

The background of the entire cover is a vibrant, abstract image of flames in shades of orange, yellow, and red. In the center, a man and a woman are shown in a close, intimate embrace. The man, on the left, is shirtless and has his arms around the woman. The woman, on the right, has long brown hair and is wearing a black lace bra and white underwear. They are both looking down, their faces close together, suggesting a moment of passion or intimacy. The overall mood is sensual and romantic.

Changeling Press

Uninhibited
fire

Aubrey Ross

Alpha Colony: Uninhibited Fire

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After a lifetime of trading passion for ambition, Doctor Emily Hillard is determined to catch a killer. Instead of being awed by her technology, the morphs pair her with the most exasperating man she has ever encountered. He's barbaric, domineering, and unapologetically savage. She should be frightened, or at least repelled by his lack of sophistication. Instead, she finds him refreshing, and pictures herself crushed beneath his strong body as he skillfully peels away her civility.

Cruz, a panther-shifter with pyrokinetic abilities, spent eleven years as an assassin before being allowed a reprieve. He is finally enjoying some down time when a murderous rogue chooses his territory for a hideout. Now half of Alpha Colony is searching for the rogue, and Cruz's handlers are desperate to get their hands on Emily's prototype. Ordinarily Cruz would have ignored their threats and ultimatums, but he's intrigued by the delectable doctor. So, he decides to show the hothouse flower what life in the wild is all about.

Prologue

"I'm disappointed in you, Amara." Izak's tone was flat and dispassionate.

Were it not for the carnal hunger gathering inside her, Amara might have rolled her eyes. No matter what she did, or how carefully she followed Izak's instructions, he was always disappointed in her. "What did I do to earn your displeasure -- this time?"

His arm swung fast and hard, the back of his hand connecting with her cheek. Her head snapped sharply to the side and lights burst in front of her eyes. She was bound, spread-eagle, inside a wooden frame, so she hadn't been able to hamper the punishing blow.

The frame had been a surprise, a project he'd used to fill the hours while she sneaked into dog territory to determine the success of his latest scheme. When she'd returned to their hideout with news of his failure, he'd calmly restrained her, and the berating had begun.

"Don't provoke me. You've just about outlived your usefulness." His cruelty had long since eroded his physical appeal. She'd formed this alliance out of desperation, and the faint hope that he'd give her cubs. Now she obeyed out of fear and necessity. She simply knew too much. If she tried to leave him, she'd be his next victim, and they both knew it.

"Just get it over with," she muttered, tired of his games. "Your plans failed. These crimes are too convenient even for the dogs to believe. Our only hope is to lay low, really lay low until --"

"Until what?" He grabbed the back of her hair and snarled into her face. "Until they find me? Turning them against each other was the only thing that kept them from joining forces against me! I might have a couple of days, maybe even a week, but they will find me."

"Then let's sneak out. If a cat and a dog can do it, so can we."

"That cat and dog had help, lots of help. We'd be on our own." He released her hair with a frustrated hiss and took a step back from the frame. "I'll think of something. I always do."

That's what worried her. Each of his plans was more bizarre, and more dangerous than the last, and she was the one who took the risk. He remained in their secluded hideout while she sneaked into enemy camps and seduced sentinels.

He moved behind her and she worked to decipher the sounds he was making. He'd positioned the frame near the center of the room, allowing him to approach her from any angle, and making her feel even more on display.

"What are you doing?" She hated the weakness that made her ask the question.

"You'll see, or actually you'll feel, momentarily."

This was the aspect of their partnership she enjoyed. Izak was by far the best lover she'd ever had. He was creative and demanding. He brought out a wildness in her she hadn't been aware of before they first fucked. And that's what they did. They didn't make love, or even have sex most of the time. What they did was raw and animalistic. It was fucking, plain and simple.

"I always think better with empty balls. Now tell me about the lions."

Something cool and smooth slipped between her thighs and she tensed. She needed his cock, not a dildo. Where had he gotten a sex toy anyway? The keepers considered them technology, so they were forbidden. It was another transparent ploy to control the morphs, but even the simplest vibrator was contraband. He activated the toy and slid it forward and back, between her folds and over her clit, without venturing into her passage.

"Are they as big as people say?"

"Why do you do this?" She jerked against the braided cords binding her wrists. "You'll punish me if I don't answer, but you'll punish me harder if my answers anger you."

"So don't anger me." He hovered at her opening, teasing her with a hint of fullness and a subtle throb that reverberated through her body.

"They were men, like any other."

He withdrew the toy and stepped back. "Don't lie to me again, or I'll leave you strung up for the rest of the night."

She stared across the cave, letting the darkness console her. She needed to regain what control she could. Izak had given her the tools she needed to survive in his world, and she'd taken those tools and learned how to use them so deftly that she not only survived, she thrived.

Licking her lips, she chose her words carefully. "Duff was barely more than a boy." Oh, Izak would like that. The air stirred and the toy returned, no vibration, just the cool thickness of the shaft. "He was lean, with the sort of frame that would become impressive, but was not yet bulky like so many of those soldiers are."

Izak's breath warmed her back, and his hand came to rest against her hip as she aroused him with her words. He moved the toy between her thighs, awakening her senses slowly, allowing her passions to build gradually for the most intense climax.

"The other one was impatient and cruel." It was an exaggeration. They had both been remarkably cooperative, but that wasn't what Izak wanted to hear. "His name was River, and he forced me to my knees. Then his hands tangled in my hair."

"Where was the young one? Did he watch? Was he reluctant or exuberant?"

"He was reluctant, at first." Izak thrust the toy deep into her pussy and activated a slow pulsing that made Amara groan. "Duff watched while I sucked River's big cock, but the sight was too much for him. He took me from behind, apologizing for his misbehavior the entire time he was inside me."

Izak moved the toy faster and faster, then he suddenly pulled out and rammed into her with his cock. Amara grinned, thrilled by his urgency and the heat of living flesh. He took her fast and hard, each stroke straining the bonds holding her wrists and ankles.

His groin slapped against her ass and he came so fast, she was left throbbing while he spurted. She listened to his ragged breathing, frustrated and annoyed. Then she heard the faint hum of the forgotten toy.

"Have I ever left you wanting?" He passed the toy over her clit in light, teasing circles, and her body happily continued its interrupted climb toward completion. She remained perfectly still and focused on the sensations building inside her. The orgasm burst suddenly, gripping her with rippling spasms of pleasure.

"Where did you get that thing?" He turned off the toy and pulled out, leaving her alone within the frame.

"I took it off that dog I killed. I couldn't see wasting my time with a toy when there were so many other games I wanted to play with her." He chuckled, tossing the vibrator to the dirt at Amara's feet. "Damn, that bitch could scream."

His casual tone cramped Amara's stomach. She might not have been there, but she was as guilty of the dog's death as Izak. She was his willing accomplice, providing him with whatever he needed to accomplish the task. Task? It wasn't a task. It had been a heinous murder.

And it hadn't been the first.

Regret crashed over her in punishing waves. There was no justification for what she'd done, no way to excuse her part in the horror. She was a murderer! A violent shudder shook her body, and she turned her face away. How had it gone this far? Why had she allowed him to... No, she couldn't blame it on Izak. She'd known the cruelty driving him, and still she'd instigated their alliance.

"Why so glum?" He moved in front of her and cupped her breast. She tried to twist away from his touch. "It's a little too late to play hard to get. My cum is running down the inside of your thighs."

"Stop it!" She struggled hard enough to rock the frame. "Untie me. Now!"

His gaze narrowed on her face. "Maybe I'm not finished. Maybe that just took the edge off my hunger."

He returned to his position behind her, and she tried to still her struggles. Fighting him now was not only pointless, it would heighten his enjoyment. Gods, she hated these games!

"Now let me tell you a story. This might not be how it happened, but it's how I'm going to picture it from now on."

A menacing snarl echoed off the stone walls. Whipping her head toward the cave's entrance, Amara barely had time to scream. A large panther separated itself from the darkness and bounded across the cavern. It leaped across the fire pit in a graceful arc, and let out a ferocious roar.

Izak shrieked and jerked back so fast her body burned in protest. The panther's soft fur brushed her shoulders and back as it drove Izak to the floor. There was a moment of frantic struggle, growls and screams, then an absolute, surreal silence.

Amara jerked against the cords binding her wrists and ankles. Had the panther killed Izak, or was he just incapacitated?

What the hell was going on?

Like a shot of adrenaline, the metallic scent of blood burned panic's haze from her mind. She had to think, had to determine the panther's motives if she hoped to get out of this alive.

She heard the distant drone of engines and panic surged anew. Engines meant keepers, and keepers meant... "You work for DOMA?" Trepidation pressed in around her, cold and smothering. "You can't let them take me. Please! Kill me quickly. I won't go back to the labs."

He moved into her peripheral vision, and she held her breath. Panthers were known for their sensuality, and this man reinforced the stereotype. She craned her neck, needing to see him more clearly. Sleek blue-black hair flowed away from his face, just brushing his broad shoulders. Sculpted with angular lines and masculine beauty, his features offered no hint of his lethal nature -- until she looked into his eyes. Endlessly black and cutting, his gaze stripped away her excuses and peered into her soul.

"Do you know why they want you alive?" His dark, silky voice perfectly matched his appearance.

She shook her head. "Who knows why they want any of us. I'm barren. Maybe they want to fix me."

"Would that be so bad?" One of his dark brows arched, but his gaze remained cold and unfeeling.

"Did they fix you?"

Cruz wasn't sure what he saw in the tigress' gaze that made him change his mind. Perhaps he just hoped someone would do the same for him, if the situation were ever reversed. It didn't matter. He wasn't going to turn her over to his handlers. No one deserved what the handlers did to morphs, what the handlers had done to him.

"I'll catch hell for this. They specifically told me you were to be unharmed." Light flashed across the mouth of the cave. He didn't have much time. Disregarding less direct strategies, he moved behind the restrained tigress. "I know your mate deserved what he got, but do you deserve to die?"

Her response came without hesitation. "I'm as guilty as he was. Please, hurry." Cruz took a deep breath and snapped her neck. She slumped in the makeshift frame, head lolling to one side.

Without a backward glance, he strode to the mouth of the cave and watched the transport land on an adjacent bluff. There were no roads to speak of in this area, which was one of the reasons he'd chosen it for his "retirement."

He hiked to the base of the hill and waited for his primary handler to climb on a hover-cycle and meet him at the bottom of the narrow gorge. For a covert mission, the tactical team sure as hell wasn't trying very hard to be stealthy. The small vehicle was quiet, but its headlight could be seen by every morph in the valley.

All of the handlers were identified by alphanumeric codes, so Cruz had devised his own system for identifying those he interacted with on a regular basis. He called his primary handler Jack. The others earned less complimentary names like Jackoff and

Jackass, which was why DOMA tried to send him Jack as often as possible. Things just seemed to run smoother when Jack led the operation.

The hover-cycle slid to a stop beside Cruz, and he reached over and deactivated the ridiculous headlight. He morphed his eyes enough to penetrate the darkness, enjoying Jack's momentary disadvantage.

"Where's the female?" Jack never wasted time with pleasantries. Cruz might not trust him, but he appreciated his candor.

"The male snapped her neck as soon as I entered the cave. There was nothing I could do to stop him." Cruz seldom lied to Jack, which was why the human would believe him now. There had been countless situations when it would have been easier to manipulate events, but Cruz had reported accurately. A shiver darted down his spine. If the truth of this situation ever came to light, he would pay dearly for his moment of twisted compassion.

"Is the male dead?"

"Of course," he replied, allowing his impatience to show. He shouldn't be this distracted by such a simple case.

"Don't sound affronted." Jack swung his leg over the seat and slid to the ground. The darkness was insufficient to hide his agitation. He took off his gloves and slapped them against his palm. Even wearing his helmet and boots, he only reached Cruz's shoulder. "You were contracted for one hit and one capture. Your contract remains incomplete."

Heat erupted in his palms, making the skin tingle and glow. He clenched his fists and drew back the energy, refusing to lose control. "I'm not responsible for what happened in the cave. I will not be penalized for --"

"One hit and one capture. That was the deal. If the woman is dead, you still owe us the capture."

Cruz slowly ran his hands through his hair, letting the cool strands soothe his stinging palms. It would be so fucking easy to just fry the useless bastard! Jack's men would open fire an instant later and this nightmare would finally be over. Death by

keeper. Lots of morphs checked out that way. Lots of weak, cowardly morphs. Cruz dismissed the impulse with a hiss and raised his face to the sky.

He breathed in the cool mountain air and absorbed the tranquility of the pine-scented night. "If I refuse?" He knew the answer. Why did he bother asking the question when the answer was always the same?

"You'll be recalled to active duty. I'll reactivate the chip in your head so General Hidaka can locate his favorite toy. We both know how much he'll enjoy having you under his thumb again."

Hatred swept through Cruz, focusing his emotions and chilling his blood. Under the general's cruel tutelage he had been painstakingly molded into a ruthless living weapon. For eleven years he'd obeyed without question or hesitation, until his soul withered and died.

"Of course, Director Balentine will be disappointed to learn you've gone back into rotation. She had to pull some serious strings to have you discharged the first time around. She might not be able to pull it off again." Jack shrugged and placed his hand on the seat of the hover-cycle, the pose anything but casual.

This was blackmail plain and simple. Cruz hated to give in to anything so mundane. Karah Balentine, DOMA's current director, had a taste for male morphs, and panthers were her favorite. Her infatuation with Cruz had lasted longer than most, and she had used her considerable power to keep her pet out of harm's way in case her itch needed scratching again.

The actual dynamics were a bit more convoluted, but Jack already knew more than he needed to know.

Cruz just glared at him, so Jack continued, "Ultimately our military contracts pay the bills. Even Director Balentine can't argue with the almighty bottom line."

There had to be a reason for this trip down memory lane. If Karah wanted to see him again, she would have summoned him. Gods knew she hadn't been subtle when summoning him in the past. This was business. What he did for Karah might be

infinitely more fun than what he did for General Hidaka, but he wasn't foolish enough to think he meant any more to her than he did to the general.

"Who do you need me to capture, and what does it have to do with Director Balentine?" His tone grew cold even as his conditioning kicked in.

"Not who. What. Director Balentine has reason to believe Milo will send one of his agents here to help search for the rogue tigers. The agent will be equipped with a prototype Director Balentine is anxious to examine."

"Which means I'm not to report what just happened in the cave?" Karah and Milo had been archrivals for longer than Cruz could remember. He wasn't sure about the cause of the rivalry; he only knew it was heated.

"Very good." Jack's sarcastic tone made Cruz's claws prick his sensitive palms. "You need to present yourself to Maddox at the feline village and volunteer to help lead a search team."

"Why would the leader of Barbary pride trust me to lead a search team? I could be the rogue for all he knows."

Jack waved away his concern. "Maddox knows the identity of the rogue. He's just trying to locate Izak so he can prove his suspicions. You'll tell him you want everyone out of your territory, so you're willing to help him with the search."

"If I wanted everyone out of my territory -- which I do -- I'd just dump Izak's body at his feet and be done with it."

"Stop playing stupid!" Jack took a step forward. Cruz was sure the handler meant it to be menacing, but he wasn't impressed. "I know you already understand what I want from you."

Jack was right. He could easily see where this was leading. "I tell Maddox the tigers gave me the slip this morning, and I can't track them while I'm tripping over the other search parties, then what?"

"We'll help you time your arrival so it corresponds with Milo's agent. Hopefully he, or she, will allow you to assist them. If not, you'll need to track them to an appropriate location, then take possession of the prototype."

"What is this prototype?"

"It's integrated into the vehicle the agent will be driving." A slow, cruel smile parted Jack's lips. "If Milo sends who we think he'll send, there might be something more in this for you."

"I only want one thing, and it has nothing to do with Milo!"

Jack ignored the outburst. "We're only interested in the prototype, which means you can do whatever you want with the agent. Kill them quickly, or indulge your long-neglected animal nature. I know how long it's been since you really let loose."

"I only owe you a capture, remember? That doesn't cover the agent."

"Details." Jack waved away his concern and tightened the strap on his helmet. "If you can figure out a way to deliver the prototype without sacrificing the agent, more power to you. But you know the rules. No witnesses. No loose ends. I expect delivery within three days."

This was the third time in four months his retirement had been interrupted for "one final assignment." He was DOMA's slave. He had a chip in his head rather than manacles and chains, but the bondage was every bit as intolerable. "And once you have this precious prototype, how long will I be allowed to remain inactive?"

Jack shrugged and climbed back onto the hover-cycle. "I'll do what I can, but your skill set is unique and extremely useful. Concentrate on the mission."

"What about the bodies in the cave?"

"Standard verification protocol." Which meant holo-images and DNA samples. "Then torch the place. It's obvious you need the release."

Chapter One

Sharp claws pricked Emily Hillard's throat while a massive hand immobilized her against the rough-hewn wall surrounding the feline village. Maddox, the leader of Barbary pride, loomed over her, silent, majestic, and lethal. Only his hand touched her as he stared into her eyes. Nothing more was needed to control an unarmed human.

She hadn't expected a hero's welcome. But she'd been dragged out of her vehicle by brutish guards and shoved against the wall before she had a chance to explain who she was or why she'd come to Alpha Colony. A small crowd had gathered by the time Maddox arrived, and her treatment at his hands had been even less welcoming. The morphs had no reason to trust humans. She understood their hostility. Even so, she had expected some level of civility.

Taking a careful breath, she tried to regain her composure without increasing the sting of the lion-shifter's claws. "Milo sent me." She maneuvered the words beyond her dry lips, amazed that she could speak at all. Would that mean anything to him? Maddox was organizing the cat clans in support of the building rebellion, but she wasn't sure how much he knew about the external efforts.

One of Maddox's tawny brows arched, and he relaxed enough to sheath his claws. His hand slipped to the base of her throat as his face descended. She knew enough about morphs to understand what he was doing. He sniffed her hair, inhaled her breath, and gradually moved lower. The examination was humiliatingly thorough, yet in no way intimate.

"You reek of dogs."

"I just came from their camp." Her voice regained a bit of its strength. Apparently, he'd decided not to rip out her throat. That was something. "I needed --"

He caught her jaw again, snapping her head back so fast she bumped the rustic perimeter wall. "The only thing I need from those curs is the safe return of my sister!"

"Maddox, their scent is on her clothing, not her body." The throaty, female voice came from somewhere behind Maddox, but Emily couldn't see around his broad chest. "Are you calm enough to process the distinction?"

Emily didn't detect playfulness in the female's words, but Maddox smiled and moved his hand to the wall. His gaze lingered on Emily's face for a moment longer; then he angled his body toward the other woman. "I'm always calm. I was hoping to detect Jizette's scent, but all I can smell is dog."

The blonde shrugged as she ambled closer. "Perhaps we should remove her clothes. Then we can determine if she's been near Jizette or not."

"I have," Emily immediately volunteered.

The blonde chuckled. "Humans are so easy."

"But it's not what you think. I'm not working for Timberline pack. I have important information, if you'll let me explain."

The female stood beside Maddox, confident and comfortable. Golden hair flowed to her waist and framed a face both angular and graceful. "I'm Dyauna." She held out her hand toward Emily. "Maddox is my mate." Her simple, filmy garment did little to conceal her supple curves. The two made a stunning couple.

Maddox smiled at his mate's possessive phrasing and pushed off the wall. "You're usually the one ready to bust heads first and ask questions later. Is mated life taming you?"

"In your dreams." Dyauna motioned toward Emily's vehicle. "What is that thing? I've never seen anything like it."

Emily glanced at the guards and other onlookers. Her arrival had caused quite a stir. "Much of what I need to explain is highly confidential. Is there somewhere we can go to talk?"

"Do you know where Jizette is, or not?" Maddox faced Emily again, all playfulness gone from his demeanor.

"I do, and she's unharmed. The rest is complicated."

"There's nothing complicated about releasing a hostage." His nostrils flared, and Dyauna placed her hand on his forearm. "All the dogs need to do is let her go."

Dyauna gave his arm a meaningful squeeze. "This really would be better without an audience."

He heaved a sigh and called out to the guards, telling them to open the gate. "Bring that contraption inside. We'll talk in the workshop."

Emily wasn't sure where the workshop was, but Maddox and Dyauna guided her inside the feline village. Watching the gates close behind her felt oddly prophetic. This wasn't her first field mission, not even her first time at Alpha Colony, so why did she feel so jittery?

She only caught a glimpse of the village proper, which appeared well organized and... quaint. The word made her smile. Felidae-morphs were primal and organic. How could they stand such a bland environment?

As she steered the skimmer into an oversized garage, she noticed a surprising array of machinery. She powered down the engines and activated external shields before joining Maddox and Dyauna.

"I thought technology was forbidden within the colonies?" She hesitated over the question, not wanting to insult her volatile host.

"There's a long involved process for securing waivers, but once a machine is deemed acceptably by DOMA, anyone within the colony can obtain one," Maddox explained. "Only machines with specific, practical purposes are considered for the reintegration program."

"And DOMA inflates the prices of everything to discourage our dependency on these frivolous conveniences." Bitterness crept into Dyauna's tone, and her gaze lingered on Emily's skimmer. "Somehow I don't think your ride would be considered acceptable by DOMA. What all can that baby do?"

"You can ask her all about her toy later. She has some questions to answer first." Ignoring the curious looks of the workers, Maddox led them to an enclosed area in the

back corner of the workshop. He closed the window and locked the door before returning his attention to Emily. "What were you doing in dog territory?"

"Collecting samples, but I need to go further back. I'll keep it quick. I promise."

He scoffed. "A woman who can manage a succinct explanation? This I've got to see."

Dyauna slapped him on the shoulder with feigned outrage and an odd pang assailed Emily's heart. She couldn't even imagine what it would be like to be so obviously in love. The few times she'd taken time out of her busy schedule for social relationships had only revealed the pointlessness of such endeavors. Regardless of her body's needs, her personality didn't seem conducive to romance. She found other scientists boring, so it was easy to understand why strong, aggressive men didn't look in her direction for sexual companionship.

"Director Darman and I both worked for DOMA around the same time," she began. "He was my mentor. We've kept in touch even after I resigned and he was banished to Alpha Colony."

"He considers this banishment?" Maddox sounded insulted.

"Don't you?" Emily let the challenge resonate for a moment before she went on. "We've continued to pass each other information down through the years."

"You're his contact?" Dyauna watched her intently, arms crossed under her breasts. "The one who leaked the video and so forth?"

Emily blew out a frustrated breath. Maddox was right; this wasn't going to be quick or easy. The room's primary function was obviously storage, so there was nowhere to sit. She needed to stick to facts and keep details to a minimum. Her mission had two components, and this was supposed to be the easy part. She thought of the scope of her tale and wanted to laugh.

"Do you both know who Milo is?"

"He's the only one out there with balls big enough to stand up to DOMA," Dyauna said.

"It's not just DOMA. Milo refuses to be bought by any person, corporation, or government. So Director Darman's efforts to expose DOMA as corrupt and merciless immediately caught his attention. I'm one of a team of people who have been working closely to stir up public support for morphs and discredit DOMA's claims."

"What does all this have to do with Jizette?"

"Jizette is fine. In fact, she's more than fine, but her circumstances are complicated."

Maddox shook his head. "So much for your quick explanation."

Emily didn't respond to his sarcasm. "Kage, the alpha's son, knew the only way to protect Jizette from his pack mates was to smuggle her out of the colony."

"Jizette is -- beyond the walls?" Maddox looked at Dyauna, his expression too conflicted to read.

"Again, let me stress, she is in no danger."

"If she's out there, she's in danger," Maddox snapped. "One wrong scan and she's a criminal."

Emily paused. This was a whole lot harder than she'd expected. She'd thought knowing Jizette was unharmed would pave the way for the other surprises, but Maddox continued to be adversarial.

Dyauna moved forward, gaze narrowed, hands loose at her sides. Beneath the surface calm seethed a maelstrom of emotion. "Cut to the chase, human. What's wrong with Jizette?"

"Nothing is 'wrong' with her, per se." Emily shoved her hands in her pockets, and glanced away from Dyauna's semi-hostile stare. "Jizette is a universal breeder."

"Meaning?" Maddox's voice began to rumble.

"Her reproductive system has been programmed to morph so she can produce offspring with anyone, or at least any hybrid or shifter. I don't know if she can produce offspring with humans."

Dyauna paced between her mate and Emily, her features sharpening as if she were about to shift. "And how did you figure out that Jizette was a universal breeder?"

"I compared her scans with the --"

"Why did you perform the scans?" Dyauna stopped in front of Emily and put her hands on her hips. "What did those fucking dogs do to Jizette?"

Maddox snarled, and Emily rushed through the rest of the story. "No one hurt her, I swear. She was attracted to Kage and he to her. They didn't understand --"

"A dog! Jizette was attracted to a mangy dog!" Maddox growled, shaking his head as he fought back his body's need to transform.

"They were more surprised than anyone, but by the time they arrived at Milo's farm they were both suffering from mating fever. It was not rape, Maddox. The desire was mutual."

With a tormented roar, Maddox lost his battle with his instincts. His body rippled, undulating and distorting as the transformation swept away his human shell and freed his lion. Emily backed toward the door, amazed, yet terrified.

Dyauna caught her upper arm and shook her head. "Just give him a minute."

Emily had seen countless vids of morph transformations, but she'd never been this close to one. The air sizzled and currents of energy pulsed all around her. Maddox was tall and muscular in human form. His lion form was breathtaking, massive, richly colored, with dramatic black accents in his mane and around his eyes. Torn between fear and awe, she couldn't drag her gaze away.

"Do you know Kage?" Dyauna ventured, insinuating herself between Maddox and Emily.

"Not well, but I work with people who trust him implicitly." She motioned to the lion prowling the small space behind Dyauna. "Can he understand what we're saying?"

Dyauna laughed and tossed a conspirator's smile over her shoulder. "Our instincts are stronger in cat form, but we don't become mindless animals."

"I don't consider animals mindless."

"You know what I mean. He might not be able to speak, but he's still Maddox." Dyauna looked at her mate and smiled. "He thinks it's only fair I warn you that I can hear his thoughts."

She'd figured that out by their actions. Still, she tried to smile. "I appreciate your honesty." If Maddox could still understand her, she didn't see a benefit in waiting to explain the rest. "As soon as I realized what was going on, I also realized DOMA has to be waiting for Jizette to... activate, for lack of a better word."

"Are you positive they don't know where she is?"

Emily nodded. "They might suspect Milo had something to do with her disappearance, but no one followed Kage when he left the colony."

"Where are they now?"

"Milo sponsors a sort of sanctuary for victims of DOMA's ambition. It's secluded and primitive, but they will be safe, and their baby will --"

"Jizette is pregnant?" Maddox echoed Dyauna's sharp question with a menacing growl.

Nothing Emily could say would help them adjust. It would take time for them to accept the bizarre turn of events. Jizette and Kage were still reeling, and they had their love to cushion the blow. "We'll pass on updates as often as we're able, but obviously the information will have to be encrypted and general."

Dyauna looked at Maddox for a moment, then said, "He wants to know if you have any proof that all this is true."

Emily smiled, having anticipated the question. She held out a thin comcrystal. "Jizette recorded this for you. Do you have a holo-projector stashed away somewhere? There's one on my skimmer, but this was really meant to be viewed in private."

"We have access to one," the blonde admitted.

"Good." She paused, feeling awkward and restless. "It's likely DOMA attempted the procedure with more than one female. Jizette might be their only success, but it's vital that pride leaders be prepared if others are found." She handed the crystal to Dyauna and waited as the couple indulged in a brief telepathic exchange.

"Could you please step outside for a bit? Maddox would like to shift back and he doesn't want to make you uncomfortable."

"Why would the transition make me uncomfortable?"

Dyauna held up the shredded remains of his clothes. "We usually undress before we morph."

Accepting the explanation with a nod, Emily left the storage room and closed the door behind her. Well, that had gone about as well as she could have hoped. At least he hadn't killed the messenger. The next part of her mission was even more complex and required her ability to act. She appreciated Milo's confidence in her, but this was by far the most dangerous mission she'd ever undertaken.

The workers had resumed their tasks, though few bothered to hide their curiosity. A gray-haired man offered her a friendly smile, then smacked his apprentice on the shoulder and turned the younger man's head back toward the tractor they were repairing.

One of the guards who had helped drag her out of her skimmer strode into the workshop with a dark-haired man. Her gaze shifted to the guard's companion and awareness spread through her like warm honey.

The newcomer was lean and compact, built for speed and agility. Silky black hair swept away from his face, just brushing his shoulders in back. At a distance he created an impression of restrained power. As he strolled toward her, the details of his features become clear and Emily began to fidget. Where lion-shifters projected noble strength, this man emanated smoldering sensuality.

Framed by ridiculously long lashes, his deep-set eyes locked with hers. She felt enveloped by his black velvet gaze, caressed and captured, unable to look away. Attraction drew her toward him like an invisible leash and she nervously licked her lips.

One corner of his mouth quirked, and his brow arched in subtle challenge. Did he feel this stirring too, or was he simply aware of her reaction to him?

"Is Maddox inside?" the guard asked, his curious gaze darting from her to the stranger and back.

"He's getting dressed." Heat crept across her cheeks as she heard her own words. Both men chuckled, so she felt compelled to clarify. "I upset him, and he shifted, which shredded his clothes."

"Is Dyauna in there with him?" She nodded, so the guard tapped on the door. "Maddox, you have another visitor. You might want to make it quick."

Emily couldn't make out Maddox's reply, but the guard seemed satisfied.

"You can pick up your weapons on your way out of the village."

"I'll do that," the man assured him and the guard left.

"Doctor Emily Hill." Chances were slim that any of the cats would recognize her name, but she simplified it just in case, as she had done with Maddox earlier.

Rather than shake her hand, the newcomer moved closer, his gaze intense and assessing. She felt the storeroom door at her back and realized she'd mirrored his steps. Up close he was even more... everything, more sensual, more dangerous, more feline.

"You smell like a dog, but I'm pretty sure there's a human under that stench."

Despite his insulting words, his deep, smoky tone made her insides quiver. "Thank you for noticing." All her life she'd longed for a lover bold enough to command her, to take control and free her from the worry and responsibility so prevalent in her life. It was way too easy to imagine this man in that role.

He stepped back, barely, and extended his hand. "Cruz." Black synth-leather gloves covered both his hands.

"Nice to meet you." The glove felt cool and soft against her skin, but his fingers were strong, his grip firm. What would that glove feel like gliding over her breasts or spreading her thighs? Would it mute the pleasure as he spanked her ass, or add a teasing quality to each swat? Would he take them off when he pushed his fingers into her pussy or... She had to stop thinking about sex! He'd smell her arousal and know exactly what she was imagining.

She tried to pull her hand back, but he drew her forward, as if he'd take her in his arms. Her heart fluttered, and she started to object. Then the door swung open

behind her, and Maddox stood framed in the doorway. Snatching her hand out of Cruz's grasp, she pivoted to his side, and faced their host.

Maddox had attempted to put on a pair of coveralls, but the garment couldn't accommodate his height. The sleeves were tied around his lean waist and his muscular chest was bare. No one could deny these cats had amazing bodies.

"Feel better?" The genuine amusement in Cruz's eyes softened his smirk.

"Not hardly." Maddox narrowed his gaze and inhaled deeply. "Who are you?"

"Cruz." Though Maddox was half a head taller, Cruz met his gaze directly, every bit as confident as the pride leader. "Your people are crawling all over my mountain. I want it stopped."

Maddox crossed his arms over his chest, looking somewhat suspicious. "How did you know I wanted to speak with you? To my knowledge, you're not in contact with any of my people anymore." Dyauna slipped past Maddox and joined them outside the storeroom.

"I had no idea you wanted to talk to me." Cruz's determined expression didn't change. "I've tried to be patient. My land is off-limits for a reason."

"Do you know why the search teams are out there?"

Emily watched the exchange in silent fascination.

Cruz shrugged in response to Maddox's question, but cunning gleamed in his dark eyes. "I'm guessing it has something to do with the worthless tiger pair that was holed up in one of my caves."

"'Was holed up,' as in they aren't there anymore?" Maddox asked.

"I try to stay out of things as much as possible. I don't bother anyone and no one bothers me, but this has been going on for far too long."

"Did you take out Izak?" Dyauna didn't sound upset by the possibility.

Cruz smiled, another subtle, menacing smile. "Not yet. I went to the cave this morning, intending to evict my unwanted guests. They'd already gone."

"Then why are you here?" Dyauna persisted. "Go find them."

"They couldn't have gone far. Dog territory is beyond my canyon, and the dogs want this bastard even more than you do." He turned back to Maddox and laid out his terms. "I'll hunt Izak and his accomplice, and guarantee resolution, but you have to call off your men. I can't track Izak if I'm tripping over half the colony."

"For weeks no one gave a damn about Izak and Amara. Now suddenly everyone and their brother wants to join the hunt. Is DOMA broadcasting subliminal messages, or is someone offering a bounty?"

"I don't know anything about a bounty. I just want everyone off my land."

"Well, I've got a counter proposal for you." Maddox stalked toward the smaller man. Most people would be intimidated by his towering height and piercing stare, but Cruz seemed unconcerned, almost bored.

"This is more of a notification than a negotiation."

"I'll call off my people, but I need you to work with someone from outside the colony." Maddox went on as if Cruz hadn't spoken. "The dogs are convinced Barbary pride was involved, and they're going to need more than my word --"

"Excuse me." Maddox looked at Emily, obviously annoyed by her interruption. "That's what I was doing at the canine compound. Cassin knew the victim's mate would never agree to an autopsy, so he had the pack's medic take samples before the body was cremated. Holo-images would have been helpful as well, but I was thankful for any physical evidence."

"You've had time to analyze the samples?" The hopeful catch in Dyauna's voice was unmistakable.

"Barbary pride was framed by a male tiger. The sperm contained within the samples of lion semen was already dead at the victim's time of death. All the other physical evidence points back to the same male tiger. Izak."

"Just like that" -- Maddox snapped his finger -- "you confirmed his identity and exonerated my pride?"

His hostility confused Emily. "You make it sound like you didn't already know. Clearly you did."

"That's not the reason for his annoyance," Dyauna told her. "Izak and Amara have been wreaking havoc all over the colony for almost a year. It's just frustrating that you were able to accomplish in a matter of hours what it took us months to verify."

"Technology has its advantages." She needed to slow down. Milo had warned her that the cats would turn hostile at the first hint of condescension. She was a guest in their home, and she needed to act accordingly. Keeping her tone respectful, she asked, "Do you need the identities of the two lions who inadvertently participated in the tragedy?"

Maddox shook his head. "They confessed and were punished."

"Which brings us back to Izak and Amara," Dyauna concluded. She looked at her mate, her expression suddenly thoughtful. "I think these two should work together."

"I was thinking exactly the same thing." Maddox finally smiled.

Cruz crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. "I work alone."

"As do I."

With an enigmatic smile still curving his lips, Maddox motioned Cruz toward her skimmer. "All right, Doctor Hill, tell us about your shiny new toy."

"Go on," Dyauna urged. "Amaze us."

"Is the vehicle designed for speed or mobility?" Cruz prompted, bending over to look under the skimmer.

The position showcased his tight, round ass and Emily had to look away. All the cats were graceful and intriguing, but Cruz oozed sexual appeal. She cleared her throat and began her impromptu sales pitch. "It will skim across the most inhospitable terrain without jostling the passengers."

"I've been in hover crafts before," Cruz dismissed. "The ride is never that smooth."

He was obviously more familiar with technology than the others. "A hover craft requires a relatively flat surface. This can follow the contour of the land regardless of how steep or rocky. It will basically climb the side of a mountain if you want it to."

"Any of us can travel just as well in cat form. How will this help you find Izak?" Maddox sounded indifferent, but his gaze moved over the small ship with obvious fascination.

"It's equipped with a network of scanners that detect and identify specific life forms. With a sample of Izak's DNA -- which I have thanks to the dogs -- this ship will fly me right to him."

"What's its range?" Cruz seemed almost defensive now. She didn't understand his reaction.

"Range is determined by an assortment of variables."

"What sort of variables?" His dark gaze focused on her face with a mixture of challenge and predatory awareness. She might not know him well enough to understand his expressions, but he was affected by her.

"Anything from weather to the mineral content in surrounding rock formations can decrease the range of the scanners, but I don't foresee any complications."

Dyauna moved to her side and leaned in to whisper, "Panthers are always moody. Don't take it personally."

"My people will accept the outcome more readily if a cat is involved in the process," Maddox told Emily. "No one knows the area better than Cruz. I'm sorry, Dr. Hill, but like it or not you've got a passenger."

Chapter Two

Cruz watched every move Emily made, carefully noting the location and purpose of each control. The skimmer really was impressive, but it was certainly not unique. Why would DOMA bother with such a generic technology? But then, the “prototype” was contained within the skimmer; it wasn’t the vehicle itself.

Emily monitored their course and speed, making occasional adjustments, but the skimmer wasn’t driven so much as supervised. “Is this model mass produced, or is it still under development?”

She looked directly at him for the first time since their departure. “Why do you ask?”

Her eyes were almost shockingly blue in contrast with her creamy skin and dark brown hair. Though casual, her clothes were neatly pressed and immaculate. He wanted to trace the dramatic arch of her brows and unfasten the clasp holding back her hair. She’d scowl and slap his hand away, which would only make him more determined to rattle her cage. Gods, she’d be fun to provoke, to muss and wrinkle until they were wrestling on the floor, flushed and breathless.

“We’re a little out of the loop at the colony. I was just wondering.” He focused on her mouth, and she licked her lips. Not the teasing gesture of a practiced flirt, but the nervous reaction of a woman who was undeniably aware of a man.

“The skimmer itself is standard issue. The bells and whistles, however, are... interesting.”

He started to ask for clarification, then changed his mind. The less she knew about his purpose, the better. “You know my motivation for joining the hunt.” He kept his tone casual, bland. “What brought you to our neck of the woods?”

"Friend of a friend asked me to help with the investigation. As you said earlier, this has been going on for far too long."

"Then you don't work for DOMA? I thought the keepers dispatched you." He flinched inwardly, unable to escape the irony of that statement.

"I severed my connection with DOMA about six years ago. The parting was less than amicable."

"They have that effect on a lot of people."

They lapsed into silence as she fiddled with the controls. Only a human had the option of "severing their connection" with DOMA. No morph could simply walk away.

Desperate for a distraction, Cruz studied Emily's profile and tried to picture her hair loose around her shoulders. The image formed all too readily, only his imagination didn't stop with her face. He saw her naked and on her knees, hands bound behind her back. Her full breasts thrust forward, nipples tight and dark, ready for his lips and his teeth.

Would she whisper denials while her pussy wept all over his fingers? The conflict was there in her eyes. She wanted him; if not him personally, she wanted a controlling hand, a man who would command her body, reach beyond her hesitation, and free her inner fire.

He knew how to handle fire. In fact, it's what he did best.

With a self-mocking chuckle, he dragged his gaze away from his unsuspecting partner and stared into the distance. She was squeaky clean and almost painfully restrained. Why had his mind immediately gone toward submission?

Because that's what he wanted, what he needed to find real satisfaction in any sexual encounter.

This part of the forest was so thick all he could see was an undulating sea of green with an occasional flash of blue sky. With his senses muted by the skimmer, he couldn't determine their location. He tensed, uncomfortable with any vulnerability.

We're only interested in the prototype, which means you can do whatever you want with the agent. Jack's words echoed through Cruz's mind, spreading temptation like a hungry virus. He had three days. Three days to "indulge his long-neglected animal nature."

If she had been oblivious to him, the idea would have held no appeal. But awareness pulsed between them, hot and electric. She might not know what to do with her suppressed sexuality, but he was more than happy to teach her.

No witnesses. No loose ends.

His half-formed fantasy came screeching to a halt. How could he take the shuttle without leaving her as a witness? Did Jack expect him to kill her even if he didn't fuck her? Gods, this was twisted!

No, he'd stage an attack. Make it look like they'd been robbed and then...

"You're awfully quiet all of a sudden. Where'd you go?"

He manufactured a smile and turned his head. His gaze collided with hers and heat cascaded through his body. Those eyes! She had the most expressive eyes he'd ever seen, and right now they were expressing longing, hesitant and conflicted, but definitely longing. *Careful what you wish for, sweetheart. I'm just the man to give it to you.*

Rather than answer her question, he said, "Have those fancy scanners locked on to our target? You seem to be taking the long way around." She didn't react to his complaint, so he looked out the side window, hoping to determine their exact location. They were no longer skimming the ground. In fact, they were no longer moving. She'd gradually increased altitude while he was lost in thought and found a cozy bower in the treetops. "Why are we --" She snapped a suppression collar against his throat as he turned his head back around. Shocked and infuriated to be duped so easily, he snarled and tugged on the metal band. "This better be a fucking joke!" The collar stung the side of his neck and reality swelled in and out of focus. "What did you --"

"Don't fight it. If I trigger another injection, your headache will double when you wake up."

His safety restraints gradually tightened, securing him snugly against his seat. "Karah will kill you for this!" Her shocked expression was almost worth the nauseating lethargy stealing over his mind and body.

"What does Karah have to do with this?"

He just sneered and let the darkness claim him.

Emily stared at the panther as chills ran down her spine. Tension gripped her belly and possibilities buzzed through her mind. Did he have a connection with Karah Balentine, or was he aware of hers? Emily had tried to end her war with Karah when she resigned from DOMA, but life was never that simple. Karah had felt betrayed by Emily's "defection" and become all the more determined to destroy her.

Had her cousin sent Cruz to... to what? Seduce her? Kill her?

It didn't matter. Milo had been one move ahead of Karah every step of the way. Despite the danger and Cruz's hostility, Milo had deemed him worthy of liberation.

Though most commonly referred to as a panther, Cruz was the rarest of the rare, a black jaguar-morph, descended on both sides from black jaguar-morph parents. He was the last of his kind. A prize far too valuable for DOMA to squander and abuse!

"And this sedative is only going to last so long," she muttered under her breath. After verifying that the ship was jamming all forms of communication, she pulled her medkit out from under her seat and went to work.

A quick scan of Cruz's head revealed what she'd expected to find, a small transceiver embedded beneath his skull. She couldn't remove it without surgical facilities, but she could permanently fuse its circuits. Cruz should attribute the headache to the sedative and not even know she'd severed his leash.

After scanning the rest of his body to verify he wasn't bugged, Emily deactivated the jammer and contacted Milo. His warm smile soothed her frayed nerves and helped her relax. "Right on time. For a lab rat, you do remarkably well in the field."

"Thank you, I think." She rolled her shoulders, still feeling tense. "I fried his tracker chip, and he wasn't bugged."

"Great. Now get your ass back to the farm."

A rustic farm sat atop Milo's state-of-the-art research facility. Security clearance was required to access any of the belowground facilities, and the farm façade made aerial surveillance impossible. Milo didn't hope to hide his location from the entire world, but a little subterfuge never hurt.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea." She glanced at Cruz and stopped herself a split second before she nibbled on her lower lip. Milo would spot her tell and realize she was rattled. She wasn't sure what she felt for Cruz, but it was far more complex than what she'd felt for any of the other morphs they'd liberated. "As he faded out, he threatened me with Karah. If this one is Karah's personal pet, he might not be worth rehabilitating."

Milo chuckled and crossed his arms over his chest. "You can play with him when we're done deprogramming him."

"He's sexy as hell, I admit it, but that's not what this is about. If Karah --"

"Karah fucks them all." His tone hardened, became more autocratic. "It's part of their training. Obedience to their mistress or whatever. Why is this an issue now?"

"Do you trust me, Milo?" She raised her chin, preparing for the inevitable fight. Milo's instincts were excellent. He ran the organization with amazing foresight and compassion, but she had instincts too. She wasn't comfortable taking Cruz to the farm.

"I know that look." He shook his head. "Where do you want to take him?"

Milo wasn't going to like this. "To the bunker." She rushed on before he could analyze the location too carefully. "If I can get him to admit he's chipped and ask me to deactivate it, then I'll know he trusts me. At least on some level."

"And if he turns you to ash in the meantime?"

"The suppression collar will --"

"The collars are hit and miss with the stronger abilities and you know it."

"I can always dose him again."

"If you can send the signal before he throws the flame." Milo leaned closer to the transmitter, his eyes bright and beseeching. "At least let me send guards."

"No way. This one will dig in deep if he spots muscle."

"So, they'll stay out of sight. But the bunker is so isolated and so primitive. There's no way you're doing this without backup."

"I'll have the skimmer," she objected. "All I have to do is step beyond the shields, and I can contact you. I don't want guards listening to everything we say and watching every move we make. It would be counterproductive to the interrogation."

Milo's brows disappeared beneath his drooping bangs. "Then this is sexual."

Denying it was pointless. Milo knew her too well. "I suspect it will become sexual, but sex is not my primary motivation for wanting to debrief him privately. He will either prove to be the most valuable player we've ever liberated, or he's too dangerous to risk. I just need a few days to determine which."

A long pause followed as Milo stared her down. "Don't make me regret this."

Milo's image blinked off and Emily sighed. This is what she wanted, what she'd imagined since Cruz walked into the workshop, so why had her heart just lodged in her throat?

Increasing altitude, she cleared the trees and set an indirect course for the bunker. The only way DOMA could be following them was if someone had been watching Cruz the entire time. He was a trusted agent, one of their best, so that seemed unlikely. Even so, she wanted to be sure she didn't have a shadow before she disappeared into the bunker.

Emily was finally satisfied she was on her own about an hour later. Cruz was growing restless, so she increased speed and made a beeline for their destination. The bunker was an underground shelter designed for protection from the most severe attack or disaster.

Her strategy was a combination of deception and coercion. She intended to make him believe they were both being punished for his careless threat. Her apparent helplessness would make her seem more approachable and create instant camaraderie. Or so she hoped.

She secured the skimmer in the larger of the bunker's two chambers, then found a hover cart and aligned it with her unconscious passenger. After releasing his safety

restraints, she guided his upper body onto the cart. Using the cart's cloth cover to slide his body forward, she managed to get most of him onto the narrow surface. His feet and one leg draped over the side, but she counterbalanced the device until they reached the smaller of the two rooms. Then she simply let go and the cart toppled, neatly dumping him onto the bed.

Quickly collecting what she might need from the skimmer, she verified the outer shields and locked herself in the smaller room with Cruz. He didn't need to know she had the code that would activate the bio scanner and open the door. He needed to believe she was a prisoner just like him.

A prisoner, or his prisoner? Why was she really doing this?

In a moment of brutal honesty, she allowed herself to examine her motivations. Ever since she could remember she'd been haunted by images of submission, tempting glimpses of pleasures she had never been brave enough to explore. One look at Cruz had brought those longings surging to the surface.

She was concerned about his loyalties. If he was Karah's pet, he was a legitimate security risk. But underlying those legitimate concerns was a very personal hunger. She needed to be controlled and commanded. Cruz would either understand her curiosity and take advantage of the situation, or she'd resolve the other issues and give up on her submissive tendencies once and for all.

The suppression collar made him as safe as any aggressive male. Danger was inherent in any sexual encounter, but she wasn't defenseless. Besides, if she was honest with herself, danger was part of what made it all so exciting.

She stashed the supplies in storage compartments, then paused. What should she be doing when he woke up? She couldn't appear to have accepted this too easily, yet she didn't want to seem pathetic either.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, he moaned and tossed on the bed, coming nearly to a sitting position before he collapsed back against the mattress.

That made it easy. She grabbed an analgesic out of the medkit and approached the foot of bed. "Don't try to move. Just relax and let the fog clear."

"Where the fuck are we?" His voice sounded gravelly. "Why'd you collar me? What do you want?"

"Are you ready for water, or is your stomach iffy?"

His eyes opened and he glared at her. "Do you work for Milo, or are you a collector?"

The accusation stung. "Collectors are despicable. I would never treat you like --"

"An animal? You collared me, drugged me, and kidnapped me. Is that how you'd treat a human?"

"I was sent to liberate you."

"Then you work for Milo."

She'd had enough of their mutual role-playing. The lies were exhausting. Her current objective was to earn his trust. She suspected he'd respond best to the truth, or as much of the truth as she dared tell him. "You know damn well I work for Milo, and I know you work for DOMA. Izak's signal blinked out shortly before I reached the feline village. I have every reason to believe you were the one responsible for his death. Can we please deal with reality now?"

"Is the prototype real?" His features were expressionless, but the flash of his dark eyes hinted at the emotions twisting inside him.

"The prototype was bait. You were my mission."

"Where are we?"

"I'm not sure exactly." She tossed him the pain reliever and rested her hands on the foot rail. "Somewhere in sector four."

"Sector four?" Pushing to his elbow, he felt around for the foil packet; then he opened it with his teeth and let the tablet dissolve on his tongue. "Why are we in the ass-end of the city?" He looked around as he swung his legs over the side of the bed.

She didn't help him, wasn't ready to get that close to him. He was recovering with remarkable speed. "Milo won't take chances with the farm. If you're Karah's lap cat, as you implied, we're both screwed."

He rubbed his temples for a moment, eyes tightly closed. "Why'd you tell him what I said?"

"He doesn't take chances with his agents either. He was monitoring us."

He looked at her again, his eyes clearly less bloodshot. Did he always heal this quickly? "So they don't want me near the farm. I get that. Why are you in here with me?"

Because I want you to fuck me more than I've ever wanted anything. Even in her mind the admission was scandalous. "They need to make sure you didn't plant something on me. Karah has access to nanite trackers." They could scan for nanites. She'd have to do better than that, or at least be less specific. "Mainly they'll know how much of a risk I am once they've determined how big of a risk you are."

"And how do they intend to do that?" He ambled toward her, gaze hot and hungry on her face.

"They'll dig deeper into your background with more specific parameters."

That brought one of his dark brows up, but he didn't quite smile. "Why go to all this trouble? What does Milo want from me?"

"He doesn't want anything from you. He wants to set you free."

Cruz scoffed. "I'm not impressed by his idea of freedom." He indicated their surroundings.

"Are you Karah's pet?"

"Who's asking? Milo or you?"

She ignored the provocation. This was still work. Despite her lustful agenda, she should try and determine whether or not he could be reformed. "Morphs don't work for DOMA because they want to. If you tell us what they have on you, we can --"

In an instant he was beside her. Then he was in front of her and her hips pressed against the bed's foot rail. He didn't touch her, just crowded her, surrounding her with his scent and his energy. "If you want to talk, release this collar -- now!"

She pressed her lips together, then shook her head. "That would be foolish. I'd be completely at your mercy."

"You're at my mercy now." He guided her hands to the rail on either side of her hips, then released her hair and spread the waves over her shoulders. "You still reek of dog. We're going to have to do something about that."

"This isn't why Milo locked me in here."

"Like hell it isn't." He pulled her head back and kissed her, hard and deep, staking his claim with tender aggression.

Emily trembled, overwhelmed by the raw sexuality in his kiss. This was what she'd wanted, what she'd intentionally arranged, so why was she filled with uncertainty?

He coaxed her tongue into his mouth, then sucked it deeper. She gasped and tilted her head, fitting her mouth more closely to his. She started to wrap her arms around him, but he growled and moved her hands back to the rail.

"Are they watching us?" he whispered against her lips.

What should she tell him? Admitting they were alone was dangerous. He could... Were they actually alone? It hadn't been an idle boast; Milo never took chances with his agents. If the guards weren't in place already, they were undoubtedly on their way.

"I don't know," she admitted.

"But it's likely?" He traced her lips with the tip of his finger as he waited for her answer.

"He won't sacrifice a proven agent unless it's absolutely necessary."

He aligned their hips and pressed against her, rubbing his hardened shaft against her clit. "How far will they let this go? Do you have a panic button or a safe word that will bring them crashing through the door?"

The standard abort code for any mission was "September." All of Milo's operatives knew what it meant. "They won't interfere unless they think I'm in danger."

His head lowered, and he nipped her lip, then whispered, "You've been in danger since I opened my eyes."

Rather than draw back from the silken threat, her senses were stimulated by it. Her nipples hardened and her pussy ached as he continued the subtle rotation of his pelvis.

After pressing kisses into the corners of her mouth, he eased back and looked into her eyes. "Is this place shielded? How hard will it be for DOMA to find me?"

"Do you want them to find you?" If he still thought of DOMA as the good guys, he was further gone than she'd anticipated.

She didn't expect him to answer and he didn't disappoint. His hands moved to the front of her blouse, hesitating over the first button. "I'll only ask this once, so be sure of your answer. Are you willing?"

Heat flooded her pussy and she fought back a moan. "It's not that simple."

He cupped her chin, his gaze hot and penetrating. "It's exactly that simple. No qualifications, no conditions. No future. No past. Just a simple yes or no."

Life had taken so much from her. It had taken so much from them all. Was it unreasonable to want a few hours of passionate oblivion? She'd feel nothing but pleasure in his arms and offer him comfort in return. An even exchange, mutually beneficial. Yes or no. It really was that simple.

She took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. "Yes."

Chapter Three

Possessive hunger threatened to buckle Cruz's knees. Emily stared up at him in expectant silence, flushed and willing, awaiting his command. Had she been trained, or was she acting on instinct? Gods, he hoped she was a natural submissive. The thought of her with anyone else heated his palms and... Unless she was a trained seductress, effortlessly extracting information with her supple body.

Did it matter why she was willing? His handlers used sex to motivate him, like everything else. He couldn't remember the last time he'd chosen his sexual partner. If Emily thought to interrogate him while they fucked, she'd be disappointed with the result.

Using his suspicions to control the desire raging within him, he deftly worked the buttons on her blouse. "Take it off." The excited tremor that shook her body certainly seemed genuine. She pulled her arms from the sleeves and tossed the garment away from the bed. The canine scent lessened but didn't dissipate completely. "Now the pants."

She had to remove her boots before her pants came off, but she soon returned to the foot of the bed and resumed her pose. Beneath the utilitarian outfit, she wore a matching bra and thong. The dark blue lacy undergarments compounded his suspicions. Why would she have worn such provocative lingerie if she hadn't expected to be seen in it?

It didn't matter! His cock had hardened when he saw her standing outside the storeroom in Maddox's workshop, and his need had been building steadily ever since.

Her creamy breasts swelled into view above the scalloped edge of the bra, while the lace cups allowed teasing hints of her nipples to show through. The miniscule

bottom barely covered her mound, and her position perfectly showcased long legs and supple hips.

She fidgeted beneath his assessing stare. Surely a woman like this was used to a man's gaze. Intrigued by her apparent uncertainty, he hooked his finger beneath the strap of her bra and dragged it off her shoulder. Her lips parted and her breath hitched.

"Why did you wear this?" He followed the undulating edge of the bra with his fingertip, barely touching her skin.

"It matches... my eyes." She inhaled sharply and her breast quivered.

"Yes, it does." He traced the lace up the other side and lowered the other strap. "Are all your bras this pretty?" She caught her lower lip between her teeth and shook her head, gaze suddenly averted. "Look at me." It took her a moment to comply, but the heat in her gaze was worth the wait. "When did you decide to wear this one?" He continued the featherlight dance across the upper swell of her breasts, intentionally avoiding her nipples.

"When Milo gave me your dossier."

He tried not to let the statement annoy him, but his control slipped a notch. "What did this dossier say about me?"

"You can read it if you like." She offered him a cautious smile. "There's nothing in there you don't already know."

"What was in my file that made you want to fuck me?" He wasn't sure why he couldn't let it go. He should kiss her and recapture the heat, but his brain wouldn't cooperate with his body. Did he feel more than lust for this complex human, or had he lost what little was left of his social acumen?

Releasing the rail with one hand, she hesitantly touched his face. Her fingers felt so good against his cheek so he allowed the small disobedience. "I was captivated by the conflict in your eyes. You looked angry and savage, even lethal. Yet there was such sadness, such regret. Then I read about your training and the things DOMA made you do."

The things DOMA made him do? Why was she acquitting him so easily? He was an assassin. He murdered on command. No one was that understanding. He grasped her wrist and brought her hand back to the foot rail. "It must have been an old image. I can't remember the last time I felt regret." As if to mock his statement, the emotion echoed through his heart.

She lowered her gaze, taking the heat and the intimacy with it. He understood what she wanted and he was more than capable of giving it to her, but he needed to understand why she wanted it. Submission required trust and he wasn't worthy of trust. Wasn't worthy of --

"Is Karah your lover?"

And he had his answer. Despite Emily's whispered words and forlorn looks, he was just another assignment. "Define lover." A surge of determination pushed aside his disappointment. She'd almost had him going for a minute. If she liked playing with fire, she'd chosen the right morph. "Have we fucked? Of course. Karah fucks all her operatives." Her liquid gaze collided with his and he reinforced his emotional shields. This was a game. Touch and retreat. Tease.

"When was the last time she summoned you to her bed?"

"Do you want to fuck Karah or me?"

He couldn't decipher the emotion that flashed in her eyes, but it was powerful. "Do you have to wait to be summoned, or are you always welcome in her bed?"

"No one shares Karah's bed without being summoned. Would you like me to arrange an introduction?"

Her laughter was unexpected and annoying. "We've already met."

"You no longer have permission to speak, unless I ask you a specific question. Do you understand?"

After a quick pause she said, "Yes, Sir." Tension pulsed between them, escalated by the silence and all that was left unsaid. Her lower lip was between her teeth again, but she quickly realized what she was doing and released it.

He splayed his fingers against her sides, caressing her torso with his thumbs. He started to ask if she'd been formerly trained, then thought better of it. Jealousy was smoldering within him. There was no reason to add fuel to the fire. Besides, this wasn't real. She was trying to extract information, and he was enjoying her attempts at interrogation.

Brushing his fingers over her ribs, he found the back clasp of the bra and unhooked it. She lifted her hands in turn so he could rid her of the undergarment. High and full, with deep red nipples, her breasts were beyond beautiful. He cupped one while he bent to suckle the other. She arched her back, pressing into his mouth.

The harder he sucked the louder she moaned, so he allowed her flesh to scrape against his teeth. She gasped and shivered, head thrown back as he experimented with different sensations. He watched her skin flush and her nipples pucker, learning how hard to pinch and which touches pleased her most.

By the time he kissed his way back to her mouth, she was panting softly. "Can you come like that, with just nipple play?"

"I never have before."

"Have they ever been clamped?"

"No, Sir."

He brought his middle finger to her mouth. "Take the end of my glove between your teeth and don't let go." She skimmed his fingertip with her teeth, grasping the synth-leather without biting his flesh. "Good, girl. Now hold tight." He tugged his hand out of the glove, leaving it dangling from her teeth. She closed her lips without letting go, the effect surprisingly erotic.

With a sudden burst of aggression, he snapped one side of her thong and then the other, tossing the scrap of material off to the side. "Make room for my hand between your legs." He absently rolled her nipple while he waited for her to reposition; then he pushed his fingers between her thighs. She murmured around the glove and closed her eyes. He pinched her nipple until she whimpered. "Your body belongs to me now. You are mine to do with as I will. Open your eyes."

Her thick lashes flickered before she raised her lids. Lust blazed in those rich blue depths, but he saw uncertainty too. She already had a safe word. Milo wouldn't operate without some sort of abort code. All she had to do was say the word or make the motion and the guards would end this farce. But Cruz didn't want to end it. He wanted to play out the scene for as long as Emily would allow it, which meant he had to play his part.

"Let go of the glove." It landed between her breasts like a third hand caressing her from above. Gods, that was hot! "If you want me to stop, for any reason, your safe word is 'departure.' Do you understand what a safe word is?"

"Yes, Sir." Her breathing was so ragged it dislodged the glove.

He moved one hand to the small of her back and parted her folds with the other. "You're so wet." He traced her slit with his middle finger, his gaze locked with hers. "I can't wait to --" His finger brushed her clit, and she came in short, sharp spasms. He prolonged the spontaneous climax with his touch, and her body coated his fingers with a fresh rush of cream. "Either it has been way too long for you, or we need to work on your control."

Emily wanted to crawl under the bed and hide. How humiliating! She was naked and panting while he was fully dressed. Even her erotic dream hadn't been like this. Her skin tingled and her blood seemed to sizzle and hum. No wonder one flick on her clit had made her come. Her entire body was electrified.

"Look at me, Emily."

A tingle skittered down her spine at the sound of her name on his lips. She slowly lifted her gaze and pressed her lips together, determined not to reveal her anxiety.

"Your body belongs to me, which means your pleasure does too." He took off the remaining glove and tossed it in the general direction of the first. There didn't appear to be anything wrong with his hands. So what was with the gloves? "From now on you will ask permission to come, and any disobedience will be punished."

"Punished?" The word snapped her back to attention.

"Yes, punished. Now undress me." She pulled his shirt off over his head and stared at his sculpted torso while she unfastened his pants. He chuckled and nudged her with his foot. "These have to come off before the pants."

"Right. Sorry." Gods, what was wrong with her? She'd never been with a man like Cruz. Not that her experience with men was extensive. Still, he made her feel... like she'd never done this before. The contrast was so glaring she might as well have been a virgin. Cruz was so sure of himself, so assertive, so delightfully dominant.

Her heart fluttered and her pussy ached as she knelt before him. This wasn't real. She was still on a mission. If she let herself forget that, she was a fool. She tugged off one of his boots and then the other. He combed her hair with his fingers, caressing her face with his eyes. They didn't clutter the moment with words, but let their bodies communicate their hunger.

She took her time removing his pants, touching his lean hips and muscular legs, while ignoring his erection. He hadn't given her permission to touch his cock, but that didn't keep her from looking. His shaft rose thick and long from a dark nest of hair. She'd heard rumors that morphs were larger than humans, and Cruz was certainly more impressively proportioned than any man she'd ever seen naked. In fact he was... wow.

"Lock your hands behind your head."

She glanced up at him as she obeyed. It wasn't hard to imagine what he wanted to do. She was still on her knees in front of him, but why did he want her hands behind her head?

He took her face between his hands and guided her forward, bringing her mouth to the tip of his cock. She parted her lips, and he pushed inside as one hand fisted the back of her hair. As long as she didn't resist, his grip didn't hurt. It was a firm reminder of his control.

She explored him with her lips and tongue, while he stood still and enjoyed the attention. She inhaled his scent and learned his taste. He caressed her breasts, teasing

her nipples. Soon her ministrations weren't enough. Steadying her with his hand, he moved in her mouth.

Her lips maintained a firm circle while her tongue swirled and flicked. His hips rocked faster, driving his cock deeper, bumping the back of her mouth. Would he pull out, or expect her to swallow his cum? Heat burst between her thighs at the possibility. She'd always finished her other lovers with her hand, or used this as foreplay for intercourse. So why was she sucking so hard and begging him with her eyes?

He let go of her hair and she whimpered, thinking he meant to pull out. But he moved both his hands to her face and thrust faster into her mouth. "Take it." He growled, sending heated tingles all through her body. "Take it all."

She tilted her head back and took him deeper than he'd gone before. He groaned in approval, his cock sliding smoothly against her tongue. She gazed up at him, willing him to look at her, needing the connection of his shimmering eyes.

Their gazes locked as he thrust to the back of her throat, his hands framing her face. His expression was possessive, triumphant, yet aching tender all at once. She opened for him, swallowing each burst of hot seed as he released it to her. He caressed her lips and then her face.

"So beautiful," he whispered as he slowly withdrew, his gaze still locked with hers.

He pulled her to her feet and kissed her. His tongue swept into her mouth and he growled again as he tasted himself on her tongue. He motioned toward the bed. "Lie down sideways with your legs hanging over the side. It's my turn to taste you."

* * *

Karah Balentine burst into Allen's office with an infuriated cry. His personal assistant was a step behind her. "I'm sorry, sir. She rushed right past me."

He dismissed the younger man with a wave and pushed back from his desk. "What's the crisis this time?" They had already dealt with the morning's catastrophe, at least from Ms. Balentine's perspective. His business partner was a bona fide drama queen.

Of course, he hadn't realized Karah's penchant for exaggeration when he'd proposed their first joint venture eight years before. Unfortunately DOMA had certain resources no one else could supply, and he couldn't deny the profitability of their association. Her childish antics were something he'd learned to tolerate over the years.

"How can you even ask me that?" Karah crossed the office on ridiculously high heels that accented her shapely legs and tight round ass. The only thing Karah liked better than drama was sex, a fact Allen had only recently discovered. Rather than sit in one of the chairs in front of his desk, she stood behind it and grasped the back, leaning slightly forward.

She had lovely breasts, plump and creamy, but she was a bit too willing to show them off. Stubbornly keeping his gaze fixed on her face, he said, "I've been in meetings all day. What's going on?"

"They published a list of companies with financial ties to DOMA, and they're calling for worldwide boycotts. My com has been beeping nonstop for the past three hours. All of our affiliates are in a panic."

"*They*... being Milo and his troop of troublemakers?"

"Who else?" She huffed. "The posts are always anonymous, but everyone knows the source. Why can't we shut down those fucking forums?"

"The Cloud belongs to everyone and no one," he quoted the Supreme Court ruling. "That concept has been contested by forces more powerful than DOMA."

She unbuttoned her jacket and sat in the chair, a bit of the little girl bravado fading from her demeanor. "There has to be something we can do. I will not be taken down by a group of... reporters!"

Folding his hands on his tight abs, he studied her flushed face. She was attractive, when she wasn't throwing a fit. Her light brown hair was styled in a simple twist at the back of her head. He knew she was in her forties, but she looked closer to thirty. Of course, age was becoming more and more relative with every passing day. Genetic manipulation and sophisticated medical procedures prolonged life and sustained youthful appearance. He was pushing sixty and looked forty-five.

"There are always choices." He intentionally lowered his voice, drawing her attention.

"I know and I set one in motion this morning."

Her practiced pout was replaced by a triumphant grin and Allen tensed. "I know that look. What are you up to?"

"Milo has a new toy, some sort of long-range DNA scanner. It's only a prototype now, but --"

"There is no such thing as a DNA scanner. Genetic mapping has become routine, but it still requires an initial sample."

"Well, then Milo has invented one, because I contracted Cruz to steal it for me."

He folded his hands to keep from throttling her. It took all the control he could muster to appear calm. "You sent our most valuable operative to steal a nonexistent prototype?"

"Won't you feel stupid when Cruz turns it over to me right on schedule?" She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and glared.

"When is he scheduled to return?"

"I gave him three days. Milo was going to send either Tayla or Emily and I wanted him to have some time to play."

"You set Cruz loose on Emily? Gods, woman, I had no idea how malicious you really are. That creature makes my skin crawl."

She shrugged, bending her fingers so she could study her elaborately sculpted fingernails. "I don't know that it will be Emily. That nosy reporter would be just as good."

"Little liar. You want it to be Emily, and you know it. You've been looking for a way to get back at her for years. You better pray she doesn't hide sexual deviance under her prim and proper persona. This plan could backfire in more ways than you can imagine." He dismissed the subject with a superficial smile. "But if it makes you happy, I'll keep my fingers crossed for you."

"Superstitions are a waste of time. I arrange things as well as I can and move out of the way."

"That's an interesting attitude." And he only wished it were true. She was a passive-aggressive nightmare. "What if I told you that there was something we could do to arrange things far more to our advantage?"

"What are you talking about?"

"We're in agreement that your predecessors took the project in the wrong direction?"

"Morphs were a mistake. They should have expanded the concept of hybrids." She scooted to the edge of her chair, all traces of the drama queen gone. For the moment.

"Exactly." He'd been waiting for the right moment to approach her with this strategy. It was brazen and highly controversial. Milo's meddling had created a hostile environment for DOMA, in turn opening the door for him much sooner than expected. "I propose we wipe the slate clean and start over."

Her gaze narrowed and her lips pursed. "How? Even if we walked away from the colonies, we'd never be allowed to --"

"That's not what I'm proposing." He cleared his throat and scooted closer to the desk. "There is a safety mechanism built into the genome of every morph. When triggered, it causes cellular deterioration and death. I suggest we activate it."

She shuddered, averting her gaze. "This was considered before the colonies were built. Everyone disregarded the strategy. No one wanted to be responsible for... genocide." She whispered the word with obvious dread.

"That's the beauty of my suggestion." He leaned back in his chair and smiled. "My researchers have found a delivery mechanism that will make it look spontaneous. We slip it into their water supply and walk away."

Silence descended on the office. She crossed her legs, then uncrossed them, covered her mouth with her hand, then pushed to her feet. Stepping closer, she planted

her palms on the desktop and leaned toward him. "There's one small problem with your plan."

He arched his brow, waiting for her objection while he ogled her half-exposed breasts.

"Everyone on the planet will blame me!" She pushed off the desktop and straightened her spine.

"Everyone on the planet will suspect you. There's a big difference." Her nipples created distinct peaks even through her jacket. His cock stirred and his pulse raced. He had her! All he had to do was quash her fear and he had her. "Every medical test on the planet will prove your innocence. It will look like a spontaneous breakdown of their DNA. Religious fanatics will blame it on God's wrath. Genetic purists will say that's what happens whenever we start screwing with the natural order of life."

"And after the... slate is wiped clean?"

"We accept the offer of one of the countries who have begged us to relocate. We'll have to be discreet, start slowly. But we can pursue our own agenda this time."

Her lips quirked in a pouty little smile. "How long have you known about this new delivery mechanism?"

"A couple of weeks," he lied. It had taken a year to silence his conscience. "I was waiting for just the right time. Now, I have another idea."

"What sort of idea?" She slipped out of her jacket and kicked off her heels, obviously guessing the nature of his suggestion.

"I know how you love games, and I have a new one I'd like to try." They had played all sorts of games since he walked in after a meeting and found her fucking his assistant on his desk. Rather than being embarrassed or shamed, he'd seen a glimpse of her true nature burning in her leaf green eyes.

"Go on." She dragged her index finger along the desktop as she rounded the desk.

“I have several coms that can’t wait, but I don’t want you to become bored. I propose you kneel on the floor and do whatever you want with my body, as long as you stay out of sight.”

She considered the possibilities for a moment, then a slow, salacious grin parting her lips. “What happens if I make you come?”

“What would you like to happen?”

“You bend over your desk, drop your pants, and let me fuck you with a strapon.” Her reply came without hesitation and Allen whimpered.

Chapter Four

Trembling with emotions he didn't understand, Cruz kissed his way up the inside of Emily's thigh. Her scent grew stronger as he neared his destination -- her soft wet pussy. She lay sideways, body spanning the narrow bed. One of her legs dangled toward the floor, the other rested over his shoulder.

Cream slicked her inner thighs and drew his attention to her delicate folds. Already she was deeply flushed and ready to be claimed. But he wanted this, needed her taste in his mouth as he pushed his cock into her hot passage.

He sucked and licked, drawing nearer to her dusky cleft. She fidgeted and murmured, making restless needy sounds that urged him onward. His lips brushed against her sex and she stilled. He shifted her other leg to his shoulder as well, then rotated both legs out until her ankles crossed behind his head.

Pausing, he drew in her scent, saturating his ravenous senses. She arched as he lowered his head and he squeezed her hips. "Be still. Relax and let me know you."

"Yes, Sir." Her thighs remained tense, but she stopped thrashing.

He caressed her folds with his lips and his tongue, learning her texture as well as her taste. It was a primal exploration, undeniably sexual, yet something different, something more. He devoured her cream, then savored her flesh, pressing her folds between his lips and pushing his tongue deep into her opening. He stroked around and beside, but avoided direct contact with her clit. She hadn't asked permission to come and one firm suck would have her blasting into orgasm.

She grew restless again, her abdomen tightening as her breasts quivered. "What's the matter, love?" He pushed two fingers into her pussy and raised his head.

"Are you punishing me because I came so fast before?"

"Does this feel like punishment?" He slowly drew his fingers out, then thrust them in again.

She gasped and shivered. "No, but I really need to come."

"And what did I tell you about that?"

Understanding widened her eyes and she licked her lips. "Please, Sir, may I come now? Right now!"

He chuckled and parted her folds with his tongue, triggering her climax with a firm swirl. Wanting to feel the ripples with his fingers, he thrust deep and kept the spasms going with his mouth. She cried out sharply and squeezed him with her inner muscles. He closed his eyes and imagined how the rolling pressure would feel around his aching cock.

Hot, demanding hunger spread through him like living fire. He had to be inside her, really inside her, pounding into her snug passage as she clung to him and moaned. He withdrew his fingers and grasped the underside of her knees, flipping her over as he pushed to his feet.

She cried out at his sudden aggression, but he needed her too badly to soothe her now. Once he was buried inside her he'd calm her, help her understand she was in no danger.

He grabbed her ass cheeks, giving them a nice firm squeeze. She screamed, her entire body bowing. Snatching back his hands, he stared down at the burns in horror. "I'm sorry. Oh, fuck, I..." *Heal her, now!* With his palms still glowing, he forced his index finger beneath the suppression collar and fed energy into his hand. Pain stabbed into his throat and sliced through his shoulder. He ignored the sensations. Hotter. Agonizing.

Rhythmic pounding echoed in the room. The guards were trying to get in. He had to hurry.

He tugged against the metal, determined to ease her pain. His finger sank into the semi-liquefied collar and he screamed. Fury surged, the burst of emotion releasing enough energy to finish the job. The collar liquefied, the molten serpent devouring his

flesh as it streamed around his neck and across his chest. He absorbed the pain, using the emotion to fuel his transformation.

Energy rolled over him, sweeping away his human form and freeing his cat. He threw back his head and snarled. The savage sound echoed off the austere walls. Emily writhed on her stomach, the burns on her ass and knees blistering and peeling. Oh Gods, he hadn't even realized he'd scorched her knees. He bounded toward her and she raised her arm, an instinctive attempt to ward him off.

I will not hurt you. A little late for that. *Please, let me ease your pain.* She didn't react to his telepathic urging, so he did the only thing he could do. He carefully placed his paw on the middle of her back and pinned her to the bed. She cried out and tried to push him away, but he ignored her instinctual resistance.

Hating himself for having lost control, he touched his tongue to the worst of the burns. She shuddered and moaned, a very different sort of moan than he had elicited from her before.

The door burst open with a resounding crash, but he didn't shift his focus. He coated her skin with his saliva, otherwise touching her as little as possible.

"Halt!"

"Can it even understand you?"

A blast exploded above his head. Cruz ignored the guards. Two voices, both male. Beyond that they were irrelevant. He'd harmed his mate. He'd failed... His *mate*? Even the shocking realization wasn't enough to penetrate his instincts. His mate was in pain and he must heal her. He had failed to protect her, to keep her safe, and he must make it right.

"Milo wants the morph alive, so what do you suggest?"

"Why is he... licking her?"

"Not much into mission briefings? That's how morphs heal their wounds."

"But Dr. Hillard isn't a morph."

"That didn't seem to matter when his cock was in her mouth."

"Or when his tongue was up her cunt."

Cruz stopped licking. He knew where this was heading, and there was no way he'd let it happen.

"If she's willing to fuck a morph, maybe she's not as --"

Morphing smoothly into his human form, he turned on the two guards with a snarl. Cruz kicked the smaller one in the gut and sent him sprawling, his gun skidding across the floor. The second guard was ready when Cruz turned to face him. Cruz wrested the pulse rifle from his left hand, but grunted as his right fist slammed into his ribs. He tossed the rifle out of reach.

Dropping into an aggressive crouch, the guard issued the silent challenge. Cruz fed energy into his hand, waiting until his palm glowed before he held it up and said, "That fucking collar screwed with my control. Do you really want to start this right now? I can guarantee I won't lick your ass if I do more than singe you."

Guard One made it back to his feet. "Our orders are to protect Dr. Hillard."

That was the second time he'd called her Hillard. She'd introduced herself as Dr. Hill. Tucking the fact away to analyze later, he focused on the more rational guard.

"We realize you didn't mean to burn her, but does she need medical treatment?"

"She needs what I was giving her."

"We need to hear that from her," Guard One countered.

"Brent, I'm fine."

Cruz whipped his head around and found Emily sitting awkwardly on the edge of the bed, his discarded shirt pressed against her chest. He stepped back to her side and studied her features. "I wasn't finished. You must be in a lot of pain."

"You can finish once they're gone." She moved him aside and addressed the guards. "Return to the farm and tell Milo I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Got an itch that needs scratching?" The aggressive one smirked.

Cruz took a step toward him, but Emily caught his arm. "Please. This really hurts."

"An hour, no more. Milo won't be happy that we left you." Brent grabbed the other guard by the sleeve and pulled him from the bunker, closing the door behind them.

Pain and confusion twisted through Emily, yet longing simmered beneath the stronger emotions. She'd been floating down from the most extraordinary orgasm of her life, ready for the next step in her sexual odyssey, when fire had blazed across her skin.

Moments before the accident, his fingers had been deep inside her pussy. She shuddered, not wanting to think about the agony of such a momentary lapse, but unable to keep the thought at bay.

"Lie back down. Let me finish healing you." He reached for her and she shied away. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know, but --"

"It will never happen again."

The hurt in his eyes made her feel like the villain rather than the one with a scalded ass. "How can you say that with absolute certainty?"

"The collar was like a blockage. My power built up behind it until it was forced to punch through. When I'm allowed to control it, I am able to control it."

"So this is my fault?" Ignoring her stinging posterior, she pushed to her feet.

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did. You burned me because you were collared, and I put the collar on you, so --" He silenced her with his mouth. His arm banded her waist, pulling her firmly against his chest while carefully avoiding her tender areas.

"You don't need to be afraid of me." He whispered the words against her lips. "Despite what your bottom is telling you, I will never intentionally harm you."

"Why were you wearing gloves when I first saw you? Did you burn yourself before you arrived?"

"Yes." The terse response made it obvious no more information was forthcoming.

"But your body heals incredibly fast."

He held up his hands, displaying his regenerated skin. "Anything else?"

She caught her lip between her teeth then sighed. "What are we doing here? I've never been this ineffective before."

"I know what I'd like to be doing." He smiled, obviously trying to lighten her mood.

Wiggling away from him, she shook her head. "I don't fuck the morphs we liberate. It's not fair to them, and it's too hard on me. I become attached too easily."

His gaze narrowed and his expression hardened. "Well then, you better take yourself off this case, because I have every intention of being inside you before we leave this room."

Lust rolled through her in a staggering wave. Only he would say such an outrageous thing, only he wouldn't allow her evasion. Her heart fluttered and her nipples tingled, anxious for the return of his lips.

"Lie down and let me tend you, or I'll tie you to the bed."

She turned to the bed and spread out on her stomach, but her imagination took it one step further. She pictured herself spread-eagled before him, bound hand and foot. He knelt beside the bed and traced the indentation of her spine.

"Would you like me to restrain you?" He kept right on going, teasing the crease between her bottom cheeks. "Does the thought of being helpless excite you?"

She pressed her lips together afraid the truth would come tumbling out.

"I expect you to answer when I ask you a question. Is that understood?" His fingers moved away as he waited for her reply.

"Yes, Sir."

He chuckled. "I asked three questions, love. You'll have to do better than that." He carefully moved her thighs apart. Cool air wafted across her folds, but his fingers didn't caress her.

"Yes, I want you to restrain me, and yes, the thought of being helpless turns me on."

Without explaining what he was doing, he moved away from the bed. She couldn't see what he was up to without sitting up, and her skin still pulled painfully each time she changed position, so she waited. He returned with the mesh belt from his pants. Using the tension clasp attached to one end of the belt, he effortlessly secured her wrists to the bottom rail of the headboard.

"Something tells me you've done this before," she whispered.

He settled on his knees between her legs. "I didn't give you permission to speak."

She rested her forehead on her folded arms as he bent to her ass and tended her wounds. She'd expected him to shift back into a panther. This was far more arousing. His warm, wet tongue passed over her sensitive skin again and again. This was medicinal. He was healing a wound he had created. There was nothing more significant than that.

Her core came alive with heat and aching need. Gods, she needed him there, filling her, stretching her, claiming what was his. Was she his? Why had her mind chosen that phrasing?

He licked his way down the back of one leg, gently caressing the other. The burns on the back side of her knees weren't nearly as deep, more like a bad sunburn. Even so, he bathed her skin with equal attention.

Her legs were spread, her pussy dripping. All he had to do was push inside. Why didn't he take her?

"Please." The word sneaked out on a sigh.

"Please what, love?"

"Do it. Put it inside me."

He arched over her, rubbing against her. "Put what inside you? I want to make sure I know what you want."

"Fuck me, Cruz. I want your cock inside me."

"That's better." He gently held her hips while he drove inward.

She held her breath and closed her eyes. Her pussy opened around him, embracing him as he pushed deeper and deeper. He drew her to her knees and gave her a little more. Then his arm wrapped around and he found her clit and she gasped, shivering as sensations burst beneath his fingertips.

“Come for me. I don’t think I can move unless you come.”

He feathered kisses across her shoulders as his fingers worked their magic. Her passage had never been stretched this tight before. Could she really... He gently tugged on her clit and liquid pleasure flowed all through her abdomen.

“Oh yeah. That’s what we needed.” He slowly pulled back. The sliding sensation had never been so acute. His inward stroke was sharper, a true thrust that rocked her body forward onto her elbows. She adjusted her position, providing resistance, without interrupting his rhythm. His fingers continued their skillful dance over and around her clit, while he moved in her pussy.

Surreal, yet painfully keen, each sensation seemed sharper, each pleasure brighter. She responded with her eagerness, unable to touch him or see him.

Then he pushed into her mind. Terrified at first, she fought against the unexpected invasion.

I will never harm you, Emily. This is a natural part of mating for us.

A surge of pleasure carried her beyond rational thought. She floated on bliss, as his being passed through her and flowed into her. She opened for him, surrendered. He pushed deeper, with his body and his mind.

Come for me. Come with me.

He thrust deep and wrapped his arms around her waist, shuddering violently as he released his seed. Wave after wave of sizzling pleasure bathed her in tranquil joy. He was fierce and commanding, savage and dangerous, so how had he given her heaven?

We found heaven together, my love. And don’t let the pleasure fool you. I am dangerous.

Have you always been able to hear my thoughts?

No. It’s part of the bond. And even now, the link must be intentionally activated before we can communicate. I can’t read your mind without the link.

Can I learn to open the link?

You figured out how to use the link without instruction. You obviously have talent.

With obvious reluctance, Cruz separated their bodies and released her hands.

“You said the bunker is shielded. What about the ship?”

“Why do you ask?” She held her breath, willing him to offer the confession that would open the door to trust.

“I’m chipped. I don’t think it’s active at the moment, but DOMA or one of their clients could turn it on at any time and locate me.”

She took his face between her hands and kissed his sexy mouth. “Welcome to freedom, Cruz. I fried the bug before you woke up. DOMA has no power over you.”

Chapter Five

Easing her arm out from under Allen's heavy body, Karah inched her way off the bed. They'd been fucking all afternoon. Surely a man his age would sleep for hours now that he'd succumbed. He muttered under his breath and rolled to his stomach, taking a pillow with him, but his breathing remained even and his eyes stayed closed.

She snatched her robe off the foot of the bed and slipped it on as she padded barefoot from the bedroom. The past five months with this human had brought into sharp focus why she preferred playing with morphs! Allen treated her like a bothersome child. He loved bending her over his lap and spanking her soundly, before he made her take it up the ass. It had been a shocking change of pace, but she was tired of being treated like a whore.

Her cats knew their place -- on their knees with their tongues on her clit! She grinned. They understood her power and went out of their way to... Her thoughts came screeching to a halt. By enacting the rash plan they'd been discussing all afternoon, she'd be depriving herself of the only creatures who had ever truly satisfied her. Damn it!

She meandered through her dark apartment, determined to formulate a strategy that would allow her to take advantage of this opportunity. DOMA was off course, had been for at least a decade. She hadn't been a strong enough leader to fill her father's shoes, and her father had paled in the shadow of his father, the almighty Fremont Hillard, founder and driving force behind DOMA.

Admitting she'd made a mistake was the first step toward correcting it. That's what everyone told her. Well, Allen was a galactic mistake. She had to get rid of him as soon as possible. There were others who needed to be exposed, but Allen would be a damn good start.

DOMA was meant to protect the morphs, to act as liaison and advisor. She had to refocus the organization, to restructure and return to its original purpose. She would expose their enemies and allow the morphs to devour them. Morph justice was swift and brutal.

Much like their passion.

A shiver slid down her spine as her thoughts returned to the beginning. No one licked like a morph. No one was as possessive and eager to please. And those cocks! No wonder Allen couldn't satisfy her. His puny excuse for a shaft felt like a finger after... Cruz. Her pussy clenched and her nipples tingled as she thought about her favorite. Cruz was the perfect combination of ferocity and finesse.

How dare Allen expect her to sacrifice such perfection? It was a sacrilege!

Morphs were wily and suspicious. She could work with that. One carefully worded warning and DOMA would be back on track.

She went to her office and secured an outgoing line. Technology was forbidden within the walls of the morph colonies, so she'd implanted a tiny receiver behind her pets' eyes before she allowed them to be released into the wild. Whenever she wanted them, she "pinged" them. A tiny red light would blink in their peripheral vision until they retrieved her message.

She hated to bother Cruz while he was on a mission, especially when she was the one who had generated the contract. But Allen had her rattled. If there was any possibility the prototype was a hoax, then Cruz could be in trouble. She needed to warn him about Allen's plans without blowing his cover. This was going to be tricky. But Cruz was smart. He'd know what to do.

* * *

"You expect us to believe you shared Karah Balentine's bed for six years and yet you know nothing about the inner workings of DOMA?"

Milo was clearly frustrated by the outcome of this "liberation," but Cruz had no deep, dark secret that would soothe Milo's pride. Besides every time he brought up Karah, Emily sank deeper into her chair. They'd only made love once, but that one time

had been more significant than all of his other sexual encounters combined. "If I make up something, can I go take a shower?"

The skimmer had been met by armed guards as Emily set down between a rustic farmhouse and a large barn. They'd been ushered through the barn so fast Cruz had barely registered the pungent smell of hay. A dizzying ride down in an open elevator brought them to a pristine corridor that was a bizarre contrast to the earthy scene above.

Milo waited in a conference room just off the main hallway. He'd been pleasant, at first, offering beverages and welcoming Cruz to the farm. But that had been hours ago and everyone's patience was wearing thin.

"Tell me about your assignments and we'll call it a night," Milo offered.

Cruz glared at the human. There was no way he was going to detail his missions in front of Emily. She didn't need to know how often he'd killed or how ruthlessly he'd pursued his targets. "My handlers took me out when someone deserved to die and locked me away the rest of the time. It wasn't brain surgery."

"Who were your handlers, and who was their superior?"

"I called them Jack, Jackass, and Jackoff. Is that helpful? Why the fuck would they tell me their names? I was as significant to them as any of their other weapons."

"How many assassins does DOMA employ? Where were you trained? How were you recruited?"

With an exasperated curse, Cruz shoved his chair back from the table and stood. Milo had no intention of letting this go. He was going to gnaw on the bone until his teeth broke off. "It's all ancient history. How can it possibly help you now?"

"I'm building a case against them. Any documentation is helpful. Facts, locations, contacts. That sort of thing."

"I'm hungry, gritty, and --" A tiny red light blinked in the corner of his eye. "Fuck."

"What's the matter?" Emily scooted forward and took his hand.

He looked from her worried face to Milo and back. If he ignored it long enough, would Karah deactivate the strobe? The humans couldn't see it, but it was going to make him irritable as hell. Like they'd notice a difference. "Nothing." He'd tell her later when Milo wasn't around. Emily had earned his trust. Milo was an asshole!

"Is there anything else you can think of? The smallest detail might prove important."

Gods, the man was persistent. "It didn't take long for me to realize my handlers didn't always answer to the same person."

"Go on."

"First it was a man they referred to as the Trainer, then I was sold to General Hidaka."

Emily gasped. "You were sold?"

Milo didn't seem surprised. He was far more interested in the buyer than in the fact that Cruz had been purchased. "General Hidaka is well known to us. He is Director Darman's military equivalent, and his reputation is immaculate. If this is true, it could prove very damaging."

"I might be impressed if I had any idea who Director Darman was." Cruz grasped the back of his chair, torn between sitting back down and smashing it against the nearest wall. "All I know is Hidaka owned me for many years, and my assignments became incredibly savage while he controlled them. Karah finally pulled some strings and had my contract transferred back to DOMA directly. If it wasn't for her intervention, I'd still be committing acts that are hard to justify in the heat of battle much less in a civilian setting."

"How many contracts does Hidaka own? Could he have a controlling interest in DOMA?"

Cruz released his death grip on the chair. Milo was finally starting to make sense. "Now those are questions I've asked myself over and over."

"Because Karah saved you from Hidaka?" Milo challenged.

"In part, but more so because I know them both and he is far more an ambitious bastard than she is. Karah isn't smart enough to want to rule the world."

For some reason that made Emily laugh. "I'd have to agree with you there."

"Do you know her well?" He paused and glared at her.

"She's my cousin. She came to live with my family when she was eight, so my mother likes to introduce us as sisters."

"Dr. Emily Hillard?" He rubbed his temples, the light steadily blinking in the corner of his eye. "You're Fremont Hillard's granddaughter?"

"Guilty." She scooted up to the table and folded her arms on the tabletop in front of her. "My father and Karah's father couldn't agree on DOMA's intended role in the lives of the morphs. Karah's father eventually forced my father out."

"Odd that his shuttle exploded a few months later," Milo muttered.

"Wait. Why did Karah come and live with your family if her father was still alive?" Cruz asked.

Emily fiddled with the end of her hair. "He claimed she reminded him of her mother, and it was too painful to have her around."

"That's ridiculous. What child could accept such logic?"

"We tried to give her a loving home, but we were a poor substitute when her real father was still alive."

"And when your father began to resent her father," Milo reminded her. "You can't blame all of Karah's bitterness on her father. Your parents were just as bad."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before now?"

She met his gaze, her expression open, yet cautious. "I had to know I could trust you."

He closed his eyes and rubbed his lids, but the blinking persisted.

"Now spit it out," she prompted. "What's going on with your eyes?"

He shot a resentful glance at Milo, then looked at Emily as he explained, "Your darling cousin wants to speak with me. You fried their tracker chip and suddenly I'm summoned. That seems a bit convenient, don't you think?"

"How is she summoning you without the transceiver?" Milo asked, clearly uncomfortable with the new development.

"This implant creates a blinking light in the corner of my eye. It's annoying as hell."

"And how do you retrieve the message?" Milo persisted.

"The same way everyone else does," Cruz grumbled. He was trying to wind down this conversation, not complicate it. "I have an account in the Cloud. Not under my name, of course, but --"

"How do you access it?"

"The perimeter wall is a twenty-minute run from my cabin. I have clothes stashed near the guard tower. Why is this important?"

"What about the guards?" Emily sounded skeptical.

"DOMA controls the guards and Karah controls DOMA," Milo reminded her.

"What's with the summons? What do you think she wants?" Emily let go of his hand and scooted back in her chair. "Somehow I doubt this is about sex anymore."

"Let's think this through," Milo suggested. "Have you missed a check-in? How long did they give you to return with the prototype?"

"No, and three days." Cruz crossed his arms over his chest, tension coiling inside him. "She's never pinged me while I'm on assignment before."

"It seems counterproductive to me, too. I say we get out of the way, so you can see what she wants." Milo activated an access terminal at one end of the conference table. He vacated the chair but made no move to leave the room.

The messages were always recorded, so it wasn't like Karah was going to see them. Still, Cruz was annoyed by Milo's heavy-handed manner. Sending up a quick prayer that Karah didn't say anything too outrageous, Cruz accessed his account and activated the one and only message.

Karah's image formed on the holoscreen in front of him, looking rumpled and sensual in nothing but a synth-silk wrapper. "Hey, lover, sorry to ping you like this, but it's important. You know I do things for you I don't do for the others, and we both

know why. Something big is about to go down. I mean really big. I want you to pack up and leave Alpha Colony. Go to that freak sanctuary or just disappear. I don't care where you go, just go. I can bear all the rest if I know you're safe. Please promise me you'll go. Two days. They make their move in two days." She reached for the controls and then paused. "Don't drink the water. They'll be releasing test runs before they dump it full-scale. Don't drink anything that came from inside the colonies. And thanks for everything." She blew him a kiss and her image blinked off.

"All right. That was cryptic as hell." Milo took the seat Cruz had used earlier and scooted it up to the table. "Do you have any idea what she was talking about?"

"Why would she want you to leave?"

Emily's tone was so hesitant he hardly recognized her voice. It really bothered her to think of him with Karah. He didn't want to hurt her, but jealousy was an unpredictable emotion. At least he made her feel something other than lust. "I don't know what catastrophe she was warning against, but she believes it's real."

"Why warn you?" Milo asked.

"That's none of your damn business." He'd had enough of the human's expectant attitude. "You heard the warning. Do with it what you will. In two days, someone or something is going to contaminate the colony's water supply."

"We need to warn the clan leaders. At least let them post guards," Emily suggested.

"I think it's a waste of time, but you're right. We have nothing to lose by sharing the information. Let the clan leaders decide what they want to do with it."

"And in the meantime, I'm taking Cruz home with me. I'll help him make a detailed report. After you've read it, you can decide if you have more questions. But for now, the inquisition is over."

Cruz grinned. Sweeter words had never reached his ears.

Chapter Six

"Where did you go while I twiddled my thumbs in the skimmer?" Cruz muttered, his dark eyes filled with speculation and hunger.

Emily handed him a glass of wine and smiled, wanting him to relax. "Did you miss me?"

"I was bored." He took a sip of the wine and looked out the window.

She glanced beyond him, but her gaze quickly returned to his tense face. This section of the city was mostly residential. They were in her apartment on the eleventh floor of a modest high-rise. Moonlight accentuated his slashing cheekbones and deep-set eyes. Even surrounded by urban sophistication, he looked primal, only half-tamed. And she had never met anyone who intrigued her half as much as this man.

"I gave a copy of Karah's message to Tayla. She's an investigative reporter and she --"

"She won't post it to the Cloud, will she?" He was immediately on edge, tense and watchful.

"She won't release it publicly without your consent, but she's going to do some digging. Unlike Milo, she was immediately intrigued by the possibilities. She thinks we should have video crews at strategic sites out at the colonies two days from now. See if we can catch them in the act once and for all."

He nodded, his expression thoughtful, then his gaze snapped back to hers. "But we can't allow the water supply to be jeopardized. I'm not sure what they're planning to use, but we can't become dependent on humans for... Maybe that's all this is. Maybe they just intend to foul our water supply so we're forced to buy theirs."

"That's a solid possibility. And as you said, we need to make sure they aren't able to follow through with their plan regardless of what it is."

"I like the reporter's idea of catching them at it. We need to talk to Maddox and some of the others. Find out where they're likely to strike."

"Careful, Cruz. This is starting to sound like a strategy." She took a sip of wine and tried to focus out the window. "Milo might think you care."

"I don't give a fuck what Milo thinks." He moved closer, resting his hand on the wall beside her head. "He's damn lucky you found me first."

They sipped their wine in silence for a few moments, staring into each other's eyes.

"If Fremont Hillard was your grandfather, how can you work for Milo? Doesn't that make you the traitor, not Karah?"

"You're a morph. Do you really need to ask me that?" She didn't take offense. His attitude was understandable. To many, she was a traitor. "I worked for DOMA for years, side by side with Karah as a matter of fact. But DOMA has become so corrupt, so far removed from what Grandfather envisioned. It's tragic. I thought Karah was being manipulated by people more powerful than she is for a while, but now I'm no longer certain. She could be the puppet, or she could be the puppet-master. I have no way of knowing. All that matters is that DOMA is stopped, and the morphs are protected."

"And identifying the enemy is the first step."

It was more of a statement than a question, but she nodded. "Not just identifying them, exposing them. Making sure the threat is clear to the entire world."

He responded with a thoughtful nod and refilled their wineglasses.

"Can I ask a question?" Her hushed voice penetrated the building tension.

"Of course."

"You don't have to tell me, but I need to ask. Why did Karah warn you? She has lots of pets. There had to be something else between you, something more than sex."

He sighed and retreated into his wine. She thought he wouldn't answer, that she'd simply added to the tension. Then he drained his glass and set it aside. He stared straight ahead as he said, "It was never love with me and Karah. It's important that you

understand that. The first time she summoned me, I saw the pain in her eyes, the loneliness, and I understood that we were... kindred souls."

"How can you not love your 'kindred soul'?" She held herself back, unwilling to risk her heart until she understood where this was leading. She would not be prisoner to her cousin's ghost.

"The connection I felt with Karah was not romantic. We were angry. We'd both been betrayed. We used sex as a form of therapy. It was harsh and raw, at times brutal, always on the verge of violent. It was cathartic, but it became awkward as our wounds began to heal. When the self-loathing eased, she began to need something I couldn't give her."

"Tenderness?" He looked at her and her heart leaped within her breast. He'd been incredibly tender with her. She'd seen glimpses of the raw savagery, but there had been tenderness too.

His tone grew harsh, and his gaze filled with anger as his tale progressed. "The last night I saw her, I gave her my dagger and begged her to end my life."

Shocked by the casual confession, Emily automatically reached for him. He warned her back with an upraised hand, unwilling, or unable, to accept her compassion. She lowered her hand, aching with her need to soothe him, to share his pain.

"There are harsh penalties if we try to end our own lives, but Karah could claim to have lost her temper or a hundred other excuses for ridding herself of one of her pets. I wrapped my hand around hers and tried to force her to thrust the blade into my heart. She struggled against my hold, and in my desperation, I broke her wrist." His voice took on a flat emotionless cadence as he recanted the gruesome details. "It was a bad break. The bone tore through her flesh, and there was so much blood. Yet she refused to call a guard or summon a physician."

"She wanted you to heal her?"

He nodded, a bit of the life coming back into his eyes. "She said I'd made the mess and now it was time for me to clean it up."

Emily couldn't help but smile. "Sounds like Karah."

"So I healed her." He started to look away, then shook his head with a sigh. "It was more complicated than that. We formed a blood bond, an unbreakable vow. I fed her energy for days, restoring her to health physically and emotionally, and she made me promise not to take my life. She also promised to do everything in her power to make my life more bearable. She bought back my contract from Hidaka the next morning, and she's never summoned me since. The warning was part of our blood bond. Our lives are linked. It was her responsibility to see that I was not harmed."

"I'm glad she was there for you. And I'm glad you were there for her. Believe it or not, I care for my cousin."

"It's over, Emily, and it has been for almost two years. That's why I was shocked by the summons."

"She didn't actually summon you. She just left you a message." She pushed to the balls of her feet and brushed his lips with hers. "I can live with that."

He set his wine aside and wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck. His lips covered hers, caressing, promising pleasure without demanding more than she was ready to give. "I'm still waiting for that shower."

"Milo promised you a shower. I never --" He pinched her bottom, and her sentence ended in a combination of giggles and squirms as she tried to evade another playful pinch. "Fine. The bathroom is the second door on the right."

"Show me." He took her by the hand and led her across the living room, ensuring her cooperation.

She wasn't opposed to having sex with him again. "This is all happening so fast," she murmured, needing him to understand the nature of her hesitation.

"I'll try and slow down, if that's what you really want." He brought her fingers to his mouth and kissed them. "But I'm not sure what we gain by waiting."

"We just met! I've known you less than twenty-four hours."

He pushed open the bathroom door and pulled her inside the small room. Backing her against the nearest wall, he caged her there with his body. "If you were human, I'd understand your concern."

"I am human."

His brow arched and he leaned in until their noses touched. "You're a hybrid at least, perhaps a latent morph. Did you really think I wouldn't notice the distinction in your scent and your taste? I haven't been able to lock in your breed, but you're a cat, just like me."

"I wasn't engineered. I'm the biological offspring of altered parents. My father was a yellow jaguar hybrid and my mother was a black jaguar-morph."

He grinned and lightly grasped the nape of her neck. "Which means we're biologically compatible, because I'm a black jaguar-morph too." He caught her lower lip between his teeth, teasing her with his tongue before he released her. "All the other male 'panthers' are black leopard-morphs. But then, you already knew that. Didn't you?"

She gasped and shoved against his chest. "It wasn't like that. Milo wanted to --"

"This isn't about what Milo wanted, or what Karah did." He ripped his shirt off over his head and returned his hands to the wall so fast she hardly saw him move. "Stop lying to yourself. You saw my image and your imagination engaged. You caught my scent, and your instincts took over. We aren't just mates; we're the last of our kind. I knew this was different the first time I touched you. Now I understand why."

The significance of his conclusion washed over her, soothing and exciting. It all made sense now. They'd been brought together for a greater good, the preservation of their species. "There's a fundamental conflict inside every hybrid. We're not content as a human, yet we don't know how to be... wild."

He chuckled, the sound sexual and hot. "All you have to do is trust me, and let go."

She raised her hands above her head and pressed them against the wall. He understood the gesture, immediately taking the lead. With deft fingers he unbuttoned

her blouse and unfastened her bra. She lowered her arms long enough for him to rid her of the garments; then he guided her hands to his waistband.

“Undress me.”

She lowered his zipper and eased her hands inside his pants, groaning as her palms pressed against his lean hips. He tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her head back, claiming her mouth for a deep, urgent kiss. His free hand moved over her breasts, while she tried to push his pants lower without losing the intimate heat of their kiss.

His tongue moved in her mouth, sliding and caressing, pausing to curl around hers before continuing its steady motion. She kicked off her shoes, and he tugged off his boots. Then urgency erupted and they attacked the lingering garments in a ruthless rush toward nudity. He picked her up and tore her pants off, pinning her against his chest. The instant her legs were free, she wrapped them around his waist.

He carried her into the shower, and she activated the spray. Cool water did nothing to ease the burning, so she adjusted the temperature. The warm cascade was less annoying, but she still trembled with a combustible longing.

She arched her back, letting the water saturate her hair. He supported her effortlessly, one arm wrapped around her waist while his other hand moved up and down her back. A low growl echoed off the walls and raised her head.

His features were contorted with savage need, eyes glowing like molten gold. “If I don’t... I’m going to morph.”

It wasn’t hard to understand his desperation. A similar need was driving her. Levering herself against his shoulders, she raised her hips. He quickly positioned himself at her entrance and steadied her as she lowered herself onto his cock.

Emily let her head fall back on her shoulders as she impaled herself on his thickness. She was taking him, claiming him, fucking him.

He allowed her to savor the sensation for a moment; then he pressed her against the wall, startling her with the cold tiles and the strength of his body. Clasp

with both hands, he bent his knees and began to move. Not as deep as other positions had allowed, his thrusts still drove her steadily onward.

"Can you come like this?" His gaze bored into hers, demanding the truth.

"I... don't know." His cock felt amazing. She didn't want him to stop.

With amazing agility, he lifted her off him and turned her to face the wall. Her feet touched the cold floor and she shivered. Then he pulled her hips up and thrust into her from behind. The angle was new, and she wasn't quite tall enough for the position, but he pulled her back onto his feet and she relaxed.

"Better?"

All she could do was nod. He rocked in and out of her pussy, while his middle finger lazily strummed her clit. His feet wedged her forward onto the balls of her feet, which bent her knees just a little, giving him the perfect angle for each deep thrust.

Tingling heat gathered with shocking speed, as if commanded by his magical finger. "Oh please, Sir, may I come?"

"Not yet." He nipped her shoulder, driving the sensations higher, yet disrupting the cycle enough to ward off her orgasm. "Let it build. Enjoy the ride."

"That feels so good." She tightened her inner muscles, pushing back to deepen his strokes.

"Tell me. Or better yet, show me. Open your mind and let me feel."

She found her end of the link and eased it open, allowing him greater and greater access. *Feel me.* She concentrated on the rhythmic slide of his cock deep inside her. *Feel how you fill me, how empty I am without you there.*

He groaned and thrust deeper. His fingers carefully rolled her clit between his thumb and forefinger.

I want your cum deep inside me. I want it rolling down my thighs. I want to squeeze you so hard you can't hold back. Please, Sir, let me come.

"You learn fast. Go!" He thrust his full length inside her and pressed on her clit until the pressure burst. She threw back her head and yelled, her cunt rippling in

breath-stealing spasms. He wrapped his arm around her waist, his cock jerking inside her as he released his seed in hot, rhythmic spurts.

He clung to her back, shivering with spontaneous aftershocks. She folded her arms against the wall and pressed her forehead against her arms. His fingers caressed her mound, the touch familiar, yet not intentionally stimulating.

"If we keep this up, we'll never get clean." He chuckled and eased from her body.

"I didn't start it this time, you did."

His brows shot up at that. "Then you're taking responsibility for what happened in the bunker?"

"I locked us in there together. My motivation was somewhat convoluted, but seducing you was part of the agenda."

He reached for the soap while she increased the water pressure. "Or presenting me with an opportunity to seduce you?"

"If you prefer."

"I always prefer to be the seducer rather than the one seduced." He worked up lather between his hands and scrubbed his chest.

"I'll keep that in mind." She had to turn around as she washed her hair. Watching him rub soapy hands all over his amazing body was too damn tempting.

Cruz watched Emily turn and smiled. She probably had the right idea. One glance at her smooth, round ass and his cock sprang back to life. He couldn't get enough of her. As soon as he floated down from one mind-numbing orgasm, he was ready to start all over again. He wanted to lick her from head to toe then devour her soft pussy while she sucked his cock. Then he'd lie on his back and let her ride him until he couldn't stand her leisurely pace. They'd finish face-to-face with her legs over his shoulders so she couldn't move at all. He'd pin her to the floor and pound into her cunt while she came over and over in helpless pleasure.

His soapy hand was firmly stroking his cock when Emily turned around. She gasped, her eyes going wide then narrowing as she watched his hand.

"Cruz, we have to stop." She licked her lips then glanced away, her voice soft and awkward. "You're really big and... it's starting to hurt."

Shame punched him in the gut, immediately halting his stroking. He placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry. Thank you for being honest with me."

After a quick rinse, they exited the shower, and Cruz wrapped a towel around his hips and dried Emily with another. When his hands patted with respect and caring rather than stimulation, she allowed him to make amends.

He took her by the hand, and she told him where to find her bedroom. "Are you hungry?" He hesitated in the hall as he waited for her answer.

"The wine made me sleepy. I think I'd rather wait until morning."

Accepting her answer with a smile, he swept her up in his arms and strode toward her bedroom. He didn't bother with a light. Her hybrid physiology should allow her to see in the dark. If not, she would just have to trust him. He set her down beside the bed as he pulled down the covers, then rid her of her towel before he placed her in the center of the bed.

He tossed his towel aside as well and crawled onto the mattress. "If you're sore, I'll make do with memories until your body recovers. But you will let me tend you." Before she could argue or analyze what he was proposing, he spread her legs and knelt between them.

"Cruz, if you put your mouth on me, I'm not sure I'll be able to say no."

"You won't have to." Cupping her warm, round ass in both hands, he lifted her pussy to his mouth. Gods, her scent alone was addictive. He carefully parted her folds with his tongue, listening to her breathing and her groans for any sign of discomfort. Her thighs relaxed and he delved deeper, mashing his lips against her sex as his tongue pushed into her core. So hot, so wonderfully soft. He swirled his tongue and bobbed his head, gently fucking her with his mouth.

Her body responded with a fresh rush of silky cream and he growled low in his throat. That taste! He wanted more, needed her dripping right into his mouth.

Wrapping his arms around her hips, he rolled over, bringing her with him. She cried out, then pushed up and straddled his face.

"Ride my tongue. Let me fuck you." She cupped her breasts and rocked her hips, her motion tentative at first, embarrassed. He grasped her hips and guided her as his mouth moved against and into her. Soon she lowered her hands and ground her pussy against his lips, taking his tongue deep with each thrust of her hips. Her cunt tightened with the beginning of an orgasm and he quickly withdrew his tongue.

With a cry of exasperation, she rocked forward away from his face. "Why do you do that?"

He chuckled, happily licking her cream from his lips. "Because you come twice as hard when I finally do let you come."

"Well, I still hate it, when it happens." She glared at him over her shoulder. "I'll forgive you later."

"Why don't you turn around and start forgiving me now. I thought I could wait until morning, but this is killing me."

She turned around and crawled back on top of him, taking her own sweet time to arrange herself. Her pussy was just out of reach and he had a delightful view of her star-shaped opening. Had his reserved little mate ever been introduced to anal pleasures? He seriously doubted she had done anything so unconventional.

Her warm lips closed around the head of his cock and he parted her outer pussy lips with his thumbs. Her cunt was deeply flushed and creamy, but he wasn't sure if the color was due to the size of his cock or the attention of his mouth. He had promised not to hurt her, and he meant to keep that vow.

Circling her clit with his tongue, he slowly built a new cycle of arousal while she slid her mouth up and down his shaft. Her thighs flexed and shifted, her tension obvious. Was she close again already or did she enjoy sucking his cock?

Accessing their link, he let her emotions wash over his mind. Her body had no problem with their joining. Even her heart had accepted that he was her mate. But her

stubborn, analytical mind was still struggling with the logic of submitting to a fated mate.

He understood her reservation. Without her stubborn determination she wouldn't be Emily.

Well, he could break through her logic and shatter her misgivings at least for this one moment in time. He moved smoothly in her mouth, savoring the snug circle of her lips and the warm pass of her tongue over the tip of his cock.

Carefully, gently, he gathered cream from around her vaginal opening and moved it back toward the tempting ripples of her anus. She shivered when he circled the sensitive star, announcing his intention. Her muffled murmur could have been encouragement or protest. He didn't pull out of her mouth to find out.

He kept his tongue circling her clit, while he slowly worked the tip of his middle finger past the tight collar of muscle. No way she'd ever had a cock in here. With firm inward pressure he breached the second barrier and she gasped.

"Is that what you want?" His cock fell out of her mouth and landed against his belly with a thud. She sounded positively panicked.

"Do I want to feel you come around my finger? Yes, or I wouldn't have pushed it in here."

"Then you're not going to --"

"Not tonight. If and when we decide we want to pleasure each other like this, I will prepare your body to take me. I will not intentionally hurt you. Tonight or ever." She reached for his cock, but he stopped her. "I should punish you for not trusting me. That's all I ask of you. Trust. Without it, we have nothing."

"You're right. I shouldn't have doubted you. When you're ready to punish me, I'll willingly submit to whatever you deem appropriate."

He accepted her pledge with a stiff nod and returned to her clit. She sucked his cock back into her mouth, but they were both distracted. The promise of punishment teased the edge of his consciousness, and Emily's failure to trust him in the first place stung his pride. His mate should have no doubts, no hesitations.

Her lips were warm and eager and short minutes later he arched off the bed, coming in the back of her mouth. Her ass squeezed his finger as he flicked his tongue over her clit, but the climax lacked the power of its predecessors. There had been no mystic connection, no emotional intensity. This had just felt like sex.

Cruz set her away from him and draped his arm over his eyes, feeling restless and unsettled.

"Can I ask a question without pissing you off?"

"Probably not," he warned. "Go to sleep."

"You said there were harsh penalties for trying to ending your own life. That indicates to me that at some point one of DOMA's assassins chose suicide rather than completing a mission."

He moved his arm and glared at her. "Why would that surprise you?"

"It doesn't surprise me. Were you coerced into killing?"

"I would never willingly take a life." He just stared at her, sickened by the implication of her question. Did she really think so little of him? His heart plummeted and his chest burned. How could she think anything else? He was an assassin. One of DOMA's henchmen.

"Then how did they... make you do it?"

Chapter Seven

The anguish in Cruz's gaze made Emily want to weep. "I'm sorry," she said before he could start his explanation. "It doesn't matter."

"Like hell it doesn't." He rolled off the bed and glared down at her, hands fisted at his sides. "You took me into your body, believing I was a cold-blooded murderer? What does that say about you?"

"That's not what I said." She tucked her legs beneath her and reached for the sheet. He snatched it out of her hand and snarled. "That's never what I believed."

"So start at the beginning." His voice was cold and demanding. "Milo gave you my file. Were you assigned to the case at that point, or were you one of many?"

"I was one of three. The decision was made the following morning." She couldn't meet his gaze, couldn't bear the pain, knowing she had caused it. "I knew DOMA trained covert operatives. Those types of programs were going on even when Father was still alive, but no one I knew was subjected to the sorts of things listed in your file."

"If my file detailed my training, then I don't understand your question." A bit of the anger eased from his posture. Now he just looked tired.

"You misunderstood my question." She crossed her arms over her breasts, unable to stop the nervous gesture. They were so close to something rare and wonderful, yet their relationship was still so fragile, so new. "I wasn't implying that you killed willingly. At least not intentionally. Even the limited information in your file made it clear you were being manipulated. I was asking you to confirm what I'd always believed. I was asking for the specific means they used in your particular case."

He tensed again, his jaw working. "Why do you want the gory details?"

"Two reasons. One, I'm a female cat and we tend to be curious by nature. Two, I want to make sure we cover every base and leave no stone unturned. Your chip is fried,

and I'll remove it as soon as you trust me enough to let me put you under, but what other motivations can we anticipate?"

His dark gaze moved over her face for a long, silent moment. "You're trying to protect me?"

She dared a hesitant smile. "Is that allowed?"

"It's not necessary." His tone remained gruff, but familiar tenderness returned to his dark eyes. "There were several years when my siblings were used to ensure my cooperation, but they've all found better situations."

"Do I even want to ask?"

"Both of my sisters have found strong, true mates, able to protect them. One lives in a mountain village, the other was smuggled beyond the walls. Last I heard she and her mate had passed their second winter in Sanctuary. My brother is no longer with us."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"I've had six years to adjust to his passing. There is still a chance my sisters can birth black cubs, but as of right now, I'm the last black jaguar-morph." He rubbed the back of his neck and closed his eyes. "Do you have any other questions that can't wait until morning?"

"No." She placed her hands on her legs and lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry I upset you. We can't change the past. I need to learn to leave it alone."

He cupped her chin and raised her face. "I need your submission when we fuck, but I don't want to be mated with a mindless servant."

She grabbed his wrist and yanked him onto the bed. "Good. Because I'm not sure how long I can be polite. I'm far too mouthy and --"

"I rather like how you use your mouth."

"We'll explore that thought more fully in the morning. We have got to get some sleep." They lay on their sides in a tangle of arms and legs. With an agile thrust of his hips, he pushed his cock between her thighs, sliding against but not into her pussy. "That is such a tease."

He held her firmly against him, not allowing her to move. "When you wake up, I'll be inside you. Think how good that will feel." He whispered the words against her lips, his breath wafting over her lips.

She laughed, which rubbed her nipples against his chest and pressed her clit against his groin. "How am I supposed to sleep with that in between my legs?"

"Just close your eyes and relax."

Snuggling against him, she drew his scent around her like a blanket and willed her body to obey.

* * *

Emily rolled to her back the following morning, careful not to awaken her lover. Conflict raged inside her mind, and all her body wanted was sex! Her lover. The term seemed so casual, so insignificant, compared to the feelings they'd awakened in each other.

They had two days to determine if there was a real threat to the inhabitants of Alpha Colony, who was behind the threat, and what form the threat would take. How could they justify indulging their passions when so many lives hung in the balance?

Using the rationale to push back her desire, she slipped out of bed and hurried across the room. If she could be showered and dressed before Cruz woke up, she could avoid... Why was she trying to avoid something so wonderful?

It was the right thing to do, the responsible thing to do. They needed to focus on the mission.

Milo greeted them as she set the skimmer down in the side yard an hour later. He told them Tayla would join them as soon as she returned from her latest snooping expedition. "Did you bring a bag?"

Cruz tossed him their overnight bag as he came around the back of the skimmer. "You're right. It makes more sense to stay here until this thing is over."

"Good. I've got plenty of room."

After a quick breakfast, they settled into the conference room. Cruz seemed restless almost immediately. He participated in the conversations when he had something to say, but he spent a lot of time pacing the room.

"As usual the lack of technology behind the wall slows everything down to a crawl," Milo muttered. "Even when I can get messages to my people, it can take them days to respond."

"We don't have days," Cruz told him. "Like it or not, this goes down some time tomorrow."

Galvanized by the reminder, the rest of the day took on a sharper focus and a clearer sense of urgency. Tayla's snooping session introduced a bounty of new possibilities, but even with Milo's best hacker piloting the computers, they were able to solidify few facts.

Late in the evening Cruz told Emily he wasn't feeling well, and he'd wait for her in their bedroom. She offered him a smile as he'd left the room. That had been two and a half hours ago.

"This can wait until morning," Milo pushed back from the table and stood. "We're just spinning our wheels."

"Fresh eyes might help," Tayla agreed. "See you in the morning."

Tension gathered low in Emily's belly, intensifying with each step she took. Had Cruz really felt ill? Was he angry about this morning? She had taken the coward's way out.

Her hand hesitated on the handle, making it jiggle. She rotated the latch and swung the door inward, stepping into the room before she could overanalyze herself into hysterics.

Cruz stood by the window, staring out into the night. Bare to the waist and barefoot, he'd unfastened the top of his jeans, and they rode low on his lean hips. "How are you..."

He turned and looked at her, his gaze ravenous and feral. Her words scattered and her heart fluttered. He belonged outdoors, surrounded by towering pines,

swimming in icy lakes, running wild. Even in a charming farmhouse he looked caged. "How's your head?"

"Lock the door, then get undressed. You made me wait over two hours."

"I didn't realize --"

"I know." He stalked toward her, his movements slow and rolling. "You're not being punished for your actions tonight, but your actions this morning."

She swallowed hard. "What did I do this morning?" Better make sure they were on the same page.

"You left my bed when you knew I needed your soft pussy. Oh, and don't think I've forgotten last night and your oh so sweet vow to me."

"I promised to submit to whatever you deemed appropriate for not trusting you."

"You do remember. I wasn't sure you meant what you said last night."

She'd meant every word. Regardless of the emotions battling within her, she wanted to surrender, to experience the pleasure waiting on the other side of her misgivings.

Without a word she kicked off her shoes and turned around, unbuttoning her blouse as she fought for composure. She kept her back to him, knowing she would never appear calm if she saw the hunger in his eyes. He moved up behind her. She could feel the heat of his body, but he didn't touch her, didn't speak. Her bottom brushed against his groin as she bent to remove her pants. It had been a glancing contact. Still, she imagined his cock, hard and straining against his jeans.

"Why did you hide from me this morning?"

"I didn't hide. I --"

He whipped her around and silenced her with a glare. "I want no lies between us. Do you regret giving yourself to me?"

"No." Then more slowly. "It wasn't regret, more like fear. But I'm not afraid of you. I'm afraid of losing myself in you. I'm a scientist. My brain doesn't know how to process what's happening to us."

The corners of his mouth tilted and his gaze softened. "You can't process this with your brain, Emily. Aim a little lower. Use your heart."

Soothing heat swirled through her, sweeping away her uncertainty and warming her blood. She raised her arms and locked her hands behind her head, needing him to understand that she was ready to take the next step. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Sir. I should have been more attuned to your needs."

He shook his head. "It's my job to gauge your needs. I should have made sure you understood my expectations." Keeping his body back, he leaned in and kissed her mouth. His lips covered hers and their tongues played, but he denied her his touch. Their gazes lingered as he pulled his mouth away.

Rather than motioning her toward the bed, he guided her toward the blankets he'd spread on the floor near the window. There were pillows stacked off to one side and their overnight bag was within easy reach. Clearly he had made good use of his time alone.

"When hybrids grow up among morphs, they tend to be more comfortable with our animal forms. I know you were in pain when I transformed before, but I do not want you to fear me."

"I'm not afraid of you." The sudden catch in her voice only added to his point.

"When I'm in animal form, I'm fully cognizant. And I would never hurt you."

Before she could protest, or even fully realize what he intended, energy rippled across his body. His human form bunched and wrinkled as it was drawn toward the floor. Then the cat pushed forward, elongating the basic shape by determined lunges. It hovered in shapelessness, an undulating mass for a moment before the panther burst free.

Emily gasped and took a step back before she recovered. "You could have warned me."

His warm chuckle sounded in her mind. *I thought I had.* He passed in front of her, warm body brushing against her thighs. *Touch me. Cats love to be petted.*

Reaching out slowly, she ran her fingers through his thick fur. His body was warm and strong, shifting restlessly beneath her hand. He turned in a surprisingly tight circle and brought his head up between her breasts. His ears tweaked her nipples, and then his tongue rasped across one unsuspecting tip. She shivered. The rough texture combined with the tentative lick was incredibly enticing.

Lie down. I want to make sure all hint of tenderness is gone.

She turned her face away as she took her place on the blanket, unable to hide her smile. *Are you sure you don't just want to lick my pussy?*

He didn't respond to her teasing. Instead he nudged her legs apart with his head and lay on his belly as if he meant to stay there for a good long time. *Hands over your head and close your eyes.*

She obeyed without question, but she was curious. Why did he want her to close her eyes?

His tongue rasped a path from the underside of her knee to the seam where her thigh met her groin. She moved her legs farther apart, hoping to draw his attention to her aching pussy. He wouldn't be rushed. He repeated the teasing trail along her other leg, increasing her frustration with each passing moment.

She pushed up with her heels and rocked her hips, wanting his tongue on her clit or sliding in her core. He finally traced her slit with the tip of his tongue, and she stilled beneath him.

So soft. Carefully parting her folds, he found her clit and flicked the delicate nub.

How could he be so gentle in cat form? His tongue rubbed over and around her, allowing her to savor the sensations building beneath the caress. This was too exact, and too... smooth. Sneaking a peek between her lashes, she confirmed her suspicions. He was back in human form.

His head rotated, lifting without losing contact with her clit. Their gazes locked for a second; then he returned his attention to her body. *I wanted you to accept pleasure from my cat. But it's easier to deliver as a human.*

That he felt the need to explain himself at all was pretty amazing. *I understand. And you're right. Your cat's tongue is too rough. That feels better.*

She had just started the climb toward orgasm when he rocked back onto his knees and raised his head. He reached into the overnight bag and pulled out a slim, pink vibrator. "Is this yours?"

"Where did you get that?" She pushed up on her elbow and tried to snatch the toy out of his hand.

"It was in your nightstand, which means it's probably yours. But I wanted to make sure before I push it inside you."

"It's mine," she whispered and lay back down. Now she knew what he'd been doing while she finished her shower. He'd been snooping through her stuff!

"How often do you use it?"

She covered her eyes with her forearm and braced for impact when she heard the familiar buzz. "Am I not allowed to masturbate?"

"Of course you can masturbate." He pressed the vibrating toy into her free hand. "Go ahead. I want to watch you fuck yourself."

"That's not what I meant." She turned off the toy and tried to toss it back into the overnight bag, but he neatly intercepted her throw. "I meant before. I have needs just like anyone else, and there hasn't been anyone in my life in a very long time."

"Our pasts are behind us. There is no one for me but you."

"And no one for me but you."

They let the moment linger, absorbing the warmth and the sincerity in the vows.

He offered her a shockingly playful smile and said, "Now it's time for you to demonstrate your trust." He made a rotating motion with his finger. "Turn over and fold your legs beneath you, head down."

She understood what he wanted, the classic submissive pose, body open, willingly offered for whatever pleasure he chose. He wouldn't hurt her. This was the final hurdle. She turned onto her side then bent her legs, coming up onto her hands and

knees as she completed the turn. Then she bent her elbows and lowered her head onto her folded arms.

He pushed a pillow under her chest and set one by her elbow, a silent signal that he was still thinking about her comfort.

"What happens when you leave your mate aching all day because you sneaked from our bed when you knew he intended to fuck you?"

"I don't know." The low buzz of the vibrator gave her a pretty good idea of what he intended. She tried to slow her breathing and relax, to accept that she wasn't going to come for hours.

He moved her legs farther apart and traced her crease with the tip of the toy, letting it hover over her clit until she moaned. "Is my assessment of the situation fair?"

"Yes. I knew you wanted to fuck me, and I ran away."

He slowly pushed the vibrator deep into her cunt and waited while the sensations spread through her abdomen. "Open your mind to me. I can't stand this separation." He pulled the vibrator back and thrust it in fast, the motion helping her focus. She found his signal pulsing at the edge of her consciousness and drew him into her mind.

For several long moments he fucked her with the toy as they savored the intimate connection. She could feel his stubborn control and the intensity raging behind it. His free hand caressed her hip and her ass, occasionally stroking down onto her thigh as he kept up a steady motion with the toy.

Then his hand slipped between her thighs, and circled her clit with the very tips of his fingers. Her arousal built and he turned up the toy. *You do not have permission to come.*

I know. I won't. At least I'll try really hard not to.

Oh so slowly, he drew the toy out and moved it up toward her ass. She clenched her jaw and balled her fists. She should have figured this would play a part. It was how she'd displeased him in the first place.

He circled her other entrance with the toy, and she cried out against her arm. Had she always been that sensitive there? Darts of pleasure shot up her spine and down her legs, and her pussy contracted with painful need. This was going to be a lot harder than she'd thought.

The toy eased past the stubborn collar of muscle and she moaned. "Please turn it off. I can take the fullness, but the vibration is going to make me come."

"Then come," he growled. "This lesson is more important than your punishment. I don't want you to fear any form of pleasure. I'll spank you instead."

"Oh. Oh!" He pushed deeper, and she came in tight, fast spasms. Her pussy kept time with the ripples of her ass. She raised her head, needing air -- needing him to share the wonder -- but the shift in position launched another wave of spasms. He drove the toy well into her body and left it there, vibration softly humming.

"Have you been spanked before?" His voice was so dark and smoky she looked back at him, then shook her head. "You obviously like the idea. It sent you over the edge. Close your eyes again and try not to think. Let your body control your mind."

She returned her forehead to her arms, reaching out for him with her mind. He sent a reassuring wave of affection to her, but remained stubbornly controlled. The distant buzz of the toy only added to the anticipation. His palm smacked down on one cheek and then the other. Heat erupted in a sudden burst, pulsing back and forth between the two sides, with the vibrating toy in between.

Trembling, she waited for the next set of spans.

"I can't... hurt you." He drew out the toy and thrust his cock into her sopping pussy, the contrast startling. Pulling her up against him, he caressed her breasts with one hand while he held her against him with the other. "Do you need pain?"

"No! I was curious. Now I'm not. You are more than enough for me."

He pulled her face back for an awkward kiss, then whispered, "So much of my life has been darkness and pain. With you I want only pleasure."

She reached back with both hands and squeezed his hips, pouring heat into his mind. "Then take me, give me pleasure. I'm yours, love. Now and forever."

“Now and forever.” He guided her back down and thrust deep, sliding against her back as he hammered between her thighs. His urgency thrilled her, confirming that his need was as great as hers.

She tossed her head, meeting him halfway. He covered her and filled her, joined with her mind and completed her body. She yielded without reservation, unafraid of herself for the very first time.

Chapter Eight

After spending more time with Milo, in a less confrontational setting, Cruz began to understand why Emily enjoyed working with him. Emily introduced him to Tayla, the investigative reporter largely responsible for breaking the “Alpha Colony scandal,” and he liked her on sight.

It didn’t take long for Cruz to notice a similar dynamic between the two couples. Milo and Emily were both analytical and systematic while he and Tayla acted on instinct and responded to hunches the other two couldn’t understand. He wasn’t sure if Milo and Tayla were an actual couple yet, but there was some serious chemistry between the two.

“It just doesn’t feel right,” Tayla said for the third time. “There is something we’re not seeing, a vital piece to the puzzle we don’t have.”

“We’ve done all we can.” Milo stepped back from the conference table, littered with half-formed strategies. “The morphs are on guard. We have media teams positioned at the three most likely targets. All that’s left is for us to join the fight.”

“There’s still no hint of contamination?” Cruz asked. “Karah’s warning said there would likely be trial runs.”

“Apparently they didn’t risk it.” Milo rubbed the bridge of his nose, his eyes beginning to water. “If the rest of her warning is accurate, we need to get going.”

“I say we split up. Cover more ground that way,” Tayla proposed.

“You two take the reservoir above the canine compound, and we’ll head for Hanging Lake,” Cruz suggested.

“Works for me,” Milo said.

* * *

Cruz watched the scenery pass as Emily effortlessly maneuvered the skimmer toward Alpha Colony. Urban clutter gradually gave way to suburban sprawl and finally to a tragic stretch of wasteland. "The trip seemed much faster when I was unconscious," he muttered.

She didn't comment, but her smile was soft and caressing.

After an endless stretch of barren earth, life returned again. First grasslands, then forests, and finally the rugged peaks and deep valleys of the Morphological Preserve. His chest compressed and his mouth dried up. This was the only place he had ever known anything resembling peace.

He looked at Emily, but she was busy adjusting their trajectory. Could he ever make her understand how he felt about this place? There wasn't much to recommend it, but it was home.

"Will the skimmer's shields get us through security?"

"We'll sail right by, and they won't even know we're there."

Nodding, he turned his attention back out the window. The high walls had never looked so military with their razor wire and guard towers. It sickened Cruz to think cubs were taught that this was normal. Determination surged through his body. Regardless of the price, it had to stop now. His people could not go on living like caged animals.

Hanging Lake wasn't far from his valley. He frequently hiked here to fish. The water was crystal clear and shimmered in the afternoon sun.

"Put down behind that boulder," he whispered.

She smiled at him as she obeyed. "No one could hear us, even if they knew we were here. The skimmer is soundproof."

There didn't appear to be anyone else around, but he knew better. Either Tayla or one of her teams was recording the entire area, and Maddox had sentinels posted all around the lake. A systemic threat had been the motivation the morphs needed to network as never before.

Emily used a heat signature scanner to identify the other players lying in wait of the villain. Cruz was fascinated by the toy, but he suspected that his nose could have told him just as much if he weren't sealed inside a skimmer.

"Here we go." She pointed to a solitary figure. "They just got out of a small land vehicle. I can't get a visual on them from this angle."

"Are they alone, or is someone waiting in the car?"

She made several adjustments, but shook her head. "It's hard to say. This could be residual heat from the person who just got out. My guess would be he has a buddy."

"Let's concentrate on the mover." Cruz watched the shadowy figure cross the scanner screen, wishing he could better relate it to the world around him.

As if she heard his mental grumblings, Emily activated the main viewscreen and winked at him. "Better?"

"Much." The man crept along, keeping his back to trees, and hesitated at the smallest clearing.

"He's depending completely on visual clues. He must be human."

Cruz smiled. A few days ago, she'd proudly claimed the title for herself. "Stay here." He punctuated the directive with a firm glower, but suspected she'd disobey. This was her mission too. In fact, they had been dispatched by her supervisor. He was technically the interloper.

The human crept along in the shadows, a silver case clutched in one hand. Without warning or debate, Cruz charged the man, ramming his shoulder into the smaller man's gut and ripping the case out of his hand.

The man yelped then cursed, coming alive with brutal alacrity. He swung at Cruz with a tight right fist then immediately countered with a left upper cut. Cruz dodged the right, but the left caught him on the jaw, jerking his head sharply to the side. Lights danced before his eyes and he felt the man tugging on the case.

"Back off!" Emily's voice cracked like a whip, and he couldn't help but smile. The human let go with a curse and stepped back.

Cruz saw panic in the human's eyes half a second too late. The man glared at him, as if he'd continue the fight, then he turned and ran off through the woods.

He didn't get far. Maddox tackled him and the rumble of an engine told everyone the human's driver had just deserted him.

The cameraman shot the human from several angles so facial recognition could identify the culprit.

Emily opened the silver case, but would need to analyze the liquid before she could determine what the vials contained. "None of it was anywhere near the water, so I'm not sure it matters. But I'm dying to know what they were hoping to accomplish."

Milo and Tayla arrived a few minutes later. "Your team must have warned the others. All we saw was a shuttle speeding off across the sky. Tayla caught a less than stellar image of it, but I'm not sure it will help. There didn't appear to be anything unusual about the shuttle."

"Then we have no idea who set this in motion?" Cruz had never been so frustrated in his life.

"We have two important clues," Tayla reminded him. "The human you captured, and whatever is in his silver case."

Emily nodded. "You take the human; I'll take the case?"

"You're on."

* * *

"It's not a toxin." Director Jack Darman told Emily a couple of hours later. He moved out of the way and motioned her toward the microscope.

It felt wonderfully familiar to be working at his side again. She just wished something pleasant had brought about their reunion. Focusing through the lenses, she felt her heart miss a beat. "Oh Gods. Why would anyone revive this?" She straightened and shook her head, feeling nauseous and shaken. "Father worked so hard to purge every sample, every record that even mentioned this atrocity."

"What atrocity?" Cruz asked from the doorway. After realizing he would have nothing to do in the lab, he'd decided to visit some old acquaintances in the feline village.

"DOMA calls it the failsafe," Darman told Cruz. "Every morph was engineered with a genetic message that can be activated at will. This message has been inherited by your children. If the morph population becomes too large, or too unruly, they can be terminated at any time."

"Terminated?" Cruz echoed. "What does this message do?"

"Causes your DNA to deteriorate." Darman glanced at her then clarified, "You would all die, and it wouldn't be pretty."

Cruz's sculpted features settled into an expressionless mask, but Emily knew him too well. Fury and betrayal twisted through his gaze. "DOMA was trying to annihilate us?"

"I don't think it was DOMA," Emily said. "We've wanted to pull off the puppets and reveal the puppet-master. Well, here's our chance."

His gaze narrowed and his hands clenched at his sides. "Why are you defending them? Karah had to have known about this."

"Oh she knew. I have no doubt she knew. She also knew this activation wouldn't hurt you, it would only unmask whoever had attempted to use it."

He raked his hair with his hand, his agitation obvious. "Okay, you lost me. What are you talking about?"

"The failsafe was the primary reason my father left DOMA. The board refused to abandon the protocol, so he resigned. Before he left, he destroyed the template and every variation of the activator. He also purged the archives of any research material that pertained to the failsafe's development."

"If this code is already in all of us, why won't the activator hurt us?"

"Because my father engineered a genetic response, a cure. His brother, Karah's father, engineered the failsafe, so Father felt personally responsible to right the wrong."

"He worked in secret after he left DOMA," Darman added. "Rumors circulated that he was attempting to override the failsafe, but everyone believes he died before he accomplished the goal."

"You said Karah knew," Cruz mused. "Why would she allow the board to believe the failsafe was still in effect if she knew your father had succeeded?"

"Despite her shortcomings, Karah genuinely cares for the morphs." Both Cruz and Darman snorted, but Emily went on as if they hadn't made the disparaging sound. "Someone sent Father anonymous information that allowed him to progress at several pivotal junctures. He always believed it was Karah."

"When was this cure administered and why do we know nothing about either the failsafe or the cure?"

"The cure was part of your admissions protocol, and newborn cubs are injected shortly after birth." Darman buried his hands in the pockets of his lab coat and asked, "How do we find out where this came from?"

Emily smiled. "We keep searching until we do."

* * *

Three days later Emily sat beside Cruz in the skimmer watching Tayla on the main viewscreen. Her effervescent personality made her easy to like, and Milo's faith in her made her easy to trust.

"The human was nobody, a thug-for-hire," Tayla began. "But the shuttle we caught speeding away from the canine camp was registered to a subsidiary of Parkwauld Pharmaceuticals. Allen Parkwauld is the owner and CEO of that global conglomerate."

"Does his name mean anything to you?" Milo asked.

"Allen Parkwauld had popped up during several of my previous investigations, so I dug through my old files and launched a few new lines of inquiry."

"And what did you learn?" Milo's prompting sounded a bit impatient.

Tayla laughed, refusing to be browbeaten. "A couple of well-placed bribes got me into his computer system. I couldn't access the information itself, but I figured out

who was most likely to have been working on the activation mechanism. One weak link was all I needed, and I found it in Ava Lloyd, a disgruntled biologist who felt overworked and underappreciated. She admits to knowing what the activation mechanism is capable of doing, but contends that she was told the tests would never leave the lab."

"Her confession is on the record?" There was no mistaking the hesitation in Milo's tone. He wasn't taking anything for granted.

"On the record and ready to air. I left her at the police station. They promised me an exclusive as soon as they formalize charges. They're working through the jurisdictional nightmare right now, but this is going to be huge!"

"So, what specifically do we know?" Cruz asked. "Parkwauld was behind the attempt. That much is obvious, but why did he do it? What was he hoping to gain?"

"Allen Parkwauld has been a silent partner and DOMA board member for the past eight years," Tayla told him. "He has strong ties to the military, and one name keeps mysteriously popping up whenever Parkwauld wins a military contract."

"Let me guess," Cruz drawled. "General Hidaka?"

"Give the man a prize." Tayla smiled. "These two are thick as thieves, yet they're pulling at the middle from opposite ends of the spectrum."

Milo folded his hands on his desktop, trying not to look impatient, and failing. "A little less illustration and a little more detail, please."

"Fine." She harrumphed. "Allen has built his empire on drugs created by or derived from hybrids, while Hidaka uses full-fledged morphs for everything from covert recon to assassinations. I think what we interrupted was an attempted coup."

"Allen tried to rid himself of morphs, thereby ridding himself of Hidaka?" Emily needed to make sure she was following Tayla's logic.

"Exactly."

"I guess my illustration has been faulty all along," Emily decided. "I said there were puppets with a puppet-master. It looks more like two massive bullies yanking on a rope."

Cruz took her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. "Karah might not have been a villain in all this, but she wasn't blameless either. DOMA was meant to protect morphs, to run interference with more powerful forces."

"You're right."

"Allen Parkwauld is in custody and the arrests have just begun," Tayla said. "If the authorities clean house for her, Karah has no excuse not to get her act together."

"And if she doesn't take advantage of the opportunity, maybe it's time for a new director." Cruz looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. She hoped it wouldn't come to that, but someone had to do it and she was Fremont Hillard's granddaughter after all. "Keep us updated. News is a little hard to come by out here in the sticks."

Tayla promised she'd send frequent messages then terminated the link.

No sooner had the viewscreen reverted to its default setting than the com blinked in the lower left corner. "Identify incoming caller," Emily said to the computer.

"Karah Balentine on a priority channel. Shall I activate?"

She looked at Cruz. "How did she find my com-designation?"

"Don't look at me. I didn't give it to her."

"I wasn't accusing you, really. It just seems --"

"She's trying to interrupt," the computer informed.

"Put her through."

The viewscreen flickered and Karah's image came into focus. She was perched on the corner of a desk. "You've always been so suspicious. I just wanted to say thank you. Things worked out even better than I'd hoped." She looked at Cruz and smiled. "I see you decided to keep her. That's probably a good thing. You both need someone and no one else will have you." She laughed.

"You knew it would be Emily when you sent me after the prototype?" His tone was tense, almost brittle.

"She knew it would be me or Tayla. And she hates us both." She waited until Karah met her gaze. "Are you disappointed that he didn't kill me?"

"He deserves to be happy, even if the rest of us don't. If you make him happy, I'll have to learn to deal."

They'd all come so far. Reliving the past would accomplish nothing. It was time to establish a better future. Emily looked at Cruz and let the familiar warmth wash over her. When she returned her gaze to Karah, she felt nothing at all. "So what becomes of DOMA?"

"I pull my head out of the sand and get back to basics, running interference for hybrids and morphs." She sounded remarkably sincere.

"It's going to get worse before it gets better," Cruz predicted. "With or without your support, those walls are coming down."

"I'll do everything I can to support you and your people," she told him.

"And I'll hold you to that pledge."

She looked at him for a moment in silence then turned her head and smiled at Emily. "Be good to each other."

Before Emily could reply, the link deactivated.

"She's a strange one," Cruz muttered.

Emily couldn't argue. "Always has been."

She set the skimmer down beside Cruz's cabin. The sleek vehicle looked out of place in the rustic setting, but she enjoyed the contrast. Cruz waited until she secured the vehicle, a habit he hadn't been able to break her of in the three days she'd spent inside the walls.

"Parkwauld will turn on Hidaka," Cruz predicted. "If he goes down, he'll take the general with him. You can count on it."

"So where does that leave us?" She'd meant morphs and hybrids, but the question took on a personal edge as he looked into her eyes.

"Once we drive off the guards and tear down the walls, I think many will simply live off the land." He paused and his expression took on a ruthlessness she'd never seen before. "Others will need to learn new skills. We'll need to prepare for a world run by

humans. We'll protect what's ours by better understanding our enemy. Never again will we be victims."

She wrapped her arms around him and pressed herself against his chest. How could she begrudge him a little bitterness? He'd earned that and a whole lot more. "Not all humans are evil." She felt compelled to point out. "Tayla is human and she's championing our cause."

"I never said they were. I said we needed to understand what we're doing if we're going to do business with them."

Easing away from his chest, she looked into his eyes. "Is that what you meant by understanding the enemy?"

"Business is very adversarial from what I've seen." He tucked her hand into the bend of his arm and led her into the cabin.

"What sort of business are you interested in pursuing?"

"If Parkwauld Pharmaceuticals was built on the backs of hybrids, I think it's time the empire gave back to the community that spawned it."

"And I know half a dozen lawyers who would be more than happy to make sure they do."

He paused just inside the door and cupped the side of her face. "We don't have to live 'out here in the sticks.' I want you to be happy. I can live anywhere. We can go back to your apartment, or --"

"You'd hate it in the city. There's no way I'm doing that to you." She turned her head and kissed his palm, then looped her arms around his neck and smiled into his eyes. "You need wide open spaces and fresh mountain air. A night on the town will be nice once in a while, but everything I need is right here."

Aubrey Ross

Award-winning author Aubrey Ross writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans, to adventurous Mystic Keepers, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of her recent awards include an EPPIE finalist, two Passionate Plume finalists, and a CAPA Nomination from The Romance Studio.

With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, Aubrey dreams of fascinating worlds and larger than life adventures -- and wouldn't have it any other way! Visit her website at <http://www.aubreyross.com>. Join Aubrey's news group at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Anything-but-Ordinary/>.