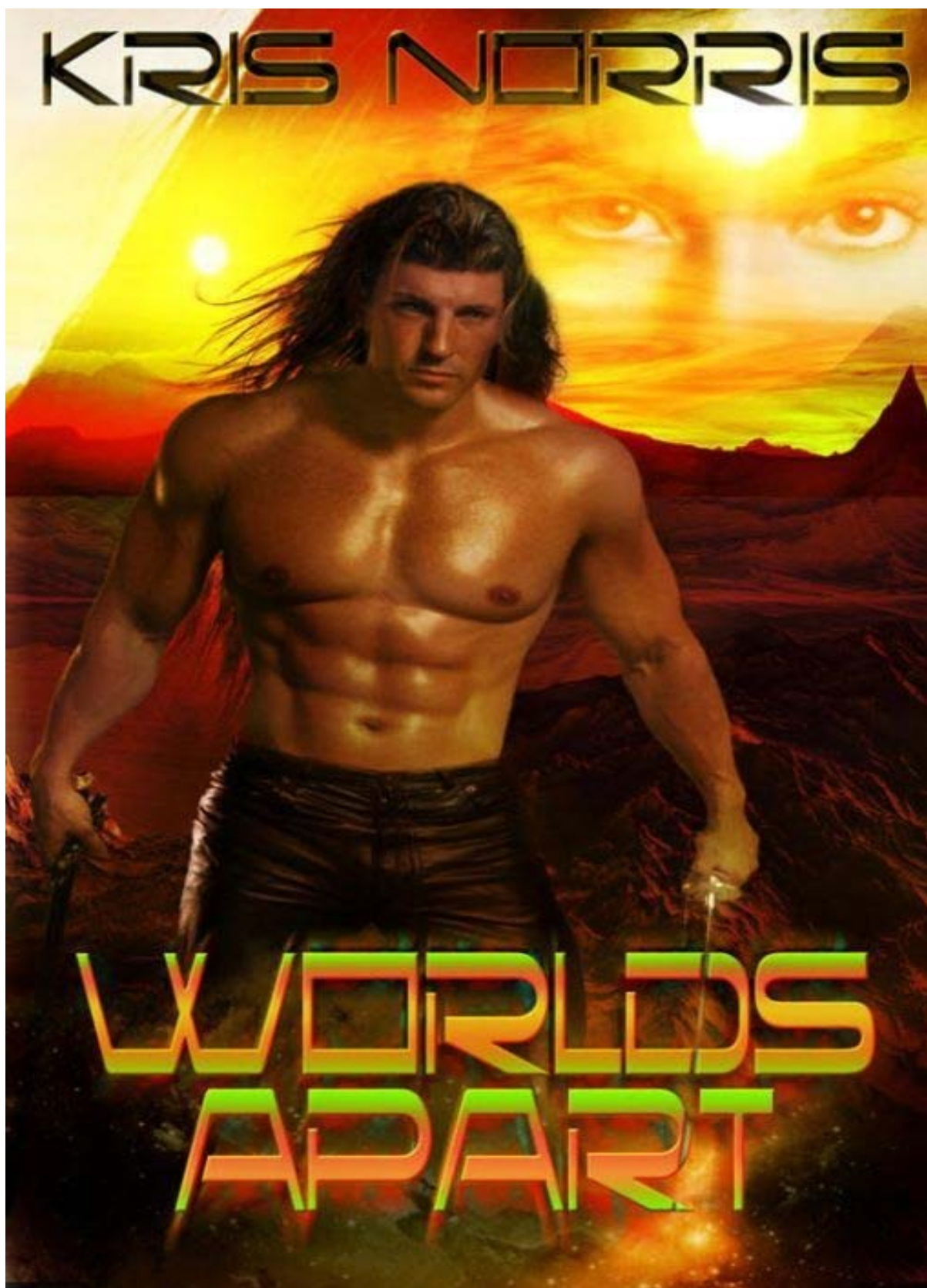


KRIS NORRIS



WORLDS
APART

Worlds Apart

By Kris Norris

Resplendence Publishing, LLC

<http://www.resplendencepublishing.com>

Resplendence Publishing, LLC
2665 N Atlantic Avenue #349
Daytona Beach, FL 32118

Worlds Apart

Copyright © 2010, Kris Norris

Edited by Christine Allen-Riley

Cover art by Les Byerley

Electronic format ISBN: 978-1-60735-151-1

Warning: All rights reserved. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Electronic release: May 2010

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

To everyone who hasn't allowed being different to destroy their dreams.

To my family and friends for loving me despite my flaws.

And to Chris...my soul sister. I'm thankful for every day you're part of my life.

Chapter One

"That last hit compromised the plasma conduits. If we don't eject the core soon, the whole ship's going to blow." Caleb James bounced off a console as another explosion rocked the bridge. "Damn it. We just lost the starboard engine."

"How much time left?" asked Sam Grier, bracing against a chair as the ship rolled on its side.

"I can give you fifteen minutes, but only if I reroute the power to the containment shield. Even then, it's going to be dicey. The explosion from Gorgan's ship destroyed half of the navigational controls, and all of the escape pods are fused into the launch shafts." Caleb looked back over his shoulder. "Now would be a great time for one of those hare-brained schemes of yours, Samantha."

Sam winced. Caleb only called her Samantha when her impetuous nature had gotten them into trouble. The situation must be as grim as she feared. She struggled over to the sensor array, kicking debris out of her way. They'd lost over a hundred crewmen in the last two days, and it looked as if their luck was finally up.

"All interstellar communications are off line," snapped Caleb. "There's no way I can send out a distress call."

"No one's coming, Caleb. This was a covert mission, and the fleet won't risk prosecution to save our asses. That's why we got sent out here—we're dispensable. We'll be lucky if a bloody salvage ship ventures this way in the next few years. Our only hope is to find somewhere remotely habitable."

"Great. Just fucking great." He cursed when steam vented from a ceiling panel. "Thirteen minutes."

Sam sighed—Caleb wasn't helping. "We've lost the main sensor array. I can't scan the system for viable planets. I'll try to search for thermal levels."

"I knew nothing good was going to come from this assignment." Caleb fisted the panel. "Sometimes I really hate this job."

"Wait. I think I've got something." Sam rerouted the image to the main viewer. "Look. There's a planet in the Delta sector showing similar heat patterns to ours." She punched more keys. "DNA sensing predicts life forms with ninety-eight percent compatibility."

Caleb snorted and turned to face her. "Chimpanzees have the same percentage, but that doesn't mean I want to land on a planet ruled by them."

"Well, if we had a choice, we could afford to be picky. But since we don't..." She palmed her hands on her hips. It was a blatant female gesture, but she didn't care. She was the only senior officer still breathing, and somehow trying to be one of the guys didn't seem that important right now. Hell, if he didn't like it, he could kiss her ass.

She smiled at the thought. Like any one of the men on this ship would be caught dead kissing *her* ass. "Mark a course, full impulse power, while we still have it. We'll jettison the core just before we enter the atmosphere."

"You want me to glide this thing in with no engines and only a few stabilizers for control?" asked Caleb, staring at her as if she'd just sprouted another head. "This isn't a trainer, Sam. It's a bloody warship!"

"It's either that, or the core explodes on impact."

Caleb growled. "I was only joking about the hare-brained scheme."

"Trust me. This is pretty tame compared to my next suggestion."

Caleb waved a hand at her. "Don't even try." He nodded at the planet growing larger on the viewer. "I suggest you hold on tight to something. This isn't going to be pretty."

* * * *

Samantha groaned, regaining consciousness just as the panel beside her erupted into flames, spewing sparks across the room. She winced and tried to cover her head but couldn't move her left arm. She twisted, her breath hissing through clenched teeth as she stared at the large, metal cylinder punched through her shoulder, the battered end protruding several inches from her body.

"Sam? Damn it, where are you?"

“Caleb.” Her voice cracked as her breath stalled. A new pain sizzled to life, constricting her lungs until she thought they’d burst through her chest. She’d cracked a rib. Several if the pain was any indication.

“God, damn.” Caleb bent down over her, brushing her blood-spattered hair back from her face. “Can you move?” He flinched as more sparks filled the air. “We gotta leave before the whole ship blows.”

“The crew...”

Her voice keened into a cry as Caleb heaved her up, grinding her ribs together. Dark streaks swirled in the smoke, blurring her vision, as she stumbled across the floor, Caleb shouldering most of her weight.

“What about the others?” she coughed, trying to squint through the black plumes.

“We’ll save as many as we can on the way out.”

A cold fist settled in her heart as they battled their way through the ship. They helped those still breathing, forming a long, tattered line down the corridors. Sam did her best to carry her weight, but by the time they emerged through the cargo bay doors, she could barely feel her legs.

Caleb groaned, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Do they really need two suns? What the hell kind of life form lives in this heat?”

Sam looked up, but the unforgiving sky glared back in shades of red, beating down what hope she had of relief. Even the ground was blistered and cracked, billowing up clouds of dust as they staggered towards an outcrop of rock. Caleb had managed to keep the ship upright, but over half of it was buried beneath a desert of sand. The path of destruction trailed out behind them, disappearing over the edge of a ridge. It’d take weeks to salvage through the wreckage, but without some of their supplies, they’d have little chance of survival.

Sam stopped when they reached the rock, leaning against the stone in hopes of staying on her feet. Their trek through the bowels of the ship had shifted the rod, dripping blood down her chest. She nodded at Caleb when he shouldered up beside her.

“We need to find some shelter.” She glanced at the remains of her crew scattered across the rock. “We’ll never survive out here in this heat.”

“You need to lay down. You’re losing blood, and you look like hell.”

She felt like hell. Black swirls rimmed her vision and it was getting harder to concentrate. "There're others worse off than me." She tried to smile, but only managed a low whimper. "Besides, there's not much you can do until we salvage some medical supplies."

Caleb's face paled and the lines around his mouth tightened. "It could be a while before we can get back inside the ship. Maybe..."

She waited, but he just stared off into the distance. For a moment, she wondered if her hearing was gone until she realized he was cursing under his breath. "What?"

He palmed the grip of his weapon as he motioned toward the horizon. "Looks like we've got company."

Sam turned and followed his stare. A large, dark blur shimmered across the sand, rippling the air as it moved. The troop was too far away to distinguish any details. But based on how they filled the landscape, it wasn't likely her crew would fare well in a battle, regardless of whether their weapons were more advanced or not.

"Fuck." She pushed herself up, biting back a groan as the knuckles of her broken bones rubbed together. "I was hoping we'd have a chance to regroup before the locals got curious. We must have crashed close to their settlement." She squinted to get a better view. "At least they look human. A bit on the big side, but human."

"Big? I doubt there's anyone among them under six feet." Caleb looked across his shoulder. "I'll rally the crew. We can—"

"Let's see what they want first," she interrupted, forcing her feet forward, kicking up dust as she staggered across the ground. "I'll meet and greet. You keep the men...together."

"Samantha, you're in no condition to—"

"My decision. My risk." She gave Caleb the best smile she could muster. "Just be ready, either way."

Caleb scowled, but headed back to the men scattered along the rocks. Sam turned to the group stalking toward them and cursed. They weren't just big. They were massive. She could see enough of them now to distinguish both males and females in their ranks. But other than the obviously larger breasts on the females, it was hard to tell the two sexes apart. Both looked fierce and toned, their bulging muscles rippling beneath their tight clothing. She could tell by the way they moved, they were more than capable of handling themselves in battle, and the steel glint in their eyes left little hope of mercy.

One of the males signaled to the others, halting the group several yards away. He nodded to the female standing beside him and continued forward, his eyes locked on Sam. A shiver tingled down her spine, but it didn't feel like fear. There was something about the way he looked at her. It stole what little breath she had, and the world started to spin.

The massive man stopped a few feet away, his eyes roaming her body. She tried to dismiss it as an enemy measuring up his opponent, but that wasn't what she saw in his expression. He grunted something she couldn't make out and pointed at her shoulder.

She cursed as the world dipped again, threatening to drop her to the ground. She looked up when he repeated the words, taking a step closer. "I guess it's not my lucky day."

She chuckled when he tilted his head and stared at her as if he'd never seen a woman before. Of course, she was probably different than the females in his group, but he sure as hell *looked* all man. Hard chiseled features surrounded by long, flowing hair. His shoulders would've filled any doorway in the ship, and she could tell by the way they flexed when he shifted his weight they were for more than just show. His chest looked just as strong, the hard angles peeking out from beneath an open vest. She followed the line of ripples down to his waist, where his smooth skin disappeared beneath tight pants. And just lower...

Oh. My. God.

His pants bulged in all the right places and she couldn't help but admire the large one between his legs. He was definitely all man.

Sam sighed and forced her attention back to his face. He was still staring at her and the world rotated again when his gaze lingered on the vee of her thighs. Moisture she couldn't quite explain pooled between her legs, and she fought to suck a small gasp of blazing air into her lungs as she tried to remember what she'd started saying.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I don't understand you. I don't suppose you speak English?"

The man gave her another long, slow gaze, this time focusing on the metal jutting out of shoulder. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes as if fascinated by her scent. The muscles in his jaw flexed and when he opened his eyes again, flicks of red danced amongst the grey, spiking the heat coursing through her. She clenched her jaw and forced herself not to flinch when he growled softly and stepped toward her, his tongue tracing a slow path across his lips. She tried to ignore the unexpected reaction of her body, praying the sudden beading of her nipples and the sharp clench in her pussy were all a result of the trauma she'd suffered. But as he stared into her eyes, she had the feeling she'd just walked willingly into the lion's den.

"I speak your language," he rasped, the low, gravelly tones flowing off his tongue like warm honey. "You're bleeding."

"It's not that bad," she lied. "But some of my crew didn't fare as well." She glanced up at the sky, but the red had washed into shades of grey. "And we won't last long in these conditions." She looked back at him. "Do you know a place we can go?"

He looked over her shoulder at the small gathering of men. "We have room in our colony for you and your crew, if that is your wish?"

"That's most generous of you. Thank you." She yelled back to Caleb, but when she turned to meet him, her legs buckled, knocking her to the ground. The spike jabbed through her back, and a warm wash of blood covered her skin.

"Samantha! Damn it, I told you not to move like that." Caleb was at her side, his hands pressed against her skin. "Slow breaths. Stay nice and still."

Another set of hands scooped her up followed by the hard press of muscles against her side.

"I'll take her. I can get her back to the colony faster than you. Get your people ready. We need to get everyone out of here before the sand beasts decide to brave this unholy heat on the chance you taste as good as you smell."

Caleb mumbled something, his voice fading into footsteps along the ridge. She managed to open her eyes long enough to catch a closer look at the man carrying her across the sand. His jaw was strong and smooth, and she had the sudden urge to taste it with her tongue. She took a quick breath, humming at the exotic nature of his scent. It was sweet and tangy, and filled her with a sudden feeling of euphoria. She smiled against his chest, loving how his muscles twitched at the gentle contact.

"I don't even know your name," she whispered.

He looked down at her as he picked up speed, dashing across the desert as if she were no heavier than a child. "My name is Griffin. And you are Samantha—an apparently stubborn female who doesn't seem to know when to back down. You should've been resting and allowed your friend to deal with me."

Sam tried to laugh, but only managed a soft moan. "My decision. My risk...my crew." She shivered as a deep cold settled inside her, rivaled only by his sweet scent. "God you smell good," she rasped, pressing her head against his shoulder. "You make me feel..."

Her voice trailed off, but Griffin's husky growl told her he'd heard. She watched as he inhaled again and looked down at her, his expression more seductive than frightening.

"Thank you. You have a delicious scent about you as well. But that doesn't make you any less stubborn." He pulled her tighter against his chest, sharing his warmth. "Now save your strength. Because as soon as I think you're ready, I'll be tasting every inch of you, my dear, Samantha."

Chapter Two

Four weeks later...

"Well, look who's finally back on her feet." Caleb smiled as Sam walked into the colony's meager control room. "I thought you were going to sleep another month away." He nodded at her. "How's the shoulder?"

"Good enough to kick your ass," she said, feigning a smile as she looked around the small area. Compared to the ship, this place was the size of a broom closet, but then she guessed the original settlers hadn't planned on remaining here indefinitely.

Caleb laughed, giving her body a slow sweep. "Everything *else* feeling okay?" There was no mistaking his emphasis and Sam sighed at his peculiar expression.

"I'm fine. You act as if you've never heard of anyone getting a blood transfusion before. It was actually quite common at one point, you know."

"Common a few centuries ago. You're just lucky Quinn is a history buff." Caleb stopped and raised an eyebrow at her. "Don't you find it just a bit strange none of our crew was a match, but their illustrious leader, Griffin, was?"

Sam shrugged. She'd found that particular aspect puzzling as well, but she'd be damned to let Caleb know. He'd only gloat.

"Quinn said it had to do with the Rh factor. Everyone left alive from the crew was positive. Apparently I'm negative. But our friends don't have an Rh factor. It's part of their genetic engineering. And I guess since Griffin shares my blood type, he felt he should be the one to offer."

"Right. He volunteered as a show of good faith."

Sam turned. She didn't like the sarcastic tone to Caleb's voice. "Are you implying he had ulterior motives?"

Caleb laughed, flashing her a smile she immediately wanted to smack off his face. “Are you actually going to stand there and pretend I haven’t seen the way he looks at you? Come on, Sam. Maybe the others haven’t noticed, but I’m telling you flat out. Griffin saved your ass because he wants to get his hands on it. Plain and simple.”

Sam sighed and made her way over to the control panel, ignoring the knowing look Caleb shot her way. “Any luck getting this stuff running?” she asked, hoping the change in subject would ease the pounding of her heart. Ever since Caleb had mentioned Griffin’s name, her pulse had kicked into high gear, making her feel light-headed. It’d been happening a lot lately. Every time Griffin dropped in to check on her, or brushed a finger along her arm, she’d felt the reaction in her stomach. Butterflies fluttered to life, and a warm feeling settled between her legs. It was more than unnerving and she wasn’t quite sure how to handle it.

Caleb huffed, pounding his fist on the panel when the damn thing beeped. “The colony’s technology is over five-hundred-years old, and I have a feeling it was hardly state-of-the-art then.” He waved at the screens. “Rider has managed to reactivate the shield surrounding the complex, but other than that, he’s had little success.”

“Were you able to savage anything useful from the ship?”

“A few weapons and a couple of hover crafts. But it’s going to take months, if ever, to get the damn things functional. And we don’t have the resources to keep charging the energy units on the blasters. Once their power cells fail, we’ll be left with only our benefactor’s idea of weapons as defense.”

“Blades kill just as well as blasters. You just have to be a bit closer to do it.”

“It’s the close part I don’t like,” said Caleb, leaning against the panel. “I think it’s time to face facts. We can learn to keep their gadgets going, but integrating our technology isn’t going to be an option, at least not until Rider has had time to go through every connection in the complex. And Griffin’s people don’t seem to have a clue how to run the stuff.”

“They were brought here as slaves. Genetically engineered to survive the harsh climate and mine the crystals the previous regime used to power this place and sell to emerging civilizations. Most of them hadn’t even set foot inside this complex until after Griffin’s ancestors staged the revolt. Hell, it’s a miracle they’ve kept even a few synthesizers functioning this long.” She nodded at the blinking lights. “We’ve got water, food, and shelter. We don’t need much else.”

“Speak for yourself,” huffed Caleb, cursing when another alarm screeched to life. He stalked over to the other side, slamming his hand down on side of the panel. “I signed up to be a starship pilot, not a barbarian.”

“Barbarian? Is that what you think we are?”

Sam grimaced. She didn’t need to turn around to know who the biting tone belonged to. She’d heard the woman speak enough times during her recovery to recognize the condescending attitude. Sam shot Caleb a quick glare before turning around, stopping dead as her eyes locked on Griffin’s. He stood beside the tall, muscular female, his large figure making even the warrior’s body look feminine. Sam muttered a curse when he smiled at the heat she felt flushing her face.

“I apologize for Caleb’s choice of words, Sirena,” she replied. “I can assure you he meant no disrespect. He was merely trying to point out that acclimatizing to your culture has been a challenge for some of my crew.”

“Because you consider yourselves above us mere savages!” she bit out, sneering at Sam with a show of teeth.

Griffin growled out a warning as the female took a calculated step toward Sam, her teeth still gleaming through the tight line of her lips. Sirena stopped, a slight shift of her eyes the only indication she’d heard Griffin, before she took two steps back.

Griffin ignored the muffled huff of protest from the woman, nodding at Sam. “You’re back on your feet. That’s a good sign.” He walked toward her, though it appeared more to Sam as if he were stalking her with every intention of claiming her as his prize. “And it would appear your crew members aren’t the only ones finding the adjustment challenging.”

Sam smiled at the sinful look on his face. “Change is never easy,” she said, trying to ignore the way he inhaled as he moved closer, closing his eyes as if the very scent of her pleased him. “And it might help my crew to remember that without your hospitality, most of us wouldn’t have survived.”

He raised an eyebrow at her as he turned toward Caleb. “The shield your engineer fixed has proven to be most effective against the constant attacks of the sand beasts. You’ve allowed my warriors to worry more about keeping their families fed than whether one of those ungodly creatures will breach our defenses.”

“Seeing as how it’s our asses on the line as well, it seemed like our first priority. But I’m afraid that’s about as much help as we’re going to be.” Caleb fisted his hand through his hair.

“Your technology isn’t compatible with ours, so there’s not much hope of integrating anything we salvaged from the ship.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to make do with our more limited culture.” Griffin turned back to her. “If there’s anything I can do to help with the transition...”

“Actually, I’d love for you to show me the rest of the colony,” she said, trying to ignore the way Sirena’s eyes bulged wide at the suggestion. “I’ve been told only a handful of your people actually live in the complex. That they prefer to reside in their original huts.”

“I’ve encouraged all of them to seek refuge in here, but I’m afraid the older members are too swayed by ancient beliefs to listen.” He looked around the room, nodding at the array of panels and blinking lights. “This represents the suffering and torture our ancestors endured, and I think it’ll be some time before all of my people are ready to put that past behind them.”

“And for good reason,” said Sirena. “How many of us died at the hands of our creators, all for the sake of their technology?” She hissed as she glanced at the blinking lights. “We have no use for this world,” she began, looking straight at Sam. “Or for your kind.”

“That’s enough,” said Griffin, stepping in front of the woman, silencing her with a heated glare, before shifting his attention back to Sam. “It would appear I owe you an apology for my warrior’s impetuous tongue. As I said, your people aren’t the only ones who must learn tolerance.”

Sam flashed a smile at Sirena, despite the evil gleam in the woman’s eyes. “After all I’ve heard of how your people were treated by the scientists who brought you here, I can’t blame them for being cautious. As a matter of fact, I’m somewhat surprised you didn’t decide to just kill us that first day.”

Griffin kicked half his mouth into a grin that sent shivers down her back. “Quite the contrary. Your presence here shows much...promise.”

Sam tried, but she couldn’t completely crush the soft moan building in her chest as his eyes played along the sensual curves of her silhouette. She watched Griffin lick his lips when the hushed rumble lighted the air, his gaze falling to her lips. She forced down a swallow, hoping to ease the dry feeling in her throat. “Then I’d love to see the rest of your colony.”

“I thought we agreed we’d keep the humans...contained.” Sirena stepped up beside Griffin, ignoring the dark glare he shot her.

“I was merely waiting for their Captain to regain her strength. After all, it’s customary to allow their leader first rights.”

“But—” Sirena’s voice cut off when Griffin turned and brushed her back with a determined step forward.

“The discussion is over.” He reached back, extending his hand to Sam. “This way.”

Sam nodding, stilling another moan when his fingers traced the fine line of her back as he directed her through the door and down the hall. She tried to make her own way through the series of corridors, but found herself relying on Griffin’s lead. Every damn hallway looked alike, and she could understand why Griffin’s people were hesitant to give up their natural way of life. The complex used by the original humans was a patchwork of white corridors, all leading to a centralized series of rooms and stations. Sleeping chambers were located on the periphery, circling the complex like small satellites, while the more sophisticated systems were located in the center, most of which had spent centuries collecting dust.

“Did any of the scientists choose to stay after the revolution?” she asked, pausing at an over-sized door. “Or were none sympathetic to your cause?”

Griffin shook his head, twisting the large, circular handle locking the door in place. “From the stories passed down, anyone left alive escaped in machines like the one you crashed in, leaving my people here to live or die by their own devices. As you can see, my ancestors chose to live, but in exchange, they lost the secrets of this society, relying, instead, on their instincts to keep them alive.”

“But you’ve managed to keep the food and water synthesizers operational,” said Caleb, squinting as the door gave way, opening the complex to the glaring light of the planet. “Someone must have known how to work these machines at some point.”

Griffin nodded, leading them through the doorway and into the heart of the colony. “There were a few among the tribe who had spent some time in the complex, keeping their owners...*pleased*,” he began, sliding a suggestive look toward Sam. “But they were only shown how to work the basic units. After the scientists fled, those were the only devices the colonists could keep going.” He stopped. “I can assure you, Caleb. Had we known how to keep that shield functioning, we would have. I can’t tell you how many of us have died defending the colony from those bloody beasts.”

“Getting it up and running wasn’t that hard, but we might need more of those crystals if we’re going to keep it going for the indefinite future. It’s unfortunate we had to eject the core. It was the only resource Rider might have been able to convert over to your power source.”

“If the time comes, I’ll get you more crystals. But the remaining deposits are located in a series of caves just outside the sand beasts’ mating ground. Not a place to venture without just cause.”

Griffin continued along the path, nodding to the members of his tribe. Sam watched as every set of eyes followed their progression. They looked haunted, as if they suspected her to enslave them all with her next breath. Griffin spoke about their history, but Samantha didn’t need to hear his words to see what his people had suffered at the hands of humans just like her. Bitterness and fear followed her, and she couldn’t help but wonder why they didn’t demand Griffin kill them before she and her crew stole their freedom—or worse, their souls.

They stopped in front of a large ring, watching as two warriors circled each other, crude weapons poised in their hands. She winced when the clashing of metal echoed across the barren land, unable to look away from the brutal show of skill.

“Easy, little one,” rasped Griffin, sliding in behind her as though he belonged there. “They’re merely practicing.”

His breath licked over the warm skin of her shoulder, beading it with tiny bumps. She shivered despite the heat, wondering why she could hear her heartbeat pounding in her head, only to realize it wasn’t hers. She tried to turn when Griffin trailed his fingers down her arm as he feathered another breath across her neck.

“I can hear yours, too,” he whispered, caressing the soft shell of her ear. “But we’ll talk about that later.”

Sam all but groaned as he moved away, leaving her with an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. What the hell was wrong with her? Since when could she hear someone else’s heartbeat ringing in her head, and what did he mean he could hear hers, too? She watched him give her body a long, slow sweep before he nodded at the men in the ring.

“Cain. Mika. Perhaps a less violent display is in order for our visitors,” he said, narrowing his eyes on the two men. “Their customs are different than ours, and we don’t want to give them the wrong impression.”

“What impression is that?” asked Cain. “That our race doesn’t rely on fancy gadgets to keep us alive? That we could snap their Captain like a dry twig?”

Griffin leaned forward, baring his teeth as he breathed in Cain’s face. “Careful, or I’ll take that as a challenge.”

Cain shrugged. "If she was worthy of commanding her tribe, she'd be able to answer the challenge, herself."

"We did away with the need to bully our troops long ago," said Caleb, stepping up beside her. "Simple strength doesn't win battles when you're staring down a warship."

"I don't see any *warships* here, human." Cain glared at her, his lips pulled back in disgust. "Those who can't fight don't deserve to lead."

Griffin growled this time, but stopped when she cupped his arm.

"It would seem you think I'm unworthy to lead my crew," she replied. "Or do you just hate women in general?"

"A warrior's position is not judged by their gender," mocked Cain. "Perhaps you should show us why your men follow you with such devotion."

Sam glanced at the ring, wondering if her shoulder would hold together long enough to knock the Neanderthal on his ass, before Caleb grabbed her arm, pulling her back slightly.

"Samantha doesn't owe you any explanation as to why we respect her position of power. Besides, you have no idea what you're getting yourself in to. If you value your life, you'll let this slide."

Cain laughed, giving her a quick once over. "She certainly looks imposing. But I'd be willing to take my chances. Too bad you humans can't fight as good as you talk."

Caleb snarled, fisting the posts lining the ring, before Sam stopped him with a firm hand.

"Easy, Caleb." She pulled him back, smiling at his intense scowl. "This isn't your fight."

"It shouldn't be yours, either," he said. "You don't have to prove anything, especially with your shoulder still hurt."

Sam nodded, patting him on the arm. "Not to you, perhaps, but—"

"But nothing," he interrupted, before lowering his gaze and kicking at the dirt. "There's no telling what will happen once you step in that ring." He huffed, dragging his focus back to her face. "We can't risk a scene."

"Don't worry. I'll stay in control. Just, stay back in case..." Her voice trailed off as she climbed between the wooden bars. She wasn't exactly dressed for combat, wearing nothing more than one of the bra tops Caleb had retrieved from the wreckage and a pair of buckskin pants Griffin had given her. But she wasn't going to back down because her clothes didn't suit the challenge. She nodded at Cain. "You sure you're up to this?" she asked, glancing at Mika standing

behind him. "Or would you rather I face your friend?" A hollow howl filled the air, and it took her a moment to realize the man was laughing.

"As I said, I'll take my chances." Cain stalked over to the side, grabbed a blade off a wooden table and tossed it at her feet. "I'm afraid we don't have anything small enough to fit you. Perhaps I can see if one of our offspring has a toy you can borrow."

Sam glanced at the weapon. While the asshole was far too arrogant for his own good, he had a point. The curved metal was longer than her arm and she could tell by the dull thud it'd made when it'd landed on the hard dirt, it was more than heavy. She looked up at the man, leaving the blade on the ground. "Thanks, but I prefer to choose my own weapon."

Cain's lips kicked up into a bemused grin as he watched her walk over to the table and grab a long staff off the top. He nodded at the pole. "Interesting choice."

"Samantha."

Sam stilled at the gravelly resonance of Griffin's voice. Just the sound of it pulsed the blood through her veins until a warm flush covered her skin. She looked over, pinned by the seductive look on his face. "Griffin."

He leaned against the ring, wrapping his massive hands around the wood. "Caleb is right. You have nothing to prove, despite the careless chatter of my men." Griffin shot Cain a scathing glare, and Sam watched the cocky warrior's face pale. "Please, put the staff down and ignore the rantings of these juveniles."

"Thanks, but we both know that won't solve anything." She moved back to the center of the ring, spinning the pole twice as she walked. It'd been a while since she'd practiced hand-to-hand combat, but her time in the facility ensured she'd never forget how to fight...or kill. "Are there any rules I should know about?"

"Just one," said Cain. "Stay alive."

"This is only a practice spar," warned Griffin. "No blood."

Cain huffed as he nodded, stepping sideways around the ring. Sam kept the weapon poised at her side, ready to counter any attack. But he didn't strike right away. Instead, he watched her movements as if gauging her weakness. She already knew her shoulder was the perfect target. There was no mistaking the stiffness in it as she swung the staff to the other side, keeping Cain several feet back. And his first attack was exactly as she'd pictured.

Cain lashed out, swinging the huge blade toward her left side, arcing it down across her chest. Sam parried, knocking the punishing blow away as she met his second attempt with a firm

upswing. Cain growled and dodged to his left, trying to break through an opening on her right, but she pivoted with him, catching his arm with the thick wood as he lunged at her.

A cry of pain broke the air as she knocked him sideways. But he rolled as soon as his shoulder hit the dirt, regaining his balance before Sam could launch an attack. She clenched her jaw, feeling her instincts taking over, but praying she could keep control long enough to settle the challenge without knocking the creep's head off.

"Not bad," he mocked. "But that won't be enough to keep you in one piece."

He lunged again, swinging the blade in graceful arcs, slicing the air with clean, strong strokes as he drove her back, corralling her toward the edge. Sam knew he was hoping to pin her against the wooden slats, but it'd take more than a pretty show to best her. She moved with him, giving him just enough ground to open up the other side of the ring. With a quick flick of her staff, she shuffled him off to her left before diving across the parched earth, kicking up a cloud of dust as her body rolled past him. She pressed up, tasting the dried mud on her tongue, as Cain turned to face her, anger glinting in his eyes. He snarled once then charged, the blade a blur of silver amidst the dull brown scenery. Sam countered his attack, but pulled back on the last swing, not wanting to slam the wooden staff against his head in case the sheer weight of it cracked his skull open. Cain took the retreat as his sign to attack, and sliced a line across her left bicep as he dodged past her.

Pain flared through her arm, clenching her fingers around the unforgiving wood as she stared the blood welling along the cut. A harsh growl sounded from the side, and she heard Griffin mutter in the same guttural language he'd used the first time they'd met. Cain diverted his eyes, an arrogant smile capturing his lips.

"Right, no blood." Cain met her gaze. "My mistake."

Sam clenched her jaw, fighting the urge to toss the staff at the bastard's smug smile. Instead, she dropped it on the ground as she turned toward the table.

"Done playing already?" he taunted, chuckling at her seeming retreat. "Perhaps you made your way to the top by lying on your back."

Sam ignored the lurid comment, focusing on the weapons still perched on the table. She'd chosen the staff in the hopes of keeping Cain far enough away she wouldn't have to actually engage in a fight. But he'd gotten under her skin, and she wasn't about to let his indiscretion go unpunished. His irritating cackling stopped when she picked up two short poles and spun to face him, her smile widening when his faltered.

“Only one rule, right?” she noted, moving toward him.

His lips turned down, ending in a low growl as he stalked around the ring, watching her every move. But she didn't care. She'd already analyzed his tactics, and all she had to do was wait for his anger to get the better of him before he'd attack, lunging at her with the same series of moves he'd used the previous two times. His strategy was sound, but his delivery was curtailed into only a few different strokes, leaving him vulnerable.

Sam waited, matching each step, watching his chest for any slight twitch of his muscles. He liked to fake a direction with his head, but his shoulders couldn't help but lean in the direction he planned to attack. Cain bared his teeth, kicking the dirt in a show of dominance, before darting forward, trying to catch an opening on her left shoulder. Sam reacted, sandwiching his arm between the two shafts as she rotated her body, aligning her right side with his. His head snapped toward her just as she shifted her weight, kicking him twice in the ribs before dropping his arm down and tossing him across her hip. He hit hard, jamming his arm under his chest as he tried to roll with the blow.

Sam moved away, savoring the shift in power. She chanced a look at Caleb, pulling back the urge to see Cain's blood stain the dull ground when Caleb shot her an unsettled look. A deep voice rumbled in her head, but she didn't have time to figure out where it was coming from as Cain surged to his feet, his face a twisted mask of fury. He tossed his head back, an angry howl breaking the silence before he charged her, his blade shimmering in the oppressive heat. She followed his lead, blocking his attacks, tempting him with a possible victory only to dash his hopes with a quick maneuver that effectively changed their positions. He kept moving, lashing at each side, trying to break through any opening when Sam decided she'd had enough. She whirled away from the last charge, catching his wrist between her poles as he overshot a stroke. A well-timed twist had his body strung tight, his arm locked to the side as she pummeled him with four more kicks before dropping his arm and finishing the fight with a hard round-house kick to the head. His jaw shifted beneath her boot before he crumpled to the ground, blood oozing from his nose.

Sam huffed, bracing her weight on her knees when a loud snarl sounded behind her. She turned in time to see Mika stalking toward her, a short shaft gripped in his hand, his lips pulled back to expose a set of sharp canines. She'd never noticed how much longer Griffin's teeth were, but Mika's seem to gleam in the harsh sun, making him look every inch the barbarian Caleb had claimed him to be.

She pushed up, readying her staffs for Mika's first strike, when Griffin appeared in front of her, blocking Mika's stroke with only his arm. She winced when the wood cracked, spraying chips across Griffin's face before he grabbed the end, twisting it out of Mika's hand and snapping it in half. Mika snarled, reaching for Griffin's neck, only to have Griffin strike first, fisting the man's vest in one hand as he threw the guy across the ring, bouncing him off the wooden posts. Mika crashed to the ground, billowing a layer of dirt across the ring before pushing back up. He glared at Griffin, nodding at Cain lying limp at her feet.

"I demand the right of substitution," said Mika.

Griffin flashed his teeth, taking a slow step forward. "Cain gave up any rights when he broke the rules of engagement and drew first blood, even though it was obvious the Captain checked her swing in order to miss cracking his arrogant head open."

Mika clenched his fists and glowered at her. "Cain apologized for his...accident."

Griffin chuckled shifting his eyes to her. A tremble shimmied through her at the alluring look in his eyes. He seemed more than proud, and the way he moistened his lower lip with a slow sweep of his tongue made the ring spin. She forced down a swallow, wishing he'd wet her lips with the same motion. Griffin smiled at her, flicking his eyes across her mouth as if he'd heard her thoughts.

"Yes, Cain did," Griffin replied, meeting Mika's glare. "And Captain Grier accepted it with more grace than I would've given him. I consider it fortunate she allowed Cain to continue breathing." He took two steps back until his arm brushed against hers. "This matter is over. Samantha answered Cain's challenge and has more than proven her right as leader of her crew. I expect she'll be given the same respect as me."

Mika huffed at the statement, rolling his eyes as he toed at the hard dirt. Griffin arched one eyebrow.

"If you have a problem with my decision, I'd be more than happy to continue this challenge with you." Griffin turned to her, gently slipping the two wooden poles from her hands, smiling at the way her skin prickled at his touch. He inhaled again, nodding his head as he looked over at Mika. "Is that your wish, Mika?"

Mika stared at the weapons in Griffin's hands, as if he were actually considering the question. "Be careful where you put your alliances, Griffin. Or you just might end up getting bitten."

The corners of Griffin's mouth kicked up as he skipped his gaze across her face, lingering on her lips. "I can only hope I'm that fortunate."

Sam snagged her bottom lip between her teeth as her gaze locked on his. There was something in the way he drew his tongue along the tips of his canines as he spoke that made her heart race far more than when she'd faced Cain. Griffin looked as if he intended on having her for dinner, literally, and she cursed when a warm rush of moisture slipped between her inner lips, rubbing the seam of her pants across her clit. She crushed the soft moan building in her chest, but Griffin's expression told her the effort was wasted.

Mika stiffened at Griffin's words, measuring up Sam with little more than a flick of his eyes. "But she's one of them," he insisted.

"Us," Griffin corrected, moving back to Sam's side. "Her crew are part of our colony now. Period." He looked around at the gathering of people. "If anyone else has a problem with my decision, speak now."

Sam chanced a glance at the crowd, wondering how many would raise their hands, but was met with only silence. She sighed, hoping the awkward tension would dissipate with time. She inched closer to Griffin, touching his arm to gain his attention. The low rumble that filled her head caught her by surprise as he cupped his hand over hers, sending a bolt of longing straight to her sex. She sucked in a harsh breath, wondering what the hell was happening to her, when he inhaled again, humming softly in her ear.

"You smell like a Bocca flower after a rare winter rain," he whispered, washing his spicy breath across her skin. "I can't wait to taste you." He eased back, extending his hand to her. "Come. We need to have that arm tended to."

Sam sighed as she followed him back through the bars of the ring. She smiled at Caleb, watching the man strike off with Sirena, as she headed down the path, wondering why Griffin still had his fingers splayed across the small of her back. Something far more serious than the fight had transpired between Griffin and Mika, but she wasn't quite sure what it was. Obviously the other man had noticed their mutual attraction, but Sam didn't know what the hell biting had to do with anything.

"You have questions," rasped Griffin, opening the large door to the complex.

Sam nodded as she ducked inside, relieved to be out of the blazing heat, and back to more familiar surroundings. "I understand the need for me to prove myself, and I can see why your people are hesitant to trust us. But I can assure you, if my crew had thought they'd fare well in a

battle, they would've challenged your people that first day." She stopped when they reached the medical room. "We might have more advanced technology than you, but your sheer numbers make any kind of insurrection an act of suicide."

Griffin sighed. "I believe patience will be our best guide in this matter." He inched closer, fisting the handle as he brushed his chest against hers. "Besides, I made it quite clear I have no intentions of allowing you to...escape."

A tendril of heat shimmied along her skin, so hot she expected small wisps of smoke to curl off her arm. She drew a deep breath, not sure if it was his scent or hers hanging in the air. A deep rumble vibrated through her chest, and she couldn't crush the low moan that broke free.

Griffin moved impossibly closer, pressing his body tight to hers. His face lowered to the left side of her head, his lips a warm caress across her collarbone. "Those aren't your only concerns, are they?"

She could only shake her head as his tongue trailed along her neck, stopping at the sweet spot behind her ear. She tensed her jaw, hoping he couldn't tell she was all but dripping arousal on the floor, when she felt his lips lift into a smile, and cursed under her breath. "I'd like to know what's happening to me," she began, her voice cracking into another moan when his hands cupped her waist, accentuating how small she was compared to him. "What the hell has biting got to do with anything? And why have I got this incessant thrumming in my head?"

"All in good time, little one." He dropped an open-mouthed kiss on the tip of her shoulder, backing up enough to open the door. "Now let's have your Dr. Quinn take a look at Cain's pathetic attempt to defeat you."

Sam fought off the sudden need to rub against him like some bloody cat in heat and walked into the room, not sure why her hips seemed to rock back and forth as if moving to a distant rhythm.

Quinn huffed, and shook his head the moment he caught sight of her. "What in the bloody hell happened now?"

"I cut myself," she answered, not meeting his gaze.

"Let me guess. You were shaving and things turned ugly." He grabbed some bandages, staring at her until she finally looked at him. "Just tell me you used some of that martial arts crap of yours and kicked the bastard who did this to you on his ass."

"Your Captain did a very fine job of kicking Cain on his ass," said Griffin. "I'm afraid my warrior underestimated her."

Quinn laughed, angling a laser across her laceration. "She's quite a spitfire. A fact more than a few of the crew has found out the hard way." He dismissed her huff of protest with a firm glare. "I thought I told you to take it slow?"

"I had something to prove," she stated.

"You always have something to prove, Sam. You're worse than the men when it comes to that pride of yours. But you need to give your body more time to heal. I'll be damned if I have to go through another blood transfusion. It wasn't that much fun the first time." Quinn cursed when the laser flickered and died, tossing it aside. "I don't have the resources to keep treating you for life-threatening injuries."

"It's only a cut," she said. "I'd hardly say it's life-threatening."

"Only because you won. You might not be so lucky the next time."

"Don't worry," said Griffin, stepping up behind her until his chest brushed across her back. "There won't be a next time. I made it clear she'd more than fulfilled the challenge."

"Does this mean we might actually be seen as something more than merely human among your people?" asked Quinn, raising an eyebrow at Griffin.

"Fear is never easy to overcome." He looked down at Sam. "But I think your Captain secured your place among us."

"Good, 'cause I'm running out of Sam-sized bandages," added Quinn, taping one in place. He patted her on the arm. "You're good to go. Just keep that on for a few hours, and for God's sake, stay out of trouble for a while."

Griffin laughed as Quinn walked away, disappearing behind a set of cabinets. Sam tensed as Griffin smoothed his hands down her sides, splaying his fingers across her thighs. She closed her eyes, hoping the dizzy feeling was somehow connected to the laceration, only to curse when a spike of need shot through her as he lowered his lips to her skin.

"Perhaps I should see to your doctor's wishes, myself," he rasped, drawing his mouth across the back of her neck to the other side. "Though to adequately assure him of your safety, I'd have to stay close." He drew a deep breath, humming as the air washed across her flesh. "Would you do me the honor of having dinner with me? I'd be more than happy to answer all of your *questions*."

Sam bit her bottom lip. While she wanted to know the truth, a part of her wasn't certain she was ready to hear it. She tilted her head, intending to turn, but he fisted his hand through her hair, halting her with her neck completely exposed to him. He growled this time, scraping his

canines along the sleek muscle threading into her shoulder. She gasped at the erotic sensation, pressing into his mouth, wanting him to increase the pressure, but unsure why. He chuckled at her tactic, laving the area thoroughly before pulling back.

“Is that a yes?” he asked, releasing her hair, but trailing his fingers down her spine before moving around to face her.

She looked up at him, knowing she'd give him anything just to feel his mouth on her skin again. “What time?”

He smiled at her husky reply, tracing the outline of her lips with his finger. “Come by whenever you get hungry. I'll be waiting.”

Sam held her breath as he walked out of the room, his back flexing beneath the thin vest. She closed her eyes, not sure what the hell she'd just gotten herself into, but knowing she'd be standing at his doorstep long before the first sun dipped below the horizon.

Chapter Three

Sam stood outside Griffin's room, trying to gather the nerve to knock on his door. She'd spent over an hour going through her clothes, looking for something appropriate to wear. But everything she had made her look like she was out to get laid. She'd never really thought of it that way before. Hell, she'd worn short tops and low-rise pants all the time on the ship, but then, she'd never wanted any of the men to pounce on top of her and tear the damn things off, either.

She sighed, pulling at the hem in a feeble attempt to yank the bottom down past her navel, but it was hopeless. Caleb had only been able to find a handful of stuff for her during one of the salvage operations, and he hadn't seemed to care what he'd grabbed. Everything was low-cut, low-slung, and so damn snug you could see every twitch of her skin. Even her pants clung to her ass, accentuating her rounded curves. She'd opted to wearing the couple of pants Griffin had given her the past few days, but they hadn't felt right tonight. They were as alien as the feelings tumbling inside, and she needed something—anything—to help keep her grounded. From losing what little sanity she had left.

Sam took a soothing breath. She needed to get control of her hormones. After all, there was no guarantee he even wanted to pursue a more physical relationship with her. Hell, no one else ever had since...

She cursed and pounded on the door, anger breaking through the fear. She waited, fists clenched at her sides, blood thrumming through her head until the continued silence made her want to scream, and she turned to go, stopping when the door rattled and opened, a soft swirl of air breezing past her feet. She turned back, hands palmed on her hips, one foot tapping the floor as she watched the gap widen across Griffin's hard body, slowly exposing every inch of chiseled man. Her breath left her on a long sigh when she stared into his dark eyes, captivated by the

hooded look he flashed her. His long fingers wrapped around the frame as he leaned against the doorway, his shoulders filling the large space. He was dressed in the same vest and pants, but the sight of his bronze skin beneath the soft leather ignited a fire in her veins.

She followed the rippling bands of muscle up his torso and along his shoulders, finally settling on the firm curve of his jaw. His lips were perfect, full but not feminine, and she loved how they quirked up at the corners when he found something amusing. She held her breath, fighting every urge to step forward and taste those lips with her tongue. Run it slowly across the silky skin until he opened his mouth and she could dip inside. She'd bet money he tasted exactly as he smelled, and she wanted nothing more than to savor that scent until it was burned into her memory. Fuck, who was she kidding. It already was, and she hadn't even kissed him.

Griffin's gravelly chuckle shattered the spell, and she bit back a curse when she realized she'd been staring at him the entire time she'd been fantasizing about kissing him. She smiled at his amused expression, nodding as he motioned her into the room.

"For a while, I wasn't certain you were going to knock," he confessed. "You've been standing there for twenty minutes. I thought you might've changed your mind."

Sam spun around, glancing at the door. "How do you know I've been standing out there?" she asked, waving at the door. "It's not like you could see me."

The corners of Griffin's lips slid up slightly on one side, making him look more than sinful. He shuffled closer, drawing a single finger along her shoulder and down her arm, before raising it to his face and inhaling. "I don't need to see you to know when you're close." He leaned forward, running his fingers through the ends of her hair. "I can smell your scent anywhere."

"Smell?" She furrowed her brow. "Exactly what do you smell?"

His brazen sweep down her body made more juice pulse from her sex, and she wondered when the hell she'd become so damn needy. She'd never had her body cream from just a smile, before.

Griffin shrugged. "It can be as subtle as the soft essence of soap on your skin to the heady sweet aroma of your desire. It's one of the genetic advantages we were given—a very keen sense of smell, similar to that of the animals indigenous to this world. Being able to smell your prey before they have a chance to attack is often the difference between victory and failure."

"Is that what you consider me? Prey?"

He laughed, shaking her head as he moved to the center of the room. "I suppose that depends on how long you make me hunt you. Now please come in, and have a seat. I'll get you something to drink."

Sam followed him into the room, sinking down on a small sofa. Griffin had taken the time to cover the offering in soft, animal skins, a distinct contrast to the angular geometry of the furniture. She gazed around, smiling at the way he'd integrated two cultures into one, emphasizing the best of both worlds. Rustic weapons and bowls were elegantly displayed beside crystal statues, the different textures playing off each other.

"Have you always lived inside the complex?" she asked, taking the cup he offered her. "Or is this a recent move?"

"My ancestors chose to live within the complex from the time of the revolution. They'd hoped the rest of the tribe would embrace the offerings and make peace with their history. But as you can see, that has yet to come to fruition." He sighed as he sat across from her, his large frame consuming the other chair. "I've tried to convince the others they don't have to give up their heritage to accept what the humans gave us, but they don't believe me." He arched his eyebrows. "Perhaps they're right."

"Because you chose to adapt instead of wallowing in the past?" she challenged, raising the cup to her lips.

"No. Because I can't find a single reason why I shouldn't take you as my mate."

Sam nearly choked on the sip of liquid, allowing Griffin to take the drink from her hands before she dropped it on the floor. While she'd been expecting him to mention their attraction, she hadn't expected it within the first five minutes. She stared over at him, wanting to speak, but not sure what to say.

"Surely you knew I asked you here for more than just a friendly dinner. I told you that first day that as soon as I thought you were ready, I'd be tasting every inch of you." A slow smile captured his lips as he skirted his gaze down her body, stopping at the vee of her thighs. "That day has arrived."

Sam shifted in her seat, acutely aware he could smell every drop of juice that slipped out of her sex and collected on her velvety lips. She did her best to hold his gaze, wondering why the beating in her head didn't match the shaky rhythm playing in her chest. A warm chuckle sounded in her mind, but she knew he hadn't spoken. She surged to her feet, unsure whether to demand answers or make for the door.

Griffin followed her lead, towering over her as he placed her cup on a small, wooden table. "Easy, little one. I told you I'd answer your questions, and I intend to do just that." He took a calculated step sideways, blocking any hope she had of escaping. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather sit?"

She shook her head, knowing if she sat down, she wouldn't have the strength to stand up again. "Is it your voice I keep hearing?"

He nodded. "And my heartbeat, though I suspect it only happens when we're close. The bond is far from complete. To be honest, I'm impressed you can sense me this well with nothing more than a few drops of my blood."

"Blood..." Her voice faded as the reality struck home. "This is all happening because you gave me your blood? But I thought yours was the only match?"

"There were others who could have donated their blood. But I wouldn't allow it. Not when I suspected a bond could be initiated by doing so." He took another step closer, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I've been waiting for this...for you...for a long time."

"But..."

Her voice disintegrated into a husky moan when the hand in her hair palmed the back of her head, pulling her close. Her breath mixed with his, creating a scent that was both spicy and sweet. She closed her eyes, loving the way the combined aroma encircled them. She'd never smelled anything as entrancing as the tangy mixture and she wanted to stay wrapped in the moment forever.

Griffin's low growl had her opening her eyes. His face hovered over hers as he tilted her head back, positioning her lips beneath his. He inched forward, teasing her with just a hint of contact before easing back, smiling at her hushed whimper.

"Trust me. I have every intention of kissing you until your taste is fused into my soul. But I won't take you until you understand the nature of the bond." He traced the delicate line of her lower lip with his tongue as if he were unable to deny himself just a sample of her scent. His blatant hum of approval nearly dropped her to the floor. "Bonds aren't created, they're revealed. Though I'm able to couple with any female I choose, I can bond with only one." He repeated the gentle lick, probing the corner of her lips with the tip of his tongue. "I never thought I'd ever find that bond. But from the moment I saw you, I knew. I think you knew it, too. I sensed your longing that day in the sand...just as I sense it now. But make no mistake. Once you take me inside you, there'll be no turning back. We'll be bound to each other...until death."

His final words echoed in her head. Fear surged through her arousal, and Sam pushed against him, breaking his hold with nothing more than a gentle shove. He released her, allowing her to stumble to the table, her breath wheezing through her chest. She focused on the rhythm, hoping to get it under control before she passed out. The soft press of his feet sounded behind her a moment before he spoke.

"Samantha." His voice was low and tender, and her pussy contracted at the sound of it. "I realize this is more than you bargained for. But I can't couple with you without you understanding the consequences." He stopped with a warm hand around her shoulder. "I'm not like the other men you've been with."

A hysterical chuckle bubbled free, and she didn't struggle when he turned her to face him. His eyes narrowed on hers and she could see his concern etched in the furrow of his brow.

"Are you okay?"

She laughed at the absurdity of the situation. Why did it always come back to that night? She met his gaze, wondering if she'd ever seen eyes the color of his. "I'm sorry, it's just..."

Her voice trailed off. What was she supposed to say? That she'd never been with a man? That she'd nearly killed the one creep who'd thought he could take advantage of her? She closed her eyes.

"Samantha?"

She shook her head as he lifted her chin. She could feel him watching her until she finally opened her eyes.

"You have been with other men, haven't you? I waited to see if one of your crew had already claimed your heart, but—" He stopped when she laughed again. "Care to tell me what you find so amusing?"

"The fact you think one of the crew would want me," she blurted out, cursing when his expression changed, though she couldn't tell if he was angry or sad.

She pulled out of his arms, wrapping hers tight around her chest as she backed away. His hands fell to his sides as he watched her through narrowed eyes.

"How many lovers have you had?" he asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Not to me. But it clearly matters to you." He waved his hand down the length of her body. "Tell me. Is it me you're afraid of?"

"No," she insisted.

“Is it the sex?”

She shook her head, but she could tell by the way he tilted his head to one side as if listening to another voice, he didn’t believe her.

Griffin looked over his shoulder, motioning in the direction of his sleeping chamber. “I’ve only taken two females into my bed,” he stated, taking a cautious step forward. “I gave up, concentrating my energy into other avenues, once I realized my life partner wasn’t among the tribe.” He nodded at her. “Your turn.”

Sam worried her bottom lip between her teeth. How the hell did she confess she was still a virgin without blurting out the whole sordid story? She cursed the need making her stomach flutter with excitement and lowered her head. “None,” she whispered.

His sharp inhale told her he hadn’t been expecting her answer. His feet shuffled closer until she felt his breath wash over her skin. “May I ask why you’ve kept your virtue this long? Surely there have been offers—”

“There haven’t been any offers, Griffin,” she interrupted. “No one on the ship would’ve touched me if I’d begged them to. Not even Caleb...” Her voice cracked as tears pooled behind her eyes. She didn’t know why she was so upset. It’d never bothered her, until now.

Griffin smoothed his hand up her arm, caressing her skin in gentle circles. “There must be a reason,” he soothed, repeating his caress with his other hand. “Not even a full-human male could be blind to such beauty.”

A small smile flickered across her lips at the honesty in his voice. She took a deep breath, praying the truth wouldn’t send him scurrying for cover. “I had a very *isolated* childhood,” she began, fisting her hands at her side. “When I first joined the Star Gazer, I kept to myself. But after a while, I forced myself to interact more with the crew—to be more like them. There was this one officer who kept asking me to join him for a drink. One night, I finally agreed, but when I declined to have him join me in my quarters, he took it upon himself to enlighten me.” She sighed. “He was a lot like Cain. He thought because he was bigger than me, I’d simply give in. I asked him to leave—when he refused, I insisted.”

She stopped, finally raising her eyes to his. “By the time security got there, the bastard was in pretty bad shape. He tried to say I’d attacked him, but I’d flipped on the audio recorder during the fight, so he was sentenced to the brig, then dismissed from the crew. After that, the men kept their distance. It wasn’t until I rose in rank they even acknowledged my position. When I made Captain, they followed because I’d earned it, not because of my bra size.” She laughed, though

even she could tell it was forced. "Cain couldn't have been farther from the truth when he suggested I slept my way to the top."

"Cain is an arrogant ass, as was the man who thought he could take his pleasure from you. He should consider himself lucky he still isn't among the crew, for I'd rip off his shaft and feed it to him for daring to touch what is clearly not his." Griffin moved one hand to her face, cupping her chin so she couldn't look away. "If you wish to keep your maidenhood, I'll honor that request." He smiled and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. "But I think you'll find I'm not one to back down from a challenge. Especially when the rewards are so...delicious."

Desire roared to the surface, and she wasn't certain if it was his voice or hers urging her on. She took a deep breath. "How do you know I'm this 'bond' you're looking for? Surely there are other women who arouse you?"

The smile that captured his lips was nothing short of dangerous. "You do much more than just *arouse* me. Besides, if we weren't destined as mates, my blood wouldn't have had this effect. Only a true soul bond calls to her mate." He stopped, and smoothed his fingertips along the band of skin between her shirt and pants. "And your body is calling to me most urgently."

Sam clenched her jaw, hoping the pressure would stop the ringing in her head, but it was useless. Every inch he touched prickled to life, robbing her of what little breath she had. She glanced at the door, knowing she could be out in less than four steps. But as he splayed his fingers across her naval, his husky voice murmuring in her head, all thoughts of running faded into shades of his skin against hers.

She sighed, feeling her inhibitions vanish along with her breath. He smiled at her visible surrender, twisting her in his arms as he pulled her back tight to his chest. Warm lips descended on her shoulder, teasing the small hollow near her neck. A low moan rumbled free as her head fell back against his chest, fanning her dark hair across his shoulder. He hummed with delight, scraping the sensitive tissue with the tips of his canines.

"Do you have any idea how hard it was not to rip Cain's throat out when he cut you with his blade." He huffed out a slow breath, washing the warm air across her skin, beading it with tiny bumps. He drew his fingers gently across the bandage "A mistake he won't make again."

Sam could only nod as he slipped his hand beneath her shirt, probing her tense muscles as he inched his way up, stopping at the bottom swell of her breast. A harsh breath hitched in her chest as she stood waiting for his next move. She jumped when his mouth caressed the soft shell of her ear, nipping at the lobe.

“Are you certain this is what you want?”

“Yes.” She cringed at the husky tone of her voice, so full of arousal and fear, it sounded as if it’d come from far away.

Griffin cinched her closer, twirling his free hand through his hair, anchoring her head to the side. “Be very sure, little one. While I would never do anything to hurt you, once I taste even a drop of your nectar, I’ll be unable to stop until my shaft has claimed your sheath as mine. While I will take your virginity this night, it’s only the first of many we’ll spend joined as one.” He chuckled, making her pussy cream in anticipation. “Cain may have been wrong about how you became Captain, but there’ll be no mistaking how you spend your time as my mate... Though lying on your back is only one option.”

Sam moaned when his hand shifted and cupped her breast, holding the heavy mound as his fingers teased her tight bud, making her nipple crinkle against her skin. Fire erupted inside her breast, echoing the burning need in her sex. She squeezed her thighs together, not sure how to contain the desire surging to life. Griffin tugged on her nipple, tearing a wanton cry from her lips. He smiled against her hair, dipping his head down to swipe his tongue along the length of her neck, nipping at the skin behind her ear.

“You taste even better than you smell,” he rasped, threading his fingers further through her hair as he increased his hold. “I can’t wait until I have my head between your thighs and my tongue between your lips. Had I known dessert was going to be this delicious, I wouldn’t have waited this long to invite you to dinner.”

“Griffin.”

He growled at her raspy plea, trying to thumb open the button on her pants with his other hand. She shook her head, trying to pull away.

“Griffin...wait.”

He tensed, the muscles in his chest tightening against her back. She felt his mouth curve downwards in a frown as his grip loosened. “Are you having second thoughts?”

Sam could hear the uncertainty in his voice, and barely held back the chuckle building in her chest. She shook her head as she turned in his arms, her hands palming his ribs. “All my thoughts are of you...first and second,” she teased, tracing the band of muscles until she reached the tight tips of his nipples. She smiled at his gravelly moan, loving how his eyes squeezed shut as his head tilted back, accentuating the sleek muscles along his neck. She tiptoed up, indulging in her need to taste the strong curve of his jaw. A spicy tang erupted along her tongue, making his

scent seem stronger. She inhaled as she leaned back, meeting his gaze. Her lips tipped into an amused smile at the confused look on his face.

“Were you not enjoying my touch?” he asked, moaning when she flicked her nails along his nipple, tensing the hard bud with a strong pinch of her fingers.

“More than you know, but...” she added, palming his chest when he tried to twist her in his arms again. “I have a feeling once you take control, I’ll have little chance to indulge in any of my own fantasies.” She held his gaze as she trailed her other hand down his waist, grazing it across his bulging erection. “This is my first time with a man, and I’d like to watch you give yourself over to me, the way I’ve pictured a thousand times in my mind.”

Griffin lifted one side of his mouth into a wicked smile. “By all means. You may touch and pleasure me to your heart’s content.” He stepped forward, burying his fingers in her hair as his lips hovered an inch from hers. “Just remember, my pretty, little mate. My reckoning will take the rest of the night, but first...”

He eased down, brushing his lips against hers. Sam held her breath, savoring the fleeting contact as he teased the soft flesh with his tongue. She waited, lips slightly parted, eyes half-lidded, until he captured her lips in his, dancing his tongue inside. His flavor filled her mouth, far more intense than the simple lick of his skin. He drank in her hum of pleasure as she ran her fingers through his hair, holding him tight. His gravelly reply sounded in her head, louder than before. She heard his heartbeat echo hers until the two rhythms matched, beating in perfect sync. Something deep inside her shifted, warming her body from the inside out. A sense of euphoria moved through her, and for the first time since her family had died, she felt safe.

Griffin pulled back just enough to catch her gaze. “You’ll always be safe,” he said, watching her with a look that emphasized his confusion, though it wasn’t necessary. She could feel his uncertainty as if the emotion belonged to her. “I won’t allow any of my men to touch you again.”

She smiled despite the cold shiver easing down her spine. She wasn’t afraid of his men, but she couldn’t tell him the real reason for her fear—not without reliving that day. Instead, she leaned forward, bridging the small distance to take his lips in hers again. They were warm and soft, still wet from her kiss. She opened for the strong sweep of his tongue, loving how he traced every contour of her mouth daring her to do the same. She acquiesced to his desire, running her tongue along the sharp points of his teeth before dipping fully inside, following every curve of his

mouth. He moaned when she stroked his probing flesh, twining their tongues together. It wasn't until her lungs burned with need she pulled back, watching his slate colored eyes darken.

"Is there anything else I should know?" she queried, smoothing her hands along his shoulders until his vest slipped off and fell to the floor. Her breath stalled as she stared at the perfection sandwiched against her. His body was larger than she'd thought, his muscles far more defined than she'd been able to see. A deep, satisfying moan lit the air as she traced every inch of his torso with her fingers, loving the way his skin twitched beneath the gentle contact.

"If you're asking me if I'm physically different from a human male, the answer is no... At least not in the way you're thinking. We have more animalistic traits, and there are some rituals you may find...primitive. But my anatomy is identical to that of a man."

Sam shook her head, squeezing the massive muscles in his arms and shoulders. "I can assure you, I've never seen a *man* identical to you. I'm afraid you're one of a kind." Her lips quirked up when he moaned at the way she slid her fingers down his chest, pausing at the ties of his pants. "Are you sure this is what you want?" she questioned, pulling the first tie loose, loving how his shaft jumped beneath the smooth material, pushing up against the tips of her fingers as if seeking their touch. "From what you've said, you'll be bound to me as much as I am to you." She pulled another free, exposing the smooth tip to the warm air. A tremble moved through her stomach when she watched a small drop of fluid bead from the tip, making the head shimmer in the light. "I don't want you to be disappointed later."

Griffin grunted as she touched the top of his cock, swirling the slick substance around his skin. "I have no doubts. But if you continue to tease me I'm afraid you'll find yourself on your back after all."

Sam laughed, loving the way his confidence made her feel sexy and strong. She looked up at him, holding his gaze as she released the rest of the ties, freeing his shaft. His eyes fell shut and his head pressed back as she took his cock in her hand, running her closed fist down the length of his erection, squeezing the base before moving back up, stopping with just the tip exposed above the tight clasp of her fingers. She lowered her gaze, feeling her pussy clench, when more fluid eased from the tip, dripping across her hand. She released his shaft, gnawing at her lip as she brought the slick juice to her mouth, tasting the thin line with a slow swipe of her tongue. His essence filled her mouth, the spicy tang more delicious than she'd ever dreamed possible. A hungry growl lit her lips as she fisted his pants, dragging them down, falling to her knees in an effort to rid him of the offending garment. He followed her lead, stepping out of them before she

tossed them aside. His amused chuckle keened into a moan when she trailed her fingers up his thighs, massaging the powerful muscles.

“You’re bloody amazing,” she said, pausing to knead the thick bands.

She’d never met anyone as strong as Griffin, and the way his muscles flexed when he moved made her whole body twitch with anticipation. She raised her head, swiping her tongue across her upper lip as her eyes came level with his cock. It looked as massive as the rest of him, and she couldn’t help but wonder if he’d even fit inside her.

“Don’t worry, I’ll fit.”

Juice creamed from her sex at the sexy tone of his voice, the certainty of the act to come making her clit throb. She chanced a glance at his face, realizing her mistake a moment too late. His eyes bored into hers, his intensions so clear she nearly toppled onto her ass. Heat fused through her, bringing her desire to a new level. She could feel the connection gaining strength, his thoughts clearer in her head. She felt a seductive smile curve her lips as the image of her feasting on his shaft flittered across her mind. He was imagining her sucking on him, and if the clarity of the thought was any indication, it was one he’d had a hundred times before.

Sam brushed her hands up his thighs, across his groin and over the taut bands in his stomach before descending again, resting them on either side of his cock. His wanton groan sounded in her head, and she couldn’t help but chuckle when his hips punched forward, as if the tip of his shaft sought her touch. She moved with him, keeping a breath of distance between them until he growled and moved back, his hands finding her hair.

“Careful. Don’t enter a challenge you have no hope of winning.”

She looked up at him, raising an eyebrow. “No hope?” she repeated. “We both know you’d never force yourself on me, so I believe it’s you who has no hope of winning. Now be a good boy, and take your pleasure like a man.”

Griffin howled in delight the moment her lips touched the silky edge of his shaft, grazing her skin across his. Warm pre-cum covered her lips, and she couldn’t stop from opening in response, desperate to taste the spicy essence first hand. She flattened her tongue, running it up the length of his cock, humming at the glorious feel of his flesh beneath hers. His fingers tightened in her hair as his thighs tensed, a low growl resonating off the walls. She sighed in defeat, wanting to tease him more but unable to deny herself the need to feel his cock thicken in her mouth as she took him deep to the back of her throat. She opened her lips, parting them over the tip until the head pushed inside and she slid down his shaft, taking as much as she could into

her wet heat. The raspy noise that purged from his chest had her weeping cream. He sounded like a beast crying out in victory, and she knew she'd never grow tired of hearing him give his soul completely over to her.

"You taste like sin," she murmured, lapping at the fluid trickling from his cock. "I could do this for hours."

Griffin grunted clenching his fists before he must have remembered they were locked in her hair and released them. He threw his head back, another rumble echoing through the room. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are with my shaft lodged in your mouth?" He bared his teeth when she drew on him, nipping at his hood. "Dark hells."

Samantha increased her speed, bobbing up and down his shaft with quick, strong strokes. His sac drew tight to his body, his thighs now trembled against her assault. A sense of urgency filled her mind, spurring her on. She moved one hand down to his balls, matching her motion with a rocking movement. Griffin growled in ecstasy, clutching her head as he began to thrust with her. She widened her stance, opening her mouth and allowing him to set the pace. She could tell he was close by the way his entire body tensed in response, rippling every muscle in turn until his head tipped back.

"Now, my mate. Move back if you don't want to drink my offering."

She shook her head, needing to taste her prize as much as he needed to give it to her. She inched closer, watching his face as his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth pulled tight. A roar unlike any other filled her head as his cock pulsed twice, then erupted, spurting his male seed deep inside her mouth. She cried out around his thrusting shaft, wanting more, but not sure how to coax it from him. Griffin shouted her name, shooting another round across her tongue, his body shaking from the strain. She kept moving, swallowing every drop he gave her, sucking on his shaft until the grip in her hair loosened, and he bent down to brace some of his weight on her shoulders. She closed her eyes, savoring the feel of his heart beating with hers, before finally releasing him, pulling herself tight to his groin. She took a long deep breath, amazed at how his scent was now a mixture of hers, his spicy essence tempered by her sweet. It was the same aroma she'd tasted on his tongue and she couldn't help but wonder if she'd taste the same. A deep rumble vibrated through her chest as Griffin reached down and lifted her up, juggling her into his arms. She wrapped her hands around his neck as he turned and headed for his bedroom.

“I’m eager to discover the answer as well, though I’m afraid I’ll not be as merciful. I intend to eat you until I’ve had my fill.” He paused as he placed her on her feet, her calves brushing against his bed. “I can assure you that will take some time.”

Chapter Four

Griffin stared at the beautiful creature wrapped in his arms and had to remind himself she was new to the pleasures he wanted to show her. A virgin! He hadn't allowed his head to even imagine that possibility. With a crew of mostly men and being the only woman to have survived the crash, he'd just assumed she'd had her share of lovers.

The animal in him purred in pleasure at the thought of being the only male to sheath himself within her sweet heat. He'd never been with a virgin before, and a part of him worried at the prospect of hurting her. She felt so small next to him that her previous question about whether he'd fit inside now seemed a viable one. He felt her rub against him, and forced his gaze back to hers.

"I know you won't hurt me," she whispered, brushing her lips across the lobe of his ear. "So stop worrying and take what's yours."

A haze of lust descended over him at the simple admission of his ownership. He fisted the bottom of her shirt, chanting his mantra to go slowly, only to curse when the fabric ripped in his grasp. He clenched his jaw, hoping she wouldn't ask him to stop, when her easy laughter floated on the warm air. He met her gaze, moaning at the desire darkening her eyes. She shook her head, easing his fingers off as she lifted the torn remains over her head, allowing the skimpy top to fall from her grasp and puddle on the floor. The muscle in his temple pulsed as his gaze fell to the creamy perfection of smooth skin mounded on her chest. Her breasts were perfect. Not overly large, but more than enough to cause a shadow to fall between them, accentuating the curves. Her nipples were hard and tight, pointing straight out as if asking for his touch. He nodded in agreement and smoothed his hands up her ribs, cupping each side, savoring the feel of her warm, soft skin. Her sharp inhalation pushed the supple mounds harder against his palms, and he

couldn't resist rolling her nipples between his thumb and forefinger. Sam's head fell back as a husky moan cascaded off her full lips, filling his head with images of his mouth wrapped around the tiny buds.

He lowered his face, nuzzling the closest one with his nose as he drank in the fruity essence of her skin. The fragrance filled his senses, as he flicked his tongue across the tip of her nipple, groaning at the harsh moan that echoed in his head.

"By the Gods, your skin is so sweet it's like tasting nectar." He licked her again, feeling her nipple bead beneath his tongue as it tightened further. He grunted, covering the hard bud with his lips as he sipped it into his mouth. Her hungry cry peaked his shaft against her stomach, as her hands twirled through his hair, anchoring his mouth to her breast.

Griffin growled, wanting her to know he was the one in control. He'd given her a chance to explore his body, now it was his turn. He eased back, dropping to his knees as he moved to the other side. He blew a warm breath across her breast, watching her nipple tremble before sucking it into his mouth, drawing on it until she pulled on the strands of hair wrapped around her fingers. He chuckled at her tactics, loving how her husky voice mumbled in his head, begging him to quench the fire raging inside her. He pulled back, licking each nipple again before slipping his hands down to her waist, fingering the band of her pants. She trembled as he reached for the front, fumbling with some demonic contraction holding them together before just ripping the seam apart. He'd take the time to learn the technology behind her garments later, but for now, his basic instincts would have to suffice.

Her eyes widened at the sound of the material rendering, but she didn't stop him from tugging the cloth free, leaving her gloriously bare. The blood in his head pounded in anticipation as he stared at her smooth pink flesh. He'd never seen a sheath not surrounded by silky tufts of hair, and the beauty of it amazed him. He reached out a single finger, tracing each pouting lip, mesmerized by the softness of her skin. Creamy moisture eased from between her lips and he barely stopped himself from tossing her on the bed behind them and plunging his shaft deep inside her.

Virgin!

He cursed the desire coursing through his veins, making him aware of nothing but his need to claim her. To join their souls in a bond only death could break. He inhaled, drinking in the sweet scent of her arousal. It smelled stronger now and he couldn't stop the quick dart of his tongue as he lapped the excess juice off her skin.

“Oh my God.”

Her voice was nothing more than a breathy rasp and his cock flared at the sound of it. He cursed, scooping her into his arms as he surged to his feet, stepping over to the side of the bed and placing her on top. He tensed his muscles, hoping the effort would tame the desire demanding satisfaction as he stared down at the woman splayed across the thin sheets. Something inside his chest shifted and he knew once he claimed her, he'd never be the same. He smiled at the way she swept her gaze along his body, starting at his eyes and ending at his groin.

“Don't worry, little one,” he soothed, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “By the time I claim your sheath, you'll feel nothing but pleasure from my intrusion.”

She snagged her upper lip as she nodded, reaching out to trace the curves of his chest. He closed his eyes at the gentle contact, wondering how he'd ever survived without her touch. How he'd managed all these years without the feel of her skin against his. He licked his lips, knowing the time for waiting was over.

“Your body is screaming for me to pleasure it. To take you in a way you've only dreamed. But before I do, I'd like to know how much experience you have.”

“I already told you,” she whispered, a deep flush lacing along her cheeks and down her chest. “I haven't been with anyone.”

He nodded, trying not to smile at her admission. “Perhaps not completely, but surely you've allowed a man to kiss you before.” He watched her swallow as she nodded her head. “And these breasts,” he said, circling each nipple before tweaking them with his fingers. “Have others touched them?”

Her eyes darted to the side as she mumbled, “just a quick graze.”

A deep rumble formed in his chest, but he crushed the sound before it broke free. “And your sheath? Has a man touched you there?”

“You said it didn't matter,” she snapped, pulling her arms back.

“I didn't think it did until I realized I'd be your first lover. Now I find myself quite jealous of the thought that another has touched what's mine.” He trailed his fingers down her stomach, massaging her hipbones as he watched her face.

Sam's jaw tightened as she skirted a glance at his shaft. It was fully engorged again and he knew she was wondering how he'd get it inside her while keeping his promise not to hurt her.

“No one's touched me...there.”

“Here?” he asked, slipping a single finger down her slit until he brushed across the tiny nub hidden in her flesh. “No other man has ever touched you here? Not even with his tongue?”

She cried as he pinched the tight bud, milking more cream from her channel. “No,” she screamed arching her hips toward him, trying to sink his finger inside. “I’ve never had a man’s lips on my body other than on my mouth.” She fisted the sheets, pushing her head back against the mattress. “I swear no one has ever touched me the way you have. You’re the first man to taste me. Now please, don’t make me wait.”

The rumble he’d crushed resurfaced, filling the room with his approval. “I think you’ll find the waiting to be half the fun. But then playing is the other half.”

Griffin slipped one hand under her knee, lifting her leg over his body as he shuffled to the middle of the bed, taking his place between her splayed thighs. A deeper red stained her cheeks as he stared at her weeping sex, the pouting lips slightly parted to give him just a glimpse of the tight nub he’d pinched with his fingers. She moved with him when he opened her legs further, bending her knees so he could get a clear view of the silky skin glistening with her arousal. She followed his gaze as he tilted his head, trying to see where her sheath disappeared inside her body. He smiled when she jumped at the simple contact of his hand along her abdomen.

“Easy. I’m just looking.”

A tentative smile creased her mouth as she tensed her muscles, making her flesh contract. He cursed, tracing the joint of her inner thigh as she fluttered her sheath again.

“Dark Gods, but I could watch you do that forever,” he breathed, drawing his finger down her crease and sinking just the tip inside her. “Do it again—around my finger.”

He groaned as the firm contraction encased his finger, gripping him as if she never intended on letting him go. Desire spiked his need, and he bit back another moan as he sank the knuckle further inside her, the heat from her channel matched by the burning want pumping through his veins. Samantha writhed beneath him, chanting his name as he stopped at the thin proof of her virginity. Emotions collided in his head, and he didn’t know if they were his or hers. He glanced up, feeling his stomach knot at the trust gleaming in her eyes. She was giving herself completely to him without reservations or doubts. The man in him surged to the surface, pushing the primitive urges back.

Griffin leaned forward, softly thrusting his finger in her channel as his lips hovered over hers. “You are the most magnificent beauty I’ve ever laid eyes on. Kiss me, and let me show you all the pleasures a man can bring a woman.”

Her lips met his in a playful dance, neither vying for control as the kiss deepened, sealing his heart to hers as surely as he would their bodies. She followed him up when he broke the contact, snaking her hand around his neck and pulling him back down as if she needed another taste more than she needed to take a breath. He licked at her lips, teasing her as she squirmed in his arms, before thrusting his tongue inside, humming at the delicious flavor.

“More,” she whispered when he finally pulled back, his finger still gently working her sheath. “I feel... I need...”

Her voice trailed off as if she were unsure how to voice what she felt. But Griffin already knew; his need to continue the bond as strong as hers. He dipped down for one more kiss before licking his way down her body, settling between her legs. He cast a glance across her torso, whispering in his head for her to watch him. Her eyes narrowed, a quick shift in her gaze telling him she’d heard his request.

Order.

He smiled as her voice sounded in his mind, the word spoken as surely as from her lips. He didn’t understand why their connection was so strong so soon, but he wasn’t going to question his good fortune. His shaft flared as her scent called to him, his mouth watered with his need to taste her. He’d only gotten a fleeting sample of her sweet nectar, and he wasn’t going to be able to keep his control if he didn’t get his fill...soon.

“So pretty,” he sighed, caressing the soft skin, moaning at the way more juice seeped from her channel to coat her skin. He dipped down, inhaling the sweet bounty of her arousal. She trembled as he reached one hand up, using two fingers to gently splay her lips apart, revealing the pulsating knot of nerves tucked inside. He hummed at the sight of it, already imagining what it’d feel like to caress the small protrusion with his tongue. Heat flared through his cock, threatening to surge him into a climax as he lowered his mouth to her slit, licking a path through her creamy juice.

“Oh, Samantha. You’re sweeter than even the Bocca fruit in the summer when the sun ripens it to perfection.” He licked again, slower this time, determined to feel every inch of her slick skin beneath him.

Samantha arched up, pressing her nub tight to his mouth as he nipped at it, sucking it into his mouth. She cried out, angling her hips, deepening the penetration of the two large fingers still working her sex. He needed to stretch her, but he didn’t want to take her maidenhood with his hand. That privilege was reserved for his shaft when he finally joined her body with his. She

squeezed her inner muscles, gripping his fingers as he eased them back. He smiled, knowing she'd feel much more of him before the night was over.

"Oh, God. Please..." Her voice keened into a wail when he suckled harder, releasing her lips long enough to pinch one nipple as he ate his fill.

She thrashed against him, squeezing his arms until his muscles spasmed. But he didn't stop. Her taste was too addicting, too exquisite to deny, and he knew he'd never get enough of her. She moved her fingers to his head, locking them around his hair as she thrust her nub against his teeth. He granted her wish, but stopped before her body plunged over the edge. She huffed in desperation, trying to move him back to her throbbing core, but he merely smiled, shaking his head.

"I told you I wouldn't stop until I'd had my share," he rasped, nipping at her folds. "I suggest you make yourself comfortable. I have a few more hours to go before I'll consider you truly ready."

Samantha hissed out her breath, as she pulled her mouth into a tight line. A growl sounded in his head and he laughed at her attempt to sway him.

"Nice try, my little mate. But it'll take more than a show of teeth to convince me." He landed a firm whack on her ass, making her sheath cream in delight. "You like that," he noted, loving the way she tried to deny what her body so clearly showed him. "I'll have to remember that. Now lay back and let me taste you again."

Samantha gave him one last glare before falling back on the bed, clutching at the sheets as if drawing strength from them. Griffin smiled in victory, returning his attention to her pretty mound. He found the smoothness of her bare skin exciting, and trailed his tongue across the top in wonder.

"Are all females from your world bare?"

Sam groaned as he drew his fingers out, swirling the warm liquid around her nub. "Make me come, and I'll answer your question."

Griffin chuckled. "You are a naughty little one, aren't you? Perhaps you need to be put over my lap?"

She stilled at the comment, but he could tell by the images that flashed in his head, the thought aroused her. He smiled, filing the knowledge away, as he returned his finger to her sheath.

“So tight. I can’t wait until you squeeze my shaft that way.” He added another finger, knowing his time for play was coming to an end. “Very well. Hold on while I bring you to your pleasure.”

He heard Sam’s breath stall as he placed his mouth on her nub and suckled, flattening his tongue as he lapped at her juices in long, firm strokes. Her voice became a strangled combination of his name and a word he didn’t recognize. He held on, thrusting his fingers to the same rhythm he attacked her bud, feeling her climax ripple along her body. He felt the muscles in her thighs tense first, followed by a tightening of her stomach as the walls of her channel started to quiver. He moved faster, wanting to feel her peak with both his fingers and his tongue. She arched into him, a harsh gasp filling the room as her body heaved beneath him, convulsing around his hand as cream pulsed from her sex, dripping past his fingers and over his tongue. He growled at the erotic taste of it, stronger than before, as he eased his fingers free, quickly moving over her. Her eyes flew open, her fingers braced on his shoulders as he nudged her weeping sheath with his shaft, waiting to see if she’d grant him entrance.

Sam raised her head, taking his lips with hers as he inched his way inside her, cursing at the firm clasp of her walls. It felt tighter than when she’d squeezed his cock with her hand, and he wasn’t sure he could stand the pressure without barreling into her. He plundered her mouth, hoping to ease some of his need, only to wail her name when she locked her heels around his tailbone, sinking him further inside until his head brushed against her virginal barrier. His gaze flew to hers, their eyes locking as her voice cried out in his head. He released her lips, watching the play of emotions flicker across her expression before rearing back and driving through her maidenhood, burying himself balls deep inside her.

Sam latched onto his shoulder, her teeth scraping his skin as he stayed poised above her, his body strung tight, his muscles quivering in an effort to remain still. He needed to give her time to adjust to his width, afraid he’d already broken his promise to bring her only pleasure. A hushed sob caught his attention, and he nearly died at the thought he’d hurt her. He eased up, finally finding the strength to meet her gaze, only to feel his breath hiss from his chest. She smiled at him, her eyes glassy with desire, her skin flushed a beautiful pink.

“For the love of God, move,” she huffed, throwing her head back against the bed. “I’m dying and all you can do is tease me?”

A relieved laugh lighted his lips as he stared at the woman bound to his soul. He leaned forward, nipping at her lips, loving how her eyes rolled back when his groin pressed against her bud. "Your wish will forever be mine as well," he whispered. "Forever."

A single tear pooled in the corner of one of her eyes, and he caught it on his fingertip as it cascaded down her cheek. He searched his mind, his chest constricting around a large knot at the strange emotion that seemed to fill his head. He'd never felt anything as strong and he wasn't quite sure how to categorize her feelings for him. She didn't give him a simple word to convey her thoughts, and his only recourse was to ease his erection out of her quivering channel, pausing at her entrance before slowly reclaiming her warm sheath.

"Yes."

The word hissed through her teeth, as her fingers scratched at his back. A bite of pain flared with the pleasure, but it only heightened his need. He lowered his mouth, licking the patch of skin directly above her collarbone, where her shoulder muscle flexed as she tried to draw him closer. His canines ached with need, wanting to sink their sharp points into her flesh, marking her as his mate. But he held back, thrusting again, wanting her to climax one more time. She arched into him, meeting each stroke, angling him deeper as she levered her hips against his. Her breath came in heavy pants, a warm wash of air across his shoulder with every pass of his cock. He closed his eyes, stilling the fire burning down his spine, cursing the tingling sensation building in his groin.

Sam pleaded beneath him, begging him to go faster, deeper. He lowered his head, knowing he'd regret the intensity of their first coupling, but unable to deny her request. He lowered onto his elbows, lifting her hips with his hands as he pummeled into her, crushing his groin to hers with every thrust. She cried his name, her voice so loud he was certain the very walls shook with the force, as her body tensed, her channel pulsing around him. He kept moving, pushing through her tight tissues, giving her everything she asked for. Fire erupted in his sac and he felt her go over a moment before his seed spurted from the tip, drenching her channel with his essence as his body went rigid above her. Her name followed his as his eyes squeezed shut, the immensity of his climax pulling him into a numbing haze. He felt her pull him tight against her before her arms fell to her sides and her legs collapsed around his hips.

Griffin kept moving, jerking his body against hers until every drop of seed was purged from the tip. He glanced down, wanting to sink his teeth into her flesh, but knowing that final act would have to wait until their next mating. He could tell by the hushed sobs racking her body,

her emotions had been pushed to the limit. If he bit her now, he risked pushing her too far. Though it was rare, bonding could cause physical pain if taken too quickly, and based on the connection they already shared, he didn't want to chance hurting her.

He clenched his jaw, satisfying the urge with a nip to her ear. Her contented moan spiked one last shot from his shaft before he rested over her, hoping he wasn't crushing her with his weight. Her breath feathered across his shoulder, draining the last of his strength. He fell to the bed, curling her into his body with a strong pull of his arms. She molded perfectly to him, her small body sheltered within his. He drew his fingers down her cheek, brushing away the wash of tears.

"You didn't hurt me," she whispered before he'd even posed the question. "I'm not sure why I'm crying. I never cry. I've just never felt..."

Her voice faded on a sigh, and he drew her close when her chin quivered. "Rest. We'll talk once you've gained some of your strength back. Just know this. Next time, I'll finish the bond, and you won't have to wonder where you fit in again."

* * * *

Griffin woke to the combined scent of woman and sex. He cracked his eyelids open, blinking back the fuzziness. The room was dark, the light from the setting suns long faded. He waited for his eyes to adjust before drawing a deep breath, moaning at the instant thrum of arousal that pulsed through his veins, flaring his shaft against Samantha's backside. He cursed the incessant need that demanded he take her again, and gazed down at the lovely creature curled against him. By all that was holy, she was beautiful.

He swept his gaze down her pale skin, following every dip and curve until he reached her hip. She was turned away from him, but he could still picture the smooth joint of her legs, where her bare skin glistened above her silky lips.

A harsh rumble filled his head, though he managed to curb all but a low grunt. The unexpected exotic treat still amazed him, and he couldn't believe he'd ever considered hair covering a female's delicate sex attractive. The skin was too smooth, too soft to hide behind a tuft of curls and he gave thanks for the gift she'd given him.

Griffin smoothed his hand across her hip, smiling at the way her skin beaded, reacting to him even in her sleep. He eased back, intent on rolling her over when his shaft shifted into sight, stopping him cold. A smearing of blood covered the head, the red color a striking contrast to the pale background of her skin.

He cursed, fisting his hand at his side. He'd been selfish. Staking his claim without giving her anything in return. He should have seen to her needs, bathing her and offering the dinner he'd skipped over, instead of falling asleep with her body nestled against him. He bit back a strange feeling in his chest, hoping the tight clasp didn't rob what was left of his breath.

"Samantha."

He stroked her arm as he bent over her, wanting to see her eyes the moment they opened. She mumbled his name, curling into him, rubbing her sweet sheath across his erection. He squeezed shut his eyes, trying to rein in his desire. She palmed his chest, and he opened his eyes to a sea of vivid blue. He'd never seen eyes so light. He sighed, tracing the gentle curve of her chin.

"No."

Griffin stilled, confused by the word. "No?"

She grinned, and his heart stopped before slamming back to life at twice the speed. Her hand reached for his face, and her smile widened as she rubbed her fingers across his skin, scratching at the rough covering of hair.

"You asked me before if all females from my world are bare. I promised you I'd answer if you made me come." A light flush crept down her cheeks. "Seeing as you did such a wonderful job, I thought I owed you an answer."

"You were the one who climaxed so beautifully." He frowned as glanced at her thighs. "Are you sore?"

"Not really." Her lips mouthed the words but the slight shift in her eyes told him she wasn't quite convinced.

"I know I took you harder than I should have." He allowed his gaze to drop to the small space between them. "I should've exercised better control." He dragged his head up until their eyes locked once again. "I'm sorry."

Sam cupped his jaw, drawing him to her with nothing more than a tilt of her head. He gave in to the sweet caress of her mouth, licking his way inside when she opened willingly for him. A deeper, more intense taste infused his senses, and he knew it was the combined essence of both their scents. An essence every other male in his colony would be able to smell. The marker proclaiming that she belonged to him.

The ends of Griffin's canines ached, the need to fulfill the final act so paramount, he had to visualize the blood he'd seen coating his shaft to stop his arms from pinning her to the bed and

thrusting inside while her tongue still danced with his. He held her stare, nodding toward her thighs. "You can lie to me all you want, but the evidence of my eagerness is smeared across your legs and my shaft."

Samantha glanced down, tilting her head as she moved her legs from side to side. "It's not that bad, Griffin. You make it sound as if I'm covered in blood."

"Every drop is one too many," he huffed, trailing his fingers over the small patches dried on her legs. "I should've seen to your needs, instead of basking in my good fortune."

A sly smile lit her lips and Griffin couldn't stop a low rumble from vibrating through his chest and into hers. "You can make it up to me now," she said, scratching her nails across the tight buds on his chest, making his shaft pulse in anticipation.

Griffin grabbed her hand, stilling her movement. "I'll not take you again until you've had time to heal."

Her laughter caught him off guard. "I'm hardly broken, beastman. In fact, I've never felt better." She held his gaze as her hand slipped down his chest, massaging each rippling muscle until her small fingers encircled his cock. "Bloody hell, but you're large," she gasped, squeezing her fist down the length of his shaft before slowly moving back up. "It amazes me you even fit inside me."

Griffin closed his eyes, unable or unwilling to stop the steady motion of her hand as she bobbed it along his erection, dotting his slit with beads of pearly fluid. She nuzzled her face into his neck, purring softly in his ear.

"Do you have any idea how much I want to lick all that spicy cream away? I could eat you endlessly." She licked his ear, nipping at his skin. "I know the bond isn't finished. I'm not sure how, but I can sense there's still one part of you you're keeping from me." She drew his lobe into her mouth, bathing it before pulling back. "I need that part of you."

"But—"

His words cut-off as she placed her finger over his mouth, shaking her head. He watched, eyes wide, breath lodged tight in his chest, as she lowered her other hand to her mound, pulling back the plump lips to reveal the small bud hidden inside. His growl licked the skin of her hand as she circled her finger around the nub, milking her warm nectar from within her body, leaving it to glisten along the edge of her sex. Her head fell back, a low moan feathering from her lips as the act made her breathing race and her breasts swell.

Griffin reached for her, suckling her finger into his mouth as his hand replaced hers, the feel of her slick juice pulsing the vein in his temple. She relaxed back on the bed, reaching for his shoulders as he moved over her.

“You are truly a witch, my little mate. A witch who has stolen my heart and my good sense.”

He slipped between her legs, working a finger gently into her sheath, as he watched her face, determined to stop at the slightest shift of her eyes, only to groan when her eyes rolled shut, pleasure capturing her expression.

“Oh, God. Yes. Right there.”

Her legs tensed around him as her body flushed against his assault. He wished he'd taken the time to clean her pretty skin, but the sight of her virgin blood only made his desire soar. She'd given him a part of her no other man had ever touched, and he wouldn't stop until she knew the extent of his claim—until she was bound, completely and only, to him.

Breathy moans filled the air as Griffin worked her higher, loosening her tight sheath as his finger worked her nub. Her face became a mask of twisted pleasure as she writhed on the bed, her thighs clamped around his shoulders. He dipped down, knowing he wouldn't be content until he'd tasted her again.

Her hips arched up to meet his warm caress, her fingers weaving through his hair as he lapped at her juices, humming his delight against the tiny knot of nerves. She cried out, pushing harder against his mouth, screaming his name when he pushed three fingers into her wet heat. The beast in him roared to life, demanding he make his final claim.

Griffin pulled the animal back, vowing he wouldn't mark her until his shaft was sheathed inside her, so deep she'd feel his heartbeat from the inside out. The muscles in her stomach tensed, and her fingers tightened around his hair, adding a strong sting. He nudged her bud with his nose, loving how her scent surrounded them, hanging in the air like a sensual fog. Moisture rained down on his tongue, and her sheath fluttered around his fingers a moment before she screamed his name, convulsing in his arms. Rhythmic pulses danced along his skin as he continued to stroke her sex, knowing the motion would only enthrall her more. He kept moving, pausing only when her hands fell from his head, and her thighs opened in fatigue.

“I've never witnessed such an erotic act as when you reach your pleasure.” He leaned up, dropping a chaste kiss on the tip of her nose. “You're more beautiful than I ever imagined.”

A satisfied smile tugged at the corners of her lips, but it was quickly replaced by a grimace of pain. Griffin straightened, glancing down her body, wondering if he'd touched her too soon. His gaze flew back to hers, fear twisting in his gut.

"Samantha?"

She shook her head, panting out a rough breath. "It wasn't you," she choked out, palming her abdomen. "It's my stomach. God, it hurts."

He watched as she rolled to her side, curling herself into a ball. He frowned, not sure how to help her, when her scent washed over him. It was strong, desperate, and as he smoothed his fingers along her clenching muscles, he understood what was happening.

Sam groaned when his hand covered her belly, focusing on the area just below her naval. He bent over her, feeling the tension ease as he rubbed small circles along her skin, whispering heated words in her ear. Her head lolled off to one side, exposing the sleek line of her shoulder. A growl rumbled through his head, and he knew the time had come.

"Knees."

He barely got the word out before he'd wrapped his arm around her waist and heaved her onto her hands and knees. Her breath whooshed out on a moan, as she braced her weight, instinctively moving into his splayed thighs. Her head whipped around when she backed into his shaft, the large flared head nudging her channel. She nodded, baring her teeth as he inched his way inside her, pushing through the tight tissues until his head filled her sheath.

"Mine!" he roared, cupping one breast as the other hand locked in her hair, tilting her head back to the side. "You're mine, Samantha. Make no mistake about that." He accentuated the statement by rearing back and reclaiming her tight canal in one hard stroke.

Sam pressed her forehead to the bed, hissing with each thrust of his hips. His name became a wanton plea, as he pumped her hard, wanting her to fully understand his claim. Her emotions flickered through his mind, spurring him on, assuring him his actions were welcomed. He didn't stop when her voice keened into a cry, her back bowing beneath him. He lowered more, rubbing his chest along her skin as his mouth scraped her neck.

"Mine!"

Samantha screamed out her climax as his teeth punctured her skin, sinking into her flesh with primal intent. Her blood flowed into his mouth, the taste both familiar and new. He sucked at the wound, taking all he needed before releasing her, watching as she collapsed beneath him, his hands the only link holding her up. He continued to move, fighting the tight clasp until the

coil inside him snapped, flaring his cock as his seed shot from the tip, drenching his shaft, the excess seeping out to cover his sac.

Griffin threw his head back, her name a harsh promise in the heavy air. He stayed poised behind her, his hands grasped at her waist, his shaft tucked deep inside until his strength waned and he fell to the side, pulling his weakening erection free as he curled her into his arms, licking the wound he'd left on her shoulder. A shiver trembled through her, and she snuggled closer, her eyes squeezed shut.

"Little one, are you okay?"

She didn't open her eyes to answer him, but simply smiled, kissing his hand as she drifted off, her body limp against his. Griffin smoothed his fingers down her side, assuring himself she was merely sleeping. He sighed at her irritated grunts before she drifted back to sleep. He gazed down at her, scrubbing a weary hand over his face. While he had no reservations about binding himself to her, he couldn't help but wonder about all the questions they hadn't answered. What if others like her came looking for Sam's crew? What if they wanted her to leave? The animal part of him growled at the thought, and he pushed the unsettling thoughts away, as he took his place at her side. He'd let her rest, then he'd run her a bath and feed her while she soaked her sore muscles. Then, he'd make love to her again.

Chapter Five

Griffin closed the door to the complex, relieved to be out of the scorching heat. He'd spent the past two days strengthening the compound's walls in an attempt to keep the sand beasts from breaking through. While the shield was more than effective, the constant draw on the crystals had forced him to agree to only have the shield activated at night, when a full attack was more likely. But the damn creatures seemed intent on tasting the colony's newest members, and a steady vigil had been necessary.

He ran a weary hand over his face as he made his way to the control room. Sam's crew had volunteered to take shifts guarding the border, but it still hadn't seemed to bridge the gap between the two cultures. Having Sam as his mate for the past few weeks had helped, but he feared rebellion was only a careless act away.

A nagging pain arced across his temples. If he didn't get some sleep soon, he knew the dull throbbing would escalate. He cursed the bloody timing, stepping into the room before coming to an abrupt stop.

Her essence filled the room, easing the tension from his shoulders with nothing more than its sweet fragrance. He spotted her on the other side of the room, bent beneath one of the panels. Her ass swayed in the air, the sexy shimmy making his blood boil with need. She'd been working as hard as he had, trying to find another way to power the shield, and he doubted she'd slept in the last forty-eight hours.

He stepped forward, inhaling again. Her scent changed as he got closer, the tangy aroma replaced by something darker, more urgent. He drew his brows together, not sure what the change meant when Caleb ducked out from behind another panel, sweat beading his forehead, his shirt covered in some sort of slime.

“Griffin. How are the reinforcements coming along?”

Griffin stopped, shifting his gaze to Samantha, smiling when her body stiffened, a visible shiver trembling down her back. He dragged his attention back to Caleb, still intimately aware of every twitch of Sam’s body. “We’ve braced the structures as best we can. With continued watches during the day, we should be able to stop any attacks before the cursed beasts breach the barriers.”

Caleb grunted as he kicked at the smooth floor. “We shouldn’t have to worry about that. But I can’t seem to reroute any power to the main panel array. The damn shield keeps spiking the energy signature every time one of those bloody monsters tries to beat their way in. During the night, when the food synthesizers aren’t being used, it’s not a problem. But lately, we’ve had some of the dispensers blow.” Caleb paused and shook his head. “Until we can either reroute the power grid or find an alternate form of energy, we’ll have to restrict the shield for when the colony is most vulnerable.”

Griffin nodded, watching Sam re-emerge from beneath the panel, her skin-tight top smudged with slimy residue. He gave her silhouette a long slow sweep, holding her stare long enough to see a flash of pain flicker through her eyes. He frowned, stepping over to her. “Any protection your shield can provide is more than we’ve had. Their attacks are limited during the day’s hellish heat. We’re thankful for the reprieve at night.” He turned to face Sam, his frown deepening. “Are you okay, little one?”

She gave him a warm smile, but the shadows in her eyes said she was far from all right. “Fine,” she muttered, clutching her stomach in a fleeting motion before turning back to the panel. “Trying to reconfigure these panels is useless. Every time I touch one of the plasma conduits, the bloody thing disintegrates on me, and I end up wearing the damn stuff.” She huffed, fluttering the wisps of hair framing her face. “We’d be better off starting from scratch.”

“A simple enough task,” said Caleb, “*if* we had some sort of engine to power their crystals.”

Sam nodded, not turning to face Griffin when he shuffled up behind her, brushing her back with his chest. A breathy moan sounded in his head, followed by a painful whimper. He scowled, trailing a finger down her side as he glanced back at Caleb over his shoulder.

“We’ll make do with what we have for now. If the situation worsens, I’ll take a small party to the caves and get more crystals. Maybe you can work some magic if you have more of them at your disposal.”

Caleb raised his eyebrows, skimming his gaze over Griffin's hands before nodding and turning to the door. "No sense getting anyone killed when things seem to be under control. We'll wait it out. Maybe those beasts will grow tired of having their bodies singed." He made for the door. "I think it's time for a cold drink and some sleep. I suggest you do the same, Sam. You're looking a bit pale."

Sam cursed as Caleb's chuckle followed him out, his deep voice fading along with his footsteps. Griffin shifted his attention back to his mate.

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong, or do I have to guess?"

An irritated grunt sounded in his head before she turned around, shoving him back. "Don't you think I'd tell you if I knew," she lashed out, crossing her arms on her breasts only to double over in pain. "Fuck."

Griffin moved in behind her, placing his hand across her naval. She tried to jerk away, mumbling something he didn't understand, but he held firm, brushing his lips against her ear. "Easy, Samantha. I'm only trying to help."

Her hushed sob barely reached him. She took a shuddering breath, moving her hands aside as he splayed his fingers just above her mound, rubbing her taut muscles in rhythmic circles. "I don't understand what's happening to me," she whispered, her voice a mixture of pain and growing arousal. "I was fine until last night. Then the pain started. It's gotten to the point I can barely breathe through it."

Griffin licked at the supple skin beneath her ear as he moved his hand to the band of her pants, pushing the material aside enough to slip his fingers beneath the smooth leather. Sam's breath left her on a sigh, her head falling back across his shoulder. He felt her body ease beneath his, the muscles relaxing.

"Your body is still adjusting to the bond," he rasped, nipping at her lobe as he inched his hand lower, grazing the top of her mound. She pushed up onto her tiptoes, granting him access to her drenched folds. His breath washed over her damn skin, prickling it. "God, you're so wet. I can smell your urgency." He slid his finger down, grazing her bud. "You shouldn't wait so long to seek relief. Bonding can be dangerous if the mated pair get separated for long periods while their bodies are still undergoing changes. It usually fades with time, but you should've come to me last night."

“But you were working,” she gasped, reaching her hands behind her and wrapping them around his thighs. “I’m quite capable of taking care of myself. And I did seek relief last night... But my finger had no effect. In fact, I think it made the pain worse.”

Griffin growled at the image that materialized in his head—Sam naked, her thighs spread wide as she worked her delicate finger around her pulsating nub. He could see the look of pleasure on her face, smell the hot aroma of her arousal, as she fought to draw her climax out by sinking her finger inside her, feeling her walls clasp her skin.

He felt his lips pull back of their own accord as he lowered his mouth to her shoulder, scraping the mark he’d left just a few weeks earlier. A muffled cry strummed through the air, her head tilting away to grant him access. He threaded his fingers through her hair, holding her open.

“Did my naughty little mate just confess she pleased herself while I worked just moments away, hot and hard at the knowledge I’d miss tasting her sweet sheath?” He shook his head as he teased the hole of her sex with just the tip of his finger. “Dangerous choice, little one. One that won’t go unpunished.”

Her surprised shriek filled the room as he twisted her in his arms and lifted her up, tossing her over his shoulder before heading for the door. He nodded at Sirena and Cain as they walked into the room, ignoring the scathing glares they gave him. They still didn’t approve of his choice of mate, but he wasn’t in the mood for explanations.

He turned left out of the doorway and picked his way through the intersecting hallways, smiling at the way Sam cursed under her breath. She obviously hadn’t expected him to carry her off like the barbarian her crew often accused him of being, but she’d pushed him too far. Watching her bite back tears as the pain of their separation all but tore her apart was more than he could stand. After today, she’d understand the depth of their bond.

Sam huffed and crossed her arms on her chest when he finally placed her on her feet at the edge of the sofa in their room. A small crease lined her forehead, and her foot tapped restlessly against the floor. “Just what in the hell do you think you’re doing?” she said, unlocking her arms so she could palm her hands on her hips. “In my world, men don’t throw a woman over their shoulder like a bloody sack of potatoes and march home like some conquering hero.”

Griffin matched her accusations with a step forward. He could tell by the slight twitch in her mouth that his dominance excited her, though he knew she’d never willingly admit it. He reached out and cupped her chin, stroking one side with the pad of his thumb. “You can claim you want your independence... that you don’t enjoy when I take control, but your body says

differently." He inhaled, closing his eyes at her sweet scent. "You smell delicious. Now come with me, and I'll show you what happens when you deny me the right of pleasuring you."

"But—"

Her voice cut off into a delighted squeal when he hoisted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. A brilliant smile lit her lips, accentuating the cute dimple in her chin. He covered the four strides to the bed, sitting down on the edge with her still cradled in his arms. She grabbed for his neck when the bed gave beneath his weight.

"I'd never let you fall," he said, brushing the loose strands back from her face. "But I'm afraid I can't allow your actions to go...without recourse. After all, you reached your pleasure..." he held up his hand, stopping her protest, before continuing. "However unsatisfying it may have been." He smoothed his fingers down her chest, stopping between her breasts. "Now be a good girl, and take your...punishment."

Sam's eyes widened when he fisted her shirt, tearing it off before twisting her forward, repeating his actions with her pants, as he laid her across his legs. She wiggled against his hold, stilling when his fingers traveled the length of her ass.

"No, Griffin. You are *not* going to spank me."

"I can see you're still intent on denying what your body so clearly desires." He swiped a finger through her crease, gathering her cream on the tip. He hummed as he sucked the digit clean, dipping down for another pass. "How many times must my hand connect with this beautiful flesh before you admit what I know to be true?"

"Griffin!"

He chuckled at the authoritative tone to her voice, all the while her body clamored for his touch. He curled over her back, kissing her neck. "Trust me."

Her body tensed as he trailed his tongue down her shoulder, then relaxed against his hold, molding to his legs. He smoothed his hand down her back, squeezing the taut muscles, loving how they flexed at his touch. Her skin was so pale compared to his, the whiteness of it stark against his sun-kissed bronze. He often wondered if she'd tan beneath the burning rays of the sun, allowing her color to match his, but it seemed to stay the creamy white he'd come to admire.

Tiny bumps prickled to life when his fingers reached her buttocks. God, how he loved the shape of her ass, round and firm, but with a feminine softness that drove his senses wild. Most of the females in his tribe were as muscular as the males, limiting their differences in appearance.

The fact Samantha could fight like a sand beast but still look like a woodland nymph enthralled him beyond words.

“Do you have any idea how much I love touching your ass? It tempts me in ways I’ve never considered before.” He followed the small crease, running his finger over her tight pucker. He’d never taken a woman in that primal way, but over the past few weeks, his desire to feel the most forbidden of passions consume him was becoming an increasingly incessant need. He probed just the tip of his finger inside her hole, moaning at the tight feel of anal canal. “By the Gods you’re even tighter back here than your sweet sheath.” He bent down over her, lapping at the mark still evident on her shoulder. “I’ve never taken a woman this way, and I must confess, your body is more than tempting.”

A shiver raced over her skin, twitching it beneath his probing finger. He could feel her indecision coil her muscles. She was curious, but hesitant.

“In time,” he rasped, moving back to her round cheeks. “But first, your reward.”

“I thought it was punishment,” she countered, chancing a glance at him across her shoulder.

“I think you’ll find them to be one and the same.”

Sam’s eyes darkened as he raised his hand, hovering over her waiting flesh. He held it there until she turned away, wanting her body to anticipate his actions. She sighed out one last breath before he landed the first slap, making her skin shimmy beneath his hand. A desperate moan broke the silence as she shook in his grasp.

“From now on, you’ll be a good little mate and seek my pleasure when your body requires it.” He landed another, not hard, but enough to give his hand a slight stinging sensation. “There’s nothing more important to me than your well-being. Until your body has fully adjusted to our bond, you’ll not deny it, or me, the pleasure you require.”

She nodded her reply as the fourth smack sounded in the room. Griffin felt her tense her jaw against his legs, holding back what he believed was a cry of pure ecstasy. He caressed her skin, knowing she needed a few more to push her over the edge.

“Are you ready to admit I know your desires better than you do?”

She looked back again, closing her eyes as his hand connected again. A tremble washed through her before she slowly opened them. “Fine. You guessed that I’d enjoy your little... *punishment*. Are we done now?”

He flashed her a smile he knew spiked her need and spanked her again. "Really, little one. Is that the best you can do?"

Sam cursed as he made two quick slaps, these slightly harder. "Yes," she hissed, shifting on his lap, grinding her nub against his leg. "You know my desires. Now, please..."

"Please, what?"

The cry she'd held back cut the air when he plunged a solitary finger inside her, gathering her slick juice before pulling it free and licking it clean. Her forehead fell to his shin, and her breath raked across his leg. "Make me come before I pass out!"

"Much better," he praised. "Open your legs for me, and I'll see what I can do."

Her thighs jerked apart as if she were barely able to control the movement while her arms wrapped around his calf. He brushed his finger over her nub, smiling at the breathy hiss that erupted from her lips. She was more than ready to explode for him, but he didn't want her to climax without his tongue deep inside her channel.

Without warning he picked her up and tossed her on the bed, twisting her to her back in the process. She bounced once before his body wedged her thighs apart, his hand cupping her mound.

"I thought I could resist your taste long enough to grant your wish, but your scent is too tempting." He placed his other hand between her breasts, pushing her back. "Relax. No more teasing."

Samantha held his gaze as he dipped down, licking the pooling juice from her skin, humming when his tongue grazed her tight bud. He knew the slight vibrations heightened her pleasure, and he needed to show her just how far he could take her. Her hands flew to his head, anchoring him to her mound, as her breath became a mix of grunts and disjointed words. He lapped at her silky lips, thrusting two fingers inside her in a rhythm he knew would drive into an orgasm. She rasped his name, arching her hips, rolling her head back and forth across the bed. A thin film of perspiration dotted her skin, amplifying her scent until the air was thick with the heady fragrance. He didn't try to draw the sensations out, knowing the time for teasing was over. Her body was strung tight, and he couldn't chance causing her more pain by stopping.

"Yes! Oh God!"

Her body exploded. There was no other way for Griffin to describe it. Her thighs clamped around his shoulders and fingers, as if forbidding them to desert her, while the muscles in her stomach rippled in sequence, flexing and bunching beneath her shimmering skin. The vein

in her temple pulsed to the beat of their hearts and her lips pulled into a thin line as she tightened her jaw until he was certain he heard her teeth crack. A deep pink hue flushed along her chest, lacing its way up her neck and across her checks. And on her shoulder, his mark turned into two red points, the bright color dimming the cool white of her flesh.

Griffin eased up, brushing his chest along her torso as he moved above her, watching the last flickers of pleasure wash across her face. God, but she was beautiful. Her eyelids fluttered, and the moment her liquid blue eyes locked on his, he knew he was lost.

"I will never tire of watching you give yourself over to me." He lowered down, brushing a tender kiss across her rosy lips.

Samantha smiled, scratching her nails across his chest. "Then take me, and you can watch it all over again."

The image of his finger penetrating the smooth pucker of her ass filled his mind, but he pushed the idea away. He could tell she wasn't ready for him to dominate her that way, but he couldn't help but acknowledge that, with time, it was a need he'd be obliged to fill.

He sat up, chuckling at her huff of disappointment before grabbing both legs and placing them against his shoulder, tilting her hips. Her eyes rolled when he pressed the head of his shaft against her entrance, pushing half his length inside her in one strong thrust.

"Dark hells, but you're tight this way." He surged further inside, feeling her channel grip his cock as if trying to draw it deeper. "So tight I'm not certain I'll be able to fully penetrate you."

Sam levered off his shoulder, tilting her hips even more, brushing his cock against the back of her pelvic bone. "You'll fit. But I swear if you don't fuck me now, I'll make you pay."

His chuckle sent her sheath into a spasm, rioting his shaft with rhythmic pulses. He groaned at the erotic sensation, biting back the howl building in his chest. "Still being naughty. For that you will pay. But next time."

Sam's reply surged into a harsh rasp as he thrust forward, slapping her ass with his sac. He squeezed his eyes shut, savoring the tight fist of her channel wrapped around his cock before dragging the heavy length back through her tight folds, leaving the head wedged in her sex. He paused, looking at her one last time before pistoning into her, taking her channel in hard, quick strokes, grabbing her ankles to keep her perfectly aligned.

"Forever mine, Samantha. You won't deny your needs again."

"Never!"

She screamed the word back at him, beating her hands against his arms as he watched her climax steal her breath. Her lips opened on a moan as her hips arched up into his pelvis, locking him in place. He stopped, one arm wrapped around her legs, the other bracing the rest of his weight as she tilted her head back, her fingers gouging through the skin on his ass in order to hold him still. He grunted, removing his hand from the bed long enough to palm her nub.

“Yes!”

It was nothing more than a whisper, but it sounded deafening in his head. He froze in place, mesmerized by the sheer beauty of her climax, as it twisted her face with pleasure. It wasn't until her breathing relaxed that he drew back again, retreating from her moist heat an inch at a time. Sam's eyes sprang open and her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

“Don't go.”

She reached for him, worry etched across her brow. He twined his fingers through hers, shaking his head as he straddled her thighs, lowering his body until every inch touched.

“I'm not going anywhere. But I would like to continue. If you'll allow me.”

Tears glimmered in her eyes but she closed them before they fell. Questions crept to the surface, but he pushed them away. He'd heard the hint of fear in her voice, as if she thought he'd desert her, though she'd hidden the magnitude of it well. She was hiding something, though he knew enough to leave it alone for now. Time would see to the truth.

He kissed her lips, lingering until she opened for him, twirling her fingers through his hair as he drank in her breathy moans. Her hold tightened when his hips thrust into hers, pushing his shaft deep inside her. His sac pulled tight, a strong shiver snaking down his spine.

He gritted his teeth. He could tell by the way she clung to him, she needed something more than a hard, fast shafting. Bloody typical his cock wanted just that. To slam into her until he felt his skin merge with hers, their hearts beating to the same rhythm. It was like this every time they coupled. Desire and lust took over until they collapsed in a mass of limbs and sweat.

“Griffin.”

Her voice was a soft beckoning, drawing him back. He dropped his gaze to her face, feeling his cock flare at the sight of her pale eyes staring up at him.

“You don't have to hold back. I'm far from fragile.”

He went to speak when she pressed against his chest.

“Roll onto your back.”

He raised an eyebrow before cinching his arm around her waist and dropping his shoulder to the bed, switching places. He groaned as the new position inched his shaft deeper, pressing his sac against her ass. "Are you trying to punish me?"

"Reward."

His smile faded into a rough moan as she levered up, rotating her hips until only his crown remained in her sheath. He looked down, captivated by the layer of cream coating his shaft as he watched it slowly disappear, parting her wet folds as she lowered down, burying him to the hilt. Fire swept across his skin, prickling his sac, as it pulled tight to his body.

"Now I know why you like to be on top," she whispered, riding him with long, slow strokes. "It's sexy as hell."

"That it is... watching your breasts float around my lips." He paused, capturing the closest one with his teeth, drawing it gently into his mouth. "Had I known you'd be such a vision above me, I would have placed you there weeks ago."

Her gentle laughter made his stomach flutter. He reached up, cupping each breast, pinching her nipples with every drop of her hips. She arched back, fingers braced on his shoulders, hair wild around her face, as her pace increased, her excess moisture coating his thighs. He moved his hands, cradling her back as her muscles clenched and released, her motion more of a jerk than a thrust. Tiny spasms quivered along his shaft and he knew she was close.

"Come for me, my pretty mate. Let me watch you give yourself completely to me."

Samantha slammed onto him, pounding his groin with the same desperate motion he'd used on her. Her cries increased with her pace until both were a heated blur of sound and skin. He braced her weight, meeting her thrusts with his, driving his hips into her plunging thighs. His release snaked down his back, squeezing his cock, threatening to burst with every stroke. He held on, wanting her to climax on more time.

"Now. Griffin. Yes!"

Her back bowed as her orgasm raced over her, leaving her limp in his arms. His roar followed her soundless scream as he pushed into her three more times before his seed exploded from the tip, drenching her already wet channel. Strong contractions milked him dry leaving nothing but the combined scent of their mating behind. He held her firmly, waiting for his cock to stop flaring before pulling her tight to his chest, sighing when his weakening flesh slipped free of her grasp. Sam mumbled something in his ear, but it was lost to the beating of their hearts.

Griffin wrapped his arms around her, aware of how her scent had changed again. Soft and sweet, free of the darker aromas he'd detected in the control room. He made a mental note to check on her when his duties kept him away and closed his eyes, drifting to sleep on her whispered breath against his skin.

Chapter Six

Eight months later...

Sam tossed in the bed, desolate images filling the darkness. She fought against the tight feeling in her chest, wanting to break free of the nightmare, but unable to vanquish it. She could see the bodies littered on the floor, their blood pooling along the ground. The metallic scent permeated the air, making her stomach heave. Gunther sat in a chair off to her left, his eyes gleaming in the wavering light. He showed no sign of remorse, as he calmly cleaned his hands on his pants, indifferent to the smell of death. She closed her eyes, knowing this one act would throw the colony into turmoil.

A desperate moan left her lips as she startled awake, sweat beading her body. Images from the dream wavered in the stillness, the lifeless eyes still watching her from the shadows. She cursed the way her stomach rolled in protest as she ran a shaky hand through her hair. Even after six months, the faces of the dead family were just as crisp as the night she'd walked in on the murder scene. She looked down at the sheets, but all she could see was the glimmer in Gunther's eyes. She'd never thought her head of security would be capable of such atrocities, but he'd willingly admitted his guilt. And she'd been left wondering why. Had it been nothing more than a simple hate crime? Or was it the start of something much darker?

More questions filled her head as a tendril of heat licked at her skin, teasing each nerve as it swept along her torso, culminating in her groin. Despite the horrid dream, her body was in a constant state of arousal, leaving her with an ever-present ache.

She closed her eyes and rolled over, hoping the pressure on her stomach would ease the cramps, but the pain just moved, shimmying up her back and down her legs. She growled out a

curse, punching the pillow twice before rolling to the edge. The bed dipped slightly from her weight, but sprang back when she rose to her feet.

She looked at the covers, wishing she could just go back to sleep, before shuffling to the shower. She'd had one a few hours earlier, but if she didn't get even a small measure of relief from the heat, she wouldn't be able to work. Her body protested the sudden spray of cool water, but it faded with the steady stream of droplets. She sighed, leaning against the wall for strength, wondering how in the hell she'd make it through another day.

Tears pooled, but she blinked them away, refusing to give in to the anguish welling inside her. She'd lived through more than her share of misery, and now wasn't the time to dwell on facts she couldn't change. If Griffin's people knew the truth, nothing would stop another rebellion. It was the only reason she kept going.

I'm sure it has nothing to do with the fact you're still madly in love with him.

She ignored the taunting voice, stepping out of the spray as she grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her shoulders. Caleb would be there any minute, and she needed to get ready.

Sam walked into the other room, tossing the towel over the end of the bed as she rummaged through her cloths. She tried a few on, but nothing felt right. They were either too big or too rough against her skin. She finally settled on an old pair of cargo pants and one of her tops. She knew the others wouldn't be pleased by her choice, but they could kiss her ass. She wasn't in the mood to wear *their* clothing. She needed something more familiar—something she could depend on.

Another contraction rippled her groin and she glanced at the small table beside the bed, her eyes landing on the hyperspray waiting on top. It was the last one Quinn had agreed to give her before crossing his arms and announcing she'd need to see him in the med lab if she wanted more. She cursed the bloody timing. If she used it now she might make it through the day without passing out on the floor again. But there was no way she'd get through the night without another dose.

She snagged her bottom lip between her teeth, fighting off the images that slammed into her head. Griffin must have entered the complex. She could sense his gruff emotions, the only ones he seemed to have these days, though the connection was weak. There'd been a time when she could hear his thoughts even if he was across the compound. Now he had to be extremely close for her to pick up even a hint of his feelings.

Tears leaked from the corner of her eyes before she had the strength to stop them. Pain fluttered through her heart. She ambled over to the bed, grabbing the spray off the table and placing it against her neck. It wouldn't stop her heart from aching, but it might enable her to bite back the tears. She clenched her jaw, wincing as the medicine fused through her skin. There was a moment of intense pressure, followed by a hot flare that tingled down her body, flashing white dots across her vision. She closed her eyes, waiting for the rush to subside when a knock sounded at the door.

She swore under her breath and stumbled through the doorway, grabbing onto the sofa. Her vision blurred as she reached for her boots, falling onto a chair as she slipped one on. She took a soothing breath, hoping she didn't look as hazy as she felt. "Yeah."

The door cracked open and Caleb's head popped in. "All clear, or should I grab my sword?"

Sam huffed, tugging on a lace as she kept her gaze focused on the floor. "Not funny. And no, Griffin's not here so you can keep your weapon tucked in your pants...as usual."

Caleb chuckled and stepped inside, glancing over his shoulder before leaning against the wall. "You about ready?"

"Doesn't it look that way?" she snipped, pushing to her feet and bracing some of her weight on the back of the chair.

Caleb straightened, giving her body a slow sweep. "You're going out dressed like that?"

Sam frowned, and palmed her hips. "Yes. Why? What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

Caleb drew his mouth into a tight line and shrugged. "To start off, I haven't seen you flash that much skin since Griffin tossed those two guys across the room when they growled at you. And second, if you're trying to hide how much weight you've lost the past couple of months, you're failing miserably."

Sam frowned, tugging at the hem of her shirt. Griffin's territorial issues were the least of her concern. But she didn't need to flaunt her how her body had changed recently. She glanced back at the bedroom. Griffin's scent was the strongest in there... One of the few places he stayed for any length of time when he bothered to come home. But she hadn't seen him for weeks. She looked back at Caleb, knowing she didn't have the strength to go back in the bedroom, even to change.

"You act as if anyone is going to be looking. I think Griffin's reaction put an end to that."

"Oh, they look. More than you realize. And with Griffin not around as much..."

His voice trailed off as Sam's gaze flew to his. Was he trying to tell her he knew they weren't the happy couple they pretended to be?

"I guess I'll just have to fend for myself if any of the locals get antsy about me wearing my *own* clothes."

"Hey, I don't have an issue with it, but you haven't worn anything but the stuff Griffin got for you in a long time. I was just trying to help."

She sighed, grabbing her communicator off the table as she walked by. "I know, and I appreciate it. I'm just not in the mood today."

"Just do me a favor?" He smiled when she stopped, looking at him with a raise of her eyebrow. "Don't go getting all kung-fu crazy on anyone until I get out of the way. I don't need Griffin breathing down my neck when the guy goes ballistic later."

Sam rolled her eyes, swatting him on the back as she made for the door. At least, Caleb still had his sense of humor.

* * * *

"What are we doing here?" Caleb grabbed her arm, pulling her back from the door. "Don't you think you should just head back to your room? Maybe Griffin's back."

Sam held back a sigh at the mention of Griffin's name, trying not to show how much the simple word hurt. She shifted her shoulders, praying the gesture made her appear more indifferent. "He's not in the complex," she muttered, crossing her arms on her chest in the hopes of concealing her body's involuntary reaction.

She didn't need Caleb to see the way her nipples had beaded into tight little buds as the thought of catching Griffin in their bed, his long, lean body stretched out on the crisp sheets, filled her head. She'd always loved the way his skin looked next to the white cloth, as if he'd been bathing in the sun all day. He liked to sleep on his stomach, showing off the strong line of his back, narrowing into the tightest ass she'd ever seen. It was perfect, and she loved cupping each mound in her hand, feeling the power hidden within his muscles, as he thrust his shaft deep inside her.

A tight feeling gnawed at her chest, but she pushed it away. No sense pouting over what she couldn't change. While she didn't know the reason behind his abrupt change of heart, his calculated avoidance of both her, and the situation, was enough to keep her distant.

"You know, it's really creepy the way you can tell where he is or what he's thinking. Remind me not to mate with one of the locals."

“He’s too far away for me to read his thoughts, which means he isn’t be in the complex. And if you aren’t willing to mate with one of the locals, you’d best start ogling up some of the crew, ‘cause the last time I checked, I’m the only full-blooded human female on this over-heated rock.”

Caleb shook his head, motioning back to the door. “So why not just head home and get some rest? You look tired.”

“I’m always tired, and quite frankly, I need a drink. Leave it to our friends to restrict alcohol to one bloody room.”

“It’s safer that way.” He huffed, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “This isn’t the best place for you right now. Not without Griffin. Some of the males might get pissy if we go in together.”

“Then I’ll go alone,” she said, fisting the handle. “We have as much right as anyone to grab a drink. If being with me bothers you, then head home.” She pulled open the door. “I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself. I don’t need you or Griffin to hold my hand. You of all people know that.”

“I know you well enough to realize that if anything goes wrong in there, you’ll be the next one on trial. And you *do* remember how well Gunther’s went, right?” He motioned her forward. “Fine. One drink, then I’m seeing you back to your room.”

Sam shrugged, leading the way into the dimly lit room. Shades were drawn over the windows to keep out the blinding light and tables were scattered around the floor. With daylight lasting nearly twenty hours, it was impossible to tell whether it was night or day simply by looking outside.

She headed for an empty table, scraping a chair back before collapsing into it, sighing as the simple act eased some of the tension in her back. The hyperspray she’d taken that morning was beginning to wane, and she hoped a couple of drinks would keep the pain at bay. She watched as Caleb gazed around the room, surveying the layout before sliding into a seat across from her, his back to the door.

“Nothing’s going to happen. Besides, we have a clear path to the exit and only a couple of tables between us the windows. We can be out of here in a matter of seconds.”

Caleb didn’t answer, studying the room again. He glanced back when a female marched up to their table, banging two glasses down in the middle. She didn’t bother to talk, muttering in her native tongue as she stalked back to the bar, her irritation clearly marked in the stiff sway of her hips.

"Thanks," said Sam, tipping her glass at the bar before sealing it to her lips and taking a long, deep swig, licking away a stray drop beaded on the rim.

"For God's sake, Sam, don't lick the bloody glass like that. You'll have every male in here fighting to fuck you."

Sam waved his worry away, taking another sip. "They know Griffin would rip their throats out if they tried. They might be stupid, but they're not suicidal."

Caleb sighed out a deep breath, shifting his eyes to the table behind her. "I'm not so sure. Maybe before, but..." His voice trailed off.

"But what?" she questioned, leaning forward in her seat and resting her elbows on the table.

"Just forget I said anything."

"Not bloody likely?" she stated.

Caleb held her stare, his smile fading into a tight line. "But they might not listen to reason now that you and Griffin have...changed."

Sam stilled. If Caleb had noticed the distance, chances were others had come to the same conclusion. She dropped her gaze, gathering strength. "Nothing's changed. Griffin's just...busy."

"Right. He's too busy to take care of his mate. I'm sure it happens all the time."

"Since Gunther's trial, Griffin's been preoccupied trying to ensure his people don't decide to make us all pay for the bastard's cruelty. It hasn't been easy."

"No, I suppose it hasn't. But this didn't happen right after Gunther killed that family." Caleb looked around, lowering his voice. "You two seemed fine for a while. But then a couple of months ago, you started acting differently. You rarely eat, don't sleep and there's the pain you try to hide." He gave her a guarded smile. "You're sick, and it has something to do with this bond with Griffin."

Sam kept her mouth clamped shut to keep from sobbing out the truth. As much as she wanted to confide in someone—anyone—she couldn't chance it. Having everyone believe she and Griffin were the perfect match was the only barrier between her crew and a war they couldn't win. She leaned into the table, sighing out a slow breath just as footsteps sounded behind her. She cursed, already aware of who had sauntered up behind her.

"Where's Griffin?"

Sam chuckled as she turned to face Cain, laying one arm along the back of the chair. "Working."

"Where?" he huffed, cracking his knuckles.

"Outside." She tapped the communicator still attached to her hip. "If you'd all wear one of these, you could just call each other."

"You shouldn't need one," he bit out. "As his mate, you should be able to sense where he is."

"And I have," she said, turning back to face Caleb. "He's outside."

Cain growled, and grabbed her arm, pulling her back toward him. Caleb slammed his fist on the table and pushed up, only to stop when Sam held her hand out. She shook her head, spearing her gaze back to Cain.

"I suggest you let go before Griffin rips your arrogant head off."

Cain laughed, tightening his hold. "If Griffin gave a damn, he'd be sitting in that chair beside you, instead of romping around outside, securing his heritage, no doubt."

Sam tensed her jaw, feeling the vein in her temple pulse as she rose to her feet, once again signaling Caleb to back down. "I hope you have the skill to back your mouth. Because unless you've improved since our last meeting, it's going to get ugly."

"I was under orders not to hurt you last time. But I wonder if Griffin feels the same now?" He raised an eyebrow, as if dismissing the thought. "I doubt it. As a matter of fact, I bet he'd be thankful. Death is one way to break the bond. Then he wouldn't have to hide his other lovers." Cain inched closer. "I bet Sirena's one of them. What do you think?"

Pain collided in Sam's heart, adding to the hurt already culminating in her groin. Just hearing Cain voice her fears cut through her defenses, making the room spin. She'd worried Griffin had taken another lover, and just thinking that woman might be Sirena wrenched an ache medicine couldn't cure. She fisted her hands, allowing anger to replace the emptiness churning inside her. A calming haze settled over her, narrowing her vision until Cain's face was all she saw.

"Easy, Sam. He's not worth it."

Caleb's voice sounded in the distance, but the words didn't register. She was in the zone, a place she'd vowed she'd never go back to. A place where survival was the only rule.

"What's the matter, Captain Grier," mocked Cain. "Did you really think he'd go without just because he didn't want to shaft you anymore?" Cain sneered at her. "And don't try to deny it, I can smell your stench from here. Strange how I can't smell his anymore. Makes me believe it's been months since he's touched you. Care to elaborate for us?"

“Come on, Samantha. Don’t do this. I see the look on your face. You won’t be able to stay in control this time.” Caleb’s hand shook her shoulder, but she didn’t respond. “I know you don’t want to hurt everyone in this room. But if you don’t walk away, that’s what will happen.”

She heard Caleb call to Cain when she didn’t reply, warning the man to stand down, but Cain only laughed as he drank in her silhouette.

“Stay out of this, human. I have every right to challenge Griffin’s ownership. If your dear Captain truly belongs to him, Griffin will sense her impending danger and come to her rescue.” Cain searched the bar before turning back to her. “But it appears he’s too busy shafting his second in command.” Cain stepped even closer, washing his foul breath across her face. “Don’t worry. I have no intentions of killing you. I’m merely going to give your body the relief it begs for. I wouldn’t be surprised if Griffin thanked me for taking care of business for him.”

Sam locked her eyes on his, feeling her lips curve into a smile. A part of her welcomed the coming battle, and she didn’t hold that part back. She lifted her arm, nodding at Cain’s hold on her, so tight her skin was already starting to bruise. “I’ll give you one chance to walk away. I suggest you take it. I’m really not in the mood.”

The smile Cain flashed her filled her with anticipation. “Which is why Griffin isn’t riding to the rescue,” he snarled, pulling her against his chest. “And I’ll walk away after your juice coats my shaft.”

“Ah shit, Samantha.”

Caleb’s voice was her last conscious thought. She moved, striking Cain with hands and feet, pummeling his body with blow after blow, grinning when his blood sprayed from his nose and mouth, splattering the men standing behind him. His cry of pain only encouraged her, driving her to finish the challenge as he’d intended it. She locked his arm in hers, dropping him with a hard kick to the head. She smiled at his crumpled body, watching the increasing pool of blood form beneath his mouth.

Another hand struck her face, throwing her sideways. She rolled with the motion gaining her feet as fingers wrapped around her shoulder, clenching to the point of pain. She didn’t bother to look at the guy, breaking his arm before he’d had a chance to spin her around. His howl cut through the heavy air, and she turned to meet his savage snarl. Something dripped along the corner of her mouth. She licked at it, recognizing the ferric taste of her own blood. She grinned as Mika pushed the other man aside, moving toward her with feral intent.

Silence fell across the room. Mika looked at the men then back at her. He grabbed a chair, splintering it across one of the tables, holding up the broken leg in victory. Sam held her ground wondering how many of them she'd maim before they backed down, or Caleb joined in. He was already edging her way, his attention focused on the men gathering behind her. An image flashed in her head a moment before Mika struck.

Sam countered his attack, making his attempt look like that of a child's. His roar bounced off the walls, his anger reflected in the gleam of his teeth. He lunged again, missing his target, spinning to face her as she pivoted and kicked him back. He stumbled against a table, pushing back up, racing at her like a man possessed. She readied her body, her response already planned when a whirl of flesh filled her vision, shoving her away. An ungodly howl echoed through the room, followed by the sound of bone on bone. She looked behind her, wondering why the men waiting there didn't attack, when a table crashed to the ground in front of her. She turned back, another heartbeat strumming in her head as she stared into Griffin's grey eyes.

Blood covered his knuckles, glaring at her like a beacon. The muscles in his arms and chest flexed as he looked over her shoulder, snarling at the men surrounding her. She returned his stare, not retreating when he stalked toward her, hissing at anyone within reach. He stopped an inch from her face, his spicy breath hanging like a mist around him. She tried not to inhale, but the simple closeness filled her head with his delicious scent, making her body tremble in anticipation.

Griffin growled a warning, breaking her gaze when one of the men charged his back. Sam flinched as Griffin's arm shot out, grabbing the male by the face and tossing him across the room. Another table shattered beneath the guy's weight, blanketing the floor with shards of wood.

She heard Griffin snarl something off to her left but lost track of his words when Mika's friend lunged for her. She dropped the guy before Griffin stepped between them, pulling her behind his back. A hand settled on her shoulder, and she nearly kicked the guy until she realized it was Caleb.

"Come on. We have to leave."

She shook her head, her mind still wired for survival. She tried to pull away, but backed into Griffin's chest.

"Go with Caleb, Samantha, or I swear by all that's holy I'll paddle your ass so hard you won't sit down for a week!"

Sam glared at him over her shoulder. After all this time, she'd be damned if she'd take orders from him. She growled back, intending to stand her ground, when Caleb locked his fingers around her wrist and yanked her across the room.

"For God's sake, snap out of it." He waved his hand in front of her face as if she were under some sort of magical spell. "Let's go."

She stumbled across the floor after him, her mind still fuzzy. She remembered zeroing in on Cain's face, but the rest had dissolved into distorted images shaded in red. She looked back at Griffin as they bridged the doorway. She sensed his rage, the intensity matched only by the infernal need pounding through her body. A warm ache settled between her legs, pooling moisture along her tender lips.

She tumbled out of the room, slamming into Caleb's back when he stopped two corridors over, his fingers still cinched around one wrist.

"What the hell happened back there?"

She winced at his shrill tone, backing her shoulders into the wall. "What was I supposed to do, back down?"

"Yes. That's exactly what you should've done. Jesus, you could've killed half those men, then died along with them. Is your damn pride that important you're willing to destroy everything we've worked for just to save it?"

"The bastard had it coming," she bit out, wrenching her arm free. "I asked him to bugger off, but—"

"But then he bad-mouthed lover-boy and you went ballistic," interrupted Caleb. He shook his head, taking three heavy steps away before spinning to face her. "Here I thought Griffin was dangerous. He's definitely found his match in you."

Sam's pussy clenched as more of Griffin's ragged emotions bubbled through her defenses, doubling her over and nearly dropping her to the floor. Black dots swirled around the edges of her vision, making the surface look potted with holes. Caleb knelt down beside her.

"Fuck, are you all right?"

When she didn't answer he shook her shoulder.

"What's wrong with you." He cupped her chin, raising her face even with his. "I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Fatigue weighed heavy on her soul, and she didn't resist when her body slid down the wall, sliding her onto her ass. She wanted to refuse, but she didn't have the strength. "It's the bond," she whispered, sighing out a low breath. "It's killing me."

Caleb snorted in disbelief, edging closer. "What do you mean? I thought it was just a substitute for marriage?"

"If only it were that simple." She pressed her head into the wall, hoping the pressure would ease the pounding in her temples. "It turns out mating is much more physically binding than either of us thought. Quinn seems to think it's linked to their genetic engineering... Something to do with the way my body replicates their unique cellular markers. Instead of attacking the intruders, my cells incorporated their makeup into mine. Whenever I don't get a steady influx of more of these anomalies, my body rebels." She laughed. "Who knew you could literally die from lack of sex."

"So because you and Griffin aren't..." He paused, finally resorting to making a humping motion with his hands. "You get sick?"

"That's pretty generalized, but it basically what Quinn told me, though I'm not sure he really understands the process either. It's a little out of his area of expertise."

"Really?" mocked Caleb. He sighed. "So what's the big deal? Just do the nasty with Griffin a few times and you'll be good as new. It's not like you don't want to."

"What I want isn't part of the equation. The situation is worse than you thought. Back there...in the bar. That's the first time I've seen him in weeks. He uses our connection to avoid me."

Caleb looked away, a deep furrow lined across his forehead. "Any idea why?"

"He's never said anything, just started working opposite shifts until we didn't see each other anymore."

"It has to have something to do with Gunther. Griffin must be upset he allowed you to sway his judgment and stay the bastard's execution. It went against their damn laws."

"You know I couldn't allow them to kill him."

"Sure, I know why, but does Griffin?"

Sam looked away, not wanting to see the irritation on Caleb's face when she answered. "He didn't ask."

"So you just let it be. Damn it, sometimes I swear you have more brawn than brain."

“Killing is wrong. Period. If we’d executed him, we’d be no better. Besides, exiling him from the colony had the same result. No one’s been able to survive on their own outside the walls for more than a day. He was as good as dead the moment we closed the gate.”

“They haven’t evolved that far to agree with you. To them, retribution is fair game. They want to see justice served, not leave it up to fate. I think today’s little episode just proved that.” He cupped his hand under her arm. “Let’s go before Griffin comes storming out, and I have to step between the two of you.” Caleb kicked half his mouth into a bemused grin. “Damn, did you see his expression? He looked as if he were seeing you for the first time. I think you amazed him. I’ll assume you never told him the agency has you listed as a deadly weapon.”

“Surprises can come in handy.”

Caleb shook his head and helped her up. He extended his hand, but the earth shifted beneath her feet as a deafening rumble filled the corridor, sparking pain in her ears. She covered her head, not sure if she was still standing, when alarms cut the heavy air, sending a shrill shiver down her spine.

“What the fuck?” Caleb grabbed her arm, hoisting her up in a single motion. He pointed down the hallway, covering his mouth as a plume of smoke crested the corridor. “It sounded like it came from the control room.”

Sam nodded, following Caleb as best she could through the choking fumes. They managed to crawl their way to the room, only to discover the door had been blown off. Caleb motioned for her to wait as he ducked inside. She coughed as the blazing air seared her lungs, making her stomach heave. Judging on the damage, the entire power grid had blown. Caleb dove back through the door, wheezing from the smoke.

“Someone crossed the main plasma conduit into the energy grid. The whole fucking generator is nothing more than a smoking lump of twisted metal.” He cursed, shielding his face when sparks spewed through the doorway. “There’s nothing we can do to fix it.”

“In other words, we’re totally screwed.”

Caleb’s grim expression told her all she needed to know. She followed him back along the corridor, heading toward the outer door. Another setback was the last thing they needed. Once Griffin’s people heard the blast had been pre-meditated, more than a little blood would spill. She cursed the fucking insanity of it, hoping by some miracle they could find a way out—one that didn’t end with her crew on the other side of the barriers.

Chapter Seven

"I already said, no, Samantha." Griffin crossed his arms, leveling a heated glare at her. "Don't test me further."

Sam glowered back at him, meeting his gruff stature with the same determination he'd seen in the bar. "I don't tell you how to command your troops. Don't presume you can tell me how to command mine." She huffed out her irritation, and he could tell she was resisting the urge to stomp her foot on the floor. "I won't send my crew on a mission I'm not willing to undertake, myself. I wouldn't be much of a leader if I did."

"Leaders should do just that...lead."

She raised her eyebrow at him. "Does that mean you're sending Sirena in your place? So you can stay behind and lead?"

He cursed, knowing he had no way out. "I'm the strongest warrior among the tribe. I'm obligated to go."

"As am I, or weren't you watching back in the bar."

Griffin growled. "I'm very aware of your display in the bar, but that isn't the same as hanging your ass out on some desolate ridge hoping the sand beasts don't catch your scent before you find this mysterious core fragment you claim will save us all."

"There's nothing mysterious about the core. I've known it's whereabouts for a while. There just wasn't a reason to risk anyone's life when the old system was working. Now that some asshole has seen fit to destroy our only functioning technology, we don't have much of a choice. It's the only system Rider might be able to link to your power supply, assuming we can get our hands on more crystals."

“The crystals are the least of our worries. This ridge where your ship’s core crashed is in the middle of the sand beasts’ mating ground. We’ll be lucky to return. Period.”

Griffin huffed, stepping back as Sam sneered at him and turned away, the muscles in her back flexing under the stain. He’d spent the past few hours trapped in the same small room with her, and the close contact was taking its toll. He’d caught her wild scent the moment he’d walked through the door, and had been forced to inhale the dark aroma with every breath. His cock had peaked the instant she’d looked his way, and had stayed swollen against the tight bind of his pants ever since. It’d gotten to the point he’d thought the head of his shaft might actually explode, ending the agony once and for all.

He cursed and scrubbed a hand across his face. He hadn’t been this close to her in weeks, and seeing her turn away from him hurt more than the brawl in the bar. He could still picture it. Her body primed for battle, a trickle of blood easing down her cheek. He’d smelled her combined scent of arousal and anticipation the instant he’d stepped in the room, and had barely contained his anger enough to face her attackers without killing them. As it was, he’d lost three of his best warriors to injuries that would take weeks to heal.

An amused chuckle threatened to surface, but he managed to crush it in time. His little mate had definitely impressed him, and he couldn’t help but smile with pride. Though if he saw Cain before the bruises on her wrist faded, he’d likely send the bastard right back to the medical room.

Sam tossed her head back, sighing out a breath before turning to face him again. Some of the anger had lifted from her eyes, but she was far from calm. She shot a glance over to Caleb, as if seeking his support. The man shrugged, flicking his head at Griffin. Sam huffed, and looked back over at him.

“We’re wasting time. We need to get to the hovercrafts and head out if we’re going to make it back before nightfall. I’ll concede and agree to carry the scanner. I’ll know if a sand beast is within a hundred yards of us before they can catch our scent. I’ll even agree to having your team search the ridge, seeing as your warriors are more accustomed to this bloody heat. But I’m going. Period.”

He watched as she crossed her arms, shifting one hip out to the side. It looked innocent enough—a female gesture as old as time. But that wasn’t the only reason for her change in position. He’d noticed the tight beading of her nipples a moment before she’d covered them with

her arms, and there was no mistaking the increased potency of her arousal. Sparring with him had always turned her on, and it seemed things hadn't changed.

He stepped forward, stopping an arm's length away. "Caleb. Do you agree with your Captain's decision?"

Caleb chuckled, shaking his head. "Even if I didn't, I wouldn't admit it. I like my balls right where they are, if it's all the same to you."

Griffin smiled in spite of his anger. He'd grown to like Caleb, and knew the man would do everything within his power to see to his mate's safety. "Very well. We'll meet at the west gate in twenty minutes. We'll travel together as far as the riverbed, assuming those cursed crafts of yours even work. There, your ship will head into the dunes, while we continue to the ridge. We'll grab these godforsaken pieces of junk and return before the suns set below the horizon. There'll be little chance of survival if we don't make it back before the guards close the gates."

"Understood." Sam turned to Caleb. "Go get Rider. Tell him to start rigging the new connections for the core's conversion. We won't last long without those synthesizers and we can't afford to spend a moment waiting for him to figure the whole thing out."

"He's already on it," said Caleb. "I only hope it isn't a wasted effort. There's a strong possibility the fragments might be beyond repair."

"The signatures that flickered across the screen were too large to be just chunks that survived re-entry. If my guess is right, the plasma disintegrated before the core hit the atmosphere, pre-empting the explosion. The outer shell is made of the same compound as the ship. It should have survived the impact fairly well."

"Guess that's the last time I listen to one of your hare-brained schemes," he teased. "Eject the core...glide it in. Great idea."

"There's a big difference between leaking plasma into space and into the energy chamber," she tossed back.

"Right," he nodded, heading for the door. "Just keep telling yourself that."

Sam smiled as Caleb left. "I swear that man doesn't have a serious bone in his body."

"He needs it to endure your stubborn streak without feeling the need to paddle your ass," noted Griffin. He edged closer, unable to keep his finger from trailing down her side. She trembled beneath his gentle touch and he didn't know whether to push harder, or pull his hand away.

"Now that Caleb's gone, there's that little matter in the bar to discuss." Griffin allowed his hand to fall to his side when she stepped back from his caress. "Where the hell did you learn to fight like that?"

"I told you. My upbringing was *isolated*. And according to your laws, I've done nothing wrong. Cain challenged your ownership...I answered it. Done."

"Perhaps in the eyes of my warriors, but not in mine." He matched her step. "Care to explain what you were doing in there without me?"

"Seriously? You're actually asking me why I went in without you?"

"You should have known better, especially with tensions so high."

"If I'd waited for you, I would've died of thirst."

She turned and stalked across the room. He followed. She'd escaped him earlier, but he wasn't about to allow her to get away from him this time.

"You know how tenuous the situation is. You shouldn't have pushed it. Regardless that Cain and Mika are prejudiced Neanderthals, as you call them, they were some of my best warriors. The colony could use them at a time like this."

"Then they should have considered that before they thought I was ripe for the taking," she snapped.

Griffin felt his blood pound through his head as he grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to meet his gaze. "They threatened to rape you?"

Sam tried to look away, but he cupped her jaw, locking their gazes again. She shrugged, blinking back the tears he saw glistening in her eyes. "What did you think they wanted?"

"I'd assumed they'd simply been rude. I had no idea..."

His voice trailed off as he watched her jaw clench in an effort to hold his stare. He released her, cursing as she, once again, turned away, putting several strides between them. Remorse ate at his gut as he watched her toe the floor, her back hunched in shame. Of all the idiot things to try, taking her by force was Cain's worst choice. Griffin had promised her he'd never allow another man to challenge her that way, and yet, he'd broken his vow. He sighed crossing the room to join her near the wall. She tensed as he shuffled up behind her, pressing his chest against her back.

"I'm sorry. I'll see that Cain is dealt with once he regains consciousness."

"Don't bother," she huffed. "I already took care of it. Besides, what do you care?"

Anger shaded his thoughts, clouding his good sense. "You're my mate. Isn't it obvious I care what happens to you?"

Her hysterical laughter caught him off guard, and he didn't resist when she pulled away, turning to face him. "Your mate? I haven't seen you in weeks, let alone anything else." She shook her head, hugging her arms tight to her chest as if for strength. "I might be your mate by title, but that's all."

Griffin growled, no longer able to stay distant. He moved forward, backing her against the wall, feeling her breasts crush against his chest. Whether by instinct or choice, her hands reached for his shoulders, anchoring her to him as her groin pushed into his. Her head fell back on a moan as she rocked her nub across his erection, flaring his head until he thought the damn thing would split the seam of his pants. He growled in need, moving his teeth to her neck, scraping his canines along her smooth skin.

Her breath hissed across his shoulder as her fingers speared his hair. Her nipples raked his chest, the hard points spiking his need. He fisted her hair, holding her captive as he brushed his lips across hers, swallowing her breathy moan. Arousal shaded his thoughts, blurring the line between duty and desire. Accusations of her alleged betrayal faded with her soft plea, and for the moment, he couldn't quite remember why he'd stayed away in the first place. She moaned again, and he gave in.

His lips came down hard on hers, his tongue demanding entrance. She opened for him, her breath mixing with his. She tasted fruity and sweet, and he plunged back inside after stealing a quick breath.

Sam arched into him, squeezing his muscles as she traced the hard planes of his chest. He loved the way she teased his nipples, scratching at them until he begged her to taste them. She had a way of nipping at him that made his cock swell in response.

Griffin kneed her legs apart, thrusting his thigh against her groin, encouraging her to ride him. She matched his rhythm, undulating against his hard muscles, moaning in pleasure as each pass grazed across her bud. He inhaled, wondering if she'd taste as good as he remembered.

Better.

He smiled at the thought, not sure if it was his or hers, but determined to find out. He wedged his hand between their bodies, inching it inside her pants until he brushed the top of her mound. Her soft cry rang through the air, making his chest squeeze tight. Emotions battled in his

head, and he wasn't quite sure what to make of them. Sam whispered his name, nipping at his ear.

He pulled back, eager to watch her face as she reached her pleasure. He'd only just touched the small, knotted bud hidden inside her wet folds, but he could tell she was close. The way her eyes clenched shut, followed by an involuntary tilting of her hips, told him all he needed to know. He moved his fingers lower, intent on feeling her wet sheath contract around him, when the shrill sound of his name ringing off the walls broke the sensual fog.

Griffin snapped his head up, fighting to focus on the face standing at the door. He took a deep breath, finally shaking the fuzziness away as he met Sirena's piercing brown eyes. Sam's head fell to his chest, her breath a series of hard pants across his skin. He braced one hand along the back of her neck, giving her one last squeeze before moving away, cursing the loss of heat the moment their bodies separated.

"What?"

His voice was a harsh rasp as he fought to calm the pounding of his heart. Sam's arousal still enveloped him, and he wasn't certain he could simply walk away.

"We need help bracing one of the walls before we head out. I'd usually ask Cain or Mika, but it seems they're...unavailable."

There was no mistaking the vile tone in her voice, and Griffin bit back the reprimand poised on his tongue. Feelings were still raw from the explosion and aggravating the situation wasn't going to prove useful. Too many of his people believed Sam's crew was behind the attack, and he needed to find answers before they demanded retribution.

"I'll be right there."

Sirena spared a quick glance at Sam before spinning around. "We don't have much time," she tossed over her shoulder, leaving on a huff.

Griffin fisted his hands at his sides. Sirena's timing sucked. He looked over at Sam, but she'd shuffled to the back of the room. He sighed in regret, knowing he'd lost his chance at any kind of reconciliation. "Samantha."

She flinched at the sound of her name, putting more distance between them. "Your people need you. Go."

"Very well. But this is far from over."

He thought he heard her mumble something as he made for the door, but the shaky thudding of his heart blocked it out. He punched the wall as he stalked by, hoping the stinging

pain would help him focus. Her scent had darkened as he'd walked from the room, and he couldn't help but wonder what the hell he'd just done.

* * * *

"That's the best I can do," shouted Caleb, securing the line on the ragged chunk of metal behind the hovercraft. "Rider extended the air cushion, but the damn thing still weighs a ton. We can only hope we make it back before the engines seize. They weren't designed to take this kind of stress. If they burn out, we'll be walking, never mind dragging that thing behind us."

"I'll note that for next time, and keep my fingers crossed," said Sam, watching the craft dip as Caleb stepped onboard. "Any news from Griffin's team? They should be nearly done."

"Nothing's come over the air. I tried them a couple of times, but it's almost as if they've turned the communicator off."

Sam cursed. She wouldn't be surprised if Griffin had done that just to piss her off. And the man had the nerve to call her stubborn.

"We might be able to get a reading on the scanner when we get closer," suggested Caleb. "They're still out of range."

She stalked back to the ship hopping inside. The machine whined in protest, dimming the power for a moment before spooling back up.

"We'd better head out. Doesn't sound like this thing is going to hold together much longer."

Caleb nodded, signaling to the crewman in front. He looked over at her as the vehicle banked to the left, slowly gathering speed across the ground. "I hope Griffin found the other half, or this will be a wasted trip."

"He'll find it. I'm sure the damn thing dug a hole in the sand even Sirena couldn't miss."

Caleb turned the edges of his lips up slightly. "Not fond of her, are you?"

Sam rolled her eyes, ignoring his smug smile, as she watched the landscape blur by. So far everything had gone according to plan. They'd made their way to the salvage site and retrieved their share of the core. Sam had kept a constant vigil on the scanner, but nothing had triggered it. Now all they had to do was get back to the colony before the damn hovercraft broke in half.

She looked to the horizon, watching the first sun dip below the jagged line. They only had a couple of hours left before the other one set, leaving them with a few hours of reprieve from the glaring heat. But it was more than enough time for the sand beasts to venture out, killing every living thing in sight.

A shiver tingled along her spine, making her hands shake. The constant influx of adrenaline had helped stem some of the pain, but now that her body was starting to relax, the gut-wrenching cramps had returned, stealing what little breath she had.

She cursed. Griffin's little grope in the colony hadn't helped. With nothing more than a couple passes of his finger, her body had sparked to life, creaming her tender folds in preparation for the pleasure she knew she wouldn't receive. She could still taste his spicy scent on her tongue, a delicious mixture of man and beast. It was a scent she used to share.

Tears gathered behind her lashes, and she hoped she could blame them on the wind. Despite his statement that they were far from over, she couldn't shake the feeling that it was the last time she'd touch him.

A loud beep interrupted her thoughts, dragging her attention back to the scanner. She looked down, drawn to the small blips moving across the screen.

"Stop!"

The hovercraft shuddered to a halt, a cloud of dust whirling around the small ship. She jumped out, running over to the bottom of a ridge.

"Bloody hell. What on earth do you think you're doing? We barely have enough power to get back to the compound, never mind wasting it idling in the middle of nowhere so you can play with your new toy?"

"I'm not playing, Caleb. Look!" She handed him the unit, watching the contacts move across the screen as Caleb cursed.

"Damn. There's got to be at least six of them." He glanced up the length of the ridge, running his fingers through his hair. "I'll try to reach them on the communicator again."

Sam waited as he placed the other unit to his lips, reciting the same sentence over and over. Fear beaded her skin with bumps, making her shiver in the oppressive heat, while they listened for a reply.

"Fuck. What the hell does he think he's doing? How are we supposed to help his people when they refuse to follow any instructions?"

Sam shook her head, eyeing the steep slope. There was no way to get the hovercraft up there, even if they left the core fragment behind. As it was, Griffin had probably left his machine on one of the smaller ridges on the other side of the hills, hoping he and his warriors could carry the chunk down the cliff.

"I'm sorry, but we just don't have the power to wait. Griffin will have to deal with the situation on his own."

"We can't just leave them," she said. "Those bloody creatures are everywhere. And I bet my ass they're upwind. Griffin's team won't know what hit them until it's too late."

"So what you have us do? If we execute a rescue operation, we'll have to leave the core behind. Even then, there's no way the hovercraft will make it all the way back. We'll be forced to walk the last few miles." Caleb scrubbed his hand across his face. "Griffin knows the sand beasts will be hunting him. I'm sure he's posted a guard."

"Are you willing to bet their lives on it?"

Caleb sighed, cupping her shoulder. "Sam—"

She pulled away, palming the hilt of the blaster strapped to her side. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Damn it, stop trying to save everyone. You can't do it." He matched her step, breathing heavily in her face. "I know you're trying to keep our worlds together, but maybe that's just not possible. If we don't get that hunk of metal back to the colony, more than a few lives will be at stake. You have to put your faith in Griffin. He'll be okay."

"If one of those wretched creatures tears him limb from limb, then what?" She bit back the sob tight in her chest. She couldn't stand the thought of losing him, even though she knew his heart was already gone. She took a deep breath, nodding towards the ship. "I'm ordering you to take the core and return to the compound. I'll rendezvous with Griffin's team and warn him about the sand beasts. Under no circumstances are you to wait for me...understood?"

"That's suicide. You know damn well their craft won't be able to carry all of you and tow that bloody unit. There's no way you can all make it back."

"You have your orders, Commander."

Caleb cursed, growling at the hot wind blowing across the dunes. "You're nuts. Completely nuts." He kicked at a stone, tumbling it against the rock. "Fine. But take this." He handed her his blaster. "There's only enough energy for a few shots with each one. So don't waste them on Sirena's head."

"I'll use them wisely. I promise." She patted him on the shoulder, climbing up the first few feet. "You're in charge until I get back. Make sure our saboteur doesn't get within striking distance of that unit. If we don't get those systems up and running, we're all dead."

"We'll all be dead if Griffin doesn't bring that other piece back." He paused, shaking his head. "Are you sure he's worth this? After everything?"

"I'm sure. Now get going before that damn ship falls apart."

Caleb grimaced, nodding at her before running back to the hovercraft, signaling the crewman to start moving. She watched until the machine was nothing more than a dark blur against the red sky before climbing the rest of the way, following the signals moving across her viewer. The terrain was a patchwork of gullies and slopes, twisting across the high cliff. It reminded her of a place her folks had called the Death Lands back home, though she'd only ever been there once. Spires of rock thrust out of the ground, rivaled only by the sheer drops gouged into the rock. She picked her way along the ridge, slowly descending into a large chasm. There were even more hazards here, with caves dug into the sides and large gaps between the cliffs. She jumped across one of the fissures, slipping on the smooth rock and slamming into the surface. Pain flared in her shoulder, as she pushed up, scrabbling to her feet before some alien creature mistook her for dinner. Sand beasts were only one of the worries this far away from the compound, and she didn't relish the idea of fighting her way to Griffin.

A loud snort drew her to a halt. She snuck a glance at the scanner. A series of dots wavered on the screen dangerously close to her. She inched forward, edging around a sharp bend, unsure of what would greet her on the other side. Fifty yards off, four of monsters circled a sole figure, their long canines dripping saliva onto the parched rock. Their skin was covered in spiny scales, arranged into spikes down their backs. The man in the center held his ground, watching them without turning around. He was trapped on a large outcropping, with no other recourse, but to fight.

Sam crept around the bend, Caleb's blaster clenched in her hand. If she was lucky, she'd kill one before the other three had a chance to react. She fired, hitting the one closest square in head. The beast howled, rearing back in pain as it twisted toward her, its scaly lips pulled back in a snarl.

She fired again, hitting in between the eyes, dropping it to the ground. The other three threw back their heads, roaring at the setting suns as they charged past the male, thundering toward her. She didn't retreat, checking her aim before firing twice, killing one and knocking another of them back. It stumbled, missing a step before crumpling onto the rock. She saw it shake its massive head, kicking back up as its mate barreled down on her.

She crouched down, judging its path, waiting until it was too tight to turn before diving past its feet, brushing her shoulder against the cliff as she skimmed her leg against the animal's side, ripping her pants open.

The beast howled again, skidding to a halt, trying to turn on the small path. She fired at a section of rock directly below its outer leg, breaking it away, shifting the creature's balance. The sand beast clawed at the unforgiving stone, its cries resonating off the cliffs before more of the path collapsed, dropping it into chasm.

Sam pushed onto her knees, looking over her shoulder when another roar sounded behind her. She fired, hitting the beast's head. The animal shook the shot off, rearing back on its hind legs. Sam tried to fire again, but the gun powered down, as the animal pawed the stone. She grabbed at her knife, knowing there wasn't enough time to unclip her other gun from her belt. She glanced down at the blade, suddenly aware of how small it looked compared to the animal, when the creature's mouth opened on a piercing cry, blood spraying out of its nose. She stood, watching the creature writhe, unable to look away. The beast bucked against an invisible predator then simply dropped, billowing up a cloud of dust.

She covered her mouth, trying not to taste the metallic mixture of blood and sand, when a shadow emerged through the haze, picking her up and pinning her against the rock as if she had the strength of a child. Hands held her immobile as a pair of lips came down hard on hers, demanding entry to her mouth. She struggled against the possession until a familiar scent filled her head.

Griffin pulled back, staring into her eyes, holding her against the wall with the weight of his body. He didn't speak, just watched her from behind a veil of lashes. She relaxed against him, hoping he wouldn't let her fall.

"Griffin—"

He cut her off with a piercing glare, lowering his mouth, brushing his luscious lips against hers. She fought the urge to lean into him, knowing she'd be helpless against his desires. He exhaled a warm breath across her skin, nudging her mouth with his.

"I've never seen such a blatant disregard for life. Those bloody beasts could have ripped you to shreds. I have half a mind to toss you over my knee and paddle your ass!"

Sam stared into his eyes, and for the first time since she'd met him, she saw fear. A coil snapped inside her, crushing her defenses. "You're welcome."

Griffin growled, fisting her hair, holding her head to the side as he nipped at his mark, scraping the skin with the tips of his teeth. Fire erupted inside the small divots, resurrecting the feel of his teeth buried within her flesh. She arched into him, tilting her head, inviting him to reassert his claim. He snarled against her skin, rustling the small hairs on the back of her neck. She

closed her eyes, acutely aware he'd already managed to shove her pants over her hips, exposing her groin to the blazing heat. The hot air licked across her body, drying the first beads of moisture only to replace them with a light film of salty sweat. She bit at her lip, wanting to pull away, but unable to move, realizing her body was tied to him in a way she hadn't known existed. Regardless of the pain coursing through her heart, she knew she'd give him anything he desired, if only to feel his body sheathed within hers one last time.

Griffin palmed her stomach, massaging her muscles as he smoothed his fingers down her hips, cupping her mound in his hand. His finger found her cleft, pinching the tiny nub as his other hand captured her breast. Every tug of her nipple spilled more juice along her folds, covering his hand with her slick cream.

"By the Gods, you're wet." He licked the patch of skin behind her ear. "If only I had time to lap it all away." He nibbled his way along her jaw, stopping at the curve of her mouth. "Release my pants."

Sam fumbled with the ties on his leathers, wondering why the hell his people hadn't discovered zippers, before loosening the knot, and tugging the excess material away. His shaft sprang forward, the heavy weight bobbing it against her hand. She moaned in victory, encasing his cock, squeezing the hard length as she ran her fist toward his groin, retreating with the same slow motion. His hungry groans breezed past her ear, his finger tickling her clit in response. She pressed her mouth against his shoulder, muffling her harsh cries, afraid the noise might attract more prey.

Griffin pulled back, his hand covering hers, stopping her from making more fluid weep from the thin slit. She huffed in protest, trying to break his hold, but he held her firm.

"Our time is limited. Now be a good girl and come for me before my control shatters and I shaft you against this wall, climax or not."

His words dissolved the last of her doubts, and she pressed her forehead into his chest as his finger danced over her clit, increasing the tight feeling coiling in her stomach. It fanned out, pitching and rolling, growing in strength until it was impossible to pinpoint the source. She tilted her hips as her orgasm neared, sending her sheath into spasm. Dizziness threatened, and she latched her hands onto his shoulders, hoping his strength would keep her on her feet when the climax finally hit. The rough skin of his hand snaked around her waist, bridging her weight a second before the dam burst, and her release surged forward.

Chapter Eight

Griffin watched Samantha unravel in his arms, his name murmured against his skin. He pressed his finger against her channel and was rewarded by a husky moan and a tilt of her hips. Despite the climax still pulsating the walls of her sheath, her body clamored for him, drenching his senses with her desperate scent. It was dark, like in the bar, and his shaft flared in protest, bobbing against her mound as if seeking relief without him.

“Wrap your arms around my neck,” he rasped, licking the shell of her ear as her head fell back against the unforgiving rock.

Her eyes darted to the side, as if she was afraid they'd be discovered, but she obeyed his command, clasping her fingers behind his head as he lifted her in his arms, aligning her weeping channel with his groin. He reminded himself to go slowly, but threw his head back in defeat when she locked her heels around his tailbone and thrust half his length inside her, forcing her quivering muscles apart in an effort to grant him entry. He growled her name across her damp skin, but she ignored his warning, shifting her hips, inching him deeper, brushing his crown across her womb.

Images of her round with his child slammed into his head, vanquishing all thoughts but his need to fill her with his seed. He reared back, drawing his cock through her slick folds, fighting against the sharp contractions determined to keep inside until just the tip rimmed her entrance. He paused, his cock covered in her cream, his ass clenched in an effort to stay still before thrusting forward, reclaiming her sheath in one fluid motion.

Her voice surged into a harsh wail, the sound muffled by the gusting wind. It licked at his back, kicking sand across his exposed skin. He ignored it, his mind focused on the tight clasp of

her channel as he withdrew again, only to bury his shaft to the hilt as her body convulsed around him.

He smiled with male pride, knowing he'd sent her into another climax with only a few strokes. But he was far from done. Months of longing prickled along his spine, spurring him on. He lifted her higher, howling at her husky moan as his pelvis grazed her nub, spilling more of her sweet juice along his shaft. His body crushed hers, holding her trapped against the rock as he pounded her sheath, slapping his sac against her ass, drinking in the strong scent of her need.

Her teeth bit into his shoulder, the sharp pain only driving him higher. He angled her hips, slipping one hand further up her thigh, gathering some of her weeping cream onto his finger. He slid it forward, parting her lush cheeks, slipping the slick digit inside her puckered hole. A guttural moan keened into a ragged plea as he slowly penetrated her ass, feeling his driving shaft through the thin barrier of skin.

The animal in him roared, wanting to have that hot forbidden opening clench around his cock. But he held the urges back, satisfying the beast by taking her anal channel with his finger, pushing it back and forth to the urgent rhythm of his cock. Her hands scratched at his back, her pleas ragged and harsh as she begged him go harder, faster.

He curled back his lips as the pressure in his groin strengthened, rimming his vision with black dots. Fire erupted in his sac, burning up his spine until his control snapped, and he released, shooting the first jet of seed deep inside her, drinking in her breathy gasp as his lips found hers.

Samantha ate at his mouth, dipping her tongue along his, moaning as every jerk of his hips purged more of his seed from his still swollen shaft. He cursed, desire still ringing through his veins. He wanted her again...as many times as she'd allow him. Once had only taken the raw edge off. Now, he wanted to explore. To rediscover every dip and hollow of her sexy, lithe body. Trace his fingers along her salt-damp skin, licking the tiny drops as he went. She felt even smaller next to him, her loss of weight more than evident.

Guilt settled like a cold fist in his chest, bringing some of his senses back. Their connection had frayed to the point he couldn't detect more than her strongest emotions, and he had a nagging feeling she was keeping something from him. He pulled back, determined to get the truth. Samantha met his unyielding stare, her eyes dotted with tears.

"Are you hurt?"

Fear shimmied along his spine. Had he been too rough? Did she regret allowing him to couple with her?

Her chin quivered before she looked away, her emotions too jumbled for him to make sense of. Her chest grazed against his as she took a deep breath, releasing a hushed moan into the whistling wind.

“Samantha—”

“I’m fine,” she said, threading the two words together as if she were afraid she wouldn’t be able to get them out.

He shook his head, drawing her face back to his with a single finger. “You don’t seem fine. Did I hurt you?”

Her lips quirked at his words, making the hairs on his neck stand up. “I said I’m fine.”

“Yes, you did, but that doesn’t answer my question. Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head, trying to pull away from his touch when footsteps sounded behind him.

“Griffin!”

He cursed, knowing he didn’t have much time before Sirena crested the ridge. He turned back to Sam, easing his shaft from her wet heat, missing the connection the instant his body left hers. He sighed, tucking the hard length inside his pants. He turned toward the ridge, hiding his mate from sight, just as Sirena darted around the outcrop of rock, skidding to a halt amidst the carnage. She stared at the dead beasts, a long blade clutched in her hand.

“What happened? I thought I heard someone scream?”

Griffin resisted the smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Perhaps it was the wind.”

Sirena furrowed her brow, pointing at the dead animals. “More of the beasts are gathering near the border. We won’t get past them if we don’t leave now. Jonah has secured the human’s energy device as ordered, though I’m not convinced their machine will be able to tow it all the way back to the village with the four of us aboard.” She screwed her face into a ball. “We never should’ve taken them in. I warned you they’d bring us nothing, but misfortune.”

Griffin bared his teeth, taking a heavy step toward her. “And I’ve warned you to watch your tongue.”

“I have,” she huffed. “Look what it’s gotten us. A family is dead, and now the entire colony faces extinction!”

“What will you do if it turns out one of your people was behind the attack?” asked Sam.

Griffin felt her brush his back as she stepped out from behind him, stopping at his side. He moved closer to her, needing to feel her body against his. She tensed when he placed his hand at the small of her back, but didn't try to shake off his hold.

Sirena's eyes bulged wide as her lips opened on a growl. "What are you doing here?" she snarled, clenching her fingers around the weapon fisted in her hand. "I thought you were with the other humans."

Sam shrugged, nodding at the beasts. "We detected a large herd heading your way, and I thought you might need some help. We tried to use the communicator, but you didn't answer."

Something flashed in Sirena's eyes, but it faded just as quickly. "We don't need your help. Jonah and I already took care of two of the beasts."

"And Samantha killed three before they had a chance to tear me to shreds," said Griffin, pulling Sam closer to him. He'd known her presence wasn't going to be well received, and he needed to make sure Sirena understood her place. "If she hadn't distracted them, I might not have survived."

"How considerate of her. But how are we going to get her back to the colony?" Sirena skirted around the corpse, stomping to a halt in front of them. "There's no way that machine will carry all of us and tow that contraption. It was her engineer that told us only four would fit!" She sneered, shaking a finger at Sam. "Would you have one of us stay behind to accommodate you?"

"Enough," snapped Griffin, stepping between the two women. "Sam's motivations were far from selfish. She could've died trying to warn me about the impending attack. As it is, I'm only standing here because of her actions." He took another step forward, forcing Sirena back. "We'll figure a way to make it work. I won't leave anyone behind."

He turned to Sam, holding his hand out to her. "Come on. Let's get you back to the colony."

Sam shook her head, her gaze fixed on his hand. "Sirena's right. The hovercraft can't take all of us. The stress will overheat the engines, then no one will get back." She finally dragged her eyes up to meet his. "You need to get that core fragment back to the compound before it's too late. I'll follow behind. It's not that far. I can run it and be back by dusk."

Griffin snarled, grabbing her arm and pulling her into his chest. His breath washed over her ear as he lowered his face to hers, daring her to look away. "Do you really think I'd leave you here while I escape in that damn machine! If anyone is going to run back to the colony it'll be

me.” He cut her off when she started to protest. “Now I suggest you get your ass down to the ship before I decide to keep my promise and tan your hide.”

Griffin pushed her forward, nodding to Sirena to lead the way. A troubled silence descended on the group as they followed the twisting path, picking their way back to the hovercraft. Sam walked in front of him, her back stiff, her shoulders bunched. He could sense her restlessness, her concern for his people more than evident. He sighed, suddenly unsure of the reasons he’d pushed her away. She’d more than proven her alliance to his tribe, and for the first time in three months, he wondered if there were darker motivations at work? If the evidence he’d been shown implicating Sam had been contrived to drive a wedge between them?

Sirena stopped a few feet in front of them, glancing back over her shoulder. “We have to go one at a time,” she said, pointing to the large log stretched across a gap. “I nearly tumbled into the rift when Jonah tried to cross with me.”

Griffin nodded, cupping his hand on Sam’s shoulder. He frowned at her increased tension, the muscles beneath his fingers quivering. “Easy, little one. It’s no worse than the path along the ridge.”

She nodded, her eyes glassy, her breathing erratic. He smoothed his hand down her back, letting it fall to her hip. A hushed moan drifted to him on the breeze and he smiled at her involuntary response. He tapped her ass when Sirena jumped off the far side.

“Your turn.”

Sam turned to him, fear flickering in her eyes. “You first.” She glanced back at the sheer drop over her shoulder. “That way I can watch how you cross it so I won’t fall.”

Uncertainly flared, as he watched her snag her bottom lip. He tried searching her thoughts, but the connection was too weak. That, or she was shielding herself from him. He leaned closer, tracing the gentle curve of her jaw.

“There’s nothing to fear,” he assured her.

“I’d just feel better knowing you were on the other side to catch me if I stumble.”

Griffin nodded, moving over to the wood. “I could carry you,” he offered, but she shook her head, motioning him forward.

He climbed on, making his way across, landing on the other side in a cloud of dust. He turned back just as a streak of light flashed in his eyes, knocking him to the ground. A sharp hiss filled the air, followed by a loud crack. He squinted through the smoke as the log burst into

flames, splitting near the center before plummeting into the empty space and crashing onto the rocks below.

Griffin pushed up, waving his hand to clear the air. Sam was standing on the other side, her blaster palmed in her hand. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Saving your life. You know the hovercraft can't take all of us, and there's no way you'll let me back out, so..."

Her voice faded as she stared at the open space, her eyes glassy. Rainbow colored dots reflected off the tears gathering in her eyes, making her skin sparkle in the light. He fisted his hands, eyeing the drop, when her voice echoed down the rift.

"It's too far, even for you," she said, a smile touching the corner of her mouth. "Now go, before the second sun sets."

"I'm not leaving you here," he barked, brazing a glare at Sirena. "Get Jonah and Luca, and bring back the rope."

"But Griffin—"

"Don't challenge me. Just do as I ask." He turned back to Sam as Sirena darted down the path, disappearing down a steep slope. "Damn it, Samantha. I swear, once I get my hands on you I'll—"

He stopped when the tears he'd seen gathering in the light fell silently down her cheek. "Little one—"

"Don't," she interrupted, holding her hand up. "I'm not your little one, your mate or anything else." Her head drooped toward her chest as her voice cracked. "I'm nothing but a link you can't sever."

"What are you talking about? You aren't making any sense." He huffed as he edged closer to the rift. "Is this because of our coupling? Did I hurt you?"

Her head lifted to meet his gaze. "Coupling? That wasn't a coupling. It was you scratching an itch!" She shook her head as sobs wrenched from her chest. "I can't live like this, Griffin. I can't keep pretending there's nothing wrong. That we're the perfect pair." She grabbed her stomach, bending over as if she were going to throw up. "The pain is killing me. Hell, even Cain could smell that you hadn't touched in months. I can't keep lying to everyone...it hurts too much."

"What do you mean the pain is killing you?" Anger bubbled his blood as she simply shook her head. Damn but she was stubborn.

"I appreciate what you tried to do. But it didn't work. Now you're bound to someone you can't even stand to be in the same room with." She moved back until she was leaning against the side of the cliff. "It's better this way. You know it is."

"Samantha, listen to me."

She stopped him with a raise of her hand. "There's nothing left to say." She motioned to the path behind him. "Go, before it's too late. I'll head to the caves, gather as many crystals as I can." She held up a small device. "I brought a locator beacon. It's set to go off at sunrise. I'll try to get as close as I can, but either way, Caleb should be able to track it."

"Samantha. No."

"Please don't make this any harder than it is." She took a shuddering breath, wiping at the tears. "I knew the moment I saw you that I was in trouble." She flashed him a genuine smile that made his heart clench. "No one had ever looked at me like that. Those first few months... It was the first time since I was a child that I ever felt safe. I'll always cherish that."

Griffin growled as she turned and walked up the path, ignoring his frantic calls. He looked at the gorge separating them, knowing he couldn't jump the distance, but willing to die trying. He looked up, pinned by her pale eyes.

"It's okay. I've made my choice. Just promise me you'll keep our people safe."

He nodded despite the numbing feeling constricting his chest, making it impossible to speak, to breathe.

"One last thing... I love you. I think I always have. And I know I always will." She lifted her hand, waving at him as she bridged the bend. "Goodbye, beastman. Find happiness. You deserve that."

* * * *

Griffin paced the length of the barrier, scowling at the men standing beside the gate, daring them to challenge him. He'd ran all the way to the hovercraft, barking out orders, angling the machine over toward the other side of the hill in the hopes of cutting Sam off, only to quit when darkness edged the horizon. He'd pushed the thing hard, running it to the point it'd cracked in half just shy of the colony. Luckily, Caleb had made it back. The man hadn't uttered a word as he'd pulled up in the other craft, hooked up the unit and towed it inside, taking the rest of Griffin's crew with him.

Sirena had met him at the entrance pointing to the growing darkness as if he hadn't noticed it. He'd shoved her away, not wanting to hear what was already screaming in his head. He wasn't giving up. He couldn't.

Griffin turned when a hand grabbed his shoulder. Caleb stood behind him, his lips drawn tight, his eyes narrowed.

"Can I have a word with you...privately?"

He nodded, shouting commands over his shoulder as he followed the man off to the side, trying to bottle the growl building in his chest. He really didn't have time for this shit. Caleb stopped near the wall, stuffing his hands in his pockets as if he were afraid he might hit someone if he didn't restrain them.

"Let's cut to the chase. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Attempting to save your Captain's life. If they close the gates, she'll be trapped outside the barriers until dawn."

"Don't you think she knows that?" said Caleb, pulling one hand free to punch at the wall. "She knew the moment she jumped out of our hovercraft, she wasn't coming back."

"That's because she's too damn stubborn for her own good." He glared at the man. "You never should've let her go."

"There was no way she was leaving you behind... Not when she feared you, or one of your warriors, would die during the attack. It would've killed her."

"Better to have that than have her ripped apart by the sand beasts."

Caleb sighed, running his hand through his hair. "Don't dishonor her sacrifice by allowing your people to suffer." He nodded at the open gate. "Close the gates. We'll follow her beacon at daylight."

An unforgiving wind whistled through the stones, blowing Griffin's hair across his face. A sick feeling fisted his stomach as he turned to the guards, nodding at them to close the gates. A loud bang echoed across the village, shutting out Sam's last hope of salvation. He looked to the west, watching the last sliver of light fade below the desert sand, streaking the horizon a bloody shade of red. He glanced at Caleb over his shoulder.

"I'll leave without you if you're not waiting for me."

"I'll be here."

Griffin nodded. "And that cursed machine had better work."

"I'll have Rider do what he can."

He grunted his reply, marching toward his room.

“Hey, Griffin.”

He turned, watching Caleb point toward the horizon. “She did this to save both our worlds. Remember that.”

He shook his head, feeling the truth burn a hole through his heart. “She did this because of me.” He sighed, turning back to the complex. “Daybreak, Caleb. Not a moment later.”

* * * *

Griffin opened the gates, watching the first ray of sun peek above the horizon. He’d spent the night staring out his window, watching a rare winter storm rage across the dunes, hoping each flash of light would reveal Samantha’s silhouette against the horizon, but knowing it was only a dream. He’d ventured to the gates after the rains had passed, drinking in the sweet smell of life. It always amazed him how it flourished on his desolate planet, sprouting forth with only a hint of help. Even now the rocks were covered in a thin dusting of moss, dotting the bleak landscape with various shades of green. The unique sight usually brought him peace. But today, it brought only emptiness. Footsteps padded up behind him, as a hand settled on his shoulder.

“The hovercraft’s ready to go. But we only have enough power to get us as far as the riverbed and back. If we haven’t come across her by then, we’ll have to go on foot.”

Griffin nodded, not trusting his voice. Ever since Sam had confessed her love, he’d felt as if a large lump had formed in his throat. It made him anxious, like the restlessness he experienced the night before a hunt, and he wasn’t sure what to make of it. His people didn’t use words to express their feelings, choosing to show their convictions with actions. But he’d done neither for her over the past few months, hiding behind his role as leader instead of fulfilling her needs as her mate.

He sighed, vowing to make things right if he wasn’t already too late. He turned and followed Caleb back to the hovercraft.

* * * *

“I’ve got her.” Caleb handed him the scanner, pointing to a small red dot on the screen. “That’s the beacon’s signature. If she’s still got it clipped to her belt, she’ll be at that location.”

Griffin jumped out of the ship as it shuddered to a halt, feeling the hot air blast against his legs. They’d almost reached the riverbed, meaning they’d have to travel the rest of the way on foot. He glanced down at the scanner again, judging the distance.

“That’s about a mile from here,” he yelled, shielding his face from the glaring sun as he scanned the horizon. “If your bloody device is right, she’s at the edge of the scrub lands.”

“Whether it’s right or wrong depends on Sam.” Caleb looked at the ship. “We can take the hovercraft, but it means we’ll all be walking the last couple of miles home.”

Griffin shook his head, handing Caleb the scanner. “It’s better if I go on foot. That cursed craft of yours makes too much noise. It’ll have half the herd breathing down my neck before I even reach her. Wait here. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Caleb grabbed his arm as he turned to run, pulling him back. “I’m coming with you.”

Griffin smiled, easing out of the man’s hold. “No offense, but you’ll only slow me down. And I can’t take the chance one of the sand beasts will eat you, leaving me to pilot that hunk of floating metal.”

“Your concern for my life is truly touching.”

“Just stay here and have that damn thing ready when I get back.”

“Don’t you want the scanner?” asked Caleb, holding it out to him again.

Griffin paused. If Samantha was still alive, he should be able to sense her once he got close enough. But if the bond was severed... “I don’t need it.”

“Like I told Sam. That whole sensing each other? Creepy.” Caleb slapped his hand across Griffin’s back. “Good luck, and try not to bring the herd back with you.”

Griffin nodded, as he took off running, feeling the wind warm against his face. There was a time he would have enjoyed running across the wet sand, feeling the earth give beneath his feet. But today, he cursed every step. While the rain had provided some much needed water, it’d also erased all traces of Sam, leaving only their shared connection as his guide.

He bounded along the soft sand, watching as the landscape gradually changed, replacing the gritty dirt with dried grass, already marked with pockets of light green. He slowed as he neared a thicket of trees, their bare branches dotted with new buds. He ducked down behind a clumping of boulders, pressing his back against the cool stone. At least the wind was blowing against him, hiding his presence, if only for a while.

Griffin inched around the side of the rocks, scanning the field beyond. The area was deserted, with nothing more than innocent shadows playing across the ground. He looked off to his left, drawn to the small grove of trees. Something moved in the shadows, shaking its massive head from side to side as it sniffed the air. A lone whine drifted on the breeze as it pawed at one of the trees.

A fleeting image flashed in his head, following by a flare of pain. He held his breath, squinting at the canopy, feeling his heart hammer in his chest when he spotted a small figure nestled in the trees. It was splayed across the branches, its limbs hanging limp at its side.

Griffin breathed her name, knowing if he didn't act fast, the animal would find a way to topple the tree, leaving her defenseless. He looked around, darting over to another group of rocks, hoping the ringing in his head wasn't as loud as it sounded. He looked back at the tree, anger overcoming his apprehension as he watched the bloody beast jump at her, snapping at the air as it missed its target.

He growled, moving out into the open, racing toward the animal as it jumped again. He raised his blade, waiting until he almost upon it before leaping into the air, landing on the creature's back. The beast howled and reared, trying to buck him off, but his blade was already piercing through its flesh, staining the ground with its dark blood. He held on, working the knife back and forth, tearing chunks of flesh from its bones. The animal roared, twisting one last time before falling to the ground, its limbs still twitching.

He rolled off, stumbling to the tree, hoping he could get her down before more of the monsters appeared. It only took him a minute to climb up beside her, pulling her into his arms before jumping to the ground. A soft moan tickled his skin as he cradled her against his chest. Her left leg was torn open, the wound still dripping blood on the ground. The sharp metallic scent ravaged his senses, adding to the tight feeling in his chest. He pressed the ragged flesh against his arm as he turned, darting back across the field. Distant howls strummed through the air, and he knew the animals had scented her blood.

Griffin picked up speed, ignoring the burning sensation in his lungs as his body fought to keep up the pace. The howls grew closer as he crossed back onto the sand, kicking up the drying specks as headed toward Caleb, praying the man was ready. He yelled when the craft shifted into sight, nodding at Caleb to start moving. A loud snort sounded behind him, the animal's breath panting in the hot air. He kept running, feeling the beast closing in but not daring to glance behind him.

Caleb hit the button, dipping the ship to the side, striking it off across the ground. He looked back over his shoulder, lining it up with Griffin's legs, as he pulled up alongside. Griffin tossed Sam in the back, grabbed the edge and vaulted inside, ducking down over her as a set of jaws snapped overhead. Caleb fired at the creature, knocking it back, as he hit the throttle,

increasing their speed until the sand blurred past the ship. Griffin lifted Samantha onto his lap, clamping his hand around her leg.

“Is she alive?”

“Barely. I can only hope your doctor still has a few miracles at his disposal.”

“When it comes to Sam, every time requires a miracle.” Caleb glanced back at him. “I thought we agreed you wouldn’t bring the herd back with you.”

“They insisted.”

“Great. Now hold on. I’ll see how fast I can push this thing before it breaks in half.”

Griffin forced a grin, pulling Sam even closer. He drew a finger along her cheek, caressing the wound Mika had caused in the bar. She’d fought to keep their cultures at peace, and all he’d done was hide. He lifted her up, brushing his lips against her forehead, lingering at the feel of her soft skin pressed against his. It was time to reveal her secrets, even if it pushed their worlds further apart.

Chapter Nine

Griffin jumped when Quinn opened the door and surged to his feet, scrubbing his hand across his shadowed chin as he watched the man sigh. “Well?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. She’s alive, but...fading.”

“What do you mean, fading? Have you healed her or not?”

Quinn scowled, crossing his arms on his chest. “It’s not a matter of healing her, Griffin. I’ve tended to her wounds. Stitched up her leg, given her fluids and meds, but she’s not responding to the treatment.” He met Griffin’s intense glare. “It’s not the injuries that are killing her... It’s you.”

Griffin stilled, not sure what to say. He shot a glance at Caleb, trying to read the man’s expression, but Caleb simply stared at him, hands stuffed in his pockets, his lips pulled into a thin line. “You’ll have to explain it better than that, Quinn. How, exactly, am I killing her?”

Quinn gave him a puzzled look, as if it irritated the man that he had to explain. “It’s not you, physically. It’s this bond between you.” He waved his hand between them. “It all started when the two of you stopped being...um...mates.”

“That’s the whole point of the bond. We can’t stop being mates. We’re tied to each other. Period.”

“Oh bloody hell.” Caleb stalked across the room, stepping in front of Quinn. “What the good doctor is trying to say, but doing a terrible job at, is that Samantha’s sick because you’re not having sex with her anymore.”

Griffin stared at the man, stunned. He glanced at the closed door, a sick feeling settling in his gut. “What has sex got to do with her dying?”

“Everything!” huffed Caleb, stuffing his hands back in his pockets as he turned to Quinn. “Tell him.”

Quinn sighed, raking his fingers through his hair as he shifted on his feet. "I'm not exactly sure how it all works, but to simplify it, Samantha's body is dependent on yours for a constant supply of a unique genetic marker, found in your blood, saliva and seminal fluid. When she's denied this marker, her body begins to shut down, rejecting her own cells because they don't possess the correct makeup. I've seen similar cases with other species, but never this severe. I tried creating a synthetic form to slow the process, but it obviously wasn't enough to maintain her health."

Griffin looked away, feeling Quinn's words punch him in the gut. All this time he'd been avoiding her, worrying only about his people and if the rumors were true, while she'd been slowly suffering, keeping it quiet in order to save them all. He cursed, walked past the two men and pushed through the door, moving over to her bed. She was tucked beneath a single white sheet, her pale face peeking out the top. Her eyes were closed, her long lashes resting against her skin. She looked so fragile, he wondered why he hadn't seen it before.

"I'm sorry I don't have better news," said Quinn, stepping up behind him. "If I could do more..."

He nodded, knowing he was to blame. He reached out and touched her skin amazed at how soft it was. "So that's it?"

A hand clenched his shoulder, jerking him around. He grabbed Caleb's arm when the man fisted his vest, trying to push him back.

"Haven't you been listening?" Caleb bit out. "You're the only one who can save her."

"How?" He scowled when Caleb rolled his eyes, nodding at her. "By coupling with her?" He scoffed at the notion. How was he supposed to make love to her when she wasn't even conscious? He pulled free of Caleb's hold, taking a quick step back. "How would you suggest I do that? She's unconscious."

"If you cared about her, you wouldn't let that stop you," said Caleb.

Griffin stared at the man. Clearly Caleb had spent too many hours out in the heat.

"I won't take her without her consent," he stated. "Besides, we...coupled just the other day and it hasn't seemed to have cured her."

"One quick shag in three months isn't tending to her needs, Griffin. If you're going to save her, you'll have to make *healing* her your sole vocation for a while."

Griffin huffed, stabbing his hands through his hair. He turned to Quinn, pinning the man to the spot with a heated glare. "Is that true? If I...tend to her needs, will she survive?"

"Honestly? I don't know. All I can tell you is, there's nothing I can do." Quinn stepped forward, patting Griffin on the shoulder. "It's worth a try. I'm just not sure if it's already too late."

Griffin dragged his gaze back to Samantha, watching her take a labored breath. His heart clenched. Just the thought of losing her sickened him. He leaned down, easing his arms underneath her and the sheet as he scooped her up, cuddling her close. Her eyelids fluttered, a hushed sigh whispering across his skin. He closed his eyes, not sure why they stung.

"Griffin."

He turned, Sam tight against his chest, her fragile weight nearly dropping him to his knees, and met Caleb's knowing look. The man ambled over to him, brushing a lock of Sam's hair back from her face.

"Just do her a favor?"

Griffin nodded, not sure what else he could possibly do to help her.

"Don't do this unless you're certain it's what you want."

"How could I not want to save my mate's life?" he argued.

"I have no doubt you're willing to save her, but that's not enough." Caleb took a deep breath. "She loves you. She deserves the same in return. If you can't give her that, you should do the honorable thing and let her die." His gaze fell to Sam's face again. "She hasn't had an easy life. Don't sentence her to a future of being tied to a man who only comes to her because he has to. It's far more cruel."

Caleb didn't wait for him to answer, dropping a chaste kiss on Sam's forehead before stalking from the room. Griffin sighed and followed him out, picking his way down the corridors, careful to keep Sam tucked against him. She moaned when he entered their room, and eased her down on the pale sheets, tossing the one from the lab on the floor. Her eyelids fluttered again, but didn't open, her head lolling off to one side.

Griffin sat back, staring at the woman spread across his bed, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do. How did Caleb expect him to pleasure her when she couldn't even open her eyes? He cursed, resting his head on his knuckles as he tried to come to terms with the conflicting emotions in his head. He knew his feelings for Sam ran deeper than he'd ever imagined, but he couldn't ignore the accusations burning in the back of his mind.

Again, he wondered if things weren't what they seemed? Whether Sam was really involved in the attacks? Or whether what she'd told Sirena was true, and that one of his own warriors was the mastermind? But why? His people gained nothing from the innocent deaths, or

the recent explosion. They were as dependent on the humans for keeping their technology running, as the humans were on them for simple survival. Whether both sides wanted to acknowledge it or not, they were already bound to each other, as surely as Sam was bound to him.

He looked at her when she whimpered, a painful grimace twisting her mouth. He moved over to the bed, cursing when it dipped against his weight, wondering if the simple act would cause her more pain. She tried to turn into his body when he edged up against her, but he held her still, afraid she'd pull out the stitches on her leg. Sam groaned, looking as if she wanted to curl into a ball.

Griffin eased his grip, smoothing his hand along the delicate skin of her shoulder until he reached her neck. He could see the marks he'd left just above the soft hollow and couldn't resist trailing the pads of his fingertips along the sleek line of her throat to circle the small set of scars. Her heartbeat thrummed against his touch, and he paused to watch it flutter just below her skin. A low moan rumbled through her chest, making his sac tighten painfully in his pants.

His name left her lips on a slow breath, drawing it out as if it were a prayer. He continued down her chest, tracing the inner curves of her breasts, watching her nipples pull tight against the thin, white top. He wanted to rip it to shreds and toss the pieces on the floor where they belonged, leaving her completely naked, but he didn't want to chance that any touch beyond the lightest caress might hurt her.

He took a deep breath, hoping to calm the blood surging through in his veins, but only increased it when her scent blossomed in the air, drowning him with her luscious aroma. It smelled like the desert air before a storm, electrified and restless, a dangerous mixture of power and fury. He drifted over her ribs, dipping into her navel as he massaged the strong contractions rippling her stomach. He could see the muscles bunching, causing dips and shadows in her skin where the pain demanded his attention.

Griffin palmed her abdomen rubbing the area in small circles, feeling the tension ease beneath his hand. She murmured something he couldn't quite make out, rolling her head toward him, resting her forehead against his shoulder. Her breath wisped across his skin, drawing his sac even tighter.

He sighed, knowing he couldn't deny either of them the need for release, even if she did little more than moan. He leaned forward, dropping a tender kiss along her temple, grinning at the smile that touched one side of her lips.

“Easy,” he whispered, slowly circling his hand lower, grazing it across the top of her mound. “I only want to...” He struggled with what word to use, not sure what he felt, until the words escaped, as if on their own. “Love you.”

Samantha sighed, and he felt the soft press of her mouth against his skin. His stomach trembled, anticipation making his body bead with sweat. He kept her close, sharing his warmth, as his finger traced the vee of her nether lips, teasing the soft skin before delving lower and sliding through her wet folds. His groan ruffled her hair, fluttering it against her face. He smiled at her hushed huff, softly blowing the hair back, entranced by the curve of her jaw and the fine lines crinkling the skin around her eyes. Despite the strain he’d caused her, she was more beautiful than ever.

He eased back, tilting her head enough he could touch his mouth to hers. Her lips molded to his, her breathy moan captured by his conquering tongue. He took her gently, inviting her to join in, but insistent enough she’d know he had no intentions of backing down. Her mouth opened for him, and she stroked his flesh. Her movements were soft, slow, and he closed his eyes at her gentle assault. Even as weak as she was, her affect on him was nothing short of powerful. His heart jackhammered in his chest, his head grew dizzy and thick, and his shaft flared in protest, already demanding the sweet satisfaction of her sheath.

Griffin pulled back, dropping open-mouthed kisses along her throat and shoulder as his hand returned to her slit, circling the tiny bud pulsing within her flesh. Feeling the small protrusion swell slightly with each caress, growing harder beneath his fingers.

Sam arched into his hand, increasing the pressure. He licked his way down her torso, knowing he wouldn’t be satisfied until he’d cleaned all the cream off her skin. He pulled away, bending her good leg off to the side, and easing between her splayed thighs. He dropped kisses along the length of bandage, careful not to touch the area Quinn had stitched back together, wishing he could heal the open wound. He sighed. He’d have to settle for healing the rest of her body first.

Griffin drifted closer, nuzzling her parted lips with his nose, inhaling her glorious scent. He could smell her urgent need. It was richer, spicier, but alluring just the same. He poked out his tongue, dipping the tip into her weeping cream, teasing her soft flesh with a fleeting touch. Sam moaned, and twirled one hand through his hair. He barely felt the gentle distraction, as he blew a heated breath across her nub, watching it pucker in response. More juice glistened along her cleft, begging him to devour her.

He moaned, licking at the slick fluid, humming against her folds. He didn't stop when the hold in his hair tightened slightly, her fingers tugging against his scalp.

"You're even sweeter than I remember," he praised, testing her sheath with a slow slide of his finger. "Soon, you'll squeeze my shaft with the same glorious pressure."

Sam moaned his name, her breath a series of hard pants. He glanced up at her, enthralled by the half-lidded gaze she flashed him. She looked on the verge of consciousness, but the heat in her narrowed gaze told him she more than approved of his actions. He nodded at her quivering bud, tonguing it one more time.

"Are you ready to explode for me, my pretty mate?"

Her reply was little more than a hitch of her breath, and he didn't waste more time teasing her. Her body was already strung tight, the muscles in her legs trembling with her impending orgasm. Griffin drew her lips apart with his forefinger and thumb, wanting to see her nub quiver as he brought her to her pleasure. He leaned in, lapping at her clit, sucking it between his teeth, as he pushed two fingers inside, glorying in her harsh cry as her walls contracted around him, holding him tight.

A hiss of pleasure echoed through the air, blazing a path straight to his shaft. He pressed his groin into the bed, hoping the pressure would stay the fire sizzling his sac before he creamed his leathers. Sam cried out again, urging him on, her voice a soft echo of need. He laid his tongue flat, sweeping it up and down her crease, swirling her hot juice around her nub. She inhaled, holding her breath as her muscles contracted in sequence. Griffin plunged his fingers again, thrusting them deep inside her channel before retreating fully then penetrating her sheath with steady strokes. Her pleasure filled his head, merging their emotions into one steaming pot before she arched her hips and released.

"More." He couldn't stop the word from springing forth, her taste too exotic to deny. He lapped at her, licking her slit clean, groaning when more rimmed her sex.

Griffin eased up, not sure what to do next. His shaft knew. It pulsed beneath the excruciating bind of cloth, edging his vision with black swirls from the tight hold. He grabbed his erection, squeezing it off, hoping he could maintain his control when it seemed so easy to just let it go. He looked up at Sam, not sure if he'd be pleased with what he'd find.

Her eyes were closed, her long lashes resting against her pale skin. A tentative smile touched her lips and a faint pink hueed her cheeks. He climbed over her, mindful of her injuries, determined to lull her to sleep with a gentle kiss. His cock tightened in protest, but he ignored it.

After all the time he'd made her wait, he wasn't about to seek his own pleasure at her cost. She sighed as his lips brushed hers, and he watched her eyelids flutter open.

"Griffin." Her voice sounded soft, as if she were calling him from another room.

He smiled, rubbing his nose over hers. "Shhh, my love. Rest. I'll keep you warm."

Her face broke into an easy smile, making his heart soar. "I must be dreaming," she mumbled, blinking as if to keep her eyes open. "You feel so real."

"I am real. But you need your rest. Sleep."

She shook her head, as her eyes drifted shut. "No. I've had it too many times before. But you're never real." Her voice cracked as a single tear crept down her face. "You never stay. You never make love to me."

Griffin's breath lodged around the lump in his throat, choking back any reply. He caught the tiny drop on his fingertip, watching the water waver on his skin, before falling to the bed, leaving only a dark ring behind. He closed his eyes, fighting the raw sensation gnawing at his gut. What the hell had he done? Had she really resorted to having him as her imaginary lover? Had he neglected her that long? His stomach lurched, as the cold truth finally settled with an unforgiving bite.

He forced his eyes open, gazing down at her, determined to right a wrong he never should have agreed to without having had the courage to confront her first. He leaned over her, kissing another tear away, tasting the salty flavor on his tongue. "I'm sorry, Samantha. I never..." He took a deep breath, not sure how to tell her all the emotions he felt churning inside. "I won't leave you again. Now try to stay still, while I show you how much I've missed your touch."

Griffin rolled off the bed, trying not to bounce her around, as he clawed at his clothing, tearing a few of the seams as he fought to release his cock before he came inside the damn pants. Samantha moaned at his desertion, reaching out beside her as if searching for his touch. He kicked the restraining garment across the floor, taking her hand as he crawled back to the center, skimming his body along hers as his lips trailed up her arm and along her shoulder. She tilted her head further away, opening up the sleek line of her neck, practically begging for him to reassert his claim. But he wouldn't do that, not until she was fully conscious and he could revel in the way she'd scream his name, once again joining her soul with his.

He leaned in, nibbling at her skin, tasting the soft shell of her ear. Her eyelids fluttered, giving him fleeting glimpses of her beautiful eyes. He inched closer, cupping one breast in his hand, capturing her turgid nipple between his fingers. She hissed out her breath, arching her neck

back in pleasure. He tugged again, watching the tight bud lengthen in his grip, smelling her reaction as her channel pumped out more juice, making her silky lips look shiny in the bright light.

Griffin brushed his body completely against hers, releasing her breast so he could cup her leg and drape it over his. He clenched his teeth, waiting to see if she'd cry out in pain as he laid her bandaged thigh across his, but her breath released on a husky moan, her eyes once again drifting shut. He smiled, inhaling her rich scent, knowing it would change with every climax he gave her. His stomach fluttered with anticipation as he smoothed his hands along her abdomen, teasing the joint of her mound. Sam arched her hips forward, trying to move his finger lower. He licked the skin of her shoulder, wishing he could dip down for another sample of her sweet cream, but he knew she needed more than his tongue. His seed was much richer in his genetic markers than his saliva, and if he had any hopes of saving her, he needed to give her as much of his seminal essence as she could take—as many times as she'd allow him.

He palmed her mound, slipping his finger along her slit as he tilted his hips toward her, his shaft finding her entrance as if it could see its destination. Sam's breath caught, her voice keening into a soft cry as he thrust forward, slipping the crown inside her wet heat, parting her soft tissues until half his length was gloriously buried inside her. Her voice grew in intensity with every inch he nudged inside, wedging her tight walls apart, reveling in the feel of her body joining with his. His teeth scraped the delicate skin on her shoulder, eager to once again taste her flesh, but he held back, pushing his shaft forward until his sac lodged against her skin.

"In my wildest dreams, I've never felt such sweet pressure."

Griffin closed his eyes as he pulled back, feeling her channel seal behind him, loving the way she whimpered in need, silently begging him to return. He retreated fully, leaving only a hint of his crown inside, knowing the first few inches held the sweetest reward, before sliding back in, growling at the small contractions pulsing around his shaft. Only one stroke and already she was close to screaming out her release.

He moved slowly, not wanting to hurt her, hoping the constant shifting of his hips didn't compromise her injury. Sam twitched beside him, fisting the sheets, rolling her head from side to side. He bit at her neck, increasing her need, feeling her muscles ripple beneath him.

"Now, my mate. Come for me and let me watch you give yourself to me."

Sam's eyes clenched shut a moment before her body spasmed around him, sending rhythmic pulses along his cock as her climax flooded her channel, immersing his shaft in even

more of her luscious juice. He pulled back, staring at the coating of slippery fluid, loving how her body parted to accept him, before driving back in, breaking the silence with her shattered scream. He bowed his head to the back of her neck, knowing he'd regret his loss of control later, but unable to stop the frantic force of his thrusts. Plunge after plunge filled her sheath, squeezing his shaft and tightening his sac until he was sure his eyes would pop out of his head.

Sam writhed within his arms, calling his name, trying to meet each punishing blow. He held her firmly across the waist, keeping her as still as possible as he continued his claim, knowing he wouldn't last much longer. Fire erupted at the base of his spine, sending sparks along his skin until even his clenched teeth couldn't keep the sensation from bubbling over. Griffin yelled her name, scraping his canines along her shoulder as he pumped his cum into her waiting channel, grinding his hips into her ass. Her voice keened into a harsh moan as he jerked against her, shooting blast after blast of his seed from his shaft, groaning into her ear at the sheer magnitude of his release.

She whispered his name as her body relaxed against him, her head rolling off to the side. He kissed the soft spot beneath her ear, returning her hushed words, as he inhaled the tangy scent of their combined release. It was sweet and earthy, and he felt a cold tear strike a path down his cheek.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, pulling her closer, snaking a hand between her breasts, feeling her heart beat beneath his fingers as a faint thrum echoed in his head. At least, their connection was growing, though it was still weaker than after their first joining. He cursed his own stupidity, vowing to make things right, before slipping into a deep sleep, Sam's hushed breath whispering in the air.

* * * *

Griffin sat in a chair, watching Samantha sleep as he picked half-heartedly at his food. Though he'd been able to feed her a couple of mouthfuls, she was still too weak to do more than sleep—and mate. A roguish smile lit his lips as he recalled the past two days. Between mating with Sam and bathing her, he hadn't left the damn room. If Caleb hadn't stopped by with some food, he wouldn't have bothered to eat.

He didn't fight when his eyes drifted shut, the room silent except for the twin beating of their hearts. It was a constant thrumming in his head now, proof his efforts weren't wasted. He could only hope she wouldn't kill him once she regained her senses.

Sam's soft voice drew him back, and he opened his eyes to find her watching him, her bright eyes still half-lidded and glassy, but brimming with a familiar sparkle he hadn't seen for months. He pushed off the chair, joining her at the bed.

"How do you feel?" he asked, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, humming at the silky feel of the tresses along his skin. He couldn't wait until he could fist the thick mass in his hands as she feasted on his shaft, her luscious lips wrapped around his pulsating flesh.

"Tired..."

Her voice faded as she squinted at him, as if confused by something. He smiled, knowing she'd heard his thoughts.

"You need to rest."

She shook her head, glancing around the room. "Where..." She huffed, meeting his gaze again. "I don't understand."

He pressed a long finger to her soft lips, wishing he could feel her warm skin against his again. Despite the fact he'd coupled with her every few hours for the past two days, there was no mistaking his desire to feel her again. To dive inside her wet channel, her thick cream coating his shaft. She was more appealing than ever, and his hunger had only increased.

"Don't worry about that now," he soothed, tracing the outline of her mouth. "It'll all make sense once you're stronger."

A low moan feathered past his finger as she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, exposing the smooth skin of her throat. Griffin couldn't resist tracing his fingers along the length, feeling her pulse quicken beneath his hand.

"Griffin."

He stilled at the hushed call, dragging his focus back to her face. She smiled at him, tracing his jaw with a weak finger.

"I need..."

Again her voice faded, but she didn't have to finish. Her need was written in the shadows beneath her eyes and the sweet scent of her arousal floating in the room. He smiled against her finger, drawing it into his mouth as his other hand moved to her breast, circling the nipple, watching as it crinkled against her skin, hardening into a thick bud.

"I love how your body reacts to me," he rasped, plucking at the taut flesh, grinning at the deep flush that crept along her skin. "I can tell you're already prepared for my shaft."

Her lips twitched at the side, and he couldn't stop from dipping down and covering her mouth with his. She opened eagerly, stroking his tongue, tracing the hollows of his mouth. He gave her control, encouraged by her enthusiasm. Until now, she'd only responded to his explorations, and it eased some of his worry to have her initiate the encounter.

Griffin pulled away, peppering kisses down her neck and along her chest until he reached one turgid point. It trembled as he blew a warm breath across the peak, and he wasted no time sipping the hard bud into his mouth. Sam moaned his name, spearing both hands through his hair. Her grip was firmer, and he felt a slight sting when she tugged on the ends, trying to direct him lower.

He shook his head as he met her gaze, her nipple still trapped within his mouth. He intended on denying her tactics and making her wait so he could finally enjoy her body the way he wanted, but the sheer look of rapture on her face destroyed the words poised on his tongue, filling him with an overwhelming need to grant her every wish.

"Did you have other plans for me?" he queried, watching her snag her lip between her teeth as she angled her hips toward him. He arched his eyebrow, flickering a look down her body, lingering on her mound just long enough she arched again. "Is this where you'd like me to concentrate my efforts?" he mused, trailing a single finger down her hips and across her mound, probing her wet folds. He moaned. "So wet, little one." He pinned her with his gaze. "Shall I indulge myself and lick all of this wonderful cream away?"

Her eyes darted to the side, as her cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red. She looked back at him, a timid nod the only indication she'd answered him.

He shook his head in feigned disappointment, tickling her nub. "Is that the best you can do? Really, Samantha, I thought you were far more assertive than that."

Sam's lipped pulled tight as her eyes narrowed, a hushed sigh washing out with her breath. She grabbed his head, pulling on the strands as she shoved him lower. "I want you to lick me. Now!"

He hid his smile against her skin, loving the hint of authority she'd put into her demand, though her voice had been little more than a husky rasp. Perhaps his little witch was getting stronger than he'd thought.

"As you wish," he nodded, shuffling down the bed, discarding his pants before slipping between her legs. He looked at her across her hips, watching her gaze shift between him and his

shaft. He twisted slightly on the bed, giving her a better view of his erection, smiling at the way her breath hitched and her eyelids drooped slightly.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get that soon enough. But first, I intend to follow your orders.”

Sam’s eyes followed his as he lowered his mouth to her mound, swiping a path through her crease, humming at the sweet explosion of flavor that filled his mouth. She pressed her head back, breaking their visual link as her fingers tightened around his hair. He chuckled against her flesh, not hiding his amusement when his breath made her bud quiver. He’d only licked her once, but already she was eager for her release. Gone were the subtleties. Of slowly building her up and leaving her there, teetering on the edge until her body simply imploded from pleasure. His desertion had left her with a need so great, he had to forgo the art of making love, and concentrate on healing her.

“Please.”

His heart clenched at the desperate quality to her voice, as if she believed he’d simply satisfy his urges, then leave her, empty, hopeless. He kissed her delicate lips as intimately as he did her mouth, hoping she’d realize he had no intentions of leaving.

“Close your eyes, and let me hear you scream my name.”

Sam cried out as he attacked her cleft, licking and sucking, nipping at the tightly knotted nerves. His hand found her sheath, and he plunged two broad fingers inside her, pushing through her tight channel, fucking her with the same rhythm as his lapping tongue. Sam arched below him, tilting her hips, chanting his name as her muscles tensed. Her stomach tightened and her thighs trembled as her release neared, spilling more juice along his hand.

Her voice keened into a cry, his name mixed with words he didn’t understand, as she climaxed beneath him, squeezing his shoulders and fingers, locking him in place. He lapped at her slit, licking the juice coating her velvety lips, sucking his fingers clean as he slowly withdrew from her heat, aware of the mournful whimper that rang in his head. He glanced at her face, but her head was thrown back against the pillow, hiding all but the sexy curve of her jaw.

Griffin moved over her, kissing at path up chest, teasing the small scars on her shoulder. She hissed her approval, but he knew it was still too soon to bite her again.

Her eyes opened on a sigh, her gaze clashing with his as he hovered above her, his knees keeping hers spread wide. He glanced down at his shaft, groaning as it flared in anticipation, more fluid beading from the tip.

“I want to taste you.”

His head snapped up at her hushed confession, the look in her eyes confirming her claim. His cock pulsed again, and it took all his concentration not to cream her stomach. He bared his teeth, lowering to nip at her mouth.

“There’s nothing I’d like more than to see your luscious lips wrapped around my shaft as you take me deep, swallowing my seed as quickly as I can pump it down your throat.” He paused to draw his finger up her neck, tracing the outline of her mouth. “But that fantasy will have to wait until you’ve regained more of your strength.” He held his hand to her lips when she started to protest. “Not this time. Now be a good little mate and welcome your master home.”

Griffin nudged his shaft against her channel, probing the tip inside as he waited for her response. Sam watched him through narrowed lids, the black disks hiding the brilliant blue. She darted her tongue out to moisten her lips, nipping at his jaw as she tilted her pelvis, guiding the first few inches inside her.

Desire raged through his veins, and he took her sheath in one fluid motion, hilding his sac against her skin. Sam arched under the assault, moaning his name, telling him to go hard, fast. He lowered his chest, rasping it across her sensitive nipples, capturing her cry as he devoured her mouth. He didn’t wait for her to lead this time. He attacked, full force, his tongue demanding she acquiesce to his desires. She obeyed, eating at him when he finally retreated.

“More,” she whispered, meeting his driving thrusts, wrapping her good leg around his back.

Griffin slipped one hand beneath her ass, lifting her higher, changing the angle to give her more pleasure. She responded by screaming his name and clamping her teeth around his shoulder, adding to the mark she’d left the day on the ridge. He growled his delight, fighting the urge to return the favor, knowing when he finally did she’d never question his devotion again. Instead he clenched them around the pillow, pumping harder, wanting to feel her sheath contract around him.

“Now. Yes. Yes. Yes.”

Her voice became a series of pants and groans as her body surged into a climax, milking his cock until his seed burst from the tip, drowning her channel and covering his sac. His body went rigid above hers, his hips still grinding as more cum shot from his shaft, draining him of both his fluid and his strength.

He fell to the bed, pushing himself off to the side, pulling her into his arms, his breath fluttering her hair across his shoulder. Her head rested against his chest, and he could feel every

wisp of air across his skin. He closed his eyes, knowing he'd do anything to earn her love again and regain the bond he'd so foolishly given up in the name of his people.

Sam whispered something against his skin, but it was lost to the sound of their hearts beating in sync. He smiled and held her close, content to enjoy his good fortune while he still had it.

Chapter Ten

Sam winced as the bright light cut through the room, glaring off every surface, making her eyes sting from the intensity. She blinked, waiting for her focus to stabilize. A constant thrumming echoed in her head, making her stomach roll. She closed her eyes, running her fingers through her hair, trying to make sense of the sensations rioting her body. Pain flickered at the edge, but it was different, more localized. Uncertainty gnawed at her conscience, and she opened her eyes as her memory returned, flooding her head with a collage of images. Griffin yelling to her from across the gorge. Fighting off two sand beasts in the cave. Climbing a tree in the hopes of dying peacefully.

Sam pushed up. She was far from dead and the sudden stabbing pain through her thigh was more than enough proof. She tossed a single blanket aside, lifting her injured leg to the ground, praying it didn't buckle when she put weight on it. A smattering of food sat on a tray near the bed, along with a glass of water. She reached for the cup, downing what was left, nearly choking in the process. How long had it been since she'd tasted anything so good?

An image of Griffin standing before her, his cock stretched out proudly toward her lips flashed into her head, and she cursed the sudden fluttering in her groin. She hadn't meant to compare the water to the unique taste of his seed, but her body didn't seem to care. It knew what it wanted, and if the heat creeping through her pelvis was any indication, she was about to go into a full-fledged hunger for him.

"Not bloody likely," she snarled, searching the room for clothes, grunting when she realized the only piece of clothing was Griffin's vest. It was puddled on the floor, as if he'd torn it off in a rush.

She bent down, gritting her teeth against the burning sensation in her thigh, and grabbed the garment off the ground, slipping it over her shoulders, trying not to inhale the rich aroma of Griffin's scent. But it was hopeless. It was fused into the fabric as if it were his skin. She glanced around the room, closing her eyes at the rush of heat that balled inside her stomach, rolling outwards in cresting waves. His image flashed in her mind, and she couldn't help but smile. His tousled hair hung around his shoulders, the shadow on his chin heavier than usual. He looked tired, but content.

She shook the thought away, pulling the vest around her, laughing at the absurdity of it. If she'd had a belt, she could have worn the damn thing as a dress, and been more covered than the warrior outfit Sirena pranced around in.

Sam hissed as the mere thought of the woman made her head feel as if it were going to explode. Just the thought Griffin might be sleeping with her... She sighed, swallowing past the tight feeling in her throat. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about Sirena, or sex. She needed to find out how the hell she'd survived, and who had dragged her ass back.

She limped across the room, stumbling from the bed to the doorway, hoping she hadn't left anything on the floor to trip over, as she made her way into the main area. She'd left her communicator on the table. All she had to do was call Caleb, and she'd get some answers. She shuffled toward the couch, reaching for the cushion, when she came to a dead stop.

She felt the blood drain from her face, the world spin slightly as she stared at the vision before her. He sat at the table, hunched over what looked like a broken spear. His hair trailed along his shoulders, teasing his jaw, hiding part of his face. It was just like the image from the bedroom, only hotter. She could see the stubble on his chin, and smell his dangerous scent. It reminded her of a wild animal...pretty to look at, but deadly to touch.

Fire prickled inside her veins, and she half expected to see tiny sparks lighting her skin. She grabbed the couch, knowing it'd be the only source keeping her on her feet as she watched him freeze, his shoulders bunching. She snagged her bottom lip, wondering when her throat had gotten so dry, when he turned toward her, his gaze crashing into hers. Her breath stalled, and a cold shiver snaked its way down her spine as he watched her from beneath a veil of lashes. His skin was drawn tight across his cheekbones, and he looked thinner than she remembered. He didn't speak as he rose from the chair, dropping the spear on the table. She watched as every muscle flexed in sequence, rippling across his body with each step. He moved slowly, allowing his gaze to linger in all the right places.

Sam cursed, shaking some sense back into her head. She should slap him. Shove him away and toss any handy object at him. Anything, but beg him to fuck her. She set her jaw, swinging her right hand as he stopped in front of her. Griffin caught it mid-air, smiling at her as he snatched her wrist, holding her hand up. A moan bubbled in her chest, but she managed to crush it as he lowered his lips and placed an open-mouthed kiss on the palm of her hand.

“Now, now, little one. I suggest you put your claws away. I promise to play nice, if you will.” He ran his gaze up and down the length of her body. “Interesting outfit. Perhaps you should wear my vest around our chambers all the time.”

Sam tugged at her hand, but Griffin merely held her firm, licking her palm this time. The moan she’d crushed resurfaced, stronger than before, trembling past her lips before she could stop it. A hint of a smile tugged at Griffin’s mouth, as he lifted her arm slightly higher, kissing a path to her shoulder. She tried to concentrate on her anger, but the feel of his warm, wet lips against her skin blurred the line, until only the fire she’d felt in the bedroom lingered in her thoughts. He was seducing her, and she was more than willing.

“How did I get here?” she demanded, hoping he wouldn’t notice the husky rasp to her voice, only to curse when he raised his eyebrow at her.

“Caleb and I followed your signal. I found you half dead in a tree.” His teeth pulled back slightly. “We’ll discuss your decision later. First, let me tend to your need.”

A wash of spicy air breezed across her skin, filling her head with his delicious scent. She set her jaw. She would not ask him to make love to her, no matter how much her body clamored for his touch. Griffin sighed, leaning closer, smoothing his other hand down her back to rest on her hip. She closed her eyes against the rush of need, wanting to fall into his arms, but knowing any action on his part would only be a surrender—a means of keeping her alive. Tears threatened, but she held them back, determined not to show him how much it hurt, when his lips grazed her ear.

“Do you really believe I’m only here because I have to be?” His voice was soft and low, the usual gravelly tone noticeably absent. “Have I hurt you that badly, you question my every motive?”

She didn’t answer, unable to talk around the ball of emotion stuck in her chest. He sounded so sincere, so hurt, she couldn’t find a way to question his desire.

A single finger touched her chin, raising her closed eyes until she could feel him staring at her. She squeezed harder, wishing she hadn't ventured out of the damn bedroom, when his lips brushed her eyelids.

"Please, little one. Talk to me."

Sam unclenched her jaw, allowing her eyelids to fall open, instantly pinned by his dark grey eyes staring down at her. Uncertainty flared in his expression, and she watched as he took a labored breath.

"I can see the questions in your mind, and you have every right to ask me to leave."

He kissed her again, longer than before, testing her willingness with a light brush of his tongue along the crease of her mouth. She expected him to growl, but he pulled back, hovering his face next to hers. He slid his other hand off her hip and across her thigh, dipping between her legs. His finger eased into her crease, gathering some of her juice before bringing it to his mouth. He held her stare as he inhaled, a sinful smile capturing his mouth before he poked out his tongue, licking the digit clean.

"I'm asking to stay."

Sam could only stare as he kept one finger on her lips while he sucked at the other. She didn't know when she'd given him permission, only that she was helpless to say no. Another moan breathed past his hand and he smiled at her response. He nodded, replacing his hand with his mouth, delving between her lips when she opened for him, playing her tongue along his as he explored every inch. Her hand found his hair, and she groaned as she twirled the thick mass around her fingers, anchoring herself to him. He growled in delight, snaking one hand around her waist, the other under her good thigh.

"Hold on."

The gravel was back in his voice, pooling more moisture along her slit as he lifted her up and shuffled her to the table. He ran his hand along the top, sweeping the spear and some wooden cups onto the floor, seemingly oblivious to the way they clattered across the hard surface. His lips reclaimed hers, this kiss more demanding than the last. She met his challenge, not backing down when he vied for control. He eased back, a low chuckle filling her head.

"Griffin."

He moaned, licking her lips before running his tongue down her neck, nipping at her collarbone. "I love the way you say my name," he rasped, scraping his teeth along her skin.

She groaned, tilting her head, needing him to reassert his claim, but knowing it'd only make it harder when he left this time.

"I'm not going anywhere," he whispered, playing with her lobe. "And the next time I bite you, I'll be buried inside your beautiful ass for the first time."

Sam stilled. *Shit*. The connection was back, stronger than ever. It'd been so long, she hadn't noticed the extra heartbeat thrumming in her head or realized the images were fantasies he'd conjured up. She met his gaze, acutely aware he was serious.

Heat infused her body at the thought of his cock breaching her virgin channel. While she'd enjoyed the times he'd used his finger to penetrate her ass, she wasn't convinced his shaft would fit without splitting her in half.

Griffin growled into her ear, poking his tongue in. "Don't worry, I'll fit. And I'll make sure it's exactly like you're imagining it." He chuckled at her hushed curse. "I know all your fantasies. Would you like to know what I intend to do to you once your leg heals?" He kissed her shoulder, teasing the faint scars. "I'm going to bind your lovely arms to the head of our bed, then do the same to your legs. I've always wondered what you'd look like spread out for me, your body completely at my mercy." He snagged her lip between his teeth. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Her reply was a guttural moan as he fingered her clit. She couldn't deny his claim. She'd pictured it enough he'd know every nuance of her fantasy. She met his heated gaze as he moved back, dropping a glance at where his finger disappeared between her wet folds.

"Now be a good little mate and keep your legs wide. I enjoy watching you as I eat my fill." He hummed as he drew his finger out, holding it up for her to see. "Do you know how many times I've licked this wonderful cream from your flesh the past few days?" He shook his head, sucking the juice clean. "It's never enough."

He knelt down, pushing her good leg farther over, exposing her clit to the air. She felt it flutter at the sudden chill, easing more fluid along her slit. Griffin growled at the act, leaning his head forward, swiping a long, slow path through her crease. Fire spread through her stomach as her fingers clutched his head, holding him close to her mound. She wasn't up for one of his marathon teasing sessions. She tugged at the long strands, urging him to give her what she wanted.

"You must be feeling better to be challenging me so quickly," he said, pulling back as his gaze clashed with hers. "You know how much I enjoy savoring you."

"Savor me later," she rasped, pushing against his head. "I need you."

A flash of emotion crossed his face, making her heart skip. He looked sad, or was it guilt? Either way, it vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving only raging desire behind. A warm breath fluttered across her nub, drawing a heated moan from her chest.

“Very well. I’ll concede to your wishes...this time.” He narrowed his eyes, placing his finger at her entrance, testing it with just a hint of penetration. “But mark my words. Next time, I’ll set the pace.”

Samantha shouted his name as two fingers filled her sex and his mouth descended on her clit, tugging at it with quick strong pulses. Colored dots blanketed her vision making the room blur into a mass of swirling lights. She closed her eyes, her hand still anchored to his head, as her climax surged inside, prickling her skin until she thought she’d burst into flames. He growled against her flesh, adding another layer of stimulation, making her body clench in anticipation. Pain and pleasure mixed into one, stealing her breath, keeping her suspended on the edge of a cliff she knew she couldn’t jump.

“Come for me, Samantha. Give me what I need.”

The sound of his raspy voice feathering over her clit unhinged her. She heard her voice keen into a wail, the harsh sound a combination of his name and a ragged plea for more. He echoed her wish, lapping at her pussy, pushing his fingers through her pulsing channel until nothing remained but the pleasure. A contented rumble played in her head, and it took her a moment to realize he was chuckling.

She opened her eyes to find him staring down at her, his eyes heavy-lidded, her cream coating his mouth. A flash of heat seared through her, as he licked some of the slick juice from his mouth, humming in response.

“Do you have any idea how incredibly beautiful you are when you come for me.” He leaned forward, licking at her lips, as she felt him shove his pants over his hips, brushing the material against her thighs. “I could watch you reach your pleasure all day.”

Sam smiled, smelling her earthy aroma on his breath as he teased her lips again. She opened for him, tangling her tongue around his, tasting her release. It was sweeter than she’d imagined, and the thought of him repeating his performance made her toes tingle. Griffin nipped at her lips as he pulled back, nudging her sex with his shaft.

“I’d be more than happy to eat my fill again, but you seemed anxious for another part of me.”

Sam groaned when he surged forward, pushing the first few inches of his cock inside her, igniting a deeper need. Her hands rose to his shoulders as her head fell back on a sigh. There was nothing more delicious than the way his body joined with hers. She tilted her head, granting him access, wondering if he'd forgo his promise and reclaim her now. Teeth scrapped along her skin, increasing her desire, but they didn't penetrate the surface.

"Are you asking me to stop, and flip you over so I can finally claim your beautiful ass?" He rasped her neck again, harder. "For if that is your wish, I'll obey. But I meant what I said. I won't bite you again until you give me that final gift. For only then will I be certain you believe in my devotion to you."

Sam snapped her head up, overwhelmed by the hurt tone to his voice. Wasn't he the one who'd simply vanished from their life? Hadn't she done everything to give him his freedom? Hell, she'd confessed her love, something she'd sworn she wouldn't do, not when it wasn't the custom of his people. She'd never heard any of his kind say they loved their mate. It seemed the physical connection was enough for them. But she'd come to realize she needed to hear the words as much as she'd needed to say them. She bit at her lip, not sure how to respond without saying the words again.

Griffin slid the final inches inside her, pulling her close, cradling her head in his hand. She could feel his heart pounding in his chest, the erratic rhythm matching hers. She rested her head on his shoulder, wondering how she'd ever live without this kind of connection, bond or not.

"The fault is completely mine. And how you live will be your choice. But it wouldn't be fair to bind you further, when your emotions are so unclear." He leaned forward, kissing each eyelid. "You need time to trust me again. Until then, I'll give you all I can... All you'll allow."

Griffin's lips found hers in a kiss that bound her more than any other act he could've chosen. Tears clogged her throat as he set up a steady rhythm, claiming her channel in long, flowing strokes. He kept her locked against him, only his hips leaving her in fleeting movements. She held on, wrapping her arms around his back, pressing her skin against his. It seemed as if a lifetime had passed since he'd given her more than just his cock. And she couldn't seem to keep from giving him her soul in return.

Griffin tightened his hold, dropping kisses along her shoulder as he quickened the pace, filling to the hilt, then leaving only the tip inside her. She tilted her hips, angling him deeper, wanting him to stay buried inside her forever. He rasped a husky 'yes' in her ear, palming his hands down her back, pulling her tighter with every thrust.

“Oh, God. Yes.”

The words hissed through her teeth as her orgasm raced along her back, squeezing the muscles across her stomach. She threw her head back, shouting his name, feeling him flare inside her. Griffin's hand cinched around her thigh as he stiffened in her arms, his harsh cry echoing hers. She felt his cock pulse, followed by the hot rush of his seed. Something inside her clicked, and she knew she'd never be free of him...that she'd never want to be free. She closed her eyes and held on, praying he wouldn't let her fall.

Griffin held her close, her thoughts rioting through his mind. He could see her fears, her expectations, and just the thought she held such power over him scared him. He'd never truly believed he'd ever share the kind of connection they did, and the harsh reality of his position was like a slap in the face. He was bound to her, and not just physically. His every thought revolved around how to bring her the most happiness, or how to ease her way. And he knew it was time to put his leadership second. If his people didn't like the way he ruled, they were free to challenge him. Until then, he wouldn't put Samantha's health or happiness at stake again. He'd owed her more than an explanation... He owed her his life.

Her soft breath whispered across his chest, making his heart wrench. He'd more than screwed up, and could only hope she'd understand once he'd explained his situation. A dark cold settled in his heart and he wasn't quite sure what he'd do if she turned him away. Death or not, he had a feeling her pride would take precedence and she'd risk everything to salvage it.

He pulled back, intent on confessing everything, when the door opened on a whoosh of air.

“Griffin! You need get to the control room...”

Caleb's voice faded into a curse, as he skidded to a halt. More footsteps tapped into the room, followed by a hiss of anger. Griffin sighed. At least Sam was hidden behind him, though he could tell by the way her muscles tensed and her back hunched, she wasn't pleased by the interruption.

“I'll wait outside.”

Griffin heard Caleb leave, though he could tell by the way his hairs prickled on the back of his neck, they weren't alone. He snarled in frustration, easing back from Sam just enough to grab his pants and pull them over his hips. He gave her a smile, dropping a quick kiss on her

pouting lips, mentally telling her to stay put, as he turned to the door, crossing his arms on his chest.

"Are you done?" snapped Sirena, nodding toward Sam. "Or will I have to endure another round of watching your ass flex between her spread thighs?"

Griffin bit back the retort poised on his tongue, trying to remember all Sam had gone through in an attempt to bring peace to both their cultures. "If you'd bothered to knock, we could've avoided this awkward situation."

"Caleb was the one who barged in," she bit out.

"And Caleb had the good sense to leave after he'd realized his mistake." Griffin called to the man, smiling when Caleb slipped back in. "I assume there's an issue in need of my attention?"

"If you hadn't holed yourself up in this room for four days, you wouldn't have to ask."

"Careful, Sirena," Griffin said. "I'm not in the mood for your tedious dribble today." He motioned to Caleb. "What's wrong?"

Caleb ran a shaky hand through his hair, skirting a gaze at Sirena. "There's been another attack on the control room."

"What?" demanded Sam.

Caleb smiled, raising an eyebrow at her as she moved out from behind Griffin. "Nice outfit, Sam. It goes well with your bandage."

"I'm flattered you like it," she mocked. "Now tell me what the hell happened."

"I don't have all the details. From what Quinn told me, the guards drove the perpetrator off before any real damage was done, but Rider took a blaster shot to his shoulder."

Griffin felt Sam's body stiffen and turned to see the color drain from her face. He shuffled over, prepared to catch her if her strength simply gave out.

"How..."

Her voice cracked and faded as she leaned against his side, allowing him to shoulder most of her weight. He wrapped his hand tighter around her waist.

"He's okay," soothed Caleb, taking an involuntary step forward as if he also felt the need to comfort her. "Quinn was with him when the attack occurred. He's in a lot of pain, but Quinn said he'll be fine."

Sam nodded, a small shiver trembling through her body. She spared Griffin a quick glance, though he could tell she was far from okay.

“Convenient how you feel remorse for your own kind,” snipped Sirena. “Yet you blatantly defended the animal who took several of *our* lives.”

Sam straightened, obviously intent on meeting the woman’s accusations, when Griffin held her back, growling out a warning.

“I suggest you curb your tongue, before I find a better use for it!” He nodded to Caleb. “Was anyone else hurt?”

“Just Rider. If it’s okay, I think you should take a look.”

“We’re right behind you,” said Sam, taking a step forward before Griffin snagged her wrist, holding her back. She turned to him, drawing her eyebrows together in frustration as she tugged against his hold. “I’m not going to argue with you about this, Griffin. I’m well enough to see how badly my crewman is injured.”

Griffin flashed her a smile, giving her body a long, slow sweep. “You’re more than welcomed to accompany me,” he began, closing the distance. “But I’d prefer if you kept that outfit limited to our chambers. Or were you planning on having me fight off another hoard of admirers?”

A deep flush crept over Sam’s cheeks as she cinched her hand tighter around her waist, keeping the vest snug against her body. She shot Caleb a quick glance. “I’ll be out in five,” she muttered, pulling her hand free as she limped back around the couch, disappearing into their bedroom.

Griffin watched her go, drawn to her simple gracefulness. Even injured, her body flowed across the ground, and he had no doubts that she’d still fight like a sand beast if given just cause. A smile forced up the edges of his mouth, and it took him a moment to realize he was proud of her. Of her devotion and compassion. Of the way she fought for what she believed in. He’d never felt this way about anyone before, and it made the reality of the situation even harder to bear. He needed to get their issues out in the open, so he could put his fears aside and concentrate on loving her.

Love.

The word rattled around in his head, refusing to be ignored. He wasn’t certain he completely understood the ramifications of the emotion, but there was no use denying it any longer. He’d fallen in love with Samantha.

He shook the thought away as she stumbled back around the corner, dressed in cargo pants and a tight shirt. She'd ripped most of the pant leg off, exposing her bandage. She held up her hand as she limped to the door, waving it in the air.

"These were the only clothes I could butcher and fit over my leg."

"If you'd rather change back into that vest, I'll wait..." Caleb's voice choked into a grunt as Sam whacked him across the chest, nodding at the door.

"Just get going," she said.

Caleb flashed her a smile, heading back through the door. Sirena glared at them before following after Caleb, her back stiff. Griffin grabbed Sam's arm as she turned to follow, holding her gently, but firmly.

"I know this is important to you, but don't push yourself. Your body is still far from healed, and I have no qualms about tossing you over my shoulder and carrying you back here if I sense you're not listening to its...demands." He drew the last word out, sliding his eyes down her silhouette, smiling when her face flushed and her eyes dilated.

Sam smiled, crinkling lines around her mouth. "I wouldn't dream of denying my needs," she charmed, batting her eyes at him. Then she slipped forward, encasing his cock in her slender hand. "But I'm not the only one with...demands." She eased back, tucking her hand against her chest as if the contact had affected her. She grabbed the door. "I went three months without your company. I think I can last three hours."

Griffin sighed as she hobbled out the door and down the corridor. Any hope of explaining his absence calmly, or rationally, faded and he knew he was in for one hell of a ride.

* * * *

"Bloody hell. What on earth happened?"

Sam's voice filled the room as she hobbled through the door, her back stiff and her skin a deathly shade of white. Griffin stepped in behind her, surveying the damage before moving over to the man sitting on the floor, a bloody bandage wrapped around his shoulder.

Rider feigned a smile, wincing when Quinn pulled one end of the gauze tight. "You're alive! We weren't sure you were going to make it."

Sam shrugged, bending down over him. "We can discuss my miraculous recovery after you tell me what the hell happened in here."

The smile faded from Rider's lips and he shot a quick glance at the other two men leaning against the far wall. "We were just coming in to test a few connections when we found someone

tampering with the conduits. We ran after him, but the guy started firing a blaster at us, and we had to dive for cover. By the time we were able to launch another assault, the bastard was gone.”

Caleb shuffled up beside the man, tapping his good shoulder. “Apparently we have to work on your diving skills.”

Quinn huffed, pushing Caleb out of the way to secure another bandage. “The good Commander wouldn’t have gotten hit if he’d taken cover with the rest of us *instead* of trying to run the creep down by himself.”

“He was going to destroy the new lines,” insisted Rider. “Do you have any idea what would’ve happened if he’d managed to accomplish that?”

Quinn frowned, stepping back. “I realize the seriousness of the situation, Rider. But getting shot point blank with a blaster wasn’t your best option. Just be thankful the damn thing was barely charged, or all I would’ve needed was a big hole in the sand.”

Sam shook her head, crossing her arms on her chest. Griffin tried to ignore the way the subtle movement pushed her breasts out above her arms, showing off the tight pucker of her nipples. Heat prickled down his spine as a slow smile crept onto his face. Sam glanced back at him, her brows drawn together and her lips pursed into the cutest pout he’d ever seen. She looked ready to smack him up the back of the head. He nodded at her, darting his eyes at her chest. She scowled, mentally telling him to bugger off as she turned back to Rider. Griffin sighed. He needed to get used to her reading his every thought again. While he realized now wasn’t the time to be thinking about how tight and hard her nipples got, his shaft refused to relinquish control of his thoughts.

“So are you going to tell me who the mystery man is,” asked Sam, flashing Rider the same irritated expression. “Or do I have to guess?”

More color drained from his face. Griffin sensed Sam’s increasing tension as he watched her body stiffen. He moved forward palming the small of her back.

“If you know who’s responsible, it’d be best for you just to tell us,” said Griffin.

Rider looked away, wincing from the movement, as he muffled, “I didn’t get a good look at him,” under his breath.

Sam huffed and ran a shaky hand through her hair as the two warriors standing on the other side snorted in disbelief. Griffin turned to them, baring his teeth.

“If you have something to say, Cain, then I suggest you start talking. Otherwise, your opinion isn’t needed.”

Cain nodded at Rider, pushing off the wall. "He's lying. He knows perfectly well who tried to blow up the complex. He just doesn't want to tell his *Captain*."

Griffin stepped forward, intending to finish this thing with Cain once and for all when Sam turned back to Rider, her voice breaking through the tension.

"Is that true?" she demanded. "Do you know who did this?"

Rider glared at the two men, muttering something Griffin couldn't make out under his breath. The man sighed, and looked away. "It was Gunther."

A dead silence fell over the room, and Griffin could feel Sam's surprise. It was in that instance he knew his suspicions were right. Every emotion whirling through her head confirmed she'd known nothing about Gunther's rise from the dead, and that meant all the information he'd been shown had been planted.

Sam staggered back, as if Rider's words had been a physical blow. "Gunther?" She looked around at the gathering of people, her mouth gaped open in shock. "But that's impossible. He was banished from the colony months ago. There's no way he could've survived on his own...all this time..."

Her voice trailed off as she stared down at the floor and Griffin felt a surge of guilt move through her.

"Bravo, Captain," sneered Cain. "Your performance is most convincing."

"Drop the smartass routine, Cain. You really can't pull it off," snapped Sam.

Cain drew himself up, flicking a glance at Griffin, before glaring back at Sam. "Your pretense that you know nothing of Gunther's involvement is pathetic." He took two steps toward her. "Rumors of his return have been floating around for months. Are you actually going to stand there and have us believe you had nothing to do with his miraculous resurrection?"

Sam's mouth tightened until her lips became nothing more than a pale line. Griffin went to step between her and Cain, but she held her hand up, halting him.

"No," she said, shaking her head. She scowled at Cain. "The last I saw of Gunther, he was standing on the other side of the gate as we closed the damn doors and activated the shield. If he's found a way back in, it wasn't my doing."

"Of course not," mocked Sirena, stepping over to Cain's side. "You only stood up for him and stayed his execution, even though you knew murder was punishable by death in our colony. There's absolutely no reason we should suspect you at all."

Griffin growled, unable to keep his defensive instincts from rising to the surface. He'd be damned if he'd stand there and allow his subordinates to harass his mate. Again he leaned in, only to have Sam shove him back. He turned to her, shooting her a stern look, when he caught the glint of sadness in her eyes. He stopped, suddenly bombarded by images flashing through his head. People he didn't know bound to poles in the middle of a strange village. Screams ringing through the air, as fire leapt at their skin. He could feel their pain and anguish as the life slowly drained from their eyes.

He shook the pictures away, gagging from the smell of smoke lingering in his senses as he focused on the sole image still flickering in his mind. A woman, tall and slender, with golden hair and pale skin. She looked older than Samantha was now, but there was no mistaking the familiar shape of her eyes or the line of her mouth. Pain erupted in his chest, but he didn't know if it was his, or Sam's.

Sam tensed her jaw, her gaze never straying from the warriors standing in front of her. "Murdering that family was wrong, and Gunther should have to pay for what he did. But killing him makes us as barbaric as him." She took a deep breath. "When we first arrived here, you accused us of being no better than the humans who'd enslaved you. I've fought hard to show you we're nothing like them. If I'd allowed you to execute him, I would've failed."

"It's the way of *our* people," sneered Sirena. "But then I suppose that doesn't matter to you."

"Not every law is a good one, Sirena, regardless of which world you were born to. Killing is wrong, and the only way to vanquish it, is to put an end to it. The hate has to stop somewhere, and I choose for it to begin with me." She turned to Rider. "How long have you known Gunther was still alive?"

"I heard the rumors a couple of months ago, but I didn't really believe them until today."

Sam nodded, shifting her gaze to Caleb. "What about you?"

Caleb shook his head, holding his hands palms up in front of him. "I had no idea, or I would've told you." He sneered at Cain and Sirena. "But then if they believed you were Gunther's inside connection, they must have thought I was involved too. So it doesn't surprise me I haven't heard the rumors either."

Sam shook her head, and Griffin could feel her anger replacing the other swirl of emotions. She looked over at him, her eyes narrowing into thin slits. She cocked her head, as if

trying to read his thoughts only to curse when he did his best to block her out. "And you? Were you aware of this...situation?"

Griffin clenched his jaw, wanting to lie, but knowing she'd see through it. He fisted his hands at his side, trying to keep his expression neutral. "I'd heard there was a possibility Gunther was still alive and gaining access to the colony. I just couldn't prove it."

Pain flickered in her eyes as she slowly nodded. Then the ramifications seemed to slam into her and she crossed her arms again. "How long?" She held up her hand when he went to answer. "Don't bother. I can tell you exactly when you discovered the truth. The same day you decided I wasn't worthy of being your mate anymore."

Griffin winced at the sheer anger in her voice, wishing he'd had the guts to bring the subject up before they'd been forced into this position. He took a step forward, stopping when she matched his with a quick step back. "Samantha. Please understand my position. I had no way of knowing Gunther's connection. It could've been anyone."

"Yet you chose to believe it was me, without even having the decency to ask? You could have simply searched my thoughts. What good is this damn connection if you don't trust in it?"

"The connection isn't a given when it's between other species. Some have learned to shield..." His voice trailed off. Now that he'd said it out loud, it sounded more than ludicrous.

Samantha snorted. "Well, you don't worry about trusting it now, because you're not fucking touching me again!"

A tremble shivered through her and it was all he could do not to lunge across the room and take her in his arms. More pain filled his head, only there was no mistaking who it belonged to.

Sam turned away from him, directing her anger toward Cain. "Just what in the hell did you all think I had to gain by helping Gunther? What possible motive could I have?"

"That's simple," said Cain. "You want power."

"Over what?" she demanded, huffing at his knowing smile. "You?" She palmed her hips. "Believe me. The last thing I want is to be the supreme commander of a bunch of barbaric assholes like you... people who can't overlook the fact that we're human to give us any kind of a chance." She cursed, stomping her foot on the floor. "If I'd wanted to take control of the colony, Cain, don't you think I would've tried it as soon as we'd crashed? Why suffer through challenges and insults if I had the capability of simply annihilating you? Perhaps if you spent the same

amount of time thinking about the logistics of it, as you do hating us, you'd see that we have just as much to lose in this relationship as you do."

Cain's arrogant expression faltered slightly. "Who else would aid an animal like Gunther, but one of his own?"

"Someone who has more to gain." She glanced over at Rider. "Can you fix the damage once Quinn gets you back on your feet?"

"Yes, Captain."

She nodded. "Do what you can. We need that shield up." She looked at Caleb. "See what you can do to keep this place secure. I need some air."

Sam limped across the room, stopping short when Griffin blocked her way. She glared at him. "Don't."

"We need to talk."

"We needed to talk three months ago, when you first discovered that bastard was still alive! It's too late, now. Just make sure your people are safe." She hobbled around him, staying beyond his touch.

"Running away isn't going to solve this," he said, hoping to guilt her into talking to him. Hell, at this point he'd try anything.

"You were the one who ran, Griffin. I'm merely closing the door."

Griffin cursed as she limped out of the room, her shoulders hunched, tears building behind her thick lashes. He never should have believed the stories. But he'd felt a need to stand up for their way of life, after allowing her to persuade him to stay the execution. It'd been centuries since his kind had mated with humans, and he just couldn't dismiss the possibility that she'd been able to shield her thoughts from him. Now he'd pay for that decision...with his soul.

"She's lying," snipped Sirena. "Why else would she have demanded Gunther be banished instead of executed? Don't think for one minute I believe her story about standing up for justice."

Griffin growled at Sirena, too exhausted to deal with her insubordination. He didn't have a clue who was helping Gunther. He only knew it wasn't Samantha.

"You prejudiced little bitch," snapped Caleb. "Just because Sam gained Griffin's attention doesn't give you the right to persecute her for something she's not guilty of."

Griffin stepped between the two when Sirena took a calculated step forward, her weapon gripped in her hand. "Enough. Sirena curb your tongue, or I'll remove it. Samantha is still my mate

and she'll be treated as such, or you'll answer to me in the ring." He released a heavy breath. "And I won't grant you the pleasantries she extended to Cain."

Sirena's face paled and she dropped her hand, muttering something under her breath as she darted out the door.

Griffin sighed, wishing he'd just stayed in bed with Sam. He turned to Caleb, not anxious to hear the man's next statement. "You might as well say what's on your mind, Caleb, so we can get back to work."

Caleb grunted, glancing over at Quinn and Rider before looking back at Griffin. "Sam never told you why she doesn't believe in the death penalty, did she?"

A cold shiver crept along his spine, bringing the inklings of fear. "No," he said, not sure where Caleb was heading.

"Did she tell you anything about her childhood?"

Griffin could only shake his head.

"She rarely talks of it. She doesn't like anyone to pity her." Caleb took a deep breath. "Her parents were both doctors, and their specialty was alien diseases. When Sam was about eight years old, her parents answered a distress signal from a distant planet plagued with a devastating illness. The only way they were able to save the inhabitants was to use some very advanced treatment. Unfortunately, the elders saw their methods as evil sorcery and accused the family of practicing witchcraft. They tried to flee, but they were captured and dragged back to the town square. Sam watched as one by one, her parents and then her brother and sister were burned at the stake."

Caleb stopped, drawing in a ragged breath as he turned to stare at the closed door. "While they were preparing her pyre, one of the women her mother had saved cut her ties and helped her escape. Sam ran for days on end, afraid the villagers would hunt her down and take her back to her death. It wasn't until over a year had passed she returned to the ship. She activated the homing beacon, but it took two more years for anyone to find her. By that time, she wasn't the same girl."

He shrugged, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "She spent the rest of her teenage life being shuffled around in facilities...places where orphaned and undesirable children get forgotten until they're old enough to fend for themselves. When she turned eighteen she was given a choice of either signing up in the fleet, or going to a reform facility. Lucky, she chose wisely."

He nodded toward Cain and Mika. "I know you two haven't seen eye to eye. But you might want to cut her some slack. She's come a long way." He headed for the door, stopping at the threshold. Looking back at the men over his shoulder. "For the record. She could kill you before you had time to blink if she wanted. She's had...*special* training."

Griffin watched Caleb leave, his head bowed low. A new wave of guilt slammed into him. Caleb shouldn't have had to be the one to tell him that. But he'd been too busy tending to Sam's physical needs, to think about her emotional ones. Tears stung his eyes, but he blinked them away. He needed to talk to her. Beg for forgiveness and find out who was really behind the attacks, before the entire colony became extinct.

Chapter Eleven

Sam pushed her back against the cool rock, trying to catch her breath. She'd left the control room and had headed straight for the cliff near the rear perimeter, stopping only to grab a blaster from Caleb's room. There were very few places Gunther could bypass security, and since he obviously wasn't walking in through one of the gates, he had to have found an alternate way in. The massive stone wall was the only place that might hold the answer.

She'd shimmed up the side, nearly falling twice when her damn leg had refused to move the way she'd wanted and had made her way along the ridge, looking for any sign of an opening. She'd just about given up hope when her foot had slipped and she'd slid down a small overhang, falling onto a hidden plateau beside a large grotto.

Now she stood peering into the darkness, recognizing the hazy pattern of light against the far wall as a reflection off of a candle from deeper within the cave. Faint designs flickered across the stone, making it appear as if the rock was breathing.

Sam bit back the pain in her leg as she palmed the grip of the gun, limping her way down the narrow passage, the dank odor of cave permeating the heavy air. She stopped just short of a blind corner, praying she wouldn't have to kill Gunther, but knowing his fate was already sealed, before stepping into the wavering light.

Gunther stood at the other end of a large cavern, his shadow playing along the adjacent wall. He had his back to her, bending over a rough wooden table as he muttered to the empty room. She glanced around the bleak space, but it was barren except for a small scattering of chairs and tables, and an old mattress tossed on the floor in a corner, the edges dotted with mold. She took another step in, pointing the blaster at his back.

"Captain Grier. I wondered when you'd drop by," said Gunther, still fiddling with something on the table. "To be honest. I expected you a few weeks ago. But then I guess you haven't been feeling very well." He glanced back at her over his shoulder. "How's Griffin?"

"Cut the act, Gunther, and turn around." She motioned at his hands. "Don't try anything stupid. We both know how accurate I am with a blaster."

Gunther nodded, placing a small unit down on the wood before turning to face her, crossing his arms on his chest as he leaned against the table. "Accurate yes...but motivated?" He chuckled. "I don't have to be able to read your thoughts to know you have no desire to kill me. It's what I've been counting on all along."

"Believe what you want. I came here to bring you to justice. How that happens is your choice. But it's over. I can promise you that."

"Over," he repeated, mimicking her voice. "Oh, my dear Captain, it's just beginning." He smiled a toothy grin that made her stomach heave. "Getting Griffin to banish me was only the first step in a journey that's just now starting to take shape." The smile faded as he huffed out a harsh breath. "I would've been further along if Rider hadn't interrupted me, but I suppose that's just a minor setback. One that's easily overcome, especially now that you're here." He nodded at a chair off to her right. "Why don't you have a seat before your leg buckles. It wouldn't look very good if you passed out before you were able to exact your *justice*."

"This isn't funny. Because of you, the entire village is at risk, and not just Griffin's people. Bloody hell. What could possibly drive you to this? Why did you kill that family?"

A slow scowl captured his lips as he glared at her, his eyes narrowed. "Ah, the million dollar question. Why did I kill those poor, innocent people?" He snarled and spat on the ground. "Do you really think this is about them?"

"I have no idea what you're thinking. I can't even begin to imagine what's going through your psychotic skull."

"I'm far from crazy, I can assure you of that. As a matter of fact, it's a brilliant plan. One that hinged completely on you begging your lover not to kill me." His smile returned. "You played your part perfectly, Samantha."

Sam shook her head. "This has nothing to do with me."

"Oh, but it does. Don't you see? I counted on your distaste for killing to gain my freedom. I couldn't have claimed this wonderful place as my own if you hadn't gotten me exiled. From here, I've been able to execute every piece of the puzzle, without anyone the wiser."

“What the hell are you talking about? What plan?”

“Why, the plan to rule everything and everyone on this hunk of rock.”

Sam stared at the man, wondering if the solitude had finally gotten to him. “Griffin’s people will never follow you. Besides, there’s no way to beat them, not with the number and strength of their warriors.”

“Perhaps,” he shrugged, an evil smile tugging at half his mouth. “Or perhaps all they need is a leader who shares my vision.”

A cold shiver raced down Sam’s spine. Had that been his plan all along? To dispose of Griffin? Was everything else just a way of building to that goal? She heard a growl resonate through the cave, and was surprised to realize it’d come from her.

Gunther smiled at her, raising one eyebrow. “What’s the matter? Can’t bear to think about life without your animal lover?”

Sam shook her head, taking a small step back. Just the thought of losing Griffin made her stomach drop, and it took all her strength to keep from heaving. “You’re crazy. If you think for one moment I’ll allow you to hurt him...”

Her voice faded when a cold blade caressed the side of her neck, just as a set of fingers wrapped in her hair. She froze, fighting the urge to strike, wishing her instincts were wrong, but intimately aware of who stood behind her.

“What do you think you’re doing, Gunther?”

Gunther pushed off the table. “Just having a few words with my former Captain.” He grunted and pointed his finger toward them. “It took you long enough to get here, Sirena. The good Captain could’ve killed me a dozen times over by now.”

She felt Sirena shrug as her hand tightened in Sam’s hair.

“Please. The bitch doesn’t have enough gall to kill you. She’s too *compassionate* to murder someone, even if they deserve it. Isn’t that right?”

Sam winced as Sirena yanked on her hair, shoving her toward Gunther. She held her breath, gauging every line of attack, as she allowed the woman to drag her into the middle of the room.

“Put your blaster down over there,” order Sirena, motioning to another small table beside them.

“I don’t understand,” said Sam, tossing the gun down. “Why would you kill your own people?”

“My people?” she raged, twisting Sam’s hair to the point of pain. “They’re not my people anymore, at least not the ones who believe you’re anything more than blood thirsty animals intent on enslaving us again. I warned them...all of them...but they wouldn’t believe me. Griffin kept insisting you’d been sent to save us. That you came just when our technology was about to leave us defenseless. But I know the truth. You’re nothing more than lying heathens that will spell the end of our way of life!”

Sam stared at the woman. Sirena’s eyes were bulged in rage and her hair was wild about her face. She looked more savage than ever, and Sam had a bad feeling Gunther was merely a victim to Sirena’s desires.

“By destroying the power converters, you’re the one destroying your way of life,” said Sam. “The colony can’t survive without that power.”

Sirena laughed, a shrill sound that felt like nails across Sam’s skin. “Oh, you poor, stupid human. Don’t you see that’s exactly what I want? If the colony becomes unsustainable, then Griffin will be forced to move us to a place void of your kind... Where there aren’t any white walls or magical devices dispensing food. We’ll finally be free to live as we were intended.”

“There isn’t anywhere else to go, Sirena. If you leave the safety of the compound, the sand beasts will hunt you down and kill you.”

Sirena growled, tightening her hold before flinging Sam off to the side. Sam stumbled across the ground, trying to gain her balance as she bounced against the far wall. Pain flared through her leg, sending dots across her vision. She palmed the stone, shaking off the fuzziness, meeting Sirena’s enraged glare.

“We don’t need your help to survive,” she yelled, grabbing the blaster. “We never needed the humans to survive.”

“If you hate us so much, why team up with one of us?” taunted Sam, wondering how Gunther couldn’t see the path Sirena was taking.

“I needed someone who believed in my vision to help me out, and Gunther was the perfect specimen. He hates my people as much as I hate yours, but he wasn’t above fucking me. And that’s where true power lies. Isn’t that how you’ve manipulated Griffin? With your pretty little sheath?” She leaned back, flashing a smile at Gunther. “Turns out sex is the one thing our two worlds have in common.”

Sam shouldered some of her weight against the wall, watching Sirena caress the muzzle of the blaster. While she was confident she could best Sirena, even injured, she couldn’t dodge

multiple blaster shots. "Griffin would never endanger his people that way. He won't relocate them knowing there's little chance of survival."

"Griffin's opinion isn't part of the plan," she hissed, raising the blaster. "Once I prove you were conspiring with Gunther, his reign as leader will come to an end." She laughed again. "Though I might allow him to join me if he proves to be half as good at shafting as I saw this morning."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" snarled Gunther. "Leaving Griffin alive was never part of the plan. We're going to rule this planet...together."

Sirena turned to him, shrugging. "I guess that means there's a change in plans."

Sam jumped as Sirena fired the blaster, hitting Gunther square in the shoulder. The force knocked the man back, dropping him to the damp rock with a dull thud. Smoke curled off his shirt, as his head lolled to one side.

Another giggle filled the space. "I can see why you like these. They're very effective." She pulled the trigger again, only to snarl in disgust when the unit powered down, one last spark arcing through the air before sizzling against the wet floor. She hissed and tossed the machine away, turning her anger toward Sam. "Typical, but then I've always preferred my own weapon."

Sam limped sideways, keeping a healthy distance between them. If Sirena insisted on fighting, she couldn't guarantee she wouldn't kill the woman, though at this point, her desire to see the bitch's blood staining the dark floor more than tempted her.

She held up her hand, trying to talk some sense into Sirena. "Don't do this. I really don't want to kill you, but if you don't stop, you won't leave me any other choice."

"You...kill me. In what reality?" Sirena sauntered toward her, flicking her blade in her hand. "I should've done this long ago. Griffin was going to choose me as his mate! But then you showed up and everything changed." She banged one of the tables out of the way, sending bits of metal skidding across the ground. "You, with your pale skin and blue eyes. He acted as if he'd never seen anything so lovely." She stopped, a hysterical cackle catching in her throat. "You should've seen his face when I told him Gunther was alive, and that you were the one helping him gain access to the compound. He didn't want to believe me, but I had proof. I'd stolen some of your human clothes and gotten Gunther to sleep with them until his scent was infused with yours. I also made sure some of his precious seed got splattered across a pair of your disgusting panties." She smiled, shaking her head. "I thought Griffin's head was going to pop right off his shoulders. It was delicious."

“Even if you manage to kill me, Griffin won’t believe your story. Our connection is back and he knew the truth the moment Cain accused me of being involved. He could feel my surprise, my innocence. He’ll never be yours.”

“Then he’ll die alongside you,” she said.

Sam skirted another table, already feeling the numbing haze start to creep into her. “Stop this now, Sirena, while I still have some control. You don’t know what I’m capable of...what they did to me in that facility. I try to hold back, but I won’t be able to—not this time.”

“You don’t scare me. I’ve fought more demons than you could imagine. You’re just like them.”

Sam clenched her jaw, trying to keep the haze from smothering her, but she could feel it slipping away. She took a soothing breath, knowing it’d be over before Sirena even knew it’d begun, when a harsh light exploded on the ground between them.

“Sirena!”

Griffin’s voice echoed through the space, shaking Sam back to her senses. She turned toward the tunnel, staring at the gathering of men, wondering how long they’d been watching. Sirena sneered at Griffin, waving her blade through the air.

“See. I told you,” she shouted, pointing at Gunther. “I found them together...planning their next attack. I managed to disarm her and kill the bastard, but she’s still a threat. Kill her!”

Griffin held out his arm, stopping Caleb from pushing past him, and took two steps forward. “It’s over, Sirena. We heard everything. Sam had nothing to do with this. It was you...it was always you.”

Sirena shook her head, then stopped, throwing it back as she laughed. “All this time you made your mate suffer and for what? Lies?” She snorted, flicking her head at Sam. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve done all the damage I need. You’ll never get her back, not after the ease with which you betrayed her. And the colony will fall into chaos, just like I planned.”

“I won’t allow my people to die because of your selfishness,” said Griffin. “Put the blade down.”

An evil smile picked up one side of her mouth as Sirena glance at Sam. “As you wish.”

Sam read Sirena’s intentions, diving to her right, twisting her shoulders in the hope of lessening the impact of the blade as Sirena threw it at her, hurtling it through the air, the silver edge gleaming in the flickering light. She tensed, waiting to feel the sharp edge tear through her

flesh, when a spear flashed in front of her, catching the blade mid-air, and knocking it to the left. It ricocheted off the wall, clanking to the ground near her feet.

Sirena screamed in frustration, pulling another knife from her belt, aiming it at Sam's chest, but Griffin was already moving. He dove across the rock, rolling to his feet in front of Sirena, deflecting the blow with his arm as he locked his hand around her throat, lifting her off the ground. She gasped and wrapped her hands around Griffin's arm, fighting against his death grip.

Sam pushed to her feet, balancing on her good leg. "Griffin!"

He shifted his head, but didn't turn toward her.

"Stop. Please. I don't want it to end like this."

A low growl vibrated the air followed by a loud huff. He dropped his head, tossing Sirena across the room. She collapsed against Cain and Mika, a ragged sob her only reply. Mika locked the woman's arms behind her back, before nodding at Cain and striking off toward the entrance.

Cain motioned to the blade. "Why didn't you kill her? You had more than enough time."

Sam mustered a weak smile. "I guess I'm not the animal you think I am."

Cain grunted, fisting his hand on his chest before turning and disappearing into the darkness. Caleb walked over to her, shaking his head.

"Was that Cain being nice?" he mused. "I didn't think he had it in him."

"He's probably still suffering from his head injury," she replied. She turned as Griffin stopped beside her, his eyes narrowed, his lips two thin lines. "Great throw."

"*Great throw!* After everything that just happened that's all you have to say? What in the dark hells did you think you were doing going after Gunther alone?" He ran a shaky hand through his hair, looking as if he wanted to pull some of it out. "I swear, Samantha. You're the most reckless female I've ever encountered." He sighed and toed the moist floor. "You will surely be the death of me."

"You might get that wish if we don't get that wound looked at," she replied, motioning to his arm, fighting the sick feeling at seeing his blood drip on the stone floor. "That cut looks pretty deep."

Griffin flicked it off. "I'm fine." He motioned to her leg. "But I think Quinn should have a look at your leg. I wouldn't be surprised if you pulled out some of your stitches." Another sigh rumbled from his chest. "I should have known it was Sirena. All the accusations...the lies. I guess I didn't want to believe it."

Caleb patted him on the shoulder. "None of us did. But it explains why there were traces of knife wounds beneath the blaster marks on the family Gunther killed. They did it together. And she was carrying the communicator that day on the ridge. She must have turned it off, so you'd be put at risk." Caleb sighed. "I guess she figured if you were killed, your people would turn to her for guidance. And we both know where that would've ended." He looked around the room, and Sam noticed how he skimmed over Gunther's lifeless body. "Let's go. Quinn needs to take a look at both of you. Just don't ask me to get in the middle. As far as I'm concerned, you're both reckless."

* * * *

Sam sat on a low outcropping of rock, watching the second sun play along the horizon. Orange and red streaked across the sky, melding into a deep mauve. It was so different from the places she'd lived, but familiar just the same. She took a deep breath, drinking in the sweet scent of the Bocca flowers scattered along the rocks. The sporadic storms over the past few nights had provided just enough water that the flowers had flourished. She'd never seen anything as beautiful as the large saucer-shaped buds that exploded into shades of purple and red once the suns disappeared. They shimmered in the rare moonlight, looking like large spotlights along the ridge.

She'd ventured to this same spot for the last two nights, needing a place to think where even Griffin didn't search her out. He wasn't fond of heights, which was the reason she'd chosen this place as a form of sanctuary. She couldn't think when he was close, his thoughts and emotions jumbling with hers until she couldn't tell what she was feeling. Since they'd discovered Sirena's involvement, he'd been distant, removed, and she'd followed his lead, keeping to herself as much as possible. But the continued absence was already taking its toll. Even now, frantic cramps sparked across her lower abdomen, making her pussy clench in need. She'd thought about drowning the pain in liquor, but couldn't bring herself to venture into the bar alone, and she wasn't about to ask Caleb to join her.

"So this is where you've been hiding."

Samantha jumped at the sound of Griffin's voice, feeling her heart jackhammer in her chest. She placed a shaky hand between her breasts, trying to steady the sudden rush of adrenaline. "Bloody hell. Don't scare me like that," she scolded bringing her knees to her chest so she could wrap her arms around her legs, hoping the position would hide the way her nipples peaked at the mere sound of his voice or how her pussy fluttered in anticipation, sending a wave

of moisture to her swollen lips. She glanced at him over her shoulder, wondering if was going to sit down or just stand there, staring at her. "I thought you didn't like heights."

He smirked at her, stepping closer. "Only when I'm looking at having to jump across a rift because my stubborn little mate is testing my patience."

"I wasn't testing your patience. I was making a choice."

"And a dangerous one at that. The same way you chose to hunt Gunther alone."

Samantha shrugged, trying to block her feelings when she felt him reach out to her in her mind. "If you came here to lecture me, feel free to go back down." She turned away, trying to distract herself with the way the fiery disk dipped below the horizon, outlining the distance hills.

Griffin sighed, and she could picture his face. The way he drew his brows together, forming a perfect vee on his forehead, or how he pursed his lips into a slight frown, making them look full and red and more than kissable.

"As I've said...you will surely be the death of me." His feet scuffed against the rock as he moved in beside her, brushing her arm as he sat down, staring out at the fading light. "You've been avoiding me for a couple of days now, but there's no hiding what's happening inside you." He grazed his hand along the curve of her back, smiling when a shiver of longing trembled through her. "The pain is back."

"I'm fine."

"You can try to hide your feelings, but you're not strong enough to shield them completely. I can sense your uncertainty, and your need."

Sam cursed, pushing to her feet, facing Griffin with her hands palmed on her hips and her chin held high. "I'm more than just a body for you to fuck when the feeling strikes you," she said. "I need more than that. I need your lo—"

She stopped, tears tight in her chest, her voice lodged in her throat. Pain erupted in stomach, doubling her over, dropping her back to her knees. She stared at the rock, wishing he'd just left her in the tree, when his hand cupped her chin. His callused fingers smoothed over her skin, sending tiny shocks of desire to her already aroused core. Another sliver of pain twisted through her groin and she whimpered before she could catch it.

Griffin frowned at the soft sound, holding her chin so her gaze clashed with his. His eyes softened as he trailed his other hand along the side of her jaw, tracing the outline of her lips. "If it's my love you want, then you're in luck. You already have it."

Shock punched through her as Griffin moved behind her, snaking one arm around her waist as the other slid between her breasts.

“Lean back.”

When she didn’t move, he sighed out a heavy breath and positioned his mouth next to her ear.

“For once, Samantha, could you please do as I ask without fighting me?” He kissed the skin behind her ear, prickling the hairs on her nape. “Please.”

She cursed under her breath as she eased up, following his guide until her back pressed against his chest. She raised her head, allowing it to fall into the crook of his shoulder as he splayed one hand out below her breasts while the other drew small circles along her abdomen.

“It isn’t customary among my people to voice their emotions with words. We choose to show our affection with actions. But I neglected to consider how important it’d be for you to hear how much I love you.”

He paused when her body tensed at the words, his fingers still massaging her belly. A rough rasp of air skirted her shoulder followed by the warm press of his lips.

“I can feel your uncertainty, but I assure you, I have nothing to hide. I won’t deny that nothing is more pleasurable than sheathing myself in your sweet body, but that’s not the only part of you I love.” He raised his left hand, and stroked her hair back behind her ear, exposing her neck to him. “I love your compassion, your spirit. How you put your people and mine above your very life.” He dragged his lips down the line of her neck, nipping at her shoulder. “I knew that first day you were my destiny. I’m only sorry I didn’t show you how important you are in my life. I wasn’t prepared to feel like this. I thought it was just a physical connection. I never dreamed I’d find the other half of my soul...the heart I never had.”

He placed a solitary finger under her chin, turning her head until she was gazing into his steel-grey eyes. “I’m sorry I hurt you... That I doubted you. I allowed my position to rule my heart. I can’t make up for the pain I caused. I can only promise, on my life, to never doubt your conviction again.” His lips twitched into a half smile as a single tear crept down his cheek. “The choice to stay is yours. Quinn can heal your pain with the use of my blood, and perhaps, with time, can break the bond. My path is clear. I won’t mate with another. My heart and soul belong to you.” He released her chin, easing back until their bodies were no longer touching. “I love you, Samantha, and I always will.”

A calming peace descended over her, as she felt the truth of his statement seep into her heart. He wasn't holding anything back, his feelings were completely open to her. She smiled as tears broke from her eyes, not bothering to brush them away. He frowned for only a moment until her thoughts joined with his, lighting his face with a joyous smile. He leaned forward, reclaiming her body, pressing every inch of his torso against hers.

"Apology accepted," she whispered, brushing her lips over his as he nuzzled her neck. "But I won't consider it permanent, until you reassert your claim." She chuckled at his husky growl and the way his cock hardened against the small of her back. "Hold true to your promise, and prove your love...your way."

Griffin looked around the deserted rock, arching his brow in question. "Here? Wouldn't you be more comfortable back in our room?"

Sam shook her head, turning into him as she pressed her chest tight to his. "Too far," she rasped taking his lips in hers.

Griffin met her attack, opening his mouth, allowing her to delve inside. She reveled in his taste, humming in pleasure as the pain ebbed, replaced by a deep hunger that was stronger than ever. She lifted her arms when he grabbed her shirt, sighing when he ripped it instead, tossing the torn pieces away.

"I won't have any clothes left if you keep tearing them off me."

"Then I suppose you'll have to stay in our chambers wearing only my vest," he countered, cupping her breast in his hand. "Do you have any idea how incredibly sexy you are like that? I thought Caleb's eyes were going to pop out of his head."

Sam shook her head, letting it fall back on a moan as he tweaked her nipple between his fingers, sending spikes of need to her sex. She gritted her teeth when he repeated it on the other side, sipping her other nipple into his mouth.

"Griffin. No teasing this time. I need you inside me."

He shook his head, still suckling her nipple until she grabbed at his head. He raised his eyes to her, a devilish sparkle gleaming in them. "I've waited a life-time to love you like this. I have no reason to rush it."

Her heart fluttered at his simple use of the word love. She trembled against him wanting nothing more than to give him the one part of her she'd kept sacred. "You make it impossible for a girl to argue with you. It's just..."

He smiled at her attempt to sway his plan, kissing her on the tip of her nose. "You're more dangerous than an entire herd of sand beasts. This one time, I'll concede." He held his finger to her lips when she went to speak. "But only because I can scent your urgency. Mark my words, little one. As soon as I get you back to our chambers, I'm tying you to our bed, until I've had my fill."

More juice rushed to her folds, as her pussy fluttered at his promise. Images of her bound to their bed filled her head, testament to his claim.

She nodded, nuzzling his neck as she whispered into his ear. "Just as long as I get to tie you up next."

"You've already bound my heart. I don't think you could bind me more. So I accept your condition. Now lay back so I can remove this bothersome piece of cloth."

Sam relaxed against the rock, lifting her hips as Griffin removed her pants, throwing them beside the remnants of her top. Then he slipped off his vest and shoved his pants down, revealing the tightly sculpted muscles across his chest and abdomen. She watched as each muscle flexed and rippled, his skin gleaming in the fading light. She leaned forward, intent on taking his cock in her mouth, only to have him grab her arms and pin them above her head.

"You may devour my shaft when it's your turn with the restraints. I have other plans for where my release will go. After all, you did demand I reassert my claim. There's only one way to do that properly."

Sam snagged her lip between her teeth, glancing at the width of his cock. She wasn't convinced he'd fit inside her anal canal, but she was more than willing to let him try. She moved willingly when he lifted her up, turning her onto her hands and knees.

"You have the most remarkable ass I've ever seen. I can't wait to feel it clench around me." He skimmed his hand along her spine, easing the tension she felt building in her muscles. "Relax. I'll ensure that you're ready before I breach your tender opening, and there's no better way, than to start with your sweet sheath."

A strangled cry caught in her throat as he dipped one hand over her mound, sliding it through her drenched lips. He rumbled at the evidence of her desire, licking at her shoulder as if he were desperate to taste her.

"Dark hells, you're wet." He circled her clit, nipping at her skin when she allowed the next cry to break free. "I can't wait to eat every last drop of your cream, but for now, I'll be satisfied

with feeling it coat my shaft.” He inched his groin closer, nudging her entrance with his flared head. “Get ready to scream for me, my love.”

His name carried across the compound as he surged forward, taking her channel in one firm thrust. Her walls spasmed around him, already close to climaxing. He groaned behind her, pulling her up to his chest, wrapping his arms around her.

“Forever, Samantha. You’re mine, forever.”

She nodded her reply, hissing the word ‘yes’ out with her breath as he pulled back, scraping her sensitive tissues before plunging back home, locking his sac against her ass. His teeth scraped her skin.

“I want to hear you say it. Tell me what I need to hear.” His demand was little more than a dark whisper, but she couldn’t deny the dominance and urgency in his voice.

She tilted her head, groaning when he scraped her shoulder again, tightening her inner muscles in an attempt to keep him inside her. “Yours, Griffin. Forever yours.”

He growled at her admission, levering her forward enough he could pound into her, the wet sounds of his thrusts echoing off the rock. She closed her eyes as her climax coiled inside, looping around until she couldn’t tell where it started or stopped. He kept moving, filling her hard, then retreating just as fast. Her channel quivered with every rough entry, building her need even higher. She cinched her hands around his arms, gouging his skin, but unable to let go. He breathed in her ear, whispering her name, telling her to come for him.

She took one last breath, before the coil snapped, whipping sensations out through her stomach and along her nerve endings, electrifying her skin. Somewhere in the distance she felt Griffin pull free from her sex, as his hands descended on her buttocks. She screamed his name, wanting him back inside her, needing to feel him pulse as he gave her his precious seed, when the pressure returned around her anus. She tried to stop writhing in his arms, but her climax had taken on a life of its own, rippling unending pleasure through her womb. She bent forward, giving him better access, not sure what to expect, when his cock slipped through her tight ring of muscles and surged forward, burying him completely inside her.

Griffin stilled, groaning at the tight clasp of Samantha’s ass, as it held him captive within her forbidden heat. He hadn’t intended on thrusting so quickly, but the rippling effect from her sheath had sent his desire into overdrive, and he’d pushed forward, when her tight pucker granted

him entry. Now he was poised behind her, her back stretched out in front of him as her ass flexed beneath his hands. He forced himself over her, needing to know he hadn't hurt her.

"Little one, are you okay?"

She growled in a voice that was hungry and raw, much the way he felt every time he mated with her. Disjointed sounds broke from her lips, making his sac pull tighter. He reached out, probing her thoughts, wondering why she hadn't answered him. The pleasure that filled his senses made him groan in need.

"By all that's holy, Griffin. Move!"

He chuckled at her plea, so like the first time he'd made love to her. He fisted her hair, tugging it to the side, opening up the sleek line of her neck. "As you wish. And when I finally give you my seed, our souls will once again be as one."

Griffin reared back, dragging his shaft through her vice-like channel, grunting at the force it took to move through her tissues. Samantha cried out, whimpering with every inch he pulled free. He stopped with only the head lodged inside her, her tight ring pulsating around his hood. He threw his head back, growling out his desire as he plunged forward, claiming her passage, giving her all she could take.

Sam thrashed beneath him, her pleas a mixture of his name and a holy affirmation of his actions. He didn't stop this time, thrusting back and forth, feeling the friction build between them. His cock flared, increasing the pressure, drawing a ragged wail from somewhere deep inside her. He held on, filling her ass, needing to show her the full extent of his love. Fire tingled along his spine, warming his sac, making his head pound with need. He bared his teeth, knowing his release was only a few strokes away. He leaned over her, bracing his weight on one hand as the other held her head to the side, revealing her throbbing vein. He licked it once, warning her of his impending action, wanting her to feel every moment of his teeth locked in her shoulder. He felt her channel spasm again, stronger than before, tearing a scream from her chest. He roared behind her, pumping the first shot of seed into her ass, growling her name as he latched onto her flesh, piercing it with the sharp tips of his canines.

Sam jerked beneath him, begging him not to stop, tilting her head even more until her strength finally gave out, and she collapsed in his arms. He held her tightly, savoring the exotic taste of her, knowing he'd never live a day without her by his side. He licked at the wound, a sense of love overwhelming him. Tears stung his eyes, and he didn't try to stop a few from

cascading down his cheek, pooling on her back. A soft sigh filled his head, and he knew it'd come from her.

"Are you well?" he asked, praying his enthusiasm hadn't hurt her.

"Very," she mumbled, allowing him to roll her in his arms, pulling her against his chest as he laid down beside her, dropping frantic kisses across her forehead.

He smiled at the contented look on her face, so innocent he had to remind himself he'd just creamed her ass in a flurried mating. "You're a truly amazing female," he murmured, kissing the tip of her nose. "I thank the Gods for bringing you to me. My world will never be the same."

"And here Caleb thought our two cultures would be worlds apart." She smiled, but then a serious look crossed her face. "Were you serious about Quinn being able to separate us?"

"I never wanted to tie you to me, if it wasn't your wish. After all I'd done, I felt the least you deserved was a way out. Quinn was my only option."

"I don't want a way out," she whispered, running her finger along his jaw. "But I wouldn't mind being tied..."

The growl that rumbled free brought a mischievous smile to her face. He scooped her into his arms, rolling her onto his chest so he could push onto his knees, gaining his feet in the space of a heartbeat. He held her gaze as he placed her on her feet. "I'll give you ten seconds to slip my vest over your luscious body before I lift you into my arms and take you back to our chambers, dressed or not."

Sam giggled, slipping his vest over her shoulders as he pulled his pants up, lacing them together with nothing more than a quick bow. She shrieked when he picked her up, ignoring the other garments still littering the rock.

"I might release you long enough for you to claim those tomorrow, but then again..."

She smiled at his confession, wrapping her arms around his neck. "My body's yours, beastman, but remember. You're next."

Epilogue

One year later...

Samantha dashed into the control room, her heart racing, her stomach twisted into knots. Caleb's coded message had more than piqued her curiosity, but a part of her was nervous about what he'd found. She headed straight for the sensor array, praying her worst fears weren't being realized.

"Well?" she panted, trying to catch her breath as she shouldered up beside him.

Caleb turned to look at her, his gaze falling to her rounded stomach. A flicker of worry flashed in his eyes as he pointed to the small screen centered on the control panel. "I've picked up a signal."

A shiver shimmied down her spine, making her stomach flutter again. "Is it a warship?"

Caleb shook his head, flicking through a series of screens. "Rider hasn't finished installing all of the sensors we managed to recover from the ship, but it's not large enough to be anything more than a salvage vessel. Based on the trajectory, it won't come close enough to the planet to pick up any significant readings, unless we try to send out a signal. I'm not sure the damn beacon will even work, but I can give it a try." He settled his gaze on her again. "If you want me to."

Bile burned in the back of Sam's throat as Griffin stalked into the room, a deep furrow on his brow. No doubt he'd sensed her anxiousness, and had answered her unspoken call. He moved in behind her, palming his hand along the small of her back.

"Is everything all right? You seem...worried."

Sam glanced at Caleb, knowing she couldn't hide the truth from Griffin, but wishing she didn't have to tell him. "Caleb picked up a distant signal on the sensor array Rider installed. It

looks like there's a salvage ship in one of the adjacent quadrants. It isn't headed this way, but we could probably contact it, if we sent out a distress signal."

The vein in Griffin's temple pulsed as he smoothed his hand over her belly, rubbing the mounded flesh with his fingers. He took a deep breath, but Sam could feel the pain burning in his chest. "We knew this day might come." He looked at her. "What is your wish?"

A soothing calm enveloped her when the baby inside squirmed, kicking against her ribs. She smiled and covered Caleb's hand with hers. "I already know my decision, but do you really want to go back?" She nodded at the woman working in the other room, her long dark hair, flowing over her shoulders. "Are you prepared to give up what you've worked so hard to achieve?"

Caleb followed her gaze and smiled. "I don't see the point in sending out a rescue beacon when we're already home." He nodded at her. "Good thing Rider also thought to install a type of cloaking device." He pressed a series of buttons, chuckling when the panel glowed a soft green. "Now if they bother to search for viable life forms, all they'll find are sand beasts. And we've boosted their signal to make them even uglier than they really are."

Sam smiled, twinning her hand with Griffin's as she leaned into his chest. "And to think you told me you didn't want to live on a planet ruled by apes."

"I guess this place brings out the beast in me."

Sam shook her head. "You really need to work on your jokes. Now if you've got everything under control, I have some business to attend to."

She turned to Griffin, squealing when he picked her up and headed for the door. She nodded at his unspoken question. "You promised me forever, and I won't settle for anything less. Besides, our child needs a father, and I don't think anyone else could fill your shoes."

Griffin smiled, snuggling her close. "I knew you'd be the death of me," he whispered. "But I wouldn't have it any other way."

About the Author

Kris sees herself as somewhat obsessive and feels she tends to push the boundaries of common sense sometimes. Her friends graciously see her as passionate and adventurous. After all, speed limits are only a guideline and shouting is just her way of rising above the chaos.

Kris loves the outdoors. If she's not on her computer— or chasing after her three kids— you'll find her out on a trail somewhere, either running or riding her mountain bike. Kris took up adventure racing a few years ago, and does her best to enter one or two races every year.

Kris started writing some years back, and it took her a while to realize she wasn't destined for the padded room, and the voices chattering away in her head were really other characters trying to take shape. (And since they weren't telling her to conquer the human race, she went with it.)

Kris loves writing erotic novels. She loves heroines who kick butt, heroes who are larger than life, and sizzling sex scenes that make you squirm in your seat, and leave you feeling just a bit breathless.

Kris loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.krisnorris.ca.

Thank You!

We appreciate your purchase of this Resplendence Publishing title. We hope your reading experience was a pleasurable one, and invite you to take 10% off your next electronic book purchase from website.

Visit www.ResplendencePublishing.com, select any title, and enter the following code when you check out: **ReadRP10**. This code is valid only on our website, for electronic book purchases only.

During your visit to www.ResplendencePublishing.com, you can enjoy Free Reads from RP's hottest authors, obtain information on our Read Green charitable donation program, or sign up for our quarterly newsletter and our RP Reader Rewards program, which awards loyal readers with a \$10.00 gift certificate for every \$100.00 spent.

You can also join us on MySpace, Facebook, and Blogspot. You will find regular updates, information on upcoming releases and appearances, as well as contests for free RP titles. We love to hear from our readers, and hope to see you there.

Thank you again for your purchase, and we look forward to becoming your number one resource for high quality electronic fiction.

Best,
The RP Team

Also Available from Resplendence Publishing

***Checkmate* by Kris Norris**

For years he's hidden in the shadows...watching...hunting. His attempts have never been successful, until now. And his game is just beginning.

Kendall Walker and her brother, Trace, share a passion for adventure racing. But when Trace is kidnapped by a psychotic figure from their past, Kendall finds herself immersed in an adventure race beyond anything she's ever known. And if she doesn't reach each checkpoint in time, Trace will die. She'll do anything to get her brother back, even surrendering to a man intent on becoming her lover. Luckily for her, Dawson has other plans.

Special Agent Dawson Cade doesn't know how his life went from complacent to complicated in what feels like a heartbeat. He has absolutely no leads on the bastard terrorizing Kendall, and he can't stop himself from wanting to take her into his bed. He knows he needs to keep distant, but when circumstances force him to succumb to the desires of a man intent on possessing Kendall, Dawson must face the truth. He's going to be Kendall's next lover, even if she doesn't know it yet.

And as the race begins, he can only hope he's able to save Trace, and keep Kendall from sacrificing herself, in a game where even victory has a price.

***Soul Dancer* by Aurora Rose Lynn**

Once they used to dance as children, now Jamar Q'ellan wants to take dancing with Kierra Vonne to another level. As the years have elapsed, the distance between Jamar and Kierra has become insurmountable, yet both will become entangled in a dance of desire.

On the planet of Manitee-a in 2975 C.E., skin color determines whether you're of the ruling class or a slave. Sex and love is forbidden between the black-skinned Jaquill ruling class and the white Kattanee slaves. Kierra, a slave, knows the ultimate penalty if she makes love to Jamar, but he is persistent, persuasive, and unwilling to let go of her and consequently the carefree past in which she loved and trusted him without reservation.

The one time Kierra is allowed to choose, she must make a life or death decision—walk away from Jamar and true love or give him the passionate nights they both deserve. She just might make the wrong choice.

***Finding Her Place* by Midnight Dupree**

The war is over and Cameron Cabot no longer knows who she is. Her life was enveloped and consumed by the fight, but suddenly things have changed. Instead of fighting creatures wanting her planet, Cameron is now fighting the urge to lay claim to two men who believe she is their mate. Has Cameron found her new assignment in the arms of a Noah and Mars?

Yes, if a mischievous little spirit has anything to say about it...

***Blue* by Maddie James**

Cyan Seye is on the run. She is the last blue-eyed Caucasian woman known to exist in the year 2077. Her father has just been murdered and suddenly her safe and sequestered life no longer exists.

Devin McCrae, a Mulatto, is her protector. Hired by her father to see Cyan to a safe place called Betatakin, it is his mission to see to her father's dying wish.

Running from the government, the Underground, and hidden forces aligning against them, Devin and Cyan begin a frantic journey for safety. Cyan's life is totally in Devin's hands, while his life depends on getting them both safely to Betatakin. Relying solely on each other, trust becomes a critical factor. But trusting Devin is no easy feat for Cyan—especially since her protector and her father's murderer are one in the same.

***Knight in Shining Amour* by Demi Alex**

An uncharacteristic storm catapults Effie Genes to the night medieval Rhodes fell into the Ottoman hands. Pulled onto Lord Kavin's stallion, the modern-day Effie experiences the war and degrading occupation of her birthplace, as passion and danger dictate the fate of lovers born five hundred years apart.

Lord Kavin risks his life to keep Effie out of a Sultanzada's bed and claim her as his own. But once he has her in his arms, will he need to release her in order to save her?

Find Resplendence titles at the following retailers

Resplendence Publishing

www.ResplendencePublishing.com

Amazon

www.Amazon.com

Barnes and Noble

www.BarnesandNoble.com

Target

www.Target.com

Fictionwise

www.Fictionwise.com

All Romance E-Books

www.AllRomanceEBooks.com

Mobipocket

www.Mobipocket.com