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# GUNNAR'S *Game*

A DAWN ENDEAVOR TITLE

MARIE HARTE

*Dawn Endeavor 4:*  
*Gunnar's Game*

*Marie Harte*



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## **Dawn Endeavor 4: Gunnar's Game**

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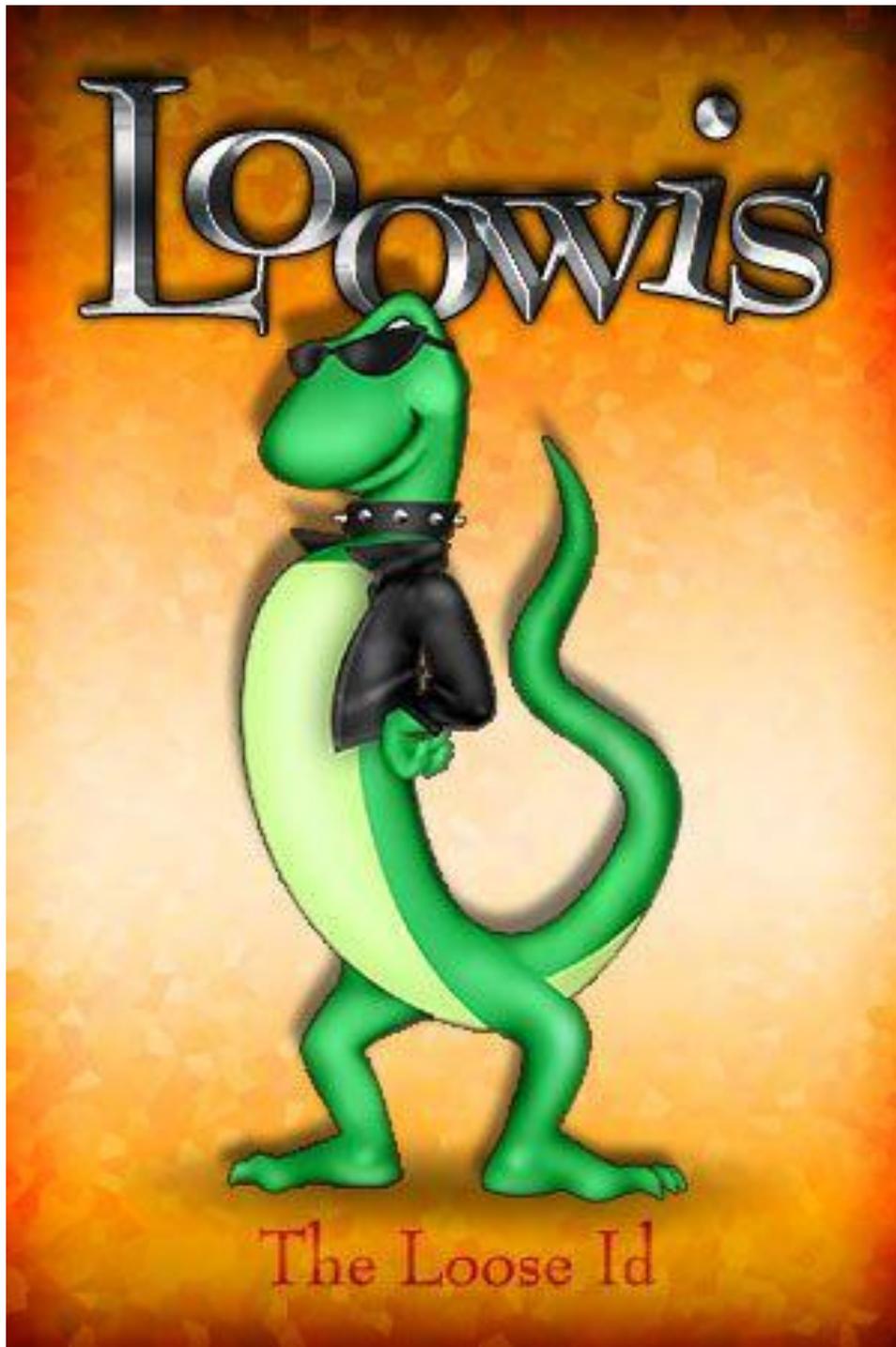
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## Chapter One

*Shenandoah National Park, Virginia*

*Hunted.* Not a word Frederik Gunnar Tersch would ever think to use to describe himself. He was the biggest badass of the Dawn Endeavor team, often likened to a Viking berserker, and could break a man's neck with little force, even when in his human form. He'd been a US Navy SEAL for six years, then a Circ—a genetically enhanced fighting machine courtesy of Uncle Sam. When *changed*, as he was now, he shifted into a monstrous giant with claws, fangs, and skin tougher than armor. Tersch killed those who deserved it with little conscience and defended his country and his teammates with honor.

So why did the thought of going home scare the shit out of him?

“Thinking about Ava again, hmm?” Kisho Hayashi, his best friend and fellow Circ, murmured with laughter in his voice. Hayashi's chest rippled with muscle, his skin slightly darker than his normal almond tone, his frame larger and more lethal in his beastly form.

“Shut up, Hayashi.”

“She told me to keep an eye on you.” Hayashi cracked a smile, exposing fangs that glistened under the full moon.

Tersch growled. Though pleased that the once taciturn Asian now seemed to take great joy in life, he didn't appreciate being the butt of the joke.

He quickly glanced around him at the surrounding forest, making sure Morgan Reynolds, Hayashi's obnoxious mate, was nowhere around. The asshole constantly

poked fun, and Tersch was tired of it. Hell, he was tired of everything lately. “Dude, I’m sorry, but Ava’s not my keeper. And she’s not your boss. Just ignore her.”

The way Tersch had been trying to ignore her for the past year. *Trying* being the key word. Though Ava’s diminutive height made her seem less than dangerous, the rest of her was pure threat. Tersch had never seen a woman better put together in his entire fucking life.

Her dark brown skin glowed, smooth and rich. Her hazel eyes could flash green or brown, depending upon her mood. She had a face that could have graced any number of magazines, with a stubborn chin, button nose, and those thick, ripe lips that made him sweat in remembrance. And that body... Ava had a woman’s curves. Full breasts, a tiny waist, and a heart-shaped ass. And two weeks ago he’d learned she was Circ. A potential mate.

Holy fuck.

Hayashi chuckled, distracting him. “Oh yeah, you’re definitely thinking about Ava.”

Tersch grimaced and tried to will away the erection stabbing through his camouflage trousers. It never failed. He always grew hard at thoughts of the stubborn little witch who was no doubt waiting at home to nag him about something.

“Fuck off.”

Hayashi sighed. “I would if Morgan were here. I wish Jules would stop pairing him off with Fallon.”

“Jealous?”

Hayashi snorted. “No. Fallon’s too head over heels for Olivia. And with the baby coming, you barely see one without the other anymore. Besides, Morgan knows how lucky he is to have me. He’s not going to screw up a good thing.”

“You got that right.” Because if the annoying male even tried fucking over Hayashi, Tersch would gut him. Slowly.

"The problem is you."

"Huh?"

"Our illustrious team leader knows how much Morgan bothers you. I think he's afraid you're going to lose your temper one of these days and rip Morgan's head off."

Tersch grinned. "You know, that's not a bad idea. I like the way Jules thinks."

Julian Hawkins had been his lieutenant in the US Navy, when Tersch had been a SEAL. Tersch had followed him into the Circ project and hadn't looked back since. He trusted Jules with his life. He'd do anything for the man, to include keeping the enemy from taking another whack at him. Hence their trip into the sweltering early September heat of Virginia. He could only thank God his toughened skin repelled the insects on the hunt for blood.

Hayashi sighed. "I know Morgan can be a pain in the ass."

"I'm sure you do," Tersch muttered and kept his eyes open for any sign that the enemy had been through this section of the forest.

Hayashi ignored him and continued, "But he's not the problem. You and that temper are. Say what you want, but we both know you've been getting worse at keeping a tight rein over your anger."

Especially since the monster that lived deep inside him refused to be silent any longer. Unlike the other Circs, Tersch didn't just have to deal with a beast he changed into at will. A darker, stronger force lay buried deep inside him, a force that grew closer and closer to taking over every day. And Tersch blamed Ava for the damned thing's impatience.

The berserker wanted its mate. The beast wanted his mate. And both of them wanted her *yesterday*. Tersch flushed. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not."

Fortunately, before Hayashi could start counseling him, Tersch picked up the scent. "Our prey went that way."

"Quarry, not prey," Hayashi replied with a whispered growl.

They moved swiftly through the forest. Tersch connected with the ground beneath him. He absorbed every rock and root through the soles of his bare feet without complaint, the undersides as tough as the rest of him. Like Hayashi, he wore only his trousers as clothing. Made of a special fabric, they expanded when he *changed* from man to beast.

*Hunt, kill.* The animal sentience that dwelled just beneath his skin had an innate sense of self-preservation. His beast had been urging him to annihilate these fuckers ever since they'd learned the enemy was out here.

He took a deep breath and scented the enemy's spoor. Violence and the pungent smell of rogue Circ told him he was headed in the right direction. Tersch grunted with satisfaction and listened with a keen ability—and that other part of himself more wild than even his beast.

In the far distance he could make out Raul LaGarda and three other rogues. Unlike Tersch and his team, rogue Circs lived on the raw edge. They had trouble filtering right from wrong and were driven to satisfy their baser needs. Many of them had to work hard not to kill, when every primal urge insisted they take what they wanted whenever they wanted. At some point during the course of a rogue's life, they devolved into mutants: inhuman creatures more monster than man. Supposedly a mate could cure that spiraling transformation into becoming mutant, but Tersch wasn't buying it.

Just more mate propaganda from Mrs. Alicia Sharpe, their annoying boss. He detested the woman's interference. He didn't need a wife, a mate, or a goddamn girlfriend. He didn't need anyone but his team. He huffed and increased his pace, determined to concentrate on his job and only his job.

Hayashi fell behind as Tersch's rage sneaked up on him. He barely realized that he'd begun to *change* even more, into his inner berserker. Though not gifted with the psychic abilities his friends had, Tersch could enhance his physical prowess, becoming faster and stronger than anyone he'd ever met. Even Morgan,

that slippery bastard, couldn't outrun Tersch when the raw, basest part of him took control.

He grew several inches taller than his beast, now towering over seven feet in height. Muscles upon muscles developed. His heart grew, supplying more oxygen to his body through enlarged arteries, and his expanded lungs increased his intake. His claws and teeth grew sharper and harder, and his flesh darkened, almost rivaling Ava's brown skin. But where hers was soft and beautiful, his was coarse, designed to protect against enemies.

His eyes, he'd been told, frightened grown men. As a Circ, he had slit pupils surrounded by blue irises. But his eyes turned black all over when he went into berserker mode. Streaks of white and blue covered the orb, making his eyes look "like a reflection of deepest night, speckled with stars." Hayashi had described him so poetically, while Morgan had likened him to a demon's bitch, come to drag the unworthy back to hell.

Tersch's berserker preferred Morgan's description. Hell, fire. Death, destruction...

The creature lived to destroy everything in its path. A good thing when in the presence of the enemy, but a bad thing when surrounded by friends or family. Family who could be taken and tortured, like what had happened to Jules just two months ago. Friends who could be thrown from a building and nearly killed, as Hayashi had experienced months before that. Every one of his teammates and their mates had suffered because of men like the ones he now hunted.

He'd be damned if he'd let them get away with it. Accepting the rage, he used it to fan his aggression as well as his abilities. He followed the trail of his enemies with ease and loped through the forest on silent feet.

He found the rogues waiting for him, having caught his scent on the shifting wind. Four large Circs led by Raul LaGarda, their target. Perfect.

When they spotted him, they froze, and he scented fear. Tersch chuckled with glee, pleased at the rush that overtook him.

“Which one of you wants to die first?” he growled in a voice less than human.

*Need to keep Raul alive for questioning. Don't forget.* Tersch fought to get through to his berserker, the monster, but he feared it was too late.

As the rogues leaped to attack, he met them fist for fist. He countered with deliberate slowness, absorbing the blows and press of claws against his rough hide but not feeling much more than featherlight taps. He clawed through one rogue's chest and another's back. Both dropped to the ground, unmoving.

Though *changed*, his enemy couldn't withstand the power behind his punches, his sheer animalistic rage. The remaining two flailed as they tried to run away, but Hayashi had caught up and stopped one of them with a kick to his face.

“Not so fast.” Hayashi stood ready to attack Raul, the last one standing. Hayashi glanced at Tersch and quickly looked away, careful not to make eye contact. “Oh shit. This cannot be good.”

Raul struck out, but Hayashi retaliated with a kick to his ribs and a following roundhouse that took Raul off his feet. The rogue fell and hurried to right himself. Too late.

Tersch lifted him off his feet by his neck. Though Raul must have weighed a good three hundred pounds of solid muscle, he didn't come close to straining Tersch's muscles. Tersch smiled through his fangs, his berserker pleased at finally being allowed to play. Though he often exercised his beast by letting it come to the surface to frolic and fight, his berserker had to be kept on lockdown for fear it would kill everything in sight. The raging creature hated being cooped up, on a leash, and scolded into behaving by everyone on the goddamn team. Including Tersch.

While Hayashi took care of the Circ he'd kicked trying to regain his feet, Tersch shook Raul like a rag doll.

“Fuck! Let me down, you freak!” Raul choked, barely able to breathe.

“What? I couldn't understand that.” He felt his back teeth form. When Tersch transformed, his canines grew into fangs. But when he allowed his berserker to

emerge, his entire physiology changed. All his teeth grew sharp, and a second row grew to reinforce the front, increasing his ability to inflict greater damage.

His berserker loved the thought of biting into prey, and Tersch forced himself to keep Raul at arm's length. He shook Raul again, taking care not to accidentally break the fucker's neck. Playing with this new toy amused him, and he didn't want it to end too soon.

"Hell." Hayashi swore next to him. "Gunnar, buddy, you can hang on to him all night if you want, but don't kill him. Jules wants him alive for questioning."

Tersch frowned, his inner berserker not pleased. *More orders. More rules. No fun. The Circ challenges me for dominance?* He grumbled at Hayashi and took a threatening step nearer, even though Tersch knew he stood next to his friend. *I'm a fucking monster.*

"Come on, Tersch. It's me."

Tersch leaned down to sniff and nodded, pleased when Hayashi bared his throat and turned his head away. The berserker knew and trusted that scent. Friend. Family. Hayashi had been his before and would be again. No matter that the others had all taken mates. At heart they belonged to each other. When the mating heat struck—as it did just about every month and sometimes more often—gender and marital ties meant less than satisfying their inner beasts.

At the thought, he grew hard. Both his berserker and his beast wanted sexual play. *So long since I had that ass.* Tersch glanced down at Hayashi and grinned.

Hayashi swore again before lifting a radio out of the small pack he carried. "Jules, it's me. We have them. You'd better hurry before the Viking kills Raul. He's ultrahuge again, and his eyes are that funky striated black and blue. Freaky, yeah." He rattled off a set of coordinates he read from the GPS on his radio and signed off. "Okay, Tersch. You'd better put him back on his feet again. He's turning purple."

Tersch lowered the rogue to the ground but kept his hand around Raul's neck. Every now and then he squeezed to remind Raul he lived because *Tersch* allowed him to live. His berserker thrived on dominance as much as Tersch did. He had to

be in charge, because to lose command of a situation would be deadly. As he well knew.

“Why did you take Melissa Keiser?” Hayashi asked Raul while they waited for the others to join them.

“Who?” Raul answered in a hoarse growl.

Tersch shook him. “Melissa Keiser.”

Raul swallowed hard beneath Tersch’s palm. “Fuck. You want to know? Fine. Like I give a shit about her. Melissa *Ramirez* is working for some bigwig in Washington. Keiser was the name she used to sucker you assholes into believing her.”

Hayashi snorted. “We figured that much out ourselves. How long has she been working for this bigwig?”

“As long as I’ve known her. Nine months or more, I’d guess.”

Tersch had a bad feeling Melissa had been working for the enemy for as long as she’d been working at the mansion, what the team had dubbed Circ central. Their home. And it had never been as safe as any of them had thought.

His anger grew. Someone had dared put those he loved in danger.

“Easy, Gunnar.” Hayashi spoke softly, and Tersch realized his claws had grown another inch and darkened in color.

His vision blurred as he strove to remain in control. He nodded, pushing past the layers of sheer feeling into thought. Hayashi gently stroked his forearm, helping to soothe him. The familiar touch and scent eased his berserker, as well as his beast.

Hayashi continued his interrogation of Raul. “But you don’t know who she’s working for, right? I know the name Colonel Ricardo Montaña rings a bell. You worked for him, remember?”

They'd killed the asshole drug runner just two weeks ago. Jules had pulled Montaña's heart from his fucking chest. A thing of beauty, but Tersch had been too busy trying to save Ava's sexy, sorry, lying ass at the time to witness it.

As if thinking about him had conjured him, Jules appeared, followed closely by Fallon and Morgan.

"About time," Tersch said with a grunt.

Fallon swore and gave Tersch a wide berth.

Morgan groaned and did the same. "Shit. I hate when he turns all freakish."

"Pussy." Tersch chuckled and showed Morgan his teeth, delighted when Morgan's green eyes widened.

Morgan shook his head. "You are one spooky Circ, you know that?"

Tersch took it as a compliment.

Jules sighed. "Tersch, level down to your beast. *Now.*"

*Not yet, still hungry. Want to play.* Tersch's berserker whined, even gave him a small fight about going back under, but Tersch persisted. He tucked the monster back down and allowed his beast to resurface. After letting go of Raul, he shrank a few inches to seven feet. His sharp teeth returned to normal, except for the fangs, and his muscle mass decreased considerably. Still, he was larger than the others around him, and his beast took comfort in the fact.

"That is some fucking weird-ass shit." Raul gasped and clutched at his throat, where Tersch's fingerprints were slowly fading.

Jules crossed his arms over his broad chest. His bright gray eyes shone with hard purpose. "Raul, let's not play games. You helped Sheridan escape from Montaña's compound two months ago. You pretended to work for him then. But who have you really been working for?"

"Myself." Raul sneered at them.

Jesse Fallon shook his head. A telepath, he could be relied upon to dig information from sources who didn't want to share. His talents came in handy,

especially on cases like these. “He’s telling the truth, but not all of it. Raul’s in it for himself. He worked for Montaña because it was the easiest way to gain information on the asshole. He spied for someone else. And he doesn’t know who he’s really working for, except that he goes through Melissa. But Melissa knows the boss. Some guy she calls Lonnie.”

Jules blinked but said nothing. Yet a stillness overcame him, and Tersch didn’t like his leader’s sudden worry.

He took an automatic step closer to Jules, the ingrained need to protect overwhelming.

When Jules noticed, he bared his teeth in a growl. “Stand your fucking ground, Tersch. We’ve been over this.”

Unhappy but not willing to annoy Jules more than he already had, Tersch obeyed and stepped back. The last time he’d tried to smother Jules with protection, he’d paid for it with his ass.

“So Melissa knows who she’s working for.” Jules paused in thought. He stared hard at Raul. “What about Jack?”

“Who?”

“Jack Keiser, her husband,” Hayashi clarified.

Raul shrugged. “Never heard of him or saw him till we set fire to their house. Melissa’s the only one I had contact with. She’s psychic, but you already knew that. One powerful, money-hungry bitch. You can smell it on her.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Fallon agreed. He frowned, but by then it was too late.

Tersch had already moved. He’d seen the way Raul’s body tensed in the moment before the rogue sprang at Jules.

Already in front of his team leader, Tersch intercepted the claws meant for Jules and took the stabbing blow into his own chest. As he did, he caught Raul’s head in his hands and twisted.

The rogue dropped like a stone, and his claws left Tersch's chest in a sucking sound.

The pain was intense, but the gaping wound healed quickly. He glanced at Raul staring sightlessly from the ground, his head twisted at an odd angle, his neck broken.

"Nice move." Morgan nodded to Tersch. "I guess I'll put out some feelers on Melissa Ramirez. I wouldn't have minded some time to dig for more answers from this one, but they never learn." The ex-mercenary might be a pain the ass, but he was a helluva guy when it came to learning information. Between Morgan's contacts and interrogation techniques, he'd become handy to have around.

Tersch agreed, considering the dead rogue.

"I thought I told you to stand your ground," Jules said in a soft voice, one that sent chills down Tersch's spine.

*Shit.* Tersch slowly turned around. "Sorry, Jules. It was instinctive."

Jules glared. "Bullshit. I told you I don't need you fighting my battles anymore."

"Oh, this is gonna be good," Morgan muttered to Hayashi as he crossed to stand next to his mate.

"Jules, he was just trying to help," Fallon offered but quickly shut up when Jules shot him a hard look. To Tersch, Fallon mentally sent, *"I tried, buddy. I have a feeling you're in for it."*

*"I know,"* Tersch sent back. Though not telepathic, he replied on the wavelength Fallon had used.

"Come here." Jules tugged Tersch by a belt loop on his trousers, closing the distance between them. "Need some discipline, Gunnar?"

*Fuck, he would have to do this now.* Thoughts of Ava continued to crowd his mind, the need for sex and blood and violence an ever-present source of desire, especially after he'd walked in the footsteps of his berserker. It didn't feel as if a

mating heat pressed, just the good clean scent of lust and Circ pheromones invading the space around them.

“Shit. I’m going to tie up our surviving rogue,” Morgan mumbled and quickly moved to the one on the ground still breathing. “I’ll keep watch while you four... Hell.” He rubbed his own erection through his trousers. “Too bad we can’t film this so I could watch it later.”

Hayashi grinned at him. “Don’t worry. I’ll give you a blow-by-blow tonight.”

“You’d better.” Morgan gave him a stern look, then turned and dragged the sole unconscious Circ away.

Hayashi said to Jules, “Morgan knows what we need, and he’s good with it. We haven’t done this in a while. It’s time, I think.”

Jules flashed his fangs. “Glad you approve.” He turned back to Tersch. “But my intent isn’t only to strengthen our team. Seems Tersch here still wants to play by his own rules. He doesn’t seem to remember that he’s part of the pack and that he’s not the alpha. *I* am.”

## Chapter Two

“Jules,” Tersch growled, but he couldn't ignore his own excitement. Now mated to Sheridan, a beautiful redheaded healer with a temper to match her fiery hair, Jules had been distracted of late. Though he'd used sex to bond Tersch to his female, Jules hadn't bonded with the whole team for a while now. Added to that, he was going to become a father, and Tersch understood why his team leader had been preoccupied.

Yet Tersch needed the belonging. Hell, they all did. Sex not only served to procreate their new species; it tied them all together, closer than family. Circs had a pack mentality, and belonging was a necessary part of it.

Sheridan, Morgan, and Fallon's mate, Olivia, knew and understood what their Circ mates needed from one another—a desire to keep each other close, sane, and safe.

Tersch knew he was the biggest threat to the others, and it shamed him. But he could only do so much to contain his berserker. As it was, the monster wanted to come back out and take part in their play. But Tersch couldn't afford to let him. Sometimes he wanted too much pain, and the creature scared him with its appetite. His beast, on the other hand, he could fully control. Mostly.

“Come here, Gunnar.” Jules slowly stripped out of his clothes, as did the others. *Changed*, their muscles bulged and expanded. Their cocks were long, thick, and slick with the natural oils their Circ bodies secreted, natural lubrication to ease the mating act and increase the probability of conception. When Tersch made a move to release his own trousers, Jules shook his head.

“What?”

“Pull them down but don’t take them off. Stop when they’re at midhigh, then get down on your hands and knees.”

“Come on, Jules.” Tersch was so hard, he wanted to explode. He lowered his trousers but remained standing, needing to be disciplined. Needing to be loved.

“Lesson number one. I own you. Lesson number two, I don’t want to hear you.” Jules glanced at Fallon, who smiled widely. The bastards were speaking in their heads, and it didn’t look good for Tersch.

Jules shoved Tersch forward. Off balance because of his pants, he landed hard on his hands and knees.

Fallon followed him, rounding to his front as he dropped to his knees. “Perfect. Don’t talk. Just open your mouth.”

Centered on the hard, shiny cock waiting on him, Tersch leaned forward and took it in his mouth.

Fallon’s sigh and the faint scent of mint, Fallon’s telltale sign of arousal, increased his own. He moaned and took Fallon’s huge shaft to the back of his throat, loving the musky scent of his need.

“Oh man, I’m not gonna last,” Fallon said on a breath and began fucking Tersch’s mouth.

Then a light scent of cinnamon teased, and large hands cupped his ass while someone knelt behind him. Hayashi. “A nice, tight ass. I like his legs bound together by the pants.” Hayashi’s cock prodded his anus, pushing and teasing, before he slid his thick shaft inside Tersch with ease. Hayashi clenched Tersch’s hips tight and shuddered. “God, I love this.”

Full, Tersch allowed himself to be taken, glorying in the sense of communion as his friends strove to find fulfillment.

Jules stood next to him and murmured, “That’s right. They come, but you don’t.” His team leader gripped his long hair tight. Normally Tersch’s blond hair

barely reached his shoulders, but when he *changed*, it lightened almost to white and came to the small of his back.

“Oh fuck, I’m coming,” Fallon said on a breath.

“Fill him up,” Jules murmured.

Fallon groaned and spewed, the rush of seed hitting the back of Tersch’s throat and filling his mouth. Tasting his fellow Circ, taking the essence of his teammates into his body, sated Tersch’s strong need for acceptance.

Fallon pulled away before he’d finished coming, and Jules milked the rest of Fallon’s cum from his shaft.

“So good,” Hayashi moaned and fucked him harder, the burn of his fat cock even better.

Tersch needed relief from his own aching sex, but he couldn’t get there, not yet. Not enough pain, no push to shove his libido further over the crest into climax.

Hayashi shoved hard once more and came, sighing as he unloaded.

“Good.” Jules approved, and he let go of Fallon to embrace Hayashi. The sound of a kiss made Tersch clench that cock tight in his ass.

Hayashi hissed and raked Tersch’s ass with his claws.

“Oh yeah,” Tersch rumbled, almost purring with delight.

“No, pull out, Kisho. I have a treat for our boy.” Jules’s deep voice was husky with desire. “Stay close, you two,” he said to Fallon and Hayashi. “He’s going to need more.”

Tersch didn’t see if Fallon and Hayashi took his advice, because he was suddenly shoved over onto his back, his legs still captured by his trousers.

“That’s nice.” Jules straddled his face, his hairless cock huge and flushed, his balls tight. “Now you’re going to suck me until you gag, Viking. But first, you’re going to apologize for disobeying orders.”

Tersch got off on the submission. They both knew he could defeat Jules in a hand-to-hand fight. But Jules’s dominance was unquestioned. Tersch bowed to him,

to the commander and savvy hunter who led Dawn Endeavor. Jules knew just how much pain he needed to be free of his cravings.

“I’m waiting,” Jules growled.

“I’m sorry, Jules. I won’t do it again.” Not so obviously, at least.

“Open up.” Jules didn’t treat him gently. He rammed his cock between Tersch’s lips, literally gagging him as he fucked his mouth. Unlike Fallon, who’d slid in and out with a gradual rhythm, Jules pummeled hard, the hurt oh so good.

Tersch moaned around that cock, so needy, so painfully hard. Yet Jules didn’t stop. He shoved down hard with his pelvis, nearly cutting off Tersch’s airway as he sought release. Then claws, Hayashi’s or Fallon’s, gouged one of Tersch’s shoulders, holding him down. The bite of pain was more than welcome.

Tersch felt a small spurt at his cock and knew he wouldn’t last much longer. One touch on his dick and he’d lose it.

“That’s it. Take my cock to the back of that strong throat. Good boy.” Jules leaned back and ran his claws over the bloodied streaks in Tersch’s shoulder. Then he let go to wrap his fingers in Tersch’s hair. “Like gold. Like I’m fucking gold,” Jules growled as he shoved his cock deeper.

Tersch choked and grasped the back of Jules’s ass for more. And then he felt a hot mouth around his own cock. Felt the press of fangs and a tongue over his shaft. Thick fingers suddenly pressed at his already slick hole, and he fought to hold on.

“I come first,” Jules whispered and dug into his wounded shoulder, a satin promise of pain should Tersch disobey.

Tersch struggled to hold on while his entire body screamed at him to release.

A strangled groan, and Jules was coming into his mouth. The cum ran over Tersch’s lips as he swallowed as fast as he was able.

“That’s it,” Jules whispered and shafted his mouth a few more time. “Come for me, Gunnar. Now.”

Suction increased around Tersch's cock, and a third finger stretched his hole. Fangs scraped his shaft, and he couldn't breathe, his mouth still hugging Jules's flesh before Jules pulled out and stood.

The explosion hit him, and he let out a hoarse yell.

His orgasm struck hard, and he came and came, writhing in ecstasy as one of them swallowed his cream. He felt jets of warm sperm hit his legs, his belly, and he blinked up to see Jules unloading more cum onto his chest while Fallon jacked off as well.

He could barely catch his breath as satisfaction consumed him.

Hayashi licked the last bit of seed from his cock and stood, his hand around his own erection that flagged, slick with moisture.

Tersch's eyes suddenly burned, a well of emotion drowning him from out of nowhere. So much pleasure, and all centered on him. He blinked rapidly to halt mortifying tears. "Thanks," he said gruffly, too spent to move.

Jules leaned down and kissed him, the affectionate caress more than needed. "You're mine." He straightened. "All of you. Don't forget it." Jules's low voice sounded threatening, but each of them smiled.

"Hard to forget with you ordering us around all the time," Fallon teased.

"Yeah. Especially when you remind us like this." Hayashi grinned, his gaze joyous. "And thanks. This is going to make Morgan nuts later. You wouldn't believe how creative he can get in bed if he thinks he's missed out on something with the team."

Jules smiled. "I'll visit you two tomorrow night, after we get back. Wouldn't want your boy to feel left out."

"I heard that," Morgan yelled from the woods. "Cocksuckers."

Tersch snickered. Replete, exhausted, and finally able to tamp down all his aggression, he slowly made his way to his feet and pulled up his trousers. In the

back of his mind, he couldn't help wondering what Ava would think of this, and how she'd feel under him.

His good mood left him, because he knew he'd never find out.

\* \* \*

Ava Belle grimaced at the woman she'd spent a lifetime trying to please. Alicia Sharpe, currently known as an all-around ball breaker, had recently returned from a meeting in Washington and was smiling at something Olivia said. *Don't do it, Olivia. Don't get suckered in by those soft brown eyes and feminine charm. That woman is a shark.*

Her grandmother turned to wink at her, and Ava gritted her teeth. *Grandmother* was an affectionate term for the woman several generations her senior. Hell, Ava's mother had called Alicia grandmother. None of the family really knew how old she was, only that she'd been around for a long time. Nothing about Alicia was normal; then again, Ava couldn't claim to be average on a good day.

She liked to think of her small frame as petite with curves, though her ass seemed to get more than its share of attention. Gunnar especially liked looking at it...when he wasn't avoiding her. She scowled, needing to unload her frustrations on the actual source of her bad mood.

If she believed half the things both men and women said to her, Ava had a breathtaking beauty, a figure that put swimsuit models to shame, and an astonishing capacity to render the male of the species speechless with a smile. Funny, but none of her positive attributes seemed to make an impact on her absent, stubborn-as-hell *mate*.

She stomped from the kitchen, where Olivia and Sheridan, Jules's new mate, soon-to-be bride, and expectant mother, were laughing at something her grandmother said. Sure, the younger women could afford to be happy. They were mated, pregnant, and looking forward to their men returning today.

Lately, Ava had only to meet Gunnar's gaze to send the man racing away in a panic. "Tough guy, my ass," she muttered as she strode down the hall toward her own office.

"Yo, Ava, wait up." Keegan Price, one of the dozen psychics now assigned to the protection detail working the house, called out to her.

Ava swore under her breath as she slowed down and turned. Keegan wasn't a bad guy. Hell, a few years ago, they'd even dated once or twice. It wasn't his fault he reminded her too much of the man currently avoiding her. Keegan had height, brawn, intelligence, and the psychic wherewithal to tear a body apart with nothing more than his mind. Her grandmother's new favorite secret weapon. Ava thought Alicia might like Keegan almost as much as she liked the Circs. What that really meant, she had no idea, nor did she want to know.

She sighed. "Yes?"

"Now, honey, don't be like that." Keegan grinned, and she imagined him tipping up a cowboy hat if he'd been allowed to wear one in the house. Regulations stipulated that the guards all wear a standard uniform of black boots, trousers, and black shirts. As if Ava or the others would have a hard time distinguishing their new bodyguards from the Circs that lived in the mansion.

"What do you want, Keegan? I have things to do."

His good-old-boy grin faded. "You okay?"

She wished he would stop being nice. Ava didn't do well with nice, which was probably why she and Mr. Avoidance complemented each other so well. "No, I'm not. I have to deal with the fallout from the Keisers. Remember them? The husband-and-wife handyman and housekeeper who tried to kill Morgan over two weeks ago?"

"Yeah, about that—"

"I have several meetings between Mrs. Sharpe, Mr. Anderson, and a few House Committee lackeys in DC to coordinate."

"Right, but—"

“And the Circs are due home today, so we need someone to cook, clean up around here, and make sense of all this housekeeping shit.” She glared when his eyes narrowed. “So if you’re here to whine about the new tasks set before your team, don’t bother.”

He opened his mouth and closed it with a snap. “Fuck.” He swore more under his breath as he turned on his heel and walked away. In his wake, a vase on a nearby table shattered, dribbling water, flowers, and pottery shards to the floor.

Terrific. One more mess for his boys to clean up.

Ava understood his plight but didn’t have time to care. His men had been assigned to Circ central to protect the Circs and their mates from the outside threat intent on killing and/or using them for further Circ experiments. Unfortunately, until Ava found a replacement for the Keisers, Keegan’s men were currently cooking and working as handymen as well as protecting. Their one trustworthy housekeeper could only keep up with so much.

She hurried to her office before someone else stopped her. Most of the guards Admiral London had assigned them had even tempers, but a few put her on edge. She could deal with telepaths and empaths. Guarding her thoughts and feelings from others came naturally. But the telekinetics and pyrokinetics took skill to deal with. Men who could move things with their minds or start fires with a thought made powerful enemies. Keegan had a temper but had the self-control to handle himself. She glanced at the vase and amended. He *usually* had self-control.

*Unlike some people I might name.* Bright blue eyes set in an unforgiving face stared back at her in memory, and she sighed, more than missing Gunnar, that arrogant idiot.

Once inside her office, Ava moved immediately to her desk chair and began working. For an hour, she made appointments, cancelled meetings, and coordinated with Mr. Robert Anderson, Alicia’s new favorite contact in the Pentagon. Lately they’d been meeting weekly. What her grandmother and Anderson talked about was

anyone's guess, but Ava had too much to concentrate on in this place to worry about the grand scheme of things.

Schemes were why they paid her grandmother the big bucks.

She snorted. If the men up north knew just who they were talking to, they'd shit a brick. Alicia might look like a professional woman in designer business suits and pearls, but the older woman could kick serious ass any day of the week.

Knowing that helped keep Ava's temper in check, because every time she thought about all she'd endured waiting for Gunnar to catch up to her, she wanted to pound something. She knew it was unfair to blame Olivia or Sheridan for having slept with him. Hell, the entire Circ team had fucked Gunnar. Ava should have been incensed, and she was...at herself. If she'd claimed him all those months ago, she could have spared herself the jealousy. But she hadn't, and her mate had needed Circ contact. Who was she to blame him for seeking ease in the Circs who loved and accepted him? Oddly enough, she didn't begrudge Gunnar the time he spent with his team. It was the intimacy he'd shared with the females that bugged the crap out of her.

*Alicia Sharpe, you seriously owe me for this.*

*"Ava, dear, you have work to do. Focus on today, and tomorrow will come."*

"Dammit." Ava hadn't intended for her grandmother to hear that. Trust the old woman to know every damned thing that happened in this place.

Ava tried to throw herself back into work, but after another twenty minutes, she gave up. She couldn't concentrate past Frederik Gunnar Tersch. The biggest pain in her ass she'd ever met, and the only man she wanted more than life itself. Tall where she was short, fair where she was dark, his contrasts fascinated her. He was the most powerful Circ she'd ever encountered. Though he and his team had been created by science, Ava and her kind had lived long before the Circe serum came to be.

Her unique abilities made her the perfect mate for Gunnar, if only the stubborn man would stop running from her. She'd thought that revealing herself as a Circ would have relaxed him. Instead, he took her existence as a personal affront.

"Asshole," she muttered.

Her phone rang, distracting her.

"Yeah?" she answered.

"The men are home." Mrs. Sharpe disconnected before Ava could say anything else.

Anticipation filled her from head to toe. The men had left to follow a lead on the rogue Circs that had attacked the mansion two weeks prior. Raul LaGarda was their ringleader and an unstable Circ her brother had been investigating. To hear Grayson tell it, Raul wanted money, women, and power, and not necessarily in that order. She wondered if the team had found him and the others.

A sixth sense told her Gunnar had fared well, so she didn't worry about his health. But she couldn't deny how much she wanted to see him again.

She joined the others in the large family room attached to the kitchen. The mansion boasted fourteen thousand square feet. It had the requisite pool, gymnasium, and an assortment of high-class amenities she would never have associated with a navy-run program. The laboratory in the basement had been specially designed for the team, in addition to the state-of-the-art security system they'd recently upgraded.

The open kitchen had dark granite counters, white cabinets, and plenty of work space. A large oak table that could easily sit twelve sat off to one side. Over the expansive counter where many of the men liked to sit and eat, the living room invited company with plush leather sofas, chairs, a huge plasma screen television, a pool table and poker table, and a fireplace. Across from the fireplace, a set of French doors led outside onto the patio. The Croatan National Forest bordered the land behind them, the tall oaks, hickories, and pines providing the perfect place for Circs to run and hunt without detection.

“They’ve only been gone three days, but it feels like a lot longer,” Sheridan said to Olivia.

“I know.” Olivia grinned. “Jesse just told me they’re all doing well, and they learned some interesting things on their trip.”

Olivia and Jesse shared a lot without speaking. One of the perks of mating a telepath, Ava suspected.

She studied Sheridan and Olivia, two women she considered very good friends. Olivia was tall and slender with black hair, blue-green eyes, and model-good looks. Her ability to read emotions had made her the perfect mate for Jesse, a man who heard thoughts. She had a great sense of humor and cared for the Dawn Endeavor team. And she had a soft spot for Gunnar. As much as it burned Ava that Olivia knew Gunnar intimately, conversely, it made Ava like her that much more for her open heart.

Sheridan had only had sex with Gunnar once—that Ava knew of—and that had been to establish ties to her as the team alpha’s mate. Ava didn’t want to, but she understood and grudgingly accepted Sheridan’s place in the team’s hierarchy. The woman had dark red hair, blue eyes, and a curvy frame that had snared Jules from the get-go. She could also heal with a touch, and she stood at Ava’s eye level. Not someone to look up to, finally.

Keegan entered the kitchen. “They’ll be in shortly,” he said to Mrs. Sharpe and scowled at Ava, still not happy with her, apparently.

*Join the friggin’ club.*

“We’ll be standing by outside,” Keegan added in clipped words.

The Circs had issue with the psychics. Though Jesse and Olivia had personally scanned every single one of the new men, trust was still a commodity much in demand around the mansion. And not only that, but the psychics had an odd effect on the Circs. Ava sensed it as well.

Jules had explained that it was as if he sensed a kindred spirit with the new guards. He wanted to take them in, make them pack. But the guards were fully

human. Making them pack would have involved his beast biting and fucking them—brutal bonding humans would never accept. So the Dawn Endeavor team kept their distance from the powerful males.

Having men around their mates, and pregnant mates at that, didn't bode well. So when the Circs remained at home, the guards normally made themselves scarce, patrolling outside yet close to the house, away from the females. Keegan and James Foreman, a pyrokinetic with a wicked sense of humor, remained near her grandmother but out of sight, at Alicia's command.

Ava scented the team as they neared, attuned to Jules's signature. He gave off a subtle waft of vanilla and grass, an earthy blend of sultry Circ. Kisho smelled like cinnamon, Jesse like mint, and Morgan like citrus. Morgan was human, but since he'd mated to Kisho, he'd taken on Circ energy, altering his physiology enough that to Ava, he was Circ.

And Gunnar... She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to manage her sudden fiery libido.

Gunnar smelled *perfect*. A blend of cedar and the light scent of the Amazon. Thick, humid, a jungle of sex and lust and violence. Her beast absolutely loved his darker, wilder self, what he called his berserker. Unfortunately, Gunnar rarely let the creature out to play, too afraid of hurting anyone in the event he lost control. She'd seen him that way once—huge, his hair long and white, his eyes black agates of danger.

She shivered, wishing she could see him like that again.

The men followed Jules into the living space. Sheridan raced to meet him and jumped into his arms. Jesse found Olivia and kissed her long and hard. Kisho and Morgan entered together, the pair of them like bookends. Different yet the same, fitting together as if made for each other. They collapsed onto the couch and sighed with relief.

"It is *so* good to be home." Morgan pulled Kisho into his arms and just lay there with his eyes closed, his head back against the couch.

*God, I want that. To belong to someone else, to need and be needed.*

Almost against her will, Ava sought Gunnar. She turned to see him frowning at her, his bright blue eyes narrowed in anger.

She sighed. What had she done now?

“Good trip?” Alicia asked, one brow raised in inquiry.

To Ava's trained eye, her grandmother had always spent more attention on Gunnar than the others. Though Jules commanded the team, Alicia had always seemed partial to Gunnar, though Ava had never understood why.

Gunnar answered, “Raul's dead. We killed two of his three buddies but brought the fourth to Quantico for the admiral to deal with. Fallon read him before we handed him over, though.”

“Excellent.” Alicia beamed and took Gunnar by the arm before he could blink. “Why don't the rest of you settle in and relax. Gunnar can fill me in on the mission. Keegan has the guards in hand. There's no one new and no problems to speak of.”

“You expecting one?” Gunnar asked. He stood stiffly under her grandmother's touch, but he didn't refuse it. Progress.

“Not at all. I just like to make sure we're all on the same page.” Alicia paused. “Ava, dear, see to it that Gunnar has fresh towels. I'm not sure that was properly attended to.”

“I'll have James—”

“Ava.” Her grandmother frowned.

Gunnar smirked, and she wanted to smack him right in the mouth, then kiss his fat lip all better. “Fine. I'll see to it. Welcome home, guys.” She left the living room and started down the hall toward the wide stairway leading to the Circ wing upstairs. Once up on the second floor, she paused to grab a few large bath towels from the linen closet—God forbid Gunnar actually find his own linens—and continued on her task.

She walked into his room, expecting the worst, and got a pleasant surprise. Housekeeping had obviously taken the time to fix Gunnar's mess. The usual Tastykake wrappers and dirty clothing no longer littered the floor. The king-size bed had been neatly made, dark blue and gray pillows littering the headboard. The room had a masculine feel while still being luxurious. Across from the bed an antique desk was being used as a small media center. A video game console and a stack of magazines sat beneath a television mounted to the wall. The smaller chairs that graced the other rooms had been replaced with a large, ugly recliner to fit Gunnar's massive frame.

She tingled just thinking about his size. Though small, Ava knew she would fit him if the blasted man would give her the chance.

Ava pushed through another door and walked into an attached bath. Gray and green porcelain tiles covered the floors. A huge shower stall with multiple showerheads, a large sink, and a toilet completed the room. In this wing, the Circs each had a bedroom suite complete with bath.

Down the hall in the next wing, where the guests stayed, some rooms had attached baths, and others didn't. Ava snorted. Her own room, downstairs next to her office, was a third the size of Gunnar's. A half bath connected the bedroom to her office, but in order to shower, she had to make use of a guest bathroom upstairs. She hadn't minded so much because she'd never figured on making the mansion her permanent home. And with Gunnar's recent attitude, she'd begun to wonder if she'd made a huge mistake in thinking him her mate.

*Mine. My mate.* Her beast growled low in her throat. Trust the animal within her to want the most obnoxious Circ she'd ever met. She could only be glad she didn't suffer the same mating heats as the team. She couldn't imagine needing to have sex with a Circ and being denied Gunnar time after time. It was bad enough she had to watch him flinch from her touch.

She knew he was afraid he might hurt her. But she had no idea how to get him over his fears. *Maybe I should just jump him, tie him up to the bed, and have my way with him.*

Her beast liked the idea, a little too much.

Sighing, Ava turned to leave the bathroom. She made it as far as Gunnar's bed before pain, the likes of which she'd only felt once before, splintered her mind. She didn't even get a chance to cry out before she fell to the floor and passed out, trapped in a nightmare of jumbled thoughts and images that seemed never ending.

## Chapter Three

“I trust the mission went off without a hitch,” Mrs. Sharpe said as she handed him a cupcake.

Tersch looked at it with mistrust, wondering at the woman’s game. She was usually all over his ass to eat healthy. He also didn’t like the fact that the others had left him here alone with her while they cozied up to their mates upstairs. Even the psychics who normally bugged the shit out of him had disappeared.

That fucking Keegan. Bastard was always making eyes at Ava when he had work to do.

“What’s up, Alicia?” He stared at the chocolate confection in front of him with suspicion.

The older woman laughed. “Honestly, Gunnar. You can eat it. It’s not poisoned.”

“Yeah, right.” He gave it another sniff but could detect nothing but empty calories and cream. He ate it in one bite and sighed after he finished chewing. “Damn, that’s good.”

When she said nothing, he persisted. “What?”

“How are you feeling?”

The warmth in her gaze took him aback. He never liked this side of her. The softness confused him. Normally hard, unflappable, and commanding, when Mrs. Sharpe took him aside, away from the others, she turned all maternal on his ass. He much preferred her cold and imposing.

"I'm good." He cleared his throat, wondering when the hell Ava would return. Much as he needed to avoid the sharp-tongued little witch, he was never quite right without her. Besides, she made a strong buffer against her *grandmother*. Christ, he'd never seen that one coming.

"You seem stronger," Mrs. Sharpe commented.

He shrugged.

"The power inside you has grown, boy." Her eyes flashed to that funky red, making him feel both uncomfortable and strangely reassured. He'd have a hard time hurting her. The beast inside him respected her; the berserker sensed great power. To Tersch's surprise, he thought the monster might fear her. And that easily, she kept him in check.

"I don't feel any different. I'm the same."

"Still angry with me and Ava?"

"What, for lying to all of us for a year? For not telling us your goddamn granddaughter is as much a Circ as the rest of us?"

She smiled, annoying him. "Why, is that a problem?"

*Because if I'd known she was Circ from the beginning, I would have taken Ava and made her mine before my anger got so out of control. Now I change into my berserker even when I don't mean to, and I'm afraid I might hurt her. A chip off the old block, like my fucking old man.* "It's not, I just..." A strange sense of unease hit him hard.

"Gunnar?"

Tersch glanced around him but didn't scent, see, or hear anything amiss. He didn't know what the hell to think. "Ah, you think the compound is secured?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"No reason." He rubbed the back of his neck, his beast pushing at him to take a look around.

“Hold on.” She turned from him and found a phone. After making a call to security and reassuring herself all was well, she turned back to him. “I don’t sense anything amiss either, but it never hurts to check. Now tell me about Raul LaGarda.”

“Fallon read him before I had to deal with him. Hey, he was going to kill Jules. I had to stop him.”

Mrs. Sharpe just watched him, sighed, and shook her head. “Right. So tell me what happened.”

“Don’t you already know?”

“Don’t be flippant, dear. If I knew, I wouldn’t need to ask, now would I?”

The hell of it was, he didn’t know what she knew. Half the time he felt like he was playing some kind of game with the older woman and losing. She always smiled at him, and Tersch knew he was far from pleasant, even on a good day. Now Ava, she never pulled her punches. The sexy woman called him an asshole right to his face. That he could respect. Ava didn’t play games, not like her spooky relation.

Mrs. Sharpe grinned, and he did his best to guard his thoughts. He cleared his throat and took the next cupcake she handed him, feeling like a calf being fattened up for slaughter. “LaGarda was the same rogue Circ who helped Sheridan and Jules escape from that jungle prison a few months back. The bastard also admitted to helping Melissa Ramirez—that was her real name—pull one over on us.

“He didn’t know who he was really working for other than her, but he thinks she knows. Said the woman always referred to the guy as Lonnie.”

Mrs. Sharpe didn’t react, but the absolute stillness in her petite frame reminded him of how Jules had reacted before. Her tension said what words did not. The woman was seriously freaked.

“Mrs. Sharpe?”

“Lonnie?” she whispered. She paused in thought. “That *can't* be right. No.” She closed her eyes, then opened them, her expression bleak. “But it makes a twisted kind of sense.”

Oh hell. The woman was blinking back tears. In the year Tersch had been working for her, he'd rarely seen anything upset her. An arched brow, a mocking smile, one or two sharp words, but nothing of panic or grief, even when Ava had been held at knifepoint in the woods outside the house, right before they'd killed Montaña.

“You're not going to cry, are you?” he asked in a hoarse voice. Where the fuck was Ava? Olivia, hell, Sheridan?

Mrs. Sharpe blinked. “Of course not. I had something in my eye.”

“Right.” A part of him wanted to hug her, to reassure her that he'd protect her. But he couldn't make that call, not when he feared hurting her in the process. If only he could keep a handle on that monster inside him. The raging chaos that wanted nothing more than to destroy.

She took a deep breath and exhaled a shaky sigh. “I have a few things I need to look into. I'll talk with the rest of you later. Let the others know to meet in my study after breakfast tomorrow. Nine o'clock.”

He started to really worry when she didn't make any “don't be late” comments before she left.

Not sure what the hell was going on, Tersch decided to grab a shower, then a late lunch and some rack time before dinner. While the others were no doubt screwing themselves silly, his libido had been sated by Jules and the guys yesterday. Maybe it had been a mating heat after all, because seeing the female Circs today hadn't aroused him at all. Normally, he felt at least a pull of attraction at remembrances of Olivia or Sheridan in their Circ forms.

*But now all you can think of is Ava, normal or changed—and that is a sight worth seeing again.* His beast purred his pleasure at the thought. The creature wouldn't leave well enough alone. Even his damned berserker wanted to mark and

claim the female, and that wasn't happening. It would be one thing if Tersch could fuck Ava out of his system. He'd take her and forget her. Except he knew it wouldn't be that simple.

Not with Ava.

The man would make love to her; then his beast would push his way into claiming her, fucking, biting, petting, which would then lead to his berserker trying to break free from the tight hold he held on it. And that creature wanted nothing more than to possess Ava. No, not possess, *own*. As if Ava would allow that to happen. But when the time came, he'd just have to make her realize...

He started, aware he hadn't questioned the *when* of claiming her, but the *how*.

"Hell, this is not what I need right now," he muttered and stomped up the stairs to his room.

Someone had cleaned it, because he'd left it a mess, as usual. Chaos made him feel at home. A clean room reminded him too much of his early years spent trying to please Eric Tersch, a time best forgotten.

He closed his bedroom door behind him and sighed as he finally relaxed. Letting the tension ease from his tired muscles, he stripped off his boots, socks, and shirt. He walked into the bathroom and grinned at the stacked towels on the sink. "Bet that burned her ass."

Some twisted part of him got off on making Ava serve him. Probably because it annoyed her to no end, and he liked the strange relationship they had. He wanted her but wouldn't have her. She wanted him but didn't want to desire him. And they both knew how the other felt, so they dealt with their common frustration by pissing each other off. It worked for him.

He shifted on the balls of his feet when her scent hit him—the clean, pure smell of Ava Belle. Oddly enough, she didn't smell like a typical Circ. Nothing fruity or flowery about Ava. Hers was a feminine perfume uniquely her own.

And it was growing stronger.

He leaned closer to the towels. Not there. He turned around and followed his nose...to the slumped figure fighting to hold on to the bedspread. He hadn't seen her before since the bed canted to an angle, but she was now visible over its massive mattress.

*"Shit."* He dashed to her side and easily lifted her in his arms. Gently lowering her to the bed, he looked her over, running his hands over her to make sure she hadn't broken anything. "What the hell, Ava? Baby, you okay?" He stemmed the guilt he felt as pleasure coursed through his veins just from the simple contact of touch. *I'm not copping a feel; I'm trying to make sure she's okay. So why am I so fucking hard right now?*

She groaned.

"Ava, talk to me. You're freaking me out." With one hand he felt for her pulse, relieved to feel the steady thrumming of her heartbeat. She didn't look injured, but he couldn't tell with her clothes on.

At the thought, he froze, one hand on her belly, the other on her neck.

She dragged a hand to the one he had plastered to her T-shirt and opened her eyes. He stared into orbs more green than brown. So clear, so goddamn beautiful. Sooty lashes made a mystery of those eyes, and she blinked lazily, like a cat, as she watched him.

"You're hot," she said in a throaty drawl.

Unconsciously, he spread his fingers over the flat plane of her stomach, feeling the muscle and warmth of the vibrant woman beneath him. "So are you." Any pain he might have expected to see on her face didn't appear. Instead, hunger and a familiar feminine defiance looked up at him.

His beast responded with an eager growl, taking note of a prime female waiting to be claimed.

Tersch had to force himself not to accept the challenge she presented. He slowly withdrew his hands and sat next to her on the bed. He coughed to clear his throat and hoped his position, sitting with his side to her, hid his erection.

“So, uh, Ava. You going to tell me why you were dozing on my floor?” When she flushed, he smiled. “Looking under my bed for something? All my nudie magazines are in the nightstand, if you’re interested.” And the ones he used for inspiration all featured women who looked like her.

“Ass.” She tried to sit up, but he put his hand on her chest and forced her back down.

He quickly pulled his hand back from the pillowy feel of her soft breasts. “Spill, or I’m telling Grandma.”

She glared at him, relieving him that whatever had befallen her had been temporary. Ava seemed well on her way to recovery if she could stare holes through him.

“I tripped, must have hit my head.”

He raised a brow, knowing how much the gesture aggravated her. “Oh?” He ignored her protests and ran a hand over her soft brown hair, taken with the silken strands. Ava’s light brown skin tone and straight hair hinted at European ancestry somewhere in her family tree. The woman fascinated him on every level. He loved everything about her. Small, curvy, pretty. *Mine*, his beast had to add. Unfortunately, it was getting harder and harder to ignore that inner voice. Too easily, he could imagine taking her hard, uncaring of her concerns as long as he could bend her to his will. Pain and pleasure, a heady offering only a monster would need...

But the disgust wouldn’t come, buried under a desire so deep, he could no longer ignore its call.

“Funny, but I don’t feel any lumps,” he murmured in a thick voice and turned to add another hand, stroking her scalp with pleasure.

She moaned and twisted under his touch as if seeking more. “You’re a real jerk, but you have such good hands.” She relaxed under him and closed her eyes. “That feels good. Yeah, get the lower part behind my head, just above my neck. A tension headache.”

He rolled his eyes. Somehow he'd gone from interrogator to masseuse. The woman had a way of wrapping him around her finger with little effort. God help him if she learned she had so much power. "Ava, tell me what happened." He stopped his ministrations.

She blinked her eyes open. "It's no big deal."

"Ava," he warned in a soft voice.

"Okay, okay." She glanced up at him, her lips parted, her eyes becoming more brown. The damned things changed color with her moods, and he could see her worry. "I need your help."

"Oh?"

"It's only happened to me once before. A searing pain in my head. But it's Grayson's fault."

He grimaced. "The psychic? The same one you told me you were sleeping with but who denied it like crazy? That Grayson?"

She scowled up at him. "I did no such thing, you pervert. He's my brother."

He blinked. "Like hell."

"No, he is. I'm not lying."

"Who the hell knows with you? You told me before that you were sleeping with one of the psychics. Now you're not, and he's your brother?"

"We have the same eyes."

"Yeah, but you're brown. He's white."

She sighed. "I'm black, not brown."

He tried not to be taken in by her wide eyes and that soft, creamy skin. But where Ava was concerned, Tersch was weak. He'd made so many mental comparisons of that sweet flesh, he could tick them off on the fingers of both hands. "No, baby. That skin is nowhere near black. A rich coffee, a dark caramel, a milk chocolate, something sweet I'd like to eat up one bite at a time." His hands tingled where they touched her. He leaned closer, unable to help himself.

“We...we were talking about my brother.”

“Were we?” His brain seemed to have shut off. He’d been wondering for an entire fucking year what it would be like to feel her mouth under his. And she was so close. In his room. On his bed...

*Don't do it. Keep the monster away from her. You'll put her in danger.* In the back of his mind, he heard his sister’s cry, Susanna’s plea for life, an enraged roar. But Ava surrounded him with pure, sweet need. He couldn’t resist the temptation, not any longer.

He planted his hands on either side of her head and lowered himself so that his bare chest pressed against her thinly clad breasts. Fuck, he could feel her nipples against him, his body overly sensitized to her nearness.

“Gunnar—”

“Ava,” he whispered back and kissed her.

She tasted like everything he’d dreamed. Womanly, sweet, and so sexy, it was all he could do not to rip her clothes off, mount her, and fuck her like the animal he was. He licked at her lips and thrust his tongue inside when she opened for him on a moan. He invaded, taking as much as giving.

Tersch gripped the mattress on either side of her head with fingers quickly turning into claws. He shivered, so under her spell, he could barely remember his own name. Ava, finally his. The mate he’d been longing for, the answer to his hopes and dreams. So soft, so feminine, desirable...

Her hands crept up to his shoulders, and the feel of her palms on his flesh made him rock hard in seconds. She stroked his shoulders, then his neck, and pulled him closer into the kiss.

He slanted his mouth to angle for deeper penetration. She met his tongue stroke for stroke, allowing him to plunder, to take what he’d been wanting for so long.

*Breathe. Have to...breathe.* He pulled away, gasping, but couldn't stop planting kisses over her smooth skin.

"Mmm, yes," she murmured and ran her hands over his shoulders to his chest. "So strong."

He made the mistake of leaning back to look into her eyes and saw her beast staring out at him through slit pupils, daring him to take what they both knew to be his. *Take her. Mine, ours. Now.* If it were only his beast, he might have succumbed. But his berserker wanted more, and a sudden flash of the recent past intruded.

*He'd been so angry, so furious at not being able to help Jules. So he took it out on the nearest opponent. Fallon. He'd pummeled the bastard, enjoying the outlet, excited to exercise so much anger. Then someone tried to stop him. He turned and would have smashed Ava in the face if Fallon hadn't knocked him out of the way. Ava—beautiful, intelligent, sexy Ava, a victim to a brutal monster's rage.*

Scenes of violence against women inevitably drew him to the fateful night he'd spent a lifetime trying to forget. His father's manic shrieks, his mother's screams, his sister's tearful pleas before his father choked the life from her. And then, the stark sound of his girlfriend's neck snapping in the sudden silence broken only by grunts and sobs...

Tersch pulled back from Ava as if scalded and leaped from the bed. He ignored the aching need in his body and paced until he could control, if not will away, his arousal. *The past is the past. Not the here, not the now. I won't hurt Ava. Not ever. Let it fucking go.*

Ava sat up, grumbling. "I'd call you a cock tease, but we both know you give *them* what they need."

He flushed at her referral to his teammates. He couldn't help it. She was right. But he knew they could take care of themselves. Even though he'd seen Ava as a Circ, he couldn't help stop thinking of her as a smaller, frailer woman. The thought of hurting her made him sick.

"Tell me about Grayson," he said, his voice rough with frustration.

She grunted. “Well, *that* killed the mood. Sure, whatever. Grayson *is* my brother, you know. He’s not exactly white, either. We have a nice little mix of ancestry in the Belle family. Grayson likes to say he’s the light end of the spectrum. I look like Mom; he takes after Dad.”

“Your parents are still living?” Just about all the Circs in residence were the last of their lines. Well, except for Morgan, but Tersch didn’t count him because he’d mated into the Dawn Endeavor family.

She nodded. “Mom and Dad are still kicking. And they’d be pissed as hell to know Grayson’s sending messages when he shouldn’t be. I’m not a telepath.”

“Thank God.”

“And I don’t want to be one.” She glared at Tersch. “I can’t imagine what goes on in what you call a brain.”

His fear of hurting her slowly receded under her irritation. Ah. There was the Ava he knew and lo—liked. He grinned; he couldn’t help it. She was so cute when annoyed.

“Grayson is in trouble. He’s in DC working on something for a friend of ours. And the shit just hit the fan.”

“How so?”

Ava frowned. “I’m not sure. He sent a ton of images and words into my head that I’m still trying to piece together. But he needs my help. He never would have sent me the info, knowing it would hurt me, if he hadn’t been desperate.”

“Well, hell. We’re going to need to talk to your grandmother about this.”

She sighed. “I know.” Ava didn’t look like she had plans to move from his bed, though. “Can I ask you something?”

He answered, wary. “Sure.”

“Do you like games?”

He blinked. “Games?”

“Yeah. Do you?”

"I guess so. I like to have fun." Though normally his idea of fun involved beating the shit out of some dickhead deserving it.

"I do too." The sly look that passed over his body and centered on the bulge under his jeans unnerved him. "Let's play a game, Gunnar."

"Ava..." His voice left him when she trailed her fingers down her body, past her breasts and belly to her crotch. Her hand hovered there before she slowly unbuttoned and unzipped her shorts. *It's like the woman is reading my fantasies. Holy shit. Am I awake?*

"You see, you got me all worked up and left me high and dry. You claim to have perfect control. Let's test that, hmm?"

"Not a good idea," he rasped, his gaze glued to her fingers delving beneath her panties visible underneath her zipper. "Oh, fuck." He could see the outline of her fingers under the cotton, and the corresponding pleasure on her face clearly showed him what she was doing.

"I need it. I don't have mating heats, but sometimes the desire for sex is there all the same." She bit her lower lip as she worked her fingers over her clit.

He could smell her desire, and it was all he could do not to rip her shorts off and shove his face in her pussy.

"I'm so wet," she said on a breath as she rubbed herself. "I'm close to coming already."

"Me too," he admitted, mesmerized by what he couldn't exactly see. The hint of movement under her pink panties, over her cunt, tantalized. She was so sexy, not showing him skin while giving him an erotic tease he'd never forget.

He wasn't sure when he'd unbuttoned his trousers. He shoved his hand down his pants and grabbed his shaft. It was either that or let her do it, and he wouldn't touch her again. He couldn't without completely losing it.

“Mmm, you smell so good.” She moaned and increased the motion of her hand between her legs. “Like cedar and sex. I bet you could slide right up into me right now. No pain, only a full, throbbing stretch as you take me.”

“Yeah, full.” He pulled on his cock, jerking up and down, faster and faster. The oil over his dick made it too easy to bring himself off. The more excited he was, the more lube. And Tersch could have poked a hole through a steel wall with his erection.

“That’s it. One finger inside me,” she said softly as she angled her hips up. “Now two.”

“Put another in. Stretch yourself wide. For me,” his beast demanded.

She licked her lips and groaned, and he could see himself guiding his cock to her wet folds, could imagine the heat and the scent of her as he finally claimed her.

He widened his stance and rubbed so hard and so fast he neared his climax too soon. But Ava beat him to it. She threw back her head and cried out as she drenched the room in her scent. So fucking beautiful.

Tersch lost it.

He groaned as he spewed, coming hard all over his belly and hand. Loads of cum that should have been in the slight female writhing on his bed. Instead, he made do with his hand, squeezing his orgasm from his ruddy shaft.

“You’re so pretty,” Ava growled, her beast there in the depth of her voice and the hint of fangs touching her lower lip. “So big. I wonder what you’ll feel like inside me.”

“Not gonna happen.” His hoarse response caused her to smile.

She rose from the bed and straightened her shorts. Ava stared at his half-hard cock now covered with cum and nodded. “Oh yeah, we’re going to happen soon, Gunnar. I’ll play your games now, but in the end, I intend to win.”

He had the strangest sense she meant what she said. A woman stalking Frederik Gunnar Tersch? “Baby, I can eat you for breakfast.”

She approached until she stood right in front of him. "Why wait for breakfast?" She lifted a finger and rimmed his mouth.

The scent and taste of her cream turned him inside out. Before she could draw her hand away, he grabbed it and took her finger into his mouth. He closed his eyes and sucked, his beast and berserker both rolling in delight as they absorbed the scent of his mate. When he couldn't take another taste without fucking her good and hard, Tersch pulled her finger from his mouth.

"You keep pushing, you won't like what you find."

"Baby, you don't know the meaning of the word 'push.'" Ava chuckled and had the nerve to tuck him back into his trousers. The feel of her hand on his cock brought out his berserker.

In a flash, he put his hand to her throat and squeezed, warning his mate to understand her place. "Let me go before I hurt you. Because I want nothing more than to hear you scream," he warned, shaky and trying to tamp down his hormones. He forced himself to let her go but didn't step away. Neither did she, and his berserker smiled at her fearlessness.

"Promises, promises," she said and drew her hand from his cock. She licked his cum from her fingers and winked. "I'll see you later, big guy. Try to get some rest and dream of me." Ava pranced away, flaunting that tight, round ass at him, like waving a red flag at an angry bull.

He took a step in her direction.

Fortunately, Ava left his room and closed the door behind her. He missed her the moment she left. But aside from pining for the woman he couldn't have, he felt a huge wave of unease. Ava had sounded as if she expected to have him in the end. And that would spell disaster.

The uncanny woman had a knack for getting under his skin. His eyes nearly crossed at the thought of tasting more than her arousal off her fingertips. He could too easily imagine going down on her, eating her out until she cried his name, then fucking her so hard they saw stars.

He grimaced down at his painful erection and stripped. Heading for his shower—which was what he'd initially come back to the room to do—he stepped into the stall and let the cold water flow. But it did nothing to stem his arousal, especially when he heard a few hoarse shouts from his team caught up in their mates.

Gunnar jerked himself off twice more before he found a measure of peace. He fell asleep in his bed, awash in her scent.

For the first time in a long time, he slept like the dead. But he dreamed of Ava, all the same.

## Chapter Four

Lonnie shot up in bed, covered in sweat. The dreams had come again. Blurred images of death, torment, and the ultimate prize out of reach. He ran his hands over his face and through his hair, glad he'd at least woken alone. The sound of a shower told him Melissa hadn't yet left his hotel room. Arriving hours earlier, the annoying bitch had whined and complained, but at least she'd agreed to suck him off so he could catch some sleep.

Melissa defined the ideal of a wet dream. She had long blonde hair, blue eyes, full, pretty tits, and a tight cunt that could wring him dry with ease. Unfortunately, her constant clinginess was wearing thin.

When they'd first met, he'd seen her instant response and had been glad of it. He considered himself an attractive man, but he knew what had really drawn her to him. Power. Lonnie could manipulate psychic energy as easily as he'd influenced his peers and superiors in his long trip up the political ladder. Now he had more than mental strength, but the position in Washington to do great and terrible things.

A chance meeting with Jack Keiser had convinced him Melissa would be the key to giving Lonnie the edge he needed. Jack had been perfect. A spotless record with the government, the instincts of a deadly hunter, and the psychic status as one of the Psychic Warfare Program's—the PWP's—best new recruits. A few blasts of Lonnie's psychic energy, and he'd convinced Jack that Jack and Melissa had married. Quite a coup, because not only had Lonnie been able to keep tabs on the Circs, but he'd had firsthand knowledge of how Jack worked in the field.

Lonnie rubbed his fingers together, pleased at the fiery tingle they produced. When Melissa stepped out of the bathroom, her hair damp, clad in a towel, she stopped at the sight of him.

He spread his naked thighs, aroused at the thought of controlling her once more. Melissa had such strong shields. Taking them down, brick by painful brick, aroused him to no end. "Come here."

She smiled, no doubt thinking herself in love. Selfish, vain, and needy, Melissa Ramirez was just his type of woman. He didn't bother hiding his physical response to her beauty as she drew close. "On your knees, my dear."

She knelt before him.

"I think next time we'll bring Grayson in to join our fun." He knew how much she loathed anything related to the Circs.

She frowned at him, and he touched her right between the eyes. He concentrated a blast of manipulation, and her frown eased.

"Whatever you want, lover."

"Yes, whatever I want," he repeated. He looked to the nightstand. "Get me the lube."

Melissa blanched. "But I thought—"

"Do it."

He could tell she tried to fight the compulsion, but she couldn't. Her fear felt delightfully thick as it settled over him.

"That's it." He watched her return with the tube in hand. "Now spread it over me. All over me."

She did, and he swelled, so excited. Fucking Melissa's ass degraded her. She hated it, absolutely hated it because she loved it, thanks to some delightfully dysfunctional drama in her past. It had become his favorite way to take her, and a way to punish her for enjoying Jack Keiser so much. Though he'd ordered her to feign a life with Jack, he'd never intended her to enjoy the man's clumsy attentions.

As he took her hard, forgoing any foreplay, he enjoyed the snug feel of her ass around his cock and dissociated his emotion from the act. He thought about what he had planned for Dawn Endeavor, and in particular, Alicia Sharpe.

It had taken a lot of time and effort, but he now counted her among his arsenal of weapons. With every meeting and every slight touch, he drew her deeper and deeper into his web. Unfortunately, it had taken longer than he'd anticipated bringing her to heel.

The woman infuriated him, because he knew the truth about her. What he wouldn't give to have so much power. And none of it had been artificially manufactured. The woman had been born with magic. An anomaly even among psychics, Alicia Sharpe had lived far longer than anyone he'd ever met. A fact he'd only found out due to a freak coincidence. Imagine his father having a photograph of the woman from thirty years earlier looking exactly the same. For once, his father's devotion to South American causes had come in handy.

Not only had Sharpe helped his father take care of some illiterate villagers in the remote jungle, she'd introduced him to the notorious Elliot Pearl, founder of the Circe serum and all-around mad scientist. Another piece that fit the puzzle, since Lonnie had learned from Pearl that a woman matching Sharpe's description had given him the kernel of the idea to develop the serum. Through trial and error and a mysterious sample of mutated blood—Alicia's blood—Elliot had revolutionized genetic manipulation. And the Circes were born.

From that, the PWP had sprung. What Lonnie had convinced himself would be a way to leap ahead several steps to success had actually turned into a problem. The damned PWP had become viable, and he spent as much time shielding his activities as he did working the system.

Frustrated and annoyed that things weren't going the way he'd intended, he pushed himself harder inside the malleable woman beneath him. He came hard, but the climax left him wanting. Melissa enjoyed it too much.

“Lonnie.” She moaned his name again when he pulled out, conflicted by shame and enjoyment, that familiar look of chagrin on her pretty face.

Annoyed with her, he had no intention of letting her come. “I’m so sorry, my dear. I just realized I have something urgent awaiting me. We’ll take this up again the next time you’re in town.” A not so subtle way of making her leave.

“And I just took a shower. I guess I’ll head in again—”

“No. I’m afraid you’ll have to go *now*.” He raised a brow when she tried to argue.

“But I’m—”

He interrupted again. “You’re what? A whore who enjoys a fat cock up her ass? Yes, you are. So you should wear your shame home. Let it soak into your panties and remind you where you belong.”

At the word *belong* she subsided. “Yes, Lonnie.”

So incredibly easy to maneuver. Melissa no longer provided a challenge. A pity, but she’d soon have to go.

He sighed. “I do look forward to our next meeting. Now out you go.”

She quickly dressed and left without another word. The cow. He hurried into the bathroom and showered, eager to rid himself of her stench. Cleaning himself, he put into plan a new course of action, one that would certainly benefit him in the long run. And maybe he’d find out where the hell Jack Keiser was hiding. A loose end he definitely needed to tie up on the off chance the bastard knew more than Melissa had said.

Lonnie whistled under the hot spray, knowing he wouldn’t dream anymore tonight. Melissa had been good for one thing at least.

\* \* \*

Ava stared at her grandmother the next day, dreading this meeting. Alicia had called everyone into her office. The spacious conference room a few doors down would have better served everyone, but her grandmother preferred her cozy space.

A large desk area sat against the far wall, while five Circs, Morgan—a cousin so distant, she wasn't sure the blood tie even existed—Sheridan, her grandmother, and Ava occupied the seating area. She found it no great surprise that Gunnar took the chair farthest from her.

Apparently, the sexual play yesterday had made him more than wary. *Too bad, mate. You're going down. Right underneath me.* She smiled at him and winked, and he scowled back. Ava hadn't realized it before, but running her mate to ground was actually turning out to be rather enjoyable.

Jesse and Olivia looked at Gunnar, then exchanged an amused glance.

"Fuck off," Gunnar growled at Jesse. "I'm not in the mood."

"You sure?" Ava asked sweetly.

Morgan coughed to hide his laughter. Kisho didn't grin, but his eyes sparkled with amusement.

Sheridan and Jules continued to talk in low voices with her grandmother. Though anyone wanting to know what they conversed about could easily hear. Hell, just about everyone in the room was Circ through blood or relation. At the thought, she suddenly missed her brother very much.

Her grandmother raised her head and looked directly at Ava. "Explain."

Everyone turned to Ava.

She sighed inwardly and pulled her inner shields tight. "Grayson is in trouble."

"The forecaster?" Kisho asked. "I'd wanted to talk to him last week, but he left before I could. I had an odd dream about him."

Morgan frowned.

"Not that kind of dream," Kisho continued, a flush on his handsome cheeks.

Ava thought him adorable. So strong yet almost shy when it came to dealing with his mate. The sensitive Circ. Her gaze immediately sought his opposite. Gunnar—the antithesis of sensitive.

"Jesus, Kisho. Is that a blush?" Gunnar snickered.

Jules interrupted just as Morgan opened his mouth. "Ava, please. Before this turns into a brawl. What is it about the psychic we need to know?"

"How about, he's her brother?" Morgan replied and steepled his fingers over his chest.

Jules scowled. "Grayson is your brother? Then that means he's Circ, right?"

"Um, yes." She tried to ignore the grumbling and irritation clearly visible on the team's faces. "I think he's in trouble. He sent me a jumble of thoughts and images I'm having trouble processing."

Jesse blinked. "Your brother is telepathic too? I thought Grayson was like Hayashi and saw the future."

Ava shook her head. "Not really. He's a powerful telepath, but I'm not." She ignored Gunnar's muttered *Thank God*. "It hurts when he forces the contact, so by sending to me the way he did, I know he's in trouble."

"Your brother." Jules's low voice rumbled through her. The true alpha of the team, regardless of her and her grandmother's power, Jules commanded without even trying. "We've avoided this because Mrs. Sharpe told me to. And we've had enough to worry about with Jack and Melissa's defections. But I really think the time has come for you to explain some things." He looked to her grandmother as if giving her the opportunity.

"Oh no." Alicia fingered the pearl at her ear. "Let the girl tell it. You'll have less questions that way. Ava likes to talk."

"Does she ever," Gunnar had to add.

"Shut it, Frederik." Pleased with his scowl, Ava did her best to answer the questions that had been building for days. "Well, you obviously know I'm Circ, or at least, an earlier version of what you are now. So is Grayson."

Sheridan nodded. She'd treated Grayson months earlier, when he'd had been undercover, working alongside Raul LaGarda, of all people.

Ava knew Grayson hadn't told her everything before when she'd asked. She had a feeling her idiot brother had answered the rest of her questions with that migraine of information he'd sent her. Now she just had to reach through the mind-blowing pain for answers.

"My parents are like me, as is Grandma."

Everyone stared at Mrs. Sharpe with speculation.

"But we're different than you. We were born this way, for one."

Sheridan's blue eyes widened. "Amazing. Again a case of science catching up with what nature had intended. I never saw you *change*, Ava. Do you look like the others?"

Ava didn't need to see Gunnar to feel the sexual energy directed her way. She knew the arrogant Circ had liked the look of her in her beast's form that brief time he'd seen her. But not half as much as she liked him, any way at all. She cleared her throat. "Um, yes. Kind of. I don't get as large as you do. Actually, I only grow a few inches in height. And my muscles aren't huge. My bones change, and I'm really, really fast. I have the ability to influence my body's density. That's the most scientific way to explain it, though I don't even think that's technically the right of it."

Kisho leaned forward on the couch, where he sat next to his mate. "So...what? You can *change*, but you don't look all that different from the way you look now?"

"You need to show us." Jules didn't so much ask as order.

"Yeah." Gunnar nodded. "I didn't catch that much of you when we fought Montaña. I was too busy trying to kill the bastards threatening your 'frail human shell.'"

"Let it go already." Ava glared at him. "So I lied. At least I'm honest about other things." *Like how much I want you.*

He glanced at her finger tapping on the chair arm, the same finger she'd used to plunge inside herself yesterday, and took a deep breath he slowly let out. Though

Ava couldn't read his thoughts, she could read his body language. And the flare of his nostrils, the tension in his frame, and the darkening of his blue eyes signified Gunnar's arousal.

"But *how* are you Circ?" Jesse wanted to know. "We were all given the Circe serum, like the Circes up north. It basically changed our DNA, allowing us to shift. But all of us had some kind of psychic ability before we were dosed. The other Circes we've met aren't psychic, though." He glanced at Alicia. "We've all known from the get go that Mrs. Sharpe is more than she seems. *You* were a surprise. But not a surprise to all of us." He narrowed his gaze on Morgan.

Kisho sighed. "Tell them," he said to Morgan.

Finally, the attention leaped to someone else. Ava eased into her seat, ignoring Gunnar, who had yet to look away from her.

"Hell. Throw me into the fire, why don't you?" Morgan muttered. "Fine. I've known Ava since she was five. My family is a lot like hers. There's a rumor we're somehow related."

"You are. Distantly, but it's there," Mrs. Sharpe added.

"Yeah, well. The point is, the Belle and Reynolds families are different. Psychic, more in tune with nature and our animal ancestors. But Aunt Alicia is *way* different. And I mean that in a nice way."

"Aunt Alicia?" Gunnar snorted.

Alicia smiled at Morgan. "I know, dear."

Morgan continued, "Shape-shifting isn't all that weird, not where I come from. Deep in the heart of the Amazon, you see things. Medicine men, shamans. Witches and priestesses are a lot more common than you'd think."

Sheridan spoke up. "Medically speaking, the Amazon jungle has untapped potential. If we could get the developers and poachers to leave well enough alone, we'd have a real bevy of discoveries to tap into. My Sheridan Rose, that special flower I was researching before I got involved with you all? It has healing

properties. You wouldn't believe what I found when I cut into the stem and separated—”

“That's right. I said shaman,” Morgan said loudly as if Sheridan hadn't spoken. When she glared at him, he shrugged an apology. “Sorry, honey, but you're losing Tersch already. Too many big words, I'm afraid.”

Gunnar grunted. “Kiss my ass, Morgan.”

“My point is, what many people regard as myths or improbabilities are actually real. We were born this way, and the next generation of Circs will be as well.”

Alicia nodded. “What he said is true. I've seen a lot in my lifetime. Some good, some bad. I have a touch of Kisho's ability to see into the future. Not as clearly, and some things are meant to be, no matter how much you struggle to change them.” She deliberately glanced from Gunnar to Ava.

*Thanks, Grandma. Make the guy hate me, why don't you.*

“You're all here for a reason. There's so much good you've already done and so much more you have to do. But you can't do it alone.”

“We're not exactly alone.” Jules gestured to everyone around him.

“No, you're not, are you? And yet some of you are.” The cryptic response did little more than aggravate the Circs. Just as Alicia no doubt intended. “Suffice it to say we need everyone present in this room if we're going to nip our current problem in the bud.” The strain on her face worried Ava. “It's come to my attention that though Melissa and Jack Keiser were the informants giving our information to the enemy, we actually have a threat much closer to home.”

Jules groaned. “Mrs. Sharpe, not now.”

Ava had spoken briefly with her grandmother earlier and absolutely refused to believe Lonnie might have been in on anything that would hurt them. Grandma wasn't supposed to say anything yet, not until they'd talked to Lonnie first, face-to-face. But the woman had been acting weird. “Grandma, I don't think—”

“It’s Admiral London. He’s been against us from the beginning. Honestly, I’m not sure how I didn’t see it. Perhaps because Lonnie’s always had a special place in my heart. But regardless, he’s been the one pulling Melissa’s strings, giving Montaña insider information as well as details about us we wouldn’t want him to know.” The stare she aimed at Olivia’s and then Sheridan’s flat stomachs unnerved everyone.

Rogues getting their hands on Circ babies would not be good. At all.

The heavy silence in the room felt oppressive.

“No way.” Morgan shook his head. “Admiral London’s a good guy. He’d never stoop to something so low.”

Jesse looked unsure. “We’ve been down this road before with Elliot Pearl and William Delancey. I’d hate to think it, but what if Admiral London really isn’t on our side?”

“You can’t believe that.” Kisho frowned.

“I told you, Mrs. Sharpe—” Jules began before she cut him off.

“Lonnie is the special name I call him in private. You know that, Jules; you’ve heard me say it. When Gunnar told me what Raul had said about Melissa’s contact, I didn’t want to believe it either, but it explains a lot. How our enemy was able to work around me and the team. The things he knew, timing events to always miss being picked up by the navy and his own psychics. It makes sense, unfortunately.”

“Maybe.” Ava wasn’t convinced. One thing Admiral Geoffrey “Lonnie” London wasn’t was stupid. No way he’d slip up so easily by using the exact same nickname with Melissa that her grandmother and she used. The man was smart enough to cover every base. It made no sense. Yet her grandmother seemed certain, wounded, and angry. A terrible combination all around.

Alicia continued. “The admiral is due to visit in a few days for an informal briefing on the status of a drug shipment gone missing. His men are guarding us around the clock. We’ll have to remove them without being too obvious. I’ll order the

lot back to Quantico as a protection detail for Olivia and Sheridan. Doc's there anyway, and I'd like our expecting Circs to see him."

"I've already done some workups, Mrs. Sharpe," Sheridan said. "Olivia and I are healthy." With a touch, she could verify sickness and heal it. If Sheridan thought they were okay, they most likely were.

"I understand, but it gives us an excuse to get you two out of here, and for you to meet Doc, finally."

Dr. Evan Dennis had been with the Circ project from the beginning. A steadfast and loyal man, he worked with the Circs up north and had thus far delivered two Circ babies into the world. It made sense for Alicia to send them.

"Okay." Sheridan grudgingly accepted.

Olivia nodded.

Gunnar had to add his two cents. "Keegan Price and James Foreman will be a problem. They're supposed to stick to you like glue, and they have authority issues."

"Pot calling kettle, hel-lo," Morgan said. He returned the finger Gunnar shot him. "Leave Price and Foreman to us." He nodded to Kisho.

"Fine," Jules agreed. "But I don't want Olivia and Sheridan to leave our small sanctuary alone, and right now I need to be here for a few things. We need a handle on Grayson."

Kisho shared a sad glance with her grandmother. Now what was that all about?

He turned back to Jules, his eyes narrowed in thought. "Why don't Morgan and I convince Price and Foreman to follow the ladies to Quantico, per Mrs. Sharpe's special orders? I'll make up something about a classified liaison with Admiral London and draw them away from here on one pretext or another."

Morgan offered, "Hell, tell them you already saw them accompanying us. Pretend it was a vision."

“Good idea. That should work.” Jules nodded. “But I want you two focused on Olivia and Sheridan twenty-four seven.”

“Can do, hoss.” Morgan smirked.

Ava rolled her eyes. Jules hated being called hoss, and her cousin knew it. Trust the team to be on each other’s cases during a crisis. Not surprisingly, their easy banter calmed her. Gunnar too, she noted, pleased to see him grin at the rumblings Jules threw Morgan’s way.

Her grandmother straightened in her seat, sitting primly. Always a lady...concealing the predator within. Ava could only imagine the conflict brewing in her grandmother’s heart. Her great love for Lonnie fighting against his supposed betrayal. Ava didn’t believe it, but her grandmother did. Why? After so many years spent loving each other, how could her grandmother doubt Lonnie? There had to be more to this that Alicia wasn’t telling her.

Ava not only needed to find out what the hell Grayson had gotten himself into, but how Lonnie was tied into it. And all while sticking close to her elusive mate. A headache of monumental proportions.

Alicia cleared her throat. “While the rest of you prepare for what’s coming, I need Ava, Jules, and Gunnar to stay behind.”

Everyone else filed out. Sheridan stopped to kiss Jules before waving at Ava and Gunnar, then left as well. Ava watched her grandmother with the others, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“I’d like to know what you all think.”

Ava opened her mouth to reply, but Jules beat her to it. “Mrs. Sharpe, this is wrong. Admiral London has done more for us than I can say. I know we should be leery. Hell, what with our own captain and then Melissa and Jack turning on us, I get it. But I’m no fool. Geoffrey London is not what we’re being led to believe he is.”

Gunnar stirred. “Let Fallon question him. He’ll get the truth.”

"You know, the Viking actually makes sense." Ava winked at Gunnar. "I thought you'd recommend a little bit of bloodletting, at least."

He smiled, showing sharp fangs. "Oh, we'll get to that if it turns out our good friend is lying. If his answers aren't what we want to hear, I'll make him dance." He flexed his fingers, and five sharp talons grew in seconds.

Ava quickly tamped down the arousal flaring at his show of strength. He never used to flash his abilities around her, but now that he knew she was Circ, Gunnar apparently didn't feel the need to hide himself. And God, he was so sexy when he turned mean.

She must have let something show, because Gunnar's eyes darkened. Jules coughed, and her grandmother sighed.

Ava purposely looked away from him, trying to gather her wits. "Grandma, I agree with Jules. Something feels off about this."

"What the hell does that mean?" Gunnar asked. "Just how psychic are you, Ava?"

"I'm not a mind reader or an empath. I don't see glimpses of the future. I just know things sometimes."

"But you haven't said that you *know* he's not guilty," Alicia corrected her. "You just don't want him to be guilty." To Ava's shock, her grandmother's eyes watered. "I don't want him to be guilty either. But Kisho had a vision earlier. One with Lonnie and a gun. And I'd been shot."

*Crap.* Ava rushed to her grandmother's side and leaned down to hug her tight.

"Shit, Alicia. Dry up the waterworks, would you?" Gunnar's soft growl sounded more worried than annoyed. "Come on, we'll fix this. I won't let the bastard hurt you. I swear."

Her grandmother's sobs continued. A quiet suffering made worse because she tried to hide it and couldn't.

"I'll get Olivia," Jules murmured and left.

Ava turned to Gunnar helplessly. She'd never seen her grandmother so upset before.

Alicia pushed out of Ava's arms and stood with her back to them.

He looked as if he'd rather hug a cactus, but Gunnar gently took her sobbing grandmother in his arms. Like a giant bear hugging a doll.

Ava gaped, not quite sure what to think. The same man who sneered at her grandmother's orders, who called her Alicia instead of Mrs. Sharpe, and didn't seem to respect her authority when he dragged his feet over her every order, offered *physical comfort?*

"It's not that bad, Alicia. Isn't that what you always tell me?" He patted her back with what Ava assumed he meant to be soft taps.

Her grandmother jerked under the blows.

The older woman stopped her tears and squirmed to free herself.

Torn between laughter at Gunnar's awkward assistance, surprised pleasure that he'd been so thoughtful, and concern that her grandmother might have shattered a rib, Ava pulled Gunnar aside.

"Better now?" she asked Alicia.

Her grandmother wiped her eyes, now filled with mirth.

*Thank you, Gunnar.*

"That was just what I needed, Gunnar. Thank you." She gingerly made her way to her desk and sat, looking more amused than upset.

Not wanting Gunnar to feel embarrassed by his kindness, Ava tugged him with her. "I need to talk to him about Grayson. I have some ideas on how we might contact him." She kept her shields up tight, just in case Grandma had a sudden urge to peek.

"That's fine." Alicia chuckled and smoothed back her hair. Not a trace of sadness lingered on her face.

Ava could have kissed the stubborn Circ resisting her pull.

Alicia nodded at them. "Go on, Gunnar. I need to focus on a few other items right now. Ava, call Robert Anderson. Notwithstanding his participation in a congressional hearing that has bearing on our funding, he was the last one to talk to Grayson that I know of. And that was two days ago. I'll leave your brother in your hands...for the moment."

"Good idea. Come on." Ava released the hold on her strength and yanked Gunnar out of the office. She closed the door behind them.

He stumbled to a halt in the hallway and glared. "Jesus, you're a lot stronger than you look. Not to mention more irritating."

No more Mr. Nice Guy. He'd probably spent his load of kindness back in the office. So much for their brief bonding moment consoling Alicia.

At the thought, she couldn't contain a grin. "So, Mr. Comfort, how come you never offer to hug my fears away?" She batted her eyes. "I'm so scared of the future. However will I survive?" Actually, she did worry for her brother, but she'd rather laugh than cry about him.

"You really need a better use for that smart mouth." He raised their twined fingers to rub them over her lips. Tingles suffused her entire body, and he leaned closer. "Next time you're hard up for a good fuck, I'll let you suck me off. A real treat for you. How's that?"

She swore under her breath. Ava truly was perverted, because his arrogance made her wet. And he knew it, by the look of that sly grin.

"Oh really?" Determined to have the last word, she stood on tiptoe and tugged him down to whisper in his ear. "I don't think so. But now that I think of it, the next time I'm 'hard up for a good fuck,' I'll look for someone to take my mind off it." She deliberately nipped his earlobe, smugly satisfied when his breath caught. "Yeah, I'll just go find Keegan or James and let a *real* man take the edge off." She pulled away from Gunnar and smiled. "Thanks for the idea."

The laughter caught in her throat when he muttered a few swear words under his breath, hauled her over his shoulder—fireman-carry style—and strode down the hall. He dumped her in Jesse's hands and left without a backward glance.

## Chapter Five

Tersch grimaced. For two whole days he'd avoided Ava. He felt like a grade-A pussy, but the sexy little witch was driving him fucking crazy. He smelled her everywhere. His masochistic beast refused to let him change his sheets, where she'd made herself come. And damn if that image would leave his mind anytime soon.

He made sure Fallon kept her well away from him. Though he'd been dying to see her *change*, he didn't think he'd be able to help himself if he did. So when Jules and the others met with her to see just what she could do, he'd insisted on staying by Olivia's side. The sweetheart had known exactly what he'd needed and let him stay with her as she and Sheridan readied for their trip to Quantico.

He sat in Sheridan's lab at the moment, watching as she gathered her notebooks and downloaded files onto a portable hard drive.

"For Doc," she explained. "I want him to see just what I've been doing. It's not much, but I think I might be able to help him with any new rogues his people find. I'm developing an antibody with my research that needs a lot more testing, but it might actually provide some relief to the mating heats. The shots you guys were getting actually suppressed your instinctive senses, though Jules told me he never felt a difference. That's why Mrs. Sharpe took you off the meds, you know."

"A decent tradeoff, I'm thinking." He wondered how he'd handle his next heat. Because after that incident with Ava in his bedroom, he didn't think anyone *but* Ava could relieve his sexual needs. And that worried the hell out of him.

Sheridan worked in silence for a few more minutes.

"Gunnar, when I'm gone, promise me you'll take care of Jules."

"Of course I will."

She patted him on the arm. “No matter what he says, do what you have to do to make sure he’s all right.”

Tersch grinned. “Can I quote you on that? Because he’s pretty sensitive about anyone actually trying to help him out. Has a stick up his ass about it the size of Texas.”

She sighed. “I know. But ignore it like you always do. He’s as fit as ever, but I think he worries about me and the baby when he should be focusing on work, and he can’t afford the distraction right now.” She leaned closer. “But don’t tell him I told you that.”

Tersch liked Sheridan more every day. When he’d first met her, he’d thought her a troublemaker out to hurt Jules. Then he’d thought her a seductress bent on taking advantage of their team. It had taken some tough love, but she’d made him see the light. Oh boy, had she. The feral little redhead had sucked him off but good.

A twinge of guilt hit him at the thought. Did Ava know? Would she understand? And why did he feel a sense of shame for what they’d shared, the communion of his alpha’s mate with him? A natural thing for the team to share loving, mates and all. Yet he suddenly sensed he’d done something wrong, and he couldn’t have said why.

Hell, lately even the soft, flowery scent of Sheridan smelled stale to him.

“Gunnar, are you okay? You don’t look so good. A little wild around the eyes.”

“I’m fine.” To his embarrassment, his voice sounded hoarse. He cleared his throat and took a subtle step back. His beast approved the small distance, but his stupid berserker wouldn’t be satisfied until he sought Ava again. “Ah, make sure you take care of yourself and Olivia while you’re gone. Don’t stray from Morgan or Kisho. At all, Sheridan,” he warned with bite. “I’m not kidding. You can’t chance that kid.” He nodded to her stomach. Jules’s young, the continuation of their species. His beast nodded as well, pleased that their leader’s strength would be passed on to future generations. The very reason for the mating heat to begin with.

Perpetuation of their kind.

"I'll be careful, Gunnar." Sheridan smiled at him and moved closer for a kiss when his beast jerked him back.

What the fuck? He could bend over for the guys but not kiss the girls? To cover his uncontrolled reaction, he backed away and lied. "Uh, Fallon's calling me. I gotta go." *"Fallon, get your ass down here and sit with Sheridan. I need a breather. She's getting all weepy and shit, but don't tell her I said so."*

*"Right-o."*

To his relief, Fallon didn't complain. A decent buddy, one who hadn't changed or softened because of Olivia. Then again, Tersch couldn't have picked a better mate for his friend than the dark-haired beauty. Olivia gave as good as she got, and she kept Fallon on his toes. Plus, she had a kink streak a mile wide.

A streak he no longer had any interest in riding.

*Fuck. What the hell is my problem?*

Tersch practically ran out of the room and hurried down the long hallway of the basement to the stairs. He passed Fallon on the way.

"Where's Ava?" Tersch didn't even try to hide his need to know the woman's whereabouts so he could avoid her. The guys found it hilarious, especially since Ava seemed to be enjoying her time trying to find him. She friggin' tied him in knots. He thought she'd be angry he wanted nothing to do with her. Instead, she treated it like another game.

"Your woman is currently sparring with Price and Foreman. I think they're in the gym—"

Tersch saw red. He bounded up the stairs and pushed past Jules, knocking him into the wall.

"What the fuck, Tersch?" Jules swore.

Tersch couldn't stop. He kept hearing Ava's teasing comments in his head. *"Yeah, I'll just go find Keegan or James and let a real man take the edge off."* Like hell she would!

He barged into the gym ready to rip Price's head off and fuck Foreman up in a bad way. He stopped at the sight of Ava sparring with Kisho while Morgan downed a bottle of water, watching. No sight of Price or Foreman to be seen.

*"Oh, did I say Price and Foreman? I meant Hayashi and Morgan. My bad."* The laughter layering Fallon's thoughts annoyed the shit out of him.

*"I'll get you back, you bastard."* Tersch sent him.

*"Bring it on, you lovesick ass. Dude, just surrender gracefully. It's embarrassing to watch her hunt you down."*

Tersch ignored the last part, knowing how it must look. A pint-sized sexpot stalking a man twice her size who could rip her in half. Then again, the way she threw her weight around lately, he didn't think tearing her in half would be easy. A good thing. Because he knew what a man with his strength could do to a woman. How love could damage when it should have strengthened.

That in mind, he stared at the trio before him with a straight face. In control and calm. Mostly.

Morgan frowned at him but didn't move away from the match. The gymnasium was lined with thick blue mats. On the west corner free weights, benches, and a Nautilus system kept them in decent shape. But Tersch was partial to open fights and hand-to-hand combat.

Watching Hayashi battle Ava didn't bother him at all. He trusted Hayashi like no other—and not because his buddy was gay, but because the Asian understood him best. Hayashi had grown up on the streets, unloved by his family, unwanted by his relatives. Much like Tersch, also unloved and unwanted, who'd been raised by an abusive asshole who'd killed his sister and his girlfriend. And all because of him.

Ever reminded of the past, he shoved the brutal remembrance down and forced a wry grin. "Hayashi, you're getting your ass kicked by a *girl*," he said with a sneer, hoping to break Ava's concentration as she met Hayashi kick for kick and punch for punch.

Sure enough, she glared at him. Hayashi took advantage and swept her off her feet. Except Ava didn't hit the mat when she should have. Instead, she somehow managed to move ten feet away in the blink of an eye. Now behind *him*, she knocked Tersch on his ass before he could block her. He drew in a deep breath and felt a long, sharp claw at his throat.

His cock hardened instantly.

Morgan laughed, the asshole. "Damn, that was incredible. Let him up and do it again, Ava."

Hayashi joined him. "Nicely done. I thought for sure I'd break you down, but now I have a feeling you were just toying with me. Your speed is a huge advantage, Ava. You're even faster than Morgan."

"Hey. I'm plenty fast."

"In the bedroom," Tersch managed.

Hayashi chuckled at his lover. "Don't mind him, baby. We can work on that later."

Morgan scowled. "Shut it, *kitsu*. You're not that cute."

Tersch shifted under Ava's hand, allowing her claw to dig into his skin and getting off on the tiny prick of pain. He watched Morgan dive for Hayashi, and the two began fighting, then wrestling. Despite Morgan's larger frame, Hayashi held his own.

"I guess I should let you up, though I still haven't heard you say mercy." Ava's snarky laugh annoyed the shit out of him.

Before he thought better of it, Tersch latched on to her hand at his throat, mindless of the blood she shed when she dug her finger deeper. He yanked hard and rolled, pulling her under him. Leaning his weight onto her, he stared down into hazel eyes gone so dark brown, they looked black.

“Oh,” she said on a breath when he pressed closer. “I guess you *are* happy to see me.” She wriggled under him, making him harder. The press of her full breasts under his chest didn’t go unnoticed. “Wanna wrestle?”

Imagining all sorts of positions he wanted to share with his mate—*this woman*—he quickly moved back and up onto his feet. “Sorry, habit.”

“What? Getting hard for your sparring partners?” she asked.

“Frederik has such a thing for my ass, Ava. Sorry to have to tell you that,” Morgan taunted before Hayashi grabbed him in a bear hug, wrapped a foot around Morgan’s calf, and took him down hard. They landed with a grunt and a laugh and continued to battle.

Tersch kept his gaze on Ava. “Smart-ass. No, taking advantage of helpless little girls. Like you and Morgan.”

“Did you just...call me a...girl?” Morgan said between breaths.

“Shoe fits.” Tersch shrugged, but he couldn’t break his stare from Ava. She looked better every time he saw her. Doubt crept in where she was concerned. Why the hell would a woman who looked like her ever want someone like him—a great big lumbering oaf with little grace?

“Come on. You’re upsetting my cousin.” Ava pulled him with her out of the gym. She wore a thin tank top that didn’t much conceal her sports bra underneath, as well as shorts too short to be called anything but a tease.

“He’s not your cousin. And you need to put some damn clothes on.”

Instead of letting her drag him, *he* dragged *her*. He marched her down the hall, past a grinning Keegan—whom Tersch flipped off without a thought—and right to her bedroom.

“Go get dressed,” Tersch growled.

“I need a shower first.” She walked through the door into a spartan bedroom. No frills, no flowers, just function.

Tersch had been in here before, but he still didn't like it. Where the hell were her pictures of friends and family? Her books, knickknacks, her interests? Just a bed, a dresser, a small TV, and a closet, though the room could hold much more.

He shut the door behind him, annoyed for no reason. "This looks unlived in."

Ava shrugged, then moaned and dropped onto her stomach on her king-size bed.

"What's wrong?" He didn't scent any blood on her. "You need to see Sheridan? She's leaving in another hour or so. We have time to get you—"

"I'm just sore, you idiot. Rub my back, would you? Kisho took me to the mat because of you."

"I didn't see you hit."

"That's because I'm fast, and I recovered before you could blink. It still hurt."

"Suck it up, princess. Don't blame me for your lack of concentration. The enemy won't go easy on you." But he sat next to her anyway, even knowing how incredibly stupid this was. He put his hands on her shoulders—her strong, shapely shoulders—and rubbed.

"Oh, God. That's good."

He continued to rub, wishing she'd stop making those grateful, mewling little moans. The same way she'd sounded right before she'd come. His cock ached to sink inside her. He'd jerked himself off the past two nights to no avail. Tersch woke each morning hard and wanting Ava.

"I remember doing this before." Just two days ago in his own room. Talk about a sexual *déjà vu*. He needed to leave and pronto, before he did something really stupid, like fuck her. His berserker was stirring again. The need for blood and sex and pain built. How sick was he that pain turned him on? After everything he'd been through?

"Shut up and straddle my back. You're not giving me the right pressure, and I hurt," Ava whined.

She sounded so feminine, so soft when she said it. He couldn't explain how she did it, because he didn't think she actively meant to manipulate him. But her scent hit him smack between the eyes. He obeyed her without thinking twice. Keeping his weight on his knees on either side of her curved ass, he applied a slight pressure to her neck and shoulders.

She moaned her appreciation at the small pop that sounded.

He froze.

She rolled her shoulders. "That's perfect," she purred. Literally. The woman vibrated beneath him, and before he knew it, he answered in kind, more than satisfied because she was. Their combined rumble of contentment touched him in a way he was hard pressed to deny.

"You smell good." In a move that would have done Hayashi proud, Ava slid out from under him, turned around, and pushed him on his ass. Stupefied, he watched as she unfastened his jeans and tugged them free of his body with little effort. She settled between his wide-spread thighs before his conscience caught up with his libido.

"Ava, what the hell?" He tried to move, but the woman planted her hands on his thighs and *held him down*.

Incredible. His beast surged to the forefront, and he partially *changed*. His pupils elongated, his nails lengthened, and his chest swelled. As did that other part of him already hot and bothered. "You're such a pretty little beast."

She winked up at him and inched closer, on her belly. "I know."

He chuckled, or rather his beast chuckled, the dark rumble sounding like thunder.

The sexy woman licked her full lips, making them shiny and ripe. "Now I recall you saying something about giving me a treat."

Tersch wanted to protest. He wanted to keep Ava far away from him and his growing desire, to keep her safe. Pussy that he apparently was, he did nothing but obey her.

“Mmm, nice. Cup yourself for me,” she ordered.

He held his aching balls and waited. *This is so not smart. Where has your discipline gone, man?*

“Thick, aren't you? Your slit is wet. For me?” She laughed, and the low purr of her beast captivated him. “Good. Now don't move.” She grazed his inner thighs with her claws, drawing streaks of blood.

He throbbed with desire and couldn't contain a groan.

When her lips surrounded his cockhead and she began taking him in, he endured, sweat beading on his brow. When she took him all the way to the back of her throat, he did his best to keep still. But when she palmed his balls and squeezed just hard enough to set him off, he couldn't stop himself.

His beast rose and refused to back down. “Yes, baby. That's it. Suck it all down. Gag on it, Ava. *Yes.*” He thrust hard into her throat, growing longer and thicker, daring his mate to keep up.

And keep up she did. She scored his shaft with her sharp little teeth. He barked a pained laugh and slid into her mouth, thrusting harder. The berserker inside him took notice and smiled when she made choking sounds. *So fucking good. So right.*

Her grip on his balls tightened. He twisted, needing more. He fisted his hand in her hair, loving the feel of her. Gripping her head, he tried to pull her harder over him, but she growled and nipped harder.

And the pain increased his desire.

He swam in her scent mingling with his. Her pussy creamed and grew wetter when his nails bit into her scalp. “Fuck, Ava. So pretty, so mine. Open that mouth wider around my cock. Your little treat, mate. Eat me. So fucking good.”

He arched up and pumped into her, jolted into a monstrous orgasm when she licked him hard with a raspy tongue just under his crown. Right where he needed it.

Tersch roared out as he came down her throat. He held her so tight, it was a wonder she could breathe. Her nose smashed against his belly as she swallowed loads of cum that he couldn't stop. Yet the slight woman drank him down, licking and sucking him dry.

"Shit. Ava. Baby." He panted, watching as she slowly eased up off his cock. So erotic, so beautiful as her lips left his flesh. Those ripe brown lips glistened with his seed.

"You taste good too." She licked the soft petals of her mouth as she knelt before him.

Unable to help himself, he leaned down and took her face between his large palms. He kissed her, tasting himself, and he purred louder. The scent of her need beckoned.

"Ava—"

She pulled back. "Man, I'm so sweaty and tired. Why don't you go back to helping Sheridan? I'll talk to you later after a short nap. Plus, I have a few ideas about Grayson. I talked to Anderson already. I'll meet you later, okay?"

Funny, she didn't look tired. She looked aroused. He narrowed his eyes. "You planning on getting Price or Foreman in here to ease that pussy?"

She blinked at him, and her mouth dropped open. "What?"

"You think I can't smell how wet you are?" He forced her back against the headboard and shoved his hand down the front of her shorts. Beneath her tiny underwear, a hot, aroused woman teased his finger. "I can get you off, baby. Let me."

"No, I—"

"You don't want it?" he whispered, needing her to want him as much as he wanted her. *No. I have to keep my distance. I'm too rough. Too brutal, too...*

“That is *so* good. No fair.” She arched into his touch as he rubbed her hard clit with his thumb. When she tried to move away, he shoved her back against the headboard, too incensed to be gentle.

“Games again, Ava?” He shook his head. “Tsk, tsk. Honey, you’re not going to play me. Uh-uh. But I have every intention of playing with *you*. Look at how hard your clit is. Bet I could bite it, and you’d come so hard.”

She moaned and drenched his fingers just waiting at her swollen folds. Ava clutched his arm holding her back while he played with her.

Tersch teased her clit and shoved a finger inside her. Without warning, he added another and began pistoning them inside her.

Within seconds she came around him, clutching his arm for balance. The sweet cry of her release eased the berserker still riding too close to the surface. Hearing Ava’s pleasure soothed him in a way he hadn’t expected. Tersch slowly removed his hand from her sex and wiped it under his shirt, on his belly. He wanted her scent on him, bold and possessing.

Limp, Ava sank against him, her sweaty forehead pressed against his chest.

“Damn, girl. You need a shower. You smell like sweat and sex.” Add blood to the mix, and he’d be in heaven.

“Ass.” She yawned.

“Come on.” He sighed and carried her cute butt off the bed into... “You don’t have a shower in here.” He’d forgotten.

“No shit, Sherlock.”

Grumbling under his breath, he dropped her back on the bed, put his pants back on, and carried her once more out of her room. Ignoring the snickers and comments from those he passed on his way upstairs, he took her to the guest wing and lifted his head. He smelled her soap, a citrusy scent that always made him think of her, and found the bathroom she used. He dumped her back onto her feet.

“Now clean up. You smell ripe.”

She frowned, shoved him into the hallway, and slammed the door in his face.

As soon as he heard the shower running, he sagged back against the wall and closed his eyes, reminding himself to leave well enough alone. She didn't want or need him in there, not if she knew what was good for her. He liked sex. Hell, he loved it. And he loved pain. He got what he needed from his teammates. The few times he'd needed tenderness, Olivia had sated him. A part of the pack, she fit his softer desires. He never lost his head with her, so he didn't fear hurting her. Besides, he never came to her without Fallon present. And that bastard would never let him harm a hair on Olivia's pretty head.

His berserker had never bothered to come out when in the presence of the other females. Only when his teammates were in danger. And with Ava, he thought, uncomfortable all over again.

Thoughts of being with the others refused to leave him. Tersch literally cringed at the memories of his play with Olivia, which made no sense. She'd helped him, had drawn his pain while giving only pleasure, and at the bequest of her mate. So why did he now feel guilty for having been with her?

The sounds of Ava's humming and the downpour of the shower reminded him that Ava stood naked behind a thin wooden door, one that wouldn't take any time to break down. Tersch considered wrecking it for a brief second before reason returned.

The berserker wanted Ava with a raging passion. But Tersch refused to give in to it. His beast had already had a taste of the stubborn woman, but that was as far as he'd let it go. He'd be damned if Ava and her stupid games would be the death of her. Hell, he'd protect her sorry ass from herself if he had to.

He stalked away from his nemesis, more confused than ever. And as he left the second floor, he wondered if he'd just been outplayed once again.

## Chapter Six

An hour later, Gunnar, Jules, and Jesse waited in the conference room the team hated to use. None of them looked that thrilled to see her.

"Ah, I thought it was just going to be you and me," Ava said to Gunnar as she took a seat across from the three of them.

He shot her a glare but refused to answer.

*One step forward, two steps back.* So much for giving her mate one hell of an orgasm to soften him up. The irony in her words wasn't lost on her, and she chuckled at the thought of Gunnar ever around her without a semierrection. *If that happens, I'm losing my touch.*

His glare made her feel worlds better.

"So what's this about Grayson in trouble?" Jules asked, his deep voice soothing. She loved that about him. No matter the situation, Jules always kept it together. Even when his mate had been in danger, when Ava had appeared to be held in the arms of their enemy, or even when he'd learned about Jack and Melissa's treachery, he'd maintained that cool front.

Gunnar should take a lesson or two.

"Amen," Jesse sent her with a cough to hide his grin. *"You're projecting, honey. Just so you know."*

Ever since she'd revealed her Circ nature, she'd loosened up her defenses around the team. But it wouldn't do to give too much away. She clamped down on her inner shields, holding Jesse out without effort. Only when she dwelled too much on Gunnar did she lose her focus on keeping herself together. Lately, she couldn't

think of anything *but* him. Especially now that she'd had a taste of what he'd be like in bed.

Gunnar squirmed in his chair. "Explain, woman. While we're young." The husky throb of his voice told her he could scent her arousal, and the amusement on the others' faces didn't need explaining.

Ava flushed, wishing she could go back under that tight band of sexual numbness she'd forced herself to behave under this past year. But ever since letting her beast out of her cage, she'd lost her ability to remain unaffected. Hell, she wanted her mate with her every breath. And now that she didn't have to hide it any longer, she didn't want to pretend, no matter how embarrassing it might be.

"My brother is in a shit sandwich. He's been compromised, and no, I don't think by Lonnie."

Jules sighed. "I told Mrs. Sharpe not to say anything about 'Lonnie' until I looked into it. But she wouldn't listen."

"How did you know?" Gunnar asked.

"When we interrogated Raul LaGarda—before you killed him—LaGarda referred to Melissa's boss as Lonnie. I overheard Mrs. S. and the admiral a few times, and that's what she called him when she thought she was alone."

"I never heard that." Jesse frowned. "She's pretty closemouthed and close-minded around me, though. I never catch a glimpse of what she's thinking."

"And you'd never hear me if it wasn't for my current distraction," Ava grumbled, glaring from Jesse to Gunnar. She refused to ignore the obvious anymore. No more tiptoeing around her mate. She'd go balls-out taking him down, and if she had to use his friends to help her do it, she would.

"Yeah, well," Jesse murmured, not looking at Gunnar's fierce scowl. "I've thought hard about this. I don't care what she called him or what she thinks she saw. The admiral's not guilty."

"You don't know that," Gunnar growled. "Just because you like the prick doesn't mean he's not against us."

"Nice mouth." Ava shook her head.

"Didn't hear you complaining earlier," he muttered.

Her cheeks heated, but she ignored him. "Lonnie isn't a common name. I don't know anyone she works with that fits that name. And no one who's familiar with the Circs in DC goes by Lonnie either. It's too much of a coincidence to think our enemy randomly chose 'Lonnie' as an alias. Someone's setting him up. They want us to mistrust him."

Fallon shrugged. "Maybe so, but I can tell you Raul was telling the complete truth when he confessed to us in the woods. Dude wasn't lying. Panicked and close to death, people normally can't think straight enough to hold a lie in their heads. And LaGarda was no rocket scientist."

Ava blew out a tired breath. "Right. So we need to talk to Lonnie. More, we need to find Grayson. I've been going over what he said in my head, and I think the admiral's the key."

"So he is guilty. He not only fucked us over royally, but now he has your brother." Gunnar had a one-track mind sometimes.

"No," Ava answered with patience. "I combed through Grayson's garbled message, and he's frantic that we find Jack Keiser. The admiral will be able to tell us where Jack is. And once we have Jack, we can find Grayson."

"How the hell does the admiral know where Keiser is? The asshole's been on the run for two weeks. No one's seen a hint of him anywhere. Even Morgan's contacts have struck out."

"And the psychics won't rat out their own," Gunnar added in a huff. "None of the bastards around here have any idea where he is. Like I believe that."

"Trust me. Admiral London can help us with Jack."

Jules stirred. “And why is that, Ava? What do you know that you aren’t telling us?”

The others quieted. The attention directed on her felt uncomfortable, smothering.

Should she tell them the truth or cushion the blow?

“Ava, dammit. Spill.” Gunnar flashed his fangs at her. He wasn’t a happy camper.

“Jack Keiser is working for the admiral.”

Even to her own ears that sounded bad.

“Oh, come on, guys. That doesn’t mean Lonnie’s a traitor!”

“The hell it doesn’t.” Gunnar muttered a few more choice words under his breath for the admiral.

“Seriously.” Ava leaned forward, pleading with at least Jules to believe her. “Grayson showed me a few images of Jack meeting with Lonnie in secret. But the information passed between them implicated someone else. There was real worry on Lonnie’s part to take care of us. Not *take care of us* as in kill us,” she snapped at Gunnar, reading his suspicions. She turned back to the others. “Look, this is about Grandma right now. Why do you think Grayson didn’t try to send her his message? He’s worried about her. She’s the one we really need to protect.” Ava tried to use compassion to aid her cause. “She’s vulnerable. She loves Lonnie. And he loves her. They’ve been together for years.”

Jesse flushed. “That’s true. The, ah, vision I saw when I first met Mrs. Sharpe was of the pair of them from a long time ago. And they were really friendly. Naked friendly.”

Gunnar grimaced. “Shit, man. Did that need to be said out loud?”

“The point is, Grandma isn’t looking at anything with clarity right now. She needs us to be her eyes and ears. We need to intercept Lonnie before he arrives the day after tomorrow and without her knowing. *We* need to handle him. Not Alicia.”

Ava looked to Jules. "Trust me, when she goes postal, there's no one that can stop her. Not even Gunnar."

Gunnar finally looked interested. "So what's she like when she *changes*? Does she look like you?"

Jesse added, "And just what can she do? Predict the future? Read minds, emotions? She seems to know a lot about stuff. Then she has gaps in other things that could really help us."

Ava wanted to tell them but didn't want to violate her grandmother's confidence.

Jules said nothing. He simply waited for her to talk.

"You want answers? Fine. Help me deal with Lonnie. Hell, if you still don't believe him after he explains himself, I'll serve him to you on a silver platter."

"First intelligent thing you've said all day," Gunnar said with a smile.

"Jerk."

"Witch."

"Kids, can the love talk," Jesse cut in. "I'm all for getting to the bottom of this. And I'd love to talk to Jack again, face-to-face." The dark grin he shot her gave her beast chills.

Though Jesse came across as charming and fairly civilized, he wouldn't tolerate a threat to his team.

"I'm in, but only because I want to know what the hell Mrs. Sharpe has been hiding." Jules regarded Ava with a half smile. "You know, you and your grandmother are a lot more alike than I first thought."

"Thanks," she grumbled.

"Blackmail, threats, bits of information you dangle like a carrot. Oh yeah, you're definitely related." Jules snorted and stood. "Fallon, let's go say good-bye to our mates. Tersch, you have your orders."

Gunnar opened his mouth, but Jules glared him into silence. “No questions, no arguments. Just fucking do it.”

“Hell.” Gunnar grumbled and sank lower in his seat, defeated.

“I guess that’s as close to ‘aye-aye’ as I’m gonna get.” Jules kissed Ava’s forehead before heading out. “Keep an eye on him, honey. He gets surly when he hasn’t bitten anyone in a while.”

Jesse snickered.

“Laugh it up, pretty boy,” Gunnar snapped at him. “I’d love nothing more right now than to bite your sorry ass.”

“Bye, guys.” Ava pushed Jesse out the door before he could screw with Gunnar. She turned to face her mate and waited. When he said nothing, she asked, “Well? What were your orders?”

“To babysit *you*. Happy you asked?”

“Oh yeah, I’m just thrilled to be paired with a hulking, sulking Circ with an attitude problem. Thank you, Jules.” *Yes! Finally, an excuse for him to stick by me. Gunnar can’t ignore me now.* Still, she didn’t want to appear grateful. Gunnar seemed to like her best when he thought he was getting on her nerves. Probably because he felt safer that way, more distant.

Gunnar grinned. So handsome, so incredibly male. Her beast sighed at the sight of him. “Well now, Ava. What would you like to do first?”

“You mean besides wipe that shit-eating grin off your face?” *And ride you so hard, you can’t breathe without thinking of me?* She cleared her throat. “Let’s go for a walk. I need the fresh air.”

“Thank God. One more minute around all this damn drama, and I was going to shoot myself.”

“Not if I shoot you first.”

He laughed again and followed her out of the conference room

To Tersch's surprise, he enjoyed walking with Ava in the woods. Behind the mansion, off the large stone patio, they walked along a running trail through the forest. Several feet wide and equipped with lights, the trail had mile markers until it came to a complete end at a ten-mile turnaround. He normally hauled ass out here, racing one or more of the guys while in shorts and running shoes. When he *changed* into his beast, he liked to venture into the woods, away from manmade paths.

Ava tucked her small hand in the crook of his elbow. "This is nice, hmm?"

Too nice. He cleared his throat but didn't pull away from her. The heat from her palm warmed him from the inside out. Though Ava didn't show off her power, he could feel it any time they touched.

"Yeah, nice. So are you going to tell me about Grayson? Why he was here pretending he didn't know you? You ready to give up your secrets yet, baby?" His low voice grew even huskier when she stroked his forearm. He glanced down at her, but she kept her gaze ahead of them, unconsciously petting him.

"I can't tell you all my secrets. Then I'd be too easy to handle."

"Ava, I could know everything about you and still find you hard to handle."

She grinned.

"What the hell do you have to hide, anyway?"

"I'll answer a question for a question. My answers for yours."

He should have known better than to try to dig into her past, but he really wanted to know. Maybe he could substitute knowledge for sex. He could own her secrets if not her body. "Sure, whatever."

"But you can't lie. I'll know if you lie." Her eyes narrowed.

"So you do read minds."

"No, but you have tells. There are things you do with your body and expressions you make that give you away."

“No shit?” He stopped them and turned to look down at her. “You’re kidding, right?”

Her smug grin should have annoyed him. Instead he found her arrogance charming. Man, he had it bad.

“I know a heck of a lot about you, Gunnar.” She put her arm on his and guided them back on their walk. “But there’s more I want to know. Go ahead and ask me anything.”

“Why the subterfuge with Grayson?”

She sighed. “I knew you’d ask that. First of all, I don’t know everything my brother does. He’s worked a lot of classified missions over the years.”

Tersch frowned. “He’s DoD?”

“Department of Defense? I guess you could say that. Grayson doesn’t technically work for any organization in the government. He’s a floater, and he’s referred by name.”

“A contractor.”

“He likes to think of himself as a mercenary with pull.” Ava shrugged. “I’ve helped him a time or two.”

“Oh?” The innocent look on her face didn’t fool him, because he was coming to realize Ava had a lot more going on under the surface than he’d expected.

“I don’t have a ton of field experience, but my abilities make it easy to get in and out of tight spots without being noticed.”

He thought of her speed. “I’ll bet.” He opened his mouth for another question when he inhaled a waft of her scent. Sexy, arousing, and dangerous. Tersch coughed and tried to focus on *not* screwing her. “So I get your brother being an undercover guy. But why with us? We’re Circ. We’d understand.”

“Because he didn’t trust everyone at the mansion. And I don’t mean Grandma. He’s known for some time that there are powerful people out to get you guys. Think of him as another line of defense. He’s been running interference for a while.

Grayson worked with Raul when the pair were at Montaña's compound in the Amazon."

"He did?"

"Yeah. He didn't tell me much about it until I saw him a few weeks ago. But he helped Sheridan escape and protected her from Raul. Raul was not a nice guy."

He curled his fist against his side. "I know."

"Oh, that's right. You broke his neck." She said it as if she'd been talking about snapping a twig.

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Nope. I have a much different view of the world than most people. Where I come from, we respect the elderly, protect the innocent, and fight against injustice. There's not a lot of forgiveness in my family for wrongdoing."

He wondered what she'd think if she knew he'd killed his own father.

She clutched his arm tighter. "Why are you so afraid to be with me?"

Trust Ava to cut right to the heart of the matter.

"I'm not afraid, exactly..."

"Bullshit. You're scared of me." She paused. "Is it because I was born Circ?"

The flatness of the question made him look at her closer. To his shock, Ava seemed vulnerable. He didn't like it, so he did what he did best. He set out to annoy her into a good mad.

"No. It's because you're black."

"*What?*"

"I don't like black women. And you know, I'm not that into women, come to think of it. I'm much more into cock."

She blinked at him with her mouth open.

"Nothing like taking it up the ass. Tits and pussies are for morons."

"You... That's... I..."

He snorted. “Yeah, that’s stupid, isn’t it? As stupid as me not wanting you because you were born this way—strong, sexy, and lethal. Or because your skin is so pretty and brown, or that you have the nicest breasts and most fuckable ass I’ve ever seen.” Just thinking about everything Ava made him hard and aching. “And what moron prefers dick to womanly curves?” He rethought the question. “With the exception of Hayashi, gay men don’t know what they’re missing. Of course, that’s probably because no one compares to you.”

They continued walking in silence while they both absorbed what he’d said.

“Do you realize that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me?” Ava’s soft voice wrapped around his heart and squeezed. “Why can’t we be together, Gunnar?”

He couldn’t look at her, because she’d see the longing in his eyes. “I...” *Tell her. Tell her the truth. You’ve been feeling it since day one. At least let her know why there can never be an “us” in our future.* “Ava, I care for you. A lot.”

She stopped them and turned him to face her. The glowing green of her eyes hinted at the deep emotion she must be feeling, but her face remained blank.

He repeated himself. “I care for you more than makes sense. I’m not an easy man.”

“I know that.”

“No, you don’t. You think you do. You know what I can do to my enemies, but you’ve never seen what I can do to someone I love.” And God, if he ever damaged Ava, he’d kill himself. He’d barely survived after Susanna’s and Sophie’s deaths, and he felt so much more for Ava. A man’s love, not a teenager’s infatuation.

“You would never hurt me.” She reached out to him, her eyes now brown and soft. And so loving.

He stepped back. “I wouldn’t try to hurt you, but I could. Too easily.” He sighed, wishing this conversation over. “Ava, I’m attracted, no doubt. But it’s more than that.”

She frowned at him. "You slept with Olivia and Sheridan. And they're a lot weaker than I am. Yet you never hurt them."

He flushed. "You, ah, knew about them?" Of course she knew.

"Yes. I know you still struggle through mating heats." She tried to play it off, but he could see the glow of anger in her eyes. "I wasn't available for you, so you turned to them. And I understand that you need the team in that way. The guys don't bother me at all. I told you I'm different from most people you know."

"I was only with Olivia and Sheridan in the presence of their mates," he tried to explain. "And with them it was nice."

"I'm nice."

"No, you're not." He burned for her. "You're pissy, arrogant, and mean."

"*Gunnar.*"

"Please. You know it's true. Why the hell do you think I walk around with a hard-on every time you're near? Why do you think it's so fucking difficult for me to stay away from you? You're bitchy, gorgeous, and hardheaded. You don't take my shit or cry because I hurt your feelings when I say something stupid. *You're mine,*" his beast had to add, just to be heard.

"So then what's the problem?" She cocked her hip and leaned a hand on it, showing her annoyance. "You think I can't handle your beast? Honey, you're strong, but you have nothing on what I can really do."

"Ava, I want you. My beast wants you. But my berserker, it wants to dominate you, real bad. I get angry a lot, and it's hard to control myself on a good day. But around you, I have a hard time keeping it together. I'm afraid I could seriously hurt you, honey. And I could never live with myself if that happened."

She studied him with an odd look. "You think I'm buying this?"

"Why would I lie?" Frustrating woman. He was trying to be honest, to be up-front and put his cards on the table.

“Because you’re scared. Scared of making a commitment, scared of having someone to love and toe the line for. You like playing too much.”

“Dammit, that’s not true.” He clenched his fists. She made him sound like some selfish playboy. Didn’t she realize how difficult this was for him? How much he wanted her but denied himself for *her* benefit?

“Sure it is. I read your files, Gunnar.” She smiled, showing sharp white fangs. “I know all about your time in the navy. I’ve read detailed accounts from your old captain and from the doctors who treated you in Pearson Labs, back when the Dawn Endeavor program was brand new.

“A different woman every night, sometimes two at a time. You liked to play around, and you liked your sex a bit rough.” She shrugged. “So do I, but you don’t see me trying to avoid how I feel for you because I want to play the field.”

“You’re missing the point.” He forced himself to remain calm. Like hell she’d *play the field*. “That was years ago. I don’t want anyone else. Shit. I don’t want any other female Circ but you.”

The canny woman was now grinning at him. She liked him wanting her and hurting because of it?

“Ava, I never hurt Olivia or Sheridan, because I didn’t love them. I like them, I respect them and their mates, and I’ll treasure the softness they gave me when I needed it. But with you, I can’t be gentle. Or safe.” He swallowed hard, seeing Susanna in his mind’s eye. “I can’t protect you from me.”

Ava *changed* in an instant and launched herself at him. She knocked him to the ground and straddled his abdomen, her tiny hand around his throat and cutting off his air supply.

He stared at Ava who wasn’t quite Ava. A shimmer of her beast lingered over her human form, like a shadow of animalistic rage over the beautiful woman underneath. This Ava had fangs and claws and unbelievable strength. She hadn’t grown much, yet her strength was that of a Circ much, much larger.

"I don't need your fucking *protection*." She spat the word like a curse. "I'm stronger and faster than you'll ever be. Your hesitance makes me question why I thought to consider you worthy of mating with me. You act like you're scared of your own shadow."

She insulted his manhood. His beast didn't like the challenge. But it was his berserker that he worried about. The monster wouldn't tolerate its mate's rejection. Just what Tersch had been trying to avoid.

He struggled against letting her see what she should be so scared of and rasped, "Ava, shit. Let me up and back away."

"I've seen your berserker before." She huffed and loosened her hold on his throat. "I'm not impressed."

"Don't do this. Don't do this," he chanted, holding on even as his beast broke through his constraints as well as his clothes. His shirt split; his toes cut through his sneakers and socks. His trousers burst at the button and seams. And still, he grew.

His skin turned a darker shade to reflect the monster that lived within, and his sight became infused with a tinge of red as his infrared heat vision engaged to better illuminate nearby prey.

"Ava, please. Get off me. Don't make me hurt you."

"Prove you're stronger. Don't pretend any longer that you deserve me if you can't back it up."

He roared his denial and held on to a semblance of sanity as he stared up at his mate. "Fuck! You don't understand. I can't help myself. You think this is about a fear of commitment?"

Tersch rose to his feet, forcing Ava to cling to him as he stood. Once again towering over her, he pulled her from his body and pushed her back. When she threw herself back at him, he caught her. Though her weight seemed impossibly as heavy as his, he held her up and stared into feline pupils dilated with rage.

“Little girl, you know nothing about anger.” Tersch’s berserker leaned closer until they stared at one another nose to nose. “Did you read *all* my files? Did you read about Frederik Gunnar Tersch’s dysfunctional little family?” He laughed, and she finally showed a modicum of sense.

Ava shrank back and dug her claws into his arms to find purchase in the crushing muscle drawing her closer.

“Did you read about how I killed my sister, my girlfriend, and then my father?” His back teeth filled his lower jaw, and the urge to bite grew. “I choked the life out of him, watched as the capillaries in his eyes burst, and listened as he gasped for his last breath. So sweet, that destruction, that battle for domination.” He nipped her neck for a taste of her sweet blood, captivated by her shudder. He whispered, “I killed him, and sick fuck that I am, I loved him. I loved all of them, you know. But I love you even more. Think what I could do to you with all that precious emotion?”

The horror on her face drove him on, and his berserker ripped through her shirt to clutch one firm, brown breast. He squeezed hard, pulling the strong scent of arousal from her, as well as the bitter scent of fear. “When I’m ready, I’ll take what I want, what I *own*. You’re mine, Ava. All mine. I wonder if your neck will snap as sweetly as Susanna’s did?”

Ava pushed out of his arms and ran away.

He squelched his instinctive urge to give chase and tore down several trees in his rage to find control. Tersch finally pulled his berserker back down, fighting the creature’s urge to take care of its mate. Though Tersch wore his berserker’s skin, the warning had been all Gunnar, the man. And he’d hated every word of it.

Now she knew. The ugly, distorted truth of a man so unworthy to be loved. Alone and lonely, Gunnar imagined his life without Ava and felt unbearably sad.

Tears filled his eyes, but he ignored them. Instead, he left the trail and walked deeper into the forest. Then he ran and kept on running.

## Chapter Seven

Ava spent the night alone. Despite Admiral London's pending visit in another day, her grandmother's fragile calm, and the danger circling close, she could think of nothing but Gunnar.

She'd wanted to call his bluff yesterday, but the truth in his words, in his voice, shocked her to silence. The berserker she'd been so attracted to seemed suddenly cold and threatening. To the Belles, family was all. Yet Gunnar admitted to killing his sister and father, not to mention his girlfriend. *What the hell?*

She wanted to blame his berserker for his lack of control, but she'd sensed the man inside the monster as it spoke. He'd seemed pleased to have killed his own father.

Lying in her bed past nine, she couldn't make herself get up. Maybe if she slept long enough, she'd wake to find it had all been a bad dream. Gunnar was a lot of things, but a murderer? He killed to protect, period. Yes, a part of him liked it, but that was the animal conquering weaker prey. She couldn't believe he would actively seek to kill his own family. There had to be more to the story than he'd told her.

Didn't there?

His team had always stuck by him. Her grandmother favored Gunnar over the others. Would any of them do that if he'd actually done such horrible things? Sure, everyone deserved a second chance, but some sins, in Ava's mind, were too horrible for atonement. Had she been so wrong about Gunnar for so long? Was Ava like her grandmother, trusting the wrong man because she thought she loved him?

The similarities in their plights were too bizarre, and Ava knew she needed to talk about this. Except when she called her grandmother's office, Keegan answered. He told her Mrs. Sharpe had left for Washington last night. Something about critical funding issues.

"Aren't you supposed to be with Sheridan and Olivia?" she asked.

"Sorry, Ava. Price and I are under strict orders to stick with Mrs. Sharpe, and that's what we're doing. Damned woman gave us the slip. Now we have to find her and bring her back. Admiral London's not happy she's gone, and we're worried this might some type of ploy to draw her out from the Circs and put her in danger. Don't worry about Sheridan and Olivia. Kisho and Morgan took charge of the rest of our team. They and the psychics are guarding the women."

"Terrific." She sighed. "Well, go get Alicia and haul her back. Put all expenses on the corporate card."

"Will do." Keegan hung up.

She dropped the phone onto its cradle, wondering what else could go wrong.

"Ava, we've got a problem." Kisho startled her out of her musings. He stood at her bedroom door, and he made it a point to respect personal space.

"Why aren't you with Sheridan and Olivia?"

"I sent Morgan ahead with them. I'll join him after we talk."

"Great. Pile on." She waved him inside. "I take it the problem you're referring to is my grandmother taking off for Washington without telling anyone."

"What? Since when?"

"According to Keegan, she left last night."

"Uh-oh. Now this wasn't supposed to happen." He frowned. "In my vision, she's here when Admiral London arrives and shoots her."

"Okay, say that again."

Kisho sighed. "Your grandmother didn't just believe Admiral London was guilty on the basis of Melissa Ramirez. She had a vision I shared."

“Has that happened before?” Ava sat up, her back against her headboard. Clad in a T-shirt and underwear and covered at the waist by a thin sheet, she didn't worry about modesty. Especially since the only man she wanted sexually—her mate, Mr. Murderer—had made it plainly apparent they could never be anything but distant friends, if that.

“No. Mrs. Sharpe and I usually see different futures. The fact that we saw the same one upset us both. In it, Admiral London stared down your grandmother and shot her without blinking an eye.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“I wish I was. She was here in her office when he shot her, point-blank. She fell behind her desk. Shouts and fighting outside.” His eyes flickered, and a haze of psychic energy clouded between them.

Ava had a feeling he experienced it all over again. “All hell broke loose.” Kisho blinked. “But now... I don't understand. I still see it happening.”

Something in Ava snapped. She refused to consider Admiral Geoffrey London her enemy. Because if Grandma could be wrong about him, then Ava might be wrong about Gunnar. And she couldn't imagine living without him. Even if he was a lying, stubborn, arrogant son of a bitch.

Her beast rose to the surface. “I don't care what you've seen. Lonnie is on *our* side. I'll prove it when he arrives tomorrow. Now, you join Morgan and cling to Sheridan and Olivia like glue. Keegan and James are after my grandmother, and I have a feeling they won't mind knocking her out and dragging her ass back.” She knew the way Keegan worked. Her grandmother was in for an unpleasant surprise when they caught up with her.

“But the vision—”

“Will play out as it's meant to or disappear. You know you can't always change everything.”

“I know.” Kisho paused. “But Ava, your grandmother has come to mean the world to me. I love Morgan, and she means the world to him. I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“Then don’t. Stick Olivia and Sheridan with Doc and his Circs for protection. Then become Alicia’s personal shadow.” A terrific plan.

He frowned. “I don’t see her okay with that.”

“I know.” Ava gave him a sly grin. “Consider it payback for all the meddling she’s done in your life.”

“She gave me Morgan. How can I hate that?”

Ava leaned forward to stroke Kisho’s cheek. “Morgan is so lucky to have you. But trust me when I say the woman is a busybody. You have no idea how you’ve been manipulated.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I’ll tell you all about it when this vision and our troubles are over.”

“We’re Circ. Our troubles will never be over.”

“You have a point,” she conceded. And though she hated to ask, she found her lips moving anyway. “Seen Gunnar lately?”

A ghost of a frown crossed his face. “No, and Jules isn’t happy about it. I don’t see anything negative in Tersch’s future, but he’s in a bad way. I know it.”

“He’s always in a bad way,” she muttered. “*I killed him, and sick fuck that I am, I loved him. I loved all of them, you know. But I love you even more.*” Could her life suck any more? To finally hear his declaration of love, right before he threatened to murder her because of it? The man seriously owed her one hell of an explanation.

She glanced up to see Kisho’s sober expression. “What?”

“Ava, Gunnar’s had a thing for you from day one. It’s grown worse. He’s infatuated, obsessed, in love, call it what you will. But he’s afraid to hurt you.”

“So he said.” In detail.

“You don’t know how he suffered, and he’ll never tell you.” Kisho looked sad. “He’s one of the most generous people I know, though he’d be mortified to hear me tell it. I can’t know how bad his past was because I didn’t live it, but I do know he lived with an abusive father for most of his young life. There’s tragedy there, and some of it’s due to the wildness that lurks beneath his heart.”

An abusive father? That started to put things into perspective. Odd she’d never read of that in his detailed files.

“He needs you, Ava. He needs you to be whole. His rages worry me; they’re getting worse. I know you can help calm him, but you have to make him see what we all know—that he’d never hurt his mate. Not in a million years.”

The faith Kisho had for his friend made her ashamed she’d doubted Gunnar.

“I admit,” he continued, “his berserker can be alarming. But in all the time we’ve been together, he’s never harmed me. He’s been rough, aggressive, and at times downright dominant. But he’s my friend, and I hate to see him hurting like he is.”

“I’ll try, Kisho. But he’s been avoiding me. I talked to him yesterday.” She blinked away angry tears of frustration and remorse. “It didn’t go well.”

“Morgan and I figured as much when we saw you leave hand in hand but you returned alone and upset and smelling like one furious she-demon.” He held up his hands. His eyes crinkled. “Morgan’s expression, not mine.”

“Your mate is an ass. But he’s sweet on the inside, yeah, yeah. Trust me. I know Morgan the way you know Gunnar. And if Gunnar could love me half as much as Morgan loves you, I’d consider myself one lucky Circ.”

Kisho patted her leg. “Then you know what you have to do. Collar the stubborn bastard and make him admit how wrong he’s been for not believing in himself and you.”

His advice gave her the confidence she needed to seek out Gunnar once more. When had Ava ever quit when going after something she wanted? Why start now? “I love you, Kisho. Marry me.”

The phone suddenly rang, interrupting her. She answered it on speaker. “Hello?”

“Witch. Get yourself dressed and away from my mate.” Morgan’s snippy attitude cheered her even more. “Before you ask, I’m using one of the astral projectors here—one I know we can trust—and you wouldn’t believe what he’s seeing. You and my mate in your bedroom.”

Ava grinned and waved at the ceiling. “Kisho’s thinking of going hetero for me.” Ava batted her eyes.

Morgan’s growl made both her and Kisho laugh.

“Oh, relax, Cuz. I’ve tolerated you and him balling what’s mine, so give me some slack.”

Morgan coughed. “Jeez, Ava. It’s an instinctive bonding thing. You know that. And Kisho and I don’t really do stuff with the guys anymore unless it’s an all or nothing thing. Er, not usually. We’re monogamous, mostly.”

“You are so cute when your face is all red.” Ava grinned.

“You don’t know shit.”

“I don’t have to see you to know you’re blushing.”

Kisho laughed. “You were wrong, Morgan. She isn’t evil at all. She called you cute.”

“Shut up, kitsu. And you,” he said to Ava. “You and Tersch deserve each other.”

“Thanks! Now you need to get a move on. If your psychic hasn’t filled you in, Kisho will when he calls you later. Here are the nuts and bolts.” She briefly filled him in on her conversation with Keegan.

Morgan sighed. “Fine, fine. Just make sure Kisho keeps his distance from Keegan. To tell the truth, I’ll feel better when all the admiral’s psychics around this place leave and don’t come back. No offence, Scott,” he murmured to someone in the foreground. “I don’t like the way Foreman looks at my kitsu.”

Kisho stood and winked at Ava. "If Gunnar doesn't come back soon, you'll probably find him at an abandoned cabin fourteen miles due east of here. *Change* and run that way, and you'll scent him."

"Thanks."

Morgan tried asking a question, but Kisho interrupted. "I'll explain later, Morgan. And Scott, get out of here," he said to the astral projector. Kisho leaned over her to disconnect the call. "Good luck, Ava."

"You too."

She waited until Kisho left before jumping out of bed. Excited about her newfound courage to deal with her scary, emotionally scarred mate, she wasn't ready for the mental blast that hit her between the eyes. Damn you, Grayson, she swore before hitting the floor—hard. Then she blacked out.

\* \* \*

Alicia Sharpe and Robert Anderson exchanged a look filled with understanding over the head of the small, balding man currently spouting book and verse about spending, overspending, and unlawful travel claims.

Alicia wanted to ask the loathsome little toad if he was serious. Then she wanted to rip his throat out and feast on his entrails. She stole a glance at her designer suit and nixed the idea. She didn't want to think about staining her pale blue wool skirt or getting blood on her precious pearls. She fingered one earlobe, comforted by the smooth round gemstone. Though she knew the action to be telling, she at times used the convention to express nerves she didn't necessarily feel. Looking like a frail older woman had its advantages.

Robert saw her touch the earring and gave a subtle nod. He couldn't stand Hank Berstrom either. The accountant acted as if each penny he saved the government came from his own wallet, yet he never questioned claims from his lobbyist friends for yachts, five-star hotels, and gourmet dining.

“What I think Mrs. Sharpe means, Mr. Berstrom, is that her project is still as viable today as it was a year ago. Admiral London sent you the paperwork yesterday, I believe. He copied me the memo.” Robert sounded apologetic as he reached into his briefcase and handed Berstrom the memo.

While she waited for him to read it, she sought deep inside herself for the answers she needed. She’d loved Geoffrey London for over thirty years. She’d been far from a young girl when they’d met, though he’d been an aspiring junior naval officer. Something about him had enamored her from the very beginning. He had good looks, intelligence, and manners drilled into him by loving parents. But it was his integrity, his yearning to give and protect those who couldn’t protect themselves, that had struck a chord in her. That and his scent.

After the death of her mate, she’d never thought to find love again. Then she met Lonnie. Though human, Lonnie smelled like a Circ. Like home. He had a small bit of psychic ability, a touch of awareness for others with psychic gifts. And he’d been as drawn to her as she was to him.

Both of them had responsibilities that pulled them apart from one another. His had been to the United States Navy, while Alicia’s had been to her family and the future her mother had long ago shown her. When she’d met Lonnie, it seemed as if fate smiled upon her, because Lonnie and his aims were a part of it all.

She didn’t know how her life would end. Nor did she know if the things she influenced would come back to one day haunt her. She only did what her mother and her mother’s mother had done before her. She trusted in her spirit, in the totem of her foremothers, and in herself. She loved Lonnie with the same passion she stored for those she considered her own. Like her daughter and her descendants, her sisters and her nieces and nephews.

Without her help, Ava, Morgan, and Olivia would never have come close to achieving their potential. Now Morgan had a mate to love. Olivia had a husband and father for her child. Ava still needed her help, but her great-great-

granddaughter had to do things her way. Stubborn brat. Alicia curbed a smile, knowing that in Gunnar, Ava had found a man worthy of the title *mate*.

Her pleasure in their stunted courtship faded. Gunnar had a world of hurt in his broad frame. A lifetime of cruelties suffered by an innocent child who'd turned into a brusque, hardened man. Only a stubborn woman like Ava would be able to pierce his hard shell and conquer the monster within.

A strong female for a strong male. The pair were obviously alike, both stubborn yet fierce. Unlike Alicia and Lonnie. He'd said it had never bothered him that Alicia was physically stronger than he was, so psychically gifted. But perhaps it had. Maybe that's why he'd turned against her in this time of strife.

She blinked away useless tears, distressed and disgusted that she could be so weak in the presence of others. Alicia never cried, and she couldn't have said why she lately had trouble containing her emotions. To her relief, Berstrom and Robert seemed to be engaged in conversation and unaware of her distress.

Subtly composing herself, Alicia reined in her awkward emotions, not used to feeling so much uncertainty. She believed in a higher power, in the spirits that guided her. She'd deal with Lonnie the way she'd dealt with so much other stress in her long-lived life. One day at a time.

"Right, Mrs. Sharpe?" Robert said.

"I'm sorry, dear. What was that?"

Berstrom sniffed. "He just said that there's no reason for you to remain while he and I iron out the details the two of you already agreed upon."

She smiled and nodded at Robert, grateful he'd decided to deal with Berstrom's unpleasantness by himself. No reason for them both to suffer. But before she could thank him, she felt a distinct sense of wrongness. Without letting either man see her unease, she slowly rose from her chair.

Robert moved forward to assist her and caught her hand in his. She felt the slow draw of his finger over the back of her hand, a familiar stroke he often used when they met. Come to think of it, Robert often found an excuse to touch her.

Nothing sexual, just platonic touches to endear himself, or so she'd once thought. Not sure why she'd never noticed it before, she instinctively pushed a psychic block at the contact. Then she caught the faint trace of Melissa Ramirez on him.

Stunned and not sure what to think, she kept her expression pleasantly polite and nodded her thanks. "I'll see you later, Robert? Dinner, my treat." She forced a smile and glanced at Berstrom.

Robert's lips quirked. For an older man, he kept himself in shape. Thick black hair threaded with silver was coifed in a sophisticated cut and gave him a polished look. His nails, his grooming, even his manners were always so carefully displayed.

Wondering if Melissa thought to use Robert against them or if Robert could possibly be an enemy to beware, Alicia kept up her internal shields while projecting friendship and the scent of trust. Unlike others of her kind, Alicia could and did scent emotions. Robert's seemed typically driven, nothing dark or untoward. Yet Alicia couldn't help feeling a bit hazy where he was concerned. Too bad Olivia or Jesse couldn't have accompanied her. She could have used their input.

No matter. By projecting her own light scent of trust, she'd control the players of this game she had no intention of losing. Her Circs, her great-great-granddaughter, and her entire future depended upon coming out the winner.

Her mind now on this new mystery, she slowly made her way from the room into the hallway. She walked down the corridor toward Admiral London's office in this five-sided puzzle palace. Time to see just how deep Lonnie had sunk in this quagmire of deceit.

He watched carefully as she walked down the hall. Lonnie had to make damn sure the woman couldn't see the truth. She had eyes like a bat and the intuition of a soothsayer. For all he knew, she really did see the future. Alicia Sharpe knew enough to be dangerous, like that asshole Kisho Hayashi. Personally, Lonnie had no use for prognostication. What was the use of knowing a future that might or might

not come true? It gave him a headache to ponder the probabilities—if tomorrow would happen because he'd affected it that way, or because it was meant to happen.

Fortunately, his talent lay elsewhere. He'd been working his mojo on Sharpe for years. Though they'd only come together officially on this project, he'd set the stage some time ago. He needed her to trust him, and with the press of his fingers against her hand, those harmless handshakes, he'd infused a link she had yet to deny. He had her right where he wanted her. If she'd found him out, she'd have killed him long ago.

He could respect that. From one predator to another, taking out the weak, disabling the enemy, made sense. And speaking of weak... He felt the small note Melissa had left in his jacket pocket and wanted to kill her, right the fuck now. He'd been so careful for so long. Apparently, forcing her to leave the other night hadn't done him any favors. The bitch had sneaked an apologetic love note into his inside pocket, amid a few other business cards he'd tucked away.

He had only himself to blame, of course. He should have gone through his things before coming to work. Aside from Sharpe, there were hidden psychics running amuck in the Pentagon, more turnouts from the PWP. Both a blessing and a curse. While he took credit for the project's successes, he also had to guard against being found out. Unfortunately, he couldn't count on all of his men standing by him, not when he sometimes awarded foreign nations rights that ran counter to American objectives.

Lonnie tried to shrug off his concern. If Sharpe had detected him or his tie to Melissa, she would have confronted him about it. It's not as if he hid from her, not with his office a stone's throw from Berstrom's.

Berstrom suddenly stood with a sick smile. "Admiral. So good to see you here. Robert and I were just finishing up."

"I just wanted to make sure our budget for the next fiscal year is in order. No worries, right, Berstrom?"

All three men nodded at one another, the semblance of friendly camaraderie one that they all knew to be false.

“Things are fine, Admiral,” Berstrom answered in a chipper voice. “Just fine.”

*And it would be. Just as soon as Alicia and her Circs were no more. Time to scrap the Dawn Endeavor project, finally, and move on to bigger and brighter things.*

## Chapter Eight

Gunnar sat in the cabin where he could think, away from everyone and everything. He couldn't help it. He knew Jules and the others needed him. Admiral London was due to visit in another fourteen hours, and they needed to prepare. But fourteen hours was half a day away. He had some time to kill.

Time to kill, not *people* to kill.

Regret for the way he'd ended things with Ava hit him hard. His berserker and beast refused to rise, weighted down under lashing sorrow. For all that he'd claimed he'd killed his girlfriend and sister, he could too easily see their happy faces glowing just for him.

Gentle Sophie, his younger sister. He remembered white-blond hair and blue eyes. A soft smile, that special pleasure she reserved just for him. The poor kid hadn't had much to smile about growing up dirt poor under the stern eye of an autocratic dickhead. And what about Susanna? For all that he thought he'd loved her, would never live without her, he'd survived long enough to join the navy, become a SEAL, a Circ, and fuck anything that moved.

At first the sexual needs had felt like a betrayal. But since screwing other women had hurt him as much as it soothed his physical needs, he'd reveled in the emotional pain, because he deserved it. If he'd been less selfish, less concerned with his fucked-up need for affection and belonging, he never would have invited Susanna into his life, and she'd still be alive today.

Sophie he should have protected, and he knew that. She'd always been in danger, but Susanna had been a true casualty of bad timing and the bad taste to see something good in him.

A replica of his father, Gunnar had the same height, the same brawn, the same cold, ice blue eyes, or so his mother had repeatedly told him before she'd died. The bitter woman had blamed him for so much. Too weak to leave his father, she'd put the fault for Eric Tersch's abuse at Gunnar's hands.

*You're too loud, too quiet. Too neat, too sloppy. Hurry up. Slow down.* No matter what he did, he was fucked. She doted on Sophie, though. His father did too, until he drank or forgot how much loved her. Sophie was the little ray of sunshine in a house from hell.

Was it any wonder he'd killed his father? Tersch had been born and trained to destroy—by example.

Eric Tersch loved order, and he loved control. The raging beast was never far from his father's mind. *No, not a beast. A berserker. The fucker didn't deserve a beast. He'd have killed it for being a pure-hearted thing.* Though Tersch's beast liked his anger, he knew better than to harm because of it. His beast protected the innocent. Always. It was the berserker that went off half-cocked.

His beast puffed up with pleasure at the distinction before urging Tersch to return to the mansion to find Ava. *Claim her. Need her. Love her.*

Tersch rubbed his eyes, so tired of fighting himself all the time. "Christ. I do love her. That's why I'm protecting her from it, you bastard." *And now I'm crazy for talking to my schizoid beastly personality. Fuck.*

He'd known from the moment he met Ava that one of them would eventually have to leave Circ central. He wanted her, but he couldn't have her. And now seeing she was Circ, he really had to go. After he dealt with the dickheads trying to kill the team, he'd look for another place to live. It would kill him to leave his friends, to leave Ava, but he had no choice. He'd learned his lesson the hard way.

Best to sacrifice his happiness than kill an innocent woman, the way his father's berserker had killed the women in Tersch's life.

He groaned and lay back on the blankets covering a section of the dirt floor. Since he'd discovered the place months ago, he'd taken pains to make it more

livable. Hayashi had helped, and Tersch now had a place to sleep, a stash of Tastykakes in a cooler to repel wildlife, and several bottles of water he filled from a nearby natural spring. Solitude and silence, just what he needed.

“I know you’re in there.”

He jumped to his feet in shock when Ava pushed through the open doorway, bathed in moonlight. “What the hell?”

“Didn’t hear me or smell me, I know. What can I say? I’m good.” She grinned, and the sight of her smug smile pained him enough to bring tears to his eyes.

*Don’t be a pussy, Son. Man up.* He heard his father’s scornful words and felt the open-handed slaps to his face as if he’d been struck yesterday. So much for years of distance and repressed memories to salve the pain.

He turned before she spied his weakness, embarrassed anew. So much for control. The damned woman unraveled him like a fucking black widow.

“Gunnar?”

Shit. Not the soft, concerned voice. “I need space, Ava.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here.”

Did she not hear him? “I said—”

“I know what you said. But you’re an idiot. You don’t know what you need.”

“Didn’t you listen before?” Anger returned, and as much as he welcomed the strength of the emotion, he feared it as well. He couldn’t get too carried away, or the berserker would return to hurt Ava.

*“I said shut that bitch up!” Eric yelled. He struck Sophie so hard, she hit the table and sliced open her forehead. “I want space, quiet. I can’t think with all that racket.”*

*Momma stared at him in silence, a broken woman. And then Susanna made a noise, and his father pushed open the door to his bedroom, where Gunnar had been hiding her. She’d showed up at the house unexpectedly. He’d warned her never to come around. Especially not with Eric home, drinking, mad...*

“I won’t go away. Not again.” Ava’s beast stared at him through dark black eyes. “I’ve come to claim my mate.”

He snorted, trying to pretend he wasn’t shaking. “Bullshit. You’re just pissed because I don’t want you.”

She had the nerve to laugh, then hit him so fast and with such force, he saw stars. Before he could recover, she moved in a blur and stuck him with a specially tipped needle to penetrate his thick skin. Even in human form, Circ skin was tough.

She depressed the plunger and injected him with something. Tersch wanted to be mad, but both his beast and his berserker approved the trickery. *Good mate. Smart.*

“It’ll just relax you a bit. Enough to hide your rage under a calming haze, but not too much.” She smiled at him.

God, she was so pretty. Crazy but gorgeous.

“Now you just lay there while I strip those clothes off you.”

Alarmed at the idea, he protested, gratified he had enough cognizance to know she shouldn’t get him naked. “No. The shit you gave me isn’t working fast enough. If I can still think, I can still get mad. Leave me, Ava. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. You love me,” she said defiantly, as if daring him to contradict her.

“And you love me. So how stupid does that make you?” he growled. “Now let me... When—What the fuck did you put on my wrists?” Shocked, he tugged but couldn’t free himself from the dark cord wrapped around his wrists and fastened to stakes on the ground on either side of his head.

“I told you I’m fast, sweetie.” Ava hummed under her breath as she used her claws to strip him of the trousers he wore. He’d left the house the day before while *changed* and didn’t wear anything else.

“Man, have I told you how much I love that you go commando? That is one beautiful cock.”

His dick stiffened, pointing directly up at her. To his mortification, he felt his cheeks heat. "Ava, come on." He squirmed and sucked in a breath when she closed her small hand around him.

"You're so thick, I can't wrap my hand around you. You're always big, aren't you? Even when you're not *changed*." She licked her lips, and he groaned. "Now, this is how it's gonna be. I'm going to ride you until you're begging me to come. Then I'm going to make you bleed and do it all over again." She lifted a hand and flashed her pretty claws at him.

The meanness in her tone turned him on so much, his dick grew wet. Not just from the oils he naturally secreted when *changed*, but from a burst of precum that dampened his slit.

"You can't. The beast might play nice, but my berserker's going to hurt you, Ava. Why the hell do you think I've never claimed you before?"

"Maybe because you're scared?" she taunted. "Not used to fucking a woman who can put you on your ass." She ran a claw down his belly, and he shuddered. "Hard to pound into a woman you're afraid of crushing under all that might, hmm?"

"Dammit," he rasped, completely under her spell. He could barely concentrate on anything but the feel of her sharp nails over his skin. She didn't play nice at all. She dug hard enough for him to feel it, but not hard enough to break the skin.

"I can do this all night." Ava chuckled. "But I don't think you'll last that long."

"I can last forever if I have to." An empty threat, and they both knew it. His cock felt so hard right now, he feared he'd come without much more provocation.

She wiped her fingers over his slit and rubbed it over his cockhead.

He bucked in her hand.

"I already know how good you taste." She licked her lips. "Do you remember how good my mouth feels?"

“Shit.” He panted, trying to bring himself back under control. He’d never been this turned on, and he kept worrying that his beast would push past the drug she’d given him. Once his beast took control, his berserker wouldn’t be far behind.

“No, no. That’s not right. I want your honest response, Gunnar.” Ava remained clothed, and the sight of her fully dressed while he was naked lent her an impression of power. *Impression? Hell, the woman has me tied down like a fucking sacrifice.*

“I’m not going to tell you again. Let me g—Ava!”

She swallowed his cock in one large breath, taking all of him to the back of her throat. She didn’t move or suck him, just held him there, helpless, aching, and needing to come so badly.

“Baby, oh yeah. Fuck me,” he pleaded.

She slowly withdrew until the tip of him rested against her plump lips.

He couldn’t stop staring at the erotic sight, drugged on her skillful play.

“Where do you want it, sweetie? In my mouth or in my cunt?”

Hearing her talk like that, watching her lick and nibble at his cock, turned him inside out. He felt his berserker rage to break free, and then Ava slapped his chest hard and raked her nails down his abdomen, drawing blood.

“*You*, wait for it,” she snarled, and he had the oddest notion she spoke not to him, but to his berserker.

Staring up into pitch-black eyes bemused him enough that he ceased movement. His berserker stared into the Circ he wanted with his last breath. To his astonishment, he felt something inside him give. He couldn’t understand how this slight female could break him down so completely. But he couldn’t deny his berserker’s subtle approval. A distant surrender.

As if sensing it, Ava became pure woman once more, her now hazel eyes slumberous as she glanced down at his cock and stroked him.

“Ava, come on, baby.”

She raised a brow. "What's that? I don't think I heard a please."

"Goddammit. I'm going to come."

"So come." She ran a sharp nail under his glans.

He shuddered as a spurt of cum shot from his tip. "*Fuck*. Ava, honey, I want to come inside you, deep in your pussy. I want all of you. *Please*." He shivered, aware he'd yielded to the petite female, a thing he'd never done to any woman. Tersch knew the time had come to acknowledge her place in his life. He could only hope she wouldn't come to hate him for it.

Love blazed from her eyes, from her smile. She tore his heart from him with a look. "Now why didn't you say so in the first place?"

The little witch stood and slowly stripped down, giving him a tantalizing view of her slender belly, full breasts, and long, toned legs. For a short woman, Ava had been given the requisite curves and swells of a goddess. And that ass...

He couldn't help promising, "I'm gonna fuck that ass."

"Frisky, hmm? Oh, and ready to come, I see."

He wanted to warn her to move slowly. He was right on the edge, aroused from being at her mercy—under the care of a strong, deserving mate. Before he could say anything, she straddled his body, giving him a view of her delectable pussy.

"Get down here," he ordered. "Let me eat you."

She took her sweet time kneeling, but then her folds descended to his lips, and he lost himself in the taste of her.

Sultry, womanly, powerful. Her essence reminded him why he loved her so much. And her clit, the plump bud was ripe. He was hard, and she was harder. Tersch nipped her flesh and shoved his tongue inside her, wishing it was his cock.

He arched his hips up in the air with every stab of his tongue. Her scent changed, a sweet wildness indicating her near climax. But before he could finish her, she pulled away.

"Not yet, baby. Let me get you there."

“No. This way’s better.” The woman moved in a blur of speed as she straddled his groin and slammed hard over his cock, sheathing him deeply inside her.

The impact shot him into instant orgasm, and he roared.

She screamed his name as she clenched him tight, coming hard while he unloaded a mess of cum. The sheer agony of pleasure had him convulsing a second time, needing to tie himself to the woman.

Though he didn’t *change*, he swore his beast joined him in the effort. Milky white seed continued to jet inside her, so much that it began trickling down over the base of his shaft, where they remained joined. And then she moved.

Despite his able readiness as a Circ to engage in sex, coming so hard had been both painful and pleasurable. He wanted to beg her for a minute to recoup, but his body didn’t seem to need the respite. He remained just as hard as if he hadn’t spilled inside her.

Ava rode him, her breasts bouncing, her stomach contracting. She pinched his nipples and scored his chest. When she leaned down to kiss him, their tongues dueled, and he emerged the victor. Especially when he readied once more to fill his mate.

Ava broke the kiss and whispered into his ear, “Oh, Gunnar. You’re so hot. So thick.” She licked his ear and stuck her tongue in, and he came all over again, unable to stop the ferocious pleasure darkening his vision. “Yes. All inside me. Claim me, baby. Claim me good.”

“Ava, fuck. Yeah,” he moaned and jerked his left wrist free from its restraint.

She continued to slam over him until she came again.

But this time he held her tight, gripping her back to press her down, her full breasts against his chest.

When she calmed and he’d regained his ability to do more than hug her and breathe, he ripped his right wrist free.

"Oh, wow." Ava shuddered in his arms. "That was amazing." She blinked at the broken restraints. "I can't believe you freed yourself from those cords. They're the latest in Circ technology, supposedly unbreakable," she rasped, still trying to catch her breath.

"Do they work on you?" he asked, feeling replete, yet not finished. Not yet.

"Yeah." She swallowed loudly. "You're not angry or anything, are you?"

"Angry?"

"That I claimed you. You're mine now, Gunnar. Forever."

He wanted to be more upset that she'd put herself in possible danger, but the drug she'd given him had made it possible to finally have her. "I should be mad, but all I can think about is teaching you a lesson."

She leaned up on his chest and frowned down at him. "A lesson? Honey, you should be thanking me for fucking the breath out of you."

"Nice mouth, mate." He liked the word as it slipped off his tongue. Mate—a word he'd never thought to use for himself. "But I've tasted your tongue. And your pussy." He palmed her fine ass, willing and able to go another round. Thank God for Circ genetics. He could go all night long.

And so could Ava.

His grin widened.

"Oh hell. That smile is scary. Do I even want to know what you're thinking?"

Ava wished she'd never asked that question. Because Gunnar had whispered in detail what he'd fantasized about doing to her. And now, bent over on her hands and knees, she remained still while he shoved that monstrous cock up her ass.

"No, don't move. And don't use that speed of yours to get free. You owe me, you little witch." His gruff order turned her on, so she let him play his games.

For years she'd wanted to find a male to take charge of her, but Ava's strength knew no bounds. Though she gave the appearance of being smaller and less

powerful, in actuality, she could take on several Circs at once and emerge the victor with ease. Only Gunnar had ever managed to outdo her; only he called to her softer, feminine side to let go and place her trust in the dominant male.

And now she was paying for it. She'd *changed* back at his request, smaller now. Human. "Ow. Come on, you're too big." She glanced over her shoulder and saw him staring down at himself, where he ended and she began, with awe.

"If you knew how many times I've dreamed of this." His whisper melted her mental resistance, though her body could only handle so much in this frailer form. "Feel that burn, baby? That's me inside you. Fucking you." He pulled out and pushed back inside, stretching her wider.

Ava had played with anal sex before, but she'd never been with anyone Gunnar's size. The brute knew it and took great pleasure in baptizing her narrow ass.

"I'm going to drop a load in this ass. Make it mine."

His low growl thrilled her. So possessive, so dark and demanding. Now if she could just get him to allow his berserker to come out to play.

"You going to fuck me or talk me to death?" she jeered him.

When he pulled back, then pounded back inside her, she wondered what she'd asked for.

"Oh, fuck. That is so good. Keep mouthing off, Ava. I like it," he said in a thick voice. He continued to take her, no longer gentle. Grinding into her, he rammed that large cock deep.

The rough finger that grazed her clit threw her into a frenzy.

"Yeah, you like that, don't you? My kinky lover likes being fucked up the ass, don't you?"

She felt as if he'd split her in two, and the hell of it was, she liked it. A pain junkie just like her mate.

He grunted and shoved harder, gouging her waist as he took her. In and out, deeper, harder. And that finger. He continued to punish her clit with soft strokes, bringing her so close to orgasm. Then he'd pull it away, frustrating her.

"Make me come, Gunnar." She tried to shift under him but couldn't budge him.

"Beg me."

"Ass."

"Oh, yeah. Here I come." He yelled and shot hard, filling her with slowing thrusts. "Oh, baby. Motherfucking perfection."

The jerk. The scent of his cum made her mad to draw him in. She needed to climax, to join him in that same bliss.

"What's that?" he asked, panting. "Need something, little Circ?"

"Gunnar, please." She rocked back, feeling his balls slap against her clit.

*"Pretty please, mate. Say it."*

"Pretty please, mate."

"That's right." He remained inside her ass, still half-hard, and rubbed her clit with his rough thumb.

She came hard, clenching her ass around him again.

"Damn, that's good." He lifted her back to his chest, still joined as one. "This little pearl is so full." He wiped her cream over her clit. "You smell so good, Ava. Like me, but sweeter." He buried his nose in her neck and wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her against him with ease. "I never want to move again."

After a moment, she gave a weak chuckle. "You might not want to move again, but we're going to have to. I'm swimming in you, and that iron bar up my ass refuses to soften."

He laughed. "I can't help it. I'm always like this around you. And now I know why. I swear, sticking my dick in you is like shoving into an electrical outlet. So hot in there. That pussy and that ass." He gently withdrew, leaving her sore, sated, and wanting to do it all over again. "I have water, but we both really need a shower."

Ava wondered if she should press him about his berserker, but she didn't want to spoil the mood. "Do you think we could lie here together, in all our filth, for just a few more minutes?"

Grinning, her Viking pulled her with him onto some blankets and positioned her atop his chest. She leaned up on her elbows so she could see him.

His light blue eyes looked bright through her Circ senses. He liked that she smelled like him, but she liked more that he smelled like her. Claimed, taken. Off the market.

Pleased, she started purring.

"You are so sexy when you do that." Gunnar stroked her back and began to purr as well.

"So are you." She sighed. "I hate to ruin the moment, but I have to say this. If I ever catch you with another woman, without my consent, I will gut you and make it really hurt."

His eyes narrowed. "Yeah, same goes."

"I don't suffer mating heats. You don't need to worry about me."

"Well I do, worry about you, that is. You're too pretty for my peace of mind," he grumbled. "And I don't like the way other men look at you. Never have."

She liked this side of him very much. "Yeah, well, how do you think I feel, knowing you've banged everyone in the house with the exception of my grandmother?" At his flush, she added, just to be mean, "You didn't have sex with Alicia, did you?"

"Ava, please." He cringed. "Give me a break. You know about me and the guys and why we fucked. It's a—"

"Circ thing, I know. And I understand about Olivia and Sheridan. But that's over now."

"I know." He sounded glum.

She stretched her claws over his chest and dug in.

"Sometimes you are such a bitch." He grinned. "No wonder I fell so hard for you. Don't worry, baby. Yeah, I was with the guys a few days ago. Circ stuff. Sue me. I'm part of the team."

She frowned. "I get that, I said." And she wanted to see the guys in action for once. How sexy to watch three men take her mate down, to see him as a part of something greater, the Dawn Endeavor team.

"Olivia and Sheridan don't smell right anymore. I haven't craved anyone but you ever since you came out that you were Circ."

"Good. Keep it that way," she growled, satisfied when he hugged her closer.

"Whatever you put in that shot did the trick, baby. God, I was so scared of hurting you. But we can be together without worry now. Just dope me up with that suppressant and we can fuck like bunnies."

Ava paused. Great. How to tell him the needle had been full of a saline solution, a placebo she'd stolen from the lab before searching out her stubborn mate? She'd always known he could control himself if he stopped being afraid and just did it. But she didn't think now was the time to tell him. He hadn't hurt her because it wasn't in him to harm someone he loved. Which brought back what he'd said before, about killing his family...

"Gunnar?"

He ran his fingers through her hair, and she relaxed into his arms. "Yeah?"

"Tell me what really happened with your family. I know you didn't kill them." Curiosity over his history had plagued her since he'd tried to scare her away. She could only hope the great sex had softened him into telling the truth.

"Ava, I don't want to ruin this."

"You won't. We claimed each other, right?" Actually, she'd claimed him. She wondered if he realized he had one more step to go—releasing the berserker, the core of him, to claim his mate. Until he truly accepted that part of him, he—and she—would never be complete.

“Right.” He sighed. “You really want to know, huh? I guess you should. In a nutshell, my dad was a psycho. He had his own berserker, but he couldn’t control it. He never turned into a freak show, like me. He was totally human. But the fucker was strong and always so goddamn angry. I grew up under his fists. He had big hands.” He lifted his own hand and glanced at it. “Like mine.”

Ava took his hand in hers and kissed his fingers.

Gunnar blinked and tried to smile at her. The horror in his eyes brought her to tears, but she knew he wouldn’t welcome them, so she forced them away.

“Yeah, the old man was a dick. My mother wasn’t much better. She was a shell of a woman who blamed me for everything wrong in her life. My younger sister was the one good thing in my family. She could do no wrong, unless Dad had been drinking. He tended to forget everything but being angry with a bottle of Jack in his hands.”

“Gunnar.” *I’m so sorry, baby.*

“I loved Sophie. We all did. Life sucked, but it was all I knew. I don’t want your pity,” he suddenly snapped.

“You don’t have it,” she snapped back, one blink away from tears.

Fortunately, he didn’t call her on it. “Anyway, there was a girl at school I couldn’t get out of my thoughts. I’m not sure why, but she liked me back. I knew it was wrong, but somehow we were going out.”

She could see where this headed.

“I had warned Susanna not to come to the house. Told her all about my asshole father. But I didn’t show up for school for a solid week, and she was worried.”

“Why?”

“My dad had beaten me pretty bad. I jumped in front of Sophie during one of his rages, the way I usually did. But I wasn’t thinking. I yelled back at him, sick of what he was doing to us, to me and Sophie. My mother just watched, blaming me, probably. Dad went mental. Broke my arm and nearly my back.”

“Holy crap.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed her hair as if seeking a source of comfort but not wanting to ask for it. He glanced away from her face, caught in memories she'd forced him to relive. “Well, Susanna came to the house on a bad night. I was still healing. Even then I healed fast, but nothing like now. So Susanna snuck in, and my dad caught us.”

“Having sex?” she asked in amazement.

His dry chuckle relieved her. “No, he caught us in my bedroom. She was packing me a bag. We were going to grab Sophie and leave. But he found us.” Gunnar grimaced. “It happened fast. Dad hit me around. Sophie came in, already bloodied from his fists, and tried to protect me. So he struck her again. This time he killed her. My mom started shrieking, and he slapped her too. But she was conscious, could have called the cops for help. Instead she watched while he broke Susanna's neck.”

*Oh, dear God.* “You told me you killed them.”

“I did.” The hollow look in his eyes scared her. So much pain. How had she never seen it before? “I didn't protect Sophie, and I dragged Susanna into the mess.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen. Nearly seventeen. Old enough to know better.”

“So what happened?” He seemed steeled for pity, but she didn't give him any, and he relaxed under her.

“Something in me snapped. I don't remember much, only a rage unlike anything I'd ever felt before. My berserker.” His smile was devoid of warmth. “It finally woke up. I ripped the fucker's head clean off and passed out. When I came to, I was in the hospital. Social services took me from my mother. When she told them I'd turned into a monster and killed him, they accused her of being on drugs. She did like to drink a lot. Anyway, I escaped into foster care for a year or two, then joined the navy. The rest is history.”

They lay there together, each watching the other warily.

Ava wanted nothing more than to comfort him, but she knew he wouldn't accept it. *God, I love him so much.* She cleared her throat and changed the subject. "Thanks for explaining; I was curious. Ah, I had another message from Grayson earlier. The bastard knocked me out cold again."

Gunnar sat up suddenly and cuddled her against him, checking her scalp and then the rest of her for injury. "You idiot. Why didn't you tell me? Are you okay? I'm going to brain your brother when I see him again."

Ava bit her lip to hide a smile. Her mate recovered quickly from his sorry past when her health was in question. And there was the secret to Frederik Gunnar Tersch. The grizzly was actually a marshmallow inside once she peeled past the gruff exterior.

"I'm fine, Gunnar." At his look, she admitted, "Okay, so he knocked me out again. This time he was much more careful to speak slowly. He's being held prisoner, drugged up and held in Melissa's 'playhouse,' wherever the hell that is, with Melissa and a few rogue Circs standing guard. Apparently, she's more worried about Jack finding her than any of us reaching her. Grayson's positive they weren't in on it together to betray us. He told me to talk to Jack. And he's set Jack up to come here, on the pretext of saving Admiral London from us."

"You lost me."

"Grayson might be locked up, but my brother is really strong. Alicia Sharpe strong. He used up a lot of precious energy to telepathically link with Jack and told him that Admiral London would be in danger at our compound. The admiral will be here by noon tomorrow, and Grayson sent Jack instruction to help him get the admiral to safety."

"Keiser doesn't know Grayson's been kidnapped?"

"No. Like I said, they've spoken telepathically, but not face-to-face. Jack has no clue this is a setup."

"I didn't know Jack was a telepath."

“He’s not. Grayson is like Jesse. He makes the pathway for mental communication, and he takes it away at will. Unlike Jesse, he’s not limited by distance.”

“Holy shit.”

She gave him a smug grin. “I told you he was strong. Now we need to get back, get cleaned up, and work with Jesse and Jules to finesse the admiral. I have a plan.”

She waited for Gunnar to take charge, at the very least, to order her around the way he normally did. But he surprised her.

“A plan, eh? Good. Let’s nail Keiser to the wall. We’ll get London to confess, and then you and I have a date in my bed.”

She grinned. “Yes, Master.”

“Oh man. Have I mentioned I have a real thing for handcuffs and whips? You’re going to love my porn collection.”

She shook her head, feigning disappointment. “Porn, Gunnar?”

“Please. If I know you, you have your own stash.”

“You’re damned right. And none of mine involve girl-on-girl action, so forget it.”

“Aw, come on, Ava. What if I beg? What then?”

“Idiot.” She kissed him smack on the lips, wishing they could spend the rest of their lives alone together. Unfortunately, fate was never that kind.

They rose together, hand in hand, and left the cabin.

## Chapter Nine

At eleven thirty the next day as he sat in the conference room, Tersch still couldn't wipe the grin from his face, no matter how hard Jules and Fallon laughed at him. The future he'd been afraid of having with Ava no longer seemed unattainable. He'd made love to his mate, and she'd screamed out her satisfaction. Nothing but orgasms, some playful pain, and a lot of loving. He could do it; he could commit to her without fear of killing her. Just so long as they kept a ready supply of that suppressant on hand to keep his berserker at bay.

When he'd questioned her about it late last night, she'd shushed him and forced him into the shower. His little mate had control issues, but he liked letting her think she was in charge. He knew she expected him to kowtow to her. And he did, but only because *he* wanted to make her happy, not because she was really in charge.

"How the mighty have fallen," Fallon said with mock sadness. He leaned closer, glanced around for Ava, and seeing her not present, whispered, "Pussy."

"Fuck off."

Jules laughed. "What happened to not needing a mate, a girlfriend, or a woman? I would love to say I told you so, but Sheridan said I have to be nice while she's gone."

Fallon gave Jules a wounded look. "Then why have you been such a dick to me?"

"She didn't say anything about being nice to you."

Tersch leaned back in his chair and linked his hands behind his head. "Yep. Once they've had a taste of me, everyone else pales by comparison."

He nearly fell out of his chair when Ava shoved him forward.

She scowled. "For God's sake. Don't start comparing penis sizes."

Fallon laughed until she glared him into silence. Good to know Tersch wasn't the only one she bullied.

"Er, ah, hi, Ava." Fallon smiled, putting his all into that polished charm that worked on anything female.

Apparently it worked on her as well, because she gave him a grudging smile. "Hi yourself. Jules, you know what to do?"

Jules nodded. "I like it, Ava. You hold London here until Jack comes in. Then we'll circle around and lock him down tight. You sure you'll be okay by yourself with the admiral?"

"She'll be fine. The woman's lethal. Don't let the dimple fool you." Tersch warned with pride. She had knocked him on his ass, no easy feat. For that alone he might have been enamored. But this plan of hers was so tricky and devious, he wanted to make love to her all over again.

The gleam in her eyes showed her pleasure.

"Ahem." Jules waited until Tersch returned his attention. "If we could think with our big heads, guys?"

"Amen," Ava muttered.

Jules frowned. "I'm not at all comfortable with having Jack Keiser running around the mansion. I still don't know what he's capable of. And he's a threat until I get the answers I want."

"I can handle him," Tersch promised. He wouldn't be taken unaware by Jack Keiser again. If he had to gut the asshole, he would.

"Now see, that's a problem." Fallon sighed. "Tersch, you can't kill Keiser because he lied. We need to know what he knows about Melissa and this bigwig in DC. Please don't kill him until we have that at least."

Ava groaned. "Don't kill him, period. Come on, Gunnar. You know what Grayson said. We need him to pull this off."

"Your brother has a screw loose. How can we trust anything he said? He's being held prisoner and is probably drugged to the gills."

Ava's eyes narrowed. "You have a screw loose if you mess with my plan."

He rose and stood over her, looming like the predator he knew himself to be. To his enjoyment, the argument felt a lot like foreplay.

Fallon coughed. "And on that note, let's go." He tugged Tersch with him, preceding Jules out the door. "Come on, man. You can get busy with Ava later."

"Quit reading my mind."

"Sorry, is that erection in your pants for me?" Fallon asked politely.

"Dick."

"You're broadcasting all over the place. I'm glad you finally came to your senses and claimed the woman, but you need to focus here. We can't mess this up. A lot depends on us grabbing London and Keiser."

Tersch hated when they talked down to him. His berserker had rage issues. *The man* had a temper, but he could reason just fine. "I know that."

"Good." Jules shoved him forward. "Now quit gabbing like little girls and get into position."

Fallon shook his head. "I'm telling Sheridan you said that."

"You and your feminist bullshit. Oh, shut up." Jules scowled. "And if you tell my mate I said that, I'll let Tersch tear into you the way he's been wanting to. I still remember what you said about Ava the first time we saw her."

Fallon glanced from Jules to Tersch and hurried forward. "Fine, fine. I heard nothing."

Tersch narrowed his eyes. "No, what did he say?"

Fallon darted around the corner without another word.

"I'll tell you later," Jules said in a quiet voice. "Now *change* and get ready."

The three of them waited in an alcove up the stairs, out of sight. Tersch smelled Admiral London the minute Ava welcomed him into the foyer. The scent of sandalwood and the sea. Clean, pure. He didn't smell dirty.

*"He isn't thinking about anything other than how much he's missed Mrs. Sharpe,"* Fallon broadcasted to them both. *"Ava's thinking that Tersch had better keep to the plan or no sex for him later. Man, she's cruel."*

*"She's mine."* Tersch sent him.

*"Couldn't have said that better myself. What else, Fallon?"* Jules asked.

Fallon continued. *"London's nervous. Something doesn't feel right. He wants to get Ava alone, to ask her if she's all right and to see what's up. He doesn't protest when she takes him into the conference room and locks them inside. But they aren't alone. Jack's in with them."*

That wasn't the plan. Tersch tensed, angry, worried, and trying hard to control his temper.

Fallon added, *"Dammit. Ava's loudly telling me she knew where he'd be all along and to leave her well enough alone until she tells us to come in."*

Fear crept over Tersch's body like walking fingers of dread. *"I'm going to spank her silly."*

*"She wanted us out of the way so she could get them where she wanted them. Now she wants us to listen in, but not to enter the conference room. Not yet."* Fallon sent them a burst of humor. *"You have to respect a female who can manage three Circs without breaking a sweat."*

*"Oh, she's gonna break a sweat later. Trust me."*

Ava knew this would be a problem, but she needed to talk to Jack and Lonnie freely. She kept her mind open, sharing her vision and her thoughts with Jesse, so he could share them with the others. She'd let them know when to join the party.

Lonnie looked tired but healthy. Jack appeared like a dark, hulking shadow of his former self. His unkempt, shaggy hair brushed over his eyes, hiding his expression. His lips seemed firmer, his body leaner. Yet as she stared, he seemed to shimmer. He wore a pair of jeans and a dark T-shirt, showcasing arms a heck of a lot bigger than they'd been two weeks ago. Hell, everything about Jack now looked meaner and larger than he had in all the time he'd lived and worked there.

"Oh man." She understood. "You're a chameleon. Wow, I should have guessed."

Jack nodded tersely.

Lonnie blinked. "How do you know that term?"

"Come on, Lonnie. I've been around the scene." The psychic scene. "I've known others like Jack. Pyros like Foreman and kinetics like Price aren't as unique as you might think. You should know, considering that the PWP is yours. Like Jack, your secret spy."

"*Son of a bitch.*" Jesse's anger intruded, and she warned him to stay silent so she could think.

She said to Lonnie, "Want to tell me why you never told us about Jack?"

Lonnie sank into a chair and motioned for Jack to do the same, but Jack continued to glance around him, no doubt wondering about the others.

"Don't worry, Jack. I have them preoccupied so we can talk about Lonnie's betrayal, and yours, without interruption."

"Betrayal? For stashing my eyes and ears in the mansion?" Lonnie swore. "Hell, Ava, your grandmother could out-stubborn a mule. The woman wouldn't listen when I told her she wasn't safe, but she wouldn't let me install any security here. So I used Jack instead."

"And then Melissa used me," Jack said in a gravelly voice. "You want my neck in a rope? Go ahead. But not until I repay that bitch for everything she and her precious Lonnie did to me for over a year."

Ava felt Jesse and the others tense through his psychic link.

“What?” Lonnie turned to Jack. “What are you talking about? I never ordered Melissa to shoot Morgan or spy for our enemy.”

“Not you, Sir. *Lonnie*. Robert Leonard Anderson. That Lonnie.”

Ava swore. “Shit.”

A *changed* Gunnar burst through the door, followed by Jules and Jesse. So much for asking them to wait. But at least Jack had spilled some vital information before Gunnar choked him to death.

“Ava, you okay?” Her mate looked her over from top to bottom, then glared at Jack and Admiral London.

Jack glanced from Ava to Gunnar and smiled. “About time you two hooked up. We had bets on it.”

“Fuck off, Keiser. You don't speak here unless asked to open your mouth.” Gunnar frowned. “And how the hell did you get so buff in a few weeks?”

Lonnie sighed. “Would all of you sit down? You can kill us after we talk, all right?”

Jules rolled his eyes. “Tersch, man the door. The rest of us can handle this.” The Circs remained in their beastlike forms, intimidating to say the least. Ava was proud of the team. They made one hell of an intimidating presence.

Jack looked suitably wary.

“Fine. They try to leave, they're mine.” Gunnar stood by the door, his claws exposed, his entire body one vibrating mass of fury. Until Ava caught his eye and winked at him.

He subtly relaxed and winked back, then glared at Jack and flashed a fang at him.

“This was never about hurting any of you,” Jack explained in a tired voice. “When I signed on to a special government project two years ago, it was to help serve my country with the gifts I'd been born with, gifts soon enhanced courtesy of what you now know as the Psychic Warfare Program, the PWP.”

“Like the Dawn Endeavor project,” Lonnie said to Ava and the Circs. “You know what that’s like.”

“Yeah, and?” Jules prodded Jack.

“Admiral London wasn’t happy with Mrs. Sharpe’s idea of protection, which was using *herself* to defend against all threats.”

“That doesn’t make much sense,” Jules agreed. “I always wondered why we didn’t have more around-the-clock protection, especially considering half of us were always gone at one time or another.”

“Welcome to my world,” Lonnie muttered. “I asked Jack to work for me, undercover, to protect Alicia and the rest of you. When I got wind of threats headed your way, I used my PWP teams and Jack to cut them off. When you Circs spent a lot of your time away, Alicia was vulnerable, though she still refuses to admit it. I wanted Jack as a nearby backup.”

“So how did Melissa shooting Morgan and nearly kidnapping Sheridan play into this?” Gunnar drawled.

Jack shot him a look of pure venom. “Fuck off, Tersch. I didn’t see you ripping through her disguise, did I?”

“No, but I didn’t marry her.”

“Neither did I.” Jack swore. “Fuck. Melissa’s precious Lonnie, Robert Leonard Anderson, is a powerful psychic big into mind control. All he needs is physical contact. He and I met weekly, supposedly on behalf of the admiral, when he’d actually reinforce his influence. The cocksucker had me believing I’d married Melissa and that we were working to help protect you guys. When she turned information over to her ‘source,’ I never batted an eye. I thought it was for Admiral London.

“When those rogues shot me, it broke his hold over me. Melissa escaped, Morgan was shot, and I started to understand I’d been played for a fool.”

“Why not explain the situation to us?” Jules asked.

“Mrs. Sharpe wasn’t happy, and when she’s not happy, she’s scary. The woman planned on isolating me until she pulled the whole truth of my presence here. But I couldn’t wait.” Jack turned to Ava. “Grayson contacted me a while back. He helped me avoid Mrs. Sharpe long enough to learn a few things. Together, we’ve been working to uncover Anderson’s involvement in it all.”

“Grayson’s been captured.” Gunnar tossed the information out.

“Shit. You sure?” Jack rubbed his hand over his eyes. “More mess we don’t need.”

Ava felt bad for him. “He’ll be okay. Grayson told me they’re holding him in a place Melissa knows about. A place she thinks of as her personal fortress away from home that she calls her playhouse. If you can find her, we’ll get him out. I called Anderson a few days ago looking for Grayson, so he knows we know my brother is missing.

“According to the information Grayson sent me, Anderson is using the psychic shielders of the PWP on a special project, so our attempts at astral projection and remote viewing to find Grayson haven’t turned up squat. The PWP guys think they’re holding the bad guy at bay, but they’re actually working *for* the bad guy.”

Jack lit up with a fierce energy that put Ava and the Circs on guard. Weird shadows flickered over his skin, like stripes almost. Then they vanished as if they’d never been. “I know where she is.”

Admiral London nodded. “If anyone can do it, Jack can. He was gifted before he joined the PWP. I’m sorry my people are being used against us right now, but they’re actually quite a boon to our government. Folks like Jack have been around for a while, working for me.”

“Like Keegan Price?” Gunnar wanted to know, his gaze hard on Ava.

She forced herself to pretend a calm she didn’t feel. Oh boy. She hadn’t wanted to explain her past in detail just yet.

Lonnie glanced from Gunnar to her and back. “Keegan Price is one of my best men. He worked with Ava a while back, but that information is classified. Sorry, Gunnar.”

“Me too. Because I’m not buying any of this shit.”

“It’s true.” Jesse sighed. “All of it. He and Jack might be trying to bullshit us, but they can’t hide their thoughts for long. As it is, the admiral is starting to worry that he hasn’t found Mrs. Sharpe yet. Jack can’t stop thinking about wrapping his hands around Melissa’s neck and squeezing.”

Everyone studied Jack.

“I was married to her for a year, except I wasn’t. Can you blame me for wanting payback?”

Jules grunted. “Not really. She fucked with the wrong woman when she messed with Sheridan.”

“Try being forced to acknowledge a tie to a woman you know you don’t love. You don’t understand why you can’t leave. You don’t want her, but you can’t help yourself. And she’s sick. Really, really twisted in ways you can’t imagine.” Jack’s harsh whisper disturbed her. What had Melissa done to him?

Jesse frowned. “But why stay? Was her hold on you that strong?”

“You’re not listening to what he said.” Lonnie shook his head. “It wasn’t Melissa. She’s a shielder as well as a telekinetic with advanced ability. But it’s *her* Lonnie—Robert Anderson—who’s the master at work. As I understand it, when he met with Jack weekly, he took bits of old memory while shoving new memories down his throat. After a while, he burned out Jack’s ability to protect himself.”

“Wow, Jack. I’m sorry.” Ava commiserated. “I can see why you want to get even.”

“Not get even, get justice. Anderson and Melissa hurt a lot of people.” His eyes darkened. “She especially deserves what’s coming to her.”

Gunnar nodded. "Yeah. Because of her, Montaña hurt Ava and nearly killed Jules."

"No. She had little to do with Montaña. That was Anderson's doing," Jack explained. "He used Montaña to manufacture that drug to take out the PWP because they were starting to detect a traitor in their midst. Him." Jack's eyes flashed. "But then he realized the drug had potential. It wouldn't hurt the Circs, and it made some of them psychic. He's been farming out rogue Circs to foreign countries since the projects started."

"Where's he getting them?" Jules asked.

"From a lot of different places. Delancey and Montaña were just two of his sources. There are more. But now that we know who he is, we just need to know where to strike next to take him down. I'm going after Melissa. I'll send Grayson back in one piece."

"Jack," the admiral tried.

"I'll do it. No one else needs to die for my stupidity."

Ava thought he was being a bit hard on himself. But then another problem presented itself.

A hard female voice yelled from just beyond the conference room. "Ava!"

She paled. "Oh shit. Grandma's back. And she's pissed! We need to get Lonnie out of here, ASAP."

Before anyone could move, the door to the conference room burst open, knocking Gunnar back a step. Instead of her petite grandmother, a raging beast with snout, snarl, and fangs hurled herself inside like the Big Bad Wolf.

"He's innocent, Grandma." Ava made the mistake of stepping between her grandmother and Lonnie.

The eight-foot-tall monster that used to be a tiny woman slapped her across the face and into a nearby wall.

Gunnar roared, his voice deepened, and chaos reigned as everyone tried to calm a transforming berserker and Ava's furry, clawed grandmother.

"Down, Tersch," Jules commanded. "I'll handle this."

Fallon attempted to soothe Alicia. "Easy, Mrs. Sharpe. Let's talk about this. Lonnie's innocent."

"Lies," her grandmother rasped. Talk about a berserker. Her grandmother, when *changed*, normally appeared like Ava's beast. A slightly larger version of herself with claws, fangs, and incredibly enhanced agility and strength that appeared like a hazy film of savagery over her human frame. But unlike Ava, Alicia had another level of beast, an angrier, deadlier version that rarely appeared. Her grandmother's angry intensity rivaled Gunnar's berserker.

Ava blinked, and as the room came back into focus, she saw Gunnar in front of her. No longer a beast, now the berserker had come to play. Hell. His black, white, and blue striated eyes fixed on her grandmother, who had yet to look away from Lonnie.

Lonnie, to Ava's surprise, didn't back down. He yelled back at Alicia, "How could you think I'd turn against you? After everything we've been through? You could honestly think I'd try to hurt you?"

Alicia lifted him by his throat and shoved him up against a wall.

"Do it, then. Cut me in half," he dared her, shaken, distressed. "There's nothing for me without you, Alicia."

Her grandmother paused and loosened her hand, dropping Lonnie to the ground.

Gunnar charged.

"No, stop!" Ava stumbled to her feet and *changed*. She noticed Jack slip out the door and watched as Jesse and Jules rescued Lonnie. Jesse raced outside with the admiral, taking him to safety.

Jules turned to confront Gunnar, but Ava held him back.

“Just go. Let me handle this, okay? For Gunnar’s sake, please don’t.”

Jules looked from her to Gunnar. Then he nodded. “I’ll stay out of the way, but I’m not leaving.” He posted himself at the door.

“All that talk about patience and trust,” Gunnar’s berserker roared at her grandmother. “You tell me to trust you. To trust my gut, that my past doesn’t matter. Love wins in the end. And you slap your own granddaughter away like a fly on the wall?”

Nimble and fast, Alicia slashed at his gut and darted away from his instinctive return blow. “Stay out of this.”

“No.” Before Gunnar could launch himself at her grandmother, Ava inserted herself between them. To Alicia she warned, “Leave my mate alone.”

Alicia paused. “Mate?”

“He’s mine.”

“She’s mine,” Gunnar parroted.

Her grandmother cocked her head and sniffed. “Not yet.”

Gunnar raged. “She’s mine!”

“Then why haven’t you claimed her?” Alicia snorted. “Pitiful. At least I marked the man I loved. Had the sense to make sure everyone knew he was mine.” Her grandmother raged again, and red points of fury dotted her eyes. “Until he turned on me!”

“Shit,” Ava murmured and gripped Tersch’s large hand behind her. She was more concerned with her grandmother than with the berserker. Something wasn’t right. Alicia Sharpe knew better than to condemn a man without undue proof, despite the vision she and Kisho had seen. What else did the woman know that they didn’t? Ava opened her mouth to ask when her grandmother flew into action.

Alicia struck out. But before Ava could move on her own, Gunnar jerked her back and planted his body in her grandmother’s way. Her claws bounced off

Gunnar's hardened skin. He didn't backhand her or slap her away. Instead he stood still, waiting.

Alicia swung again and again. Gunnar remained, buffering Ava from harm while refusing to strike back. Blood trailed down his flesh, his wounds inflicted by Alicia's lethal claws.

"Enough," he snapped when she geared up to attack again. "You nearly killed Admiral London, and you strike out at me? I thought you loved him. All that bullshit about resolving conflict and keeping a level head I've had to listen to for a fucking year. I was finally starting to believe you. And now this? What the fuck are you doing, Alicia? This isn't you."

Ava stared at Gunnar in shock. He sounded unbelievably rational, considering he'd transformed into his wildest and most uncontrollable state.

Her grandmother trembled and blinked rapidly.

Jules approached, looking small next to Alicia and Gunnar. He frowned and murmured, "Her aura isn't right. She's dimmer than she normally is." In a louder voice, he said, "Anderson is the guilty party. Jack and Fallon confirmed it just before you arrived. Apparently Anderson's been pulling the strings from DC, and he's psychic."

"With mad skills," Ava added, suddenly understanding a bit more. "Just his touch convinced Jack that he'd married Melissa. I bet Anderson's been tainting you every time you've met."

Alicia stilled. Her eyes flashed, but less with rage than comprehension.

Jules nodded. "That would explain her aura. I don't always look with my inner sense, so it would have been easy to miss her fluctuations before." He turned back to Alicia. "Anderson's full name is Robert Leonard Anderson."

"I know that," Alicia snapped, though she sounded more together than she'd been before. "I thoroughly investigate everyone I work with." Almost to herself, she added, "But a psychic? I never realized."

As the team watched, she began to shrink. “Lonnie could be short for Leonard, I suppose.” She continued to grow smaller and less hairy. A haze of light made it hard to see her, and then, in the blink of an eye, she was once again dressed in a business suit, her pearls just so, her hair perfectly in place. Yet the air of sorrow around her couldn't be missed. “Anderson's been manipulating me the whole time, hasn't he? Him and his wealth of psychics. Whenever I'd get too close to discovering the truth, he'd announce the need for an unscheduled visit, a fiscal issue, manpower problems, some concocted reason to see me in person.”

Ava and Jules shared a glance. “Yes.”

Controlled rage replaced the look of sorrow in Alicia's dark brown eyes. “Well then, someone has a date with the devil, I think.” She drew in a deep breath and faced Ava and Gunnar once more. “I apologize for striking out, Ava. I would never intentionally hurt you, dear. I lost myself a bit there. And I don't like when that happens.”

“It's okay, Grandma.” Ava watched her grandmother carefully as the older woman approached. Gunnar stood stiff, but he allowed Alicia to hug Ava tight. Already Ava's bruises healed, courtesy of Circ genes.

Alicia faced Gunnar. “Gunnar, honestly, if you want to hold on to Ava, you're going to have to fully claim her, and don't pretend you don't know what I mean.”

His berserker would have to claim her—Ava and he both knew it.

Gunnar growled low in his throat. “I won't hurt her.”

Jules sighed. “No, you won't. We've been telling you that for months.”

But Alicia wasn't done. “Otherwise, Keegan might think he still has a chance. They dated briefly a few years ago, you know.”

Ava gritted her teeth. Blasted woman! The growling behind her grew louder. Great.

Jules raised his brows. “Well, on that note, I think I’ll join you, Mrs. Sharpe. You and the admiral have some talking to do, and we seem to have lost Jack again. I’ll get with Fallon and find him.”

Alicia tucked her hand in the crook of his arm, the way Ava had walked with Gunnar just a few days ago. “Good, good. We need to get back to normal. This is all so embarrassing.”

“Love usually is,” he answered.

Alicia smiled, looking much more like her typical, vivacious self. “Did I frighten you when I *changed*?”

“About wet myself, thanks.”

She laughed, and Ava breathed a sigh of relief. Gunnar’s growls grew louder.

“Keegan fucking Price?” Gunnar’s whisper simultaneously scared and aroused Ava. Because his voice didn’t sound human at all. She’d been waiting for him, but until now, she’d been the one doing the chasing. She’d been in charge. If she truly accepted Gunnar, she’d have to relinquish control and trust him.

When Jules and Alicia reached the doorway, Jules stopped. “Maybe I should stay.” He cast a wary eye at Gunnar, who was practically frothing at the mouth as he stalked Ava.

Alicia chuckled. “You trust him, Jules. Remember that. My, I haven’t *changed* in months. That felt more than good. Gunnar, not too rough. Remember, she’ll be the mother of your children some day.”

“Sooner than later.” Gunnar tossed several chairs aside. He threw one so hard, it hit the wall and crumpled in on itself. “Payback’s a bitch, Ava.”

“They’ll be fine, dear.” Alicia tugged Jules with her. “Trust me. Trust Gunnar.”

Jules stared at Ava’s grandmother for a moment. “You’re back, golden all over.” He looked over at Ava and Gunnar and sighed. “Be gentle with him, Ava,” he teased and shut the door behind him when he and Alicia left.

Ava tried to think of a way to ease her mate's temper and found herself pinned to the wall instead. He towered over her, a giant in his berserker's form. Oh boy. Then he leaned closer, and his hot breath warmed her cheek. A fang scraped her neck, drawing a line of blood.

She shivered, and her thighs slid, moist from her growing need.

His fist punched a hole in the wall a few inches from her face, and she jumped.

"Nice. Your pussy is so wet for me. I think you like the fear." Gunnar ripped her clothes off, scratching her in places.

And it felt so good she moaned out loud, no longer able to pretend she didn't want him just the way he was. Listening to instincts ingrained into her since birth, she slowly shifted into her beast, needing the enjoyment of all her senses in the open.

Gunnar grunted and tore his pants off, leaving him gloriously naked. "About time you stopped hiding from me."

"Not me hiding," she rasped, on fire from the heat of his body bleeding into her. Though her tough skin repelled threats easily enough, it was sensitive to her mate in ways she'd never realized. She could almost feel him inside her, a part of her, as he leaned closer, rubbing against her like a large cat.

His thick voice deepened. "Time to play, Ava. Just like you played with Price," he ended in a snarl and bit her shoulder hard.

She gasped from the pain, as well as the erotic temptation of her mate in a rage. He was wild, naked, and hard as hell.

Finally. It was time.

## Chapter Ten

He'd tried. God, he'd tried so hard not to allow this to happen. But he was helpless to the monster now. Knowing she'd given Keegan Price her surrender, when she'd yet to give him the same, set his berserker to raging.

The taste of her coppery blood lay like sugar over his tongue. He lifted her higher, sucking at her neck, and forced her body into contact with his. Those full, firm breasts trailed blazes of fire down his chest. And he could smell her pussy creaming, so wet, so ready for him.

Her claws dug into his scalp as she ran her hands under his hair. She tugged to pull him away, and he smiled against her shoulder.

"No," she gasped. "I want you to kiss me."

He withdrew from her shoulder and grinned down at her, blood dripping from his fangs to land on her breast. "It's what I want that matters. You're mine now, Ava. All mine."

Tersch shoved her back against the wall and angled her for penetration. He slammed her down over him, gloving his thick shaft inside her hot pussy. The sheer ecstasy held him as he rocked her hips over him, aware of nothing but the carnality of the moment and the woman he finally owned.

"Yes, yes," he rumbled as he took her faster and harder. He squeezed her hips, nipped at her neck and cheek, and bruised her swollen clit as he shafted her with brutal force.

"Harder," she growled, shocking him.

He glanced down at her and saw a beast staring back at him. Slit pupils surrounded by dark, brown heat. She glowed with sexual energy—his mate.

“What *I* want, remember?” he rasped, but he dug deeper into her anyway.

She cried out and tightened around him, and he continued to surge in and out, sawing like a beast as he sought fulfillment. When she bit his chest and dug her fangs into him, the added pain pushed him over the edge.

Tersch yelled out his pleasure as he poured into her, filling his little mate with a warrior's seed. Her breasts shook as he continued to pump. “I haven't had a taste of these yet, have I?” He grinned, showing her his teeth. But the savage woman flashed her own set back at him.

“Go ahead. What are you waiting for?”

She met his taunt for taunt, and the fury to dominate grew. *Stop it, Ava. Just let it have its way*, Tersch wanted to warn her. But the berserker only smiled, meeting her challenge.

“Oh, I like you. So sweet and sharp. Prickly, aren't you?” He pulled out of her and carried her to the conference table. Along the way, he kicked another chair free, and it broke the projector mounted in the ceiling. The destruction suited him, a mess all around him he controlled. No one to tell him to clean up, no one to order him around. No one to hurt him again.

Before he could bend her over the table, she caught his chin in her hand and leaned up to kiss him.

The sweetness of the gesture confused him for a moment.

“Let me pleasure you first.” She licked his lips and pushed her tongue between them, stroking him, teasing him with the promise of her mouth. The brush against his fangs made him shudder with need. “Let me lick you clean, mate, on my knees.”

Mate. He liked that. Liked that the woman knew where she belonged. “Yes. Between my legs. Down, surrender.”

He stepped back and watched as she lowered herself to her knees and took his huge cock in her hands. Though he'd just come, he needed to fill her again. Everywhere.

“Beg me.” He took hold of her soft brown hair, enthralled with the texture. The berserker wanted to hold on to the softness, even as it didn’t know what to do with it. “I want...” It didn’t know why it suddenly needed more than this.

But Ava broke all thoughts Tersch might have had by taking him all the way to the back of her throat.

He groaned and let go of her hair. Instead, he wrapped his hands around her throat and squeezed as she blew him. He could see her struggling to breathe. Between his cock and his hands, he limited her airflow. Her scent intensified. The woman liked it.

In heaven, he fucked her mouth with firm strokes. Her tongue stroked him. Her teeth nipped him. She cupped his balls, rubbing them into a firm sac as he readied to spill. The berserker loved her scent, the raspy sound of her breaths as she took his cock to the back of her throat. The gagging sounds she made were like music, drawing him faster and deeper into a heady climax.

He squeezed her throat tighter, and she choked when his cockhead hit the back of her throat again in a hard push. To his shock, he felt the rumble of a purr in her throat and came faster than he’d have liked in a loud, all-out roar. Ava swallowed him down, and the hazy look in her eyes turned him on all over again.

“Keep those lips tight around my cock until I tell you to let go,” he ordered. “Think of this the next time you remember what you did with Price. When you gave him what was mine,” he growled.

She gave a subtle nod, and his berserker fell even more in love with her. Taking her punishment, accepting, not fighting. *Submitting.*

“Yes. So pretty. So strong,” he crooned and stroked her neck, pleased with the bruises he’d left. He noticed a few bites as well, though they’d begun to heal. Frowning, he hefted her to her feet and lowered her to the table, making sure to keep her knees bent at the edge.

“Gunnar?” she asked softly.

His gaze sought her slick pussy. Only a thin strip of hair decorated her mons, and the sight of her plump, wet lips entranced him.

He sank to his knees and sucked her clit into his mouth, loving the taste of him all over her.

She cried out and tightened her knees around him, but he shoved her legs painfully wide and refused to let her take control.

"Mine," he warned as he continued to lick her, sucking and gently biting that hard clit that throbbed just for him. "My cunt. My mate. *Mine.*"

She thrashed and begged as she came all over his tongue. The sweet proof of her desire soothed more of his anger, tempting him to ease his lust because she'd experienced pleasure. Her joy made his that much brighter, his satisfaction that much more complete.

Until she leaned up and winked at him. "That all you got?" she said between breaths. "For a badass monster, you seem awfully sweet to me."

Enraged all over again, he turned her over onto her belly. He lifted her hips and rammed his cock into her ass. She cried out, and he laughed, chuckling at her helpless flailing.

"Better, mate? Does it hurt now?" he asked as he reamed her with all the strength and rage burning inside him. For all the times he'd been unable to help those less fortunate, for each time he'd wanted to but had been too scared to take Ava into his arms. Every thrust into that tight little hole, he saw another of his failures, and he took her harder.

He clawed her hips and waist, burning for release as he gave the stubborn witch what she'd begged for. Punishment. Discipline. Love.

"Oh, Gunnar. Yes, yes," she cried out as she writhed under him.

Her delight with his rough handling excited him, made him eager to see how much she could take.

He leaned over her back and shoved himself deeper. Then he put his hands under her chest and gripped her breasts, squeezing tight.

“Nice tits, baby. So soft and round. Those nipples are hard, aren’t they?” he growled.

She moaned and ground her ass against him.

“Yeah, begging for my cock, aren’t you?” He pinched her nipples, elated when she bucked under him and mewed her need to come. “Drown me with that sweet pussy, baby. Let me smell your need.” He inhaled and groaned as his release drew closer.

He needed more. A taste of her blood. Tersch liked the bite he’d already made, but he wanted everyone to see his mark. “Pull your hair away from your neck,” he ordered in a low voice, thick with excitement.

She moved to obey him without delay, shoving back against him.

Tersch acted on instinct. He bit her neck hard, let go of her nipples, and then squeezed them again. Then he withdrew from her ass before shoving home once more, coming with an explosive ending as he filled her ass up.

Ava cried out as she came, joining him in a bliss so complete, Tersch found himself shifting back into his beast without thought. The orgasm seemed to last forever, and he could barely think as his body stopped firing.

In a slow pull that felt like heaven and hell in the same breath, he withdrew from her body and came again. The small afterbursts of pleasure left another mess all over her ass as he shook out the rest of his cum.

Ava lay limply against the table, suddenly human and so still, his heart seemed to stop beating.

“Ava?”

She groaned and rolled over. Tersch was horrified to see her covered in blood and bruises on her front. His claws had cut her in places all over her beautiful

breasts. And even though her skin was dark, he could see the mottled blood bursts under her skin.

Then she started to heal right in front of him until all that remained of his claiming was the sweet, subtle blending of wild jungle and cedar. Their scents, perfectly entwined.

He stared at her dumbly, not sure what to say or do as the entirety of what he'd done came back to him. He'd practically raped her. And though she'd orgasmed and cried out her release, had it been pleasurable, or had she actually been yelling out for him to stop? He couldn't remember, couldn't think past the sheer rapture of coming inside his female. Just thinking about it made him hard all over again. He didn't normally feel this horny after such mind-blowing sex, but with Ava, none of the rules applied.

She groaned again and rubbed at her bloodied throat.

Shame filled him, a need to make things right. He needed to clean her up and leave her alone. But he owed her more than that.

Tersch *changed* back into his human form. Wanting to atone, he apologized for his brutality with a tender kiss. There, where he'd marked her neck. On her nipples, where he'd ground the sensitive flesh. Again and again, all over her body. He licked her to a climax with just the easy stroking of his tongue, and though he remained hard, he refused to take her again. Not like this.

The berserker had tried to force her submission, but Tersch knew Ava had willingly given it. She'd endured it for him. And that made all the difference. He just hoped he hadn't killed her love with his brutality.

Ava blinked up at him, dazed and not sure if half of what she'd felt had been real. She'd never been taken so thoroughly before. Gunnar had marked her everywhere. He'd come in her pussy, her mouth, and her ass. Bites, scratches, and a hard reaming that still left her aching, though most of her outer marks had faded.

Had she ever been so possessed by another?

She looked into his bright blue eyes, eyes filled with regret and worry. She wanted to reassure him that she'd wanted it. Every bite and mark he'd given her, she'd earned. He'd finally claimed her with a show of force she'd never forget. A true male Circ, born to be raw and strong and hard. Her mate.

But the best she could manage was a grin as she slumped into an exhausted sleep.

When Ava awoke, she blinked into a dark room not her own. A swift sniff told her she lay in Gunnar's bed, but her mate wasn't near. Disappointed but realistic, Ava knew they'd need to talk about what had just happened.

She rolled to the side of the bed and stood on shaky feet. A glance down her body showed her wearing one of Gunnar's T-shirts. She smelled clean, like the soap he liked to use, and was bruise free, but her ass and pussy remained pleasantly sore. She swallowed and grinned. A sore throat as well, and one that had been well earned.

She made her way to the bathroom and used the facilities. She wondered how much time had passed and what the rest of the team had been up to while she and Gunnar had finally come to terms with each other.

The door opened, and her grandmother walked in.

"That's much better." Alicia smiled. "Finally mated, have you?"

Ava groaned and sank back onto the bed. "Yeah."

"I knew he'd be the one for you. He's a strong one, just like our people at home." The natural-born Circs in the Amazon. "Are you sore, dear?"

Ava blushed. "A little."

"Then it was a good claiming. Perfect."

Yet Ava couldn't contain a niggle of doubt. She wanted to talk to Gunnar, to make sure he wasn't going off again, worried he'd damaged her beyond repair.

“Don't worry. Gunnar's working with Jules, Jesse, and Lonnie. Kisho and Morgan are on the way home, and Sheridan and Olivia are safely on their way up north to stay with Doc and Circe's Recruits for a bit. They'll be safer up there while we finish this mess with Robert Anderson.”

“So you and Lonnie are good now?”

Her grandmother's perky grin reassured her. “Oh yes, though I think I probably need to do a little more groveling to make Lonnie feel better. You know how men can be.” Alicia's smile faded. “I never would have believed Lonnie capable of any wrongdoing were it not for Anderson's manipulation. I had Jules do a thorough look at my aura. I fear I've been tainted for far longer than I'd thought.”

“I'm sorry, Grandma.”

Alicia leaned closer and stroked Ava's cheek. “I'm sorry, Ava. I never meant to hurt you.”

Ava snorted. “That toss against the wall? Please. That was nothing.”

Her grandmother chuckled. “That's my girl.”

“Any news on Grayson?”

“Not yet.” Alicia frowned. “But Keegan and James managed to bug Anderson's vehicle. And one other piece of news that might interest you. Melissa Ramirez's body turned up yesterday floating in the Potomac River.”

Ava sat up, groaning as she did so. “What?”

“A gunshot to the forehead. Right between her pretty blue eyes.”

“I want to say good riddance, but somehow I thought Jack would handle it better.”

Alicia frowned. “I don't think this was Jack. And that worries me. I have a feeling Anderson is cutting ties. If we don't find him soon, he may decide to go to ground and stay buried for a while. And I'd very much like to nip this in the bud.”

“I have a feeling we need to.” That odd sense Ava sometimes had returned. If they didn’t locate and neutralize Anderson now, real trouble would befall them later. The kind even Circs couldn’t rebound from. Dead Circs told no tales.

Alicia nodded and stepped back from the bed. “Well, I just wanted to see how you were getting on. I told Gunnar you’d be fine, but the boy is being surprisingly tight-lipped this morning. You need to reassure your new mate.”

“I will.” A sudden thought hit her. “Um, Keegan’s not back yet, is he?”

“Why, yes. In fact, I thought I saw him headed to the gym earlier.”

“Hell.” Ava quickly rose and winced as she headed for the door. “I don’t suppose you know where Gunnar is?”

“I believe he’s working out with the others.”

“In the gym?”

“Yes.”

Ava sighed. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

She quickly made her way downstairs to the gym. Outside the open double doors, Jules, Jesse, Lonnie, Kisho, Morgan, and James Foreman were taking bets.

“That’s gonna leave a mark.” James shook his head. “I told him to leave well enough alone. Who the hell would think goading Tersch is a smart thing?”

“Hey, I like Keegan. See how he’s using those twenty-pound weights to knock into that idiot?” Morgan pointed to the gym. “That’s smart thinking.”

“We really should break them up.” At least Lonnie had the sense to stop the mindless fighting. “Tersch is ahead by two hits, so I win. Now let’s stop them before one of them really gets hurt.”

James frowned. “Now, Admiral, I need to make back my money. Double or nothing says Keegan slams him in the head with that barbell.”

She’d heard enough. “Okay, fellas. Show’s over.”

The group turned to stare at her, and Ava realized she should have taken a moment to dress in more than Gunnar’s large T-shirt.

Jules grinned and moved back from the door. "Please, Ava. After you."

She sniffed and walked through the small crowd.

"Ten says Ava stops the fight," she heard Morgan say.

She rolled her eyes and advanced on the testosterone-laden fools before her. Keegan looked damn good in nothing but a pair of shorts. Too bad her heart was already taken.

"Okay. Break it up, boys."

Gunnar turned to glare at her, and Keegan took advantage. A large black iron disk hit her mate in the gut and took him down.

"That's now one hit ahead. I win," Jules said from the doorway.

"Out! All of you," she shouted and ignored the muttered laughter. "Keegan, leave."

"You sure, Ava?" Keegan drawled. "Because if this big lug is giving you a hassle, I could—"

He choked off the rest of what he'd meant to say when Gunnar's large hands wrapped around his throat.

Ava licked her lips, taken with so much raw power. "Gunnar, let him go. We need to talk."

He shook Keegan before dropping him to the floor and advancing on her. In seconds, he had her wrapped under a large arm. "See this, Keegan? This is mine. Touch her again, and I'll kill you."

Keegan turned a confused gaze to Ava as he rubbed his throat. "What's he talking about?"

She sighed. "My Neanderthal boyfriend—"

"Mate."

"Mate, is convinced you want to have sex with me."

Keegan grinned. "Well, sure."

“Keegan,” she growled. “Tell him we never had sex. Even when we were dating.”

He frowned. “Well, it wasn’t for lack of trying. Fool woman was playing hard to get.” He had a twinkle in his eye. “But hey, if you want to try me on for size, I’m game.”

Gunnar snorted. “Dream on. You couldn’t handle her.”

Keegan laughed and stood. “You might be right.”

Gunnar relaxed by her side.

“I’ll let you two talk. But no sex in the gym. Some things just ain’t right,” Keegan warned and left them alone. He closed the doors behind him.

Before Ava could say anything, Gunnar turned to her with a scowl. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Excuse me?”

“Parading that body around the others? You trying to make me crazy?” His eyes narrowed. “Or maybe you like being mauled by the monster inside me. You want it back? Want me to rape you again? Talk about kink.”

She flushed. “Gunnar, stop. I was worried about you.”

He opened his mouth to retort and froze. “Worried about *me*?”

Ava grabbed his arm to keep him from moving away. “Let’s get something straight. I’m fine. You didn’t rape me. And you need to stop denying who you are. You’re a beast, man, berserker. Everything. So stop rejecting that part of yourself.”

“You and your grandmother can think what you want. I know I claimed you last night. That’s it. We’re not playing with that monster again. The next time we have sex, you’re using that suppressant on me. I won’t hurt you, baby. I don’t like knowing I made you bleed.”

“Yet you’re hard just talking about it.” She glanced at his erection with a raised brow.

He turned around, giving her his back. "I'm a freak, all right? But I love you. I can't help being this way, but I don't want to be. I like being with you." He turned around to face her again, his body once again under his control. "As a man or beast, I can handle that. I can't stomach hurting you."

"Oh, Gunnar." She hugged him tight, content when he hugged her back. "You don't understand yourself. Just because you have certain sexual needs doesn't make you a freak. I'd be surprised if you didn't have control issues in the bedroom. You're a berserker. So strong, you're naturally endowed to be dominant. But you're also a Circ, a part of a team, and you're subservient to Jules. You give and take. And with me, your mate, you can have it all."

He looked so hopeful yet wary. It made her heart hurt to see him in such conflict.

"Ava, I'll try. But until I'm sure I won't hurt you, I think we need to use the suppressant."

"Ah, about that." Damn, she hadn't wanted to discuss this yet, but the timing was right.

"What about it?"

"I don't have one. I used a placebo before, so you'd think you couldn't hurt me. And it worked," she said in a rush when he would have argued.

"You little witch."

"I couldn't agree more," Robert Anderson said from the doorway. He had a smug look on his face and a gun pointed in their direction. "Now why don't we join Alicia and the others in her study? I have so very much to share with you all."

Ava looked down at herself, wondering how she managed to find herself in these situations. "Could I get dressed first?"

Gunnar growled and stepped in front of her.

“Why bother when you look just beautiful as you are, my dear?” Anderson smiled, though the expression didn’t reach his eyes.

Ava sighed. “This is so not my day.”

## Chapter Eleven

Alicia stared at the men invading her study. Sitting with Lonnie, sharing a cup of tea and old times, made everything that had passed the last few weeks feel like a bad dream. Yet once again, Robert Anderson tried to come between her and those she loved.

Jules, Jesse, and Kisho preceded four rogue Circs into the office. Jules looked less than pleased. Kisho's face wore no expression.

*"Sorry, Mrs. Sharpe. They're holding Morgan, Keegan, and James hostage so we'll cooperate. Jules warned us not to do anything until we talked to you."* Jesse announced on a Dawn Endeavor broadcast. Even Lonnie heard the news, but like the others, he didn't react.

*"Ava and Gunnar?"* she asked.

*"Together in the gym. With Anderson."*

She had a bad feeling about that.

"So this is the bitch," one of the rogues muttered. "Doesn't look so shit-hot powerful to me."

"Smells powerful, though," another said.

The rogues were clad in a dark black material that looked formidable.

"The new Kevlar weave, hmm?" Lonnie said. "I just outfitted my team with those."

The obnoxious rogue nodded.

"Where are the others?" she asked, knowing this team would have knowledge of all the occupants in residence.

“Anderson’s got your precious granddaughter. Don’t you worry. The psychics are out of it. And Reynolds is bleeding out as we speak. You do what we tell you, and everyone will live.”

Kisho growled, and his claws appeared.

*“Morgan is fine.”* Jesse frowned. *“But he said to hurry up, or he’s going to drain more energy than his kitsu had planned to give up tonight. Oh hell, is that love talk for sex?”*

Kisho coughed and flushed, but Alicia could see the relief he tried to hide. Obviously Morgan was well enough to heal himself once Kisho found him again. The pair could exchange energy in a way she still found amazing, after all she had seen in this world.

“It’s okay, Kisho.” Alicia had finally accepted that their vision would come to pass. And now that it had, she felt much better about the possible outcome. She and Lonnie had shared truths yesterday, and she understood how fortunate she was to have someone so trusting and loving in her corner. “Jules, Kisho, Jesse, I want you to be calm and do everything they tell you to.”

“No shit, lady. *We’re* the ones with the guns and the claws.” As one the rogues held up one the new Circ 1000s. With them, Circs could be taken down in one shot, since the specially crafted rounds penetrated deeper into Circ skin than the other weapons they’d used.

“How nice for you.” She smiled and secretly handed Lonnie her own version of the gun she’d had hidden in her desk drawer for just this occasion, though hers was filled with tranquilizers. Mentally, she warned the others, *“Get ready, men.”*

The Circs tensed, and the rogues responded.

*“Now!”*

In seconds, Jules, Kisho, and Jesse had disarmed three of the four rogues. Lonnie shot the fourth, then continued shooting the others until all the rogues were down.

"I'll check on the others." Kisho and Jesse left in a rush.

Jules stood with Lonnie. They exchanged a long glance, and Alicia smiled.

"Go ahead, Lonnie. I'd try to talk you out of this, but I know you won't be budged."

He shrugged. "Sorry, Alicia. But it's for your own good. If I didn't, you'd make a mess of Anderson. You're too close to this."

"I could promise I'd stay right here."

Jules and the admiral exchanged another glance.

"Shoot her," Jules said. *The traitor*. "Sorry, Mrs. Sharpe. But even you can't expect us to believe you'd sit tight while we take care of Anderson."

She didn't plan to let them shoot her. But before she could move, Lonnie pulled the trigger. Jules caught her as she fell and gently laid her on the couch.

"Don't worry. You'll be just fine, honey," she heard Lonnie whisper. He kissed her gently on the cheek.

"T-traitor."

Jules chuckled. "Yep. You can thank us later."

\* \* \*

Tersch glared at Anderson, trying to decide if he should rip the man's head off or just break his neck. He didn't want to dirty the floor mats, but they'd scrubbed blood out of them before. He refused to let his fear for Ava get the better of him. He knew what she was capable of, and he trusted her to stay out of harm's way while he handled Anderson.

"You, Tersch. Come here."

Ava's eyes narrowed, and she shook her head. "No, stay here." The woman worried for him? His beast liked his mate's concern but felt it unnecessary.

"I'll be fine."

"Like *Alicia* was fine?" she said, obviously hinting at something he didn't understand. He was having a hard enough time reining in his beast and berserker.

Both of them wanted to emerge and torture Anderson for putting his mate in harm's way.

"I said come here." Anderson shot a hole into the wall a few feet above Ava's head. "I'm fast, and I never miss."

Tersch grit his teeth, held on to his beast, and approached Anderson.

"That's far enough."

Not for what Tersch had planned. He knocked Anderson's gun away and started choking the fucker. "You don't threaten my mate and live," he growled.

Anderson clutched at Tersch's hands, but instead of trying to break free, he stroked along the outside of Tersch's knuckles. And in that moment, Tersch understood why Ava hadn't wanted him in reach of their enemy.

Unable to help himself, Tersch looked into Anderson's eyes.

The dark blue swirled, a mirror of himself, and he allowed his own rage to pour through. Yes, he was angry that the woman constantly tried to manipulate him. The lies, the deceit. Sharpe and her smart-mouthed granddaughter. Trying to trick him, to control him.

He shook his head, aware he'd dropped Anderson and was growing. Stronger, taller. More powerful than he'd ever been. He ripped through his clothes as the berserker came out to play.

"That's right. Good. You lead, I follow," Anderson murmured. "Now you wanted to get rid of the woman first. You said something about fucking her to death. A secret fantasy of yours. I'll stand watch right here, at your command."

"My command." Tersch liked that, but the rest didn't sound right.

"Look at her, Gunnar. She's your enemy. She lied to you. She wants to control you. See how she teases, wearing hardly anything at all? The sight of her nipples, her dark flesh so tempting to anyone male?"

Tersch shook his head. That didn't seem right. But he couldn't argue the fact that a gorgeous woman wore nothing more than a T-shirt in front of him and his faithful guard.

"Do it," Anderson whispered, and Tersch's head pounded.

He stepped toward the woman, and his headache increased. His course had been set for him. He had a plan, a need to fulfill his obligations and take down this seductress before she tempted other men down a path of ruin.

Like his goddamn mother. *Bitch. Always telling me what to do! Tricked me into marriage, all because of you! He could see his father yelling and pointing at him. The slaps, the rages...*

An echo of violence sent shivers down his spine. He hastened his step, prepared to do anything to stop history from repeating itself. No more innocents left to suffer, no more deaths at the hands of deceitful affection.

He stared at the woman, bemused by her extraordinary allure. So beautiful, so treacherous. Her heat signature flared, full of power and mystery.

He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything, and it scared him.

She scared him.

"That's right. End her before she ends you. Take what's yours, Gunnar." The distant voice encouraged him.

"I don't need you telling me what to fucking do," he roared at his father. "I'm not yours anymore."

"I'm sorry," the distant voice apologized.

*Sorry, sorry. Always sorry, Frederik. You little piece of shit.*

Tersch tackled the woman to the ground, waiting for her pleas of mercy, her tears of terror.

Instead, she cupped his cheek. "I love you, Gunnar. No matter what." The soft words pierced the fog of his mind.

"She's using you. Do it."

*Snap her neck. Break it. You know you can.*

He leaned up to straddle her slim form. Tersch wrapped his hands around her neck, hands the same size as his father's. Behind him, he heard a gunshot, then nothing more. The sounds of the other males made little sense.

His gaze was glued to the woman under him. She closed her eyes and turned her head, offering him her submission. Giving. He couldn't take what had been willingly given.

"Mine," he snarled and squeezed.

"Tersch, no!" Male voices. Shouts at him to stop.

Something pricked his shoulder. Strong hands tried to pry him away, and he batted them back. He left the woman and made short work of the two males trying to shoot him with an ineffectual gun. Once he'd knocked both of them unconscious and verified that the other male who smelled wrong lay unmoving, he returned to her.

She lay as he'd left her. Waiting for him.

"I love you." Her hazel eyes were large, the loving expression in them pure, devoted. "I love you, mate."

He knelt over her again, a knee on either side of her hips. And as he placed his hands over her throat, as he'd done before, another image replaced this one. One of the magnificent woman on her knees, of her generous smile as she made love with him. Her joy as he took her in every way.

The berserker leaned closer and nuzzled her ear, taken with the scent of them both. His and hers, together. He lessened his hold around her neck and released her, planting kisses in place of his fingerprints. She made him so hard. He wanted her right now, under him. The shirt she wore rode high on her hips, and he scooted back to glance down at her pretty little pussy.

"Mine," he said again, his voice thick but not as deep. The need for her submission faded, replaced with the need for her pleasure, and he slowly decreased

in size, his berserker sinking back inside him, at peace. His beast wanted to protect, to satisfy her wants. But the man wanted to feel her under him, surrounding him, as he made love with his mate once more.

Gunnar felt himself *change* back into a man's form but couldn't concentrate on anything but Ava. He didn't give her a chance to protest. He shrugged out of his tattered clothes, lifted her to him, and pushed through her wet folds deep into her pussy.

"God, I love you," he sighed as he kissed his mate.

Their loving was passionate, hurried, and thorough. He thrust hard and fast, grinding against Ava's clit until she clenched him tight, coming hard around him. She squeezed him into an all-consuming orgasm, making him tremble as she milked him of his seed.

He finally felt normal again when he heard Jules groan.

Shocked, Gunnar stared into his mate's sated expression. He hurriedly withdrew and carried her out of the gym and back to her bedroom. Though he heard the others near, they didn't pass anyone along the way, for which he was profoundly grateful. Once back in her bedroom, Tersch let out a loud breath.

"I was worried for you," Ava said in a thick voice. Her eyes shimmered with happy tears. "But I knew you would protect me. You, your beast, your berserker. You really do love me, don't you?"

He hugged her close. "More than life itself, baby. You have no idea."

They sat for a few minutes on her bed, closer than they'd ever been.

Then Ava stirred. "Much as I hate to cut this short, I think you need to dress and rejoin the others. Jules and Lonnie thought you were going to kill me. We wouldn't want to give them the wrong impression."

Tersch chuckled and stood. "I'll get dressed if you will. Because if Keegan sees you wearing that shirt and nothing else again, I'll rip his eyes out."

“You’re so hot when you’re threatening.” She sighed. “Have I told you how much I love your growl?”

He snorted. “Save the love talk for later.”

“Might as well. After all, you owe me a few orgasms, at the least, for believing in you.”

Knowing her strengths, how fast she could truly move, Gunnar knew she could have prevented that scene in the gym when he’d been choking her. Instead, she’d lain under him, her faith complete.

“We really are made for each other, aren’t we?” He smiled as she dressed.

“I’ve been telling you that for months. Game, set, match, honey. I told you we’d be mates some day. I win.”

“No, we both win.” He hurried to her side to kiss her once more. “Now promise you won’t tell anyone we did it in the gym. A guy’s gotta have standards, and sex where you work out is just wrong. No matter how hot your woman is.” Not to mention how much shit he’d given Morgan and Hayashi when they’d done it on those same mats months ago.

“Flatterer.” She batted his groping hands away. “Now get out of here so we can pretend you didn’t just ravish me on the floor in front of an unconscious Lonnie and Jules. And Anderson was in there too. Ew.”

He saluted and left, careful to pass no one on his way to his room. But once there, he had to stop and wonder. Could his life possibly get any better?

\* \* \*

Could his life possibly get any worse? Nearly a week after “The Incident,” and the guys wouldn’t stop ragging him for fucking in the gym. It wasn’t so much that he’d done Ava on the floor, but that he’d taken her with Admiral London present, a guy most of them thought of as a surrogate father.

“Considering all the shit you gave me, you can’t possibly think you’re not going to hear about this for years to come?” Morgan murmured as they stood on the back patio barbecuing their dinner.

“Morgan, he was fucking passed out. He and Jules were oblivious.”

“Ah, hate to burst your bubble,” Jules said. “But I caught an eyeful. You were pretty intense, huh, big guy?”

“Shut it,” he growled, then smiled as Ava, Sheridan, and Olivia passed by with trays of drinks. “At least my mate knows I believe in women’s rights.”

Jules frowned when Sheridan glared at him over her shoulder.

Hayashi snorted. “That’s just because she can kick your ass as easily as you can kick Fallon’s.”

Fallon turned from ogling his wife’s ass. “Hey. Get off me. You know, you used to be a lot nicer before you mated Morgan. He’s a bad influence.”

Morgan grinned.

Ava joined them. Gunnar’s misery grew in leaps and bounds. Dammit, he needed more time to do this right. The fucking ring in his pocket was giving him hives, but Alicia had helped him pick it out. *With glee, I might add.*

“Everyone, please have a seat.” Mrs. Sharpe nodded to the large table and chairs.

Admiral London manned the grill while the rest of them took their seats. Gunnar grabbed Ava’s hand in his and refused to let go.

She glanced at their hands and mouthed, *I win.* The smug smile she gave him made him hard.

“There are a few things I’d like to clear up before we enjoy this fine meal, courtesy of my Lonnie.”

The older man flushed and glared when Tersch snickered. “Keep it up, Gunnar. Your days are already numbered. That one,” he said pointing at Ava, “is a chip off *her* block.” He pointed at Alicia.

“Poor bastard,” Jules muttered.

“I heard that, Jules.” Alicia frowned at him, then smiled. “Grayson is doing well. He plans to visit next week. He heard from Jack. It’s been confirmed Robert Anderson killed Melissa. Jack did his part by freeing Grayson, and he’s now the admiral’s problem.”

“Bastard refuses to come back in.” London frowned. “But I’ll deal with him on my own. This team has done more than its part with all this. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You could give us a raise,” Tersch muttered, considering the rock he’d forked an arm and a leg over for.

Ava raised a brow at him, and he quieted.

“As I was saying,” Alicia continued. “Anderson is now in federal custody, in the hands of a special task force assigned to deal with such individuals. He’s also volunteered to test more of those harmful drugs that hurt so many of our psychics.”

Tersch eyed Alicia with appreciation. A fitting end to Anderson. Those drugs had a bad habit of killing psychics. And the latest batch had stripped several psychics’ powers altogether.

“We’ve found another cache of rogue Circs. You’ll be dealing with them in another month or so, after a well-deserved, all-expense-paid vacation to a tropical island we’ve arranged.”

“Not that’s what I call good news,” Olivia said with a laugh. She sat in Fallon’s lap, her mate’s hand over her belly.

“Now, for the truth you’ve all been so interested in knowing.”

Everyone grew silent, the sizzle of steaks and a few chirping birds the only sounds to be heard.

“I was born a Circ, raised to know my path. I was destined to find you all, to ensure a new future for our kind. Someday another woman will take my place, one who’ll live for a very long time and do wondrous things for humanity.”

Tersch frowned. "So how old are you?"

"Gunnar," Ava chided.

Alicia held up her hand. "A legitimate question. Not terribly polite, but since it's Gunnar asking, I'll tell you. I'm Ava's great-great-grandmother. I'm well over a hundred years old."

Everyone sat in astonishment.

"No shit." Jules whistled.

Morgan grinned. "The family has good genes. You're lucky to have me, kitsu," he said to Hayashi.

"The Circs are meant to better mankind. Though you've been created by science, science had help." Alicia smiled at them all. "Years ago I met an extraordinary young man. Elliot Pearl was his name, and he had a head for science. We discussed gene splicing, recombinant DNA, and a variety of other things. But I hadn't realized how much our talk had meant until I ran into him years later."

"You're telling us you gave Elliot Pearl the idea for the Circe serum? The drug that made the first Circ?" Sheridan asked, agog.

"Well, not the first Circ, dear. The first manmade Circ, yes."

London added, "As well as a sample of her blood. Pearl was a genius, but even he wouldn't have discovered how to manage things without Alicia's blood as an example. Might have taken decades longer to come up with the Circe serum."

Tersch couldn't believe it. "You made us?"

"In a fashion. You see, Ava has a destiny she's just coming into. You and she will give birth to my successor. I needed a strong replacement. One with your strength of character and Ava's talents. She'll need the right guidance, and I fully trust in all of you to give birth to the next generation of Circs. Sheridan's baby will be a real treasure, as will Olivia's child. And Kisho and Morgan don't know it yet, but they'll raise my great-great-great-granddaughter with Gunnar and Ava as if the child were their own. You're all very important to the future at large, you know."

Tersch tried to understand. “You’re telling me you set us up so I’d make a baby with Ava?” The woman didn’t make any sense.

“Of course not. I’m not a glorified matchmaker.” Her sly grin took Tersch’s breath away. Damn, she *had* set him up. “But I will admit I picked the right woman for Jesse. I knew Kisho and Morgan would suit. And Sheridan had my help when it came to getting her a job here, to be closer to Julian. I hesitate to take credit for it all, as that sounds conceited even to my ears. You can’t force love.”

“But you can give it a helping hand,” Ava added. She winked at Tersch and gripped his hand tighter.

“But the experiments, Pearson Labs, the mutants...” Jules scowled.

“Now, now. I only put in play what was meant to be, Jules,” Alicia said softly. “I don’t countenance forcing choices, only making them. No one coerced any of you into the Circ project. You volunteered because you wanted to make a difference. And you have.”

She paused. “I see some things very clearly, yet others remain clouded from my mind’s eye. I do the best I can, guided by my ancestors and the spirit world as I see it. Much of your travail to become who you are now was closed to me. But even if I could go back and change it, I don’t know if I would. Your troubles and successes have made you who you are today.”

Tersch thought about what his life had been and what it was now. He had friends. He had family. He looked at the petite brown hand clasped in his.

He had Ava.

Tersch cleared his throat. “Now that Mrs. Matchmaker has had her say, I have something to add.”

“Here we go,” Morgan muttered.

“Gunnar.” Ava flushed. “Do you have to make fun?”

“Shush, Ava. Let him.” Alicia’s eyes sparkled. The blasted woman knew he was about to make a fool of himself, and of course, she encouraged it.

Jules smiled. "Man, you are so purple." Meaning Tersch's aura was violet, the color of love.

"Shut up." He stood. He wiped his hands on his jeans, wishing he'd thought to do this in private. But he wanted everyone to know how much Ava meant to him.

He turned to his mate and took the small box from his pocket, pleased when her eyes narrowed on the box, then widened. "I've loved Ava from the moment I first saw her. Those big hazel eyes, that beautiful face, that rockin' body."

"Amen," Fallon murmured and had Olivia socking him in the gut with her elbow.

"Shh."

Tersch watched his mate's eyes soften and tear up. Her great big green eyes. The woman was a sucker for romance. Something he'd keep in mind. Encouraged, he opened the box and held it to her. "You've made my life complete, Ava. I love you more than life itself." He glanced at Kisho, who mouthed his next line. Thank God they had a poet in residence. "Without you, I'm less than nothing. But with you, I'm right. Will you marry me?"

Ava wiped her eyes. "You were supposed to say, 'But with you, I'm right where I need to be.' Then the 'will you marry me' part."

The woman must have seen his crib sheet. Shit.

"Well? Yes or no, woman?" he growled.

She smiled, her expression so brilliant, it was like looking into the sun. "I love you right back, you big Viking berserker. And I'm pregnant, so you have to marry me. Now tell me again you love me and put this ring on."

Everyone cheered. Champagne corks suddenly burst, and laughter abounded.

Tersch had eyes only for his mate. "Baby?" he croaked.

"Yeah. I think she's going to be a handful." Ava put his hand on her stomach.

"God, I love you. And before you say a thing, I won our little game."

“Oh?” She stretched out her finger for the full-carat marquise diamond he put on her finger. A perfect fit.

“Yeah. Knocked up and engaged, and I didn’t even have to beg.”

She gave him a mock frown, which she ruined when she smiled. “We aren’t married yet.” She tugged him closer and whispered, “And until I see a little man-on-man action, I’m not using the cuffs.”

He blushed; he could feel it. Especially when Morgan smiled at him from across the table with a sly look. He whispered back, “Ava. Come on, baby. Not him.”

“Four on one. That includes him. And then maybe I’ll consider some girl-on-girl.”

“Really?” Hope filled him. Hope for the future, for his new family, and for the happiness he could feel filling him, his beast, and his crazy berserker.

“Girl-on-girl porn, that is.” She snickered and fell into his arms.

And Frederik Gunnar Tersch conceded. Ava had won her little game. And by God, he’d play with her for the rest of their blessed lives.

☪ THE END ☪

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## Marie Harte

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic, but especially all things romance. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling. Twenty-three years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dream has finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers.