

Isle

JULIAN'S *Jeopardy*

A DAWN ENDEAVOR TITLE

MARIE HARTE

Dawn Endeavor 3: Julian's Jeopardy

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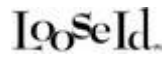
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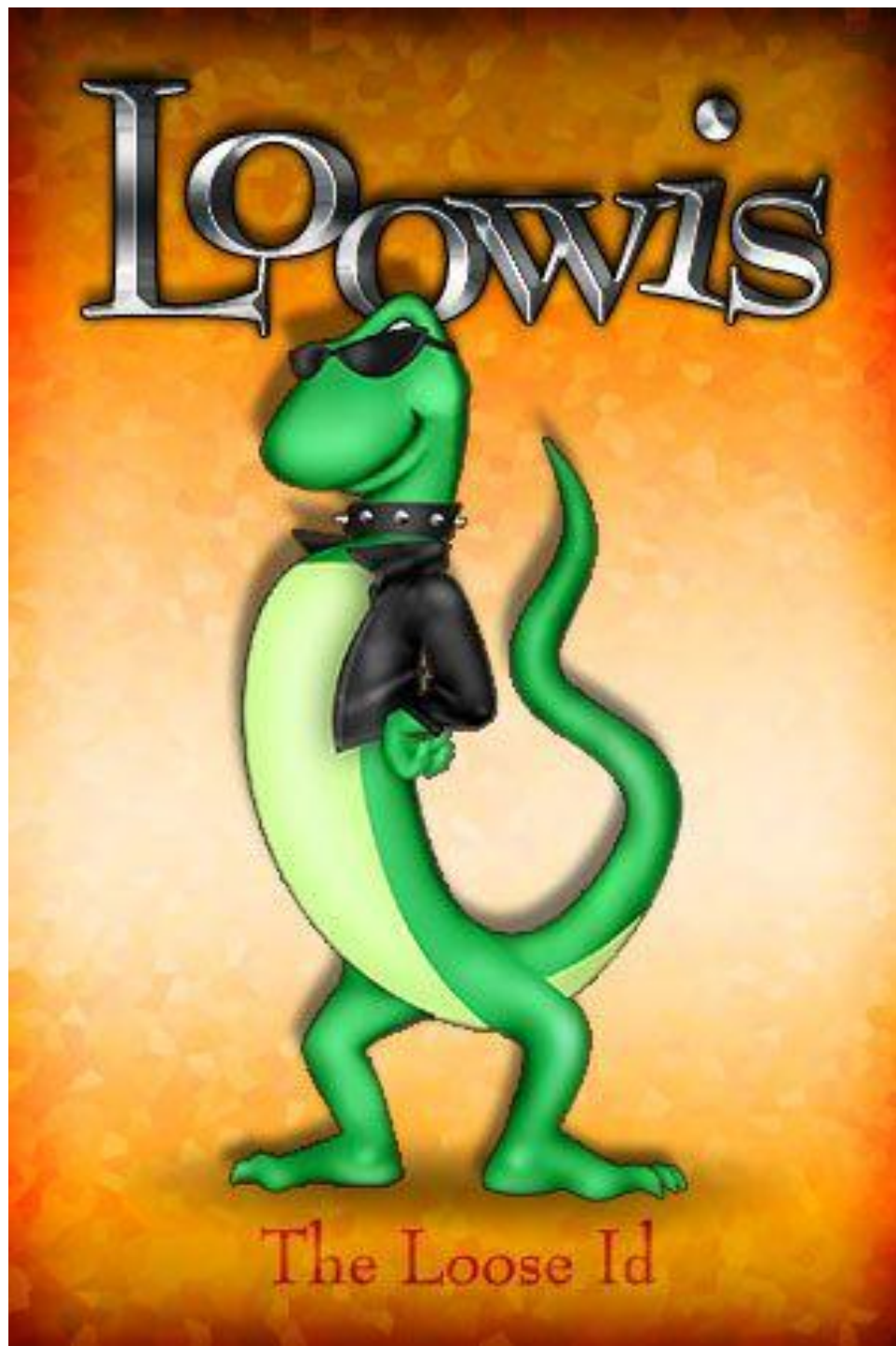
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Chapter One

Somewhere in the Amazon

Julian Hawkins clenched his jaw tight as he strained at the cuffs chaining him to the stone wall. A thin trickle of water fell down the wall across from him, lit by the lone ray of sunlight that shone through a small opening in the ceiling, some twenty feet up. Sweat rolled down his naked body; the nearby water teased, making his dry throat even drier. He would have thought a cave would be cool, but here, in this godforsaken jungle, it felt like a sauna. Just one more piece fitting into the puzzle of where the hell he'd been taken.

He yanked his right wrist again but couldn't break free. The chafe of metal irritated his raw and bleeding wrists and ankles. The fuckers who held him knew what they were doing. He could have broken his way out of simple iron cuffs, but they must have reinforced the metal holding him, because it withstood Circ strength.

Julian swayed—from lack of food, pain, or the drugs they gave him, he couldn't be sure. Hell, he didn't even know how long he'd been in this hellhole, away from his team. But it would have been long enough to turn Tersch into a raving berserker, and Fallon, Olivia, Hayashi, and Morgan crazy trying to find him.

He wondered if Alicia Sharpe, their illustrious leader and a woman he didn't trust one damn bit, cared where he'd gone. His vision blurred, and his hearing suddenly centered on the pulsing of his own heart. Flashes of his time as a SEAL mixed with past missions as a Circ, muddled with the present. *Shit, more hallucinations.* He tried to shake them off. Then his mother was there and seemed to be calling out for him, warning him to wash the mud off the dog before his father returned. Man, Dad would be so pissed. Before he could answer her, though, he suddenly found himself standing over his parents' caskets in a stale funeral home, baffled at their sudden deaths.

Grief, rage, and confusion tugged at him. And then the sticky-sweet smell of tropical flowers and the sweltering humidity of the jungle pulled him back to the present. Swearing under his breath, Jules wondered how the hell he was going to escape when he had trouble making sense of what was real and unreal.

The echo of footsteps beyond his cell sounded overly loud as his superior hearing gradually returned. As a Circ, a man enhanced by the genetic experiments of an overzealous government, Jules had enhanced senses, increased speed, the

capacity to regenerate tissue, and an intuitive sense of survival. Which didn't explain how or why he'd been chained up in this cave like a fucking pincushion for the dickheads in white lab coats, dickheads who didn't speak English. He shook his head, hoping this bout of lucidity would last. A sudden thought hit him.

Mrs. Sharpe was right. We assumed we'd found that drug lab, but we didn't find the real place manufacturing the drugs... Drugs? What drugs? A sharp pain interrupted the flow of thought, and then something inside him seemed to push through the drugs again, clarifying his memories. The drugs that had been aimed at disabling Admiral London's new psychic warfare program. I'd bet everything I own that I'm in their shitty lab as we speak.

The footsteps grew closer, and Jules forced himself to relax. He wouldn't give these fuckers a thing. Not rage, not one damn emotion that would tell them what he was feeling. He'd been stonewalling them since he'd woken up in this hellhole. Not until they answered some of his own questions would he respond with anything more than silence or insults. *If I can stay conscious enough to ask them.*

A lock turned, and the thick, wooden door of his cell grated as it opened. He'd mentally broken through that weak door a dozen times over. He only needed to be released from the chains imprisoning him to the wall.

The open door allowed a warm breeze of air to flow through. The uplifting sweet, floral smell was so at odds with the treatment he currently suffered. That scent and the lack of coolness typically associated with a cavern told him that, though he might be in a cave, he was aboveground, not under.

Four men entered. Each held a gun equipped with specially tipped tranquilizers—not bullets, as he'd learned when he'd first arrived however long ago. That they seemed to have no intention of killing him bothered him more than if they'd come at him with machetes. They wanted something. Jules had a bad feeling he knew just what that something was.

His body trembled, and he forced himself to hold on. A subtle shifting beneath his skin, a sentient presence not quite his own, reinforced his will. He wouldn't let the drug take him under again, not until he'd faced the enemy and tried to get some answers.

Behind the armed guards, an older man he'd had the misfortune of already meeting, Dr. Manoel Eduardo Melo Silva, approached with a stranger. Jules squinted. No, not a stranger. The asshole stepped closer, and Jules blinked past the haze in his vision.

Colonel Ricardo Montaña, in the fucking flesh.

A tall, muscular man who looked to be in his late forties, Montaña had short black hair, a dark complexion, and a thick mustache that curved over thin, bloodless lips. He wore a military uniform of camouflaged khaki. His eyes were dark, mean; a sadistic gleam showed through as he stared at Jules. But it was the scar that identified him. It ran down the left side of his face, from his eyebrow to his jaw.

Montaña—the murderous asshole they'd been looking for the past year.

The swarthy male muttered to the soldiers, who quickly surrounded Jules.

Jules remained silent, understanding he was in a hell of a lot more trouble than he'd assumed. He and his team had been after Montaña for months, ever since the psychotic colonel had joined forces with Jules's ex-commander. Now *dead* ex-commander, Jules thought with grim satisfaction.

Thanks to Jules and his partners, that dick had died four months ago at the hands of a mutant Circ, a monster no more human than the natural predators that thrived in the Amazon. Unfortunately, Montaña had escaped before Jules could nail him too. They'd thought Montaña worked for the Circs' ex-commander, but now Jules had to wonder. Perhaps Montaña played a larger part in the enemy's organization than they'd assumed. Jules meant to find out.

One positive in this fucking nightmare, at least.

"Ah, Julian Hawkins. I've so looked forward to meeting you."

Montaña's deep, husky voice aggravated the beast that lived just beneath Jules's skin. He forced back his animalistic impulse to bare his lengthening fangs and remained quiet while Montaña continued to talk.

"I watched you destroy William Delancey—your old captain, no? Impressive. Using his own mutant to kill him was genius. The thing fucked him to death before the yacht blew. Did you know that?"

Jules hadn't known. He'd hauled ass off the boat after making sure the explosives his teammate had set were in place. But knowing Delancey had suffered righted the scales of justice in a small way. Jules still blamed the shithead for dragging him and his team into this life beyond being human, a life that demanded so much more than he'd ever wanted to spend on living.

"So quiet." Montaña nodded at Dr. Silva. "*O doutor* tells me you're not being very cooperative, Lieutenant Hawkins. Or do you no longer go by naval rank, now that you're not officially a SEAL? That ended four years ago, eh? When you first entered the Circ project?"

Montaña stepped closer and nodded for Silva to approach.

As usual, Silva stank of fear when near Jules, and Jules's beast thrived on the stench. He didn't take his eyes from Silva when the doctor stabbed the needle into his arm, a needle made especially to penetrate thick Circ skin. Normal instruments didn't work on him, even when he was in his human form.

"I know much about you, Julian. I know you'd do anything for your team. I know more about the people you work for than you do." Montaña's voice lowered. "Think of it. Instead of all of this nonsense, you could work *with* us. Why continue to help a government that tried to kill you? Dr. Pearl had the full sanction of the Department of Defense to experiment on sailors and soldiers, and he sold you out to the highest bidder." Montaña spread his arms out. "At least here, we're honest about our means and methods."

Silva had been trying to sell Jules this same bullshit since he'd arrived—when the good doctor wasn't taking his blood or shooting him up with something that fogged his mind. Jules remained quiet, his gaze on the doctor so intense that the men near him grumbled and stepped closer.

Montaña yanked his head back by his hair and snapped, "You look at *me* when I'm talking to you! I'm willing to make you a part of my team. Just show me what I want to see. Make yourself disappear. I know you can do it; I saw you and Delancey moments before his death. Video captured it all. Show me, Julian."

Montaña leaned close, the scent of evil so strong, Jules couldn't help growling in warning.

"There's a hint of the animal, eh? Good. You're still in there, even after all of Manoel's tinkering."

Montaña released his hair and laughed at the doctor. "You see, Manoel? You just need to know how to push his buttons."

Silva shrugged. "I've been trying. He hasn't responded to the controls that work on the other Circs. He doesn't seem to care about his own life, and he's not too worried about his teammates' lives either. I don't think he believes we can get to them."

Jules noticed the grim line of Montaña's mouth and stifled a smile. *I know you can't, or you wouldn't be so obsessed with me. Take that, motherfucker.*

"But then, you always were too soft on our prisoners, Manoel. Perhaps we are feeding Julian too much. Making his life too comfortable here." Montaña waved at the room. "He has a toilet, a bed, chains long enough to allow him room to move. Get rid of the bed."

Hell, the cot was too small to fit Jules's frame anyway.

"And tighten the chains. I don't want him to be able to sit or sleep without feeling pain."

Jules kept silent, though he gave Montaña credit for trying to make his life more miserable. Sleeping on the floor, going without food or water—those things didn't matter. Being chained without the ability to move freaked him the hell out, but he refused to show any concern.

He simply stared at Montaña, plotting how to kill the bastard in the most painful way possible.

Montaña frowned back at him in uncertainty, as if feeling Jules's malice. With a push of energy he really shouldn't have used, considering his weakened state, Jules studied Montaña's aura—a dark, cloudy energy of wrongness—and allowed himself a smile.

His fangs peeked through, and Montaña's fear smelled sweet.

"You stink of terror," Jules rumbled, his voice hoarse. He smiled wider, ignoring his cracked lips and burning blood, now completely polluted with whatever Manoel had given him. "I can't wait to suck the marrow from your bones." As if he'd

lower himself to touch more of Montaña than he needed to kill him. But the threat worked all the same.

Montaña's brows rose, and his eyes widened. "You think to threaten *me*? You've got balls. I'll give you that." Montaña sneered at him and nodded at his groin. "Perhaps I should cut them off, make you less a man?"

Jules continued to smile, letting his beast memorize the features of the man he planned to break in half.

Montaña must not have liked his expression, for he muttered something in a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese before he slammed a fist into Jules's face. When Jules failed to turn away or even flinch from the broken nose, Montaña hit him again. And again. And then the colonel went crazy. He screamed and swore, pummeling Jules everywhere, on every part of his body he could reach.

When Jules next blinked into consciousness, it was to see several of the guards and Dr. Silva holding Montaña back. They swam in and out of focus like psychedelic balls of color on a black- velvet frame. But the pain returned, and with it, Jules's vision.

"You cannot hurt him like this!" Silva yelled. "You're killing our only source, Ricardo. *Por favor, amigo. Stop.*"

"Dose him with the formula." Montaña's evil smile didn't bode well for Jules. "Then we'll do this all over again tomorrow. And the next day. As often as it takes. Being nice doesn't work. We'll see how tough this Circ really is after I have a go at him." Montaña waved a knife and pushed past the doctor. He snarled at Jules, "How does this feel, amigo?"

He stabbed Jules squarely between his legs, and Jules passed out, no longer able to function past the pain.

* * *

Sheridan hustled down the corridor, knowing she didn't have much time before someone spotted her. This whole trip had been one unpleasant surprise after the other. Working for the Vida Verde organization had been a dream come true, until she'd found out that the scientific environment she now worked in was a haven for *questionable* scientific activity. Despite Jaime and Belinda Esteves's agreement that she would fare much better doing her research deeper in the jungle, Sheridan couldn't help wondering if they'd been pressured into sending her to this particular establishment.

Hell, she couldn't even pinpoint her location on a map. She had no idea where she was. She only knew that the flowers she needed for her experiments were suddenly plentiful and at hand. Eager to continue with her work, she'd tried to ignore her misgivings. The research facility had, at first glance, looked legitimate. The few scientists she'd met and spoken with had credentials. Some were botanists or chemists, and like her, they'd been closemouthed about their work. At least here, being antisocial was the norm. A place where she finally fit in, she thought, on the verge of hysterical laughter. She looked around nervously.

Man, I have got to get moving before they see me.

Ricardo Montaña was a problem and had been for years. Living in Quebec, far away from South America, had ensured that she dealt with him very little. She'd had a bad feeling about Ricardo from the beginning. The way he looked at her, as if she were his next meal, made her more than uncomfortable. For years he'd been watching her, visiting out of the blue, bringing her gifts she always, nicely, returned. Instead of upsetting him, her refusals spurred him to bring something even better each time he returned.

Her parents tolerated him because he helped fund the labs where they worked. Successful scientists couldn't be too choosy when fighting for grant money. Her parents were the best of the best. The Keyes name meant something in academia, even if she hadn't yet put her own stamp on it.

Her work meant everything to her, which was the only reason she'd accepted the last gift Ricardo had given her—a precious and unique flower that met the requirements for her botanical research. He'd named the fragrant gem the Sheridan Rose, though the rare bloom had little in common with the perennial flower.

Sheridan huffed. *The Sheridan Rose is the reason I'm in this mess in the first place. Maybe it's time I put work on the back burner and tried to get a handle on my life, like finding a way to live without all the danger and drama I'm currently in. Some way to fit into normal society instead of constantly being that freak on the outside looking in.*

A small chime sounded on her wrist, and she stifled the noise by pressing a button on her watch. She ran through the jungle, past yet another gap between the aboveground shallow caves, into a section of the compound she wasn't supposed to know about. Then again, if Pedro hadn't mentioned the caves, she still wouldn't know about them.

Sheridan couldn't believe what Pedro had told her, and she had to see it with her own eyes. She understood the need to guard the valuable research at the facility, but she couldn't fathom holding a man prisoner for weeks at a time. For God's sake, Ricardo wasn't the law!

And if he was holding a man captive, then the question became: what else was he hiding out here in the middle of the jungle?

Pedro, her one real friend and the head of information technology security at the compound, had advised her to be careful around the place. Just yesterday, he'd whispered a warning for her to leave. Despite losing such a valuable research opportunity, she was prepared to do just that. But not until she verified the truth of a man chained up in a cave. When she eventually reported this to the authorities, she wanted to present fact, not speculation.

The guard changeover would end soon, she reminded herself as she raced to her destination. Thanks to Pedro's directions, which bypassed security, she should be able to enter the cell undetected and leave before the next security change.

Another item on her "why this place is crazy" list.

Half the men who worked on the compound growled at her, literally *growled* at her, when she neared them. Like animals. And they were all bigger, stronger, and decidedly more animalistic than any men she'd ever come into contact with. The few women she'd seen always dressed like prostitutes, and she'd never seen the same woman twice. Entertainment for Ricardo's guards? Part of some bizarre experiments? Where the *hell* did Ricardo find these people?

She paused when she reached the door Pedro had told her to find. Once inside, she'd see the truth for herself. Ricardo had a mysterious background: money, power, and a menacing air. But was he a criminal? If so, what kind? The Esteveses spoke highly of him. If he was as bad as Pedro hinted, would the Esteveses have allowed her to go with him, so deep into the jungle that she'd never get out on her own?

To his credit, Ricardo never made advances. He acted like a perfect gentleman, and he'd even brought Elena along to keep Sheridan company in her off-hours. No one at the facility had touched her, and except for the growls and the hungry gazes from the men, she couldn't complain that she hadn't been treated right. Yet she felt the danger nonetheless. And, if she were honest with herself, most of her anxiety came from Ricardo himself.

Hell, he's a good twenty years older than me. He can't be interested, not when he's got a woman like Elena by his side. She snorted. *His secretary, my ass.*

The older woman was a model, for God's sake.

Sheridan shook her head, smacking her face with the long ponytail holding back her plain Scots red hair. Not blue black like Elena's. She didn't have the woman's bronzed skin, dusky lashes, or bright green eyes that glowed like emeralds. Or the toned, slender curves that magazines paid thousands of dollars for to use in their advertisements—well, they didn't exist in Sheridan. *Yeah, I'm plain and plump. What a bargain.*

Swearing under her breath, she used the device Pedro had given her and disabled the electronic lock, an incongruous sight against the natural splendor of the cave walls. Outside, bats chattered, monkeys howled, and the clicking of insects could be heard. A sudden, soft breeze cooled the sweat soaking through the back of her sleeveless shirt. The shorts she wore helped her stay comfortable. The jungle insects were never a factor when it came to selecting clothing. Sheridan just told the others she used a special spray to deflect their attention. The truth was, Sheridan had never been bothered by them.

She pushed past the keypad and entered the cell. According to Pedro, the cameras that secured the rest of the compound didn't work in the caves. She had nothing to fear about discovery, so long as she avoided the actual guards.

Sheridan glanced at her watch again. Fifteen minutes until the new set came on duty.

She shut the door behind her, and it automatically locked. She wished she could see more than what the moonlight through the hole in the ceiling illuminated. Sheridan found herself in an abandoned cave, barely larger than the room she used

as a laboratory. Why had it been closed in by a man-made wooden door? And why did an electronic keypad protect it?

Something rattled a few feet in front of her. She jumped and scuttled back into the shadows.

A low growl sounded, as if from a wounded animal. Chains rattled again, and she frowned.

"Hello?" she whispered.

No one answered, but as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she spied something—someone—held against the wall across from her.

Oh my God, Pedro was right! There's a man trapped here in this cell. And he's hurt. I can sense he's truly injured. Her palms itched, the need to soothe, to heal so strong, she couldn't ignore the compulsion. The intensity of her need should have shocked her—she'd never felt so drawn to pain before—but she couldn't think past the overwhelming urge to heal.

She darted through the moonlight into the shadows against the wall, where he stood. Except he wasn't so much standing as fighting to stand upright. The scent of blood and infection hit her hard, and tears filled her eyes.

"So much pain," she whispered. She reached out to him and laid her hands on his slick chest. Moist from blood or sweat, she couldn't tell.

He jerked, amazing her that someone who felt so much hurt could still be awake and aware. Then he straightened to an imposing height several inches taller than her.

"Don't touch me," he growled.

Light gray eyes so bright they looked white blazed down at her, almost glowing in the darkness. The preternatural shine should have scared her, but she couldn't stop staring at the giant man bound to the wall. He was *huge*. He had large muscles, a well-conditioned body, and the headiest scent she'd ever smelled. Sheridan swayed closer, wanting to inhale him, and quickly stopped herself. *Come on, Sheridan, focus.* She wished she could see him better, but she'd take what she could get.

Unable to help herself, she ran her hands over his chest, trailing heat over his skin, allowing the healing to pour through her fingers into him. The faint scent of vanilla filled the air. Sheridan sniffed again. An earthy combination of grass and vanilla, as if nature had approved of this male and set him in wait just for her.

Slowly, the infection she'd sensed in the man faded, and the vanilla scent grew stronger.

She continued to caress him, lost in a haze of wonder. Always before when healing, she grew tired, as if giving away a piece of herself. But now, with him, that wasn't the case. He—she had no other word for it—*intoxicated* her.

"Who are you?" he rumbled, his low voice quiet but burning with intensity.

"Sheridan," she answered, lost in the feel of him. He needed so much, and she had so much to give.

"God, what are you doing to me?" he rasped. "Your hands are so hot. Or is that the drugs they pumped into me? Hell if I know up from down anymore," he muttered.

"Shh, it'll be all right. Let me help you. It's okay," she crooned and kissed the spot directly in front of her face, over his broad chest.

She couldn't have said why she did it, but she had to put her mouth on him, to taste some part of him. It dawned on her then that he wore nothing at all. Stunned, she didn't know what to think.

He froze, and the heat leaving her palms returned full force, centering in every pleasure point in her body.

"Don't touch me." His voice sounded stronger. "I won't help you, no matter what you do to me."

"Please, let me finish." She tried to concentrate on him and not the unfamiliar lust coursing through her body, but she couldn't. Especially when she moved closer and felt something firm prod her belly. Good Lord, the man was aroused. She glanced down. Aroused and naked and *huge*.

He muttered under his breath, but he didn't speak again as she ran her hands over his arms, neck, and face, taking away "the bad," as she'd always called it.

"I...I have to finish. I feel more pain." She ran her hands over his hips, and he shuddered.

"Yeah, the pain's getting worse by the second," he growled. "Who the fuck are you? Why are you here?"

The strength of his voice encouraged her, but his anger didn't make sense.

"Did Montaña send you? You here to take all the pain away so he can give it right back?" He sneered.

"Shh, no." She glanced over her shoulder at the door but continued to run her hands over his legs and feet while avoiding that large, insistent part of him. She could feel his hurt, and it was more than unfulfilled arousal. Had someone injured his groin as well?

"You're blushing," he said in amazement, though how he could see in the darkness, she had no idea. "Good Christ, if you're not with Montaña, who the hell are you?" He paused, and his voice shook as he asked, "Are you real?"

"Shh." She rose and put her fingers over his lips. "I work here." When he stilled, she hurriedly amended, "I work in the botanical center. There's a legitimate lab attached to this area. I had no idea you were here. When Pedro told me, I didn't believe him. I had to see for myself."

"Yeah, you've seen, all right." He stepped closer, as close as his chains allowed. "I'm still hurting, sweetheart."

Her face felt on fire, but she couldn't avoid it any longer. She slowly feathered her fingers over his lower abdomen, down his groin to his inner thighs, and cupped his testicles.

The raw groan he gave made her nipples tighten, but there was more than carnal desire in the sound. There was real pain.

"How did this happen?" she asked, appalled.

"Montaña," he rasped, no longer trying to goad her. "Fuck, that feels good. Don't stop," he ordered, sighing into her touch. Though still aroused, he seemed to care more that the pain from his wound leached away. She eased her hands from his warm sac and slid them over his shaft, pushing away the sense of raw scarring that shouldn't have been there.

Now that she held the very essence of him, she recognized a part of the psychic makeup of his physiology. "You shouldn't need me to heal," she said on a breath, amazed. Had she found someone like her, finally? In the heart of the jungle, deep in the Amazon, had she found a kindred spirit?

"No, I shouldn't, but, honey, I'm still aching," his low rumble reminded her. "You're making it worse."

She realized that she no longer felt his hurt, but a new pain had blossomed. The male in front of her pulsed in her hands, so thick, so hot and hard. He stirred in her a keen desire she'd never before experienced, not even with the few boyfriends she'd slept with.

"Tell me your name," she said, the inane request making her blush all over again. God, she held his penis in her hands, she couldn't see what he looked like, and she didn't even know the name of this stranger chained to a wall. Talk about surreal.

"Julian," he whispered, his breathing labored. "But my friends call me Jules. Call me Jules, Sheridan. Oh yeah."

He tilted his hips in time with her touch, and she realized he was thrusting into her palms. To her amazement, he felt slick, and she wondered if she'd missed the point where he'd orgasmed. But he didn't seem any smaller.

"No, don't loosen your grip. Hold me tighter," he rasped and groaned as he literally swelled in her hands. "Fuck." He swore and came all over her. So much seed. It hit her shirt and continued to leak from his tip, the scent of musk and vanilla bringing her so close to her own orgasm, she let go of him in shock.

"Damn, I'm sorry," he said on a groan. "It's just been so long, and I—"

He tensed, his eyes flashing.

"What? What's wrong?" she asked, alarmed. She couldn't stop shaking, not from fear, but from arousal.

"Someone's coming."

Chapter Two

Jules tensed and yanked furiously at his chains. Whatever the woman had done to him worked, because his body, if not his mind, felt at full strength again. Though still dazed, he no longer ached. He had so many questions, but his beast demanded this woman get to safety. For all he knew, she was Montaña's newest way to get under his skin, but after all she'd done for him, after seeing the bright, shining white of her aura, Jules didn't much care.

"Stop. You'll hurt yourself," she hissed. "I'll be back when I can. Don't tell anyone I was here."

The sheen in her eyes froze him. Those glorious blue eyes made him want to do whatever she said without question. And that worried the hell out of him.

He slowly nodded. "I won't say a thing." But he was talking to her back as she punched in a code and rushed out the door. He swore again as the damned thing made too much noise when it closed and locked behind her.

The rapid patter of her footsteps faded while heavier, familiar noises returned. The changing of the guard. It would have made more tactical sense to never allow his door to be unguarded, but the assholes running the place insisted on daily briefings for everyone together in the central courtyard. He'd heard a few mention it in English—rogue Circes not from around here, obviously.

Thanks to the mysterious Sheridan, he felt better than he had in days, weeks, hell, a month. Who was she, and how had she healed him like that? Had he hallucinated and finally just healed himself? Though Jules normally healed quickly, whatever daily injection Silva gave him to keep him placid also affected his regenerative powers.

But nothing Silva had done should have accounted for the release of a building mating heat. With just the soft touch of her hands, Sheridan had alleviated that worry. Or had she? Had Silva's drugs somehow muted his instinctive need to mate? God, he had so many questions. He'd been anxious about the mating heat as his time—what felt like forever—in this shit hole progressed. The mating heat might be the one thing that could break him. Because without ease, he feared he'd slowly turn rogue, unable to think about anything but sating his sexual and violent appetites.

His team's sanity had made them unique among the many sailors infected with the Circe serum so many years ago. The tight bonds they shared enabled them to overcome the madness that affected so many others. Yet the mating heat still

struck them. Despite the bonding of Fallon and Olivia, and then Hayashi and Morgan, the entire team continued to need Circ sex. Only a Circ could satisfy the carnal needs that built inside them.

That Sheridan had eased his hunger in one large orgasm could mean several things. Her healing “power,” whatever the fuck it was, worked on Circs. Or his many injuries had drained him to the point that the mating heat hadn’t hit, and his erection had been a response to the shy sex kitten who’d healed his hurts so generously. Or maybe he’d lost his fucking mind.

The dreaded haze of awareness he’d been forced to exist within returned, but this time, his distance from reality comforted. Gifted with a delicious fantasy, he allowed himself to linger on her memory.

As the minutes turned into hours, he couldn’t stop dwelling on his visitor.

Sheridan.

Was she real? If so, who was she? And why was his beast so damned fascinated with her?

She’d been so small, fleshy, and so incredibly feminine that he could feel himself getting hard again just thinking about her. The woman wasn’t tall, maybe five-four or five-five. Her hair was a rich auburn color, a thick mane of red he wanted to see spread over his belly as she went down on him. Sheridan had a woman’s build, the kind men dreamed of and other women secretly envied. Not slender, not fat, but curvy, with ripe breasts and an ass made for fucking. He’d noticed everything about her the minute she’d stepped into his cell.

And such heat. Her touch was soft, healing, full of fiery energy that pulled at his beast and made him salivate to taste. He’d noticed her full tits, those hard little nipples begging for a bite. Would they be as red as her hair, or the soft peach of her blush? Such creamy, fair skin contrasted with the dark richness of her hair. Yet he hadn’t seen any freckles, nothing to mar that smooth, innocent flesh.

To say nothing of her angel’s face. A mixture of innocence and sultry beauty, a soft allure that lingered long after she’d gone. Jules had slept with a lot of women in his time. Even before he’d turned Circ, he’d had a voracious appetite.

In the course of his years, he’d never seen a woman to match Ava Belle’s beauty. Mrs. Sharpe’s assistant had a mouth that wouldn’t quit, but her beauty couldn’t be denied. The dark-skinned woman had a face and body that could have made millions had she bothered to show them off.

Yet Ava had never intrigued him as much as the mysterious Sheridan did. And he couldn’t help wondering why.

If the woman was in fact working for Montaña, then Jules was screwed, because he’d be damned if he could stop thinking about her.

Even when Montaña arrived the next day full of questions and rage that Jules had healed so fully and so quickly, even when he gave Jules a stronger beating despite Silva’s emphatic screams to stop, Jules could only think of Sheridan and what she’d make of his new bruises. His beast grunted under Montaña’s brutal

fists. He didn't flinch when Silva shoved a heavy dose of another burning drug into his arm, nor did he fight when Montaña spoke in detail about Jules's team, about things he shouldn't possibly know.

Jules made a mental note, but his thoughts, and those of his beast, remained solely on the curvy redhead he couldn't seem to quit thinking about.

* * *

The Croatan National Forest, North Carolina

Frederik Gunnar Tersch ran his hands through his hair and growled as he paced in the large conference room of Circ central. He knew he probably looked like the Viking his team often called him. His blond hair had grown longer, and as he ran his hands through it, it probably resembled an unkempt pile of straw. At six-six, he normally looked down on everyone around him. But when he grew so out of control, he inadvertently let the beast slip. And now he'd gained a few more inches, enough to make the women around him nervous.

"Tersch, sit your ass down. You're making me dizzy," Jesse Fallon growled, as anxious as the rest of them. His mate, Olivia, worried her lower lip, the sexy gesture one that usually would have Tersch teasing her, but right now, he had nothing to say.

He didn't care how dizzy Fallon felt. Jules, their team leader, the man who could always be relied on, a man he fucking loved but would never in a million years admit the emotion to anyone but himself, had been missing for six hellacious weeks.

"Gunnar, it'll be okay," Ava murmured and sat next to Mrs. Sharpe, their boss. Ava's soft hazel eyes looked at him with worry. Her light brown skin, which never failed to enthrall him, because it was so rich and so much darker than his own, seemed to ripple, as if she too fought a beast inside her. His Ava, a human woman he had no right to think about as much as he did.

But even she couldn't make this right. He lusted after the female with a hard-on that never ended and with an affection that had really started to concern him. But she could never fill Jules's shoes. Hell, no one could.

"No, it won't be okay, Ava," he said through gritted teeth, not wanting to take his frustrations out on her. He couldn't sit still. The urge to destroy had been building for days, weeks, but he'd kept ahold of himself. For Jules, because Jules would need the team intact to get him out of whatever hell he'd fallen into.

The anger, the rage, continued. He knew he had to contain it. While the others on his team had psychic abilities that helped, his harmed. Fallon could read minds; Olivia, emotions. Hayashi could see glimpses of the future—though Tersch still wasn't sure what the hell his mate Morgan Reynolds could do, other than annoy the piss out of him. And then there was Mrs. Alicia Sharpe, their boss. She was a mystery no one had solved, even after eight months of working for—not *with*—her.

“Alicia.” He snapped her name, never one to give respect where it hadn’t been earned. Everyone else called her Mrs. Sharpe, at her insistence.

The petite black woman had beauty and a presence no one could deny. Too old for him, and too classy, he admitted, glaring at her calm presence as she sat in a black business suit, those damned pearls she never seemed to be without at her neck and earlobes. Just once he’d like to catch the damned woman in pajamas or sweats. But no, she never appeared with a hair out of place or dressed in anything not fucking appropriate.

Mrs. Sharpe sighed. “Gunnar, please. I know you’re upset, but—”

“Upset? My team leader has been missing for six fucking weeks, and we’re still sitting here with our thumbs up our asses!” he roared and felt his entire body pulse with the need to fully *change*, to fit into the monster that knew just what to do with all the hurt and anger. Becoming a Circ had only increased the strength of his inner beast. Whereas the others had mental abilities, Tersch’s manifested themselves physically. A traumatic incident in his past had changed him, enabling him to channel his energy into raw strength. Even when not in his Circ form, he could do some serious damage.

Tersch tried to control himself but had a hard time thinking past the haze of fury swelling in his blood. Jules needed him. Right. Now. “Why the hell are Morgan and Hayashi in Brazil when they should be here, working with us to find Jules?”

“Easy,” Fallon said.

“Fuck easy! *I* should be there. Let *me* search the jungle. I guaran-damn-tee I’ll find Jules or beat the answers out of those who know where he is.” Jules would have calmed him down. Jules would have known how to handle him.

Olivia answered him quietly. “You know why they’re there, Gunnar. Kisho had a vision of himself and Morgan with Jules. We just have to be patient.”

She put out a hand, and he jerked back, out of reach of the empath.

He was sick to death of being patient, of waiting, of never being in control when it mattered. He was failing Jules; he fucking knew it. Just like he’d failed other important people in his life. He refused to let it happen again. “I’m going,” he announced and turned on his heel.

Fallon darted in front of him to block his way and ducked the fist Tersch threw.

“Gunnar, stop,” Olivia cried.

He wanted to, but he couldn’t.

“Hell. Ladies, get out of here,” Fallon yelled as he avoided another blow and shredded through his clothes to transform into a larger, predatory beast with claws, fangs, and toughened skin.

Tersch was barely aware of it, but his beast also rose swiftly to the surface. He didn’t want to fight, but he had to. He needed this as much as he needed to breathe. He ripped off his shirt and *changed* fully into his beast, stretching the elasticity of

his pants. "I'm my own man. I go where I want," he growled, worry for Jules pushing him to act. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the women leave the room.

"This is for your own good," Fallon muttered.

"Fuck you." Tersch tried to go around him, anticipating Fallon's tackle. When the smaller Circ launched himself, Tersch caught him and threw Fallon to the ground, through one of Mrs. Sharpe's precious antique chairs, which smashed into pieces.

Fallon hit hard but rebounded with speed. The bastard could take a hit, and Tersch's beast roared at Tersch to respond. They rolled, punched, kicked, and bit.

But instead of releasing his anger, the emotion boiled, increasing Tersch's anguish. Buried under his beast, he knew he was fast losing control. Not good, not good at all, and not what any of them needed right now. But he couldn't stop himself.

"You're not going anywhere." Fallon huffed out a breath and telepathically sent him support. *"Tersch, come on. Rein it in. You can do it."*

"Let me go!" Tersch tried to shrug out of Fallon's grip, but the tenacious Circ clung like a burr.

Anger pushed through Tersch's beast, calling forth the berserker that nothing could stop. He grew muscles on top of muscles and increased in mass. On top of that, he felt a burning fury to decimate everything in his path and intended to make good on his desire. His eyesight changed, seeing in heat patterns as the scent of his prey—Fallon—grew stronger.

He shoved Fallon back so hard into the wall that Fallon broke through the drywall and dented the reinforced steel behind it. Fallon stumbled groggily to his feet. Seeing his adversary weakened, Tersch took another step closer and drew back his arm.

Hands caught him, and he turned to attack.

Only Fallon's quick shove pushed Tersch away and saved Ava from taking a fist in the face.

Her eyes wide, she stared at him in shock, and the fury Tersch had been feeling faded under a blinding wave of shame. *Fists striking, screaming. A frail female falling, moaning his name before she hit the ground, hard. Then the scent of death, all too close...*

"Gunnar?" Ava took a step closer.

Horried he'd nearly struck her, Tersch scrambled back. He turned to leave when he suddenly stumbled. Confused and heartsick he'd nearly hurt the woman who meant the world to him, he wanted nothing but to disappear. Instead, he fell to the ground.

"Easy, Gunnar. You just need to sleep this off," Mrs. Sharpe said, her voice soft, soothing.

He glanced up to see her holding a dart gun, her expression concerned. He wanted to crawl into a hole and die. His worst fear had come true. He was nothing more than a monster, an abusive asshole like his father. Now Jules would suffer even longer because they'd never let Tersch help find him.

"Should have used real bullets," he mumbled before he blacked out.

* * *

Sheridan tugged on the spaghetti strap of her thin camisole and stared without seeing at the large bed in her room. She had a feeling tonight would prove as frustrating as the past few nights had been. She couldn't sleep, and she didn't need to wonder why.

In the past two weeks, Sheridan had only managed to visit Jules twice more. He never seemed quite aware of her, questioning her existence as if he thought himself dreaming. She thought that might be a good thing, considering his poor state of health. Better he be nearly unconscious than to be fully awake and suffering so much. *Damn Ricardo!*

Both times she'd seen Jules, he'd been beaten so severely, she'd cried as she healed him. Since she'd learned of his existence, she'd spent her time planning and plotting. With Pedro's help, she'd managed to copy, encrypt, and send her research to her family for later study. She'd thoroughly deleted her project from the compound's computers, pretending to continue her work on basic botanical studies any third-year student might access from a public university. Luckily, no one seemed overly interested in her research.

Sheridan couldn't wait to leave. And thanks to Pedro, she soon would.

He'd been a font of information concerning the compound, once she'd found the nerve to question the truth about the place. It wasn't the professional lab she'd envisioned when she'd first started working here. The scientists, if she could call them that, experimented *on people*. Or so it was rumored. She only wished she knew more. But avoiding Ricardo remained her top priority lately, especially concerning the information she'd recently overheard.

Apparently, Ricardo wanted *her*. Sheridan Keyes, quiet, unassuming, overweight botanist, had somehow managed to outshine Elena Dominguez, a supermodel and Latina hotbod. Who would have guessed?

She swallowed hard, trying not to imagine Ricardo's cold, calculating stare or the way he sometimes focused on her mouth or breasts, as if envisioning her naked. She trembled, but as usual since meeting Jules, the very word "naked" immediately conjured up images of the sexy but bruised prisoner. Her tremble of disgust quickly turned to one of arousal. No matter how much she told herself not to think about the poor man that way, she couldn't help it. Jules could look at her lips or breasts any way he liked. *And how messed up am I that I'm turned on by a guy who doesn't even believe I'm a real person? Not only is he out-of-my-league hot, but he's in pain and doped to the gills, and I'm lusting after him. Pitiful, Sheridan. Just pitiful.*

Fixing him, despite the drugs he'd been given, took a lot of energy. Fortunately, she had cured him without experiencing that odd, out-of-control desire for him while doing so. Seeing him bloody and beaten cured most of her arousal. And the drain on her power, mingled with the ever-present threat of Ricardo so near, took the zing right out of her while she healed him.

Jules had promised her that he continued to remain mute about her participation in his recuperation. But he still wouldn't tell her why Ricardo was holding him, and he'd cautioned her not to trust anyone else with what she'd done. To her surprise, she trusted him. She'd never told Pedro that she'd seen him more than that first time.

Sheridan worried about her safety. She still planned to escape, and with Pedro's help, she would. But she couldn't leave Jules behind. She wouldn't. She glanced again at the bed sitting in her spacious bedroom. While she would try to sleep on a thick mattress, poor Jules dangled from iron chains welded to a stone wall. In a freakin' *cave*.

"Sheridan, dear, how are you?"

She started, then cringed as she slowly turned around. Ricardo had entered her quarters unannounced. He'd never done that before. She hadn't been expecting anything but to crawl into bed, and she wore minimal clothing: a thin camisole, a pair of boxer-style shorts, and her grandfather's ring around her neck on a chain—a precious family heirloom that meant the world to her. She normally kept the ring in her jewelry box, but at night she liked it close. A piece of her past in a place she hoped wouldn't be her future for much longer.

He stared at her with hunger in his eyes, and she crossed her arms over her chest, unnerved. She hated that look on his face—the one that told her he clearly envisioned her sans clothes.

"Oh, um, hi, Ricardo."

He drew closer, his gaze roaming her face and settling on her lips.

She refrained from doing anything that might provoke him, instinctively sensing that to show fear or unease would only spur his interest. "I was just getting ready for bed."

"Hmm, that's too bad. You see, you and I, we need to talk." He pounced, slamming her backward and down onto the bed and settling the full force of his much larger frame on her, surprising her with the speed of his action. To her disgust, he ground an erection against her belly.

Dumb, dumb, dumb. She should have been prepared for this. The years of gifts, the subtle yet increasing sexual interest in his glances, the avid interest she always wished didn't exist, Pedro's warning that Ricardo wanted her, not Elena. She'd thought she'd have more time before confronting him. Hell, she'd hoped that she might escape before that came to pass. Now she had to deal with him and pray she could survive the fallout.

"You've been a naughty girl, Sheridan. Seeing Julian in secret, hmm?" He leaned closer, his eyes black with lust. "I bet the sight of you threw him into an uproar. That fine ass, those round tits. You're a tasty little treat, aren't you, *cara*?"

"R-Ricardo, I don't... Why are you doing this? What do you want?"

"Ah, what do I want?" He used one hand to pin her wrists above her head, his grip so strong, she felt bruised. With his other hand, he cupped her breast and squeezed.

She wanted to gag. Everything about him was wrong. His touch, his scent, the sight of his cruel gaze as it ripped past her defenses.

"I want to fuck you, *chica*. Hard, fast. To plant a baby in that belly. You're perfect for me. With your brains and beauty, and my strength, we'll have the perfect children. Just think of how incredible my sons will be, able to heal themselves whenever they wish?" He grinned at the shock in her eyes. *He knew*. "I'm tired of waiting. It's time."

Stunned, Sheridan couldn't speak. She turned her head when he would have kissed her and felt his mouth on her cheek before he slid it to her neck and sucked hard, bruising her. She shuddered, wanting nothing more than to escape.

"You have Elena," she managed when he leaned back again. "Why would you want me?"

"She satisfies my cravings when they get too much. But every man must continue his line. I knew when I first saw you that you would be the one to bear my sons. You're so special, Sheridan."

Her heart raced in panic. How had he found out what she'd kept a secret her entire life?

"Hawkins healed well after your visits, though his mind is not what it should be. But we have Manoel to thank for that." He chuckled. "His concoctions would keep an elephant down. I'll be surprised if Hawkins can remember his own name in another month."

"Hawkins?"

"Julian, your naked friend, the one you like to play with, no?" His smile turned mean.

How could he know that? Pedro had told her there were no cameras or surveillance equipment at the caves. Unless Pedro had lied. That, or Ricardo hadn't told Pedro everything. God, she didn't know who to trust anymore.

"I don't know what you mean." She tried to move out from under him, but he only shifted, fitting himself closer into the vee of her thighs.

"I think you do. You put your hand around his cock, and you milked him. Like an animal, you dragged his cum from his body." His raspy breathing increased. "You will like what I do for you, my sweet. You'll take it and love what I give you. Maybe then you'll heal me too."

She struggled and yelled out, but Ricardo slammed his mouth over hers. She bit his tongue when he tried to invade her mouth.

"*Dios*. A cat with claws, eh? Good, I like it a bit rough."

Before he could follow through with more mauling, though, Elena's scream of rage interrupted them.

"I'm sorry, but you said to let her through," one of the guards said from behind her.

"You filthy, dirty whore! He's mine! You leave him alone!"

As if she could move with the monster on top of her. "Elena, help me," she cried.

"Fuck you," Elena spat. She turned teary eyes toward Ricardo. "I'd do anything for you. But her? This bitch? She's not good enough for you."

Ricardo rolled off Sheridan and laughed. He waved Elena over. "Come here. Let's show her what she's missing."

Sheridan scrambled off the bed and tried to run out the door, but the guard stopped her. One of the large ones—who liked to growl when she passed by—the guard gripped her arm tight and held her close, sniffing her hair. She trembled. *God, how much worse can this nightmare get?*

Ricardo pulled Elena to him and shoved her on her hands and knees on the bed, facing Sheridan. "Watch, Sheridan. This is how I fuck a whore. This is how she pleasures me, the way a woman is meant to pleasure a man."

To Sheridan's shock, Ricardo yanked down his trousers, exposing himself, and pushed Elena's dress up over her thighs. Then he shoved himself inside her, screwing her right in front of Sheridan and the guard who held her.

Sheridan tugged at the guard's arm and glanced away, wanting to be anywhere but there. *This isn't real. It's all just a bad, bad dream.*

"Make her watch," Ricardo commanded and grunted as he pounded into Elena. The slaps of flesh against flesh and the slick, sucking sounds of their coupling made Sheridan ill.

The guard gripped her chin and turned her face, forcing her to watch the carnal display. "Watch, Sheridan," he said, the words rumbling from his chest. "Let him show you how good it can be." Under his breath, he whispered, "Play along. Don't make me hurt you."

Ricardo continued to slam into Elena while his gaze remained on Sheridan.

She'd never considered herself a prude, but seeing Elena being taken like a possession, seeing the sick, dirty rutting of a man who considered women no more than his playthings, pushed her to escape. *Oh God, why didn't I leave sooner?* She should have left when she realized there was more going on here than a legitimate lab. And finding Jules chained up in the cave? Why had she waited so long to go? She didn't need a perfect plan; she just needed out of this room right now!

Sheridan closed her eyes and made herself go limp, pretending a faint. The moment her guard leaned down to catch her, she slammed the back of her head into his face. He swore and released her, giving her time to run from the room.

Racing through the corridors of the housing building, it took her a moment to realize no one followed her and that the place was empty when it should have had at least one or two guards stationed at intervals throughout the halls.

She'd just reached a turn when a hand shot out and dragged her into a room.

She screamed and felt dizzy from relief when Pedro urged her to be quiet. "We don't have much time. Come on."

"Pedro!" She threw herself into his arms, feeling comfort in his paunchy build as he tentatively hugged her back.

"I'm so sorry, Sheridan. This is my fault."

She blinked away tears and stepped back. Pedro refused to meet her eyes. "Pedro?"

"He made me watch you all the time. There are cameras everywhere. I didn't want to, but no one argues with Ricardo. The things he does, what he's planning to do to you..."

She shook her head, bewildered. "I don't understand." She didn't want to understand.

"Never mind. We don't have much time. I managed to divert the guards and locked Ricardo and the others in your room, but not for much longer. You have to leave, *now*."

"But I don't even know where I am."

He handed her a backpack. "Here. There's a map, compass, some food, and water. I didn't pack any shoes or clothes, though." He flushed as he looked her over. "I-I didn't think this would be necessary so soon."

"You're coming with me?" she asked, letting the analytical part of her mind take over. Her safety and Jules: both overriding priorities at the moment. The ring was too noticeable around her neck, and she worried that if she suffered any more rough treatment, the chain would snap. She removed it and tucked it into the pack for safekeeping.

She put the backpack on. *Now to get out of here and find Jules.*

Pedro sighed. "I can't come with you. I need to stay behind to give you more time. I can disable some more of the cameras and mislead him in the wrong direction for a while. Besides, he'll never know it's me. I placed the blame on Elena and covered my tracks too well."

"But Elena—"

"Is a bitch," he snarled. "The woman is jealous of you and always has been. She tells Ricardo everything you do. She hates you with the same passion she has for the monster I work for." Pedro checked his watch.

Her thoughts raced. "I can't leave without Jules."

Pedro sighed. "I knew you'd say that. Go now and use this to free him." He handed her an iron key. "Sheridan, if you aren't out of here soon, you'll never leave."

She hugged him again. "I wish you'd come with me." But Pedro would never be able to keep up, not as out of shape as he was. And as he'd admitted on more than one occasion, he wasn't one for roughing it.

"You'll have to walk a few miles before you find a village, but there's money in the pack as well. You can buy a ride back to the coast if you push." He grew silent. "I love you, Sheridan."

"Oh, Pedro." She sniffed. She'd been so wrapped up in her work, she hadn't noticed. But now that she thought about it, Pedro's shy smiles and attentive consideration made more sense. She felt torn. He'd had a crush, and now he thought he loved her. And he might very well die because of it. She blinked back tears. God, he could die for her. For all that he worked for Ricardo, Pedro was a good man. And she felt terrible for never noticing.

He coughed. "Go. Down the southern hallway and outside the main buildings. Stay in the shadows, then grab your friend and leave. Follow the trail I marked on the map. But hurry."

She kissed him on the cheek and left. Following his instructions to the letter, she didn't encounter anyone on her way to Jules's cell. Once inside, she ignored everything but freeing him. And just her luck, he had to be in the worst condition she'd yet seen him. She had no idea how he remained standing.

He stirred when she finished unlocking the last of his manacles. "Sh-Sheridan?"

"Dammit. Don't move." She put her hands on his chest and pushed her energy into him, fast and hard. Light-headed yet filled with lust, she stumbled back and would have fallen if he hadn't caught her. She didn't think she'd given him enough healing, but it was all she could manage and still remain standing.

"What the fuck?" He held her wrist up. "Who did this?"

Already she felt the bruises along her wrists and arms. The minor hurt paled next to the burning desire racing through her body for Jules. *Man, I am so insane to want him when we're in so much danger.*

"No time," she rasped, trying to catch her breath and praying her nipples didn't look as hard as they felt. "We have to go. Now."

He studied her barely clad body and swore. "I'm going to kill Montaña. Slowly. Painfully," he said hoarsely, still not 100 percent okay.

She could feel his wounds still festering but didn't have the energy to finish him. What she'd done would have to do.

He dragged her with him to the door and exited after she keyed in the code.

"Wait. There's a map." Sheridan drew in a deep breath and found her center. She couldn't run away if she was on the verge of passing out. Though not at full strength, she intended to leave on her own two feet. It was clear Jules couldn't manage more than himself at the moment. She shrugged out of the pack and found

the map in an outer pocket. But when she tried to orient her direction, she found she couldn't focus.

"You sure you're okay?" Jules asked.

"I'm fine."

He plucked the map from her hands, turned it around, and pointed north. "That way. Let's go." He took the pack and wavered on his feet.

"Are you good?"

"I'll have to be," he muttered. He put the pack on his back and took off into the jungle, glancing over his shoulder at her every few seconds.

She surprised herself by keeping up with him, adrenaline giving her the boost she needed to escape. Though he'd been injured, he still had a well of strength she didn't. She kept up with him for what felt like a good mile, knowing full well he'd slowed his pace for her.

Then her body just quit. The drain of healing him, the shocks she'd faced tonight, and the run through the freaking jungle in bare feet, took its toll. She collapsed like a rag doll behind him.

The minute she dropped, he was there.

"Damn." Jules shook his head and just...*grew*. One minute, he stood there, a human giant; the next, he had longer hair, claws, darker skin, and stood a foot taller, wider, and just *bigger* everywhere. His growl sounded more animal than man, and she couldn't help staring in shock as he lifted her in his muscular arms. His eyes no longer resembled those of a man, but of a cat.

She was so amazed by the changes in him, she didn't even think to question being held in his arms.

Jules leaned closer and sniffed at the curve of her neck, where it joined her shoulder. "Fuck, you smell good."

She gasped when she saw fangs. "Oh my God."

He snorted, what she thought might have been a pass at laughter, and then he took off. Jarring yet exhilarating, they moved through the jungle faster than she could have moved by herself, even in running shoes. Jules flowed over the uneven ground like a jaguar at full tilt. He had speed, stamina, and an instinctive knowledge that made him seem at one with the jungle.

They'd run for what felt like hours before he slowed. But he didn't stop. At times he stumbled. His pain would flare and fade, and she felt a subtle twin sense of energy within him, as if two people fought for command of his body. It was odd; she'd never before felt the like.

His gait grew rougher, but he wouldn't put her down.

"Jules, let me go." She'd rested enough.

"Not yet."

"When? When we reach the States?" she asked drily.

“When we outrun them.”

Before she could ask who, as if on cue, a loud, wild scream rent the air.

“Mutants, probably a few rogues,” Jules answered. “They find us, we’re fucked.” Jules took a deep breath and ran faster. “And that’s if we’re lucky.”

Chapter Three

Despite the danger, despite his ragged pain, Jules had a hard time thinking with so much exposed female flesh in his arms. Imagining Sheridan naked had been hard enough, but seeing her all but bare rocked his foundation.

Running with a hard-on wasn't comfortable by any means, but if the creatures chasing them got their hands on her, Sheridan would wish for a quick death. *She's here, in my arms. For fuck's sake, she has to be real.* Unfortunately, the drugs made his beast just as hazy as the human part of him. The colors of the forest popped despite the darkness around them. The scent of wild animals, flowers, and woman mixed into one heady perfume.

His body ached, his bones and tissue desperately needed to heal, but he didn't have the time to complete the process. What Sheridan had done had helped, but it wasn't enough. And their race through the jungle made it worse. *Am I carrying her? Is she really there?*

He hugged her closer and heard a soft grunt.

She's real. His beast growled and refused to accept the fact she might not be. Not that Jules could blame him. Even the fantasy of Sheridan was better than anything they'd dealt with for weeks.

He still didn't know what had happened to facilitate their escape, but the time for talking could wait. He had to accept that he wasn't crazy. Sheridan was, in fact, a real woman.

So small and vulnerable, the woman in his arms called on every one of his protective instincts. No way would Jules let anyone put a hand on her. Sheridan had saved him, apparently at great peril to herself.

He jumped over a tree root and inwardly flinched when her full breasts smashed against his chest. A centerfold couldn't have asked for a sexier frame, and to hold her nearly nude against him was a hell he'd gladly suffer.

Trouper that she was, she didn't make a peep as he raced through the vegetation that would have scarred a normal man. The sharp blades of palms and bamboo grazed off his tough skin without leaving a scratch. Sheridan, unfortunately, caught a few cuts that bled, making her slippery in his arms. And still, she remained silent and uncomplaining as he sought safety.

Maybe because she's not really there to complain, some perverse part of him taunted. Maybe you just *think* she's there.

Enough. His beast roared at him to be silent on the subject, and needing the creature at top strength, Jules relented.

They crossed a narrow tributary before he felt confident enough there was enough distance between them and their enemy to stop. Sunlight filtered down through the eerie darkness around them via a few points in the space above the canopy of leaves overhead. Hell, he'd run all night long.

"Seems like in the short time I've known you, we're always in the dark," Sheridan muttered, the first words she'd spoken in hours.

Jules walked to a small patch of sunlight and set her down gently. He made sure she stood on steady feet before letting go. Rummaging through the backpack, he found a bandanna he dampened in the nearby river. After cleaning himself, he returned to her and wiped the blood from her body. To his surprise, her wounds had already healed.

She stared at him in silence, her look one of awe.

He frowned. "What?"

"You're so...different."

Yet instead of backing away, Sheridan took a step closer.

His beast liked the courage in the slight female, and Jules waited without moving, not wanting to spook her.

"Can I touch you?"

His cock rose in an instant, begging to be petted. "Wherever you like."

She flushed, a pretty pink that made him want to see it all over her body. As she stroked his forearms and chest, he took in everything he'd been trying to ignore while he carried her.

Her breasts strained the fabric of the thin pink camisole she wore, her nipples hard and outlined against the sheer cotton. Her shorts hugged her hips. Just as transparent as her top, they couldn't hide the thin strip of hair covering her mound. He salivated at the thought of how sweet she might taste, and to his astonishment, he caught the scent of her lust on the air.

He opened his mouth to taste it and licked at his fangs. A light floral scent, exotic and particular. He'd never smelled the like before, and it intoxicated him. Without meaning to, he leaned down and licked her neck, purring at her answering shudder. The floral perfume of her arousal intensified.

"Oh, that tickles." She inched closer and stroked the hard plane of his abdomen. "You must work out a lot. I can see all your muscles."

He closed what little space remained between them, incredibly aroused, especially when his cock touched the smooth fabric guarding her belly.

"How are you so big?"

It's you, he wanted to say, then realized she meant the *change*. "I'm Circ."

"What's a Circ?" Her hands left his stomach to graze his ribs.

He couldn't help it. A louder rumble vibrated through his body.

"You're purring!" She paused, then continued to touch him.

"That feels good."

"You have fangs. Claws." She fingered the sharp blades of his nails, not at all afraid but curious like a cat. Her creamy skin contrasted with his darker flesh, so tender, while his was so tough.

"I'm Circ. I'm a man who can *change* into this. A beast."

"A beast," she whispered. "Is this why Ricardo wanted you? To be able to transform like you?"

"I'm not sure." He didn't know her well enough to trust her with all his secrets, despite how close his body wanted to make them.

"You're fascinating." She stepped back, and he had to fight the urge not to pull her closer again. When she glanced up at him, her blue eyes sparkled in the light.

The neon blue of her gaze warned him to be careful. Her image fluttered in and out until he blinked her into focus and ignored his fading energy. He needed to lie down, to rest and recuperate with the enemy all too close. But he needed to be inside her even more.

She bit her lower lip. "You can heal yourself, like me. But you're so much more."

He grunted. "You're a lot more than you appear to be as well." Sensing they were safe, at least for now, he *changed* back, wanting to feel his normal body again, to be more compatible with Sheridan. Hell, if he were honest with himself, he wanted to feel her hands on the man's skin, not his beast's.

"Incredible." She caressed his chest, and he stifled a moan.

The fog of lust made everything else fade into the background. Suddenly consumed with the need to take Sheridan, Jules could think of nothing but her. His aches and pains disappeared, pushed behind a door in his mind as his carnal desires overwhelmed his senses. *Shit, I'm hard enough to split wood. And her pussy is creaming for me. I need this.* "Hmm, yeah. Incredible." He kissed her before she could protest, and she sank into his arms like she'd been made for him.

He licked her lips and pushed his tongue into the sweet cavern of her mouth, dizzy with need. She felt so damned good against him, so feminine and yielding. He wanted to sink inside such softness, to let it surround him and lose himself in her warmth. The energy in the woman called to him the same way her voluptuous little body did.

Ending the kiss, he trailed his mouth down her cheek to her neck. He placed his mouth over the spot on her neck he'd seen bruised, and lightly sucked, aroused when she moaned. Her nipples raked his chest, and he thrust against her belly, aching for her.

"Oh," she gasped. "You're making me so hot."

"Good, because you make me burn." He had to touch her. He ran his hands over her back, then slid them under her top. She didn't protest, and he tossed the camisole away, exposing her creamy shoulders and breasts. "Oh, man. A rosy peach, my favorite color." He groaned and sucked on her nipple, unable to keep away.

She moaned his name with so much desire and urgency that she soothed his need to take her hard and fast. After all the suffering he'd undergone, he intended to linger in the first sense of true peace he'd had since his hellish time in captivity. Hell, since he'd turned fucking Circ, if he admitted the truth.

Her breasts were full, so large and round, and tipped with wide areolas and tight nipples. He feasted on one, then the other, biting the engorged buds until she cried out and clutched him tighter. Her small hands on his waist felt so hot, so good. He wanted them on him, over his cock and balls. Closer, so close until there was no him or her—only them, joined as one.

Jules pushed her shorts to the ground and eased them both to their knees. He lay back, not wanting to hurt her skin on the rough ground. Not liking even that small of a distance between them, he pulled her closer to continue suckling her breasts.

Her moans and the sweltering scent of her need surrounded him with true paradise.

She settled over him more firmly, bringing the wet heat of her sex over his cock, and he bucked up, sliding in her cream.

"Jules, please," she rasped, a throaty whisper that taunted his willpower. "I want you inside me."

"Demanding little thing, aren't you?" he teased and kissed his way back up her throat to her mouth. A small part of him whispered of danger, of potential enemies nearby, but his beast snarled the caution to silence. This was much more important, vital to Jules's well-being. He needed Sheridan like he needed breath. And he intended to have her.

He licked at her mouth and thrust past her lips, caught in the feminine taste of her.

The kiss flamed through his body, connecting them in a way he hadn't anticipated. Affection poured through him, racing alongside the lust that continued to build. Everything in Jules, in the man and his beast, cherished the gift of this female, so small yet so resilient as he laid claim to her. He wanted the moment to last as he learned all the ways to please her.

But the stubborn woman on top of him had other ideas. She shifted, and before he knew it, he slid inside her, the head of his cock engulfed by wet heat.

"Oh, fuck." He swore and tried to stop her from moving.

"More," she demanded.

Astonished at Sheridan's sudden fierceness, he stared into her bright eyes and watched her expression as she sank over him. He lost himself in her aroused gaze,

in the flush of pleasure on her cheeks, in the parted lips that moaned his name as she willingly accepted him.

Inch by inch, she took him inside, the soft mew of her bliss making it increasingly difficult not to slam her on top of him and conquer the rest of her. Instead, Jules allowed himself to be conquered.

She straightened, her heavy breasts lifting in time with her breathing as she lowered herself until she took all of him. The heat of her around him, of her wet pussy over his balls, was indescribable.

He gripped her hips and held her there, not wanting her to move yet, or it would all be over.

"You feel so good inside me," she admitted on a breathy moan. "So full."

He swore and instinctively arched his hips. Her groan spurred him, and he raised her hips slowly, then let her glide back down him again.

"Ride me, Sheridan. God, please, don't stop. I want you to come all over me."

"Jules," she whispered and then pleased them both.

She rose higher, until only the tip of him remained inside her; then she rocked back over him, taking him deep. The slide of her pussy mesmerized him, and he watched himself disappear inside her each time she took him.

He reached up and cupped her breasts, taken with the hard nipples. They pressed into his palms and begged to be pinched. When he did, she slammed over him. So he did it again.

Playing with her breasts gave him some small control over her motions, and soon she increased her pace until she was all but crying over him, tearing his mind and resolve to shreds.

His claws lengthened, his fangs grew, and his lust spiraled out of control.

Sheridan slammed down one final time and whimpered as her body clamped down hard, seizing his cock in a grip so tight, he couldn't stop himself from coming.

"Sheridan," he moaned as he climaxed, filling her with a mess of seed. He seized in spasm, caught in an agonizing bliss as he spent and continued to spend. When finally his orgasm tapered to a stop, he pulled her off him and shoved her to her hands and knees, then positioned himself behind her. Despite coming, he was still hard, needy. Still Circ.

Mine. Make her mine. His beast snarled at him to finish it, to take his mate and bind her to them.

She didn't protest when he slammed back into her and took her again, not sure when the pleasure of his first orgasm had stopped before climbing toward a second, harder fulfillment.

But somehow she was there, sharing it with him, her pussy a vise on his cock and taking all of him while he shuddered and whispered her name.

Finally wrung dry, he withdrew from her body and collapsed on the ground. His aches and pains returned in a rush, and a bone-deep weariness tugged at him.

But he didn't care. Jules pulled Sheridan on top of him, not surprised to see her exhausted and on the verge of sleep. A satisfied smile curled her lips.

So precious. *So mine*. His beast repeated, even as it curled inside him, content and possessive. She was so slight, so frail compared to him. The thought of anything happening to her was unthinkable.

His head throbbed, and a striking pain darted between his eyes. Time was running out, and he felt that he'd made a huge mistake. The burning in his joints grew. His bones fucking hurt, and the stretch of muscle beneath even Sheridan's light weight hurt. He was fast going to lose consciousness. He could feel it.

"Sheridan, listen to me. If we separate or something happens to me, I want you to call this number." He rattled off the Circ emergency number, worried because even to himself the numbers sounded slurred. "Repeat it back to me. You can't forget. There are people there who can help you."

She repeated it five times before he relaxed.

"Don't worry, Jules. We'll get out of here together. I know it." She yawned and stroked his chest, the tingling heat from her fingers giving him something he'd been missing for some time. Warmth, a sense of belonging, affection that spread and deepened inside him.

He kissed the top of her glorious red hair and smiled as the darkness overtook him. How ironic that in the belly of this nightmare he'd find an angel of his own. *God, if I'm dreaming, don't ever wake me up.*

He caressed her back as she settled into slumber. His beast sighed and decided to join her.

No, not yet, he yelled in his dazed mind, to no avail. The sated creature refused to heed him, so tired, so worn down by the treatment they'd suffered in the labs. Jules tried, but the man couldn't deny his need to rest either. The drugs surged through his unprotected mind. Without the beast there to temper the effects, the chemicals saturating his brain turned the jungle into a circus of rioting sensation. And without wanting to, he fell into a nightmarish sleep in a place where he and Sheridan could little afford vulnerability.

He awakened to more darkness and to the foreign scent of threat in the air.

Sheridan stirred, and he had trouble raising his hand to cover her mouth to caution her to silence. She nodded, and he removed his hand. He pulled her ear to his mouth and whispered, "Stay low. We have company."

Cursing himself for falling asleep when he shouldn't have, he forced his beast to stir, giving him enough power to move to his feet and at least give some semblance of a Circ who could fight. He pushed Sheridan into a copse of trees and prayed his scent masked hers. He could feel the presence of Circs nearby. *Fuck*. Rogues, he hoped, because they'd probably been ordered to take him back to the compound. But mutants couldn't reason. They fucked and fought to sate abnormal hungers. Combating more than one mutant by himself, especially being this weak, would spell certain death. But he'd die before he'd let anything happen to Sheridan.

He straightened to his full height and pushed with everything he had in him to *change*, and just in time. Three rogues flew at him from all directions. He fought as best he could with fangs and claws and brute strength, but he put up a pitiful contest at best.

They didn't need much to take him to the ground, but still he fought, desperate to distract them so that Sheridan might escape the danger.

To his shock, his teammates arrived and began hammering on the rogues around him. Except Tersch, who delivered a punch to his jaw that hurt like a motherfucker.

"Easy, Viking," he garbled.

"Viking? Shit, he's gone." The raspy voice was unfamiliar, and Jules blinked up at a rogue he didn't know.

"Not...Tersch."

The asshole smiled and drew back his fist, readying to punch Jules right in the face. He could feel it. His beast knew it was coming but could do nothing to stop it. Sounds grew louder, then softer, and the rogue in front of him suddenly had two heads. Then the lights went out.

Sheridan's scream woke him from the darkness, and he turned to see two rogues fighting over her, tugging on her like a damned piece of rope. To his confusion, the rogue who'd been ready to hit him had vanished.

He roared and stumbled to his knees, trying unsuccessfully to regain his feet. Unable to stand on what felt like a broken ankle, he crawled after Sheridan. He didn't get far before one of the rogues fighting for her turned in his direction. Dark brown eyes flashed to green, then back to brown again. Like magic, the rogue seemed to grow, then shrink, and Jules puzzled over the male's ability to change.

"Shit, he's a goner," the shrinking Circ said. "He's fading fast. Take the girl."

"No. Sheridan," Jules rasped and scared himself. He sounded weak, his voice barely audible.

Then the mutant found him.

Too bad he found a moment of clarity only to see a monster out of his worst nightmare descending on him.

Circs who had succumbed to bloodlust faster than others were prone to a speedy descent to hell if they couldn't manage the mating heats or if they'd been dosed with a control drug meant to manage Circs. Unfortunately, the drug didn't manage so much as alter Circs, who soon mutated into creatures no longer resembling anything human.

The rogues Jules had fought looked like him—larger, wider, darker, but still mostly human. This mutant had night black skin and crawled on four feet. Its hind legs were somewhat shorter than the front legs, and it moved the way a gorilla might. But there the resemblance to the mighty ape faltered. Because this thing didn't have ears or a nose, just large red eyes without pupils, slits where its nostrils

should have been, and a mouth filled with rows of sharp teeth, almost like a cross between a shark and a predatory feline.

The thing wasn't graceful, yet it moved with such speed that it covered Jules before he could blink.

He swore he heard Sheridan yelling in the background, but he couldn't make sense of anything more than that the fucking mutant was *eating his arm*. Tearing the flesh from bone and sucking with a pronged tongue.

"Dammit!" He tried to throw the thing from him but could do no more than lie there and suffer. At least some numbness removed him from the pain. But in the back of his mind, he thought the lack of sensation might be worse than feeling the injury.

"Hunger," the mutant rasped and grinned. "Mine." It surged against him, letting him feel its mangled cock. "Hunger."

"Oh, fuck no." Jules couldn't think of a worse way to die, but at least the thing wasn't after Sheridan. Yet. "Go," he tried to yell at her. "Get away." This thing had a bad case of the mating heat; he could smell its lust in the air. But instead of turning him on, it made him want to puke. So unnatural, so pitifully wrong.

With a last burst of strength, he shifted his clawed hand between their bodies and struck hard at the thing's cock, raking his fingers over its most vulnerable part.

It screamed and retaliated by clawing his chest and biting his neck.

The pain blindsided him, but he twisted his fingers and dug deeper, sawing until he'd castrated the creature.

The resulting scream of pain and rage it made into his ear broke his eardrum, but already numb to the pain, he barely felt a pop before the darkness started to settle once more. He felt its bite and its tongue as it sucked the life from him.

But Jules couldn't think of anything beyond ending its life. If the thing made it past him, Sheridan would be next, and he couldn't let that happen. So much life, so much pure goodness in her aura. She had to live. His beast demanded it.

With a strength he hadn't known he possessed, he pulled back his hands and pushed up hard, digging into the monster's chest cavity.

"Holy shit! Do it, Grayson. While Hawkins has its attention, take its head. I'll get its legs."

He didn't recognize the voice. But he did realize that the mutant's voracious sucking at his neck slowly subsided. At that point, he completely lost his vision. Scent, touch, and hearing started to fade as well.

He dreamed of his team laughing and smiling. Mrs. Sharpe disappeared, then reappeared, standing arm in arm with his old boss, Admiral Geoffrey London, a good man, a good friend. The sky lit up like a supernova, so pure and bright. Welcoming.

His beast protested, and Jules frowned. They needed to go. But they... He couldn't leave. Not yet. Not without her.

“No! Jules. *Jules*. Come back to me. Please.” A woman’s voice. Warmth. The fire of pain as his tissue joined and his bones knit.

The numbness faded. Pain, so sweltering and all consuming that he seized in an indescribable spasm of the worst torture imaginable, became his entire center. His heart stuttered, his breath came in short bursts, and slowly, so slowly, the shaking pain became an aching throb, which gradually eased into an uncomfortable buzzing in his ears, and a weightless kind of tranquility. Not like the numbness, but a good, pure calm.

He blinked up into the vision of an angel surrounded by white. So bright, it hurt to look at, her silhouette was one of grace and peace.

“It’s okay. You’re good now, Jules. You’ll be all right.” Her voice was hoarse but sweet, and she stroked his face with hands from heaven. Jules sighed, basking in the delight of the afterlife.

The warm peace he felt reminded him of something, his experienced pain and resultant pleasure kindling a fantasy of the perfect woman in his arms. He struggled to understand the voices above him, and his beast growled at the deep male tones too close to Jules’s angel. But then peace reclaimed him, and he let himself float in the drift of calm nothingness.

Jules didn’t stir when Raul lifted him in his arms.

“Heavy fucker,” Raul muttered and shifted the bulk of Jules’s large body between him and Grayson. “Can’t believe he wasted a mutant when he was nearly dying. Damn.”

“Go easy, please.” Sheridan wiped tears from her eyes and would have fallen if Grayson, the other Circ nearest her, hadn’t steadied her.

When the two large rogues in front of her had turned and killed the other rogues trying to drag her away earlier, she hadn’t known what to think. She’d wanted nothing but to escape them all to help Jules.

It was only when Grayson left her to help Jules, and Raul caved in to her demand to help Jules as well, that she realized these rogue Circs weren’t the enemy. In an odd twist, Raul was in fact the same guard who’d entered her room earlier with Elena. The one who’d told her to comply because he didn’t want to have to hurt her.

She didn’t understand what they were really after or why they were helping her. But right now, the only thing that mattered was saving Jules. God, she’d wanted to die when Jules had begun to fade. It made no sense, but literally feeling his life force depart from his body had stolen her will to do anything but help him or die trying.

“He’ll be okay now,” Grayson murmured. Like Raul, he’d transformed back into the form of a man. She still couldn’t totally believe she’d seen men transform into beasts. The scientist within her saw the possibilities, but the woman had a

hard time believing she wasn't going crazy. For now she'd accept it, because she didn't have the time or energy to do anything else.

Fortunately, both men wore loose-fitting trousers that had withstood their earlier shift into those beastlike creatures. The pair of Circs stared at her, and she tried to look steadier on her feet than she felt. Healing Jules had taken everything within her. But it was worth it.

She smiled as she stared at Jules draped between Grayson and Raul. He was okay. Finally. He'd need rest, but he'd recuperate. *Thank God.*

Grayson cleared his throat. "Ah, you might want to put some clothes on."

She blinked, not understanding him, and would have fallen if he hadn't let go of Jules and caught her.

"Shit. Call that number, Raul. You heard what she said earlier."

She tried to make sense of his words, but she couldn't stop squirming. He felt nice, but he didn't smell right. No vanilla, no Jules. She faded, seeing nothing but darkness. And then she blinked and saw Grayson again. What had he said? "*Call that number...*"

"You're gonna call?" She said the phone number again, remembering it easily in Jules's deep voice. "He needs help. You promised." The vague assurance that she'd made a deal with these rogues in return for something lingered at the back of her mind.

"Sheridan? Hey, Sheridan," Raul said louder. "We have a deal or not?" Raul slanted a dark look at Jules now over his shoulder. "I'll take him, but you have to heal us."

She didn't have much of a choice now, did she? The need to protect Jules wouldn't leave her. "Right. The deal." She shook her head, trying to push through the fatigue weighing her down. To her surprise, Grayson began to rumble against her side in a vibrating purr. She glanced up at him and saw his hazel eyes narrowed on her chest.

"Sorry." He caught her look and grinned, and she saw a very handsome man under the threat of the Circ. "We'd best get you dressed." He cleared his throat. "So it's a deal, right, Sheridan?"

She nodded.

He turned to Raul. "Take him."

"I don't need you telling me what the fuck to do," Raul growled.

"Wait." She struggled in Grayson's arms before he set her gently down. Not sure why she cared so much, she looked around for the backpack they'd brought along. She found it near some trees and stumbled to it. Sheridan wished she had the energy to dress, but right now, she couldn't make herself care. She focused on her task at hand. The ring she sought lay in the front pocket of the pack, and she pulled it out and off the chain on which it sat.

By rights, she barely knew more than Jules's name or the way he felt inside her body. But she'd felt his energy. She's watched him protect her at great cost to himself. He could conceivably be worse than Ricardo, though she couldn't bring herself to believe it. *Just because he can heal himself doesn't mean he can't have a secret agenda. After all, he knows Ricardo in some way. A drug deal gone bad? A cop who got too close?*

Though her conscience protested she have a care in her dealings with Jules, her heart wouldn't listen. Her mother had told her that the time would come when she'd know to pass on the ring. And God help her, but Sheridan just *knew*.

The ring needed to go to Jules.

"Sheridan, he's getting heavy," Raul muttered.

"Just let me do one thing." She slowly walked over to Raul, ignoring the way he studied her body with a hunger that made her more than uncomfortable. She moved behind him to grab Jules's hand dangling down Raul's back. As she slipped the ring on his ring finger, she wasn't surprised when it fit as if made for him.

Some way, somehow, if she didn't end up dying in this jungle, she'd find him again. He'd touched her heart without meaning to. An enemy of her enemy—Ricardo Montaña.

"Be careful, Jules. I'll see you soon," she whispered and kissed his cheek. He didn't move, just lay slumped over Raul's shoulder.

Raul growled. "I'll make the call and dump him somewhere safe." The look he gave her warned her to move back.

She bumped into Grayson and froze. Like Raul, Grayson had a worn, mean demeanor. She could feel his wounds as if her own. Her palms itched, and she curled her fingers, holding back. She sensed his tension, as well as something else. Behind her, his erection pressed into her back. Against these men, she was helpless, and they all knew it.

The spark of cruelty in Raul's gaze darkened. He licked his lips, and she saw the hint of a sharp fang. "Grayson will take you someplace safe. I'll be back as soon as I can. You don't move until I get there."

She nodded, not happy, but she'd already agreed. "I have your word you won't just ditch Jules somewhere and leave him for dead?"

Raul stared down at her. But before he could answer, Grayson answered for him. "He'll do what he said. Or he'll answer to me."

The menace in his voice made her shiver.

"Fuck you." But whatever Raul saw in Grayson's face convinced him to end the argument. He turned and disappeared into the jungle after one more leering stare at Sheridan.

Grayson turned her in his arms and sighed. "We'll get along without a problem, right, Doc?"

"Sure, Grayson. But I'm not a doctor." She felt safer with him than Raul, actually. But she didn't think it best to admit it. "I need my c-clothes."

Sheridan trembled again, despite the heat. Fatigue weighed heavily on her shoulders.

"Yeah, you sure as shit need some clothes." He groaned. "Come on, Doc." Grayson took a few steps from her and dug into a large rucksack she hadn't noticed before. He took some clothes out of it, then moved to her pack and dumped the contents of it into his rucksack. He hooked the straps over his shoulder, seemingly ready to go.

He handed her the clothes, then surprised her by turning his back. She stepped into the T-shirt and shorts with gratitude.

After a few moments, he faced her once more and held out a hand. "I'll carry you. You probably weigh little more than the pack."

She flushed. *I wish*. "It's okay. I can walk."

Grayson narrowed his gaze. "No, you can't. You're weak from whatever the hell you did to Hawkins, and you're barefoot besides. Look, I'm not going to hurt you. You heal Raul from Silva's whacked-out experiments and fix this chronic stitch in my side, and I won't let a damn thing happen to you." He paused, studying her with bright hazel eyes. "You never worked for Montaña, did you?"

"No." She rubbed her throat, where Ricardo had mauled her earlier. When Jules had made love to her, he'd overtaken her memories of what Ricardo had almost done. But now, in the presence of another strange male, Sheridan couldn't help reliving the horror of the event. Her eyes welled with tears.

"Shit. Okay, Doc, here we go." His voice gentled as he scooped her into his arms and held her against his chest.

But he didn't smell like vanilla, and she couldn't help missing her Circ. *Jules Hawkins*. The man who'd taken more than her precious ring when he'd gone. He'd taken her trust, her respect, and, she feared, her heart as well.

* * *

"*Holy shit*. It's him. I thought it was going to be just another wild-goose chase."

"Easy. Don't move him yet."

"I'm not. But he seems okay. Just out of it."

Jules moaned at the loss of warmth that had cocooned him from the world. But instead of basking in peace, he blinked up into the faces of two of his teammates—Kisho Hayashi and Morgan Reynolds.

The normally stoic Asian smiled with relief when he met Jules's gaze. "Damn, Jules. Where the hell have you been?"

Hayashi's mate, Morgan, breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thank God. Now you can deal with Tersch. He's been driving everyone crazy while you've been gone." Morgan's green eyes flashed with humor as he studied Jules. "And I have to say, for a man we imagined tortured for weeks, you look pretty damned good."

Jules groaned as he stretched. "Where am I?"

"In a hotel in Trindade, off the coast of Brazil. I smell the scent of a rogue Circ in the air, but nothing more," Hayashi answered. "What the hell happened to you, Jules? Where were you?"

"Trindade?" Everything felt fuzzy, wrong somehow. Rogue Circ? What about the angel in white? "The woman. Where's the woman?"

Morgan and Hayashi exchanged a glance before Morgan answered, "There's no woman, Jules. The manager saw a big dude drop you off yesterday. The man paid well to make sure no one fucked with the room. Other than that, no one's been here."

His beast snarled at him to wake up and find her. "I need to find her."

"Easy, Jules." Hayashi helped him stand.

To Jules's bewilderment, he wore cotton pants that fit, as well as a white T-shirt. But no shoes. On his ring finger sat an unfamiliar ring. It looked old and expensive. And it wasn't his.

"You feel okay, hoss? How many fingers?" Morgan held up three fingers.

"Three, and don't call me hoss."

"Yeah, he's back." Morgan turned away to make a few phone calls on his cell.

Hayashi waved Jules to a change of clothes. "I brought your stuff, and we have a plane on standby."

Jules studied his friend. "You *saw* this"

Hayashi nodded. "I had a vision of the three of us in this very room, then on a plane back home. Nothing else. I had no idea when you'd arrive. As soon as I had the vision, I left with Morgan. We've been here for almost three weeks, scouring the nearby towns along the coast and inland. No one's seen anything of you, Jules. Then yesterday, the emergency number gets a call. Some guy says to come here to this seedy hotel. And *bingo*, here you are."

"No woman?" Where was she? *Who* was she? Was she even real? A mysterious beauty who'd healed him while in... Where the hell had he been? An image of Montaña rose to mind, but was it because he needed to find the man or because Jules had been held in the enemy's stronghold? More questions than answers, and his head began to pound.

It would make sense if Montaña had been behind his kidnapping. But that some nymphet, who just happened to screw his brains out, had helped Jules escape? Yeah, right. A fantasy if he'd ever had one.

He rubbed his chest and felt something hard brush him. The ring. Damned if he could place it.

Hayashi shook his head. "I'm sorry, buddy. No woman. It's just you, me, and Morgan."

Morgan joined them. "The team can't wait to have you back. Even Mrs. Sharpe's ready to throw a party."

Jules frowned and tried to focus on the here and now, but his mind was still muzzy from whatever he'd been drugged with. "What was it you said about Tersch?"

Hayashi sighed. "He's been having a really hard time without you, Jules. Going berserker on us. Nearly hit Ava—a total accident, mind you—and ever since, he's been like a ghost. He won't talk, barely eats. Like he's wasting away."

Jules swore under his breath. While he'd been gone, his team had been hurting, maybe as much as he had. The mystery of where he'd been and who had taken him would have to wait. "Let's go."

"Good. I'll make sure the way is clear. Don't move till I tell you," Morgan ordered. He kissed his lover, then darted out the door.

Jules raised a brow, relieved to see that at least Hayashi seemed okay.

He flushed when he saw Jules watching him. "What?"

"He's a little bossy, hmm? Since I've been away, seems someone's forgotten his place in our hierarchy."

Hayashi grinned, and Jules never tired of seeing it. His once somber teammate now looked content. The same violet aura, the color of love, still surrounded him and Morgan. And it made Jules happy to see it.

"Tell you what, team leader. Soon as we're back on State soil, remind Morgan who belongs to whom. I look forward to watching you ream him. Hard."

Jules smiled. When Hayashi turned away, his smile faded. Inside, his beast roared at him to find *her*—a woman who might or might not exist.

Chapter Four

Two months later, North Carolina

Two *changed* Circs battled for control in a messy bedroom cluttered with wrinkled clothes, skin magazines, and Tastykake wrappers. After a particularly hard hit, Jules fisted his hands in Tersch's hair and dragged the stubborn bastard to his knees. "I don't need you mothering me, you dumb shit."

Tersch growled and tried to jerk away, but since the idiot refused to call on his enhanced strength anymore, Jules took advantage. He shoved Tersch down onto his hands and knees and quickly got into position on his own knees between the male's legs. Then he shoved his cock home. Tersch groaned but didn't protest as Jules fucked the fight right out of him.

The slick glide of Jules's cock through Tersch's tight ass felt good, but not as good as it had felt...before. Damn. He still couldn't stop having hazy dreams of the perfect woman two months later. A sexy nightmare that drove him crazy with frustrated desire. And he really didn't need the added aggravation.

Jules focused instead on the Circ in front of him, the wounded creature who was now living a half life, his only purpose, apparently, to martyr himself for the team and Jules in particular.

Tersch panted as Jules gripped his hips, Jules's claws digging into flesh to find purchase as he continued to slam into the blond troublemaker.

"How's that, Viking? You like that, hmm? Like to be taken, owned?" Jules panted.

Tersch grunted, shaking as his big body neared climax.

Jules could scent his readiness, could feel the taut desire building to a crescendo in the powerful male that responded to Jules's own need. While the others on their team saw to the mating heat in private, Jules and Tersch were now the odd men out. Not mated, they turned to each other to ease the buildup of Circ lust. Though the others always welcomed them, joining them felt like an intrusion to Jules.

Tersch tensed and shifted his hips to prevent his own impending orgasm. The bastard had been in a masochistic frame of mind lately. As if they needed Tersch in a worse mood. Adding sexual frustration to the mix was like adding gasoline to an inferno.

Jules slowed down.

"No, more. Harder," Tersch demanded.

"Why? So I can come and you can suffer? No way. You're going to blow, you big bastard." Knowing what his friend liked, Jules leaned closer over Tersch's back. "You think I don't know how you like it? How a bit of pain doesn't make it good for you?"

He breathed over the curve of Tersch's vulnerable neck, pleased when the berserker shivered. "That's right. Some pain makes everything better, doesn't it?" He bit down on Tersch's neck and grabbed the man's cock, jerking him off while he remained inside his ass.

"Oh fuck. Jules," Tersch moaned.

Jules understood Tersch well enough to know that the Circ was getting off on the pain and, surprisingly, the submission.

Though Jules knew Tersch to be a dominant personality, by submitting to Jules, Tersch belonged. He fit into the team, into a family that wouldn't turn on him, the way so many others had in the past. Jules knew exactly what was wrong with Tersch, but with so much other shit going on, he hadn't paid the big guy the attention he should have.

He eased off the big man's neck and licked the blood flow that soon stopped. "That's it. Come for me. You need it." Jules gripped Tersch's cock harder, squeezing, and tunneled deeper into Tersch's ass.

With a low groan, Tersch came over his fingers, his thick cream a rich scent that layered over Jules's arousal.

"Oh yeah, that's it. Now put your hand there and work out the rest."

Tersch slid his hand over Jules's, replacing him, and continued to jerk himself off while Jules finished. Jules pumped a few more times and came, no longer having to hold back. The sheer relief, letting go of the tension, was a balm to the rage still smoldering in his beast. The stupid creature hadn't been the same since his time in Brazil, but damned if Jules could sate him.

Tired of the nagging urge to find his—what, mate?—he'd actually looked for the woman who haunted his dreams. No one had seen a glimpse of anyone resembling her description, not in Trindade or anywhere near where he'd been found. But reports had surfaced about Montaña. Jules had that much intel, at least.

Though he couldn't recall much about his time away, some of the torture he endured lingered in his nightmares. As if his suffering hadn't been bad enough, knowing that Montaña had been so close, yet now remained as elusive as ever, was like a thorn in his side. Jules had no idea where they'd been holding him, and none of the team's contacts could verify the location of Montaña and his men, other than the fact that they'd caught occasional glimpses of them in Trindade.

Jules wanted nothing more than to gut the asshole. He just had to find him first.

He pulled out of Tersch and stood, glancing at the ring he refused to remove from his hand. Instinct told him to wear it, that it held some importance he'd come

to learn in time. He'd been sure to have the ring tested before bringing it home. The thing didn't transmit or receive data, and it harbored no biohazard or other malady that could be detected. It looked like what it was: a man's ring with a large sapphire embedded in the antique gold. But who the hell had given it to him? The Circ who'd dropped him off at the hotel?

Jules snorted. Yeah, right.

"Thanks," Tersch mumbled and stood. He didn't look at Jules, and Jules had had enough.

"*That's it.* Enough of your moping. You're acting like a goddamn pussy. Now admit the problem."

The anger that flared on Tersch's face warmed him. For too long Tersch had been acting easygoing, even compliant. Definitely not his personality.

"I'm fine."

"You're pissing Ava off. You avoid her all the time. You barely look at Olivia, and you've actually been civil to Mrs. Sharpe. When's the last time you called her Alicia to her face? Or flipped Morgan off? Or hell, flirted with Ava?"

"I've never flirted with Ava," Tersch grumbled. "What the hell's wrong with me being polite?"

Jules needed a drink. Dealing with rogue Circs and avoiding bullets didn't give the headaches this emoting crap did. Olivia should have been doing this. As the team empath, she could siphon off bad emotions when needed. But Tersch refused to let her touch him. It was like the bastard *wanted* to hold on to his pain.

"You're not being *you*. Granted, not being a problem for Mrs. Sharpe is a nice change, but even *she's* tired of your behavior." Jules decided to take off the kid gloves. "I know what this is about, and you need to stop it."

Tersch glanced away.

"You're not your father. You would never have intentionally hit Ava. You were pissed."

"I should have controlled myself."

"Yeah, you should have," Jules agreed and read the surprise on Tersch's face. And that was half the problem. In trying to help him, the team had been too nice. Tersch needed a foot up his ass to keep him in line. "So next time, keep it under control."

"Jules, man, I tried." Tersch ran a hand through his shaggy blond hair. "It's like there's this festering rage inside me. When you were gone, I knew I could help. I wanted to help, but no one would let me because Hayashi had one of his damned visions." Tersch scowled. "Instead, he and *Morgan* went. That fuckhead."

Jules grinned. "Come on, he's not that annoying."

Tersch stared at him.

"Okay, he is. But he makes Hayashi happy."

"I know. Why do you think I haven't broken him in two yet? With as much shit as he's been giving me, I should have killed him by now. Asshole thinks he can order me around. And he's way too familiar with Ava," Tersch muttered then sighed. "It's just hard, you know? For so long, it was just the four of us. Now Fallon's got Olivia, and Hayashi has Morgan." He flushed, as if embarrassed to admit he was lonely. "I don't... I just... Hell, I don't know."

"You think I don't feel the same? I can literally see all that love in their auras, that violet energy that surrounds them. It's so beautiful; you have no idea." Jules wanted that kind of togetherness for himself, so much so, he could taste it. His beast shoved a vision of dark red hair and bright blue eyes at him, demanding the return of his mate, and Jules shook it away. *Christ, one problem at a time.*

"So what's stopping you from getting hitched?" Tersch asked and grabbed a rag to clean himself. He sank down onto his bed. "You're fairly normal. Women seem to like you well enough."

"You mean, until I have to admit I fuck men who turn into beasts and that I'm not human anymore?" Jules asked drily. "Sometimes a monster cock isn't a good thing, man."

Tersch sighed. "Well, there is that. Finding a mate is complicated. But it's not for me. I don't want a mate, a girlfriend, or God forbid, a wife. No ties. Just me and my team."

Yet Tersch didn't sound convinced.

"Yeah, well, I'm not here to talk you into jumping on board the love train. But interceding the way you did yesterday, throwing yourself between me and those gunrunners in Florida? Not good. You need to stop throwing yourself between me and danger. I can handle myself. No matter what the others have been saying, I'm fine, back to normal, and prepared to kick your ass if you don't quit babying me."

"Don't you mean fuck my ass?" Tersch griped and shifted on the bed. "Hell, Jules. You pounded me good."

"You complaining? Because that was an awful lot of cum that splashed over my fingers while I reamed you."

Tersch flushed. "Whatever."

Jules looked closer at his teammate, using his psychic skills, and was relieved to see that the gray and blackened streaks through Tersch's aura were finally starting to fade into a warmer red, the color of health.

"Look, I'm not a matchmaker. I could give two shits if you settle down and have a passel of kids." Which in Jules's opinion was exactly what Tersch needed—some sense of normalcy. "But we work as a unit, and the women are a part of that. Just turn back into the arrogant asshole that annoys the crap out of them. Because if you don't, I'm turning Sharpe loose on you. She's been dying to have a few one-on-ones. I've been keeping her off your ass."

Tersch sighed. "Okay, already. Understood. I owe you one."

"More than one."

“Damn.”

“And stop avoiding Ava. She’s more than pissed. She’s hurt you won’t talk to her.”

“Thought she didn’t want me aggravating her. Thought I was doing her a favor by staying away,” Tersch grumbled.

“Well, you’re not. And every time she or Mrs. Sharpe is upset with you, *I* have to hear about it. So cut it the fuck out. I don’t care if you have to pretend. Just go back to acting like a dick.”

Tersch’s slow smile showed a hint of fang. “Aye, aye, Lieutenant Hawkins. You want me to be a dick, will do.”

“Terrific,” Jules muttered. Nude, he strode over to the door and opened it. He mentally called out, “*Fallon, bring Olivia. I want you two to be all over Tersch. He’s better now, but he could use more help. Make him feel like part of the team. And make him interact with Olivia. Show him he won’t hurt her. We know he won’t, but he’s not convinced.*”

Though Jules wasn’t telepathic, Fallon was. By projecting hard along the pathway Fallon had created for him, Jules could reach Fallon almost anywhere.

“*Sure thing, boss.*”

Fallon appeared moments later with Olivia behind him. The sexy woman wore a skimpy little negligee that would have had Jules joining them if another woman’s bright blue gaze didn’t constantly crop up in his mind’s eye. And *that* he couldn’t admit without everyone thinking he’d lost his mind. He shielded his thoughts, concerned Fallon or Olivia might pick up something he didn’t want them to.

“Oh hell. Jules, you didn’t.” Tersch groaned, especially when Olivia snickered, raced past Jules, and jumped on Tersch on the bed.

Fallon entered. “No, *I* did. Olivia’s missed playing with you, idiot.” Fallon grinned and dropped his shorts. “Now, big guy, how about you give my woman some lovin’?”

Jules left the sound of feminine laughter behind him and shut the door, assured that Tersch would recover. He wasn’t yet a hundred percent, but his progression back into the Circ they all knew and loved would come around.

Reentering his own room, he headed straight for the bathroom. In a shower stall big enough to accommodate *changed* Circs, he washed off the remnants of sex he’d been needing as well. The mating heats had yet to relent. He wondered why Mrs. Sharpe continued to refuse them the shots that usually subdued their carnal needs.

Since she’d replaced Admiral London nearly a year ago, Mrs. Sharpe had taken the team on some weird turns. At first, the Dawn Endeavor mission had been set up to fight science gone wrong around the globe, on behalf of the United States government. After all, who better to exterminate mutant Circs than Circs themselves? Then the admiral’s new project had come under attack, and Mrs. Sharpe had redirected the team to eliminate the new threat. With Captain William

Delancey now dead, they had only Colonel Ricardo Montaña and the man or men he worked for to take care of.

Jules swore again, wishing he could recall more details about his time away.

Despite Mrs. Sharpe's attempts to help him remember, he had a lot of dark spots he still couldn't make sense of mingled with bouts of clearheaded specifics. He remembered a Dr. Silva, the presence of rogue Circs. Most of his memories centered on a dark, humid place, where he'd been chained, drugged, and beaten. The heady smell of the tropics tickled his memory, and with it came the sultry scent of a woman and sex and need. The glimpses he had of her told him she *had* to be real, no matter that no one seemed to know a damn thing about her.

Jules huffed and worked some shampoo into his hair. He was sick of so much secrecy. Conspiracies around every corner. Women who disappeared like ghosts in the night...

No matter how often he tried to move on with his life, snatches of his experience in the jungle continued to return, obliterating any sense of peace. And on the edge of the fists, the knives, and the numbing drugs that held his beast in check, he'd envision the woman his beast considered *his*. While working on missions, eating his breakfast, or even staring into fucking space, Jules continued to see rich, dark red hair, blue eyes that rivaled the sky for clarity, and a pinup's body that rode his without cease.

As if she remained with him, Jules could feel her body gloving his, could taste the sweetness of her kiss, and experienced the fullness of her feminine curves as he claimed her as his own.

His arousal spiked, despite his recent relief with Tersch. As he soaped himself, he tried to remember more of where he'd been and what he'd seen when he'd been gone.

It didn't surprise Mrs. Sharpe that he couldn't remember much. The drugs in his system, combined with the physical, emotional, and mental toll he'd undergone, confused his memory. To hear Mrs. Sharpe tell it, that was probably a good thing. Even Jules's beast couldn't make sense of his internment. The creature didn't like remembering, except when it came to the small goddess with large breasts, a tiny waist, and an ass that begged for his attention. Talk about one helluva fantasy to combat Montaña's treatment.

Jules groaned and rubbed his aching cock, needing to come again. His redheaded angel came to help. *Her mouth under his, so slick and soft, so needy. That pussy holding him tight, clamping down as he spilled inside her. Those hot hands, such power flowing between them as she cradled his sac and drew on his shaft...* He jetted a thick stream of cum against the shower wall and shivered from the intense climax under the cool spray of water.

He hadn't mentioned the woman again, not since he'd asked about her when Morgan and Hayashi found him. He wanted to keep the memory to himself, partially because a part of him still wasn't sure if she had been real or a fantasy. Neither had he mentioned his growing lust nor the fact that certain sights and

scents made him think of her. Bad enough that since he'd been back, everyone kept an eye on him. Olivia and Fallon treated him like a fragile piece of glass they expected to shatter at any moment. Morgan irritated him more than usual, actually being polite while he tried to usurp command of the team. Damned Hayashi watched him all the time with those careful eyes that saw way too much. And Tersch, the jackass, continued to act like his personal bodyguard whenever they went anywhere outside the mansion.

I'm fucking fine. Except for my stupid beast—and cock—needing that woman, I'm good to go. Why the hell can't they see that?

Jules sighed. He didn't think he'd given any of them reason to distrust his ability to lead. But maybe he had. Being gone for more than six weeks and returning less than focused apparently had them all worried. He flexed his arms. Starting now, he wasn't taking any more TLC shit from the team. After tonight's display of dominance, hopefully Tersch would stop babying him and take his rightful place as general team troublemaker. Now Jules just had to convince the others to relax and let him resume his place as team leader.

He hadn't anticipated how badly his capture had shaken them all. When Hayashi had gone missing nine months ago, they'd panicked. But they'd recovered him quickly. Abused and left for dead at the hands of Montaña's men, Hayashi had healed fast, thanks to Morgan's odd ability to share his energy with his lover. Hayashi had rejoined the team in no time flat. Unlike Hayashi, Jules had been missing for a good month and a half. And to make matters worse, none of them had been able to find him. It was as if he'd vanished off the face of the earth.

Where the hell was I?

He didn't have any scars to prove torture, but he remembered enough to know he'd been pounded but good. He winced at the hazy recollection of Montaña stabbing him between his legs, at the flames burning his skin, at the raw rub of metal over open wounds.

His beast rose and growled, sniffing for any impending threat.

Nothing. Not a damned thing, just flashbacks of a danger Jules couldn't totally see. He tamped his beast back down. It went but settled into an uneasy curl.

Jules tried to calm himself, annoyed that he continued to spiral into an inner rage he found harder and harder to shake. He understood Tersch's despair, the need to release the rage, to hurt someone else the way he hurt. Swearing because he felt no end in sight for this confusion and anger, the need for something he couldn't quite name, Jules slammed his fist through the shower's tiled wall.

Bone broke and reformed, but the pain didn't help his frustration. Now he had a hole in the wall *and* more unanswered questions. Too bad Sheridan wasn't here. She could have helped.

He froze.

Sheridan.

The name rang inside his mind like a bell, and his beast perked up, aroused and alert.

That quickly, the clarity faded.

But now Jules had a name to go with his dreams. Sheridan.

He finished cleaning himself and turned off the shower. *Have to get Jack in here to take a look at the mess I made. At least he can be counted on to be discreet.*

The handyman had a decent sense of humor and respected Jules's authority. Jack Keiser had been an operative in the government at one time, a badass who decided marriage suited him a lot better than the probability of dying on the job. The odds of living through the dangerous missions he'd been assigned worsened over time. Jules grinned. Then again, Melissa, Jack's wife, probably hadn't given him much of a choice.

Another love match. Another relationship that seemed to work, despite the drudge of day-to-day living. Jules's own parents had their own happily-ever-after, even dying together in a plane crash just days after he'd joined the Circ program. Fallon loved Olivia more than his next breath, and the woman would do anything for her mate. Hayashi and Morgan fairly lived in each other's pockets, joined at the hip. Tersch, for all his denial, fit well with Fallon and Olivia, who'd seemed to take the big Circ under their wing.

Everyone but Jules had someone special, and his solitude, even among the men and women he considered family, tore at him.

For all of two seconds.

The moment of self-pity infuriated him, and he suppressed his pathetic needs. When his beast moaned, wanting a mate, Jules shut him up, fast. *Suck it up, princess. You're alive, and you have a job to do. Quit whining. You sound as bad as Tersch.*

Jules reached for a towel. He dried off and, after dressing in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, headed downstairs into the family room the team used as a common center.

The large kitchen overlooked the area, which not only had a nice plasma television, pool table, and poker table, but also easy access to the outside via a set of French doors. A fireplace used to heat the downstairs during the colder winter months sat at the opposite end of the room. At present, Hayashi and Morgan played cribbage at the poker table.

He snorted. Trust Hayashi to play a game requiring math. Their sophisticated Circ, as Jules liked to think of him. Hayashi listened to classical music, read books, and wrote poetry—for fun—and had a mate who could speak several languages as well as kick ass in the gym—in spite of the fact that Morgan wasn't Circ.

Wasn't Circ yet could borrow Hayashi's energy to turn himself into a Circ-human hybrid. Shit, by harnessing Hayashi's energy, Morgan could grow bigger and stronger, but without the fangs, claws, and skinlike body armor. But Jules still didn't buy the story that Morgan wasn't Circ. He didn't know how Morgan pulled it

off, but his beast knew Morgan was Circ. The same way Jules knew Mrs. Sharpe and Ava Belle had a lot more going on under the surface than either woman would admit.

"Hey, team leader. What's up, hoss?" Morgan grinned and fucking *winked* at him.

Calling me hoss because he knows it irritates me. Ignore him. Jules drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Hayashi, Morgan. You two seem to have developed a card fetish."

Hayashi snorted. "I'm just trying to let him recoup his losses. Morgan is down four sets of laundry and dish duty on Thursdays."

Morgan scowled. "That's because you keep releasing that scent anytime it looks like I'm winning. That's cheating."

Hayashi raised a brow but didn't reply, and Jules chuckled. He sat on the comfortable leather couch and tried to lose himself in some mindless television while the pair sniped and tried to outdo each other. Friendly competition, a rivalry based on love, mutual respect, and need.

It had taken Hayashi long enough to admit he was gay, not that Jules hadn't known it for years. But for some reason, Hayashi had thought the team would kick him out if they knew his natural proclivities leaned toward loving men. Jules shook his head. The whole team had fucked one another more times than he could count, and Hayashi worried about them rejecting him for taking a man as mate?

At least Hayashi and Morgan didn't seem to have any major issues, nor did Fallon and Olivia, fortunately.

"Oh, here you are." Ava entered the room, looking pissed as hell.

He groaned. So much for relaxing for once.

"Ava, baby. What's Kisho holding?" Morgan asked, distracting her.

Hayashi frowned at his mate. "That's cheating."

"All's fair in love and cards, *kitsu*." Little fox. The endearment Morgan called him brought a blush to Hayashi's cheeks.

Ava grinned at them. "Two jacks and two fives. You're screwed."

"Ava." Hayashi muttered something under his breath in Japanese.

She turned her attention to Jules. "We have a problem."

"Look, I talked to Tersch. He's better now. Okay?" Jules squinted at the screen as some actor shot an alien with three heads, hoping she'd leave him alone.

"Our problem is sitting in her study right now, refusing to okay our medical transfer until she talks to you."

Hayashi and Morgan froze.

"What transfer?" Morgan asked.

"Medical? Are we finally getting a Circ doctor? Man, it's about time," Hayashi added.

Jules ground his teeth and reminded himself not to take out his annoyance on Ava. "Dammit, I told her we didn't need any new staff. Not with Montaña's men still out there. We can't trust anyone until we nail the leak we seem to have. Montaña is like a ghost. Any time we get close, he disappears. I was taken three miles from a damned US Marine Corps base by men wanted by the CIA. Now how the hell do you think they got so close to me without help from someone in our organization?"

"I'm not disputing that. I'm just telling you, you need to talk to Mrs. S. about this."

"I don't want anyone else in the one place we should be able to think of as safe. And I don't want to talk to Mrs. Sharpe about it *again*. Hell, I'm all talked out. That's all she's been arguing about for a week."

Ava huffed. "So tell her, not me."

"No. I want to relax for once," he muttered, taking the coward's way out. "Hell, Ava. Just tell her I'll talk to her about it tomorrow, okay? I'm tired, I have a headache, and I—"

He broke off when he noticed the concerned glances from the others.

"Fuck it." He quickly rose and stormed from the room, tired of being constantly watched like he might break. Hell, he felt like Tersch.

Tersch, though, had given them signs he was unstable. Jules hadn't. Since his return to the group, he'd been the same leader, the same take-charge SEAL trying to find and take down their enemy. Not his fault they couldn't seem to nail Montaña's location. During his time back, however, the Dawn Endeavor team had found and stopped two hits on members of the admiral's staff and ruined a failed kidnapping attempt on the admiral himself.

So why did the others continue to treat Jules like a wounded animal? *Probably because Fallon can't keep his mouth shut. I knew that bastard was combing through my mind a few days ago.* And just when Jules had flashed back to Montaña's wicked knife. Trust Fallon to share with the others.

He scowled and increased his pace toward Mrs. Sharpe's study. The woman practically lived in there. Day or night, he could always track her down at her desk. He reached the door right when she opened it.

Chapter Five

"Jules, I trust Ava told you I was looking for you?" Mrs. Sharpe smiled warmly, but he wasn't fooled. The woman was a shark in heels, even if she did come to just under his breastbone.

"Yeah." He might as well admit defeat. Mrs. Sharpe might look like a graceful aristocrat, but she had the tenacity of a pit bull. He wouldn't find any peace tonight until he dealt with the business of medical personnel.

"Come in, please."

She stepped back, and he followed her inside.

"Close the door."

He gritted his teeth but closed the door behind him. He turned and walked into Mrs. Sharpe's fastidious study. Everything had its place. A computer, fax, printer, and copier rested against the back wall in a floor-to-ceiling wooden hutch. File cabinets and a matching desk, which sat opposite the hutch, had been crafted of rich mahogany. He could see his reflection in the wood, polished to a fine sheen. The ornate pair of chairs that faced her desk had a floral, feminine design with enough strength to accommodate his frame. New chairs to replace the ones Fallon and Tersch had broken in their last big battle. When they'd fought over who would rescue him.

As much of a pain in the ass as that fight must have been, he wished he'd been here to see it.

Against another wall sat a couch facing two chairs and a coffee table. A comfortable place for lectures and meetings with the esteemed Mrs. S. Or as Ava laughingly called her, a "pain in my S."

He held back a smile at the thought, irritated when Mrs. Sharpe quirked her lips, as if reading his damned mind. He reinforced the shields around his thoughts, fairly sure the autocratic woman could read him if she wanted. Though she'd never admitted to psychic abilities one way or the other, she'd helped the others expand theirs.

Fallon and Olivia were much stronger at broadcasting thoughts and handling emotions, respectively. Hayashi could control some of his visions now, focusing his talent where he needed it. Before working with Mrs. Sharpe, he never would have been able to pinpoint where to find Jules in South America.

Jules knew the woman had power. Hell, he could feel the vibrations anytime he came in contact with her. But that didn't mean he trusted her. She held back

from them, and he knew it, even if the others didn't really care. Fallon and Hayashi both credited her with finding them their mates. Though Jules thought the same, he knew the woman had a reason for doing so. His inner beast retreated when in her presence, trying to hide deep inside him. That fact alone made him wary.

She tucked a strand of frosted dark hair behind her ear and motioned for him to sit in one of the chairs across from her desk. Instead of sitting next to him, though, as she often did, she sat behind her desk, an adversarial tactic he could appreciate. Not next to him, like a friend or teammate, but across from him, emphasizing her place as his boss and his as her subordinate.

When she continued to sit and stare at him over steepled fingers, he forced himself to sit where she'd pointed and contained the growl threatening to break free. "Yes?" Hell, he'd rather deal with Morgan's smart mouth or Ava's complaints than undergo the third degree from Mrs. Sharpe.

"I've been searching for the right person for months. I think Geoffrey has found us a keeper. She's not a doctor, but she's practiced in the arts of alternative medicine. I think she's the person we need. But she'll need to live on-site."

She'd cut right to the chase, a pleasant surprise.

"No."

"I don't think you understand, Jules. The team has been in need of a medical specialist for some time. With Doc unable to leave his own Circs up North—and for good reason, considering one of the females is pregnant again—we can't afford *not* to have our own specialist here to help us. The missions are growing more dangerous. I know you can all heal yourselves, but we need a better medical presence here. Remember when Kisho returned to us so broken, so beaten? And you can't deny it would have been nice to have someone on hand when we first found you."

He shrugged.

She frowned. "An understanding of Circ physiology is a necessity in whoever agrees to help us."

"I don't disagree. But with an unknown unfriendly in high places keeping tabs on us, I don't think it's wise to bring in anyone new right now."

"Jules, it's not an issue. Olivia will verify that this particular woman is telling the truth when she says she means us no harm." Olivia could feel a lie, a handy trait unless the person lying was a psychopath who didn't feel as if they were telling an untruth. Mrs. Sharpe narrowed her gaze. "And I don't need your permission to do my job."

"Then why do you keep asking me for my opinion? You're the boss. Do what you need to do."

"We both know the team takes its direction from you. While I may administratively command this unit, you're the heart and soul of Dawn Endeavor. Jules, why do you think we had so many issues when you were gone? Though you all should function without one another, the team knows who's alpha. That's you."

It made him feel good to hear her acknowledge that. Then he wondered why she bothered. "Go ahead. Drop the other shoe. I know you're up to something."

She sighed and fingered one of her earrings. "Jules, we've been butting heads for close to ten months now. At first I thought it was because you didn't like ceding command to a woman."

He snorted.

"I know. You couldn't care less about gender. Then I thought perhaps you were angry the admiral no longer took as keen an interest in the Circs. But you know this isn't true. Though he's very much involved with his psychics, he's kept a watchful eye on Dawn Endeavor." When he didn't respond, she continued. "So I can only conclude that your issues have to do with me, personally."

He leaned forward in his chair. "You act like we're all one big happy family. You pull and push us to do your bidding, but I know you've not telling us everything. I can sense the untruths, the hidden motivation. You smell powerful, strong, but there's subterfuge there, *Alicia*. And don't think I don't know it." He unconsciously flexed his muscles, not intending to demonstrate his physical superiority, but the beast raised his head. "I won't tolerate anyone hurting this team. I don't care how strong you are or how many connections you have. These Circs are *mine*." He ended in a growl.

Instead of displaying fear, the woman nodded. "It's taken you long enough to call me on it. I'm impressed, Julian. That's a lot of patience for someone like you."

"Someone like me?" His beast sized her up. Small, slender, physically underwhelming to the animal that lived under Jules's skin. But her golden aura showed the deception. So much power existed in the older woman. He knew better than to think he could take her out easily. If at all.

Mrs. Sharpe smiled. "You're a natural leader. Someone who takes care of those under him, a man with a full sense of his responsibilities. For months now, you've let me play at being in charge, but we all know it's a front. Even Geoffrey never acknowledged his own authority over your group, despite his rank. He simply maintained a presence in the Dawn Endeavor command structure to facilitate your needs with other agencies."

Jules cocked his head, trying to get a read on her. "What's your point?"

"My point is that I *do* have an agenda, as you so aptly discerned. But my reasons for being here happen to coincide with doing what's right for Admiral London's projects and for this country. I'm not out to hurt any of your team. Far from it."

He sat up straight. "You know things you shouldn't know. So what do you know now, *Mrs. Sharpe*? And why the hard-on for this doctor who isn't a doctor?"

She frowned. "Jules, really. The language?"

He flushed. "Sorry." For some reason, the woman could make him feel all of fourteen when she chastised. "My point is, you're not playing straight with me, and I don't like it."

"Fine. You tell me what's been bothering you, and I'll lay it on the line. Give me that ring on your finger, and I'll tell you exactly who I am and why I'm here."

He blinked and instinctively covered the ring on his finger with his other hand. "The ring? Why?"

"Tit for tat, Jules."

"I—No." He couldn't say why, but taking the ring off was wrong. It belonged to him. *She* belonged to him. *Mine*. His beast snarled at Mrs. Sharpe, and just as quickly Jules tucked the animal back where it belonged. What the hell was that about?

Mrs. Sharpe smiled, and to his shock a flare of red appeared in her pupils. It was gone so quickly, he wondered if he'd imagined it.

"Where did you get that ring?"

"I..." He shook his head, suddenly very confused. "Wait a minute. You've admitted you're here for another reason. You owe it to us to tell us why you're here."

"Do I?"

The sudden image of a curvy redhead touching him, of her hand healing the wounds on his chest, her big blue eyes round with wonder, struck him.

"You see, Jules, *that's* why I'm here. I'm just the help, dear."

He shook his head, bemused by the odd flashes he kept having of Sheridan. "What?"

"It'll make more sense once I'm through with Gunnar."

"Tersch? What are you talking about?"

She smiled at him. "Why don't you get the door?"

He gave her a perplexed look. "I don't understand."

Just then, the doorbell rang.

* * *

Sheridan Keyes stared at the door in front of her. She nervously ran a hand through her hair again, wondering if she would have looked better, more professional, by pulling it back. But Jules had seen it in a ponytail when she'd worn it before. Did it really matter how she looked? Odds were the drugs Julian Hawkins had been pumped full of would have negated him remembering anything about her, let alone his time with Ricardo. She'd come for one reason and one reason only: to get her grandfather's ring.

Sure, keep telling yourself that. As if you don't care about seeing Jules again.

She licked her lips, feeling underdressed and overwhelmed. From the jungles of Brazil to the urban sprawl of Washington DC to a hidden mansion in the Croatan National Forest in North Carolina? Well, it was a whirlwind way of going from point A to point B. That was for sure.

Finding her way out of the Amazon had been easier than expected, with two larger-than-life Circs helping her. Making the right contacts in DC had been harder,

but digging deep to find the courage to face the man—the Circ—she now knew to have a mercenary and murderous past had been hardest of all.

Why didn't I sense his wrongness when I put that ring on his finger? The sapphire had never graced an unworthy hand before, and there I go, putting it on a man who is more than suspect. Dammit. Were the drugs in his system the reason he seemed so in need of healing? Or had he been tricking me all along, as Raul said? Could the man Sheridan had taken deep inside her body, and her heart, really have killed so many for no better reason than to outdo his rival, Ricardo? Had she escaped from one murderer only to be tricked by an even bigger liar?

The thought of her grandfather's ring on the hand of such an undeserving man was unfathomable. But that Sheridan had been so wrong about Julian...that bothered her more than anything.

Perhaps Raul was wrong. Grayson had encouraged her to find out the truth for herself, and she liked and trusted the large Circ much more than Raul. With Grayson's help, she'd landed this job. It would serve, at the very least, as a temporary means of employment until she figured out what to do with her life. And in the process, she'd hopefully find a way to reconcile the Jules she thought she knew with the man he really was.

Yep. I'm going to deal with Jules and focus on work. Work is safe; work is good. Even if Jules isn't as horrible as Raul made him out to be, would Jules really want me anyway? I'm a freak. And a man as handsome as Julian Hawkins would never lower himself to be with someone like me if he didn't have another choice. Right then, the door opened, and her good intentions to treat Jules as no more than a mystery to be solved went right out the window.

Julian Hawkins looked even better now than he did in her dreams. All six feet four inches of prime male stared down at her in shock, which soon turned to suspicion. Did he remember her after all?

"Alicia!" he yelled over his shoulder, then put a hand on her arm and yanked her into the mansion.

His palm completely closed over her thin bicep, and she reminded herself to start lifting weights as soon as she got the hell out of there.

If only she could forget the memories of his touch. The familiar scent of vanilla and grass wafted over her, and she couldn't stifle a soft moan. The minute she did so, his hand loosened.

"Sorry," he said gruffly but continued to pull her with him through the grand foyer into the house.

Marble under her feet, ornate wooden frames over cream-colored walls, and rich wooden paneling under the chair rail detailed a place reeking of money. The chandelier overhead had to cost a freaking fortune. Sheridan glanced from Jules to the house again, never having anticipated that a man who could change into a beast, who'd actually fit in to the jungle as if a native, would live in such opulence. But it certainly gave credence to Raul's theory that Jules was a successful crook.

He continued to tug her into the house until he came to a large room where several others stood to greet them.

Three other men and one woman stared at her with curiosity.

"Hello there," one of the men drawled. Tall with dark brown hair and green eyes, he stood next to a slightly smaller man with a mixture of Asian and Anglican features. Both of them had the same rugged good looks and raw wildness she associated with Jules, and they both towered over her. Beyond them, a large, dark-haired man held hands with a beautiful woman—the kind Sheridan envied.

The woman was tall and slender with curves in all the right places, so pretty and sexy, she made Sheridan fade into the woodwork. *Which is what I want. I'm nothing but furniture. Don't see me, don't know me.* But a part of Sheridan wanted Jules to know her. To never forget the magic they'd shared, even if it had been no more than a passing dream of what could never be.

The woman frowned as she stared at Sheridan, and Sheridan had a bad feeling. She couldn't say why she did, but she raised her awareness and tried to block out any incoming psychic attacks. Growing up as a healer and with parents who could commune with plants, Sheridan believed wholeheartedly in extrasensory perception and the paranormal.

As well she should, standing as she was next to a shape-shifting mercenary who'd fought an actual monster in the jungle.

"I believe I'm to meet with Mrs. Sharpe," Sheridan said.

Another male entered the room, this one a giant. Blond and with piercing blue eyes, he crossed his massive arms over his chest. "Why am I not surprised to hear her say that name?"

An older petite black woman entered the room and approached Jules and Sheridan. "Ah, you must be Sheridan Keyes. I'm pleased you found us." Jules nodded at mention of her name and gave Sheridan a narrow-eyed stare that seemed to strip her bare.

She gave a subtle tug, and he slowly released her arm. "Mrs. Sharpe?" she asked in a breathy voice, wishing she sounded more at ease.

"That's me. I take it Admiral London gave you the necessary paperwork?"

"Yes." She reached into her large carryall and found the folder Grayson had procured for her. "Here it is."

Mrs. Sharpe took the stack and quickly peered through it. "Perfect. Now, Ms. Keyes—"

"Please, call me Sheridan."

"Sheridan, let me introduce you to the team."

"Sheridan Keyes," Jules repeated in a low voice. His silver eyes blazed as he studied her. "You look very, very familiar."

He ran a hand over his face; her grandfather's sapphire winked back at her.

Warmth unfurled. He hadn't taken it off. Again, she felt the rightness of seeing it there on his finger. Something flashed in his eyes as he looked back at her, a glimpse of the beast beneath his skin. To her astonishment, her entire body locked up in a searing lust that made her feel very unlike herself.

Good Lord, what is going on with me?

Satisfaction gleamed in his eyes, though he took a step back from her. She didn't dare look below his waist, sure she'd see an answering response in him.

Another woman entered the room and interrupted the tense atmosphere. This woman was even more attractive than the other one and made Sheridan feel like the proverbial third wheel nobody wanted. She had light brown skin and the prettiest face Sheridan had ever seen.

The woman muttered in a husky voice, "Who's this?"

The others returned their attention to Sheridan, silent, assessing. Dissecting.

Mrs. Sharpe brought Sheridan into the middle of the room. "Sheridan Keyes, our new doctor, for want of a better term. I'd like you to meet the team of Dawn Endeavor. I see you've already met Julian Hawkins."

"Call me Jules," Jules said in a husky voice Sheridan did her best to ignore.

Mrs. Sharpe brought her in front of each person. "This is Kisho Hayashi and his partner, Morgan Reynolds." The Asian and the green-eyed hunk. They nodded politely.

Mrs. Sharpe continued as they moved along. "This is Ava, my assistant." The brown-skinned woman who should have been a model. Unlike the others, Ava didn't tower over Sheridan. The one area where both of them were equal: height.

"Hi." Ava frowned, though she didn't seem unwelcoming. More like confused, and Sheridan had her own confusion to deal with.

"Hello," she answered before they moved in front of the handsome couple.

"This is Jesse Fallon, and Jesse's wife, Olivia."

"Nice to meet you," Olivia murmured. Sheridan had the urge to step back, though she couldn't have said why. Her psychic ability was limited to healing the flesh, but she could almost feel a hum of odd energy around the tall woman, and it scared her.

Mrs. Sharpe, to Sheridan's good fortune, stepped between them before Olivia could hold out a hand. "And this is Gunnar Tersch. He looks mean, but he won't bite."

The others chuckled, but Gunnar scowled. Bite? He looked like he could devour Sheridan in one large gulp.

"Thanks, Alicia. You're a peach." He turned his gaze on Sheridan and winked. "Call me Tersch, honey."

Mrs. Sharpe rolled her eyes.

Ava scowled, and Sheridan had the sense the woman had staked a claim. Not that Sheridan had any intention of honing in on the giant. She just wanted to be

able to trust in her instincts once more and to get her ring back. Period. End of story.

She cleared her throat. "Nice to meet you all. I hope I can be of help while I'm here."

"While you're here? You're not planning on staying?" Jules said from directly behind her.

She could feel his body heat near her, and she itched to touch him again. Not to heal, to *feel*.

Sheridan swallowed a yelp and coughed nervously. "Ah, yes, I'm staying. I just meant I'm here to help," she added lamely. Oh boy. Put her in a laboratory with plants that didn't talk back or scientists who wanted to discuss meristematic cells and chloroplasts, and she was the life of the party. But socially, Sheridan couldn't hang. She wasn't shy, just inept at making conversation. An oddball even among oddballs.

Mrs. Sharpe patted her on the back, and she flinched. "I know everyone can be overwhelming at first."

"Yeah, a party with five larger-than-life monsters is always a treat. Oh, sorry, Olivia, I forgot about you," Tersch rumbled with a grin. "Make that six monsters."

Olivia shook her head, and Sheridan stared, wide-eyed. The woman was a Circ as well? "You're all Circs?"

"Not me," Ava said. "I'm just the hired help."

"And I'm mostly human," Morgan added with a grin.

She didn't know whether to believe him or not.

Mrs. Sharpe explained, "Ava's my assistant. We also have Melissa and Jack Keiser on staff. Melissa's our cook; Jack's our handyman."

"Okay."

"And as you've met the team, I think we'll let you get settled in before we hit you with more. Ava, why don't you show Sheridan upstairs? She'll stay in the guest wing. We can show you the laboratory tomorrow, Sheridan, if you like. It's late, and I'm sure you're tired."

Sheridan grabbed the excuse and held tight. Despite their shared past, she hadn't expected to feel so much upon seeing Jules again, and she needed time to catalog and process her feelings. "Yes, I am. A long drive, you know."

"I'll take her upstairs," Jules volunteered.

"Ah, that's okay—"

Mrs. Sharpe nodded. "Actually, that's a better idea. Ava, you can help me with Mr. Anderson. I can't find the paperwork on that funding issue we need taken care of. Gunnar? Would you be so kind as to get Sheridan's things from her car?"

"Sure, Alicia," he drawled. "Hell, why don't we just open a fucking hotel? First Olivia, then Morgan, now a looker with big blue eyes. Just what we need around here—more women. Ava's bad enough." He huffed and sneered at Morgan.

“Really, Gunnar.” Mrs. Sharpe’s disapproval rang loud and clear.

“Did you just call me a woman?” Morgan growled, affronted.

The others smiled widely and laughed. Ava beamed at Tersch before following Mrs. Sharpe from the room. It seemed almost everyone encouraged his rudeness, while no one seemed easy with her being there. Terrific.

“Sheridan Keyes, in the flesh. What a pleasure,” Jules rasped and drew closer. “You know, I’d swear we’ve met before.”

“Wow, talk about a zing. Fallon, you feeling what I’m feeling?” Sheridan heard Olivia ask her husband in a low voice.

“Yeah, and you wouldn’t believe what’s in his head.”

“Fuck off, Fallon. Olivia, butt out,” Jules growled.

Not understanding the undercurrents in the room, Sheridan tried to step back and found her way blocked by Gunnar.

“I’ll need your keys, honey.” He held out a huge hand.

She stared from his hand to his ice blue eyes before dropping her keys into his palm, careful to make minimal contact.

He turned and walked away.

“I didn’t bring much,” she blurted to Tersch’s disappearing back and looked up at Jules. During their weeks apart, she’d tried like hell to convince herself that the chemistry hadn’t been strong between them. That the danger had spiked her responses. If only.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure we can find you exactly what you need while you’re with us,” Jules answered in a soft voice.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. “Er, right. Sure.” She crossed her arms over her chest, hoping the subtle move disguised her hardened nipples.

“Come with me.”

She bit her lip but hurriedly smoothed out the gesture with a wobbly smile when she noted the others staring at her. She nodded to them. “Nice meeting you all.”

“Yeah, nice,” Fallon said with a toothy grin. She blinked. Were those fangs?

“Sheridan?” Jules waited at the entrance to the room.

She hurried to follow him.

As he walked, he talked about the house and grounds. He kept pace with her, making her feel downright tiny by comparison. His muscles were just as big as she remembered, his handsome face just as attractive as she feared. Those mesmerizing eyes, those firm lips. His talented mouth that had set her on fire.

When he stopped talking, she realized he was watching her watch him, an intent look on his face.

She blushed and glanced away. “Um, so you said this hall leads to the back stairs?”

"Yeah. It's the main drag. Follow this back the way we came to the kitchen and family room. Farther down is Mrs. Sharpe's study, and past that, off to the left, is the pool. Then ahead of us, there's the gym." He pointed to a set of double doors.

If Raul was to be believed, these people were good at thieving, because this place was unbelievable. Their own gym? Their own pool? And they said they worked for the government? Please. She'd known scientists who worked for the government, and funding was *always* an issue. Then again, Julian Hawkins could do what only a handful of people in the world could do—transform into a creature with strength, stamina, and the ability to kill with ease.

Apparently, people paid a lot for those abilities. Her stomach hurt at the thought she'd really been so wrong about him.

She shivered and took a step away from him.

He frowned but said nothing.

She pointed at another door at the end of the hallway. "So where does that lead?"

"That leads to the basement, where your lab is located."

My lab. Right. "I'm not actually a doctor," she emphasized. "I'm very good at what I do, but I heal using alternative means."

He glanced down at her hands, then lifted a heated stare to her eyes. "Laying of hands?"

She imagined the feel of his thick shaft between her palms as if she'd held him just yesterday. And like that, she wanted him all over again. *Not smart, Sheridan, not at all.*

He closed the distance between them, and she backed up until she hit the wall.

"Such big blue eyes," he murmured. Then he frowned and stepped back. He rubbed the back of his neck and nodded to the right. "Let's go up."

Shaky, she followed him, and this time he made no attempt to walk next to her. Instead, he seemed content to put some space between them. What the hell had *that* been about? They reached the second floor, an expansive marble-tiled corridor with doors and hallways that branched off to the back of the house.

"My team lives down here." He pointed to the wing where several doors remained open. "We're a family unit. We trust one another, and we respect each other's privacy," he said quietly, but she understood.

"I have no intention of going where I'm not wanted."

He didn't say anything for a moment, yet she had the notion he wanted to. "Come on."

They continued down the main hallway and stopped at the veranda lit by a crystal chandelier that overlooked the foyer downstairs. Across from the veranda was another long hall filled with doors.

"This wing is for guests, and where you'll be staying. You're the only guest we have right now, so it's pretty empty." They turned and walked down the hall. She

followed him into a large suite done in a soft rose. The room had a large window that looked out over a courtyard and garden and a door that connected to another room.

Following her gaze, Jules added, "That door leads to your own bathroom. That's why you have this room, in case you were wondering. Some of the other rooms share a bath."

"Oh. Thanks."

To one side of the massive room, a small living area decorated in floral fabrics looked inviting and boasted a loveseat, accompanying chairs, and a coffee table. To the left of the sitting area, a small mahogany desk lay empty. Across the room, a king-size canopy bed took up a lot of space.

When she glanced back at Jules, she saw him eye her, then the bed.

"Kind of big for you, hmm?"

She wanted to answer but had no idea what she might have said.

He shocked her by grabbing hold of her shoulders and drawing her close. "You smell like her, look like her, and feel like her," he murmured. He ran his hands down her arms to her waist and squeezed. "God, do you feel like her."

"Like who?" she managed, even as her body turned to liquid heat.

"Like the woman he thinks is mine."

"What?"

"Shit, if you're working for Montaña, I'm going to seriously regret this."

He made no sense, but then she didn't much care. Because he did what she feared more than anything else.

He kissed her.

Chapter Six

Jules was so hard, he ached. She was real, and she was here. *Sheridan. My mate*, his beast added with satisfaction. Hell, the woman could have shown up saying her name was Jane Smith, but Jules would have known her. He'd know the taste and feel of her anywhere.

She gasped as he took her mouth, and he loved the floral scent that filled his head. He gave her a thorough kiss, then looked at her again.

"You can try to mask your desire, but you can't hide this heat. Touch me," he muttered, not rational at all. He couldn't think past the need to fuck her, to reinstate his claim. His beast purred in his breast, and she moaned.

"What d-desire?" she stuttered, clearly aroused, her eyes so wide, he noticed the slim rings of navy around the soft sky blue of her irises. "Stop, what—"

He kissed her again, licking past her lips to the smooth heat of her mouth. He'd bet his next paycheck she was hot and wet and ready for him. He could smell the sweet cream between her legs, and it was killing him.

The stubborn woman allowed him a small taste before she ripped her mouth away, breathing hard.

Not sure what she hoped to accomplish, Jules didn't plan to let her go before he knew the truth. He shoved his hand down her front, past the soft plane of her belly, to the vee between her legs.

Her denial turned into a moan. "God, what are you doing to me?" she rasped while unconsciously arching into his touch.

He slid his hand beneath her panties and shoved a finger inside her, wanting nothing more than to rip their clothes away and fuck her where she stood. She was so damned wet. Instead, he withdrew his finger and brought it slowly to his mouth.

"Wh-what are you—"

Her glazed eyes blinked, and her nostrils flared with heat—with arousal—as he sucked her juices from his finger.

Sheridan. No doubt about it now. He knew that scent, and his beast knew that taste better than he knew his own name. She'd come to find him, finally. But why had she waited so long? Hell, why help him in the first place? It hadn't escaped his suspicion that Montaña might have staged his whole rescue for some perverted purpose. To get closer to the rest of the team, perhaps. But Sheridan seemed so innocent underneath the sexy veneer.

Jules wished he could trust his instincts, but his beast was so drugged on the woman's taste he wanted nothing more than to roll over and show her his belly. Talk about taming the beast.

His reaction to her made everything suspect. She was sexy as hell, beautiful, kind—from what he remembered—and apparently she healed with a touch. Too damned good to be true. *But she's ours*, his beast whined when Jules took a shaky step back. Not sure what to believe, he forced himself to rein in his desire before he forgot everything and fucked her until he sated this unreasonable lust.

The woman was dangerous, a piece of the puzzle from his time spent with Montaña—the enemy. He couldn't trust her or himself when around her.

She drew in a deep breath and shuddered.

He silently cursed. She smelled so damned good.

"Wh-why did you do that?"

"Why are you so wet?"

The bright flush on her face only made her look that much more attractive.

"I'm not." She paused before continuing so bald-faced a lie. "I don't know. It's probably you," she said in a nasty voice that delighted him. She'd seemed so shy before. "I'm no doubt allergic to being pawed."

He grinned, feeling happy for no reason at all. His beast wanted to sniff her, to mark her. "Why are you here, Sheridan?"

"I...I wanted to see you again. To see if you were all right." She glanced away, and the guilt on her face stole some of his joy.

"Really?"

"Um, well, yes. When you left, you weren't well."

"I don't remember much." He watched for her reaction. The pain on her face wasn't feigned.

"I know. You were so brave." Her eyes looked glassy. Shit, she wasn't going to cry, was she? Sudden discomfort disturbed him. He hated female tears, and hers were making him feel terrible. His beast roared at the thought of wounding his mate.

Mate? I don't even know this woman! Panicked at the thought of having what he'd wanted for so long, only to find she wasn't who she said she was, Jules took another step back. Time for a hasty break, to figure out what the hell to do about this woman who tied him in knots.

She frowned at him and reached out a hand. "Jules?"

Her fingers grazed his chest, and he swore he felt a bolt of heat where they made contact. Apparently she felt it as well, for she blushed and pulled her hand away as if burned.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" She blinked and bit her lower lip.

He stifled a groan, wanting nothing more than to lick the sting away. Fuck, he had to get out of here. The woman was hell on his control when he needed it most. Especially with his beast clawing at him to take what he knew to be his.

"We'll talk more tomorrow. I have a lot of questions."

"All right." Her soft answer sounded too submissive for his peace of mind. Images of holding her down as he took her, of demanding she swallow all of him, made him ache like a son of a bitch.

He turned and left before he could put his hands on, God forbid, his mouth on her again. He argued with himself as he left the mansion and went outside into the night, where he *changed* and ran to dull his frustration, anger, and confusion. *She's mine. Ours. Go back.* His beast clamored to take complete charge, but Jules couldn't afford that. Not if Sheridan was a threat to his team. He needed time to figure out what her presence here really meant. A heaven-sent boon to soothe the lonely ache deep inside himself? Or a clever plot to ensnare his team in more danger?

He ran as if the hounds of hell nipped at his heels. But his beast kept forcing him to glance back, to keep some part of the house in sight. Where *she* waited...

Sheridan leaned back against the door and tried to calm her racing heart. She'd been so close to losing it. So close to latching on to the man and never letting go. What was wrong with her? She'd promised herself she'd seek the truth, not the man's tonsils!

Oh, who was she kidding? With a man like Jules, the only way to keep him at arm's length would be avoidance. God knew she had no willpower when it came to him. For some odd reason, their energies meshed really, really well. "I am *so* out of my league." A round little plain Jane compared to an Adonis with muscles on top of muscles. Yet he remembered her. She thrilled to know she'd made such an impression, even if it might eventually threaten her safety. Because if Raul had the right of it, nothing would stop Jules from doing whatever he wanted to her.

But could she really reconcile that image with the wary male who'd kissed the breath out of her? Heck, if he'd wanted, Jules could have taken her right then, but instead he'd walked away. Not exactly the move of a ruthless playboy and killing machine.

No, the more she thought about Raul, the more she came to distrust what he'd said. Jules was a warrior, but a killer? A ruthless gun for hire? She couldn't believe it. *No, I don't want to believe it, not of the man who did everything he could to save me and nearly died in the process. Not the man who touched me with such possessive tenderness.* Perhaps her fascination with Jules had to do with his being Circ. The scientist within her relied on logic when all else fell short, and she compared him, once again, to the only other Circs she'd known.

She'd spent the last two months with Grayson and Raul. She'd seen them interact with each other, had seen their beasts. But they didn't make her want. All the Circs here at the Circ compound had an unusual beauty. The women were

gorgeous, the men sexy, and all of them were wild, earthy. Yet only Jules made her so wet, she could barely think past the need to hold him inside her once more.

Her clit ached, needing to be stroked. Sheridan had never been an overly sexual creature. Two seconds in his presence, and she wanted to drop everything, spread her legs wide, and surrender.

Tired, cranky, and out of sorts, she double-checked the lock on her door. She then moved toward the bathroom, intent on a shower, when a loud bang on the door scared the crap out of her.

"Yo, Sheridan. I have your stuff." Tersch called from the hallway.

"Oh, sorry. Hold on." She took a few deep, cleansing breaths and straightened her appearance, hoping she looked calm and not like a woman who'd nearly climaxed from a kiss and a touch. In control again, she unlocked and opened the door. She stepped aside for Tersch to enter.

He had a brawn one couldn't help but notice, and she wondered how much was from the gym and how much from his Circ genetics. The shoulder-length blond hair did nothing to make him girly and only enhanced the masculine strength abundant in his frame. He had the high cheekbones and coloring of Nordic ancestors, and those piercing blue eyes of his seemed to miss nothing.

He placed her lone suitcase on the floor, and she stood back, expecting him to leave.

Instead, he stepped closer, leaned down, and sniffed.

She froze.

"Nice perfume you're wearing. Smells like vanilla." He straightened and watched her with interest.

Vanilla. *Jules*. Aware of the flush that heated her cheeks, she stammered, "I'm not wearing perfume. Must be my, um, soap."

Tersch smiled. "Smells good." He paused. "Seen Jules?" He glanced beyond her to the door that led to her bathroom.

Embarrassed he thought Jules might be in a locked room with her, she said in a rush, "He left before you came. I don't know where he went."

Tersch's smile faded as he considered her. "Okay. You need anything, you can dial zero-two on the phone to get Ava, but I wouldn't recommend calling her unless you have a cup of coffee in hand to tame the little witch." Tersch paused, and in his eyes she saw the hint of his beast looking out at her. Seeing his animal scared her more than she wanted to admit, because she sensed an out-of-control wildness to him that the others didn't possess.

Tersch's face cleared of all expression, and he took several steps back. "Let Ava know if you need anything," he muttered and left in a rush.

Sheridan shut and locked the door. Too tired to think about anything else, she stripped out of her clothes and shoes. As she bypassed the mirror in the bathroom, she paused at what she saw. She'd lost a bit of weight while hiding in the jungle

from Ricardo and his men. But for all the stress she'd been under, she was still round.

Olivia had height and a slenderness Sheridan wished she'd been born with. Ava looked like any man's idea of the perfect woman. And Sheridan, what did she have? Big boobs, a tiny waist—her only saving grace—a round butt, and nothing firm about her but her thighs, and that came about from a lot of jogging, which she'd found helped alleviate her stress. Sheridan, unfortunately, had been born athletic but without the benefit of an athlete's body.

Jules had seemed to like her well enough when she was softer, less toned, a scientist too busy to exercise daily. But had he been attracted to her because she was available, the only woman around? She frowned. Not if his reaction to her today was anything to go by. Then again, maybe he was a lot more intelligent than she'd given him credit for. He knew she responded to him. Perhaps by showing interest, he hoped to stir her into a false sense of trust.

According to Raul, Jules had his share of conquests. He thought nothing of using and discarding women the way he did fast cars, expensive toys, and illegal arms. A sudden thought made her frown. Grayson had never agreed with Raul. Nor had he disagreed. He'd simply looked at Sheridan as if urging her to make up her own mind.

Though the two Circs had stayed by her side those first few weeks in the jungle, hiding her from Ricardo's men while she healed them from the odd mutations in their blood, they hadn't seemed very friendly with each another. Between the two, she definitely favored Grayson. Raul made her uncomfortable. The way he'd looked at her and talked to her... She'd wondered what he might have done to her had Grayson not been present.

She shivered as a cool breeze teased her spine and realized that though the roman blinds had been pulled, the window had been left open a crack. At least the wind distracted her from her thoughts, and she focused on the thought of getting clean.

Needing to recharge, Sheridan dug through her suitcase. After removing a few things, she took a much-needed shower.

After washing, rinsing, and drying off, she wandered back into the bedroom, dressed in a thin nightgown, and slid between the sheets. She fell asleep the minute her head hit the pillow.

Dressed in a conservative pair of slacks, a silk T-shirt, and sandals, Sheridan felt less than professional as she joined Mrs. Sharpe for breakfast in the kitchen the next morning. They sat at an expansive oak table, just the two of them, while Melissa worked at one of the counters.

None of the other Circs had arrived, for which Sheridan was profoundly grateful. Luck shone down on her, finally. Now she just had to get her head together and figure out what to believe. Jules as a good guy, or Jules as the enemy?

Sheridan worked to keep her smile in place as Mrs. Sharpe tried to make her feel welcome.

"I can't tell you how nice it is to finally have a medical expert on staff." Alicia sighed. "We've been without for months. Doc, the resident Circ expert, comes down when he can, but he has his hands full with the team up North. Now that they're having babies left and right, it's imperative he stay close."

"Makes sense." *Circ babies?* A fascinating prospect she wouldn't have minded studying if she didn't have more pressing matters to attend. And wasn't Mrs. Sharpe quite the chatterbox? So trusting, when they'd only just met. Then again, she gave Sheridan the same vibe Olivia had. Everyone around this place felt a bit "more" than normal, though Sheridan had no idea what any of them could do. She could only hope no one read minds, because the thoughts she'd been having about Jules were embarrassing enough to turn her face perpetually red.

"You've met the team. Names can get confusing, since the men call each other by last name, well, except for Jules. But don't worry. They answer to just about anything."

Mrs. Sharpe paused, and Sheridan realized she was supposed to say something. She dug through her memories of last night. "Kisho was the soft-spoken man next to Morgan, the one with green eyes, his partner."

"And mate."

"Mate, right." *Not just partner. That's a human concept, apparently.* "Gunnar is the tall blond with the chip on his shoulder who brought my suitcase to my room. Jesse is the Circ who married Olivia. They did marry, right? I saw matching rings."

Mrs. Sharpe nodded.

"Ava is your assistant. I won't forget her, because she's the first person around here, besides you, who's vertically challenged."

Mrs. Sharpe grinned.

"And Jules..." *Jules is the god on two legs who makes my heart race and my body liquefy. A man who worms his way into my every thought and renders my willpower useless with a kiss. Man, I have it bad. If this guy's not on the level, I am in real trouble.*

Mrs. Sharpe blinked. "Sheridan?"

"Jules is the team leader. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome."

Mrs. Sharpe smiled. "That's him. They're all stubborn. Warriors to the bone. And they don't like to be told what to do unless it's Jules commanding them." She sighed. "I miss Admiral London. He used to command this group. But he's been so busy on another project for the navy that he can no longer commit himself to the team. That's why I'm here. It's not easy, but Ava helps. Melissa and Jack Keiser are worth their weight in gold." She nodded at Melissa, the pretty woman with dark hair who stood at the kitchen sink, her hands buried in soapy water.

"You should know that we really have need of you here, Sheridan." Mrs. Sharpe looked deeply into her eyes. "Jules especially needs your help."

Sheridan frowned. "Why is that? He seems healthy enough." Had she missed something before when healing him and sent him home still wounded? Or had Ricardo's drugs had long-lasting effects she hadn't considered?

"He recently returned to us from a mission that went very wrong. He was gone for a long time, and he suffered greatly."

I know. I was there.

When Mrs. Sharpe frowned, Sheridan hastily pushed back from the table and her barely touched plate of food. "Well. I appreciate all the help."

"Jules likes you."

"Ah, okay." *He'd like to screw me, maybe, and what does any of that have to do with me working to help you?*

"How shall I put this?" Mrs. Sharpe placed her hands together on the table in front of her. "The men are very physical. Quite bluntly, they're sexual creatures. They work hard; they play hard. Circs are difficult at best when it comes to social situations, this group in particular."

"I don't have any issues with anyone, but I'll be sure to let you know if I do."

Mrs. Sharpe gave her a look she couldn't decipher. "Wonderful. Then I'll let you get started on your work. The lab is downstairs, and the passcode into your office is one-one-three. We normally use the stairs, but there's a freight elevator down the hall and to the right you might need to use from time to time." Mrs. Sharpe checked the gold band on her wrist. "Will two hours be enough time before your first appointment?"

"Sure." First appointment?

"Good. I'll send Olivia down at eleven. Might be easier to work with a woman before you take on the men. I'd like you to make sure she's all right. I can't put my finger on it, but I think something might be wrong with her lately."

Sheridan frowned. "What do you mean?" She hadn't sensed anything about Olivia that seemed off, other than her psychic sense. Then again, she'd been so focused on Jules, she might have missed something.

"You tell me. Oh, and when you're done inventorying our supplies, be sure to fill out the forms in the computer for whatever else you think you might need."

Sheridan swallowed. "Mrs. Sharpe, you know I'm not a doctor."

"I know. I couldn't be more pleased you're not."

"Why?"

"Because normal medicine won't help our Circs. Doc has a medical degree, yes, but he helped created the Circe serum. He's more a research man than a medical doctor, though he serves both purposes. I want you to help heal our Circs, to fix what's wrong with them when you can."

"I can fix physical problems, but anything else is beyond me."

"No worries, dear. Olivia handles our emotional traumas."

Interesting. "Oh, I didn't know she was a psychologist. Or is it psychiatrist?"

"She's neither, and she's both." With that, Mrs. Sharpe stood. "If you need me, I'll be in my office. There's a phone list downstairs as well. Ava can help you with most things, but I'm available to answer any questions you might have as well."

Sheridan rose, done eating. "I have one now, if you don't mind."

"Yes?"

"Where is everyone?"

Mrs. Sharpe laughed. "The team is training. Physical exercise is usually a morning event, unless they're on a mission. Circs need to expend a lot of energy to avoid issues of aggression and dominance that can get overwhelming. Don't worry, you'll learn as you go. And remember, Sheridan, to ask as many questions as you need."

Fine. How about you tell me if I can trust the lot of you farther than I can throw you? She wanted to yell out all the doubt and anguish bothering her. Instead, she smiled, nodded, and made her way downstairs.

She spent the next two hours familiarizing herself with the lab. To her surprise, Doc, the Circ expert everyone talked about, had left electronic files full of notes about Circ behavior and medical issues to be aware of. He'd also left his personal number to answer any questions the medical staff here might have.

"Staff." She huffed. *A staff of one. I'm no doctor. "Healing hands,"* Jules had said. She sighed. *I hope I'm enough for these people. Even if they are a bunch of crooks, they won't have to suffer bruises, breaks, or poor health while I'm around. Healing them won't make me an accomplice.* She froze at the thought. *Will it?*

Someone knocked on the door, and Sheridan glanced up at the clock. Eleven on the dot. "Come in."

Olivia Fallon entered covered in sweat, her face flushed.

"Are you okay?" Sheridan asked, concerned.

"I'm sorry. We were training, and the time got away from us. I just wanted to come down and ask if you could wait until I showered."

"Actually, this won't take that long if you want to do it now."

"Oh, okay."

Sheridan measured Olivia's height and weight, then seated her on the exam table and took her vitals. A crash course in human physiology during her stay with Grayson, after she'd left Raul and the jungle behind, gave her the edge she'd need to carry on with her new job.

"Everything appears normal," she said after comparing Olivia's current readings to the last ones Doc Dennis had entered when he'd given Olivia a physical.

"Everything is normal. I don't know why Mrs. Sharpe insisted we all get checked out."

The curiosity in the woman's eyes unnerved her. Though she did her best to mentally shield herself, Sheridan had no idea if it was working.

"So what's this alternative medicine you practice?" Olivia glanced around. "I don't see anything different than what was down here the last time I visited."

Sheridan tried to explain. "I'm not a doctor; I never claimed to be one. But I have a special way with the healing process."

"Yeah?" Olivia rolled her neck, and Sheridan heard a small pop. "Oh, man, that feels better. Jesse tends to forget I haven't been doing this as long as he has."

"Doing what?"

"Being Circ." Olivia smiled. "So tell me about your process."

Sheridan stared, surprised at Olivia's open trust. She'd expected to have to convince the Circs to allow her to work on them. Yet Olivia seemed very open to alternative medicine.

From what Grayson had told her, the Circs had first come into being as a government experiment to create super soldiers, but the scientists running the project had screwed up. Now, few Circs remained, and those in the private sector trying to continue Circ research were hunted down and arrested and/or killed, depending upon who did the hunting. The handful of living Circs had been created years ago, thanks to the Circe serum. Most of the Circs still in existence were male. Females tended to be extremely rare.

"Do you mind me asking how you transitioned into being a Circ? From what I know, you can't turn Circ from ingesting bodily fluids or sharing blood."

"Nope," Olivia answered. "Only EP12, the Circe serum, works. I'm still not sure how I am what I am. We think maybe my dad was infected a long time ago with the serum. I'm just glad I'm Circ, so I can be with Jesse."

Right. Because only a Circ could satisfy another Circ. Sexually.

Heating up at thoughts of satisfying Jules, Sheridan cleared her throat. "Thanks for explaining. You wanted to know about my healing process. Well, believe it or not, I build up heat inside me. I put my hands on you, and it happens. The heat grows, and the healing starts. It's hard to explain. More like a feeling I get to eradicate pain."

Olivia nodded. "Show me."

"Okay. Lie back."

Olivia lay down on the large exam table big enough to fit a giant. Or a Circ, Sheridan realized, still coming to terms with the fact that the Circs actually knew about her gift and seemed to accept it as real.

It was a heady feeling to have her talent out in the open. For years she'd been forced to hide it, scared of being considered a freak or taken advantage of by those less moralistic than herself. *By people like Ricardo. But maybe I can put all that behind me and start fresh.*

She glanced down at Olivia and, for the first time, began to feel hope. *No time like the present.*

Chapter Seven

Sheridan held up her hands. "I'm going to touch you. A light stroking outward from the direction of your heart to your extremities. It's both physical and metaphysical. Some call it a lot of bunk, but it works for me. Bear with me, okay?"

Olivia nodded.

"You're much more open to this than I would have expected."

"Let's just say I try to keep an open mind about what most of the world considers 'bunk.'" But Olivia's smile said otherwise.

It was too much to expect Olivia to believe her without proof. But she'd see soon enough.

Sheridan didn't try to convince her of anything more. Instead, she trailed her hands over Olivia's shoulders, down her arms, and to her hands. After a few passes, she worked from the tops of Olivia's thighs to her ankles. The heat of normalcy, of good health, felt right. This was where Sheridan excelled.

This was where she felt at home.

"Hey, I think you're on to something there. I feel, I don't know, warmer." Olivia sounded surprised. She experienced Sheridan's small trespass of healing. Not that Olivia needed much, just a refresher to tired muscles.

"Relax," Sheridan advised. "I'm going to make a few more passes. One over your head, then one more over your torso, and we'll be done."

Except when Sheridan passed a hand over Olivia's head, she felt a strong burst of heat. A mass of energy that pulsed with a strange paranormal power that nearly rocked her back on her heels.

"You okay?" Olivia asked.

Sheridan shook her head to clear it. "Fine, fine. Must have locked my knees. I just felt a moment of dizziness." *Idiot. The woman's some kind of psychic.* She'd felt that same intensity yesterday, when she was in the room with everyone. *But was it a Circ trait? Were all these people gifted?* Sheridan quickly bypassed Olivia's temples and breezed over her face and neck. A light touch over Olivia's chest and abdomen proved Olivia to be in remarkable health. So strong, so sure. So *Circ*. Sheridan found the contrast between a normal human's energy and Circ energy fascinating. Still, Olivia didn't jolt her libido the way Jules had, nor did the woman return the energy Sheridan slowly expended while touching her.

Sheridan cleared her throat, suddenly feeling awkward. "Sorry if my touch feels intrusive. I'm not trying to be fresh."

Olivia chuckled. "Keep going. This actually feels good."

Sheridan smiled, feeling more secure. This was child's play, stuff she'd been building on and improving on since she was a little girl. She knew how to heal, how to stimulate a body's own energy to repair itself. Using her gift both drained her and thrilled her. She moved her hands to Olivia's stomach.

And then she felt a flutter in Olivia's energy. She paused, instinctively tuned in to the odd vibration that shouldn't have been there.

"What's wrong?" Olivia asked. "You seem worried."

"Not worried, just interested." Sheridan cocked her head, trying to make sense of what she felt.

Jesse Fallon burst through the door not a minute later. "What's wrong?"

"Shush, I can't... Wait a minute." Sheridan pressed her fingers down onto Olivia's belly, but she didn't push hard. She rubbed the pads of her fingers in a circle, needing to feel more. "Olivia, I need to see something. Your energy is different. Hold on." She pushed Olivia's shirt up to bare her midriff, then let her fingers dance over the woman's lower abdomen.

"What the hell, Fallon? You left me high and dry back there," Tersch's loud voice barked from the doorway.

Sheridan had a hard time thinking of him as *Gunnar*. *Tersch* sounded like *terse*. Just like the man.

"Oh, wow. What's this? Girl-on-girl action?"

"Shut up, Gunnar. Something's wrong," Olivia snapped.

"What? What's wrong?" Jesse growled. "Sheridan, talk."

"Nothing's wrong." Sheridan let the power of her energy soak through Olivia, warming the new life just beginning. "Something's very, very right." She stepped back and rubbed her hands together to ease the tingling.

Jesse nudged past her and pulled Olivia into a sitting position. "What's wrong with my wife?" he growled.

Sheridan glanced from them to Tersch, not sure whether to tell them all or to keep the news in private, for Olivia at least. It was Olivia's exam, after all, and Olivia's body that would feel those changes for the next eight months.

Jesse paled.

Is he reading my thoughts? "Um, I would tell you this in private, but you seem to be a family, so maybe I could just—"

"Spit it out, Doc." Tersch's command brooked no refusal.

When Olivia nodded as well, Sheridan gave in and smiled. "Congratulations, Olivia. You're going to become a mother in another eight months or thereabouts."

Jesse's eyes grew as round as saucers, and his grin stretched from ear to ear. Olivia's mouth dropped open. Tersch blinked in amazement, then frowned in what looked like disbelief.

"Olivia, to verify your pregnancy, I'd like you to take this." Sheridan dug through a nearby drawer for the pregnancy test she'd seen earlier. Someone had been thinking of a future for the Circs, apparently. "I believe the bathroom is that way."

Jesse didn't speak. Sheridan had a feeling she'd blindsided him.

Olivia squealed, jumped off the table, and grabbed the box from Sheridan's hands. She turned and kissed Jesse on the mouth before hightailing it into the bathroom.

"Shit. Mates, babies. Where does it all end?" Tersch slapped Jesse on the back and glanced at Sheridan. "Of course, this could be a bullshit story to distract us from what you're really doing here."

It took Sheridan a moment to understand. Tersch was suspicious of her motives for being there. She hadn't considered any of them would actually think her possible of harming them. She glanced down at herself, then up at his six-six frame. "I'm sorry?"

"No man," Jesse rasped. "She's right. There's been something off with Olivia. Nothing bad, just a different scent. She's richer, if that make sense." His flushed cheeks made him look that much more attractive.

But still not as good-looking as Jules.

Jesse's gaze shot to her face, and he grinned.

She didn't want to think about the smile he sent her, because the smugness of it suggested his grin had less to do with his own happy news and more to do with what she'd just been thinking.

The object of her affection soon arrived with Morgan and Kisho in trail. "One minute we're sparring. The next, half the team disappears. What's up?" Jules glanced at his men before fixating on Sheridan.

His appraisal made her warm—and wet.

"Man, is it hot in here or what?" Jesse asked.

"Dude, it's freakin' weird in here," Tersch muttered. "Jules is staring at the new doc like he's about three seconds from doing her. The annoying twins have been flirting with each other instead of fighting with each other all morning." He frowned at Kisho and Morgan, who winked at him. "And now Olivia's pregnant."

The others froze. Jules arched a brow at Sheridan.

She nodded. "Olivia is confirming the diagnosis."

"Pregnant? But, how?" Jules asked.

"Dude, do we really need to have this conversation?" Tersch asked his team leader.

"Ass. I meant, how did the good doctor know?" Jules growled.

"Hell if I know." Jesse shrugged. "Olivia called me, scared." He tapped his head, confirming what Sheridan had suspected. Jesse Fallon was a telepath, which explained his timely arrival.

"Scared, why?" Jules asked, suspicion in his tone.

Tersch answered with a shit-eating grin. "Maybe because your girlfriend was feeling her up."

Sheridan wanted to sink into the floor when Tersch said girlfriend, mostly because she wanted it to be true. *I am so pathetic.*

As one, the men stared at Sheridan in speculation. The look on Jules's face was positively carnal.

"Feeling her up, hmm?" he rasped and licked his lips.

For God's sake, I look like a frump. They can't possibly be imagining me and Olivia together.

"Oh yeah, we are," Jesse murmured. "Never thought Olivia would go for that, or I'd have suggested it before."

"*Holy crap.* You read my mind. I mean, you really read my mind." She blushed and refused to look at Jules. *Please tell me I didn't think about him in any way but platonically.*

"Oh no. You've been having all kinds of interesting thoughts about him," Jesse answered with a chuckle.

Her face felt hot, and she didn't know what to say. The wicked look on Jules's face spoke volumes, and she just knew Jesse had told Jules how much she wanted him.

A moment of silence passed. Sheridan desperately tried to raise her inner shields, hoping the thought of blocking everyone out would work since she'd never had to deal with such an invasion of privacy before. She was marginally satisfied when Jesse frowned at her.

"Stop it." She said and avoided Jules's hot stare. "I work with my hands. Massage is an accepted form of therapy, and one I use in my practice. I was touching Olivia's stomach when I felt her energy bunch."

Fortunately, Olivia interrupted the awkward moment by bounding out of the bathroom chanting, "I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant! I am *so* pregnant!" She flew into Jesse's arms, and the pair kissed each other with so much love and affection, it brought tears to Sheridan's eyes.

She wanted to give them a moment to themselves and backed away. Right into Jules.

He grabbed her arm and tugged her with him and the others, minus the happy couple, out into the hallway. "You better not have hurt her."

"Jules, ease up," Morgan said, frowning at Jules's tight grip on her arm.

"Shut up. Sheridan, tell me you didn't hurt her."

Offended he, of all people, would accuse her of that, she wrenched her arm away and glared at him. “I don’t hurt people. *I* help them.”

“What are you saying?”

Should she tell him what she’d heard? What if he decided she knew too much and treated her like a liability? But as she looked at him, really looked at him, she saw the beast in his eyes staring out at her with longing. Damned if she wasn’t a sucker for that possessive animal inside him. Jules’s beast had protected her in the jungle. But, she admitted, it was the man who had made sweet love to her. She couldn’t believe the worst of him. And why should she? Because Raul had said so?

“You know what? I don’t care what you think.”

Jules grabbed her hand and laid it on his cheek. “There it is—the heat.”

The dark satisfaction on his face alarmed her, because he raised an answering lust in her own body. One that felt distinctly unnatural. That link that had been between them in the jungle still remained. She tried to pull back.

“No, touch Hayashi. Right there,” he said, pointing at Hayashi’s arm, “at the break.”

Morgan opened his mouth to retort when Kisho nodded. “Do it. I’m curious. What am I supposed to feel, Jules?”

“You tell me.”

Sheridan didn’t want to, but she couldn’t help sensing Kisho’s newly healing fracture. The need to fix the break gave her a much-needed diversion, and before she knew it, she’d moved closer. She touched Kisho’s arm, then grasped it firmly in her hands, concentrating on mending the bone until it healed completely.

“Oh, wow. That is so good,” Kisho said on a groan. “Her hands are so hot.”

“But what do you *feel*?” Jules asked, his voice strangely tight.

“Warm, peaceful. Like I’m floating on the water, just floating.”

Sheridan wanted to step away, but her work wasn’t done. Screw Jules and his suspicions. “Let me see your ribs.”

Morgan lifted Kisho’s shirt. “I distracted him, and the Viking asshole took advantage,” Morgan muttered, scowling at Tersch.

“Hey, not my fault you two can’t keep your dicks down while we’re playing.”

“Training, Tersch. Not playing,” Jules reminded him tautly. “But I find it interesting Sheridan knew about Kisho’s ribs and that she heals by touch. Because it wasn’t so long ago that I met a woman who could do that.”

Kisho flinched. “Sorry, Sheridan, but that hurt. Ahhh. Now it’s better. Damn, that’s nice.” He sighed and covered her hand with his own. “Thank you.”

“You don’t feel any attraction to her? Not horny as hell?” Jules persisted.

“Jules.” Sheridan frowned.

“Hell, no.” Kisho shook his head. “Sorry, Sheridan. No offense, but Morgan’s enough for me.”

"Damn straight." Morgan winked at her.

"Well, isn't that interesting." Jules sounded way too pleased for her peace of mind.

Sheridan took her hands away and blinked up at Kisho, a little woozy from all the energy she'd pushed into him. Kisho's sincere appreciation made her smile. And then she realized what Jules had said. He recognized the connection they shared. He remembered *her* and the sexual connection she was helpless to deny. Great. As if he needed one more advantage over her.

"Crap."

Jules rumbled low in his throat. "I've missed you, baby. Now why don't we make up for lost time?" He showed her a lot of fang...and little patience.

Jules's hunger grew as a wash of new memories flashed through his mind. Small pieces, but put together, they showed him a woman who'd healed at him at great expense to herself. Her hands over his body, healing his wounded groin. Then the bliss she'd given him before she had to leave and hide from the guards. The marks he'd seen on her body, the abuse she'd suffered at the hands of Montaña, that bastard.

Sheridan had taken his pain the same way she'd taken Hayashi's. She'd made him better, and she'd taken him to bliss, only to disappear after he'd saved her life. Why had she left him? What had happened after they'd separated? He had to know.

He scowled. "We met a mutant in the jungle. He tried to kill us." The others around them stilled, staring from Jules to Sheridan. *To my mate*, his beast purred. He stopped her when she tried to turn away. "Don't, Sheridan. They have a right to know who you are and what you did to help me."

"I'm going to be a father!" Fallon shouted and laughed as he exited the lab room with Olivia. The pair stopped and stared at the tense scene.

"I know." Jules grinned through his teeth. "The way you two go at it, it's no surprise. And speaking of surprises, guess where I first met Sheridan Keyes?"

Olivia grinned. "I've been waiting for this. What a day!"

Sheridan tried to scoot away, but Jules latched on to her wrist and held firm. He wouldn't release her. Not now. Hell, maybe not ever.

"Oh boy," Fallon muttered.

"In the damned jungle, that's where." Jules turned to growl at Sheridan. "For a while after I got back, I thought I was losing my fucking mind. But then I remembered you. You were there. Montaña hurt me. And you healed me, several times, I think. It's still fuzzy. I do remember us running from rogues. But I don't know what the hell happened after I tangled with that mutant."

Tersch blurted, "Holy fuck," and seemed to blanch before Sheridan's eyes. "You telling me you really fought with a mutant? I thought that was the drugs talking. I mean, I believed you about the rogues, but even I have trouble with mutants." He

grinned. “You really are a badass, aren’t you, boss?” Then his eyes narrowed. “Sheridan was with you in Brazil? In the same compound as Montaña?”

“Or wherever we were.” Jules pulled her closer, his beast needing to be let loose. “She disappeared. And yet, here she is. Same blue eyes, same red hair. Same sweet scent.” He wanted her, ached to have her.

“Jules,” Olivia said on a breath. “Um, you’re not just emoting. You’re pushing another mating heat.”

“I’m more than up for it.” Fallon grinned. “Come on, Olivia. Let’s go upstairs and celebrate the baby.” He turned to Jules. “You need to talk to your girlfriend, because I’m catching snippets of a helluva lot she has to say. Guys, let Jules handle this.”

Sheridan groaned. “Stop reading my mind.”

“Then stop projecting so loudly,” Fallon answered with a gentle smile. “And thanks for whatever you did for Olivia. She feels much better. But next time, I want to watch all of it. I wouldn’t mind a little more skin on skin.”

“For God’s sake, Jesse.” Olivia blushed a bright pink.

“Hey, me too. Don’t forget I’m family,” Tersch whined.

Morgan added under his breath, “More like the black sheep or a mongrel dog.” He shoved Hayashi between them when Tersch lunged for him. “Come on, Tersch. You can take it out on me upstairs. I’m feeling generous.”

“Asshole.”

“If you’re lucky,” Morgan murmured, and Hayashi grinned.

“You guys are a riot.” Jules tugged Sheridan with him and had a sense of déjà vu, since he’d grabbed her the same way just last night. “I need some time to talk to my *girlfriend*. Unless you’re on fire, don’t bother me.”

“Sure thing, hoss,” Morgan said with a salute just before Tersch grabbed him around the neck and put him into a headlock.

Sheridan sputtered the whole way to his room. He didn’t care. Jules didn’t want to hear anything but *yes* and *more* on her sultry lips. To finally have her here in his arms, to finally, fully believe he hadn’t imagined it, that his beast had fixated on a real woman for a reason, made him feel worlds better. But it didn’t alleviate the need in his blood or the ache in his cock *for her*.

Once in his room, he closed and locked the door behind them. He turned to face her and stripped out of his clothes. With each article that fell to the ground, her eyes grew wider.

“Take off your clothes.”

“Wh-what, but I—”

“Do it,” he growled, unable to tolerate a moment more of anything between him and her body.

She slowly stripped, exposing more and more of her soft flesh to his gaze.

"Look at yourself," he told her and guided her toward the large mirror in his bathroom.

So hard he hurt, he crowded her against the bathroom counter. "Don't move." The sight of her full breasts and tight nipples brought the beast quickly to the surface. He wanted to bite, to suck, to taste. Jules lifted a hand and watched as his claws slowly emerged. He ran a sharp nail over her shoulder, ultracareful not to break her skin or in any way harm her.

She froze under his hands, but the scent of her lust increased. Curious to see how far he could go, he turned her so that she was belly down on the counter. He didn't make any sudden moves, waiting to see if she'd protest.

She didn't, and his desire increased.

"Stay right like that," he growled around his emerging canines. God, he was so hard. *Have to have her*. His beast wanted. Badly.

Wildflowers and female musk filled his head. Sheridan apparently liked him telling her what to do. And he suddenly couldn't wait any longer.

"What do you want from me?" Sheridan's whisper sounded more like an invitation. She spread her thighs and moaned, and the heat of her sex teased him to move closer.

"I think the question is, what do you want from me?" he rasped and angled the head of his cock between her full folds. "You want this, baby? You're wet, and I'm hard and hot. I'm aching for that pussy. I need it," he rumbled, feeling her moisture coating his cockhead. Heaven and hell in the same breath. A torturous tease with every second he didn't come inside her.

"Oh. Oh yes," she moaned, squirming to get him deeper inside her.

The right answer. *Fuck, yes*. "Well you're going to get it. All of it. Oh, yeah. This first time, it's going to be hard and fast. And then we're going to take it nice and slow."

He didn't wait to hear more as he slid inch by inch deep inside her wet pussy, careful not to hurt her. She was so incredibly tight.

Sheridan cried out and ground her ass against him, wriggling to get closer as he crammed her full.

"Please," she begged, and he lost it.

Jules pulled out and rammed back in, his balls tight, his shaft pulsing with the need to bury himself inside her.

"I'm going to fill you, Sheridan. Full of my cum."

Just the thought of it turned him inside out. He pounded into her, gripping her lush hips as he fucked her with a ferocity that amazed even him. His beast raged to cement ties, to push himself inside the female and coat her with his scent until she belonged.

Finesse, affection, tenderness—none of that mattered but proving to himself that Sheridan was real, she was here, right now, and that she was *his*.

Irrational and beyond caring, Jules fucked her harder until he reached climax. He shuddered inside her, caught in a lust so extreme, he couldn't think as he emptied himself.

When the raging need tapered enough to think again, he realized he remained erect inside her, wanting more. Sheridan hadn't yet come, and she quivered beneath him.

Shocked he might have hurt her, he took a moment to regroup.

She moaned. "Don't stop, not yet."

Her slight whimper aroused him anew, relief and desire commingling to allow him the control he needed to do this right.

Jules withdrew and pulled her upright. Wrapping his arm around her body, he forced her to watch them in the mirror. "I'm bigger than you, stronger than you, and I'm going to demand things from you that you won't want to give," he growled, his beast riding him hard.

Her slighter, paler hand covered his. She grabbed his fingers as if to take his hand away.

He reached for her breast and squeezed, and her head fell back against his shoulder. "I love your hair."

Her breath hitched. "I didn't think you'd recognize me. The drugs in your system were so strong. Even my healing didn't fully temper them."

"You think I'd forget you?"

"I'm not much to look at," she said, shocking him.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" He stared at her in the mirror, taken with the sexual kitten lolling against him. Any man's wet dream come to life, and she thought she wasn't much to look at?

He tightened his grip and pinched her nipple as punishment for such foolish thoughts. Instead of crying out, she arched into his hand, aroused by the pain. He couldn't help himself, and with his other hand, he sought out the wet heat between her legs, deeply gratified by his seed that mingled with her arousal.

"You're a wet little liar, aren't you, Sheridan?"

"No," she rasped as he shoved a finger inside her and thrust his cock against her lower back.

"Yes, you are. Because you know how hot you are, how my friends lusted after that hot little ass, those big breasts. And you love what I'm doing to you, don't you? You like me rough. You're wet and so ripe. You want to come, don't you, baby?"

He began fucking her with his finger while he pinched her nipple, alternating points of pressure until she cried out for more.

"Please. Jules, I need you."

"How much? Enough to tell me where you've been all this time? To tell me what happened after the mutant attack? Or how about why you were at that fucking compound to begin with?" Jules inserted a second finger inside her,

enthralled by the carnal scene reflected back at him in the mirror. "Look at us. Remember how good it was when you rode me in the middle of the wild? Yeah, that I remembered. You took me, let me come deep inside you. So why did you leave me in that hotel? Why not come with me, unless you had something to hide? My beast knows who you really are, baby."

Mine.

He didn't give her a chance to answer. Instead, he removed his hands and dragged her to the bed. There, he shoved her down and knelt on the floor between her splayed legs. A feast for the senses was all he could think as he stared down at her glistening pussy.

Jules kissed his way up her thighs and clamped his mouth over her ripe clit. He sucked hard, gratified by her moans and pleas for more. He ate her out, licking and sucking, relishing the taste of his seed over her. The beast inside him fully emerged, and Jules gave him his head.

The female should never have left him. And this time, she'd learn better than to try to escape again.

Chapter Eight

Several hours later, after an afternoon spent loving, eating, laughing, and generally getting to know each other's bodies, Sheridan groaned and tried to move back from the intensity between her legs. Jules's mouth felt like torture, so hot, so exciting. He burned her from the inside out. The desire she continually felt in his presence flared into a heated life of its own.

"Oh yeah. Hot and sweet." He rubbed his face against her, arousing her with more than his breath but with his mouth as well as he licked her desire. When she tried to inch away from the intensity, he held her fast, and his strength only increased her arousal. So dominant, so forceful, he fulfilled fantasies she'd never known she'd had as she instinctively submitted to Jules's touch.

The overwhelming pleasure started to scare her, because she couldn't control the growing need. His little finger shoved inside her, then retreated and inched lower, toward her virgin ass. When he rimmed her there and pushed forward, he pulled from her a deep-throated moan she wouldn't have thought she had it in her to give. Not to any man.

For so long she'd been immersed in work, in her plants, in her mind, keeping to herself to protect the nature of her ability. And then she'd met Jules, and everything ceased to matter except him. The feminist inside her railed at the truth, but the woman in Sheridan could no longer deny it. No matter what tomorrow brought, she'd take this pleasure and share in it. *Hell, I deserve it for what I've been through.*

"I'll tell you anything you want to know, but you can't stop. Please," she said on a breath, wishing she sounded firmer and not like a woman starring in an adult movie.

"I couldn't stop now if the world ended. I need this. *We* need this," he growled and showed her the beast in his slit pupils, in the rasp of his words uttered around fangs.

"Yesss," she hissed.

Jules's mouth interrupted her again. He sucked hard at her clit and shoved his fingers deeper inside her. *Everywhere.* Her ass burned, and then the pain turned to unfathomable pleasure as he angled his little finger deeper and prodded her sensitive flesh.

She trembled as her body tensed and her orgasm loomed close.

Then Jules withdrew and covered her in one smooth move, penetrating her pussy with his thick, hard cock.

She screamed out as ecstasy splintered her body, dimly aware of him riding her with a rough rhythm until he stopped and came inside her once more. Sheridan could only feel as ripples of pleasure overwhelmed the sense of caution warning her to take heed. Thoughts of babies and disease paled next to the feeling of warm cum satisfying the sudden *need* in her body. The lusty energy she and Jules seemed to exchange settled and calmed her as his seed seeped into her womb. A burst of affection filled her for her generous lover, and she wanted to hold him tight and never let go.

Jules pulled out and pumped a few more threads of seed over her belly, rubbing the mess over her stomach and marking her breasts with his cum.

"There we go. All over you," he said in a deep, gravelly voice.

She blinked up at his wild eyes, enthralled at the silver brightness gleaming around his slit pupils. When he spoke, his visible fangs made his voice sound harsh. His flesh darkened. The pattern of interlocking cells on his skin tightened as she watched. Jules knelt over her, yet it was no longer him, but the creature that lived inside him.

Stunned, exhilarated, and a bit nervous, she could only watch as he subtly, slowly grew. Wider, taller, brawnier. His soft, thick black hair lengthened, tickling his neck, then draping over his shoulders to lie against the middle of his back.

"I love this side of you. It's so sexy."

The fingers gripping his cock elongated and thickened, as did that most impressive part of him that refused to flag. "Good. Because I love this side of *you*." He nuzzled one nipple with his mouth and grazed it with a fang, causing her to gasp as yet another wave of heat swept over her.

Impossibly, her body warmed to arousal once more, as if she hadn't just come hard all over him.

Sheridan swallowed hard, and Jules's attention left her body to fall on her mouth. He grinned, a dark expression that caused her to shiver with foreboding.

"Don't worry, we'll get to that sweet mouth of yours," he promised. "But I want answers first."

She tried to scoot back, out from under him, not wanting to feel so vulnerable while they had this conversation. But Jules leaned forward and pinned her hands on either side of her head. His knees caged her hips, keeping her under him without applying his considerable weight, for which she was thankful.

"Now, Sheridan, I want to know what the fuck is going on. I need to know what happened. Tell me so we can get back to soaking all of you in my cum."

She swallowed hard, wishing she didn't want that so much. "What did you do to me?" she couldn't help asking. "I'm not me."

"Then who are you?" he drawled.

"I feel like *you*. I can't stop wanting you, so horny, I can't think. You came inside me, and I don't care. I *should* care!"

"Granted, it's a little late for safe sex."

"Jules," she warned, not appreciating the humor she could hear in his voice or the appreciative gaze roaming her chest.

"Circs don't carry sexual diseases. And unless you're Circ, you can't get pregnant." He paused and leaned down to take a good, hard whiff at her neck. "Are you Circ? I honestly can't tell, and that's just weird. You smell like me already. But that can't be unless you're Circ and we mated."

He didn't sound upset with the prospect, and for the life of her, she didn't feel averse to the idea either. *I am certifiably crazy. I can't love a man I barely know. One who's not exactly human.*

"I'm not Circ. I just handle energy in a way different than most people. Maybe that's why I smell like you. You and I share a weird connection when we touch. Not like what I felt from Kisho or Olivia. Or anyone else for that matter. It's just you."

"Good." He stroked the inside of her wrist, and she shivered. "Now tell me about the jungle. Start with what happened after the mutant attacked, and we'll go from there."

She forced herself not to look down at his growing erection. Talk. He wanted to talk.

"The rogues attacked while you fought the mutant. Grayson and Raul helped fend off the other rogues, and then they helped you kill the mutant. You'd almost done the job yourself, but you were dying."

"Mutant toxin is deadly."

"Well, that, and you'd already lost a lot of blood." She remembered her panic that he'd die, and she never wanted to feel that again. She licked her lips and calmly told him the rest. "Once Grayson and Raul pulled the mutant from you, I healed you. But it took a lot out of me. You were totally unconscious, and I couldn't help you any more."

"So this Grayson and Raul helped you out of the goodness of their hearts?" His tense expression warned her to tread warily.

She swallowed hard. "Not exactly. In exchange for healing them from some drug Ricardo injected all the Circs at the compound with, they offered to hide me and take you away to safety. I gave Raul the number you gave me. He left you at the hotel and called your friends."

He leaned down to nuzzle her throat. Then he nicked her skin and licked the pain away. "They didn't touch you. I'd know if they had."

"N-no. Grayson was kind."

"And Raul?" he asked as he leaned back a little, his face inches from hers as he studied her.

"Raul didn't touch me, because Grayson was there. I didn't trust him, though." She gnawed her lip, wondering if she should tell Jules what she'd suspected. He looked angrier to her, though his expression remained flat.

"Tell me."

Her eyes flashed to his. "Can you read my mind too?" Dear God, that would be a real nightmare.

He grinned, the murderous rage leaving his eyes. "No, but you don't have a face for poker. Your eyes don't lie." He kissed her cheek, the motion so gentle, she stared up at him in wonder. "Tell me," he said again.

"Raul insisted you were a mercenary. That you slept around with tons of women and stole whatever you could get your hands on. He said that the reason you'd been in Ricardo's jail cell was because you were his rival and trying to hone in on his drug trade."

When he said nothing, she continued. "I didn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. You were so protective of me, so caring. And when we made love—" She flushed when his eyes gleamed with hunger. She amended, "Had sex, I—"

"Made love," he murmured. "We made love in the jungle, where you gave yourself to me."

She nodded slowly, following the movement of his firm lips. "Yes. Together we felt so good. And when I healed you, it was even hotter. Well, I'm not exactly psychic. I don't feel emotions or read thoughts. But you just felt so pure, so good. I didn't want to believe what Raul said."

He glanced down at one of his hands holding her wrist. "Did you give me this ring?"

She couldn't believe she'd forgotten all about it and felt more than foolish. "Yes."

"I haven't taken it off," he whispered. "It felt right on my hand."

"Yes." She had so much she wanted to say, but confusing amazing sex with incredible psychic chemistry wouldn't be smart.

He watched her for a moment. "Sheridan, why did you wait so long to come to me?"

She sighed. "I was scared. It took a few weeks to safely escape the jungle. Then more time to sneak into the States and find you again."

"Why the hell were you at Montaña's compound to begin with?" Jules asked. "That's been killing me, not knowing."

She gratefully answered. "I went to Vida Verde to work on my plants, and somehow I ended up with Ricardo at his lab."

Jules stilled. "Vida Verde?"

"You know the company?"

"No shit." He swore some more. "Olivia's aunt and uncle run the organization."

What were the odds? “Belinda and Jaime Esteves? They’re the ones who set me up with Ricardo when I needed access to certain testing materials.”

“We need to talk to Olivia about this.” He let go of her wrists and levered off her body to sit next to her on the bed.

It was all she could do to keep her eyes on his face and not on the thick shaft that still gleamed with her own cum. Sheridan took a deep breath and sat up. She crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly embarrassed to be naked in front of him.

He pushed her arms away. “No, Sheridan. Let me see those pretty breasts. Hmm. Such tight nipples. And you smell good. Like you need more of me.”

She blushed when he glanced at her body and licked his lips. When he cupped his balls and stroked his shaft—one that was scar free, thanks to her handiwork—she forced herself to look back up at his face.

He bared his teeth in a half smile. “Still shy? Don’t be. Not with me. I like your curves, Sheridan. The intelligence behind those baby blues. And then there’s the way those full lips know how to hug a man’s cock.” His voice lowered. “A man doesn’t forget a mouth like that.

“Touch me again,” he dared and grabbed her hand. He pulled her closer and tried to wrap her fingers around his cock, but he was too big. “God, you feel so good.”

She stared at him, taken with the rougher texture of his skin. So much longer and harder than she could handle, yet Jules felt right. He made her feel safe. Even when he had cause to doubt *her*, he hadn’t done more than hold her tight. Never hurting her, unless she wanted him to. And the way he looked at her right now, like he cared...

“Lick me,” he growled.

“What if I don’t?” she teased, amazing herself that she felt free to taunt his beast.

“If you don’t, I’ll paddle that ass before I fuck it,” he promised, breathing hard. A bead of dew filled his tip, his arousal obvious and growing stronger as she watched. The feminine power coursing through her veins thrilled her, and Sheridan licked her lips, teasing him again.

Jules growled.

Sheridan petted him, relearning the feel of his sex as she ran her hands over him. To her surprise, the hair around his groin had disappeared with his *change*. Hairless, he looked even more imposing.

“Taste me, please.”

He sounded ragged, and she loved knowing she’d brought him to that.

The wet tip of his shaft shone, drawing her to temptation. The warm vanilla musk that thickened around them enticed her closer. She gave in and licked the crown of his cock.

He moaned, his cock jerked, and she sucked the head into her mouth.

His hands fisted in her hair. "I've dreamed about this, seeing your dark red hair over my thighs when you go down on me. Oh yeah."

She didn't answer, taken with the sultry texture and taste of him. Wild, pure, masculine. They fit together. She knew it. She accepted it, but she still wasn't sure ultimately what to do about it. But right now, she didn't have to think. She only needed to feel as she tasted him.

"Lick me, baby. That's it," he said, panting as she stroked him with her tongue.

He spread his thighs wider and pulled her head closer.

She couldn't take much of him inside her mouth, but the little tease of his cockhead disappearing between her lips seemed to entrance him.

"You're going to lick me until I come. Then I'm going to shoot all over those pretty tits. So much seed to mark you as mine," he promised, his beast domineering, assured.

They settled into a rhythm—he guided her by her hair, and she sucked him hard, the press of her teeth and the suction of her lips strong enough to make him groan his encouragement.

"That's it. I'm going to cover you with my cum, and then I'm going to eat you again. Fill you up all night long. Won't that be good, baby?"

He cupped her breast and squeezed, and an answering heat continued to build between her thighs. An almost animalistic need filled her, a foreign yet familiar sense that she experienced what he felt. And she loved it.

"Hmm, good girl."

His gritty voice stroked her like silk. His compliments made her yearn for more of him, to swallow his orgasm and bring to him to the bliss he constantly gave her. His taste brought her closer and closer to orgasm.

And then the door burst open.

Jules's hands tugged her head by her hair. "Don't stop."

"Fuck me, that's hot." Tersch's low growl should have embarrassed her. But Jules continued to fuck her mouth, and she couldn't stop licking him. To her shock, she didn't care that Tersch was in the room. In fact, she wanted him to watch, to see how she pleased her mate.

Jules snarled. "I told you—"

"Yeah, yeah, not to bug you unless I'm on fire," Tersch rasped. "Well, I'm not. But Jack and Melissa's place is. Does that count?"

* * *

"Yeah, it's burning. You want me to engage?"

Ricardo Montaña smiled and toyed with his mustache as he spoke into the speaker. "No. Not yet."

"What about the couple? I have them in the van. Bring them in or kill them?"

Ricardo thought about it. “Break a few of Jack Keiser’s limbs to let the Circs know we mean business. I want the Dawn Endeavor team panicked. And I want them to have some doubts about their new houseguest. Give Melissa Sheridan’s message.”

“Will do.” The Circ disconnected the call.

Ricardo Montaña pressed a button on his phone and stared at the device, lost in thought. For two long months, he’d waited. He’d planned, he’d cursed, he’d killed. Still, nothing took the edge off. He’d grown accustomed to Sheridan’s presence in her time at the compound. He liked watching her at all hours without her being aware. His possession, she belonged to him. And now she’d been stolen by a dickhead Circ without a true appreciation for what she could do. Healing was the least of Sheridan’s worth. Ricardo had chosen her to breed his children. A privilege many would kill for, yet he’d been minutes away from bestowing it on the bitch. Finally ready to start his legacy to the world, he’d had everything in place.

And then they’d fucked him over.

He’d publicly disemboweled Pedro to discourage future mutiny among the men. He’d tightened security as well as his hold over the rogue Circs, increasing the dosage of their “vitamins” Manoel had improved.

Despite the chaos of Sheridan’s escape, he had a good idea of what had gone down. Pedro had disabled the security. Raul and Grayson, two of his strongest rogues, had gone after Sheridan, but either the mutant or Hawkins had killed the other rogues he’d sent after them as well as Raul, and they’d nearly taken Grayson. Luckily, Grayson had a brain in his thick skull, and he’d reported back to Ricardo and followed Sheridan out of the country. At this very moment, Grayson continued to keep tabs on the stupid *puta*. Elena hadn’t survived Ricardo’s fury either when he’d discovered Sheridan gone. Because of her jealousy, he’d lost his opportunity to breed strong sons with Sheridan.

He snorted. As if Elena could have kept him satisfied. Women like her could be found in every port in every city. But Sheridan had something none of them did. She had power, the ability to heal. He’d only suspected, but after she’d healed Hawkins not once, but *twice*, she’d shown her ability to be even stronger than he’d imagined. Bringing her to his compound had been a huge test—an exercise in restraint on his part. He’d hoped she might show him some gratitude, even loyalty.

She’d failed miserably.

“Ricardo?” a voice called through the intercom. Ken Williams, his new chief of security. The rogue had a sadistic penchant for blood that Ricardo appreciated.

“Yes, Ken?”

“We’ve lost another Circ. He’s mutated. Should I cage him with the others or put him down?”

Ricardo frowned. The control drug didn’t seem to be working as well as it should, unless this batch of rogue Circs was tainted. Considering his boss had

paired him with this group, he couldn't be sure. "Kill him. I need functioning muscle, not a mindless killer."

"Yes, sir."

"Patch me through to Dr. Silva."

"Hold on, sir."

Ricardo waited until he heard Manoel's tired voice. "Yes?"

"Any luck with Hawkins's blood?"

Manoel sighed. "No. I need more. I was so close to perfecting the invisibility formula, but then a few rogues lost control in the lab. They fought and destroyed my last test. I need another forty milliliters of blood, as well as a fresh skin sample."

"I have men on-site, but I can't move yet." *I can't chance them hurting the future mother of my sons. Not until she's conceived and bred my children, at least.*

"So have you found her?"

"Yes. As we thought, she eventually showed up in North Carolina. Business unfinished with Hawkins, I take it." Ricardo didn't like that at all. He'd replayed her interactions with the bastard so many times, he could see their meetings replay in his mind's eye. Hell, he could almost feel her small hands pumping Hawkins's cock, could taste the warm spice of her breath, the way he had just a couple months ago.

His arousal stirred, the recollection of those full breasts under his own palms exciting him. He couldn't deny how stimulating it had been to finally show Sheridan how it would be between them. And having her watch as he fucked Elena had been so good.

Manoel called his name, and he forced himself to pay attention. Ricardo sighed. "What now?"

"I want to run tests on Sheridan as well. When do you think you'll have her again?"

"Soon, Manoel. But first we'll scare them, show Dawn Endeavor they're not as safe and secure as they think they are. There's nowhere they can run that I can't reach." Ricardo smiled, grateful to that DC asshole he was forced to call *el jefe*—the boss—well, at least for now. "I'm keeping a team on them while we run this next shipment of the drug. But we need to see progress, amigo."

"*No hay problema.* I got word that one of London's psychics convulsed and died just moments ago after trying to use his gift. And it was all thanks to us and our 'wonder drug.'"

Ricardo hoped *el jefe* would be happy enough with this latest test result. The asshole always wanted more, and he knew the risks they took to smuggle the drug onto US soil. Admiral London's psychics had just moved from Washington DC to Quantico, Virginia, home of not only the US Marine Corps but the Federal Bureau of Investigation as well. Despite the security in the area, Manoel had managed to infect one of London's men. Ricardo wanted to crow his victory to one and all.

"The man was a telekinetic. Word has it the secret project no one's supposed to know about might die before it begins," Manoel said in a smug voice.

"Good. One less problem to deal with." *Now I just have those fucking Dawn Endeavor Circs to take care of. Well, them and el jefe.*

"I'll keep you informed. I sent you a video of the test, so when the boss calls, you'll be able to give him details."

And that's why Ricardo treasured Manoel. He didn't complain, he could be trusted, and he stayed one step ahead of everyone else.

Ricardo smiled. "Good work. I'll get back to you as we know more. And I'll try to get you the samples you need soon. Give me a few days, *sí*?"

"Okay." Manoel hung up, and Ricardo decided to reward himself for a job well done.

He punched in a few buttons and waited to hear Ken's voice again.

"Sir?"

"I need a woman. Send her up, pronto."

"Sure thing." Ken hung up.

Ricardo didn't have to wait long. He pushed back from his chair and dragged a whip off his wall. Caressing the braided leather gave him a hard-on, and he imagined using it on Sheridan before he fucked her until she screamed.

A knock came on the door. "Come in." The petite redhead who awaited him, dressed in nothing but pale pink panties, resembled Sheridan, except for the brown eyes. Not bad. Not bad at all. He cracked the whip and the redhead jumped, fear flashing over her innocent face.

Ken Williams deserved a raise.

"Come here, you little whore. And do what Master tells you to."

The tears in her eyes made everything that much sweeter, and Ricardo unleashed the whip with a fire in his belly and a burn in his soul.

Chapter Nine

"I don't know what happened." Jack Keiser swore as Sheridan laid her hands on his arm. They occupied the couch in the family room off the kitchen. He flinched, then sighed as his bones knit together and the bruising in his muscles faded. "One minute Melissa and I were getting ready for bed. The next three big guys jumped me. I looked over, and Melissa was gone."

He grimaced and glanced at his wife, who wept in Mrs. Sharpe's arms. She kept taking small glances at Jules in his *changed* form. The team didn't often change in front of Melissa or Jack.

Jules regretted alarming her more, but he'd be damned if he'd be less than prepared if the bastards returned.

"I don't know why the alarm didn't go off." Olivia shrugged at her husband, a perplexed frown on her face. "It's state of the art, and there's no way anyone should have been able to get through without alerting us. I checked it, and the system is still working. It had to have been disabled for the intruders to come onto the property, but I don't see how they did it. Only Jack, Melissa, and I know the codes. If they'd been broken by outside means, they'd have tripped a small alarm only I knew about."

"So how the fuck did they get on the grounds?" Tersch asked, breathing hard.

Jules and Hayashi exchanged a glance. Hayashi and Morgan had taken over the task of keeping an eye on Tersch, and Jules now saw firsthand Tersch's burning anger to hunt down the assholes responsible and tear them apart. Stepping closer to Tersch, Jules put a hand on his shoulder and gripped tight, trying to reassure Tersch all would be well. "We'll get them. Jack, step me through it."

He watched Sheridan circle to the other side of the couch to reach Jack's right leg, which also showed signs of trauma.

"Another break," Sheridan muttered and shook her head. "Animals did this."

"No kidding." Jack's face went white when she touched him.

Jules looked with his inner eye and saw Sheridan's energy flare hot and strong. Jack's was a pale green, signifying his injuries. But a light rose subtly threaded through the green, Sheridan's healing energy restoring Jack to a healthy red while he watched. She was amazing. Even though Jules still didn't fully know what to make of the story she'd told him, he had to admit she had helped more than she'd harmed while she'd been with them.

"Thanks, Sheridan," Jack said on a breath before answering Jules. "The guys were on me before I knew it. A few of them grabbed Melissa and vanished, while the others beat the shit out of me, then tied me up and gagged me. I have a better than average response time, but I was no match for them. They had to be Circ."

Morgan frowned. "Circs? Has to be Montaña behind it. But now he's coming right at us? Why now?" He cast a suspicious glance at Sheridan, and though Jules didn't like it, he couldn't blame him.

Sheridan was the newest member among them and had been employed at Montaña's compound. All around, it didn't look good for her.

Jack continued, "They dragged my broken ass from the house and into the woods, where I rejoined Melissa. They didn't even ask me anything. Just beat the hell out of me to send a message, I'd guess. Before they left, they threatened Melissa and torched the house. They could have killed us but didn't."

Hayashi nodded. "Montaña is throwing down the gauntlet, showing us he can do whatever he wants to."

While they spoke, Sheridan continued to tense. Jules smelled her fear, and he didn't like it. One thing he could be sure of—she didn't like Montaña at all. A sudden image of her bruised and wearing torn pajamas hit him. He turned to Melissa, who'd finally calmed down. Ava entered the room and took her place on the other side of Melissa, lending her an arm.

"Melissa, you sure they didn't hurt you?"

She shook her head. "But they wanted me scared, and they succeeded."

Mrs. Sharpe frowned and glanced from Melissa to Jack, but she didn't say anything. Jules had studied the woman enough to know she knew more than she was saying.

"Come here, honey." Jack held out his hand, and Melissa went to him on the couch.

"Did they say anything at all?" Jules asked, not sure why his beast wanted him to pursue this. But he sensed there was more he hadn't uncovered. Hell, were the Keisers involved somehow? It made no sense that the intruders hadn't set off an alarm. And since Sheridan had been with him the whole time, he couldn't blame her for any of it. Thank God. He didn't want to think the little healer was involved directly.

Melissa shook her head, then buried her face against Jack's shoulder and started crying again.

Mrs. Sharpe stepped forward. "I think it might be best to let these two get settled in my office. I have a few questions we need answered." Again, the look she shot Jack concerned him. What the hell did that mean?

"Yeah." Jules nodded. "After we check to verify the house is secure. Morgan, you stay back to keep an eye on everyone here." He glanced at Sheridan specifically, and Morgan nodded in understanding. "The rest of us will fan the perimeter and see if we pick anything else up."

"I want to look at that computer. The logs might tell us something, unless they were tampered with too. But the security code should be fine," Olivia muttered.

Since she, Melissa, and Jack had worked together to write it, she ought to know. "Let me know what you find, okay?"

"Can do."

"I'm not leaving her alone." Fallon folded his arms over his chest.

"Fine. Go with her. But I want to hear ASAP as soon as you know more." Jules tapped his forehead. Fallon nodded, and the pair left together.

"Ava, contact the base and get a detail of men out here." Mrs. Sharpe held up a hand to forestall Jules's objections. "We have a situation we need contained right now. There's a US Marine Corps base just half an hour from here. They can post a guard until our naval contingent arrives. Because if you think I'm going to let this stand without a fight, you're wrong."

Jules didn't like the thought of strangers around their sanctuary. He didn't want men he didn't know around the women, and especially not around Sheridan. His beast growled inside, but the strategist within Jules understood the need for tighter security.

He turned to Fallon and mentally added, *"Fine, we'll use the jarheads on a temporary basis. But instead of dragging some navy contractors down here, why not use some of the admiral's men? That way we can protect his psychics while they're protecting us. Broadcast that to the others and Ava and Mrs. Sharpe."*

Fallon nodded and did so, including Jules on the repeated message.

Mrs. Sharpe seemed to ponder the idea.

Fallon frowned and broadcasted back what he'd heard. *"Ava said to use just the enforcers, not the brainiacs. And she sounded way familiar with the admiral's top secret project. She also said there are a few telekinetics he's got on tap that could really help us."*

The team looked at Ava, and if Jules wasn't mistaken, she flushed.

"What the hell?" Tersch said aloud. He straightened and took a step in Ava's direction. "What do you know about this shit?"

"I know his men and women are a lot *friendlier* than some of the Circs in this house."

Before Tersch could blow a gasket, Jules dragged him toward the door. "Hayashi, come with us. Let's find something in the woods so we can follow these sorry pricks. Jack, you need to show us where they took you."

Jack stood on steady legs, though Melissa tried to hold him back. He shook his head. "No, honey. I'm okay. Sheridan took care of that. Thanks."

"Sure." Sheridan didn't look comfortable receiving his gratitude, and Jules caught a hint of guilt, which alarmed him. He *felt* her emotions, which didn't make a lick of sense. Jules didn't read minds. He didn't know more than what a person's

aura could tell him about a body's state of health. Yet he'd swear Sheridan *felt* guilty.

Touch, stroke. Give her what she needs. The animal within demanded he soothe his mate.

Shit. Mate. Oh, man. Jules acknowledged the truth and heeded his instinct. He went back to Sheridan and took her face in his hands. "Everything will work out." A threat or a promise? Either way, he couldn't stop himself from giving her a thorough kiss. Right there, in front of the others. He left her staring after him in shock.

Hayashi shook his head and looked at Morgan. "I told you."

"Shit." Tersch didn't look happy. He glared at Sheridan before eyeing Jules with concern.

Jules didn't care what anyone else thought. They had a mission to accomplish. "Okay, guys. Time to hunt prey."

Sheridan watched as Jules and the others left, taking Jack with them, stunned that such a small token of affection could make her feel so much better. She felt guilty that the attack on the place was her fault, that somehow Ricardo had found her. Burning down the cottage was definitely his way of warning her that he could still get to her. But then, considering how easily the Circs took it in stride that he'd come after *them*, she began to wonder if perhaps Ricardo didn't care so much about her as he did about getting his hands on Jules again. And if that were the case, what was his obsession with Jules?

She glanced at Morgan, who'd been tasked with staying behind with them. "What now?"

Melissa clutched her side. "It hurts," she whispered.

"Where, Melissa?" Sheridan asked as she approached. She exchanged a concerned glance with Morgan.

"Melissa?" Morgan asked.

Melissa started shivering, and Sheridan had a bad feeling. She couldn't sense pain anywhere, but Melissa obviously needed help.

"Morgan, I think Melissa and I need some privacy."

"The laundry room," Melissa said, now clutching her belly.

He nodded reluctantly. "Let me double-check the garage, since it's attached." He left and returned within moments. "It's clear. I'll be right outside."

They walked to the laundry, and Morgan stepped aside. He caught Sheridan's arm before she followed Melissa.

"Yes?"

"Be careful with her," he said, low enough for her ears only. "I don't like this. Something's off."

Sheridan blinked in surprise. "I'm not going to hurt her, Morgan."

"It's not... Never mind. Just help her if you can."

She nodded and entered the room. Melissa had raised her shirt and was looking at her stomach.

Sheridan closed the door behind her.

"Lock it," Melissa whispered.

Sheridan did, and Morgan immediately knocked.

"What's going on? You two all right?"

Melissa nodded to her to answer. Puzzled, Sheridan called back, "We're fine. Melissa just wants some privacy."

"Okay."

Morgan left them alone, and Sheridan approached Melissa, more than curious. The moment she neared, Melissa yanked her close and whispered, "They gave me a message for you. Ricardo wants you back. If you come with me now, he won't hurt anyone else."

The venom in Melissa's voice stunned her. "Wh-what?"

Melissa kept one hand on Sheridan and waved the other at the door adjoined to the garage. To Sheridan's shock, the door *opened*, and Raul entered.

"Melissa, how did you do that?"

"Easily. You think that was amazing, feel this." She squinted, and Sheridan's head pounded as if someone had taken an ax to her head. "I call it my psychic vise. You like?"

"Go easy, Mel. You know what he said," Raul warned.

"Raul?" Sheridan gasped, relieved when the pain stopped.

He smiled, showing his fangs, and joined them. Then he raised a pistol and put it to Melissa's head. Instead of looking horrified, the woman smiled.

Sheridan had the strange feeling that nothing was real.

Raul nuzzled Melissa's cheek. "Go ahead and scream."

Melissa yelled at the top of her lungs. "No! Sheridan, please. No!"

Not sure what to do, Sheridan took a step forward. But Melissa wasn't the victim. Or was she? Because now she looked downright terrified.

Then the door behind Sheridan burst open, and Morgan shoved her aside.

"Let her go," he growled at Raul.

"You did well infiltrating the compound, Sheridan. We'll send word to Ricardo. Follow me, and this bitch dies," Raul said and smacked Melissa in the side of the head with the gun. She mewed in fear. Then Raul turned the gun on Morgan and pulled the trigger, shooting him in the chest. "Again, great work, Sheridan. Ricardo is going to reward you well."

He turned and left with Melissa, leaving her staring after them. She wanted to follow the rogues, to show Jules and the others that Melissa was the traitor. But she had to save Morgan. The chest wound be fatal without her help.

“Morgan, hold on!” She quickly knelt next to him and threw her all into stopping the bleeding and healing the damaged tissue. The bullet gradually surfaced and left his body, letting her get rid of the contaminant causing the damage. It took her a long time, and she expended a lot of energy. The exhaustion tugged at her and weighed her down.

“What the fuck...?” Morgan sputtered just as she lost consciousness and passed out on top of him.

Sheridan woke to a heated argument going on around her.

“I want her gone. Out of here, now.”

“She nearly killed him!”

“Something’s not right about this. I don’t like any of it.”

“What the hell did she do with Melissa?”

She blinked and slowly sat up on the living room couch. The sudden silence unnerved her. “Wh-what happened?” She clutched her head, then turned to Morgan, suddenly remembering she’d been down on the floor, trying to save him from a chest wound. “Are you all right?”

“Should I thank you?” he asked, his voice sharp. “What the hell did you do to Melissa?”

“Melissa?” Sheridan rubbed her aching head. Her hands were sore, throbbing. And the sheer mistrust centered solely on her made her want to sink back into oblivion. The Circs, Mrs. Sharpe, Ava, and Jack Keiser stared at her with expressions ranging from puzzlement to rage to sheer disbelief. But it was Jules’s face that concerned her the most. His was closed off, more than angry, but unreachable.

Sheridan cleared her throat. “All I know is that Melissa said she wasn’t feeling well. She wanted privacy. Fearing she’d been...violated...we went into the laundry room after Morgan had cleared it.”

“Convenient.” Morgan crossed his massive arms over his chest and glared at her.

“I don’t know what happened! One minute, Melissa was clutching her stomach, as if in pain, and the next, she made the door open by itself behind her and zapped me with some sort of mental whammy. Then Raul walked through the door.”

“You’re saying Melissa’s psychic?” Jack snapped. “Give me a break. That’s my wife.”

“Really?” Mrs. Sharpe murmured, her eyes dark, pensive.

“Raul?” Jules asked, his voice deceptively quiet.

Sheridan nodded.

“The same Raul who saved you only a few months ago? The one who left me in that hotel room? Your *friend*, Raul?”

Okay, put that way, it didn't look good for her. "I don't know why he was there or why Melissa started shouting at me. She told me Ricardo wanted me back and to come with her. It didn't make any sense. But I didn't do anything. She's the one who lured me in there. Raul shot Morgan, and I saved him. I didn't plan any of this."

Jules glanced away from her, his jaw tight. Did he blame her for Raul's presence?

Morgan shook his head. "Nice try, but I heard him thank you. Even after he shot me, he told you that you'd be rewarded for your help. Why? Why would you involve Melissa? Why not just attack us head-to-head? She's not involved in this."

Olivia frowned. "I don't think—"

"Don't think," Jack yelled. "Don't do any of your freaky shit. Don't try to explain this away. I want my fucking wife back!"

"Easy, Jack," Jesse said with a frown. He stared at the man, looking confused. The glance he shared with Olivia didn't make sense.

Then again, nothing much did.

Sheridan started to get really scared. The men were no longer treating this like a mix-up. Instead, the accusatory glares and deliberate blame seemed to be settling on her. She turned to the one person whose opinion really mattered. "Jules?"

He didn't answer.

Mrs. Sharpe frowned. "Sheridan, tell me again why you and Melissa went into the laundry room."

"I told you. She wanted privacy. She was holding her side, then her stomach, which was odd, because I didn't sense any pain. But I wasn't sure. Everything was so tense, and she seemed scared. She's the one who wanted privacy. It wasn't my idea."

"Wasn't it?" Morgan asked. "You locked the damned door."

"I did," she admitted and swallowed hard. "But Melissa asked me to." Sheridan wasn't stupid. Melissa had deliberately set her up. But why? Why show her to be one with the enemy? And why the absolute hatred and venom in Melissa's voice when she'd talked to her? It made no sense. "Melissa isn't who you think she is. She opened that door with her mind. And she threw some kind of attack at me. It made my head hurt."

The others scoffed in disbelief, and Kisho had to hold Jack back from attacking her.

"Where's my wife?"

Sheridan didn't know what to think. She stood and immediately wished she hadn't. Tersch invaded her personal space and smiled. The grin threatened more than his scowls did. "Give me a few minutes with her." He cracked his knuckles. "I'll find out the truth."

She tumbled back onto the couch before Jules pushed the others aside. Thinking he'd finally come to his senses, she wasn't prepared when he pulled her off the couch and dragged her away. Not toward her room, but toward the stairs leading to the basement.

"Jules?"

He didn't speak.

She had to run not to fall as he dragged her down into the laboratory. He strode through the corridor toward one of the locked rooms she hadn't yet explored and punched in a keycode. Then he shoved her inside.

"Jules?"

He didn't speak, but he didn't have to. The disappointment and anger in his eyes stopped her from saying anything more. The door closed, and a *snick* let her know it was locked.

Tried and convicted without a jury. Terrific.

Sheridan sniffed, determined not to cry. Then she sat on a cot, stared at the open toilet, sink, and mirror, and noticed the lack of anything else in the small room. Not room—cell. The tears started, and she couldn't stop.

Jules heard her soft sobs and wanted to pound his fist through the wall. Why the hell had she done it? What had Sheridan hoped to accomplish? Why take Melissa? None of this made any sense. To top it off, whereas before he'd sensed her guilt, now he felt nothing from the woman. Her grief robbed his ability to reason when it came to her.

He strode back upstairs before he did something he'd regret, like open the door to her cell and shake the truth out of her. Just as he was coming to accept the absurd *possibility* of falling in love with a strange woman in even stranger circumstances, he learned she was really the enemy.

Talk about a cruel twist of fate.

Once back upstairs, he interrupted an argument about what to do with Sheridan.

"We need to look into this. It doesn't ring true," Olivia was saying. "Jack wasn't feeling scared. He was angry."

Fallon nodded in agreement. "Excessively angry. And I couldn't read his thoughts at all. Or Sheridan's, when before I could read her easily. It's like someone doesn't want us to know what the hell's going on."

Tersch and Hayashi wanted Sheridan out on her ass.

Morgan remained quiet as he watched the others argue. He shared a glance with Mrs. Sharpe that didn't tell Jules anything.

"Come on, Jules. What do you think?" Hayashi asked when he noticed him standing there.

"I don't know what to think." Jules exhaled a long, weary breath. "Why would Sheridan help rogue Circs burn down Jack and Melissa's house?"

Hayashi added, "Why take Melissa?"

"But it's the how that bothers me most," Morgan murmured. "Melissa acted like she was hurt, but when we asked her earlier, when we found her outside, she said nothing had happened. She was the one who wouldn't talk in front of me."

"But you said Sheridan locked them in the laundry room," Tersch pointed out.

Morgan shook his head. "She said Melissa told her to. When I heard Melissa scream through the door, she was yelling at Sheridan. Why would Sheridan let her alert me like that?"

"To get you in the room with them," Tersch answered.

Morgan disagreed. "Then why have her buddies kidnap Melissa and shoot me, then Sheridan turns around and saves me?"

"See, that's what I don't understand." Fallon clutched Olivia's hand in his. "Sheridan's intelligent. All this did was put her under suspicion. The smart thing would have been to let Morgan die and take off with her friends."

"Thanks." Morgan scowled.

Fallon shrugged. "It's true. All she did by saving you was throw herself under the bus."

"Yeah. And that doesn't make sense." Olivia rubbed the back of her neck. "Jules, you know Sheridan better than we do. Her shock and grief overwhelmed every other feeling she had. Once she settles down, I'll try to read her again."

He tried to piece the puzzle together. "When I was held captive, Sheridan healed me, and she definitely saved my life there at the end, before Morgan and Hayashi found me. If she and Raul were really working together, why help me escape? And when I was down, why not take me back to Montaña?"

"Unless the good colonel is up to something none of us knows about," Mrs. Sharpe added quietly. "We really don't know what Sheridan's motivations are. I get the sense she has to heal, that it's a compulsion with her."

Jules frowned. "She said something similar to me. So maybe she never wanted Raul to shoot Morgan. Maybe by doing so, he ruined her escape. Or he double-crossed her. Hell, I don't know what's going on."

Mrs. Sharpe didn't look happy. She seemed out of sorts, so different from the calm manner in which she normally held herself. "Here's what we do know. The security force is on its way. Admiral London is making a trip out here to see what's going on. Jack's wife is missing, and Jack is working with Ava right now to detail everything that happened, word for word, minute by minute, when he was taken from his house. We'll keep Sheridan downstairs for her safety and ours. Until we know more, that's how things will play out."

"Yeah, that's a good idea." Jules needed to get some distance from the situation. His beast was warning him to take note, that he'd missed something

important, something that had to do with Sheridan. But damned if he could figure out what. He kept seeing Jack's panic over losing his wife and hearing Sheridan's heartfelt sorrow. Then he glanced at the bloodstained tear in Morgan's shirt and resolved to stand firm.

"Let's get those new guards locked in position. I don't want any new people but the ones we have out there right now. Get to know each and every one of them. And let's come up with a plan to answer our questions. I want this place on lockdown ASAP," he growled at his team.

They nodded.

"Olivia, you're in charge of our prisoner. She so much as hiccups, you report it to me. But under no circumstances are you to go into her cell or have any physical contact with the woman. Clear?"

Olivia frowned. "Yes, sir." She gave him a sharp salute. "Hard-ass," she muttered.

"And don't you forget it," he replied and almost ran over Tersch when he turned around. Jules shoved the Viking aside. "And you, quit breathing down my neck. I told you to give me some space."

"Yes, sir." Tersch gave Jules the same salute Olivia had. "Now let's track down some rogue Circs and have a barbecue. My beast is hungry."

Chapter Ten

Sheridan's next few days passed in abject misery. The only person who would talk to her, through a closed, locked door, was Olivia.

Now more than ever Sheridan realized her mistake in not asking Jules for her family ring and leaving that very first day. Hanging around because of Jules had only hurt her, especially since she shouldn't have to work so hard to make Jules believe in her innocence. She thought she'd seen affection on his face when they'd been making love. Apparently, her feelings had been completely one-sided.

"I shouldn't have to prove myself," she muttered and stared at the pale blue walls in her cell. "I saved Morgan's life," she ended with a raised voice.

"And I'm glad of it," Morgan answered back in a loud voice that boomed through the door.

Sheridan scrambled to her feet. Olivia had told her she had strict orders to watch over Sheridan, as well as to keep others away. As if Sheridan had any friend in this place clamoring for her attention. "You're not supposed to be here."

"I can't stay away. What can I say?"

"Morgan..." Olivia said something else Sheridan couldn't make out.

"Go take a break, Olivia. You've been down here for three days, and your mate is trying my last nerve. Go on. I'll watch her."

Olivia grumbled. "Fine. But when something goes wrong, like it always does around you, I'm not taking the blame."

"Sure, sure. Now get that cute little ass out of here."

"I'm going. Don't have to tell me twice."

Sheridan didn't hear any more and stepped back from the door. After a second it beeped and opened, and Morgan strolled inside. The automatic door closed behind him, enclosing them both in a very small space.

She glanced up at him, feeling the brawn and size of him so close. His bright green eyes regarded her with interest, and he remained with his back against the door while she tried to move as far from him as she could. She'd saved him, but he hadn't stood up for her. Maybe he'd come down here to beat an answer out of her. She didn't know anything anymore.

"What do you want?" she snapped, hoping she didn't sound as nervous as she felt.

"I want you to tell me exactly what happened after you and Melissa entered that room."

"I told Olivia what happened at least twenty times. Nothing of my story will change."

Morgan sighed. "I don't want anything to change. I just want you to explain it again."

Sheridan went through the same song and dance, wishing she'd done more than watch Melissa walk out the door with Raul.

Morgan frowned. "She said you should just go back to Ricardo."

"Yes, for the tenth time. She practically hissed at me, and she had a really nasty tone. Then she waved her freaking hand at the door, and it opened. She gave me a killer headache until Raul warned her 'he' wouldn't be pleased, whoever 'he' is. Then Raul put that gun to her head. But there was never any fear in her eyes. Looking back on it, I should have known Melissa wasn't right."

"Why?"

"Because after she was brought into the house, I didn't sense any pain in her. I can feel physical injury, Morgan."

He nodded. "And you can't stop yourself from healing it."

"Where'd you get that idea?" she asked, surprised.

"Jules and Mrs. Sharpe mentioned it."

She snorted. "Well, they're wrong. Yeah, the compulsion is there to fix what's broken, but I don't have to do it. I won't break if I ignore someone's pain. But I'm a healer. It's what I do. I *like* to heal people. But I don't *have* to," she muttered.

"Interesting." His wide smile made him look even hunkier than usual, but it didn't deter her hostility. "I'm doubly grateful you decided to heal me, then."

She flushed, not amused. "It's not like you asked to be shot. And that's what's so weird about all this. Raul helped me escape from that lab two months ago. He had no love for Ricardo. I don't understand why he's suddenly helping him."

Morgan's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure Montaña is behind this?"

She hadn't questioned his involvement. "Who else would it be?"

"Who else," he repeated and paused. "Tell me what you know about Raul."

Before she could answer him, the door opened. Jules stood there, his expression shuttered. "Bring her into Sharpe's office." He left before she could gather her wits to say anything.

Morgan sighed and stepped back. "After you."

She gladly walked out of the tiny room into the laboratory corridor. As they moved down the hall, Morgan leaned close. "He never left you completely alone."

"What?"

Jules disappeared up the stairs ahead of them.

"At night, when Olivia took her break, Jules stayed in front of your door. And he made sure to pop down to 'check your status' nearly a dozen times a day. What do you think that means?"

Sheridan warmed, despite not wanting Jules's actions to affect her. The damned Circ had her tried and found guilty before listening to anything she'd said. She shouldn't care how often he came near her cell. "Probably felt guilty."

They reached the stairs, and Morgan chuckled. "Jules doesn't do guilty. He leads, we follow. He's a controlling asshole who makes decisions for the whole team, Sheridan. He can't afford to be indecisive or to make the wrong decision."

"And me? I'm a wrong decision?" she asked, annoyed.

"Not from where I'm standing. Without you, I'd be a dead man."

The earnest thanks in his voice stopped her on the steps. "You mean that."

"Yeah, I do. Unlike the beasts that live here, I'm more intelligent, suave, and sophisticated. I know how to tell the good guys from the bad guys." He tugged Sheridan with him up the rest of the steps.

She stared up at him in stunned confusion. Morgan thought she was one of the good guys?

They continued down the hallway to where Jules waited impatiently for them by Mrs. Sharpe's door.

Morgan kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks for saving my life."

The fury on Jules face when they passed him and entered the study almost made her incarceration worth it.

"Morgan, we're gonna talk later," Jules rasped, his fangs plain to see.

Sheridan didn't know what the hell to think. For three days she'd been cooped up in that small cell with nothing to do but read the few paperbacks Olivia had offered. No one but Olivia had talked to her, and the misery of Sheridan's existence and her doomed future had lulled her into despondency. She had no reason to perk up just because Jules had spent the quiet nighttime hours with her. She hadn't known he'd been there. It shouldn't matter.

But for some odd reason, it did.

"Sheridan, please, come sit." Mrs. Sharpe pointed her to a chair that seemed to be the center of everyone's attention.

Morgan sat down next to Kisho. Tersch stood by himself toward the back. Mrs. Sharpe and Ava sat on the couch with Olivia next to them. And of course, Jesse stood near his wife. Sheridan didn't see Jack and didn't want to, not after witnessing his rage. Jules took the seat right next to her, and she tried not to be obvious as she scooted her legs away from the broad spread of his own.

"Sheridan, why don't you tell them what you told me," Morgan suggested.

Jules turned to Olivia. "I thought I told you not to leave her room."

Olivia didn't meet his eyes when she answered. "Please. She no more staged Melissa's kidnapping than I did, and you know it."

Jules growled.

"You don't think I did it?" Sheridan had to know.

"I don't. Olivia and Fallon don't," Morgan said. "But the others aren't so sure. Just to be clear, Sheridan told me she doesn't have to heal. It's something she needs to do, but doesn't have to do, which sheds a new light on things, eh, Jules?"

Sheridan glanced at Jules, who stared at her with a brooding intensity that alarmed her, especially because it turned her on. "Sheds a new light on things? What's he talking about?" she asked.

"Did you or did you not heal Morgan?" Jules rumbled, his beast staring out at her through a man's eyes.

"You know I did."

"Why?"

She blinked. "Why? Because a man shot him. He would have died if I hadn't saved him."

Jules held up a hand, and when his fingers turned into talons, everyone in the room stilled.

"Jules," Mrs. Sharpe warned.

Jules didn't tear his gaze from Sheridan. He took his forefinger and slashed a deep wound across his forearm. It bled like a sieve, and he stabbed it again when it started to heal. "Fix this."

Like she was a show pony. "Fix it yourself, you jerk," she snapped. Her fingers itched, but she refused to be drawn into a game she didn't want to play.

Morgan sighed. "I told you."

Jules shocked her by grinning. "Hell. That's a relief." He wiped the blood from his arm but to her dismay, it kept bleeding, slower now, but a continuous flow.

"You're not healed."

"I nicked an artery."

"Stupid man." She reached out and dragged his arm close. Sealing her hand over the wound, she pushed the healing energy into him. The returning lust and boost in energy she subsequently felt didn't surprise her, but it did make holding him awkward, because she wanted to kiss him better.

Dropping his arm, she scooted farther back in her chair and ignored the sudden blaze of desire in his bright eyes.

"So Melissa went with them willingly." Kisho frowned. "That doesn't make sense."

"It does if she and Jack have been part of our problem from the beginning." Ava leaned forward in her chair. "For a while now, we've known someone's been watching us. Hell, Jules. Remember when you first returned from Brazil? You told Mrs. S. that Montaña knew more than he should. How do you think that was

possible? Sheridan just got here a few days ago. Not like she could have told him anything about life before you went away, now could she?"

"This sucks." Tersch grumbled. "I played poker with those two. Hell, I ate Melissa's shitty meatloaf."

"Well, how do you think I feel?" Jesse asked. "I'm the mind reader, but I didn't sense anything from the pair. I still don't get anything from Jack. When are you going to let me at him again, Mrs. Sharpe?"

The smile she gave him chilled Sheridan. "No need to worry about Jack. He and I have come to an understanding."

Jules rubbed his forearm, where Sheridan had healed him. "I don't understand Raul's part in this, though. So Melissa wants to give them an in. Okay. But why blame Sheridan?"

"I think Sheridan needs to tell us what life at that compound was like. We've already checked into the Vida Verde connection and found that Montaña was giving them funding under an assumed identity. I'm sure Olivia's aunt and uncle thought him just another investor. No wonder they sent Sheridan to him. What exactly do you know about Colonel Ricardo Montaña, dear?" Mrs. Sharpe asked Sheridan.

Too much. Sheridan remembered too clearly how he'd assaulted her, and she did her best to push the recollection to the back of her mind. But she wasn't fast enough.

Jesse straightened next to Olivia. "He assaulted you?"

The other men seemed to grow angry on her behalf, whereas just moments ago, she'd been their enemy. "You guys need to make up your minds." She tried not to blush at what Jesse might have seen, ashamed of what Ricardo had almost taken from her. "I'm either the bad guy, or I'm not."

"You're not," Ava and Tersch said at the same time.

Tersch clenched his jaw and missed the satisfied smirk Ava shot him.

Jules kicked Sheridan's foot to get her attention. "Look at this from our point of view. I disappear and come back with my memory skewed. Hazy images and feelings of something I'd rather forget, except for a certain redhead with crystal clear blue eyes, hands that can heal, and a body that—" He stopped himself, and Sheridan saw the others staring at him with open curiosity and smirking faces.

"That makes you what, Jules?" Morgan asked, all innocence.

"Asshole." Jules muttered under his breath and ignored the question. "I remembered you, Sheridan."

"We've been dealing with Montaña for over a year, and his men attack us just after you're here? Do the math," Jules said with a shrug. "You looked guilty as hell. Especially after Melissa was captured and Morgan was shot, *and* he heard your buddy Raul *thank* you for your help."

Sheridan bit her lip. "Well, when you put it like that, I see your point. But if you'd just listened to me before, I could have cleared this up."

Jules snorted. "Oh really? When was that? Because according to Olivia, you only wanted to talk after spending a few hours in the lab."

"Lab? Try cell," she said with a huff.

Mrs. Sharpe interrupted. "Sheridan, this is important. Tell us about your time spent with Colonel Montaña. We need to know all we can about him."

Sheridan looked around her. Raul had told her these people were the enemy. What a crock. He'd shot Morgan and worked with Melissa, for God's sake.

"So Raul told you we were the enemy, hmm? Interesting," Jesse murmured.

"Stop reading my thoughts." She gave Jesse a sharp look. "Let me tell it. I have a history with Ricardo Montaña, if you could call it that. It goes back several years. I'm a botanist, like my parents. But it's hard to get funding to work. So with grants and an investment made by Ricardo Montaña, my folks have gotten by."

"Ah, that's what I was missing," Mrs. Sharpe murmured. "Go on, Sheridan."

"Yes, well, Ricardo made his interest in me pretty plain a few years ago. He'd show up announced at our labs and bring me things, expensive jewelry, clothes... It was weird. I gave everything back, until he brought me a special flower."

"Flowers, typical," muttered Tersch.

She shook her head. "No, not just any flowers, but an unusual specimen with properties I'd been researching in the course of my studies," Sheridan corrected. "I've done a lot with this particular bloom, but it's a rare find. It grows in abundance in certain parts of the Amazon rain forest. I hooked up with the Vida Verde organization two years ago. I loved working there. But my work revolved around the Sheridan Rose, and I needed better access to the specimen."

"Sheridan Rose?" Jules murmured.

Sheridan blushed. "The name is ridiculous, I agree, but it's what we called it. The flower was abundant around Ricardo's compound. That's all I cared about."

"I want to know how you got from Vida Verde to Montaña's lab," Jesse said.

"Me too." Olivia sounded worried. "Morgan can't reach my aunt and uncle, and my cousins haven't gotten back to us yet."

Sheridan sighed. "They were the ones who recommended Ricardo's compound to expand my studies. At first, the place seemed like a dream. There really is a laboratory there, with real scientists working on various projects. I admit, I was so into what I was doing, I didn't pay great attention to what was going on around me. But I did notice the weird guards."

"Weird how?" Tersch asked.

"They were all, well, a lot like you guys. Big, muscular, kind of wild. They had a tendency to growl at me. No one ever hurt me or made any unwelcome advances, not until Ricardo..." She paused. "My friend Pedro told me about Jules. I couldn't believe Ricardo could keep a man in the condition he'd described. When I found him, I was stunned."

Sheridan glanced at Jules. "He was bruised and bloodied. You all heal fast, but Jules had been tortured. It was terrible." She swallowed the pain of remembering. "I healed him. And there was an instant connection between us."

"I'll say." Jules clearly remembered what else she'd done for him that first night.

Sheridan remembered their first encounter all too well herself. "During the next few weeks, I tried to sneak down whenever I could to help him heal. But I later found out Ricardo knew all about it. The night he attacked me, Ricardo told me he intended to marry me. That he wanted me to, um, wow. This is embarrassing."

"Go on." The angry look on Jules's face worried her.

"He said he planned to marry me, for me to bear his children. He told me that, right before he assaulted me." She bit out the reminder. "Then Elena, his girlfriend, burst in, and he was with her."

Tersch frowned. "With her?"

"They had sex," Morgan explained, apparently reading the embarrassment on Sheridan's face.

"Yeah. That. He made me watch, and he used Raul to guard me."

"I'll kill him." The quiet in Jules's voice bothered her. He'd made a promise, not a threat.

Sheridan hurried to continue, aware of everyone's attention. "I managed to escape with Pedro's help. He was the head of security, and he gave me a backpack, some money, and the means to evade the cameras all over the compound. He also gave me the keys to help Jules. You probably know the rest. Jules and I ran through the jungle. He carried me most of the way, and then he fought the rogues and the mutant that attacked us. But in doing so, he was injured."

"Wow. Jules, you really know how to live it up while you're off duty," Tersch mocked, but his slow grin showed Sheridan how much he respected his team leader. "Not just Montaña, but rogues and mutants. Not bad." He raised his brow at Sheridan. "And you got the girl too, hmm?"

"Did I?" Jules asked.

Sheridan cleared her throat. "Grayson and Raul are the Circs who saved our lives. Raul took Jules back to that hotel and called the number Jules gave me. Grayson took me to a deserted cabin in the middle of nowhere. I healed them, and we made plans to get me to back to Jules."

"Why?" Ava frowned.

"Yeah, that's what I want to know." Jules held his hand up, and her grandfather's ring flashed at her. "You said you wanted this ring. But why do I have it in the first place?"

Sheridan tried to keep her mind and her thoughts her own, aware of Jesse's scrutiny on everything she said and thought. But she couldn't possibly tell him the truth—that she'd started to fall in love with him and wanted him to have it. "At the

time, I didn't know Grayson or Raul, and that ring means a lot to me. You'd proven yourself trustworthy, and I thought I'd have a better chance getting it back from you than from them if they proved criminal."

"But you went with them," Tersch pointed out.

"I had to. Jules was in no shape to help me. He'd almost died. That...thing he killed was alien. That mutant? It had rows of teeth. It...it nearly chewed his arm off." She shuddered just thinking about it. "And I could feel that Grayson and Raul needed healing. I offered to help them in return for taking care of Jules."

"What was wrong with those Circs?" Olivia asked.

Sheridan expelled a breath. "I can't explain it. Grayson called it the thing that turned Circs rogue in the first place. Something Ricardo had perfected and injected into the Circs on the compound who weren't suffering from the initial Circe serum infection. I just"—she shrugged—"burned it out of them. It actually took some time to help them, because the malignant cells reformed after I'd burned them out a few times. But we got to the point where their bodies stopped making the foreign cells.

"We stayed far away from Ricardo's compound, deep in the jungle. I know both men wanted nothing more to do with Ricardo, so I don't understand why Raul would have done what he did. Why he shot Morgan. Then again, he was the one who told me lies about your team to begin with," she mused.

"Let me guess, that we're all thieves, murderers, and *mercenaries*?" Kisho glanced at Morgan with a half smile.

Morgan muttered, "Ass."

Sheridan nodded. "Yes. You wanted to know why I'd come here if I was so scared of you. I wanted my grandfather's ring. It's priceless to me." The truth, for so many reasons. "What Raul told me didn't fit with what I'd known of Jules, but then, we were in danger, and I didn't really get to know Jules that well."

"Well enough, I'd say." He glared at her. "So you took Raul's word. And you took a job here in Circ central. Why?"

She sighed with frustration. "I don't know. I guess I wanted to believe that Raul was wrong, and I thought if I could spend some time here among you, I'd figure it out. I didn't like thinking I couldn't trust my own instincts, which had told me to trust you. And if I was wrong, I just thought I could convince you to give me my ring back. Then I'd take it and disappear."

Tersch snorted. "Not likely."

"Oh?"

"Jules has had a hard-on for you since the minute you stepped through that door. You really think he'd let you walk off without his say-so?"

"Gunnar, language," Mrs. Sharpe reprimanded.

"Jeez, Gunnar." Ava coughed to hide a laugh.

Jules surprised Sheridan by agreeing with him. "He's right. No way are you leaving without my permission."

"Excuse me?" Sheridan scowled.

"Now this is where it gets good. We need popcorn," Jesse said in a loud whisper to Olivia.

"I thought the whole point of this discussion was to learn about Ricardo Montaña."

"And you, Sheridan Keyes. It's very important we know as much about you as we can," Mrs. Sharpe said.

She didn't miss the satisfaction on the woman's face...or on Jules's.

"There's not that much more to know. My name is Sheridan Keyes. I'm a botanist who can heal injury with my hands. But other than that, I'm actually pretty boring." Sheridan wanted nothing more than to escape all the drama. She didn't like being the center of so much attention, even if the winds of blame had finally shifted from her.

"You're far from boring, Sheridan," Jules said in a low tone that made her entire body take notice. "You sated my mating heat with those hot little hands. And the rest of you..." His study left little to the imagination.

"Jules," she hissed, more than discomfited, especially since she recalled what she'd been trying to ignore. Tersch had witnessed her slutty behavior earlier. Could she possibly be more embarrassed than she was right now?

"Now that is something special, Sheridan. Did you help the other Circs with their mating heats as well?" Jules asked, his voice suspiciously quiet.

"No!" She wanted to sink through the chair in humiliation. "Grayson and Raul didn't want that from me." Well, Raul had wanted it, but she hadn't desired anyone but Jules.

"I called it," Jesse murmured.

Olivia nodded in agreement. "I feel it. Can't understand why Jules doesn't, though."

Sheridan wished she could just up and leave. "What more do you want from me? I told you the truth. I have no idea where Ricardo's compound was because we traveled at night. And when I left, it was under Grayson's guard. Raul just took off one day, and I hadn't seen him until he showed up and shot Morgan. Melissa is your traitor, not me. So why don't you just let me out of here." She glared at Jules. "And give me back my ring."

He shook his head and stood. "No can do, baby. We have a few more things we need to discuss in private. I'll talk to you guys later." In a heartbeat, he'd hauled Sheridan out of her chair and into his arms.

"Quit it. You're always grabbing me." Sheridan felt as if she were drowning in a sudden wave of sexual desire.

"Oh, man, not again." Tersch groaned and practically leaped out of the way when Ava reached for his shoulder. "I'm out of here."

"Wait, Gunnar. I want to talk to you." Ava followed him out of the study.

“That girl has no patience,” Mrs. Sharpe muttered. “Go talk some sense into Sheridan, Jules. The rest of you, stay here. There are some things we need to do.”

Sheridan protested, but no one listened. In minutes, she stood in Jules’s locked bedroom with nothing but time, and a rapidly receding distance, between them.

Chapter Eleven

The cell phone felt cool against her ear. “We did it. No, she didn’t follow us. And I just know she healed that asshole Morgan Reynolds.” Melissa Ramirez, previously known as Melissa Keiser, frowned at Raul, not pleased at the way this had panned out. Melissa was supposed to just disappear, not look like she’d been involved in her capture. Now the chance existed that those dickheads at Circ central might believe Sheridan Keyes was the innocent she claimed to be. And if that happened, Jack might put two and two together and not play his part.

And she really didn’t need Jack Keiser on her tail. Posing as his wife had been one thing. The sex had been great, but she feared she’d let him get too close. He knew things about her, the way she thought, how she’d react in certain situations. Having a scarily psychic badass after her might screw everything up, especially since she’d never bought Jack’s cover story about quitting the Feds. Too bad her boss hadn’t believed her suspicions. As if Jack Keiser would betray his country. Yeah, right.

Raul and his friends stared at her with hunger bright in their eyes. But nowhere in her contract did it state she had to fuck animals to earn her paycheck. She hadn’t wanted to work with another Circ in the first place, but Lonnie—the great jefe—had insisted. And what Lonnie wanted, Lonnie got. She missed her man, but he had important things to do.

He answered her with a pleased chuckle. “Good work, Mel. From what I’ve gathered, our security forces are headed down there to help. Sharpe is blaming Montaña for your kidnapping.”

“Then the plan is working out better than I’d hoped it would. Montaña’s men burned down the house and tried to use me as a messenger to deliver his threats, personally. Your boy Ricardo wants Sheridan. He’s playing with Dawn Endeavor now, but he’s going to go for their throats soon enough. According to Raul, he wants the invisibility trait Jules possesses, and he wants to use Sheridan as a brood mare.” Which made sense to Melissa.

Why the hell else would anyone want that bland little bitch? Sex, Melissa understood. Hell, even Jack had eyed the curvy redhead like a treat. But Jack had questionable taste. Hell, he’d fucked her, she thought with a grin.

“Interesting,” Lonnie said. “I’ll use that as leverage if I have to. He’ll want to know this right away.”

Mel's pleasure faded. *He* always wanted everything right away. Lonnie jumped when the man said jump, and it irritated Mel to no end. If Lonnie was indeed el jefe, the boss, shouldn't *he* make the rules? But she supposed Lonnie played the game his way, while she did what she had to do to survive. A hellish year and a half spent working for the navy had finally paid off. The end was in sight.

And at least you had a taste of Jack, Mel reminded herself. Talk about pleasure.

"We good, then?" Lonnie asked.

"I'd say so, for now. I recommend letting things play out between Montaña and the Dawn Endeavor team while we wait."

She frowned as Raul nodded, rudely listening in to her conversation. Damned Circs and their enhanced senses.

The crackle of the phone sounded before Lonnie answered, "Sounds good. Stay out of sight. I'll call you again in a week to firm new plans."

"Bye, baby."

"Mel." He hung up.

Mel turned to deal with her new team. Oh hell, they still seemed hungry, except for Raul. To her pleasant surprise, he looked reasonably sane. Not like he had the last time they'd met, before this mess had taken shape.

"I can see your friends need to expend some energy. You take charge of them. I'm going to take a nap. I earned it."

"Sure thing. Don't worry about the furniture. We'll try to play nice." Raul turned and started dropping his clothes right in front of her. Mel beat a hasty retreat into the back bedroom of their little safe house in the middle of nowhere. She closed and locked the door behind her.

One more week until she'd hear from Lonnie again. She couldn't wait.

Something growled. Muffled curses became roars, and then all hell broke loose as the walls shook and bodies bounced. Mel shoved her head underneath her pillow and prayed for their stupid mating heat to be over soon. God, she couldn't stand being two feet next to those barbaric assholes.

She missed Lonnie, his sophisticated humor, his lofty connections, the things he could do with his tongue...

"One more week, baby. Just one more. And then you and I can start making our *own* rules."

* * *

Jules had a hard time focusing on anything but the hunger beating in his beast—for Sheridan. "You were right."

She swallowed audibly and kept the bed between them. As if that would stop him.

His hands went to his shirt, and he ripped it off his body.

Sheridan licked her lips, absorbed by him, though she tried so hard to fight it. The poor thing. She had no idea how much his beast loved that sexual innocence. He needed to push past it to the hungry female beneath. *My mate. Take her now.*

"Right about what?" Sheridan rasped.

Dark red hair flowed over her shoulders and teased the tips of her full breasts. God, he loved her hair.

"We have a unique connection, you and I. One I've never felt with anyone else." He kept his jeans on, though the denim was hell on his cock. He needed her, had to have her. But the woman was cautious. He could see the same desire in her eyes, could smell the musky arousal growing between her legs, and knew she belonged to him. Now he had to convince her of the same.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice breathless and so arousing, he groaned.

"I can't stop tasting you, that rich floral scent that goes straight to my head and to my dick." He rubbed himself, needing her to see. Jules slowly unbuttoned his jeans and shifted his cock so that the tip of him was visible. "See how hard I am? How wet? My slit's full of cum, baby. I need you to suck it off."

Sheridan licked her lips, and a rush of her arousal washed through the air. "You...you shouldn't do this. *We* shouldn't do this. This biochemical reaction—"

He cocked his head. "Biochemical reaction? That's what you're calling this?"

"I don't know what else to call it," she bit out. "You want me; I want you. It's a basic attraction. Nothing more."

"No? Then why do I think about you all the time?"

She crossed her arms over those perfect breasts, unfortunately still covered by her damned clothes. "What can you possibly have to think about? We barely know each other. The only thing we've done together is have sex, and that's when you're not locking me up somewhere or hauling me around like a damned rag doll."

The hissing kitten turned him on so damned much. "I know a lot about you, baby."

"My name isn't baby. It's Sheridan."

"For example, *baby*, I know the way you throw your head back and cry out when you come around me. You flush a pretty pink, right along the tops of your breasts when you're aroused, and that sweet, sweet smell of your need is so tasty." He opened his mouth and sighed, tasting her on the air. "You're wet now, aren't you?"

"I don't believe this. You want to have sex? I thought you wanted to talk."

"I do. But I can talk while I'm inside you, can't I?" She didn't respond to his grin, but she did squirm a little. He could just imagine the slick ride between those thighs and tugged his zipper down a fraction. "See how hard I am? Come on, baby, you know you want a taste."

She tried to hold out; he could see her determination to remain unaffected. His beast respected her need to assert herself, but Jules wasn't having it. He commanded. He led his team, and he'd lead his damned woman where he wanted her.

"I've tried being nice. Now get your ass over here and kneel," he snarled, pleased when her scent ripened. The little scientist liked it when he told her what to do. She was so perfect for him. *For us*. His beast preened under the hungry look Sheridan shot his cock. "Open that mouth, baby. I've got what you need."

Sheridan moaned her denial even as she planted one foot in front of the other. In seconds, she knelt before him, naturally submissive. As if in a daze, she fixated on his cock and stared. "This is just lust. It doesn't mean anything."

"Touch it," he said, his voice hoarse. *God, if she doesn't do something soon, I'm going to come while still in my fucking pants*. "But first, lose that shirt and the bra. I want to see those tits while you're blowing me."

She shuddered as she removed her T-shirt and bra, leaving her full breasts exposed, the hard little nipples telling their own story. "You can't tell me what to do," she denied weakly, contradicting the sight of her on her knees before him, half-naked and horny as hell. She smelled so fucking sweet.

"You're wet, aren't you, baby? Wet for me," he growled and to his shock began purring.

Sheridan answered by leaning forward to lick the tip of his cock with a quick swipe of her tongue.

"Fuck." Jules couldn't stop himself from plunging his hands into her thick hair as she took the tip of his cock in her mouth. She didn't touch him except to use her mouth, and Jesus, it felt good.

She moaned and licked the underside of his shaft, sucking on the plum head until he found himself humping her mouth.

"Unzip me more," he said on a breath. "Come on, you little witch. Lick me from my tip to my balls. I want you to suck them, rub them, then gag yourself on the head of my cock." He'd never been so blunt, so graphic, and yet it turned him on as much as it did her as he smelled her arousal spike. "Dirty little girl, aren't you?"

She moaned. Her nipples stood stiffly, hard little beads begging for his touch. He grazed one with his hand, and she sucked him so hard, he nearly came.

She released him from her mouth and pulled down his zipper too damned slowly. "I want you so much." Sheridan met his gaze with a cloudy one of her own. "This doesn't mean I'm not still mad at you. You put me in a cell, Jules."

"I know, I know. A mistake, but one that kept you safe all the same. I'll apologize later, I swear."

"Yes, you will." She groaned and licked him again. "You taste so good. Different from before. God, Jules, I want you."

"Oh yeah. Take it, Sheridan. Eat me." Had he ever desired anyone so much? Burning up, on the verge of a cruel lust that spiraled out of control, Jules couldn't wait for her to do what he asked. So he demanded it.

He gripped her hair tight, but not hard enough to hurt, and pulled her closer. "I fucking told you to eat me. Do it."

"Yes," Sheridan moaned. "Oh yes." She went to town, licking his shaft from tip to base while holding him with a dainty hand that heated him from the inside out. As she feasted on his cock, Jules felt strange, as if he were changing inside, and his beast encouraged it. Different from their sex before, this was something they both needed. Wanted. Instinct guided him, and he shoved hard into her mouth when she started to swallow him.

Her hands rubbed his balls; her mouth took him deeper. And then he was there at the back of her throat as she choked. *And he didn't care.* Too rough, he tried to tell himself, but his beast hastened him on.

Sheridan clutched his ass tighter, not letting him go as she took him deeper. She had to be gagging, had to be uncomfortable. Even as he thought it, he began to *change*, to grow, unable to stop himself. To his shock, Sheridan rose up with him as he grew taller, still crouched between his legs.

"Shit, no. Not now." He tried to stop, tried to pull himself away from her, but her grip became one of iron, and he couldn't do more than thrust deeper.

"Sheridan, baby, I'm losing it. Fuck. Yes, yes," he roared as he fully transformed into his beast and came down her throat.

The ecstasy of orgasm was so pure, so clean and hot, and then it was more. She cupped his balls and squeezed, and the small pain blazed along his shaft. He continued to come, pouring himself down her throat.

He felt thirsty, so hot, so needy. And the taste of him. He needed more. No, *she* needed more. Like before, Jules sensed Sheridan's emotions. Pain was a small part of what she experienced as she swallowed Jules's seed. The woman took him into her body, accepting him and his beast, and she wanted to share her desire with him.

He should have known Sheridan would be anything but typical as a lover, a mate, and a woman.

Her healing hands released his sac, and she pulled away from his sensitive cock, making him shiver as he drew back. She slowly rose and stripped out of the rest of her clothes.

She looked tiny compared to him. Except, to his utter amazement, she didn't remain small. His beast watched with satisfaction as his fiery redhead began to *expand*. Her large breasts grew larger, and his mouth watered. The pale skin on her slight, human frame grew darker, a shade of cream that complemented the almost black red of her thick hair that now reached down to her round ass. An ass he had yet to claim.

"Hmm. You taste so good," she said in a throaty growl that had him instantly hard once more.

Sheridan, his little Circ, didn't just smell good, she smelled ripe. Fertile. And she smelled like him.

Smiling at him with fangs that grew even as he watched, Sheridan flashed him a wicked smile before leaning close to lick a trail from Jules's abdomen to between his nipples. She nipped her way up his body, searing him with the bite of her new fangs that could pierce his tougher skin.

"So pretty, mate. So fucking good," he rasped as she latched on to his nipple and bit hard. "Oh, fuck. Need to take you again. All over. Flood you with cum."

She opened her mouth and released him. Her blue eyes looked neon bright as she blinked up at him. "Mate, hmm? I'm Circ now, aren't I?"

"Yeah, and so damned beautiful, you make it hard to think about anything but loving you."

She paused, studying him for a moment. And then she smiled. "Well then, *mate*, come here and take me. If you think you can handle me."

The challenge he welcomed. But the sight of her in her entirety, in her *changed* body, stopped him in his tracks. His beast scented the wildness in her, the raw core that seemed like it had always been there. "How?"

"I don't know. This time was different than the others we've been together. It's you. And me. You changed me, made me a part of you." Her eyes misted before the slit of her pupils widened. "My mate," she hissed and would have swiped a clawed hand down his belly if he hadn't stepped back. A typical reaction from a mated female. His beast needed to earn her respect with a show of strength.

"Fast and sexy. I like." He growled a warning she didn't heed, and the growing affection he'd had for the little scientist who'd healed him blossomed into an immediate and overpowering love.

Jules picked her up and tossed her onto the bed. He didn't give her the chance to argue or fight and grabbed her wrists, holding her hands by her side. He sucked hard on her breasts, tasting the reminder of her pheromones screaming for his seed. The plump offerings drew him, and he sucked hard, imagining these same breasts full with milk for his offspring. A fantasy he'd had of his perfect woman, and one that felt like it was unfolding even as he thought it.

His cock ached, but he needed more. Jules teased her breasts until she begged for him. He kissed a trail down her belly and inhaled the scent of a female in need. She was dripping wet, thick with honeyed cream just waiting for his tongue. Barely aware of anything but Sheridan's scent, he released her wrists.

The minute he tasted her, he wanted more. She screamed her pleasure as she came, but he didn't stop, pushing her toward another climax. Jules licked and sucked her clit, delving his tongue into her body to feel the slick walls of her sex waiting for him.

"Please."

"Please what?" He needed her to say it again, could feel her insatiable desire to come as it tangled with her want to be independent. But that could never be, not now that he'd finally found her.

"Please, Jules. Take me."

"No. Please, *what?*" He snarled and shoved his tongue deeper, but not deep enough. "Please what, *mate?*"

She struggled but could get no closer, and her scent drugged him to the point he readied to mount and fuck her, despite the fact she wouldn't say what he wanted.

But to his relief, she cried out her answer. "Please, mate. I need you inside me."

Jules swept over her and surged inside her in one hard, hot thrust. The incredible feeling of oneness swelled, their joining much more than the physical, but a true mating of beast, man, and woman.

Her skin rippled, became fascinating contrasts of ivory and a darker gold, like stripes of value marking her as more than special, but unique.

"Come inside me," she begged.

"I'm going to fill you up. All over that tight pussy, inside your mouth, your ass. You're going to be covered in me," he rasped as he grazed her hard clit, the pebble of lust she couldn't hide from his sensitized flesh. "Come, baby. Come for me, so I can fill you."

He lunged against her, grinding over her clit until she burst.

Sheridan screamed while Jules pounded into her like a madman. He couldn't make himself care about anything but impregnating Sheridan, so that she'd carry a part of him inside her.

She belonged to him, finally. Made into what he needed, turned by his own flesh and blood into what she'd always been meant to be. His beast knew it to be true, and when Jules convulsed and jetted inside her with full force, the man welcomed the woman with his whole heart. His mind. His soul.

He had barely finished spending when she moaned and shifted beneath him.

His dick twitched. He propped himself up on his forearms and leaned down to suck her nipples into his hungry mouth. "Yes, mate. Again. And again. And again. Until you're full with my young, full of my heart."

She whispered a yes against his throat, and they started all over again.

Sheridan woke the next morning, pleasantly sore all over. A large arm held her fast against a body she knew as intimately as her own. She blushed, not understanding how things had changed so fast between them.

"I can feel you thinking too hard," Jules rumbled. "My pretty little beast. God, you're so hot. All that red hair, that fire just for me."

To her shock, he purred, the way he had last night when *changed*. Sheridan didn't know how or why she'd *changed* as well, but Jules hadn't given her much

time to think about anything. Too busy coming all over her. He'd taken her ass, her pussy, her mouth a number of times, and still she wanted more.

Sheridan had expected pain, but her Circ body adapted to his without effort. A miracle of nature, thanks to Jules's miracle of science, and one she needed to explore, just as soon as Jules eased the sudden desire that consumed her.

"You're a hot piece of ass, aren't you?" he whispered into her ear as he rolled her onto her belly. "No, stay flat and spread your legs. Don't get to your knees. Not for this."

She felt the press of his erection against her back and shivered. He always seemed so slick, a benefit of being Circ, he'd said. Circs needed a lot of sex, so the males secreted a natural oil over their shafts to ease penetration. Which explained how easily he'd fit inside her each time. Although her own lust had a lot to do with that. Around Jules, Sheridan felt perpetually horny.

"You have the sexiest body, Sheridan," he said on a breath as he began sliding his cock along the crease of her ass. "Just as sexy as that brain of yours that never stops. Do you know how hard you make me?"

"I think so."

He laughed and prodded her tight hole. "Hmm, should I take you here? Or is that pussy dry and needing me? Tell me, baby. Better yet, show me."

Jules pulled away, then angled his cock into her pussy. He shoved forward so slowly, he drove her crazy.

"Stop teasing," she rasped. "Fuck me now."

He thrust balls-deep and stilled. "I love it when you talk dirty to me. Makes me hard."

"Everything makes you hard."

He chuckled and began thrusting, a slow pace that didn't satisfy her need to come.

"No, no. No coming until I say so."

"Not fair."

"Not fair is turning Circ on me and throwing my cock into overdrive. I think I'm actually sore, Sheridan."

She chuckled and wished she could see his face. She loved watching him pour himself inside her, loved to see the agony of sexual fulfillment as he came, knowing *she* took him to that needy place.

"Laugh it up, you little witch," he growled and pounded into her.

Her laughter turned into groans of need as he owned her body. But just as she neared an intense orgasm, Jules pulled out.

"Not yet. Don't stop now," she begged.

And then he spread her ass cheeks wide and pushed inside. Stretching her rim, prodding and demanding, he made her ache until the burning heat that always

flared between them obliterated the pain. Pleasure showered her as Jules grunted and continued to fill her with his thick cock.

"Fuck. Seeing myself inside you like this, it's so good, Sheridan. So right," he said on a growl.

His beast took over then, the scent of him strong enough to pull her beast through as well. Sheridan submitted gratefully, and he sensed it. Jules reached around and fingered her clit, rubbing as he continued to stretch her.

"Come for me, baby. Let me scent that honeyed cream."

His frank talk during sex only heightened her arousal. And she knew her blatant language did the same to him. "Yes, Jules. Fuck me. Come inside my ass. Give me that hot cum, yes," she moaned. His finger increased the pressure over her clit; his driving thrusts grew more desperate, rougher.

Sheridan tried to hold off, to come with him, but she couldn't. She cried out and clutched the bedsheets as she came. Seconds later Jules joined her, slamming deep inside her as he emptied the desire riding him hard.

"Sheridan, baby," he moaned and shuddered. Moments later, he finally pulled out.

He left her for the bathroom. She heard the faucet run, but she didn't have the energy to do more than close her eyes. He startled a tired yelp out of her when he lifted her up.

"Come on, lazy. We need to clean up and join the others. And are they going to be surprised by you."

Sheridan sighed. "No more than I'm surprised by me. I don't understand any of this."

He kissed her cheek, then her lips. "I don't either. But I'm happier now than I've ever been. And if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to make you feel the same damned way."

He kissed her again. When he looked at her, his eyes seemed to glow. Then he blinked, and she wondered if she'd had too much sex, because she could have sworn his pupils had disappeared. Even when he'd been in his other form, the pupils had grown thin and long, but they were still there.

Jules's smile seemed to light up his entire body. "My favorite color is blue."

"Um, okay."

In the shower, he washed her and took care of her with a tenderness that shook her.

"I like sports. I like sex."

"Yeah, I get that."

He continued to list his many attributes, likes and dislikes, until she stopped him. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"I'm trying to get you to know me. Then I'll get to know you. That way when I ask you to marry me, you won't be able to say no."

Chapter Twelve

A week later, Sheridan still couldn't get Jules's words out of her head. Marriage? How the heck was she supposed to respond to *that*? He hadn't seemed like he was joking, but Jules had smiled at her. He'd bathed her, dried her, and dressed her, since she'd been too stupefied to do more than stand around looking like a moron.

Then they'd joined everyone for breakfast. He hadn't mentioned one word about her *changing* into a female version of his beast, and neither had she.

In the five days since, she'd seen him a handful of times. While he and the others worked together flying around the country checking on leads, she'd been assigned the labs, as if she were a permanent member of the Dawn Endeavor team.

The women gave her space. She'd spoken with Mrs. Sharpe a few times, mostly because Mrs. Sharpe wanted to make sure Sheridan had everything she needed in the labs. She'd also volunteered Sheridan the use of any and all equipment necessary to resume her work on the Sheridan Rose, should she want to.

Sheridan had gladly taken the offer.

So here she sat, staring around her lab while Jules was out risking life and limb to find Montaña. He said he wanted to eliminate the threat to her while also doing what should have been done a long time ago, whatever that meant. Apparently, Montaña and these Circs had a history.

And if everything Mrs. Sharpe had said could be believed, Ricardo Montaña needed to be locked up for life for all the terrible things he'd done.

Sheridan felt like a fool for ever having doubted Jules and the others. From everything she'd seen since she'd been here, the Circs had saved more than just her life, but countless others as well.

But more than that, they were now a part of her. Jules was a part of her. A fitting mate, a voice inside of her seemed to say. That other awareness continued to grow, a kind of beast that wanted to experience the world. Sheridan felt both an innocence and an awakening, and though the scientist within her was fascinated by these changes, the all too human part of her was scared to death. She hadn't allowed more than a few of the beast's thoughts to penetrate since she'd *changed* a week ago. Though Jules had urged her to talk to Olivia or Morgan for advice, she wanted time to herself to ease into the changes her life was taking.

A knock at the door startled her.

"Sorry, it's just me." Ava entered and stuffed her hands in her pockets.

"Oh, hello, Ava. How are you?"

Ava had been scarce lately, and even the others had commented on it. "I wondered if you could take a look at a friend of mine and see what's wrong with him."

"Sure, if you'd like me to."

Ava stared at her with those beautiful hazel eyes. Her coloring was so exotic. She made Sheridan feel like a pale frump and a half. Even *changed*, Sheridan retained a softer aspect to her. Why would Jules not go for someone like Ava or Olivia? Both women were sexy and smart. Jules had looks, strength, and a commanding presence everyone respected. So why the hell was he interested in *her*?

"Can I ask you something?" Ava asked.

"What?"

Ava shuffled her feet. Somehow, though she stood at the same height as Sheridan, Ava managed to look much taller. A self-confident woman who knew her worth.

"What can you tell about a person when you touch them?" Ava looked sincerely curious.

Sheridan turned on her stool to fully face her. "My hands get an itch when I'm around someone who's hurt. Not emotionally wounded, but physically pained. Even if the person isn't aware of it, I sense it. Like buried cancer cells or blood disease or that something in Circs that makes them turn rogue."

"Hmm. Touch me." Ava stepped forward and held out her hand to Sheridan. "What do you sense?"

Sheridan took Ava's hand. To her surprise, she felt a kindred spirit. "You're like the others. You can heal yourself."

Ava didn't blink. "What else?"

"I... Wait." Sheridan held tight, then slowly ran her hands over Ava's arms. Up and over her shoulders to her neck. The curious tingling in her palms continued. "Fascinating. May I?" she asked.

"Go ahead."

Sheridan stroked Ava from top to bottom. From her head to her face to her chest, knees, and feet. Everywhere, the woman tingled. Jolts of energy pulsed like sparks. "You're healthy, no physical injuries of any kind. But you're hot."

"How so?"

Sheridan couldn't put her finger on it. "I don't know. You feel like Jules did when I first touched him. His Circ energy is intense, like yours," she said slowly. *Like mine*. Sheridan looked into Ava's eyes and watched as Ava's pupils slowly narrowed and lengthened.

"Wow," she said on a breath, still holding on to Ava's hands.

"Yeah. That's me. Miss Wow," Ava muttered. She pulled back from Ava and stepped aside. "You felt that, all that heat? I'm healthy, right?"

Confused, Sheridan nodded.

“So how does my brother feel to you?” She turned to the door and yelled, “Come on in.”

Sheridan watched in horror as Grayson entered and shut the door behind him.

“Hello, Sheridan. It’s been a while.”

* * *

In the Amazon jungle

Jules glared at Tersch as the big Circ dropped a dead rogue to the ground on top of the other bodies they’d amassed. “I thought I told you to cut that shit out. I had him. I didn’t need you darting in front of me to deflect a bullet.”

At such a distance, the fired round had bounced off Tersch’s *changed* skin, as it would have bounced off Jules’s.

“Sorry.”

Tersch didn’t sound sorry. Before Jules could lay into him again, Morgan, Hayashi, and Fallon rejoined them while a Force Recon platoon secured the compound where they hoped to find Montaña. Fallon held a bloodied mercenary by the back of his neck in one clawed hand, and Hayashi held another in a white lab coat.

“This one says he doesn’t speak English,” Fallon growled.

The silence in the jungle, but for the spatter of gunfire and swearing, felt as thick as the humidity drenching Jules in sweat. To his grim satisfaction, being here restored his memory. The hated tests, the sticky aboveground caves, the fucking rogues patrolling as security.

He and his team kept to the outskirts of the jungle, watching the operation go down. Though the US Marines had worked with them before, *changed* Circs still tended to distract warriors who didn’t need to focus on anything but the mission. So for the most part, Jules and his team kept out of sight.

The intelligence Morgan had gathered finally led them to this place, where already a million dollars in drug money had been confiscated by discreet members of the United States’s “nonexistent” black ops contingent.

“Surprised they used the jarheads on this,” Tersch muttered.

“Admiral London pulled some strings. Apparently they were already down here on some other business.” Jules stared at the man in the white coat and slowly smiled. *Hel-lo, payback*. “Hey, I know you. *Manoel*. Good to see you again.”

Dr. Manoel Silva sputtered with fear. The mercenary in Fallon’s hands tried to launch himself at Jules, but Fallon stopped him. The clash of Fallon’s fist and the man’s face proved fatal.

As Fallon withdrew his claws, he apologized. "Sorry, Jules. Wasn't paying enough attention." He dropped the man to the ground and stepped closer to Dr. Silva, now cowering in Hayashi's firm grip. "So how do you know this guy?"

Jules flashed his fangs, pleased with the scent of terror wafting off the doctor. "Manoel likes needles. He's Montaña's best friend. Used me like a pincushion last time I was here."

Morgan smeared the camouflage on his face when he wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Fuck." He glared at Silva before turning back to his mate. "You know, I missed being home, but now that I'm back, I miss our air conditioner more."

Hayashi grinned. "Suck it up, princess." He ignored the finger Morgan gave him and turned back to Jules. "So if Manoel is Montaña's best friend, maybe he can tell us where his buddy is. The perimeter is surrounded, but no one's seen a hint of Montaña in days."

Jules had a bad feeling in the pit of his belly. He glared down at Silva. "Where is he?"

Silva whined and cried, pleading ignorance.

Hayashi opened his mouth to speak and froze instead.

The entire team waited for the psychic spoor of energy to settle. Tiny shards of power sparked around the Asian, and whenever Jules stood too close, the uncomfortable zaps of energy made his hair stand on end.

"Ah, I see," Hayashi murmured. He handed Silva over to Morgan. "Let's get this guy into safekeeping. I'm sure between Fallon and Olivia, we'll get tons of shit out of him. Now it's time to go home. Scarface is coming for you, Jules. For you and Sheridan. You're going to have to give him what he wants this time, or Sheridan's going to die."

Two hours later, after everyone had been taken into custody and the laboratory shut down, the Dawn Endeavor team left South America. "*Sheridan's going to die*" replayed in Jules's mind over and over as the flight dragged on. Jules couldn't wait to see his mate again, to touch her and stroke her hair, kiss her lips, brand her as his. Though Hayashi promised she'd be there waiting, Jules didn't trust his good fortune. He'd been so lost after he'd come back from that hell in the jungle the first time. And now that he finally had Sheridan back, he didn't want to lose her again.

Ever.

Nine hours later, after flying into the New River Air Station, Jules and the others headed home. This time, they had to pass not only the electronic gate and secured lock, but two psychic guards, courtesy of Admiral London.

"Great. Strange men at the house," he muttered.

"Can't be any stranger than you bastards," Morgan added under his breath. He sucked in a breath when Tersch's fist made contact with his arm. "Asshole."

Fallon laughed.

Tersch grunted. "I'm telling you, Hayashi. You scraped the bottom of the barrel with this one. You should have gotten a better dude. Someone hotter maybe," Tersch said with a critical frown. "And one with less mouth."

Hayashi answered in a calm voice, "I like his mouth just fine."

Which had Morgan snickering and Jules loosening up. He hadn't realized how tense he'd been, waiting to see Sheridan again.

"And speaking of mouths..." Tersch continued. "Jules, what's with this new female? She's kind of snarky, which I like. But she's connected to Montaña, which can't be good. So you keeping her or what? Because after what I saw her doing to you, I have to wonder. Your scent is all over her. And I don't know if I like that."

The others exchanged glances.

"*You* don't know if you like that?" What the hell did it matter what Tersch thought? Granted, he loved the guy like family, but Jules led the team.

"Oh boy," Fallon murmured. "Here we go."

"She might not be good for you, is all." Tersch clenched his jaw tight and didn't look away when Jules glared at him.

The SUV finally pulled into the large stone circular drive. "We're going to continue this later. First I have to go see my *mate*," Jules said with a low growl of promise and hurried to the front door.

"Mate?" Morgan shouted. "No shit."

Jules heard the others talking excitedly behind him as he moved through the front door, past the guard inside who sized him up and nodded in welcome. None of the team should have been surprised by his admission. Though Jules hadn't openly stated his claim, his scent marked Sheridan better than words. But it still wasn't enough. He needed to solidify his position with his mate, so that she couldn't question where she belonged.

He hadn't been lying when he'd told her he wanted them to get to know each other. Unfortunately, he'd spent most of his time during the past few days out of the country. He lifted his head and tried to scent her.

Immediately, the sweet floral beacon drew him downstairs. He passed the few psychics Olivia, Fallon, and Mrs. Sharpe had okayed to be in the house while the team had been gone. Jules nodded to them, and they kept well out of his way.

"She's downstairs," one of the braver telekinetics mentioned.

"Thanks." Apparently everyone else knew he'd staked his claim. His beast growled in approval at the thought.

In the downstairs corridor, he nearly ran into Ava and a large male.

Ava smiled. "Welcome back, Jules. She's in the lab."

The big guy next to Ava didn't say much. He kept his gaze averted and nodded a hello.

Probably as attuned to Jules's alpha tendencies as the others. The psychic team reacted oddly to the Circs. Most of them kept a wary distance, which satisfied Jules. Because being around the fuckers made him want to beat on his chest and prove his dominance to the unfamiliar men. Strangely, his beast sensed like warriors in the dozen or so men attached to the security force. But the one with Ava had to be new. Jules hadn't seen him before.

Something about the male tugged at him, but before he could investigate, the scent of Sheridan hit him hard.

Ignoring Ava and the male, Jules picked up his pace and found his mate in the larger office she'd turned into her personal lab. She sat on her stool staring at the wall. Baffled, cute, and so sexy, he wanted to take her hard up against the wall she watched. No foreplay, just a hard, deep fuck. His beast snarled its agreement, and Jules took a long, deep breath to calm himself.

"Hey, baby."

She squealed in fright and nearly fell off the stool.

He caught her, expecting a sarcastic setdown.

"God, you scared me." Instead of yelling at him, she plastered her mouth to his.

He couldn't catch his breath as the whirlwind in his arms gave him the hard-on from hell.

"Oh, man, going at it already." Tersch groaned from the doorway. "Come on, lovebirds. Mrs. Sharpe wants everyone upstairs. Emergency meeting, right now."

Jules didn't want to stop, but he managed to tear his mouth from Sheridan's and panted, "Fuck. Right now?"

"Sorry. You and your *mate* will have to take up after." The mean look Tersch directed at Sheridan snapped the hold Jules had on his control.

He gently set Sheridan down, turned, and flew at Tersch. Slamming the stupid berserker against the wall, Jules pulled back his fist, ready to remind Tersch about the current hierarchy in leadership. Mates ranked right up there with team leaders.

"Jules! What are you doing?"

"Teaching Tersch when to learn to shut his fucking mouth," Jules growled, sensing the frustration and the hurt in his Circ. Since his friend responded best to pain, Jules thought he'd use it to enforce his point.

"Don't hit him." Sheridan sounded worried.

"I don't need you to fight my battles for me, red," Tersch sneered.

She nudged Jules aside and poked Tersch in the chest. "My name is Sheridan, you big jerk."

Her aggression startled both men into silence.

"And it's my lab, so I'll say whatever the hell I want to say. You two want to fight, take it upstairs. Now," she added in a mean voice when neither Jules nor Tersch moved.

Tersch must have seen something in Sheridan's eyes, because he stopped bracing himself for Jules and leaned closer. "Tell me I did not just see that." He licked his lips, and to Jules's unease, Sheridan stared at his mouth.

"See what?" she growled in a tone much rougher than the one she normally used.

Jules glanced at her hand and saw the shimmer of her sharpening claws.

"Have you shifted at all since we've been gone?" he asked quietly.

She blinked and pulled back from Tersch. "Ah, shifted?"

"Yeah, *changed* into your beast? That sexy creature that took me so lovingly just a few night ago?" He wanted her again, right now. He wanted Tersch to watch, so that the male would know exactly who Sheridan belonged to.

"Jules, shush." Sheridan's face heated, and he turned her head to plant a kiss on her lips.

Tersch's eyes were huge. "The mating heat is strong. She's Circ? When were you going to tell us?"

"Asshole, I told you I mated her."

"I'm not Circ." Sheridan shook her head.

"No?" Tersch sniffed. "Smells like Circ to me. Nice, flowery, wild. But you smell like him too. And I don't know, but..."

Sheridan frowned. "But what?" Before Tersch could answer, she swore under her breath. "I don't belong to anyone. I'm a woman, unattached, who's thinking about having a civilized relationship with Julian Hawkins. I've been thinking, Jules."

"Shit. When they start thinking, you're in real trouble." The slight grin on Tersch's face relieved him.

Jules didn't want to fight Tersch, but Tersch needed to know Sheridan belonged. He glanced from his friend to his mate. Maybe her Circ traits had convinced Tersch to give her the respect she was due.

"Then again, I think you're in over your head with this one anyway," Tersch added, his smile disappearing. "How do you know she's not working for Montaña?"

Sheridan inhaled sharply. "I would never help that man do anything, let alone join with him to hurt Jules." When Tersch simply shrugged, Sheridan's voice rose. "Screw you. And get the hell out of my lab."

The ferocity of her anger had the bite of the beast, enough so that Tersch straightened, glanced warily at Jules, then left without another word.

"Baby, you said you've been thinking?" Jules couldn't have been more pleased. Every time he saw another facet of his mate, his beast purred with contentment. So strong, so his.

She watched Tersch's retreating back. "Ah, yes. Yes, I was thinking." She turned to face him and cleared her throat. "We've never gone out on a date. I think we should have one."

Things looked better than ever. Jules smiled. "Just what I was thinking. Let's get through this meeting with Mrs. Sharpe, and then we'll have some alone time. Out of the bedroom," he added before she could complain they had nothing but sex in common.

He didn't see the problem with their physical compatibility, but only because he trusted his beast's instincts. He *knew*, without a doubt, that Sheridan belonged to him. She'd turned Circ for him. She'd healed him. She turned him on the way no one ever had. Despite all his adventurous sex with his team and their mates, only sex with Sheridan involved the depths of his soul.

Jules had never believed in soul mates, but with Sheridan, he knew.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked in a soft voice, her blue eyes clear of guile.

He couldn't help himself and glanced at her aura. It still glowed a bright, neon purple—that of a woman in love.

"Like what?" Jules asked, knowing he wore a dopey smile on his face.

He guided her out of the lab and up to where Mrs. Sharpe and the others waited in the conference room.

"Like you..." Sheridan blushed. "Never mind."

Jules squeezed her to him and kissed the top of her head. "Soon as we're done with this meeting, put on a dress. We're going somewhere nice. Just you and me."

* * *

And the rest of the team, apparently. Did Jules honestly think Sheridan hadn't seen Tersch disappear around the corner into a booth with one of the psychic guys, who wore an obnoxious baseball cap? Or that Morgan and Hayashi, coupled with Fallon and Olivia at a booth several feet away, weren't noticeable?

"I thought we were going out alone?" she murmured as they sat in the back corner of the Islander, an upscale seafood restaurant near Atlantic Beach, just half an hour from the mansion.

"We are alone. The others are here for our protection, I swear." Jules took her hand across the table and rubbed it in soft circles.

Her blood heated from just his touch. The vanilla musk always surrounding him deepened, and she drew in a jagged breath.

"Yeah, I know," he whispered. "I feel it too."

The love? Is that what he feels? Or the incredible intimacy between the two of us, despite the crowded restaurant?

"You're so beautiful."

She blinked. "Me? You think I'm beautiful?"

Jules chuckled and brought her hand to his lips. "Honey, your hair is the stuff of fantasies. First time I saw it tied up in that ponytail, I wanted to rip the band away. The sight of your hair over my stomach when you're going—"

"Jules," she hissed.

He grinned. "Well, the sight of all that thick hair gets to me. And your eyes are special. So blue. And of course, though I hate to be a typical guy and say I'm hot for your body, I am. Very, very hot." He cleared his throat and let her go. Then he drained a glass of water in one long swallow.

She blushed, thrilled he was so attracted. "I still don't know why."

"You're oblivious."

"To what?"

He sighed. "It's probably for the best. Sheridan, the minute we walked in here, every guy gave you a look. I can't blame them. That blue dress really shows off your curves. You have the nicest ass I've ever seen. And don't get me started on your breasts."

She huffed. "Okay, okay. I get it. You're weird. You like redheads with big butts, big boobs, and pasty skin."

He chuckled. "Good. You keep thinking I'm weird and not that you're a bombshell with killer curves. Then I won't have to kill any of the assholes making eyes at you."

She took a sip of her own water and pretended she believed him. The waiter appeared, and they ordered their food. When he left, Sheridan jumped into the discussion that was long overdue.

"Jules, I've wanted to talk to you for a while."

"I'm right here, sweetheart. Talk away."

Why did he have to call her *sweetheart* and *baby*? On his lips, they weren't putdowns or platitudes but endearments. Jules made her feel treasured, cared for, almost...loved. Sheridan studied his face and his eyes, searching for the truth. What did he really feel for her? When he said she belonged to him, what did that really mean?

They barely knew each other, and they'd met under unfortunate circumstances. Physical chemistry wasn't enough to base a relationship on. I know that, she reminded the animal inside her wanting to leap across the table and sate herself with his rock-hard body.

His eyes flashed, the pupils narrowing as he studied her.

"Your beast, hmm?" he asked softly.

"She's in there. I want to call it an *it*, but she won't let me." Sheridan shook her head. "But you're distracting me. I wanted to talk about us."

"Good. So do I."

She frowned. "You do?"

"Sheridan, I really like you, but I have the sense you don't like me."

She blinked. This wasn't how she'd envisioned their conversation. "Excuse me?"

He shifted in his seat and glanced away. His lips quirked, and she had the uneasy suspicion he might be laughing at her.

"Are you—"

"Sheridan, I have real feelings for you," he said in a low voice. "I've tried telling you about me, hoping you'd do the same. But you won't talk to me."

"Probably because whenever we're together we make lo—"

"Your salads," the waiter said as he set down their plates. The minute he left, Sheridan leaned closer.

"I'm talking to you now." *Oh wow, he looks hurt. Like I hurt his feelings or something.* "Are you okay?"

"Am I? Sheridan, do you even like me?" His earnest expression took her aback, and she realized he might feel as awkward about their combustible lust as she did.

"I do like you." She did. A lot. More than was healthy.

He's mine.

Clamping down on her beast, she smiled at him. "You're protective, responsible, a leader of men. You have integrity and a decent sense of humor." She thought about what she knew of him and continued. "You're really good in bed. Really, really good." *Man, understatement of the year.*

He smiled at her, and his eyes twinkled. The rest of the room disappeared. Only Jules mattered.

"You're too good for me." She sighed, depressed at thoughts of him eventually leaving her.

He blinked. "What?"

"Jules, I'm a realist. I work with plants, and I like my job. Why? Because I don't have to deal with people. I'm honest, sometimes brutally so. I try to be nice, but I have a bad habit of just saying what I think without filtering first. I don't dress as fashionably as Olivia and will never look even half as good in jeans as Ava does. I'm not fond of sports, though I do like to run. And you'll never see a six-pack on my belly." *My jiggly belly.* She frowned and touched her stomach. Actually, come to think of it, she'd felt firmer since her change into the beast.

"None of that matters." Jules waved away her concerns. "Sheridan, I'm not normal." He lowered his voice. "I have a dangerous job. And I'm a lot more than a regular guy." He paused. "I'm Circ. I have to be to survive the mating heats. I've been with women—and *men*." He seemed to be waiting for a reaction.

Unfortunately, she couldn't drum up the disgust he seemed to be looking for. Good Lord. The thought of Jules doing the other Circs made her wet. He was a sexual male, and she loved his dominance.

His nostrils flared, and he smiled, showing a hint of fang he quickly covered. "See? That's why you and I work. You can accept what I am. I'm different, and I always will be. I'm in charge because I have to be." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "And you like that."

God, yes, do I. She coughed and took a sip of her water. Then a sudden thought came to her. "Have you and Tersch...?"

"Yeah. A lot. And with the others too. I'm the leader, an alpha. Sex bonds us. The team, I mean."

She flushed, suddenly wet and wishing they were anywhere but here.

He exhaled hard. "Man, you smell good. So I take it that doesn't bother you?"

"Olivia and Ava too?"

"Olivia, not Ava. She's not one of us."

That's what you think. "Olivia, hmm?"

He didn't look away from her, and the lack of his discomfort somehow made it easier to accept. "Olivia's happily mated to Fallon. She's a part of my team now. But I don't want to spend the rest of my life with her as my mate. She knows her place among us, and being with her is almost intrusive now, especially with the baby coming.

"Sheridan, I know this sounds really out there, but we're not human. We're Circ, and Circs have unusual needs."

Though Sheridan didn't like the thought of Jules with Olivia, her beast accepted it. Just the notion that Jules had kissed Olivia bothered the crap out of her; jealousy reared its ugly head. Yet her beast urged her to understand the necessity of the Circ bonding process.

A glance over to her right showed Olivia sitting with Fallon, her arm around his shoulder. The woman was clearly in love with her mate. Though she'd expressed affection for Jules, she didn't seem flirty or more than friendly with him.

"So you're not in love with her?" As soon as she said it, Sheridan hastily corrected, "I mean, you're not involved with any of your team that way? Like mates, right?"

"We're all a team. The longer you're with us, the better you'll see how we function. I'd give my life for any of them. We've been through some tough stuff, danger, pain, loss. But now Fallon has Olivia, and Hayashi has Morgan, as irritating as he can be."

They shared a smile.

"Two of us have bonded, but Tersch and I are still alone. Or at least, Tersch is." Jules grasped her hand again, his energy snaking into her palm. "Sheridan, I want to know everything about you. I know you like vanilla and not chocolate. That you're sexy as hell but still innocent, no matter what we've done." He grinned at her blush. "You're a tremendous healer. Your gift is much of who you are. Giving, caring, unselfish. That's why I fell in love with you, Sheridan. That's why I mated you and why I want to marry you. We have the rest of our lives to learn about each other. I want to get started with you by my side."

Chapter Thirteen

The waiter chose that moment to return to their table, and Jules wanted to strangle him. Fortunately, the guy had enough sense to back away with a hasty excuse.

Sheridan's blue eyes were huge as she stared at him, her full lips parted in amazement.

The violet in her aura hadn't changed. He knew she loved him, but he couldn't understand why she thought he'd reject her. The woman had guts, a kind heart, the mind of a genius, and the body of a goddess. Why *wouldn't* he want to marry her?

"You love me? You want to m-marry me?"

"Yes. The sooner the better."

"But Jules, we don't know each other."

"What do I need to know about you that I don't already know?" he asked.

She sputtered, looking both adorable and sexy in that dark blue sundress that showed off her generous cleavage. "We might have nothing in common!"

"Opposites attract. And besides, we have several things in common." He held up a hand and ticked off his fingers. "One, we both like to run. Two, we both get bigger when we're excited," he said with a wicked smile, startling another blush out of her. "Three, we're both loyal to friends, and we fight to protect the innocent."

"That's four things, not three," she corrected in a soft voice. "Jules, I don't know. It's not rational. We barely know each other. We've spent less than a week together at most."

"Love isn't rational. I love you, Sheridan. How do you feel about me?"

She didn't answer, but her aura glowed like a beacon. "That's not the point," she said after a pause.

"That's exactly the point. You love me. I can see it."

"What?"

"I can see auras. And yours is violet any time you're near me," he said with satisfaction. "The same way Olivia and Fallon are, and Morgan and Hayashi are."

She blew out a breath. "God. This is so embarrassing."

"What? Knowing that the woman I love loves me back? Baby, it's magic, and it's right. Why can't you let yourself just go with it?"

“Because it’s new and it’s scary. Hell, *I’m* scary. I’ve always been different, Jules. But now I’m beyond different.”

He understood that all too well. “I could always read auras, Sheridan. Never quite fit in with the crowd. But now I’m with others the same way. Fallon reads minds, Olivia reads emotions, Hayashi can see the future, and Tersch is like some damned berserker out of Viking legend. Morgan steals energy. None of us are normal, but we all have something in common. We fight the good fight, and we fight it together. We’re family.” He smiled at her, his heart so full, it hurt. “Sheridan, I want to be your family.”

Her eyes filled. “Man, you’re good.”

He laughed.

“You seem a little too perfect. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.” She rapped her fingers on the table. “What about my research? It’s important to me. I might want to continue it.”

“You can’t do that at the mansion?”

“Yeah, I can.” She admitted. “Well, what about us?” She lowered her voice and leaned closer. “Are you still going to have sex with the others while we’re together?”

The outrage he might have expected to appear on her face didn’t. Instead, anticipation made the scent of her arousal so damned alluring.

“Yeah, we might. Sometimes, if I’m away from you on a mission, and it’s just the guys, we’ll do what we have to.” His vision brightened, and he knew she had to be seeing his *changed* pupils. “And sometimes we’ll play at home, just for fun. As my mate, you’ll have to establish yourself. The men might be okay with you, but if they’re not, we’ll send them a message.”

She swallowed hard, and his cock swelled with need.

“We?”

“Yeah. Ever been stuffed full, baby? Ever had your mouth taken while someone pounded into your pussy? Or had your ass and pussy filled at the same time?”

She blinked at him, and he saw the flash of her beast watching with keen attention. “No.”

“Well, we’ll have to remedy that.”

Sexual tension filled the sudden silence between them.

Someone cleared their throat nearby, and Jules glanced up to see Olivia standing by their table. She focused on their uneaten salads. A smile played at the corner of her mouth. “Um, you guys need to go. We have to leave.”

“Why?” Sheridan asked.

“Because you pushed Hayashi into a mating frenzy, and he barely made it into the SUV with Morgan before they needed to ‘share some love.’”

Jules grinned. “What about you?”

Olivia glanced at him with a smile. "I'm feeling it, but it's tempered by the baby, I think. Jesse is waiting for me, though. We don't want to leave you here by yourselves."

"We're not alone. Tersch is here."

Jules frowned at Sheridan. "What?"

"I saw Tersch when we walked in. He's with someone sitting around the corner. Out of sight, I guess."

Jules had specifically told Tersch to stay home to watch after Mrs. Sharpe and Ava. A test to see if the big guy was having trouble following orders again. "Olivia, go on back with Fallon. Sheridan and I will round up Tersch and head back as well."

Olivia nodded. "I just wanted to say congratulations." She laughed at the flush on Sheridan's cheeks. "The love between you two is so strong, it makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time. I'm so happy for you guys."

The pleasure on Sheridan's face made up for Tersch's blatant disregard for orders. Almost.

"Thanks." Jules stood and accepted Olivia's bouncy hug. Sheridan did the same. Then he wrapped his arm around Sheridan's shoulders and squeezed, inhaling the warm scent of his mate.

After Olivia darted back to Fallon, Sheridan murmured, "Wow, she's walled a band of positive energy around the baby. I can't wait to see how he turns out."

"He?" Jules wondered at his mate's abilities.

"Definitely a boy. And won't he be adorable with Jesse for a dad and Olivia for a mom? Good genes."

Jules kissed her. "Imagine what ours will look like." He inhaled and tensed at the same moment she did. That subtle variation in her scent. It spooked him.

"Oh, wow. Is that possible now, since I'm like you?" Sheridan looked shocked.

They had never used protection. His claiming of her had been more than intense. It had been *thorough*.

They reached Tersch's booth, a perfect distraction. *A baby*. Oh, man. He was ready to be a father, but... Jules forced himself to speak in an even voice. "Tersch. What a surprise. I thought you were supposed to be home."

"Dude, you don't look so good." Tersch stood and grabbed his arm.

The man with him in the booth wore a baseball hat and seemed to shrink into himself. Quietly he said, "I'll see you back at the house," and scooted out from the booth.

Sheridan gasped, and Jules immediately turned to her.

"What's wrong?" Had she finally felt that stirring of life within her? She'd seemed to accept her feelings for him, but would this sudden descent into motherhood be too much to bear?

"I'm fine. Great. Let's go home."

Jules shrugged off Tersch's hand. "I'm fine, Tersch. But you're not going to be. The three of us are going home to have a nice, long talk together."

Tersch shrugged. "Whatever."

But an hour later, once back in Jules's bedroom, Tersch's casual disregard for Jules's orders faded under a more aggressive tone.

"Dude, you don't see what she is? She's trouble." Tersch glared at Sheridan, who glared right back.

Jules wanted to praise her for not bowing under Tersch's anger, but he had to deal with Tersch first. He could feel the Circ's tension and knew what provoked him. Tersch suffered from their current mating heat and from the recent distance from Jules. Though the team had been together working to find Montaña, Jules hadn't sexually bonded with any of them since Sheridan's arrival. With the others mated, they could go to their partners for repletion. Jules knew Tersch hadn't gone to anyone.

Jules glanced at Sheridan. He could only hope she wouldn't have a problem with what he needed to do. Because accepting him meant accepting the team. Talking about the mating heat was one thing, but seeing and participating in it was another.

"Sheridan's my mate, Tersch. We're getting married."

She smiled.

Thank God. Unfortunately, Tersch showed no such pleasure, and Jules growled, "I think it's about time I reminded you of your place."

"Oh? Going to fuck me up the ass?" Tersch sneered, his gaze challenging as it rested on Sheridan.

She shared a look with Jules that he immediately understood. Her beast asked permission to come out and play. He couldn't wait and nodded to her. "Oh yeah. Do it."

Jules grabbed Tersch and shoved him back against the wall. "Don't move, you bastard. You wanted our attention. Now you have it."

"What 'our'?"

"Please." Jules took a good whiff of Tersch's ripe need. "You're hot. And fucking hard. I'm not blind." Jules palmed Tersch's cock, satisfied when the big man groaned. "You need to be taken in hand."

"By you, not her," Tersch rasped, but Jules saw his friend's hungry stare narrow on Jules's mate, as if the berserker couldn't help himself.

Jules asked her, "Remember what I told you earlier, baby? About being filled?"

She nodded, the flash of wildness in her eyes a welcome reminder of how well they fit together. Her beast raced out to play. She unzipped her sundress, which fell to the floor, kicked off her sandals, and stood in nothing but a thong. Her nails lengthened as he watched.

"Christ." Tersch ground his cock against Jules's hand. "She's beautiful," he grudgingly admitted as Sheridan stepped out of her thong and fully *changed*.

Jules yanked Tersch's clothing off until he stood naked. Then Jules took off his clothes and *changed* as well.

"You stay as you are," Jules commanded. "No beast. Not yet."

"But—"

"You do as you're told," Sheridan's gravelly voice echoed. She approached and sniffed Tersch's chest. Even *changed*, she only came to Tersch's pecs. But she'd filled out everywhere.

Her breasts pressed against Tersch as she leaned closer, and he groaned.

"Look at her tits. *My* tits," Jules growled at Tersch. He left Tersch and stepped behind Sheridan. He cupped her breasts and then made her drag them across Tersch's flesh. "Her nipples are pretty, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Tersch whispered.

"Tasty too." Jules shoved his erection between Sheridan's ass cheeks and slid through the crease. "She's a hot one. My mate. She's important to me. She's not the enemy."

"No," Tersch agreed. "Not the enemy. God, you smell good, Sheridan." He leaned down to lick her, and Jules grabbed him by the hair and slammed his head back, sandwiching Sheridan between them.

He snarled. "She's mine. You're fucking mine. You obey orders, Gunnar. Why were you at the restaurant?"

Sheridan paid little attention to him as her beast toyed with Tersch. She ran her hands up and down his body and caressed his cock. Jules saw and felt Tersch tense, but the Viking didn't touch Sheridan again.

"Thought you might have some trouble. Wanted to protect you," Tersch rumbled, his beast obviously wanting to come out.

"Keep it in," Jules warned. "I told you I was fine. The others were there. Sheridan was there. I'm not fragile. I'm not going to disappear again."

Tersch growled, and Jules slammed his head back against the wall.

"Fucking listen to me. *I'm* in charge. You do what you're told when you're told."

Their gazes remained locked for a full minute. Then Tersch finally submitted. He closed his eyes and turned his head, exposing his throat.

"Good." Jules nodded Sheridan to the bed and yanked Tersch forward. To Sheridan, he ordered, "Lie down and spread your legs."

She grinned, exposing her canines. But before she moved to the bed, she turned and kissed him. Jules lost his grip on Tersch, his entire focus on Sheridan.

When she broke away and sauntered to the bed, he panted, watching her with a combination of love and lust he could almost see, as if the world took on a violet hue to match what he felt.

Tersch hadn't moved. "Fuck. She's yours. I get it. I really get it," Tersch said in amazement. "Can you smell it? Her beast, it's yours. Like Hayashi and Morgan, man. She pulled a part of you into her. I think she's Circ because of you."

Jules considered his explanation, which made a weird kind of sense. Sheridan had admitted she wasn't Circ, yet she'd adapted to suit him. An exchange of energy, thanks to her ability to heal?

"Olivia doesn't smell like Fallon. She smells claimed by Fallon," Tersch grumbled in a low voice, leaning closer to Jules as they watched Sheridan's toned legs spread wider on the bed. "Such a wet pussy, Jules. Your mate is smokin'."

"Yeah, she is. But be gentle. She's a part of me, Gunnar." *And she's carrying a part of me.* He whispered what he suspected to Tersch.

"Damn. First Fallon, now you?" Tersch smiled with visible pleasure before he replaced it with a mock frown. "I ain't changing diapers."

Jules shoved him forward. "*Change.* Slowly. I want Sheridan to watch you do it." To Sheridan he said, "Watch, baby. Tersch is going to show you all of him. He's your protector now too. Never be afraid of him."

"Jules, I don't want to scare her, but—"

Jules came up behind him, hugged Tersch's back to his front, and bit him hard on his shoulder.

Tersch swore as Jules marked him, showing him where he belonged. The pain spiked Tersch's arousal, and to Jules's pleased surprise, his mate's as well.

"She likes my dominance," he murmured before focusing his attention on Sheridan again. "Show us how much you like my Viking, baby. Let me see that cream." Jules rubbed his massive cock against Tersch's ass, sliding between his cheeks.

Over Tersch's shoulder, he saw his mate slide her finger inside herself.

"Oh yeah. More," Tersch pressed back against Jules, humping Jules's shaft.

"Not yet. Not until you do what I told you to. *Change*, you bastard. We do this my way," Jules growled.

Tersch moaned and began to *change*.

"See, baby? You're exciting our friend. Tersch is big, bigger than me. And when he's gone berserker, he's a monster. But he's *our* monster." He nudged Tersch's ass and was pleased to scent the Circ's thickening arousal, the strong smell of cedar and musk wrapping around them.

Sheridan moaned. "You smell good. Both of you." She played with her taut clit, excited and not hiding it.

"Watch this." Tersch preened, his beast showing off for his leader's mate. Jules felt the subtle growth that turned his friend into a behemoth Circ of muscle and flesh and bone.

Tersch's skin turned darker, and his skin cells enlarged and overlapped like scales. The long, thick mane of his blond hair turned almost white. His claws

hooked at the ends, as tough as steel and as sharp as blades. The blaze of his blue eyes grew sharper and brighter, bisected by slim pupils that could see so much more in this state.

"Oh, so strong," Sheridan murmured, though her gaze continued to linger on Jules, letting his beast see her devotion, her love.

Jules rocked against Tersch as Sheridan continued to exude her own unique scent, unable to stop his instinct to take.

"Want to taste her." Tersch's low voice sounded more animal than man.

They both knew if Tersch wanted to, he could take Jules and break him in half. It wouldn't be easy, but Tersch's incredible gift couldn't be denied. It was a testament to Tersch's loyalty and Jules's leadership that Tersch willfully followed him.

"Ask her."

Sheridan answered before Tersch could ask. "Please. Lick me, Gunnar. I want to feel your tongue on me."

The Viking joined her in a hurry and buried his head between her thighs.

Seeing his friend go down on his mate felt right. The jealousy Jules would have felt in any other circumstance didn't factor here. He needed to help his friend, and he wanted to share the love he felt for his mate.

"That's it. Lick her up nice, and while you do, I'm going to give you what you've been begging for."

Sheridan moaned and ran her hands through Tersch's long hair.

"Yeah, Sheridan. I'm going to fuck him hard while he eats you out. That turn you on, baby?"

"Yes." She arched up, her breasts full, her nipples tight, as Tersch licked her juices.

"She tastes good, hmm?" Jules rasped as he fingered Tersch's hole.

The Circ rubbed his head between Sheridan's thighs and tilted his ass higher, waiting for Jules to fill it.

Jules slid the natural oil he exuded all over his shaft. Slick with lust, it swelled and ached. Kneeling between Tersch's feet, he positioned himself at Tersch's rim and eased inside. As he did, he reached around Tersch and cupped his sac.

The large male groaned and shuddered as Jules sank balls-deep. Tersch felt impossibly tight. The vise of his ass gripping Jules was almost too much to bear.

"Fuck. You feel good. So hot and tight, Gunnar. He's hot for me, and for you, Sheridan," Jules said on a breath as he began pounding inside Tersch. He made it rough, giving Tersch the hurt the Circ needed.

Sheridan cried out and came, and Tersch continued to lick her. He shoved a finger inside her and did something that made Sheridan moan for more.

It didn't take Tersch long to come, and soon he was pumping his seed over Jules's hand while Jules continued to ram inside the Circ.

"Come, Jules. Come for me," Sheridan said on a purr and held her breast up to him like an offering. Her darker skin, the length and richness of her hair and scent, Tersch's sexy beast beneath him taking all he had to give—it all pushed him into a rushing climax that made him see stars.

"Fuck, oh fuck, yes," he gritted through his teeth as he jetted into Tersch's tight ass.

When he finally came down from the sexual high, he saw Tersch kissing Sheridan's thighs and pussy, licking her with tender care. Jules pulled out and stood, not surprised to find himself hardening again.

"I'll be right back." He disappeared into the bathroom to clean himself and returned to see Sheridan on top of Tersch on the bed. She was kissing him and rubbing herself over him like a cat.

Jules grinned. "Time to fill you up, baby. But this time, I'm going to spill inside *my* pussy."

"My pussy," her beast growled. Somehow, Jules couldn't see his reserved scientist this uninhibited in bed with him and another male. Not yet. But it was nice to see her beast playing.

"This is so good," Tersch said on a breath, his hair spread over the pillow in a wreath of white gold. "You two are good together." He sighed. "Sorry if I was all over your ass before, Jules. I just don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"That's sweet," Sheridan said and nipped at Tersch's abdomen. His cock jerked, and Jules fisted his own erection.

"Do it, Sheridan. Go down on Gunnar. Lick his balls. Swallow his cock. Eat him up."

Tersch groaned as Sheridan followed Jules's instructions to the letter. But when she bent over, Jules's intentions to go slow and make it last went south. Fast.

* * *

Two hours later, the three of them lay on Jules's bed, completely human and completely wrung out. Sheridan felt as if she'd run a marathon. Her body refused to obey her need to get up and shower. She lay between her mate and Gunnar—no longer the coldhearted Tersch.

He'd been at turns gentle and rough, a sexual creature so in need of affection and belonging, she was surprised she hadn't sensed it before. But as much as she liked being with him, her fantasy man lay to her right, in the form of a domineering Circ wearing the ring that claimed him as hers. She stared at the bejeweled hand resting on her belly.

Jules stroked her abdomen with such care. Almost as if...

She tensed, and he stopped.

"Baby?"

Oh, God. *Baby*. She didn't know why she hadn't sensed it before, because even as she thought the word, she felt the tiny spark of life fluttering just under Jules's hand. She'd always imagined she'd have children one day. But like this? With a man she barely knew? She blew out a slow breath. He was the man she loved, and he loved her back, her beast reminded her.

Worry smothered her shock of pleasure. What would Jules think? Would he be happy? Would he be worried? Would he be able to think past *oh my God*?

Instead of answering, Sheridan blurted out the truth about her grandfather's ring. "All the women in my family get that ring you're wearing when we turn six. Then we hold on to it until we find a special person, the one meant to wear it. I knew it was you when I gave it to you in the jungle."

He resumed stroking her belly. Tersch snored quietly beside them.

"The ring is a family keepsake." She started to calm under the steady motion of his hand and told another truth. "I wanted to have a reason to find you again. And not just to get the ring."

"I've been waiting to hear you admit that," Jules murmured and began to purr. The pure energy flowing between them couldn't be ignored. He'd confessed he loved her, pledged to marry her, and he'd helped make the baby growing just under his hand.

Despite the danger all around and the newness of their relationship, Sheridan didn't want to hold back anymore. Just once, she wanted to experience real happiness that she could keep close to her heart and never let go. Funny, but her interludes with Jules always ended with joy, because he showed her he cared for her in so many little ways. Even this past week while he'd been gone, he'd called her every day just to say how much he missed her.

"I love you," she said quietly.

He stopped stroking her and shifted her to lie on top of him. "Was that so hard to say?"

"You already knew."

"Maybe. But I need the words too, baby." He kissed her with such tenderness, the caresses filled with love and affection. "God, I'm so lucky I found you."

She rubbed her nose against his, delight filling her from head to toe. "You mean, you're lucky *I* found *you*."

"Yes, dear," he said dutifully, and they both chuckled softly, trying not to disturb Gunnar. After a moment, Jules murmured, "Sheridan, what would you say if I told you I wanted to start a family? I mean, a smaller, more intimate family than the one I share with the team. One just with you, and maybe a rug rat or two."

Relief made her light-headed. "Really? Because I—"

A frantic pounding on the door interrupted her. Before it stopped, Tersch leaped from the bed and crouched between the door and them. She blinked, amazed he'd moved like lightning when she'd thought him asleep. And while he'd been

flying off the bed, Jules had dragged her off his chest and shielded her body with his. She peeked over his shoulder, ignoring his order to keep still.

“What?” he yelled at the door.

“It’s me.” Fallon broke through the door in a panic. His dark eyes widened as he took in the sight of the three of them. “We’ve got major movement outside.”

“Unfriendlies?” Tersch growled.

“You could say that. Montaña’s men are all over the place. He’s waiting for Sheridan. And for you, Jules. He wants the two of you outside right now, and he’s just behind the fucking house.”

“Sheridan’s staying here.” Jules had never sounded so firm.

“Jules.” Sheridan started to convince him otherwise.

“She can’t stay here.” Fallon swore. “Because if you two aren’t outside in ten minutes, he’s going to kill Ava.”

Chapter Fourteen

As he stood behind Dawn Endeavor's mansion, hidden in the thicket of trees beyond the back of the house, Colonel Ricardo Montaña grinned. For too long, things had not gone his way. But now he was back in a position of power. *As it should be.* The bastards might have overtaken his jungle compound, but he'd been prepared for such an eventuality. Though he'd anticipated leaving the lab on his own timetable, he wouldn't bemoan his new fate. He did regret leaving Manoel behind, but anything worth having required sacrifice.

Most of the drugs they'd cultivated—which had been moved out of the compound before the raid—were even now being transported through the Amazon into prearranged shipping lanes. In another week, at most, the latest batch of Manoel's wonder drug would join the rest of their haul in the secret warehouse in Maryland.

Ricardo would have preferred a location farther west, but el jefe wanted things neat and closer to his headquarters in DC.

"He's coming." Grayson nodded toward the direction of the mansion in which the Dawn Endeavor team lived. Though Ricardo hadn't stepped foot inside the monstrosity, he'd gleaned a description of the layout from his boss's spies. Ricardo also had his own sources, so he knew the players in their little game. Though many of the Dawn Endeavor security force waited in the woods out of sight, surrounding the mansion, the Circs remained inside, clearly visible behind the large glass windows to the left of a set of French doors. That was, until someone with a brain turned off the lights, leaving the house shrouded in darkness.

Alicia Sharpe, their ringleader, made him the most uneasy. The short, serious woman had stared at him through the glass window as if she could see him in the tree line, like he was the devil incarnate. He couldn't say why, but when he considered the whole of his adversaries, his instinct told him to focus on the petite black woman dressed to the nines.

Next to him, Grayson tightened his grip on Ava Belle's arm. Now there was a woman worth having. Such a sweet, fuckable body, one made to cradle a man's cock and answer any and all delights he could imagine. The woman had an edge Ricardo liked, a dangerous challenge in her light-colored eyes.

He couldn't wait to see what she could handle.

Which brought his thoughts once again to Sheridan. The little bitch had evaded him far longer than he'd thought she would.

“Let me go.” Ava swore when Grayson tugged her back with him into the shadows. “They can see in the dark, asshole. Doesn’t matter where you go or what you do. When Gunnar sees this, he’s going to kill you.”

Her rage gave Ricardo a hard-on. “Gunnar? You mean Frederik Gunnar Tersch, that animal? We’re ready for him. Don’t you worry, Ava.” His men had specially calibrated darts to incapacitate the team before killing them, and extra-special ones for that behemoth. No sense in Ricardo losing his own Circs if he didn’t have to. “Ava, you’re so pretty. We’re going to see what better uses I can find for that mouth than swearing. Maybe some time on your hands and knees will work that tongue till you’re too tired to do anything but lick, hmm?”

The rogue Circs around him laughed, their animalistic timbres so fitting for a war with creatures better off in a fucking zoo. Every damned one of his men had *changed*, awaiting a real challenge from the Circs inside the house. Five or six, counting Olivia, against twenty-four—odds Ricardo could well appreciate. He wasn’t leaving anything to chance with today’s mission.

Two dozen prime beasts were ready and willing to take apart anything Ricardo put in front of them, so long as he rewarded them with drugs and pussy come their victory.

Ricardo had promised them the moon, and he intended to deliver. Just as soon as he got his hands on Sheridan. He’d pretty much given up on Hawkins. After much discussion with Manoel, they’d agreed Hawkins would probably force them to kill him before being taken captive again. But Manoel’s synthetic version of Hawkins’s talent for invisibility held promise. It didn’t completely change Ricardo’s DNA, but it did work when taken every two hours. And Manoel had worked with it so that Ricardo could call on the ability to disappear and reappear at will.

Using his night-vision goggles, Ricardo watched as the Circs finally opened the door and fanned out in front of the back patio. Ricardo recognized Jesse Fallon, Kisho Hayashi, Morgan Reynolds, and Julian Hawkins. But no sign of Tersch, Sharpe, Olivia...or Sheridan.

Ricardo glared at the pricks he’d come to kill and fought to retain his calm. “Julian, how nice to see you again. Where is Sheridan?”

“She’s not coming.”

“That’s a pity.” Ricardo snapped his finger, and Grayson did something that had Ava crying out. “I’ll kill pretty little Ava if you refuse to hand over my fiancée.” A quick glance over his shoulder pleased him.

Grayson held a knife to Ava’s throat, and a thin line of blood trickled down her neck from where he’d stuck her. Grayson maintained his human form as a backup, a lethal surprise to use just in case Hawkins and his men got the jump on Ricardo.

The Dawn Endeavor team took a few steps closer. At their current distance of a few dozen feet, Ricardo could easily shoot each man before his rogues killed them. Too far away to help Ava and too far away to reach Ricardo and his team. He had timed this perfectly.

Ricardo stepped back into the shadows and disappeared behind a tree. He removed his night-vision goggles and tossed them to the ground before stripping out of his clothes. But he held on to his gun as he focused, the way Manoel had instructed. Ricardo literally vanished, using his new ability to shift the alignment of his cells to refract the light around him, masking not only his body, but the pistol as well. The energy it took to keep himself and the weapon invisible was draining, but if Hawkins could do it, he could damn well do it too.

"You have no one to blame but yourself, Hawkins," Ricardo shouted. "Grayson, do it."

Except Grayson was no longer there. There was a loud, inhuman roar, and then several of Ricardo's rogues attacked in the direction of the monstrous noise. More rogues joined the fray. Several started slamming into trees and each other, as if something tossed them around like puppets.

Ricardo raced away from the chaos to the house, bypassing Hawkins and the others as they ran toward the noise. Inside, another crew of Ricardo's men waited. Strategist that he was, Ricardo had left nothing to chance. Unnoticed, Ricardo slipped into the house. He saw four of his rogues surrounding the Sharpe woman.

"Kill the bitch," he ordered, startling several Circs who obviously hadn't seen him.

The largest one grinned and latched on to her arm.

Ricardo left them to join a rogue he'd seen standing by a door, glancing around. The creature stopped looking around, apparently catching his scent, and narrowed his slit-eyed stare in Ricardo's direction as he approached.

"Where's Sheridan?" Ricardo asked.

"Downstairs with another female. I was told to wait here."

"Good. Do that. When I'm finished, you can have the female with her."

"Yes, sir."

Ricardo passed him and descended one floor into a brightly lit corridor. Trust these idiots to put a friendly face on science. In Ricardo's world, there was no place for sentimentality or niceties. A metal table, chains, and a cave had served his purposes just fine.

With the drugs from his compound, as well as the cache of Circs he now owned, Ricardo could well afford to go into hiding, not to be seen again for years. He planned to maintain his wealth from a distance, using others to mediate while he worked on his own dynasty—namely, the sons he'd fuck out of Sheridan. With his brains and her natural ability to heal, he'd sire boys who would never die. A perfect scenario.

Lost in thought, he neared a room where the sound of voices lowered in argument could be heard.

An open door spilled blue light into the hallway.

He neared it then stood in the doorway, surprised. Both Olivia Fallon, a Circ in her own right, and Sheridan were hurriedly stripping out of their clothing.

"You aren't supposed to be here," Sheridan said, glancing at the doorway. She looked right through him, and he decided to play with her while invisible. Her shock and fear would make fucking her even better when she tried to fight against a demon she couldn't see.

"Screw that. I'm not leaving you alone to that bastard Montaña."

Apparently his reputation preceded him. Ricardo smiled and stroked his mustache, reveling in the sight of Sheridan's full breasts, her tight nipples, and the pussy he'd soon discover for himself.

Olivia slowly *changed*, her features broadening as she grew several inches in height and packed muscle on to her enlarged bones. Her black hair touched her ass, and her bright blue-green irises now surrounded the feline pupils of a Circ. Despite her largeness, Ricardo found her sexy as hell. He wondered how strong she was, how much pain she might be able to tolerate. Perhaps he ought to watch the Circ upstairs take her down. It would prove interesting and most likely arousing.

Ricardo returned his attention to Sheridan, wondering why she had disrobed.

"Come on, already," Sheridan snapped. "I don't like him looking at me."

Ricardo didn't understand. And then he did, a split second too late. Sheridan's features began to *change* just as a piercing pain slashed through his side, where large claws raked him.

Blood poured from his wound and interfered with his ability to cloak himself. He looked down at his boots and swore. He did manage to jump out of the way of Hawkins's fist, just in time to avoid a crippling blow to his neck. When he glanced around again, though, he saw only Olivia and Sheridan. Hawkins had vanished.

"Get back," Sheridan called to Olivia in a husky voice, and it was then that he saw her for the freak she'd become.

"No. I had plans for you!" he screamed, furious she'd yet again thwarted him. Via the various breeding experiments he'd studied, he knew that a female Circ could only breed with a male of her species. Which meant she wouldn't be able to provide him any heirs. *The bitch.*

She sneered. "Please. I've seen all of you, Ricardo. And none of it's pretty." She dismissed him with a look. "I much prefer a man who can satisfy me. A masterful lover, like Julian." The bitch purred, literally *purred* like a cat, and Ricardo launched himself at her.

Instead, he bounced off something solid and crashed over a metal table holding several sharp instruments. Picking up a scalpel in one hand, he removed the gun tucked into his belt with the other and fired two times at Sheridan.

A heavy thud sounded before Hawkins reappeared lying on the floor. Ricardo had shot the bastard twice in the gut. He looked down at Hawkins bleeding on the floor before the fucking Circ disappeared again. *Fuck.*

Sheridan slapped the gun out of his hand. Her next slap broke Ricardo's nose, and the third jarred a few teeth from his mouth. Though they now stood at the same height, the woman had the strength of a Circ, and she didn't mind using it. Behind her, Olivia Fallon had picked up his pistol and now aimed it at him.

"Enough, Ricardo."

Sheridan's husky voice aroused him, and he wanted to crouch with shame. That a woman had beaten him, that Sheridan had chosen someone else over him... It was bad enough that she was no longer human. How? Why?

"You bitch. A monster like them, eh? Are you in heat, you filthy whore? Don't you need me to make it all better?" He laughed, a shrill sound of desperation he couldn't help. Ricardo sensed his own death spiraling closer. "Now you'll only make brats that turn into fucking monsters. A waste of fine pussy. Puta." He spit. "You're nothing but a dirty, stupid whore who can't—"

He choked, suddenly unable to breathe. A glance down showed a pool of dark red liquid running down his body.

Hawkins grunted and pulled his hand from Ricardo's chest, then fell over.

"Not...supposed...to be..." Ricardo could no longer speak. He collapsed on the floor. The bleak, black wash of death carried him away in a current of nothingness.

"Fallon is going to paddle that ass," Jules rasped to Olivia and tried to rise. "You're not supposed to be here, Olivia."

Sheridan swore and shifted back into her human form. Uncaring of her nudity or Ricardo's blood staining her feet and knees as she knelt in it, she laid her hands on Jules and pushed herself into him. The healing took a lot out of her, and she would have fallen over Jules had Olivia not been hovering nearby, waiting to catch her.

When Sheridan next opened her eyes, it was to see the Circs clustered around her in Jules's bed. Ava and Gunnar were present as well, though they seemed to be avoiding looking at each another. *Now what's that all about?*

"About damned time," Jules said on a relieved breath as he bent over and scooped her into his arms. "The baby okay?"

"Yes, she's fine... *What?*"

"Oh, a little girl. She can play with our boy," Olivia whispered loudly to Jesse, who groaned and rubbed his eyes.

Tersch growled, "Shit. Two kids running around this house are more than enough. It's not Romper Room."

Mrs. Sharpe smiled. "You're showing your age, Gunnar. I for one am ecstatic that Olivia and Sheridan are carrying. Strong mates will breed strong children." The room grew silent, and Mrs. Sharpe rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Jesse. The things you think about. I'm not behind any attempt to get these women pregnant. Blame yourself, young man."

Jesse flushed. "That's not my point, Mrs. Sharpe."

"He's probably afraid you're tampering with other people's lives, forcing them to do things they don't want to do," Ava said in a bitter voice, one Sheridan hadn't yet heard from the beautiful young woman.

Gunnar finally looked at her.

"Holy crap. That's a lot of, ah, lust there, Gunnar." Olivia fanned herself and stared from Gunnar to Ava and back again. "On both sides," she murmured.

"Can't help that, Olivia," Tersch growled. "Not when we have another Circ in the house, one who's been waving her fine ass at me since day one."

"No shit." Fallon's mouth dropped open.

"Ava. I should be more surprised," Jules murmured and glanced at Tersch.

The others stared at Ava in shock, though Sheridan thought it interesting Morgan didn't look more surprised. Nor did Mrs. Sharpe. Go figure.

Ava straightened to her less than imposing five foot four and opened her mouth to retort, but Mrs. Sharpe beat her to it. "If you can't be cordial, Gunnar, you should leave."

He stomped away, muttering under his breath. But before he left Jules's bedroom, he stopped, turned around, and muttered, "Welcome to the family, Sheridan." Then he tore out the door without a backward glance.

"It's official, then. If Tersch approves, you're in. He still hasn't welcomed me yet, so good on ya." Morgan teased and leaned forward to kiss Sheridan on the forehead. "And a baby to boot. Jules as a father. Sca-ry stuff."

Hayashi elbowed him out of the way. "I can't wait. I'll be Uncle Kisho." He kissed Sheridan, then Olivia, which had Jesse growling. "Down, boy. Come on, mate. Let's leave the new lovebirds alone and grab Tersch before he picks a fight with the security guards. Like it's their fault they followed Mrs. Sharpe's orders. If they hadn't, Montaña never would have gotten onto the grounds."

Morgan brightened. "Stellar idea. Come on, Ava. You can explain to all of us how long you've known you're Circ."

"Oh, count us in," Olivia said and nodded at Jesse. Ava groaned but let the pair drag her after Kisho and Morgan.

"I knew it all along," Morgan bragged as he followed them out.

Only Mrs. Sharpe remained behind. Sheridan felt ridiculously pampered, held tight against Jules's broad chest.

"I trust you're going to stay on with us, Sheridan?" the older woman asked, a twinkle in her eye.

"Yes," Jules answered before she could. He tightened his hold around her, and she huffed out a breath. "Sorry," he muttered. "So Ava's Circ, hmm?" he asked of Mrs. Sharpe. "Why is it that you're not surprised?"

Mrs. Sharpe smiled, showing more teeth than Sheridan had ever thought to see in the petite woman's mouth. "Blood will tell, Jules. Blood will tell." She winked,

and Sheridan swore she saw a hint of red in the woman's warm brown eyes before the flash faded. "Now I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about. I'd recommend a September wedding, to at least let us get the young bride ready and get her parents here. But then—"

Sheridan squeaked and shot up in Jules's arms. "My parents! In all this mess, I nearly forgot. How are they? Where are they?"

"They're fine, dear. Just visiting with their friends Jaime and Belinda Esteves."

"The pair that sent her to Ricardo Montaña?" Jules growled.

"The very same. But it wasn't their fault, Jules. They couldn't have known Ricardo Montaña, one of their benefactors for years, was a drug lord. He used a false name and a front company to launder his money. Think of all this as fate, Jules. In a way, because of Montaña, Sheridan found you."

Sheridan and Jules glanced at each other, then at Mrs. Sharpe.

The wheels turning in Sheridan's mind gave her the answer. "Right place, right time."

"Exactly."

"I still have the feeling you somehow manipulated this. You hired Sheridan on purpose, knowing who she was, didn't you? Always playing games, *Alicia*. Someone want to tell me why I shouldn't go a few rounds with the kindly old lady in front of me?" Jules bristled with frustration.

Mrs. Sharpe scowled, not so thrilled with him herself, apparently. "Who are you calling 'old,' Lieutenant Hawkins?"

He opened his mouth to reply, but Sheridan put her fingers over his lips. "He was just teasing. Naturally, we'll wait until September to say 'I do.' And we'd be honored if you'd be my baby's godmother."

Mrs. Sharpe beamed. "I'd be thrilled. Now let me go make peace between my hotheaded granddaughter and her mate before the two kill each other."

She left them staring after her in shock.

Sheridan gaped like a fish out of water, but she couldn't help herself. So many coincidences that looked like conspiracies. She thought back to Grayson's timely arrival. "Did she just say granddaughter?"

"And did she mean Ava?"

"When she said mate, the only Circ left is Gunnar." Sheridan started putting the pieces of the puzzle together and smiled. "Who knew?"

"We've all known he has a thing for Ava. We just didn't think it could go anywhere with her being human. Gunnar and Ava. And she's Circ. Holy shit." Jules groaned and lay back on the bed, pulling Sheridan down with him.

"What's wrong?" She kissed his chin, then his lips. But before he could deepen the kiss, she pulled back. "Jules?"

“Leading this team of egomaniacs, pigheaded warriors, and obnoxious Circs who always seem to have emotional troubles, gives me a headache. So as my mate, you’re hereby ordered to deal with the mess that will be Ava and Tersch.”

“Ordered, hmm?” she asked in a silky voice. She rubbed against the hardness growing under her belly and smiled.

“Yeah, ordered,” he repeated in a gruff voice, the scent of earthy vanilla and man growing stronger. “You like it when I boss you around. Makes you wet.” He placed his hands on her hips and pulled her tighter against his erection. “Besides, you went down on Ava’s man. You’re going to have to make peace with that shrew.”

Sheridan blushed. “Oh, God. I did. I had sex with Gunnar,” she whispered, completely embarrassed, while her beast preened. “She’s going to kill me when she finds out.”

He had the nerve to laugh. “Honey, we’ve all done Tersch. Trust me. Fucking him was the only thing saving him from having a coronary because we wouldn’t let him randomly kill the bad guys.” He paused and took her cheeks between his palms. “Everything will work out for the best, baby. Because with you by my side, I’ll never have to worry about being alone again.”

She smiled. “Don’t you mean with ‘us’ by your side, future father of a baby Circ?”

His light gray eyes glistened with unshed tears. “I’m not crying. And I’m not pussyng out just because I’m totally, completely in love with you. Tell Tersch I cried, and I’ll spank you for a week.”

Sheridan kissed him again and crossed her fingers behind her back.

She thought about it for a few days, but in the end, the spanking was totally worth it.

* * *

A week later, Ava glanced around the parking lot of the small diner to make sure she hadn’t been followed. She leaned forward and rested her forearms on the ledge of the Jeep’s open window. “Do you have to go?”

Eyes a mirror image of her own regarded her with resignation. “You know I do. But don’t worry. I had a long talk with Gunnar about you. You’re set, sweetheart.”

“Don’t ‘sweetheart’ me, Grayson Alexander Belle,” Ava snapped. “Grandma’s been a pain in the ass about my mate, and I’m tired of waiting. Now’s my time, and if you said anything to screw up my chances with that boy, I’m going to gut you, shave your vain head bald, string you up by your balls, and—”

The bastard had the nerve to laugh. Ava decided then and there not to speak to her brother again for the next fifty years.

“I love when you get all cranky. No wonder Gunnar’s half in love with you.”

“Yeah, right.” Ava’s heart pounded. Her beast moaned to be let free and find the male that she needed.

It had been so long since her beast had tasted a true fight. That night in the woods a week ago wasn't nearly enough to sate the animal inside Ava begging for another bite of freedom. But it had been a thing of beauty to *change*, to see Gunnar's gorgeous berserker killing the enemy Circs left and right through eyes that could track in the night. Such a strong mate, a worthy male to respect and love. If only the stubborn bastard would stop avoiding her.

The minute he'd laid eyes on her in her beastly form, after he'd pulled her from the men she'd been battling, he'd treated her like poison ivy. Staying far, far away.

Grayson gave her a shit-eating grin. "Fucker spent that night at the Islander warning me away from you. For some reason, he was convinced I was doing my sister. Uh, ew."

She flushed. She'd hinted to Gunnar that she might be having an affair with one of the psychics working security around the mansion. Hell, he never gave her the time of day, yet he screwed anything Circ, to include Sheridan! Boy, did she have a bone to pick with the new little pregnant lady. Though she'd known Gunnar needed the release he found with his team, she didn't have to like it. And by God, all that nonsense was coming to an end.

Ava contained a snarl and said to her brother, "I don't know where Gunnar gets his odd ideas. But I do know that if you're going to leave, you need to do it now. I can't cover for you anymore. Sheridan knows you're Circ, but she promised not to tell. The shielding exercises we taught her are helping her hide the truth from Fallon and Olivia. You know, it's a good thing you look like Dad."

"And you look like Mom." He grinned. With a white father and black mother, the two had never been mistaken for siblings, until they *changed*. Then they looked almost identical, with the exception of their obvious gender differences.

Ava continued, "The other psychics newly assigned to the place will think you went back to DC. Tell Lonnie I said hi when you see him."

Lonnie, what the family had always called Admiral Geoffrey London—good friend and faithful companion to her grandmother for more years than Ava had been alive.

"Will do." Grayson frowned.

"What?"

"I don't know. I've been getting weird vibes from Lonnie lately. Probably the stress of the new platoon. Psychic soldiers and sailors can be a pain in the ass. They make the Circs look like prima donnas. Oh, that's right, they *are* prima donnas." Grayson smirked. "Your Gunnar is a high-maintenance dude. You sure you want him?"

Ava smiled through her teeth. For two solid years, she'd waited and watched her wild man. The time had come to finally claim him as hers. Now, since they'd conquered Montaña, she just had to battle Tersch's inner demons. She had no doubt they'd soon find the worm Ricardo had worked for. She could feel it in her bones. Her Circ bones.

She flashed her canines at her brother and blinked at him through eyes that now saw in shades of heat, to better ferret out prey. “Trust me, Brother. Your sister is going hunting, and I won’t quit until I’ve bagged my man.”

One way or the other, Frederik Gunnar Tersch, your ass is mine.

THE END

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Marie Harte

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic, but especially all things romance. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling. Twenty-three years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dream has finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers.