apologize. I was seeing mah sister off on her bus."

One eyebrow rose. "That really was your sister?"

He nodded. "Aye. I said so, didn't I?" The air around them seemed charged. He inhaled sharply, again inundated by the striking scent she wore.

"So you did. I apologize as well. I shouldn't have assumed you would lie."

He flashed a grin. "Well, now that we've both apologized, let's start fresh. Shall we get some lunch?"

Her smile melted his insides. Brilliant white teeth stood out against her honey-hued skin. That sparkle was back in her eyes as she stared up at him.

"Let's," she agreed.

Xaria kept her eyes on the handsome man across from her. She couldn't help it. He was such a work of art. His skin, a deep, smooth brown, reminded her of sinful dark chocolate. Her gaze traveled over the firm chin, high cheekbones, and damnably handsome features. She shifted on her chair as the thought of being in his arms filled her mind.

"Okay, Mr. O'Shea. Now that you have me, why don't you tell me what you think I can do for you?"

There was a small flicker on his face. His eyes shifted and looked her over before he smiled. Xaria realized what she'd said and it took all her willpower not to retract any of it. She knew how it must have sounded.

The arrogant smirk that flashed across his face told her exactly how he'd taken it, anyway. "Do I?" he asked, his rich brogue flowing over her.

She held his gaze. "For the moment. I have a plane to catch in one day."

He sighed. "What will it take for you to not get on that plane and teach me what I need to know?"

"I honestly don't think there's anything you *can* say, Mr. O'Shea. While I'm happy my earlier assessment of you was wrong, I have no intention of missing out on this trip."

A smile quirked his lips. "You are? What's your assessment of me now?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't push your luck. Tell me why you need my help."

Xaria's breath hitched as he leaned in closer. The table between them suddenly seemed much, much smaller.

"There are times," he said, "when mah job could put me in a position out in icy conditions. I know a little bit now, but I know I could learn much more from ya. I'm familiar with basic survival skills, but I could learn how to build shelter much quicker, forage for food better, and what not, if you'd assist me."

"What is your job?" she questioned.

"I'm with the Teams. And I'm confident with the jungle, the desert, any terrain but the ice. I need your help."

The Teams. He was a SEAL.

Xaria couldn't help smiling as his words moved over her. How fucking sexy was it to have a man speaking to her in an Irish brogue and looking like he did. "I can recommend others who can teach you the same thing."

"Nae," he said immediately, shaking his head.

She arched a brow. "No?"

"You trained them? These men you're willing to send me off with?"

"Just about all of them." She furrowed her brows. "A couple of old timers who helped train me are still around."

"That means you still know more than most. I don't want the second best. I want *the* best." He reached across the table and covered her hand. "I want you."

Her insides trembled at the combination of his touch and those words. *How I wish you did*. "I'm sorry. I can't. I wish I could help you, but I can't."

She could feel his disapproval. It washed over her like a wave.

"You mean you won't."

"I've been planning this trip for years, Mr. O'Shea," she snapped, not liking how her guilt made her feel. "I don't need you to come judge me about whether or not I choose to help out a member of the United States military." She tugged her hand away from his and set it on her lap. Her nerves were wound tight at just his simple touch.

"If that's what it takes for you to help me, I'm willing to do it."

Xaria stared at him. He was handsome enough that she was imagining him in ways she shouldn't be. There was just something about him that called to her.

*No, damn it! I want to go on this trip!*

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I can't help you. I'd be more than willing to give you some other names, but there isn't anything you can say or do to make me give up this opportunity."

"That's what you think," he muttered in a low voice.

"What did you just say?"

"You heard me," he said. "I have no intention of losing out on this opportunity either, Ms. Hummel."

She groaned softly as he wiped the corner of his mouth with the napkin. The man was a walking ad for sexual allure. It wasn't anything he tried to do; it oozed from him, as if bred into his DNA. His dark eyes moved over her and left her skin tingling. She swallowed once, twice, and even a third time, but it did her no good. Her throat was still unbelievably dry.

"So that means both of us are sorry. No matter. I'm still going." She pushed her chair back and stood, wiping her hands on the napkin before placing it beside her plate. "I'll leave some names at the front desk for you if you change your mind. It's been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. O'Shea."

Tossing some money down beside her plate, Xaria left without looking back.

Adrian sat there, elbows on the tabletop, and watched her walk away from him for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. *Damn!* he thought, running his tongue over his teeth.

He could honestly say this wasn't even remotely how he'd envisioned things to go. Jötunn, he'd envisioned to be a man, not a woman whose mere presence made all sense leave him. Add to that her flat-out refusal to assist him in his quest. Aidrian had expected this person to jump at the chance to teach him. With a deep breath, he leaned back in his chair and thought again about Xaria "Jötunn" Hummel or Xar as she claimed she was also called. She intrigued him more than he cared to admit.

Aidrian ground his teeth together. He needed this. *And I'm going to get it!* Pushing up from the table, he went to the elevator and rode up to his room. When he stepped from the interior of the car and headed for his door, a smile crossed his face as his gaze landed on the gentle swaying hips of one Xaria Hummel. She stopped and looked over her shoulder. Her eyes widened slightly before she turned toward him.

"Mr. O'Shea," she said, walking closer to him. "Were it not for the fact we're housed on the same floor, I'd begin to wonder if you were stalking me."

Aidrian smiled again and leaned nonchalantly against the wall, watching her approach. "And you know we're on the same floor, how?"

Xaria stopped before him, her expression amused. "So you *are* stalking me."

His grin grew wider. "Nice dodge. Won't work, though. This where you saw me and made your assumption of me?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Perhaps."

Aidrian put one hand in his pocket and withdrew a keycard. Stepping closer to her, he noticed how her breathing increased and her pupils dilated. He leaned down by her ear. "For your information, as a general rule, I have the utmost respect for women. But be assured, Miss Hummel, you and I have unfinished business and we *will* meet again." Backing off, he maneuvered around her and let himself into his room. Xaria had turned to watch him and he winked her before closing the door behind him. He sank against it. "Yah should be grateful, I respect women, Xaria Hummel, or you would already be in mah bed."

He shifted his stance before heading to the table where he had a bunch of books and manuals on ice survival. Picking one up, he thumbed through a few pages before tossing it back down with a low growl of frustration. Aidrian shook as his hands gripped the edge of the table. He needed some release. Changing quickly into sweats and a sleeveless tee, he went back down to the gym and began working out.

Xaria's heart was going unbelievably fast by the time she made it into her room. Immediately, she headed for the mini bar and grabbed a water to quench a thirst that seemed extremely vast. All she had to do was imagine Aidrian O'Shea, tall, muscular, dipped in dark chocolate, and panty-soakingly handsome.

Shaking her head at her behavior, Xaria thought about his request. Despite what he might think, it hadn't been easy to say no to him. In fact, she'd wanted to say a lot more to him, just nothing about teaching him secrets of the ice.

*Imagine being alone with him night after night. Out under the stars.*

A shiver of longing roared over her. "Okay. I apparently need to get laid." She headed toward her bed and flopped down on it. Xaria tried to think about Nepal and the amazing time she was going to have.

Instead of the Himalayas, her mind's eye conjured up Aidrian O'Shea and Antarctica. He was more than lovely to imagine. What wasn't, however, was the disappointment in his onyx gaze when she'd refused him.

Rolling over, she groaned with exasperation. She'd grown up on the ice, had experience not many would ever attain. Her father, with his green eyes, appeared in her head and she knew what needed to happen. Xaria sat up, reaching for the phone to place two calls. After that was completed, she lay back on the bed and took a nap.

An hour later, she was standing in the elevator, and Xaria shoved her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. When she reached the ground floor, she headed straight for the restaurant and grabbed a table near the back. While she drank a beer and waited for her food, a shadow fell over her dimly lit table. Xaria looked up and had a hard time swallowing the liquid. Aidrian O'Shea stood there dressed in a blue button-down shirt and black slacks.

*Oh, hell, I'm screwed!*

"Good evening, Mr. O'Shea. I'm about to eat, would you care to join me?" *Would you put me on your menu?*

He held her gaze before a smile cracked the stern visage of his face. "Thank you, Ms. Hummel." His large body settled gracefully into a seat across from her.

"Xaria, please. Or Xar. Hell, even Jötunn." *Shit, I'm babbling like a not just a fool, but a damn fool!*

His sexy bald head nodded once. "Xaria it is."

Xaria longed to melt below the floor at the sound of her name rolling off his tongue. It wasn't the first time he'd said it, but it was so different this time. That one word from his lips brought to mind long nights of endless pleasure.

Wetting her lips, she smiled. "Better, thank you."

It didn't take long before a beer sat before Aidrian and his order had been placed. His intense gaze held hers until she closed her eyes and took a swig of her beer.

*Distraction. I need a distraction.* Glancing from lowered lids at him, she noticed he still watched her. Endless patience was what his expression told her. This man was one not easily ruffled or put off. Beneath his exterior lingered a thread of danger. She wouldn't have expected SEAL for he didn't match her assumption of one. But there was clam assurance about him that did more, *way more*, than intrigue her.

"What can I do for you, Xaria?" His question rolled off his tongue in a near purr.

*Strip naked and let me lick you from head to toe. Hold me in your arms; back me up against a wall and...* Xaria shifted on her seat. "How long were you allowing for this crash course in ice survival?"

He leaned forward, beer bottle dangling from two long fingers, and rested his elbows on the table. Aidrian licked his lips, which sent more longing racing through her.

"I want the whole class. One week I believe."

*One week. With just him.* Damn, if that thought didn't have merit. "You want an advanced course?"

"Absolutely."

He placed his beer on the table and relaxed back in the chair. And yet, Xaria wondered if he weren't suddenly, somehow, more dangerous. She sighed, her decision made. "Okay. We'll need to go over a few things beforehand and I'll make some calls to arrange transport back out to a station."

"Name the time and place and I'll be there."

*Now. Here.* Xaria glanced at her watch just as their food arrived. She remained silent until it was just the two of them again. "My room, after dinner." His eyes met hers and she shivered with desire at the heat that flared there. Shoving down her reaction, Xaria lifted her brows. "Will that be a problem?"

"Not for me," he responded.

"Good."

They ate in a comfortable silence for a while.

"Tell me how you came to this, Xaria," he ordered as he ate his last prawn.

"My father. My parents divorced when I was young and he spent most of his time in Antarctica. So when I visited, he'd take me places. When my mother passed, he kept me with him instead of shipping me off to some boarding school. I was nine when I moved in with him."

"And you never had any desire to do anything else?"

Xaria was surprised there was no censure in his tone, only pure curiosity. "Not for a second," she answered honestly.

"Where's your father now?" he questioned.

"Back home in Norway. He lives with my uncle, his brother, and helps out there. My uncle has a bookstore in Tromsø. When he lost his

leg, my father realized Antarctica was no longer a place he'd be able to call home."

"Sorry to hear that. Where's Tromsø located?"

"Thanks, but he's still deeply involved in expeditions when he's not at the bookstore. It's in northern Norway on the island of Tromsøy, off the northwestern coast of the mainland. Largest Norwegian city north of the Arctic Circle. It's used as a starting point and support base for arctic expeditions as well you can study the Aurora Borealis there. For being so far north, it's got a lot, including a university and an airport." She smiled. "He's developing a deep love for the Arctic now."

"And he met your mother where?"

"England. She was there from Egypt going to college." Xaria shrugged. "I guess they tried to make it work, but it wasn't meant to be." *Okay, I really didn't mean to tell him all of that.* Normally she kept her private life private.

He remained silent for a bit and just watched her. Utensils down, Aidrian asked, "Dessert?"

"No thanks. Go ahead, but I should begin making those calls."

"I'm good," he assured her and waved for the check.

*Of that I have no doubt.* Xaria opened her mouth to dispute him when he reached for the check, but kept silent at his pointed look. As he signed his name, he winked at her, sending tremors of longing through her. She had to fight the urge to snuggle into his chest as he assisted her from the chair. Side by side, they walked to the elevator, her head reaching just above his shoulder. She watched him out of the side of her eyes. He appeared relaxed against the wall of the elevator car, but she was positive he was well aware of everything around him.

When they stopped, she led the way to her door. "This is me," she said softly.

"I know," he whispered in her ear.

Xaria shivered even as the warmth of his body surrounded her. Opening the door, she entered. "Grab a seat, I'll get some pamphlets." She went to her bag by her bed and sank to the mattress, wishing it were in a separate room. She needed more than a second to gather her thoughts. Getting what she wanted, Xaria moved back to the small table where he sat at one of the chairs. She tossed the material between them on the laminate surface and sat down. "Okay, this is what I can offer you."

## Four

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Aidrian lay upon his bed, a half smile on his face. One week. One whole week out in the middle of nowhere with Xaria Hummel. The partial smile grew to a full one as he imagined all kinds of things. Dinner had been fun, not to mention informative. Afterward in her room, it had been one hell of a challenge to behave himself, though. He'd noticed each time she'd cast a sideways glance at him. His cock had hardened at the gentle smell that surrounded her. *Is it possible to smell like starlight?* If so, then that was how he would explain he smelled – starlight and a hint of mint. It was heady and intoxicating.

He sobered as his thoughts drifted to the States; more specifically, his teammates and friends. He'd headed here after a celebration at Harrier's house. It was actually a baby shower for Ernst "Ghost" Zimmermann and his wife Kacy. Even his sister had been there. But he needed some down time, so Aidrian had put in a chit and ended up here.

Every free moment he'd had he'd spent looking for the woman who'd left a knife embedded deep in Merlin's back on a rooftop in Rio. She was still out there. And that was unacceptable. He'd been raised to treat women very well; but this one, this assassin, he was ready to kill. Aidrian forced himself to calm down.

"One day, Mara, one day, we *will* meet again."

His mood was slightly better come morning when he headed to the weight room to work out. As the miles passed beneath his feet on the treadmill, he got the feeling of being watched. Turning his head, he saw Xaria walking toward him. Pressing a button, he slowed the treadmill down and lowered the incline.

"Good morning, Aidrian," she said.

"*Maidin maith*, Xaria. *Conas atá tú?*" At her confused look he translated. "I said, 'Good morning. How are you?'"

She smiled. "Ahh. I'm fine, thank you."

His gaze took in her snug blue jeans and tight tee shirt with a slogan that read "Ice Rocks" on the front. Her thick golden hair was gathered back to fall free down her back. *Does she know how adorable she is?*

"Something I can do for you?" he eventually asked.

Her green eyes flared with passion for a second, then a smile cracked her composed face. "Clothing."

Aidrian lifted a brow. "Sorry?"

"I need to check your clothing."

He couldn't stop the smile, especially as her eyes darted from side to side once she realized how it sounded. Stopping the treadmill totally, he grabbed his water and towel before standing near her.

"I'm ready now." He draped the towel over his neck. "It'll take me about five minutes to shower and change. You can wait or come by in a few."

Aidrian was hard-pressed not to toss her over a shoulder when her gaze dropped to his midsection. When her eyes finally made it back to his, they were a deeper shade than normal.

"Xaria?" he asked when she remained silent.

"I'll come...um...by in a bit." She spun away and left off without looking back.

Aidrian allowed another smile to cross his face as he watched her flee, her tight ass swaying seductively. He knew she was embarrassed but he didn't care. He liked her. A lot. *This trip will be interesting to say the least.* Going to his room, he showered and dressed in record time.

He'd just slipped his shirt on when the knock sounded on his door. With most of the buttons done up, Aidrian opened the door and was again captivated by a pair of ice-green eyes. *Damn! I want this woman!*

"Xaria," he said by way of a welcome and stepped back to let her in.

She flowed past him, and right on her heels was the arousing and alluring scent. It teased his nose and placed his body on high alert.

"Show me what you've got," she stated.

"There's a loaded statement," he murmured as he shut the door behind him. She couldn't hide the slight shudder that racked her form.

"I meant clothes."

"I know what you meant, *súl glas*."

Xaria looked at him, her eyes narrowed slightly. "What did you call me?"

He smiled and gave into the urge to touch her. One finger trailed down the side of her face. Her skin was unbelievably soft and Aidrian's pulse shot though the roof. His dark skin stood out vividly

against the natural golden hue to hers. And yet they complemented each other wonderfully.

"I'll tell you after our week out."

"And I'll hold you to that."

He winked. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

They stared at each other. The temperature in the room rose by leaps and bounds. His heart pounded in his chest and he longed to lean down and kiss her rosy lips, just to see how soft they were.

"Your clothes," she said after swallowing.

He nodded toward the bed and did his best not to imagine Xaria spread out upon the floral comforter. Her gaze moved over him in slow, blatant perusal before she looked at the bed on which his bag lay. He wanted to bring her eyes back to him. Instead, he remained still and watched her pour over his attire.

She filled the room with noncommittal murmurs as she moved quickly through it all. Her lower lip became caught between straight, white teeth when her attention refocused on him.

"What's the verdict?" he asked, positioning himself at her side and staring at the piles of folded clothing.

"You're good."

*You have no idea just how good, Xaria.* He merely smiled at her.

"But," she added, "you need a few more pairs of socks. New, thicker wool and some thin ones; silk, cotton-wool blend, or even polypropylene ones. You're straight with pants, have a good material. It's like Gore-tex but I can feel some difference in it." Xaria looked at him and he could read the question in her eyes.

"Similar."

As if sensing nothing further was coming in the way of an explanation, she sat down by a stack of shirts. "You've got decent items for the layer method of dressing." Xaria looked at him. "You know about that, don't you?"

"I do. We got that in survival training. I'm comfortable with the right things to wear, layering so I can move and yet remaining warm all the while keeping perspiration away from my body."

Xaria nodded. "So you want to learn more about the ice itself."

"Yes. We don't have many opportunities to jet off to a frozen wasteland to hone our skills."

She crossed her legs and stared at him. Aidrian waited patiently for her to say something else.

"It's going to be a quiet week, isn't it?" she questioned softly.

"I'm a quiet man, Xaria. Don't say much. Never have." He repacked his bag quickly. "Nature of the job."

"Everyone on your team this quiet?"

"No, not even close." He smiled as he envisioned his friends and teammates. "Don't get me wrong, Xaria. I'm more than capable of having fun."

A sexy and husky chuckle emerged from her. "I have no doubt about that. Sorry to say where I'm taking you has no strip...um...gentlemen's clubs, casinos, or anything of the sort around."

*When you take me where I long for you to, you can bet your life it won't have a damn thing to do with clubs or casinos.* Closing his rucksack, Aidrian tsked. "Making more assumptions of me?" He looked at her, taking in the slight flush to her cheeks. "Besides, if that were what I longed to do, I wouldn't be asking to go back out to Antarctica." He winked at her. "I'll toss in a pack of cards for down time."

The way her mouth curved up sent his mind down a path he'd barely managed to leave a few seconds ago. *How the hell will I behave myself, even if it's one week?*

She stood and smoothed her hands down the legs of her jeans. "Maybe you should bring two packs. You may need to burn them to keep warm." Xaria headed for the door. "Let's go shopping," she said once she got there.

Aidrian shrugged and grabbed his wallet, making sure his ID was in there, and cell phone. Double-checking to make sure he had his room key, he swiped his jacket off a chair and slid over his shoulders. "Lead the way."

Xaria watched Aidrian decide between several types of socks. She could see other women in the store watching him as well, and it made her long to claim him. *It's not like I can blame them. The man is just too damn fine.*

"Something bothering you, *súl glas*?" Aidrian's powerful silvery voice flowed over her from behind. Xaria's gaze snapped back to where he'd been. Gone. And she'd never seen him move.

"If you tell me what the problem is, I'll do my best to fix it," he promised.

She shuddered at the pure sexuality in his tone. *I want to beat these whores for even lookin' at you!* Xaria fought for sanity. She'd known him for a day; this was no way to act.

"No problem," she murmured and denied the desire to lean back against his marbled chest.

He stepped closer. Her skin tingled, nipples tightened and her pussy gushed when his body pressed against her. She barely contained her whimper of desire when his breath skimmed the back of her neck and his arm reached past her to briefly touch a pair of sunglasses.

"If you say so. Your expression shows otherwise."

"Does it now?" she questioned.

"It says so much, *súl glas*, so much."

Xaria felt a loss when his body stopped touching hers. "Guess I shouldn't play poker with you, then."

His warm presence surrounded her again. "Oh, I'd love to play poker with ya. That would be a most delightful way to spend an evening with you."

Xaria turned to face him. Her heart lodged in her throat. Aidrian was much closer than she'd anticipated. She couldn't move, for the sunglass tree was behind her; so unless she stepped into the handsome SEAL before her, she wasn't going anywhere. With a sharp inhalation, the rugged masculine scent he wore so well almost intoxicated her.

*Two can play this game.* Xaria licked her lips and slid her hands in her back pockets before grinning. "Wow," she drawled. "I know much more...um...entertaining ways to spend an evening."

A smile spread across his face and he skimmed his gaze over her. "Oh, poker can open the doors to many wonderful..." he trailed off and tilted his head slightly, "amazing experiences. It's all in how you play."

Her legs didn't want to work. They trembled as his obsidian gaze burned her. Never in her life had she felt such an immediate attraction to a man before.

"Is that so?"

"We could always find out," he said smoothly.

*Somehow that sounds very much like a promise.* And she was okay with that. Very much so.

"We could," she agreed. "Are you done shopping?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. We need to go. Our plane will be leaving soon."

"Plane?"

"We're heading out tonight. Spend the night at a station and trek out in the morning."

Indecision was on his face for about two seconds before it smoothed away. "Okay." That was all he said before going to pay for his items.

Walking back to the hotel, she noticed he kept checking his cell; and although his expression didn't change, it wasn't hard for her to discern he wasn't pleased.

"Everything okay?"

"Not sure. I'm waiting to hear from mah sister. She went to Perth but she's nae told me she's arrived." He shook his head and closed his phone.

"She usually calls?"

"Aye."

His concern was palpable. "Do you have other siblings?"

"She's my mah only one."

"I'm sure she's fine," Xaria said, placing a hand on the arm of his black leather jacket.

"I dinna trust the man she's with." He took a deep breath. "Not much I can do from here."

She smiled. "You're a good brother. Your sister wouldn't probably like you following her around all the time."

Aidrian chuckled. "Probably not."

They rode in silence up the elevator. As they exited the car, she stopped when his hand settled upon her arm.

"Yes?" she asked over the pounding of her heart.

"Your room or mine?"

The silken question flowed from his lips to her core. *Mine! Then yours.* Knowing full well if she picked one or the other, she'd not take responsibility for her actions, Xaria swallowed and prayed for strength.

"Meet at the desk to check out in ten?"

His rumbling chuckle poured over her. "Almost like you're afraid to be alone in a room with me, Xaria." He pressed close to her. "I promise I'll only bite when you ask me to. See you in ten minutes."

Xaria watched him walk away. She couldn't help it, the man moved with such coiled grace. Like a big cat, he flowed with an eerie elegance and confidence.

Her body had hardly calmed down when he met her at the front desk. He'd changed and she'd longed to melt into his embrace when he'd turned to her and gave her a sexy half smile. Signing her bill, Xaria tried to ignore the thrum this man sent through her system.

From her peripheral vision, she watched him interact with the woman behind the desk. He gave off an alluring vibe and Xaria found herself wanting to hiss in anger at the woman and her fawning attitude toward him. She closed her eyes when his rich laugh echoed around her. Her body shuddered with longing and she knew he stood extremely close. Slowly opening her eyes, she found his large physique leaning against the counter beside her.

Aidrian had apparently waited patiently for her to look at him. "That scowling look is back on your face, *súl glas*. What put it there?"

*Damn him for noticing.* Xaria shrugged nonchalantly. "Nothing." She put the pen down. "Let's get going."

Aidrian's expression told her there was no way he believed her. Before she could move, he bent down, grabbed her bags with one hand and adjusted them so they hung down over his back. He arched a black brow at her but didn't say a word. They walked in silence to the waiting taxi.

Xaria observed him as they rode to the airstrip, then grinned when he glanced between her and the small propeller plane they were going to board.

"This is our ride," she announced.

"Nothing bigger?" he asked as a powerful wind whipped across the runway area.

"Are you scared?" she teased softly, standing beside him as he chucked their bags into the small plane.

He turned skeptical eyes on her. "This will make it, right?"

A man with a thick beard that hung to his chest popped his head around the nose of the plane.

"Jötunn!" he boomed. "Right on time. Ready to go? I've got...whoa...aren't you a big man?"

"Shank," she said with affection. "We're ready. This is my friend Aidrian. Aidrian, meet Shank."

The men shook hands before Shank looked back at her. "You're going to have to be in the back, Jötunn."

She nodded. "Works for me." With a smile and wink to Aidrian, Xaria grabbed the edges and vaulted herself up into the back of the plane to settle herself among the boxes being delivered to the base.

"Wait—" Aidrian's deep voice broke in.

"Take the front; you'd be way to uncomfortable back here."

Whatever he was going to say was cut short when Shank slammed the door shut. The men climbed in and she gave Aidrian a

thumbs-up sign when he glanced back at her as the propellers roared. With a yawn, Xaria readjusted once they'd taken off, but her eyes flew open when the plane began to shake like it was coming apart at the seams. She jerked up as the plane pitched sharply. Staring forward, there was zero visibility through the small windshield.

"Shank?!" she hollered.

"Brace yourself, Jötunn! We're going down." Shank faced forward. "Mayday! Mayday! This is flight—"

Everything went black.

## *Five*

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The snapping brought Aidrian back to consciousness. He slowly got to his feet. Everything hurt. Glancing around, he could barely make out the plane through the snow, but the flames helped.

"Xaria?" he called, heading to the plane from where he'd landed. Aidrian couldn't hear any kind of response. "Shank?" Still nothing. He stopped by the mangled metal that used to be a plane. "Xaria? Can you hear me?"

"Here!" her voice was hardly discernable over the wind. "I'm here."

"Are you okay?"

"Have some cuts. Shank didn't make it."

Aidrian found her on the other side of the plane; blood trickled down the side of her face. Before her lay Shank with a large chunk of glass embedded in his chest, his blood seemed to have frozen almost instantly. Aidrian dropped beside her and pulled her to him, turning her face from the dead body of her friend.

Drawing up her hood, he said, "I'm sorry, Xaria. Truly, I am, but we need to see what we have left and tend to your wounds. Then, we can see to Shank."

Despite obvious reluctance to leave her friend, she did so, and soon they were rummaging through the scattered items on the ground. A low string of curses reached him and he squinted through the increasing snow to see Xaria kick over a container. Ducking his head against the wind, he moved to her side.

"What's wrong?"

"We have no gear to call anyone. The radio is totally smashed. Can't even salvage parts to make another one." She glanced up at him, a wry smile on her face. "Guess survival training is going to begin sooner than anticipated. Not to mention taking on a whole new meaning."

He could see the pain she tried to hide about the loss of her friend and her own injuries. "I believe you're correct."

Xaria nodded and pulled up her facemask. Touching his arm she said, "Let's get this done. If there's enough light left we'll take care of Shank. We need to find a bit more secure place to hole up for the night."

"Okay." He'd already piled what he'd found and was ready to move them. Within moments, everything she'd found was beside his on a makeshift sled. Aidrian remained silent and gave her a moment to say goodbye to Shank. Another popping sound reached him, though, and that brought her back to his side.

"Let's go," she said, stepping up beside him and lifting one side of the rope. He took the other side and together they pulled. It didn't take too long for them to find a rhythm. "Always easier with a team of dogs," she announced over the wind.

He smiled, but it immediately turned into a frown when he saw the wall of ice before them. Turning toward Xaria, he found her scanning the barrier by walking down and back. Her hood was off her head and he could see the concentration on her face.

"Ideas?" he asked.

A cracking sound, louder than the previous ones, reached them and her gaze snapped to his in less than a second. "We go through. Sled stays. Take our bags and whatever else we can manage."

"Through?"

"Yes. There's a hole to my right. What there is of the remaining light I can see some at the other end. The opening is small, so the sled won't fit; but you should be fine, although it will be tight for you."

"Let's do it," he said, glancing back to where he could no longer see the plane or the flames that had smoldered upon it. Aidrian grabbed his bags and handed hers to her.

"You won't be able to wear yours. Hook them to your belt and pull them through behind you." She was snapping karabiners onto his bags as she spoke. "There. I have different lengths so they won't get overly tangled." Xaria turned on her headlamp and pulled her hood back up. "Stay close and tell me if you lose feeling in anything. Ready?"

Aidrian was impressed. She was no nonsense and methodical. "Yes, ma'am. I'll be right on your six."

"Good."

He followed her down the wall before he saw the opening she meant. *Shit! That's gonna be a tight squeeze.* He watched her gouge out a foothold and wedge in two metal spikes.

"If you can grab at least one spike before you come through that would be great. If not, don't worry about it."

Xaria quickly disappeared in the hole. Bags hanging on the ground behind him, he illuminated his headlight as well and mimicked her actions for climbing into the hole. Aidrian removed one spike and

drilled it in the floor of the tunnel. Then did the same with the other one, using the one on the floor to ensure he didn't fall back.

"You okay back there?" Xaria's question came.

"I'm fine, second bag just pulled through."

Aidrian took the spikes and held them as he slinked through the hole on his belly. *Damn near too big to fit in here.* The sides and roof pressed against him as he inched along. He could see the light at the other end but could tell it was a ways off. Another loud, popping noise burst into the air and the ice around them shuddered.

"I don't suppose that's normal, is it?" he queried.

"It is. Don't worry, we're almost through."

Aidrian pulled his face mask up before continuing on. They were silent until the end when she stuck her head out.

"Be careful," he said.

"On it."

His heart skipped a few beats as she slid from his view. Inching forward, he looked over the smooth edge and saw her scouting around. Aidrian turned his attention to what lay before them and gasped. Unparalleled beauty stretched out ahead of him. Endless smooth swathes of ice were broken by jagged peaks. The sky had almost become totally dark and the scene took his breath away.

*And I thought Ireland was beautiful.*

"Come on down. Just be careful," Xaria said.

Aidrian slid out and got to his feet. Unhooking his bags, he rolled his shoulders to get the kinks out. He narrowed his eyes against the increasing winds and protected them with his goggles. Xaria was a bit away, setting up a tent. Going to her side, he helped set it up without a word.

"Start a fire," she said when they were done.

Grabbing the bags and setting them inside the tent, he noticed her touching the side of her head as he closed the flap. "You okay?" he asked crouching down beside her.

"I will be; head's just throbbing."

Aidrian removed his hand gear and reached inside her hood to grip her chin. He turned her face so he could see her wound. It wasn't bleeding but it wasn't pretty.

"Go lie down. I'll start a fire and clean the wound." He tightened his grip on her when she began to protest. "Do it; we can argue about it later."

Xaria stared at him for a few moments before she nodded. "Okay. I'll set up inside."

As her slender form disappeared into the tent, he fixed his glove back on his hand and reached for his small shovel that sat near the door of the tent. It didn't take too long and soon he had a fire going, content it would burn despite the wind and snow for a while.

"I'm coming in," Aidrian announced by the tent flap as the wind swirled around him. He waited about five seconds before entering. It was going to be close quarters. Xaria sat cross-legged on her sleeping bag, and between the bags was a glowing lantern. Immediately, he felt warmer; and it wasn't just because he was out of the wind. Being in Xaria's presence did that.

Closing the flap behind him, Aidrian sat back on his heels and tugged his mittens and the thermal liners off. She had a cloth up to the cut on her head. "Let me do that," he said, pushing his hood back and removing his goggles. Aidrian took the medical wipe from her hand and scooted close enough to finish tending the injury.

He did his best to be gentle. His heart wrenched when she winced. Xaria never cried out, just clenched her jaw. As he placed the last butterfly bandage across the cut, he gave her a smile.

"Sorry I don't have any cute or pretty Band-Aids for you, *súl glas*. Plain is all we have."

Her green eyes shone like crystals in the light. "Don't need anything pretty. Kinda partial to the Green Lantern, though. Got any of those in there?"

His cock hardened as he held her stare. "Sorry. I'll get you one when we get out of here."

"I'll hold you to that as well," she said with a grin.

*I have to get away from her or I'm going to lose control.* "I'll check on the fire and fix some food. I'll let you know when it's ready."

It didn't take long for him to bundle up and leave the beautiful and tempting Xaria alone in the tent. As he crouched by the fire, he looked at the dark sky.

"This is gonna be way harder than I thought."

Even though he'd done numerous undercover assignments with attractive women, none of them had been able to addle his thought process. He sucked in a sharp breath as he heard Xaria open the tent. Moments later, she was across from him.

"Ready to eat?"

"Starved," she said.

They ate quickly and quietly. Soon they were back in the tent. Their bodies in close together combined with the shelter keeping out the snow and wind created a relatively comfortable situation, given their present location on earth.

"We start nice and early tomorrow. By my calculations, we're about seven or eight days away from the station. Sorry, but this survival training just became the real deal."

"What about a rescue?"

She sobered. "Assuming the chunk of ice we crashed on hasn't already disappeared into the frigid waters, it most likely will be by morning. If Shank did get his mayday off in time and it was received, there will no trace of the plane. That's assuming this weather lets up enough for authorities to get a search off. I won't sit here and hope just to find out. We have to trek it, anyway; but we suddenly have a lot less food."

Xaria's explanation made a great deal of sense. "Okay. So we hike."

Xaria slid into her bed. "We do. Get some sleep, Aidrian."

He did. As he reached out to turn off the light, he whispered, "*Oíche maith, súl glas.*"

\*\*\*\*

Xaria snapped the cover on her compass shut and pushed to her feet. Shielding her eyes, she stared across the frozen landscape until the bundled image of Aidrian appeared before her. A smile turned up her mouth. Who knew these past three days would actually be considered fun? He was a fast learner and the skills he already had made him a great asset. When he did ask questions they were smart and concise, and they talked a bit while they trekked; though, that was kind of hard sometimes in the conditions they'd faced. Yesterday, they'd proceeded on tied together so they didn't get separated.

At night, the attraction seemed to intensify a hundred fold, for there were no facemasks between them. So many times during the nights she'd had to restrain herself from curling up close to his large, warm body.

Right now, he was crouched on his haunches, the stick used to check for crevices resting beside him. Gazing past him, she smiled as her eyes settled upon a hole in a jutting ice formation.

"Hey," she hollered at him.

Her heart caught as he faced her. Aidrian O'Shea was a man unlike any she'd ever met before. So sexy, and at the same time, so respectful.

"What's up?" he asked as he came to a rolling halt beside her.

"Wanna show you something," Xaria pointed in the direction of the opening.

"And that would be?"

"An ice cave. Come on."

Together, they walked toward it, and no words were exchanged as they entered the cave. Xaria sighed with pleasure as she took in the beauty of their surroundings.

"This is incredible," he said on his own sigh.

Xaria pushed back her hood and placed her pack down. Aidrian did the same before moving further in, murmuring in a language she didn't understand. Sitting on her pack, she stared along the cavern walls. The shades of blue were damn near iridescent in its hue. The large dimples covering the walls and ceiling only added to the majesty of it all.

Rolling her shoulders, she groaned and shut her eyes. *This is the life.* The only thing that could make it better would be if someone knew where they were. *That's not all that would make it better. You know you'd love for something tall, muscular, and covered in dark chocolate.*

Spikes of longing shot through her. *Good thing I'm sitting down.* Xaria fought not to shift in her seat. This was neither the time nor the place for those kinds of thoughts. With another deep sigh, Xaria opened her eyes to find Aidrian leaning nonchalantly against one of the dimpled cave sides.

"We have time to explore a bit?" His accented question filled the chamber.

Running mental calculations, Xaria pushed to her feet and nodded. "Sure."

The smile that flashed across his masculine features was boyish. Hoisting her pack on, Xaria let her eyes roam over the man who was her traveling companion. The stark whiteness only highlighted his rich skin tone, not that she got to see his skin. They were both covered from head to toe.

They were making good time. He was in incredible shape but there was still that niggling doubt in the back of her mind. If he was worried it didn't show in the slightest.

Her belly twisted when he turned onyx eyes onto her. *Damn, I just want to fuck him. Just once!* She pasted a smile on her face and went toward him. He winked at her as she passed him, creating more havoc in her system. *It's like he is reading my mind.*

Xaria led the way and soon the corridor they were exploring opened into a huge cavern. Her breath caught.

Delicate ice crystals and impressive stalactites hung from the high ceiling. The light in the room was magnified as it reflected off the glossy and shiny surfaces. Sticking up from the floor were stalagmites as well as ice sculptures, created by nothing but time and nature. It seemed as if they'd entered a fantasy world, one where everything was magical and anything was possible.

"Damn," she murmured, not wanting to break the spell surrounding them.

"Most aptly put," Aidrian said beside her. The awe in his voice matched hers. "Is this common? Something like this?"

"Ice caves are pretty common, but I'll admit I haven't been in one as impressive as this one. In...ever." Xaria looked up and shook her head. "Look at that; it's almost like fish are frozen in mid-swim.

He nodded. "Flash frozen. Those aren't really fish are they?"

"No. It's all the dips, swells, and shadows giving off the image."

"*Dochreidte.*"

"What'd you say?"

Aidrian turned his head toward her instead of the ceiling. His eyes gleamed in the blue light around them as he held her stare. "Incredible." He blinked. "I said it's incredible."

The silken pull of his timbre made her feel like they were in the middle of a desert and she was in desperate need of an oasis. Xaria struggled to not show how desperately she wanted him.

"It is, isn't it?" she commented with more calm than she felt.

He never took his eyes off hers. "Oh, yeah."

Biting the inside of her cheek, Xaria prayed for strength. "Shall we?" she managed to mutter.

"We shall very soon," he responded in a richly smooth tone that flowed over her like warm, melted, extremely decadent dark chocolate. There was no arrogant smile on his face, just promise.

They explored for another half hour, grateful to be out of the wind. Talk was minimal as they each became lost in thought. Xaria wandered back toward where they'd entered and removed her pack again. This time when she sat down, it was on the glassy surface.

Bending her knees, she wiggled her toes inside her boots and looked up at the ceiling.

"Ready to go back out?"

Pulling her gaze from what held her attention, Xaria rose to her feet, smiling gently as he lifted her pack. "Yes." Glancing at her watch, she rubbed her eyes and read the stats. Xaria inhaled deeply as he slowly released his hold on the pack and gave her the full weight of it. Even with the cold, dry air, she still picked up his heady scent.

"Lead on, *súl glas*," he murmured by her ear.

With a practiced move, Xaria put her goggles back in place and headed out, turning in her pre-determined direction.

By the time they stopped for the night, Xaria was exhausted. At least the wind had died down and the skies had cleared.

"Gonna be extra cold tonight," she said as she drove the tent spike into the frozen ground.

"You know where I am if you get cold," Aidrian offered from beside her.

Xaria grinned, glad he couldn't see her reaction through the facemasks they wore. "I'll remember that."

After dinner, she remained outside to give Aidrian a moment alone in the tent. They had private time all worked out.

"Aidrian," she said. "Come out here."

She heard him move and then he was there, beside her. "What?" he questioned in a low tone.

"Look." Xaria pointed beyond them.

The night sky was filled with greens, pinks, blues, even some yellows. It was like a live, dancing watercolor portrait.

"It's not the Northern Lights, is it?"

Xaria shook her head as peace and contentment filled her. "No. These are the Aurora Australis, the Southern Lights. Northern are the Aurora Borealis."

"And I thought the ice cave was amazing. I have seen a lot of things I never imagined, but this..." His voice dropped off as if he were unable to find the words.

Xaria took a deep breath. She understood his inability to describe it. It seemed the lights danced not only in the sky, but also upon the ice.

"Welcome to my world, Aidrian O'Shea," she said softly.

Her pulse sped up and her breathing grew ragged as he turned her toward him. Xaria could see reflections of the stunning light show in his fathomless gaze. He stared for a moment before tugging down his facemask, then hers. Liquid fire raced along her skin when he lowered his mouth to hers. His lips were warm and inviting, and gently nibbled along her lower lip.

Xaria gripped the sleeves of his jacket and pressed against him, wishing it were warm so they didn't have to wear all these clothes. Like a master he stroked her, absorbing her whimpers of longing. His tongue ran along the seam of her mouth, seeking entrance; and when she gave it to him, her knees began to shake. The reason, and the only one, she didn't collapse to the ground was because of his hold on her. Never in her life had a man's embrace made her feel safer. His strength kept them pressed together tightly as he continued his leisurely exploration of her mouth. He tasted so good. Xaria was addicted.

She pressed against him more as her tongue glided along his. Her breasts ached for his hands to touch them and more. A low growl rumbled up from his chest and the kiss increased in heat and intensity. He dominated the kiss. His tongue thrust deep making her purr in response. Aidrian flexed his hips against her and his invading muscle refused to relent in its attack on her. Waves of desire roared through her. Sucking hard on his tongue she arched her pelvis into his. She moaned in frustration when he ended the kiss. With one motion he drew her mask up and spun her toward the tent.

"Inside."

Xaria followed his rumbled command on legs that could barely support her. Her hands trembled as she opened the tent and crawled in the dark interior. Licking her lips, she shivered once his large body entered behind her and secured the tent flap behind him. She was shrugging out of her parka when his hand closed about her wrist. Her heavy jacket fell to the floor of the tent.

Knees to knees they came together again. She wrapped her arms back around him; grateful he had less attire on. A low growl left him as he found her mouth in the dark and plundered its depths. Xaria closed her eyes and whimpered as one hand delved between the layers of clothing she wore and settled upon her skin. She tensed expecting his hand to be cold. It wasn't. His palm was warm and singed her flesh where it touched. He slid around until his hand rested upon her waist, and soon his other hand settled along her other hip.

Aidrian's kiss enveloped her and when one large hand slipped up to cup her breast, Xaria shook, her body near experiencing an intense orgasm.

*So long. It's been so damn long.*

"I want to explore every inch of your body," he murmured, "but I don't want you to get cold."

*Can I get cold when you're touching me?* Xaria knew he was right. There was always a risk in this climate. "Please." It was the only word out of her mouth. She needed him so bad. His touch. Everything he had to offer.

He began kissing her again. Xaria matched him thrust for thrust in their tongue duel. Her body began to boil. Aidrian played with a taut nipple, sending more tremors through her. Her breath stuttered as he slipped a hand below her layers of pants. His strong fingers skimmed across her pussy. Xaria spread her legs more and mewled as he parted the nether lips. His touch drove her crazy.

Her fingers dug down through the layered clothing and into the rock-hard muscles of his arms when he slid two fingers deep inside her wet core in a single motion.

"Ahhh!" she screamed, her climax hitting its peak.

Aidrian pumped his wrist, driving in and out as she came all over his fingers. He pinched her nipple as his mouth renewed its domination of her. If she hadn't been holding onto him, she would surely have fallen back. Each thrust of his tongue matched the drive of his thick fingers. He stretched the walls of her pussy with his digits.

*Imagine what his cock will feel like filling me. Stretching me.* Xaria quivered all over again at the thought.

"More," she begged. "Oh, please God, more."

Aidrian was about ready to explode in his pants. The tent was filled with the heady aroma of Xaria's arousal. He wanted her naked.

"Your skin is like silk," he uttered from deep in his throat against her neck.

Withdrawing his fingers from her, he placed both hands on her hips and lifted her. With minimal encouragement, Xaria wrapped her legs around his midsection. Primal energy ran rampant through him. Turning, Aidrian moved on his knees until he faced his bedroll. With care, he laid her down upon it. Rubbing his lower body against hers, Aidrian pressed kisses all along her jaw line, murmuring in Gaelige.

When she was moaning and thrashing beneath him, he made short work of removing both of their clothes. Moving quickly he zipped them up within his bag. Xaria's toned body molded so nicely to his.

"You feel so good against me. I can't wait to have my cock buried balls deep inside you, feeling your muscles milk me." He lowered his face to hers as his hardened shaft slid along her pussy. The moisture

from her orgasm and her desire coated him. The need to dominate filled him again.

"Please, Aidrian," she whimpered as she rested a foot on his back.

Without waiting any longer, Aidrian guided his erection to the moist entrance of her body. Slowly he pressed into her, clenching his jaw as her heat welcomed him. It was like slipping into a heated, velvet glove.

*Shit!* Placing his face in the crook of her neck, he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Oh, God," she moaned.

He tried to stay in control. His balls tingled and he knew he wouldn't last long. Not with the way Xaria cradled him. It was a snug fit, the two of them in the bag, but he didn't care. The experience was more intimate this way.

Slowly, Aidrian began to move.

Back and forth. Nice even strokes. Xaria made small, sexy mewling sounds and pants in the back of her throat as her body moved in tandem with his. Her short nails dug into the muscles of his back, the stinging pain heightening his pleasure. The tent filled with their soft groans and deep grunts. Outside, the wind blew with increasing ferocity, but neither of them cared. They had what they craved right in each other's arms.

Aidrian picked up the pace when she undulated hard into his forward stroke. The feel of her internal muscles gripping him was almost too much. He wrapped a fistful of her hair in each hand. Then, his tongue plundered her mouth in time with his pistoning hips.

Harder.

Deeper.

Faster.

Breaking the kiss, her arousing cries filled the air. "Please."

"What do you want?" he asked. "Tell me."

"I need...want...so close...please." Her incoherent ramblings grew louder with each stroke. Xaria moaned into his shoulder as her teeth bit down. A mixture of frustration and desire poured from her.

"Scream all you want, baby. No one will hear." Back and forth. "I love your cries of pleasure."

"Let me...oh, God...please!"

Faster and faster he drove into her. Aidrian could feel her internal muscles ripple as she began milking him. Her pussy held him like a

vice and he couldn't stop. As her lithe body exploded around him, her wails echoed in his ears. Aidrian relinquished control to the release roaring within him. With a low growl of possession, he powered into her. Once, twice, three times, and four, then exploded deep within her, covering her womb.

Breaths came heavy and hearts pounded erratically as he left her body to carefully and skillfully roll them so they were on their sides. He cupped her face and traced her lips with his thumb. Then he pressed a light kiss to her mouth.

"Wow," she said on a sigh, burrowing her face into his chest.

"Couldna have said it better myself," he agreed, tightening his hold upon her.

After a few moments of silence she asked, "Do this much in sleeping bags?"

He eyes snapped down toward her, despite the fact he couldn't see in the darkness of the tent. The sides still flapped under the force of the wind.

"Nae, why?" There was a bite to his tone.

"Don't be offended," she said, kissing above his heart. "Just you're pretty agile in a sleeping bag."

The anger receded as quickly as it had surfaced. Repositioning his hand so he could pinch her ass, he smiled when she yelped.

"I'll just say I had wonderful motivation to make it work."

"Hmmm," she murmured, "the cold *is* very good motivation."

"Verra funny."

"I thought it was 'verra funny'," she retorted.

Aidrian smiled at her mimicking his accent. She had a great ear. *Ain't all that's great on her, either.* Another wave of possessiveness rose up within him. He'd barely known her for a week, and he didn't want to go a day without seeing her sparkling green eyes, amazing smile, or hearing her voice.

"Hey," she uttered. "What's gotten your attention?"

"Thinking about you," Aidrian admitted honestly.

"Good thoughts?"

"Most definitely."

"Good." She began to back away and he tightened his hold. "I...I mean we need to get some clothes on."

Aidrian didn't want to let her out of his arms; however, she had a valid point. It wasn't exactly tropical weather.

"Okay," he said reluctantly, relaxing his hold on her. A smile flitted across his features when she shifted closer to him.

"It's cold out there and you're so warm."

Aidrian pressed a kiss on her forehead. "One day we'll spend the night together in each other's arms, naked. But not tonight," he vowed in Gaelge.

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing. Come on, we have to dress. I don't want you to freeze."

Xaria sighed. "Fine. Let's make it quick. Where's the light?"

Aidrian reached out of the warm cocoon they'd created and found his headlamp. After the glow filled the interior of the tent, he glanced at the woman in his arms. *Not to mention my sleeping bag.* Her hair was tousled and her golden-hued skin was flushed, giving her the most delightful well-pleasured look.

"Light," he muttered.

"Still cold out there," she complained.

"Nothing I can do about that, I'm afraid."

"Humph." With a couple of deep breaths, she nodded. "I'm ready."

Aidrian winked at her. "Okay." Unzipping the bag they both bolted toward their strewn clothing. Despite the urge to banish the cold, he couldn't help but steal glances at her. His cock began to swell again as he stared at her.

Everything on her was firm and muscular, yet there was *no* mistaking her as anything but a woman. She had a figure to die for. Her skin was all the same tempting golden shade.

*So she either tans or sunbathes in the nude. Or that is her natural skin tone.*

Xaria shook out her hair after pulling on the thermal gear she slept in, raking it back with one hand looking at him with a smile.

*Damn!* His heart pounded at the devilish gleam in her green eyes. *This is the first time I've not felt uncomfortable with a woman after sleeping with her.* Most of the time, he'd leave immediately after. Not with Xaria; he didn't want to leave, even if he could have.

*Dinna use protection, man,* his brain reminded him.

Aidrian swallowed hard and realized he still didn't feel like running in the opposite direction. He opened his bag all the way and said, "Come here." Xaria did, grabbing her sleeping back along the way and soon the two of them were cuddled together. Aidrian turned off the

light before wrapping his arms back around her; the steady beating of her heart soothed him. With one final press of his lips to her nose, Aidrian allowed himself to sleep.

The next morning, the storm having passed, they trudged along when a sound reached them. Aidrian tensed as he glanced at Xaria. He couldn't see her face because of the fur on her parka; but when she faced him, she was shaking her head. Remaining still, he waited for her to get to his side.

"What the hell was that?" he asked.

Behind her goggles her eyes twinkled. "Nothing we'd like to meet. Let's backtrack."

"What is it?"

"We'll see it on the other side." She spun around and headed off.

*Damn woman, can't even give me a simple explanation.* Since she hadn't given him any choice but to follow, Aidrian tugged on his hood and followed her white-clad body. He caught up to her as she looked over an edge. Adjusting the straps of his pack, he said, "Going down?"

"Loaded statement," she uttered as she looked up at him and winked. "Worried about shrinkage?"

Narrowing his gaze, he snorted. "Why don't *you* tell me if you think I should be worried about such a thing?"

She chuckled before pulling her ice picks off her belt. "Don't think I'm gonna answer." Xaria flipped the one in her left hand expertly. "Use yours to help you down. Nice and easy."

Aidrian heard the instructor tone to her voice and grabbed the items from his own belt. He watched her begin her descent before mimicking her movements. It didn't take them to long to reach the bottom. As he reattached the picks, she came beside him and gestured forward.

After heading up a slight slope in the terrain, Aidrian once again heard the grunting and growling noises. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. Xaria touched his arm and drew him down toward her mouth.

"Make sure you keep your distance."

"From what?" *What the hell is making that noise? And do I really want to know?*

Together they moved to where he could see around the corner. A large, dark-gray, muscular animal lay stretched out upon the ice. When it lifted its head, he saw a whitish throat with black spots dotting it.

*That is so not the cute little seal you see on stamps.* "What is that?" he asked as the creature began feasting upon the dead animal before it.

*"Hydrurga leptonyx, a leopard seal. That's a big one too. I'd say over five hundred kilograms."*

*"Damn! Is it a male?"*

*"Hard to say. In this species, the females are more often larger than the males."* She shook her head. *"However, whichever sex it is presents a problem."*

*We don't need more problems. "And that would be?"*

*"That large creature is pretty much smack dab in the middle of our path. We'll have to make a wide arc around him...or her; they're very aggressive when defending their food. As in they'll hunt you down for messing with their dining experience. We don't want to play 'survive the ice' with a pissed-off leopard seal on our ass."*

He picked up on the concern and frustration in her tone. "How much out of our way do we need to go?"

"A ways." She waved her hand in the air. "The wind is blowing in a piss-poor direction, so we need to do this widely."

*"Backtracking?"*

Xaria shook her head. "Nope. I don't think so. That large crevice we jumped a bit back widens in the place we'd have to cross. We couldn't make it. Time to show me what you're made of, SEAL-man."

He grinned behind his mask. "Name the time and place, *súl glas*."

*"Let's go, Aidrian,"* she said with false exasperation.

*"Hondo."*

*"What?"*

*"Call me Hondo."*

*"Nickname? Or is that part of your actual name, like your middle name or something?"*

*"Nickname. My full name is Aidrian DeWayne O'Shea. But really only my parents 'n' Affrica call me that."*

She rolled her shoulders. *"I like Aidrian."*

*"Stubborn woman."*

*"You have no idea."* With a gesture with her gloved hand she began to walk.

They made a wide arc around the leopard seal and pressed on hard the whole day. Brief stops were made to ensure appendages were doing fine and to eat. That night, they slept cuddled up together in the tent beneath another spectacular display of the Aurora Australis.

A powerful storm began to brew and they sat in the tent while Xaria did some quick figuring.

"It'll be hard going, but we really need to get out of this storm. There's a station that is closer now given our detour. We can head there and crash while waiting for the storm to blow itself out."

Aidrian watched her for a hint of strain. He didn't spy any, so he didn't worry. Zipping up his parka, he flipped up the hood and nodded. "Let's do it."

Within a few moments, they had their heads down and were trudging along the barren landscape. There was no chatter between them but Aidrian felt closer to her with each step they traveled. It took an amazing person to face the odds they were and not crack. When they sat for a short rest, her sharp exclamation drew his attention.

"What?" he asked.

Xaria lowered her binoculars. "I don't understand it. This station is supposed to be empty right now."

"And?"

"It's not."

Reaching for the binoculars, Aidrian put them up to his own eyes. Sure enough, he could make out small figures moving across the ice in the distance. With a quick motion, he slipped his pack from his back and retrieved his own binoculars. He whipped off his goggles and put binoculars up to his eyes. With the press of a button, he zoomed in. Even before the image totally sharpened, a shiver ran down his spine.

"Who's there when the station's open?"

"That's usually...run by Aussie's." She moved up beside him. "But now, maybe they'll help us out."

"Doubt it," he muttered. "Not unless the men working here are normally armed with automatic weapons."

"What?!"

She jerked his binocs from his hand. A low string of curses left her mouth. Retrieving his glasses from her, he focused back on their only hope for survival. He felt the temperature drop just while they were sitting there.

"Damn it!"

"Xaria?"

"I bet those bastards are mining. This area is known for lead and...hell, uranium."

"Ah, hell," Aidrian repeated. The illegal mining of uranium didn't bode well for anyone. Men mining something that dangerous wouldn't be easy to overtake. They'd be well armed and very cautious.

"I have to stop them."

Her comment ricocheted through him. Aidrian grabbed her and pulled her back to his side. "Hold on, there. You can't just go strolling in!"

"You don't really think they'd kill a woman out on the ice, do you?"

His eyes narrowed as thoughts of what they *would* do to her flashed through his mind. "I don't think that would be their *first* thing to do to you." Aidrian's stomach curdled at the thought of those men's hands on Xaria's body. "You'll wish you were dead; of that, I'm sure."

"I won't sit here while they rape this land!" she hissed.

Turning so they were face to face, he growled, "Better the earth for a while longer than you. Give me a bloody second to think."

He crouched down. *We have the advantage.* All the white gear they wore and the element of surprise gave it to them. Mentally running through the items he had, Aidrian groaned. *This isn't going to be easy. But, hey...if I wanted easy I wouldn't have joined the SEALs.* He didn't have much aside from his training.

*Not true,* his brain reminded him. *We have Xaria. Jötunn, a Norse primeval frost-giant. Enemy of the gods. I do have an ace in the hole.*

"How long before the storm hits full blast?" he asked.

"No more than two hours." She hunkered down beside him.

"What are we gonna do?"

"So sure I have a plan?"

"Of course."

"Really?"

"Well, given what you do and the fact you know I'll go anyway tells me you'll want to keep me safe. Then add to that the fact you're falling for me, I'm pretty sure you'll come up with something."

"Am I now?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered holding his gaze.

It was hard to think and be romantic when trussed up like a polar bear, staring through goggles, and unable to see the other's expression with the protective face gear obscuring it. But damn if Xaria Hummel hadn't found a way.

"Pretty sure of yourself, *súl glas*, aren't ya?"

"Tell me I'm wrong," she countered.

Aidrian didn't know what to say or do. *I can't*. He shook his head. "We'll discuss this later. We need to work fast if we're gonna be ready when the storm hits." He jerked his attention from the engaging woman who'd grabbed more than a part of his heart and opened his pack.

*Running away isn't your style*, his brain taunted. And it wasn't. Not normally. But what Xaria made him feel wasn't normal. Aidrian shook his head at his behavior, then got to work on the task at hand.

## Seven

---

Xaria smiled behind her mask as Aidrian stared at the contents of his bag. She'd never been so bold with a man before; but with him, she couldn't help it. Her admiration had grown during their time together on the ice. He was smart, attentive, and a quick study. It was more than that, though. The past few nights with him had been unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

She'd never met a man like Aidrian before. He truly was a gentleman with more than a hint of rogue. But she knew there was more than met the eye with him. A sensation in her stomach told her she was about to find out what that meant exactly.

"If this doesn't go the way I planned," Aidrian began, his face before hers, "thank you for everything. And I'm sorry. Stay here; I'll be back."

"No. We *don't* split up on the ice."

"One person has a better chance —"

"No!" Trepidation filled her. "I know the ice better than you. I can help with this plan."

He was silent for a moment, his gaze holding hers. "Fine. We stick together. We'll go out side by side, because I don't want you first. I'll trust your judgment, but you have to trust mine as well. When we get closer, do what I say when I say it."

"Deal." Xaria promised, even though she had the wildly inappropriate desire to strip off all his clothes and spend hours exploring his hard warrior's body instead.

"Let's go."

Those two words brought her back to reality. There was no way to see his features; it was damn hard to make him out from the way he blended into the landscape.

"Jesus, I can hardly see you and you're less than five feet away from me."

"Kinda the point when blending in. Pull down your mask until it reaches your goggles." She did. "Good, let's go. Nice and steady."

Silence fell as they prowled closer to the outskirts of the station. Every so often, he'd put his binoculars up to his eyes. How he saw

through the increasing snow, she had no idea. They moved cautiously, checking for crevices as they advanced.

"What about our tracks?" she whispered when they stopped the next time.

"At the rate this snow is blowing, I don't think it's a concern." He looked again. "That's it; come closer." Aidrian handed the binoculars to her and said, "Wait here."

Xaria held the item up to her goggles and gazed through it. *Damn these are nice.* She could make out his shape barely through the snowflakes. Peeling back the top of her glove-mitten combo, Xaria pressed a button she could now feel. Instantly, the screen changed. She could see a red object moving toward a smaller, hunched one. The smaller one was where she'd last had eyes on Aidrian. Infrared.

Her breath caught in her throat as she watched it unfold. Xaria's heart seemed to slow the closer the moving red blob got to the motionless one. It happened so fast, she thought she might have imagined it. Aidrian struck like a snake, rising up from the ground and surrounding the other figure. Then another slumped to the ground and the remaining one took something from the rapidly cooling body on the ground. Xaria didn't move as in almost a straight line the figure came back. Her breath didn't really come easier until Aidrian's deep voice reached her.

"You okay?"

"You killed him," she blurted out as he removed the binoculars from her hand.

"I didn't see him politely handing over his weapon and helping us."

Uncertainty set in. "You didn't know. We could have asked."

Aidrian turned her face toward his, although it was hard to see. "I'm good at this. I will stop them from mining but there will be casualties. And when it comes to you or them, I pick you. Now, let's go."

His words made her shudder with desire. *I pick you too.* Common sense returned and the gravity of the situation sank in. This was dangerous. Xaria stuck close as they moved forward. The closer they got, the more nervous she became. She could feel the cold starting to move beneath the material she wore. The clothing was good, but nothing could withstand the fury of an Antarctica storm forever.

"I know you're cold, just a bit longer," Aidrian spoke from beside her. "I'll get you to one of those sheds and I want you to stay hidden and quiet."

Xaria was silent while they approached from the back. Aidrian quickly disabled another man and kept his weapon.

"What's this one used for?" Aidrian questioned.

"Looks like it would house a snow-cat." She squinted and watched him go to a door and try the handle. Something she couldn't understand slid from his mouth.

"Help me," he said in English.

Together, they wrenched the door wide enough to slip in. Immediately, Xaria felt better just by being out of the wind. Aidrian exposed her face; how he found her she didn't know, for she couldn't see a thing.

"Stay out of sight." His breath was warm against her cheek.

Closing her eyes briefly, Xaria took a deep breath and Aidrian's scent with fresh, Antarctica air infused her. "Be careful."

"Yes, ma'am." His thumb skimmed her lower lip, setting up tremors in her lower body, tremors that became large quakes when his lips replaced his thumb. Even though it was dark and she wore goggles, Xaria closed her eyes again, sighing in the simple pleasure of his touch.

After the kiss ended, she remained there with her eyes still shut, envisioning a warm room, large bed, and Aidrian O'Shea naked and waiting for her. Shoving back her whimper of longing, Xaria fought the urge to cross her legs to stem the flow of moisture from her pussy. With a groan she moved slowly until she reached a corner and sank to the floor, sitting on both of their packs. Pulling her hood further forward, she waited in the darkness.

Aidrian moved through the dark and blowing, snowy winds. He hugged the wall of the building once he made it there. The odds didn't look all that promising. He was grossly outnumbered and out armed. Still, despite the gravity of the situation, a smile crossed his features beneath the face protection he wore. This was what he loved, the adrenaline rush before and during an op. His hand closed around the hilt of his K-BAR knife and he slid it from the sheath. Holding the binoculars to his eyes, he scanned.

There were three guys patrolling in front of the one place where light broke through the night. At least that was all he could see. Hidden, Aidrian watched them for a while. They had Russian guns, AK-74M, and moved like mercenaries. He shook his head. *So much for lucking out and not having to hurt them.* A short moment passed he shoved the slim binoculars in his pocket.

Ducking back into the deeper shadows, Aidrian went behind the metal buildings. He lay in wait for the man near him to get close enough. When his target was in position, Aidrian rose up and grabbed him around the neck, dragging him further into the shadows. It didn't take long for the man to breathe his last and crumple boneless to the ground. Aidrian sheathed his knife, shouldered the AK-74M he retrieved from the deceased, and patted the prone man down for more weapons. There was a sidearm and two grenades.

Aidrian ran his tongue over his teeth as he shoved the side arm in the back of his pants. Moving closer, he repeated the process for the second man he encountered, blending in with the elements. This one went down as quickly and silently as the first. *They seem a bit relaxed, must assume the cold isn't gonna bring out many people to see what's going on. Bad news, it won't be so easy, now. One man can be explained. Two men missing who should be standing guard, not so much.*

Staring through the shifting winds to the bunker where he'd put Xaria, Aidrian closed his eyes briefly before cradling the assault rifle in his arms the same way he'd noticed the man holding it. Pushing to his feet, Aidrian stepped out into the open. The third target leaned against the side near the opening, the light pouring from there was becoming harder and harder to see.

Adopting the second man's walk, Aidrian kept his head angled against the wind and headed for the lone sentry. He stayed sharp the closer he grew, going straight toward him without stopping.

"Lars?" a deep voice shouted over the brewing storm. Aidrian didn't answer. The man stepped forward. "Lars! What's your problem? I know it's colder than fuck, but you know Mr. Lanchester wants us out here. Don't go inside."

Moving with fluid, grace and deadly accuracy, Aidrian dropped his left hand from the barrel of the rifle and reached behind him. There was no hesitation when he took out the sidearm and shot the man, sending him back into the wall of the building before he slid to the ground.

"Nope, not Lars," he muttered.

*Here's hoping the shot wasn't heard.* Pale eyes stared sightlessly back at Aidrian, glowing severely from the light. Hauling the body out of immediate sight, Aidrian crept to the doorway and peered cautiously inside.

The hum of machinery reached him. From his position, he could see a wide crevice littered with makeshift lifts and more. Five people

were just going down on one and although he couldn't see any more bodies, his gut told him there were more, many more. As silently as he'd gotten there, Aidrian vanished, blending into the night, and returned to Xaria.

Wriggling through the opening, he said, "Xaria?"

"Here," she said from behind him.

"You okay?" he questioned as he progressed carefully until he found her.

"I'm good. What about you?"

Aidrian pushed back his hood. From his pocket he withdrew a glow stick and broke it. The muted orange hue illuminated the room. "I'm good. I need your help." Xaria smacked him in the chest. Even though it didn't hurt, he still put his hand there. "Hey, what was that for?"

"That's all you have to say to me? Nothing else?"

A smile curved up the side of his mouth. He reached out and grabbed the front of her parka, drawing her near. "Yeah, there's something else."

"Damn well better be," she muttered in a barely discernable voice.

Aidrian tugged down his face protection and did the same to hers. Then he kissed her, a kiss that told her how he truly felt, how glad he was no harm had come to her. All the things he couldn't verbalize. He broke from Xaria's tantalizing lips only when her body sank into his.

"I missed you and I'm verra glad you're safe, *súl glas*," he whispered against her lips.

"What do you need me to do?" she asked, breathless, burrowing against him.

"How do you think they would hide the evidence they were here?"

"Blow it closed. It's not uncommon for these ice shelves to shift, so that would be my guess. And the last time I remember hearing anything about this I believe that's what they did. Whoever the *bastards* were."

*Not sure how I can get an entire ice shelf to shift with just two grenades. I'll have to blow some fuel as well.* "Okay, so if we blow the crevice, it won't sink us into the sea as well?"

"I can't guarantee it, but I don't think it would. I'd bet big tremors, but this ice is pretty damn thick, which is why they can mine here. The machines would fall right though if it weren't incredibly solid.

Unless we're right by the explosion. Is that what you're thinking of doing? And why would you?"

"We are grossly outnumbered and outgunned. I'm trying to think of a way we can win with these odds." He wrapped his arms around her. "Do you know a Mr. Lanchester?" Her body tensed. "Xaria?"

"He's a bigwig who splits his time between Australia and England. Has a few large military contracts. I've met him a few times. He's actually a doctor."

"First name?"

"Umm...Da...Daniel...David...Donald...something like that. Why?"

"I'm going to need to speak with him after this." *If he isn't here already.*

"Do you really think Dr. Lanchester is in on this?"

"His name did come up."

"When you were out there?" She stepped back. "You had time to talk about Dr. Lanchester? I was in here scared and alone while you were out there conversing? I thought you said these weren't the type to converse?"

Aidrian followed her retreat and gripped her shoulders. "I didn't stop for a conversation. A sentry thought I was someone else named Lars." He could see her trying to get a hold of herself. "It's going to be—" He clamped his mouth shut as a shiver of warning snaked up his spine.

"What is it?" Xaria asked on a low hiss.

"Quiet." Aidrian picked up the glow stick and searched for the door to the snow-cat. "Come on." Grabbing their bags, he moved to the white door. "Get in."

"It's locked."

Aidrian looked back to where she stood by the vehicle. Withdrawing his knife, he popped the lock and slid the door open. "Go now," he bit off, tossing the packs in and handing the glow stick to her. "Bury this in a pack and stay quiet."

"They're coming," she stated in a solemn voice.

"Yes."

Xaria took the orange stick and nodded. "How can you tell?"

"I've been doing this a long time. It's a feeling." Aidrian stared into her eyes and wished they were anywhere but where they were. "I'll be back as soon as I can." He checked his ammo in the light.

Xaria opened a pack and placed the light in it. "You'd better. You still owe me a Green Lantern Band Aid."

Aidrian smiled and kissed her briefly. "So I do. Hide *súl glas*." Before she could say anything else, he shut the door quietly and waited for the glow to vanish. Still, Aidrian hesitated for a second before heading to the building door. Cracking it open, he held the binoculars up and searched. Sure enough there were multiple heat signatures moving together well.

*Even though I didn't find radios on the men from before, I should assume they have them.* Aidrian squeezed through and closed the tall object behind him the best he could. Moving cautiously along the shadow's edge, he headed for the furthest man out. It was slow going; for halfway there, the area was illuminated by strong floodlights. A low curse left him; even with the storm, the added light severely cut his chances down. *So much for blowing this place. There's no way I'll be able to get them back in the building and rig it to blow. Shit! Only one way left for me to get us out of this.*

Soon, the cold Antarctica night filled with intermittent bursts of gunfire and shouting.

## *Eight*

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Xaria's eyes flew open at the ominous sound of gunfire that seemed to rise up all around her. Heart pounding erratically, she sank further down toward the floor. Remaining motionless for about ten seconds, she swore.

"Jesus, Xaria. He's the one out there in danger protecting you," she hissed at herself. "Snow-cats sometimes have radios." Staying on her hands and knees, she moved as quietly as she could toward the front. Xaria sat on the floor and stretched up to feel along the dash for a radio.

*Shit, I'm going to have to sit in the seat.*

Once in position, she pictured the vehicles she'd been in and where everything was located. Xaria reached up and sighed in relief when she found the handset. Finding the knob with her other hand, she turned it on. Static crackled across the line, but she didn't care. Turning down the volume, she shut her eyes for a moment and prayed this would work. Skimming quickly through the channels, Xaria didn't stop until she reached the one Station Molodezhnaya frequently monitored.

Worrying her lower lip, she turned up the volume and pressed the button. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

*"Privet?"* a response in Russian responded.

*Thank you, Jesus!* Switching to Russian, Xaria said, "My name is Xaria Hummel. I need to speak to Vlasi immediately. Please, it's an emergency."

*"One moment,"* the voice said.

A few moments later, although it seemed like an eternity, Vlasi's voice came across and Xaria sighed.

"Jötunn? Where are you? We heard the mayday but haven't been able to find anything."

"Vlasi, please. I need your help. We're holed up at the Aussie seasonal station just southeast of you. There's an illegal mining operation going on. We're outnumbered and can't go anywhere because of the storm, not to mention the guns they have."

Vlasi cursed low and long. "We're not armed to take on illegal miners, but we have some things."

"No! Don't come anywhere near here; I don't want you to get hurt, either. Can you put in a call and send some people who are equipped to handle this?"

"Where are you?"

"Hiding in a snow-cat."

"Stay there. I'll tell them to hurry. Check back in ten minutes, Jötunn."

"Okay, Vlasi. Thanks." She switched it off and rested against the seat for a moment. "I can't sit here and let Aidrian fight all of them alone." But what could she do? She didn't want to get in his way.

Silence fell. An eerie one. Not even the wind howled any longer. Crouching lower, Xaria pulled her ice picks from her belt and held one in each hand. The lights from flashlights or headlamps sliced the inky silence. She shifted on her heels as the lights moved toward the door she was by, and barely stifled a gasp when it was yanked open. She met the blank stare of a man holding a gun.

*Well, hell, this isn't good.*

He jerked his head in her direction, the weapon holding steady on her. "Drop the picks," he rasped in an accented voice.

Indecision filled her for maybe a second. Then with a nod, she placed them beside her.

"Out."

Xaria didn't hesitate. "Okay, okay. Don't shoot. I'm coming." She moved slowly toward him. *Aidrian! Where are you?* The man's face was covered but damn if it didn't feel like he was leering at her. Another flashlight shone in her face, causing her to squint, and a low whistle filled the air.

"Well, damn! I didn't think I'd see a woman until this trip was over." Her mask was tugged down. "Give me five minutes with her." Xaria had to fight not to flinch at his touch, look, and words.

"Keep your dick inside your pants if you want to keep it attached to your body." The one who'd found her pushed back the hood of his parka and took off his mask. For a second, she breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm keeping her for myself. If you keep your mouth shut about her I may just share her with you."

Xaria tasted the bile in her mouth and struggled not to vomit all over the place.

"How about not," a third voice, deep and angry, said as a knife seemed to materialize against the throat of the man who'd found her.

Jerking her head, she saw Aidrian emerge from behind the other man and grab the sides of his head. A loud snap filled the air and Aidrian lowered the body to the ground. His eyes were hard as they turned to her, then they began to soften.

"Aidrian," she said, her legs beginning to shake.

He pulled her close, shielding her from the sight of the two dead men. "Did they hurt you?" he asked in a graveled voice. Xaria noticed there wasn't a single trace of his accent. "Xaria?"

"No. They didn't touch me except to expose my face." A slight shudder ran through her as she thought about what could have happened had Aidrian not intervened.

"Get the packs, Xaria," he said in that same toneless voice.

When she did and had turned back to him, she noticed him sheathing his knife. "The radio works," she informed him. "I got in touch with Station Molodezhanya and they said they'd call someone about the mining. So do you think it's possible we just get out of here?"

"Good for you. I think getting out of here is a very good idea. Contact them again and have them meet us a bit from here. We can steal a snowmobile and go. I can disable the others so they can't follow us."

"Okay."

"How long?" he asked turning her back to him.

"Maybe three minutes."

"I'll wait."

There were no words to describe how happy she was that he wouldn't leave her alone again. Scrambling into the front of the snow-cat again, Xaria put in another call to Vlasi. In few moments, she had a destination where they would meet. Setting the coordinates on her watch, she climbed back out and shimmied into her pack. Aidrian watched her the whole time.

"Ready," she told him.

"Coordinates?"

She gave them to him and he nodded. Glancing at his watch, she knew he was figuring out in which direction to start. "I don't know how safe this will be; we won't be checking for crevices or anything like that," Xaria said as she touched his arm.

"It's a risk, but the best option I'd say for the choices we have of staying here or leaving. Let's go. More men will be arriving anytime. The storm seems to have stopped, so that will make visibility a bit better for us. Unfortunately, it also helps them out."

They didn't do much sneaking; Aidrian stuck his head out the door and did a quick scan before grabbing her hand and taking off at a run. She was ready to curse his long legs when he slid to a stop by a smaller building. Together, they opened the door and she smiled as her headlamp shone on a line of snowmobiles. Still, she frowned when he closed it behind them.

*How the hell are we getting out of here fast if you're shutting the door?*

"We're each taking one," he told her as he moved toward her.

"Give me your pack; I'll secure it on a snowmobile," she told him as he moved to the one on the edge. He got out of it quick and laid it upon the back of a sled. "Guess that's the one you want," she muttered, securing the pack in short time.

"Did you want that one?" he asked.

"No, I have mine. It's got green on it," Xaria informed him as she swiftly tied hers to the back as well.

He chuckled lightly and went to the final sled, disabling it. "Let's go."

Xaria straddled the seat of her vehicle and made sure her face would be well protected, then adjusted her telescoping handlebar. "After you, boss." He muttered something she didn't quite catch. "What?" she questioned.

"We ride side by side once we're out of here; don't make it so we can't see one another."

"Got it. And I don't think that's what you said to my comment. Gonna have to tell me what you said one day."

"One day, *súl glas*, one day." He started his snowmobile and she followed suit. "Hide your eyes," he said over the noise of the two motors.

She watched him lift a gun and aim it at the shut door. A low whoomp filled the air. Seconds later, the door exploded.

"Go, go, go!" he yelled and she did, gunning the powerful motor.

Almost as one, their vehicles shot from the building and into a mess of scattering people. Shots rang out around them but they didn't stop. Aidrian steered his with one hand and shot with the other, helping to clear them a path. Soon, they were heading in the proper direction. The lamps on the snowmobiles and their headlamps were the only light across the frozen terrain.

Xaria occasionally snuck glances to the side to make sure she could still see Aidrian. He was right there. Thirty minutes later, he

signaled to her to stop. Halting beside him, she stood near him so he could speak without risking body exposure.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Nothing a warm shower and a hot drink couldn't cure. Glad I have extra layers on."

"Not me," he said by her ear. "I'd like you naked."

Xaria's body temp skyrocketed and she shuddered. "Not nice to tease me, Aidrian," she muttered back.

"I'm not. That's what would make me feel all kinds of better." His arms wrapped around her and he lifted her with ease back onto her snowmobile.

"Me too," she admitted before he returned to his vehicle.

"When we get back indoors, we'll have to see about making that happen again."

"Don't make promises you can't or won't keep, Hondo," she said.

Aidrian eliminated the distance he'd just put between them. "Finally, you call me Hondo, and it's with anger in your voice. That's not nice. I meant every word I said."

Xaria sat in silence while he got himself situated and started his snowmobile. She followed suit and soon they were once again skimming across the land. *I can't believe he means it.* They stopped two more times to fill their gas tanks and their journey continued. When they stopped for breaks, they used the time to warm their hands on the high/low hand warmers.

His whistle reached her as they sped along, and she stopped to take the binoculars he handed her. The morning sun was breaching over the pristine landscape.

"What do you think?" he asked.

Her heart filled with relief as she saw the large snow-cat with a Russian flag painted on both the top and sides. "I'd say the cavalry has arrived. It's Vlasi."

"Good. Let's go get warm."

"Right behind you," she said, returning the binoculars to him and sinking back onto the seat. She gunned the engine. Soon they were skidding to a stop by the waiting snow-cat.

Xaria smiled behind all her gear as Vlasi's powerful arms closed around her.

"So glad you made it out of there okay, Jötunn," he rumbled in her ear in Russian.

"That makes two of us," she responded in the same language. "Let me introduce you to my friend." Stepping back from his embrace, she looked between the two of them. "Aidrian, this is Vlasi. Vlasi, meet Aidrian." She made the introduction in English, her gaze lingering on Aidrian as the men shook hands.

"Thank you for taking care of Jötunn," Vlasi told him.

"My pleasure, but our survival is as much because of her as me. She is an amazing teacher."

Xaria noticed there was still no accent to his words. It was very odd to hear him talk without one. Vlasi's was very thick compared to the absence of Aidrian's.

"Let's get you both to the station, warmed up, and full of some real food, and then we can see what has come from the mining thing." He opened the door to the front car. "Climb on in; I'll get your snow-mobiles on the trailer."

Xaria climbed up in while Aidrian vaulted in effortlessly as well. He sat down on the floor and shoved his hood back, taking off his face protection next. He stared at her and held out his hand, beckoning to her. Without hesitation, Xaria scooted over beside him and sat down before lessening her own attire as well. With the lumbering start of the snow-cat, Xaria glanced out the window and saw another storm brewing off in the distance.

She closed her eyes and ran over the events she'd just experienced, from the very first meeting of Aidrian O'Shea in the dark interior of the bar to watching him in action as he helped them escape.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

"Lookin' forward to a warm meal and a real bed."

"Yeah."

"Jötunn," Vlasi's voice sounded from a squawk box up in the corner. "Grab a nap; it'll take us about two hours to get back."

"Sounds good to me," Xaria mumbled as she put her head against Aidrian's shoulder.

After about two minutes, she looked up at the man she leaned upon. His eyes were wide open. His beard hid a lot of his face, but she could still see his reluctance to relax.

"Vlasi will get us back to Molodezhnaya without a problem, Aidrian. It's okay to rest."

"You rest."

His tone had a hard edge to it. Settling back against him, a small smile curved up the corners of her mouth. *If I didn't know any better,*

*Aidrian O'Shea, I'd say you were jealous. "I'll do that,"* she said, closing her eyes again.

She awoke when they rumbled to a stop. With Aidrian, she disembarked from the snow-cat and walked to the station. Xaria smiled at the familiar faces and hug after hug enveloped her. She spent quite a bit of time here and was well known.

"You can meet up with him later. We'll let you two get cleaned up," Vlasi said, shooting a quick glance to Aidrian as he stopped at a room and held the door for her.

"Okay, thanks, Vlasi. See you later, Aidrian."

Xaria held Aidrian's gaze for a moment and he afforded her the slightest of nods. She felt saddened by his lack of emotion, but didn't let it show. Instead, she entered the room and took a quick, warm shower. When Xaria was finished and dressed, she found Vlasi leaning against the wall of the corridor outside her door.

"Hey," she said, taking in his attire.

Vlasi was a tall, strong Russian. He wore a dark blue sweater and tan pants. He kept his brown hair long, but wore a beard clipped close to his face.

"Hey, yourself," he said in Russian. "Hungry?"

"Yes." She stepped out of the room and walked up the hallway beside him. "A warm meal sounds divine."

"Are you sure you're okay, Jötunn? We were so worried about you when we got the mayday call. Then there was nothing from you."

Her smile, although a bit tired, was there. "I'm fine. I wish we could have saved Shank, but it didn't happen. I was in very capable hands."

They walked into the dining area. "Who is he?"

"An American who wanted to learn more about being on the ice. I was gonna take him out for a week from here but...you know. We never made it."

Vlasi stared at her and she knew he didn't totally believe that. Thankfully, he remained silent on that fact. They got some food and sat down at the table. It didn't take too long before they were reminiscing about expeditions and experiences from their past. As they spoke, a shiver ran down her spine. Xaria turned her head to the left and swallowed the bite of food she had in her mouth. Aidrian stood in the doorway.

All sorts of things began to happen to her insides as she stared at him. He'd shaved his beard off and had his hands shoved in the pockets

of his white pants. The collar of a dark turtleneck peeked over the top of the jacket he wore.

"Excuse me, Vlasi." She got to her feet and moved toward him a smile on her face.

Aidrian felt a low growl of anger and possession well up within him as he spied Xaria sitting and chatting easily with Vlasi over a meal. The Russian was a tall, handsome man and he hated the fact she seemed so comfortable with him. *Do they have a relationship with one another? Did they share one? What the hell kind of name is Vlasi, anyway?* She looked nothing short of delicious as she sat there. He wanted to storm over there, toss her over his shoulder, and take her to a room where he could make love to her like he longed to.

*What the hell is wrong with me? I never act like this over a woman.* Not until now. Not until the fates had seen fit to intertwine his life with one Xaria Hummel. He'd been content single, dating who he wished, when he wished, for as long as he wished.

He fought the urge to grin like a school lad when she left the tall Russian to head toward him. The look in her eyes bordered on happiness and hunger. From the way her eyes kept traveling up and down his body, he had a pretty good idea what she wanted. He had no complaints.

"You look like you fared pretty well. Anything frozen?" Her voice was sultry and immediately he felt himself stir in reaction to her.

"Everything's fine. Bit hungry though."

"Let's get you fed."

Xaria headed toward a counter with food on it. Aidrian followed but noticed how Vlasi kept glancing between him and Xaria. He filled a plate with hot food and followed her back to the table where Vlasi still sat. Aidrian ate mostly in silence, listening to Xaria and Vlasi talk instead.

"I should get back to work," Vlasi said. "You two rest and relax. You most definitely deserve it and I'll see what I can do about getting you out of here."

"Thank you," Aidrian responded.

"Yes, Vlasi, thank you. I'll swing by your office later."

Aidrian bit back another growl when the Russian smiled and pressed a kiss to her cheek before saying something to her in Russian. Blue eyes met his and Vlasi nodded briefly. "Mr. O'Shea."

Running his tongue over his teeth, Aidrian ate another bite of mashed potatoes and watched Vlasi exit the room. Now it was just he and Xaria left. Blinking his eyes, Aidrian saw the slight frowning of her brows.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Where's your accent?"

*My accent?* Aidrian put his fork down and tilted his head to the side. "Where it always is. Why?"

Her gaze narrowed furtherer. "I just spent a week with you and you had one. You lost it when you," she paused to lean in and whisper even though they were alone in the dining room, "killed those two men at the snow-cat. And it hasn't come back." Xaria sat back. "What is it? A ploy to get women?"

He shook his head. "No, not at all. Xaria, it's a habit from the job. I lose the accent so people can't tell where I'm from. Sometimes we adopt one to fit into the area we're in. But trust me on this, *súl glas*, 'my accent', as you put it, is very real. I was born and raised in Ireland."

Her entire body relaxed. "So it's only there when you feel comfortable?"

*Never thought of it like that.* "Yes. That's a good way to put it."

His heart clenched when her green eyes twinkled. "Told ya you were falling for me."

Aidrian cracked a smile. *She's just so damn cute.* "So you did."

A faint blush scampered up her cheeks. "I should go and see Vlasi."

Possessiveness flared to life again. Aidrian forced himself to remain calm and collected. "Is there a phone I could use?" he asked instead of demanding her to explain what was between her and Vlasi.

Xaria tightened her jaw. "Sure."

Shoving her chair back, she grabbed her tray and stomped to the kitchen where he heard her slam it down. Frowning, he followed and placed his tray near hers.

"Did I say something wrong?" he queried.

"Nope."

He frowned. *This isn't making sense.* "Then what's got you mad?"

Her green eyes jerked up to meet his. "Nothing. Not a damn thing." She brushed past him only to stop at the door. "You can do a video call in the room at the end of the hall. Try to keep it short."

Aidrian stood there bewildered as she marched away, her back ramrod straight. *What the...? Okay, I think I missed something here.* Brows

furrowed in confusion, Aidrian followed her instructions and knocked on the closed door when he arrived.

"Enter."

"Excuse me. I was told I could borrow the phone or video cam to make a call."

Another man Vlasi's size was in the room. *Jeez. Are there any ugly men here?* Aidrian couldn't forget this was where Xaria had been when he'd first tried to find her.

"Of course. Come on in," the man said in nearly flawless English.

"Thank you."

"No problem. It's right over here." Aidrian had just sat down when the man continued. "You were lucky to be out with Jötunn."

Bringing up the computer address he wanted to call, Aidrian nodded. "I know. I'd be dead if it weren't for her."

"Yes, you would." The response was immediate and positive. "I'll leave you alone with your call."

"Thank you."

When the door closed, Aidrian pressed the call button. He settled back when a familiar face popped up opposite him.

"Well, hell. Here I was hoping a beautiful woman paged me. Look what I get instead, your ugly mug."

Aidrian flipped Maverick off. "Good to see you, too, Maverick."

His friend raked a hand through his hair and cocked his head to the side. "Where are you?"

"Antarctica."

Black eyebrows rose. "It worked? You got him to teach you?"

Aidrian smiled. "Kinda. Long story."

"Give me the short version, including why you have new scars on your face."

He touched the new additions to his plethora of scars, these courtesy of the plane crash. "Scars are from the plane crash." Maverick frowned and Aidrian held up his hand, trying to avert the flood of questions in response to that statement. "I'm fine. Just a few new scars. But Jötunn's not a he."

Maverick whistled. "And?" Aidrian remained silent and Maverick shook his head. "Another one bites the dust," he said in Lakota.

"I didn't say that," Aidrian retorted in the same language.

Maverick just smiled. "There's something else. Tell me." He'd switched back to English.

"Check up on a Dr. Lanchester for me. Lanchester is Lima Alpha November Charlie Hotel Echo Sierra Tango Echo Romeo. Deals with military contracts, mainly in England and Australia."

"Looking for?"

Aidrian opened his mouth to answer but hesitated with the door behind him swung open. Glancing over his shoulder, he fought a smile as Xaria came into view. Facing the screen, he said, "Anything. We hit some illegal mining op here and his name was mentioned."

Maverick frowned. "What the hell is there to mine in Antarctica?"

"A lot actually," Xaria said, standing behind Aidrian. "Where we were, there've been both lead and uranium deposits found. More uranium near that station, but they could have hit a lead area too."

A slow grin filled Maverick's face and Aidrian fought the urge to roar in frustration. He recognized the flirty smile of his soon-to-be ex and dead best friend.

"And you are?" Maverick asked.

Aidrian stifled a groan when she leaned over his shoulder to answer. "Xaria Hummel."

Maverick's smile grew wider. "James Lonetree, ma'am. Thank you for saving his six out there. We'd kinda miss him around here."

"A pleasure, James," she responded in a way that made Aidrian long to break the connection, then his friend's neck. "I hope I get to meet you someday."

An unsubtle wink came across. "I'm sure hoping so, too, ma'am. Please call me Maverick. Maybe I'll come take a survival course from you too."

"Touch her, Mav, and I will kill you very slowly," Aidrian rumbled dangerously in Lakota.

"I suggest you tell her how you feel instead of threatening me, Hondo," Maverick responded calmly in his native tongue. "And I didn't teach you this language so you could make idle threats."

"It's *not* an idle one. It's a promise." Aidrian could feel Xaria's gaze on him.

Maverick sighed dramatically before he grinned again. "Very well. Now, give me your time frame. I have to report in. *Some* of us have to work," he said in English.

"Some of *us*," Aidrian began and pointed at his friend, "need to stay out of trouble."

"How much trouble can I get into without you around?"

Aidrian chuckled. "More than your fair share."

Maverick smirked unapologetically. "True. But I'm talented."

Rolling his eyes, Aidrian turned his gaze to Xaria, who had rested her chin on his shoulder. "Any news on when we'll get a ride from here?"

"Actually, that's what I came to talk to you about. There is a large cargo plane scheduled to leave here once this current system clears up. You're welcome to tag along on that."

Facing Maverick he said, "A few days at the most."

Maverick nodded. "It was nice to meet you, ma'am. I'll let them know you'll be back soon. Take care." Sobering slightly, Maverick added, "We'll talk about the plane crash later." He gave a brief two-fingered salute and the connection between them was severed.

"Bye, Maverick," Aidrian said as he closed the feed on his end.

"Does everyone have a nickname?" Xaria asked, taking her chin from his shoulder.

"Yes."

"Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine." Turning, he stared at her. "How are you? How'd your visit with Vlasí go?"

Her gaze shuttered. "Fine. He'd like a word with you, though."

Aidrian rose to his feet and moved toward her. Her nostrils flared and he could see the pulse at the side of her neck pound faster. He didn't stop until he was up in her personal space.

"Something's bothering you, *súl glas*. Why are you keeping me at arm's length? Don't want Vlasí to know what transpired between us?" Her eyes narrowed. "I'm getting colder looks from you than what the temperature is." Aidrian kept crowding until the door prevented her from moving any further.

Her chest rose and fell sharply. "Vlasí —"

"Can wait." Aidrian boxed Xaria in by placing a hand on either side of her head. "Why the cold shoulder, *súl glas*? Dinna tell me it's me accent ya be missin'," he said with a thick brogue.

Her shudder trailed on the heels of a soft whimper. Xaria gulped. "Don't be ridiculous. You were the one acting like we're strangers," she bit off.

Nuzzling the hollow behind her ear, he asked, "So, you wanted me to be jealous when you were in Vlasí's arms?"

"Yes!" She paused. "No! Not jealous, but maybe show some damn emotion."

"My *emotion* would have been knocking him out and carrying you off over my shoulder." Aidrian drew back and stared into her amazing green eyes, which were wide with shock over his admission. "I didn't think you would have appreciated that."

Xaria gripped the sides of his jacket and cracked a smile. "You're right. I wouldn't have. I don't know what's come over me. I just wanted..." she trailed off and placed her cheek against his chest while her arms closed about his waist.

"Trust me, *súl glas*, I noticed and I didn't like it. Not for a second." For a moment in time, they stood in each other's arms and the world shrank to just the two of them. Aidrian spoke with reluctance, "I should go talk to Vlasi." Her head nodded against him but she didn't let go. "I'll catch up to you later, Xaria," he promised.

"Okay. I'll see if I can help out here." Her arms dropped from his midsection.

Aidrian stepped back and cupped the side of her face. He stared at her, drowning in her green eyes. Without thought, Aidrian leaned in and kissed her. It was meant to be a gentle kiss; but as her intoxicating taste sank into him, that changed. He jerked her to him with a low growl, pressing her body against his hard one.

Xaria moaned into his mouth and arched against his stiff erection. He bucked back, sliding his hands down to cup her ass. Desire slammed into him, eroding the thin barrier of proper behavior he'd erected like acid. Lifting her, Aidrian thrust his tongue in and out of her mouth as her legs wrapped around him. He rumbled in pleasure and rocked against her core, the friction stroking his cock.

Russian conversation in the corridor pierced the haze. Aidrian stopped his hand from sinking beneath her pants with a growl of frustration, a sound mirrored by the luscious vixen in his arms. When the door opened, there was nothing but space between them as Aidrian logged off the computer and Xaria sat on a couch, thumbing through a Russian magazine.

It was Vlasi.

"I was looking for you," he told Aidrian and he smiled at Xaria. "Come, we need to talk."

"Sure," Aidrian said. "Thanks for letting me use the computer." Aidrian noticed Xaria rise and head to the door.

"I'll catch up with you later, Aidrian," she said even as her eyes sent his body into overdrive all over again.

"Right," he responded. He couldn't say more; all his energy went to controlling his body. Sending her a look promising to finish what they'd been started, he followed Vlasi out of the room.

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Xaria pounded her pillow in frustration. She needed release, of the sexual kind. Her body became tighter and tighter each time she saw Aidrian. Yet for the remainder of the day, they'd not been alone together. She and Aidrian had helped out around the station. Not that she'd minded, but there was something she wanted more. And it hadn't happened. Each rich laugh from Aidrian or each time his voice filled her ears, the longing started all over.

*I should be happy. I'm in a building and a real bed.* Xaria groaned and flopped over to her other side. She wasn't. She'd willingly give up the bed and building just to be able to spend another night in Aidrian's arms.

"Aidrian," she whispered to the darkness of the room.

She half expected him to materialize before her and was fully disappointed when he didn't. Sleep eluded her for a long time. When it finally came, it was a restless.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

Xaria stirred. "Who is it?" she asked sitting up.

"Aidrian."

Her body thrummed with anticipation. "Come on in." Swinging her feet to the floor, she never took her eyes off the door as it eased opened and Aidrian stepped inside. "Morning."

"Morning, *súl glas*," he responded in an intimate timbre.

The heat in his stare burned her. Standing, she moved to her pack and pulled on another layer. "What's up?" she questioned, brushing her hair.

Aidrian tsked. "That's not a good way to say good morning."

Securing her ponytail, Xaria faced him. "No? What'd I do wrong?"

He stepped closer, one arm snaking out and encircling her waist. A sultry grin spread across her face as he pulled her close. Silent, Aidrian kissed her. Lust ripped through her as his mouth dominated hers. Moaning, Xaria sank into him, deepening the kiss. His tongue dueled with hers, stoking the fires of passion to a full, roaring burn. Her

fingers clutched at his sides, desperate for more of what he could give her.

He ended the kiss, pulling on her lower lip as they separated. Aidrian swiped his thumb over her swollen lips, his black eyes boring into hers. "That's a proper good morning. The flight's ready."

Xaria sobered. She hadn't told him. "Okay." Slipping past him to the door, Xaria quickly headed down the hall and closed up her parka before pushing open the outside door.

"Xaria!" he said from behind her. Aidrian caught up to her as she neared the waiting aircraft. The ramp to the belly of the plane was down. His strong hand curled about her wrist. "Hey. What about your bags?"

A forklift moved past them carrying a stack of boxes. Taking a deep breath, Xaria looked at him. "I'm not going with you."

His dark gaze snapped to hers. "What do you mean?"

Her heart ached. She had no desire to leave him. "I'll stay here for another day, then I'll be heading to Nepal."

"We're ready when you are, Mr. O'Shea," a deep voice intruded.

"One second," he bit off, his gaze staying on her. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I didn't know how." She smiled past the heartbreak she experienced. "It has been nothing short of amazing. Thank you for everything."

Aidrian sighed heavily and stepped close. "This...this thing between us isn't over, Xaria." He tipped her chin up toward him. "Take care of yourself in Nepal, *súl glas*."

Staring up at him, Xaria asked, "What's that mean?"

He kissed her on the cheek and whispered, "That's one promise I have to break. I'm not ready to tell you yet."

"But you will?"

Aidrian nodded. "I will. Until we meet again, Xaria Hummel."

He stepped back and stared at her. In his eyes, Xaria could read the conviction and promise of the words he'd uttered.

"Bye, Aidrian."

There was no response from him. He just held her gaze a bit longer then grabbed his pack with an easy motion and went up the ramp into the belly of the plane. Xaria stared at his easy predatory movement. Just before he disappeared, he glanced over his shoulder at her. The look lasted less than a second, but the effect it had on her was

gargantuan. Xaria took a while to recover and after she had, she found the plane turning and preparing for takeoff.

Xaria watched until she could no longer see the airplane before going back inside. She moved to her temporary room and sank down upon the bed, burying her face in her hands. Fighting back tears, she stretched out and fell asleep as memories of being in Aidrian's arms played in her mind.

His image that kept her warm those cold nights she climbed the Himalayas. The trip was everything she'd expected it to be. And yet, Xaria still couldn't get the handsome man out of her mind. Aidrian's onyx gaze seemed to follow her around no matter where she went.

"Thanks, Kohia," Xaria said as she shut the door to her apartment behind her and her best friend Kohia Hughes.

"My pleasure, Xar. I'm just glad you're back." Kohia sat the stack of mail down by the other that had been piling up. "How was your trip?"

Setting down her bags, Xaria smiled tiredly. "Like a dream come true. Absolutely beautiful."

Kohia hugged her again. "I'm glad you made it back safe. Now, you get some sleep. We'll catch up later." With a smile, Kohia left Xaria alone in her loft apartment.

Xaria sank into a chair and groaned. A week downtime seemed in order. *First – a long, hot shower.* Pushing to her feet with another groan, she stripped as she headed to her bathroom. Sliding back the frosted glass door, Xaria turned on the water to let it heat up.

Soon, she was under the pulsing sprays of hot water. There was nothing like a massaging showerhead. She rotated her shoulders as the kinks and tightness from the trip melted away. Xaria stayed in until they were all gone. Wrapping a towel around her midsection, Xaria sat on a chair and ran a comb through her hair.

Padding across the spotless wood floors, Xaria halted by the stack of mail she had. "Not bad, considering I've been gone for a while." She didn't get much junk mail. Xaria set aside a few outdoor guides and reached for a small package wrapped in plain brown paper. There was no return address and the postage mark was from Geelong.

"Okay, I admit it, I'm officially intrigued."

Her phone rang and she answered with a smile, for she well knew who it was. Her father, Nils Svien Hummel.

"Hello, Papa," she said.

While she chatted with her father, Xaria carried the box with her. It was small and light. After hanging up, she dressed quickly, leaving her hair to dry at its own speed and took the box to her couch.

Curling up on the end, she used her penguin letter opener to slit the tape. The interior box was plain with a small piece of scotch tape on it. She opened that as well and smiled when she saw the contents.

"Oh, Aidrian," she said with a sigh.

Xaria pulled out a box of Band Aids. The cover had been fixed to read Green Lantern Band Aids instead of DC Comic. Opening the box, she dumped out a bunch of them. Staring through the white, protective cover she could make out the image of Green Lantern.

At the bottom of the shipping box was a small envelope with her name written in the same neat script as the address on the box. Xaria opened it and pulled out the small square inside. On the front was a watercolor painting and she gasped. *It looks so similar to what we saw out on the ice, the night we first...* She stopped that train of thought with a whimper. The sheet was a single piece of card stock and she flipped it over.

Xaria,  
I promised you a Green Lantern Band Aid.  
Since I wasn't close enough to you to ask what style you preferred, I got a  
few.  
I want to see you again. My number is at the bottom of the card.  
Both of them.  
Call me.  
I miss you, *súil glas*.  
~Aidrian

Her heart pounded so hard as she stared at the two numbers. *Do I dare?* Lord help her, she longed to hear his voice as it poured over her. Her body reacted just thinking about him. Squirming on the seat, Xaria worried her lower lip before getting up and heading back to her phone. Taking a deep breath, she dialed his home number.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four rings passed, her belly tightening with each passing one. A delectable shiver ran over her as his voice, with its incredible accent, filled her ear. Even so disappointment filled her. Xaria listened to the message before leaving hers. With a sigh, she hung up the phone. Moments later, Kohia returned and soon the women were on their way to grab some food. As she filled Kohia in on her trip to Nepal, Aidrian O'Shea's handsome and sexy image lingered in the back of her mind. He appeared relaxed as he watched her.

"Hondo!"

Aidrian turned his head and smiled as his best friend and teammate came jogging over. He stopped and waited. When Maverick was close enough Aidrian said, "Hey, thought you already left."

"Nawh," Mav answered. "Went for a swim. What are you still doing here?"

"Just finishing up some extra training," he hedged.

"Bullshit." Maverick crossed his arms over his chest. "What gives?"

"Nothing," Aidrian tried again.

Maverick shook his head as he picked up his bag. "Can't get her out of your head, can you? Never mind, don't bother answering that."

Aidrian fell into step with him as they headed to the parking lot. "That obvious, huh?" he asked as they waited for a formation of marines to run by.

"Yes. You're letting me down here man. Thought you were going to remain single with me," Maverick teased.

"Man, I'll take Xaria's face over your ugly one any damn day of the week," Aidrian informed him as they stopped by Maverick's bike.

Swinging a leg over, Maverick secured his bag and put on his helmet. "Can't blame you there. She is a looker. Get her fine ass up here so I can meet her in person." The motorcycle rumbled to life. "See ya for dinner," Mav said over the roar of the powerful motor. Waving briefly, he headed for the street and on toward the gate.

Aidrian sighed before going to his vehicle, a sangria red, clear-coat metallic Lincoln Navigator. Not a vehicle he would have originally bought, but he and a few members from the Team had been at a police auction and he'd fallen in love with it. Got it for a steal, a lot less than he'd planned on putting into a vehicle, so the extra went to his Dream Car Fund.

Unlocking the door, he got in and drove to his apartment. He had a good six hours before he and Maverick met for dinner. It was their day off. Aside from him and Maverick, the rest of the Team was with their families or girlfriends. He'd been fine with his single status until he'd watched Merlin fight so hard for the woman he loved. Being there when he proposed to her one the catwalk at a fashion show had been the turning point for Aidrian.

"Not like I expected to fall for Jötunn," he muttered, pulling into his parking space.

But there was something about her that made him understand there was more to life than being a SEAL. He longed to have someone waiting for him, someone to stare at him like his teammates' women watched their men. Like his parents stared at one another. *What is it like to mean so much to someone?*

Entering his domicile, he dropped his bag on the floor and grabbed a drink of water. Once he quenched his thirst, Aidrian turned to his bedroom but got waylaid by the flashing red on his machine. Leaning against the back of the couch, he pressed play.

One from his mother. One from his sister. Two telemarketers, and the last one sent ripples of desire slamming through him. Xaria Hummel's voice reached out from the machine and stroked him.

"Hello, Aidrian. It's Xaria. I just wanted to call and thank you for the Band Aids..." she paused, "it really made my day. Thank you. The trip to Nepal was wonderful, it's absolutely beautiful there." Another pause. Her voice sounded softer when she continued, maybe even unsure. "I'd really like to see you again too. Call me."

He smiled. *No problem with that.* Glancing at his watch he frowned. *Damn it. I can't call her now; it's the middle of the night for her.*

In his shower, Aidrian let the spray wash away the sweat from his workout. Hands braced against the wall, he stood with his head hanging down as the hot water worked its magic. Eyes of green ice popped into his head. Soon, Xaria stood before him, wearing next to nothing.

He groaned as his cock began to harden. Aidrian longed for the day when he could enjoy Xaria's body slowly and leisurely. Their time together in Antarctica had been highly explosive, but because of their location, exploring her body hadn't really been an option. He wanted that. To suck on her golden breasts, nuzzle down the flat of her belly, and bury his face in her pussy and feast.

*Xaria!*

Aidrian groaned, his left hand already fisting his hard length. Snatches of Xaria's images flickered through his mind. The scent of her arousal. The way her heated flesh gripped and caressed him as he drove deep into her.

His hand moved faster and faster, imagining it was Xaria's touch instead of his. The tightening of his balls told him he was close. Squeezing his eyes shut, Aidrian came with a low shout, his cock pulsing in his hand. Breathing hard, Aidrian remained motionless to regain his strength before he cleaned up and got out of the shower.

He dressed quickly and was soon traveling to the local youth centre where he spent a good deal of time when he was home. From there, Aidrian went to dinner with Maverick before finally returning home. As he parked and strode toward the door, a voice called his name.

"Aidrian."

Turning, he smiled at the sight of Landi Melonakos coming toward him, wearing her signature pink and juggling four bags of groceries. Shaking his head, he moved to her and said, "Let me get those."

"Thanks," she responded, holding onto one of the four. "I didn't mean for you to carry them for me, but I had a ques for you."

Aidrian knew she hadn't meant that. Didn't matter; he wouldn't expect her to carry them. "Ask away."

He held the door then followed her to the stairs. They walked the three flights in silence. Landi still hadn't said a word when she unlocked the door to her and Dimitri's apartment and swung it open.

"Thanks for helping," she said when he placed the bags on the counter.

"No problem." He smiled and gazed around the place. The apartment had so much life now that it had Landi's touch to it. "Where's Merlin?"

"Probably still on his run." Landi began putting away groceries.

"Something I can do for you?" he questioned.

"Yes. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to do this without Dimitri finding out, but I'm trying to surprise him with a trip to Greece." She stopped moving and stared at him.

Aidrian nodded just as the door opened to admit a sweaty Dimitri Melonakos.

"Hey, hon," Dimitri called before stopping. "Hey, Hondo. Everything okay?"

Landi butted in. "He helped me in with the groceries and I'm getting his sister's addy if he doesn't mind giving it to me."

Aidrian smiled. "Sure thing. If you drop by in about two hours, I'll have it ready for you."

"Thank you," she said as her eyes found his. "And again, for the help with the groceries."

"Anytime." He nodded at his teammate and continued on to his own apartment. Two hours exactly had passed when admitted Landi into his home.

"Thanks," she said, stepping past him so he could close the door. Aidrian stared at the two small pans of manicotti she held in her hands. "You need to eat," she stated when he gave her a raised brow.

Aidrian took them with a smile, knowing it was pointless to argue with her. She would get her way. Placing them down in his kitchen, he looked at her as she stared at some photos his sister had taken and sent to him that he'd hung on his wall.

"Did you have a specific date in mind?" Aidrian asked.

"Maybe in two months. I have another presentation over there and thought if he could get away, he could visit his family." She glanced at him over her shoulder.

"Okay. I'll have a chat with Scott about this." He walked toward her with a pad and pencil in hand. "Write down your cell number and the dates. I'll let you know as soon as I get a response."

She did so quickly. "Thank you."

Aidrian took back the pad and jotted something else down on it. "Here's my sister's address. Thanks for the food."

Landi put the address in her pocket. "Wonderful, I have something to send her. You know you're more than welcome. Gotta go, see you."

Landi was gone in a whirlwind of pink. Aidrian grinned as he shut the door behind her. The scent of the still hot food filled the air, tantalizing his nose. Moving to the kitchen, he made three pieces of garlic bread and put them in the toaster oven. Not long after that, Aidrian sat down at the table and ate a quiet dinner.

After he cleaned up the kitchen, he went to his room and set his alarm for 0300, going to bed not long after that. Aidrian awoke immediately when his beeping alarm broke the silence of the room. He shut it off before reaching for the cordless phone by his bed. Settling against the headboard of his platform bed, Aidrian turned on the bedside light and pressed a pre-set button on the phone. He held his breath as the phone began to ring.

"Hello?"

Xaria's sultry voice wove around him and stirred his cock. With a sharp inhalation, he could almost smell the scent that had been around her since the day he'd met her.

"Hello?" she said again. "Is someone there?"

"Hello, *súl glas*."

"Aidrian," she said on a soft purr.

"How are you?"

"Better now. And you?"

Aidrian smiled. "Better now too."

Silence fell for a brief moment. Xaria broke it with a nervous laugh. "I'm not sure what to say."

"Am I interrupting anything?" he asked, wishing he could hold her.

"Is that your way of asking if I'm alone?"

*Was it?* "Yes."

"I'm alone. Wish I wasn't."

"Makes two of us. When are we meeting?"

This time her laugh wasn't nervous at all. "So blunt, Aidrian. What, no wooing?"

He chuckled and got out of bed. "Wooing? Okay, I can do that."

"I have no doubt. Now, tell me what you're doing."

Aidrian smiled as he walked to the kitchen. He and Xaria chatted up until the time he had to leave for work.

His mood was light as he drove to Dam Neck. He'd talked more with Xaria than he'd ever done with a woman before, sister and mother not included. Conversation had flowed easily between them then as it had while on the ice. Xaria was a very talkative person. That would normally bother him; but with her, it didn't. He loved hearing what she had to say.

Maverick met him on the way into their building. "Did you tell her you loved her?"

Aidrian glared at his friend as they headed down the hall to the briefing room. "Do I need to kill you?" he retorted.

"When's she coming?" Maverick questioned, unperturbed by the threat.

"Next month."

"You *are* going to let us meet her, right?" Tyson queried as he brushed by them into the room.

"Meet who?" Scott called from his chair.

"Hondo's woman," Maverick informed them.

That got everyone's attention. In that second, Aidrian knew it was out of his hands. He could agree and be in on the plans or he could refuse and have absolutely no say in how it would play out. Scanning the room, Aidrian grinned at the mischievous smiles on his teammates' faces. They were tighter than blood kin and had been through things no one else could begin to understand. They were friends. They were

family. They were brothers. And he knew all of them wanted desperately to meet her.

Seven faces stared at him without guile. He shook his head and moved to his seat. "I don't have a choice in this, do I?"

"Nope," they answered as one.

The teasing didn't relent for the month prior to her arrival. Aidrian knew his phone bill would be astronomical and he didn't care one single bit. They tried to speak once a day; but sometimes, he got her machine. He lived for the phone calls.

Finally, the day of her arrival came and Merlin was with him as Aidrian made sure his vehicle was spotless.

"You've got it bad, Hondo."

He did. What could he say? "I know."

Merlin tossed a rag at him. "Go pick her up. Five to one that the second you see her, the condition of your interior ceases to exist."

Aidrian smiled. "Thanks, man." He jumped in and headed off toward the Norfolk International Airport. His case of nerves began again as he walked to baggage claim. Terrorists. Torture. Life-threatening injuries. Death. He'd faced all of that and hadn't been as nervous as he was this very second.

The wall had to support him when the yellow-orange light over the carousel began to flash and her flight number lit up the sign. With a groan, the belt began to move.

*Won't be long now.* Shoving his hands into his pockets, he watched the newly arrived passengers collect their luggage. People reunited right before him and for once, the man trained to watch people *didn't*. His eyes were attuned to find one person only.

Xaria Hummel.

*Where is she? Maybe she cancelled and I missed the call.*

Not even a second passed from the end of that thought and his sharp gaze honed in on her as she approached him. Her body flowed with the same grace he'd seen the first time he'd watched her walk.

Xaria wore a purple tee shirt and black cargo pants that sat low on her hips. Her golden-brown hair was unconfined and swayed with every step she took. Plain white canvas shoes were on her feet. Over one shoulder hung a dark-green backpack.

Stepping away from the pillar, Aidrian strode toward her. The smile that spread across her face when she spotted him was like emerging from the dark and seeing the sun's brilliance. Her green eyes sparkled and tripled the speed of his own heart.

"Aidrian," she said softly, halting before him.

"Hello, *súl glas*," he whispered as the noise of the airport faded into the background.

"Is there some reason you haven't kissed me?" she asked, stepping closer.

*Yeah, idiot. Kiss her already!* Saying nothing else, Aidrian hauled her deep into his embrace and joined their mouths in a fiery and passionate kiss.

A low growl rumbled up from within his chest as her taste swamped his senses. Xaria's purr of pleasure echoed within him and her arms circled around his neck as she pressed her svelte body against his. Low whistles broke them apart. Aidrian was ready to take her right there.

"Hi," he murmured after ending the kiss.

"That's a hell of a welcome," Xaria said breathlessly.

*I've not even begun.* He smiled. "How was your flight?"

"Long," she admitted with a yawn. Pressing a light kiss to his lips she added, "But so worth it."

He stroked a finger along her cheek and together they went to grab her bags, one of his hands wrapped around hers.

## Eleven

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Xaria sighed again. She'd missed Aidrian more than she believed. Her pulse had increased exponentially when he'd materialized in her line of sight. In fact, she'd gotten slightly lightheaded. That second her eyes had taken in his physique, the word *forever* had filled her head.

Aidrian was impeccably dressed in black slacks and a deep-maroon, button-down, long-sleeved shirt; settled over that was a black, three quarter-length leather jacket. Sin personified. Staring at him had brought to mind all sorts of sexual acts.

Walking hand in hand with him to his car felt right.

"Before I forget," he said in the deep seductive tone she'd missed so much, "my Team wants to meet you. So there is a cookout, weather depending, at my CO's house."

*He wants to introduce me around.* She smiled. "Sounds great."

A young sailor in his uniform began to walk by when he stopped and looked at Aidrian. "Good morning, Ensign O'Shea."

"Morning, Petty Officer. Good to see you back. Did you have a good flight?"

It was clear the Petty Officer liked him and practically beamed when he introduced him to his mom. Aidrian introduced Xaria as well but didn't say who she was to him. She was almost hurt, but they *were* holding hands. Aidrian never rushed the Petty Officer or his mother; and while he spoke to them, Aidrian constantly rubbed the inside of her wrist with his thumb.

"Hey."

Xaria blinked a few times to find him staring down at her. "Yes?" She noticed the young sailor and his mother had left.

"You okay?"

Xaria nodded. "Yes. He seemed to like you."

"Petty Officer McQuarters is a good man. Come on, let's go." Before exiting the building, he looked at her. "Do you have a jacket in your backpack?"

"Nope. It's in my suitcase."

Aidrian dropped her hand and shrugged out of his jacket, placing it over her shoulders. "It's chilly out."

"Thank you."

The heat and scent of Aidrian surrounded her like warm velvet and she struggled not to snuggle further into his jacket. Her mouth grew dry when she took in the way his shirt stretched across his torso.

*Damnation!* Every fiber within her being longed to peel back the smooth cotton and lick the skin beneath. To indulge. Xaria put one foot in front of the other out the doors to his vehicle. He acted as if he wasn't aware of his affect on women. There was no knowing smirk on his face, no arrogance. His sole purpose had been to keep her from being cold.

Her heart fell deeper for him.

Ever the gentleman, he assisted her into the SUV. "Rest," he said as they stopped at the gate to pay for parking.

"I'm okay," she protested.

Aidrian kissed her knuckles. "Rest now."

She heard the order in his tone and closed her eyes, sleep rushing up to cradle her. Xaria gave in and drifted off.

"Wake up, Xaria," Aidrian's voice wove into her sleep and roused her.

Stretching, she sat up as he pulled into an apartment complex and parked his Navigator. Although she wasn't caught up on sleep, Xaria had to admit she did feel a bit better. Rotating her head, she noticed Aidrian sat there staring at her. She smiled, once again nervous.

"What? Was I snoring?"

"No." He unbuckled his belt, leaned across the interior and kissed her. A low purr of pleasure vibrated in the back of her throat as his thick tongue slipped into her mouth, stroking and exploring. Xaria squirmed on the seat and leaned further into his magical kiss.

She growled in frustration when he pulled back. Xaria could see the rapid pulse in the side of his neck. She longed to lick his chocolaty skin. *At least he's not resistant to me.*

"Not here," he rumbled low and dangerous. "I want you spread across my bed so I can love you like I wanted to do in Antarctica. Slow and thorough."

His words made her pussy cream with anticipation. Xaria's heart pounded erratically.

They left the car and went to his home. Xaria scanned the apartment as he entered behind her. The soft thump of her bags echoed through her. She shivered when his hands settled along her hips,

spinning Xaria so they were chest to chest. She toyed with one of the matching buttons on his shirt.

"I missed you," she said, staring at her fingers. Her breath hitched when he captured both her wrists in one hand.

"I missed you, too, *súl glas*."

With a slow motion, he leaned down and kissed her. She melted into him, trusting in his immense strength to keep her from collapsing. Beneath his soft, cotton shirt, the strong and steady beat of his heart pounded into her soul.

Deepening the kiss, Aidrian lifted her off the ground with one arm. Xaria wrapped her legs around his lean waist as he began walking. Drawing hard on his thrusting tongue, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the simple fact she was in his arms again.

"Xaria," he uttered in between kisses.

She nipped on his lower lip before kissing away any sting. Sliding one hand free, Xaria put it on the back of his sexily smooth head. Tremors shot through her when she felt the wall press into her back. His hips ground into her as he began to dominate the kiss. She wriggled against him and the hand on his shirt tore at the buttons. Xaria mewled as he began inching her shirt up, the calluses on his hands sending shockwaves through her system. Her nipples were painfully tight and her pussy throbbed, desperate to be filled again by his thick length.

Xaria moaned in satisfaction when he shrugged out of his shirt. "Aidrian," she panted.

"What, Xaria?" His voice was rough and his brogue thick with desire.

"No more waiting."

He muttered something in Gaelic and before she knew what was going on, he was laying her back onto his bed, tearing at his clothes. Xaria made short work of her own attire. Her breath caught at his revealed physique.

*Shit!*

Another wave of wetness flooded her. Aidrian O'Shea was one hell of a male specimen. The faded scars didn't take away from his masculine beauty. Her mouth grew drier while her pussy pulsed. Aidrian stared at her with more hunger in his gaze than she'd ever seen. Her skin prickled with anticipation.

*Sweet Jesus. It's like he wants to eat me alive.*

She longed for a taste of him. Xaria blinked and Aidrian was right before her, his large hands lifting her back onto his bed. He

covered her with his strong body and Xaria pushed into him. The length of his erection teased her wet slit.

He muttered in Gaelic again, his deep voice sending pulses through her. Reaching between them, Xaria purred when she closed her hand around him. His whole body jerked and he pulled back.

Xaria didn't let go of his erection. "This—" she broke off and tightened her hold on him slightly, "inside me. Now!"

"Guide me home, *súl glas*," he ordered harshly.

Xaria did and hissed in pleasure as he sank completely into her wetness.

"Better than I remembered," he grunted.

"Yes..."

Back and forth he began to move; Xaria placed her feet on his back and undulated against him. Fire spun out of control within her. His hips powered his cock into her as he kissed his way to a nipple.

"Shit!" she wailed when he drew it in, grazing the hard tip with his teeth. Tremors racked her body.

"Fast this time." He verbalized her wants perfectly.

"Yes. Please, Aidrian. Give it to me," she cried.

Harder.

"Oh, God! More." Her nails dug into the flesh of his upper arms.

Deeper.

His low grunts matched her panting.

"So close. Please," she begged.

"Come for me, Xaria. Come for me," he commanded as he flicked his fingers over her swollen clit.

"Ahhh!" Xaria came fast and hard, clenching down on him.

A low growl poured from him as he thrust deep twice more and erupted within her. Xaria came again. She shook with the aftershocks of their shared pleasures.

Aidrian collapsed on top of her, his chest pounding against hers, slick with sweat. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him. Xaria arched against him, wriggling her hips. He groaned and began to grow hard within her. Xaria closed her eyes and hung on for the ride. They made love until exhaustion overtook them. They curled against one another, woven together, becoming a beautiful blend of dark chocolate and golden hues.

Hours later, Xaria stirred. Strong arms tightened around her. She opened her eyes and stared directly at a hard, muscle-packed torso. *Aidrian*. With care, she untangled herself from his embrace. He groaned

and flopped over on his back. She licked her lips as her gaze travelled over his prone form. The white sheet was vivid against his dark skin. Desire rose up again.

Pushing down her insatiable craving for him, Xaria noticed it was getting dark. Naked, she looked outside the bedroom door and saw his shirt on the beige carpet. Decision made, Xaria went to it and slipped it on. She buttoned it up and sighed as the scent of Aidrian cradled her. Then she took herself on a tour of his apartment.

It was very clean and there was a floor-to-ceiling wooden shelf made up of identical-sized cubes. It was full of car and truck models, each in a protective clear case. *I must have missed this when I first got here.*

"Damn," she muttered while staring at the magnificent display.

There was a space dead center that had an empty box in it. Xaria knew whatever vehicle that would reside there held big meaning to him.

Looking past the shelf, she stared at the walls upon which beautiful, framed photos were hung. Her breath left her again. *Apparently, I really didn't see anything but him when I first arrived.*

The photos seemed arranged by sections. One comprised of all scenery shots. They were breathtaking images from all over the world, according to the small cards tucked in the corner of each frame that were written in beautiful calligraphy. Another section had all animals in their natural habitats. There were no words Xaria could summon to describe how amazing the shots were.

On top of a bookcase sat some smaller frames and she moved to look at them. There was a photo of four that she knew instantly was his family. *He has a beautiful family.* Two men and two women. Aidrian stood beside a man who was the older version of himself. The woman in front of him was his mother. Timeless beauty. Xaria also recognized the woman in front of his father as the one she'd seen him with in Australia. *Damn, she really is his sister.*

Aidrian stirred and opened his eyes. Xaria was gone. The thought jerked him upright as she listened for any sign he hadn't just gone through one hell of a dream. No sound reached him but the fear it had only been in his mind faded when he spied one of her canvas shoes by the door.

Xaria.

With a smile, Aidrian climbed from bed and grabbed a pair of boxers before tugging on a loose pair of jeans and zipping them. Mo-

ments later he'd found her. His heart skipped then began to pound harder at the sight she presented him. His maroon shirt draped over her to stop at her knees. His cock began to stiffen as he watched her move from photo to photo. She was so damn gorgeous. Approaching silently, he stepped up and wrapped his arms around her from behind. A small moan escaped her as she leaned back against his chest.

"Hey," she murmured.

"Do you have any idea how damn sexy you look wearing my shirt?" he asked, kissing her behind the ear.

"No." Turning in his arms, Xaria slid her arms around his waist. "Did I wake you?"

"Not at all." Aidrian stared in her big, green eyes and smoothed some brushed hair away from her face. "Hungry?"

"Yes."

Kissing her deeply, Aidrian trailed his hands down until they cupped her ass. His shaft jumped when he realized she wore no panties. *Don't be a damn animal, Aidrian. She's not just here for sex.* Patting her on the butt, he released her and together they headed to his kitchen.

Not too much later, Aidrian fried the pork chops and cast glances at Xaria while she chopped fixings for their salad. In the background played one of the CDs Affrica had left when she'd last visited. It was an eclectic mix of many musical genres featuring a lot of smaller groups he'd never even heard of that his sister had encountered on her travels.

Xaria swung her hips in time to the beat, constantly distracting him. *And here I thought her wearing more clothes would help.* It hadn't. He bit back a chuckle. *I should have known better. I wanted her when we were under a lot of layers in Antarctica.*

Aidrian forced his attention off the woman in his kitchen and back to the food he prepared. As they worked side by side, Aidrian couldn't help compare her to the other women he'd been in a relationship with. Not many women had even made it to his apartment. This was his sanctuary and sharing it didn't happen often. Xaria enhanced it. He liked having her here.

"Hey...hey, Aidrian."

With a shake of his head, he focused back on her. She stared at him, a question all over her face.

"Sorry," he said. "What'd you say?"

"I was asking about serving utensils for the salad."

He smiled. "Just to the left of the dishwasher."

"Thanks."

She walked behind him, her hand trailed familiarly over his ass. Aidrian snagged the back of her top and pulled her close for a brief yet intense kiss. Her green eyes smoldered after and she looked a bit disoriented. He loved it.

After dinner, Aidrian held her in his arms as they watched a movie. When it ended, Xaria had fallen back to sleep. As much as he longed to wake her up and make love to her again, he knew she was exhausted and suffering from major jet lag. Getting to his feet, Aidrian carried her to the bed where he undressed her and tucked her in. Then, he quickly shut off lights and disrobed to slip in beside her.

"Sleep well, *súl glas*," he murmured as she immediately curled up to him and draped her naked body over his. *Hell, this is gonna be hard.* Licking his lips, Aidrian closed his eyes, held her close, and waited for sleep to arrive.

\*\*\*\*

"I like her," Maverick said as he sat down at the picnic table beside Aidrian.

They were at the cookout. The weather was a bit on the cool side but not raining. Aidrian pulled his gaze from Xaria, where she stood talking to Ross's daughter, Charmane, and Tyson's wife, Jayde. Maverick wasn't looking at him but also watching the women. His friend had come stag to the gathering, which was unusual for him.

"Me too," Aidrian said with a smile. "A lot."

"She fits in well with the women. They all like her."

He agreed. But the wives of the Megalodon Team were an amazing group of women, each and every one of them. He would do anything in his power to protect them.

Taking a swig of his beer, Mav asked, "How does she stay so tan if she's on the ice so much?"

"She's half Egyptian."

"Ahhh. So that's where she get's that golden hue." Maverick looked at him. "Now, I just have to figure out what she's doing with you."

"Makes two of us, Maverick. I don't know why she's with me, either."

Maverick groaned. "Ah, hell, man. Are you getting all sentimental on me?"

Aidrian smiled and drank some beer. "No. Wouldn't dream of it."

"Well, that's good, because I'd hate to have to kick your ass for fucking this up because your *feelings* are confusing you." Maverick got up and walked off.

Running his tongue over his teeth, Aidrian nodded. Maverick's message was understood. James "Maverick" Lonetree wasn't an easy sell and the fact he liked Xaria told him a lot. It wasn't just Maverick, either. Each member of SEAL Team Seventeen, the Megalodon Team, was fiercely protective of his teammate. And that fell to the women as well. But if a woman gave a bad vibe, as a rule, they would let the other person know. It worked for the Team.

His heart smiled when Xaria caught his eyes and sent him a wink.

"Come on, man." Maverick nudged him.

"What?"

"We're playing baseball. Damn, stop drooling over her and get your sorry ass up."

Pushing to his feet, Aidrian shrugged unapologetically. "Can you blame me?"

"Nope."

"Back off, man," he growled, narrowing his gaze at Maverick.

White teeth flashed as Maverick grinned. "Don't ask if you don't want me to answer."

Punching him in the shoulder, Aidrian dodged the return throw, laughing. They reached the group as sides were being chosen.

"I agree," Xaria said as he approached. "Women versus men."

Sliding and arm around her midsection, Aidrian looked at her and asked, "Are you sure about this?"

She met his gaze head-on with a gleam in her eyes that matched the siren's smile curving up her full lips. "Oh, yeah." Xaria stepped away from his touch toward the women.

Aidrian grinned and shook his head, sliding on his sunglasses. "Okay. Let's show them how the game is played." The men hollered in response and the women just rolled their eyes and walked toward the field.

An hour later, Aidrian wasn't nearly so cocky. The women weren't just holding their own, they were *winning*. A groan slipped from his lips as Dezarae slid in for the winning run, totally unhampered because Osten was too busy watching CJ.

Feminine squeals filled the field as the women converged together for hugs and high-fives. Aidrian stared at Xaria sauntering toward him with her baseball cap on backward, grass stains on her jeans, and her mulberry warm up jacket unzipped three quarters of the way to reveal her white T-shirt. Plastered upon her face was a huge smile.

Xaria strode right up to him and kissed him. A low growl erupted from deep within his throat as her tongue slipped along his. He wrapped his arms around her and answered her passion with some of his own. Aidrian devoured her until loud whistles intruded into their world. He slowly ended the kiss, savoring her sweet taste as long as he could. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, her lips were swollen, skin was flushed, and her breathing was much heavier than it had been when they separated.

"Thank you," she whispered before she grinned and returned to the women.

Dinner was a blast. The men took their defeat well and as he and Xaria waved goodbye on the way to the car, Aidrian realized he hadn't spent such a wonderful day in a long, long time.

"So did you have fun?" he asked, driving back to his place.

"Definitely. You work with a great group of guys. And their wives are wonderful."

He smiled. "I know they felt the same way about you. I'm glad you had fun."

"Thanks for taking me. I learned a lot. About you too. Maverick was kind enough to share many tidbits."

Aidrian chuckled. *Should have known that man wouldn't be able to behave himself.*

## Twelve

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Xaria groaned in contented pleasure. She lay on her belly, totally naked, while Aidrian gave her a massage. Her lids were heavy as she teetered on the brink of slumber. Soft instrumental music played through the room, adding to her complete relaxation.

"Yours hands are magic," she mumbled.

Aidrian brushed his lips along her shoulder. "Thank you."

Xaria smiled and sighed deeply. She was leaving tonight and they'd barely left the bedroom all day. Personally, she had no complaints on that.

"Do you want to eat out tonight or stay here?" Aidrian asked as his strong hands worked on her lower back.

"Oh, God," she moaned in ecstasy. "Keep this up and you can do whatever; I'm damn near boneless now."

A sexy chuckle filled the room. "Well, that leads to a whole other set of ideas. But I'm serious. It's your last night here. What do you want to do?"

Xaria rolled over and stared up at the man straddling her. Beautiful. That was only one of the words she thought of when she looked at him. Surely God had created a one-of-a-kind mold for him.

Reaching up, Xaria trailed her fingers over his bare chest and down to the waistband of his boxers. "I want to spend time with you. I don't care if we eat peanut butter and jelly. I just want to be with you."

Aidrian's eyes seemed to smolder as he gazed upon her naked body. Spirals of heat moved through her, the lethargic feeling his massage had wrapped her in dissipating. Shifting her hips beneath him, she reached in the slit on his boxers and withdrew his semi-erect cock. Xaria stared at him while she began stroking his rapidly hardening shaft.

A low hiss left him as her hand moved. Up and down. He felt like steel wrapped in velvet. With reluctance, she released him. "Lose them," she ordered.

He got off her and quickly did as she'd commanded. Xaria rose up on her knees and watched him. Her gaze zeroed in on his erection as

it jutted out from a thatch of black hair. Glistening on the large bulbous head were drops of pre-cum. She licked her lips and moved closer.

"Wait," she said before he could get back on the bed.

Aidrian stopped and looked at her. Reaching out with both hands, Xaria wrapped her fingers around the rigid muscle. It bobbed as she began to explore it with light touches and caresses.

"Xaria," he said on a low rumble.

Instead of responding verbally, Xaria leaned forward and took the head of him inside her mouth. He groaned as her tongue slid along the underside of his cock. Sucking deeply, Xaria took more and more of him in, not stopping until the thick hair at his groin tickled her nose.

Up and down she slid her mouth over him, loving the way his body reacted to her administrations. She shuddered when his hands delved into her hair along each side of her head, gripping tightly. Xaria tightened the pressure she applied on his cock when Aidrian began to thrust into her mouth.

Dropping her hands to rest on his hips, Xaria dug her nails into his flesh as he set the pace. She closed her eyes and took what he gave her. Back and forth, Aidrian drove deep into her mouth and she willingly took it all. She used one hand to slip between his legs and skimmed her nails lightly across his balls.

"Jesus," he muttered as his body jerked.

Xaria hummed along his shaft as it slipped between her lips.

"Xaria," he groaned.

She lifted her gaze to see him staring down at her. She hummed again increasing her suction.

"I'm about to come, baby."

Xaria just closed her eyes and put both hands on his hips again, keeping him close and refusing to let him back away. His hold on her head tightened as he pounded into her mouth, faster and faster, coming into her mouth with a low growl. Xaria declined to release him until she'd gotten every salty drop from him.

The second she sat back on her heels and licked her lips, Aidrian flipped her over onto her hands and knees and sank his entire length into her in one quick shot.

"Fuck!" Xaria yelled as he stretched the walls of her pussy.

Lightning rocketed through her and she came in a rush. She gripped the comforter as he thrust into her. In and out, back and forth. His strong fingers held her hips immobile. Grinding back against him, she whimpered her need.

"Tell me," he ground out.

"I need...I...damn you, give it to me!"

He did. Aidrian powered into her, giving her just what she wanted. The depth, the intensity, everything she needed to find the pinnacle she so desperately sought.

"Ahhhh!" she came with a shout.

Her internal muscles milked him and brought him to another release. Xaria dropped her head to the mattress as wave after wave of pleasure flowed through her. Boneless, she collapsed and felt his hard body cover hers, his harsh breathing in her ear.

"Cake," she mumbled.

"What?"

"I want some cake."

Aidrian laughed and pulled out of her, pressing a kiss to her cheek before getting off the bed. "Cake it is, then. Come on."

Xaria rolled her head and looked at his naked body. He stood there before her, no shame, holding one hand out toward her.

"Damn, you're hot," she said, reaching up to take his hand. "Where are we going?"

He winked at her. "To shower, of course."

He helped her to her feet and Xaria continued to marvel at just how strong he truly was. "Of course we are, how silly of me."

Aidrian wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her clean off the ground, kissing her passionately. Arching into him, she wrapped her arms around his neck while her ankles hooked behind his back, pressing them closer.

After their shower, they took their time getting dressed; but eventually they made it to a restaurant and Xaria's mouth watered as she stared at the Black Forest cake slice Aidrian had brought over after they'd finished their main course. They sat in a small booth across from one another. During the entire time, she had her foot wedged in between his thighs.

A hint of sadness tinged the conversations now. Xaria constantly lost herself in his gaze as he ate his marble cake. Aidrian reached across the table and took one of her hands in his. Interweaving their fingers, he sent her a slight smile and gave her a gentle squeeze.

"Thank you," she said sincerely.

"Xaria, I—"

"No," Xaria interrupted him. "Don't say anything. Let's just enjoy what time we have left."

There were clearly words he desperately longed to say but didn't. And Xaria was glad for that. Her nerves were wound so tight at the moment she was liable to cry. Xaria wasn't normally a weepy woman. She didn't cry. But the thought of being away from Aidrian O'Shea was fast making her become one. *Am I being selfish? I want to lock the two of us away and keep him to myself.* Part of her was waiting for him to laugh and tell her she'd been fun but it was time for him to move on. Never had a man paid such devoted attention to her.

"What are you thinking about, *súl glas*?" His rich voice grabbed her back from her musing.

Forcing a smile on her face, Xaria shrugged. "Just going back over the past week in my head."

In a brief second, she knew he didn't believe her at all. Instead of challenging it, though, he just squeezed her hand again. "Ready to go?"

*No!* With a sigh, Xaria nodded. "Yes." Releasing his hand, she took a final bite of the cake and sat on the hand he'd been holding, needing a few moments to put a bit of distance between them.

He watched her with this unnerving amount of clarity at her actions while waiting for the bill. He signed without really even looking at it and returned his dark gaze to her. They left the restaurant and Aidrian said something she couldn't understand as he held the door for her at his Navigator.

"What did you say?" she asked once he'd gotten in.

"I said it's not going to work." He started the engine.

"What isn't?" she questioned even as dread filled the pit of her stomach.

Xaria jumped when she felt his strong fingers cupping her chin and turning her face to his. Aidrian turned on the overhead light so their eyes could meet.

"This thing of you trying to distance yourself from me. You're getting on a plane, Xaria. Not out of my life. Unless," he paused, "that's what you want."

Somehow, Xaria didn't think he'd let her leave his life even if she wanted to. "That's not what I want," she whispered.

"Good," he said, his lips millimeters from her. "Not what I want, either."

Xaria groaned as his tongue slipped into her mouth and began the mating dance with hers. Her eyes dragged closed, tingles overcoming her body. She leaned into his intoxicating kiss as much as the seatbelt would allow.

"Aidrian," she whimpered, reaching out and wrapping her hand around the back of his neck.

They were both breathing hard when he ended the kiss. Forehead to forehead, he stared into her eyes. "We have to get going," he said.

She hated he was right. "I know. Don't want to miss my plane."

One quick kiss and he sat back. "Wouldn't hurt me if you did."

Xaria stared at him as he drove them to the airport. The silence in the vehicle almost overwhelmed her but she just took his hand from the steering wheel and laced their fingers. He gave her hand a slight squeeze before trailing his thumb along the inside of her wrist.

Aidrian watched Xaria walk toward the security checkpoint. It was as if part of his heart had ripped from his chest. Their goodbye had been painfully short. He wanted to run after her, toss her over his shoulder, and take her back to his place. Where she belonged. With him.

Xaria got in line for the checkpoint and looked back at him. A soft smile tinged with sadness spread across her golden face. She waved goodbye one more time and faced forward again. She never looked back as she went through security and headed toward her gate.

*Goodbye, Xaria.* Deep within his soul, Aidrian knew she was his other half. Taking a deep breath, he spun on his heels to the exit and stopped when he saw Maverick leaning against the railing near the escalators.

There was no mocking smirk on his friend's face. It was serene and composed. "Let's get a beer," Maverick said when Aidrian reached his side.

"Sounds good to me."

Not much later, the two friends were sitting at a bar enjoying a cold one when their beepers went off simultaneously. Aidrian swore as he pulled it off his belt and looked at the number. It was very recognizable, as was the 9-1-1 after it. With another sidelong glance at the beer, he shoved it away and pulled out some cash to cover it. Together, he and Maverick headed back to the base.

As he changed, Aidrian allowed himself one final thought of Xaria and how much he missed her. Then he turned his full attention to the upcoming task while Harrier debriefed the Team. As their plane zipped down the runway, Aidrian settled back in his seat and relaxed, intent to get some sleep. His apartment was in good hands; he knew Landi would keep an eye on things as well as handle his mail for him.

He sighed when the *Sovereign* reached cruising altitude and leaned his head against the small window. With a yawn, he closed his eyes and listened to the lighthearted chatter from his friends around him. He knew they didn't expect him to be in the conversation; he was one of the quieter of the members of SEAL Team Seventeen. Aidrian awoke when they began their final descent.

It was cold and rainy. Aidrian tugged the brim of his field hat down further over his eyes as he headed across the tarmac to climb aboard the plane awaiting them at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. The Megalodon Team was catching a ride on one of its flights and was the last to board. As they took their seats, Aidrian looked up along the two rows of men sitting in the belly of the plane.

*Jesus, they get younger every single year.* The gear and helmets couldn't hide the youthful faces that stared out from them. Aidrian nodded at the young man beside him. His face seemed a little pale and there was a trickle of sweat making its way down his head from beneath the camouflaged helmet he wore.

These young men were going up for jump quals, going for enough jumps under their belts to earn their jump wings. Aidrian listened to the jump master explain what they would be doing tonight. Briefly, Aidrian met Maverick's gaze in the dim lighting before gazing back up the rows of men. The energy in the air was near palpable and underlying it was a small tinge of fear from those jumping.

After a while, the plane banked to the right and Harrier stood up. Aidrian and the rest of the Megalodon Team followed suit. They double checked gear as the jump master lowered the ramp. Aidrian looked down at the young man who'd been beside him, touched his shoulder, and said in a tone only the young airman could hear, "Good luck. It'll get easier."

A large smile spread across the man's face. "Thank you, sir."

Giving him a brief nod, Aidrian turned and with the rest of his Team stepped off into the night. Eight shapes hurtled through the dark sky and almost simultaneously the same number of black chutes ripped open, ensuring the safe landing of them all.

They'd landed in Prekmurje, the easternmost region of Slovenia, setting down in the hilly area to the north of Murska Sobota that was also known as the Goričko.

Chutes were quickly stored and the men prepared to move out. Aidrian glanced to his left and his right, feeling the familiar thrum of energy his job gave him. His night-vision goggles, NVGs, firmly in

place, they began toward their target through the damp and inky blackness, silence reigning.

The mission: Get in quietly and extract a foreign arms dealer with ties to one of the main terrorist groups that was a threat to the United States. No trace left behind. They had less than five hours to do their snatch 'n' grab and make it to the extraction point.

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Xaria fretted. Really, that was the best way to put it. Ever since she'd checked her messages and found one from Aidrian saying he'd be out of contact for a while, she'd been preoccupied. For a brief moment, she thought she'd been pregnant but that had been a false alarm.

Thankfully.

*Am I really happy about that?*

Xaria sighed and waved goodbye to Kohia, her best friend. Mail in one hand, keys and bags in the other, Xaria rode the lift up one more floor to her loft. Since they lived in the same building, just on different floors, they did most things together. Today, they'd gone shopping, swimming, and more, having a wonderful time.

Tossing the mail on a counter upon entering her apartment, she took her purchases to her bed and placed them there. Then she showered and dressed before thumbing through the post. Grabbing the pile, Xaria moved to the hammock she'd situated in front of large windows. With a contented groan, she stretched out. After getting through five items she was ready to take a nap.

*I'm just so damn comfortable.*

A yellow, greeting card-sized envelope caught her eye. Pulling it out, she glanced over it. *Wonder what this is.* The postage mark was local and nothing on it was handwritten. Opening it, Xaria couldn't stop the gasp from slipping past her lips. A card graced by a beautiful image of a castle surrounded by green and a single word: IRELAND. Licking her lips, Xaria sat up and opened the card.

Out slipped a note and a plane ticket. Xaria looked at the ticket first. A week-long timeframe on a first-class ticket. *Oh, my God!* She picked up the card and read in nicely printed letters: *Come to me.*

Xaria's heart pounded erratically and her palms grew sweaty. A low fire formed within the pit of her stomach. The lift sounded and soon Kohia's voice filled the loft.

"Hey. What's for dinner?" her friend hollered.

"He wants me to meet him in Ireland," Xaria blurted out, staring at her friend, the plane ticket still in her hand.

"What?!" In mere moments, Kohia was beside her and had the ticket in her own hand. A low whistle left her mouth. "Damn. This boy's got it bad for you. First class." She tsked. "Ya bitch."

Xaria just stared at the note. *Come to me*. Nothing personal, really. *Did he want a booty call?* She shook her head. That was one hell of an expensive one if it were really the case. "I don't know, Kohia," she said to her friend. "There's nothing personal on it."

Kohia stretched out beside her in the hammock. "I'm sure it was the best he could do being someone else typed it. I doubt he'd want anything personal to be shared with others."

Xaria took the ticket back and held it along with the note before lying back and resting her head against her friend. "I'm scared," she admitted. "I feel so strongly...so damn strongly for him. I don't want to get hurt."

Kohia wrapped an arm around her and pressed a friendly kiss to her temple. "I've never met this ebony god you keep going on about, but it sounds to me like he thinks plenty of you. He's hot as all get out; I think I'd be lappin' him up if I were you." All teasing aspects left her voice when she continued. "Nothing in life is cemented in stone other than we will all die one day. Don't hold back from him. Love well during the time you have with him. Does this have something to do with your parents and the fact they got divorced?"

*Did it?* "Yes. No. Hell, Kohia, I don't know. It's not like my parents ever stopped loving each other. I never knew either of them to be with anyone else, even after my mom died. So unless Dad was great at hiding a relationship, he hasn't had one since. He still wears his ring."

Kohia forced an eye connection. Staring into dark-brown orbs, Xaria saw ageless wisdom. "You should discuss this with Aidrian. If I learned one thing from my failed marriage, it's communication. Don't expect him to read your mind. No matter how perfect you think he maybe. When all is said and done, he's still a man; and that wobbly Y-chromosome creates easy confusion in them."

Xaria laughed briefly. "What if I fall?" she asked quietly after a small silence.

Kohia sighed. "You come back home and together we pick up the pieces. Just like we did when I came home."

"Okay. At the risk of being a sap, you do know you're the best friend anyone could *ever* ask for, right?"

Kohia looked at her with impishness alive and well in her dark gaze. "I know. Just promise me one thing. If that hunk has any friends, single of course, you point them in my direction."

Xaria smiled. "Will do."

With a gentle push of the hammock, the women rocked in companionable silence, each lost in her own thoughts. A small grin curved up the corner of Xaria's mouth.

*Ireland.*

## Thirteen

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Xaria worried her lower lip as she gazed around her. Her pulse raced with anticipation. The thought of being with Aidrian again had that effect on her, but that wasn't the only thing. Last time she'd talked to Aidrian, he'd informed her they were staying with his parents. She'd protested but he'd reassured her, saying they were looking forward to her staying there and getting a chance to meet her.

*Meeting parents is stressful.*

"Welcome to Ireland," the customs agent told her as she was cleared to proceed.

"Thank you," Xaria responded before following the signs to baggage.

As had when in America, the second her gaze landed upon Aidrian O'Shea, her breath caught and her pulse increased even more. He stood talking to another man but ended the conversation when he spied her. With a smooth move, he headed toward her.

Aidrian wore a snug-fitting, marble-gray tee shirt and nigh-indecently tight blue jeans. He moved toward her with the lazy predatory way he owned. *And just like that, I'm ready to sink to the floor nothing but a puddle.* The man had the grace of a big cat. Each step a lazy ripple that did little to conceal the power behind it. His movement told everyone he'd found his prey and *nothing* would get in his way of attaining it. Xaria felt her body temperature skyrocket.

Aidrian didn't slow. When he reached her, he swooped in and kissed her. Sparks shot through her and her toes curled within her shoes. With a whimper of longing, Xaria leaned further into the wall of muscle before her. She slid her hands up around his neck and returned the passionate greeting with fervor. Xaria was lightheaded when he pulled back and stared into her eyes, his own gaze burning with desire.

"Hi," he said quietly as one thumb skimmed along her cheekbone.

"Hi, yourself."

A sexy smile turned up his kissable lips. "I missed you."

Those three words stopped her heart briefly. Blushing, Xaria stepped back and looked him over once more. *Damn, he's fine!* "Thank you for inviting me," she said, suddenly unsure.

Aidrian stared at her and Xaria felt like he could see her innermost thoughts. And fears. An understanding gleam filled his black eyes and he leaned in to kiss her lightly. "Let's get your bags. Don't worry; they're going to love you."

Bags stowed, Xaria sat on the passenger side of a light green — lucerne green — Aidrian had called it, Range Rover. She relaxed against the gray, leather seat as he drove them out of Dublin. Light instrumental music played while the city disappeared behind them. The scenery gave way to amazing rolling green landscape of the countryside. Xaria couldn't help the gasp that left her.

*It's so beautiful. Never have I seen so many different shades of green.*

"Welcome to *my* home, Xaria," Aidrian spoke in a low intimate tone, sending shivers throughout her.

"Didn't I say something similar to you, once?" she questioned, tearing her gaze off the landscape and placing it on him.

He winked at her. "Aye, ya did. Right before we..."

Xaria shifted on the seat. She remembered all right. That statement of hers alluded to the first night they'd made love.

"Do you remember?" His question was like dark silk wrapping around her, sliding against her skin.

Her pussy gushed. Xaria swallowed hard. "I remember," she said.

A wickedly sexy smile flashed across his clean-shaven face. "Good." He put his attention back on her, his obsidian eyes glowed with promise.

Xaria's skin prickled from the single-minded determination in his stare. Shifting again, Xaria tried unsuccessfully to stem the waves of desire racing throughout her. *Would it be wrong to jump him here in the car?* Her mouth watered and she clenched her hands, nails digging into her palms.

"Stop that, *súl glas*," Aidrian said on a low thread of danger.

"Stop what?" Xaria asked totally befuddled.

"I'm doing my best to not take you before we get to my parents' house. So unless you want to meet them smelling of our sex, you need to stop those sexy mewls erupting from your throat."

Xaria clamped her mouth shut. She had no idea that was what had been coming from her. The devil on her shoulder grinned mi-

schievously and used the pitchfork on the angel, sending it somewhere far, *far* away.

"We wouldn't want that," she commented airily, unbuckling her seatbelt and sliding closer to him. Bracing most of her weight on her right hand, Xaria trailed her left up his inner thigh.

Aidrian jerked beneath her touch, the Range Rover swerving on the narrow road. "Xaria," he rumbled, his hand covering hers, pressing it tight against his rock-hard erection. "Stop."

Blowing some hair out of her face, Xaria tightened her fingers along the ridge in his jeans, pouting. "I've missed you." Leaning closer, Xaria kissed the side of his neck, licking up along his carotid artery.

"Xaria." His voice shook.

She could see him gripping the steering wheel so tightly, his knuckles were almost white. Xaria pulled free from his hand and unbuttoned the top button on his jeans.

A low curse left his mouth as he veered off the road, came to a halt, and slammed the gearshift into park. Before she blinked, it seemed, he'd pulled her from the vehicle and was lowering her pants. Xaria moaned in ecstasy as he sank two fingers fully into her soaked pussy. His large body covered hers.

"Ahh!" she screamed as an orgasm washed over her.

His face nuzzled her neck as he murmured in Gaelic. Eyes closed, Xaria bit her lower lip as his fingers retreated and she felt the head of his cock at her entrance. With an arch of her hips, she impaled herself fully upon him.

"Shit!" His expletive ripped from his throat.

Flames licked along her skin as he thrust within her. Her body held onto him as tightly as it could. Xaria purred as he took possession of her mouth and drove his tongue within her, matching the drive of his hips.

"Uh...uh...uh..." It was the only sound she could make. Xaria didn't care they were barely hidden from view of the road. It didn't matter she was on her way to meet his parents. All that mattered was they were together, their bodies moving in tandem.

Faster he moved. Xaria met his pace easily. Aidrian yanked his mouth from hers, before capturing her head in his hands. His eyes damn near glowed with feral fire as he stared at her.

"Mine!" He swore the word seconds before he unloaded deep within her. He kissed her, his thick tongue sweeping through her.

Xaria came with him; her body shook from the combination of the orgasm and his single utterance. Aidrian lifted his head and held her gaze, his eyes not so wild but just as possessive, gentling a bit.

"You're a distraction, *súl glas*. One hell of a distraction, but we need to get going. They're waiting for us."

Xaria smiled at him, trailing down his face with a finger. *This is contentment*. "I think I could really like it here."

He chuckled and pulled out of her. They dressed in silence and then walked the short distance to the car. Aidrian took her to the back and opened it.

"What are you looking for?" she asked when he grabbed a dark-blue bag.

"Wipes. As much as I love the accumulation of our sexual scents on you. I'm not about to introduce you to my parents smelling that way." Xaria flushed. Aidrian gripped her chin lightly. "Thank you."

She took the wipe from him and cleaned up quickly as he did so as well. When Aidrian was closing up the back, another car approached and stopped. Xaria watched the man lean out from the window and yell across the road, "Everything okay there, Hondo?"

In that second, Xaria realized he knew the man. And apparently very well if he knew his nickname. Another blush began to creep up her face.

Aidrian waved and hollered back, "Everything's fine, Mr. O'Grady, thanks. Just stretching our legs quick."

A knowing smile crossed the older man's face. "Good idea. Welcome to Ireland, lass." He drove away with a wave.

"Oh, my God!" she wailed. "Just how close to your parents are we?"

"About twelve kilometers. You'll meet Mr. O'Grady later. He'll stop by." Aidrian kissed her and led her to the passenger side.

When they pulled into a driveway a bit later, Xaria felt only slightly less embarrassed. Aidrian held her hand the whole way. And now she sat there while he again came around the vehicle to help her out.

"Ready?" he asked, shutting the door behind her.

"I hope so." Truth be told she was petrified. It was very important that Mr. and Mrs. O'Shea liked her.

"You'll be fine. They don't bite," he paused, "well, not all that often."

Xaria took a fortifying breath and walked with him toward the white two-story home. Before they made it to the step on the porch, the door opened and out stepped his parents. They looked the same as they had in the photo. His father wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt and his mother wore a skirt and a blouse. Both had welcoming expressions on their faces.

It was time to meet Duane and Simone O'Shea.

Aidrian's mother smiled as she walked toward her. There was no hesitation and Xaria found herself wrapped tightly in her embrace.

*"Céad míle fáilte, Xaria,"* Simone said in a soft voice, her voice gently tinged with an Irish accent.

A warm feeling flowed through her and tears pricked the backs of her eyes. There was nothing in the world like a mother's embrace. Aidrian's smelled like sunlight and comfort.

The women separated and Xaria found herself staring into a gentle pair of dark-brown eyes. She smiled. "I'm not sure what you said but I'm very happy to meet you."

Simone winked. "We'll have to teach you the language. It's a traditional welcome. One hundred thousand welcomes." She hugged her again. "Come on in and tell me all about how you and my son met."

Xaria felt like she'd been run over. Not in a bad way, but suddenly she wasn't sure of what was going to happen. His mother took her arm and began steering her toward the house.

"Hold on there, Mother. Don't go sweeping our guest off before I get a chance to meet her," Duane said, placing himself before them.

He was the same height as his son. But where Aidrian was packed full of muscles, his father — although by no means small — lacked the bulk Aidrian had. They shared the same black eyes though. Duane's smile was just as kind when he drew her in for a hug. "Welcome to the family, lass. Call me Duane, Papa Duane, or just Papa, whichever you prefer."

Xaria snapped her gaze to where Aidrian stood watching them. He sent her a wink so brief and subtle, she wasn't sure she hadn't just imagined it. She pressed a kiss to Duane's lightly bearded face.

"Thank you."

Simone O'Shea shooed her husband off. "You boys bring in the luggage. I'll show her to her room."

Xaria hung on for the ride.

Aidrian watched Xaria disappear into the house he'd spent the second part of his childhood in. He stared at his father when he headed toward him. Aidrian waited and the men walked in silence to the rear of the Range Rover and removed Xaria's luggage. Duane shut the hatch and slapped him on the shoulder.

"She's the one...is she?"

"Yes, sir," Aidrian answered, casting a side glance at the man who he looked up to more than anything in the world. His father was his role model.

Nothing else was said as they strode to the house. Aidrian headed up the stairs with her bags as his father headed to the conservatory. Knowing his father, he would read a paper or enjoy some coffee; Aidrian could smell some. When his father was ready, Aidrian knew he would speak again about Xaria. Duane O'Shea did things at his own speed. After he put the bags in his sister's room, Aidrian followed the sound of feminine chatter and located his mother and Xaria in his mom's quilting room.

"Hey," he said, poking his head in the door. "I'd wondered where the two most beautiful women in Ireland had gone."

His mom shushed him while Xaria tore her gaze away from the green and gold quilt hanging on the wall before her to stare at him.

"My son, the charmer," his mom said.

"He is definitely a charmer," Xaria agreed.

Aidrian went in and kissed his mother before moving to stand behind Xaria. "Amazing, isn't it?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her.

Xaria sank into his touch. Her hands settled on top of his and she nodded. "I'm blown away. Your mother is unbelievable. These are...I can't even begin to find the words. It's like looking at a portrait. Everything is so vibrant. So alive."

He smiled as he listened to Xaria talk about his mom's work. He believed it was Simone's love of quilting that gave it such a powerful emotion on each masterpiece she created.

"She is extraordinary. This and the flowers are her loves." He kissed Xaria on the temple, seeing his mother leave the room quietly.

Xaria sighed. "So your family is talented. Your mom gardens and quilts. Your sister takes amazing photographs. What does your father do?"

"He's a woodworker. There's a shop out back; I'll show it to you later. He's done the statues lining the driveway and some of the furniture here in the house."

"The leprechauns?" Awe was evident in her voice.

"Aye, those are the ones."

Xaria turned in his arms and wrapped hers around his neck. An enchanting gleam entered her gaze. "And what's your special talent?"

His cock swelled and he swallowed. Then he grinned, lowering his face to hers. "I don't know if you're ready for that yet."

"Perhaps not, but I bet it'd be one hell of a ride."

He kissed her lightly. "It sure will be. Come on; let me give you the grand tour." Aidrian led her to the door. "The room at the end there is the one belonging to my parents. You're staying in Affrica's room." They walked around the opening for the stairs, his hand on the small of her back. "This," he said in a whisper, "is my room."

"Hmmm," she murmured, sliding past him to enter. "Let me see what we have here."

Aidrian watched her move slowly through the room, looking but not touching. His gaze stared past her to the bed. His shifted a bit as his shaft responded to the line of thoughts he was having.

"You love cars, don't you?" she asked, stopping by a model. "I loved your collection at your apartment."

He nodded. "Classic cars are a passion of mine, yes." Aidrian went to her side and picked up the car she'd been perusing. It was a '67 Corvette Stingray. Marina blue with a black stinger. He skimmed along the flawless paint job with a finger. "I've spent a few days off with Dezarae, Ross' wife. She restores and rebuilds them."

Xaria reached for the car in his hand but pulled back at the last second. "What's your dream car?"

Aidrian smiled. "That's easy. A 1964 Jaguar E-Type 3.8 Litre Roadster." He put down the Stingray and wrapped an arm around her middle. "Come on. I know my parents want a chance to talk with you." Nibbling on her ear, he added, "Although, there is something I would love to do with you up here." He slipped a finger in the waistband of her pants.

Xaria slapped his hand away. "Oh, no. This is your parents' house."

"And?"

"It ain't happening in here. Respect your parents."

He groaned and pulled her closer. "Come on," he suggested, only partially playfully, pressing his erection against her. "You make me all kinds of horny."

She chuckled and pushed him away. "I mean it, Aidrian, that's not happening here. Not in this house."

Aidrian sighed dramatically and guided her to the stairwell. "How about the workshop?"

Xaria barely slowed as she headed down the stairs. "Nope."

Aidrian caught up with her at the bottom and drew her back into him. "Lots o' field trips are in order then."

She ground back against him. "Most definitely," Xaria murmured as her hand reached around and stroked him through his jeans.

*Shit!* It took him an inordinate amount of willpower to continue on through to the conservatory instead of tossing her luscious and tempting body over his shoulder and heading back up the stairs.

"There you are," his mother said when they entered the sunny room. "Come sit."

Aidrian watched helplessly as his mother tugged Xaria down beside her on the sofa. He wanted to sit next to her. With a small sigh, he lowered himself into an oversized chair, knowing full well the turn of events were out of his hands. He observed with pride as his parents fell in love with Xaria just as he'd hoped they would.

Aidrian barely bit back the laugh striving to explode from him when his mom got to her feet and looked down at Xaria, saying, "Let's continue in the kitchen; you can help me with dinner."

Xaria's gaze snapped to his and he could see the panic in the green depths. He sent her an encouraging nod.

Xaria took a deep breath, got to her feet, and said, "Just tell me what to do. But I'll tell you now; I'm not any kind of cook."

"You don't cook?" Simone asked.

A wry smile crossed Xaria's golden-tan face. "Not really. There's not much call for big meals out in Antarctica."

His mom seemed mollified by that. "Well, I'll have to teach you some things. My son can put it away."

His eyes lingered on the gentle sway of Xaria's hips as she left with his mother. Once the women had disappeared from view, Aidrian turned his attention to his dad.

"She's a hell of a woman, *mac*." Duane got to his feet and walked to the door. "Let's go to the workshop."

It was as much an order as a suggestion and Aidrian got to his feet immediately. They walked along his mother's garden path to the shop. No matter how often he saw it, he loved how she did things. There were palm trees, ferns, and a whole hell of a lot of flowers he still didn't know by name. In her greenhouse she grew orchids, one of her favorite flowers.

When his dad opened the door to the workshop, the strong aroma of freshly cut cedar swamped him, and Aidrian smiled.

"You okay with her living across the world from you?" his dad asked as he moved to an item sitting on the worktable.

Picking up some sandpaper, Aidrian stared at it. "No. I hate it." His fist clenched. "I want her with me."

Duane picked up a plane and began working on the object before him. "Have you told her?"

"Told her what?"

"Don't be dense. I dinna raise a fool. Have you told her you love her?"

*I love her?* Aidrian had barely begun to accept that himself. It wasn't easy to hear it from his father. "How can you be sure?"

The sound of the plane sliding along the grain of the wood was the only noise for a while in the shed. Aidrian waited, knowing his father was thinking of how to put his thoughts.

"You know your mother was just the cutest woman I'd ever laid my eyes upon. I couldn't even remember my own name—she had to ask me at least twice before I could pull myself together enough and make my tongue work to answer. No matter where I was or who I met after her, no one could speed up my heart like she could. It's the same to this day. I'd give my life to have her give me nothing more than that special smile. I live and breathe for her."

Aidrian sat on a stool, hooking his feet on a rail. His eyes followed the endless motion of his father as he worked a piece of wood.

"Listen to me, Aidrian DeWayne. Let's assume you'd ever even brought a woman home to meet us before. Then I'd say you'd need to think carefully. Still should. Given the way you watch her, how you talk about her, and how gentle you are with her, it tells us a lot." He stopped planing and stared directly at him. "*Is folamh, fuar teach gan bean.*"

*Empty and cold is the house without a woman.* Aidrian knew his father was right. He didn't want a house like that. The warmth that Xaria brought to his life was more than just nice, it was addicting. He nodded. "I don't know what to do, Da."

His dad quirked a lip. "If I had the answers I'd be a millionaire." He began working again. "You'll know what the right choice is."

"Excuse me, gentlemen. I was sent to collect you for supper," Xaria's voice broke the silence.

"Hey, beautiful," Aidrian said, waving her closer. His heart soared when she came to his side without hesitation.

"What are you making?" she questioned his father.

"A hope chest. Come here, lass."

Xaria stood next to him. As Aidrian watched, his father handed her the plane and gestured to the wood.

"Oh, no. I don't want to ruin your piece."

"You won't. Nice 'n' easy, lass. Go with the grain."

Aidrian stared as Xaria got a lesson from his father. They spoke to one another in low voices. He didn't even start when an arm slid around his waist. His mother.

"Figures, he'd get her going on woodwork," Simone said with some humor in her tone. Pressing a kiss to his mom's forehead, Aidrian draped an arm around her shoulders. "Come on you two," she insisted, "you can spend time here after supper."

"Right behind you, Mother," Duane said without looking up.

"Come on, Ma, let's eat while it's warm," Aidrian said in an exaggerated whisper. Together, they left the workshop.

## Fourteen

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Xaria sighed and rested her chin on her knees as she sat up on the smooth bench. The cool night air blew through her hair, which was currently unconfined. She gazed up at the dark sky. It was as if God had taken a scoop of diamonds and tossed them across black velvet.

"There you are." Aidrian's deep voice wove out of the dark and wrapped around her, bringing with it a sense of security and heat.

"Hey," she said softly, not wishing to break the spell around her. He sat beside her. "You okay?"

"Oh, absolutely." Xaria turned her head and looked in his direction. She could barely make him out. "Your parents are amazing."

"They like you a lot too." His hand covered hers. "Take a walk with me."

Xaria wasn't sure if it was a question or a command. Not that it mattered. She got to her feet and walked with him. The light from the house faded as they strolled beneath the star-studded sky. Silence stretched between them but Xaria didn't mind; it wasn't an uncomfortable one. His hand covering hers was large, warm, and protective.

Aidrian stopped and pressed her against a tree before lowering his mouth to hers. She shuddered as a deep need welled up within her belly. Xaria leaned into him and returned the drugging kiss. She purred with contentment as his hands sank into her hair.

His breathing as harsh when he broke the kiss. "Come on, *súl glas*, let's get some sleep."

Disappointment rose up within her. *Doesn't he want me?*

It was as if he could read her mind. "This trip isn't just about sex, Xaria. I have to prove that to you." His pelvis brushed against hers. "God knows I want to be buried balls deep within you. Man, do I, but I have to show you it's more than physical attraction for me."

She smiled in the dark. "Are you getting sentimental on me?"

He kissed her nose lightly and muttered, "I don't know. I just don't know."

There was true bewilderment in his tone. Xaria hugged him briefly. "Let's go. I'm still exhausted."

Aidrian scooped her up in his arms and she shrieked with surprise. His husky laughter echoed around them. The serious moment had passed for now.

Xaria knew he was struggling with his emotions regarding her. In a way, she was doing the same thing. Relationships were usually hard, and she and Aidrian weren't exactly a normal couple. He lived in the northern hemisphere and she spent her life below the equator in the southern one. Their jobs weren't typical nine-to-five, either. She knew he could be called away at any given moment and there was no guarantee of a safe return.

*Not like my job is risk free, either. I don't sit in an office all day.*

So instead of pushing the issue, Xaria let it go. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed his cheek. "I want a piggyback ride."

He chuckled again and set her feet on the ground. "Okay, climb on."

Xaria quickly moved behind him and jumped on. She smiled in the dark as he headed back. Holding tight, Xaria kissed his neck, laughing when his hands tightened on her butt.

"Behave," she teased. "Your job is to get me home safely."

Aidrian stopped. "I could have done that how I was carrying you before."

She bounced on him. "This is funner."

"Is that even a word, *súl glas*?" he questioned as he began walking again.

"Doubt it. But I don't care. Do you know how long it's been since I've had a hot-ass man give me a piggyback ride?"

"Do I *want* to know?" he growled.

*He's jealous.* Xaria grinned in the darkness. "Probably not, but I'll tell you anyway. Spring break in New Zealand." He grumbled and she continued. "I was on the beach with my best friend Kohia – who wants to meet you by the way. We joined in some game so I climbed on the back of her brother Tane; and even though we didn't win – came in second, we did – that was the last time I had a piggyback ride."

She squealed as he shifted and she found herself against his chest again. "And where is Tane now?"

"Still in New Zealand." With a heavy sigh, Xaria snuggled deeper into his embrace. "Yours was way better if you cared." Aidrian grunted and she laughed. "Yeah. Didn't think it mattered to you at all."

"Woman," he rumbled before letting go of her.

"Hey!" Xaria yelled. She would have fallen to the ground had her arms not been around his neck. *Not like the ground is hard but damn...* "What was that for?"

"Dinna think it mattered," he retorted. Even though it was dark, Xaria stuck her tongue out at him. "Stick that out at me again and see what happens, *súl glas*."

*How the hell did he know?* "Spoilsport," she grouched. Off in the distance the light from his parents' home beckoned warmly to them.

Aidrian kissed her and placed her on the ground with care. "Come on; if I know my ma, there's some kind of snack waiting for us."

"I'll not fit into any of my clothes if I keep eating the way I did at supper."

Smacking her on the ass, Aidrian said, "I'll help you work it off."

Delightful shivers raced through her. "Teasing isn't nice," Xaria insisted, walking off.

He grabbed her and spun her into him. "That was nothing less than the God's-honest truth."

Hand in hand, they finished the walk to the house. His parents were waiting as he'd guessed. There was a pan of brownies on the table.

Simone looked up from where she sat peeling apples and smiled at them. "Come in and have a snack. Did you have a nice walk?"

"Yes," Xaria answered. "It's absolutely beautiful here."

Simone smiled. "I know and yet my children hardly ever come home."

Xaria could feel Aidrian's sigh even though she couldn't hear it. She squeezed his hand before dropping it and heading to the sink where she washed her hands. After drying them, she went to the table and asked, "What can I do to help?"

Xaria made herself right at home over the course of her stay. Every morning they'd go jogging together. Up the small roads, past farmers and their sheep. Everyone waved and wished them a great morning. She spent her days playing tourist and taking in many of Ireland's gorgeous sites. Aidrian made love to her at least once a day. Never in his parents' house, but that didn't bother her. With each passing day, it seemed to her they were growing closer. This particular morning, Xaria bit her lip as she ran along the road, Aidrian at her side and easily keeping pace. *Damn man shouldn't be allowed to run in that.* It wasn't easy focusing on the narrow road. Aidrian wore a light-gray sleeveless tee shirt and a pair of dark-blue running pants with a yellow

stripe down them. The shirt hugged his impressive torso and it seemed to highlight the strength in his powerful arms. The pants didn't do much in the way of concealing his firm ass or legs, either.

"Top o' the mornin' to ya," Old Man Grady yelled as they moved past him.

"Morning, Mr. O'Grady," Xaria replied with a wave.

"Morning," Aidrian's response was right on the heels of hers.

Aidrian winked at her as they turned in the driveway. There was another vehicle there that hadn't been there when they'd left for the morning run. Slowing to a stop, Xaria swallowed hard as the front door opened and out flowed James "Maverick" Lonetree.

*Damn!* Maverick wore skintight black. Shirt, pants, and boots. The mid-morning sun glistened off his shoulder length blue-black hair.

"Damn," she muttered as her gaze travelled over him.

Aidrian scowled as he heard Xaria's low utterance. A dark head of jealousy rose within him. Maverick leaned against the front pillar, hands at his sides and a blank expression on his face. None of that quelled the urge to smash in his nose.

"What's up, Mav?" He walked toward his friend.

Serious black eyes met his own before Maverick cut his gaze toward Xaria. A slow grin spread across his chiseled face. Aidrian frowned further when his soon-to-be dead friend moved in her direction.

"Xaria," Maverick said, reaching for her hand and bowing low over it. "It's a *pleasure* to see you again."

"Hello, Maverick," her response was warm and welcoming.

Aidrian wanted to roar in frustration. The urge to maim and beat had never been so prevalent. *What the fuck is he doing?*

Maverick pressed a kiss to the back of her hand before slicing his sharp gaze to him. Aidrian glared back. There was more than a twinkle of trouble in Maverick's stare as his attention was soon returned to Xaria. "Do you mind terribly if I steal the scowling man behind you? I do apologize for ruining your time together."

In that second, Aidrian knew whatever had brought Maverick here, wasn't anything good. His heart sank.

"Of course. I need to stretch anyway." Xaria smiled at them both before walking off and leaving them alone.

"What's brought you to Ireland, Mav?" Aidrian questioned, punching his friend in the shoulder to get his attention off of Xaria's swaying hips.

All traces of humor vanished from his eyes. "Mara." A deadly edge lined the Lakota's response.

That one name shot rage through every fiber in his being. In less than a second, every bit of the relaxed, fun-loving son and potential boyfriend was wiped away. In its wake remained a warrior.

"Where?"

"Bēylul."

His brows furrowed in surprise. "Eritrea?" The need to know what she was doing there quickly became second to his next question. "When do we go?"

Maverick turned his head and Aidrian followed his line of sight. Xaria was still stretching. "As soon as you're ready."

"Good."

The men glanced at one another. No more words were needed. Both of them, the entire Team actually, had a score to settle with her.

"Go tell your woman. I'm going back in to help your mom clean up some of the food in the house." Maverick walked off without another word.

Aidrian watched him until he disappeared back in the house, then he moved toward Xaria. Bit by bit the tension within him faded away. She looked up at him, the smile in her green eyes faded. His heart roared in pain and frustration when she pulled her gaze away.

"Xaria," he said, sinking down before her.

"Don't say it. He came here to take you away." Xaria pushed to her feet and strode past him.

Jumping up, Aidrian grabbed her wrist and spun her back into him. There was more than just a bit of anger in her eyes. Her gaze snapped between his hand on her wrist and his face. Aidrian got the hint and released her.

"Can I explain?"

She shoved a hand through her now unconfined hair. "Why bother? Would it change the fact of you leaving or not?" He couldn't answer and she continued. "I didn't think so." Before he could blink, Xaria had vanished inside the house.

By the time he got to see her again, Xaria had showered and gone back with his father and Maverick. They were deep in conversation. His dad looked up before nodding at something that had been

said. As he approached them, Aidrian noticed both the men were carving some wood. Xaria sat cross-legged on a large section of log while his dad and Maverick had their feet on the grass.

Aidrian walked up behind Xaria and slid his hands across her shoulders. He felt her stiffen slightly but he ignored it and tugged her so she leaned back against him. Maverick caught his gaze when she finally relaxed into him and Aidrian understood the look from his friend. Maverick was happy for him, for them both.

"When are you two leaving?" his father asked.

Aidrian looked at Maverick who answered, "Within the hour."

Duane stopped whittling the wood and pointed to the back of the property. "I suggest you say your farewells to your young lass, then."

Aidrian glanced down when Xaria tipped her head to gaze at him. "Walk with me, *súl glas*?"

In the depths of her green eyes, Aidrian read the sadness. It didn't stop her from getting to her feet, however, and there was no hesitation when she placed her hand in his. Walking off with her, Aidrian looked at his father, then his best friend. Both had knowing and understanding looks in their eyes. They moved in silence and when he stopped, Xaria pulled her hand from his and placed it in her pocket.

"Shouldn't you be getting ready to leave?"

Aidrian licked his lips. "I'm ready. Mav has my bag with him."

"Oh." Xaria scuffed her toe in the grass, looking everywhere but at him.

"I didn't plan on things happening this way, Xaria."

"I know. Doesn't make it any less difficult." She took her lower lip in her teeth and stared at him. He could see the struggle within their depths. "How do they do it?"

Aidrian drew her in close, loving how she fit so perfectly against him. He stared out across his beloved Ireland before he closed his eyes. "I don't know *súl glas*."

"Aidrian?"

"What?" He pulled back and tipped up her chin, skimming his thumb along her soft cheek.

"Be careful?"

"I will." Aidrian leaned in and kissed her. She purred and arched closer, pressing all her wonderful curves into him.

"One more time," she murmured against his mouth.

Aidrian didn't disagree. His body craved hers in every possible way. Not long after those words went from her mouth to his ear, Aidrian had lowered Xaria to the ground and slipped his hard shaft smoothly into her wetness. Her sigh of pleasure filled him.

Xaria undulated against his rhythmic thrusts. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she met every one of his strokes with a fire that matched his.

*Mo croí. My heart.*

Back and forth he drove.

*Mo anam. My soul.*

In and out he powered into her, carrying her along with him to the end.

*Mo beatha. My life.*

His balls tingled and he ground his back teeth, knowing full well the spell would break once he stopped. That was the last thing he wanted. He couldn't help it. The feel of her velvet warmth gripping him, rippling along his slick shaft, was too much.

Faster he thrust.

Deeper he sank.

They crested together. Aidrian roared low as his shaft pulsed within her, covering her womb with his seed. Exhausted and spent, Aidrian barely managed to keep from crushing her beneath his large body, managing to rotate his body so he wouldn't squish her at the last minute. Hearts pounding, they lay cradled in the softness of Ireland's fertile earth, the sun above warming their sweaty bodies. Aidrian kept her tight against him, reluctant to release her even in the slightest bit. Her hand rested upon his chest above his pounding heart and as if it literally touched the beating muscle. The simple pleasure of her touch seared him.

Trailing his hand idly up and down her arm, Aidrian pressed his lips to her temple. She stirred and began tracing lazy patterns on his chest.

"We should probably get going, shouldn't we?" her question was hushed.

"Yes," he mumbled against her skin.

They didn't speak while they dressed but he hauled her back up to his side when she began to walk away. "Xaria..."

"Don't," she said, shaking her head. "Don't make this long and drawn out. I don't want to have our parting like this."

He knew she was struggling to keep hold of her emotions. So was he. Wrapping her hand in his, he kissed the back of it as they strolled slowly back toward the house. Each step taken was like a dagger being shoved into his heart.

*How do they do it?* Her question ran repeatedly in his head. He wanted to know the same thing, but not from the women's side; he wanted to know how the men did it. Leaving behind both wives and kids. Not knowing if they'd return home safely. Or at all.

When they emerged from the corner of the house, his folks and Maverick stood near the parked cars. Three sets of eyes fell upon them and he swallowed while he gave Xaria's hand an encouraging squeeze. When they got there, he let her go and hugged his folks.

"Thanks for everything," he said to them in Gaeilge. "I'll miss you both."

"We love you, Aidrian," his mom said. "Stay safe and come back soon."

"We'll take good care of your lass," his dad said as he hugged him.

Parents stepped back and all too soon he found himself staring at Xaria. His heart stuttered a second as he stared deep into her green eyes. They shone with the presence of unshed tears.

Stepping close to her, he slid a hand along the side of her face. "*Súl glas*," he murmured.

It trembled and was almost nonexistent, but Xaria gave him a smile. "What does that mean?"

His other hand settled on her face as well. With the pads of his thumbs, he wiped away the first of the tears that leaked from the corners. "Green eyes." Aidrian prayed for the strength to leave her here. "*Súl glas* means green eyes." Lowering his head, he brushed his lips over hers as if she were made out of porcelain. "Until next time, *súl glas*."

Stepping back, Aidrian walked to the car and got in. He stuck his head out the window and waved as Maverick drove them away. Xaria standing between his parents was the last image he saw of her.

# Fifteen

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*Red Sea off the coast of Eritrea near Bēylul*

Snug with his rebreather on, Aidrian swam close to the floor of the sea. Above them, a dust storm rolled across the Red Sea, giving them a bit more camouflage on the off chance there was someone out at night searching. He moved slowly and carefully, not wishing to destroy the reef nor run into any one of the forty-plus species of sharks that called the Red Sea home. Not that facing a barracuda would be any better.

*I bet this is a beautiful place during daylight hours.*

NVGs were great but there were some serious clouds being stirred up.

"Up. Nice and slow." The whispered command came.

Without a word, Aidrian adjusted the angle of his body and glided up through the water, barely making a ripple. In fact, all of the Team were doing their namesake proud, moving with graceful yet deadly precision.

After peeking over the water's surface to ensure a safe exit, the men soon stripped off their drysuits and kept to the shadows as they neared Bēylul. Aidrian shifted and readjusted his Skorpion before stepping from the dark onto the road. Osten "Baby Boy" Scoleri and Tyson "Cade" Kincade fell into step beside him while they progressed on into the city.

Not much later, Aidrian and the rest of the Megalodon Team hunkered down for the night. He flopped back on the bed and propped his feet up on his bag. A quick glance at his timepiece told him how long until the rendezvous. Closing his eyes, he listened to the low chatter of the others in the abandoned apartment where they'd holed up. Intermixed with the conversation was the familiar sound of guns being cleaned and reassembled.

A sharp nudge to his foot brought one eyelid up slowly. Maverick stood there, dressed in his normal attire of solid black. Aidrian lifted a brow, opened the other eye, and stared at his best friend. Maverick made two gestures in silence before Aidrian nodded once and again shut his eyes. Without a word, Maverick had told him he was off

to scout for a good vantage point and be back in no more than a half hour. If he weren't, Aidrian would go look for him. But until then, he'd rest.

Thirty minutes later, Aidrian opened his eyes; and after taking a second to get his bearings, pushed to his feet and went to the small living quarters. The tenseness in him faded when he spotted Maverick standing a sentry post at the heavily covered window. There was only a low glow in the room. His teammates were sprawled around and he moved to where Scott dozed in a chair.

"Harrier," he said in a low tone. Aidrian found himself staring into a very alert pair of cornflower-blue eyes. "Stretch out for a few. I'm good."

"Thanks." With an ease that belied his size, Harrier left the old chair and headed to the bedroom to sleep on the bed.

Aidrian sat in a chair near Maverick's position. "What'd you find?"

Mav kept the scope up to his eye as he answered. "There are two good ways to get to her. Time wise; they're equal. She's not alone, though. I detected more than just her heat signature."

"Did you have a shot?"

That question got Maverick to look at him. "If I'd had my rifle, I'd go with about a three-second window. She's very careful."

*Careful or not, that bitch is going down.* "Okay."

In the hushed light, Aidrian could see the grin on Maverick's face wiping away all solemnity.

"When's the wedding?" he asked.

"What wedding? Who's wedding for that matter?"

"Yours and Xaria's of course."

His heart quadrupled in speed with the mere mention of her. Shaking his head, Aidrian said. "Isn't one planned."

"Wait. You didn't ask her to marry you?" Maverick sounded incredulous.

Aidrian scowled. "You wanted me to ask her to marry me then cut short our vacation to travel around the world after *another* woman?"

Maverick shrugged. "You're right. Why tell her you love her? She probably doesn't feel remotely the same."

A low growl grew from his throat. "Is there a point you want to make, Mav?"

"Should there be?"

"Thought you weren't *for* marriage."

"Not. But that's for me. I've sat here and watched every man on this Team fall head over heels in love. They all had to admit it to themselves. And it happened." Casting another glance out the window, Maverick continued, only this time in Lakota. "Stop fighting it. The look you get when you talk about her, it's only gotten stronger. Tell Xaria how you feel about her." Maverick looked at him. "Haven't you thought about this?"

"Meaning?" Aidrian ground out in Lakota. *Of course I have!*

Maverick sighed. "You're war. She's love. Each strong alone and yet can't have one without the other."

Aidrian frowned. "Explain better."

In English, Maverick did. "Your names. Hondo means war. And your lovely Xaria – means love."

Aidrian tilted his head to the side. *I hadn't thought of that.*

Maverick took another glance out the window. "*Do cinniúint.*"

Aidrian snapped his gaze toward his friend. Maverick had the NVD up to his eye. "*Cad?*" The fact Maverick had spoken in Gaeilge and he'd answered didn't register with him.

"Don't ask me 'what'. You heard me very clearly." Maverick was back to English and his words rang full of admonishment.

And he had. Maverick's two words had been crystal clear despite the hushed tone in which they'd been spoken. Aidrian waited for Maverick to say something else. He trusted his friend and had more than just a passing respect for his Lakota heritage and the visions that sometimes came to him.

*Mo cinniúint. My destiny.*

Was it the truth?

Aidrian leaned back and sighed heavily. He shouldn't be focusing on Xaria right then. Still, he couldn't stop the sexy image of her from popping into his mind's eye. Her stunning face seemed to watch him and he felt himself stir in response.

*Mav is right. But how do I convince her to be with me?* He knew how much she loved what she did. *Can I take her away from that?* Aidrian frowned. *Would she give it up for me?*

That question remained in play even as he mingled in with the early-risers along the streets of Bēylul. Aidrian walked easily and without any haste. He listened to the numerous languages being spoken around him, picking up on a few. Arabic, Italian, and even some English. Rounding a corner, the pungent smells of baking food reached

him. He smiled as he moved along, stopping at vendor stalls, inspecting the merchandise, and talking with the sellers.

Aidrian stopped by a man hawking jewelry. He observed the contents while keeping an eye on a woman who'd just emerged from a hotel. Aidrian held up a gold link bracelet, delicate by design, and dug in his pocket for some nafka to purchase it. With a smile, he put his new bracelet in his pocket and headed off.

"Moving now," he murmured as he sidestepped a woman walking with her two children. "Second street alley."

"Got her." Cade's answer came.

Aidrian moved quicker, his heart pounding harder as he rounded the corner. It was a narrow alley in which Mara was currently halfway down. She turned slightly to a door, a move most people would overlook, but was very telling to someone trained to watch. She hesitated when Cade came around the corner at the other end of the alley. Mara continued on toward his teammate.

Quickly scanning the area, Aidrian reached into his loose attire and curled his fingers around the butt of his Skorpion. Mara slowed and subtly moved her hand toward her pocket.

"Let's not do that, Mara. Keep your hands away from your sides."

Even though she jumped, Mara quickly got herself under control. By the time she turned to face him, she wore a bored expression across her visage.

"Hmmm," she said, staring at him. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage. You know who I am; care to even the score?" Her blue eyes dropped to the gun he'd trained on her before returning slowly up his body to land upon his face. "Aren't you a tall jug of sinful chocolate? Surely we don't need the gun. Honey, I'd follow a man like you anywhere."

Behind her, Aidrian could see the mocking smile on Cade's face and he knew there would be plenty of ribbing from his teammates later.

"How nice," he said in a bored tone. "No need for names and I don't care if you would follow me anywhere. Right now, we're going into that building right there to find out what you're doing here."

Anger sparked in her eyes and she glanced over her shoulder at Cade, who also had a gun on her. She sighed and lifted a shoulder. "Two men armed against a woman. Sure it has to be this way?"

"No doubt," Cade said without humor. "Move." He gestured to the wall of the building closest to them.

When she reached it, Aidrian stepped up to her and kicked her legs apart before patting her down.

"Mmm," she purred. "What happens if I resist? Will you cuff me?"

Aidrian withdrew a knife from a sheath hidden in her boot and stood, pressing his body against hers. He dragged the flat of the blade along her cheek.

"No. I'll kill you." Aidrian stepped back, holding a knife and a small handgun he'd found on her. "Let's go." Aidrian turned the weapons over to Cade then took a rag and gagged Mara.

They walked to a door and headed up the back stairs of the warehouse. One hand on Mara and one on his gun, Aidrian moved cautiously. There were two doors at the top and he met Cade's gaze before looking to Mara. Trusting her was out of the question.

Her gaze turned smug and he narrowed his eyes in return. "Killing you is still an option."

Mara held his stare for a moment before she looked away. Apparently the reality had sunk in.

"Coming in," a low voice said in his ear.

Aidrian observed her when the next group reached them. Her eyes widened when they landed upon Merlin. Fear snuck in and Aidrian pushed her toward the stoic Greek. "Keep an eye on her."

"No problem," Merlin said.

Jeb was with him at one door while Cade and Ghost were at the other. At the same moment, they entered the rooms.

"Clear." Aidrian sighed once the room had been cleared. Two dead bodies, men he recognized from Rio. "She was cleaning house," he said.

"Or someone else tried to eliminate her," Jeb commented. Aidrian looked over his shoulder and saw the guns Jeb nudged with his boot.

"Woulda saved us a trip," Aidrian bit off.

"Didn't like the barracuda dip we took last night?" Jeb teased.

Aidrian shook his head. "Considering what I left to take that dip. Nawh man, not even close." *We're missing something.* "Something's still not right, though."

"She was sleeping here. She had to be. So by that logic, there has to be a hidden area somewhere."

"That's what I was thinking." Aidrian scanned the room again.

"Figured out who the target was," Cade's voice sounded via their earpieces.

"We've got two dead here," Aidrian responded before moving silently to Jeb and tapping him on the shoulder. A few signals and the men had their weapons trained on a wall. Aidrian felt along the wall for a depression. Eventually he found one, but it was faint. He dug his fingers in and pulled. A portion of the wall swung toward them. Aidrian smiled for about one second until he saw the wire.

*Shit!*

He kicked the door back toward the shut position and tackled Jeb so they both fell further away.

"What the hell?" Jeb asked as they slowly got to their feet.

"That door is rigged. Get Merlin in here."

Jeb cast another glance at the fake wall before slipping out of the room. Not long after, Merlin was carefully disarming it, Cade and Ghost in the doorway behind him.

"Who was the target?" Aidrian asked Cade as Merlin worked diligently.

"A guy who worked for the state department. I remember he was coming here after visiting Asmara to try and help rebuild relations between Eritrea and the US."

Shaking his head, Aidrian rolled his shoulders. "Family?" *Not that I really want to know.*

"Yes," Cade said with blatant disgust. "A wife and three kids."

Aidrian barely stopped the rumble of anger rushing up from his chest.

"Clear," Merlin announced, pulling the door wide open and stepping back.

Aidrian walked in cautiously and nodded when he saw the makeshift bed and case for Mara's weapon. Two bags, one black and one blue, were in a darkened corner that he'd spotted when he'd pulled off the blackout paper from the small window. When he looked up from the bags, the entire Team stood near.

"Whadda we got?" Harrier questioned in his unflappable tone.

Aidrian ignored him. "Where's Mara?"

Merlin shrugged, looking way more innocent than he was. "Authorities. I guess they got word of her being here. Mara is apparently highly sought after. Especially with the news of the murder."

"The bag, Hondo. Contents?"

Aidrian looked at the CO and said, "About a quarter mil." He knew Dimitri would have loved to extract the same amount of pain from Mara that she'd done from him, but he must have gone searching the law instead. And with her being as conniving as she was, if she were going down, the police would be showing up in moments.

"Authorities will be here soon. We should go." Harrier gestured to the bag before meeting all glances. "We all on the same page with the contents of that bag?"

As one the seven other men said, "Hoo-yah!"

Harrier nodded. "Then let's get the hell outta here and get ourselves back Stateside. Well done."

Aidrian grabbed the bag, not wanting to lose the money that would be going to the family of the deceased man; and within moments, the men were out of the warehouse and blending in with the locals while moving toward their extraction point.

\*\*\*\*

### *Australia*

Xaria spun the rings on her finger, the smooth polished feel bringing her some much needed comfort. Her hand remained in her pocket so no one could see how nervous she was. The two men in the room with her were neither pleasant looking nor setting her at ease. *Don't these men know how to smile?*

"What else can you tell us, Ms. Hummel?" Dour-face Number One questioned.

*Deep breaths. I've done nothing wrong.* "Not a thing."

His watery, pale-blue eyes narrowed. Walking toward her, he sat down at the edge of the wooden table. "Are you sure?"

She spun the rings again and held the disbelieving stare. "Positive." Xaria looked to the man behind him. "Can I go now? I have things I need to do."

The man immediately before her shook his head. "This doesn't make sense."

Xaria stood up. "It's not my fault you don't get it. I'm leaving. If you have anything further to discuss with me, make an appointment." She strode to the door without a single glance back at either man and walked out. Her breaths were ragged bursts as she walked down the overly bright hallway and went outside.

She slipped her shades on while the heavy *thunk* of the door behind her echoed. Turning up the collar of her jacket against the strong wind, she took two steps and stopped when a man pushed away from a tree and headed toward her. A smile grew across her face the nearer he got. Her gaze moved familiarly over the strong body.

"What are you doing here?" she hollered over the loud thunder rolls.

"I came for you. Can we get out of the weather before the sky opens up?" he questioned, jerking his finger toward an overhang.

Xaria grinned. "Scared of a little rain?"

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Beach?"

"Sure. You know I love to watch storms over the water."

"Dangerous you know."

She shrugged and winked at him even though he couldn't tell because of her sunglasses. "You're taller. I'll be safe."

He tipped his head back and roared with laughter. "I've missed you," he said, wrapping his arms around her.

"I've missed you, too, Ben."

By the time they reached the beach, they had gone through a brief downpour; but it had ended. The sky still swirled with dark, angry clouds and the winds whipped around them powerfully, helping to dry their soaked attire.

"What can I do for you, Ben?" Xaria asked as they strolled along the sand, darkened by the past rain.

"I need a guide."

Picking up a piece of driftwood, Xaria looked at the man with her. He'd changed very little since she saw him last. "What's the deal?"

"Nothing too big. They'd like some short-day excursions around the station."

"Why me?"

"They heard you were the best."

She drew some rings in the sand before ultimately letting go of the wood and watching it fall to the beach. "How many?"

"Two. And the pay's awesome."

Money was a good thing. This job had allowed her to stash up a sizeable savings. Even with sending her father some monthly, she had the means to live very comfortably.

Xaria sighed and looked at the man beside her. "You hungry?"

"I'm always up for a meal."

"Good. Let's go to my place, that way I can check my calendar and we can avoid that small squall heading right for us and eat."

"Sure. Sounds great to me. Are...um...those suits with you?" Ben gestured behind her and Xaria glanced and groaned when she saw Dour-faces One and Two.

"I'm done with them. I can't keep sitting and wasting time while they think up different ways to ask me the same damn questions."

"Still about the mining?"

"Yes. I tell ya, it's not like new things pop up in memory just because a different idiot asks the question."

Ben laughed. "Let's go. My stomach's rumblin' already."

They walked up from the beach. Xaria smiled as the wind picked up even more.

"Ms. Hummel," Dour-face Two said when they were close enough. "We still have more questions for you."

Clenching her jaw, Xaria fought for patience. "I have no further information for you. I have your card, from both of you. On the off chance I recall anything else, I'll call. However, what I will *not* do is waste anymore of my time."

Number One stepped closer. "We can force your cooperation."

She bristled and stepped up flush to the man. "Fuck you," Xaria seethed. "Be my guest. Draw up charges on the woman who was almost raped and murdered by those bastards because she can't remember anymore than she's already told you." She took a deep breath. "*I dare you.*"

"Come on, Jötunn. Let it go. Come on."

Ben's hands landed on her shoulders, gently tugging her back. Reluctantly she allowed it. Together they walked in silence to his car. Xaria was still livid when Ben parked at her building. She relaxed only slightly when he lifted the gate on the elevator and they strode to the door of her loft.

## Sixteen

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"Make yourself at home, Ben. You can use the bathroom first."

He hoisted his bag and went to change. Xaria closed her eyes and ground her back teeth. She was so pissed at those two men. *How dare they? How fuckin' dare they?!*

Instinctively, her thumb sought the rings on her finger. Aidrian had slipped them in her luggage and she'd found them when she'd gotten home. Inside the small case had been three stackable rings made out of sterling silver inlaid with Connemara Marble. They were smoothly polished; and, honestly, every time she touched them, her mind drifted back to Aidrian and the time they'd spent together. The rings made her feel closer to him despite the distance separating them.

She took a few more deep breaths and walked to the shelf near the door that held her photos. Xaria skimmed over them until she saw the individual one of her mother. Ramla Tameri Badawi Hummel.

*You were so beautiful, Mom.* In this photo, her mother had short black hair that was worn close to her scalp, the length about a quarter of an inch long. Xaria could remember it well when it had been long and luxurious, cascading down her back. She had big, brown eyes framed by long curved jet black lashes and smile that was always welcoming. Her dark-brown skin had possessed nary a flaw in it. Her mom had donated all of her hair after she'd been diagnosed with cancer.

"No point in keeping it just so it will fall out, Xar. I may as well donate it to someone who needs it," her mom had said in her gentle tone.

"Even without your hair, Mama, you were the most beautiful woman in the world," Xaria said, touching the silver frame. "I miss you."

Her gaze drifted to the one of the whole family, taken when she was just a baby. Her father was so handsome in his suit and her mother took her breath away. She'd worn her thick hair coiled about her head in a combination of braids and knots. Endless elegance flowed off her mother, even from the picture.

"It's all yours," Ben's voice broke into her wandering thoughts.

"Awesome," she said wiping her eyes to erase all traces of tears before turning.

Xaria stood under the powerful spray of her shower and washed away the grimy feel she'd gotten from being in the police station. She didn't stay long; yet when she toweled off, Xaria felt so much better. Dressing in lounging clothes, she padded back out, her wool socks making no noise as she moved. A smile crossed her features as she saw Kohia whipping up something in the kitchen while she chatted with Ben.

"Well, I see you two have met," Xaria said, sliding onto a stool and eating some fresh cut fruit off the plate before her.

"Ben was just filling me in on what things were like at Station McMurdo."

Ben grinned. "You never told me your friend was this charming."

Xaria rolled her eyes and Kohia batted hers playfully. Reaching for a chunk of kiwi, Xaria popped it in her mouth and slipped off the stool to help Kohia with the cooking. Before long the three of them were sitting down to a meal. Most of the conversation was Kohia asking Ben a lot of questions. Xaria didn't mind at all. It was very cute to watch this side of Ben.

*He's not used to talking this much.*

Soon, she was cleaning up and laughing right along with Kohia and Ben as they talked about days past. Xaria was still laughing when the lift sounded and a voice yelled outside her door. "Hey, Xaria. Got a package for you." Wiping her hands off on a towel, Xaria opened the door and came face to face with Kohia's brother, Tane. "Hi, stranger," he said, leaning around the large box in his arms to place a kiss on her cheek.

"Tane. Come on in. We just finished eating but it'd be no problem to fix you a plate."

"Sounds excellent to me. Let me go set this down."

"Hey, big bro!" Kohia hollered from the counter where she stood wiping down the smooth surface.

Kohia fixed a plate for her only brother while Xaria made introductions between Ben and Tane. The men chatted easily and so Xaria turned her attention to the large box Tane had placed on her couch. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the return address.

Ireland.

"Here." Kohia handed her some scissors, then gave the plate of food to her brother.

"Thanks." Xaria cut the tape with care and opened the box to find brown paper over whatever it contained. On the top sat a small white envelope with two words written upon it in an elegant script.

### *To Xaria*

Lifting it, Xaria opened the envelope and found a card with the same handwriting on it. With a deep breath she read the note.

*Just wanted you to have a small bit o' Ireland  
with you.*

*No matter where you lay your head at night.  
Thanks for the visit. Come back anytime.*

*~ Duane & Simone O'Shea*

Xaria smiled before placing the card down. She tugged the paper off and gasped. Staring at her was a pair of bookends. They were created out of wood, beautifully handcrafted, and painted in the shape of harps.

*Oh, Duane.* Xaria hesitated a bit before touching them. *These are amazing.*

"Those are gorgeous," Kohia said from beside her. "The new in-laws?"

*If only it were so.* "They are beautiful and no, not from my in-laws. Last I checked, one needed to be married to accomplish the in-law hurdle."

"If you say so," Kohia's sarcastic reply fell.

"Hesh you. Put these on the counter."

Kohia had a shit-eating grin on her face when she did as requested. Shaking her head, Xaria looked back in the box at the wrapped item that had been under the bookends. She reached in and pulled it out

before removing the covering. Even prior to the wrapping falling to the floor, Xaria knew what it was. That knowledge didn't stop the sharp intake of breath from slipping out.

Simone O'Shea had sent a quilt.

Within moments it was spread out over the couch so everyone there could get a look at it.

"Oh, my God," Xaria said in awe as she stared at the masterpiece before her. It was absolutely incredible.

The background was a warm cream color with faint designs in the pattern. In the center there were four diamonds with appliqué in them. They were a gold harp, a Claddagh, a Celtic cross, and shamrock. Those four touched a large diamond in the middle. There was a pristine white backdrop upon which dark-green embroidered words displayed a saying.

*Go n-éirí an bóthar leat  
Go raibh an ghaoth go brách ag do chúil  
Go lonraí an ghrian go te ar d'aghaidh  
Go dtite an bháisteach go mín ar do pháirceanna  
Agus go mbuailimid le chéile arís,  
Go gcoinní Dia i mbos A láimhe thú.*

*May the road rise to meet you  
May the wind be always at your back  
May the sun shine warm upon your face,  
The rains fall soft upon your fields  
And until we meet again  
May God hold you in the hollow of His hand.*

The entire quilt was edged by Celtic knots in gold and blood-red thread.

"I'll be her daughter-in-law," Kohia said in awe as she touched the quilt. "This is breathtaking."

Xaria didn't know what to say. Tears pricked her eyes and she tried to keep them contained. The men, bless their hearts, didn't say a word about it. Kohia squeezed her forearm and smiled kindly at her.

"I'm going to put this on my bed," Xaria announced when she found the words. "Oh, and Kohia, I *fully* expect it to still be here when I get back."

"I can take that to mean you're coming with me, then?" Ben asked.

"Yeah, Ben. Count me in." Xaria carried the quilt and spread it on her bed. "You will take care of this place, right?" she asked Kohia who had walked with her.

"Of course. You know me." Kohia tugged gently on a corner of the quilt. "When you get back, we'll have to talk about Ben and his stats."

Xaria gave her friend a thumbs-up as she moved to her closet and grabbed her bag, pre-packed with her gear. A wistful smile crossed her face as she remembered Aidrian also had one ready since he never knew when he could or would be called upon.

*Speaking of, I should call him.* For a brief moment, Xaria stared at her phone. But she would want privacy when she talked to him and that wasn't going to happen this time.

She did take time to pen a thank you to Aidrian's parents and put it in the slot on the box outside their building as they left for the airport. With a hug for both Tane and Kohia, Xaria climbed into the bush plane and slipped on her headphones while Ben started the engine. Xaria waved through the small window at the siblings. The entire flight she and Ben chatted easily.

Upon her arrival at McMurdo, Xaria stored her stuff and met the two she'd been asked to escort. The two men were in good physical shape and had ready smiles for everyone.

"Xaria," Ben said, "meet Jet Carson and Doug Mueller. Guys, this is your escort, Jötunn."

"Nice to meet you both," Xaria said, offering her hand to Jet first, then Doug.

"Likewise," Jet returned. His blue eyes sparkled with humor.

"Thanks for indulging us," Doug said as he released her hand. His eyes were a deeper shade of blue. Both men were attractive with their dark hair and model-perfect grins.

"Why don't we grab some food and decide where to go on these day trips," Xaria suggested.

"I like the way you think," Doug answered with another smile. "Now, what are we to call you? Xaria? Ms. Hummel? Jötunn?"

"Xar or Jötunn is fine," she responded lightly as they entered the eating area.

They spent the remainder of the day making plans; and since they would be heading out bright and early, Xaria retreated to her quarters sooner than usual. She sighed as she burrowed beneath the blankets on her bed.

Excitement raced through her. She loved her life. Aidrian's image flashed before her. His obsidian gaze, dark-chocolate skin, muscular body, and eyes that made her shiver. Biting back a groan, Xaria shifted as fire began to spread through her veins. Her nipples hardened and a spike of longing shot through her pussy.

Nibbling her lower lip, Xaria finally gave into her body and slid her hand down over the trimmed hair of her pussy, slipping one finger between the lips and touching her swollen clit. That simple contact jolted her and she couldn't stop the whimper that escaped. Closing her eyes, Xaria lost herself to a mental image of Aidrian O'Shea as she brought relief to her body.

The next morning she met the men with a smile on her face. This was her time. She looked at Ben and waved before she started the snowmobile and led Jet and Doug off for a day of exploring. As they wandered around some of the nearby ice caves, her mind drifted back to when she and Aidrian had spent time in one. This one although beautiful in its own right, paled in comparison to the other one for her.

Jet and Doug were blown away and taking plenty of photos as they walked throughout the cave. Snatches of their conversation reached her as she remained in the background, letting them investigate basically on their own. Xaria hadn't quite figured them out yet. An enigma. They were extremely quiet about their personal lives and she had no clue how they were able to fund a trip such as this. But, truth be told, she didn't care. They were a bunch of fun.

"We should be getting back," she announced, her voice bouncing off the smooth walls.

"Right," Jet responded.

They climbed on their snowmobiles and started them. Xaria noticed a storm brewing off in the distance and knew it would be close for them to make it back without being caught in it.

"Let's get going," she said over the motors.

The men followed in her tracks as she sped across the frozen landscape. Luckily they beat the storm, and Xaria stood with Ben as the men ate dinner with two of the others who worked at the station.

"How'd it go?" Ben asked.

"Not bad. They are a lot of fun. We went to an ice cave today. With the way the weather's been, I'm leery about walking out with them."

Ben stared at her. "Trust your gut, Jötunn. You're the best at what you do." He crossed his arms. "What about the dogs?"

Immediately, she shook her head. "I don't want to give a crash course in dog sledding. And it's not fair to the dogs to pull both of them. We'll keep using the snowmobiles or walk."

He shrugged. "Okay. I could go out with you one day; we could each have a sled and a team. That way only one man per sled."

Xaria looked at him. "You'd do that?"

"Of course. I got you into this. Besides, it's been a while since I've gone out on the ice with you."

"Great. I'm sure they'd love it. There is something amazing about being out on the ice with a team of dogs as well. Maybe the day after tomorrow."

"Just let me know. Let's grab some chow. I hear there's a poker game tonight and I don't want to miss this."

Xaria laughed. "You and your poker games."

"Hey. I have to have some fun around here."

"I'm surprised there's anyone left here who will play with you."

"Jet and Doug are up for a game." He grinned evilly, which set her off on another round of laughter.

"You are so bad. Figures that's how you would do it."

Ben winked at her and put his hand at the small of her back, guiding her toward the kitchen for some food. Shaking her head, she allowed herself to be propelled.

Later that evening, Xaria watched halfheartedly as the poker game ensued. She was writing a letter to her father for his birthday. When her lids wanted to cocoon her in a world of darkness, she cried off for the night and headed to bed. As happened with the previous night, her hand slipped between her thighs and brought her release as she envisioned Aidrian's dark face before her.

The next day, the trio headed off in another direction, once again upon snowmobiles. Doug and Jet took more pictures and seemed to have another great day. Again, the men played poker that night and again sleep eluded Xaria until she gave in and brought herself pleasure by imagining it was Aidrian's touch upon her body.

In the morning, she and Ben had finished hooking up the dogs when Jet and Doug showed up. Jet climbed on her sled while Doug got aboard Ben's. After ensuring Jet was in and secure, Xaria picked up the hook, released the brake, and hollered, "Come on, Raiden, get on up. Let's go. Hike! Hike!"

Raiden lunged forward and Xaria grinned behind her face mask, the rest of the team following. Beside her, Ben and his sled moved as well. When they got farther out, Ben dropped back behind and Xaria used the brake to slow Raiden down. The humans explored and ate, allowing the dogs to rest. Xaria sat beside Ben while Doug and Jet conversed with him. She kept an eye on the sky and on Raiden. He was her favorite dog and he was also great for sensing trouble, such as thin ice and even crevices.

"Let's go," she announced, standing and going to the sled.

A strong wind whipped around them and Doug's shout snapped toward her. Her throat tightened as she saw not just Doug but also Jet and Ben running out on untested area. Ben was surpassing Jet.

"Stop!" she hollered.

Before her shout faded from the air, a loud scream pierced it and Doug disappeared from view. Ben slid to a halt and grabbed Jet, stopping him as well when he would have continued past. Grabbing her pack, Xaria ran toward them. Ben was cussing and Jet had this horrific look on his face. Xaria slid to a halt beside the men and stared down into the crevice. A thin trickle of blood began to gather by his head. Doug lay unmoving upon his back, limbs sprawled.

"Damn it!" she swore as she strapped on her harness and attached her crampons. "What the fuck was so important he and you had to go off the marked path?!"

Jet stuttered, "He...he...was chasing his glove. Oh, my God, he's not moving!"

Xaria ignored his blabbering, focusing instead on securing in an ice screw and attaching her rope to the karabiner. With a roll of her shoulders, she made sure the pack rested comfortably then tossed the end to Ben. Once he was set, she returned to the edge and looked down.

"Ready, Ben?"

"I've got you, Jötunn. I'm on the rope."

"Going down." Xaria moved carefully but as fast as she could to get to the prone body of Doug Mueller. One level above the ice he was spread out on, Xaria hesitated. Carefully she stepped on it, not wanting to risk a break.

"You okay, Jötunn?" Ben's voice dropped to her.

"So far, so good. I'm about to check him over." Xaria knelt beside him and removed her glove to check for a pulse. *Thank the Lord.* "I've got a pulse," she hollered up. "Send me the board."

Before long a wooden back board was being lowered down. She knew it wasn't common to have, but Xaria had one on each sled she used. Just in case. Carefully, she rolled him on it.

Ben's deep voice reached her. "We've got a system coming in, Jötunn."

She muttered expletives under her breath and began to shrug out of her harness. Carefully, she put it on the unconscious man and triple checked it before yelling up. "He's secured, Ben. Still unconscious, but nothing more I can do for him here. Bring him up nice and slow. Both ropes at the same time; he's in my harness as well."

"Here we go."

Xaria tensed when the ropes grew taut. She helped steady Doug as he was pulled into a vertical position. There were a few jerks before it smoothed out and he slid up the side. When the board was totally off the ice she stood on, she heard a low, near guttural-popping sound.

*Shit!*

She froze as Doug was moved up. Xaria alternated between watching his progress and quickly anchoring another screw into the wall of ice. With some leftover rope, she tied herself to it. Seconds before she could wedge her feet in the wall, the ice beneath her gave way.

A scream ripped from her throat as she plummeted down among the falling chunks of ice. Throwing up an arm to ward off a large piece, Xaria ground her teeth as fire erupted from her elbow and spiraled out. With a strong jerk, her body convulsed painfully as the rope she'd fastened herself to reached the end. Closing her eyes against the tears that were rapidly gathering, Xaria fought to remain awake and not succumb to the blissful darkness of a pain-free unconsciousness.

Through the fog enveloping her, Xaria could barely make out Ben's voice. *He sounds so far away.* Hanging how she was, Xaria could feel the trickle of a warm stickiness on her head, running up toward her scalp from her temple. Moments after her dangling body stopped spinning, another crack rent the air and in what seemed like slow motion, Xaria watched as Ben's hazy face faded while her body fell further into the bowels of the crevice.

Then there was nothing.

## Seventeen

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Agony unlike anything she'd ever experienced flowed like fire through her body.

"Ahhhhh!" she screamed, unable to keep it contained. Fighting for breath Xaria asked, "Hello?" There was no answer. Nor was there one the next three times she hollered.

With a groan, Xaria tried to get up. Blinding, white-hot pain flashed and she fell back, boneless. She had no idea how much time had passed and she couldn't move her left arm at all.

*It has to be broken.* With a deep breath, Xaria tried again, totally favoring that arm. It wasn't graceful, but she got to a sitting position. Tears streamed down her cheeks when she finally managed to struggle out of the pack she wore. Her movements were jerky as she opened the pack and reached for her headlamp, praying it wasn't broken. Despair rose up within her as the faint light flooded the area and she glanced at her arm. There was a peak pointing up from inside her parka.

Xaria knew what that meant. *I have a compound break.*

Turning her gaze upward, she noticed how narrow the crevice was. For a brief second, she let her thoughts drift to Ben. Then she shoved them away, knowing full well his job first and foremost was to get Jet and Doug back to McMurdo. Knowing Ben, he'd also radioed ahead; so, God willing, there would be help here soon.

*What about the system he said was moving in?*

A round of snaps set her heart racing again. *I have to get going.* With careful motion, Xaria got to her feet and leaned against the wall at her back. She awkwardly put the headlamp on and pulled her hood back up. Her head spun and pain raced through every cell of her body. Pulling out an energy bar, Xaria forced herself to eat it, know she was going to need what it could give her. Then she turned her attention to the arm. Tears had returned by the time she shrugged from the coat.

"My fuckin' shoulder must be dislocated." The prospect of slamming it back into place held very little appeal for her. "Suck it up, Jötunn, we're running outta options, here."

Gritting her teeth, Xaria slammed her shoulder into the unforgiving wall of ice. Stars erupted before her eyes and she fought down

the wave of nausea crashing around her. Xaria couldn't even summon the energy to wipe away the sweat she could feel moving down the side of her face.

Tipping her head down, she sighed thankfully her crampons had survived the fall with her. She longed to splint her arm, but there wasn't anything around with which she could do that. Besides, broken or not, she needed to use it to help her escape. The cold helped numb the pain a bit and it would slow down blood flow.

Looking up, Xaria focused on the small shaft of light that was her ticket to freedom. *This is going to hurt a hell of a lot.* Returning the pack to her back, Xaria tightened her left hand around an ice tool, grimacing from the excruciating throb.

*Deep breaths, Jötunn. Nice and even. Focus.* Her father's words came back to her from the first crevice she'd fallen into. Closing her eyes, Xaria took a deep breath, grabbed her other ice tool off her belt with her right hand, and felt the familiar feel of its weight sink into her. With a snap she opened her eyes and dug the tool into the ice above her head. Her left foot rose and the sharp spikes from her crampons sank into the glassy surface.

"I can do this," Xaria told herself as she made her way up. Inch by torturous inch. Her right arm shook, for she was doing most of the pulling with it, and it was tiring. If the loop on the ice tool hadn't been secured to her wrists, Xaria knew she'd be back down in the inky blackness as her bruised and broken body had slipped few times.

She hadn't any clue of how much time had passed when she cried out. *I can't go anymore.* Xaria looked up to see lights shining down on her. She heard the voices and tried to answer them as two bodies repelled down quickly toward her precarious position. With her last remaining strength, Xaria held onto the handle of the ice tool with her right hand. Her left arm dangled beside her, useless. Tears fell from her eyes as the man she faced lowered his mask.

"Hang in there. We're getting you out of here."

She felt them place a board under her and secured her to the both of them. When they began rising, Xaria gave herself over to the oblivion which waited for her, content she was now safe.

\*\*\*\*

Hondo ran a hand over his head as he paced back and forth in the hospital room. He wanted to yell, holler, anything to get her to open

her eyes. The beeping machines seemed to mock him. Kohia called him and he'd been here for a few days and she'd always been sleeping. He needed to see her eyes.

"Xaria," he said softly, stopping beside her and reaching for her face. With just his fingertips, he traced along her cheekbone then her bottom lip. "Come on, *súl glas*, open your eyes."

The only responding sound came from the monitors attached to her. Aidrian looked over her lifeless form. Bandages on her head; arm in a cast from where it'd been broken. She had two fractured ribs and a sprained ankle too. Aidrian knew she was lucky to have survived at all. Fear swamped him all over again when that prospect flashed before him. Close on its heels was anger.

*How could she be so foolish?*

Aidrian stepped away from her when the nurse entered and checked on Xaria. The second she'd finished he reclaimed the spot beside her. With a kind smile, the nurse left the room. Drawing a chair beside the bed, Aidrian sat down only to push to his feet seconds later. The door swung inward and Xaria's best friend Kohia entered. Lines of worry and stress on her dark face smoothed away a bit when she saw him. Behind her followed a good-looking man.

"Hey, Aidrian," she said. "She not awake yet? This is my brother, Tane. He's going to help me get her things home for her, so all you have to do is bring her once she awakens."

Tane. *The man Xaria said gave her a piggyback ride...before me.*

"Nice to meet you," Tane said, stepping toward him and offering a hand.

Aidrian knew his smile was tight but he shook the hand. "Likewise. Thanks for helping get her things back to her place."

Tane smiled. Aidrian forced himself to not beat the man for touching Xaria with easy familiarity when he kissed her cheek and whisper something in her ear before finally stepping away. Kohia hesitated to leave; but after some prodding from her brother, she left, Xaria's things taking with her.

Alone again, Aidrian sat back down beside her. Stretching his legs out, he got comfortable—he had no intentions of leaving her. About fifteen minutes later, her amazing green eyes opened and greeted him.

"Hey there," she said softly.

He leaned forward and cupped her cheek. "Xaria, how do you feel?"

Something sparkled in the depths of her gaze. "That's it? No kiss or how much you missed me?"

Narrowing his eyes, Aidrian asked, "That's all you can say?"

"Shut up and kiss me, Aidrian O'Shea."

He did as she'd commanded. With care, Aidrian placed his lips over hers. They were soft beneath his touch and a wave of possessiveness swamped him. Aidrian broke the kiss with a low growl. His body raged against him, demanding release with none other than Xaria.

Sharp breaths raked him as he sat back, putting some space between them. Xaria opened her mouth only to shut it and reach for his hand instead. Aidrian bent his head and kissed the trio of rings he'd replaced on her hand. Her fingers tightened around his.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"You can go home today," he told her. "We've been waiting on you to wake up. Kohia and Tane have taken the flowers and cards to your loft."

Xaria sat up carefully and smiled. "Oh, good, I've missed home."

Aidrian nodded and squeezed her hand lightly. "I'll go get your doctor."

He stood and brushed a small kiss over her lips before walking out. Aidrian retrieved the doctor and forced himself to remain outside the room until the physician departed. While he waited, he tried to calm himself down. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to work.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her lying there with blood running from her fresh cuts. The warrior in him longed to rage and destroy but he couldn't. Shoving his anger back, a very composed Aidrian walked back into the room. Xaria had slid into a large dress shirt.

"Where'd you go?" she asked as she awkwardly attempted to button it.

Aidrian closed the door behind him and stood before her. Brushing her hands away, he quickly had the soft lilac shirt buttoned. "There you go," he murmured and crouched to slide her feet into the black and white checkered canvas slip-ons.

"Thanks," she said, touching the side of his face.

Aidrian glanced into her eyes and was lost all over again. "My pleasure, *súl glas*."

Getting to his feet, Aidrian held out his hand. She took it with her good one and got off the bed. They walked to the door hand in

hand, Aidrian stopping to grab her bag and hold the wheelchair for her to settle into. Outside the hospital a taxi waited for them and Aidrian held the door for her before climbing in himself. Xaria was silent, uncharacteristically so, for the ride. There wasn't even a slight complaint from her when he paid the fare. Standing behind her, Aidrian stared at her building. *Looks like a warehouse.* He followed her in and to the lift. Taking her keys from her, Aidrian unlocked her door but stood back and allowed her to enter first.

"No point in standing on formality. Come on in," Xaria said as she passed him.

He did and scanned her place. It was huge and spacious. Large windows allowed maximum sunlight. Wood floors spanned the entire place and he could see there were some partitions up. Looking beside him, he saw the photos sitting there. Aidrian picked up one of her mother and could see where Xaria got her beauty. Her mother was absolutely stunning.

"What are you doing by the door?" Xaria questioned.

"Admiring the pictures."

She moved to stand beside him, her head on his arm. "That's my mama. Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yes." Aidrian replaced the photo. "I can see a lot of her in you."

Xaria sighed. "Some days I think I can; others, I can't." She cleared her throat. "Are you hungry? Kohia left some food."

"Show me your place," he said, brushing his lips along her temple.

"Not much to it. The bed's over there behind the black opaque blocks and behind the white ones is the bathroom and shower."

Aidrian took a step and stopped when she touched his arm. "Yes, *súl glas*?"

"What's wrong?"

*What's wrong? I almost lost you, that's what!* Aidrian smiled. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem different. Distant even." A frown flashed across her face. "Something happen to one of your Team?"

*Damn, she's intuitive.* "No. They're all fine."

A furrow appeared between her eyes. "Then what? What is it?"

*Tell her!* Aidrian ignored his brain and smiled. "There's nothing. Everything's fine."

Xaria looked skeptical but she didn't push the issue, for which he was grateful. Instead, she nudged him toward the living room area.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'm going to heat up some food. Hospital chow is hardly filling."

"Okay."

Aidrian wandered throughout her place. A smile appeared when he spied the harp bookends. Aidrian could spot his father's work anywhere. When he saw the quilt covering her bed, Aidrian knew Xaria hadn't just touched his heart.

"There you are," Xaria spoke behind him.

"Nice quilt."

Her arm slid around him and Aidrian had to count to ten and remind himself she wasn't up to what he craved to do to her.

"I can't believe she sent it to me. It's so beautiful." Her voice filled with enthusiasm. "And your father sent me some bookends."

"I saw them. I know they'll both be so happy you're using their gifts."

Aidrian swallowed and led her away from the bed he longed to lower her upon. During supper, the looks she sent him grew hotter and hotter until his shaft was granite-like in his pants. He knew she was doing it on purpose. Aidrian did all he could not to give in, a decision that was sorely tested at bedtime.

"Why are you wearing boxers?" Xaria asked, stepping flush to against and stroking his erection through the cotton.

*Shit. A suit of armor may not be enough.*

"Don't, *súl glas*. I'm already at the end of a rapidly fraying rope."

"Don't you want me, Aidrian?" Her fingers tightened around him.

His hips bucked into her touch. "Does it feel like I don't?" he asked on a harsh whisper.

"Then why the boxers?"

"You just got out of the hospital, Xaria. I'm not going to send you back because I'm horny as shit."

"Sleep with me naked, Aidrian." She tugged on the waistband of his sole item of clothing and the only barrier between them.

"Xaria..." he groaned.

"Please. I'll be good. Promise. I want flesh against flesh."

*I can't promise I will be.* With a defeated groan, Aidrian removed them. His cock jutted out proudly from his pelvis. It jerked when Xaria's powerful green gaze settled upon it. The tip of her tongue snuck out to dampen her full lips.

She found his stare and said, "Come to bed, Aidrian."

He didn't move until she'd climbed under the blankets. Aidrian shut off the light and joined her. She curled against him, draping a leg over his. The tips of her fingers from the cast teased the sensitive skin of his hip. Against his thigh, he could feel the dampness on the soft curls of her pussy hair.

*How am I going to make it through the night?*

"Nite, Aidrian," she mumbled as her fingers touched his cock ever so lightly.

*"Good night, súl glas."*

\*\*\*\*

*Damn him and his restraint.*

Xaria shifted against the seat, tightening her legs. She was beyond horny and Aidrian seemed content to ignore each and every one of her advances. Her pussy throbbed and she longed to feel his thick shaft sliding into her. Filling her. Stretching her. She bit back a moan and swallowed hard.

He lifted his head from where he stood loading her dishwasher. Xaria swallowed again as his black eyes, full of hunger, moved over her. Holding the stare, Xaria did nothing to hide her own desire for him. She craved him and he was treating her like she would break if he so much as held her tightly.

"Can I get you something while I'm in here?" he questioned, turning away from her gaze.

Xaria got to her feet and went to him. "You."

Aidrian's body stiffened before he faced her again. "Be serious, Xaria."

She rolled her eyes. "I am. I want you." Pressing against his chiseled body, Xaria dragged her fingers up his chest, delighting in the shivers that racked him. "I want you. I want your cock deep inside me. So deep, I don't know where I end and you begin."

His nostrils flared and she could see his resistance fading fast. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard a few times. Aidrian's black eyes burned with feral heat.

"Xaria—"

"Save it, Aidrian," she interrupted. "I won't break. You'll just have to be gentle, although that's not what I want; I'll take what I can get." Looking up at him, she skimmed his lower lip with her fingertips.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Please." Xaria could hear the begging tone of her voice and she didn't give a damn. If getting him took dropping to her knees and pleading, she would. Bottom line, she wanted this man. Now!

He sucked the finger on his lip into his mouth and Xaria knew he'd caved in. Aidrian swirled his tongue around the digit before releasing it. He stared at her, the passion on his face so strong she could almost taste it. With care, Aidrian scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

*Yes! Her body cried in pleasure. Finally.*

Aidrian placed her upon the mattress with the same tenderness he'd used to lift her. Xaria stared at him. *I believe I'm in love with this man.* He sat beside her and kissed her.

Xaria groaned beneath his masterful kiss. His tongue slipped between welcome lips to stroke along hers. Shivers moved along her skin. With amazing thoroughness, he explored the depths of her mouth. She whimpered when Aidrian backed away, leaving their lips barely touching.

"No moving, *súl glas*. I don't want you to hurt your ribs anymore."

*No moving? "Aidrian?"*

"No. You stay as still as you can."

"Okay." She'd promise anything so long as he touched her.

He kissed her again and covered a breast with his hand. Xaria swore the heat from his palm seared her through the rough shirt and bra. Her eyes closed and her fingers gripped the blanket as she forced herself not to move. Aidrian shifted and Xaria opened her eyes to watch him unbutton her shirt. Her breath caught when with one hand he unhooked the front latch on her bra, exposing her breasts to him.

"No moving," he reminded her seconds before his mouth settled over one bared breast.

"*Ohhh,*" she moaned in pleasure. Her pussy clenched and began to cream while her belly quivered with want.

Aidrian made love to one breast before laving a path to the other one and repeating the process all over again. Her nipples were painfully tight and his touch tormented her. He grazed the tips with his teeth and swirled his tongue around them to soothe the sting away. While he feasted on one breast, she felt him tug down her pants. The elastic band allowed him to remove them easily. And although she longed to complain when his mouth left her breasts, she didn't.

Aidrian was careful when he removed her panties as well, taking care not to jostle her bandaged ribs. Not that she gave a damn at that moment.

"Jesus," he said on a low guttural groan. "You're so fucking wet."

Xaria bit her lower lip as his finger slid through her damp curls and between her nether lips to sink into her wetness. Her body clenched down on his finger, desperate to keep him within her core.

"Aidrian," she gasped as she came around his digit. It had been so long.

He added a second finger and began stroking them within her. The nice, steady pace created a low burn inside her.

"Slow," he murmured.

"Please, Aidrian. I want you inside me. I *need* you."

Aidrian scissored his fingers and withdrew them. Xaria longed to squirm but she focused on his chest when he ripped off his shirt. She licked her lips. Pure chocolate. Desire grew stronger. Her breath caught when he removed his pants and stood naked before her, his cock rigid and proud. Xaria moaned when he slowly spread her legs and placed the head of thick erection at her entrance.

"Aidrian," she begged her body on fire for something only he could deliver.

"Slowly, *súl glas*," he insisted as he sank into her inch by inch. "Slowly."

Tendrils of pleasure spiraled out from her belly to her entire body. "*Ohhh*," she groaned. "*Oh, yesss*."

When he'd sunk fully into her, his black gaze sought hers. "Are you okay?"

Xaria could only nod. *I don't think any pain could take away what I'm feeling now.* Aidrian was barely putting any weight on her. His arms held him off of her torso; she could see their flexed power as he protected her as best he could.

"Watch me."

Her eyes drifted from his corded arms up to his face at his brogue-thickened command. Eyes boring into one another, Aidrian began to move, all the way back until just the head of his cock remained in her; then, he'd flex his hips and smoothly sink back into her.

In and out. Back and forth. Endless motions of pleasure.

Xaria watched him and his eyes pulled her in. They surrounded her like warm velvet and drifted across her skin like silk. He never

increased the pace, just continued to feed the burn. She'd never felt as cherished as she crested into bliss. Moments later, she felt Aidrian erupt deep within her. His mouth covered hers and he kissed her while the aftershocks of their encounter shuddered through her.

Xaria longed to tug him onto her but he backed up, leaving her body and stretching out beside her. Aidrian gathered her figure to his. Exhaustion settled over her. The release he'd brought her was what she'd needed. Xaria kissed his jaw and shut her eyes. She could feel his erection pressing against her and realized he *had* truly held back as to not further injure her.

As sleep overtook her, the love she felt for him grew even deeper.

# Eighteen

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Aidrian stared at Xaria while she slept. The setting sun highlighted the golden-caramel hue of her smooth skin. His gaze narrowed as it landed on the cast over her left arm and the white bandages around her middle from her fractured ribs. The scars had almost totally faded but his fear of her job hadn't even begun to disappear.

Yanking on a shirt, Aidrian walked away from her sleeping body. He left a note for her on the table then tied on his shoes. Grabbing his mp3 player, Aidrian took the lift down where he stretched out and began to run. The music and repetitive motion of running helped him calm down.

Somewhat.

Aidrian was torn. As a man used to being fully in control of almost every aspect of his life, he wasn't sure how to handle Xaria. There were lots of ways to do it, but Aidrian wanted a "perfect" solution.

*I'm in love with her.* That realization almost made him trip over his own feet. Regaining his stride, Aidrian continued on. *Issue one: living arrangements. Issue two: her job. Issue three: does she even feel the same? Or am I something that will do until something better comes along?*

Arrogant reasoning swiftly overshadowed logical thoughts. He liked being calm and methodical, but Xaria had a way of tossing that all out the window. Aidrian turned to head back and pushed Xaria out of his mind, focusing instead on the music and burn in his muscles.

He cooled down outside her building and was very ready for a cold drink by the time he raised the lift gate and exited the elevator car. Voices reached him as he pushed her door open. White-hot rage coursed through him when he saw her sitting so cozily with Ben Gates on the sofa. They were holding hands and laughing with one another.

Silent, Aidrian walked past them and headed straight for the shower. Xaria called out to him but he ignored her, knowing full well if he said anything it wouldn't be pleasant. By the time he'd emerged from the shower, she stood there with a glower on her face. Arching a brow at her, Aidrian reached for a towel and wrapped it around his midsection.

"What's your problem?" she questioned.

"What do you mean? I ran and then showered. Like I always do."

"Without saying hi to Ben?"

"Didn't look like you needed me to interrupt your cozy little interlude," he bit off. Brushing past her to grab a shirt from his bag, Aidrian tugged it on over his still wet body.

"'Cozy little interlude'? What the hell are you going on about?"

Whipping off his towel, Aidrian barely noticed the appreciative gleam in her eyes as they moved over his lower half. He dressed quickly. "What would you call it?" he asked, returning to the bathroom to hang up the towel.

"A friend who stopped by to check on me."

"Really? I don't sit holding the hands of girls I check on." He spun around and saw her glaring at him.

"Do you even have girls that are friends?" her snide question fell.

"Nope. I'm a cold, heartless bastard," he tossed back. "Thanks for reminding me."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Aidrian." She reached for him and he stiffened beneath her touch. Aidrian knew she noticed but she didn't let go or back off. "He is just concerned about me. Wanting to make sure I'm recovering fine."

Aidrian removed her hand and strode past her. *Stay calm. Stay relaxed*, his mind said. He battled the demon of jealousy and anger. Just when he believed he'd gotten the upper hand on that, Xaria spoke again.

"It's not that he doesn't think you're taking the best care of me. It's just that...well...he was there helping to rescue me and saw how bad off I was."

Just like that he lost the battle. Vanished like a puff of smoke. "I know. I know. I know! Damn it, I know that, Xaria. Not a fucking day goes by that I don't know that fact, or that I feel like I failed you for not being there when you needed me. Do you know what it does to me to see you with the man who was?"

Her green eyes got larger as she stared at him. "You're jealous of Ben."

"Yes!" he shouted. "I hate how he makes you smile and not to mention he's the reason you got hurt to begin with!"

She held up her cast-free arm. "Don't go there." Her tone was laced with warning.

Aidrian didn't care. "Why not? If we skirt the issue then we can ignore the fact you almost died? Is that how it works?"

Something close to defiance flashed in the depths of her ice-green gaze. "I'm not skirting the issue. I know exactly what happened. I did my job and saved a life."

"At the risk of your own."

Xaria opened her mouth when a knock came to the door. She clamped it shut and brushed past him. He turned and watched her angry strides carry her to the door. When she opened it, he couldn't stop the growl of anger from escaping as Vlasi's blond head became visible. Aidrian saw red when Vlasi folded Xaria into his embrace.

He was by her bed when she came back to his side. "What are you still doing back here? Vlasi stopped by."

"I see that," he forced from clenched teeth. "We need to talk about this, Xaria."

Exasperation filled her expression. "There's *nothing* to discuss. This is my life. Not to mention I have company."

Aidrian swallowed back his retort and stared at her while he found a thread of control. "You're right. You do have a visitor. And it's *your* life."

Uncertainty flared in her gaze before she clenched her jaw, showing the hurt in her eyes back. "Glad you understand. We're going to pick up some dinner and will be back shortly."

Aidrian held himself immobile while she touched his cheek. Pain unlike any he'd ever known flowed through him. He stayed there until he heard the door shut on their voices. Turning slowly, Aidrian stared around before he moved to his bag, lifting it and placing it on her bed. He was packed in seconds and riding down to the ground floor in a matter of moments.

Stoic of face to hide the breaking of his heart, Aidrian waited for the taxi. He hesitated slightly before climbing in.

*Xaria was very clear about it being her life. I won't beg her to give up what she loves for me. I can't. No matter how much I want her to.*

"Where to?" the driver asked.

One last glance at her building and Aidrian said, "Airport."

As the taxi pulled away, Aidrian refused to look back knowing he'd already left part of his heart there.

Xaria's heart sank the second Vlasi closed the door to her apartment behind them. *He's gone.* She wasn't sure how she knew it but she did. *Aidrian!*

If Vlasi noticed her change in attitude, he made no mention of it. Despite her heavy heart at Aidrian's sudden departure, Xaria had a really good time with Vlasi. The sadness returned full bore once she was all alone. Aidrian hadn't even left a note. Nothing. Just left.

Lying down on her bed, Xaria curled up in the quilt and burrowed her face in the pillow that still smelled of Aidrian. She knew she'd been short with him but she hadn't like getting into an argument.

*Even less so once Vlasi stopped by. Still, why did you leave without a word, Aidrian O'Shea?*

Tears pricked her eyes and began streaming down her face while Xaria lay motionless. *What have I done?* Had she ruined any chance of being with him long term? Xaria knew he'd wanted to say more when she'd uttered, "This is my life." It was as if a door had slammed within him, locking away any feeling. His voice had fallen upon her cold and emotionless and without the accent she'd come to crave to hear.

*Stupid. Oh, my God, I'm so stupid!*

Xaria knew he was a very quiet and private man. Aidrian wasn't loud, didn't seek confrontations, and she respected that from him. Lots of men she knew seemed to be overly full of testosterone, inviting any kind of conflict to "showcase" their supposed prowess and how much of an "alpha" male they were. Aidrian didn't do any of that and he was more of an alpha than any of them.

*So why am I so angry he didn't try to fight for us?*

Even as her brain asked the question, she knew the answer. There had been someone else there. And Aidrian wasn't the sort to throw him out just so he could argue with her. And he respected her enough not to do so in front of a man she worked with on occasion.

"And I made my decision." Her chest hurt. "I left with my friend instead of talking it out with Aidrian." More tears flowed.

Xaria cried until exhaustion took over and carried her off to sleep. When she got up in the morning, her reflection told it all. She looked like hell. There were big bags under her haunted eyes.

Making some coffee, Xaria reached for her phone while it percolated. She dialed his number without thought or care to the time difference. All she knew was she needed to hear his voice. She stared at the wall when the phone began to ring. Each ring drove the stake of betray-

al further into her heart. After his recording played, she left her message.

"Aidrian. Hi, it's me, Xaria. I really want to talk to you. Please call me back, anytime, day or night. I'm not going anywhere right now." She paused before adding softly, "I miss you."

Xaria didn't leave her apartment the entire day. She jumped, heart accelerating, each time the shrill ring of her phone reverberated through the air. Aidrian never called back. When she climbed into bed that night, she felt devastated. The remainder of the week did little to improve her state of mind. Aidrian still hadn't returned her call and Xaria knew she was wallowing in self-pity.

It was early Sunday morning when the phone woke her up. Reaching for it, she grumbled, "Hello?"

"Ms. Hummel. I'm Ms. Jarvi and I'm calling on behalf of Dr. Lanchester."

Xaria woke up immediately at that statement and sat up in bed. "Yes. What can I do for you, Ms. Jarvi?"

"Dr. Lanchester would love to set up a meeting with you. He has some things he'd like to discuss with you."

Her heart pounded and her palms grew sweaty. Licking her lips, Xaria asked, "Discuss what?" she couldn't shake the memory of Aidrian saying that name had been mentioned with the mining fiasco.

"That I couldn't tell you. I'm just calling to set up the appointment. What day would work for you?"

"Where does he wish to meet?" Xaria got out of bed.

"Dr. Lanchester is giving speeches in Sydney this week and has told me to fit you in. I'll send a plane for you and a car will meet you at the hangar. And, of course, a return flight will be provided. So," the crisp professional tone said, "when this week is good for you?"

Thinking fast, Xaria said, "I'm meeting a friend in Sydney on Thursday. I could see Dr. Lanchester then before I meet my friend."

"Very good. I'll have a car at your loft at 0600 Thursday morning. Is that okay? You can meet your friend after and the plane will be at your disposal for your return."

"Umm...yeah...sure...very well. Thank you."

"Wonderful. Good day, Ms. Hummel." The call ended with nothing else said.

"Well, goodbye to you too," Xaria snipped to the quiet room. Hanging up the receiver in the base, she stretched. Xaria walked to her

closet and grabbed a shirt from the armoire, slipping it on over her head. Heading to the kitchen, she turned on the water for tea.

Dread settled around her shoulders as she placed the peppermint tea leaves in the tea infuser and set it in the mug. Without thought, she added two cubes of raw sugar in as well. When the whistle of the teapot pierced the air, Xaria poured the liquid into the mug and stirred it around, helping to seep the leaves and dissolve the cubes.

She sat on the stool and held her cordless in one hand. The aroma from the peppermint tea surrounded her. Worrying her lower lip, Xaria sighed and pressed a button for a preprogrammed phone number. As before, the machine picked up and Aidrian's voice flowed around her. She took a deep breath and sighed, trying to figure out the best way to tell him what words she needed to say.

"Aidrian, it's me, Xaria." She paused. "I really wish you were around to talk. I got a call today from Dr. Lanchester. He requested a meeting in Sydney. I meet with him on Thursday at his office; so if you have any advice on what I should or shouldn't say to him, I'd be appreciative." Another pause. "I hope you're doing well. Goodbye, Aidrian." She hung up softly and drank her tea.

The days passed and soon Thursday had arrived. Xaria made her way down to the waiting car Dr. Lanchester had sent for her. She waved to Kohia before she slid into the back of the chauffeured vehicle. Her belly was in knots as she walked to the waiting Leer Jet. She never relaxed even during the flight. Her ribs ached with the jarring of the landing so she disembarked with care.

A black town car with heavy-tinted windows waited for her. Shoving a hand through her hair, Xaria climbed in. The ride to Parkside Tower was totally silent. Another suited man held the door for her when the car came to a stop. As she stepped out, her gaze landed upon a tall statuesque blonde in a crisp white-and-black skirt suit with heels. In one ear, Xaria could see a Bluetooth. Vivid blue eyes stared at her.

"Ms. Hummel," she said with a distinct accent. "Thank you for coming; I'm Ms. Jarvi. Dr. Lanchester is waiting for you. I trust the flight went well."

Xaria nodded and followed the blonde Amazonian inside the tall glass building. As she followed Ms. Jarvi and the clack of her heels across the smooth marble floor, Xaria felt extremely underdressed. She wore casual smoke-colored cargo pants and a black shirt loose enough not to aggravate the wrapped ribs.

The building was moderately busy and there were others in the elevator with them. However, no one else was in the car when it stopped on the top floor. The doors slid open to reveal a large burgundy and gold room.

"This way." Ms. Jarvi strode off to the left, leaving Xaria to follow.

Xaria walked through the ornately decorated room to a surprisingly unadorned door. Without knocking, Ms. Jarvi pushed it open and led Xaria in. This room was huge and well lit by the sun's rays that streamed in through the large windows.

Dr. Lanchester stood from behind his desk upon their entrance and Xaria skimmed her gaze over the silver-gray with blue-accented power suit he wore so well. His salt-n-pepper hair was cut short in an attractive style. He looked similar to how she remembered him.

"Ms. Hummel," he said, walking around the large mahogany desk toward her. "It's great to see you again. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

*I'm surprised he even remembers me. And as far as the meeting goes, don't know if I really had any choice.*

Pasting a smile on her face, Xaria stuck out her hand. "Thank you for the plane and the car."

Dr. Neil Lanchester bent over her hand and kissed the back of it. Then he gestured to her casted arm. "My pleasure. Were you in an accident?"

"Yes. But I'm fine. What did you want to see me about, Dr. Lanchester?"

"Sit down, please." He led her to a comfortable-looking leather chair. "Can I get you anything? Water. Tea? Coffee? Espresso?"

"I'm fine, thank you." Xaria noticed Ms. Jarvi had left the room.

Dr. Lanchester settled himself back down behind his desk. He laced his fingers and stared at her. "I'll get to it, then. I heard you overheard my name being mentioned during some illegal mining thing." He arched a brow and stared at her, his expression skeptical.

It didn't help her feel any better. *What do I say to that?* Xaria felt way out of her league suddenly. "I didn't hear your name mentioned. Why do you ask? And how do you even know I was there?"

Blue eyes went cold and flat. "There's not much that goes on of which I'm not aware of. But if you really want to know, this is how." He pressed a button on his phone. "Send him in."

Xaria turned in the chair and frowned when a familiar face walked through the door. Unlike when she was with him last, there was no kind smile on his face for her. Instead, there was a fierce scowl. Tosya Lotrov.

"Tosya?" she questioned. "What are you doing here?"

"Jötunn," he said with a sneer. "I'd say it was a pleasure, but it's not." His words were sharp as a dagger's edge.

"I don't understand," she said ignoring the fear that had begun to bloom in her belly.

Tosya chuckled harshly. "Of course not. It's been under your nose the entire time. I don't work for the station; I work for Dr. Lanchester."

"You knew about the mining." She didn't want to believe that. An unapologetic grin filled his face. "My wife likes her lifestyle."

"That's how Dr. Lanchester knew I was there. You told him."

"Yes. Personally, I'd hoped you wouldn't make it when we heard of your accident. But you did," he continued with a shrug. "And now I get the pleasure of your body before I kill you."

"Don't even think about screaming. Ms. Jarvi won't help you."

*How stupid could I have been to come here?* Xaria refused to cower despite her fear.

"Excuse me, Dr. Lanchester. Ms. Hummel's friend is here," Ms. Jarvi's voice interrupted.

Xaria swallowed and waited, knowing full well she hadn't any plans to meet anyone.

"Send him in. We're just about done, anyway," Dr. Lanchester said.

Her brain scrambled as she tried to figure a way out of this. Nothing leapt to mind. How could she call for help?

Xaria turned toward the door when Tosya frowned and said, "I thought you were American."

Positioned in front of Ms. Jarvi stood her own knight in shining armor. He wore dark slacks and a white button-down shirt. His hands were in his pockets as he looked at her. Xaria couldn't help the desire that swamped her, he looked so damn good.

His strong voice filled the room. "Sorry to interrupt, but I thought I'd surprise Xaria here so she didn't have to come find me in the park."

Her heart sank when his black eyes moved almost dispassionately over her to settle upon the two men in the room. It didn't matter. Xaria immediately felt one hundred percent safer with him in the room. She didn't want the cops anymore. This was the man she wanted. The one she knew would protect her beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Aidrian O'Shea.

## Nineteen

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Aidrian had to look away from her. He *had* to. Aidrian knew he'd go ballistic on the two men in the room and kill them for daring to put that fear on to Xaria's beautiful face. Aidrian was proud of her for trying to keep it hidden, but he could tell. Her gaze had that same haunted look in it as had been present during the time he'd stashed her in the snow-cat. Aidrian recognized the man beside her, Toysa from Station Molodezhanya. He hadn't liked him then either but now he knew why.

*You slimy bastard.*

"And you are?" Dr. Lanchester asked.

"My name's not important." Aidrian stood next to Xaria, still not looking at her but craving to be near her. "I'm well acquainted with your work, though, Doctor."

"Really?"

"Really." Aidrian kept his hands in his pockets, trying to appear less threatening.

Dr. Lanchester leaned back in his chair. "I'd love to know what you *think* you know about me."

"I'm sure we'll have an opportunity to talk. But right now, if it's all the same to you, I'll wait for you to conclude your business with Xaria so we can be on our way." Aidrian's fingers itched to enclose the man's neck and squeeze until no air passed through again.

Blue eyes narrowed before a tense grin curved up one side of his mouth. "Very well. I would hate to keep you two from your appointment. Ms. Hummel, thank you for coming by. We'll continue this at another date."

Aidrian couldn't agree more. "Let's go," he said helping her to her feet.

"But—!"

"Later, Xaria," he ordered in a no nonsense tone. Her elbow firmly encased in his hand, Aidrian escorted her to the door. Behind him he could feel the two men watching his every move. He kept an eye on the personal assistant as well. Aidrian didn't relax until the elevator doors closed on the two of them.

"Aidrian, what —?"

He silenced her with a look and said, "We're clear." Aidrian dropped her arm as if it were alive with flames and stepped away. He could feel her gaze burning into him. Clenching his back teeth, Aidrian ignored her. Lord knew it was hard. He longed to gather her close and bury his nose into her hair. But he couldn't. He *wouldn't*.

When the elevator stopped, Aidrian had positioned himself before her, just in case. When his gaze landed upon Ghost and Jeb in the lobby, he reached behind him and drew Xaria up to his side. She walked easily and when she hesitated slightly, he applied more pressure and kept her moving. A vehicle waited for them. Silently, Aidrian held the door for her and followed her into the darkened interior. He nodded at the two uniformed men in the back. As soon as the door shut, the car was pulling away.

"Will someone tell me what is going on, please?" Xaria's voice tense with frustration broke the silence.

Both men glanced at him and Aidrian gave a barely discernable nod. He kept his stare out the windshield of the car as it headed toward the outskirts of Sydney.

"Captain Decker Abrams, ma'am. Australian Army."

"I'm Second Lieutenant Gage Malone, Royal Marines."

"Charmed," Xaria said, obviously exasperated.

Aidrian hid the smile. He knew his friends were extremely popular with the ladies, and Xaria ignoring their good looks made him ecstatic.

"I'm sorry for having to put you through this, Ms. Hummel," Decker said. "We're in the middle of apprehending Dr. Lanchester. When we'd received word about where he was going to be, we got the location in exchange for your safety."

He felt her hand on his arm and looked at her.

"Aidrian?" she questioned, her voice quiet and unsure.

The car stopped and Aidrian opened the door. The sound of an approaching chopper infiltrated the silence of the vehicle's interior. Licking his lips, Aidrian stared at Xaria through his mirrored shades. Suddenly, it didn't matter there were two other men in there with them. Aidrian cupped her cheek and skimmed her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb.

"I know this is your life, Xaria, but I'll protect you if I can." Without looking at the men he continued, "Keep her safe, guys."

"Consider it done," Gage replied.

Aidrian kissed her. His tongue slipped between her lips and barely touched hers before retreating. He didn't want it to end but Aidrian kept his desire in check and ensured the kiss was gentle. Ending it, her sigh filled him.

"Goodbye, *súl glas*," he murmured against her moist lips. Then he quickly got out of the car and jogged toward the waiting chopper without a single glance back.

His teammates had solemn expressions, but thankfully none of them said a word. The helicopter lifted off immediately and within moments he couldn't even see the car she sat in. He was one of the last to board the *Sovereign*, Maverick behind him. The pilot, USN retired Rear Admiral Rich Meckler, offered him a slight smile but Aidrian wasn't in the mood to be cheered up.

Maverick tried to talk to him but Aidrian hadn't any desire to engage him in conversation. He was quiet on the flight and completely threw himself into their mission, ever determined to get Xaria out of his mind. Back at their base, Aidrian saw his commanding officer waiting for him, his face solemn.

"Have a minute?" Harrier asked.

"Sure. Not going out in my skivvies." Opening his locker, Aidrian withdrew a green shirt and pulled it on over his head.

"You do know it won't get any easier, right?"

Tugging on some slate gray workout pants, Aidrian grabbed his shoes and sat on the bench to tie them on. "What's not?"

Harrier straddled the bench and faced him. "The ache will only get worse until you face it."

Aidrian looked up and found a pair of blue eyes focused directly upon him. Hooking his arm over one knee, he stared back. There was no lingering humor in Harrier's gaze, nothing that told him to figure it out and take care of it. Harrier was known for busting people's chops, and yet he wasn't this time. No gruffness, just honest belief in what he was saying.

"I know. I have to face it."

"Yes." Harrier got to his feet and smiled. "You know you can always talk to me. Teammate to teammate or," he paused and winked, "as soon to be in-laws."

"They're not engaged," he snarled. "Commanding officer or not, I will *kill* your brother if he hurts my sister."

Harrier sighed. "I know. I've warned him. He knows we all think of Affrica as our little sister."

Aidrian curled his lip in anger. "And yet...he still won't give up."

Harrier shrugged. "Do any of us?"

He sighed. Thinking of his sister and his CO's brother together wasn't a way to calm down. Not to mention it wasn't something that took precedence at the moment.

"Hang in there, Hondo. It will all work out. I believe that. You need to as well." Harrier strode off without another word.

It was raining when Aidrian left the building and walked to his Navigator. Instead of going home, he went to the beach and walked in the rain along the shore. He still couldn't get the Xaria's look of need and longing out of his mind.

Aidrian felt more than a little pensive by the time he made it home. He dropped his mail on the table and walked to the bathroom to grab a towel. Standing with it around his neck, he pressed the button on his answering machine. A smile crossed his face as his father's voice reached him, until at the end when Duane O'Shea switched from English to Gaeilge.

*"An áit a bhuil do chroí is ann a thabharfas do chosa thú."*

With that phrase circling about in his head, Aidrian moved to a small frame that held a picture of him and Xaria. It had been taken when they were in Ireland. They'd gone sightseeing and this one had the crags along Donegal Bay behind them as a backdrop. The wind blew through her long hair as she stood in his arms, a huge smile upon her face. Behind that image sat a shot of his whole Team. The people in each picture were so important to him.

Heart heavy, Aidrian turned from the photos and went to the kitchen for a beer.

\*\*\*\*

Xaria ruffled Raiden's head as she walked with him around Station McMurdo. The day was damn near perfect. A smile crossed her features as she stared across the pristine whiteness of her beloved Antarctica.

"Don't get much better than this, Raiden, old man. Not much better at all."

"Not any way to make it better, *súl glas?*"

Her heart lurched as a darkly sensual voice reached her. Turning, she gulped and took in the man before her wearing dark-blue pants and a yellow parka. A blue stocking cap sat upon his head.

"Aidrian," she breathed, unsure if she was seeing things. "What are you doing here?"

Even beneath the heavy coat he wore she could see the lazy ripple of motion that lifted a shoulder.

"I'm here for the trial."

Her heart, which had been so elated a moment ago, deflated like someone had slashed a hole in it. Composing herself, Xaria nodded. "Of course. Makes sense they'd want you around for it as well." She turned her back to him, determined not to ask why he was here instead off in a hotel waiting for tomorrow. "See you at the trial, then," Xaria said walking off.

She ignored the tears along with the powerful urge to run and jump into his arms. He wasn't there when she returned and chained up Raiden. Xaria went indoors and waved to Ben before heading to her room. Not long after, Xaria entered the dining area and her betraying heart reacted at the mere sight of Aidrian O'Shea. *Can a man become even more beautiful?*

Warring emotions rose up within her. Shaking, Xaria turned around and went back to her room where she curled upon her bed and prayed for guidance. Half of her craved for him to burst in the room, but she knew full well that wasn't his way. Ben came to get her for dinner and she sat across the table from Aidrian. He was full of smiles and easy conversation. *What's going on with him?*

"Coming to play cards, Xaria?" Aidrian asked after the meal was finished.

Meeting his gaze, the hurt returned when all Xaria saw in the depths of his black eyes was friendship. She wanted more. *I can handle this. I'll find a way.* "Sure. I'll be right there."

"Great." Aidrian's gaze burned hotter as he scanned up and down her body. But it vanished so fast, Xaria wasn't sure she hadn't imagined the entire thing.

The game barely kept her mind off the mouthwatering, panty-soakingly handsome black man at the table. Xaria wanted to yell and scream at him for treating her like one of the guys. She spoke often with innuendo, but he never bit, not even when she hinted at being in a relationship with someone. There was no flicker of interest in the slightest.

Xaria slept alone and frustrated that night. The next morning when they got in the plane, Aidrian was almost aloof to her. His responses were one-word answers; and if not for his indifference the previous night, she would have thought him jealous. *I'm so bloody confused. What does he want? What do I want?*

Her mood hadn't improved any by the time the plane landed and four guys in suits met them.

"Ms. Hummel. We're here to escort you to your home and then to the trial."

Her throat tightened. "All of you?"

"Yes, ma'am." He flashed his credentials.

Uncertainty swarmed her and before she knew what happened, Xaria found herself staring at the man beside her. "Aidrian?"

He looked down at her. At least it felt like it. *I want to rip those damn shades off his face!*

His head lifted and he stepped forward. "You go with her. Check the apartment before you let her in, *leave* when she changes." Aidrian's voice lowered and octave and he issued a warning, "You keep her safe or you'll answer to me."

*He is jealous!* The thought had her wanting to sing and dance.

Aidrian turned his head toward her. "I'll see you at the courthouse, *súl glas*," he murmured in a soft voice.

Xaria realized then she could face anything. Aidrian O'Shea might not be ready to accept it, but she knew. This was the man for her. *You are mine, Aidrian. Mine!* "Okay. See you there," she said.

As she sat in the courtroom a few hours later, having already been called to the stand, her heart caught as Aidrian's name was called as the next witness. She turned her head and watched him stride through the door. Breathing became difficult. He was in his military uniform. The whites. His hat was tucked along his left side, held in place by his arm.

*Jesus! He's so fucking hot!*

Xaria had to remind herself to breathe when he took the stand. It didn't register when the defense asked for a recess. Aidrian O'Shea commanded all of her attention. She started when Kohia nudged her.

"What?" she asked, tearing her gaze from Aidrian's chiseled form.

"It's over. Dr. Lanchester took a deal. Whatever information your man up there had was enough to scare him."

Xaria blinked and listened as the magistrate thanked and dismissed Aidrian before ordering Dr. Lanchester be taken into custody. Again, words held no meaning to her as she watched Aidrian leave the courtroom.

"I have to go, Kohia," she blurted. "I'll meet you outside." Shoving to her feet, Xaria dashed after him. "Aidrian!" she hollered the second she cleared the door to the outdoors, skipping some steps as she headed to the bottom.

He stood by a car with the two men she'd met the last time she'd been with Aidrian. Turned out both of them were also Special Forces; and while both were very handsome, Xaria didn't want them. She wanted the man with them.

Aidrian turned toward her and for a second she gloated at the raw appraisal in his black gaze. Just as quickly, he reined it under control.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Do you have time or are you leaving immediately?" Xaria could hear the hopefulness in her tone. She smiled at the other two there.

"I'm afraid I have to go. I have a flight to catch."

Willing the tears to stay away, Xaria nodded. "Of course. I...I...had just hoped..." she sighed and forced a smile. "Have a safe trip. It was good to see you again. Captain Abrams and Lieutenant Malone, it's nice to see you both again as well."

"Yes ma'am," they answered together.

Xaria turned and walked off hearing Abrams say, "Don't be a Seppo, Hondo." She didn't look back. What good would it have done? It was obvious he'd been lost to her. Not until she entered her apartment did she allow the tears to fall.

A few days later, well past midnight, she crawled into bed and closed her eyes. Hugging her second pillow to her, Xaria wallowed in the despair of her own creating.

"I'd handle it all differently if I could do it all over again." She knew that was one of the main reasons her parents had divorced. Her father couldn't or wouldn't give up his life on the ice. *Lord knows I don't want to, but will I be happy without him in my life? Could I make a life for myself in the US?*

Xaria loved what she did and for that reason she'd never hated her dad for not giving it up. A knock on her door surprised her. Getting up, Xaria turned on some lights and stopped at the door.

"Who is it?"

"Open the door, *súl glas*."

Her knees buckled at the rich, lilting timbre that streamed through the door. It wound around her like satin or silk and was as warm as mink. She did and when the light from her place poured out into the hall space before the lift, she hungrily ate up the vision he presented. He held a bouquet of red roses in one hand. Black slacks and a ruby-red button down shirt only added to the mouthwatering appeal.

Her body pulsed with an immediate and near desperate need for this man. *Damn him for making me feel so helpless around him.*

"What do you want?" She tried to look indifferent and keep her voice bland.

His black eyes narrowed and a tic grew along his jaw. "Tell me you don't have anyone in there."

God help her, but the dangerous rumble of his voice made her pussy cream.

"And if I do?"

"He has five seconds to get out or I'll send him through the window."

"Please. You aren't like that. You're always in control."

"Is. There. Anyone. Here?"

Xaria knew he was barely holding on to said control and so she stepped back. "No, Aidrian, I'm the only one here. Come on in."

The words had barely left her mouth when he'd hauled her into his embrace. He didn't just kiss her, Aidrian engulfed her. The passion was so strong, Xaria felt like she were drowning. His thick tongue thrust within her mouth as she sank into his touch. Her body burned for him.

"Mine!" he growled before he plundered her mouth all over again.

*Yes!* Xaria ripped his shirt, the buttons scattering as they hit the floor. "Aidrian," she gasped, pushing into him further.

She purred in pleasure as he thrust against her, her back along a wall and his erection pressing into her. Her contentment grew to displeasure when he jerked away from her and stepped back. Xaria stared at him. The open shirt highlighted his dark skin, and the roses he'd brought were forgotten on the floor. She stepped toward him only to have him hold up a hand to ward her off.

Forcing herself to adhere to his silent request, Xaria laced her fingers before her and watched him. Aidrian took several deep breaths

and stared at her. For the first time since she'd met him, uncertainty shone in the black diamond orbs with which he watched her.

"I need you, Xaria," he said in a graveled voice. She stepped toward him. Again, he shook his head and she stopped. "Let me finish." Xaria slid back a few inches. "I need you in more than a physical way. I need you in my life, *súl glas*."

"Aidrian," Xaria said, moving toward him. She brushed his hand away and placed her palms on the sides of his face. He covered hers with his larger ones and moved them so their hands rested between their bodies.

"Marry me, *súl glas*," he murmured, staring directly into her eyes.

Time stopped for her as those four words lifted her to cloud nine and beyond. *Oh, my God. Is he for real?* Xaria couldn't speak.

Aidrian kissed the knuckles on one hand and continued, "I tried to let it be just your life, but I can't. I want it to be *our* life."

Xaria nodded and leaned in to kiss him. "Yes. Yes. Yes!"

Aidrian lifted her and carried her back to bed where he made slow passionate love to her until they succumbed to exhaustion. Xaria awoke perfectly sated. The first thing she saw was the defined torso of the man she curled up against. Her lips curved up as she trailed a hand down his sternum.

"Mmmm," he groaned. "Morning."

"Morning," she returned softly. "Did you mean what you said last night?"

He captured her hand and rolled so they were eye to eye. "You'd better believe it. You backin' out on me?"

"Hell, no!"

"That's my girl." Kissing her lightly he asked, "Would a wedding in Ireland be okay with you? Like really soon?"

*Oh, God yes!* "I don't need anything fancy, Aidrian. I just want you."

"You have me, *súl glas*. You need your father there and Kohia too. I'll fly them in."

"How long are you here for?"

He kissed her again and got up. "I'm going to shower so we can get you a ring."

Propping herself up on her elbows she stared at him. "Aidrian? How long?"

"Fore'er."

She sat up fully. "I mean until you're due back for work."

"I'm not."

"What are you talking about?"

"I resigned my commission." He headed for the shower.

Xaria was speechless. *He gave it all up for me?* She shook her head as her mind recalled the camaraderie between him and the other members of the Megalodon Team. *Oh sweet Lord, what has he done?* She got out of bed and stared in the direction in which he'd disappeared.

## Twenty

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### *Ireland*

Aidrian paced back and forth. He was so nervous. Xaria. She was all he could think of; and in less than an hour, she would be his wife. *My wife*. He smiled and immediately felt another wave of nausea flow over him. *I wonder how she's doing*.

Her father had arrived last night to take part in the festivities. Aidrian was happy with his future father-in-law. His family was here...well almost all. He'd left a message with the Megalodon Team but there had been no response.

"Ready, son?" Duane asked in Gaelge.

"I've never been more nervous in my entire life."

"I'm so proud of you, son."

Aidrian smiled and tugged on the coat of his tuxedo. "Remember that when I pass out."

Duane laughed. "Let's go. You don't want to keep your bride waiting."

*My bride. Mine. "I'm ready."*

Aidrian walked with his father through the door and stopped in his tracks. Staring back at him were nine faces he'd not expected to see there. The men of SEAL Team Seventeen, The Megalodon Team, sat there along with Rich, the pilot of the *Sovereign*, and his co-pilot. All of them wore tuxes; and as Aidrian approached, Maverick got up and strode toward him. They hugged.

"What are you doing here?" Aidrian asked when they broke apart.

Maverick winked. "Can't let my best friend get married without me, can I?"

"Stand up with me?" Aidrian asked.

"It would be my honor, brother," Maverick answered in Lakota.

The priest cleared his throat and Aidrian grinned sheepishly as he moved to his proper place. Maverick stood beside him. The music started and Kohia walked down the aisle, but Aidrian's breath caught when he stared at Xaria and her father. She was so beautiful. He didn't know much about the dress she wore, just that it was white and offset

beautifully against her sun-kissed skin, fitting her body like a dream. The straps were off the shoulder and the hem reached the floor, a train following her. Her hair was up in some elegant knot with a wreath of flowers upon her head.

The ceremony passed in a blur until he was told to kiss the bride. Not even the cheers and catcalls took him from the path to do just that. As he held her in his arms for their first dance, Xaria smiled at him.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Something my father said. How beautiful you are and how much I love you. And that I'm the luckiest man in the world."

"I love you, too, husband."

"That is a beautiful word coming from your lips, *súl glas*."

She blushed. "What'd your father say that you're thinking about?"

"*An áit a bhuil do chroí is ann a thabharfas do chosa thú*. It means 'Your feet will bring you to where your heart is.'"

"Oh, Aidrian..."

"Mind if I cut in?" Maverick asked.

Aidrian noticed other couples were out dancing; and though he was loath to release her, he did. Aidrian danced with his mother and his sister in the meantime. After he finished dancing with Affrica, Harrier approached him.

"Congrats, Hondo. Affrica, good to see you again."

"Thanks." He paused and looked to see if there were something he needed to worry about concerning his sister. Affrica stared at Harrier before muttering something to him and leaving. Taking a breath, he figured he wouldn't worry about it. "And thanks for coming."

"We're family. Where else would we be than showing our support for you. The women are mad they weren't able to come, but they do send their love." Harrier gestured over his shoulder. "And gifts."

Aidrian was going to miss this. Miss them. "Thank you. I'm going to miss all of you."

Harrier arched a brow. "Well, I think you can handle your honeymoon alone, and if not..."

Aidrian grinned. "That I can. But I meant after."

Harrier drank some champagne. "I fully expect to see you at work."

"I resigned my commission," Aidrian said with a slight frowning of his brows.

"I un-resigned you," Xaria's soft voice said beside him.

Harrier saluted them with his champagne flute and stated, "That's my cue to leave."

Aidrian looked at his new bride. "What's going on, Xaria?"

She grabbed his hand and laced their fingers. "I'm sorry for going behind your back, but I wasn't about to let you give up your career, what you love."

"I love you, *súil glas*."

"And I you. And part of the man I fell in love with is a Navy SEAL. I know you don't want to stop being a SEAL any more than I want you to." She squeezed his fingers. "We'll make it work. How can I expect you to give up what you worked so hard for and love so much if you're willing to allow me to continue my dreams?"

Aidrian sighed. "I love you, Xaria Nichelle Hummel O'Shea."

"I love you too."

That night in their hotel room, Aidrian opened the gift Xaria handed to him. His heart leapt as he unwrapped a polished black 1964 Jaguar E-Type Roadster model.

"Oh, this is...is..."

"You like it then?" she asked from where she sat by his feet. "I was worried I got the wrong one."

"This is absolutely perfect. Thank you."

"Well, it'll have to do until you get back." Xaria took his hand and pressed something into it.

Aidrian opened his hand and stared at the Jaguar keychain resting there with a key on the end.

"No," he breathed.

"It's at Dez's."

"I can't..."

"You can't say no," Xaria interrupted.

Placing the model beside him, Aidrian turned his attention to his wife. Kissing her, he pressed her back to the floor and groaned in contentment as he sank deep into her wet core.

Later that night, Aidrian woke and gathered Xaria closer to him. This was life. "*A chuisle mo chroí*," he whispered to a slumbering Xaria. "You are my heart's pulse."

Brushing his lips over the top of her head, he smiled. Who knew something could feel so right. After all the years of hiding from even the possibility of something remotely serious, he was finally happy.

A warrior, a man who had little time for anything else, Aidrian had been brought down by a woman who was his other half in more ways than one. Xaria wasn't just his wife, she was...

O'Shea's Love.

## *About the Author*

Aliyah Burke loves to read and write. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached at [aliyah@aliyah-burke.com](mailto:aliyah@aliyah-burke.com), [aliyah\\_burke@hotmail.com](mailto:aliyah_burke@hotmail.com), and feel free to join her yahoo group at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aliyah\\_burke](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aliyah_burke) or friend her at <http://www.myspace.com/aliyahburke>. Please stop by her website, [www.aliyah-burke.com](http://www.aliyah-burke.com) for more available titles—just don't forget to sign the guestbook!

Aliyah is married to a career military man. They have a German Shepherd, a Borzoi, and a DSH cat. Her days are spent splitting her time between work, writing, and dog training and showing.