

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

Marie Harte



Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

Copyright © February 2010 by Marie Harte

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-524-1 Editor: Ann M. Curtis Cover Artist: Justin James

Printed in the United States of America

IooseId.

Published by Loose Id LLC PO Box 425960 San Francisco CA 94142-5960 www.loose-id.com

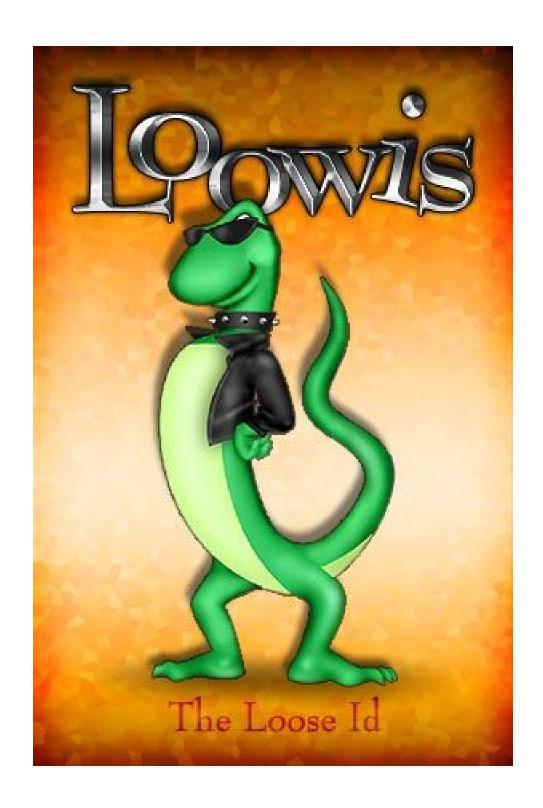
This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.



http://www.loose-id.com

Chapter One

Grinning around a fat lip and bloodied teeth, the large man waved a hunting knife in front of him. "Come on, you big prick. I dare you."

Jesse Fallon sighed and silently counted to ten before he did something stupid, like break the guy's neck. Granted, leaving the backwoods bar by himself after Tersch had instigated an earlier fight with this idiot and his many friends wasn't smart, but he'd been hoping to avoid more bloodshed. Though Tersch liked to engage in an out-and-out brawl at least once a week, Fallon preferred more peaceful means to alleviate the constant tension that threatened to pull him apart.

He upped his internal count to twenty before answering, "Buddy, I don't know you, and I don't want to know you. Now step aside, before I shove your head up your ass." If his headache hadn't been bothering him, he would have found a much more diplomatic way to defuse the situation. Instead he knowingly fanned the flames of aggression.

Unfortunately his damned headache and the asshole's anger made his mental shields too thin to withstand the invasion of unwanted thought. Telepathy was such a bitch.

The man's anger penetrated. *Gonna find his truck, carve his tires, then his pretty face*, the bruiser thought before yelling for reinforcements. "Back here!"

Fallon didn't wait. He walked right up to the big man, ignored the knife slash to his forearm, and punched him in the face. His opponent fell in a heap on the ground at the exact moment several men jumped out of an approaching pickup. The overhead moon shone brightly in the nearly deserted parking lot, highlighting six burly men armed with bats, knives, and hamhanded fists. Ah. New challengers. The others had been carried out of the bar hours ago.

"Terrific." Fallon rubbed his temples as more unwelcome thoughts intruded.

Take him from the front while Ben hits him from the back.

Glad I brought a bat. This fucker's huge.

2 Marie Harte

Too bad the others are here. I wouldn't mind a piece of that ass. The images following that thought disgusted him.

Fallon turned his hostility in the direction of the bully who liked to beat up, then rape his victims in secret. He broke the rapist's ribs before throwing him into the midst of two of the assholes wanting to fight.

"Damn, Fallon. You couldn't have waited for me?" Tersch whined as he exited the bar in front of Hayashi.

"Oh hell. I'll wait in the truck," Hayashi muttered. "I should have stayed home with Jules." The large Asian swallowed the ground on silent feet, not making a stir over the graveled lot as he moved to their truck.

Fallon cursed Tersch's aptitude for trouble. "I was having a fine time. Beer, the possibility of some fun with a waitress or two." He sidestepped a blow to his back and tripped the next guy attacking with a bat. "But you couldn't leave my happy time alone. Why do you insist on provoking them?"

The giant blond snorted, his huge hands on his hips. The damned Viking stood several inches taller than Fallon and had muscles on top of muscles. He was hard enough to beat when normal, but *changed*, he was unstoppable. Fallon considered this ass whooping a favor to the locals too stubborn to back the hell down.

"If you weren't such a pussy earlier, they wouldn't be trying this shit with you," Tersch growled.

"Communicating with my mouth instead of my fists isn't being a pussy." "Dickless," he added, sending the telepathic message to his irritable friend.

Tersch's bright blue eyes blazed. "Oh, it's on."

Fallon shrugged. Better to help Tersch deal with his demons than let these idiots die at his hands.

He knocked another one out of the way while Tersch put the remaining two out of commission.

"Was that necessary?" Fallon sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, annoyed to see his brand-new shirt ripped where a knife had cut it. But his skin had already knit, healing without a scar. "Sometimes it's good to be a Circ."

Tersch grinned. "It's always good to be a Circ." He swung a fist, which connected with Fallon's cheek, igniting Fallon's already shortened fuse.

"Hell yeah, it's on. You're mine, you damned berserker." Fallon tackled him, and they rolled over bodies, gravel, and each other as they indulged in a fight that had been brewing for hours.

Twenty minutes later, Fallon limped back to the truck in a foul mood. Tersch walked beside him with a spring in his step, humming under his breath.

"You kids done playing?" Hayashi asked from the truck's interior, his voice bored. Something classical played on the radio. As usual, Hayashi sat behind the wheel.

Fallon grunted and shoved aside Tersch's helping hand. "Fuck off. I don't need help getting into the truck."

"Sorry." The unrepentant bastard had the nerve to smile.

"Well, at least one of you is in a better mood." Hayashi grinned over his shoulder at the finger Fallon gave him. He engaged Tersch in conversation on the ride home, seeking details about the fight, which Tersch was all too happy to give him. While they drove, Fallon fought his aches as his body healed and tried to relax, glad he didn't need to join in on the conversation.

The last three years of his life had been fraught with danger. Hell, if he were honest, he'd been in one scrape after another since joining the navy and becoming a SEAL. Fallon hated to admit it, but he liked trouble. He found nothing as invigorating as a challenge. Reading minds paled next to saving people and protecting his country. Volunteering for the top secret Project Dawn had been a no-brainer, especially when his team leader and fellow SEALs said yes.

Becoming a Circ did have its advantages. Project Dawn had turned him into a super soldier, or super sailor, as he liked to call himself. He was now faster, stronger, and had better instincts than a normal person. Hell, he could hold his breath underwater for an hour. If not for those more unfortunate side effects to the project, he'd consider being a Circ perfection.

Pain splintered his brain again, and he gritted his teeth to avoid groaning out loud. His telepathy, while occasionally handy, took its toll if he used it too much. The shields he worked hard to hold in place prevented him from hearing thoughts when he went out on the town, but his brain didn't like the extra stimulation. He was just grateful his fellow Circs had learned to shield themselves from him, so he didn't have to work so hard at home.

4 Marie Harte

He didn't like showing weakness, not even around men he considered family. It didn't help that everyone seemed so damned capable. Hayashi rarely complained about anything. Jules, his team leader, handled missions with a calm assurance. Even when the team had been under Dr. Elliot Pearl's evil thumb, Jules had protected them and promised an escape from Pearl's hellish labs, which he'd delivered. Tersch, for all his violent ways, only needed a bit of physical relief to become his jovial if boisterous self.

Fallon, however, constantly felt pressured to keep up with the others, as if he were the weak link striving not to slow anyone down.

"So quiet back there. I didn't hurt you too bad, did I?" Tersch asked in a deep voice.

Hayashi coughed, probably to cover a laugh.

"Shut up, *Frederik*." Fallon turned his head and rested his forehead on the cold glass of his window, hoping the cold would numb the throbbing.

"I hate when you call me that." Tersch glared over his shoulder.

"I know."

The ocean rolled by as Hayashi accelerated. Winter approached Emerald Isle, North Carolina, in a fierce whip of wind and pelting rain. At the promise of the first clear night they'd had in a week, Fallon and the others had ventured out to take advantage of the crisp night air, as well as their recent breather from six months of nonstop training. The training aside, he appreciated the southern climate more than he'd liked living in Jersey. Two years in Trenton had made him long for anything south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

They passed several condominiums, as well as new beach houses being reconstructed in the aftermath of the last tropical storm to hit the area. Turning away from Cape Carteret, they continued along Route 58 inland, away from the ocean toward the Croatan National Forest. A perfect place to hide creatures that were neither man nor beast, but something in between. Those "unfortunate side effects" of the project, he thought with a brief burst of humor, wondering what the world would think if it knew the popular green cartoonish monster was in actuality a military brainchild, not green, and fully capable of thinking for itself.

He glanced at his friends in the front seat. Make that, capable of thinking for themselves.

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

5

Hayashi continued to drive through a small spatter of raindrops. At least the constant swipe of windshield wipers lulled Fallon's temper, if not his headache. He couldn't wait to get back and relax in the one place he felt truly at home.

The large mansion they occupied served its purpose well enough. Near enough to the Marine Corps base at Camp Lejeune and the air station at Cherry Point, he and his team could use air, ground, or water for transport.

Hayashi pulled up to a gate, inched the truck to a halt, and punched in a few numbers on the dash. Once the gates opened, he drove up the winding drive. The large estate housed a tenthousand-square-foot home, big enough to contain four Circs with varying temperaments and give each of them the privacy their secret organization demanded.

The truck pulled to a stop outside the front door. The small droplets of rain turned into a larger, faster deluge.

"Need me to carry you in, princess?" Tersch offered.

Fallon ignored him and sucked up the pain as he exited the truck. He stopped so suddenly, Hayashi crashed into him.

"What—"

He held out a hand and concentrated past the agony in his brain and the cold rain leeching away his warmth. "Admiral London's inside with Jules," he said, hearing the admiral's thoughts as he spoke with their team leader. "And someone else." Someone who made him hurt far worse than any bruising Tersch had given him that evening.

He sagged and would have fallen had Hayashi and Tersch not grabbed his arms. He heard Hayashi snap his fingers in front of his face.

"Hell. Let's get him inside."

Fallon had a hard time seeing past the burst of color beneath his eyelids. Sounds and images bombarded his tired mind like pricks of lightning—all piercing and unavoidable.

Then a soothing voice filtered through—feminine, powerful, alien. He didn't like the invasion and fought to rid himself of it.

"Dude, move faster," Tersch grumbled.

6 Marie Harte

"He'll be fine. Fallon, quit trying to make Tersch feel guilty for pounding you. You know how he gets."

Fallon wanted to tell Hayashi he wasn't acting, but he couldn't form words, nor could he send a telepathic message without breaking the mental shield he strove to maintain. The female's strange thought patterns threatened to undo him.

"Fallon?" Jules's commanding voice reached him through a fog as someone lowered him onto a couch.

"Here, let me." A soft hand grazed his forehead, and the pain vanished as if it had never been. Fallon blinked up into eyes he wouldn't soon forget. Dark, unfathomably deep, and set inside a mature, feminine face full of mystery and strength.

The woman had dark brown skin as smooth as a baby's. Her age seemed indeterminate, anywhere from forty to sixty; he couldn't tell. Laugh lines crinkled at the corners of her eyes, but other than that, she seemed like an ebony statue of calm. Short, dark hair frosted with gray framed her face with regal care.

A strand of delicate pearls surrounded her neck, and a single pearl graced each earlobe. She wore a navy blue suit, her skirt showing off trim legs and slender ankles. When she straightened, he noted she wore no-nonsense pumps that matched her dress. They put her at a petite five feet four, if that.

"Better now?" she asked, her voice soft yet firm, resonating with an energy he couldn't identify but wanted to understand.

"Yeah," he rasped and tried to stand.

Tersch yanked him to his feet. "Hell, Fallon. Next time you want a lady's attention, just ask for it." "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm good, thanks." Fallon cleared his throat, embarrassed to be the focus of so much attention. "Sorry. I think I had too much to drink."

Hayashi and Tersch said nothing. Jules frowned. Jules could always tell when he was lying. He never drank to excess. Still, Jules didn't say anything aloud. "Careful. She's strong. And way weird."

Admiral London cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to have come at such an odd hour, but operationally it's been a busy month. I've come to impart some important information. Jules, perhaps the conference room would be best for this."

Jules nodded. Their leader, Julian Hawkins, had patience, ability, and a keen perception of others. His obvious leadership had garnered him the attention of Captain William Delancey, Admiral London's old protégé. Invited to participate in Project Dawn, Jules had followed his captain's recommendation and allowed himself to be the first one infected with the Circe serum. The U.S. Navy's first Circ, but definitely not its last.

Jules led Admiral London and the woman to their secure conference room. Fallon and the others followed. Jules punched in the code on the door keypad, and the group entered and sat, waiting on the admiral.

"There's no easy way to put this."

Fallon noticed Jules's frown. He must have seen something in the admiral's aura that bothered him. For Fallon's part, he couldn't hear a whisper of the man's thoughts.

His gaze met the woman's. She raised a brow, as if questioning his attention. Fallon sent Jules an apology. "I can't read him at all. I think she's blocking me."

"Admiral, please, just say whatever it is you need to say," Jules said quietly.

"I can't handle your assignments and my new duties at the Pentagon any longer. While it's been a true joy to be so close to the thick of things again, I have to get back to the bigger picture." The admiral drew in a deep breath. "To that end, I've chosen Mrs. Alicia Sharpe to replace me."

As one, all four Circs turned their attention to the unassuming older woman studying them with placid interest.

"I've known Alicia for over thirty years. She's a problem solver for our government. She's not NSA, CIA, nor does she belong to any other agency. She's not a scientist either. Alicia is here to manage the group. She'll be handpicking your assignments from now on, as well as a new staff to better suit Circ needs." The admiral made eye contact with every one of them, his greeneyed gaze serious. "I trust her with my life and with yours. She won't let you down. I don't expect any of you to let her down either."

"Aye, aye, Admiral," Jules answered without a qualm. Jules trusted the admiral implicitly. Fallon wished he could be so lucky.

Fallon felt uneasy, especially when the admiral favored Mrs. Sharpe with a warm smile. A sudden image of the woman, years younger and wearing nothing but a string of pearls as she bent over Geoffrey London, hit him hard.

He choked on his shock and shielded himself from seeing anything more. He was astonished to have seen anything at all.

"Fallon?" Hayashi murmured.

"Sorry, dry throat." God, his eyes were going to burn out. Seeing the admiral naked and aroused wasn't his idea of a good time. But he had to admit, Mrs. Sharpe had been a definite stunner in her younger years.

She gave him a small smile before composing herself, and her lack of embarrassment tempered his discomfort.

"Geoffrey, I'm pleased to have your endorsement."

And then some.

She shot Fallon a sharp glance before turning back to Admiral London. "I look forward to my time here. I'll be making regular reports to the admiral, as will you four," she said, nodding at each of them. "You'll continue to maintain an open-door policy with the brass. But I hope if I do something you don't like or understand, you'd come to me with it first."

The look she shot Tersch was telling. The big guy didn't look any more pleased at this development than the rest of them.

Mrs. Sharpe continued. "This is the *dawning* of a new day, gentlemen. The true beginning of the navy's Circ project: Dawn Endeavor."

Quiet filled the room as they absorbed the news.

Admiral London broke the silence. "That is all, gentlemen. Alicia, if you and I could have a few words?"

Fallon shot out the door before he caught more than he wanted to see in the admiral's head again. Close proximity to a person often increased his ability to read minds. Better for him to be far, far away from Admiral London right now.

"What the hell?" Tersch grumbled as the four of them left the conference room and headed for the kitchen. Predictably, they needed to eat. Circs had revved-up metabolism and the earlier fight had exacerbated his hunger. "This is a surprise I didn't see coming," Hayashi said, confusion evident in his tone.

"You need to work on that foresight thing," Jules murmured. "For a prognosticator, you're lacking."

"Ha-ha. Very funny." Hayashi accepted the plate of cold chicken Tersch handed him and set it on the large kitchen island. "Grab me the cheese on the bottom shelf."

Tersch grabbed the plate and held it far from his body. "Ech. What is *that*? Brie? Looks like snot."

Hayashi took the cheese from Tersch. "You don't have to eat it cold. Heated and topped with almonds and cranberries, it's delicious."

Jules made a face. "Tersch, gimme a beer."

"Amen." Tersch scowled at Hayashi, handed Jules a beer, and grabbed one for himself.

The team ate in silence for a while before Tersch turned his blue eyes on Fallon. "What the hell did you hear in there that turned you three shades of red?"

"More like what I saw."

Tersch snorted. "I didn't know you saw things. I thought you just heard voices, you know, like the crazies in the psych ward."

"Dick. No, I don't normally see images, but if the sender is thinking hard enough, I can sometimes see what he sees. The admiral projected some powerful shit. I got an eyeful of Mrs. Sharpe and Geoff going at it."

"Oh man." Tersch grimaced.

"Well, it was a memory from years ago. The woman looks good in nothing but pearls."

"Dude, she's old."

"You think any woman over the age of eighteen is old," Hayashi said drily.

The flush on Tersch's face was worth the man's weight in gold. "Hey, that girl looked a lot older than eighteen. Her driver's license said twenty-three! Not my fault the chick was barely legal." He paused. "Never going to let me live that one down, are you?"

"Nope."

"Guys, seriously, what do you think about this?" Jules asked. Under the bright kitchen lights, his eyes shone like diamonds. Fallon thought the comparison apt. He'd never met a tougher man than his team leader.

Fallon gave the question some careful consideration. "Mrs. Alicia Sharpe revs with energy. What kind, I'm not sure. I don't know if we can trust her." He turned to Jules. "What does she look like?"

"She's golden."

"What does that mean?" Hayashi asked. "I've never heard you describe an aura as golden before."

"That's because I've never seen one that color before. She's different. Different good or different bad, though—that remains the question," Jules muttered and grabbed a chicken leg before Tersch could finish the entire plate himself.

"Damn." Tersch glared at him. "Well, I for one don't like her. She gives me the heebiejeebies."

Hayashi blinked. "The what?"

"The willies, the shivers. She scares him, right, Frederik?" Fallon asked, trying to sound helpful while he poked fun at their resident Viking.

"Jackass. No, she doesn't scare me. I just don't like her."

"Well, that's too bad, gentlemen, because I already like you." Alicia Sharpe strode into the kitchen. She stopped next to Tersch, looking downright tiny in his shadow. "Now, how about a nice cup of coffee while we get to know one another better?"

Chapter Two

One month later

Olivia Lynn stepped out of her car and stared up at the picture of gothic horror come to life. Okay, granted, the mansion didn't look that old. Gothic certainly didn't describe the house. With its tiled circular drive, fieldstone facade, and bright white columns, the place could have been featured in a home and garden magazine. The lit chandelier, visible through the grand window over the door, hinted at a spacious, welcoming interior. The surrounding darkness, however, called to mind monsters and things left best uncovered.

Shifting winds rustled the leaves of the water oaks, hickories, and pines that bordered the house and seemed to stretch for miles. The scent of a storm lingered, wild, wet, and cold. Cones dropped, and wildlife scattered in the shadowy woods around her. Stifling a shiver, Olivia shut her car door and walked across the flagstone path to the brightly lit doorway.

She knocked, not sure what to expect. The journey for this particular assignment had made sense, right before she'd veered away from the Marine Corps base. Her foray through the dark roads surrounded by dense forest had unnerved her. The secure gate at the end of her ride had given her some confidence, but the winding drive up to the house had filled her with trepidation. She swore she'd seen yellow eyes glinting at her from between the trees.

Taking a firm grip on her imagination *and* her satchel, Olivia did a last-minute inspection of her appearance. Her tailored wool suit showed off her femininity while maintaining the professional demeanor needed for a woman working in a man's world. The pale pink silk blouse complemented her olive skin tone, and the neat twist she'd put her hair into lent her a scholarly appearance.

Pleased she at least looked the part, Olivia mentally reviewed her strengths and weaknesses. To her surprise, the door suddenly opened. She hadn't heard or felt anyone approach.

"Perfect." A short African American woman with hazel eyes and lips to die for stood inside the doorway. Dressed in jeans and a ragged sweatshirt, she appeared a few years younger than Olivia. The woman's beauty stunned Olivia for a moment, as did her effortless smile, which seemed to lift the gloom around them. She radiated positive energy. "Another woman in the house. It's about damned time."

Olivia stood still, bemused by this greeting. Though the environment wasn't exactly military, the mission fell under navy control. This beauty queen didn't fit with Olivia's preconceived notion of those on the job. A sailor, someone in a uniform or suit, maybe? But not Ms. Sexy USA.

"You coming?" The younger woman stood aside and waited, her hand on her hip.

"Ah yes." Olivia stepped inside onto a marble tiled floor. The foyer had been filled with plants and a coat tree. The bright lights overhead only emphasized the cleanliness and grandeur of the place.

"Nice digs, eh? I'm Ava, Mrs. Sharpe's assistant."

"Olivia," Olivia said by way of introduction. She followed Ava through the house, aware of the silence all around. "This isn't quite what I was expecting."

Ava laughed. "I can imagine. A job with the navy is never this 'wow.' But then, this isn't your average government job." Ava winked at her and led her to a set of closed double doors. "Mrs. S.'s office. She's a pain in the ass, but she means well."

The doors opened. A petite woman with skin a shade darker than Ava's scowled her displeasure. "Ava, don't you have work to do?"

Ava rolled her eyes. "Working me to the friggin' bone," she muttered and left in a flounce, back the way they'd come.

Mrs. S. sighed. "That girl. A terrific assistant, but she needs an attitude adjustment every now and then. Well, Ms. Lynn, come on in."

Olivia followed Mrs. S., presumably Mrs. Sharpe, the woman who'd contacted her about the assignment, into the office. Like Olivia, she wore a feminine suit that defined competence and professionalism. Pleased they had that much in common, Olivia waited until Mrs. S. sat before taking the seat opposite her.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Olivia began, but Mrs. S. waved her protest aside.

"No matter. I figured the weather or the directions would complicate matters. Finding your way around these parts in the dark isn't easy, and I live here. I'm Alicia Sharpe," she said, holding out her hand.

"Olivia Lynn." They shook hands, and Olivia felt a flare of power in that brief contact. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she sensed satisfaction in Mrs. Sharpe's touch. For an empath who often had trouble shielding herself from the world, the fact that she couldn't read Mrs. Sharpe came as a real surprise.

"Would you like anything to drink or eat before we begin? You must be hungry after your trip."

Olivia had left Dam Neck, Virginia, after putting in half a day's work. The four-hour trip had turned into a six-hour trip, thanks to a flat tire, an interstate pileup, and the weird back roads she'd had to use to find this place.

"I'm fine, but thank you for asking." She propped her satchel beside her chair and crossed her legs, as prepared for the interview as she could be.

"What exactly do you know about this job?"

"It requires someone who speaks Portuguese, who has clearance, and who can be gone for months at a time without a problem."

"Correct. We're in need of a translator for an upcoming trip abroad."

Olivia nodded, still not sure why she'd been selected to apply, considering she wasn't a linguist by trade. She'd leaped at an opportunity to escape a job that had begun to bore her, not wanting to deal with the headache of applying for a new job and moving again.

"But I'd like you to tell me why you think you'd be best for this task."

Olivia had this down pat. "As you know, I currently work at the naval base in Dam Neck, at the Expeditionary Warfare Training Group. I teach software instruction, so I'm familiar with both the IT field and training."

Mrs. Sharpe nodded but said nothing. Her dark brown eyes didn't blink as she studied Olivia.

"I have a BS from Virginia Tech. I've been awarded several commendations from my supervisors for my hard work and innovative teaching techniques. I'm loyal and dedicated to any task set before me. I hold the necessary clearances for this mission, and I speak Portuguese like a native. My mother was born in Brazil. She moved here with my father, who was in the navy."

"They died when you were young." Of course Mrs. Sharpe had run a background check on her.

Olivia nodded. "My aunt and uncle raised me. A happy childhood with an emphasis on education. My uncle made sure I continued to learn the language, as my DLPT shows."

"Yes, on your language proficiency test, you scored a four, which equates to a native speaker. Are you capable of taking orders?"

"Yes."

"Can you adapt to change quickly?"

"Yes."

"Can you think outside the box? Accept the possibility of that which is normally considered impossible?"

Hell, I can read emotions. That's pretty outside the box. "Yes."

"Do you have a problem with men?"

"In what capacity, exactly?" Lady, you can't shake me. I'm like a tick hanging on to your every word. I want this job.

"You'll be working with four men on this mission."

"I work with men all the time."

"Yes, but you're outside the classroom here, Olivia."

What did the woman want to know? Olivia couldn't imagine she'd be tasked with anything dangerous. She wasn't trained for it and wouldn't have been selected for anything needing real-world experience. But she'd handled tougher interview questions, so she'd answer this one.

"I can handle myself. In addition to staying fit, I take self-defense classes. A single woman living alone can't be too careful."

"True." Mrs. Sharpe smiled, the first indication she liked Olivia. "Just one more thing. I'd like you to meet the men you'll be working with before I make my final decision. And if you get this job, you do know you'll train here before going out? That means you'll be required to eat and sleep here—in your own room, of course—alongside the team. A cohesive unit means less possibility for mishap out in the field."

So she wouldn't be translating here. The possibility of leaving the States thrilled her. "Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Sharpe nodded. She turned and pressed an intercom. "Jack, could you please find the gentlemen?"

"I'm on it." A deep voice boomed back.

"That's Jack. He's our resident handyman who used to work for the government. A Mr. Fix-It who can handle a gun as well as a wrench. His wife, Melissa, is our cook. A pretty little blonde with a mind as quick as a computer. We also have two girls who come in to clean twice a week, Jack's nieces."

"Not such a large staff for a place this big."

Mrs. Sharpe didn't say anything, but Olivia caught the shimmer of her anticipation. At the thought, the woman smiled, as if reading Olivia's mind. That smile probed at something in Olivia's past, something that reminded her of...

"You called?" A giant of a man lumbered inside. He wore jeans, a button-down shirt, and no shoes. Odd.

Olivia considered herself tall, but this man had to be a foot and a half taller. Blond and blue eyed, he looked like a first-class brawler. As he caught sight of her, his frown turned into a smile. She wanted to call him handsome, but the word didn't capture the raw power and wildness vibrating inside him. She sensed a strong frustration and sizzling desire bursting to be set free.

"Well, hello there. And who are you?"

Mrs. Sharpe took charge. "Olivia, this is Gunnar Tersch, our resident weapons expert."

"Weapons expert, yeah." He snorted. "So who's this? Another experiment, *Alicia*?"

She glared at him, and he glared back before shifting his gaze away.

"Sorry, Mrs. Sharpe. I haven't been the same since I've been off my meds." The smile he flashed did little to inspire confidence. "Nice to meet you, Olivia." He turned and left with what sounded like a growl.

"You'll have to forgive Gunnar. He's off his usual regimen, and it's made him more aggressive than usual."

More aggressive? Meds? Though she hadn't sensed an imminent threat from the man, she had no doubt he could break her in half, should he choose to.

"Mrs. Sharpe?" A tall, dark-haired man entered the room. He stopped at a respectful distance from them and waited. He had Asian features tempered by an Anglican ancestor. Handsome and somber, he seemed a direct opposite to the giant who'd stormed out just a minute ago.

"Olivia Lynn, I'd like you to meet Kisho Hayashi. Kisho is a demolitions expert who can do all manner of things. He's the calm in our storm."

Olivia stood and was still dwarfed by the man. Unlike Tersch, though, he didn't leer. His dark eyes held respect and a polite distance. But when she shook his hand, she nearly trembled at the need pushing at his internal barriers.

She forced herself to show no expression, but the narrowing of Kisho's eyes told her she hadn't been totally successful. She subtly withdrew her hand from his larger one and stepped back. "Nice to meet you."

"You too." He turned to Mrs. Sharpe. "What else can I do for you?"

"Nothing, thanks."

They watched Kisho leave, and another man took his place. This one stood almost as tall as the blond but seemed even more commanding. He had to be their leader. Dark haired, but with light gray eyes that seemed to miss nothing, he looked every inch a warrior.

"Ah, Jules. Olivia, this is Julian Hawkins, the team leader. Jules, this is the translator I was telling you about."

Jules didn't speak. He looked at her with an intensity she found unnerving. Like the others, he had muscles galore, height, and hands that could crush her in seconds. The knowledge was there in his eyes. He knew he was dangerous, and he wanted her to know it as well.

"Interesting." The way he said it made her aware that he looked at her with more than his eyes. He didn't ogle, not exactly. His energy, like the others', expressed hunger. But he had that need tightly bound under a well of curiosity.

"Jules?" Mrs. Sharpe raised a brow and fingered her pearl necklace.

"She'll do. Nice to meet you, Olivia." He turned and left, then returned with another man he forcibly pushed into the room. "Suck it up. We all hurt," he murmured before leaving them alone with this last man.

Olivia had remained standing after being introduced to Kisho. Now she wished she'd been sitting. Her breath left her in a rush when she looked into eyes as brown as warm amber. Short, dark hair framed a masculine face that would make men envious and have women falling all over themselves for a closer look.

A straight nose, square jaw, arched brows, and thick lashes arranged themselves into a face she couldn't look away from. He had bronzed skin, laugh lines at the corners of his eyes, and firm lips. She had to look up to see him, putting him several inches taller than her own five-eleven. Broad shoulders, thick arms, and a trim waist sat above long, powerful legs encased in jeans. Like the others, he didn't wear shoes.

He appeared clean shaven, but when she continued to stare at him, she thought she saw a trace of darker skin along his cheeks and neck.

"This is Jesse Fallon," Mrs. Sharpe said with unmistakable satisfaction. "Jesse, meet Olivia Lynn, our new translator."

He opened his mouth, and she swore she saw a hint of...fangs? She took a step nearer, needing to see, needing to feel the fan of his breath on her face, to taste the intriguing scent of mint filling the space between them. Her nipples hardened, and her womb quickened. She licked her lips and leaned closer.

"Gotta go." He jerked backward and stumbled over his feet in his haste to leave the office.

Olivia had to blink to free herself from his spell. Embarrassed that she'd sent him running from the room, she turned to Mrs. Sharpe, expecting the woman's dismissal. Nearly jumping her coworker couldn't have put Olivia in a favorable light.

Instead she found Mrs. Sharpe wearing a wide smile. "Welcome to the team, my dear. I'll call Ava and get you settled in for the night. Any questions?"

Olivia closed her mouth around a hint of mint. She took a deep breath and realized she hadn't caught anything Jesse had been feeling. Interesting, to say the least. "Ah no, no questions." Except for where my mind has gone. Because I really want a look at that Jesse again. Whoa. Wait. Remember, Olivia, you're here to work as a translator, not a mattress.

"Good. I'll have Ava show you to your room, and we'll get the ball rolling."

As Mrs. Sharpe put events into motion, Olivia wondered just what she'd gotten herself into. The four men she'd met could have posed on any Special Forces poster. Yet they lived in a mansion away from the military base and worked for a civilian woman, a tiny lady who wore a designer suit and pearls. Talk about stepping into wonderland.

* * *

Fallon didn't care what the hell Jules had ordered. If he didn't fuck someone soon, he was going to explode. That hot piece of ass in Sharpe's office hadn't helped matters at all. She'd only made them worse.

Giving in to his inner beast, he raced from the office toward the gym, where he could smell traces of the others. Normally they had a harsh workout after suffering from the burdensome arousal. But not tonight. Arousal rode his beast hard. He could scent the same lust from the others in the air. Pheromones called, luring him with the promise of surcease.

As he moved, he stripped until he wore nothing at all, and *changed*—that unfortunate side effect from the Circe serum, the ability to *change* into an altered state. While as a man, Fallon had enhanced vision and hearing and could heal quickly; as a beast, he could do so much more. He grew several inches in height and breadth as his muscles and bones expanded. His hair grew, his skin hardened, and he developed fangs and claws capable of annihilating an opponent.

The *change* no longer hurt after three years of constant shifting, but the mating heats were getting worse. The virus that genetically mutated him into another form altogether turned him into a Circ, a creature with the need to make more of its own kind. With Doc Dennis's drugs, they'd been able to suppress the mating heat. But now that Sharpe had ordered them to stop taking them, the heat was back, and worse.

A Circ could only find sexual satisfaction from another Circ. Fallon could fuck all day and all night long, but only another Circ could give him relief from the need to procreate. Male or female—it didn't matter. He needed his own kind to ease the ache building in his balls.

He hurried down the corridor, the scent of the others drawing him near.

The first generation of Circe's Recruits had been able to overcome the mating heat by finding mates. That those guys had managed to find females with Circ genes at all amazed him. Fallon had no such hope for himself, not after fighting so many rogue Circs and mutants, aftereffects from Elliot Pearl's mad-scientist experiments. There didn't appear to be any available female Circs left standing. Which sucked, big-time.

Though he didn't prefer men if given the choice, he viewed sex with them as a necessity to still the voracious sexual hunger that gnawed at him.

Need, must have her, his inner beast growled. He'd learned to trust the ingrained instincts that came with being a Circ, but he thought maybe this time his libido had fried his senses.

Her? What "her"? He hadn't seen a female Circ since his last trip up north. And those females were totally off-limits. His inner beast made little sense, but Fallon knew he'd put his sexual need off as long as he could.

He shoved through the gymnasium doors into instant darkness. In the time it took his eyes to adjust to the lack of light, a hard, naked body knocked him to the ground. He sensed Jules before he smelled him. Their team leader had a psychic feel different from the others. A sweltering sense of power that tempted too easily.

"Come here." Jules grunted. His eyes glowed like shimmering diamonds. Long black hair hung over his shoulders and covered Fallon as he looked up at his leader. Fangs glinted, but before Jules could bite him, Fallon shoved him aside, brushing against his slick cock.

Another aspect to being Circ. In the *changed* state, a male Circ emitted natural oils to lubricate his erection to facilitate sex. It looked like Jules planned on coming in him first.

A glance over Jules's shoulder showed Tersch and Hayashi, both naked and *changed*, fighting for dominance. The Circ mating dance, they liked to joke. Blood and sex often went hand in hand. Violence, for their inner beasts, was nothing more than a test to determine the worthy.

Just as Tersch flipped Hayashi onto his belly and mounted him, Jules rushed Fallon. "Shit"

Jules knocked into him, and they both rolled over the floor mats, trying to gain the advantage of being on top. Though Jules had more muscle, Fallon was quicker. Except mental

distractions kept him from making Jules work as hard as he should have. An image of Olivia Lynn popped into his mind—thick black hair held back from a sultry face, those ripe lips, a body made for fucking...

He slacked enough for Jules to pin him.

"Now spread those thighs." Jules panted. He lifted Fallon's pelvis, pushed his cock between Fallon's buttocks, and thrust hard.

"Fuck." The reaming felt so good. That huge cock burrowing deeper and harder with every push of Jules's large body. The respite so out of reach for so long seemed suddenly within Fallon's grasp.

Feeling his leader inside him soothed that need to belong, as Jules claimed him once again. The sex not only eased their need to procreate, but it cemented ties between them, like a real pack.

"With me, Fallon?" Jules rasped and leaned down to kiss him. One thing Jules never tolerated was letting the act remain only physical. Fallon couldn't think about anything now but Jules.

The slide of his pelvis grazed Fallon's cock time and time again, teasing while promising an end to his ever-growing need. He heard Tersch yell out his release and groaned, wanting to come as well.

"That's it. Ease that ass around me," Jules growled. "God, I needed this."

"Me too."

Jules kissed Fallon again, shoving his tongue inside Fallon's mouth, sweeping and stroking while he continued to ram inside him, digging for purchase in a body that could never reward him with child for such. But that wouldn't stop Jules from filling him all the same.

The scent of Jules—a mix of vanilla and grass and man—hit Fallon hard.

"Christ yes." Jules gasped as he shuddered and stilled inside Fallon, coming in great pulses.

While Jules spent, Fallon did his best to hold on, but desire burned a hole in his resolve. Not caring if Jules had completely finished, he angled out from under him and stood, holding out his dick. "Need it bad," he growled.

Jules didn't wait but took Fallon into his mouth and began sucking, grazing with his fangs. A glance to his left showed Tersch doing the same for Hayashi. To see such powerful males on their knees, accepting and trusting in the males above them, always aroused him. Longing, love, and a healthy respect for how hard this was on all of them never failed to make an impact.

The incredible suction from Jules's mouth turned him harder than stone. His leader dug his nails into Fallon's thighs and raked, leaving blazing trails of pain that only heightened his pleasure. When Jules cupped his balls, Fallon nearly exploded, loving the sensation of danger and lust only a Circ could arouse.

"Mmm." Jules moaned as he took Fallon even farther into the back of his throat, swiping the length of his shaft with his thick tongue.

Unable to hold on, Fallon gripped Jules's hair to hold him steady. Two more thrusts and he came hard, shooting load after load into Jules's mouth. When he finally let go, he realized the others waited on him. Hayashi and Tersch looked worn-out. Jules rose to his feet and wiped his mouth.

He sighed, an odd sound to hear from such a savage-looking creature. "There's no denying we needed it."

"Yeah," Fallon rasped and milked the last bit of cum from his cock. He felt no regret or embarrassment, only the wish that he could control these bouts of lust. The mating heat normally struck every other month, but the crew had been dampening the need thanks to a special injection. Until Mrs. Sharpe took them off the treatment, claiming the drugs were doing more harm than good.

What she knew about Circs that Doc didn't, Fallon couldn't say. Dr. Evan Dennis, or Doc to those who knew him, was the Circ expert. Months after Fallon's release from the hated labs, he and the team had stayed with Doc and his Circs up north. Through trial and error, Doc had concocted the shots that kept their mating heats at bay. Why would Alicia Sharpe question Doc's methods? But more to the point, why would Admiral London agree with her?

"I hate to say it, but that was fucking ten times better than Doc's shots," Tersch admitted.

Hayashi said nothing, but he remained in close contact with Tersch, needing the touch of acceptance.

22 Marie Harte

"It's been a while since you've bonded with them," Fallon reminded Jules, not surprised to see Jules's cock stiff again. Circs had an insatiable appetite, and they'd abstained for longer than normal. Sex with humans didn't count. Only other Circs could dampen the need.

"Good point, Fallon." Jules smiled, his fangs sharp. "Go fetch me a wet rag, would you?" Fallon left for the small adjoining locker room and returned with two soaped towels. He tossed one to Jules and one to Tersch. As they wiped themselves down, he looked forward to another round of pulsating sex, despite his desire to go seek out the new woman, Olivia.

Something about her had stirred him past control. He needed to study her, to see what it was that tempted his inner beast. And then Tersch crooked a finger at him.

"Not this time. Viking, I want a piece of that ass," Fallon growled, knowing he'd lose but needing the fight. In the end, he'd blow Tersch, then fuck him, because the big guy was always generous after an orgasm.

A flickering thought hit him just as Tersch gripped him by the neck and tried to force him to his knees. Would Olivia be as generous after an orgasm? He hardened at the thought, surprised to find that he looked forward to finding out.

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

Chapter Three

Olivia halted in her tracks. "I look forward to finding out." A man's voice, yet only Ava sat in her bedroom.

"What's wrong?"

"Did you hear that?"

Ava frowned. "Hear what?"

"Never mind." Great, now I sound like a wacko. "How long have you worked here?"

"Two weeks."

"That's all? You seem like you know everything about this place."

Ava shrugged, and her gaze shifted to the open closet, where Olivia had already stowed her bags. She'd been instructed to bring enough clothes to last her several months, in the event she earned the job. So now she had two suitcases and an overnight bag crammed with personal items, as well as a duffel bag full of shoes. Good thing they hadn't given her a limit on clothing.

"It's my job to know everything. I'm Mrs. S.'s right hand." Ava smiled. "How do you like your room?"

"It's bigger than my condo at home." The room had a king-size bed, a closet fit for a queen, and an entertainment system that boggled her mind. She could barely deal with one remote control at home. Three sat on her nightstand in the bedroom she could now call her own. The room also had an area she could use as an office, complete with a desk, chair, and love seat. Done in shades of blue, white, and yellow with chintz curtains, the whole bedroom had an elegant air. She wondered if Mrs. Sharpe had decorated.

"Mine too." Ava gestured to the room. "You'll get the hang of the house's layout the longer you're here. The wing you're in is for guests. So far, that's just you. Mrs. S.'s room is in the next

hall over. Jack and Melissa's quarters are out back, that cottage house you can see through the window."

Olivia peered through and saw a pretty house lit from within.

They spent the next hour talking about flowers and housing costs in general. It seemed Ava had planned to move out West before she'd found the job working as Mrs. Sharpe's assistant.

"So where's your room?" Olivia asked.

"I'm downstairs because I need to be closest to whatever everybody needs. And by everybody, I mean Mrs. S. And by needs, I mean her office." She smiled, showcasing a dimple.

"I'll have to be careful of your boss."

"And now your boss. I'm just teasing. Mrs. S. is good people."

"Good to know."

They left the room and walked along the second-floor hallway past the main stairs.

Olivia told herself she wouldn't ask. "So where does the team reside?" So much for not asking.

"In here." Ava stopped in front of a long wing. "There're all prior SEALs, big guys with big appetites. But don't worry. They're mostly harmless."

At that moment, loud footsteps sounded behind them.

"Speak of the devil." Ava crossed her arms over her chest and raised a brow.

Olivia turned to find all four sweaty, haggard men. They wore jeans and nothing else. And no shoes. Strange. She had a hard time tearing her gaze away from such fine physiques and found herself wondering, not for the first time, just what kind of work these men did for Uncle Sam.

At the sight of her, they stopped. Curiously they didn't project the same hungers they had earlier. Perhaps they'd worked it out of their systems, since they looked like they'd just gone ten rounds with a heavy bag and lost.

"Ava," Jules greeted. He nodded to Olivia. "I see you've made the cut. Welcome. We met earlier. I'm Jules."

"And that's Kisho, Jesse, and Gunnar," Ava finished for him, pointing out the respective team members.

"Hayashi, Fallon, and Tersch," the blond corrected.

Ava ignored him. "Kisho is the quiet one with the soul of a poet. Jesse's a player, so watch out for him."

"And what about me?" Gunnar, or Tersch, asked.

"Gunnar's a walking hemorrhoid. Ignore him." Ava pulled Olivia with her and brushed by the men, who chuckled, except for Gunnar, who growled. "We're on a tour. Excuse us."

As she passed, Olivia's hand accidentally brushed Jesse's. The contact sent sparks of desire through her, and she gasped, unable to help herself. Unlike before, this time she felt a sense of awareness and something more, a hint of wildness under the surface.

"See you later," he murmured.

She could feel his eyes searing into her back as she walked away. She followed Ava down one of the sets of stairs and explored the downstairs, trying to ignore her intense reaction to Jesse Fallon.

"Don't let the guys intimidate you. They tend to take over a room, you know?"

Olivia nodded. "They're all so...big." Lame, but it sounded better than sexy, handsome, or hot as hell. How professional was that?

"Yeah, and you get to work with them. Lucky you." Ava pretended to hang herself with a rope.

Olivia chuckled. "This isn't what I was expecting at all. Everything is so, well, relaxed. You're in jeans, and I could be mistaken, but I don't think any of the men were wearing shoes."

Ava smiled. "We do things a lot differently around here. This isn't Dam Neck or Camp Lejeune. You could say we're attached to the military in a very, very loose sort of way. In fact, the less we look military, the better it is for all of us."

She didn't say any more, but Olivia understood the implication. No one here wanted attention brought to them. The veiled secrecy only made her that much more curious about what the mission would entail.

They walked around a spacious kitchen, past the long oak dining table that could comfortably fit a dozen diners, and into the living area. A great, big, open floor plan that would

be terrific for entertaining. Yeah, right, Olivia. Can you see those guys sitting around drinking wine and eating canapés?

"This is where everyone seems to congregate every night. Movies or cards, you name it. The guys are actually pretty easygoing after they've had a decent meal. Melissa is an angel in the kitchen."

"How long has everyone been here?"

Ava perched against a card table. "Well, I'm new, but Jack and Melissa have been here since the guys moved in, a year, I think. The team's mostly here and gone, lots of overseas missions. Then Admiral London took a backseat. Mrs. Sharpe is in charge of the group now. She brought me in."

Olivia paused. "What do the guys do?"

"Protect and defend. What else?" Ava said, a twinkle in her eyes. "Mrs. S. will brief you and the others soon enough. You need to get used to the team dynamics before you head out to Brazil. So lucky. I wish I were going."

Excitement thrummed. "Brazil, hmm? I haven't been there since I was a little girl."

"Cool. Make sure to bring me back something special."

"Sure thing." A sudden longing for family assailed her. Time to call home and talk to Uncle Jaime again. "Can I make a phone call?"

"You'll have to ask Mrs. Sharpe about that. But be careful. The woman will put you to work so fast, your head will spin."

"Ava." Mrs. Sharpe's voice carried through the kitchen.

"See?" Ava sighed and left her.

Alone, Olivia considered the strange turn her life had taken. She couldn't say she was bored. Not any longer. One look at Jesse had cured her of that. She wondered what he saw when he looked at her, if he saw anything. She couldn't read him, not that she'd tried overly hard. Still, it wouldn't hurt to put her feelers out.

But that's *all* she'd be putting out.

The last four months she'd been happily celibate. Tired of attracting Mr. Wrong in search of Mr. Right, she'd decided to shift men into a low priority in her life. And the most important

priority at this moment was settling into this new job. God, she'd so needed a change in her life. Men were predictable; the job was predictable—hell, even her aunt and uncle asked the same questions every time they talked. "How are you, querida? Do you have a boyfriend? When are you coming to visit? When are we going to see some grandbabies?" Like clockwork.

She frowned. Maybe not calling Uncle Jaime and Aunt Belinda would be best.

"Olivia Lynn. Doesn't sound Portuguese," Jesse said from behind her, his voice smooth.

She started and turned to face him. The others were nowhere in sight. *Easy, Olivia. Remember, you're off men right now. Get your head together.* If only she could convince her heart rate to relax. "Is it Jesse or Fallon? I'm not sure what to call you."

He smiled, and her pulse shot into overdrive. "For you, Jesse."

No wonder Ava had called him a player. No man should look this good in clothes. Then she remembered what he looked like with his shirt off, and had to force herself not to check her lips for drool.

He waited, and she realized he'd asked her a question. "Lynn was my father's name, but my mother's was Esteves before she married him."

"Hmm."

"What?" He didn't say anything, looking her over from head to toe as if envisioning her naked. The arrogance annoyed her. *That's right. He's just like every other gorgeous man you've fallen for: selfish, flawed, and ultimately, boring.*

"Just imagining you in Rio wearing one of those string bikinis they're famous for."

She blushed through a scowl. "Does this approach ever work for you?"

"No." He sighed. "Apparently it's not working now either."

She didn't want to smile but couldn't help herself.

"You have the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen. That blue-green. It's like Key West and the Caribbean all rolled into one tropical paradise." He looked away, but not before she saw his pupils *stretch*.

"Jesse?" Olivia stepped closer to him, fascinated. Like before, she could sense nothing of his emotions. But she visibly saw the hunger she'd sensed in the others. *What the hell?*

He blinked rapidly and drew in a deep breath. "Sweetheart, back up. You take another step closer, and I'm going to—"

Jules entered, frowned at Jesse, and inserted himself between his friend and Olivia. "So, Olivia, what do you think of the place so far?" He took her by the arm and led her into the kitchen.

She glanced over her shoulder with a frown, but Jesse had turned away.

"Don't mind Fallon. He means well. Can't help himself from falling all over a pretty woman."

That nailed it. As if she needed another reason not to take an interest in Jesse, or Fallon, or whatever the hell they called him. "This is probably the biggest house I've ever been inside, if you don't count the Biltmore Estate in Asheville."

At his blank look, she added, "You know, the one George Vanderbilt built back in the late 1800s? His 'house' has over two hundred and fifty rooms."

Jules smiled, and the expression warmed her. She felt soothing waves of energy, a calm that contradicted the worry she'd felt when she glanced over her shoulder at Jesse. "It still feels huge to me. I'm used to a stateroom on board ship. At best, a hole-in-the-wall I called my apartment when I lived in Virginia Beach."

"Where in Virginia Beach?"

They chatted by the expansive kitchen counter while Melissa fussed over dinner. All the while, Jesse kept his eyes on her, as well as his distance across the open, spacious area in the living room. The rest of the team joined him, cleaned and revitalized as they sparred back and forth.

She turned her attention back to Jules. "Do you know what this mission will entail?"

"Yes and no." He sniffed and sighed. "I could eat a horse. I'm famished."

So much for getting any information out of the friendliest of the bunch. "I guess we'll find out when Mrs. Sharpe is good and ready."

He grunted, and she felt his flare of irritation. She intuitively knew it wasn't directed at her but at Mrs. Sharpe.

"How well do you know Mrs. Sharpe?" she asked, conscious to keep her voice low.

"Not well enough. She's new to Dawn Endeavor. Hell, we all are," he murmured.

Aware of Jules's probing gaze, she continued. "Mrs. Sharpe seems familiar to me, but I can't place her. I don't suppose you know where she was before she joined you?"

"No, but it's interesting you say she looks familiar. I'm curious. From what I know, you worked intel systems in Dam Neck. No special-ops experience, no critical analysis in your bio, right?"

"That's right."

"So why are you here? We normally find ourselves in hot situations. Dangerous situations," he clarified.

"That's a good question. My supervisor told me about an opportunity for temporary duty away from training. I made no secret I was looking to go somewhere else. Frankly, sitting around computers all day and teaching software to sailors and civilians who would rather be elsewhere isn't my idea of a good time."

"I get that."

"I'm not sure why he even allowed me time off, since we have an inspection coming up, but I jumped at it. The only prerequisites were for a native speaker able to deploy at a moment's notice. And I held the clearance needed already."

"Right." Jules paused, then leaned closer, staring directly into her eyes. She didn't flinch, used to dealing with men trying to throw their weight around. He overwhelmed her, as he surely knew. What she found curious was her muted attraction. Though he clearly had looks, brawn, and intelligence, she wasn't drawn to him. Nor was she overly attracted to any of the others. Except for Jesse.

This close to him, she'd nearly plastered him with a kiss.

"Mine," she heard echo in her mind.

He leaned back, bemused, and she had the odd sense he'd heard that same voice. "Sorry, thought I saw something in your eye."

"My eye. Yeah, sure." She huffed and deliberately turned her back on him to grab a cup off the counter. Shaken, she didn't know what to think. Sharing feelings had always come naturally to her. But thoughts? "Can't blame a guy for trying." Jules shrugged, feeling not at all sorry for acting like a jerk.

Actually his arrogance put her at ease. She was used to dealing with the macho type. "Sure you can. Hey, Melissa, what's for dinner?"

"Breathe deep and focus," Hayashi muttered, gripping Fallon's arm. "Damn. What the hell got into you?"

Fallon wished he knew. Hell, after the rough sex he and the team had just indulged in, he should have been too tired to be turned on again. But something about Olivia drew him. His inner beast purred around her, wanting to touch. He'd been a hairbreadth from grabbing her and taking her up to his room for some fun, when Jules had arrived.

Though he hadn't liked Jules's intervention, he'd needed it. But seeing his friend close in on his female bugged the shit out of him. Time to prove his worth, to flaunt his strength and superiority.

"Mine," he growled in a low voice and clenched his fists.

Tersch grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. "What's that? You want to see some television? Great idea." He forcibly sat Fallon down on the couch and sat beside him. Hayashi caged him in on the other side. In a low voice, he rumbled, "What the fuck? You're broadcasting now? I heard you."

"So did I," Hayashi added.

"And why are you sniffing around the female? Dude, you just came like three times."

"Four," Hayashi murmured.

Fallon flushed. "Shut up."

"It's true. I'm sensing a lot of frustration, Fallon." Hayashi's calm voice began to soothe his need for violence and sex. "And this telepathic loudspeaker is something new, isn't it? I know you've been working with Mrs. Sharpe on it, but I have to say, I'm impressed. I didn't know you'd progressed so far."

He hadn't, not until tonight. "It's no big deal."

"Sure it is," Tersch added, smiling. "Just think how that can come in handy the next time we're under fire. You can share info a lot easier with the team."

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

31

He had a point, but Fallon couldn't think past Olivia just now. To his relief, she moved away from Jules and engaged Melissa in conversation.

Jules joined them, casually bent forward, and shoved a heavy fist in Fallon's gut that took his breath away. In a low voice, he said, "What the *hell* were you going to do? *Change* in front of Olivia?"

"Not...exactly." Fallon tried to catch his breath.

"Well, keep your dick under control. The female isn't just a pretty face. There's a helluva lot of energy packed inside her."

"I wouldn't mind being packed inside her," Tersch murmured.

Fallon's beast didn't find him amusing. Claws began to replace his fingernails.

Jules snarled in a low voice, "Put a lid on it, Fallon. Tersch, shut up. In fact, you steer clear of the female too. Hayashi, you take her." He exhaled loudly when Fallon turned on Hayashi, his pupils mere slits. "To occupy her while we get *you* under control," he directed back to Fallon. "Come on."

Tersch stood and called out to Melissa, "We'll be right back. Forgot something."

He dragged Fallon away behind Jules, but Fallon felt Olivia's eyes on him all the same. He didn't understand this need to be near her. And he didn't like it. He had enough problems controlling his abilities lately.

His senses had been spiraling out of control. His mental abilities had grown under Mrs. Sharpe's tutelage. She'd taught him to increase his hold on the others, to enlarge his capacity to encompass not only thoughts but images as well.

Except her instruction physically hurt. Headaches, nosebleeds, and an unhappy beast wanting to play instead of train. Then the woman took them all off the shots needed to subdue their mating heats, stating the medication prevented them from fully developing themselves into the Circs they were meant to be.

And now look at him.

"Shit."

"You said it." Jules didn't look happy. He stopped them farther down the hallway, away from prying eyes and ears. "What the hell was that 'mine' crap?"

"I don't know. I just didn't like you so close to Olivia."

Instead of chastising him, as Fallon expected, Jules rubbed his chin, his gaze thoughtful. "Really?"

"Hell, Jules. Lately I find it hard to think. Sharpe has us off the shots. She's playing with our minds. And then we have the heat right as our new guest arrives. Sue me if I'm a little off-kilter." He tried to play it off, but the truth was Olivia shook him. The minute they'd made eye contact, something inside him shifted. But God forbid he told Jules any more. He had no intention of being put under a magnifying glass. This next mission sounded important. The team needed him, whether they knew it or not.

"Off-kilter, hmm? Okay, Fallon. Get yourself together and join us for dinner. Five minutes."

"Five minutes. Got it."

Five minutes later, he still didn't have it. Eschewing dinner for a much needed getaway, he left the mansion and gave his beast free rein. Time enough for an ass chewing when he returned. And maybe in his absence, he'd figure out why Olivia Lynn bothered him so damned much.

"What's up?" Tersch asked, stopping Jules before they rejoined the others. "I know that calculating gleam."

"Wow. I didn't think you knew any words more than two syllables long."

"Ass. Come on, Jules. Is Fallon okay?"

Jules wondered. "We all know the shots weren't working like they used to, even before Sharpe took us off them. But I have to admit, I'm satisfied from our workout earlier."

"Yeah. Didn't realize Fallon was such a stud."

"Me either." It didn't make sense. Fallon was dependable. Always ready with a smile or joke, the easygoing male was a cohesive member of the team. Hayashi had a tendency to drift into his own little world. Tersch could get lost in bouts of anger or depression. And Jules knew he sometimes overlooked the immediate needs of the team in favor of the bigger picture. But Fallon could be counted on to hold everyone together. The communicator effectively spoke without speaking.

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

His possessive attitude toward Olivia reminded Jules of another group of Circs and the way they'd acted around their females. Yet hadn't the admiral and Doc exhausted the search for more female Circs? Nothing about Olivia smelled Circ. Beautiful, sexy, and psychically gifted, yes, but other than that, she wasn't so much different from Ava.

"Jules?" Tersch asked again.

"Fallon's fine. Don't worry. I'll talk with Sharpe and iron things out."

"Better you than me. I still don't like that woman."

Jules smiled. "That's because she won't take any of your shit. Just like Ava."

"You'd think a woman that fine would have the sense to appreciate a Norse god like myself."

Jules laughed, his mood lightened by Tersch's familiar arrogance. "Well said. Any woman who can resist you must have something wrong with her."

"Yeah," he grumbled. "Must be something in the water around here."

"Must be."

Olivia didn't react to Tersch or him the way she'd reacted to Fallon. He'd watch her with Hayashi tonight to see how she acted around him. As team leader, he couldn't afford to let her affect his team in a negative way. But if what he suspected might be true... The possibility would mean a brighter future for them all.

Chapter Four

"So, Olivia, do you come from a large family?" Kisho asked as they sat around the table.

Kisho, Gunnar, and Jules sat across the table from her, while Ava and Mrs. Sharpe sat on either side of her. Melissa and Jack had retired to their cottage for the night. Jesse remained conspicuously absent, much to Mrs. Sharpe's voiced irritation.

"My parents died when I was young. I grew up with my aunt and uncle and a bevy of cousins. All boys, so I know how to deal with you people," she warned, pointing her fork in Gunnar's direction.

He grinned and continued to eat the mountain of food on his plate. Pot roast, roasted potatoes, cooked beets, and green beans filled her belly, but she hadn't made close to a dent in her plate as compared to the men around her. Ava also consumed a vast amount of food for such a small woman.

"Yeah, well, we all know women are nothing but trouble. Sad but true," he said before Ava could contradict him.

Mrs. Sharpe favored him with a patronizing grin. "Ah, the innocence of youth."

Jules snorted. "True. Tersch has the mentality of a four-year-old, but you can't be that old, Mrs. Sharpe."

She shrugged prettily, maintaining that air of mystery Olivia was coming to associate with the woman. "We do what we can, Jules. A woman's secrets should never be revealed."

The way she tilted her head tugged again at Olivia's memory. "Have we met before, Mrs. Sharpe?"

The table quieted.

"No, I don't believe we have," the older woman said softly, her gaze intent. "Why do you ask?"

Olivia wished she could remember. "No reason. Déjà vu, I guess."

"No such thing," Ava cut in. "Just repressed memory is all. Ask Kisho about it."

She turned to Kisho, who regarded her with a soberness in keeping with his quiet at the table.

"One thing you'll find the longer you're here is that there are forces at work in the world we cannot begin to understand."

"Here we go. I hate when he goes all Zen on us," Gunnar muttered.

Kisho ignored him. "Many of us here have a special ability. I can see glimpses of potential tomorrows."

Olivia stared at him, wide-eyed, but didn't discount him. Truth felt like a warm blanket, much like what she felt from him now. "Isn't that dangerous? If you know too much, you could directly influence something you weren't meant to."

Mrs. Sharpe beamed. "I told you she'd understand."

"You don't discount the possibility of prognostication?" Kisho asked.

"No. I spent a lot of time in the jungles of Brazil in my youth. My family is dedicated to preserving the rain forest, and you wouldn't believe half the stuff that lives in there—things regular people would call impossible."

"Like what?" Jules interrupted.

"Like plants that heal. Like animals that shouldn't exist but do. There are rumors of mystics living deep in the heart of the Amazon. It sounds like a fantasy, but when I was little, my aunt filled my head with stories." She smiled. "I can't convince myself it was all fiction."

"Sometimes the unexplained is more fun," Ava agreed. "And sometimes it's a pain in the ass. Like the mystery of why men can't quite find the hamper two feet from their dirty clothes. Or why there are always five million soda cans littering the counters, when the recycle bin is just under the sink. Or why—"

"Ava helps around the house," Mrs. Sharpe explained with a hint of a smile. "Not that I can fault her. Those are mysteries that used to keep me up late at night."

Hinting that the woman used to be married, maybe? Or that now that she had Ava to help, she didn't need to worry about such matters anymore?

"But that aside, I had hoped we could talk tonight about your upcoming trip to Brazil." She glared at the seat next to her, the one Fallon should have filled. "Jules, you can catch him up, after I talk to him."

Jules sighed and nodded.

"Gentlemen, Olivia, in two weeks, the five of you will be traveling into the heavily touristed area of Trindade in the Brazilian state of Bahia."

"But if it's tourist heavy, why do you need me? If your contact is there, he'll probably speak English," Olivia said.

"When you meet our contact, you'll have to speak the language to pass on the instructions he'll give you. Gatito doesn't trust outsiders."

"What? I'm not some type of operative. I'm here as a linguist. Linguists work with headphones, behind a desk."

"Mrs. Sharpe, I have to agree." Jules frowned. "Taking a civilian into danger makes no sense."

"Damn, Alicia. Even for you, this is a bit much," Tersch added.

Ava said nothing, but her expression said she agreed with Tersch.

Mrs. Sharpe waited. "Are you all finished? I am in possession of information you don't have and don't yet need. Jules, I would never endanger your lives, or Olivia's, were it not absolutely necessary. And remember, I have the admiral's go-ahead on this. Do you really think he'd risk her—or you—in any way if it weren't absolutely necessary?

"I need a woman who speaks like a native, one who can tell a truth from a lie."

Olivia froze. "What?"

"Come now, Olivia. Kisho's been forthcoming. The others will be as well. They need to know what you can do."

"That has no bearing on any of this," Olivia said stiffly. She hated the curiosity, the suspicion. She'd seen it too many times before—the very reason she kept her abilities secret.

"Oh but it does. I didn't need just any linguist; I needed *you*. Just you, Olivia Lynn." The surety of Mrs. Sharpe's words spooked Olivia into confessing the truth.

"It's no big deal." She shrugged. "I'm an empath."

"You read emotions?" Ava asked, curiosity but no scorn in her voice.

"I feel them. And truth feels warm. When people are near, and when I touch them, I can usually feel what they feel. If they're lying, I can tell. But I don't read thoughts or anything like that."

Jules nodded. "I see why you wanted her here. But I still don't like the idea of bringing an untrained civilian into danger."

Mrs. Sharpe shook her head. "I understand that, but Olivia is not as helpless as you might think. I've also been considering using her for another reason altogether, as a control."

"Excuse me?" Olivia asked.

Kisho frowned. "This sounds all too familiar. We heard the same things at Pearson Labs."

"You know, Alicia, that place that imprisoned us for a year? The one that performed experiments where they drugged us and turned good men rogue?" Gunnar added harshly.

"Tersch," Jules warned.

"This isn't the same thing," Mrs. Sharpe asserted. "The laboratory you are going to find and destroy in the jungles of Brazil has cultivated a drug derived from a special plant found only in a particular section of the rain forest. Circs are immune to its effects, on purpose, I suspect. Normal people are put into a state of almost catatonia, unable to do anything but obey. It's information gathering at its best."

"So you need Olivia as a control. For what purpose?"

"I need to see what it does to a psychic mind."

"No way. Sorry, Mrs. Sharpe, but I didn't sign on to be a guinea pig." Was the woman off her rocker?

"You don't understand, Olivia. I wouldn't inject you without a counteragent ready. We know that this drug has already been used to ferret out national secrets from a few members of the government the admiral is currently working to contain. These men not only told everything they knew; they predicted future events before dying of brain aneurysms within twenty-four hours of being dosed. But a team of scientists worked on decoding the serum. We now have a viable antidote."

Jules scowled. "One that's been tested?"

"Yes. Those infected with the drug recovered in minutes after being inoculated with the antidote, with no lingering side effects. The problem is—" She paused and narrowed her gaze on Olivia. "I shouldn't need to repeat that what is said in this room does not go beyond these walls."

Olivia nodded. Who would believe her anyway? Truth serums had always been out there, but not ones that gave people ESP or controlled minds. Science fiction and fantasy, not a military reality.

"The problem is," Mrs. Sharpe continued, "that a branch of the Defense Department has been working on developing psychic soldiers. We have a bad feeling this drug was invented as a direct threat to stop Admiral London's progress with his new division."

"So that's why the admiral dumped us. He's got new toys to play with." Gunnar speared a piece of meat and shoved it into his mouth.

Ava glared at him. "The admiral didn't dump you. He was forced to take over this other project so that what happened to you doesn't happen to them."

"Ava." Mrs. Sharpe shook her head. "That's not a discussion we need to have right now. What Admiral London is doing is important, just as important as what you all are going to do."

Olivia's head was spinning. "Hold on a minute. Let's start at the beginning. Exactly who the hell are you people? And what's this about labs and psychic research?" She glanced at the three unflinching faces across from her, then turned to Mrs. Sharpe. "If you want me to help you, I need to know what you know."

"Good luck with that," Gunnar said under his breath.

"Have you ever heard of Project Dawn?" Mrs. Sharpe asked.

Olivia blinked in surprise. "Yes, actually. A little over a year ago, there was some huge scandal with a senator and some military bigwigs associated with Project Dawn. I remember because my division heads moved all over the place trying to plug holes in the rumor mill. Stories about super soldiers and genetic research gone bad. More science fiction..." She trailed off, until she realized the men she stared at could easily fit the description of the Circs she'd heard so much about.

"Not fiction," Jules admitted. "My team is the second generation of super soldiers. We're called Circs, after the Circe serum used to change our genetic code." He shared a look with Mrs.

Sharpe. "Basically, we're stronger, faster, and more lethal than the sailors and soldiers you know."

"And we kick jarhead ass," Gunnar added with a toothy smile. "Tell that to Roane the next time you see him," he said to Mrs. Sharpe.

Confused, Olivia asked, "Who's Roane?"

Mrs. Sharpe rolled her eyes at Gunnar. "He's the team leader for the original batch of Circs, a group of U.S. Marines. And a digression. Olivia, this team was put together to stop scientific research gone wrong. The intent of Dawn Endeavor is to stop rogue science from hurting the men and women who defend our country. The original Project Dawn was compromised. The lead scientist manipulated good people, turning some into monsters and others into brutal killers. And others"—she paused to indicate Jules and the others—"into weapons for good.

"Now we do our best to make sure Dawn Endeavor functions as the initial project was originally intended, to help our government. If we don't find and destroy this new biological weapon, we'll lose not only a new resource at our disposal—namely those psychic warriors fighting for us—but we'll also chance giving the enemy vital insights into our nation. Imagine what they could learn from men of power in our government? Not only national secrets but foresights we couldn't help to combat."

A real problem. "So you want me to work with this team of supermen," she said slowly, her eyes on the Circs, "and let myself get infected with this drug to see if it hurts me the way it did them."

"Yes"

"Do I need to die to prove it works?" she asked drily.

"Not at all. We'll bring you back to safety and extract you from Bahia before the team takes out the lab. Once here, under proper supervision, you'll be dosed with the drug. If you begin to have visions, which we know isn't a part of your skill set, we'll inject you with the antidote."

"I'm sorry, but I need time to think about this."

"Me too," Jules growled. "We're not using Olivia to test some drug that kills people. Bad enough you want us to walk her into danger."

"It's a lot to process," Mrs. Sharpe agreed, ignoring Jules. "Why don't you take a walk outside? The path is lit, so you should have no trouble seeing during the dark. You'd be surprised, but the back gardens are particularly pleasant this time of year, despite the cold. The mums and pansies are bearing up just fine."

Blinking at the mundane mention of flowers after hearing about psychic warfare and unbelievable Circs, Olivia pushed back from the table. "You know, maybe I will."

Ava moved to go with her when Mrs. Sharpe shook her head. "Let Olivia have some time to herself."

Jules gave the woman a look Olivia couldn't decipher. But she suddenly needed some space. She left wondering why the hell she'd wished for so much excitement. It seemed her days of being bored were totally numbered.

Fallon watched Olivia stroll through the garden, her hands tucked into the pockets of the formfitting jacket she wore. Her hair had started to come free from the clasp holding it back, framing her face with delicate strands of dark silk.

So much for getting this need to touch her out of his system. At least he'd dealt with his more pressing need to handle his beast. The run he'd taken had soothed his wild urge to mate, which made no sense. Too much Circ sex lately, perhaps.

Wanting to at least spend some time with Olivia that didn't involve stalking or staring through trees, he raced back to the woods where he'd left his clothes, *changed* back, and put them on. Then after hurrying through the house and skirting the dining area, he joined her again outside.

She turned when he opened the door and shut it behind him. "What are you doing out here?"

"I figured I'm in enough trouble for missing dinner. Mrs. Sharpe is a stickler for punctuality."

"She wasn't happy you missed the meal."

Her troubled gaze bothered him. He stuck his hands in his pockets so he wouldn't be able to reach out and offer comfort. "You okay?"

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

She regarded him with more than curiosity, but a sense of unease.

"Hell. She told you about us."

She nodded.

He swore under his breath. "Didn't think she would yet. So you know...what?"

"That you're some kind of super soldier."

"Sailor. Super sailor. We're SEALs."

Olivia gifted him with a small grin. "Go navy."

"Yeah."

"So you guys are really strong and fast. And it seems you're all psychic too."

"Like you," he reasoned, aware he still couldn't read her. "Most of us had weird abilities before Circs ever existed. The Circe serum just enhanced them. I'm telepathic, but you're closed to me."

"Oh, wow. Kisho said he can see the future. But I didn't know about the rest of you."

"Jules sees auras. Tersch is a battle maniac. We call him our own berserker."

"That fits."

"What about you?" He took a few steps closer, careful not to spook her. The fear he'd seen on her face bothered him. Fallon wanted her aware of him, not scared of him.

She flushed. "I can sense emotions."

"An empath. Cool."

"But not around you." She frowned. "This is going to sound forward, but can I touch vou?"

His heart raced. "As if I'll say no."

She didn't smile. Instead she stepped closer and took his larger hand in her own. The touch electrified him, but it put him no closer to reading her.

Huge blue-green eyes blinked up at him. "I can't tell what you're feeling at all. This is amazing!"

"Good or bad?" he asked huskily, closing his hand around hers. Her skin felt so soft under his calloused palm. This close, he could smell a lingering scent of flowers, either her perfume or shampoo. Her head fit under his chin, and he knew if he angled closer, he could pull her into his embrace and feel her hot breath on his chest.

"G-good," she stammered, caught in his stare.

He wanted to know what she thought as she looked at him, but not knowing was an enticement all its own. "I'm sorry about this, but I can't stop myself."

"From what?"

He lowered his head, waiting for her to try to bolt. When she remained still, he gentled his hold and savored the first press of her lips under his. So perfect, so goddamn right. She closed her eyes, thick lashes fanning her rosy cheeks as she responded, ever so slowly, to his touch.

Tentative yet open, she blossomed under his mouth and turned him rock hard in a heartbeat. He slid his tongue inside and groaned as her flavor burst on his tongue.

Her hands crept around his neck and pulled him closer. And then, without knowing how, he lost control of the kiss. The shy woman in his arms turned into a firecracker. She opened her mouth and teased his tongue closer, capturing his flesh and demanding a heady response. He rocked into her, wanting to feel the wetness he could sense building between her legs.

She held his hair tight and nipped at his lower lip.

"Fuck," he said on a breath as he looked down at her.

Dewy eyed, rosy lipped, and flushed. So damned sexy.

He lowered his mouth again and let her have her way as she buried her hands in his hair. The damned jacket she wore impeded his touch, and he slashed through it without thought, needing to put his hands on her naked breasts.

As if thinking it, he made it happen. Her shirt gaped, and her bra fell apart under a well-placed claw. Then his hands were full of her, the weight of her globes and the press of her taut nipples like lightning, setting off the fire of lust within.

"I need to be inside you, right now," he rasped and traced a hand down her belly and under her skirt.

The thin triangle of her panties proved no barrier as he slid a his hand beneath the material and between her legs. Shoving his tongue inside her mouth again, he speared her with a finger,

enticed by the feminine heat coating him. So tight, so hot. She fit his finger as if made for him, and he loved her responsiveness.

Olivia dripping wet was a fantasy come to life. Thoughts of how little he actually knew this woman paled in comparison to the lust riding him hard.

He wanted to impale her, to come inside her as many times as he could, then to *change* and do it all again.

The rabid thought slowed him down, and he knew he'd have to corral the beast. This time. But he wanted more. Had to have more.

She tore her mouth from his. "Oh God. What are you doing to me?" She gasped and groaned when he grazed her clit.

He pinched a nipple, then circled to the other. Bending down, he took the ripe fruit in his mouth and sucked.

She cried out and squirmed in his hold, surging against his steely cock. Hungry to feel her all around him, he knew he'd come in seconds if he took down his pants. Instead he lingered on her breasts and pussy, laving her nipple with hunger before knowing he had to have more.

He withdrew his hands and knelt in front of her before she could protest. After tearing her skirt, he then ripped through her panties and shoved his face into her groin. The scent of her heat went straight to his head, and he prodded her thighs wider. Latching onto her full clit, he devoured her.

Encouraged by her desperate cries, he plunged a finger inside her, thrusting the way he intended to with his cock. Her walls clung to him, and she pressed her hips closer, pulling at his hair with a desperation that soothed his beast. His mate desired him. *Wanted him*.

He nipped at her clit and shoved his tongue inside her, stretching to fill her as much as he could.

She keened and rippled around him, coming hard into his mouth.

He continued to caress her, enamored with the scent and taste of the woman he knew, on a fundamental level, to be his. She satisfied the part of him that was always empty. Even his beast wanted her, to know all of Olivia, to possess her.

44 Marie Harte

She shivered above him; whether from the cold or an excess of passion, he couldn't say. He rose to his feet, ignoring the discomfort of unanswered arousal. As much as he wanted to come inside her, the confusion and wariness on her face told him now was not the time.

"Easy, baby. I've got you."

She continued to stare at him, slowly warming when he took her in his arms.

"I guess I'm easy, huh?" she said on a half laugh.

"Not at all. Tasty, though."

She blushed and nestled her cheek against his chest, the gesture more intimate than what they'd just done.

Fallon couldn't explain it. He didn't believe in love at first sight. Had never been emotionally attached to any woman but his mother, and she'd passed long ago. He liked women; hell, he loved fucking them. But this, holding Olivia while his body throbbed in abject misery, had to be the best thing he'd experienced in a long, long time.

Chapter Five

"Are you okay? I worried when you didn't come back last night," Ava said as she peeked around Olivia's door.

With Fallon's help, she'd sneaked back to her room, tattered clothes and all. She didn't know how he'd torn her clothes apart, but after that incredible, exhausting orgasm, she hadn't much cared.

This morning she felt more relaxed and bewildered than she'd imagined she would.

"Ah, I'm fine. Just groggy after such a long day yesterday. All this has been a bit much to swallow." Olivia shoved a hank of dark hair from her eyes and sat up in bed. "What time is it?"

"It's after nine. I would have let you sleep, but the old ball and chain wants a group meeting at ten. Thought you might want to clean up first."

Olivia looked for her suitcases but couldn't find them.

Ava buffed her nails against her chest. "I unpacked everything for you while you slept." She studied Olivia with a critical eye. "So tall, so pretty, all that long, black hair. And you don't even snore. You suck." She stuck out her tongue, then closed the door behind her as she left.

What an odd woman.

Olivia stumbled out of bed, amazed her legs could hold her. As she showered in the adjoining bathroom, she couldn't help wishing she could swirl down the drain with the rest of the water. Oh God. How was she going to look at Jesse again? How could she look at his team? No doubt the handsome playboy had told everyone what they'd done, how he'd nailed the new girl in under a day.

Though he'd been the perfect gentleman last night, even going so far as to dress her in a nightshirt and help her into bed, she'd been through this song and dance before. In her experience, the prettier the guy, the worse his behavior.

Jesse was by far the most handsome man she'd ever...what? Fucked? Not quite. Though he'd brought her to bliss, he hadn't experienced the same—at least, not at her hands. Why had he done that?

Puzzled he hadn't displayed the characteristic selfishness his type normally did, she relived every kiss, caress, and touch from the night before. She had to end her shower by dialing down the heat, cooling her libido in a hurry to make the ten-o'clock meeting.

After drying off, dressing, and blow-drying her hair, Olivia dressed in slacks, a sweater, and a pair of leather mules. Taking a deep breath, she resolved to act as if nothing had happened. That she hadn't broken every cardinal rule in the workplace by sleeping with a coworker, if she could call Jesse that.

When she opened her door, she found a rose and a short note under it. *Our secret*.

Warmed, though still hesitant to believe in him, Olivia tucked the rose and the note in her room and hustled down the stairs. She retraced her steps twice but found the kitchen soon enough. To her delight, a warmed plate of eggs and toast awaited her. She took it to the expansive counter and pulled up a stool across from the team.

"Hey, Olivia. You missed the rest of the bacon by minutes. Thank Gunnar for eating the last of it," Kisho greeted.

"No worries. I don't eat much in the morning."

Jesse, Gunnar, and Jules sat at the counter. Kisho stood on her side of it, drinking water. Jules read the paper, while Gunnar and Jesse traded insults.

She glanced at Jesse, saw his smile of welcome, and quickly glanced away, praying she looked more at ease than she felt. God, her libido kicked into high gear at just the sight of him.

Kisho frowned. "You should eat more. You could do with a few pounds."

"I knew I liked you."

He grinned back at her, and she felt like she'd earned a treat. She had the feeling Kisho didn't smile as often as he should.

Cupping a mug of coffee, Gunnar scowled. "Hey, you snooze, you lose. Sorry, sweet cakes, but I like meat. A growing boy's got to eat."

"Jerk." Fallon smacked him in the back of the head. "Ever heard of ladies first?"

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

"Please, she's no lady. Olivia has 'trouble' written all over her."

She grinned. "You're damned right. And don't you forget it."

He grunted. "See?"

Jesse sighed. "This is as good as he gets. I'll apologize in advance."

"Nothing more we can do about him," Kisho agreed. "And it was all we could do to get him housebroken."

"Smart-ass." Gunnar tried to hide a grin. "Don't let the Asian fool you. Kisho acts all nice and friendly, but he's deadly. One word of his poetry and you'll die of boredom."

Kisho said something in Japanese.

"What?" she asked.

"I told him he has the face of a goat and the lovemaking skills of a swine. But it's much more *poetic* in Japanese."

"How'd you sleep, Olivia?" Jesse asked.

Jules looked up from his paper. He narrowed his gaze at Jesse, then her.

She studied her plate and toyed with her eggs. "Fine. This place is better than a five-star hotel. Ava even put my clothes away for me."

"Did you enjoy the gardens last night?" Jules asked.

Olivia took a bite of breakfast and forced herself to chew, concentrating on not blushing. She didn't look up. "I did. I love the landscaping around here. Very pretty, even in the cold." Good job. Now if you can just keep your cheeks from flaming every time you see Jesse's talented mouth, you'll be okay.

She still didn't understand why she'd let him go down on her. Olivia had no problem expressing a healthy sex drive, but oral *before* a first date had never been her MO. No doubt about it, Jesse was dangerous. She'd be best to steer clear of him while she acclimated to her environs and the team.

At least he hadn't bragged to his friends. Kisho wouldn't say anything if he knew, but Gunnar most certainly would.

"Ah good, you're all here." Mrs. Sharpe joined them. She wore a similar outfit to the one she'd worn yesterday. Gray wool slacks but with a black dress shirt and the pearls. "I've put

together a folder for each of you. Study the contents thoroughly, and you'll know as much as I know. I want this to be your focus for the next few days. After that you'll start training with Olivia. You'll need to see what she can do physically and mentally."

Mrs. Sharpe turned to her. "My dear, I'd like to see you later today, after you've had a chance to look over the folder." *Folder* actually translated to a thickly bound sheaf of paper.

"Don't you want to know if I'll agree to do the job?" Olivia asked, curious that Mrs. Sharpe acted as if her participation were a done deal.

Mrs. Sharpe looked at Kisho.

He nodded. "Sorry, Olivia. You're on board. Saw it again yesterday."

"Really? What did you see?" Incredible, she thought, to know the future.

"I get glimpses of possibilities, but every one I've had since Mrs. Sharpe told me about this mission has you in the jungle with the four of us."

Her mouth dried, and she reached for the glass of orange juice Jesse handed her. Their fingers touched, and she shivered. She didn't mistake his look of satisfaction.

"Ah, okay."

"And there you have it." Mrs. Sharpe dropped a thick stack on the counter. "Read up, and I'll see you all later. Olivia, five o'clock sharp. Don't be late."

She left them in a well of quiet.

"I hate reading," Gunnar grumbled. "It's going to be a long day. I can just feel it."

Jesse drank the rest of his coffee and carried his cup to the sink. He grabbed his stack of material and headed for the door with a salute to the others.

Jules stood. "Fallon—"

"Gotta get busy. Talk to you later, Jules." He disappeared in a flash.

Jules didn't say anything, but the dark expression on his face promised problems for Jesse. She felt bad for him, but at the same time, she appreciated not having to trip over herself in his presence. At least now she could eat, then disappear up to her room to study. She took the stack of material Jules handed her as he passed them out to his team.

"Bastard's fast; you have to give him that." Gunnar sighed long and loud as he traipsed over to the couch across the living room and sat down. He propped his gigantic feet—still bare—up on the coffee table and opened the folder. "Wish I could disappear too."

"Don't we all," Kisho murmured.

Gunnar shot him a finger, which Kisho ignored. He sat next to his friend and began to read.

Olivia finished her meal in silence, aware of Jules's scrutiny. She had no intention of telling anyone what she and Jesse had shared; what it had felt like to fly so free. Her experience with a virtual stranger had been the best sexual experience of her life. How pathetic did that make her? The queen of easy, and desperate to boot.

Now depressed and eager to be alone, she shoveled her food into her mouth, poured herself a cup of coffee, and took it and her folder with her back to her room. Time to get to work.

Five o'clock rolled around all too soon. She'd enjoyed the sandwich Melissa brought her for lunch. But all this good eating made her realize she'd better start exercising or she'd turn into a dumpling. Good genes afforded her a slender though toned frame, but she didn't take anything for granted. She planned to take a jog after her meeting with Mrs. Sharpe. No time like the present for good health.

On her way to her meeting, she dwelled on what she now knew. The laboratory responsible for the manufacture of this drug had secret funding. Nothing linked it to another government, and the consensus Mrs. Sharpe's information gathering had come to suggested that an independent contractor was out to make some serious money. From what Admiral London and his investigative team had put together, criminals within the United States had kidnapped a senator and several key personnel privy to the new psychic program. What the mastermind behind the stolen information decided to do with it was anyone's guess.

While the admiral worked on his own damage control, several South American sources pooled together intelligence on details about the lab. Some of the material she'd read had been in Portuguese, and she now knew much more about their contact and a Colonel Montaña than she wanted to. The head of the laboratory's security had a sadistic streak a mile wide. Good thing she had no intention of going to the lab. She crossed her fingers, worried about jinxing herself.

A quick peek at her watch showed her to be five minutes early for the meeting as she arrived at Mrs. Sharpe's office.

Ava left the room, muttering under her breath, and hurried down the hallway.

"Come on in, Olivia."

The woman must have had the ears of a bat, because the door obscured her view of the hallway. Olivia entered and shut the door behind her.

"Please, sit down." Mrs. Sharpe poured her a cup of coffee fixed just the way she liked it. Just another odd quirk to add to the woman's growing list.

Impressed the woman noted even minute details, Olivia thanked her, sat in the chair next to her, and accepted the cup with gratitude. "Just what I needed, a caffeine boost."

"I figured. The folder I gave you is quite thick. While I prefer electronic means for disseminating information, this was simply quicker since Admiral London couriered the information this morning."

Olivia wondered about that.

"Not personally, of course." Mrs. Sharpe's lips twitched. "He's rather busy at the moment."

"Oh right."

"So what do you think about all this?"

Olivia hadn't expected a personal conversation. She'd anticipated questions and answers about what she'd read, so it took her a moment to answer. "I'm a bit overwhelmed, if you want the truth."

"Does the nature of who you're working with bother you?"

"Not really. Maybe because they still seem pretty normal, except for being so big and, ah, masculine." She blushed as Jesse's image flashed in her mind. "I mean, well, they're an intimidating group, but they've been nice to me thus far." *More than nice*.

Mrs. Sharpe sipped from her own cup. "They can be boisterous, demanding, aggressive, and when it comes to Gunnar, annoying, yet they wouldn't harm an innocent to save their lives. I read people for a living, and I can tell you, I've never met a finer group than these men." She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "But don't tell them that. I don't want their heads to get any bigger than they are now."

Olivia chuckled.

"I want you to be comfortable around them, to trust them. But I'm a realist. Trust comes with time. Unfortunately we don't have a lot of that. The original plan was for us to fly our contact out here, let you interrogate him, then send you home. Plans changed. You're going to fly down to Brazil and help our team learn from our contact where to go. Once you get us the information we need, you'll be on a plane ride home. Jules has convinced me that using you as a control is just too dangerous. This way we'll minimize risk to you while affording our team the assistance they need. I want to think our contacts are on the level, but I never trust from a distance, if you know what I mean."

"I do."

"You're going to be working hand in hand with four Circs. Get to know them. Talk with them. Work with them. Show them how strong you are, and don't hold back. They need to know your strengths and limitations so we can execute a smooth mission. I know I'm asking a lot, but it's necessary." She paused. "Admiral London called me an hour ago to say he lost a man in his new division. Reports conclude the individual was captured by men who work for Colonel Montaña."

"He's got men in the States?"

"Apparently. Which means he has contacts we know nothing about. Montaña and his group are on a watch list. The minute any of them stepped on American soil, a red flag should have been raised. That it wasn't worries me. I won't trust you or the team to sources I'd normally use. That's why you're going to be so important on this mission, Olivia. You speak the language, you can pass as a native, and you'll be able to tell the men who to trust. They need you."

"But Jesse can read minds. Jules can see auras."

"Jesse doesn't understand Portuguese. And Jules's ability will help identify sickness, negativity, or ill intent, but it won't show who he can trust."

"What about Kisho's ability to see the future? Can't he focus and figure out who might betray them? He should be their ace in the hole."

Mrs. Sharpe shook her head. "If it were that simple, you wouldn't be here. Kisho sees possible futures. Change one thing, and you change what may be into what may not be. He's also

not at the point where he can call on his ability at will. His visions come at random. We're working on that, but it's slow going."

The burden of responsibility settled heavily on Olivia's shoulders. Excitement turned to anxiety as she realized the scope of this project. *But it's what you wanted. Something to break the doldrums of your daily life. Sex, psychics, and now danger. What could top that?*

Mrs. Sharpe patted her knee. "I've said more than enough. Why don't you go for that run you wanted to take? Follow the path out of the garden. You'll be safe. The trail extends for a mile if you turn around once you hit the yellow marker. There are lights to guide you, should the sun set while you're out."

Olivia frowned. "I didn't mention a run."

"Didn't you?" Mrs. Sharpe raised her brows and said nothing more.

Disturbed, Olivia raised her mental shields. Though the woman hadn't confirmed or denied her abilities, according to Ava, Mrs. Sharpe knew things she couldn't know. Olivia could only hope her shield protected the secrets she worried the uncanny woman might see.

"Well then. Thanks for our talk." I think, she said to herself and rose to her feet.

"Use tomorrow to gather your thoughts. Study the file inside and out. Know who you should be able to trust, so when the time comes, you can put them to the test. And commit the few faces we have of Montaña's crew to memory. I have a feeling he's going to be more of a menace than we'd counted on."

"Terrific." Olivia still wasn't sure about the dangerous aspect of this job, but she didn't like the thought of Jesse—*or any of the men*—heading into peril when they could avoid it. She said good-bye to Mrs. Sharpe and headed to her room.

Stress suddenly felt like a second skin. After changing into a jogging suit and pulling her hair into a ponytail, she finished tying her sneakers and headed downstairs and out through the garden doors. To her relief, she didn't run into anyone. Spending the day in her room had ensured her privacy and the quiet to study what she could of that massive folder. She wasn't ready to face Jesse and the others yet, especially after Mrs. Sharpe's bombshell.

Olivia did a quick stretch and began running. The dirt path stretched several feet on either side of her, so she didn't feel hemmed in as she ran. The exercise helped clear her mind of the web of fear and tension. Talk about problems on top of problems she needed to face.

One, she had no training for this type of thing. It was a bonus that she spoke the language, but that wouldn't save her from a bullet. Two, how the hell was she expected to keep up with the best of the best? The rumors she'd heard about Circs mentioned men who never tired. Five minutes into her run, her lungs ached and her legs pinched. Not good.

Three, what she'd read about Montaña made her cringe. *Sadist* might as well have been his middle name. Brutal but efficient, he didn't suffer fools or traitors. His men remained loyal for fear of torture *and then* death. And Mrs. Sharpe wanted her to fly down to Brazil to be closer to the man. Terrific. She sped up. Four, for a woman facing a major crisis, she felt like a horny teenager. She'd happily settled into celibacy several months ago, determined to stop falling for Mr. Wrong because she couldn't keep her hormones in check. She thought she'd conquered her bad habit of falling for handsome men with little character. Until she'd allowed a gorgeous man she barely knew to give her oral sex not more than four hours after they'd first met.

What kind of woman did that?

She ran faster, sprinting to the yellow sign ahead of her. The turnaround point.

What really stuck in her craw, though, wasn't the danger of the assignment, the potential for disaster, that she might hurt the team, or even her unsuitability to perform, but that Jesse might think her easy.

She hadn't explained to him how unlike herself she'd been with him. She just wasn't *like* that. Sure, she liked sex, but she normally lasted at least a few weeks before succumbing to temptation. She'd work hard to earn an orgasm or two, then let go of her boyfriends after sharing too many of their emotions. Boredom would set in. Disgust that she couldn't break out of bad habits, especially when she could see going into a relationship it would end badly. Yet here she was, once again, mooning after a hunk way out of her league. Go figure.

She turned around at the sign and slowed down, her lungs burning. At least Jesse seemed to be circumspect about what they'd done. Probably because he hadn't had his "happy ending" yet.

Even as she knew she unfairly condemned him, she couldn't help herself. Every time she'd wished one of her Prince Charmings would be different, he'd turned into a frog. And none of them had ever churned her up so much inside. She barely knew Jesse, and she couldn't stop thinking about him.

She wondered what he was really like, beneath the muscles and the looks. Would he remain as nice once he had what he wanted? When would he show his true colors—when he didn't get what he wanted? And what did he want? Sex, sure. But anything else?

So intent on her thoughts, she literally ran into the man on her mind.

"Shit!" She bounced off him and would have fallen on her ass if he hadn't reached for her arm. Her heart raced, as much from the shock and the adrenaline rush as from her run. "Sorry. Didn't...see...you...there."

"My mistake. I should have called out. You seemed miles away." He didn't sound out of breath. Despite the weather, he wore shorts and a long-sleeved shirt. At least this time he wore sneakers.

"Aren't you...cold?" She leaned over, trying to catch her breath, and placed her hands on her knees

"Nah. Tough skin." He thumped his chest. "You okay?"

She drew in a breath, stood, and let it out slowly. "Yeah. Thanks."

"No problem. Actually I was looking for you."

Her pulse picked up. Down, girl. "Oh?"

His gaze narrowed on her mouth before shifting back up to her eyes. "Yeah. We haven't talked much, not since last night."

He just had to bring that up.

"Oh."

"You're not, ah, mad at me or anything, are you? Because I swear I didn't plan on going d—I mean, I only meant to kiss you. You have the sweetest-looking lips," he rasped, rubbing a thumb over her lower lip.

She stood as still as a statue, unable to move. The smart side of her told her to demand he back away and keep his hands to himself. She wasn't some floozy he could toy with. But the hungry side of her subtly leaned into his touch. When he dropped his hand, she licked her lips, telling herself they were dry and needed the moisture.

His eyes darkened, and he took a deep breath. "So. Right." He exhaled. "I just... I didn't want to scare you away."

"I'm not scared." The stubborn woman within refused to acknowledge his power over her without putting up a fight.

"I am," he admitted. "You're different."

She scowled. "Thanks a lot."

"No. I mean, you make it hard to think past wanting you." He closed his eyes and opened them, a flush on his cheeks that completely devastated her. Handsome and vulnerable?

"I—oh."

"Look, what the guys say about me, it's not true. I'm not some roving stud." He frowned. "I have needs, sure, but I'm not some idiot out to nail any piece of ass." He paused and snapped his mouth shut.

She raised a brow, bemused by his lust that mingled with anger. At himself or at her? *Oh wow. I'm sensing his emotions.*

Jesse ran a hand over his short hair, obviously frustrated. "Shit. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I'm not some dog in heat."

"All the time," echoed in her mind.

Sensing his emotions and reading his mind?

"I know this is bad timing. We have a job to do. We can't afford to muck it up with sex. Hell, I've worked with women before." Now he sounded defensive. "I don't jump every hot woman I come into contact with. Let alone rip their clothes off them."

The quieter she remained, the more flustered he became. His insecurity captivated her. She'd never assumed to see this side of the man. Never assumed someone so incredibly sexy and commanding could have a side like this.

"Hell, Olivia. I barely know you. I know what your file says, but not about you. Your favorite color, your favorite flavor ice cream. Do you like adventure movies, or are you a chick-flick type? A dog person or a cat person? Shit like that. Important stuff." When she continued to stare at him, wide-eyed, he swore and took a step closer. A shock of anger brightened his gaze. "But you know what I do know? How you respond when I do this."

She knew all about high-handed men. But she had never dealt with one who made her wet with a look before.

Jesse kissed her with a rough determination that made her want to belt him. The brutal kiss smashed her lips against her teeth. His tongue thrust into her mouth with a cruel possession. He plastered her breasts to his chest and ground a huge erection against her belly. She couldn't move, because he'd tangled his fingers in her hair, pulling the band holding it back and tossing it to the ground. Gripping her tightly, he consumed her.

Olivia had a temper slow to boil, but when it did, it flamed until it burned itself out. Unfortunately Jesse didn't arouse the anger she desperately needed to fight off this sensual devastation.

Instead of pulling back and slapping him, she attacked him right back with a kiss that made his look tame by comparison.

She couldn't think, could only feel as raw desire poured through her very soul. A wild need to take, to keep, settled into her soul and wouldn't let go. Not until she got what *she* wanted.

Olivia bit his lip and then licked at the spot of blood she caused.

"Yes, oh yeah." Jesse groaned and rubbed against her, his cock incredibly large.

"Shut up," she growled, and then the sexual beast who used to be Olivia took charge.

Chapter Six

Fallon couldn't think as the woman he'd come to think of as a delicate flower turned feral on him. She bit and sucked and threw his beast into a frenzy of arousal and affection that surged through him in a wave of confusing need.

The woman gripped him with fingers he couldn't escape, even if he'd wanted to. The little witch hurt him by pulling him closer, but the small pain only made him that much harder. His shorts tented, obscenely distorted as he poked her belly, wishing he could angle for penetration.

Crazed to feel that hot pussy he could smell creaming for him, he succumbed to her wildness, giving in to his beast, who was surprisingly content to let this female dominate him.

Fallon didn't much care at the moment, lost to the desire he'd felt since he'd last tasted her. He would have sworn he'd entered another mating heat, except his friends didn't seem bothered by it. To his relief, none of them seemed as drawn to Olivia as he was, or he knew for certain he'd have drawn blood to fight for her.

"Shit," he groaned as her hands distracted him.

She tugged his hair back to look into his eyes. Since she appeared more vivid now than she had before, he knew she had to be seeing his slit pupils and larger irises, eyes of the beast who lived inside him. To his pleasant surprise, Olivia's sly smile proved she was unafraid. If he weren't mistaken, she even appeared to issue a challenge.

He hissed as her hands snaked down his body with lightning speed. Sure fingers circled his girth through his shorts, pressing along the wet spot where his shorts molded to his arousal.

"So big. I bet I could eat you up and not be full," she whispered in a husky voice and licked her lips.

"Eat me. Yeah, baby. Do that. Right now," he growled, unable to help his beast's wanting an end to this teasing.

Instead of obeying, Olivia winked and darted a hand under his shorts to circle his shaft.

"Christ yes," he whispered, sure if she stopped, he just might beg. He'd never been so hard before. Despite the rough times dealing with mating heats, he knew he'd never felt such desperation to seek completion. "Please."

It slipped out before he could stop himself. A weakness.

"I like pretty words from pretty men." Olivia pushed his shorts down and grabbed him with both hands. Then she drove him out of his fucking mind.

Pulling and pushing, she rubbed his flesh with torturous slowness, grazing his balls with every pass. Using the generous precum at his slit, she lubed his cock and continued to stare up at him as she brought him closer and closer to bliss.

"Yes, Olivia. That's it, baby. Rub me. Fuck, give it to me. More," he said thickly, unable to understand how he'd lost control, and ecstatic that he had.

"I want to feel it. I need it on me, your scent," she demanded, her voice deeper, raspy. Familiar.

He caught a hint of something not quite right, but then she tugged him, her fingers gliding just beneath his glans, that sensitive spot that made him see stars.

"Fuck."

She rubbed and caressed, played with his balls and increased the speed and tightness of her hold.

"You're so full. Give it to me. Now." Her voice turned mean, but her scent... Like ripe cherries, bursting with sweetness, with arousal.

His beast roared his pleasure, especially when one of her nails dragged along his shaft. He swore he felt a prick and smelled blood, but it didn't matter. He stared into her eyes as he came all over her hand.

Unable to cry out, breathless with the drugging ecstasy of the moment, he covered her palm with milky fluid. And he didn't stop. She pulled it out of him, each ropy jet of semen that continued to pump over her commanding fingers until he was too wrung out to do more than breathe.

He slumped and had to grab onto her shoulders to steady himself.

And then she did the one thing guaranteed to make him wake up and take notice. She took her hand, held it up in front of him, and shoved it under her pants, between her legs.

"This is where it should be."

Hell, yes.

When she brought her hand back out, he took her fingers and shoved them into his mouth. The familiar, drugging taste of her pussy addicted him. But she pulled her fingers away.

The sultry vixen flashed him a smile, her eyes deep lagoons promising every pleasure.

He let her go and watched as she reached down to hold him again. He remained half-hard, his cock rising quickly as his beast told him to get ready for another round.

But she only wet her fingers in the cum covering his cockhead.

When she brought those same fingers to her lips, he jerked in reaction, his cock rock hard and ready to go again. She took each finger deep within her mouth, all the way to the second knuckle. When she'd pulled the last one from her mouth, he pushed her to her knees.

She surprised him by not resisting.

"That's right. Enough playing. Now take your mate to the back of your fucking throat," he growled, unable to keep his beast from coming out to play. Aware he began to *change* as well, he tried to tamp down his wildness, not wanting to hurt her.

But she wouldn't let him.

She clamped her hands to his ass and pulled him forward, deep throating him without a problem. Even when he thickened and lengthened, she accommodated him without gagging once. He closed his eyes, unable to think as he grabbed her hair and pounded into her mouth.

The unreality of the moment didn't much matter. A normal woman couldn't accommodate a Circ, not in this stage of rut. But Olivia didn't falter. If anything, she stimulated him with her tongue, which never seemed to quit. He gripped her thick hair and held on, nearing his end once again.

"Yes, sweet, that's it. Lick me. Suck it good. I'm going to come in a rush down that pretty throat. Mmm. God yes," he murmured as he pistoned faster. Shorter jerks as his ass puckered and his balls drew up, readying to unload.

So hot, so tight, her mouth suctioned him, taking him to heaven as he yelled out and showered her throat.

"All of it, swallow me," he insisted on a heady groan, though he needn't have.

Olivia's long nails dug into his ass as she devoured his cock, sucking away his cum as fast as he jetted into her.

Finally spent, he withdrew, pulled up his shorts, and shivered, caught in the aftermath of a powerful orgasm.

Olivia rose to her feet, her gaze lowered. Her chest rose and fell with a quickness not at all natural.

"Olivia?" Worried he might have hurt her and not known it, he waited for her to look at him.

When she did, he did a double take.

Her eyes weren't human. They were Circ.

She blinked, and he once more stared into human eyes. What the hell had he just seen?

"Olivia?"

She rolled her neck, her shoulders, then stepped back.

"You didn't know how I'd respond when you kissed me, did you, Jesse? Bet you weren't expecting that." A gleam of victory lightened the frustration in her gaze. "Well, I'd best finish my run and get back to that folder. I'll see you later." She turned without another word and took off down the path toward the house.

Fallon stared at her retreating back until she rounded the bend out of sight. A chill breeze whipped through the trees. An owl hooted in the distance. Overhead, the clouds shifted to cover the emerging moon.

"Am I fucking nuts, or did I just have sex?" He actually pulled his shorts from his body to examine his cock. Fading lines along his shaft proved he hadn't lost his mind. "She did it. Olivia gave me not only a handjob, she sucked me down like a champ."

Still reeling from the incredible orgasms that had finally drained the all-consuming hunger for the woman from his tired body, Fallon jogged back toward the house. Before he reached the garden, Jules met him.

"Olivia passed by. Tell me I did not just smell you all over the female, and right before a huge operation is about to go down." Yet Jules didn't sound angry.

"Am I dreaming?"

"Did you or did you not just fuck that woman?"

"No. Yes." Did I? Did she really take all of me? I didn't change fully, but a part of me grew a helluva lot larger than normal. And she swallowed me anyway. Her eyes...

"Fallon?" Now Jules sounded concerned.

"That woman just gave me the first true peace I've felt since I turned Circ." He couldn't explain how she'd done it. Incredible sex, but it was still just sex. Wasn't it? "I don't get it. And I think—I mean, I'm not sure, but—"

"But what?"

"There at the end, I could have sworn her eyes *changed*."

Jules didn't say anything.

"I think I need sleep. She fucking wore me out," he said with a huge grin. His beast purred inside him.

Jules's eyes widened.

"What?"

"Your aura is changing."

"Yeah?" Probably to a glowing red, what Jules had described as the picture of health.

"Nothing, never mind. Look, it's late. Get some rest. I need to work on a few things myself." Jules ran past him, not along the trail, but through the woods and into the forest.

"Probably needs to *change*," Fallon muttered, exhausted. Too tired to dwell on anything more than sleep, he promised himself he'd deal with Olivia tomorrow. He wasn't sure, but she'd seemed annoyed with him there at the end. He shrugged. Women.

He dreamed about her all night long, and in every instance, the blue-green eyes that stared out at him from her pretty face remained Circ.

Unfortunately he didn't see her for the next two days. Mrs. Sharpe, Hayashi, or Jules constantly shadowed her. He might have been jealous if he hadn't sensed Hayashi's disinterest. He'd never seen his friend entertain women, and though Hayashi didn't talk about his sexual preferences, Fallon was almost positive his friend favored men. Why Hayashi thought he had to keep it a secret was anyone's guess, but Fallon didn't want to intrude, so he never brought it up.

Jules, on the other hand, aggravated the shit out of him. He'd heard his team leader and Olivia laughing together on several occasions. If Mrs. Sharpe hadn't sent him and Tersch on errands away from the house, he'd have insisted Jules keep his distance from Olivia, *the hard way*.

Fallon couldn't stop remembering her scent. So sweet, ripe, and *Circ*. He wished he could be sure of what he'd seen, but in the aftermath of so much pleasure, he'd been too dazed to fully recount the sight of her slit/not-slit pupils.

He and Tersch left the SUV and walked up the drive to the door.

"Earth to Fallon. What's eating you? Or should I say, who's *not* eating you?" Tersch teased, his comment surprisingly on target. "Olivia seems to like Jules and Hayashi well enough."

"Fuck off."

"Nice. And here I am trying to make you feel better." The Viking laughed. "Come on, Fallon. Not like you have a claim on the woman. I'm thinking she should try me on for size—" He gagged behind Fallon's fist around his throat.

"One more word and I'll crush your larynx." Fallon couldn't help his beast's raging need to state his claim. "She's *mine*. Don't forget it."

Tersch clutched at his hand. Not until he nodded, his face purple, did Fallon let him go.

Coughing, Tersch rubbed his throat and glared. "What the hell is your problem?"

Fallon wished he knew. "I'm not in the mood for jokes." He couldn't help adding, "I smell you anywhere near her, and my beast is going to geld you."

Tersch's eyes widened. "You're not kidding. Man, what's the deal? You barely know this woman. Granted, she's hot. But come on. We've never had problems sharing before."

"She's different. I can't explain it."

"Well, you'd better get over it. This job is going to be hard enough working with a civilian. You add sex to the mess, and we'll end up ass deep in trouble, and not just from some woman mooning over you after you dump her."

"She doesn't seem to have any trouble avoiding me lately. I don't think we need to worry about her mooning anytime soon," Fallon muttered, annoyed all over again that he'd barely seen Olivia since their run-in Saturday night.

Shaking his head, Tersch threw his arm over Fallon's shoulders and dragged him inside. "She's just a woman. Let her go." He sized up Ava as they passed her in the hallway. "Take me. Ava Belle won't give me the time of day, but you know what? I don't care. If she doesn't know what she's missing out on, I don't have the heart to tell her," he said in a raised voice and snickered at her less-than-friendly rebuttal. "One pussy's as good as another, man."

"Oh? Is that why you're always looking over your shoulder at the woman who could care less how big your dick, or your ego, is?" Fallon smirked, pleased to have caught Tersch in the act of doing just that.

"Ass." Tersch removed his arm and gave him a shove. "Come on. Let's go tell Alicia we couldn't find the file she sent us after and see what the guys are up to. I thought we were supposed to start training Olivia. Seems like all they've been doing is talking."

"No kidding." He itched to see Olivia again. Taking a subtle sniff, he followed the trace of her lingering in the hallway.

"I can't believe you're sniffing after her like a damned dog. Dude, you're embarrassing," Tersch grumbled but followed along.

Fallon sped up when he heard Hayashi's, Jules's, and Olivia's voices coming from the gym.

He and Tersch entered to find the three of them dressed for sport. Olivia wore shorts and a T-shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. The shirt clung to her in patches, sweat making her skin shine like gold.

Fallon's beast purred, and Tersch stalked away, muttering under his breath.

"I want to play," the Viking announced and stripped off his shirt.

Olivia's eyes widened. "Wow. I didn't think they made assholes that large."

Jules laughed, and Hayashi grinned.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Fallon added and stepped forward, pleased to see the awareness flash in her gaze.

"Hey, Jesse."

Her blush wasn't lost on anyone, and Fallon wanted to crow the petty victory. The woman responded to him because she belonged to him.

"Fallon, Tersch, where the hell have you two been?" Jules asked with a frown. "We've been waiting to train, just warming up. Olivia has some impressive moves. Unfortunately Hayashi's slowed down some."

Without warning, Hayashi kicked at Jules's head. Jules barely avoided the blow but instead suffered the shot Hayashi aimed at his ribs.

"Slow, my ass," the Asian muttered. "My roundhouse was intentionally sloppy because I didn't want to brain you. How does the gut feel?"

Jules grunted and straightened. "Terrific, thanks. Fallon, Tersch, get over here. I want to demonstrate a few things for Olivia before we give her some abbreviated training. Mrs. Sharpe has given us five more days before we head out. Our flight for Brazil leaves Saturday morning."

Olivia took the cue and sat down, her legs crossed in front of her.

Fallon wanted to join her, to plant a kiss on those full lips, but the look she gave him warned him not to try.

Jules stretched. "You two, go suit up. We'll wait."

Fallon and Tersch left and returned in minutes dressed in shorts and T-shirts. Fallon wondered if Jules intended for them to *change* in front of her. He didn't want to with an audience. For some odd reason, his beast considered it his own personal mission to instruct Olivia in the fundamental truth of what being a Circ meant.

"Why don't you guys ever wear shoes?" she asked, looking at their feet.

"It impedes our abilities," Hayashi answered when no one else did.

"Hmm."

"Olivia, this is important," Jules began. "The four of us work as a cohesive unit. Each of us understands the other after working together for several years. Our abilities give us a unique way to communicate as well. Fallon, open up."

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

Fallon released the shields holding his mind closed from outside thought. Olivia's mind remained behind a wall of defense, but the others sounded clear. The union warmed him, made him feel comforted by familiar minds.

"Fallon sends messages with his mind that can't be heard or penetrated by an outside source. Tersch, when he puts his mind to it, can't be stopped."

"Not even by a bullet?"

"Not even then."

Her expressive face looked so damned cute. Fallon wanted to...

"Focus, dammit." Jules frowned at him before continuing. "Hayashi, as you saw, is lethal with those fists and feet. He's also learning to better control his visions."

"For example, I can tell you that at some point in our stint in South America, the five of us are going to be running in the forest. We're going to separate." Hayashi paused, his face blank. "You'll go with Jules and Fallon. Tersch and I will lead them away while you three get to safety."

Olivia leaned forward. "Safety? From who? Montaña's men? I thought I was supposed to stay in the city while you four investigated the lab."

"What I see is a possibility, not an exact future," Hayashi said quietly.

Jules continued. "A possibility that makes it vital you can defend yourself in a worst-case scenario." He paused. "Olivia, are you Circ?"

The entire room guieted. Fallon waited anxiously for her answer.

"Am I what?"

"Circ," Fallon repeated, remembering an image of her *changed* eyes.

"Um, no. I've never been treated for anything other than a superficial cold. I'm surprisingly healthy—no weird shots, no genetic manipulation. Hell, I was almost out of breath on my run the other day." She refused to meet his gaze. "I don't have any superpowers, no stamina, no incredible strength."

"I don't know about that," Fallon murmured, remembering all too well the hold she'd had on his beast.

She ignored him. "I'm sorry. I'm empathic. End of story. I can feel your disappointment and your disbelief. But I don't know what to tell you."

Jules watched her for a moment. "Fallon, I need you to stay back. I'm not going to hurt her, but I need to see something."

"What are you going to do?"

Jules didn't answer him, and Fallon's beast didn't like the potential threat to the woman he considered his.

When his team leader vanished, Fallon swore.

"Oh my God. Where did he go?" Olivia scrambled to her feet, her mouth open. She squealed in fright when her feet left the ground. "Jesse, something's got me!"

"Dammit. Jules, let her go."

Olivia settled back on her feet and raced into his arms. They watched as Jules materialized in front of them

"How did he do that?" she asked, breathless. "My God, that's incredible!"

And she had yet to see them shift into their beasts.

"Ask Jules if he wants her to see us change," Tersch prodded.

Fallon mentally repeated the question as he stroked Olivia's back and hugged her tight.

"Not yet." Jules sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Olivia, I just thought if you were scared enough, you might... Never mind. We'll take care of you out there. But if what Hayashi saw comes to pass, you'll need to know you can trust us. You'll follow orders, no question, or you're not coming along."

She swallowed audibly. Fallon tried to calm her quivering frame. Talk about a lot to throw at a person. "I will. I promise."

"Good. You can start now. I want you to get out of Fallon's hold." "Fallon, don't let her go."

Fallon tightened his arms. She couldn't move.

"Try harder."

She squirmed, but all she did was arouse him.

"Now change, Fallon."

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

"Jules, I don't know."

"I do. She needs to know we can protect her. And we can't afford for her to panic on us if we have to *change* during the mission."

"What's going on?" Olivia breathed, still struggling.

"I don't like it. No."

Jules's entire stance changed. Aggression swelled from him in waves as he faced Fallon. "You're refusing me?"

"Hell." Tersch plucked Olivia from his arms. "Come on. Hayashi, let's continue this while they come to an understanding."

"Good idea."

His team leader growled low in his throat. "Get outside, now."

"Fuck." Fallon cast a last, longing look at Olivia and left the room. He didn't make it a foot outside before Jules knocked into him. Then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Seven

Olivia ached from her toes to the top of her head. The insane thought she'd had when Gunnar had offered to help instruct her had been one of relief. She worked out, and she'd had defensive training. How hard could it be to keep up with a super Circ? Even after witnessing Kisho's incredible karate skills, she'd been prepared for some defensive tutoring, even looked forward to it.

Two days later, she felt so stiff, she could barely move. Her sluggish brain did little more than suggest ways to rest so she'd experience less pain, but she didn't have the energy to turn over.

Gunnar had shown her ways to incapacitate men. From grabbing and twisting testicles to grabbing and twisting thumbs. Wrist locks, knee kicks, and the nose smash. Timing, Kisho had added, was everything. A woman of her size had an advantage, but she couldn't hope to defeat a man as large as the Circs training her. From what she'd read in the folder, Montaña's men would be tough to beat. Most of them had trained in his select mercenary camps, and those who hadn't had done time in South American prisons. Just the people she didn't want to run into in the middle of the jungle.

As if suffering extreme exhaustion weren't enough, she hadn't seen Jesse since his altercation with Jules. It felt as if every time she gained a foothold in her tentative relationship with the man, something else stopped her from seeing him. She'd been playing it cool, wanting him to come to her. And then Jules had put an end to that.

"Probably for the best," she murmured. This mission demanded her full attention. In just three more days they'd fly south, where she might actually end up running for her life in the heart of the jungle. *I am insane for even contemplating going*.

But the thought of leaving Jesse and the others in the hands of untrustworthy men, possibly enemies, made her ill.

A knock sounded on her door.

"Come in." She didn't bother to sit up. Clad in the same workout clothes she'd worn since the afternoon, when Kisho had put her through the wringer, she lay on her bed.

Gunnar poked his head around the door. If she weren't mistaken, he pulsed with disappointment. "Hell, I was hoping to find you naked and in the tub by now."

She grinned. "If I had the energy, I would be."

"Jules wants to see you."

"Now?" She groaned and sat up. And suddenly Gunnar was right there.

He knelt next to the bed, almost at eye level with her.

"You are huge."

He grinned, and she noted how handsome he actually was. Whenever she was near Jesse, everyone else paled by comparison. "You have no idea."

She shouldn't have, but she glanced down at his crotch. To her shock, he looked *very* happy to see her.

Her cheeks heated. "Um, I'm not sure..."

"Come on." He stood and picked her up as if she weighed nothing.

"Oh."

"You're a sexy little thing. No wonder he's so hot for you."

"Jules?" First Jesse, now Gunnar and Jules? Had she entered a dream state where everything seemed surreal?

"No, Fallon. Guy's had a hard-on for you since you walked into the damned house. He's a pain in the ass about it too. Nearly choked me when I mentioned we should hit it."

"Hit what?"

He rolled his eyes. "I said we should screw, what else?"

"Good Lord. You talked about me like that?"

"Honey, you're sexy. You could be starring in your own porno. Your smooth skin and bright eyes? That long black hair? You have killer tits, lips made for blowing—"

She clapped a hand over his mouth. He chuckled and licked her palm, and she ripped her hand away.

"Okay, I won't say it. But you can't deny you're hot."

"Thanks, I think." Talk about bizarre. She had the odd notion Gunnar's compliments were sincere. As if she should thank the barbarian for likening her to a porn star. "Where are you taking me, exactly?"

"Jules's room. Fallon's waiting there too."

She settled down at news of Jesse. But this close to Gunnar, she could feel every bit of his excitement. Arousal and anticipation raced through his veins.

Unnerved, she squirmed in his hold. When one of his hands crept too close to her breast, she smacked his chest.

"Then stop moving," he growled.

The low timbre made her shiver, not with fear, but with a foreign desire.

Alarmed, she wondered what she felt: her emotions or his?

"Do Circs feel with a greater intensity?"

"I don't know. Depends on what you mean by intensity."

"Do you guys get hornier more than most?" She tried again, going for blunt.

"Oh, that. Sure. We're hard all the time."

"For God's sake."

"You asked." He hefted her in his arms and walked down the hallway and across into the men's wing without incident. To her relief, they didn't pass by anyone. "And here we are." He pushed through the door and kicked it closed behind him.

Fallon and Jules waited within, both tense and unhappy.

Jules nodded. "Good."

"Where's Kisho?" she asked, half hoping Gunnar would turn around and take her right out the door. While she secretly delighted in seeing Jesse again, the uncomfortable notion she was the cause of the unrest between the men made her want to flee.

"We don't need Kisho for this," Jules answered.

"We don't need you either," Jesse spat back at Jules and clenched his fists.

She couldn't be sure, but it appeared as if his skin had grown darker since she'd last seen him.

"Oh boy. I've been looking forward to this," Gunnar murmured in her ear. The brute had yet to set her on her feet. He vibrated with amusement, more so when Jesse's gaze lingered on his hand over her belly.

"Let me down," she whispered.

"No," he whispered back and kissed her on the mouth.

She heard Jesse's roar, as well as the sound of blows. But Gunnar caught and held her attention. She didn't want him. That is, her affection for Jesse held. Still, an alien part of her clamored for Gunnar's attention, which made little sense.

Perhaps it was his innate wildness. Whatever the case, she leaned into his kiss and caught the scent of cedar. Cedar, not the mint she associated with Jesse. She stiffened and broke from his mouth.

"No."

"Yes." He walked to Jules's bed and tossed her onto it. To her shock, he stripped down to nothing. He'd said he was huge, and seeing him now, she couldn't disagree.

Her gaze shot from Gunnar to Jesse, who still fought with Jules.

"You want out of here, fight for it." Gunnar smiled. His lips curled to reveal two large, sharp canines.

"What the hell?" Despite her aches, Olivia scrambled back on the massive bed. She alternated her gaze from an approaching Gunnar to Jesse, struggling to free himself from Jules.

He caught her panic and swore at Gunnar. "Tersch, you fucking touch her, and I'll rip your head from your body."

"Promises, promises." Gunnar gripped his cock and began stroking himself, the sight vaguely upsetting, because instead of horrifying her, Gunnar aroused her. "Come on, Olivia. Lean closer and put those lips around me. You know you want to. Circ cum can be addictive."

"Like you'd know," she rasped.

"Actually I do. Fallon's is sweet, but then, they all are."

Stunned, she stared from him to Jesse. "You...you and Jesse...?"

"And Jules and Hayashi. We're a real close team. When the mating heat hits, there's not a lot we can do but find satisfaction in a Circ. But if we've finally found a female..." He paused, and she recalled what Jules had asked her the other day.

"I'm not Circ!" she cried. "I'm fully me. Normal. A regular girl." Who really shouldn't have asked for a break in the cycle of boredom dragging me down. Oh my God. He has fangs! A glance at Jesse and Jules showed them with fangs and claws as well.

"Tersch, hold on to her," Jules said with a grunt as Jesse rolled over him and punched him fully in the face.

Expecting to see a broken nose around so much blood, Olivia watched in shock as Jules wrenched his nose back into place and wiped the blood away. The swelling ceased as if Jesse hadn't hit him.

"Wh-what... You... He didn't..."

Gunnar caught her in his arms and stripped her, immune to her struggles. Naked, every place they touched her lit her on fire. He growled and leaned closer to sniff her. "I can't tell. She still smells like Fallon."

Jules sat on top of Jesse and leaned close. "Enough. We're going to settle this right the fuck now." He levered off Jesse and pulled him to his feet.

Poor Jesse looked beat, but when he looked at her, hunger darkened his gaze.

"That's right. You want your mate, Fallon. You know what you have to do."

Jesse shook his head, but he didn't protest when Jules stripped him of his clothes.

Gunnar had said they all enjoyed one another. And right then Olivia could believe it. The aggression in the air turned to lust between one heartbeat and the next. Gunnar held her back to his chest, but she could feel his steely cock against her backside. He cupped her breast and tweaked her nipple as they watched Jules handle Jesse.

Jules mirrored Gunnar's stance, putting Jesse's back to his front. "If you're a part of us, then you're really a part of us," Jules said clearly, his silver gaze glued to Olivia's. "Can you handle that, Olivia? Can you be what Fallon needs you to be?"

Jesse didn't seem to mind Jules's hold. The feral light in his gaze made his eyes look almost yellow. To her astonishment, his pupils narrowed and lengthened as she'd seen them do once before. His cock bobbed, long and thick, and she licked her lips, remembering the sweet taste of him.

"Watch. This is what he needs. A Circ to touch him." Jules encircled Jesse's cock with a large fist.

The sight of such a manly hand around Jesse aroused her, and she squirmed in Gunnar's grip.

"Her scent's stronger now. Less him and more her. It's really faint, but it's there," he said to Jules.

"Good." Jules smiled, the hint of his fangs there to see. Was it her imagination, or did he look a few inches taller than he normally did?

She wanted to follow that line of thought, but Jesse's hunger captured her. She couldn't look away, especially not when Jules led him toward her.

"Suck on her breast," Jules ordered in a raspy voice, his scent strong, dominant.

Yet she didn't want him. She wanted the male made for her. The one closing in on her, fighting to protect her, to covet her.

Jesse closed his mouth over the nipple Gunnar held for him. A thick cock slid between her buttocks, not penetrating but pushing, while Jesse sucked her nipple, bringing her on a shockingly fast climb to orgasm. The incredible situation grew more bizarre when Jules stripped out of his clothes. Fascinated, she watched him masturbate a monstrously large cock, slick with a lubricant she hadn't seen him apply.

He stepped behind Jesse and pulled him back. "Watch, Olivia. I'm in charge. Your Jesse answers to me; *you* answer to me."

"No." *Oh wow*. He looked like he was going to do Jesse right in front of her, and Jesse seemed to want it.

"Yes," he hissed, then bent Jesse over the bed right next to her and proceeded to fuck her lover up the ass. "He takes what I give him. This Circ belongs to *me*."

74 Marie Harte

She stared, enraptured by the sight of two handsome alpha males engaged in taboo pleasure. Jules reamed him with dominance in mind; he all but seethed with it. Jesse grunted as he took it, but she could feel his devotion, his acceptance of his leader, for whom he felt such respect.

Jules slowed and turned them, so that she faced Jesse head-on. So close, she could feel his breath fanning her flesh.

"Isn't it hot?" Gunnar breathed in her ear. "We normally don't do it this way unless we're *changed*, but we're making an exception for you. Jules doesn't want to overload you. Seeing the beast might send you screaming," he teased and toyed with her earlobe.

His hand continued to knead her breast, while his other, which had caged her ribs, slid down to her mound. "Spread your legs. Let Fallon smell your sweet pussy."

The normal Olivia would have been embarrassed to be in such a situation. But the unreality of the moment, the sheer eroticism before her, awoke something long dormant within. She shifted her feet and spread her legs wider, moaning with pleasure when he grazed a finger over her slick clit. He spread her folds and held her wide, exposing her for Jesse.

Jesse stared at her pussy and licked his lips.

Jules continued to ram into him. "Suck it, Fallon. Take her need and make it better. Then be prepared to share." Jules groaned and shuddered, and she watched as he came inside the man she wanted with her last breath.

She couldn't make much sense of anything anymore. Jesse's lips found her clit, and he sucked hard.

Gunnar groaned and pulled her back, angling his cock to rest between her thighs, coated with her arousal. He slid back and forth as Jesse continued to eat her.

And then suddenly they landed in a human sandwich. Gunnar lay beneath her on the bed, while Jesse covered her on top.

Gunnar shifted and prodded her backside, but before she could protest, he pushed a thick cock into her ass. It should have hurt. That it didn't warned her all was totally off-kilter, especially when the burn paled next to the sheer pleasure of Jesse's mouth over her pussy. He thrust, first one finger, then two, into her channel.

"Damn, that's sexy," Jules commented from behind Jesse. "Look at her eyes. She's Circ. This changes everything."

Olivia didn't care. She wanted Jesse inside her. Now. "Jesse, please."

He didn't stop. The teasing, his arousal and need, stoked her own. She blinked up at him and felt as if she saw him for the first time. His passion flamed around him: colorful, vibrant, so alive. His eyes, his fangs, the beastly part of his nature they referenced, drew her in a way no amount of petting or touching could.

"I want you inside me." Not want—need. She ached to feel his seed spreading inside her. Had to know that he would join her always. Gunnar helped fill her, but he couldn't sate her desire for Jesse, her mate. She instinctively glanced at Jules, relieved when he nodded his blessing. He radiated approval and lust, waiting for her to make her move.

She glanced back into Jesse's fiery gaze. My mate. Mine. "Now," she growled.

"Oh yeah. Fuck, yes." Jesse sighed and removed his fingers. He mounted her carefully, stretching her with a delicious burn as he filled her, sliding against the thin layer of flesh keeping him from Gunnar. "So tight. God, I won't last."

Gunnar arched under her, his strength a thing of beauty as he flexed inside her. She should have cried out, stretched and bruised from such a large intrusion through her virgin flesh. Yet she didn't feel anything more than pleasure as they took her.

Time had no meaning as Jesse worked himself deeper, fucking her with more than physical movement, but with a mental penetration that sent him deep into her psyche.

"So tight. I love this. Can't get enough." She heard the words clearly inside her head. Waves of affection and something more, possession and a claiming, settled over her body and mind, now a part of her she could no longer separate.

Gunnar's hands held her hips and reached for Jesse's. Jules came forward and stroked Jesse's back. She could *feel* it. Joining Jesse, she now experienced everything he did, and the magnified desire unleashed a torrent of ecstasy.

She cried out at the beauty and sheer heat filling her. The utter rapture of belonging took her to another plane entirely.

Dimly aware of Gunnar grunting as he stiffened and came inside her, of Jules's encouragement as he stood behind Jesse, she centered only on her mate and waited for him to join her.

"Mine, baby. All mine," he agreed as he surged one final time and shuddered. Pouring his seed, he didn't stop, coming inside her until his cum spilled over her and onto Gunnar, who shifted and groaned again. He pulsed inside her as Jesse withdrew and milked the rest of his passion over her belly.

When he finished, he gently kissed her and pulled away, taking her with him. Gunnar left her body, and she moaned as the emptiness returned. Jesse shifted to stand behind her, still caging her with his heat.

And then Jules was there, kissing her, nipping at her breasts.

"Accept me, accept him," Jesse murmured, stroking her hair as Jules laid claim to the body the others had used.

Soothing warmth filled her as Jesse's leader became hers. Family, friends, brothers, and lovers. Indefinable by mere words, Jesse's relationship with these men would never cease, and Olivia recognized and accepted their importance.

She relaxed into Jules's hold, allowing him to lay her back down.

He fit himself inside her, pistoning with greater and greater speed. So thick, so hard. But before he came, he lifted his head and stared down into her eyes. His command unnerved her, and she glanced away, right into Jesse's loving eyes.

"That's it. Show him your throat," Jesse said, his voice guttural with need. She saw his clear arousal, his cock once again hard and wet.

"Good girl," Jules whispered. His breathing increased, and he pulled out, groaning as he jetted over her belly, leaving a huge mess all over her. Gunnar leaned close and jerked Jules's cock until he was fully spent.

Then, to her astonishment, both men kissed her and left the room.

Jesse pulled her to her feet and carried her into the adjoining bathroom. He turned on the shower and kissed her, no words necessary between them.

At that moment, right then, she understood.

77

She'd become one of them. And Jesse was elated. She didn't know how to feel, or even if she could, because the needs that had bound her to three men centered around one man. To her surprise, desire bloomed anew.

They stepped into the shower and started all over again.

Olivia ignored her doubts and fears. Instead she purred with pleasure as her lover showed her why he deserved her complete surrender.

* * *

"Holy shit." Tersch leaned against the wall outside Jules's door. "They're going at it again."

"Mates. A female Circ." Jules couldn't begin to describe his deep satisfaction with the events that had just unfolded. "You realize what this means?"

"No wonder the other Circs were so damned possessive about their mates. That woman nearly killed me." He stroked his now-flaccid cock. "I came so hard in that fine ass, Jules. You don't know." He groaned when Jules covered his hand.

"I do know. If she hadn't belonged to Fallon, I would have coated her womb with my seed. I think Sharpe somehow knew about this."

"No way."

"Come on. Even you can't be that dense."

Tersch glared.

"Olivia isn't a linguist. This mission in Brazil should have gone to Doc's men up north. Why the hell do you think we have it?"

"Fuck Circe's Recruits. We're good to go on this. Why should they have all the fun?"

"Think, Viking. They're solid. All mated, all stable. They'd be in and out of the lab without worrying about a civilian. Do you honestly believe I'd take Olivia with us if Hayashi hadn't seen it? I don't care what Sharpe says. I'd never take an innocent woman into harm's way, no matter how many languages she speaks. We've always made do before. We could function without Olivia on this one."

"True," Tersch said slowly. "So you think Alicia maneuvered this whole thing to see the fireworks between Olivia and Fallon?"

To Jules's surprise, Tersch sounded worried. "What's wrong? I thought you liked Olivia."

"I do."

"If I'm right about this, Fallon won't suffer from the mating heat anymore. I don't know about you, but holding it back has been taking its toll."

Tersch nodded. "I didn't want to admit it. Hayashi seems okay."

"He's not. He's been having some bad dreams."

"That why he's not here today?" Jules looked at him, and Tersch colored. "Oh come on. I know chicks aren't his thing. But he'd be here for Fallon if needed."

"I know. But he wasn't needed. Olivia submitted to me. She now knows her place."

Tersch frowned. "So why was I there?"

Jules had him by the throat in seconds. He ignored the Viking's gasp. "So *you* know your place. Olivia belongs to Fallon. You play with her when he says so. Not on your own," Jules growled to make certain Tersch understood the warning. The large male had a problem with anger, which occasionally led to problems with authority. With a squad as small as theirs, Jules's leadership stood out, but the remaining three members played on an equal field. Sometimes Tersch forgot that fact and tried to take over.

"Shit, Jules. I get it," he rasped. "Can I have my throat back?"

Jules let him go. "Just think. If Sharpe did this, she might be able to find women for the rest of us."

"Except for Hayashi," Tersch grumbled.

Jules narrowed in on the anxiety he could see around the large Circ. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just don't expect me to be thankful for trouble I don't need. I don't want a mate. I'm happy with the way things are."

"You like being fucked up the ass?" Jules asked drily.

Tersch flushed. "Hell, most of the time, I'm the one doing the fucking. You're the only one who demands I bend over for you."

"So maybe you and Kisho—"

"Fuck you." Tersch scowled.

Jules grinned. "I didn't think so. But sex with normal women doesn't scratch the itch, my friend. You need more. And the mating heat won't get any better. The other Circs thought it

might help finding females. But you've seen how jealous they get about sharing their mates. Hell, you saw how Fallon challenged me for the woman. Olivia's bound to him and him alone."

He couldn't help feeling glad for Fallon, but a part of him hungered for a mate to call his own.

"Maybe. Even in the old days, Fallon had a thing for threesomes." Tersch's sly grin returned, and Jules's unease vanished. "I have a feeling his Olivia may just be into some kink. Woman liked me inside her while homeboy rode her. I'll give them some time, then try again later."

He left and disappeared into his own room.

Jules stood naked in the hallway, knowing he needed to talk to Mrs. Sharpe again. The woman could deny it all she wanted, but his gut told him Fallon had her to thank for Olivia. The question then remained: What would Olivia say when she understood her new place in their Circ-ordered world? And how could they risk a precious female on a mission that had the potential to go so very, very wrong?

Chapter Eight

Four days later

Olivia stared out at the blue sky from beneath the brim of her straw hat. The yellow bikini she wore had more material than that which most of the women wore as they lay scattered around the hotel pool overlooking the ocean. The resort had to be hell on the government's budget, but far be it from her to complain. While she sipped a rum cocktail from a decorative coconut, she basked in the sun. Or at least she tried to.

"Don't move an inch from Hayashi, you got me?" Jesse leaned down to take the drink from her and kissed her full on the mouth. Just as high-handed as he'd been for the last few days.

Much as she wanted to ignore him in hopes he'd go away, her body betrayed her. She reached up and pulled him closer, deepening the kiss. He wanted her. His mind and body throbbed with need, and it took Hayashi next to her, clearing his throat, to remind her they were in public.

Jesse pulled away and shoved her drink back into her hand. "That's right, Olivia. You're *mine*. Don't let any of the other dickheads around here forget it." He had the nerve to scowl at Hayashi, then practically growled at a pair of men watching on her left and stalked away.

To her chagrin, the men who'd been looking at her quickly departed the area.

So much for a blissful interlude before they had to meet with their contact tomorrow.

Hayashi chuckled. "Relax, Olivia. If you think about it, Fallon's jealousy works to our advantage. Who would think we're here for another reason when your bull of a boyfriend is making such a scene?"

"Yeah, right." She fanned herself, still hungering for the mate—*man*, she told herself—she couldn't get out of her head. "Good cover, sure." She promised herself then and there to make the

most of her poolside visit. Who knew how much longer she'd have to linger, pretending she had nothing at all but tan lines to worry about?

The mission aside, Jesse now seemed to think she belonged to him, like a pet or a thing. As if a woman could be something to *own*. Gunnar and Jules were just as bad with their comments and expectations. As if she should roll over and beg for Jesse's permission to leave the house, talk to her family, or go to the movies. And Jules seemed to consider himself lord of all. She frowned. Lately the only member of the Circ team she could tolerate for any length of time lay next to her in his own chair.

"Kisho, I still don't understand."

They sat close enough to talk without being overheard by others, grouped in private around the pool.

"What's that?" he asked, his husky voice mirroring the tiredness weighing him down. Concerned, she'd tried to convince him to confide in her, but he refused to admit anything was wrong. So she'd try another angle and maybe get some information in the process.

"How can anyone think I'm a you-know-what?" A Circ.

He sighed. "It's not a matter of thinking but knowing. We have a certain scent, a feel about us. Haven't you experienced it? Jesse's is a lot like mint. Mine's cinnamon, Tersch's is cedar. Jules's comes and goes, but he's normally pretty vanilla, which is ironic, considering what he's into."

He didn't grin, but she sensed his amusement.

"But I'm not. I'd know it, wouldn't I?" But hadn't she listened to an inner wildness lately? Since meeting Jesse and the others, her thoughts had seemed more primitive, basic yet incredibly complex.

Kisho shrugged. His suit sat low on his hips, and his skin retained a healthy glow that attracted more than his share of admirers, though he didn't seem to notice. "I know how I became what I am. All of us voluntarily underwent the experimental treatment, though I can assure you, we had no idea we'd turn out the way we did." He sat up and leaned closer to her, his presence both assuring and disturbing.

Not Kisho. Jesse. I want Jesse, something growled deep inside her.

He eyed her knowingly. "You get used to it. I like to think of my inner beast as my id, that part of me that knows instinctively what's best for me. You have yet to see the truth behind the myth, Olivia. It's not just a mental transformation but a physical one."

She swallowed. "I saw the fangs, the claws. I think Jesse's skin turns darker too."

"There's more. I thought Jesse should show you before we left, but Jules wants you to get used to your place—ah, to try to get used to us first. All these changes at once can be overwhelming."

Her place. Every time she heard that phrase, she wanted to hit someone. I haven't worked my ass off my entire life to be subservient to some man. "But I'm not one of you. I don't belong." As much as I might want to. If Jesse would listen to me instead of demanding I accept things, we might come to an understanding.

He now seemed to think they were an item. Sure, the hot sex meant more to her than just a physical pleasure, but come on. She barely knew him. One whole week of mission talk and some kinky sex and he was spouting about forever? Every time she heard the f word she panicked, because instinct kept telling her she'd never shake free of him. That she shouldn't want to.

She'd been around enough Mr. Wrongs to be cautious. She'd earned that right. Now maybe if Jesse lightened up and acted like a gentleman instead of an autocratic Neanderthal, they might continue a relationship when this was over.

Mine, always mine.

She shifted in the lounge chair, aware her skin didn't feel too hot, despite the intense sun. Coconut-scented lotion brought her attention to the bottle beside her.

"I didn't miss any spots, did I?" she asked.

Kisho rolled his eyes. "No. But if you want me to do your back again so you can flip over, I will."

Not a hint of lust in his voice.

"Why don't you have a boyfriend, Kisho?"

He stilled. "What do you mean?"

"You're handsome, sexy, intelligent, and sensitive. Is it because you're Circ?" she whispered, not wanting anyone to overhear the *c* word.

83

He inwardly seethed with discomfort, and she placed a hand on his arm, wishing him calm. To her surprise, he relaxed.

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You pulled my anxiety." Calm surprise. "I don't like to talk about my personal life, and you sensed it. Then I suddenly felt at ease."

"I don't know."

He stared at her. "You still can't feel Fallon, though, can you?"

"Sometimes." *Like when he wants to fuck me, but rarely about anything meaningful*. "He's been sending me thoughts." Or at least he had been before she'd told him to butt out of her mind. He hadn't liked that, and he let her know in no uncertain terms. "You still didn't answer my question."

Kisho turned his head and closed his eyes. "I keep my personal life private."

"The guys don't care. They hold you in deepest respect. And I think Gunnar actually likes you."

His lips quirked. "He pretends not to like anyone. He's a big fake. Haven't you seen him watching Ava?"

"Yes, actually." And maybe the woman watched him back, which would explain why she'd become so cold to Olivia the past few days. Olivia blushed, wondering how the hell Ava could know what they'd done that one night. "My point, which you keep avoiding, is that no one on the team would care. I mean, considering what you all do anyway, how could they?"

"They engage in homosexuality because they have to. It's programmed."

"But that's the way it is anyway, isn't it?"

He turned to her, surprised. "Ah, I'm not sure."

His uncertainty softened her, making her like him even more. Kisho Hayashi had the soul of a poet, Ava had said, and she was right. He listened, never offered advice unless asked, and contained his emotions behind a wall of control. But she could feel the loneliness inside him, and it bothered her.

He continued. "But I do know we can only find peace with others like us. Without a mate, we experience severe sexual hungers. Often in the past the hungers worsened into mental instability. No one is actually sure why, but it seems that finding someone to alleviate the need to procreate actually eases the mental burdens that have turned so many of us rogue."

"What's a rogue?" She's heard Jules use the term while talking to Jesse, but as soon as he'd seen her approach, he'd clammed up.

"I told them we should tell you everything, but no one listens to me." Kisho frowned and turned on his side to face her. "When we were first made, the first batch had problems. You remember the indictments on General Kohl and Senator Kuntz?"

She nodded. "Supposedly they covered up a string of murders associated with an experimental program—Project Dawn."

"Right. The press had a field day with tales of super soldiers and science gone screwy, but they were mostly right."

Olivia smacked the arm of her lounge chair. "I knew it. The whole story was too bizarre to be fictional. Of course, now after meeting you guys, it makes more sense."

"You don't know the half of it. My team spent a year in an underground laboratory headed by an evil genius. A real mad scientist." Kisho frowned. "A lot of good men died there, less than human when they went." He shook off the memory. "None of that made the papers. Claws and fangs are the tip of the iceberg."

Her mouth dried. "Why are you telling me this?" The thought of her possibly going through such a transformation scared her to death. Olivia prized control. She chose what jobs she worked. She dated who she wanted, when she wanted. Even when the men she saw turned out to be less than ideal, *she* broke off the relationships and moved on.

Becoming Circ would change all that. Jesse claimed mating heats forced them into sexual orgies, or they'd go insane. God, Olivia wasn't an orgy woman! Though she'd fantasized a time or two, she'd never thought to engage in a ménage. And then she'd slept with not only Jesse, but Jules and Gunnar too.

But instead of the dismay she should have felt about their night together, she rumbled deep in her chest, a subtle murmur of satisfaction. A part of Olivia felt she deserved such treatment, an odd form of respect from worthy males, and most especially, from her mate.

85

"It's real, and it's perfectly normal, Olivia," Kisho said quietly. "We purr when we're happy. We roar when we're mad. We feel deeply, and we instinctively know what we need. I'm telling you about our physical changes so that when they happen and you see them, you won't be scared. The vision I saw of you in the jungle? It hasn't gone away."

She swallowed. "But I'll be with Jesse and Jules, right?"

He paused. "Right."

"But you think I'll freak. Because they'll turn into that physical wildness I haven't seen yet," she said slowly, understanding what he hadn't said.

"Yes."

"But it's still Jesse. He's always aware of himself, right?"

"For the most part."

Olivia sighed. Bad enough he'd become a cute but annoying bully. "Terrific."

"There's just one other thing, Olivia."

She didn't want to know. "What?"

"In the jungle, you're wearing that same bathing suit. And the guys who put you there are standing right behind us."

* * *

"I don't want her here," Fallon said for the twentieth time since they'd left the States. The suite they had here was nicer than the one he had at home. The damned thing even had a Jacuzzi in it. But Fallon couldn't appreciate anything but the danger surrounding his mate. His beast didn't like any of this, nor did the Navy SEAL ready for action.

Jules sighed. "We've been over this. Hayashi said she needs to be here."

"Bullshit. His visions are possible futures, not definite futures."

"You're talking to a brick wall, Jules," Tersch grumbled next to them. "She has him by the dick."

"Asshole. That's not the point."

"That's exactly the point. You're not thinking straight. If we'd left her at home, Montaña's men would have grabbed her. Hayashi said so. She's safer here with us."

Fallon's beast was screaming at him to protect his mate. Yet Jules insisted he leave her with Hayashi while they hashed this out. According to their unreliable seer, had they followed Fallon's decision to leave Olivia at home, she'd manage to leave the safety of the house and fall into enemy hands. How exactly, Hayashi didn't know. But Mrs. Sharpe had agreed they had to take Olivia with them into Trindade.

He moved through the open doors onto the balcony and looked down on his mate, the object of way too much male speculation for his peace of mind. The assholes he'd warned away had left, but too many men thinking with their dicks remained by the pool. "The fuckers are all watching her."

"She's sexy. What do you expect?" Tersch retorted. "Hell, I can barely look away as it is, and I know that fine ass."

"You're such a dick," Fallon said with disgust, gripping the railing of the balcony with long fingers. "See if you come anywhere near her ever again."

"Ease up, man. She likes me." Tersch's broad grin annoyed him.

Especially when Jules added, "Not as much as she likes me." Then he sobered. "Cheer up, Fallon. We won't let anything happen to her."

"Oh really?" Fallon snarled. "Then what the hell's that?"

He pointed below him, where four brutish men surrounded Hayashi and Olivia.

"Damn, he was supposed to wait." Jules leaned over the rail.

"What?"

"Our contact insisted on meeting Olivia away from us. For some reason he doesn't trust Mrs. Sharpe."

"I hear him on that." Tersch grunted. "The transmitter's working?"

"Yeah."

"Jules, so help me, leader or no leader, if you don't fill me in, I'm going to shove your balls up your throat."

Jules had the nerve to grin. "Quite an image. Fallon, the reason I didn't mention this before is that you never would have gone along with the plan, and we need Olivia to meet with Gatito.

There's a transmitter sewn into Olivia's top so we can follow her. Discreetly," he emphasized and caught Fallon's arm when he tried to leave. "We spook him; he'll bolt."

"So those assholes belong to him?" Fallon watched as they led Olivia off the patio through the building and out of sight. Hayashi remained tense, standing by the lounge chairs. "How does our criminal contact plan to stay under the radar using those thugs?"

"Those thugs are state *policia* and friends of our esteemed Mrs. Sharpe, though Gatito doesn't know that. Relax. We have it covered. Ask your girlfriend if you don't believe me."

Fallon felt like an idiot for not having thought of that sooner. "I'm so sorry, baby. I didn't know about this until now. Olivia, it's okay. We're tracking you with a transponder sewn into your suit."

"I know, Kisho mentioned it before dropping this bombshell. Warn your Circs, I'm going to carve them into little pieces when I get back. There's such a thing as sharing information with your own team."

He let out a relieved sigh and left the balcony, but not before warning Jules. "One of those fuckers touches her, and he's losing a hand. Let's go."

Tersch grinned. "I love when Fallon turns mean. Now let's have some fun."

* * *

They followed the group by trading off. Tersch tracked her, then Hayashi, Jules, and finally Fallon. The policia dropped her off near an isolated beach house off the beaten path. Rundown and buried in a thick tropical mess, at least its location afforded Fallon cover while he darted in closer.

He used his nose to lead him to Olivia, whose fear bothered him. He stopped when he caught clear sight of her standing across from a nervous little man who wouldn't stop fidgeting. The guy seemed more worried than Olivia, which settled some of Fallon's fear that he would try to harm her.

"Obrigado por ter vindo encontrar-se comigo." Olivia held out her hand, looking out of place in her yellow bikini and sun-kissed body. Beauty and the beast, he thought with wry amusement as the smaller fellow accepted her hand.

"I'm here," Fallon sent, wanting to reassure her. "What did you tell the guy?"

"I thanked him for meeting with me. Now hush and let me learn what he has to say. That is why I'm here, after all."

He sensed her unloading power and watched as her companion relaxed by degrees. Apparently Olivia could do more than sense feelings; she could control them as well. To his surprise, he found his beast liked the thought of her with more power. Dominating a weaker woman wouldn't be much of a challenge.

"Chamo-me, ally from such a character as this Olivia Gatito. Não temos muito tempo. Vou contar-lhe o que sei." The guy rambled on, but all Fallon caught was Gatito, his name.

Several minutes passed. Olivia frowned, questioned Gatito, seemed to disagree with him at times, then nodded. For his part, Gatito remained in the shadows of the trees, his back to the large palms behind him. It didn't take a Circ to smell his fear, and Fallon noted how Olivia used her voice to question him. Soothing, reassuring, and not at all the one she used when speaking with him.

Subtle rustling to his right and the scent of cedar and vanilla indicated Tersch and Jules had arrived. Across from the partial clearing, he saw Hayashi's wave before he disappeared into the vegetation. Much of Fallon's agitation eased when he knew his team had this meeting surrounded.

And then a smell that didn't belong in the jungle reached him. The rotting scent of rogue Circ—something he'd never forget, and something he hadn't experienced in over a year.

"Shit. Jules, rogues." He stripped and changed in an instant, prepared to protect Olivia at all costs.

"Where?" Jules asked.

"I'm not—there, by Hayashi." Fronds and branches waved. Rustling and growling grew louder, alarming Gatito, who shoved some papers into Olivia's hands before bolting into the jungle, away from the beach.

"Espera!" Olivia cried and stupidly rushed after him.

"Dammit. Olivia, wait," Fallon ordered. Two rogues rushed him from out of nowhere.

Rogue Circs, unlike the mutants that resembled nothing more than mutated monsters, looked like him and his team. Enlarged bodies, toughened skin, fangs and claws, and powerful needs. But rogues possessed fierce tempers they couldn't control—appetites for sex and

destruction caused by a genetic anomaly in their blood, an anomaly that only seemed to abate once a Circ had found a mate—and before turning rogue in the first place.

Years ago scientists working on Project Dawn had created control drugs, but they only managed to turn rogue Circs into mutants. Fallon and his team had beaten the odds and managed to stay sane, leaning on one another for support, as well as the drugs Doc had fashioned for them.

The drugs no longer worked as well as they once did, but Fallon didn't worry about turning rogue. Not with Olivia by his side. Except she wasn't at his side, and he had these assholes to worry about.

Tersch yelled to him, but he didn't understand. The fierce imperative to find and protect Olivia consumed him. Without thinking about it, he sent a mental roar at the rogue closest to him and slashed at his throat. He drew blood, but the wound began healing immediately. The other rogue shoved him back and broke one of his ribs. Fallon hissed through the pain, and having lost sight of Olivia completely, he snapped. His control vanished.

He tore into the rogue who'd shoved him, with no thought but to destroy. They battled back and forth, but Fallon couldn't wait any longer. He shoved a clawed fist through the rogue's chest cavity and dug for his heart. After ripping it from the rogue's chest, he tossed it aside and bounded after Olivia.

Behind him, he heard Tersch's soul-stirring battle cry and knew the berserker had come out to play. About fucking time, he snarled mentally while tracking Olivia with skill and speed. He caught up to her in minutes but was too late to save Gatito, who dangled from the claw of a mutant.

"We have mutants to worry about too," he broadcasted to the team, unaware of how he did it exactly. Unlike the rogues, the mutants looked like nothing remotely human. This one had a misshapen spine that crooked like an S. Tar black skin, scaled instead of flesh. Red eyes without a hint of white stared malevolently as it gnawed on Gatito's arm. Sharp teeth and a forked black tongue flicked at the man's blood.

Olivia didn't scream. In fact, she made very little noise at all. When she glanced back at him, she froze. A haze of ripe cherries lingered on his tongue, made bitter because of her obvious terror.

"Baby, it's me. Jesse. This is the *change* in its entirety. That thing over there is an abomination."

She flinched at his deepened voice but didn't try to escape when he took her in his arms. Unfortunately the mutant latched onto her scent, as he'd known it would. It roared, dropped Gatito, and made a beeline in their direction.

"Run," Fallon yelled and launched himself at the mutant. He wondered what the fuck these things were doing still alive and in this particular place. Especially when he and the team were here at the exact same spot at the exact same time. He did his best to stand between the mutant and his mate.

Mutants had twice as much strength as Circs, as they weren't held back by control, reason, or conscience. They did what they pleased when they pleased, and corrupted by an unnatural drug, they lost the power to think with any sense of logic, the only flaw in their design, as far as Fallon could tell.

The thing picked him up and threw him into the base of a thick tree, cracking his femur. The pain stunned Fallon for a moment before he rolled to his feet and fought back while he healed. Olivia, damn her, hadn't moved.

"Jules, I need help. Olivia's in danger," he yelled with his mind. "Olivia, dammit, get out of here!"

"Coming. More mutants out here," Jules returned, mentally struggling.

Tersch's eerie growl echoed around them. He could only imagine what the sight of his monstrously large friend would do to Olivia's already fragile state of mind.

The mutant caught him in the side, using his distraction against him. The bastard pierced his flesh with twisted, jagged claws that hurt like a bitch. He roared his displeasure and cried out in pain as the thing ripped its nails out. They entered smoothly but pulled out more flesh, the jagged teeth on the things fucking effective weapons.

Bleeding like a sieve, Fallon faltered on his feet. Need to keep clearheaded for Olivia, he told himself and forced his feet to move. A glance at her showed her fixated on his blood.

"Olivia, honey, please. You have to get to safety," he growled, upset his mate wouldn't leave. The damned woman was going to get herself killed.

The mutant sniffed in her direction and grinned. Then it wrapped itself around Fallon, clinging like a goddamn leech, and bit into his neck.

Trying to free himself from its bone-crushing grip was bad enough, but feeling the mutant's pronged tongue sucking at his neck, ingesting his blood, freaked the hell out of him. Lightheaded and growing weaker, Fallon struggled for Olivia's sake. But as his ribs cracked, he began to drown in the fluid building up in his lungs.

An alien shriek pierced the air, but he couldn't see what happened. Weak, you're weak, he berated himself as he fought to remain coherent, to not leave his mate to a horrific fate. Instead he floundered in a sea of cold, dark hell, listening to inhuman screams while he imagined the demon killing the only thing he'd ever loved.

Olivia couldn't stand it. The monster was eating Jesse! The only guy to ever prove somewhat promising in the relationship department, and a reject from the Black Lagoon was devouring him.

"Hell no," she yelled and gave in to the sudden well of rage boiling inside her. She used the creature's own hungers to foster a need to kill within herself. Screams and alien noise from all around her only added to the insanity of the situation. Jesse's large, tough body continued to bleed out as the thing tightened around him like a coiled boa.

On fire, Olivia pulled at her clothes and stretched with every cell she possessed. The pain was agonizing, but the mutant's fury fed her desire to destroy. When the ache finally passed, she clenched her fingers, aware of a subtle difference. Her nails were an inch long and hard as steel

A glance down at herself showed her body to be darker, taller, and way more muscular.

She smacked her lips, called for the mutant, and had to avoid piercing her tongue on the long, sharp fangs in her mouth. *Holy crap*.

"I'm here, you prick," she yelled to it again. The scent of its internal decay sickened her, but in a way she also felt a strange pity. The thing had no sense of self, only a lonely need for companionship. It broadcast like a radio tower, its feelings loud, all-encompassing, and pathetic.

"I'm here. Come to me," she said more quietly and held out her arms.

It didn't break its stare at her as it released its hold on Jesse. He slumped on the ground while the mutant crawled to her. Before she could figure out what she intended to do to it, a dark blur flew in front of her, taking the mutant away once more.

Two more Circs entered her immediate space, and she crossed to hover protectively over Jesse. A glance at him made her wonder how she'd ever thought him a beast. He still appeared like himself as a man, but he was better, stronger, harder. The blood all over him bothered her, and she sent him a burst of heat, warning him with an emotional tug to heal himself.

"Christ, that's perfect." Jules's sarcastic growl came from the large Circ to her right. He radiated power, and she couldn't help her instant attraction. The beast within her preened at having the leader's attention. "A female Circ out here to tease the rogues circling us like a damned hunting party. Talk about a helluva trip."

Kisho blinked at her and cocked his head. "I didn't see this coming." Bigger, like Jules, he took her breath away. Exotically slanted eyes, thick, long, dark hair, and muscles that gleamed in the Brazilian sun. Were it not for her mate, she might have tried claiming the others as her own. But she needed to protect Jesse first. The rest of her new family could come second.

In the back of her mind, Olivia recognized her newfound thoughts and emotions as not quite a part of her, but right now she focused her attention on those directly within reach of Jesse.

The mutant uttered a hoarse cry before growing silent, its lack of noise a distinct warning that something much worse had joined them.

To her shock, she barely recognized Gunnar. He stood a head larger than Jules and Kisho. Ripped with muscle, the tendons in his neck and arms stood out in stark relief. Veins bulged as he moved like a hulking bodybuilder who ate other bodybuilders for breakfast. But it was his eyes, bright blue blazes bathed in black that alarmed her. Nothing about him looked remotely human. His claws dripped with a black, oily substance, and his teeth dripped with the same stuff. Not fangs, but sharklike, pointed teeth that could rip into a body and decimate his opponents.

He raised his head and sniffed and took a threatening step in her direction.

She pulled at his rage and snarled in warning.

He stopped and blinked and, to her surprise, began to shrink in size. He remained large but not so gigantic, and his eyes once again looked normal, the slit pupils declaring him Circ.

"Olivia?" he asked, his voice hoarse. He absently wiped the black stuff from his face and hands. "Fuck, you fully *changed*." He stared hard, his gaze centered on her breasts as he licked his lips.

"Is Fallon okay?" Jules asked.

She didn't know, but when he moved forward to check, she growled at him to stay back.

"We don't have time for this." Jules scowled. "We need to get you both out of here before the others find us."

"Others?" Olivia knew it was Jules; she trusted him. But her beast didn't want to give up her mate's safety to anyone.

"Remember who's in charge," Jules rumbled and released a torrent of vanilla that soothed her protectiveness.

"I—Sorry." She shook her head and allowed Jules to pull her away. Hayashi rushed to Jesse's side. "I don't know up from down right now." She rubbed her jaw, aware it felt heavier than it should. She should have been embarrassed about her nudity in front of the others, but seeing them all naked, in their natural forms, took away any sense of shyness from her.

Jules ran his knuckle over her cheek. "It's okay. The beast acts on instinct. Jesse Fallon belongs to me, but he belongs to you as well."

She nodded.

"We have to leave. Rogues are unsafe, and as you saw, mutants are a real problem. Hayashi, you and Tersch lead them away, then lose them in the jungle and circle back to the safe house, not the hotel. They'll be waiting for us there."

"Right." Gunnar waited for Kisho. "Olivia, listen to Jules. Protect your mate," he growled, his eyes blazing.

"I will."

"We'll see you soon." He nodded at Kisho, and they left without a sound.

Jules bent down and hefted Jesse, who was no longer bleeding, over his shoulder. He gave her a grin that lifted her spirits. "Don't worry; we do this all the time. Our boy will be just fine after some rest. Now let's lose these assholes and stash you someplace safe."

94 *Marie Harte*

"Stash *us* someplace safe," she corrected. "He's not ready for battle yet." She glanced at Jesse, lying helplessly against Jules.

"Right. Don't worry, Olivia. He'll be swearing up and down at you in no time. Trust me."

"I do." She paused. "Or I would have ripped out your throat the minute you touched what's mine." She blinked. "Did I just say what I think I said?"

Jules chuckled. "I can see you're going to fit right in. You'll keep Fallon in line. Come on."

Fit in. Acceptance, family. Mate. Despite the extremity of the situation, all was right with the world. "Lead on, boss."

95

Chapter Nine

Jesse woke to throbbing ribs and a pounding headache. He stared at a broad back and tight ass and recognized them as belonging to Jules.

"Olivia?" he croaked.

"I'm here."

He pushed up from Jules's back and stared, amazed, at Olivia in shifted form. Dear God, she was *perfect*. Tall, lithe, yet packed with muscle. Her golden skin had deepened, not so much brown as tan. Her dark hair hung in thick black waves down her back. Her fangs peeked over full bloodred lips pursed in displeasure. And that body...

"Jules, he's awake and hurting. I can feel it."

"So take some of the pain." Jules didn't slow down.

She frowned at him, pleasing Fallon that she didn't like his leader as much as he'd feared. Jealous bastard that he was, he wanted her affection all for himself.

Her blue-green eyes shone with energy as she absorbed some of his aches, leaving him with a hazy sense of wonder.

He smiled at her. "Nicely done, baby. Now how about a little kiss?"

Her expression of joy made him hard in an instant.

"Shit, Fallon. Your cock is digging into my chest. Save it, would you?"

He couldn't help it. Seeing all of Olivia in her nude, *changed* glory, aroused him. Her full tits were fuller, tipped with rosy nipples he intended to suck as soon as Jules put him down. Her long legs would wrap around his hips tightly while he pounded into her. So good, she'd take him as roughly as he wanted.

He couldn't wait.

"Fuck. Hold on," Jules grumbled, no doubt smelling the heady scent of lust and mint mingling with cherries on the air. "We've been walking for hours. The safe house is another mile east, but I have a feeling you two won't make it that far. And who can blame you? A prime Circ female. Have at it, Fallon, but don't think I'm not going to watch or taste some of her when you're done."

"I'll share. After I've had my fill," Fallon growled, healing at a remarkable rate. Funny what lust could do for his beast, a sexual creature at heart.

The scent of cherries intensified. Olivia had picked up on his desire and mirrored it.

Jules pushed past the next tree and stopped in the small, enclosed, grassy field. He set Fallon down and sat back against a thick palm. Spreading his feet wide on the ground, he gripped himself and waited.

Olivia hesitated.

"Come, mate. It's time." Time to claim the beast.

"I...ah...I don't know." Her humanity had a hell of bad timing, reappearing right now. Fallon didn't intend to allow it. Time the female knew her place. For days she'd fought him on one thing after another, striving to maintain an independence no longer possible for a Circ. As much as he respected her intelligence, the woman didn't seem to be firing on all faculties.

Circs had a pack mentality. Together, they thrived; alone, they turned rogue or worse. His beast had already claimed the woman. Now he needed her beast.

"I know. Come here."

She frowned.

"I said come here," he said again, his voice low, and projected his scent.

Her nostrils flared, and her eyes narrowed. Fallon glanced at Jules; he was transfixed by the byplay.

Olivia took a step, then another and another, toward him. Her nipples puckered, and the sweet perfume of her lust smacked him hard.

"Oh yeah. That's it, baby. Bring me my pussy. Open for me. I need a taste."

She lay on the ground and spread her thighs wide, giving him an intimate look at her flushed sex. Her clit was full, and he salivated at the sight.

"Tell me you need me. Tell me you want it."

Olivia licked her lips, the hint of her fangs a clear tease. A part of him wanted to bite her, to mark her, and to feel her mark him.

```
"I want it," she growled low. "I want you."
```

```
"Mate. I want you, mate."
```

He stood over her, holding out his dick, which had grown harder than the rocks beside them. "Say it."

"I want you, mate. Please."

He lowered and settled between her thighs.

"She smells so good, so ready," Jules murmured, intent.

"She is. *My* pussy is wet," Fallon rasped and buried his face between her legs. He licked and sucked, entranced with this spicy part of her he'd only hoped to experience.

She cried out and grasped his head, pumping her hips against his mouth.

He grazed her clit with his fangs and drank her honeyed cream, wanting nothing more than to sink inside her. He hurt, needing to unload his swelling balls, to fill her with his seed.

```
"Love me."
```

He heard the whisper, wanting badly to follow it back, but he didn't want to scare her. This was the first time she'd initiated contact since learning she was Circ.

```
"Please, Jesse. Love me," she begged.
```

"Yes, baby. I will. I do," he admitted, aware he meant much more than anything physical. Chemically, physically, he and Olivia were a perfect match. Her tits fit into his hands, even as large as her breasts now were. He held her as he ate her, pinching her nipples until they stabbed into the air.

He wanted to feel them in his mouth, so he let her go and covered her. His cock was slick with need, but he kept the tip of himself at her entrance and grazed her clit as he feasted on her breasts.

[&]quot;Jesse, please."

"You're big, Olivia. So sweet. Look at your nipples, hard for me." He sucked one into his mouth and bit gently, ecstatic when she writhed and begged him to fuck her. Her descent into frank language turned him on like nothing else, because he knew she'd lost control.

He made her crazed. Not Jules or Tersch, not some Circ hormone. But Jesse. Him.

"I want to feel that cock inside me. Please, Jesse. Fuck me hard. Come inside me, all over me. My mouth, my ass. Everything you want," she rasped and twisted underneath him, rubbing his cockhead against her clit. She thrust up, and he slid an inch inside her.

"This what you want?" he growled, giving her just his tip.

She cried out and bucked, but he wouldn't be rushed.

"Yes, yes! More."

"I want more, *mate*." He wanted the stubborn woman to acknowledge her importance in his life. He knew she had thoughts of slipping back into her regular life away from him, and his beast—and the man—found the notion unacceptable. Fallon wouldn't let her go. Not ever. He couldn't. Just the thought of it frustrated and saddened him and made him want to lash out in a fury.

She stilled. "What's wrong?"

Panting, he pulled out of her completely and glared down at her. "You're not leaving me, *ever*. You're mine, dammit. My mate, *my woman*." He shoved her legs apart and speared her with one swift, hard thrust.

Crying out, she arched against him. Beyond them, Jules groaned.

"You belong to me, and you know it."

"Yes, yes," she mumbled, clutching his hips and gouging his flesh as he fucked her.

"You're family, Olivia. You'll carry my children, bear my burdens, as I'll bear yours." He pistoned, undone, as he unloaded not just his seed but his fears and hopes and dreams inside her. "I can't live without you, baby. You can't leave me. Not when you'll take my happiness with you when you go."

He came inside her too quickly, caught in the warm hold of her tight pussy. Shuddering, he continued to admit a truth he could no longer deny. "We belong together. Feel me. Reach out and feel me, dammit."

He opened himself fully, waiting for her psychic touch.

But she didn't reach out to him with her mind. Instead she angled her hips and mewled her satisfaction as she climaxed. And the grip on his cock stirred him to come again.

"Ah yes, shit," he swore, pumping and unable to stop. "Come on, baby. Feel me."

"I—Oh, *Jesse*." She screamed and clenched around him. "So good. So good." She shivered on the ground, caught in lust and something else, something he touched with his mind.

To his astonishment, the normal boundaries shielding her mind weren't there. As he pulsed inside her, he read the fears and worries she had about him, about being Circ, about her future. She wanted so very badly to believe in him, but she'd been burned before.

Her hesitation made sense. As much as he wanted to push her into trusting him, he knew he needed time to build their connection. That, he could and would enforce.

"You're not leaving me. Say it."

"So bossy," she said with a breathless, sexy voice. "I'm not leaving you."

"Good." He ground against her and savored her telling reaction.

"Fuck, I'm done waiting."

Fallon glanced over at Jules, surprised he'd forgotten all about his leader. Now, however, feeling Jules's heavy stare, his cock stirred to life once more.

"On her knees, I think." Jules stood, his dick thick and shiny. Totally aroused.

"God, I want you both again. What's wrong with me?" Olivia asked dreamily. "I'm in heat or something."

He and Jules shared a look and smiled. "Or something." Fallon withdrew from his mate and turned her onto her hands and knees. He couldn't keep himself from biting her shoulder and nudging her ass with his erection.

She only moaned when his fangs pierced her flesh, but as he sucked a drop of her blood into his mouth, the scent of cherries saturated the area.

"I think your female wants it," Jules said. "How do you want it, Olivia?"

She trembled, and to Fallon's surprise took his hand and placed it over one full breast. Fallon molded over her, cupping that perfect tit in his hand, and squeezed.

"Hmm. Yes, harder. Like that."

"You want this in that ass or your mouth?" Jules asked, holding himself for her.

"My ass, while I swallow my lover's cum."

They didn't waste any time. Fallon couldn't wait to feel her mouth over him again, and Jules wanted to sink inside a willing female.

Olivia tried to take charge, but Jules slapped her ass hard.

"Wait, woman. Let me first—Ah." He moaned as he pried her ass cheeks apart and slid slowly inside her. "Oh fuck. This won't last long at all."

Fallon watched as Jules fucked his mate. The jealousy he'd thought to feel didn't form. Instead his desire rose as he saw Olivia rock with every hard thrust. "That's hot. So sexy," he rasped and joined them. On his knees, he guided himself to her mouth.

He didn't have long to wait. She opened her lips and took him to the back of her throat. Purring, his mate licked and bit and sucked until he couldn't stop himself from plunging in and out of her mouth.

At first passive, then actively controlling the minx as she enraged his lust to an all-new level, Fallon quickly neared his end.

Jules raked his nails over her ass as he worked toward orgasm. "Yes, that's it, Olivia. Take it all." He groaned and stilled, coming in heaving gasps.

The sight of his mate taking his friend pushed Fallon past his limits. "Swallow me, baby. That's so good." He poured into her mouth, pulsing jets of cum down her throat. The scent of his need entwined with hers.

"Touch her, Jules."

Jules nodded and reached under her. "She's going to go over fast. I can see it." In her aura, he meant. "Let's pinch that tight bud, sweetheart."

She sucked harder on Fallon, who came again, painfully hard, and moaned around his cock.

"Oh yeah, so tight. Yes," Jules hissed and squeezed his eyes shut.

He pushed into her again and held while she bucked and twisted between them, lost in her own rapture.

Their beasts finally sated, both men withdrew from Olivia. Fallon caught her before she landed face-first on the ground. Concerned, he relaxed when she sighed against his chest and fell asleep.

"God, you're lucky," Jules said with a sigh. "She's good, Fallon. Too good for half measures."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Jules groaned. "That means you'd better propose. Soon as we get back, go get a ring, you dumb bastard, and make it right. She's not the type of woman who'll settle for less."

"I—Yeah, well, I—" He loved the woman, didn't he? So why did the thought of marriage scare the hell out of him? It wasn't that he hadn't thought about it. But he'd never expected to find a woman who could handle him.

"Your auras are the same."

"They are?"

"Yeah, both violet, just like the pricks up north in love with their bossy mates." Jules grinned. He'd never admit it to the Circs in Jersey, but Fallon knew he respected the hell out of them.

"In love with their bossy mates."

"Christ, I never said anything about love." Yet as he held his mate, Fallon's heart felt full, warm, and protected by this woman who belonged with him.

"You don't have to say it—well, not to me. But you're going to have to tell her eventually." Was what he felt love? "The same color, you said?"

"Yep. Both violet, the shade of amour." Jules grinned. "Now let's get you and the Mrs. to the safe house. She's had a really hard day." He laughed at his pun. "And God knows I have."

"Ass." Fallon grinned back at him. "A ring, huh? I'm not sure she'll say yes."

"No, she'll make you work for it. The good ones always do."

Fallon carried her with him behind Jules, lost in fantasies of the future. Rings and wives and babies. "I can do all that," he murmured, content and more than pleased at thoughts of keeping her forever. "But no picket fence. I've got to draw the line somewhere."

"Well, what do we do now?" Olivia asked, frustrated, tired, and more than a little pissed off. Jules's and Jesse's assurances had eased her worries. They'd find the safe house and then fly the hell out of Dodge. No such luck.

Apparently mutants and rogue Circs weren't enough for the bad guys. Montaña's men had raided the safe house before they arrived—and how the hell did he know about that?—and organized into search teams to find them. Luckily Kisho and Gunnar had evaded capture. They had all managed to group back together and were now traveling through the thick vegetation of the Amazon.

In the process of avoiding detection in the rain forest, they'd captured one man. Jesse had raided his mind and shared with her the contents of what he'd found. Nothing good, not that she'd suspected otherwise.

According to their captured guard, Colonel Montaña had issued orders to bring her directly to him, unharmed. Jules, Jesse, and the others wouldn't be so lucky. Montaña wanted them brought in dead or alive.

"Now we try to find that damned entrance Gatito wrote about," Jules rumbled and clutched the papers Gatito had handed Olivia earlier. Thank God, in all the turmoil, they hadn't been lost. "You said he stashed documents there that can corroborate the participation of not only Colonel Montaña, but the head honcho as well?"

"That's what he told me," Olivia corroborated. "If he hadn't been so unnerved by all of Montaña's men around town, he would have brought the actual proof with him."

"Best that he didn't, considering he's dead," Jules said with a bluntness she appreciated. They didn't have time to sugarcoat the situation. He walked ahead, his muscles bunching and stretching, calling attention to his darkened skin and thick muscles. Immediately her gaze sought Jesse.

He watched her without blinking. Always keeping an eye on me. So I don't run away or to protect me? she wondered with a burst of surprising humor. Kisho and Gunnar came up behind him and waited for her to follow Jules. She continued walking.

The five of them remained in Circ form, moving faster and quieter with enhanced reflexes in such powerful bodies.

It took some getting used to, but Olivia was starting to appreciate some aspects of her "beast," as Jesse called it. The ability to walk for miles without tiring and without suffering from bug bites had its upside. She wasn't yet totally comfortable without clothes on, but the others tried to make her feel less awkward. For the most part, they didn't look at her.

She experienced twinges of self-awareness when she'd catch one of the men staring at her naked form, but otherwise the group moved through the jungle without incident.

The wildness inside Olivia thrived in the hot, humid atmosphere. No laws, no people. Just animals, plants, and her pack.

"Not pack, teammates," she muttered, trying to find a way to keep that burgeoning, *other* awareness, from penetrating.

"What's that?" Jesse asked. He loped right next to her and hugged her to him, bringing with him that delicious scent that turned her on like a switch. They slowed, and she huddled into the security of his larger frame. He made her feel so safe, so protected and cared for. Almost...loved.

God, if this kept up, she'd convince herself it really was love. Nothing like danger to increase the air of intimacy between them. Even knowing the warmth Jesse continually projected toward her couldn't be real, she snuggled closer.

Jules growled, "Not now, you two. We have some distance to close. About a day's worth. Good work getting Gatito to open up to you, Olivia."

How Jules knew north when surrounded by huge-ass trees and green as far as the eye could see, Olivia had no idea. But she had no problems following his direction. He radiated leadership and surety. They might as well have been walking through hell; she'd wade through the flames if he said so.

His approval soothed her because it made Jesse happy. Except the need to make Jesse happy should have irked her.

To add to her emotional dilemma concerning the man, his smothering overprotectiveness didn't feel all that bad anymore. Neither did his desire to see to her every need. *Man, I could so get used to this*.

He kissed her before putting some space between them, not bothering to hide his thick erection. His excitement made her feel both better and worse.

She sensed his feelings, and she knew that Jesse liked seeing her in this stronger form. Her perceived power eased his anxiety.

Unfortunately hers grew.

Olivia felt more than powerful; she felt deadly. That small voice ever growing inside her could and *would* kill if pressed. She had no doubt that her new instinctive needs would soon triumph over rational thought. And the imagined loss of control bothered the hell out of her. What if while stroking Jesse's cheek during a passionate encounter, she accidentally clawed his face? What if she hurt one of her friends while trying to help them? And what if, when encountering the enemy, she killed someone?

It was all well and good to wish the enemy gone, but to take a life? This wasn't a game, and Olivia was way out of her league.

I'm an intelligence instructor, a linguist at best, but not a Special Forces expert! Oh wait. That's right. I'm not even that anymore. Now I'm Circ. The pleasure at that thought further unnerved her, because it was, and it wasn't, her own.

The animalistic sentience inside her continued to grow. Her beast didn't like being ignored, especially when she felt as if she belonged out here, her presence clearly visible for the entire world to see.

She stroked her large forearms, bemused at the golden brown flesh there. And so tough. Olivia dragged a sharp, one-inch nail, as strong as steel, down her skin, expecting to see blood. Instead her skin deflected the piercing. Upon closer inspection, she swore she saw subtle lines like tiny scales fitted together to make a strong, armored suit of skin.

"It gets easier the more you wear it," Gunnar rasped right next to her, and she jumped.

For such a large male, he moved with astonishing silence.

So close, his scent overwhelmed her. Familiar, but not...right. She instinctively opened her mouth and tasted him on the air. A hint of cedar, but not the mint she wanted. Stepping away from him, she followed in Jesse's footsteps.

Gunnar chuckled. "Fallon, man, she's into you, big-time."

She turned to glare at the hulking Circ.

"Easy, princess. I just think it's funny the way you keep trying to stay away from him. But you can't help yourself. Circ genes, baby. They trump everything human about you."

"Whatever." She licked a large fang, wondering how funny he'd think her if she bit him.

As if he could read her mind, he took a step back and said to Kisho, "Damn, I think she's just as mean as Fallon. Talk about a perfect pair."

Kisho didn't respond, frozen in place.

Everyone stopped.

"What—" she started.

Jules shook his head. "Hayashi?"

"They're scattering like mice. Everyone's gone. All is lost, except for one box he forgot. One small cardboard box containing tomorrow's answers."

Kisho's hollow voice and blank expression unnerved her. Her beast didn't like it, and she would have moved away from him if Jesse hadn't latched onto her arms and held her fast.

"Easy. He's seeing what we need to know," he murmured.

"There's one vial they left behind, though. Not the box, what Dr. Nunes invented to destroy London's new project. He's afraid Montaña will kill him and his daughter if he refuses to help the big boss. But I can't"—Kisho cocked his head, as if trying to hear more—"I can't understand. The language barrier won't give. Not this time."

Not this time?

"Gunshots. The girl. Blood all over her silky black hair. Such a waste, now Nunes won't cooperate. Have to kill him too..." He choked on a cry and stopped speaking, his breathing loud in the sudden silence.

Olivia could only imagine what he'd seen.

Kisho blinked, and life returned to his face. "What happened?"

Jules grimaced. "We need to find that lab. Double-time now."

Kisho's expression darkened, and Olivia felt his regret as memory of his foresight slowly returned. "Right."

The group took off running. The beast within Olivia roared to life. Her questions would have to keep, because she started losing herself in the physical exertions her beast demanded.

She ran through the jungle, through twilight, midnight, and into the dawn, and finally began to tire.

The men showed no signs of stopping.

"Jesse, I need to rest."

Just ahead of her, he slowed. Behind her, Gunnar stopped.

Not winded whatsoever, Jesse called to the others. "Jules, Hayashi, why don't you two go on up ahead and scout? We have to be close. I could use a break, and I'm sure Olivia could as well."

Jules nodded. "Good idea. You three stay here while we check ahead. If Hayashi's right, there shouldn't be much of a threat left."

Gunnar growled, "You're not going in without us?"

"No. But I want a look at their security. If we can't tag Montaña or his men, we can at least see what they're working with. And again, whatever's left in the lab will help us track the bastards."

Gunnar grunted. His idea of a yes, Olivia supposed. In his beastlike form, he towered over her and made Jesse look small. Sexy yet threatening. She liked the combination, but not more than her beast liked the look of her dark-haired, dark-skinned mate.

Jesse's eyes glowed as he studied her, and his body responded.

Gunnar's did as well.

"Ah, I have to... I need privacy."

Jesse nodded to his left. "I don't hear anything threatening. We'll wait here."

"Yeah." Gunnar agreed. "Hear that? A small waterfall about three hundred meters south. I'll find it. Meet you there."

After Olivia took care of her needs, she returned and followed Jesse to Gunnar. A waterfall spilled over several large rocks and into a pool of water, where they found Gunnar standing waist-deep.

"Check it out. A bath, and I found some fruit. We're in luck." He nodded to the bank, where a large cluster of bananas sat.

Olivia glanced with suspicion at the fruit. "Be careful. The banana spider is one of the most venomous in the world. They hide in the dark places of the plant."

Jesse bent down to inspect the fruit and stood with his palm out. "Like this one?"

"Don't move!"

"Relax. He couldn't bite me if he wanted to. Remember, honey, toughened skin." He put the spider back down.

She watched it scuttle under some leaves and relaxed, and Gunnar grinned.

"Come on, Olivia. Why not get wet?" he asked, the smirk on his face making the question more suggestive than it should have been.

"Back off," Jesse rumbled, deep in his throat, and Gunnar's smile faded. "My mate, my female."

Gunnar looked as if he wanted to argue, but to her surprise, he didn't.

Before she could question that possession thing again, her beast took charge. "You're mine. And he's mine, if and when I say so," she growled. She tripped Jesse, who fell flat on his back.

Olivia refused to give him quarter. She followed him down and straddled his body. In seconds she spread her knees wider and took him deep inside her pussy.

"Olivia." Jesse moaned and clutched her hips hard enough to leave bruises, even in *changed* form. "Yeah, that's it. Ride me."

She didn't argue, didn't do much more than soothe the ache inside her. The void inside her womb needed to be filled. And as much as she wanted Gunnar to want her, to sink inside her, only Jesse's seed would take root in her belly. Her mate, her conditions.

"Fuck me. She's aggressive and hot as hell," Gunnar whispered from just behind her.

When he would have approached, she snarled at him to stay back and slammed herself over her lover time and time again.

He groaned and came inside her, but she didn't let up. Hungry for more, she shared her sexual frustration, mixing her needs with his violent climax until his emotions followed whatever she dictated.

"I want you inside me when I come," she said over her shoulder. "In my ass while my mate fills me again."

"Yes, ma'am," Gunnar teased and joined them on the ground.

What should have been awkward worked surprisingly well. Gunnar fit himself inside her, stretching into her flesh with his lubed cock. He worked her, pushing her, using her to fuck Jesse, and the erotic notion fueled her desire.

Jesse pinched her nipples and sucked on any part of her he could reach. His kiss set her ablaze, the promise of so much more than just sex with every swipe of his tongue and hands all over her body.

She arched against him, her clit full and deliciously sensitive while Gunnar and Jesse filled her body.

"Come all over me," Jesse murmured. "Make me wet with cream, baby."

Gunnar bit down on her shoulder. "Give it to him. Suck him dry, just as I fill up your fine ass. So fucking good, Olivia. So tight, honey." Gunnar fucked her harder, ramming inside her with a force that would have really hurt a normal woman.

Her beast was in heaven. Two powerfully strong men at her disposal. And she already had her mate's seed.

She stared down at him, losing herself in his gaze as Gunnar continued to pound into her, driving her tighter and harder against her mate.

A burst of love tore from Jesse and filled her with joy.

Olivia couldn't stop herself. She let out a breathless cry and clenched Jesse's cock with her tight walls. He swore and gripped her hard as he came again, his painful pleasure a thing of beauty. Then Gunnar stiffened behind her and shuddered, moaning his pleasure.

The emotional catharsis eased the tension that had been building all night and day, and thoroughly wrung out, Olivia slumped down over Jesse.

Gunnar groaned as he withdrew. He left them to clean himself in the water.

"It just keeps getting better," Jesse murmured and stroked her hair. His long nails scraped against her scalp, his restrained strength incredibly appealing. "Nothing matters but getting inside you. And not just with my cock." His crudity shocked her out of her floating bliss. "But with my head. When you come, you leave yourself open," he said quietly. "I can read

everything. Your hurts, your angers, your pleasures, and your needs. I can give you what you need, you know."

She didn't want to talk about anything. Olivia wanted to bask in the afterglow. How the hell had life gotten so complicated? When a man wanted to talk and a woman just wanted to enjoy some physical relief?

She couldn't be sure, but Jesse looked as if he battled a smile.

"Jesse?"

Gunnar joined them, growing in size as Olivia watched. "Much as I wouldn't mind getting it on with you two again, company's coming."

She scrambled off Jesse, wishing she'd at least had some time to clean up.

Jesse pushed her behind him.

She wanted to argue that she could take care of herself. But then he stretched out those glorious arms, and his claws actually lengthened. Deadly, fierce, and *hers*.

"No playing around," Jesse said to Gunnar. "Gut them, and let's move. No dicking around with Olivia's safety."

"No fun, but okay."

Two men with guns walked into the clearing. Right behind them followed Kisho and Jules.

Gunnar smiled, showing large white fangs. "Terrific. Playtime."

Jesse shifted and blocked her view. The sounds of fists meeting flesh sounded, then silence.

"Two down, fifteen to go," Jules said. "The lab is gone. The mission's a bust, and we have not only Montaña's men to worry about, but we found rogues working on his security detail. We need to move."

"Yeah. Time to get the hell back to the States before Montaña's men get their hands on Olivia," Jesse agreed.

"You have my vote." Kisho sounded calm.

"Fuck. No offense, Olivia. But you're putting a definite crimp in my style," Gunnar complained.

"Sorry. But you can always fight Jesse or some annoying local back home, can't you?" she offered, both relieved yet sorry they had to leave without what they'd come for.

"I guess I'll have to," Gunnar muttered.

Jesse clapped him on the shoulder. "Look on the bright side. I'm sure Ava's just dying to get her hooks into you. You left her a basket of laundry with a snide note."

"Snide." Gunnar snorted. "Dude, do you even know what snide means?"

Olivia interrupted when she saw Jesse's hands ball into fists. "Um, Jules? I don't mean to put another crimp in anyone's style, but how are we supposed to go home looking like this?" She blushed and wondered if they could tell under her *changed* skin.

"Good point." Jules cleared his throat. "Ah, Fallon? You and Olivia might want to rinse off before we head out, to dull her scent."

"For God's sake," she muttered, embarrassed at being compared to a breeding animal.

"It's natural, Olivia. Your beast needs to procreate. Circs are sexual, as you've already seen." There was no scorn or condemnation in Jules's voice. "It's something you'll get used to. Your scent is extremely enticing."

She blushed again.

Kisho added, "And to answer your earlier question, when we scouted the lab, I found a cell phone. I made a few calls to discreet contacts. We'll be out of here, *changed* back, and dressed before noon. If we hurry."

Olivia entered the stream and washed herself. She still had a hard time believing she'd been naked around four men for more than a day and barely flinched anymore. She glanced up, met Jesse's gaze, and shivered at the sensual study he gave her.

Definitely time to go home before I forget who I am. A woman who not only wears but likes clothes! She just hoped they made it home in one piece.

Chapter Ten

The trip home was anticlimactic. Olivia had anticipated danger, problems, more rogue Circs, or even Montaña's men. Instead they rode first-class back into Wilmington, where a rental van awaited them. An hour later she exited the vehicle and stared at the mansion she'd come to think of as home.

"This all feels like a dream."

Gunnar nodded, sympathetic. "A nightmare. I know, honey. But that's why I think you should move into my room for the time being, because—" He oomphed the rest of his reply when Jesse elbowed him in the stomach.

"Get away from my woman. Dick." Jesse took her by the arm and gently pulled her with him into the house. "Don't mind Frederik. He talks a mean game, but he and the others know you're mine."

That possessive thing didn't irritate her anymore. Now it worried her. Had Gunnar spoken the truth before? Were her feelings for Jesse simply a matter of Circ survival? Was none of it real? "Why do you call him Frederik?" she asked to change the subject.

Jesse's lips quirked, but he didn't laugh. "Because his name is Frederik Gunnar Tersch."

Gunnar chose that moment to enter and scowled. "You just had to tell her. See if I protect any more of *your* secrets." He stomped away, yelling for Ava.

Mrs. Sharpe hurried down the steps toward them. "I worried when you didn't call."

Jules entered behind them with Kisho in tow. "Sorry, Mrs. Sharpe. The Brazilian authorities tried to hold us up, but Kisho fixed things."

"A calm head prevailed," Kisho added. "I'll tell you about it later."

She nodded and turned her attention to Olivia and Jesse standing hand in hand. "So what's this?"

"Another long story," Olivia said with a sigh. She pulled her hand from Jesse's but kissed his cheek to settle him down. Public displays of affection tended to ease her mate—*lover*—and she liked calming him. Affecting his moods gave her a sense of control she had worried she'd lost. It had nothing to do with making him happy, or so she kept telling herself.

He grinned like a little kid at Christmas and sauntered away with her bags. "I'll put them in *our* room."

Mrs. Sharpe's eyes widened. "Oh. Like that, is it?"

"I have no idea what it's like. Apparently I'm a Circ, and Jesse and I have a *thing* going. Yeah, go figure. I'm tired and hungry. We can discuss this later if you like." *After I've had a chance to figure out what all this means*.

"Of course. I'll have Melissa fix supper while you all settle in. We'll debrief after dinner. You and I can talk later."

Summarily dismissed, Olivia turned and headed up the stairs. She entered her room, not ready to deal with Mr. "Ours," and fell asleep.

She awakened to a warm mouth on her naked breast. Lips tugged, and teeth pulled. A thick finger entered her while another slid over her clit with exquisite slowness. The finger inside her became two, scissoring to stretch her. And then they disappeared, replaced by a long, thick cock.

Mint and lust filled the very air she breathed as Jesse kissed her. A leisurely exploration of tongue and lips and teeth, he worshipped her body as he brought her to orgasmic bliss and continued to make love to her.

"That's it. Again. Tell me what you want, baby," he murmured and caged her face between his hands. He stared into her eyes while he fucked her, the emotional sea of sharing and love and pleasure like a drug she couldn't quit.

"That's it," he said with satisfaction before ramping her up again.

He changed the angle of his thrust and grazed her clit as he rode her. The change also forced him to touch a very sensitive spot inside her, one that made her see stars and rainbows as he pounded into her with greater excitement.

She clenched him tight as he came, cradling him in her arms like the treasure he was turning out to be.

Finally spent, she sank into her bed and sighed.

"You like my cum inside you, don't you, Olivia?" Jesse murmured. "So hot in your pussy. With as many times as I've shot inside you, won't be long, and we'll be making babies, hmm?"

"Babies," she repeated. Little boys with his dark hair and eyes, mischievous toddlers who'd crawl all over him and her and—"*Babies*?"

He leaned on an elbow and studied her. "You don't want kids?"

"Yes, I do. But not now. I'm still young, and I wanted to travel, to do and see things..."

"Like Brazil?" he asked lazily, his smile wide. He palmed her stomach and rubbed with a tender touch. "Every time I come inside you, I feel like I've gone to heaven. And I can't help thinking about watching you nurse my son, to see your breasts swollen with milk to feed our daughter."

She shivered at the intense longing in his voice. "You...ah...you mean that?"

"Never thought I would, but yeah. I'm an adrenaline junkie. Joined the navy and became a SEAL, then a Circ. But nothing would give me more pleasure than to get you pregnant." He ran a finger over her nipple, arousing her anew. He leaned down and kissed it, sucking on the nub, which was growing hard, sensitive. "God, Olivia. We don't know each other well enough for this, but I can't help it. I want you. I fucking love you. And I can't explain it."

She froze. "Wh-what?"

"I know you want to leave and go back to Virginia, but to what? You're tired of your job. Why not take a position here, working with us and Mrs. Sharpe? I know Tersch is a pain in the ass, but I'll make him behave. Jules is a great guy. Kisho likes you, and he's pretty particular." He swallowed hard. "I know it doesn't seem like it, but I'm not really into sharing. It's just that as a Circ, we're sexual creatures. What's normal for other people isn't normal for us."

"Like having sex with your team, orgies of orgasms." She stared at him, wide-eyed, and wanted to see him go at it with his team again. She knew she had a sexual side, but this Circ thing made her feel perpetually horny. Hearing him say "I love you," even "I fucking love you," made her want to roll him over and make love to him all over again.

"Yeah, I guess. What I'm saying is that I'll give you whatever fantasies you can dream up. We both know I can satisfy you."

Did they ever. "What are you trying to say, Jesse?"

He swallowed loudly. "Olivia, will you m—"

Gunnar burst through the door. "Shit, guys, give it a rest already. Problem. Hayashi's missing. He went to return the van but never turned it in, and he's not answering his phone."

Jesse leaped out of bed and hurriedly dressed while she did the same. That Gunnar didn't leer or make any other comments about her body told her of his distress, even if he hadn't throbbed with worry on the psychic plane.

"Come on."

She followed Gunnar and Jesse out the door, surprised to see the light of day creeping through the house. "What time is it?"

"You slept through our debrief. It's the next morning," Jesse informed her.

They met Mrs. Sharpe, Jules, and Ava in the living room.

"Kisho is missing. I have several men looking into this as we speak," Mrs. Sharpe said. She looked calm, but Olivia could feel her worry. That the older woman had let it slip alarmed her.

"When he didn't come home last night, I figured he needed a break. You know he sometimes goes out by himself." Jules rubbed the back of his neck in agitation. "Never occurred to me he could be in danger."

Mrs. Sharpe frowned. "I've heard back from the team that went in to destroy the lab. They found a dozen dead bodies. None of them Montaña's men, just scientists and servants. All traces of the drug were gone. There was no account of proof about anyone's involvement in anything. Gatito's notes weren't there."

Jules shook his head. "Someone knew we were coming. Who, Mrs. Sharpe?"

"Admiral London, myself, and a few of his team discussed the mission. But ultimately I accepted it."

"We need to do a sweep of the house," Gunnar stated.

"I'll have Jack get on it."

"The handyman?" Olivia asked.

"The ex-spook handyman," Jesse confirmed, and she remembered what Mrs. Sharpe had told her before. "Melissa does a lot of other things besides cook too."

Her mind raced. "We still have no idea who was running the lab, though, right? Just that Colonel Ricardo Montaña runs the security, and that Montaña's men are stateside."

"Right. We lost sight of them while you were in Brazil. There's no possible reason for any of them to kidnap one of our Circs, though." Mrs. Sharpe looked as puzzled as the team felt.

"Unless they want something we have," Ava added quietly, her gaze on Olivia. "Considering the rogues and mutants you ran into, and the fact that the drug we're after doesn't work on Circs period, it's likely whoever's running the labs has a Circ agenda."

Jules nodded. "That makes sense. Just because Elliot Pearl is dead and Pearson Labs destroyed, that doesn't mean his research is at a standstill. He had plenty of scientists working for him over the years leading up to Project Dawn. How do we know one of them didn't start his or her own private research?"

"Or that Pearl didn't make some deals no one knew about when he was alive," Jesse added. "He might have a few projects ongoing, even posthumously. And let's not forget Olivia. She's a Circ, but where did she come from?"

"That confuses me too. I've never had any weirdo treatments in my life. Nothing experimental."

"That you knew of," Gunnar said. "That's how they infected Sabrina Packard. Drugged her and called it a vaccine."

"Who?"

"She's a female Circ, but she worked with Elliot Pearl," Mrs. Sharpe answered. "Olivia's medical records and the interview we had with her uncle and aunt checked out. She's clean."

Talk about extensive research. Olivia had a hard time understanding how this could be possible, despite knowing the truth. "So, what? I'm a natural Circ? Born this way?"

"Your father was in the navy," Jesse said slowly. "What if Pearl's original Circs didn't start at Project Dawn, but earlier?"

Everyone quieted.

"A scary thought," Ava murmured.

"Yes, and something we need to look into. But right now we need to find Kisho." Mrs. Sharpe took charge. Ava went in search of Melissa and Jack. The men left to go looking for Kisho. Mrs. Sharpe made phone calls.

Olivia didn't know what to do or what to think.

"Call Jaime and Belinda. I need to talk to them pronto," Mrs. Sharpe ordered. She tilted her head to cradle the phone in her ear and tapped her temple with a long-fingered hand. The light-colored polish on her nails flashed in the light, and it just clicked.

Her familiarity suddenly made incredible, impossible sense.

"You...you can't be..."

Mrs. Sharpe smiled. "Can't I? Now make the call, dear. We don't have time to waste."

* * *

Fallon sent out mental calls for Hayashi but heard nothing in return. He, Jules, and Tersch had just checked over every inch of the rental van they'd found parked in the deserted lot of a crumbling textile plant outside of New Bern. Fallon could barely smell Hayashi under the sickeningly sweet smell that covered the vehicle.

"The fuckers masked it with perfume. I can't tell if his kidnappers are Circ or human."

Fallon clenched his fists, needing answers. "Too bad we don't have more on Montaña, because I guaran-damn-tee he's behind this. He has to be."

"I agree," Jules added. "But why take Hayashi? We've had no ransom demands. I don't see them grabbing him for bizarre experiments."

"Why not? Pearl did it." Tersch paced in front of the van, unable to mask his worry.

"Yeah, but Pearl's dead. It's been a year and a half since the labs closed down. Don't you think if a hint of his research remained so close, we'd have heard before now?" Fallon asked. "Jules, what did Roane's team say when you called them?"

He snorted. "Nothing. They haven't heard or seen a hair of anything Circ in months. The rogues we encountered in the jungle were a complete surprise, according to Roane. Hell, they've been working real-world ops for General Shields, non-Circ stuff."

Jesse had the feeling they were missing something. But what? He studied the textile plant, measuring the brick building. Broken glass windows around the rooftop, busted metal doors, faded paint on the front of the place. The whole mill was in disrepair. He sighed.

"We should check over the van again."

Tersch entered, cocked his head, and stopped. Then, as if directed by another force, he reached between the driver's seat and the center console.

"What's that?" Jules asked as he pulled a piece of paper free.

"I don't know." Tersch frowned. "It's in Hayashi's handwriting, though. Sunfield."

Jesse's gaze shot to the building. "Like the wording on the mill?"

The three of them circled in front of the van and stared at the building.

"See how the s-u-n is faded, but the f-i-e-l-d is still there." Jesse felt an itch to explore. "He's inside."

"I know." Jules scowled. "But how do I know?"

"I don't like any of this." Tersch didn't even pretend. He stripped out of his shirt and shoes and *changed*, expanding underneath the elastic waistband of his pants. Except he didn't just *change*, he transformed into the fighting machine that could withstand anything they'd ever come up against—his own psychic cross to bear.

Jules said, "We'll follow in the SUV. If he's bad off, he'll need quick transport out of here. Go."

Fallon joined him in the vehicle, and they raced after Tersch. Inside the building, they followed Tersch's howls of rage up three flights of stairs into a dusty office covered in filth. There, on a metal stretcher in the middle of the room, lay Hayashi, naked, bloodied, and mending from what appeared to be multiple breaks in his body. Mottled bruising covered him from head to toe, and he had a defined wound, what looked like teeth marks, around his left nipple.

"I'll fucking kill whoever did this to him," Tersch swore as he broke the chains holding Hayashi's wrist and ankle restraints to the table. "Kisho, buddy, you with us?"

Nothing.

"I can hear him breathing. Jules, what does his aura look like?" Fallon asked, wanting to crush whoever had done this. Of the four of them, Hayashi was the most gentle. One wouldn't

know it to look at him, but the man had a soft spot around kids and animals. He seemed stoic, almost unfeeling, but only because he felt so much. The rare glimpses into his thoughts had shown Fallon much about the man behind the aloof warrior he called friend and brother.

"He's not healthy, but there's an odd infusion of light around him I can't understand. He's healing, slowly. Still, we need him checked out. Too bad Sharpe hasn't found us a doctor yet. We need someone on staff."

"No shit," Tersch growled, still monstrously large and thinking about death and dismemberment a little too often for Fallon's peace of mind.

"Dude, let it go. You're freaking me out."

Tersch gradually shrank to his normal *changed* size. "Better now, Nancy?" Tersch grumbled.

"Yeah, thanks, Frederik."

Tersch curled his lip in a smile.

Jules punched in a few numbers on his cell phone. "We have him, but we need Doc pronto." He hung up. "He's already on his way. Mrs. Sharpe called him this morning. Said she had a *feeling* we'd need him." Jules carefully lifted Hayashi in his arms. "Okay, Fallon, you drive. Tersch, you're on protection duty on the way home. I'll continue to monitor our boy, here."

They hurried back to the SUV, on edge and prepared to combat any sudden attack. Fallon opened the back and folded back the seats. Jules placed Hayashi inside, then sat next to him. Tersch jumped into the passenger side and withdrew a gun from the glove compartment.

"What do you think Sharpe's deal is?" Fallon asked as he drove.

"I don't know," Jules answered. "But I think it's time we found out. This first mission for the new Dawn Endeavor was a complete bust." He paused. "Well, not for all of us. After all, you got Olivia."

Fallon smiled.

"And speaking of which, when do we get her again? I have needs, you know," Tersch bitched as he *changed* back fully.

"Such a baby," Hayashi whispered.

Jules sighed. "Finally. Man, you had us worried. What the hell happened?"

Dawn Endeavor 1: Fallon's Flame

119

"Delancey happened."

Fallon blinked. "Tell me you did not just say Delancey."

"That fucker? So much for fading into the sunset." Jules swore bitterly. He hated their old captain with a passion. "He volunteers us for Elliot Pearl's nightmare, then somehow separates himself from the fallout when it all goes to shit. And now, a year and a half later, he's in the mix again. I'll fucking kill him."

Fallon and Tersch exchanged a glance. Jules had a real hard-on for Delancey, and not in a good way. He blamed himself for getting his men into the Circ madness in the first place, and he blamed Captain William Delancey for leading him down the primrose path, knowing the situation would FUBAR—become fucked-up beyond all recognition.

"So Delancey kidnapped you?" he asked Hayashi.

"Healing's a bitch, you know that?" He groaned. "No, a few of Montaña's men were watching us. They know about the house, where we live, who we are. Montaña's working for Delancey. The captain's the brains behind that deserted lab in Brazil."

"Holy shit." Fallon whistled.

"Montaña's guys told you?"

"Had a vision. After they dropped me from the roof of that plant as a warning for us all to back off, I saw Delancey as clear as day standing in that lab, his hands on a box the cleanup team missed. We have to stop him from whatever he's up to. It can't be good."

"Don't worry, Hayashi." Jules's voice was soft. "We will."

"I still don't understand why they didn't just kill you, though," Fallon said. "No offense. I'm glad you're alive. But if I'd set out to stop a bunch of troublesome Circs, I wouldn't let them live to tell on me."

Hayashi remained quiet.

"Kisho?" Jules said. "You okay?"

He swallowed audibly. "They left me for dead."

"I'll gut them," Tersch promised. "Slowly."

"How'd you get on that table?" Jules asked.

"I guess I had help. Who knows?"

120 *Marie Harte*

Fallon tensed against a sharp thought but opened his shields when he recognized Hayashi behind the penetration. An image of a tall, dark stranger with penetrating green eyes filled Hayashi's mind's eye and then vanished.

Fallon didn't say anything, but he planned to ask his friend about his savior just as soon as Hayashi was on his feet again. For now he had healing to do. And Fallon needed to return home and cement his ties to a stubborn female too eager to leave him.

Chapter Eleven

Olivia gnawed her lower lip. "My aunt used to tell stories about you, you know."

Mrs. Sharpe didn't answer, not that Olivia had thought she would. Ever since Olivia had remembered where she'd seen the woman, Mrs. Sharpe had internally shut down.

"You're not going to talk about this, are you?"

"No."

Olivia huffed. "But don't I owe Jesse the truth? If he learns the navy has nothing to do with my being Circ, if he learns what I really am, he'll—"

"What? Love you any less? Why are you so determined to end this relationship before it can begin? Do you know how much you've already helped him? His migraines haven't returned. He's both mentally and physically stronger. He broadcasts now. Call out to him and see. He'll answer."

"Jesse, are you okay? Any sign of Kisho?"

He answered immediately. "We think we may have found him. I'll let you know when I can. Stay safe."

She blinked. "He thinks they may have found Kisho. He'll let us know."

"Good." Mrs. Sharpe didn't look surprised.

"You knew they'd find him."

"Now, Olivia, how would I know that?"

The look Olivia gave her caused the woman to chuckle. "Well, there is that, isn't there? Come now. I'm here for a reason. And so are you."

Olivia didn't like feeling manipulated, and right now she felt like a puppet on strings. "Why didn't you ask me to come down here? Why the subterfuge? Why didn't you *tell me*?"

"Because it had to happen like this. And like Kisho will tell you, nothing is set in stone. We each have our own choices to make. Jesse fell in love with you."

"His choice or hormones?" Olivia asked drily, wishing she didn't feel such a thrill from his devotion. Wishing she could believe in it.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does. How do I know what I feel for him isn't just a Circ need to bond or something?"

"Then why don't you feel it for Jules or Gunnar or Kisho?"

"Because I—" She had no explanation. No one but Jesse felt right, and Olivia believed in her feelings.

"Exactly. What you feel, what Jesse feels, are true emotions, Olivia. Unlike you, Jesse won't shy from the truth. It's not in his character. He'll always meet life head-on, even when it doesn't make sense."

"Mrs. Sharpe, Jesse and I just met. How can I love someone when I don't even know his middle name? Where he grew up? What he likes and dislikes?"

"Love is what love is. All the rest is immaterial, isn't it? Or are you trying to say you don't love him? If he runs into trouble looking for his friend, if he dies out there, will you care?"

"Of course I'll care! How can you say that?" Olivia fumed. "I might not know him as well as I'd like, but I know he'd give his life for his friends or those he considers his to protect." Like her. "He's a good man."

"The best."

"He would never hurt me. He wants to have babies with me, you know."

"Do tell?"

Olivia sighed. "I love him, and it makes no sense. How do I know this isn't just like all my other failed relationships? I have a lousy track record with guys."

"Only because you've been looking for someone who's not out there, he's here. Honestly you don't know that this will work out. Just because you and Jesse share the same basic nature doesn't mean you'll have a happily ever after.

"You have to take a risk, Olivia. Stand on your own two feet and make a decision. You know, instinctively, that what you feel for Jesse is very different from anything you've ever experienced. Circ mating is powerful. It's primal. And because you're both psychically gifted, your bond with one another will be stronger than anything you could ever share with a normal man."

"But is it real?"

"Do you want it to be?"

That was the problem, because as much as Olivia tried to deny it, she desperately wanted a life with Jesse. What scared her more than anything was the possibility he might one day not love her anymore. That he might turn out to be less than the man she'd fallen in love with.

"There's your answer, Olivia. I know this is all new. Being a Circ is a scary thing, but falling in love is even scarier." Mrs. Sharpe settled a gentle smile on her. "Now do me a favor and find Ava for me. I need her."

Dismissed, Olivia left the study and sought the younger woman. She found Ava sniping at Jack about men in general in the doorway of the large downstairs storage room. The minute she saw Olivia, she turned and stalked toward her.

"And you," she started.

"Thank God. I have work to do. If Mrs. Sharpe asks, I'm on my way to the airport to pick up Doc." Jack disappeared from the storage room in a run.

"What's wrong with you?" Olivia asked.

"I'm tired of men. Tired of women who look like you taking all the good ones."

"Women who look like me? Have you looked into a mirror lately? You're worlds prettier than I'll ever be."

Ava snorted. "Sure. I'm so pretty, three sexy Circs ignored me in favor of you the other night."

Olivia flushed, all too aware of Ava's pique. "Look. I'm not sure what you think you know, but there are reasons for the things that happened. Um, Circ reasons you couldn't possibly understand"

Ava glared. "Oh, and you can?" She rose to her full height and still met Olivia's breastbone.

"Yes, unfortunately, or fortunately, depending upon how you look at it. I'm like the guys."

Ava blinked. "What? How?"

Olivia thought she knew. And *that* she'd never expected, not in a million years. She hedged. "Ah, my father was in the navy a long time ago. I'm wondering if maybe they fed him some experimental drugs, the same way they tampered with the current Circs."

"Oh. Wow. That's...um...wow." Ava's ire died a quick death. "Man. I guess that does explain your sudden loose morals."

"Hell, Ava. How the hell do you know so much?" A horrific thought occurred. "There aren't cameras in the rooms, are there?" She didn't like anyone knowing what she'd done with not just Jesse, but Jules and Tersch. Bad enough she wanted to bury her head in the sand, but if they had a video of it, she'd die of embarrassment.

Ava scowled. "Of course not. I'm just good at my job, and it's my job to know everything that happens around here."

"Okay, I'm officially uncomfortable now. Look. Jesse and I have something going. Gunnar's all yours."

"I didn't say I wanted Gunnar." Her lips firmed in a mutinous line.

"Sure, whatever. In case you're curious, they think they found Kisho."

"Yes! Oh, man. I need to get the lab prepped."

"Lab?"

"Our own version of Circ medicine. We've been without a medical staff for a while, but Mrs. S. said she's going to fix that. For now we're waiting on Doc to fly in."

The Circ expert, Doctor Evan Dennis. Olivia nodded.

Ava turned to leave, then paused. "I'm sorry that I've been snappish lately."

Olivia's cheeks burned. "Don't worry about it."

"No, I owe you an apology. What you do, what any of you do, isn't my business. It's not as if I've declared my intentions or anything."

Olivia swore she could feel the unspoken *yet* lingering between them. "Right. So all's forgiven?"

Ava sighed. "Yeah. Besides, I have too much to do to worry about Circ love lives. Between you and me, I think we have some security issues at the mansion. Someone in the higher circles isn't playing for our team."

Olivia stared. "Are you serious? How do you know?"

"I'm pretty good at putting patterns together. What are the odds the team went in to clear out top secret biodrugs and the lab is empty except for dead bodies? Montaña's men vanished into thin air; then they're in the States? No, someone knew we were going in. I can feel it in my bones."

"You've shared this with Mrs. Sharpe?"

"Sure did. The old lady's looking into things. And then with Kisho kidnapped—well, I think it's time to batten down the hatches, right?"

"Um, okay."

"Circle the wagons, up our defenses. You're a software expert, you should help."

"I know intelligence systems, not security measures."

"But Jack does. Melissa can write code, though she pretends she's forgotten how. Between the three of you, you could install a new security system only we can decode. I'll talk to the boss lady about it. In the meantime, Mrs. S. mentioned you're going to stay on as our own intelligence expert. So I thought it best if we started fresh." Ava smiled, her swift change in subject mind-boggling. "It really is nice to have another woman around."

"I haven't exactly decided to stay." Or been asked.

Ava raised a brow in question, the expression an eerie mirror of Mrs. Sharpe.

"Maybe I'm thinking about it."

"Right. Congrats anyway. And I want to be in the wedding." Ava left Olivia standing with her mouth agape.

Melissa found her like that and laughed. "Ava strikes again. Come on. You can help me freshen up Kisho's room for his return. I found some flowers and a few books I think he'll like."

Olivia let out a loud breath. "That I can do. So tell me. What's it like living around so much testosterone and Ava?"

Melissa grinned. "I thought Jack was bad. But the guys are a hoot. Slobs who curse like sailors." She chuckled. "But I never feel as safe anywhere else but here. And poker nights are a blast."

"Hmm."

Melissa nodded to the hallway. "Come on. Help me bring some things up to Kisho's room. There's never even so much as a speck of dust up there. Jesse's the only other one who's so neat, but he's dusty. I keep hoping Kisho will rub off on Gunnar and Jules, or heaven help me, Jack, but no such luck." She paused. "I only know what the guys' rooms look like because I help Jack's nieces clean when they come."

"Sure," Olivia teased.

Melissa flushed. "Are you kidding me? Jack is pretty aggressive. He couldn't care less how the Circs are. One of them even looks at me funny, and he's in their face. You should have seen him and Gunnar go at it at first. Gunnar was just teasing, but Jack doesn't play." She smiled. "Unless it's with me."

Olivia laughed and walked with Melissa.

Ava had a point. It was nice to be around women for a change.

Chapter Twelve

A week later

Fallon brooded while the rest of the team sat in the living room across from Mrs. Sharpe and Olivia. Despite the late hour, he didn't feel tired at all. Still wired from his recent trip to Virginia, Hayashi's near miss, and irritated as hell he hadn't been able to talk to Olivia for the past several days, he felt out of sorts.

He and the team had scoured the surrounding areas for any hint of Montaña or Delancey. They'd turned up a few interesting leads, but nothing more. He had no idea what Olivia had been doing, only that she'd spent an inordinate amount of time with Ava and Melissa. Like some whacked-out girl-power group. Jack had been deliberately clueless about what Melissa did with the others and kept his mental shields up, though he'd admitted Melissa had sworn him to silence. The pussy.

Olivia kept glancing at him, aware of the aggravation he intentionally projected.

"What's wrong?" she sent him, but he didn't answer. For a week he'd been trying to get her to answer him with her mind, but she refused. Now she wanted to play like they were friends again?

He seethed, recalling the packed suitcases he'd seen in her room earlier today. How could she communicate on such an intimate wavelength if she had every intention of leaving him?

Olivia frowned and turned her attention back to Mrs. Sharpe, the ringleader of their Circus, as Gunnar had taken to referring to their group.

Mrs. Sharpe glanced from Olivia to Fallon but said nothing to either of them. Instead she acknowledged the group, minus Hayashi, who'd been ordered to remain upstairs in his bed. "Doc gave Kisho a clean bill of health. His bones have finally knit, and his organs have repaired themselves. Due to the extent of damage he suffered, he'll need just a little more time before he's

back up to speed, no matter what he thinks. I'd remind all of you to continue to take it easy on him.

"And if I catch any of you sneaking him food or alcohol I didn't authorize, there will be hell to pay." She centered her stare on Tersch.

"What did I do?" he growled.

Mrs. Sharpe looked over the group. "As for what we've recently discovered about the abandoned laboratory, Admiral London is concerned. What should have been an easy sweep has become complicated. The reappearance of Captain Delancey was unexpected, but only because we'd anticipated his return after the drug infecting Admiral London's men was perfected."

Jules straightened in his seat. "You're telling me you knew Delancey was in on this?"

"No. I'm telling you we suspected he had some ties to those planning the destruction of the admiral's new project. That he helped fund that laboratory came as a shock."

Olivia frowned. "I read about Delancey. So he was the team's commander before you all became Circ?" Fallon and the others nodded. "And now Montaña works for him, is that correct?"

Mrs. Sharpe nodded. "Unfortunately yes. What's worse, we can't find him. It's like all traces of him vanished into thin air."

"I'll find him," Jules muttered. "And I'll make him lead us to Delancey."

"Yes, well, that's what I wanted to talk to you all about. Though this particular mission didn't succeed as I'd hoped, it has brought us a step closer to a new group we need to monitor."

"The PPA?" Fallon asked. Just a year and a half ago, the Project's Protection Agency had consisted of rogue Circs and Elliot Pearl's henchmen, assholes who did whatever the scientist thought necessary to perpetuate his bastardized version of Project Dawn.

Fallon and the others had thought the PPA was no more, ever since Pearson Labs had fallen. Then again, they'd thought mutant Circs were no more, and they'd run into several in the jungle.

"No, not the PPA. Rumors of a new type of warfare have been circulating among the Defense Department, regardless of our intent to keep things quiet."

Fallon wondered. Our intent? Was Sharpe still in bed with Admiral London?

She glanced his way, her brow raised, and he immediately amended his thoughts. *Not "in bed," "in league."*

Olivia's eyes widened. "Admiral London's new project, his psychic soldiers and sailors. They're causing problems."

"Only because several other nations out there are developing their own as well. We need to quash this threat as soon as possible. We can't afford to get behind in our race to develop the next line of defense against a strange new warfare that's not all that long in coming. You Circs are just the beginning of it, whether you want to be or not. But you're not enough to handle an army or navy of psychics. Not alone."

"Oh?" Fallon asked, curious about the expressions crossing Olivia's face. The troublesome woman looked interested. Why the hell couldn't *he* have garnered the same fascination?

"We're going to investigate anything having to do with the group targeting Admiral London's team. No matter how bizarre, small, large, out-of-the-way, or close the threats may come. Dawn Endeavor will strive to do its best."

"That sounds really grand, Alicia," Tersch said, a bite in his tone. "But Delancey's our main concern right now. The admiral has the Pentagon at his disposal. Let him use them to do his dirty work. The four of us have better things to do."

Jules didn't disagree.

"Actually, Gunnar, it's you *five*. Not four." She glanced at Olivia. "Olivia has consented to stay on as our new intelligence specialist."

All eyes swung to Fallon.

"Is that so?" He crossed his arms over his chest, daring to hope she meant it. He tried but didn't think he could contain the joy bursting through him. And he wanted to stay angry. That way he wouldn't be crushed if she continued to reject him.

Olivia shrugged. "Mrs. Sharpe asked me to stay, but only if it's acceptable to the four of you." She cleared her throat. "I'd be joining the team, so to speak. If that's okay with all of you," she repeated. Her glance at Fallon seemed uncertain.

Jules's anger faded under a huge smile. "Joining the team? Hell yeah. How can we say no to another Circ? Who would have thought, huh, Fallon?"

Fallon couldn't turn away. Was the woman asking if *he* wanted her to stay? He'd fucking admitted he loved her. He hadn't pressured her into a response, and he'd left her alone, the way she'd wanted. For an entire week he'd kept his distance while learning as much as he could about the infuriating woman. Did she not understand the flowers and poetry he'd been leaving on her bed each night?

"Jesse, could I talk to you in private?" she asked.

"Sure." He stood and walked out of the room. After heading up the stairs to her bedroom, he noted her suitcases still packed, and his anger returned. "Well?"

"I...ah...I was hoping you'd be okay about this." She bit her lower lip, drawing his attention from the turmoil in her eyes. "You did mention something about...about loving me." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I didn't think you'd mind if I stuck around."

"Mind? Mind?" His voice rose. "You have suitcases packed, ready to leave!"

"Only to move my things into your suite. I thought we could be together. You know, if you still want me."

Hope fluttered within his breast. "You have to be the densest woman on the planet. Didn't you see the flowers? Did you not read the fucking poetry I left you every goddamn night?" He dug his hand into his pocket and withdrew a small box. "Do you know what this is?"

Her beautiful eyes widened.

"Yeah, and it's your size. How do I know that? Because while you spent the week doing anything and everything to avoid me, I drove up to Dam Neck, broke into your house, and snooped. I know your bra size, your favorite color, how much you like ice-cream sandwiches, even when it's cold out. That you aunt is getting tired of your putting off another visit, and that your cousin Miguel just had another kid. His wife had a girl, in case you were wondering. They named her Olivia."

"Really?" Olivia whispered.

Fallon placed the ring on the desk near him. Then he ripped off his shirt and tugged free of his jeans. He'd waited an entire week, and his balls were bluer than Tersch's eyes. Olivia stared at him with hunger, pleasing him that she still wanted him.

Her gaze ventured from the ring to his cock, and the scent of ripe cherries filled the air.

"I love you, you know that?" he rasped. "You complained we don't know each other well enough, but I know what I know. A call to your aunt filled me in on a lot you never bothered to tell me, like how all your old boyfriends have an uncanny resemblance to me," he added, smug about that at least.

The admission blindsided her, as he'd meant it to. "Oh my God. They do!"

"And we're not that different, baby. I like the books you have in your place, even some of the movies. But don't tell Tersch, or he'll never let me live down my *Sleepless in Seattle* fixation. I'm a closet romantic like you."

Olivia's eyes filled, but he didn't worry. He sensed her capitulation. His beast sighed with relief and resolved to make her say the words.

Fallon stepped closer and slowly removed her clothing, one button at a time. Once he had her naked and breathless, he kissed his way down her body, punctuating each caress with facts about himself.

"I like vanilla over chocolate." Kiss. "Not into pets, but I like kids." Kiss. "I'm a sucker for a sexy Brazilian, but only if she has blue-green eyes and a stubborn brain." Kiss. "She has to know what I'm feeling, because if she doesn't, then I can't very well ask her to share my thoughts, can I?"

Olivia swallowed hard. "That doesn't bother you? That I might know how you feel?" She paused. "When you're telling the truth?"

"Baby, I couldn't care less. If I work at it, I can read your thoughts. Does that scare you?" She shook her head and sighed when he closed his lips over her breast and sucked.

"Why?"

"Because I can shield myself, and you can too," she admitted. "God, Jesse, I love you so much. I'm just afraid."

"I know." He swelled with satisfaction. "But I'm not like the others, honey. Your uncle likes me."

"What?" She pulled back to blink at him. "You met Uncle Jaime?"

"He and your aunt are staying in town. I invited them here for our engagement party." He glanced at the ring again. "Now you have to say yes or I'll look stupid."

"But...you...really?" Her wide smile captured his heart.

"I love you, Olivia Lynn. *Eu te amo, meu coração*." I love you, my heart. "Jaime taught me that."

She kissed him, a real kiss full of desire, of love, that he shared wholeheartedly.

"Oh, man, you really do love me," he said with a grin, loving the intimacy of unspoken trust she gave him by literally sharing her feelings. Her lowered shields invited him to look, and he heard her say it while she showed him.

"I love you so much, it hurts."

He groaned. "It really does. I've been going crazy giving you space. Now I need you, baby. I need to come inside you, right now."

She pushed him back until he sat on the bed. But he stopped her. "No. I want another kiss."

Before she could ask what exactly he meant, he pulled her onto the bed and forced her to stand over him, her pussy level with his mouth. He slid his fingers between her folds and kissed her there, caught in the spell of her wet heat.

He licked and played, overjoyed to discover her dripping with lust. His mate wanted him just as much as he needed her. Shoving a finger inside her, he hooked the digit to press into her sweet spot, knowing just where she liked it.

She keened and gyrated against his mouth, her arousal furthering his. He ached to spill inside her, his slit slick with excitement. And still he feasted, wanting to feel her pulse around him when he entered her.

"Yes, Jesse. Yes, baby, I need you so much," she cried as he added a finger to her anus. Pushing into that tight rim, he stuffed his mate, loving her passion. "You're mine," her beast acknowledged as she gripped his hair and came.

He let her go and slammed her over his cock. He groaned at the contact; she shrieked.

Clenching him like a vise, she didn't let him go three thrusts before he exploded inside her.

"Oh yeah," he chanted as he crested his peak way too quickly. Taking the edge off, he stilled her shifting hips and waited for the familiar lust to build once more. "You know, this mating heat you're starting, it's going to get the others just as hard."

She blinked up at him with a lazy smile. Leaning in, she kissed him leisurely, slipping her tongue inside his mouth with a whisper-light caress.

He groaned and cupped her ass, causing her to lift and lower in succession over him as he grew to life once more within her.

"I don't mind a little company if you don't. But only if I get to watch you get fucked this time."

Hearing her talk like that amped him up again. "Baby, whatever you want. You're so fucking hot, I'd take it any way I could get it if it meant a lifetime with you."

Long, sharp fingernails pierced his shoulders while she rode him. "A lifetime, hmm. Not enough. Forever," she said and nipped his earlobe. "And I have a confession to make. While you raided my house, I raided your room. And I have a bone to pick with you about your porn collection."

"But, baby, they were holding me over for you."

She laughed, then groaned when he slammed her down particularly hard. "Fine, but don't think I'm going to cater to your girl-on-girl fantasies."

"Hell," he said thickly. "Just your guy-on-guy ones, is that it?"

"Yeah." She sighed and kissed him again. "My guy on guy. But, Jesse, I'm not going to share you with anyone else. You even think of another woman like that, and you'll pay."

He loved the beast growling at him from within her mind. Her ferocity increased his ardor, and he quickened her pace over him. "Promise you'll make me pay? I think Hayashi has some ropes he stashes in his room. And maybe some paddles?"

She moaned and kissed him again as she rippled around him. He jetted into her, hearing the love she shouted on their shared, psychic plane. "*Mine, all mine*."

"Forever," he agreed. "Not a moment less."

* * *

Kisho Hayashi tried to bury his head beneath his pillow. Damned Fallon and Olivia made too much noise. And the scent of their need didn't just stop because a door closed or a wall stood between them. He knew he shouldn't have poured his heart and soul into that poetry for Fallon. Now, because of his love letters, he had to deal with the frustration of his friend's never-ending

lust. He grinned, despite his annoyance. Finally an end to Fallon's miserable pouting. Talk about a guy who had it bad for a woman.

An image of emerald green eyes and dark brown hair filled his mind's eye. Firm lips, broad shoulders, a narrow waist...

He groaned and rolled over onto his erection, wishing he could just will the damned thing away. He had no doubt Tersch and Jules would soon feel the same sexual frustration. No Circ could withstand the physical scent of a mating as intense as the one between Olivia and Fallon. And the psychic waves of lust fanning out from Olivia's room only made it worse.

None of it helped his own damned hungers.

All this mating put him in mind of the one person he wanted nothing to do with. The same person responsible for saving his ass from Montaña's men if he could believe his hazy dreams.

Kisho sat up, threw on a pair of sweats, and sneaked out of his room. He heard Tersch and Jules approaching but needed a moment to himself. Though he'd spent the better part of the week in his bedroom, most of it had been spent sleeping while his body recovered. He'd toyed with pain as pleasure before, but the sheer hurt from the drop off that building had shattered his nerve. He never wanted to feel that vulnerable again.

Lying there while Montaña's men laughed and kicked him had reminded him all too much of what he'd left behind so long ago. He wasn't a lost boy anymore. Circs had strength, power, and in his case, a rare ability to circumvent failure.

Too bad he couldn't see much about his own future, only that prick who refused to leave his dreams.

He skirted Ava and Mrs. Sharpe arguing, no surprise there. After leaving the house, he also avoided Jack and Melissa showing some skin in the middle of the heated gazebo beyond the garden. Just what he didn't need, the sight of more bared flesh.

He only wished it were Melissa who turned him on, not the thought of a naked Jack.

Though Circs were genetically disposed to bisexuality, needing sex with their own kind regardless of gender, Kisho knew his team only consented to touching one another because they had to, not because they wanted to. Sure, Tersch and Fallon liked fucking him. Jules loved his blowjobs. But when human and in control of their lusts, they never looked twice at Kisho.

Not that Kisho wanted them to, but it would have been nice to know he wasn't the only deviant on the team. His years spent in the navy had solidified his ties with the squad. They judiciously held to the "don't ask, don't tell" rule. But he'd never flaunted his differences, maintaining his privacy. For all the team had known back then, he had a different woman in every port.

Becoming Circ had certainly made them all tighter, but Kisho couldn't let himself completely go. He'd spent too many years on his own, too much time defending himself to the people who should have loved him, regardless of who or what he was. He couldn't afford to open himself up to the guys, no matter how much he might want to. Chancing a rejection from the only people he had left in the world was not an option. He'd kill for them, he'd die defending them, but he'd never give them a chance to turn away from him; he couldn't live with that.

Depressed because he didn't think he'd ever find a way to end his mating heats—what female Circ out there would tolerate a male who didn't want her?—he walked along the trail away from the house. But along the way, his mind grew fuzzy. The trail suddenly blurred, and then *he* was there.

Full lips quirked in a smile at something Kisho said. Laughing at him, teasing him, reminding him that as strong as he was, Kisho could never conquer this man. Angered, Kisho tried to take charge of the brute, but ropes bound him tight.

Knowing what came next, he struggled in vain to break free of the vision, but it only took him deeper.

"You break free, I'll leave you alone," the male's deep voice promised.

"Fuck off." Kisho couldn't handle the smug bastard. Always there, always watching, judging...

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" The male fingered the front of his own jeans, where a large, telltale bulge resided. To Kisho's shock, blunt fingers prodded at the button and slid the zipper down to reveal a shadow of dark, curly hair. The scent of orange spice mixed with the cinnamon Kisho knew was his beast's way of fanning out his need.

"I'm hard and wet. Want a taste? Or don't you want your little friends to know what you really need?" the bastard asked, lowering his voice so Tersch and Jules wouldn't hear in the other room.

Kisho struggled to break free, but his beast refused to appear. Never before had he lost his ability to change, and the loss now scared the hell out of him.

"That's right. You're mine now. All mine, my little kitsu." Large hands reached for him, powerful hands dragging him closer to his destiny, to his doom.

The vision faded as the dark of night returned. An owl hooted overhead, and to Kisho's shock, a slender gray fox watched him, frozen on the trail several feet in front of him.

"My little kitsu." "Kitsu"—an archaic Japanese word for "fox."

His future beckoned, but Kisho wanted no part of it. The only thing he could see of his tomorrows: a curse he couldn't shake. He turned and jogged back to the house, needing the comfort only his fellow Circs, his lovers and friends, could provide.

But as he ran, he felt the fox's stare boring into his back, and the familiar words returned.

"You can run, kitsu, but you can't hide. I'm coming for you, and I'll have what's mine."



Loose Id(R) Titles by Marie Harte

Mirror, Mirror Reaper's Reward Saturnalia Satyr's Myst Tied & True Willa's Wish

The CIRCE'S RECRUITS Series

Roan Zack & Ace Derrick Hale

The DAWN ENDEAVOR Series

Fallon's Flame

Marie Harte

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic, but especially all things romance. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling. Twenty-three years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dream has finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers.