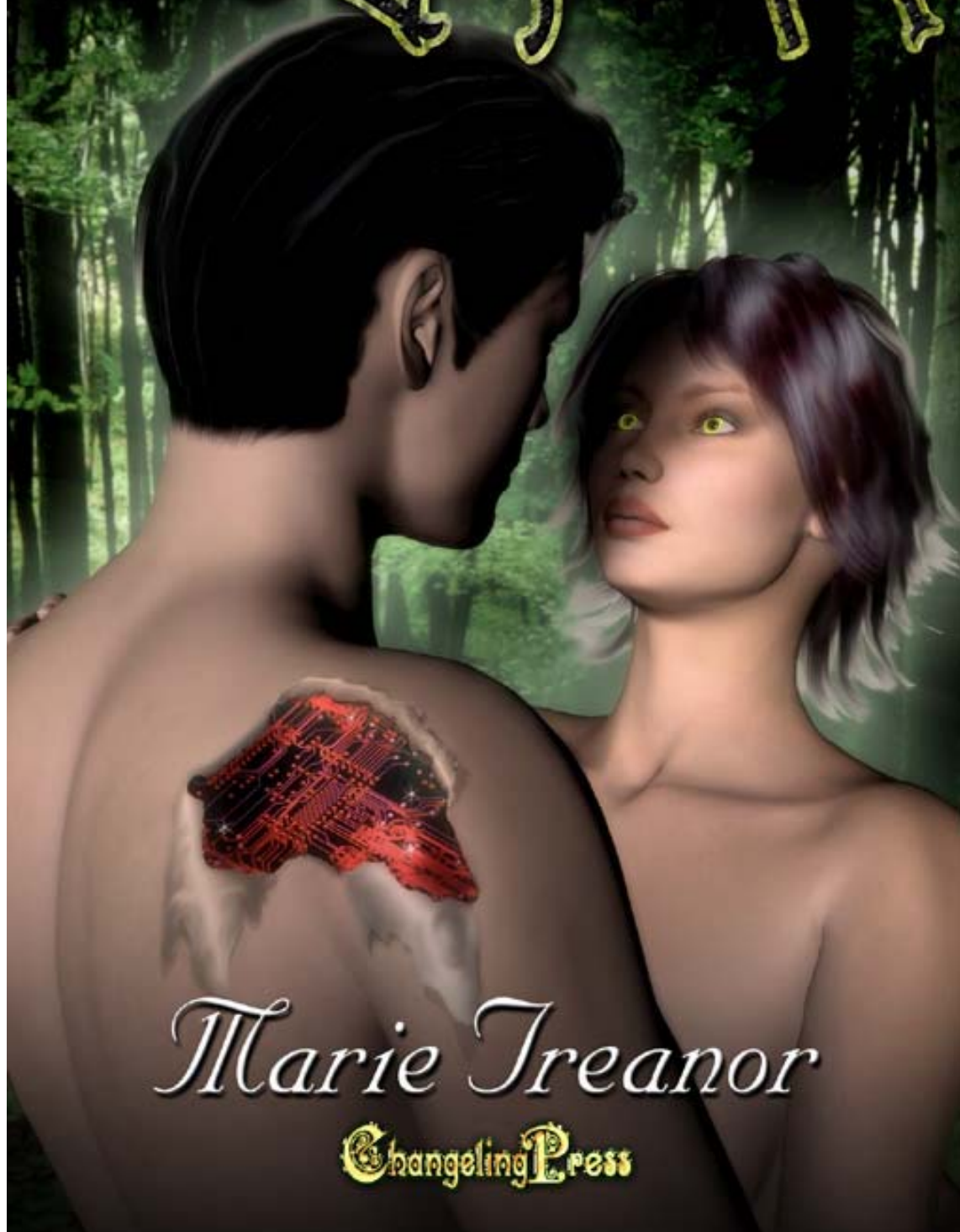


WOLF HUNT



Marie Treador

Changeling Press

Wolf Hunt

Marie Treanor

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Wolf Hunt (Collection)

Marie Treanor

Who's hunting whom?

A man wakes up naked and alone in a city doorway -- with no memory of how he got there or who he is. For journalist Rose Winter, a wolf story begins to converge with the sexy naked man she's trying to help. And a chain of events is set in motion that may change Earth's future...

Human-wolf hybrids, created by a top secret government project, have been released into the world to find and destroy alien infiltrators. But once these soldiers begin to think for themselves, their missions are complicated by attraction, sex and divided loyalties...

Wolf Hunt 1: Urban Wolf

Marie Treanor

A man wakes up naked and alone in a city doorway -- with no memory of how he got there or who he is. The locals assume he's a drunken pervert and try to drive him away. Only journalist Rose Winter believes he's more than that, but even she isn't prepared for the truth.

Following up a story, Rose finds herself hunted through the city at night by a giant wolf. As her wolf story begins to converge with her sexy naked man, her own secret becomes impossible to keep. Loyalty and duty can't prevent these enemies from becoming lovers on the run, but they both know their love is doomed as much by their own nature as by interplanetary politics.

Chapter One

Cold. So cold that his violent shivering hurt his teeth. Wetness pounded into his skin like tiny bullets, splashing on his knees, his face, running all over his body. The smell of people filled his nostrils, overwhelming the nearby cooking scents that turned his stomach. All around him was noise -- people shouting, loud, crashing footsteps, the *whoosh* of cars and aircraft.

I'm outside, in the city.

What the hell am I doing sleeping outside in the city?

"Is he dead?" asked a nearby voice.

"Of course he's not dead! His teeth are chattering, for God's sake! Hey, wake up, you piss-head!"

He caught a whiff of bacon mixed with aggression. Then a rough hand seized his shoulder, and he reacted without thought, leaping to his feet and drawing back his fist.

Rain dripped off his hair into his eyes. Between the droplets, he stared at an angry man backing away from him.

"Jesus Christ," the man said. "You're disgusting."

Someone giggled -- a young woman in impossibly high heels, and lipstick of a matching shade of scarlet. She was staring at the region just below his middle. So was the friend who clutched her arm.

"Wow," said the second woman, as her friend dragged her off, both of them cackling and whispering.

"Get yourself off the street, you drunken perv!" called an older woman's voice.

The man who'd touched him added threateningly, "Be quick about it, piss-head!" The man's gaze dropped as well, and this time, he looked too.

He was stark naked, his tackle on show for anyone who cared to look. No wonder he was cold. "Off the street" seemed suddenly very sensible advice. Only... where the fuck was he?

With quick, darting glances, he discovered he stood in a doorway, in a narrow city street of old and crumbling tenement buildings. Even the road needed to be repaired. It was little more than rubble in places. Not a good part of town to be alone -- dark, neglected, far from the more acceptable view of wide streets and tall, shiny glass buildings with aircraft darting between. Worse, he faced a group of shocked, angry citizens. If he hadn't been so cold, he'd have blushed.

Would I? Do I blush?

Desperately, he grasped for self-knowledge, a reason for being here, and found nothing. Panic stung him into action, any action. Reaching behind him, he searched for a way out and to his relief discovered a door handle. It gave easily, but before he could dive inside, a man shouted, "Hey, Art! He's breaking in to your house!"

And suddenly, they were advancing on him, their shocked faces turned mean and aggressive.

"Don't let him get in!" someone shouted.

The man who'd shaken his shoulder yelled furiously. "Get out of my house, piss-head!"

Piss-head? Is that all it is? Am I drunk? Must have been one hell of a night...

Certainly it would explain the faint haze of unreality through which he appeared to be regarding the world. Something crashed into his chest, hard and painful, and fell onto the step beside him. A stone from among the road rubble.

"Get away from there!" snarled the house-owner -- Art?

Another stone flew at him and he caught it deftly in his left hand. Weighing it, he took a step forward.

Amid a flurry of gasps and warnings and swearing, the crowd fell back. Another couple of stones hit his legs, but he kept moving, determined to plough his way through them and take the road he chose for himself, which was...

He ducked to avoid another flying stone, deflected one with his forearm, which began to bleed. But he'd seen who threw that one -- Art -- and locked eyes with him. The man looked terrified.

"Hey, what's going on?"

The female voice seemed to cut through his skin. Clear, brisk, curious, with a warm pitch that spoke straight to his cock. Or would have, had that organ not been so shrivelled with rain and cold. A ripple moved through the hostile crowd. Voices muttered and he had to strain to catch the words.

"I know her. I'm sure I do."

"Who is she?"

"She's that girl on the newscreeens. Shit, she's probably got a camera. I'm off..."

Threatening arms in the crowd lowered. Stones dropped casually on the ground with a scattering of dull thuds and several people drifted away.

A young woman emerged from the dispersing crowd, pushing down a rain hood to reveal luxuriant long hair of a bright and rare shade of amber, falling around a face that he supposed was beautiful. Certainly, her bone structure was exquisite, her lips full and tempting, her eyes large and brown...

But it wasn't her beauty or her melting eyes that truly caught his attention. It was her smell. Frowning, he tried to place it. Did he know her? Surely that scent was familiar... Something about it filled his mind with visions of naked, sweating bodies, mainly his own and hers.

She came to an abrupt halt and stared at him. Oh yes, she was highly fuckable, and yet, stronger than his upsurge of unexpected and inconvenient lust was the desire to put his hands around her elegant, swan-like neck and strangle her.

He flexed his fingers.

The older woman was explaining. "Art found him asleep in his doorway when he came home from night shift. Must be a drunk or a down-and-out, some kind of pervert too. Look at him!"

After her first flickering glance, the newcomer seemed to be rather determinedly focusing on his face. "He must be freezing," she said unexpectedly. In an instant, she'd stripped off her raincoat, revealing an orange bodysuit that seemed to match her hair, and bright, chunky beads around her throat. She advanced upon him.

He fell back, giving ground before her as he hadn't before the stone-throwing mob.

She paused. "I won't hurt you. What's your name?"

His throat closed up. Panic threatened to resurface. Her eyes searched his. Every hair on his body stood up in alarm. Though he'd no idea who she was, either, his every instinct was against trusting her.

"Where does he live?" she flung over her shoulder.

Silence and a few shrugs. "Why's he scared of her?" someone muttered.

Scared? Was he? Forcing himself, he stayed still when she took another step nearer to him. Maybe. But it felt like a powerful tug of lust. Mixed with an equally strong urge to exterminate her.

"He's not *scared* of her," answered another voice with a definite snigger. "He *likes* her."

She heard them. He could see it in the color soaring into her neck and face. He even admired the way she deliberately didn't so much as glance at his growing cock. And yet it didn't embarrass him. Perhaps he was an exhibitionist after all.

Reaching up, she placed the raincoat around his shoulders, drawing the two sides together across his chest. Her fingers brushed his naked skin and even through his numbing cold, a jolt of electricity caught at his breath. Her eyes flew up to his.

False eyes. Beautiful eyes, but false, misleading, never to be trusted. But at least the coat felt good, warming.

"Where do you live? Do you want someone to take you there?" Curiously, there seemed to be genuine compassion in her clear, musical voice. He shivered.

"Doesn't he speak?" she asked the crowd.

"Never heard him speak," said Art. "Guess his type don't feel the need."

"Have you called the police?"

Art's gaze slid away. "We don't like the police round here. The more distant they are, the safer we feel."

"Well. You don't like the police and you don't like naked men cluttering up your doorways. What are you planning to do about him? Besides throwing stones?"

Interestingly, her disapproval got to them. Art actually shuffled his feet. "Nothing," he snarled. "So long as he buggers off and doesn't come back! I've never seen him before in my life and I never want to again either!"

"He's not from round here," someone else agreed.

"I've never seen him before either."

On the whole, that was rather a relief, and yet he'd no idea where to go, what to do if they weren't going to make him fight...

"I have," said a reluctant voice, and he jerked up his head to see a youngish man in labouring clothes, whose eyes slid away as soon as their gazes connected.

"I think he's ill. A couple of people carried him into the flat below mine yesterday. Never saw him before that... it's been empty for weeks."

"Was he dressed then?" Art mocked.

"Oh yes."

"Show us," the woman said.

The labourer looked hunted. "I'm already late for work."

"Then just tell me the address!"

"No way! I don't know you from Adam! Who are you, anyway?"

"Rose Winter," the girl said. "I'm a reporter with the iGazette." She smiled. It didn't reach her beautiful, false eyes. "If there's a story in this, you'll get your names and photos on all the newsscreens."

"No way," the labourer exclaimed in clear alarm.

"Well... The iGazette pays."

Something passed hastily from her hand to the labourer's. "Come on," he muttered, and began to slouch off down the street.

* * *

Rose Winter glanced uncertainly at the naked man in her raincoat. They said he was a drunk, but she couldn't smell any alcohol on his breath, and in any case, it didn't matter to her. Something about him and his ludicrous plight aroused her pity as well as her curiosity.

At least, she was calling it pity, and it had nothing to do with the toned, naked body beneath her coat. Not even the very fine cock which had risen so flatteringly to greet her. She wasn't so shallow.

Or at least she fervently hoped she wasn't.

"He's taking you home," she assured him -- and hoped she was right. The man began to shrug off her raincoat.

"No, no!" she exclaimed in panic, making a grab for it. "Hold it round you."

Unexpectedly, the man's eyes gleamed. Was he making fun of her? Despite her indignation, she couldn't prevent the rush of heat through her body. Well, he was a big, handsome, well-endowed man. It wouldn't be natural not to notice. Though it would be more comfortable if she could just pity him without admiring his muscles, or his long, strong-featured face with those full lips and jutting chin, his shaggy black hair falling around his unshaven face. Or that attention-grabbing cock...

She swallowed. Thank God for the raincoat. But it was hard to break his gaze. The gleam she'd taken for mockery, and perhaps just a little lust, now seemed more like dislike. A pang of something ridiculously like hurt shot through her and was ruthlessly squashed. Maybe he was a nutter, a drunk and an exhibitionist, but she was learning to smell a story and she was damned sure she smelled one on him.

"Shall we?" she said, and began to walk.

Around them, the onlookers got out of the way, muttering to each other. Someone advised her to watch herself, told her not to go into his flat, certainly not without Rob, which was, apparently, the labourer's name.

Straining her ears, she caught the sound of his naked feet splashing across the wet pavement. He walked beside her in silence through the rain like some large,

graceful animal, untamed and unpredictable. Ignoring her, as well as the puddles he simply sloshed through, his gaze swept constantly around the street, and the buildings and shops, passers-by and Rob, who paused at the next corner to wait for them.

Questions almost choked her. But this was not the time. His need for silence was palpable. Casting him a quick glance, she wondered what thoughts filled his head. Though she seriously doubted the crowd's verdict of pissed pervert, he certainly hadn't seemed as embarrassed by his own nakedness as one might expect.

Perhaps he knew he looked good.

Rose gave a twisted little smile and the man spared her a rare glance before Rob halted right in front of them.

"Here," he said.

The man looked upward at the street sign. Wolfe Street. She couldn't tell if it meant anything to him. Did he really not know or remember where he lived?

"Have you had a head injury?" she asked abruptly, wishing she'd had the sense to ask before. She'd been too distracted by his nakedness. One of his hands pushed out of the coat, feeling at his head as he followed Rob inside. He didn't appear to discover any wounds, but at least he understood her.

The common stairs were dark and none too clean. The stranger wrinkled his nose. Rose didn't blame him. It was a shit-hole in a shitty neighbourhood. She could smell urine and rotting rubbish somewhere not too distant. She just hoped it wasn't in the stranger's flat.

On the second floor, Rob paused and pointed to the door marked with an upside down number five. "That's where I saw them take him."

Wordlessly, Rose stood aside and the stranger stepped past her. The loose sleeves of the raincoat brushed against her arms, as he laid his shoulder to the door and pushed.

It opened easily, as if it had never even been locked. Cold air wafted out from an open window she could see across the hall in the kitchen. The stranger walked forward,

going quickly to the window and shutting it. Then he pushed open a door on his right and after an instant's hesitation, disappeared inside.

Rose and Rob exchanged glances.

"I've got to go to work," he said uncomfortably.

"I know."

"I wouldn't go in there with him. He'll be fine on his own."

"Thanks," said Rose. "I can take care of myself."

Rob gave her a doubtful once over, then an unexpected smile that lit his face to almost handsome before he dashed off downstairs.

Rose turned back to the stranger's flat. Taking a deep breath, she walked in.

The kitchen, though still cold and with a rain puddle on the windowsill, was surprisingly neat and clean. Only its owner's dirty, wet footprints marred the wiped clean floor surface. The cupboards were worn and tatty, but also clean. Like the fridge. Unable to resist, she opened it. A carton of milk, another of orange juice and a pile of four large raw steaks in a clear, bloody plastic bag. It seemed his needs were simple.

Closing the fridge door, she turned and almost cried out.

Chapter Two

He stood quite still in the doorway, watching her, his shoulder leaning very lightly against the wall. He held her raincoat in one hand. Although he hadn't cleaned himself up, he had thrown on a pair of jeans, some sneakers and a worn black T-shirt that did little to disguise the bulging muscles of his arms, or the strength in his broad chest and shoulders. And now that she felt able to look below his waist, he had good, long legs too, with powerful thighs, between which...

Shit, don't go there again!

"Are you hungry?"

So he could speak! Worse, his voice was deep and melting, the kind that reached right into you and tickled your pussy to remind you what it was missing.

"No," she managed. "Fortunately. Steak for breakfast is a bit rich for me." Might as well be blatant about it.

Shifting his weight off the wall, he walked toward her. Her heart gave a lurch that wasn't all fear, but he merely dropped the raincoat into her numb arms and reached for the fridge.

Hastily, she stood aside. He took out the bag of steak and began opening cupboards. There was a healing gash on his arm, some dried blood he needed to wash off.

Rose swallowed. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes. Thanks."

"Do you remember your name now?"

A sound came from him that might have been a laugh. "Jon."

"Jon what?"

"I haven't the faintest idea." Discovering a frying pan at last, he put it on the old-fashioned stove and lit the gas before glancing at her. "Do I know you?"

"Rose Winter. I'm a journalist with the iGazette."

"So I heard. I just wondered if we'd met before today." He went back to a previously rifled cupboard and brought out a bottle of oil.

"I'd have remembered that," Rose said, just a shade too emphatically. Then, when he merely cast her a quizzical glance, she lifted her head defiantly. "This isn't your house, is it?"

"What makes you say that?" He poured oil into the pan and replaced the bottle in the cupboard. Interesting, because he didn't look like a tidy man.

Rose said, "You don't know where anything is."

"Apparently I only moved in yesterday."

"You were only *brought* here yesterday."

"Well, the clothes in the bedroom fit me," he countered, throwing the steak into the sizzling oil. "And the fridge just happened to contain what I most want to eat. Are you fishing for a story, Rose Winter of the iGazette?"

"Perhaps," she admitted. "If there's one here. Is there?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "If you find out, let me know."

"You really don't know your name, do you?"

"Guess I've been on a bender."

"One without alcohol."

"Maybe I'm into drugs." He held his arms out in front of him, as if he'd done it before he meant to, then dropped them with a quick hiss that might have been laughter, and turned back to his steak.

She followed, peering worriedly into his averted face. "I think you should go to the hospital..."

"No!"

One word, curt and violent. Rose stepped backward, her heart truly hammering now, and not with any vague, pleasurable never-to-be-fulfilled lust. Hatred and revulsion glared out of his eyes into hers.

"I can't make you," she said, edging herself back between him and the kitchen door. "But I still think you should."

He threw the spatula into the pan and ran his fingers through his hair. His hand shook. With oddly intense compassion, she realised the man was damaged, that she'd been right all along. He had a story all right. But like this, he was way beyond her ability to deal with.

"Look, I've got to go," she said awkwardly. "I'll leave my card in case you want to talk..."

But at that, his head snapped up. "Oh no, wait a minute."

In two strides, he was across the room, backing her into the door. Panic flared. *Stay calm, don't upset him... Smart arse. Who can take care of herself?* She was afraid to breathe.

His dark, troubled eyes stared down into hers. "Don't run off. I need to talk to you."

"Do you need to do it while rubbing noses?"

A hint of confusion flickered in his eyes, chased by a gleam of amusement. "No, but I find I quite like it."

He was too quick, too direct, and yet under the darkening of his eyes, her fear drained away. What was left was an excitement that tightened her nipples and made her stomach tingle.

"You're very beautiful," he said softly. He bent his head, breathing in, as though inhaling the scent of her hair, the skin of her face and neck. "And alluring, even if..." He broke off. His warm breath glanced off her lips, her cheek, the tiny hairs at the side of her neck and she shivered. "What are you doing in this classy part of town?"

She swallowed. "Following a story." His hard chest brushed against her breasts.

"About me?"

"God, no. Why do you say that?"

"Because I can't rid myself of the notion that I know you." His head lifted, the dark eyes pierced hers as though pinning her to the wall. It should have been scary, and yet her chief thought was that he had beautiful eyes, deep, dark and intense, the eyes of a passionate and complex man.

Pulling herself together, she said evenly, "You don't. I came down here to find the people who reported seeing a giant wolf last night. Several of them live near here. On the way, I saw the crowd gathered around you."

"And now you want my story too?"

"If it's newsworthy. Would you give it to me?"

His eyes dropped to the region of her lips, and the butterflies in her stomach began to squirm downward. He sounded distracted as he replied, "With my photo on the newsscreens? No way."

"It must be frightening not remembering who you are," she said breathlessly.

"Actually, I'm starting to find it curious... uplifting. I have no baggage, no past to temper what I want to do."

"Which is?"

"To kiss you," he said, and did.

His lips took hers strongly, making her gasp into his mouth in surprise. His tongue drove between her lips, and the tingling in her pussy caught fire. Her hands, which had been reaching up with the vague intention of pushing him away, now clung to his powerful shoulders, drawing him closer instead until his hard chest pressed against her aching breasts.

When he manoeuvred his lower body onto hers, his hardening cock against her stomach, she let out a tiny moan. Her pussy clenched and released a flood of sexual moisture into her panties. His arms were around her, hard and irresistible. She knew she'd never be able to throw him off, but nothing had prepared her for the sheer, overwhelming pleasure of being held helpless in the arms of a stranger, *this* stranger, while he kissed her mouth with wild, sensual thoroughness, and ground his cock into

her, dragging her up on her tiptoes so that he could fit it between her thighs and find the hot, damp tenderness of her pussy. She was so wet she was sure he could feel it, even through her clothes and his.

Somewhere, she knew she had to find a way to end this, that her desire and his was galloping too fast, too out of control. Only she couldn't bear to lose his mouth just yet, or the exquisite torture of his hard, bulging cock roughly rubbing against her desperate clit, arousing all those wicked desires she'd mostly tried not to think about for five years.

It was he who broke the kiss and took her head between his hands. Even her hair seemed to spark with electricity at his touch. He made an audible effort to control his rapid breathing. "Well," he murmured, "I could almost swear I haven't done that before."

She swallowed. "You haven't."

"I want to do it some more, and lots of other things besides. And yet I don't trust you. Why is that?"

"Because you're weird?" She didn't mean to say it. It was stupid hurt that forced the words out. But to her surprise, he actually emitted a sound like laughter and she found herself briefly hugged before he released her.

"You're right there," he confessed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to assault you. I'm just a little too free right now and you're too bloody tempting in what appears to be my house. Did I hurt you?"

There seemed to be genuine anxiety in his voice, which was touching if unnecessary. She shook her head dumbly. Then, while he swore and snatched the frying pan off the stove, she said, "Look, Jon, you need help to sort this out. If you won't go to a hospital, try the police. They should know if you're a missing person, or if you've been in some kind of accident..."

"I'm not injured," he assured her. "In fact, I feel extremely fit and healthy." He laid the pan down again and turned back to her. "It'll come back to me. I'm sorry you were dragged into this. Thanks for your coat."

At mention of the coat, fallen at her feet, she bent and picked it up, more to cover her flushed cheeks than anything.

"And your kindness," he added, which made it even worse. Glancing at him, she could find no trace of insincerity and yet she had the impression he'd said the words to make her blush some more.

Trying to ignore that, she rummaged in her bag and found a business card, which she laid down on the rickety kitchen table.

"If you like," she offered, "I can do some digging of my own. I have access to a lot of research sites and I talk to a lot of people."

His lips quirked. "Good luck with your giant wolf."

"It'll be a dog, magnified in shadows. It always is."

* * *

Rose halted, staring at the ground at her feet, then slowly knelt and touched the unmistakable bloodstains.

She'd just about had enough of this story, interviewing people who swore they'd seen a giant wolf on the rooftops, loping down streets, chasing people, and now, a woman who said she saw it killing a man.

She'd gone to the place the woman directed her, expecting to find nothing, as usual. It wasn't a body, but it was definitely blood. The rain, now mercifully off, must have washed away whatever mud and dirt had covered it when the police had responded to the woman's call last night. Interesting find, but unlikely to prove the woman's story. More likely it had been a dog fight, or even a dog biting someone who'd tried to catch it. Rose had already seen several strays scavenging in this area.

Taking her penknife and an evidence bag from her pocket, Rose scraped off as much of the blood as she could, along with the dust and dirt that came with it, and put it in the bag.

Straightening, she decided enough was enough, and headed back to civilization. In the main street, she caught the express craft to the hospital and went directly to Carrie's lab.

Carrie, poring over a computer screen with one of her colleagues, glanced up at her over her spectacles and grinned. "Rose Winter, ace reporter. What can we do for you?"

"Carrie Flanders, Forensics Expert Extraordinaire, test me this," Rose retorted, dropping the evidence bag into Carrie's waiting hand.

"Aha," Carrie exclaimed, gazing at it with interest. "I've cracked it. This is dried blood!"

"Really?" Rose marvelled, and Carrie grinned again. Her colleague, more baffled than amused by their on-going joke, took himself off and Rose perched on the end of the desk.

"Any chance you could tell me whose it is?"

Carrie shrugged. "There's a chance, but that's all. Depends if its owner's on our database."

"Anything else about its owner would be useful too."

"I'll bear it in mind." Carrie glanced at her watch. "An hour to go. Fancy a drink tonight?"

Rose wrinkled her nose. "I can't. I have to write up this stupid wolf story. Tomorrow would be good, though."

"Not inspired by giant wolves?" Carrie's attempt at shock was unconvincing.

"More inspired by a very sexy amnesiac," Rose confessed.

Carrie tore off her glasses and polished them, replacing them on her nose with relish. "Spill," she demanded.

Rose laughed and got off the desk. "Tomorrow! I'm going to show my face at the office and work there." If she went home, she'd be waiting for a call that would never come. She didn't write well with that sort of distraction.

* * *

Her story done -- more of a non-story, she thought critically -- Rose pressed the button that sent it to her editor for approval, and sat back in her chair.

"Night, Rose. Not going home?" said Tony, one of the senior reporters as he passed her desk on his way to the office exit.

"In a few minutes. Just waiting for Jo's okay."

"Did you track down the 'wolf'?"

Rose wrinkled her nose. "It remains a mystery," she said grandly.

Tony laughed. "Good night and good luck."

"Night."

The door swung shut behind him and his footsteps retreated along the passage. A moment later, the elevator whined, and halted, and the silence of the empty building pressed in on her.

She gave a sigh of relief and stretched, arching her back and placing both hands behind her head. She could go home and wait for Jo's reply, then publish. But if Jo wanted changes, it would be a pain with her bed calling from the next room.

Bed. Cold, lonely bed. For once, she let her vague but growing dissatisfaction with her life come to the surface. What had become of her enthusiasm, her sense of pride, patriotism and determination? It had faded into an unexpectedly fascinating alternative career, a life among people who were almost but never quite friends because she couldn't let them be. And a cold, lonely bed.

Only twice in the last five years had she been sexually desperate enough to warm it up. One had been a colleague who was leaving for the colonies, the other a stranger picked up in a nightclub when her hormones were clamouring. They'd brought her some release, but little satisfaction. But at least they'd served the purpose of putting her off any further sexual adventures. It was best to simply take care of sexual urges herself, and ignore all those whispering longings for a man to come home to, a man to care for her and for whom she could care. It simply wouldn't and couldn't happen here and she had always accepted that.

Didn't mean she couldn't fantasise about her sexy amnesiac, though... Perhaps it had simply been his nakedness, but something about "Jon" had brought all her ruthlessly suppressed lusts to the surface, and his kiss... Fuck, but he could kiss! Just

one and she'd been ready to drag him onto the floor in all his sleeping-in-doorways dirt and screw him there and then.

Part of her wished she had. He'd have done it too. He was up for anything and not just because his amnesia gave him an exhilarating freedom right now. She suspected he'd never had many inhibitions, sexually, and she found that far more exciting than she should.

Restlessly, she dropped her hands back into her lap, pressing the heel of one into her pubic bone to quiet the upsurge of desire. Maybe it was time for another meaningless copulation. Or a naughty do-it-yourself right here in the empty office.

The wickedness of that appealed. Security cameras pointed at windows and doors, bypassing the central area where her desk was located. So far as she knew, but actually she found she didn't care. If anything, the uncertainty made her feel more daring, more aroused. Let some security guard spit out his tea watching her if he felt like it. This was for her.

She just wished he was there with her. Jon...

Deftly, she unfastened the disguised opening between the legs of her bodysuit, and ran her fingers over the damp crotch of her panties, gasping at the sharp pangs of sensation. She closed her eyes and imagined Jon stood in front of her, leaning his hips against the desk, watching her slide her finger under her panties and find her own, swollen clitoris. His breathing would come faster at the sight, as it had when he'd kissed her and ground his cock against her pussy. Fuck, that had felt so good.

She stroked her clitoris and imagined him unfastening his jeans. He'd take his rigid cock out of his pants and hold it in his strong fist, watching her every movement.

She slid a finger inside her aching pussy, circling her hand around her clitoris, pushing her hips upward into her hand. Her quickened breathing filled her ears. She imagined Jon's mingling with it as he pulled and stroked at his cock. Oh yes, that was sexy. She'd love to watch him jerking off, see how he did it, how he liked to be held, the rhythms he found most pleasurable.

He'd like it too. Her avid admiration would encourage him to faster and harder strokes. Maybe he'd talk to her, telling her how beautiful her pussy was and how he was going to fuck her later on, after this steamy little bit of foreplay. He wouldn't care that they could be discovered at any time, he'd be determined to finish what they'd begun here.

"Let me see your breasts," he'd whisper. "Expose them to me..." Her hand closed convulsively over her breast, feeling the hard, desperate nipple hot against her palm. Impatiently, she pushed down the neck of her suit and pulled her breast free, pinching the distended nipple between her fingers. Pleasure shot through her, linking up with the growing storm in her pussy.

Jon growled approval in her imagination. Gasping, she pushed a second finger inside her body and plunged them in and out of her, wildly caressing her clitoris at the same time. Oh yes, she was going to come and in his excitement Jon would drop to his knees, still pulling at his cock. He'd shove her fingers out of the way and fasten his lips to her lower ones. He'd suck her clitoris into his mouth and...

Rose fell over the edge into bliss. As the convulsions shook her, she held desperately on to the vision of Jon sucking her, caressing her as he came, splashing semen over his hand and the office floor.

Perhaps he'd grab her and throw her over the desk for a proper fuck...

But the image was fading with her orgasm. The harsh, artificial light of the office brought back her bare, silent surroundings. And she was totally alone.

Slowly, she took her hand from her knickers and fastened her suit with trembling fingers. Familiar post-orgasmic emptiness wound through her. She accepted it without surprise. What did shock her was her desire to put her fantasy lover in her bed, to imagine coming home to him tonight, and tomorrow night. Every night.

For some reason, she wanted to weep. "You don't even know him," she told herself angrily. "Don't make up some pathetic happy-ever-after fantasy about a naked stranger you just want to fuck you!"

The computer beeped, startling her so that she jumped and guiltily pulled the neck of her suit back into place.

It was a message from Jo, who'd spotted a couple of typos. "Fix them and publish," was her instruction. So Rose did, using the prosaic actions to pull herself together. By the time she stood and reached for her raincoat, she was laughing at herself for fixating on a stranger who deserved her pity more than her inappropriate lust.

And yet she knew it wasn't really pity he aroused in her. Curiosity, yes, and a desire to help that had something, but not everything, to do with compassion. She'd leave it at that. Or perhaps she wouldn't. If she had to live in this bloody place indefinitely, why shouldn't she see him again, maybe even go out with him if the attraction was still there, have a real relationship and worry about the consequences later?

Hmm...

Letting possibilities weave through her head, she took the elevator to the ground level. Her spirits had lifted immeasurably by the time she walked outside into the darkness.

A glance at her watch confirmed that she'd mistimed her departure. The road and air buses had all gone.

She began to walk, hoping to pick up a taxi on the way. She felt ready to drop with tiredness and she'd be bloody glad to get her contact lenses out.

Her footsteps echoed on the damp, empty streets. Rose liked the city at night. She enjoyed walking under the streetlamps, watching the flaring shadows dance on the dark walls, the flash of distant neon lights and vehicles passing close-by. It gave her a pleasurable feeling of isolation and yet connection. Perhaps because she could see the stars, even through the city's light pollution. As long as she could, she was still connected.

A huge shadow slunk around the corner of the next block, on the other side of the street. More from idle curiosity, Rose tried to find its source, peering up and down the street and scanning the buildings.

Her heart jolted. Shit, that looked like a bloody huge dog.

On the roof?

Oh-oh. Have I found my wolf?

Chapter Three

Intrigued, Rose crossed the street for a better view. The shadow didn't move, and it was definitely dog shaped. *Large* dog shaped. And its eyes, shining like lamps in the darkness, seemed to be looking directly at her.

Very conscious of her speeding pulse, Rose stared back. Without warning, the animal moved, disappearing from view.

Rose ran on, seeking a way through to the back of the buildings. Feeling for the tiny camera that never left her pocket, she dragged it out as she dived down the first narrow alley and climbed over a gate into a back courtyard. She landed lightly and gazed around her. Several sets of steps led upward from the yard to the upper flats. Craning her neck, she scanned them, one at a time, all the way up to the roof as she walked slowly around the yard.

A rush of blackness exploded from the steps, charging at her.

Rose pressed the capture button on her camera, and bolted. She didn't think she'd ever run so fast in this city as she did then, her legs pumping toward the enclosing wall. With every step she expected to feel the tearing of the animal's teeth. Over her own panting breath, she could hear it snarling as it ran, heard its soft, pattering footsteps bounding to her left. Fearfully, she gazed in that direction, but couldn't see it.

Hurling herself at the wall, she scrambled over it, dropped clumsily back into the alley and ran on to the right. She'd no idea what was at the other end, but it seemed safer than risking any movement at all in the wolf's direction.

Wolf? When had she started calling it a wolf? The shadow charging her had been too blurry with speed to have a proper shape. She just knew it was big and terrifyingly quick. And snarled.

In fact, she could still hear its breath, pursuing her, although she thought it was rather more distant. She couldn't help the surge of relief, even though she knew celebrating her escape just yet was premature.

Stupid job. She'd been hunting the bloody creature all day and now she'd finally found it she was running like hell. Sometimes, life didn't seem to have any meaning...

Focus, moron!

Swerving through an open gate, she ran back through an archway and into a different alley, hoping to throw the wolf off her scent, or at least to make it lose interest. Surely it would move on now?

Eventually, in what seemed to be a warehouse carpark, she felt safe enough to pause, and dragged her phone out of her pocket. The police had to capture this thing.

She'd only pressed two of the three necessary keys before she became aware of the panting. Slowly, she lifted her eyes from the phone screen and met those luminous eyes she'd seen already on the rooftop.

It's hunting me. I'm its prey.

It loped nearer to her, huge, on four legs almost as tall as she was on two. She swerved left and it followed. She tried right and it changed direction again.

Rose bolted, but there was nowhere to go. The wolf was driving her into the wall of the building, which was solid and windowless. She had no way out.

What a stupid way to die. Furious, she whirled round, rammed her back against the wall and began to swing her shoulder bag like a weapon.

The wolf ignored it. It stood right in front of her, coiled back on its powerful hind legs to spring. Even in the blacker darkness of this place, she could make out its curled lips, its white, slaverling teeth huge and sharp and terrifying. Its nose twitched. Its eyes narrowed. It was still sniffing.

Please let it have scented something more alluring than me, she prayed, with surely justifiable selfishness.

Her bag had stopped. Afraid of annoying the wolf when it appeared to have relaxed somewhat, Rose kept still, tried not to breathe, although she couldn't stop her knees, her whole body from trembling.

The wolf's mouth opened wide. Rose shut her eyes.

A strange, howling sound broke from the wolf. From her terror, Rose recognised it as agony. She snapped her eyes open, to find out who or what had attacked it.

It was loping away from her, with swift, powerful paces. She could make out the bunching and stretching of muscles as it ran. With trembling hands, she fumbled for the camera, pressed the capture button several times, but she shook so much she'd no idea if it was even pointed in the right direction.

"Shit," she said aloud, dropping her head back against the wall. "I so don't belong in this job."

She forced herself to straighten and dragged herself out of the carpark. This time, she moved directly toward the sounds of traffic.

* * *

He woke with a raging hunger that refused to wait. However, when he threw off the quilt, he was shocked by how dirty his naked body looked. Everything, from the soles of his feet to his arms, looked as if he'd bedded down in mud. Or in Art's doorway, same as last night.

How did you get so dirty from lying in bed?

"You don't," he said aloud. Ignoring the ferocious rumbling of his stomach, he went to the tiny bathroom and stepped under the shower. He'd dreamed of acquiring this dirt. Strange, vivid dreams of running across rooftops and leaping over walls and cars and pausing to rest in cool puddles.

And cornering Rose Winter up against a wall.

Of course he'd done that in real life yesterday too. If he could trust any of his memories. She hadn't seemed to mind then. In fact there had been a very promising passion in her response that had almost led him to throw her over the kitchen table and fuck her with wild abandon.

His cock jumped at the idea, and he held on to it to comfort his furious morning lust.

But he was wandering from the point. In his dream, he hadn't known it was Rose he was chasing. Hunting. Not until he cornered her and gazed into her terrified eyes.

He frowned, his idly stroking hand growing still on his cock. No, that wasn't right. He'd smelled her. Her distinct, sweet and oh so tempting smell. Surely that's what had led him to her, what he'd been following? And yet he was up close to her before he recognised the scent as hers. As someone who'd been kind and helped him. And who made his cock bone hard just by glancing off his thoughts.

He stroked faster.

She'd been ready to fight too. Bravely swinging her bag like a medieval weapon. And he'd run off. But he remembered an unsatisfied feeling. A sense of disappointment because he hadn't found anyone else to kill.

And yet there had been people. He'd passed men and women, ignoring them because... Because they smelled wrong. They weren't Rose.

Rose... Her image swam in front of his face once more. Not Rose in the dream, but the real Rose, in his arms, kissing him, her mouth urgent and sensual, her tongue tangling with his, as she slid onto his cock and began to ride him. She would have smooth, warm skin, as flawless as her face. Her breasts, which he'd felt crushed against his chest yesterday, were just the right size for his hands, pert and long nipped. She would love him to suck on them while he fucked her, loving her tight, strong pussy's caressing hold on his cock. He'd roll her under him and their loving would grow wilder, harder. He'd knead her buttocks, spank them, and she'd howl and bite him, bucking and writhing while he pounded her across the bed until she screamed out her fierce orgasm and he fell into the most violent pleasure of his life...

He gasped as warm seed splashed over his hand. Leaning back against the shower wall, he let the climax take him in its intense, pleasurable hold. Even then, he knew his fantasy was as close as he'd ever come to fucking Rose Winter.

Partly because there was something wrong with him. He'd no idea who he was. And he sleepwalked to the weirdest dreams. Perhaps she was right and he did need to see a doctor. But some instinct warned him against it, and he didn't know why.

He didn't know anything. He'd spent most of yesterday raking through the flat for clues as to his identity. He'd found some money, but no credit cards, nothing with his name on it. Not even a bill. He was pretty sure that was strange too.

Switching off the shower, he got out and wrapped a towel around his waist. Well, today he was going out to make his enquiries. Right after breakfast. His mouth began to water.

As he crossed the hall toward the kitchen, he heard a knock on the front door.

For an instant, shock held him frozen. He felt so isolated in his lack of self-knowledge that the idea of someone knocking on his door was totally alien. His heart began to beat faster. It could be someone who knew him.

He strode across the hall and opened the door.

Rose Winter stood there, a bag of groceries in her hands. Her cheeks were rosy, as if she'd been running. Or she was embarrassed being here. Or she knew who he'd been fantasizing about as he'd jerked off in the shower.

She looked incredibly bright and pretty, her amber hair tied loosely behind her head. Today she wore a full, colorful patchwork skirt and a sexy yellow top that managed to look loose and comfortable while still showing off the shape of her full, oh-so-tempting breasts.

With an effort, he dragged his lascivious gaze back to her flushed face.

"I brought you some provisions," she said, a trifle lamely.

He frowned. "Why?"

She floundered. "I don't know. I thought you might need them."

Rose Winter, Rose Winter, step into my lair... He stepped aside and bowed her in with an ironic flourish.

"Brr, you do like it cold in here," she observed, laying the groceries on the table.

The window was open again. He hadn't opened it last night, had he? Only in his dream. Shit, when he was sleepwalking, did he come and go by the window?

Reaching up to close it, he glanced outside. It was a difficult jump to the outhouse roof below, but not impossible. There were smudges on the outside sill too. At least they didn't look like footprints.

As if savoring the treat, he turned his gaze back to Rose. Only when her eyes slid away did he remember that he was only wearing the towel. He laughed. "Damn, you'll never know me with my clothes on at this rate."

"I'm very early to be visiting," she mumbled. "Got a lot to do today."

He moved toward the kettle. "Find your wolf?"

"Yes, actually."

"Dog?"

"Buggered if I know. It was big, though. Massive."

He glanced at her, frowning. "Really?"

"Really. Look." She delved into her jacket pocket and brought out a tiny camera. With the touch of a button, a little screen unfolded itself and she scrolled down a list until she found what she was looking for. She passed the camera over.

It was big. A dark, blurry shape with ears and teeth. It could have been anything.

Rose pressed something else and it began to show other pictures, mostly of the same shape running away. He stopped paying attention after he recognised the wall.

A random shot of a commonplace wall, probably taken by accident as she'd gone toward it. No big deal. The trouble was, he recognised it, from his dream of cornering Rose against it.

"Shit, this is weird..." He shoved the camera back at her. "Rose, where can I get access to a computer?"

She blinked. "The library down the street."

Why didn't he know that? Actually, now she said it, he did know he should go to a library, but something told him he wasn't used to doing that.

Something beeped in her pocket and she took out a phone, glancing at the screen.

"I've got to go," she said, casting him a quick look that might have held disappointment.

He said, "Let me pay you for the stuff."

"Next time," she said, making for the door.

Next time. She wanted there to be a next time. *Rose Winter, come to bed with me now. Let me push my cock into you and fuck all this shit away...*

Blood pounded in his head through his entire body. He wanted to grab her as he had yesterday, persuade her to stay and do all those and many more things. Only his sudden knowledge that she deserved better than being his instant of forgetfulness kept him from acting on it. Besides, his towel was tented around his raging hard-on. Guaranteed to frighten anyone off. It was best he let her go. Just to make sure there was a next time.

As her footsteps receded across the hall, he sank down into the old kitchen chair and thought about a little more self-abuse. Fortunately, he didn't do that either, for she suddenly stormed back into the kitchen, grabbed his face between her hands and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"Christ, you're a hard man to hint to!"

In spite of everything he'd just been thinking, he began to smile. "Trust me, I am a very hard man," he assured her, and because her mouth was still close enough, he took it back.

God, she was sweet. He didn't care that he couldn't trust her.

Where did that come from anyway? She was the only damned person who'd done anything for him and she melted into his mouth like butter, like rich, delicious chocolate. He wanted to taste all of her, her breasts, her pussy...

He could smell her arousal, felt triumph soar. He moved his arms, meaning to hold her, but one hand had been in his lap, and the first place it touched was the hot dampness between her legs. She gasped into his mouth, but didn't stop kissing, and so he left it there, under her bunched-up skirt, felt the sweet moisture warm and wet his hand while he fucked her mouth with his tongue. When he began to move his fingers,

she gave a sound like a sob. He felt the pulsing of her pussy, the hard nub of her clitoris through her panties.

It was unbelievably sexy doing this to her with his hand while only kissing her. She seemed to feel the same way. Excitement trembled through her body and he realised she was already close to the edge. He teased her, shifting his finger away to spread the fabric of her panties over her wet entrance then push inside just a little. Her hips began to move, writhing against his finger, his knuckles.

He sucked her tongue into his mouth, and bit it softly while he slid his fingers back to her throbbing clitoris. He tapped it, drummed his fingers the length of her slit and felt her fall over the edge with a cry of bliss. He gripped her pussy hard as she came, as if absorbing all her pleasure while he gave her even more.

She shuddered and writhed in his hand, her mouth open in helpless ecstasy. He kept kissing her until the spasms stopped, then slowly withdrew his hand and his mouth at the same time.

Her eyes opened, cloudy and soft with satisfaction. Yet an instant later, a flash of something, shame perhaps, or uncertainty, broke into them. She was staring at him, as if searching for signs of mockery or contempt. Her vulnerability mixed with such uninhibited passion touched him.

He murmured, "I'm good at goodbye kisses."

Her eyes lightened, just as he'd intended. "How are you at hello?"

He smiled. "Try me next time."

Her lips curved. "Perhaps I will," she said, and straightened.

"Rose?"

She turned back at once.

He said, "I've no idea who or what I am or anything that I've done. You tempt me beyond sense, but I've no desire to hurt you."

She frowned, uncomprehending. Of course, she didn't know about the dream. Whose photographic proof was in her pocket. "Then don't," she said lightly, and

walked across the hall to the bathroom. Her hips rolled, as though pleasurable tingles still rocked her pussy.

He gazed ruefully down at his raging cock and addressed it sternly. "What the hell am I going to do with you?"

* * *

By the time Rose arrived at the hospital lab in response to Carrie's phone summons, she was still in a curious state of alternate excitement and numbness. How could she have let what was meant to have been a provocative kiss to get him to ask to see her again turn into a grope that brought her to climax? Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. Not here or anywhere else. There was just something about "Jon." His touch, his conflicting strength and vulnerability, the way he almost smiled, almost laughed. And his almost total lack of physical inhibition.

She'd made a decision in his hall, just before she'd marched back in to the kitchen to kiss him, that had changed everything. She'd started something and she wanted it go on. To hell with guidelines. She'd been here for five years with little more than a couple of one-night stands to relieve normal sexual tensions. None of them had made her feel like this.

It was frightening. It was probably wrong. But she'd never felt so wonderful in her life.

About to swing through the lab doors, she almost collided with Carrie herself coming out. "Ah," Carrie said, immediately turning and going back in. "Just in time. We've got the lab to ourselves right now, but we'll have to be quick."

"What's the matter?" Rose asked, amused. "The boss hasn't found out about the little favors you do for me, has he?"

"No, and he'd bloody better not find out about this one," Carrie said with a shade of grimness. "This is totally weird, Rose. Look." She touched the screen a couple of times and the familiar graph of DNA strands came up.

"Err -- what am I looking at?"

"The DNA from that blood sample you found."

"And?"

"And it's not human."

"Dog? I thought it would be."

"Not a dog. Nor a wolf, nor a sodding cow. Nothing on Earth." Rose frowned, glancing at her for elaboration. "Nothing on Earth," Carrie repeated with emphasis. "Rose, it's alien DNA. It has to be."

The shock of it drained the blood from her head so fast she felt dizzy and had to make a grab for the desk to steady herself. Her heart pounded with huge, loud beats that felt as if they were coming right through her chest.

"Alien?" she said, recovering, although her voice sounded too high, too unnatural to her critical ears. "That's a bit of a leap, isn't it? Couldn't it just be something new that you haven't come across before?"

"Ah but I have," Carrie said flatly. "Three years ago, a sudden death was brought to me for autopsy. He had DNA like that. And I never did discover what killed him," she added with what was clearly old irritation. "They removed the body long before I could get to grips with it."

Rose swallowed and sank down onto the nearest stool before her legs gave way. "Who did?" she managed. "Who removed the body?"

Carrie shrugged impatiently. "Government types with every authority you can think of from God Almighty down. And guess what? All traces of the work I had done were removed from my computer by next morning. So were the back-ups. There was no sign anywhere that the guy had even died. Or lived, for that matter. I checked that too, until word came down I had to stop making a fuss or lose my job. Or worse."

Rose stared at her. "Worse? How much worse?"

"I didn't ask. I'm nosy and I'm thorough. I don't like people to die for nothing. But more than that I don't want to disappear into some hospital and appear several months later with a fixed smile and half my memories missing. I shut up, and you have to, too. Drop the wolf story, Rose."

Rose nodded, dumbly. Her heart was chilled by her friend's words. Of course there were rumors of such disappearances and personality changes as Carrie feared, but she'd never met anyone so treated...

Jon! What about Jon?

Jon. The government took Jon's memory? Why? What had he done? "Thanks, Carrie," she mumbled, knowing only she had to get out of here to think. Probably away from Carrie for good if things were stirring...

"Don't tell anyone," Carrie warned, hitting the delete button on her computer. "None of this must come back to either of us."

"Got it," said Rose, turning away.

"And Rose, one last thing..."

Rose glanced back at her. Carrie said, "The wolf is not the alien."

"I know," Rose whispered.

The wolf had injured or killed an alien. Carrie knew it because she'd had an alien on her autopsy table three years ago, and he'd looked exactly like a human. And Rose just knew it.

Chapter Four

Having consumed the three steaks that were left in his fridge, along with most of the loaf and the milk that Rose had brought round, Jon spent all day on the library computer.

He didn't mean to, and the library staff clearly thought it was time he went and did something else. Since just about everyone had computer access at home, or on mobile devices, library computers were meant to be for short, sharp flurries, for the occasions you couldn't get home easily and your mobile battery had run out of charge.

Which raised another matter. He clearly knew how to use computers, so why didn't he have one in the flat? Admittedly, it was a dodgy area, but he appeared to have money, and as the day wore on, he realised he was an educated man. Didn't mean he couldn't sleepwalk and think a lot -- an awful lot -- about sex, rough wild sex. It was a side of him he rather thought wouldn't appeal to Rose.

Although she'd liked his directness. She'd liked it a lot. He'd made her orgasm, easily, and it had been good for her. That much was obvious. Next time, though, she'd be naked. He'd have her from behind, ramming her...

Shit, he really had to focus. Especially if there was ever to be a next time. He spent a long time trying and failing to track down the ownership or tenancy of his flat. Then, giving up, he moved onto missing person sites, reading police reports, hospital lists, news articles, tracking various reports of them from place to place.

None of the pictures were of him.

He did find an unnaturally high rate of military disappearances, which was odd when there hadn't been a conflict in the world for a century. These weren't listed on police reports. They were on private sites, some of which complained their previous ones had been taken down.

Someone was trying and failing to cover. The other too frequent report he saw was of people who weren't sick, according to their families, going into hospital and returning several months later "changed." Again, these were on odd private sites and in lesser-read newscreens, some of which weren't even indexed. Deliberately, he suspected. He came across them by accident -- some of them as he took a break from his research to hunt down Rose Winter's work in the iGazette.

Her stories were largely of the human interest variety. Very little politics or controversy. But she wrote with an incisive, yet compassionate style, and she was clearly very perceptive. And she was well travelled. One article described pioneer life on the Earth Colonies, and her feeling for space and other worlds was extraordinary.

She was deep, a little mysterious and entirely intriguing. And he liked her even better for it.

With odd reluctance, he returned to himself. Since it had already crossed his mind that he was one of those hospital "victims" he'd read about -- it would certainly explain his unreasonable fear of going near doctors -- he began to pursue all the hospitals which had been named, finding photographs and staff biographies, although patient information was understandably absent from public access.

On the other hand, there were ways around that... a few by-pass tricks and a password conjured up from nowhere, and he found himself staring at the private records of the Government Military Health and Science Board.

That was more interesting. He was definitely on to something... There were several establishments scattered across the world and even on a couple of colonies, where various top-secret projects took place. Weapons research, disease eradication, lifespan expansion. In another hasty by-pass he managed to get to the staff lists, scrolling down until a name leapt out at him.

He hadn't written it down. He hadn't written anything down but he remembered everything. And this name, Linnet Lewis, was one of the missing military personnel. And she was assigned to a project called...

With a crackle of static, his screen went dead.

Jon swore under his breath and hit the power button. As it hummed back into life, he found it hard not to drum his heels and his fingers in impatience. Why would Linnet Lewis's family not know that she was still working for the military? That staff list was up-to-date, and there was no record of her departure, transfer or death. Why did Linnet herself not inform her family? Because she wasn't allowed to? Because she couldn't? Because her memory had been wiped?

And if he was in the same boat as Linnet Lewis -- he had the fast reactions of a soldier, after all, and a willingness to fight his way out of a jam -- why was he here rather than there? Had he been chucked out? Had he escaped?

Hastily, his fingers flew over the keyboard, calling up the sites he'd been through to get to the last one. Except this time, his by-pass failed. Access denied. They were on to him. The knowledge, whether it came from his past or from some other instinct, was undeniable.

Standing, he pressed the power button once more until the screen went blank and silent. Then he walked hastily out of the library.

At the street door, someone seized his arm. "Ah, there you are. Come with me, please." A large, burly man in an incongruously smart suit. Another appeared on his left side, grabbing that arm.

"Not bloody likely," said Jon between his teeth and pulled back at the same time as he swung his arms. The men catapulted forward and into each other, enabling Jon to dart free. Another man walking toward him through the crowd swerved to intercept him, but Jon was quicker. He heard the footsteps of the two original men pounding after him and whirled to fight, fists connecting with a ferocious efficiency he hadn't known he possessed.

Another lighter touch on his shoulder spun him around to deal some more. Only the fact that it was a woman, young and timid-looking, caused him to drop his arm. Before he could run, she hissed conspiratorially, "This way!"

He paused for a tiny instant to stare into her frightened eyes. Which is when she stuck the needle in his neck.

He reached for it, trying to run, even to walk, but the world was fading before his eyes. His legs were too wobbly, too numb to move, and he fell into blackness.

* * *

Through the crowd in the main street, Rose watched him fall, saw the three men and the woman close in on him, dragging him upright and carrying him to a smart little craft parked opposite the library. Pushing after them, Rose heard the woman shout, "Make way!" to passers-by. "Medical emergency!"

Rose ran after them, peering over and between the crowd to see as they bundled Jon inside and leapt in after him. She didn't pause to think. She found the requisite button on her camera, pressed it and heard the door of the nearest craft unlock. Rose climbed in, and although it was five years since she'd piloted any aircraft, the controls were so simple that she was up in the air only seconds after Jon.

This wasn't part of her plan. She'd meant to find him, tell him her theory that he was a government "hospital victim" for some perceived misdemeanour, and say goodbye. For she recognised now, as she should always have done, that any relationship between them was doomed. She should have known better. But still, she owed him, and she wanted him to thrive somehow, to find a way through his difficulties to whatever happiness awaited him.

But when he wasn't at home, she'd remembered about him coming to the library, and on the way had witnessed his fight and his kidnap. Just what had he been looking at in the library to tip these guys off?

Rose kept her distance, swerving up and down, between the city craft, but always keeping her quarry in mind. Of course, it would be harder if they left the city and the skies were clearer, but there was an optimum height and distance whereby you could avoid detection by the naked eye and by surveillance equipment. Especially, if you had one of *these*.

Rose took her mobile phone from her pocket, with one hand, slid back the side with her teeth, and as the prong slid out, she attached it to the flight control. Now she wouldn't register on anyone's radar.

Only then did reaction take over. She had time to realise that her heart beat like a rabbit's, that her mouth was dry and her hands had an inclination to shake if she relaxed them. "What the hell am I doing?" she asked aloud, and answered herself almost immediately. "I'm risking everything, *everything*, to follow a man I barely know into the lion's den..."

* * *

Jon woke to voices, quiet but clear and close. Opening one eye, he saw he wore only a loose hospital gown, and lay on something like an operating table, wires from his chest, his head, his forearms. Steel bands circled his wrists and ankles. And, only feet away from him, two people, a man and a woman in white lab coats, were staring at a computer screen while they talked.

Something on the screen made them both turn. Jon hastily closed his eye and lay perfectly still. They were monitoring him, to know when he woke up, so deliberately he forced his breathing, his heart-rate to a slower pace. Where had he learned to do that? God knew what they'd make of his brain.

The doctors, or whatever they were, glanced back at the computer screen and, apparently satisfied, returned to their discussion.

"They found him hacking into government sites from a public computer," the woman said. "Which implies he remembers something from his past. But I can't see what's causing the glitch. He shouldn't remember anything."

"Well, of course he remembers something," the man retorted. "He needs to be able to speak and eat and function in society. It's almost impossible to isolate such knowledge from every other memory. Glitches were bound to occur. He's just the first of them."

"A pity 'brain wipes' aren't really possible," the woman mourned.

"Not sure a dribbling vegetable would be much use to us," said the man dryly. "Now look at this. This is much more interesting. I've been analysing the log from his chip, and it shows that he made contact with a target last night. But there was no attack."

"Why not? Could the target have escaped?"

"Obviously. But how and why?" There was a short silence, then: "You know, I can't rid myself of the notion that our man is thinking for himself. I believe that for some reason, he chose to let the target escape."

Target? Did they mean Rose? Had he somehow been set on to her in his sleepwalk? Why, for God's sake? *Calm... breathe slowly...*

"Perhaps he wasn't hungry," said the woman and the man let out a short, sharp bark of laughter. "After all, he functioned perfectly adequately the night before."

"Go over all his treatments," said the man abruptly. "Make sure there's absolutely no deviation from the plan. I'm just going to check the logs of the others, to make sure there haven't been similar instances."

"I looked already. There aren't. This one appears to be unique. And he's only been out two nights."

"It shouldn't be happening," the male doctor said in clear annoyance. "His profile was acceptable for the programme, I'm pretty sure his treatment was the same, so why is he behaving differently?"

"Talking about behaving differently," said the woman with a sudden tinge of anxiety in her voice. "It's almost sunset time. Shouldn't we get him downstairs?"

"Definitely. The drug won't keep him under when he changes. Get the orderlies."

Jon braced himself. If he could just get away with "playing dead" for the next few minutes, he might be able to surprise and overpower whoever was going to free him from those restraints...

But when the orderlies came, only moments later, they simply picked up the table top, which doubled as a stretcher, and carried him out of the lab. Though at least they took the wires off him and he felt safe to open his eyes as they carried him along, bare clinical corridors through a thick, metal door, and down some steps.

At the bottom, the smell of disinfectant was less prevalent. Instead, he could smell animals. If he'd had hackles, they would have risen. Turning his head, Jon saw a

row of large cages, made of strong metal mesh on three sides and the room's brick wall on the fourth. There were windows in the walls, barred on the outside, through which the last of the evening sunshine was petering in.

Then he saw a man inside one of them, dressed only in a hospital gown, with a short, military haircut. Large, powerful chains around each ankle. Worse, the man was crouched on the ground with his wrists tied together, gazing bleakly, desperately at Jon as he passed.

In the next cage was a young, blank-faced woman, similarly bound.

This is inhuman...

He knew where he was going now. They carried his stretcher right inside one of the cages and laid it on the bare floor. One of the orderlies dragged out a chain and fastened it to his ankle before removing the restraint already there. Damn, he'd have no instant of freedom in which to act.

"Careful, George," one of them warned. "He's awake. And it's almost sundown."

Part of him wanted to struggle anyway, to throw himself around in fury and helpless outrage. But something deeper kept him still, saving his energy and his fitness for a time when it could benefit him. Here, there was simply nothing he could do.

They bound his wrists before they unfastened the last of the stretcher's restraints, and then simply emptied him off.

Prepared, Jon leapt up, hurling himself after them, but as if they'd expected his attack, they'd already bolted, and in any case, the chains brought him to a juddering, painful halt well before he got to the cage door, which was slammed shut and locked in his face.

"Down, boy," one of the orderlies mocked, with a wink. "Be good." And they swaggered off, their footsteps echoing around the large, dreary basement as they climbed the stairs and closed the heavy door at the top with an ominous clank.

When its last echo had faded, Jon shouted to the other inmates. "Hey! What's going on here? What are they doing with us?"

He got no response, not even the rattle of a chain. "Don't you care?" he raged, before he realised that they really didn't. Whether drugged, or in the middle of whatever "treatment" the doctors upstairs had talked about, he'd glimpsed no understanding in their abject, miserable faces.

Then it was up to him alone to get them all out. And he was chained and bound so he couldn't even reach the cage door. The cage itself was riveted to the floor and the wall and the steel-reinforced ceiling, and its mesh was made of one of those strong new metal alloys. The window in the wall was well out of reach, and in any case it was barred from the outside.

But there would be chances. There were bound to be chances, he thought, just as the first pain struck him like a knife, doubling him over. From the other cages, he heard a high-pitched cry and a low moan of pain.

Synchronised cramps? This was weird.

His spine was in agony. His head was on fire. It felt as if every limb, every internal organ was being ripped asunder. Gasping with the force of the pain, he stared at his forearm as hair formed there before his eyes. Thick, black hair, like fur.

This is it, this is the change they talked about, he realised just before his body contorted in violent spasms and the screams of the others filled his ears. They might have been his own screams. He no longer knew, or cared. They said he'd been "out" for two nights. He couldn't remember the nights, except for last night's dream, and this change had something to do with it. He had to remember everything. When he changed, he had to remember this, and if and when he came back he had to remember the rest too...

And then he realised it was impossible, that nothing mattered except the pain.

Chapter Five

Rose had left her craft in the wood, some distance from the perimeter. Having circled the installation from the air, she knew this was the closest to the main building as she could come while avoiding gates.

Hoping the craft would not be noticed on any surveillance, she unplugged her shield device from it and took it with her. She'd need it to cut the fence wires, to see in the dark, and to jam the surveillance equipment.

The little laser did its job quickly and with minimum fuss, cutting her a hole just big enough for her to slip through, and easy enough to disguise away from a direct inspection by drawing the ends of the fence back together. Then, flattening herself to the ground, she listened.

There were sounds from the woods, insects and night creatures, but the howling of dogs, that came from within the building. Guard dogs, she imagined. She would just have to hope their antipathy for her would prevent them trying to hunt her down.

Rose got to her feet and ran lightly toward the building. She'd thought she'd changed. That she really had become the iGazette journalist with very little recollection or interest in her old life. Her new life had taken over as she'd made new friends among her colleagues, and Carrie, of course, whom she would miss appallingly. But now the action had begun, all her training came back to her with the clarity of yesterday. Fear was pushed aside, only the objectives of the mission mattered. And right now, her mission was to free Jon. Wherever he was.

At least the howling dogs weren't loose. Although when she approached the basement windows and pressed herself in against the wall until the searchlight had passed, she began to feel they were a little bit close for comfort.

When the light moved on, she turned and knelt, pressing her face to the grating and shining her torch inside. A giant wolf lay facing her, its nose on its bound, dejected paws. A large, solid chain ran around its hind legs, fastening them to a pole in the centre of the floor. Rose stared. Slowly, her hand crept to her throat as if trying to ease some imaginary constriction. This must be her wolf...

Well, she wasn't going in that window. Through the next, she couldn't make out anything except an empty cage and what seemed like an empty basement beyond. Then she came upon another equally large wolf, sitting on its chained hind legs, staring up at her with luminous eyes, and she began to feel really uneasy.

Shit, Jon, where are you? She decided to check all the cages before going back to the open, empty one to try and break in through the window. And just beyond a second empty one, she saw a third wolf.

It too was staring at her. But it stood, its ears upright and alert, and her stomach clenched with sudden, certain recognition. This *was* the wolf who'd hunted her last night, who'd stared at her with just that expression of confusion in its lamp-like eyes.

I'm being fanciful. Don't wolves all look alike?

The animal took a clumsy jump forward, closer to the window, dragging its chains along the ground. It leaned back onto its hind legs and pushed forward till its forelegs touched the back wall of its cage. Instinctively, Rose backed away. But the wolf wasn't snarling. It was just looking, gazing upward into her face, its nose twitching, trying to get her scent.

Slowly, Rose came back, and looked rather fearfully into the creature's eyes.

They looked like Jon's.

Oh no. That can't be right...

And yet for some reason she believed in the wolf as an ally. Which was quite a leap from the wolf who'd been distracted at the last moment from killing her last night.

According to the shield, there were no surveillance cameras close by, nothing to jam. These people were very sure of themselves. Of course they were. People were afraid to question, were afraid of disappearing. Fear was the greatest shield of all.

Using the laser, Rose cut through the outside grid and broke the window lock. The wolf backed away from her, whether afraid or just to let her jump down into its cage, she wasn't sure. Either way, it felt completely crazy, risking herself like this.

She squeezed herself through the open window and paused, wrestling with fresh doubts. But the wolf stood by, calmly watching her with no hint of the snarling aggression it'd shown last night.

Oh well, she'd come this far. With resignation, Rose dropped down beside the wolf. It stood perfectly still, gazing at her, its nose twitching. She didn't feel any safer. Warily, she glanced at its chains and saw blood at its ankle. Ignoring her probably dangerous upsurge of pity, she crouched down and reached slowly to free its front legs.

What the hell am I doing?

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She could feel its breath on her nape, but it didn't touch her. So she turned to the chains. If she judged it right, the laser could unlock them without harming the wolf.

It stood perfectly still while she dealt with each of them. Only when it stood free did it move, turning its huge head toward her. Rose couldn't breathe. It took a hesitant step toward her and bent its head.

Oh shit. I'm dead.

The fur was surprisingly soft as it brushed against her chin. Its head was warm and heavy on her shoulder.

For several pounding heartbeats, Rose didn't dare to move. Then, slowly, she reached up her hand to the creature's head. *It is Jon...*

The impossible thought was abruptly interrupted. The dim lights of the basement suddenly went up to full, just as a door clanged noisily open and human voices could be heard above. The wolf's head jerked up. Rose sprang to her feet.

"I just want to see how he behaves in wolf form," a man said argumentatively as feet fell on the stairs leading into their basement. "In particular how he reacts to a smell of the alien's clothes. These belong to the one he killed two nights ago..."

"Oh shit," whispered Rose in anguish. "Oh shit, shit, shit."

But in fact, her galloping understanding changed nothing. If they stayed here any longer they were both dead or worse. They only had this one chance of freedom. And it seemed the wolf was waiting for her.

Taking hold of the narrow sill above her head, she hauled herself up to the window and scrambled outside. The wolf landed almost on top of her, and then they were running like mad through the darkness.

The wolf seemed content to follow her lead, bounding beside her, rather than ahead. Behind her, she heard the exclamation of amazement, shrieks of warning. A few moments later, an alarm blared. Rose kept running. One thump of the fence revealed her hole and then they were through it.

The wolf ducked its head down, nudging her so that she almost fell over. Then it lowered its back, and Rose understood. The night couldn't get any weirder. Perhaps she'd dreamed the whole thing. Perhaps she'd wake up in her own bed as if the past five years had never been.

So she climbed onto the wolf's back, tangling its hair around her fingers to hold on, and it began to run, building up to a fantastic speed. The strength of the creature under her was terrifying. She could do nothing but hang on as it ate up the ground, and whisper into its furry ears instructions which against all the odds it seemed to understand, for in an impossibly short time they'd reached the forest clearing where she'd left her stolen craft.

She had the door open by remote before the wolf came to a halt and she slid from its back. She dove inside and the wolf leapt after her, rocking the tiny craft.

Rose slammed the shield into the flight controls and took off.

Below them, as she flew over the installation, she could see soldiers running in all directions. None of them could see her.

* * *

The hotel was clean, but only just. Its main attractions for Rose were its location in the busy heart of the city, size, and changeable clientele, all of which made her feel suitably anonymous.

She registered under a false name, using one of the alternative ID cards she kept for emergencies as well as undercover journalism. For although she was pretty sure no surveillance cameras at the installation had picked her up, she might just have been witnessed stealing the craft. "A quiet room at the back would suit me best," she said casually.

"Three-eighty," said the night clerk without interest, handing her the pass-card.

"Thank you."

It turned out the sullen clerk had paid attention to her wishes, because the room did look onto the back courtyard between buildings. Praying she wouldn't need to get someone up to pry open the window, she went across and tugged.

It opened wide immediately. Rose went and sat on the not too uncomfortable bed, her heart beating hard and painfully, worse than at any point throughout her rescue of the wolf and their escape. Would the wolf find the room? Would it come? Or would it go hunting?

Come to that, would it come hunting her?

Unlikely, since she would have made an easier meal in the woods or the craft, or as they'd walked through the dark city streets after abandoning the craft...

And most importantly, was she right? Or was she guilty of a stupid, unforgivable mistake that left Jon languishing in the installation while a giant wolf marauded around the city killing people?

Something rattled. Her gaze jerked up to the window, and the wolf stood there, its mouth open and panting.

Rose swallowed. "Come in," she invited, and it did, loping down from the sill onto the floor. It seemed to fill the room, massive, wild, unpredictable. And yet, still in a daze of unreality, she found herself patting the bed beside her. It jumped up without a second invitation, not to savage her, but to flop down on its stomach and lay its huge head on its paws. Its eyes were closing.

Rose knew how it felt. She was exhausted, physically, mentally, and just about any other way it was possible to be. Pulling back one side of the quilt, she slithered underneath with all her clothes on and lay down beside the wolf.

Under the covers, she took off her clothes and threw them on the floor, laughing at herself for such modesty before an animal. The wolf never stirred. She thought, despite her debilitating tiredness, that she'd never be able to sleep with him, with *it*, so close. But reality was different. As she drifted into unconsciousness, it struck her that in fact she had never been so safe in her life.

Chapter Six

She woke with a start, staring at the shapeless daylight shadows dancing on the plain wall only feet from her face. She remembered everything in an instant. Lying very still, she listened for the sounds of other breathing. She thought she heard it, very faintly, but it didn't matter. She could sense another presence.

Very slowly, she turned over and looked at the sleeping figure beside her on the bed. Where the wolf had fallen asleep lay Jon, naked and uncovered on top of the quilt.

So it was true. She hadn't really doubted it, not since she'd looked into the wolf's eyes last night and overheard the words of the doctor, or whatever he was.

What have they done to you?

Naked, he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. She'd acknowledged it on their first encounter, from the mere glimpse that had made her afraid to look any more. Broad shoulders, tapered waist, narrow hips, long, muscular legs. He was built like an athlete, his skin a deep golden brown that spoke of years spent out of doors or in warm climates. A scattering of soot-black hair dusted his powerful chest and forearms. He lay on his back with one arm flung out off the bed. The other bent upward with his hand under his head. But although he looked totally relaxed and his breathing was peaceful and even, a strong frown marred his brow, even in sleep.

Rose wanted to reach out and smooth it away. The urge to run her hands up and down the length of his body, just to know what he felt like, was so powerful that she had to clench her fists. Instead, as a reward for her restraint, she let her gaze travel the same route.

This time she didn't skim over the arousing sight of his dark, fully erect cock, jutting upwards over his paler stomach. What would it feel like in her hand? It looked too thick to close her fist around, but she'd enjoy trying.

She swallowed, wondering how it would taste, how it would react to the caresses of her tongue and the nips of her teeth. Fuck, she wanted to climb on him now and ease him inside her. He would fill her. And she just knew he'd be a good lover, satisfying her as no one ever had...

But she couldn't go there. They had to talk, work out what to do, and then go their separate ways. Maybe in time, when things were different... if he didn't hate her. If she didn't come to her senses and realise a relationship with a half-wolf was impossible.

Determinedly, she took hold of the quilt and threw it back, just as Jon turned over, throwing his arm out over the bed. It landed across her body, making her gasp with alarm. Jon, however, grunted with obvious approval, moving his hand on the tingling skin of her waist, and moving higher until he found her breast.

She could and should have thrown him off at that stage, but his touch was incredibly sweet, his questing fingers tender as they caressed around the soft underside of her breast and then over her long, hard nipple.

Rose glanced at him apprehensively, but his eyes were still closed. He'd never know the pleasure he was bringing her just by touching, pinching. She'd have this tiny moment to cherish in the years of loneliness and strife to come. But he had wicked fingers. Their every motion, circling, flicking, stroking, was electric, seeming to tug an invisible cord attached to her pussy which clenched and opened, increasingly desperate to receive him. Her whole body had begun to burn and tingle.

"Mmmm," he murmured, hauling himself across the bed at the same time as his arm tightened, drawing her into him. His thigh, warm and heavy, swept over hers and he dragged her under him with a grunt of satisfaction.

Stunned, Rose didn't move. Neither did Jon. As if he'd found a more comfortable sleeping position, he seemed quite content to lie there on top of her, his face half-buried in the pillow, his bone-hard cock across her thigh, his chest crushing her breasts. And truthfully, her body was more than content too, silencing her mind, which contemplated waking him up.

Her pussy pulsed under his weight, longing. And then, very gradually, he began to rub his body against hers, manoeuvring until his cock slipped between her thighs and the blunt head nestled among the wet folds of her desperate pussy.

Oh shit, he's asleep! I can't bear this! He doesn't know what he's doing. I can't let him...

His questing cock found her slick entrance and pushed in. Showers of sensation scattered through her. Her pussy caught him and squeezed without her brain's permission. She loved being stretched by his cock. It felt so good, even with just the head of it inside her, that she thought she would come just lying there and throbbing with him.

Jon groaned and lifted his head from the pillow, changing position to get a better purchase, leaning on his elbows. Eyes still closed, he found her mouth without difficulty, covering it in a huge, ravenous kiss that spoke volumes for his body's hunger. At the same time, he pushed fully into her and she almost exploded. His hands were all over her, running up and down her sides, catching and stroking at her breasts, reaching round her hips to her buttocks.

Growling into her mouth, he began to fuck her seriously, full, hard strokes that reached impossibly far inside her, crashing over the spot of fire and ice that sparked cascades of pleasure through every nerve in her body. She grabbed hold of his shoulders, his warm back, feeling the muscles undulating under her hands, gasping with amazement, with need. She caught his rhythm, pushing back, because she could do nothing else -- until he opened his eyes.

They looked black with lust, opaque, curiously hard in the middle but fuzzy and clouded round the edges.

Still blind. He didn't know it was her. The knowledge was pain and relief rolled into one. She closed her eyes. Still fucking, he recaptured her mouth, thrusting with his tongue, and then just as she felt the inevitable tide of orgasm begin to rise and roll, he went completely still.

She opened her eyes in alarm, and found him staring into them. The hardness had gone, but behind the desperate lust was shock, and something that looked terribly like shame.

"Rose," he said in anguish. "Rose Winter. What am I doing?"

Panic that he would withdraw lent her strength. "Fucking me." She tightened her arms around him, slid one hand down to his buttocks to encourage him. "And if you stop now, I'll die."

"You want this?" He seemed so stunned, which made her want to laugh.

"You think you'd have got this far if I didn't?" Abruptly, the laughter died, and the question she both needed and feared to know came out as no more than a trembling whisper. "Do you?"

He stared at her, comprehension dawning in his passionate face. His cock jerked inside her, making her gasp, then lay still. "Do I want to fuck you, Rose, as opposed to any random female I happen to find in my bed? Oh fucking hell, yes."

He arched his back, withdrawing almost totally while he latched his mouth to her breast in a hard, sucking kiss that drove her wild. She dug her nails into the skin of his back, his ass, and he drove into her hard and furiously.

She met his every forceful move, moaning and crying out her pleasure as he pounded her with such power that he had to hold her body steady. His mouth was fierce on her breasts, his teeth grazing and biting. Only when she began to come did he seize her lips instead, thrusting into her frenetically.

Her whole body exploded, shattering in a thousand convulsing pieces, utterly helpless under his continued hammering which drove the intensity to heights she'd never experienced or imagined. His back arched under her scrabbling hands. A deep, powerful groan soared up in his throat and erupted, rising into something approaching a howl. Hot seed spurted up inside her as his thrusts became erratic, yet still reaching fully inside her.

Her world spinning in black, devastating pleasure, she let herself be driven on by his cries, his groans until some element of pain brought her back to earth. His whole

body still shuddered in the grip of a massive climax, and yet he jerked with shock as well as ecstasy. His eyes were open and staring.

"Jon?" she whispered in sudden anxiety. "Jon!"

To her amazement, he began to thrust again, faster, while he stared beyond her. Every few thrusts he paused and ground his cock into her, circling inside her. It shouldn't have been possible after so huge an orgasm, but the sparks were catching again. And it seemed true for him too. Gazing up at him, she squeezed his cock, caressed it between her powerful muscles, writhed to egg him on. His eyes glazed, he fucked her to the brink again before his face cleared and he whispered her name and drove her over the edge with slow, tender strokes.

* * *

Rose said, "What just happened there?"

She lay in his arms, her head cradled on his chest, her hand on his lazily throbbing cock.

"I made you come twice," he said smugly.

"I made you come for a very long time," she countered.

"Oh, I know you did," he said fervently. He tugged gently at her hair until she turned and rested her chin on his chest to look at him. "I always wanted you. I looked at you through that mob and I wanted to take you on the road in front of them. Every time I looked at you, I thought of sex. Every time I thought of you, I wanted very badly to fuck you. And yet I never knew if that was just what I did. I didn't know if I reacted like that to every personable woman. If I was a womaniser, a bastard, even a rapist. Some of my fantasies were pretty wild and rough..."

"Like what we just did?"

"And more. Lots more. I thought at first I was afraid because I couldn't trust you. But actually, I couldn't trust myself."

Rose sat up. "Jon..."

"I do like sex. I like sex a lot. And since I became the wolf, I like it a lot more."

"You know you're the wolf?" Rose said, low. She didn't know if she was more relieved or anxious, but he ignored it.

He said, "But I know now I'm not violent. I won't hurt you. Except by accident," he added, a shade of uncertainty crossing his eyes.

"You can be rough," she acknowledged. Then, as a frown began to form, she touched his lips and added hastily, "I like it. I like it juxtaposed with the tenderness. I like your unpredictability and your power. I like that physically I couldn't resist you if I tried, and yet I know that I could stop you with one word. I didn't want to."

She'd never formed it into words before, but she realised as she said them that without any logic or reason, the trust had always been there.

A smile played around his eyes and lips. Reaching up, he touched her breast, toying idly with the nipple. "You're amazing. I thought you'd run a mile when you knew I was the wolf."

She caught his hand, pressing it into her breast. "When did you know?"

"Last night, when I changed. The dreams made sense. I realised they weren't dreams but memories. And as the wolf, I remembered the night before too. I killed someone."

Rose closed her eyes. "I know," she whispered. "And then you let me go."

He nodded. "I thought that was a dream. When I changed last night, I was so afraid I'd forget everything I'd discovered, forget I was a man. It all got lost in the pain. And yet when I saw you at the window, it began to come back."

"All of it? You remembered who you are, what happened to you?"

He shook his head. "Not then. It was as if I had no life before two nights ago." He smiled at her. "Until you made me come."

She closed her mouth, frowning with incomprehension.

"I began to get flashbacks," he explained. "Mixed up with the pleasure, it was kind of hard to hang onto them, but I know my name, and I know what I am, what was done to me with my permission and what without. And what my purpose is. There's

more, lots more. It's coming in dribs and drabs, but I think if we have more sex over the next few days -- lots and lots more sex -- it might speed things up."

There was a note of tender teasing in his voice that made her throat close up. "Jon, I can't."

The words didn't sit well with clutching his hand to her breast, so, miserably, she let it go. For an instant, he gazed at his hand, quite still on her pale breast. Then he too drew away.

"Because of the killing? If it helps, I was genetically altered, modified to become the wolf for hunting purposes. I was programmed if you like, to kill targets. I know I can break that now, because I didn't kill you."

She closed her eyes, so that she didn't have to see him. "Do you remember who your targets are, Jon?"

"Not exactly. Not yet. The guy who interrupted us said something about aliens. Foreigners, I suppose. In some countries there's heavy resistance to the Earth Government. Or perhaps it's the colonists..."

"It's not the colonists, Jon." Opening her eyes, she dropped her head back against the headboard. "The man you killed was an alien species. Not of this Earth. I have a pathologist friend who tested the blood for me. The DNA is alien."

For an instant he didn't speak. But she felt his eyes almost cutting into her averted face.

"What, like space monsters?"

"That's right. Space monsters who're infiltrating Earth. My guess is, the Earth Government found out about it a few years ago by accident when one died of natural causes. It was all hushed up to avoid panic, no doubt while the government found a suitable weapon against them. The trouble was, they had no idea how many were here, or who to question to find out when the main invasion would arrive. They look just like humans. Only their DNA gives them away and mass testing wasn't feasible if panic was to be avoided."

She drew in a shuddering breath. "But I think they discovered that animals react to the aliens. They can smell them. Except animals are too frightened to attack them. And so they created a hybrid of fighting men, programmed to kill, and wolf, capable of recognizing and killing. That's you."

She lifted her head and gazed into his eyes. "Why do you think when you first looked at me, whatever the attraction, you hated my guts? Why..."

"I didn't," he interrupted. His face was set, his eyes hard.

She smiled sadly. "Yes, you did. I saw it in your eyes. You get it now, don't you? You know why you were hunting me the other night. Let me just remove any doubt."

Raising both hands to her eyes, she ducked her head and popped out each contact lens. Then, slowly, she raised her head and looked him full in the face.

Chapter Seven

It was as if he couldn't look away. Then he blinked, just once, his lashes showing black against his pale cheek for the tiniest instant before his gaze returned to her. And by then it was unreadable.

It could have been worse, she thought drearily. He could be twisting her arm up her back and marching her to the nearest police station. Although if he did that, he'd end up back in the installation she'd just helped him escape from. And next time, she doubted he'd break through their conditioning. He'd be lost forever.

"How long have you been here?" His voice was almost ludicrously casual.

"Five years."

"What's your name?"

She closed her eyes. "You couldn't pronounce it. But it's the name of a winter flower on my home planet. It looks like a rose."

"Why are you here? Spying?"

"Sort of." She took a deep breath. "I'm a special operative, not a military agent, a civilian one. I'm part of a programme to infiltrate Earth. It was an honour to be chosen." Hysterical laughter fought its way up her throat and was swallowed back. "We're known as sleepers."

"Clearly an intergalactic concept," he murmured wryly. "Go on."

She shrugged. "That's it. Our task was to blend in, become part of Earth society until there were enough of us."

"Enough of you for what?"

She licked her lips which had grown suddenly dry under his interrogation. This had been his job before, she thought. To ask questions, find out the truth...

She said steadily, "To shut things down when the invasion force arrives. Jam surveillance signals, break up communications between key forces, army, police, media, so that my people can take over with minimum bloodshed."

"That's how we got away so easily last night... How many of you are there?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, I think you do," he said softly, and for the first time she felt afraid. She realised she had no idea what he would do next, what he was capable of doing to her now, despite what he'd been doing to her so very recently.

"I don't," she said wearily. "None of us know who the others are, when they arrive, or anything. We each wait for our own signal to begin."

"Have you received that signal?"

"No." She pushed her hair out of her face, and gave a twisted smile. "I've begun to think I never will. That I've been abandoned here."

"You've had no contact with your own people for five years?"

She shook her head, glancing up at him. He was frowning.

"That's inhuman," he observed.

"What do you expect?"

"Do you mind?" he countered, taking her by surprise again.

"No, I don't mind. It's like my life is here now. Sometimes I believe I *am* Rose Winter, journalist, and that the people I call friends will never hate my guts, or worse."

"Dream on."

Pain twisted through her. He stirred, restlessly.

"Why did you break me out last night?" he said abruptly.

She shrugged. "Because I saw them take you. I'd just learned that the wolf attack was on an alien and thought I might have to disappear, leave the city. I was coming to find you first, because it had just struck me you might have been one of the 'hospital disappeared'."

"Good guess," he said evenly. "But it doesn't explain what you did."

"No," she agreed. "It doesn't." She slid off the bed and reached for her clothes. "I'm going to shower, and then buy some provisions."

* * *

The shower was a great place to cry. It was private, disguised the noise, and washed off the evidence. She stood under the jet with her mouth open so that the sobs came out like breath. Salt tears and shower water poured down her cheeks and body, into her mouth and ears, and her eyes leaked and leaked. Because she'd ruined forever what could have been the most precious relationship of her life.

She couldn't have done anything else. She needed to be honest, despite her years of lies that had begun as honourable service to her government. Now nothing was clear cut except the pain of his rejection, of his coldness, of his retreat from lover to interrogator within a moment.

Earth people were weird. They railed against the government although they did very little to change it. They showed little respect or love for their planet, seemed more interested in colonizing space. And yet let someone threaten it, dare to invade it, and they turned into possessive, self-righteous, defensive bastards.

Well, she'd hit him with a lot all at once, and he hadn't exactly had an easy time of it the last few days either. She'd known he would hate what she represented, and by extension come to hate her. But she'd hoped they could talk, could at least part with an impression of goodwill, however that shattered later in the face of threat and invasion. That was impossible now. She'd seen it in his eyes. In the lack of any emotion in his eyes.

Tears flowed faster, making her gasp and shudder. What did she want of him? She'd known him for three days, and they owed each other nothing. And yet her heart hurt and she couldn't stop crying.

The sound of the shower curtain moving caused her head to snap round. Through the water, she saw the blurry figure of Jon, staring at her.

"Christ, your eyes are beautiful," he muttered and stepped in behind her, cupping her face in both hands before his mouth covered hers. "You taste of salt. Are you crying?" he whispered against her lips.

"No," she lied. His cock was bone-hard and fully erect, his balls pressing into the crack between her cheeks.

"Do you want me, Rose Winter? Now that your eyes are no longer false, do you want to fuck the wolf?"

His words stabbed at her core, making her gasp as gladness and hope reached up to swamp her. There was fear too, for the future, but at least it was no longer hopeless.

"I've always wanted to fuck you. I have this feeling, this terror, that I always will... Oh shit, Jon, one for the road?"

His hands slid round her from behind, covering her breasts. His wet cock slid between her thighs and straight inside her. She cried out. "One for the road," he said, pushing her up against the shower wall. Reaching up, she grabbed the top of the cubicle for support. His hands fell away from her breasts, one reaching between her legs to hold her pussy. Her breasts pressed into the shower wall and when he ground his cock inside her, her nipples welcomed the smooth, cool caress of the tile while the water pattered into her skin, sensitizing her whole body.

He took her clitoris between his thumb and forefinger and rolled it. She moaned and he rammed into her again, hard and continuously. With every stroke, her clitoris seemed to fuck his fingers, and the idea was almost as erotic as the action. The pleasure was so intense it was almost painful, an icy yet addictive flame that consumed her. Writhing on his cock, on his fingers, she pushed back into him, her breasts slapping against the wall. He reached up to protect them, holding them both together in one hand.

She felt his mouth on her neck, nibbling, kissing, dragging the skin into his mouth as he thrust into her and continued to roll her clitoris in his fingers, over and over.

Almost mindless with bliss, she heard him mutter, "One for the road. One for the air, one for getting there... Endless numbers... What are we going to do, Rose?"

Laughter trembled on the cusp of orgasm. "Keep fucking?"

"Oh yes," he said fervently and with one powerful ram spilled his seed inside her. It sent her over the edge, convulsing between him and the shower wall. His hands covered hers on top of the cubicle, holding her upright with his body. Shuddering, he ground and circled his cock inside her to extract the maximum joy for them both.

He eased his weight off her, slowing his panting breath. Cupping her face, he kissed her mouth again.

"You don't mind me using you as a memory locator?" he muttered.

"I'm happy to be of service," she managed.

"Good. Because for medical reasons, I have to spend the day screwing."

"More?" she asked breathlessly and stared in fascination as amber lights began to dance in his dark, lustful eyes.

"Much, much more," he said hoarsely. With which he picked her up in his strong arms and carried her back into the bedroom without troubling to turn off the shower.

There, he laid her on the bed and sprawled between her legs, still gazing in fascination at her eyes.

She said, "We can change our manners, our speech, our language, clothes and custom, but our eyes give us away."

"Yes," he agreed. "They do. But they're not false. Also... they're incredibly beautiful. Like gold. And they shine like jewels. Are all your people so beautiful?"

"I don't know," she said, a trifle lamely since she was distracted by his scrutiny of her pussy.

"Have you known many Earth men? In a carnal sort of a way?"

"One or... two," she gasped as his head dipped and his tongue flickered over her clitoris.

"How did they compare with lovers of your own world?"

His fingers spread her petals wide. His very gaze made her entrance pulse and weep. When he began to lick her clitoris, she cried out and tangled her hands in his hair for something to hold on to. "About the same," she squeaked.

"Tell me about this," he said, his breath stirring against her folds, the vibrations of his voice stabbing pleasure through her clitoris. "Tell me how it makes you feel."

"Am-mazing," she got out, bucking as he sucked her clitoris into his mouth. "Oh fuck, I'm going to come in a minute and I thought it was you who..."

He released her clitoris and slid his finger into her entrance. Her pussy clamped on it without permission. "Feel free to come and get it," he invited, taking his cock in his fist and giving it one gliding stroke before he released it.

Rose did, crawling round until her lips faced his cock. It was difficult, in an exquisite sort of a way, because his lips were latched to her lower ones and his finger was plunging in and out of her pussy. His other hand had begun to caress her bottom, his fingers probing and pressing around her anus.

Rose took his cock into her mouth and gave up trying to think any further. It was her duty and pleasure to make him come.

Which he did. And so did she.

* * *

Jon said, "Ask me my name."

"What's your name?" she said sleepily, adjusting his head on her breasts for greater comfort.

"Jon."

She rolled him onto his back to stare at him, half-laughing, half-suspicious. "Really?"

"Really. Jon Maynard, Major, Earth Force."

She smiled, as if glad she could still call him by the name she'd been thinking of him for the last three days. But she didn't ask any more questions, and he was glad. The memories that flashed into his mind during orgasm were like trailers, scenes cut from a movie, or from someone else's life. He knew they were his, and yet he didn't feel

comfortable with them yet. His sense of self was still the naked man found in Art's doorway, the man who could hunt for his own clues and turn into a wolf at night, and become mentally strong enough to decide he needed his own reasons to kill. That wasn't much of a military man, one who should always follow orders...

Most weird of all was the ease with which he accepted the wolf. As if somewhere he'd always known it was there. And he couldn't deny that his comfort with what would give most people the screaming fan-tods, had a lot to do with Rose Winter. His heart constricted. Staring into her astounding golden eyes, he said, "I don't want to let you go."

Her amber lashes flickered down, briefly veiling whatever pain was there. She said, "What will you do now?"

"I'm not sure. I can't let the invasion happen. And yet killing people like you doesn't seem right either. What about you?"

She lowered her face until her forehead touched his. Her hair fell about him like a curtain. "I don't want to take your planet. I like your people. Most of them. I don't even know what they plan to do with you all when they arrive to live here. Herd you into reservations, probably..."

She sounded so miserable that he kissed her hair. "I won't let that happen."

"I'm not so sure you can stop it. Not you nor your repressive, controlling government. My people are technically and militarily far more advanced than yours."

"Then we're concentrating on the wrong things, breeding monsters like me to hunt minor civilian saboteurs like you. We should be developing surveillance and weapons capable of fighting back. Rose, can you help us understand that stuff? Your people's technology, their location..."

There was a pause. "Some of it, perhaps. But I won't."

"You're afraid of them?"

"I can't betray them," she whispered. "They're my people. Mine. I swore oaths I believed in. In maturity, I can't approve of what they're doing, but I can't contribute to their downfall either."

It was like a mirror of his own dilemma. He couldn't approve of his government's actions either. And yet old loyalties die hard and it seemed he would still defend them. Or at least the Earth.

She said, "Don't ask me to."

He pushed his head back against the headboard. "Don't ask me to let a valuable information source go either."

"We have to part."

"I know." And they both knew he would find others like her, from whom he would get the same information. If she didn't find a way to warn them first. "I'll try to stop the killing of your people."

"I'll try to communicate with my government, though what anyone like me can do, I don't know."

He nodded slowly and reached up with both hands to her pale, elegant throat. Once, he'd felt the compulsion to strangle her. "Can we have tonight?"

She nodded and swallowed under his fingers. "I'll leave in the morning."

He let her go, and she slid out of the bed with slightly forced brightness. "We need food."

He smiled, watching her collect her clothes and march toward the bathroom once again. "I'd like to do dull things like shopping with you."

She paused. "I don't think you can, though. You have to keep a low profile. No one knows who your accomplice is, but they'll be looking out for you."

She was right, of course. He'd have to leave the city at night, as the wolf. Tomorrow night.

While she showered and dressed, and replaced the false, brown contact lenses, he thought about his next move. She kissed him before she left, and it entered his head how insane it was to be trusting his sworn enemy more than his own people for whom he was prepared to die.

While she was gone, he remade the rumpled bed and then stood under the shower to think some more. It was as he emerged that he realised the light was

beginning to fade outside. As well he hadn't gone with Rose. Turning into a giant wolf in front of the happy shoppers was guaranteed to bring exactly the sort of attention they didn't need.

Smiling sourly, he sat down on the bed and waited for the change. His nose twitched. Alarmed, he stood up, staring out of the window, searching for Rose. He could smell wolf.

Chapter Eight

Rose, weighed down with some new clothes and shoes for Jon as well as a large amount of cooked take-away food, got a taxi back to the hotel. She hadn't realised it was so late, and darkness had fallen earlier than she'd expected. Bad weather, she acknowledged, glancing up at the starless sky.

The taxi dropped her in the hotel's underground carpark. She paid the driver and began to walk toward the elevator, her footsteps echoing in the dank, empty space. Jon would be the wolf by now, which meant he couldn't talk to her.

It didn't matter. She would have his company. And they would have their last dawn together before parting forever. Fortunately, she had the strength to do that now. She could leave him, smiling, because even knowing the truth about her, he still wanted her, still made love to her as if she was the most exciting and precious being in the universe.

Something snarled. Rose stopped dead, glaring wildly around her. The place was well lit, but any number of wolves could be hiding behind the cars and craft parked in haphazard rows. She had no idea where the sound came from. It echoed all around her. Like ten wolves. Like a hundred.

Or none. It was her imagination. She began to walk faster, hugging her bags and groceries to herself. But the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up like stalks. Every nerve was shrieking.

Shadows surged up the wall in front of her. She spun around desperately and saw two giant wolves pulling toward her, snarling and slaving. Behind them, holding the lead to which they were harnessed, was a large man in a black raincoat.

The sight was bizarre enough to halt anyone in their tracks. Not that there was much comfort in the presence of the human, who clearly had very little if any control over the far stronger animals.

“Interesting,” said the man, more than a trifle breathlessly as the wolves came to their own halt a suspicious few yards from her. “ID, if you please. Throw it over to me and don’t even think of going anywhere or my wolves will savage you before you’ve taken three steps.”

Holding her groceries with difficulty in one arm, with the handles of the other bags dangling over her wrists, Rose dug in her pocket and produced the ID card which she obediently flung in his direction. It landed at his feet.

Warily, Rose glanced at the two wolves who were still snarling and snapping, although, curiously, they stayed close to the man’s legs. In fact, now that she looked at them properly, they didn’t look all that well. Though certainly large, if not quite as big as Jon, their coats were scraggy, even bald in places, and under her curious stare, one of them actually dropped its gaze. As if it was frightened.

Was that her hope?

“Rose Winter, journalist with the iGazette,” their handler read out from her card. “Nice job for an alien invader. Is that how you tracked down Jon Maynard?”

Her heart lurched. She stared at him, wondering how they were on to Jon and her so quickly. She’d assumed the wolves had just found her, much as Jon did that first night.

“Come on, Ms. Winter, I can’t hold the wolves back forever. Did he find you or did you find him? How did you discover what he was, how did you deactivate him?”

Her mouth dropped open. She saw the first glimmer of uncertainty cross his face as he recognised her sheer astonishment. And then the elevator pinged.

It was instinct to glance round, so she did, without permission, and in fact her captor didn’t object. Out of the elevator erupted another wolf, huge and powerful as it leapt the few paces across the floor to stand by Rose.

"Jon," she whispered, unable to touch him without dropping the load in her arms. Had he changed in the elevator? Or walked through the hotel like that? It was no time to ask, and in any case, he couldn't answer.

His attention was occupied, chiefly in staring at the two leashed wolves, who abruptly lay down, whining like dogs. Rose laughed.

"They're not ready yet," the man raged. "Damn it, if you don't surrender yourself to me, Major Maynard, you will be executed! Do I make myself clear?"

Jon turned on his heel.

The wolf handler said desperately, "There's no escape! Reinforcements are arriving from all over the city -- wolves, soldiers and agents, all with orders to capture the traitor Jon Maynard, who's protecting an alien! There's nowhere for either of you to hide!"

"Jon," Rose said warningly. There were shadows entering the carpark, large ones, bounding faster over the barriers and charging toward them.

"Attack!" screamed the handler.

Rose didn't wait. She bolted into the elevator, crying, "Ground!"

Jon squashed in beside her, pushing his head urgently between her thighs. It felt weird, because of who he was, before she realised he was urging her on to his back. So it was to be another fast getaway.

The door opened and Jon leapt across the foyer floor with Rose on his back, still clutching all her bags. As they charged through astonished and screaming guests, past the stunned receptionists, Rose wanted to laugh out loud. In moments they were through the door and into the fresh air. She could hear wolves howling, hunting her, the shouts of men hunting Jon, hunting both of them.

Snarling and snapping, Jon broke through two men who closed in on them and then they were off, bounding into the darkness and freedom.

* * *

There wasn't much shelter in the ruined hut, but it was enough. They'd broken out of the city and run and walked for miles before coming to rest here just as the first

dawn light seeped into the sky. While Rose prosaically unpacked the groceries she'd held on to -- mostly -- during all that time, and the clothes she'd bought for Jon, he went through the change.

Watching him, her throat constricted. "Is it painful?" she asked when he opened his exhausted eyes and smiled at her.

"Changing into the wolf, yes. This way, not so much. I've always slept through it before." He sat up, flexing his muscles, and in spite of everything, she felt her blood rise. "But here's the exciting thing, Rose. I think I can control it. Last night, I staved off the change until I got to the elevator. I could smell the wolves down there and knew they were coming for you... When I'm rested, I'm going to try and bring it on early."

"But why?"

"We'll cover more ground that way."

We. We'll cover more ground.

"Jon, they're on to us," she said urgently. "They know you've kept quiet about me. They know we're together."

"Then I guess that's one decision we don't have to make."

Her heart beat strongly, loudly. "What do you mean?" She pushed the clothes toward him, but he ignored them, reaching over them to get to her. He wrapped both arms around her, dragging her onto his naked lap.

"I mean we're in it together, and together we'll figure out a way to beat this, to stop the invasion without betraying either of our worlds."

"How the hell are we going to do that?" she demanded, gazing into his dark, clouded eyes. The glints in them heated her body, made anything seem possible. Her hands gripped his powerful shoulders so tightly that her knuckles showed white. But he didn't flinch.

"We need to find the other wolves. I spoke to the two in the carpark. They're still in treatment so I could dominate them easily. They were in the installation the other night. I've promised I'll go back for them, soon. And I will. And I think we can reach some of the others too. Using them, we'd have a hold over my government. They'd

have to listen to us. Also, we need to contact your world and convince them not to come. We need resistance from both peoples if we're to achieve anything."

Rose closed her mouth. Somewhere there was excitement and admiration, even exhilaration, but on the surface, all she had was astonishment. "Just a short agenda, then," she said weakly.

He grinned. "Not that short. For example, I thought we'd begin with a long morning screw."

Her pulses raced. Held in the arms of this particular naked man, she had no argument to offer. Her "Why?" was more of a provocation than an objection.

"So I can remember the names of my colleagues, of course."

Her hand lifted, with impetuous force, but he caught it and bore her backward onto the mud and twig-strewn floor, until he lay on top of her, breast to breast, his cock grinding between her thighs.

"But mostly," he whispered, "because I worship your amazingly beautiful, alien body. And because I love you."

She stopped fighting. "You love me?" she stammered.

"I love you, and I won't ever let you go. You're not safe until we tame the wolves. And by the time we do that, I'm hoping you'll love me too."

She seized his face between her hands, staring at him in mingled disbelief and frustration. "I can't work out which of us is stupider, or why. I've only known you three days. I don't know how this can have happened so fast. But I knew this morning that I loved you. I would only leave you for your own good."

"It will never be for my good." His hands were busy on her trousers, tearing them down over her hips and thighs so that he could ease his cock into her already wet, welcoming pussy. He entered with a sigh of pure contentment. "I could die happy in here."

"Please don't," she gasped, and hung on to him for the ride.

Wolf Hunt 2: Forest Wolf

Marie Treanor

The wolf hunt intensifies -- but when missions are complicated by attraction, sex and divided loyalties, who's hunting whom?

As the Earth government unleashes its werewolves to track down the alien infiltrators, those in command of the invaders strike back. When Louis, their android servant, encounters the werewolf Linnet, whose mission is to kill his masters, he discovers that aliens and werewolves have something in common after all -- the need to destroy the project that created such mutants.

But Louis's primary command is to serve and protect the very invaders Linnet must defeat. Worse, Linnet's wolf is in season, and she desperately wants Louis. He's fully capable of pleasuring her, and he's programmed to follow orders, but is it right to make use of a sentient being, android or not, just to fulfill her sexual needs?

Louis has been programmed to learn from his environment, adapt, and evolve, and Linnet's about to discover he has some needs of his own...

Chapter One

Louis stopped and stood perfectly still. All his sensors confirmed the intruder's presence in the forest, and now he had a more definite fix on its location. Turning thirty degrees to the left, he set off again through the trees.

As he walked, he noted the dark reds and browns and golds of the autumn leaves, and the way the colors altered subtly with every wink of sun between the thick branches. With another part of his highly capable brain, he decided to wait until he had more information before informing his masters of the intruder's presence.

His flexible-soled boots made very little sound on the soft carpet of the forest floor. The tiny cracks of dry twigs could have been made by the same small woodland animals that watched him warily from behind the undergrowth, sniffing the air to try and catch his scent, to work out who and what he was.

Ignoring them, Louis strode with quick, sure strides toward the low, even breathing of the intruder. He pushed aside a heavy branch and found her.

She lay asleep at the foot of a tree, curtailed off from casual observation by its low, spreading branches. A worn, dirty blanket covered her, revealing only a mop of black hair above the shapeless, woolen hump.

Louis hadn't expected a woman. He hadn't even been sure the intruder was human when he'd first picked up the presence. It had been more like some strange animal, although the readings had been confused. Swiftly checking, he discovered they were still confused, almost, but not quite, as if she used some kind of masking. All he could tell was that she was alive, female and mostly human. Definitely not Gardenian.

She slept peacefully enough, giving off no sign of pain or injury, although Louis couldn't think of any other reason for her to be sleeping in the forest in the middle of the morning. Questions as to how she got over the electrified fence into this private

land, and why, would wait until he'd ascertained her health. Silently, Louis covered the three paces to her prone body, and crouched beside her. Taking the edge of the blanket in his hand, he drew it back from her face.

She was aesthetically pleasing, her features small and even. From her dark-shadowed eyelids, her lashes curved long and thick and dark against the creamy pallor of her cheek. Her mouth was generous and full-lipped, her chin slightly pointed. A strong face, not a weak or a vulnerable one. There was no reason for Louis's unexpected urge to protect her, and perhaps that was what distracted him.

She was fast. Before he registered she was awake, let alone moved to react, she had sprung from the blanket, throwing a vicious punch that connected with his jaw. Then she leapt on him.

Louis rolled until she was under him, her naked body bucking furiously while her fists thudded one after the other into his palms and were held immovable. He bore her hands down to the ground on either side of her head, and when she spat at him, merely wiped the spittle off his cheek with his shoulder.

Her dark brown eyes, the shape of almonds, burned into his with animal fury. But the excitement of aggression faded fast into desperation, even fear, as she realized her helplessness. Not that she gave up. Her body twisted under him, trying to use flexibility to escape his greater weight.

Louis waited for her to work it out, patiently holding her rigid, straining hands above her head. "I won't hurt you," he said calmly. "But you have to stop struggling."

His words seemed to have the opposite effect. "Get off me, you bastard!" she snarled, increasing her efforts. "I'm warning you!"

She didn't appear to see the humour in warning an opponent who so clearly had the upper hand, so Louis refrained from smiling. However, he knew enough of her now to be suspicious when her struggles stopped abruptly.

"I warned you." Before the last word was out, her nose and mouth began to elongate and combine. Hair began to sprout on her arms, her chest, neck and face. Her

body swelled beneath him, gaining in mass and strength, and suddenly he wasn't wrestling a slight if strong woman, but a huge, angry wolf.

Her jaws opened to show large, dripping teeth. Refusing to let go, Louis jerked back to avoid being bitten in the neck and instead felt her fangs sink into his shoulder. But he refused to let his pain sensors distract him. Transferring the hairy, scrabbling paws to one of his hands, he used the other to grab at the creature's head, yanking it up by the fur, and when her teeth tore loose with an agonizing snap, he wrapped his fist around her snout and held on grimly.

The wolf possessed impressive strength, but, unlike him, she was subject to tiredness and fear. Louis knew he could hold on until the wolf tired, however long it took, but in the end, it was fear that broke her. Fear that even in this form she couldn't defeat him. He read that much in her glaring, dark eyes before she again collapsed into inactivity.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the fur faded from her skin. Her body shrank, her face rearranged itself so that the snout slid out of his fingers, and again he held a naked woman captive under his body and hands.

She stared into his face, her gaze flickering fearfully from one of his eyes to the other. Her breathing came in short, hard pants, but he had no intention of shifting his weight until he'd calmed her down. Her full breasts heaved under his chest. The soft, lithe body in his arms jerked once and was still, and suddenly he had more than pain to distract him as his inconvenient sex sensors kicked in too. If she felt his cock growing rigid against her, she'd freak all over again.

But it seemed she had other things on her mind.

"You're not afraid of me," she blurted. She lay passive in his hold now, her body still and pliant. "Shit, you're not even surprised by what I just did."

"No," he agreed. "I've already said I won't hurt you. But you have to stop fighting and talk to me."

He shifted position, moving his thigh across hers, lifting his weight slightly to let her breathe as well as to remove the threat of his now rigid cock. But unexpectedly, her

hips arched, following him not in aggression now but in a need that seemed entirely involuntary. It seemed she had noticed his arousal. And against all the odds was more excited than appalled.

Her panting breath had altered subtly and behind the confusion, something flared in her eyes that he recognized only too well as lust. When he didn't release her or move away, that look intensified. Her body heat rose, centering between her thighs, and she began to undulate, rubbing her naked breasts against his chest, grinding her pussy against his clothed cock. The moisture of her arousal assailed his sensors and his pleasure centers sparked.

It was a programmed reaction, designed to help him replicate human behavior, but for some reason, it occupied him as never before. Because it felt new and different. *She* felt new and different. And unbelievably good, writhing against him, all heat and lust. He got distracted watching her face, wanting to draw it, paint it as it was now, with her lips parted, glistening faintly as the tip of her pink tongue darted between, her dark, almond eyes warm, clouded and urgent. He wanted to see those pert breasts pushing up into his chest, take one of those pebbled nipples into his mouth and taste it. He wanted to free the rigid shaft of his cock and slide it inside her and see if that felt different too.

Though of course he couldn't. She was simply looking for another way to catch him off-guard and escape him.

But again, she surprised him. "Who wants to talk?" she said breathlessly. Her eyes smoldered. "When you can fuck?"

* * *

His weight on her felt delicious. This man she couldn't defeat as woman or as wolf, who didn't appear either to fear or hate her, held her helpless under his big, immovable body, and suddenly she gloried in his terrifying mastery. He held both hands still on the ground above her head and her naked breasts pushed up into his hard, powerful chest. She wanted his leather coat and his clothes gone. She wanted to

feel his skin on hers, hot and sliding as he pushed his cock into her and fucked her captive, willing body to oblivion.

Somewhere, the up-rush of lust shocked her, as did her pleasure in his domination, but she didn't care. Urgent, scalding, it swept through her body, causing her hips to lift into his, seeking and finding the hard ridge of his clothed cock against her thigh. She wriggled, further exciting herself as she sought to arouse him. Hell, he was already aroused, judging by the size and rigidity of the cock sliding between her thighs.

Get a grip, girl, you can't screw a stranger, however handsome...

Was he handsome? His hair was an undistinguished dark brown, his face good-looking enough, but his eyes...

It was his eyes that drew her, as distant as the hills and as old and wise as she'd ever seen. If she could remember what she'd seen. Yes, she liked his eyes and his cool, impassive face -- perhaps because they urged her on, challenged her to heat that coolness until his eyes clouded over with passion, until his whole face contorted in powerful pleasure. And his body...

Hell, who was she kidding? It was his body, big and lean and hard, that she wanted, that bone-stiff cock she'd been so foolishly excited to feel growing against her hip pounding into her, relieving her tension, assuaging the lust that tore her apart. *I can screw him, oh but I can...*

Her brain, following blindly behind the raging lust, began to justify it, pointing out that once she'd lulled him with her body, she could escape him.

And then what?

But she wouldn't go there yet. *Fuck him, then escape him. Kill two birds with one stone...* So she writhed and rubbed her breasts and pussy against him, and said, "Who wants to talk when you can fuck?" She wrapped her one free leg around his hip and felt his clothed cock slide against her pussy, shooting pleasure straight to her core. She moaned, and because they were so close and inviting, she kissed his parted lips.

Although her body had taken over, her brain made her keep her eyes open, and she could swear his expression was stunned. Excited laughter bubbled up, feeding her desire. She slid her tongue along his upper lip, pressing it in to caress his perfect teeth and entered the cool velvet of his mouth.

"What's the matter?" she breathed against his lips when he neither responded nor rejected her. "Don't you know what to do with that big bone in your pants?" She thrust against it, wriggling her body up and down it. "Come on, big boy, let me show you. Take it out of your pants and put it in me. Fuck me..."

Without warning, the still lips she kissed bore down on hers and kissed back. His tongue wound around hers in command and his cock thrust against her, making her moan with triumph and need.

But it was only for an instant.

He moved, so quickly that she barely saw it happen, heaving his body off her and drawing her into a sitting position beside him. He released one of her hands but still held onto the other.

Somewhere she knew she should feel humiliated. She knew that she would, just as soon as she let herself think about it. For now, it was all she could do to deal with her body's raging loss.

Bizarrely, the stranger picked up her blanket with his free hand and dropped it around her shivering shoulders. Pinned beneath him, she hadn't felt the cold, but now she was freezing.

"I don't know if you're trying to lead me on in order to escape, or if you just like seducing strangers, but you should know that either is dangerous. What's your name?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea. What's yours?"

Her aggression didn't appear to bother him any more than her lust. "Louis."

"Louis?" She didn't know why it should surprise her. When she thought about it, it suited him.

"Louis," he repeated. "What are you doing here? This is private land."

"I didn't know."

"What did you think the electric fence was for?"

She decided to brazen it out. "Don't you know those things are dangerous? Someone could get hurt. Why do you want to keep your land so private anyway? What have you got to hide?"

"It's not my land."

She blinked. "Then you're trespassing too?"

"No. I work here."

"Doing what?"

"At the moment, looking for you. I need to know why you're here."

She tore her gaze free, and with an effort stilled her nervously plucking fingers on the blanket's edges. "I just... I just wanted somewhere safe to sleep. I like the woods."

Even that didn't seem to faze him. He said, "You jumped over the fence. As the wolf."

She nodded, regarding him once more with blatant curiosity. "Why does that not surprise you? Why do you accept something so -- impossible, as if it happens all the time?"

He shrugged. "I'm not easily surprised."

She swallowed. "Does it happen all the time? Have... have you met others like me?"

"No."

The single word was like a blow. Just for a minute she'd hoped, seen a possibility of working this out, of discovering who and what she was.

Unexpectedly, his fingers tightened on her hand, like a squeeze of comfort. And because she hated how much she needed it, she jerked her hand free. And felt even more lost when he let her.

"Were you always like this?" he asked.

Again, she looked away, gazing determinedly between the trees, then upward to the grey, cold sky. The sun seemed to have gone for the day. "I don't know. I can't

remember anything before I woke up a week ago." *Why do you care? You don't even want to fuck me...* But reaction was setting in, and shame. She couldn't wait to get away from him. He might just let her walk, now that he'd released her hand, but instinct told her he wouldn't.

"Where was that?"

She shrugged. "Some town south of here. Maybe fifty miles south. I never even discovered its name."

"What brought you up here?"

"Nothing. I couldn't stay in my apartment. It felt -- constricting. Wrong. Even before I realized I wasn't just dreaming about running wild at night. The second night, I woke up in a field and just kept going."

"Naked?"

"I stole this blanket. And I avoid people."

"So you're just wandering aimlessly?"

"Yes." It wasn't quite true though. Not now. Last night, she'd been following a scent, a scent that both angered and excited her. She'd been hunting, and she had the powerful feeling that when she found her prey, it would end this misery, give her back herself.

How could you tell this to a stranger you'd just tried to seduce on a forest floor? A stranger you'd actually bitten. She jerked her head back around, staring at his shoulder. She'd gotten beneath the leather coat he wore, bitten hard into the sweater and the flesh beneath. She could see his clothes were ripped across one shoulder, but there was no other sign of injury.

"There's no blood," she blurted, lifting her eyes to his. "I bit you. I tore your flesh, and there's no blood."

His gaze was steady. "I don't bleed."

"Everyone bleeds."

"I'm not everyone." His lip quirked slightly. "Or even anyone."

"What does that mean? Who *are* you?"

"My name is Louis. I serve the L'Estranges, who own this land."

A servant? Him? Oh no, that didn't ring true. None of this rang true. If she'd been the wolf, her hackles would be standing straight up. "You're telling me servants don't bleed? I may not remember much, but I'm not buying that one."

She leaned forward, pushing back the coat from his shoulder, almost surprised when he let her. In spite of everything, moisture pooled again in her pussy, because he felt so large and solid. She *so* needed to get laid before this constant, nagging lust drove her insane. If she wasn't already. Perhaps she was just imagining the wolf. It would explain why she couldn't defeat Louis, why she hadn't torn him to pieces with her ferocious bite.

She felt his gaze on her, impassive and unblinking as she lifted the torn flaps of his clothing. The skin flapped with it. She could even see teeth marks, which made her feel sick. They were the teeth marks of a large animal, not a small woman. Oh yes, the wolf was real. And she was sane. Just.

But what the hell was he?

Louis sat unmoving, just letting her look. When she touched the wound, as if she couldn't help it, it felt like skin, cool and soft over a thin layer of flesh. But it didn't cover bone, it covered circuit boards and fine golden wires, and deep inside, a winking light.

She fell back, dropping her hands, staring at him. "Shit," she whispered. "*What* are you?"

"I'm an android."

Her breath caught. Bizarre thoughts clashed in her head. "Are you a Government project?"

His cool expression didn't change. "Why do you say that?"

Confused, she let her gaze drop. "I don't know. Because it seems wrong for an android to look like you." She choked on something that wasn't quite laughter. "Shit, I've been rejected by a robot. How lowering is that? I must say, your makers were very thorough."

"I am not a robot. I'm an android. Outwardly, I am a perfect replica of a human man."

Though he spoke in his normal, calm tone, something made her glance at him again. "Did I hurt your feelings?" she mocked. "Do you *have* feelings?"

"Not as you understand them."

"Do you feel pain?" she blurted, flickering a glance back to his wound.

"Of course. I am programmed with sensory input and human male behaviors." His gaze didn't back down from hers.

She curled her lip. "Not quite."

"You mean because I didn't fuck you?"

She hadn't expected him to comprehend, let alone come up with a coarse retort. Her body heated uncomfortably, and she hoped he couldn't understand blushing.

"I am programmed with choice. I didn't reject you. I chose not to take advantage of a female who thought she could use sex to escape me."

"I couldn't, could I?" For some reason, she wanted to weep. And she hadn't wept since this whole nightmare began.

"No." He rose to his feet in one fluid, graceful movement that in spite of everything set her pussy tingling all over again. Android or not, capable or not, he had one very lustable body.

He held out a hand to her, and when she took it instinctively, stumbling to her feet, he stood looking down at her for a moment. A frown creased his perfect brow. "You're tired and hungry. You can hardly stand. When did you last eat?"

"I don't remember." She'd lost any desire for food when she began tracking -- although now she thought of it, water would be nice.

He dropped her hand and turned away from her. "Come."

She hung back, glancing wildly around her. "Where? Why?"

"There's a shelter you can use, not far from here. We can collect water on the way, and I'll bring you food later."

He didn't offer to take her to the big house she'd seen last night, the house where, presumably, his masters and maybe even his makers resided. She didn't blame him. She was a naked, dirty woman who turned into a slaving wolf at sunset. Or whenever else she chose.

She walked beside him, matching his stride with more frequent steps of her own. "Will you tell them?" she blurted.

"If they need to know."

She stared at him. "That a werewolf is staying on their land?"

A quick smile crossed his lips. It was disconcertingly human.

Chapter Two

The shelter was a tree house, constructed from cut branches and leaves.

"Did you build this?" she asked, staring at it. "For them?"

"For me," he amended, and she turned to watch him crouch down by the stream which ran between the trees and under the shelter.

"You stay here?"

"Sometimes. For peace."

So even androids needed peace. He dipped his hand in the water and then licked his palm. She tried not to stare at his tongue. It had caressed hers when she'd kissed him. Just for a moment, it had, as if he'd really wanted her. And it had felt so... human.

But he wasn't, he didn't, and he couldn't. He was an android.

He said, "The water is safe." Under her bemused gaze he rose to his feet and swung himself up into the tree house, only to emerge a moment later with a flask-shaped container. Dropping lightly to the ground, he bent and filled the flask before holding it out to her.

She stared at it. Her mouth began to water. "Why does an android have a flask? Do you entertain other guests in your shelter?"

"No. There are fluids I need to function." Her reaction must have been clear for once again a smile that looked humanly cynical flickered across his lips. "The flask is clean. I wash it out after use."

Embarrassed all over again, she snatched the flask from him. "You drink machine oil?"

"Not precisely."

She took a long, grateful draught of the cold water and replaced the cap.

"Can you climb up?"

"Of course I can!"

She was strong and athletic. She knew that. But she'd reckoned without the weakness of hunger and the awkwardness of climbing while clutching a blanket. For some stupid reason, it seemed important to preserve her nakedness from his view, even although he was an android, and even although he had already seen everything she had.

Hanging by one hand from a branch, she braced herself to fall and lose whatever dignity she'd imagined she was maintaining. But without warning, a strong arm encircled her waist and she was swung into the air. Her stomach whooshed, spreading tingles below, and then she was on the platform and looking into the interior of the shelter.

It was basic. But the walls were carefully constructed to keep out the wind and rain, and there was a comfortable looking mat on the floor. She thought she could sleep there.

A shadow covered her as Louis joined her on the platform, and she crouched to enter the shelter.

He said, "I'll bring you blankets later."

"I have one," she said automatically. He was taking off his coat, and her stomach lurched at the possibility that he was about to take up what she'd offered after their brief fight.

When he pulled the black sweater over his head, her throat constricted and she realized her heart was beating like a rabbit's. She clutched the blanket around her in mingled panic and longing.

Beneath the sweater he wore a plain white shirt. Muscles seemed to bulge in his upper arms, and with less clothes, his body seemed even more appealing. What was the matter with her? She was finding a machine not just attractive and handsome, but sexy.

Well, she hadn't encountered much life in the last week. She had nothing to compare him with. Perhaps she should just try and think of him as "it."

She blinked, realizing he held out the sweater to her. "You'll be cold," he said mildly. "And this will be easier to move around in."

But she couldn't drop the blanket in front of him. "I'll be fine," she muttered.

"You're shivering," he observed. Again the tiny smile, and he turned his back, holding the sweater out at arm's length beside him.

She dropped the blanket and snatched the sweater. It felt deliciously warm and soft next to her skin and she realized how cold to the bone she'd been for so long. She was almost used to it.

The sweater came down to her knees. Pulling up the long sleeves, she realized it smelled of him, a clean, curiously male smell that didn't seem possible considering what he was. "Thank you," she muttered.

He turned back and lifted his coat from the floor. "Use that too if you need it."

"Won't your people notice it's gone?"

"No."

For some reason that one word caught her. As if he was as lonely as she. The only one of his kind. He said he had no feelings, as she understood them, but that didn't mean he wasn't affected by isolation, carelessness, rudeness.

And he'd already admitted he felt pain. She said guiltily, "What will you do about..." She flickered her gaze to the wound in his shoulder.

"It's already repairing."

She let her gaze slide away. "Does that hurt too?"

"No." He stirred, an obvious precursor to changing the subject. "Tell me, do you control your changes?"

"What?" Distracted, she blinked at him.

"Do your changes happen without your consent?" he asked patiently. "Or do you control them?"

She thought of lying, just to give herself an edge. But he was a machine. Perhaps he'd know. Besides, he was being kind to her with no reason. The truth was all she had to give him in return. "I can make it happen now. At first, I changed at night, and came

back to normal in the morning." She smiled sourly. "If this is my normal form. And then I discovered I could make myself change during the day too. I don't know if I can deliberately stop being the wolf, though. I've never tried."

"Then what happened when you fought me and changed back?"

"I don't know." She looked away, took his coat just for something to do. "It vanished with my -- anger."

He nodded. "I think it means you have some control over that change too. You just need to practice."

She paused with the coat half way around her shoulders. "You mean I can stop being the wolf?"

"Is that what you want?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"I don't know. I don't think we can stop being what we are."

Yes we can, she thought fiercely. *I will, just as soon as I find my prey.*

* * *

Louis entered the house by the side door as usual. Although their nearest neighbors were some distance away, and weren't frequent visitors, it had long been established that Louis would behave at all times like a human servant. He used the side-doors, got a day off every week, had even had a brief affair with a girl from the local village pub. And he had his own bedroom, although that was as much for Iris L'Estrange's convenience as for the sake of appearances.

He didn't expect to see his masters through the half-open door of the office as he passed. Normally, they left the routine monitoring to him, and spent their days living the life of rich, idle humans. But this morning, they were both there, which probably spoke volumes for the unease which had gripped them over recent weeks. Ever since another of their own had died a sudden and violent death.

Iris, tall and elegant in a flowing designer trouser-suit, glanced up from her computer. Still young, with smart blonde hair piled high on her head, she looked very

human, which she wasn't, and very powerful, which she definitely was. "Come in here, Louis."

Louis obeyed.

William, who held himself with the same pride, but lacked his wife's constant, implied threat, said, "All secure around the perimeter?"

"Yes." He turned to go, but again Iris stayed him.

"No, no, wait. Another of our people is missing."

"Dead?" Louis asked.

"No, we don't think so, but her beacon is inactive, as if it's being masked. It gives off only occasional readings, with hours or even days in between."

"It must be malfunctioning," Louis said. "Perhaps we should bring her in and replace it."

"That's what we thought at first, but Rose Winter was one of our first agents here. For five years she's lived among them, as long as we have, and now she's compromised."

William waved one hand at his computer screen. "Look at this. Military orders we picked up this morning."

Louis glanced at the screen. "Find and detain Major Jon Maynard and his companion, believed to be iGazette journalist Rose Winter. Use extreme caution, kill only as a last resort."

"It doesn't make sense," Iris said flatly. "This Maynard has gone AWOL, with our Rose, whose beacon has mysteriously stopped working."

"He could have discovered her and kidnapped her," William pointed out.

"Then why are the military trying to arrest him?"

"Perhaps they don't know what she is, but Maynard does."

"Wouldn't he tell them?" Louis interjected.

"I don't know," William said impatiently. "All I know is that our people are disappearing, violently, and something will have to be done!"

Clearly, he could see his nice, safe mission in the lap of luxury disappearing into a morass of failure and disapprobation. When he got no response from Louis, he flung back his seat and stood up.

"Louis, find out everything you can about this Maynard, and monitor Rose's beacon round the clock. The next time it blinks, I want to know exactly where. They key to all this is with them. I'm convinced of it."

"Very well." As William strode from the room, Louis took his seat.

Iris rose from hers and came to stand behind him, wrapping her smooth, elegant arms around his neck. "The tension of this is killing me," she murmured into his ear. "I'll come to your room this afternoon. An hour before dinner."

Louis said nothing. His fingers were already flying across the keyboard faster than Iris could see. His "otherness" fascinated her, was a large part of the reason she chose to use him as her lover. Another part of it was the excitement of fucking anyone else under the same roof as her husband. Though Louis didn't understand that, he had accepted it.

Their interludes together gave him pleasure. So much so, that at the beginning he had looked forward to them and replayed them later in his mind. In recent months, however, he'd taken the physical pleasure with a certain cerebral dissatisfaction. Behaving like a human without feeling like one. His fastidious circuitry had begun to dislike the whole relationship. Especially when his reading supplemented his ethical programming and he began to understand the value of faithfulness.

Just for an instant, he found himself comparing the slightly distasteful indifference he felt to Iris's touch now, to what he'd felt with the strange wolf woman's body writhing under him. He would obediently fuck Iris this afternoon, but it was the other woman he wanted.

Louis felt his body stiffen. Obedience was becoming difficult for him, which he knew shouldn't happen. Fortunately, Iris was too absorbed in herself and her own problems to notice any strange reaction on his part. She merely rubbed her breasts

against his shoulders, caressing her nipples on him, before straightening and leaving with a bright smile. She had something to look forward to in her day.

So did Louis. But it wasn't their bedroom assignation. It was taking food to the strange wolf woman in the forest.

Having initiated a search for Maynard, even before Iris left, he began another for wolves and synced his own circuits to monitor Rose Winter's beacon.

The L'Estranges' revelations had brought several things together in his brain, and he found what he'd been looking for pretty quickly -- Rose Winter's piece for the iGazette on a giant wolf terrorizing a city -- the same city where two Gardenian agents had died. Several other Gardenians had died in what looked like animal attacks. Such attacks were scattered across the planet and most had been covered up, so what Louis found was largely rumor and hearsay. But the very fact that they had been covered up told him what he needed to know.

Jon Maynard, distinguished peace-keeping soldier and inspired leader of men, had disappeared off all available records more than a year ago. But now the military wanted to arrest him.

The L'Estranges were right. They needed to find Rose, if only to preserve her from the wolves.

* * *

She didn't sleep when the android left her. Instead she sat on the bed-mat with her legs stretched out in front of her, wearing his sweater and holding his leather coat across her knees while she thought.

It was no good forcing the memories. Before last week, she might never have existed. She might have been born fully grown into the world. All she had was her timeless, dream-like memories of running through urban streets, and rural forests, following scents that she seemed to understand from instinct, but never finding the one she sought.

Until last night. The scent that had both excited and revolted her had brought her here, leaping over the high fence that Louis had said was electrified. Would she still

have risked jumping it if she knew? That was scary. She didn't like not being in control. It was bad enough changing into a wolf every night, but remembering the pure instinct which guided her every act at such times was downright terrifying.

Perhaps it was that which had led her to accept the android with little more than the blink of an eye. Her world was full only of confusion and fear, and absolutely no understanding. Compared to that, an android sophisticated enough to be completely indistinguishable from a man was no big deal.

Especially when he was kind to her. Burying her nose in the sleeve of his sweater, she inhaled his scent once more. The inconvenient bodily lusts which never seemed to be far away rose up again, hardening her nipples against the soft wool, releasing a pool of moisture from her tingling pussy. Curious, that despite remembering nothing of her past life, she knew what she needed to do to scratch that particular itch. And she wanted it terribly.

As the wolf, she yearned for another of her kind. As the woman, she'd glimpsed men who made the longing worse. She'd fantasized over their vague faces and powerful bodies as she'd sought the comfort of her own fingers, rubbing her swollen clitoris and thrusting inside her aching pussy until she came. But masturbating didn't seem to help.

Louis could have helped. Pinning her body beneath him, he could have caressed her aching breasts with his long, clever hands. He could have pushed his big, rigid cock inside her and given her what she wanted, hard and wild on the forest floor.

She jerked her knees up, her whole body heating with raw lust. Perhaps when he came back, he could still do that. He'd know how to caress her, and she'd show him what she liked, what she needed -- slow, caressing hands on her breasts, on her hips and ass, and his urgent, furious cock between her legs. She'd make him do it to her hard, slam into her wildly, repeatedly until orgasm claimed her. That would be so good, so sweet and intense... and necessary.

And then, with his cock still hard and ready inside her, she'd climb on him, caressing his powerful, naked body with both hands, straddling those sexy, narrow hips, and make him do it all over again.

Sweating, she bit into her trembling arm, ignoring the hairy fluff of the covering sweater. What was she thinking of? He was an android. It didn't make him a walking vibrator. Though she knew he was a machine, the idea of treating him like one appalled her on any number of levels.

He was just different. As she was.

But he *was* a machine, and programmed to serve his masters, whoever they were. Her lust was turning his presumably programmed kindness into something it couldn't be. He wasn't her friend. He was probably telling his people all about her right now, and they'd turn up with guns and dogs.

She pressed her palm hard against her throbbing pussy, once, then snatched it away and threw her head back against the wooden wall of the shelter. She waited.

She heard him coming, even smelled him, some minutes before he arrived. And although prepared for him to have brought company, she knew he came alone, and felt her heart lift immeasurably with the knowledge.

Opening the door a crack, she watched him emerge through the trees with his even, easy stride, a backpack slung casually over one shoulder. He wore a leather coat that looked exactly like the one beside her.

Perhaps his maker was a woman, because every movement of his legs and hips seemed gracefully masculine and sexy as hell. And his impassive face told her he knew nothing about that. Even if he did, he wouldn't care.

She shuffled back and sat down on the mat with her legs curled under her. She was prepared for the increasingly unmanageable lust. What she didn't expect was the funny leap of her heart when he first appeared in the doorway.

His gaze found her at once.

"Hello," she said inanely, appalled by the breathless quality of her voice. But he seemed to find nothing remarkable in her greeting, merely nodded and entered the shelter.

He sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor, and unloaded his backpack. Speech eluded her. For some reason, despite his mundane task, his presence filled the room, overwhelming her as nothing in this weird, awful week had yet managed to do.

He pushed a container across the floor to her. "Bread and cheese and fruit." Another followed it. "Steak, if you prefer."

Her mouth began to water, the safe urge of hunger releasing her locked-up tongue. She snatched at the steak container and lifted the meat up with her fingers. It was lightly cooked. She bit into it, closing her eyes to chew, and when she opened them again, found him watching her with his cool, hazel eyes.

She swallowed. "Did you tell them about me?"

"No."

"Why not?" she asked, taking another bite.

"They didn't ask."

Chapter Three

Louis moved, reaching past her, and her body reacted instantly to his nearness. She was so wet, she'd leave marks on his bed-mat. And yet something else both excited and revolted her. Some new quality to his scent screamed danger to every nerve she possessed. She knew an insane urge to sink her teeth into his corded nape. Or kiss it, she no longer knew which. Her breath hitched, her fists clenched.

And then he only picked up the water flask and moved it nearer her.

The moment vanished, lost because his tiny thoughtfulness touched her. And yet it was only part of his programming. He was a servant. Or so he said.

A sudden thought struck her, dropping her jaw, though fortunately not when her mouth was full of steak. Laying the meat down, she said, "Shit. Am I an android?"

He smiled at that, a smile that somehow changed the coolness of his eyes. Perhaps it was her imagination. Or perhaps he had an incredibly clever maker.

"No," he said.

"How can you tell? You have an infallible chip for recognizing fellow androids?"

"Or any other species."

"Then what species am I?" She meant it to be brash, mocking, but she had the uncomfortable feeling it came out more like a lost child. *I want to go home. I want my mother. I want to know who the hell my mother is.*

"Human female," he said, comfortingly enough. "With something more."

"Wolf."

"Not quite. Were you ever a soldier?"

She blinked. "I have absolutely no idea."

"But you know what a soldier is?"

"Of course I do." There was no *of course* about it. The fact that she knew how the world operated, and yet could remember nothing about her own identity was as much of a mystery to her as to him.

"Does the name Jon Maynard mean anything to you?"

She frowned. "No. At least, I don't think so. Should it?"

"Perhaps. What about Rose Winter?"

Something perked inside her. "Yes! I know her name! She's..." Not her mother, her friend, her sister. Deflated, she finished flatly, "She's a journalist on the Newscreens."

"She hasn't been on the Newscreens for a couple of weeks," Louis volunteered.

Drinking morosely from the water flask, it took her a moment to realize the significance of that. She laid the flask down with an excited thud. "Then I knew of her before! I wasn't born last week!"

His eyes changed again, not smiling this time, perhaps pitying. Could androids pity? "Have you actually met her? Perhaps with Jon Maynard?" He put a hand-held computer down on the floor between them, and it lit into life. The familiar, pretty face of the strawberry blonde journalist. The screen flickered and she saw a good-looking man with a strong, serious face. A good face. She frowned, wondering if she should remember it. Mostly, she just wanted to.

She shook her head. "If I have, I don't remember it."

He nodded, and put the hand-comp back in his backpack before returning his gaze to her face. Her stomach twisted. She wanted his mouth on hers, on her breasts, on her hot, clenching pussy. She wanted to jump him, fuck him, watch passion contort his cool, impassive face.

Dream on.

"What do you want?"

Heat surged at the possibilities, though fortunately humour came to her aid before unwise words could escape her. Choking them on an embarrassed laugh, she said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, whatever led you here, what do you plan to do now?"

"Keep looking, move on until I find... answers."

"To what?"

She shrugged.

Louis opened the fruit container and she picked out a piece of apple just to have something to do.

"Something made you jump the high fence into this part of the wood. There's plenty of forest unenclosed that it would have been easier and safer to get into. Why here?"

She glanced at him uncomfortably, sure of nothing except that he didn't threaten her. Right now he was her only friend. She took a deep breath. "I smelled something. I tracked it here."

"A good smell?"

"No-o... A smell I needed to follow. Something bad, but important. Something..." An instant of recent memory flashed into her mind. Louis reached across her for the water, his neck, his shoulders almost touching her face. "Like you," she whispered. She lifted her gaze back to his face. "Not you. Something that touched you. It's bad."

He nodded, as if even that didn't surprise him, almost as if he expected it. "Have you ever heard of the planet Gardenia?"

"No. Should I have?"

"Perhaps not by that name. What about any planet inhabited by non-Earth peoples?"

She stared. "Of course not. There aren't any. Or at least if there are we haven't found them." She spoke impatiently, because her mind clung unwisely to the previous discussion, and who or what had touched Louis to leave that smell upon him. "The people at the house. They touch you. Surely not to charge your batteries."

Christ, she sounded like a jealous, nagging wife. *Button your mouth, woman...* But this time, it seemed she'd got to him. Against all the odds. His gaze actually dropped from hers, and her reasonless jealousy surged up into new life.

"Fuck. You are a walking vibrator."

His head jerked, almost as if she'd slapped him, and she wanted to drag the words back, unsay them, punch herself. "Louis..."

"I am an android," he said flatly. "Fully programmed in male behaviors." He was fastening up the backpack and she realized in panic that he was leaving. "I need to do more work, decide what is the best thing for you to do. For tonight, I can't tell you not to shift, but be aware, there is danger for you at the house. Don't go there, do you understand?"

"I believe I've always understood English," she said stiffly.

He nodded, more android than she'd seen him before. Her heart began to ache, and not just with her own shame.

"I'll return in the morning," he said, pushing open the door, and suddenly she was desperate to keep him here, keep him with her. She catapulted herself across the floor on her knees, bumping to a halt against his thigh. He turned his head back to her without obvious surprise. "I've left clothing inside. Items Iris L'Estrange was throwing out. Is there anything else you need?"

You. The word screamed so loudly in her ear she might have spoken it aloud. His gaze held hers. His thigh seemed to burn into her leg where they touched. For an instant, she stared into his face with helpless need. A tiny twig had attached itself to his hair, and just to have reason to touch him, she raised her hand and picked it free. It brought her even closer to him. Her breast brushed against his shoulder, searing her pebbled nipple. His hair felt so soft that her hand lingered. Her gaze fell to his lips, full and strong, and she trembled with her longing to kiss them. Moisture flooded her pussy.

Because she couldn't help it, she moved her whole body in a slow, sensuous rock that brushed her thigh against his, her breast against his shoulder. Bolts of pleasure shot

through her, feeding her lust. She caught her breath and swayed again, reaching this time for his mouth.

But at the last minute, she took fright. He looked too damned impassive and she wouldn't, couldn't use him like a sodding vibrator. Fuck. She couldn't be this randy and he not feel a damned thing!

She opened her mouth to tell him she wanted him, to ask him to stay. He might choose to... But as she stared into his cool eyes, she again shied away at the last minute, merely shook her head at him dumbly, and fell back, forgetting even to thank him for what he'd already done.

He's an android! He doesn't need or deserve thanks. But as he swung himself lightly to the ground and walked off into the trees, she knew in her heart that he did.

* * *

One of Louis's greatest assets to his masters was his ability to multi-task, and he had always taken a professional pride in continually stretching himself in this area. But that afternoon, he seriously considered turning vast areas of his circuitry off, because no matter how many tasks he undertook, his memory kept returning to the wolf girl. The way she'd deliberately rubbed her luscious little body against him, the way her eyes had melted into his as her lips parted, as if she would kiss him, as if she would ask him...

Ask him for what? Sex? The use of his sexual organ as the only vibrator available to her?

"Fuck. You are a walking vibrator." He wasn't quite sure what had led her to speak those words that she so clearly regretted, but the truth in them upset his idea of self. It was almost as if, like her, he'd lost his identity.

And yet he'd never had one.

He was also aware that his decision to protect her was probably endangering his masters, and he kept returning to that decision in an attempt to justify or even understand it. More often than not, it came back to his sexual pleasure centers. Iris L'Estrange had given him his first opportunity to use them, and it hadn't been long

before his curiosity had led him to experiment, to find out if the strange pleasures were the same with a different woman. Though Barbara, the local barmaid, had induced much the same pleasures, he would have said, had he been human, that it *felt* different.

But it hadn't satisfied his curiosity. Nor had the pornographic films and books he'd devoured. Those hadn't aroused his sexual sensors at all, so he'd deleted them as pointless.

Nor was he certain why he wanted to repeat those unsatisfying sexual experiments with the wolf woman, but he did. And that was connected too to her unpalatable description of him as a walking vibrator.

If he'd been human, he thought he would be uncomfortable, even unhappy. As it was, he filled his positronic brain with research, tracked every previous bleep of Rose Winter's beacon to try and find a pattern to her erratic travels, and tried to work out what to do about the wolf woman. But only when Iris L'Estrange came into the office did it become clear to him what he had to do first. The decision made, a curious lightness descended on him, quieting his agitated circuits.

Iris didn't look pleased. She was dressed only in a skimpy robe, as if preparing to bathe before dinner. "I've been waiting upstairs for half an hour!" she snapped.

"I'm sorry. I'm busy."

"Too busy to obey me?" She spun his chair round and he gazed up into her boiling amber eyes. She'd taken out her contact lenses, unwisely leaving herself open to discovery by any unexpected visitors.

"I am obeying you. According to my programming, when two commands clash, I must choose to perform the most important. In this case, your mission clearly states that the safety of Gardenia's agents is paramount."

She stared at him, furious because she knew he was right and because he was thwarting her. "We can save the world after dinner," she said between her teeth. "Right now, get upstairs to your room. I have other tensions to relieve."

"Then I suggest you relieve them on your husband."

Her mouth actually fell open. Louis almost laughed, except he rarely allowed his appreciation of humour to be seen.

"Is that insolence, Louis?" she demanded.

"Advice. I wish to discontinue our assignations."

"You're malfunctioning," she said coldly, spinning away from him and striding toward the door. "Reset yourself. And then, come to your room."

"Resetting at this stage in my research would be disastrous," he said calmly. "And I will not be joining you in my room. That is not insolence or malfunction. It is choice."

He returned to the computer. For several minutes, her eyes bored into the back of his head. Then he heard the swish of her robe against the door as she swept out of the room.

It was as if someone had unclogged his wires, like the cerebral equivalent of sexual pleasure, even though he'd just deprived himself of the physical possibility. He straightened his shoulders and smiled at the computer screen, just as it flickered and changed according to his commands -- and showed him a standard photograph of his wolf woman.

Caught, he stared at the screen. Black hair cut short and neat under a military officer's hat, her dancing brown eyes belying the serious expression on her piquant, almost Elfin face. Younger, but indisputably the same woman.

Her name was Lewis. *Like mine.*

Linnet Lewis.

* * *

About the only familiar thing in her world was the claustrophobia that came upon her, particularly at night, when the urge to shift was too strong to resist. She felt it rise quickly tonight, fed by her churned up emotions, and her desire to see Louis again. Not to get him to fuck her brains out, but to apologise to him. A little thing beside the enormity of what had already happened to her, but for some reason, it seemed incredibly important.

He'd told her not to go to the house, so she wouldn't. But she'd damned well hang about nearby and catch him if he came out. With this in mind, she followed his track through the forest.

It was growing dark, the last song of the birds fading into sleep as the night-time animals began to wake. The forest was full of increasingly intense smells, telling her exactly what and who had travelled this way before her. In the distance, she could smell cattle and dogs and chickens. A cat fight close by disturbed the peace of the night. The trees around her began to alter subtly, not in their shapes, but in their light and shadow, in their colors.

The urge to change, like the urge, she imagined, of a mother giving birth to push, grew too strong to resist. She tried, with breathing, as somehow or other she knew birthing mothers did to postpone the inevitable, but it didn't seem to work for werewolves.

She sat down on the bumpy forest floor and let the wolf break free. When she'd first realized what was happening to her, it had scared her witless, but now there was no fear, only acceptance.

She sprang to her four feet and began to lope off the path through the trees. The joy of freedom rose fast and in an instant she was bounding, galloping, running off a huge surge of energy. And then she smelled *it*.

A brief whiff passing on the air. Lifting her nose high, she sniffed the wind and changed direction. In a very few minutes, she was looking at the house. She remembered Louis's prohibition, and knew she wasn't bound to obey him. What she was bound to do was to follow the smell to its source, to rip apart the unspeakable evil that created it.

* * *

Louis served dinner as usual to his masters in the formal dining room. Iris was stony-faced. The only time she looked at him was when, as he cleared their plates, she asked her husband if he hadn't noticed Louis behaving oddly recently.

"No, dear. But he's programmed to learn and develop, so from time to time you will notice slight changes in him. He's a very fine model, aren't you, Louis?"

"According to my handbook. If you're finished here, I'd like to discuss some of my findings with you."

William swiveled in his chair, an expression of eagerness on his face. "What have you found?"

"Jon Maynard, the soldier the military is trying to arrest, disappeared from current records more than a year ago, along with several other distinguished military personnel. The hunt for him began only a few weeks ago, at an unmapped military base. Journalists and civilian police are looking for Rose Winter, who simply didn't turn up for work one day. They've asked a lot of questions in the nearest farms, towns and villages. No one has so much as glimpsed either of them. But several claimed to have seen giant wolves, like the one Rose was chasing. Like the ones which killed at least three of our agents."

"Louis, that's rather a leap!" William scoffed. "I was with you right up to the giant wolf, but I can't --"

"Think about it. Humans can't tell you from their own people, but animals can. Cats and dogs won't come near you. They don't know what you are. But what if the Earth Government set up a military project to develop a hybrid human-animal that could both identify and destroy Gardenians?"

He had their undivided attention now. William said doubtfully, "You really think that's what they've done?"

"But what about Rose?" Iris interjected. "If this Maynard is a wolf, why hasn't he killed her? Or has he found some way to keep her beacon blinking, even if only intermittently? Why would he bother? Unless to keep us in ignorance of her death..."

"I can find out," Louis said. "I can find Rose Winter." His head snapped up, his sensors prickling. Something not quite human, something he'd already picked up first thing this morning, was too close. And the window was open a crack, letting scents out as well as in.

He moved quickly to the window, reaching up to close it, just as something crashed through the main pane.

It was a wolf, his wolf. He knew immediately. And she sprang straight for Iris, who didn't even have time to scream. William let out a bellow of fear and rage, clutching his head as he tried, no doubt, to remember where he'd put the weapons.

They'd grown slack in their years of luxury and safety. Louis knew where the weapons were. He had, in addition, one built into his hand. But he wouldn't use it.

Iris went down under the wolf in a crash of crockery, pulling the white linen cloth off the table as she went. The wolf's massive, snarling jaws bore down on her throat, and Louis leapt at her, the sheer force of his jump rolling her off Iris.

As before, the wolf bucked and writhed to free herself, even snapped at his hands, at his face. And then, for the tiniest instant, she was still. Her eyes, Linnet Lewis's eyes, stared into his. His sensors picked up more animal than human now, but the human was definitely still there. And the creature must be injured. He smelled blood. She made a sound that was half-whine, half-howl and struggled once more to be free.

Iris screamed, "Kill it, Louis! William, get the guns!"

Louis clung tight to the wolf's fur, forced his mouth to her ear. "Run to the top of the house, shut the door, and change back. You must try. Now."

He didn't wait to see if she understood, just loosened his grip enough to let her spring free. He knew he could catch her again before she killed one of them. And it was clear she wouldn't kill him. Somehow he'd known she wouldn't even try.

The wolf bolted past the terrified couple. Iris cringed into the wall, yelling. William aimed a vicious kick at the animal's rear, which connected but didn't slow her.

Louis ran after her, slamming the door behind him as if for his masters' safety. In reality, he strode across the wide hallway to make sure the wolf obeyed him. She did, bounding up the stairs in huge, powerful leaps.

Louis turned immediately toward the big glass front door, but something on the floor caught his attention and he paused. Blood. Two tiny drops of blood.

Yet the wolf wasn't wounded as he'd feared. He'd felt no wounds on her during their wrestle, sensed no sign of injury except the blood. And he finally understood.

It was the blood of menstruation. The wolf was in season, sexually aroused, constantly. The whole creature was suffering an overwhelming urge to mate.

As if she wasn't going through enough.

Even as the realization hit him he moved faster than either human or Gardenian could see, wiping up the blood on the waiter's napkin he carried in his pocket, before running to the door and crashing his shoulder through the glass.

Shards scattered everywhere, in his hair, his clothes. Shaking himself, he wrenched the door open and ran out through the porch into the garden. He ran around the house, away from the dining room window, just as his powerful hearing picked up the sound inside the house of the dining room door cautiously opening.

Louis ran on, conscious of a dilemma. Not only had he now deliberately misled his masters, he'd left them alone in the same house as the wolf whose instinct was to kill them. And yet to make his ruse work, they had to believe he'd killed the wolf. If only she had the sense and the control to stay hidden.

Her eyes had told him that his presence with her victims was a shock. He could only hope it was enough of a shock to hold her in check.

Sooner than he'd have liked, he stopped, opened his hand so that the fingers fell back from his knuckles to reveal his weapon, which he fired into the air twice. Then, returning his hand to normal, he walked back to the house.

The L'Estranges had closed the outer storm door, presumably to keep the wolf out. Louis opened it quietly, and stepped over the shattered glass from the inner door. Typically, they were waiting for him to clear it up.

William stuck his head around the door. His face looked white. "Louis? Where is it?"

Louis lifted his weapon hand significantly.

"Dead?"

"It won't be bothering you again," Louis said, wondering at both his ability to lie by implication and his efforts to avoid the actual words.

William opened the door wide and fell back to let him enter. "You were right," he said heavily. "This changes everything."

"Damn right," Iris said with feeling. Her pale face held anger and suspicion behind the fading fear as she glared at Louis. "Why didn't you kill it at once?"

"I was afraid of hitting you as well. And I needed both hands to grip the animal." He came to a halt in the middle of the room and glanced from one to the other. "We have to decide what to do next."

"It's over," Iris said in a small, hard voice. No wonder she was angry. She'd liked her life here. "Peaceful infiltration is no longer possible. Our people will die every day as these wolves attack in increasing numbers. We must begin the military invasion."

Chapter Four

She sat on the floor, her naked back to the closed door, shaking with cold and reaction. At first, she couldn't force herself to change back, because she could smell *her* in here, the woman she didn't want to call his mistress. The woman she'd just tried to kill and still wanted to, along with her evil-smelling mate. Husband. Shit.

Dragging her trembling hand through her hair, she was just grateful that the scent of the woman was faint rather than recent. That, combined with the knowledge that she'd trapped herself in here at Louis's request, enabled her to calm down, to concentrate and for the first time ever, she'd managed to control her return to human form.

She looked around her at the bare white walls, at the clean, uncluttered furniture and the neatly made bed. Not a trace of personality. Worse than a hotel bedroom, where at least, you got the odd picture on the wall, however tacky.

She took a deep breath and rose to her feet. It was Louis she could smell in here, a strong, oddly comforting scent. In the house of the enemy, for whom he worked, it made her feel ridiculously safe. Crossing the small attic room with its sloping ceiling, she began to look for clothes. She wouldn't face him naked again. Not when even the memory of his body pressing down on her wolf's one was making her hot.

God damn it, she was a randy slut. Perhaps that was why she'd been altered, only it had all gone horribly wrong. She frowned, pulling one drawer open. Did the Government do that a lot? It was wrong, she knew that much. She must always have thought it wrong. Of course, the Government didn't like opposition, but it very rarely got any. Most people put up with it, because it gave them the greatest gift of all. Peace.

There were two pairs of trousers in the drawer, neatly pressed and folded. One black pair, like the ones he'd been wearing today, and one pair of denim jeans. She took

those out and something tumbled free. A large bird feather, white and blue and yellow. A pine cone. And a large sycamore leaf in vivid, autumnal red and gold. Like the random collections of a small child walking in the woods.

Her throat constricted. She put the items back carefully, respecting his wish to keep them from his masters' notice. Hastily, she climbed into the jeans and opened the drawer above to look for a top. There was another white shirt, the replica of the one he already wore, and a black T-shirt, which she pulled over her head before she noticed the paper peeking underneath the white one. Unable to prevent herself, she lifted the shirt and found a half-finished drawing, a sketch of the wood with birds on tree branches and a red squirrel gazing directly at the viewer.

It wasn't so much the astonishing detail that captured her. It was the colors. Bright and vibrant, almost overwhelming. Was that how he saw things? Or how he wanted to see them? She began to realize that he was a very odd android. Not just beyond her understanding, she suspected, but beyond his masters'. Beyond his creators'?

He was an out of control mechanoid with enough strength to overwhelm her. Yet she wasn't afraid of him. In both her forms, she sensed in him a very gentle being. Which didn't mean he couldn't and wouldn't blow someone's head off in certain circumstances. But it did seem to mean it wouldn't be her head.

Unexpected warmth flooded her. She liked who he was, who he was becoming. And she admired the strength that made it possible, even if she couldn't understand its source. She wondered if he did.

She shut the picture away, and moved restlessly to the window. How long before he came?

She could still smell the evil ones in the house, hear their faint voices mingling with his in a distant downstairs room. It churned her up and she couldn't stop shaking. Because she wanted him. Because she'd tried to kill someone. Killing was a huge thing, and the force of her desire shocked and frightened her. And yet it had seemed, it still seemed the right thing to do. Shit, but she had to sort this out. And she had the horrible

feeling that Louis the android was making it harder for her to do so, because his presence intensified her constant lust.

And yet the idea of "ordering" sex from him, of queuing up after his mistress -- who really *would* die -- appalled her. There was no solution to this one but to take her own advice of this afternoon and get the hell out of here to lick her wounds and discover who the hell she was. *What* the hell she was. She should go back to the town she started in, investigate properly, because here there seemed to be nothing but more questions.

She only had an instant's warning before he came in, the scent of his silent approach before the handle turned and she whirled round to face him framed in the doorway. Tall, dark, cool and sexy as sin. Everything melted at the sight of him. She wanted to slap herself back to sense.

He came in quickly and closed the door. "They think I killed you," he said.

She swallowed. "Don't they want a body?"

"No. It's my place to dispose of such things. I don't lie, so proof isn't necessary."

None of this made sense. "Why *did* you lie?"

He didn't answer at once, but crossed the space between them to stand looking down at her. Her heart drummed in her breast. Her stomach started performing somersaults. And yet he hadn't even touched her.

At last he said, "As an android, I am programmed with a code of ethics as well with unquestioning obedience to my masters. Lately, I have found those two programs to be -- incompatible. In conflict, if you like. I had to make a decision. You are as much a victim of programming as I, only yours is linked to that most powerful of catalysts, instinct. I don't have it, but I recognize it."

"I'm *not* an android," she whispered. "I can't be."

Unbearably, he touched her cheek with his long, gentle finger, and she wanted to weep. She wanted to turn her face into his hand, lose herself in him. "Humans are programmed too. What else is genetics?"

Her stomach jolted. "You know something. You know what I am," she accused.

He nodded. Though his hand fell away from her face, leaving it bereft, he didn't move back. "I even know your name."

She stared into his eyes. Suddenly she didn't want to know. She was afraid to know. And yet she had to. She had to deal with this. "Spill." It wasn't a bad attempt at lightness, and it brought the quirky smile she already valued flickering across his lips.

"Your name is Linnet Lewis. Captain Linnet Lewis."

She sank down on the bed. There was no *That's it!* moment. Just more blankness. The name meant nothing to her. "Are you sure?" she asked hoarsely.

"Yes." The bed sank under his weight as he sat beside her. "Remember you asked if I was part of a Government programme? Well, I believe you were. I think you, along with several other army personnel, including Major Jon Maynard, were genetically altered to what you are now, a shape shifting human-wolf hybrid."

"But why?"

He hesitated. "I think I'd better explain that tomorrow. When we leave."

"It's something to do with these people downstairs, isn't it? The people I just tried to kill?"

He nodded. "The people you would have undoubtedly killed if I hadn't stopped you."

"I need to know now," she said firmly. "I need to know everything now."

Unexpectedly, he smiled again. His arm moved and she felt his touch on the back of her neck, light but unmistakably caressing. Alarm shot through her, but more than that, far more, was the excitement it sparked. She wanted to wriggle her whole body, lean back into his hand.

She did neither. Instead, she forced herself to sit perfectly still and hold his cool, perceptive gaze. "I need to know," she repeated.

He shook his head. "Not yet. There's something you need more."

She had to make herself rigid to avoid melting. "What?" she managed, with rather desperate aggression.

"Sex." His whole hand closed on her neck and she couldn't prevent her gasp.

"Stop this," she got out. "Stop it now."

"Linnet."

Her name. Apparently her name, on his lips. *Oh God help me...*

"Linnet, your wolf is in season. You need to mate."

Her lips fell apart. She stared at him, relaxing as the full understanding of what he said sank in. And with it came huge, powerful relief. She wanted to laugh out loud. "In season? Of course! That's what it is! It was my first memory of being the wolf, so I didn't know! No wonder I'm randy as hell all the time. I thought I was a nymphomaniac! Well, thank God for that. I just need to hang on for, what, two more weeks, if wolves are anything like dogs, and it'll pass."

He nodded. "But you don't need to wait. I think you'd find me better than a vibrator."

Heat flooded her, burning her face, clenching her pussy. "Is that what *she* says?" she demanded furiously.

"No." His hand massaged her nape, spreading treacherous comfort, exciting sparks of pleasure that spread lower to her pebbled nipples and swept through to her core. "She never offered an opinion on the subject. You should know that another result of resolving my obedience versus ethics conflict is that I will no longer fuck her."

The graphic word excited rather than disgusted her. "Did she like you to talk dirty?"

"She did the talking. If you decide to let me fuck you, we won't talk of her."

Again the word jolted her, releasing moisture from her pussy and wetting his jeans. She wriggled at the sensation and gasped as the seam of the trousers rubbed back and forth across her clitoris. She was getting lost in his eyes, those cool eyes that somehow managed to gaze at her with tenderness, while his hand continued to stroke and massage her neck. She tried to drag her gaze free, but that too was a mistake, because she focused instead on his lips, so close to hers she could almost touch them. She could make out every tiny crease of their texture, longed to taste them. Taste all of him.

Oh God, she yearned for sex. She needed sex. And she longed for it with him. The force of it battered at her, so that she had to fight not to hurl herself into his arms, tearing at his clothes until she could impale herself on that stiff rod she'd felt on their first encounter.

Gasping with the effort of restraint, she said, "I can't. You're being kind to me and even if I am an animal, I can't, I won't, let anyone fuck me for such a reason. And you've had enough of being used, Louis. I want sex, I want you, but I won't do it."

His hand tightened on the back of her neck, almost like an involuntary gesture. His hazel eyes seemed to burn into hers. Cold fire. He murmured, "I have learned that I have a choice." Shockingly, deliciously, his hand closed over her clothed breast. "I choose this. I choose you."

She moaned, just as his mouth took hers, slow, tender and openly sensual. His fingers at her nape spread, holding her head steady as he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue between her teeth to tangle with hers.

Her self-control, held only by a very thin thread, snapped. She opened wide to him, gave him her tongue with a sound very like a sob. She flung one arm up around his neck and with her free hand pressed his fingers harder into her aching breast. Taking the hint, he rubbed and kneaded it, gliding his thumb across her nipples until she thought she'd explode.

"Say it," he ground into her mouth. "Say I may fuck you."

It was on the tip of her tongue to command him to fuck her at once, before she died of need, but even in her urgency she was aware he'd known too many orders. Half laughing, half-sobbing, she dragged her mouth free and wriggled to pull the T-shirt over her head and throw it on the floor. "Oh, you may fuck me," she said shakily. "Please, please fuck me..."

There was an instant when his gaze, riveted to her breasts, sent her libido soaring with wicked pride as well as need, and then he lowered his head and took one hard, elongated nipple into his mouth. His hand held her other breast, rhythmically rubbing his thumb over her nipple while his palm caressed the underside.

She tugged at his shirt, thrusting her hands under it until he paused long enough to remove it, and she could kiss and nibble the warm, smooth skin of his chest and shoulders. He shuddered under her touch, leaving her no doubt that he found it pleasurable, and when she let her hand fall to his crotch, she found the hard bulge of his cock ready for her.

She whimpered, pushing him back to climb onto his lap, to feel the hardness against her throbbing pussy. She rocked on it, writhing, knowing she could come just like this, even through her clothes and his.

But he rolled her over onto her back, unfastening and pulling off her jeans, giving her a moment to admire the rippling muscles of his arms and chest. Any woman would have longed to run her hands over those, and so she did, savoring them, while her hips bucked upward, searching for his cock.

She swept her hands downward, under the waistband of his trousers, almost panicking in her difficulty.

"Take them off," she pleaded. "Please take them off quickly, come into me... I want you so much it's killing me."

He stood over her on the bed and as her mouth went dry and her pussy wept all over again, he took off the trousers. He wore no underwear, so his cock sprang free at once, long and thick and upright, flanked by two smooth, hairless balls hanging at either side of its root. She couldn't remember much, but she was sure there had never been anything sexier than this being standing over her, totally naked and powerful, about to take her, fuck her to orgasm.

She didn't doubt that he could. Christ, she was so close already, she would come with little more than a touch. She growled, deep in her throat, reaching up for him. He met her half way, grasping her by the waist, and then, almost to her surprise, he turned her away from him and dropped her on the bed with her back to him. She fell forward onto her hands as he drew her hips backward and the head of his cock pushed between her cheeks.

She cried out with triumph, knowing this was what she wanted and how she wanted it. "Yes!" she approved. "Oh yes, like this..." She pushed back into him, felt his cock slide between her thighs, among her folds, across her hot, swollen clitoris. She wriggled until the head of his cock probed her entrance and then, because she could wait no longer, pushed onto him with an animal cry of need.

She was so wet he slid in easily, but when he thrust the whole way in she moaned at the exquisite pleasure. "Oh God, oh please, I can't wait. Louis, do it now, do it hard..."

He pulled out of her and she cried out in loss, before he thrust back in, hard, right up to his balls. It felt so good, she almost came. But he gave her no time to savor it. Gripping her hips, he pounded into her, slapping against the soft flesh of her buttocks, powering huge waves of pleasure into her. She tried to move with him, to squeeze him and bring him the joy he was bringing to her, but he was too much in control, fucking her so hard and mercilessly that she could do nothing but take it. And God, she loved it.

In the few seconds of his sweet hammering, she had turned into a grateful, moaning mass of helpless pleasure. One of his arms reached down, dragging her upright on her knees, so that he could hold her breasts in his hands, kneading them, squeezing her nipples between his long, clever fingers.

With every stroke they jerked farther across the length of the bed. She knew she'd come before she reached the headboard and the anticipation turned her moans into cries. One of his hands slid down her stomach and grasped her between the thighs. His fingers found her soaking clitoris and pressed. And she fell at last into massive, blinding orgasm.

Her whole body shook with it. She moved with it, urged it on, melted into it, falling helplessly back against him, and yet she managed to reach up for his mouth.

He gave her it, controlling the huge, devouring kiss she craved while her body convulsed in the throes of ecstasy.

I am Linnet Lewis, and I've never known sexual fulfillment like this. I never thought I'd have any kind of happiness again. I thought I was doomed to the awfulness of the cage and the

excruciating pain of changing. I thought there was only cruelty and callousness left in the world, and then there was him. Louis...

Opening wider to him, she felt his hand move on her pussy once more. He began to move inside her again, in long, slow strokes, bringing her back to climax. And this time, she felt him shuddering too. She opened her eyes to find his devouring her face, their desperate movements one of the few signs of his agitation. But she could feel his pleasure, knew he'd finally given in to whatever kind of climax he'd been granted and was fighting to maintain his continued, even strokes.

She growled into his mouth with anxious, fevered anticipation, for the combination of his control and orgasmic shuddering swept her ever closer. As the tide broke over her once more, so did a thousand memories, of her parents, her sisters, her pet dog. Of growing up in the city and joining the army. A hundred memories of difficult duties, keeping the peace, dealing with criminals and insurgents, responsibilities and cares, all crowded in, not drowning the endless pleasure, but part of it.

She came down slowly, wondering if she had actually lost consciousness. She was lying on her back and Louis was leaning over her. There was no true expression in his face, and yet she knew he was concerned. She smiled, because he was there, because she loved him, and put both arms around his neck to kiss him.

Chapter Five

There was a moment when Louis thought it had all gone wrong, when he wondered if the pleasure he'd given her had gotten entirely lost in pain. He'd watched her avidly through every stage of the wild, urgent lovemaking he'd sensed she needed, aware of a uniquely intense satisfaction that he had brought her to this. But at no point had he intended to hurt her, and as she collapsed in his arms, he knew an anxiety that might have been akin to human guilt.

He laid her tenderly back on the pillows, scanning her for signs of injury or distress. And then she opened her eyes again and smiled at him. With a gesture so natural it made his face ache, she reached for him and kissed his lips.

"I didn't hurt you?" he said, to be certain. "I thought you wanted it like this."

She made a sound like a purr that thrummed through his pleasure centers, igniting them all over again. "Oh, I did."

Satisfied, he risked throwing his leg over her and pressing his still hard cock to her thigh. Her eyes still smoldered with their recent passion, yet behind it, he read wonder and something approaching shyness. Her hand moved, touching his cheek with her fingertips.

"It was amazing," she whispered. "The best I ever had."

Because the words pleased him, he turned his face into her hand and kissed her caressing palm. "That makes me the best this week," he pointed out.

"No, that's what I'm trying to tell you. You gave me more than wonderful sex. You gave me myself back."

His eyebrow lifted in one of his programmed gestures of surprise. "You remember something?"

"I remember lots. Perhaps not everything, but..." Warmth flooded into her face, reddening her cheeks. "With each orgasm, I remembered more. You're right. I am Linnet Lewis, and I was altered by a deliberate Government programme for which I did not sign up. I even remember your Major Maynard. He was a friend, a comrade before the project, and then he was in there with me. But what I started to say was, I remember my past lovers and none of them were like you."

He stored the remark away, not just in the memory banks where everything else went, but in the special, secret place he'd opened recently and kept expanding. The private place that stored his ideas for painting, his unorthodox ethics and perception, his profound curiosity about humanity and emotion. His idea of self.

But logic compelled him to point out, "None of them were androids." And then for some reason he asked, "Were there many?"

"Lovers?" She shook her head. "No one special. No one that meant more than work. A few who were fun, one or two who made me wish they could be more to me. Nobody made me feel like you did."

He'd been programmed with the knowledge and the sensors to provide good sex. But he appreciated her kindness.

Then she said, "What about you?" And unlikely as it might seem, he realized she was seeking reassurance. Which, as it happened, he could give her with perfect honesty.

He kissed her mouth with sensual languor. "You gave me deeper pleasure than I have ever known."

"How does that work, exactly?" she asked, caressing the muscles of his shoulders, sliding her lips along the line of his "collarbone."

"How do I feel pleasure? I have been programmed with sexual responses, and with sensors that can reward me with pleasure for bringing my partner to orgasm."

Her lips stilled. "That sounds very clinical."

"It is. But the curious thing is, I never considered myself 'rewarded' until now."

It was true. Iris's orgasms, those of the barmaid with whom he'd spent a couple of his free nights, had seemed curiously separate from him. A mechanical process that

he knew how to operate and they appreciated. But Linnet, every moment with Linnet was inspired by his private files which he knew went far beyond his basic programming. And she was feeding them.

Linnet smiled, arching her back and wriggling until she could press her pussy to his cock. "I'd like to reward you some more."

Again, he surprised himself with his own eagerness to oblige her. There was more here than a programmed need to alleviate suffering -- which, in any case, was geared primarily to Gardenians. But before he could analyze his motives, he felt her pushing against his chest.

At once, he levered himself up and off her, about to apologise, but she rolled with him, straddling his body, sliding down his length, dragging her open mouth along his skin from neck to stomach, flicking wicked little licks across his nipples and ribs as she went.

She seemed fascinated by the perfection of his navel, caressing and licking it, probing with her tongue in gentle little stabs that confused his pleasure centers with stop-start sparks that thrilled him. Her free hand found his cock, stroked its length in her fist before reaching round to cup his balls. Barbara, the barmaid, had been pleased with those too, told him how much nicer they were than unshaved hairy ones. She'd even given him a couple of licks and kisses to prove her point before clambering aboard his cock once more. That had been a novel pleasure for Louis and he found he wanted Linnet to repeat the act.

She didn't. She rolled them in her hands for some time, which felt wonderful in itself, then slid lower, and actually took one of his balls into her mouth, sucking and licking. Louis's eyes closed with bliss. He wondered if pleasure with his wolf woman would go off the scale. What a pity that would be...

Popping the ball out of her mouth, she held it in her hand instead and wrapped her lips around the other one. She seemed in no hurry, and Louis saw no reason to urge her to anything else. In time, she released that ball too, and turned her attention to his shaft, licking her way up at as it lay upright on his stomach. At the soft head, where so

many pleasure points were located, she took it softly into her mouth and kissed it, before releasing it and pressing her mouth harder against his shaft, sliding her lips up and down it.

There was no reason for his “reward.” He hadn’t made her orgasm since his last one, and yet he felt the bliss begin and had to fight it back. “Linnet.” He grasped her head between his hands, tangling her hair in his fingers, trying to make her stop, trying to caress her, both at once. She cast a wicked glance up at him, and then deliberately took his cock deep into her mouth. Without meaning to, he thrust upward, and she took that too, swallowing him, and Louis, stunned, could only fall back on the pillow and let his pleasure centers have their way with him.

No, not the pleasure centers, Linnet. Linnet was sucking his cock, giving him this bliss. Linnet. He couldn’t fight it anymore. He let the explosion come, let Linnet engulf him. And it was like nothing he’d ever known before, blind, helpless, perfect joy.

I’m an android. I don’t feel joy. But his body, his private mind belied his logic circuits, and even then he knew he’d gone too far to ever go back. Probably too far to go on...

She released him slowly, working her way up his trembling cock until only the tip remained in her mouth. She gave it a last flick with her tongue and released him. “Perfect,” she purred, rubbing her cheek against his stomach. “Nothing to swallow, spit or dodge.”

Louis began to laugh.

* * *

Linnet woke with the first pale light of dawn. She knew a profound sense of well being that amounted to happiness. Because she had finally made love with Louis; because before she fell asleep, they had talked and talked and her feelings had grown and intensified to what consumed her now at her first waking moment.

More than all that, her troublesome pussy, which had roused her with its urgent longings every night for a week, was already moving in delight. Languorous pleasure

suffused her whole body, streaming outward from her clitoris, which was being tenderly, deliciously licked.

Opening her eyes, she saw Louis stretched between her spread legs, his busy tongue lost among her folds. "Oh Louis, you know how to wake a girl up," she purred. He lifted his glistening lips to smile at her, and her heart turned over.

"Good morning," he said, and returned to her pussy, covering its lips with his and kissing it. Linnet arched into his mouth, felt his tongue swiping her clitoris while he sucked and caressed. A finger slid inside her, adding to the pleasure as it stroked around her inner walls and found the place she liked best.

"Oh God, oh Louis," she whispered, and another finger joined the first. His other hand held her steady while he mercilessly kissed and finger-fucked her to oblivion. Then, with the first wave of orgasm he moved, throwing himself on her, pushing his cock inside her and thrusting into her as she came.

Linnet clung to him as climax tore her apart, flooding her head with memory and ecstasy in equal measure. She knew her nails dug into his flesh and couldn't stop them. He was her rock, her salvation, her source of bliss and life.

As the orgasm began to fade and she opened her dazed eyes, panting, he paused and kissed her lips and her throat. His smile enchanted her, made her smile back. She dug her head back into the pillow as he bit and sucked the skin of her throat.

Then, returning to her mouth, he began to move inside her again, and she rocked with him, catching the fading sparks, urging them back to life as she sought to bring him to his strange, ejaculation-free climax. She thought she could do this forever, just stay in this bed, fucking Louis, and never come out.

The idea sent her over the edge again. She convulsed under him, bucking and heaving as he thrust into her over and over until he too began to shudder, intensifying her own orgasm into a sharp, icy joy that shattered her.

Still at last, their trembling mouths parted slowly, and smiled in unison.

* * *

"Are they up?" Linnet asked as Louis re-entered the bedroom with a tray of food. In the few minutes of his absence, reality had intruded with a vengeance, and she spoke with an air of apprehension.

"No," Louis answered, walking to the bed where she sat against the pillows, wearing only his black T-shirt. He sat down beside her, and laid the tray between them.

"Do you think they heard us?" Linnet asked, flushing slightly.

"No. The rooms are all soundproofed. They wanted it that way."

No wonder, Linnet thought resentfully. Iris had obviously imagined she could hide the sounds of Louis fucking her from her husband and whoever else happened to be in the house at the time.

But giving rein to jealousy at this point was really avoiding the issue. Linnet reached slowly for the cold meat sandwich on the tray, and lifted her eyes to his. "They're not from here, are they?"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. She hadn't really expected him to. "No."

"And neither are you. I was right about our own technology."

His eyes remained steady, unoffended by her reminder of his android status.

She said quietly, "I was altered to find and kill people like them."

"I know."

She couldn't prevent the quick smile that flickered across her face. "Don't you mind?"

"I'm programmed to protect them, you to kill them. One's as bizarre as the other."

"Why are they here, Louis? To invade Earth?"

"Ultimately, yes."

She bit into the sandwich, realizing as the taste hit her tongue how hungry she was. She chewed and swallowed quickly and took another bite. "Why?" she demanded when she could speak.

"Our home planet, which you would call something like 'Gardenia,' although it hasn't been much of a garden for some time, is too overcrowded to sustain us for much

longer. Earth is a suitable alternative. With the minor inconvenience of already having a full and thriving population."

"Then what do they intend to do with us?" Linnet demanded.

"Ship most elsewhere to less hospitable environments, enslave or kill the rest."

His calm voice sent steely shivers down her spine. She said, "There would be war, awful, total war..."

"It would be over before it began. Those who are already infiltrated would take over vital installations. Gardenian agents are already in key positions in the military, in civil administration, health, media and communications. Humanity would be helpless, unable to fight."

"It wouldn't stop us," Linnet whispered, with tragic knowledge and stupid, infinite pride.

"No," Louis agreed. "That too would solve the native population problem."

"Shit." She dropped the almost consumed sandwich on the tray and dragged her hand through her hair.

Louis spoke matter-of-factly. "Earth's priority is to eliminate the infiltrators. I'm not sure how our people were discovered -- possibly an autopsy on an unexplained death started it off -- but Earth has sacrificed everything to that cause. The basic liberty of its citizens, its best military officers, its own ethics. And it will make no difference. Gardenia would prefer a peaceful invasion, but it is prepared to fight for Earth if it has too. And it will win."

"And your ethics are all right with this?" she snapped, springing up off the bed.

"No. Which is why the L'Estranges and I will part company."

Linnet closed her mouth.

Louis poured a glass of water from the jug on the tray and placed it in her hands. She drank. He said, "What will you do?"

She took a deep breath. "I'll have to speak to the right people, tell them that this werewolf idea is not only wrong but a waste of time. The latter argument should hold," she added cynically.

"Do you really think they'll listen to you?"

"Yes -- now that I know who I am. I have a distinguished record, my superiors always listened to me, valued what I had to say."

"That was then. Now you're a werewolf telling them their strategy and their morals are wrong. No one wants to hear that, certainly no one with so much invested."

"They have no alternative!"

"Yes they have. They can treat you some more and send you back out to kill aliens. Or they can put you down."

The blood drained from her face. She couldn't argue against the inhumanity of people who'd done what they had to her, even in the name of defense. And she couldn't go through it again.

Her throat tightened. She could barely swallow the lump of rising tears. Then Louis's arm was around her, drawing her against his chest, and she clutched him as her only lifeline. One day, maybe she could tell him about those awful days and nights, but not now.

She whispered, "I can't just let it happen."

"One voice won't be heard," Louis said. "It's harder to ignore many."

She lifted her head from his shoulder and stared at him. "We're facing invasion and you want me to drum up some kind of resistance to my own government?"

"Something quick and drastic is called for." He seemed to hesitate. Then: "The L'Estranges are terrified by the werewolf threat. They want to pull all the agents out and call in a full military invasion, hoping to take your people by surprise."

"Oh fuck," Linnet said in despair. "Then we have no time!"

"We have a little," Louis amended. "I persuaded them to do nothing until I had destroyed the werewolf project base."

Linnet blinked. "You know where it is?"

"I know. And I have the use of a craft that can get me to the region in a matter of hours."

Linnet caught her breath. "Blow it up... blow it open. Tell the world what's going on there. Instant opposition, instant allies, multiple voices... Louis, I want to find the other werewolves. And bloody hell, I want to smash that place to bits!" She glared at him. "I'm coming with you."

The smile she loved flickered across his face and was gone. "I hoped you'd say that."

Chapter Six

The L'Estranges' craft looked like one of the private commuter models prevalent among the Earth's wealthier travelers. But it had been modified, so that it could travel easily at Gardenian speeds. It could even go into deep space if necessary.

Louis had brought it from its hangar and parked it in the broad driveway in front of the house before going to fetch his bag. When he emerged again, William and Iris were waiting at the craft's door.

"You must tell us as soon as it's done," William reminded him. "Tell us exactly what was going on there, and what the effects of its demolition are. Your mission is to execute all werewolves found there or anywhere else. Report any escapees at once."

"I understand," Louis said, lifting his bag into the craft and sliding it across the floor before turning to face his "masters". "Have you warned the agents?"

"We can't until we know Maynard isn't receiving Rose's messages. He could anticipate your plan and stop you."

That, Louis thought, rather depended on who had attacked the base two weeks before and who had escaped from it.

"Warn them individually," he suggested in an effort to limit loss of life.

"There are too many," Iris said simply. "Communications between us and them are not set up to be sophisticated. They should hear nothing from us except two mass messages -- either Abort or Begin. I'm not yet ready to order either. Keep us informed."

Louis inclined his head, stepped up into the craft and closed the door.

The L'Estranges stepped back. "I'm not sure he's up to this," William murmured. "It's a tough task for one being, even an android of his capabilities. We might just be losing our greatest defense as well as our best weapon."

Iris shrugged. "It's my belief he's malfunctioning anyway. But he'll get back, I know he will. And then he's on the first craft back to Gardenia for a reset. In the mean time, my dear, we need a backup plan."

* * *

The takeoff was smooth and simple. Only when they'd reached optimum height and were beyond any likely recognition, did Louis switch in the masking mechanism, increase speed, and initiate the auto-pilot. Then he stood and, crouching by his bag, unfastened it.

Linnet sat up, blowing the hair out of her face. Dressed in another pair of Iris's discarded jeans and sweater, she looked young and vulnerable and far too appealing. Louis began to realize how much he would miss her, to wish he hadn't brought her, for her own safety as well as for his own peace of mind.

I'm an android. I don't need peace of mind.

Handing her out of the bag, he returned to his place at the controls. Linnet sank into the seat beside him. For a moment, she watched the view, but apparently constant cloud didn't interest her for she turned her gaze back to his face. He sensed her smile, but still she didn't speak.

Louis didn't mind her observation. In fact, it made him feel good. His sense of self file was getting far too large, influencing all his other programs. He wondered how long he could exist at this level without breaking down, and knew that even if he exploded tomorrow, he wouldn't change the experiences he'd been growing into over the preceding months. In particular, he wouldn't change his experience of the woman beside him, who was watching his face with such close attention.

She said quietly, "I love you, Louis."

His head snapped round, almost before he gave it permission. Her expression was serene but warm, and the light in her eyes left him in no possible doubt as to her sincerity. For a moment, something cramped his circuits -- he didn't know if it was joy or pain, neither of which were possible -- and then logic won through and the blockage cleared.

He said, "No you don't. You don't know me. And in fact, since there is nothing to know, there is nothing to love. I am an android."

"You are a *being*," she said fiercely. "And there's so much to know and to love, you fascinate me."

"That is not love. I am merely a curiosity. And you are in season. Your hormonal balance will change over the next two weeks"

She frowned at him. "Exactly how shallow do you think I am?"

His eyebrow lifted. "I don't believe you to be shallow at all. You clearly have excellent qualities and the strength to survive an ordeal that would have broken many lesser beings. You are also vulnerable just now and in need of emotional support. I cannot give you that."

Her frown deepened. "I'm just a bitch in heat, is that it?"

His brain hurt. He began to wish he could disable his own pain sensors. And yet it shouldn't be a physical pain. She hadn't injured him. "It's part of it," he said evenly.

"And you were just scratching my itch?"

"You needed it. I chose to help you."

"For future reference," she spat, "I don't want your fucking help."

"Very well." He stood up. The craft was still on auto-pilot and he needed to get away from her and straighten his brain out before the pain shut him down. He made his way toward the sleeping quarters, intending to make sure they were habitable for her, but her voice followed him, accusing, almost taunting.

"Can you really say you don't love me?"

He paused, without turning. "Yes," he said. "I am incapable of love."

He walked on and let the dividing curtain fall down behind him. He was sure he heard her mutter, "Bollocks. Absolute bollocks."

* * *

"We're going down," Louis said, snapping Linnet out of her reverie.

"But it's still light," she objected. They'd already agreed that striking the base in the dark was the best way ahead. "Won't the craft show up on their readings?"

"It's too far away to be of any interest to them. We'll come down near the village and it'll be lost among the other craft. Besides, once we land, we can mask it."

"Neat. At least we can reconnoiter in the daylight."

"You'll need food," Louis pointed out. "It's a long walk."

"Through forest," she said dryly. "Plenty of small animals on the way." But she spoke more to annoy him, to rouse him from the expressionless android state into which he'd sunk since her confession of love. She wanted to remind him she too was different, or to appall him. Anything to get a reaction.

But he said merely, "As you wish. I'll carry emergency rations in case you need them."

Deflated, she watched his steady hands on the controls, remembering them on her body, stroking her breasts so tenderly, slipping between her legs to urge her to orgasm. The simmering heat in her body began to boil up, and she pressed her knees together. She began to wonder if she'd got it wrong, if an android trying to follow his programming and do the right thing was all there was here. Scratching her itch because he wanted to help her, not because he wanted her.

And yet she could have sworn there was feeling there. That in his own way, he had always wanted her and welcomed the chance to make love to her. She'd seen his pleasure and rejoiced in it. But even that was programmed. He was a machine. A handsome sentient machine, and any ideas she had about his development as a person with human-like affections spoke more for her own desires and insecurities than for harsh, cold reality.

Get a grip, woman. You've been through worse.

Have I? asked a small voice. The one which had insisted on telling him she loved him. She really didn't need to listen to that one anymore.

The craft drifted down through the trees. The danger of such a landing at least served to distract Linnet from her dismal thoughts, and by the time it settled on the ground, she had dragged her own protective mantle around her. Adrenaline had begun to pump in her veins. She was going into action.

Emerging from the craft into a small, deserted clearing, they moved together into the trees. Linnet scanned the area around her constantly, aware that Louis was doing the same, only without turning his head. Perhaps his sensors should have freaked her, but she found they just added to her trust in him.

More than that, she began to feel powerful in this environment. The forest was her natural habitat now, she felt comfortable with it. It came to her that instead of wishing what had been done to her to be undone, she should just accept it, add it to who she was. As Louis did.

In fact, if she changed now, they could cover the ground in no time. Louis could move easily as fast as her wolf...

Something assailed her nostrils like poisonous gas, and she stopped in her tracks, the hairs on the back of her neck rising like hackles. Her hand reached naturally for Louis's to hold him back, to drag him into deeper cover until she could hunt down the evil.

But he had already paused, and merely resisted her tugging. "People," he said. "Two, one point six kilometers distance at twenty-five degrees."

"Precise," she allowed. "But I smell alien. Why should there be aliens here?"

"I don't know," said Louis, moving forward. "But they've altered direction, coming straight for us, moving fast. Linnet?"

"Yes?" She left her hand in his. It felt good, curiously right, and he didn't drop it.

"Don't kill her before we ask questions."

The constant lust which had been thrumming through her all week rose up with unexpected intensity, confusing her feeling for Louis with the smell of wolf. It took an instant to work it out.

"I don't think that'll be an issue," she said grimly, increasing her speed. "There's a wolf far closer to her than we are."

As one they moved faster, sacrificing silence to speed, until they burst through the trees and came face to face with two people, armed to the teeth.

The red-headed woman pointed a gun straight at Louis. The man had his hand on his belt, from which dangled various knives and guns. Somewhere, Linnet registered that she knew the man, but that fact was lost in the upsurge of blood-lust as she stared at the woman.

The woman was alien and needed to die. Linnet knew she should fight it, that she had run here to save her from another wolf. But since the alien also threatened Louis, a howl of rage built up from her stomach. She began to shift, at the same time hurling herself forward at the alien.

She was snapped back as if she'd been held by an elastic band, crashing into Louis's side, his arm like a steel band around her, pinning her to him. Her wolf slunk back inside. "Captain Lewis?" the man said, and her eyes snapped back to him.

She acknowledged his scent as well as his familiar tall, harshly handsome face, and remembered. "Major Maynard," she whispered.

He lifted his arm, and slowly brought down the alien's. The gun disappeared. "Who's this?" His hard eyes were on Louis.

"A friend," she said hastily. "What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" the Gardenian woman countered.

Linnet glanced at her and made another discovery. She knew her face too. Rose Winter, the journalist, in reality one of the Gardenians' first infiltrating agents. Surely Maynard knew that?

Louis said, "We're going to blow up the base and bring out the werewolves."

Not many things had surprised Maynard in the old days. But that did. He swung his gaze back to Louis, eyebrows raised. Then a grin broke over his face and he offered his hand. "Us too."

* * *

They sat on the ground, drinking water and sharing some of the food each party carried, exchanging stories. Maynard said, "They took me back when I began to poke into their classified files. I think they already knew I'd let an alien go too -- that was Rose. Rose got me out, but I swore then I'd go back for the others."

Linnet nodded. "We have a camera, to record it all, so we can send it to the Newscreens, let everyone know what's going on here."

"I can do that," Rose said. "I still have contacts and I know the best places to send."

"And freeing the others should give us the beginning of a force for opposition," Linnet added. "To the invasion, and to the Government's handling of it."

Maynard stirred. "Have you considered that the aliens too could be useful allies?"

He held her gaze and Linnet saw something intensify in his eyes before a confused look came into them and a tinge of color seeped into his face.

"Aliens? How?" she demanded, while she tried to work out the cause of his confusion.

"As you know, I am one," Rose said. "I'm Gardenian. I came with the first wave of agents five years ago. I don't want to betray my people, but living here gives you a different perspective. Gardenians have no right to take this planet from you. I think others might feel the same way, especially if we talk to them."

"I doubt the L'Estranges would listen to us," Linnet said doubtfully.

"No," Louis agreed. He was watching Maynard watching Linnet.

Linnet asked Rose, "Can you contact the other agents?"

"I don't know who they are. We thought we could find them via the werewolves who've begun to remember."

Maynard shifted uncomfortably and Linnet noticed his tented trousers before he tugged his jacket lower.

Louis said calmly, "It's just a chemical reaction. She is in season."

Linnet's face flamed. Her whole body churned between fury and lust as she rounded on Louis for betraying anything so private. But before she could speak, he said, "If we're open about the facts there can be no misunderstanding."

Their gazes locked. As always, there was little expression in Louis's face, and yet she could have sworn there was lots going on behind it. If she didn't know better, she could almost imagine his words had been inspired not by openness but by jealousy.

Maynard said, "So he's how you remembered." He sounded relieved.

Her gaze flickered to him. "Yes," she said proudly.

"Then you should introduce us, because I've no idea who he is. He smells of aliens, and yet not enough to be one."

"I'm not," said Louis. "I am an android developed and programmed by the Gardenians to serve those who control the infiltration of Earth."

"He's more than that," Linnet added quickly. "Much more. He's worked out for himself what's right and he is not, absolutely not, our idea of what an android might be."

"Got it," Maynard said, amused.

"You shouldn't be able to do that." Rose frowned at Louis.

"I know."

"What else can you do that you're not supposed to?"

"I can trace the Gardenians on Earth to within a kilometer."

"How?" Maynard demanded.

"A quick download from the L'Estranges' computer."

"Useful," Maynard allowed.

"So how," Louis enquired, "were you planning to break in to the base?"

"With difficulty," Rose said ruefully. "They've upgraded security since Jon broke out. I can't get close enough to the scanners to disable them now. Also they've got cameras all over the place, and guards patrolling the perimeter of the building. We'll have to shoot the scanners, then Jon -- and Linnet if she's game -- will have to take out the guards as silently as possible to give us the chance to get inside undetected."

"In all, we're relying a lot on surprise," Maynard said ruefully. "And luck."

"Not necessarily," Louis said, and everyone looked at him expectantly. He smiled faintly. "I can disable the scanners from here. They won't break down, they simply won't register our presence."

"Bloody useful," Maynard commented. "What else do you do?"

"I can stun the guards, noiselessly." He flexed his arm, and with a motion somehow grotesque, his knuckles came apart revealing what looked like gun barrels.

"Fuck." Linnet's voice shook.

"What she said," Maynard agreed. He took a deep breath. "Well, I'm glad we ran into you guys. I think we have a chance now. To be frank, if it hadn't been so necessary to do this, I wouldn't even have risked it before. We couldn't have succeeded without a bloodbath."

Linnet, now that Louis's hand was back to normal, found it easier to drag her mind back to military mode. "One we're inside, I suggest two of us go straight to the basement where the cages are, while the other two lay the explosives. Then sound the fire alarm, give everyone else a chance to get out, then blow the place."

"Sounds good," Maynard approved.

Rose said doubtfully, "What worries me is getting the wolves out. They're in a terrible state, confused, hungry, sick, only half-changed in many cases. There's no guarantee they'll follow us, even if they smell Jon and Linnet."

"Trust me, one whiff of Linnet will do it," Maynard said fervently. Rose gave him a sharp glance, but before she could speak, if she intended to, Louis rose smoothly to his feet and distracted her with the minutiae of their plan, the angles of their attacks, and the precise timing, after which he synchronized their watches to his internal chronometer without so much as a blink of an eye. Finally, they arranged to meet back at the current location after the breakout, in order to divide the rescued wolves between their craft and begin the next, far longer and more difficult part of their plan.

"Good luck," Maynard said as they prepared to part.

Louis took his outstretched hand with a nod. Interestingly Rose, who must have been more used to the idea of android "servants," shook hands with him too. A smile

even flickered across her rather beautiful face, as she said, "You're amazing, do you know that?"

"I'm beginning to understand that," Louis said and turned away.

Something about his tone made Linnet long to take his hand, but first she had to steel herself to touch the Gardenian's hand without tearing her to bits. Looking, almost glaring into her eyes, she found it easier than she'd expected. She wasn't like the L'Estranges. She was her own person, and a good one. Linnet gave her a lopsided smile and turned hastily to Maynard. "Take care, Major. I've a feeling you might be useful in this struggle if you stay alive."

Maynard grinned. "Good to see you again, Lewis. I'm glad you came through."

"Me too," she mumbled. She pressed her forehead to his shoulder in a hard, brief gesture of friendship and pulled free toward Louis, who was already nearly out of sight.

Maynard tugged her back to face him, frowning toward the place they'd seen him last. "Linnet. Do you know what you're doing there?"

She shook her head. Without warning, she wanted to cry.

"Do you trust him?" Maynard asked urgently.

The tears vanished as quickly as they'd risen, for the answer to that one was clear. "Yes," she said and walked away.

Chapter Seven

As darkness fell, Louis began to show signs of agitation. His head turned constantly toward her, then away as soon as she looked around to meet his gaze. His too frequent movements were quick and far less fluent than before, almost jerky. Linnet worried that there was something wrong. It felt like a stab in her heart, and yet the distance he'd achieved between them prevented her taking his hand, from asking naturally what the hell was wrong.

To make things harder, she needed to change. Her wolf was clamouring to be released, but she knew she had to keep to her human form for as long as possible, to be able to think, plan, react without the interference of blind and possibly disastrous instinct. Besides, as the wolf, she couldn't talk to Louis. And so she resisted, and was almost surprised that she was strong enough to do so.

Eventually, as she rested against a tree to await the allotted time, she spoke quietly, without looking at him. "What is it, Louis?"

For a moment, she thought he wouldn't even trouble to answer. Then he said abruptly, "I don't want you to go in there."

She stared at him. "I have to go. Even if I wasn't a soldier, I'm vital to the plan."

His head jerked back against the tree in a peculiarly human gesture of frustration. "I know that. I don't want you to be... hurt."

He didn't want anyone to be hurt. But still, it relieved her, warmed her enough that she could take his hand, and he let her. "Louis. It's normal to feel like this about a friend. You have to accept it, put it to one side and play your part. Let me play mine."

He nodded. "I know that." He straightened as if he'd resolved his dilemma. And Linnet, satisfied now, reached up and kissed his cheek. "Come on then. We'll move a little closer to the fence to wait."

Movement helped her stay calm, keep the wolf at bay. She turned away from Louis and began to walk on. She still had hold of his hand, urging him to follow, but not for the first time, he surprised her.

Without warning, he jerked her back against him and spun her up against the tree with his hard, lean body hemming her in. Even through her shock, she rejoiced in the feel of his hard cock against her stomach. "Wait," he commanded. "It may end now. One or other of us may die and it would remain unsaid, undone."

"What w-" she began, but the words were lost in his mouth as it slammed down on hers, urgent and demanding. Linnet's stomach somersaulted. Bolts of desire shot downwards to her hot pussy, loosing the pool of moisture that gathered there from her continual lust. But this was different. This was much more specific. It was Louis she wanted kissing her, Louis she wanted between her legs. Even now, with minutes to spare before their attack on the base, she welcomed the raging need with an inarticulate moan of pleasure.

Louis opened her lips wide with his and took possession of her mouth with his tongue. He pressed his lower body into her, grinding his hard cock into her hips, her stomach, dragging her onto her tiptoes so that he could get nearer her pussy. She arched into him blindly. His hand slid inside her jacket, under her sweater to find her naked breast, where it closed and kneaded with unbearable sensuality. His other hand slid under the waistband of her jeans.

His unexpected urgency overwhelmed her, melted her. More than that, it pushed back her need to change, because as the wolf, she wouldn't have this, she wouldn't have Louis. She did make one brief effort to restore sense, gasping into his mouth, "We've got no time, Louis. Later..."

"Later may never be. I want you now." His hand on her breast was caressing, dragging the pad of his thumb across her hard, pleading nipple. His other hand thrust between their bodies, unfastening his jeans and her own.

They'd had all day, the hours in the craft, the time since they'd parted from Maynard and Rose. She wanted to shake him. She wanted to climb on him, wrap her

legs around him and fuck him. She knew she should stop this now, that they mustn't let the others down by being late. And yet when he yanked down her jeans and thrust his naked cock between her thighs, weakness overcame her.

"Oh God," she moaned. "Be quick, Louis..."

He slid along her wet, sensitive folds, rubbing his length along her delirious clitoris before pushing inside her in one hard thrust. Her head fell back against the tree. Its bark dug into her hair, her back and buttocks, and she loved being trapped between its hardness and Louis's.

Gyrating her hips, she clung around his neck and gazed into his cool eyes that nevertheless seemed to burn in the darkness. He pulled back and thrust again, repeatedly, while whispered words spilled from his mouth.

"I would do anything to help you, Linnet, including fuck you as often and as long as you need. But there's more, far more than that. I never initiated sex before you. I never wanted anyone before you. I was changing slowly, gradually, but since you came, it's been galloping."

She gasped, her body seeming to rise up the tree with the force of his thrusts. "Then you don't mind that I love you?"

"I want you to love me. I just can't deal with it. I'm not designed for this... I don't know how long I can sustain it. Linnet..." His mouth took hers again while he circled and ground inside her, driving her ever nearer. His words flooded her mind, sending it soaring with the joy of her body.

"Linnet, I don't know how long I have. I might blow from this, I might shut down, but I don't want to stop, however long I've got."

"Don't stop!" she begged, helpless as orgasm hovered on the brink. Only a few more of those pounding, delicious thrusts... But she was more than her hormones; it just took a while for meaning to penetrate them. "Oh God, stop, Louis. We're going too fast. We'll find a way for you to adapt, maybe one of the Gardenians on Earth, or we can travel to your world..."

She moaned as he changed the angle of penetration, stabbing against her G-spot before sliding his length along it and back. "Louis, stop. I can't lose you for the sake of one fuck, whatever it's doing to me."

"I have longer than one fuck. I just want you to know. And I won't stop. I don't want to, and neither do you. Come. Come with my cock so deep inside you, it's part of you..."

Linnet shattered around his driving cock, burying her screams in his kiss, lost in helpless convulsions. He thrust on, not even pausing when he began to shake and shudder with his own pleasure. Until it became too much even for him, and they collapsed together against the tree and let the storm take them.

It passed slowly, sweetly. His arms held her, his mouth kissed her and despite the new anxieties that he'd spilled out in the intensity of the moment, Linnet had never been so happy in her life. "We *will* find a way," she whispered.

"I don't want you to be hurt if we don't. I've struggled between that and the dishonesty of keeping silent and pushing you away. But you deserve to know."

She leaned her forehead against his. "Thank you."

He touched her face with his fingertips, caressing her lips and cheeks with a tenderness that made her throat ache. "I can't feel human love. Or Gardenian love. But there is something for you... I call it love. If it is enough."

She turned her face into his hand. "More than enough," she whispered.

He began to straighten her clothes, pulling up and fastening her jeans. "Can you walk?"

"The knees are a bit wobbly, but they'll do. Why?"

"It's time," he said quietly, fastening his own jeans.

They moved forward together. Linnet's heart hammered. She didn't know if it was what they'd just said and done, or the action to come. But she knew she wouldn't change anything. With a sigh of massive relief, she let the wolf go and ran.

* * *

An hour later, the cages were open, and the abused beings within, duly photographed in their various stages of transformation, streamed out after Linnet's wolf. She led them upstairs at full tilt, Louis running by her side.

At the top, a passing guard did a double take and raised his gun in panic. Louis launched himself so quickly that he knew humans would hardly see him move. In an instant, he had the soldier pinned by the neck to the wall, his weapon clattering to the floor, while Linnet and the other wolves ran on, some on four legs, some on two. Some were whimpering, others howling. There was no way they could keep the attack silent any longer.

Louis cracked the soldier's head on the wall and let him fall, bending his mind instead to the remote sounding of the fire alarm. The wolves had enough momentum to get themselves out now. Maynard and Rose, hopefully, would get out in the confusion.

Louis sprinted on to the blaring sound of the alarm, ready to protect the wolves from gunshots, anxious to keep Linnet in his sight. Rose bolted out of a side passage, Maynard behind her, firing his handgun back into the corridor they'd just left.

And at that moment, when Louis was sure they had won, his internal receivers got the message that could make their risk and their achievement meaningless.

The L'Estranges hadn't waited for his report after all. They were signaling Gardenia, calling for full-scale military invasion. And Louis didn't think he'd masked their message in time.

Holiday Howlz: Cry for the Moon

Marie Treanor

A lonely woman spends Christmas by herself in the country cottage she once shared with her beloved husband, a soldier who disappeared without a trace over two years ago. She has finally accepted that he's dead and is even contemplating suicide.

On Christmas Eve, a knock on the door heralds the arrival of a homeless man in ragged clothes who bears a staggering resemblance to her husband. However, he doesn't know who he is, or what has led him to the cottage. Recklessly, she lets him stay the night, but begins to suspect she may have made a terrible mistake when, in the midst of unexpected passion, a wolf flees howling from her bed.

Chapter One

In spite of everything she knew, Ruth's heart beat faster as she turned the final corner of the lane, the one that would bring the cottage into view. She even walked faster, her boots crunching over the frosty ground like those of a much younger, much happier woman rushing to meet her lover. Her breath steamed and sparkled in the cold darkness, drawing her onward.

And still in spite of everything she knew, she couldn't help the corroding disappointment when the black building loomed at last in front of her. No warm, welcoming glow from the windows. No Christmas tree gleaming behind the curtains. No impatient lover watching for her approach.

Of course there wasn't. There hadn't been for the last two Christmases and there wouldn't be ever again. Jared was dead.

Her brief, silly hope done with, she let the dull lethargy close around her again, like a familiar, if boring, friend. Stepping up to the front door, she slid her key into the lock and kicked frost off her boots before entering the dark cottage.

Although she hadn't been here for several months, it was exactly as she'd left it. Switching on the lights, she saw that a thin layer of dust covered the surface of the hall table. It would be everywhere, which would give her plenty to do tonight before she went to bed.

Walking into the kitchen, she laid her meager shopping on the table and began to unpack. Coffee, milk, bread and whisky. When she opened the fridge, she found that Jane and Charlie, her nearest neighbors who kept the spare key for her, had left a turkey as usual.

Ruth's throat constricted. It was a kindness begun when she and Jared had first bought the cottage and continued even after Jared's death. They barely saw the couple

but had always exchanged Christmas gifts -- always a fresh, home-bred turkey from Jane and Charlie -- and met on Boxing Day for a drink, if Jared didn't have to rush back on duty.

A pang of guilt struck at Ruth. She hadn't bought them a gift this year. Lost in isolation and grief, she'd never even thought of it. Now she wondered how they'd feel to find their turkey ignored and uneaten. Nor would it be kind to let them discover her body.

It was a silly idea to do it here, anyway. She should wait until she got back to the city and do it there where no one would care. She wasn't thinking straight, hadn't been since the two year anniversary of Jared's disappearance. Since he was legally dead, it shouldn't have made any difference. The army had long made it clear that she should regard him as dead, even though there was no body to mourn. They couldn't give her details for classified reasons, but they'd left her with no doubt that he was gone for good.

What the two year anniversary had done was make her a widow, make her realize finally that he wasn't ever coming home, and that without him, she really didn't want to carry on. She knew it was a weakness, a terrible fault, that she couldn't pull herself together, find some other cause to live for if she wasn't interested in finding another man as her colleagues kept trying to persuade her to do. But the truth was, she had always been a one man woman, and no other man interested her. And now she was bored with life, bored with grief.

"Stuff it," she said aloud, putting the kettle on. "What does it matter where or when? Just get through Christmas one last time."

* * *

The cottage cleaned to her satisfaction and the living room fire lit, she curled up in the armchair with a glass of whisky. Beside her, the radio played non-stop Christmas carols in its inexorable build up to midnight and the eternal hope of Christmas Day.

Ruth smiled into the flames. "Bah, humbug," she murmured and toasted the fire with her glass. "Good luck, world." She took a drink, relishing the fiery streak down her throat.

Then she closed her eyes and remembered a different Christmas, when Jared was here with her, holding her on his lap in this very chair while they'd talked and laughed and teased each other over a shared glass of whisky, just relishing this chance to be completely alone together for two or even three whole days. Christmas had seemed magical then.

Her colleagues thought she exaggerated their happiness together, but she didn't. She hadn't forgotten the bad times, the quarrels and lively disagreements. She remembered very well that Jared hadn't been perfect; he could be arrogant and thoughtlessly selfish and there was a tough, almost hard streak in him that could be frightening. But then, he was a soldier, and a basically good man with a strong sense of responsibility, serious about his job and about her. He'd been her best friend as well as her lover. They'd laughed together as much as they'd talked, and much, much more than they'd fought.

"Here's to you, Jared, wherever you are," she whispered and blindly took another drink. And since it was all so nearly over, she relaxed her self-imposed rule and let herself dream he was here, that it was his arm not her own that folded across her breasts. That there was a present for her under the Christmas tree, which she hadn't troubled to put up, and one for him. One last fantasy to the sounds of the crackling flames and the interminable carols.

The laughter at something she'd said would just be dying in his eyes as he gazed down at her. Slowly, he'd nudge up her chin and bend his head to kiss her. Jared's kisses were priceless, long, slow and thorough. And unashamedly sensual, even a kiss of greeting or farewell given in front of others. But this one would be special, deeper, more urgent.

Ruth lost herself in her dream, the remembered feel of his lips and tongue, the caress of his hand on her breast while the other sneaked up her skirt to stroke her thigh

and hip and slide round between her legs. She was wet for him, always eager, and the discovery made his breath hitch as he slid his fingers inside her panties to find the slick nub of her clitoris. Jared's fingers... she loved his fingers, adored the pleasure they gave her. But soon, she wanted more. She turned in his arms, burrowing under his sweater to pull it over his head before unzipping his jeans and dragging out his fully erect cock. Raising herself in his arms, shivering as his hands closed around her naked hips, she gazed into his hot, devouring eyes as she lowered herself onto his cock. God, it felt so good, filling her, answering her every desperate need...

A loud knock shattered her dream. Whisky sloshed over her hand as she jumped. Who the hell could that be? Whoever it was, she hated them for interrupting her dream. It had almost felt real.

Standing, she dashed her hand across her wet face. Shit, when had she started to cry? As the knock came again, loud and impatient, she walked unsteadily to the door, wiping her eyes on her sleeve as she went.

She was a woman, alone, in an isolated cottage at night. But she ignored the danger. She'd been beyond caring for some time. In any case, it must be Jane or Charlie in the midst of some emergency.

She flung open the door. "What is it?"

She found a tall man leaning one arm across the door frame, staring at her. In the contrast of the lit cottage with the darkness outside, she couldn't make him out properly, but he seemed to be large and ragged and unshaven. And by some unkind trick, he managed to look like her husband.

Her throat dried up. Shock and grief kept her frozen. Had she fallen asleep in front of the fire and was dreaming? After all, she'd had dreams like this before, where he came back... Only he hadn't looked so... rough.

He moved, pushing his head forward into the light and she saw that of course it wasn't Jared. This man had blank, wild eyes, not the thoughtful, intelligent, often cynically amused ones of her husband. And he was too thin, too unshaven. Jared had never had stubble growing all over his neck like that...

The man took a step nearer her, and instinctively, although she wasn't frightened, she took one back. She blinked. In the glow of light from the cottage, his neck no longer looked so hairy, though he clearly hadn't shaved for some time. Unsure, she lifted her gaze back to his.

He stared at her, a frown etched between his thick brows. Or were they really so thick? Perhaps they were just untidy. But his eyes... her mind was playing tricks, for his eyes seemed to be exactly the same shade of bright, piercing blue as Jared's.

He said, "Who are you?"

She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the dream to end, because it didn't seem right to let the stranger have Jared's voice, even if distorted with some hoarse, gravelly element it had never possessed in real life, only to deny any knowledge of her.

"I'm Ruth. Who are you?"

Not Jared. Even in a dream, not Jared. Life sucked. "I don't know."

She opened her eyes. "You don't know your name? Or you're having some philosophical identity crisis?"

A faint, a very faint smile tugged at his lips. That *was* like Jared, and it twisted her heart. "Both."

Dream or not, she decided to go with it. "All right, let's try something easier. What do you want?"

The frown deepened. "I don't know that either. I thought..." He trailed off, gave a quick, half-apologetic shrug. His gaze darted behind her, then upward and around the cottage before coming back to her face. "I thought you might be able to tell me. I'm sorry."

He turned away, and released from his eyes, Ruth took in the full state of his dress as he began to walk with hunched shoulders and an uneven gait. Down-at-the-heel boots with the toes almost worn out, torn trousers that were much too thin for the weather, and an old, moth-eaten coat that had been ripped down one side. A deranged down-and-out, his mind no doubt destroyed by drink or drugs or both.

With the face of her husband.

"Wait." She'd said it before she meant to, but she didn't regret it. She could give him money and send him away, only where would he spend it around here on Christmas Eve? He paused and glanced over his shoulder. "You don't have anywhere to stay, do you?"

"It's warm in the woods."

"No, it isn't."

Even in the darkness and over the distance between them, she sensed the confusion that briefly crossed his face. "Actually, it's not as bad as you think. The cold."

"You can stay here, if you like. For tonight."

There was a pause, then he said, "Thank you. But I'm better in the woods."

"Then why did you knock?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Christmas Eve."

"Then let me do you this one kindness before I die."

He straightened and began to walk slowly back toward her. "Before you die?" His eyes, his whole face looked anxious now, the frown quite ferocious, reminding her unbearably of Jared when something angered him. "You're too young to die. Are you ill?"

She smiled. "Yes," she admitted. "I'm ill. But it's not catching. Come in."

He stared into her eyes and for a moment, she thought he would refuse. Then he merely nodded and waited for her to lead the way.

Chapter Two

He stood in her little living room, shrinking it as Jared had used to, by his size and presence.

"Please, sit down." A little nervously, Ruth waved her hand at the second chair. "Coffee? Whisky?"

The stranger with Jared's eyes dragged one dirty hand through his matted hair. "It doesn't seem right," he muttered. "I've been living rough. I'm not... house-friendly."

"Would you like a bath? The water should be hot by now."

He didn't answer at once. Then he said, "You're here alone?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't do that." He frowned at her.

"What?"

"Invite strangers into your home, admit you're alone. Offer them whisky and baths."

Amused in spite of herself, she said, "Too late. I already have."

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

"No. But then I don't seem to be afraid of anyone or anything anymore."

"You should be."

She shrugged. "I'm not."

Again, his eyes scanned hers. "Then I'll accept the bath and the whisky and an hour of your time. And then I'll be going."

"As you wish. Let me show you the bathroom."

Not crowding her, he waited outside the bathroom while she turned on the taps of the old-fashioned bath and laid out a couple of towels for him. In case he wanted it,

she left out Jared's shaving kit and murmured that she'd find him some clean clothes and leave them outside the bathroom door.

Brushing past him, she felt the warmth of his body through his tattered, dirty clothes and was shocked by the tingle of her sexual response dampening her panties. Half frightened now by her unexpected reaction, she glanced up at him, almost with foreboding. His body was tense, his face carefully expressionless. But for some reason she sensed his discomfort and was soothed by it, at least enough to recognize that her desire came from the fact that he looked so much like Jared -- and by her body's unfinished business so soon after her own fantasy of being with Jared.

With a quick smile, she squeezed past and let him enter the bathroom, which he did wordlessly, closing the door with a definite snap that comforted her some more.

She thought it might hurt, digging out Jared's clothes from their untouched place in the cupboard. But it didn't. It reminded her that she should finally give all his stuff away to good causes. In the meantime, some socks and shorts, a pair of decent jeans, a T-shirt and warm sweater could all go to her visitor. And there was a warm, waterproof jacket he could have too. Leaving the indoor clothes in a neat pile outside the bathroom door, she hung the jacket beside hers at the front door. She'd give it to him when he left, whether that was in an hour or in the morning.

Then she made up the bed in the tiny spare room and went to the living room to wait. Curling up in her chair, she retrieved her whisky and wondered how long he would be. She half expected him to take ages, luxuriating in the treat of warm water, maybe even stumbling over things like shaving, which must have become unfamiliar to him over the period of his homelessness.

She surprised herself by how much she wanted to hear his story. She'd cut herself off from people too much, especially in the last few months since she'd finally accepted Jared's death as final.

More quickly than she expected, the bathroom door clicked open. He'd be picking up the clothes, going back inside to dress and shave...

Ruth took a sip of whisky, a little nervous now as to how to talk to him without sounding patronizing. Hell, she'd managed before. After all, she was planning to kill herself. She had absolutely nothing to be patronizing about.

A shadow caught the corner of her eye and she glanced up at the doorway.

Her heart jolted, sweeping downward into her stomach with a rush that left her breathless and dizzy. It could be Jared standing there. It *was* Jared standing there.

Tall and lean, he fitted Jared's clothes almost perfectly. Perhaps the muscles in his thighs pushed slightly against the denim of his jeans, and perhaps he was a little thinner around the hips, but he still looked good in them. He even suited the baggy black sweater which had been part of Jared's favorite slobbing garb. He'd always looked sexy in it, and so did the stranger.

Under her stunned gaze, he began to move into the room. The corded muscle in his neck drew her attention before she focused on his face. Clean shaven, he was Jared's double. Perhaps his cheekbones were a little leaner, his eyes a little more deep set and hollowed, but otherwise, it was Jared's face. And Jared's eyes. Without the slightly scary mixture of wildness and blankness she'd noticed before, these were surely Jared's eyes. Perceptive, sensitive, thoughtful, intelligent. And blue enough to drown in.

"Oh God," she whispered, rising to her feet. The glass slipped from her fingers, balancing precariously on the arm of her chair as she moved across the room to meet him. "Jared... Jared..."

Her arms went around him of their own volition, her head pressed into his chest. Warm, real... Jared.

She gasped. She couldn't control the ache in her throat, the words that spilled from her mouth. "You *are* Jared! How did I not know you? I'm your wife and you needed to bathe before I even knew you..."

"My *wife*?"

The unmistakable stunned note in his voice broke into her confusion. She realized he held himself stiffly in her arms, that his hands were on her shoulders, not

embracing her but holding her back so that he could stare into her face, scanning, searching. But not finding what he sought -- that much was clear.

"You don't know me," she whispered. "Am I wrong, then? Do I really not know you? Am I mad enough now to imagine your face, your voice on a stranger?"

His Adam's apple wobbled as he swallowed. "I don't know. I have amnesia. You could be my wife, or a complete stranger. You should hope for the latter."

"Why?" she demanded. "I have dreamed, I have *wanted*..."

"You can't have wanted this..."

"More than my life."

His eyes widened. He drew in a deep breath. "And that's your illness?"

She closed her eyes, shutting out his face, hiding her tears and her shame. "Yes," she whispered. "That's my illness."

He moved. She felt his arms around her shoulder, drawing her with him, seating her in the chair, wrapping her fingers around the glass she'd abandoned. His touch was vaguely shocking, warm and gentle despite the roughness of his hands. Like Jared's and yet not quite.

"I'll have that whisky now, if I may," he murmured.

She gestured to the dresser where the bottle and the spare glasses lay. His hands were steady, not those of a drunk, and the measure he poured was generous without being excessive. Jared's normal dram.

I can't bear this. Why don't I know for sure? Shouldn't I know my own husband?

She watched mutely as he came back to her and instead of taking the chair on the other side of the fireplace, sat down on the rug, by her feet, facing her.

He said quietly, "Tell me about your husband."

She swallowed. "His name was Jared. He was a soldier, an army captain. He died two years ago."

"Then I can't be your husband."

She couldn't work out if it disappointed him or not. Hell, why should it? She was clearly a half-mad woman damaged beyond repair by grief.

Perversely, she chose to fight the logic. "There was no body. I never saw the body, was never told how he died. They told me it was classified, but still there was no funeral, no memorial until he'd disappeared officially for two years."

The man with Jared's face frowned and took a sip of his whisky, reminding her to do the same. "That doesn't sound right," he observed. "Didn't you pursue it further?"

"No. I knew if he was alive, he'd come home. With or without the army's permission. But he never came."

"And now you think I might be him? Why? Do I look so much like him?"

Ruth nodded, but catching the glimmer of doubt in his eye, she reached down for her bag and dragged out the slightly dog-eared photograph she'd always carried with her, ever since he'd first given her it before they were married. "Look. He was younger then, only twenty-four, but you must be able to see the resemblance. I've got a mirror too if you need it."

He took the photograph, slowly shaking his head as he stared at it. "I don't need a mirror. I haven't recognized my own face in three months. Which is all I remember of my life."

"Nothing at all before?" Even without the Jared possibilities, that interested her, arousing compassion and curiosity.

"Not a jot. I woke up on the intercontinental express and got off at the first stop -- from instinct I suppose. Or panic. I didn't even know my own name, never mind where I was from or where I was going. And I had no documents to tell me. Only those clothes I've just taken off and which didn't last too long living rough..."

"What did the doctors say? Shouldn't you be in a hospital or something?"

"No way. I'm not going near any doctors. They'll just take away anything that's left. Besides..."

"Besides what?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

She said, "I'm a doctor."

His head jerked, his eyes widening as he searched her eyes. "Really?"

"Really. That's how I met Jared. He'd broken his arm in some military exercise when I was a student. I got to practice on him."

"So... what's your specialty?"

"Gynecology."

A smile crossed his face, unbearably like Jared. "I don't think I mind gynecologists."

"You know what that is. And you talk like an educated man."

"I don't always behave like one."

She wasn't quite sure what he meant by that. But the sudden gleam in his eye, however quickly subdued, was easy enough to recognize. Knowing she stepped on dangerous ground, she still couldn't resist reaching out to touch his cheek.

"Am I familiar at all? Is there nothing about me you remember? Nothing you know you liked?"

His eyes dropped, then immediately rose again to meet hers. His hand reached up to cover her fingers, holding them lightly to his clean-shaven cheek.

"There's a lot about you I like," he said frankly. "I like your kindness and your loyalty and the way your eyes laugh even when you don't want them to. I like the softness of your touch and I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I *know* you're the most beautiful woman I've seen in three months. I hate to see you suffering as you are. But I'd be lying if I said you were familiar, because you're not."

Her face flushed with his compliments, even while her heart twisted with disappointment like a physical pain. "Then what are you doing here?" she whispered. "Why did you come here, to his house, where we spent every Christmas since we met?"

He lowered her hand from his cheek but still held onto it. "I don't know," he admitted. "I was passing, and something drew me here... I *feel* things sometimes. I'm drawn to particular people for reasons I don't understand and often with bad intentions. With you... I sense nothing bad and God knows I mean you no harm."

His fingers moved on the soft skin between her thumb and forefinger, making her shiver. He seemed to hesitate, then added, "I can only think I was drawn by your sadness, by your need. And you invited me in because you sensed mine. I never believed in Christmas miracles -- at least I don't think I did -- but maybe we're meant to help each other."

Her body leapt, not with memory of Jared but in response to the man looking into her eyes so seriously right now. Whoever he was. She said breathlessly, "How do you suggest we do that?"

He rose up on his knees in front of her and leaned forward. Her heart began to hammer in her breast. Panicked, she almost backed away, but her body spoke for her, urging her to close what little distance was left between them.

Their lips touched and parted. Electricity jolted through her. It might have been recognition or it might have been simple lust. Or a mixture of both. For an instant, they stared into each other's eyes and then his mouth took hers fully, sinking on it, parting her lips and slowly entering with his tongue.

She wanted to weep because he felt like Jared, he tasted like Jared, and then he took her in his arms and deepened his kiss and suddenly she no longer cared if he was Jared or not. Desire soared, opening her gasping mouth for him, pressing her closer into his body. She hadn't had sex in two and a half years, hadn't been even remotely tempted, and yet one kiss from a stranger who looked like Jared and she was an instantly straining, melting heap of lust.

"You *are* Jared, you are," she whispered against his lips, not knowing which of them she was trying to convince.

"For tonight, I'm whoever you want me to be. I'm all you have, and I'll be good because you're all I want..."

She didn't even try to make sense of that, for his hand had found her breast under her sweater, and she let out a low, animal moan she barely recognized as hers. It was as if she threw out all her native caution, all her inhibitions with that one sound.

She had to have this man now, feel his naked skin on hers, his exciting hands all over her body, and his cock, most of all his cock, plunging deep inside her.

Gasping, she pushed him back. He let go at once, but she gave him no time to ask or imagine what was wrong. Instead, she followed, throwing her body against him with such force that he fell backward onto the rug, with her on top of him, and at last she felt the unmistakable, hard ridge of his cock digging into her stomach.

With a little growl of triumph, she wriggled herself downward, fitting his straining bulge between her thighs. He thrust upward from the hips and bolts of delight whipped through her, egging her on.

She rose up, straddling him, loving the feel of his erect shaft from her clitoris to her anus as she rocked on him. Dragging her sweater up over her head, she moaned again as his hands closed over her breasts, impatiently shoving aside the bra before she'd even unclipped it. His hips gyrated under her, driving her nearer to orgasm, which she'd never expected to share with anyone again.

Spurred on, she pushed up his sweater and T-shirt until he pulled them off and she fell forward onto him, pressing her breasts into his hard chest, rubbing her pebbled nipples across his hot, responsive skin. Rough chest hair ground against her skin, her nipples, exciting her further. His hands roved across her back and shoulders, sliding up her throat to hold her head steady before he took her mouth and thrust his cock against her clothed clitoris.

"I'm coming too fast," she gasped into his mouth as the almost forgotten tide of ecstasy began to rise. "Wait..."

"No." He deepened the kiss and she gave up and writhed with him until the waves broke over her like surf.

She lost control of mind and body, could do nothing but give herself over to the shattering pleasure. Yet through it all, she was aware of his mouth kissing her, his hot avid eyes on hers, drinking in her climax as if it was his own. But it was all hers, and surely one of the most intense she'd ever known. So why wasn't it enough? Because he hadn't come with her.

Forcing her shaking limbs to move, she tried to sit up on him, to reach for the fastening of his jeans, but he was ahead of her. He flipped her onto her back so quickly that her already dizzy vision almost disintegrated. Before she knew it, her jeans and her panties were tugged down her legs, hanging off one ankle, and he was yanking down his own trousers with one hand while his other thrust between her thighs.

"Still wet for me?" he demanded hoarsely. His eyes scalded her, excited her beyond endurance, especially when the smile of triumph lit them as his fingers found her soaking, desperate pussy. "Oh yes..."

She wanted to feel his fingers inside her, as something more immediately possible than his cock, but it seemed he couldn't wait. Without troubling to take off his jeans and underpants properly, he freed his rampant cock. While she moaned at the sight of it in his fist, he pushed it against her pussy. She cried out as it slid against her over sensitized clitoris and pushed straight inside her.

Nothing had filled her for over two years. She felt unbearably stretched, and yet his hot hardness within her was stunning, wonderful, amazing. And he gave her no time to get used to it. Although he shook with his need, it didn't detract from his strength or his purpose as he thrust fully inside her.

The glowing embers of her orgasm sparked back into life, and without meaning to, without even knowing she could, she strained upward to take as much of his cock as she possibly could. He ground down on her and thrust again, and she began to moan and cry with every movement.

As if encouraged by her obvious pleasure, he pushed harder, driving her across the rug. She clung around his neck, her hands all over the rippling muscles of his back and hips as he pounded into her. He reached under her to hold her buttocks and protect her from carpet burn, but never let up. Leaving her mouth, he sucked one hard, elongated nipple into his mouth, shooting sharp, new pleasure straight to her womb, while he fucked her with wild, almost savage strokes that only lifted her lust higher.

She fought to meet him, to pleasure him with the tight, straining muscles of her vagina while she reached for her own climax with a desperation she'd never known

before. His teeth grazed her nipple, dragging across it before he released it and fell on the other, bucking and groaning as he slammed his cock into her.

His breathing became a breathless pant. She knew he was coming, felt his trembling fingers splay as far as her anus and knead her buttocks with a desperate, involuntary motion that pushed her over the edge with him.

Even more shattering than the last one, the orgasm claimed her in a storm of joy. Somewhere in among it, she found his mouth and kissed him, glorying in his weight as he collapsed on her, in the sheer power of the pleasure he'd taken from her as well as given.

As his mouth loosened on hers, she opened her eyes and saw his almost rolled up in his head. His whole face was contorted with passion, hot and clouded, and yet surely his eyes shouldn't do that? Surely that was pain, not pleasure twisting his mouth?

"Are you all right?" she whispered. "What is it?"

His groan of passion changed in pitch, becoming an agonized howl. Without warning, an animal's snout pushed out of his mouth.

Chapter Three

He catapulted off her body, fur springing out on his altered face, all over him as he twisted and reformed in front of her eyes.

She couldn't move, couldn't believe, let alone comprehend, the nightmare unfolding so suddenly from her joy. Her mouth opened as if it wanted to cry out, but it made no sound. Which didn't really matter since there was no one but this impossible being to hear her.

It was a huge wolf. The man who'd just made love to her with such exquisite savagery was a wolf. She was crying inside, with primal fear, but she knew it was all in her head. The wolf's eyes silenced her, paralyzed her. Because they were still blue. Still like Jared's.

Then the wolf moved, leaping toward her face, and she let out a long, panicked sound like keening.

I'm dead. I wanted to be dead, but not like this, not from a creature with Jared's eyes...

But the wolf didn't tear out her throat. It stood over her, one thick, powerful foreleg planted on either side of her head, holding her eyes with his. It made a sound, not a growl but a whine, like a dog crying. Its mouth opened; its tongue unfurled and licked her cheek once.

Then with another cut-off whine, it leapt off her and dived straight at the window. Glass shattered as its huge body hurtled through the opening and was gone.

* * *

The wolf ran for the woods, consumed with unendurable pain. For he knew now who he was and what had been done to him. The government he'd trusted, had been prepared to die for, had made him like this, without permission and for a purpose he

couldn't quite remember yet, though he was sure it was something to do with the three people he'd deliberately targeted and killed over the last few months.

But the woman at the cottage, she hadn't been his victim or even his target. She had been his wife. Something had made it through his reconditioning, bringing him here, drawing him to her and now she'd seen what he was.

The wolf rushed on through the darkness, trying to escape the awful fear and revulsion he'd read in her eyes. How could he have done this to her? Just when she'd accepted his death, he'd shown up again, raked it all up again, and destroyed whatever good memories she'd had left of him. They'd be lost now in the terror, in the loathsome thing he'd become.

He should never have gone inside. Should certainly never have kissed her, or made love to her. But the sexual urge had been so strong, and she was so beautiful, so hurt. It hadn't been all selfish either. Although he'd wanted to fuck her, very badly, he'd meant to give her something to live for too, a reminder that there could still be sex, even love in her life. And instead he'd turned that very act into horror.

What would she do now?

The wolf stopped running, came to a halt so abruptly that his paws actually skidded on the frosty ground.

She'd been suicidal when he found her. She'd admitted that. And having scared the shit out of her, destroying all her pleasant memories of what had been good in her life, he'd just run and left her to deal with it alone.

Jared lifted up his head to the moon and howled with shame and fear.

* * *

In the cottage, shivering in the icy air, Ruth heard him howl. Standing at the broken window, staring up at the same moon, she knew it was him. Her lover was a wolf, and the wolf was her husband.

As her brain struggled to deal with the impossibilities, she glanced blindly at her watch, seeking reality and comfort in the mundane.

My husband's not dead after all. He's some kind of werewolf.

Really? Shall I put the kettle on? What's the time?

Midnight. It was two minutes past midnight. Which meant it was Christmas Day. The day she'd been celebrating all her life without truly believing in the reason.

"He came home," she whispered. "I knew he'd come home..."

She gasped as the tears welled up her throat and spilled over.

* * *

Although it was still dark, Jared managed to force the wolf back inside him, and reached out to bang his fists on the cottage door. But at the last minute he drew back. He needed to know she was all right, needed to explain things. What he didn't need was to scare the shit out of her all over again by thundering on the door. Or to appear naked, but there wasn't a lot he could do about that.

He took a deep breath and knocked politely.

The door gave way under his knuckle, opening silently. His throat constricted. Why had she left the door open? Surely she couldn't have...

No. Sniffing the air, he got no scent of blood or death. She was inside. Jared stepped into the cottage. He knew at once that she was in the kitchen at the end of the little hall, although the door was partially closed, hiding her from his view.

He went nearer, his heart beating fast with dread as well as all the love he remembered and still felt. At the living room door, he caught sight of his clothes, the ones he'd taken off to make love to her. She'd piled them neatly on the arm of her chair.

He went quickly inside, noticing with peculiar pride that she'd boarded up the broken window, using the wood he'd once planned to build shelves with for the spare room. He climbed hastily into the jeans and dragged the sweater over his head before striding out of the room and across to the kitchen.

He pushed open the door slowly, almost afraid of what he would find, preparing to meet her cries of rage and fear with calm, soothing reason. If he could find any.

She stood by the kitchen table with her back to him. She was dressed in fresh clothes, the familiar, simple, red wool dress that hugged her hips. In spite of everything, he felt his libido stir and growl.

Heat from the oven hit him in waves, and he realized she was wrapping a turkey in foil.

His throat closed up. God, did Jane and Charlie still give her one of their turkeys at Christmas? Shit, were they coming over for dinner? He frowned. It was still the middle of the night.

Then all speculation vanished because she turned her head and saw him. He stiffened, ready to take the pain. But a smile broke out on her face, warm and real, and his heart turned over. She was all that had kept him sane for months, before the memories had vanished altogether. She'd been the last to leave him and the first he came back to. There were no words for that.

Instead he said, "What are you doing?"

"I thought you might be hungry."

Fascinated, he took a step nearer. "You knew I'd come back?"

"I've always known. And that's the thing about Christmas. You have to have faith."

She stood face-to-face with him now, no fear in her beautiful dark eyes, only the love that miraculously had never faded.

"I don't know what I am," he got out. "I may never know. I will never, ever hurt you, but I am violent and I have killed."

She put her arms around his neck and he whispered, "I love you," as he brushed his lips against her soft, warm cheek. He felt her smile, even as the wetness trickled past his lips. "I love you," she murmured into his neck. "And I'll never leave you. I'll never even think of it."

In spite of the heat of the little kitchen, her nipples were hard, pressing against his chest. Raw, sexual hunger broke through his tenderness. Gently tugging back her hair he kissed her mouth, lost himself in her taste and smell and the feel of her hot, sensual body wriggling in his arms. "I know how you remembered."

"So do I. I want to remember more, everything. Put the turkey in the oven."

"Why?" she asked, clearly baffled by his apparent change of subject.

“Because I want to fuck you on the kitchen table. If you’ll have me.”

“Oh, I’ll have you,” she gasped. With apparent effort she tore herself out of his arms, opened the oven door and thrust the turkey tin inside. But before she’d even closed the door, the sight of her curvaceous rear bent over drove him to catch her hips, pulling her back against his hard-on as he yanked up her skirt.

“Now?” he asked urgently, swinging her round toward the table.

“Now,” she pleaded.

Laughter caught in his throat. For the second time that night, he wrenched open his old jeans and pushed his cock into her hot, welcoming pussy. He’d come home. His eyes closed as her warm, velvety walls closed around him and squeezed. “My God... Happy fucking Christmas,” he whispered, and set about making it just that.

Wolf Hunt 3: Galactic Wolf

Marie Treanor

As the Earth wolves are freed and the truth revealed, the Gardenians panic and bring forward their invasion. They send a fleet of star ships, led by the troublesome young Senator Cereza.

Cereza, mindful of her career as well as her duty, takes her responsibilities seriously. But she lets herself be distracted for long enough to capture the mysterious space pirate captain who's been terrorizing Gardenians on the frontier for months.

Yuri doesn't even know his own name when he first meets her, but from the beginning, she confuses his instinctive mission to eliminate Gardenians. Taking her hostage to ensure the safety of his crew is necessary. Educating her in what he's learned of Earth's situation seems sensible. Seducing her isn't part of his plan, not when his wolf is liable to tear her apart. But their lust is powerful and has consequences that go far beyond their own emotions. The fate of two peoples is balanced in their hands.

Chapter One

Cereza dragged her gaze from the document on her reader. She stared at her flagship commander in disbelief.

"They've got the entire crew of a Gardenian patrol ship in prison? Why, in the name of all the galactic gods?"

"Apparently because a space pirate told them to," Commander Azale said with heavy sarcasm.

Cereza frowned. "I know things are different out here on the frontier, but haven't the planetary authorities gotten mixed up? Aren't our patrols meant to put the *pirates* in prison?"

Azale allowed himself a very minor smile. "That's always been the way it worked in the past. But, apparently these pirates captured the patrol ship and spirited it away while dumping the crew on the planet under a charge of 'planetary misappropriation.'"

"What in space does that mean?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea. Neither have the authorities, but it sounded so serious they thought they should hold the crew until Gardenia was informed."

"We're informed," Cereza said grimly. "Get them out of there, Azale. Assign the others to whichever ship has accommodation or need of them, but I want their commander *here* as soon as you spring him."

Azale's bright orange eyes gleamed. "Yes, Senator."

As he marched off, Cereza reflected that she shouldn't be getting involved in such minor incidents. She had a more important mission a long way off, and she really didn't need any more hold-ups. Still, she couldn't leave a Gardenian crew languishing

in a frontier prison. Aside from the cruelty, it wouldn't reflect well on Gardenian authority or morality.

With an irritable sigh, she resolved to contact Gardenia once she'd spoken to the patrol captain. They could sort it out from home while she continued immediately on her way to Earth.

On the thought, she returned to the document in her hands, a description of recent events from Gardenia's Primary Agents on Earth. At least, they still styled themselves in this manner, although they'd been forced to flee along with all the agents they could collect in their small ship. It was their original plea, while still in place, that had jolted Gardenia's military wheels into unexpected motion. The Earth authorities were on to the existence of alien agents and were fighting back with a fearsome secret weapon that was seeking out and killing them. As yet, the reports were so garbled that Cereza was at a loss as to how this weapon worked, but the important thing was, a peaceful, gradual takeover of Earth was no longer possible. It was going to have to be all-out military invasion to combat Earth's new weaponry.

Flung suddenly into the deep end with her new job as Minister for Expansion, Cereza was still trying to bring herself up to speed. She was far from stupid, but knew only too well that as the youngest and most recently elected senator, she was ill suited to such a senior role. They'd thrust it upon her to carry the blame for possible failure, because she'd annoyed them by bringing up issues they didn't want to address. This invasion thing was all going too fast. If it succeeded, the senior senators would applaud her and take at least half the credit. If she failed, she'd be disgraced. Perversely, Cereza determined to succeed in a project she doubted, and so she read everything she could find of the agents' reports in order to assess the best way forward.

Frequent interruptions didn't make her study easy, and when the door to her quarters opened again, she glared at it. Azale stood there with another rumpled-looking soldier.

"Commander Kryasant of patrol ship three-one-seven," Azale announced.

Cereza blinked. "That was quick."

"I used your name and rank to good effect," Azale said wryly. "Will that be all?"

"Yes, of course. If we've got them all, let's resume course."

As Azale departed, she indicated the seat on the opposite side of her desk. "Please, sit. Are you hurt at all?"

"Only in my professional pride, letting my ship be seized by trickery," snarled Kryasant, easing himself into the chair. His eyes and hair had a soft pinkish tinge that contrasted almost alarmingly with his craggy, angry face.

"What happened? Who did it?"

"The captain!"

"Captain who?"

"How the..." Kryasant started to fume before forcing himself with obvious difficulty to calm down. He contented himself with a glare. "You don't know what's been going on out here, do you?"

"Not exactly. It's not my area of responsibility."

Kryasant frowned. "Then you haven't come to nail the bastard?"

"Sorry. We have a larger mission than one space pirate. But I will report the incident to all the relevant authorities on Gardenia..."

Kryasant snorted. "Hope you've better luck than I did. Does nobody on Gardenia know about this guy?"

"I'm sure the appropriate authorities do," she soothed. "But no, it's not general knowledge. You'd better tell me."

Kryasant sighed, drumming his fingers on the desk as he reported in words he'd clearly used before. "He sprang to life here from nowhere just a few months ago. Alien ship, not as fast as ours but nimbler, very precise weapons-targeting. He recruited a few frontier scumbags on the shady side of the law to crew it, and began attacking every vessel he passed. Boards them all, personally. Some he lets go -- which contributes to his hero status -- others are seized, plundered --"

"He has hero status?" Cereza interrupted. "How come?"

"Because he steals so sodding much! He pays his crew, repairs his ship and gives the rest to the scaff and raff of the frontier planets. As a result, they hide him and his crew, deny all knowledge of their whereabouts. Meanwhile the captain goes on seizing Gardenian ships --"

"He *only* seizes Gardenian ships?" Cereza interrupted again.

"No, but it's largely the Gardenians he sticks in the local prisons. The ones he doesn't kill, that is."

Cereza closed her mouth. "He's killed Gardenians?"

"Several. Some who've survived say he's a wild animal. I can see why. It all contributes to the legend." He snorted.

The commander's anger began to seem very understandable, because it went well beyond his own humiliating experience. "And you've heard nothing from Gardenia? No support in dealing with this?"

"Not a hoot."

"Madness! Your communications can't be getting through!"

"They're through." Krysant stared at her with barely concealed insolence. "Sitting under some senator's silver cup."

Her frown deepened, because she couldn't dispute his belief with any conviction. Inefficiency was rife in Gardenian government -- officials dealt only with the matters which would bring them wealth or glory. Frontier space pirates were less interesting than the possible assimilation of a new planet.

And Earth was certainly more important in the bigger picture for overcrowded Gardenia. But leaving her compatriots to die was not just callous in Cereza's mind, it was impossible.

She stood abruptly. "I want everything you have on this pirate. Presumably he's not stupid enough to attack a military convoy of this size, so we'll have to lay ourselves out as bait. I want you to liaise with Commander Azale."

Krysant stumbled to his feet, staring at her with mingled hope and suspicion in his tired eyes.

"You're going to get him?"

"Yes," said Cereza with conviction. "I'm going to get him."

* * *

It might not have been the battle for her career she set out on, but it was one she was just as fully determined to win. And for the first time, as she stood on the bridge watching Azale and his officers carry out their duties, she felt she had their approval. She hadn't expected to care about that either.

The flagship had separated from the main fleet. If the pirates knew of its existence, they should believe the fleet hunted for them around the planetary system while the flagship sped away on its own mission.

Few ships traveled this far out. A few vessels of science or exploration, the odd repair crew to make sure the communications booster to Earth was still working. Even the captain, according to Krysant, didn't stray this far as a rule -- it wasn't worth his time. But Krysant suspected he wouldn't be able to resist the glory of a Gardenian flagship, and Cereza was happy to go with his view. So they traveled unshielded with blatant contempt for attack, pausing often to scan uninteresting phenomena and dead planets, just to give the captain time to catch up.

Cereza's gaze fixed on the large central viewscreen which showed only the familiar blackness of space relieved with a million pinpricks of light and, on the left, the outline of a dark, dingy-looking planet with several moons. Ruefully, she acknowledged their ruse would appear in character for a Gardenian crew. Future security out here depended on a vast improvement in discipline and attitude, and so she would tell the Senate if she ever made it home. If they ever listened.

"Sir, vessel approaching fast from starboard!"

"Got him," Krysant breathed. Standing behind him, Cereza gripped the back of his chair. "He was hiding in that moon's shadow..."

"Inform the fleet now," Azale snapped. He was staring at the instrument panel in the arm of his chair. "Ready shields but hold. Switch screen to starboard."

The ship seemed to come out of nowhere, speeding straight at them.

Azale leaned forward. "Hold..." he said softly. "All right, open communications, send an ID query, in a lethargic sort of way..." His arm lifted, poised and scythed the air. "Shiel --"

Before the word left his lips, the whole ship shook violently. Thunder crashed in Cereza's ears, twice, as she was flung hard against Kryasant's chair and then back onto the floor in an undignified heap.

"How the hell did he do that?" someone demanded through the yells of surprise and the clattering of people hauling themselves back to their work stations. "There was no sign of powering weapons!"

"There never is," Kryasant said grimly. "I told you."

"Main engines offline! Weapons systems are out!" cried another officer. "Five minutes at least until they're back online!"

"Then make sure those shields are up one hundred percent!" Azale snarled.

"Sir, the shields are down too. We only have environmental protection."

Azale swore.

Cereza knew how he felt. This wasn't exactly going to plan. "Any sign of the fleet?" she asked hopefully.

"Moving in at full speed, Senator. ETA ten minutes."

"Well, the speed should surprise him," Kryasant muttered.

"Then let's stay alive for those ten minutes," Azale said. "Get shields and weapons back online!"

"Sir, they're communicating..."

The image of space and stars and the insolent, scarred little ship disappeared. In its place, an interior shimmered into life, bare and basic. Three men and a woman, dressed in rough, yet vaguely threatening combat clothing sat at partially concealed stations in the background. Another man in the foreground had his back to them, shadowed head down.

Cereza hauled herself to her feet. From the pirate ship, she heard a blast of static, then into the quiet, a woman's voice said, "Captain." And the man in the foreground straightened and swung round to face the screen.

Cereza reached for her throat, as if to stop her heart from jumping straight out of it. The man was alien, dark, indescribably threatening. There seemed to be no color about him at all, just opaque darkness. Unrelieved black hair fell in unkempt, tangled curls around his forehead and neck. Fainter black stubble covered his chin and jaw. But it was his eyes that truly scared Cereza -- alien, piercing, unafraid, and so dark that they looked black, too. How could they glitter like that when they were *black*?

"Prepare to be boarded," he said shortly, in harsh, very accented Gardenian.

Azale stood. "On what authority?"

The alien's dark lips twisted. He hoisted a large weapon into view, in one thickly muscled bare arm, and the screen went blank.

"Okay, let him on," Azale growled. "It'll pass the time until the fleet blows his ship into the next galaxy. No confrontation, no heroics. Until I give the word. Peoni, you have the bridge. Krysant, you had better come with me. Senator," he added, breaking his stride as she turned to walk with him. She had the impression he'd forgotten her existence. He frowned. "You should wait in your quarters until this is over. I'll assign a security --"

"For ten minutes?" she interrupted. "Don't you think the presence of a Gardenian senator might be the best thing to distract him from shooting the crew?"

"If he doesn't shoot *you*," Azale said grimly.

Ignoring that, Cereza strode in his wake, along the passages toward the docking bay. The floaty white gown that was standard senator uniform for females clung around her legs. Suddenly it seemed the wrong attire for the occasion. Unfortunately, it and several others exactly the same were the only clothing she'd brought for the journey.

"Where is he?" Azale muttered as they swung round the corner to find the docking bay doors still closed. Nor had there been any kind of bump to signal the pirate

ship had docked. Security men swarmed on either side of the doors and at the end of their corridor.

"Hold your fire," Azale warned them. "I want no casualties on our side. There will be one chance when the doors open -- before they can target any of us, we'll be aiming at them. You wait for the order -- understood?"

A muttered affirmative greeted him from all sides but was interrupted as the doors sprung open much faster than their usual leisurely speed. Azale's raised hand was ready to scythe downward, his lips forming the beginning of the order.

But people erupted from the bay, covering every threat with a speed and accuracy that implied they already knew exactly where the enemy was. Although they couldn't possibly. And faster than everyone, was the dark alien with his large, vicious-looking gun pointing straight at Azale.

"Drop them," the pirate snarled. He was big, tall and broad, and no less rough-looking in person than on the grainy viewscreen. He wore crumpled black pants, a nondescript shirt and a long, battered black leather waistcoat. His powerful arms were bare.

There was a pregnant pause while Azale's eyes locked to the pirate's. Then Azale nodded and the men laid down their weapons. Some of the tension seemed to relax and Cereza let her gaze dart over the other pirates. The woman, the fair Galetan whom Cereza had seen on the bridge of the pirate ship, now collected all the weapons, slinging each through the open door into the docking bay. They all wore headsets, with thin mouthpieces.

The "Captain" curled his lip and stepped nearer, reaching to disarm Azale of his side weapon. He did it quickly, yet almost gingerly, as if he couldn't bear to touch him, before shoving him into the wall. Azale bore it in the grim silence of a proud man. The captain's gaze fell next on Cereza, and narrowed.

Cereza's heart thundered. She realized she'd never known physical fear before. She hadn't expected it to have this strange effect on her nipples, or to loose the uncalled-for moisture between her thighs. It felt almost like sexual desire, which was

confusing to say the least. But this man would be frightening even if he wasn't holding you up with a gun. His very darkness was threatening.

His lip curled in apparent distaste. Without warning his hand snaked out, shoved into her armpit and swept down over her hip. Stunned, she didn't even cry out as he did exactly the same to her other side, then rammed the edge of his hand between her breasts and pushed down over her belly to between her thighs.

This time, there was no thought to her action. The invasion was intolerable and her hand lashed out on its own to smack him hard across the face. But fast as she was, he was faster and before she even connected, he'd caught her hand in a grip of steel and was staring into her face.

"He was searching you, Senator!" Kryasant said urgently. In other words, *Don't get us all killed by your pathetically outraged behavior*. He had a point. With difficulty, she contented herself with staring back.

"Senator," the alien repeated. He grinned, revealing a surprisingly white set of teeth. "Bloody hell, children, we have ourselves a Gardenian senator."

While the other pirates laughed -- whether with amusement at his ludicrous choice of swear words or with joy at having so valuable a hostage -- the captain stepped closer, insultingly close, so that her thin skirts swished about his boots and thighs and she could feel the heat of his body through her gown. Worse, she had to hold her head uncomfortably far back to keep her gaze on his insolent face.

He inhaled. His nose twitched like some animal's and the frown between his black brows grew deeper. The uncomfortable butterflies in Cereza's stomach spread until her whole body tingled with awareness. For some reason, she felt afraid to breathe.

"Back against the wall," he said distinctly and, with relief, she stepped back away from his overwhelming heat.

He turned to Kryasant, who already held out his weapon in the flat of his palm. He'd been here before. "Can't keep a good man in prison, eh, Commander? You should

have gone straight home." His gaze shifted, skimming across Cereza until it came to Azale. "Weapons store?" he snapped.

"What are you going to do with my crew?" Azale countered.

"Shoot them, if you don't answer my questions."

"You really think three of you can hold a Gardenian flagship?"

"Certainly, when we hold the commander, to say nothing of the senator here. And this time, I have a very special prison in mind." He wiped his free hand across his forehead, and in some surprise, Cereza saw that he was sweating.

"And you'd better pray we get there before Xorax blots out the sun," one of the other pirates said with an oddly vicious grin.

"We're not afraid of the dark," Azale said dryly, just as the pirates' headpieces all crackled in unison.

The words were crystal clear. "Get out of there, Captain -- we've got to go! Military convoy full ahead."

The captain swore. At least it sounded like swearing to Cereza, but since it was in a wildly bizarre language, she couldn't be sure. Then, "Go!" he barked at his minions, who immediately backed up toward the docking bay doors.

"You're too late," Azale said with unconcealed triumph. "Instead of all that gold and weaponry, you really should have concentrated on getting yourself some decent long-range sensors."

"Tell me about it," the captain muttered.

"Captain!" yelled the Galetan woman.

"Captain, we'll never break out of this intact," the earpiece yelped.

"Intact or alive?" the captain snapped.

"Either."

"Fuck," said the captain. He glared at Azale. "Honors of war, or we'll go down blasting."

Cereza held her breath. She could almost see Azale wondering if it was worth it, how many Gardenians the pirates would be able to take down before they were killed.

With a sigh, Azale inclined his head. "Honors of war," he agreed.

The pirate nodded back, an oddly courteous and almost military gesture for an undisciplined criminal. His shoulders didn't slump. He didn't even seem to be acknowledging defeat, merely a temporary setback.

He touched his mouthpiece. "Stand down."

Chapter Two

Since the pirates' vessel was already docked to the flagship and was small enough not to impede their progress, they left it where it was and continued on their way. The entire crew, amounting to six, was housed in the brig.

It wasn't long before Cereza left her studies once more, and made her way there. Though her feet dragged a little with silly reluctance, she was also conscious of eager anticipation. Behind a cell door, he would no longer be frightening, and now that she thought she knew what he was, his alien-ness wouldn't bother her.

In the cell-suite, she all but ran into the departing security officer.

"Have you found out who they are?" she asked.

He shrugged without a great deal of interest. "They're all known felons in this sector, Senator. Apart from the captain. Him, we have no record of. Anywhere."

"What does he say?"

"Nothing, Senator."

Since the man walked away with no more than a curt nod, Cereza closed her lips on the theory she'd been about to impart and shrugged. The guards at their stations in front of the row of barred cells sprang to attention as she approached.

"Hey, Captain!" the Galetan woman called out. "How you doing?"

"Fantastic," came the sour response.

"Senator lady's here."

There was no response to that. Pretending to ignore their conversation, Cereza said to the guards, "I want to speak to the captain."

"Sure. Just stay well back from the bars."

"Actually, a private conversation would work better."

"There's the interview room," one said doubtfully. "We'll bind him and keep watch, but are you sure --"

"Perfectly sure," Cereza interrupted.

She paced the interview room, a small, bare apartment furnished with three chairs, a table, and a surveillance device. She wasn't quite sure where she was going with this, but she needed to prod it to see where, if anywhere, it led.

When the door opened abruptly, she tossed her reading device on the table and turned to face the pirate captain who, despite his hands being bound behind his back, strolled in as if he'd been invited for dinner. His black gaze found her immediately and held. Again that shiver of fear rippled up her back and down her front. The guard followed, taking another security bracelet from his pocket.

"Stand still," he commanded and when the prisoner did, with a sigh, he crouched down to fit it to his ankles.

Cereza frowned. "Is that necessary?"

"He's not exactly a gentleman," the guard said wryly.

"True." The captain's eyes were still on Cereza. "But I promise not to kick you. Unless you kick me first."

Cereza caught her breath. "Deal."

She signaled with her eyebrows to the guard who rose with a resigned look that said *Your funeral* as clearly as if he'd spoken. Cereza ignored him, concentrating on maintaining difficult eye contact with the captain.

"Please, sit," she offered, waving one hand to the table and chairs as the guard left.

The captain inclined his head, but stayed where he was, merely leaning one shoulder against the wall.

So, no friendly chat. Good. "Very well. You don't like Gardenians, do you, Captain?"

"No."

"Why is that, precisely?"

His lip twitched. "If I said you smelled bad, you'd think me rude."

It was hardly the answer she'd expected. Perhaps that was the cause of the flush which suffused her face but it felt more like humiliation, especially when coupled with a sudden urge to smell her own armpits. Fighting it, she snapped, "That's hardly a reason to seek us out as you do."

He continued to regard her with dumb insolence until she wanted to slap him.

"What's your name, Captain?"

He smiled. "My friends call me... Captain."

"And what did your mother call you?"

"Boy, Brat, You -- who knows?"

Shit. "You weren't brought up by your mother?" she asked, ignoring the pointless pity trying to lure her from the point.

"I don't see that that's your concern."

Her mouth opened to answer back, no doubt childishly. Then she caught the gleam in his black eyes, all but urging her on, and she pursed her lips instead. In any case, he had a point.

"Where were you before you arrived in this sector?" she asked instead.

"Around."

"Around where?"

He smiled at her and shrugged. Butterflies jumped in her stomach, because he had an amazing smile that lightened the darkness of his face. Or perhaps just because his uncooperative manner annoyed her.

"All right, here's an easy one. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?"

"Do you know, you've got the loveliest eyes? Red eyes just shouldn't be beautiful, but they are on you."

"Then I suppose it's a pity your favorable impression is spoiled by my disgusting smell. Where were you born?"

"It isn't and I couldn't care less."

Although it wasn't terribly clear, Cereza thought she followed him. More interestingly, she thought he did care. He spoke too rapidly, too carelessly.

"Earth?" she suggested, pushing the point.

His eyes didn't change. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Oh come on, Captain! You accused Commander Krysant of 'planetary misappropriation.' Isn't that why you hate Gardenians? You've heard something about my people on Earth and you don't like it."

"I have," he allowed. "But that doesn't make me a native."

She stepped closer to the table and switched on the reading device. "Does this?"

After a moment, during which she thought he wouldn't actually trouble to look, he eased his shoulder off the wall and walked to the table. Even with his hands behind his back, he walked like a large feline, balanced and graceful and probably lethal. She imagined the muscles rippling under his bronze skin, and her body heated uncomfortably.

He chose to halt right beside her, too close for comfort. Moving away would have admitted the weakness she was beginning to suspect in herself, so she ignored it and stayed where she was, keeping all her attention on his face as he gazed down at the reader.

"Who's he?" he asked without noticeable interest.

"His name is Louis. Or Android 4176 slash 89, model C, modified."

The captain blinked and lifted his gaze to hers, waiting for more, waiting for the point.

"Gardenian scientists made him to resemble an Earth male. I found his picture while researching the Earth situation and my attention was immediately caught, because he looks like you."

"No, he doesn't." The captain appeared taken aback, genuinely surprised by her claim, and she smiled with triumph.

"Not to you. Earth faces, human faces are familiar to you. But trust me, in this sector, you're a rarity. You have the same black hair and black eyes, the same skin tone. That's what I see. You're from Earth. Or one of its colonies."

A smile began to tug at his lips. His gaze moved continuously between one of her eyes and the other, as if searching. "So what?"

"So tell me what you're doing way out here beyond where any Earth ship should be capable of reaching. Tell me if there are others out here too."

"I neither know nor care."

"Then what do you care about?" she demanded.

"Right now, the amazing color of your hair. So many shades of red, each more alluring than the last. And do you know they're all reflected in your beautiful eyes?"

"Yes," she said baldly. She couldn't think of anything else because without warning, he leaned even closer, his nose twitching as if he was inhaling her perfume. His nose, his chin, brushed a tendril of her hair.

"So soft," he murmured and his breath stirred her skin. "And fragrant."

"Is fragrant your politer word for smelling bad?"

His gaze met hers, half-rueful, and with surprise, she realized his eyes weren't black at all, they were brown. Warm, dark brown, and not opaque, not expressionless when you actually looked into them, but desperately, excitingly hungry. For an instant, she imagined herself falling into those eyes, being consumed by that hunger, that big, strong body moving on her, in her...

With a tiny gasp, she whisked herself away from the danger.

Her heart drummed in her breast, dampness pooled between her thighs, and she was very afraid that if she held out her hands they would shake. It wasn't fear. It had never been fear. She wanted him, and with a strength that shocked her.

Chemical reaction. Nothing to do with my mind. Think!

It was what she did best. Grasping on to her intellect, her mission, like a drowning woman to a tree branch, she said, "What about your ship?" And spun around to face him again.

He still stood where she'd left him, by the table. "What about it?"

"Did you travel in it all the way from Earth or did you acquire it in this sector?"

"It's mine."

"The technology is alien to us, but your weapons, your targeting devices, are all superior to what we expected from Earth."

The captain's lips twisted. "Ah. Now I get it. If my ship and I are from Earth, then Earth might give you more of a fight than you bargained for."

"Your ship is crude and puny."

"And disabled yours inside five seconds with two shots."

"Only because our shields were down to tempt you out."

"That may be a fair point," he conceded. "Have you torn my ship apart to study it?"

"Our engineers have no need to tear to study."

"How very superior of them. And what are your plans for my crew and myself?"

"You'll be taken to Gardenia and tried for space piracy."

"When?"

"When our mission is complete."

"Your mission," he repeated. He began to walk toward her again, frowning. "You travel with a mighty convoy. I thought you'd come to the frontier to clean up piracy, rattle a few sabers at the lax planetary authorities around here, enforce some discipline. But you haven't, have you?"

"My mission is not your concern." She wanted to be haughty and was very afraid she sounded merely desperate. It was his nearness as he loomed over her, almost touching, turning her from a powerful senator into a glob of immature lust.

Who am I kidding? I was never a powerful senator. I was an annoying one and I was sent out here because they wanted rid of me. Azale will direct the invasion while I watch, little more than a cipher and a convenient scapegoat for failure.

"You're going to invade Earth," he said softly. "You're the acceptable political face, and this is your armory. Fuck."

"Why do you care?" she demanded. "You don't even admit to being human!"

"I don't like Gardenians." His fierce gaze held hers, anger, contempt overlaying the hungry desire that still lurked in his eyes. His body heat soaked through her, as if he'd closed the tiny distance between them. His nearness confused her all over again. Big, overwhelming, threatening, even bound as he was.

And yet she wasn't afraid. It was he who sweated. A bead of it trickled down his forehead, fascinating her. She'd noticed that before, when he'd boarded -- sudden sweats without obvious reason.

Abruptly, he swung away from her. "I want to go back to my cell."

"Are you ill?" she asked.

"No, I'm angry and I want to kill someone. I don't want it to be you."

"Then talk to me!" she exclaimed, ignoring the threat in his words in favor of the desperation she sensed behind them. "If you care at all about your people, talk to me!"

He stared at her over his shoulder. "Talk to you? About what, for God's sake?"

"Earth!"

A moment longer he held her gaze, then he turned away and continued his stride to the door. He banged on it loudly, making her jump, before he looked at her once more. He was still sweating.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Senator. To my knowledge, I have never been to Earth in my life."

* * *

Barking up the wrong tree? What in the name of the galactic gods did that mean? His grasp of Gardenian was good, if heavily accented, but he used some extraordinary phrases.

She followed the guards marching him back to his cell. "I think he needs a doctor."

"I'll tell the medics," one guard responded laconically, shoving the prisoner back into his cell.

"Hoi!" the captain objected, lifting his bound wrists pointedly.

“Live with it,” the guard retorted. “Teach you to defy a senator.” He closed the barred door and keyed in the locking code in the panel beside it. They didn’t like him. He’d killed their comrades.

Cereza went on her way. At the final cell, she paused and looked at the Galetan woman. “How long have you known the captain?”

She appeared to mull over the question. Then, as if she decided there was nothing to lose by answering it, she said, “Two months or so. Why?”

“Where did you meet him?”

“Galeta Prime.”

“And the rest of the crew?”

“Same time.” The woman grinned. “We met up in a bar fight.”

Encouraged by the provision of information she hadn’t asked for, Cereza said, “What’s wrong with him? Is he ill?”

The woman laughed. “Might be catching. Best stay out of his way.”

Chapter Three

It was hard when he couldn't tell where he was, when he couldn't even see the stars. The urge came in waves, powerful and unexpected, giving him little time to combat it. He lay on the hard, uncomfortable mattress, fighting it once more.

He thought of the girl, the beautiful Gardenian senator, concentrating not on the blood lust she inspired, but on the sexual desire. There was something about her -- her amazing, warm ruby eyes that met his so fearlessly, the way she moved, so sleek and sensual inside that virginal dress, her very scent in his nostrils -- that made him think constantly of hot, exotic, intense sex.

Well, he'd been thinking about sex a lot recently. Not surprising when he didn't get any. But he couldn't remember any woman inspiring him with such overwhelming lust. He could have taken her against the interview room wall, in full view of the spying guards, even with his hands tied behind his back. He'd have been able to get at those plump, alluring breasts by tugging her dress with his teeth, and then he could have sucked those enticing, elongated nipples he'd only glimpsed in outline, while she bundled up her own dress and unfastened his pants to let him slide into her hot, hot wetness...

Fuck. There was a fantasy to drive a prisoner wild.

She'd been fighting it, of course, much as he was fighting the change right now, but there had been something in her secretive eyes that told him she wasn't indifferent to his physical charms. She probably liked a bit of rough. What a sodding pity he'd never find out. Because her next meeting would be with the wolf.

Not now, not now, hold on... And yet the fighting was habit. The ship had quieted. This must be their designated "night," so it was as good a time as any.

Sweat rolled down the inside of his shirt. He swallowed. He couldn't hold it off any longer in any case. It was time.

"Hey. You awake?"

There was a muffled many-voiced response, some of it delayed, showing him that Farco at least had been asleep. No matter. He'd counted five voices, and they were all alert now.

"Keep it quiet," the guard growled from outside. There were two of them on duty, but at least no one else was wandering about the cell suite either on duty or social visits.

The captain sat up, drawing himself farther into the shadows and beneath the blanket as he removed his clothing. The constant movement attracted the guard's attention, as he'd known it would.

"Settle down in there or I'll sedate you."

With the same mixture of relief and resignation with which he'd become familiar, the captain released his crumbling self-control. This time, he almost welcomed it, because it was their only possible way out of here.

He held on grimly to the pain, to the outrageous strains pulling and wrenching at his body, biting down on the agonized groans and cries he couldn't entirely suppress. But then, this time, he didn't want to suppress them.

"Hey, what is it?" The guard sounded alarmed now and closer, as if he was at the cell door. All he would see was an agonized, undulating lump under the blanket, falling onto the floor. "Are you sick? Shit, why didn't we get the medic when she said? I'm going in, Laburn. Call the medics now!"

"On it," the other one said grimly from his desk.

The captain heard the faint, hurried sound of fingers tapping on the control panel keys and then the door screeched open.

His pain slid away. The lights went up. The captain leapt at his guard, strangling the man's scream at birth. The scent of enemy, of evil filled his nostrils. He smacked the

man across the head with one massive paw, sending him spinning into the door, and bounded out of the cell.

The second guard was bolting from his desk, drawing his weapon in terror. Before he could fire it, the captain was on him, knocking him down and standing on his chest. Eager, desperate for the kill, he opened his jaws.

"Captain! Captain, we need you back, remember?"

Andra. Her voice penetrated the fog of instinctive blood-lust, reminding him he had a higher duty. The crew...

He snapped his jaws closed on air, brought up his paws to either side of the gasping, heaving guard's neck and willed himself to change back.

This was harder, going against the urge when it held him in full thrall. A weird, rattling noise came from the guard's throat -- not a death rattle but a fearful one. It was the captain's hand, not his paw, that punched him to unconsciousness.

Full of adrenaline and the legacy of the beast's enormous energy, the captain sprang naked to his feet and tried to make sense of the guard's computers. Easy. Three keys and all the cell doors slid open and his crew spilled out.

"Nice one, Captain!" Farco said gleefully. "Docking bay?"

"Can you release the docking clamps from here?" Andra demanded, deliberately keeping her gaze above his waist.

"No, it's cell security only. Everything else is locked out. We're going for the girl."

"What girl? The senator? Shit, you like her that much?"

"She's our way out," the captain snapped, unsure why he should be so irritated. "Without her, they'll blow us out of space. If they bother releasing the ship in the first place. Make sure they're both dead or out cold."

The change was easier to accomplish this time, all relief and less pain. He gave himself up to the wolf and bounded out of the cell suite, following his nose. On a ship full of Gardenians, it was hard to ignore the urge to kill as he went, hard to pick her particular scent out of all the evils, but he found it and followed it single-mindedly.

Hurling through the maze of passages, always keeping the position of the docking bay in mind, he occasionally encountered terrified crewmen, some of whom tried to shoot them. They scattered when he leapt in among them. His snapping jaws occasionally ripped flesh and the taste of blood, the sound of Gardenian screams drove him on. But he had to control himself -- there was no time to finish the kills. He had to find the girl.

When her scent filled his nostrils, he halted, sniffing under the door that was clearly hers. He let out a whine and Andra quickly pressed the admittance key.

There was a pause. Then "Come in," the senator's melodious voice said, rendered even more delicious by its husky sleepiness.

The words released the locking mechanism, and Andra and Farco entered swiftly and without fuss. The captain lost anything more than her muffled cry of surprise, because he had to scatter a group of terrified, weapon-blasting Gardenians. He ignored the sharp pain in his shoulder. From the muffled sounds inside the room, the girl was putting up too much of a fight. His annoyance was tempered by unexpected pride. She was more than a patrician, more even than a politician. It took three of them to get her out in the end, and by the look of them, she'd managed a couple of flush hits.

She was still struggling, twisting and writhing in their grip, pulling back and slowing them down. Enough was enough.

The captain growled, a deep, echoing snarl as he bounded along beside them. She caught sight of him for the first time and her cries of rage broke off as abruptly as a slamming door. Instead an inarticulate moan broke from her throat as the others yanked her onward. He felt her eyes following him, wide and fearful. Well, who wouldn't be?

Rounding the corner, they met a patrol ready to fire. The captain jumped straight into them. A weapon went off harmlessly, most of them scattered, except the one under his paws. *Now, one quick kill...*

He opened his jaws, ready to tear out the Gardenian's throat. But through the man's screams of terror, it was *her* voice he heard, barely above a horrified, babbling whisper. "No! Oh for the love of peace, no..."

It was enough to remind him he had a primary aim -- to get the hell out of here. With a snarl, he left the man and loped round the corner to the docking bay.

Of course, there was a welcoming party here too, and their weapons were armed and ready. The captain nudged their hostage with his head, knocking her into Andra, who fortunately caught on and grabbed her, holding her right in front of her to disguise the fact that she held no weapon but her bare hands.

"If you fire I'll kill her where she stands," Andra yelled. "Back off, now!"

They backed off. They had no choice. His instinct had been right. No one would take responsibility for killing a senator.

"What the fuck is that?" one of them said fearfully, staring at the captain as Farco wrenched open the docking bay doors.

"We die, she dies," Andra reminded them. The captain stationed himself in front of the doors, snarling while Andra dragged the hostage inside, hissing between her teeth, "Don't you dare bite me, you bitch."

When they were all inside, the captain backed in too and the door closed. Farco smashed the control panel, effectively locking it, while Garrech ran to open the door of their own ship.

It smelled of stale Gardenian. They'd been in here, poking around, as the senator had already implied, but there were none on board now. Except the senator herself.

As one, the crew bolted to the bridge, Andra keeping hold of the girl more from habit than anything else. The captain paused outside the door. The wolf's work was done, for now, so he willed it gone. When the shift was finished, he rose naked to his feet and grabbed the pants hanging conveniently on a peg by the door -- Andra had placed them strategically all over the ship after coming across him naked once too often for her blushes, or so she said. He yanked them up as he strode onto the bridge, flexing his stinging left shoulder.

"Engines on, ready full thrusters, communications."

"On it," came the various responses. From the torn chair where she'd been unceremoniously pushed, the senator watched him with her huge, round red eyes like rubies.

"Galaxies," she whispered. "Where did you come from?"

"Got the Commander," Andra said, saving him the trouble of answering.

He swung around to face the viewer and held out one arm impatiently. Understanding, Andra emptied the senator out of her chair and pushed her at him. She landed against him with a pleasing bump just as Azale's face glared at him from the screen.

The girl gasped but, with a politician's grasp of her public, made no undignified squeals or struggles. The captain gave his most wolfish smile and hugged her to him with one arm. She was soft and warm, and through the even finer gown she wore to sleep in, he could feel the arousing plumpness of her breast against his chest.

"We've got your senator. And we'd like you to release your docking clamps."

"And leave her to your tender mercies?" Azale snapped. "I don't think so!"

"Trust me, our mercies will be considerably less tender if you don't do as I say. You want me to give her to the wolf?"

"What in the galaxy *is* that thing?"

"Bad," the captain mocked. "Very, very bad. Out."

"Docking clamps released!" Garrech reported with glee.

"Then get us the hell out of here. Head for the nearest planet so we can lose the bastards." Still holding the woman to his side because he liked the feel of her tucked against him, he reached forward to his control panel and scanned for their position. As he moved, her nipple brushed against his naked chest, sending his already over-excited blood pounding straight to his cock. He wondered how long it was since he'd actually had a woman? Curiously enough, he knew exactly what he wanted to do with this one...

With an effort, he concentrated on the matter in hand. "In fact, there's an asteroid field at four-one-two mark five. Just the place."

"It's too far away," Farco argued.

"So what? They're not going to shoot us, are they?"

The vessel shuddered to life, slipping smoothly away from the flagship. Pacing himself, enjoying the anticipation, he looked down at the rigid girl in his left arm.

Oh yes, she was just as stunning as he'd remembered in his fantasy. Dark red hair, streaked with brighter highlights like a sunset, tumbled about her delicate, fine-featured face with its slightly turned-up nose and amazingly beautiful ruby eyes, and soft, full lips he wanted to taste under his. Or feel wrapped around his clamoring cock. Either. Both.

She made a quick, fluttering movement to be free, causing her breast to rub against him once more. Her nipple was hard, long, unable to hide from him in its flimsy covering. From instinct, his arm tightened around her, and the swell of her hips under his hand made him long to see her naked.

He didn't know very much, but he was sure he'd never fucked a Gardenian before. His focus had always been on killing them. But this one, this strange, contradictory creature with the colors of passion and the demeanor of an ice cube -- and the luscious breast pressing into his chest -- her he could fuck for a long time. A very long time...

If she'd let him. Which she clearly wouldn't. Straining away from him so that the breast barely touched him anymore, she snapped, "What's the matter? Need something to hold on to, to stop you from falling over? Or are you really planning to feed me to your wolf?"

"Sh-sh, don't wake him," he said, letting her go.

"Where is it?" She looked round warily, not, he noticed, stepping very far away from him. Andra laughed.

"Safe. For now. What's your name, Senator?"

"Cereza. What's yours, *Captain*?"

"Captain," he answered. "Steady as she goes, Garrech, don't flog the poor ship."

"They're following," Farco warned grimly.

"What do you expect? We've got their precious senator." Idly, he reached over the back of his chair and found his spare leather waistcoat. It would do until he found a shirt. "Andra, why don't you take the senator to her quarters?"

For a moment, the red girl looked mutinous, like a child refusing to go to bed. Only this child had been kidnapped, dragged from her comfortable world where she held power and a measure of control, to one full of violent criminals and a man-eating wolf. No wonder she looked vulnerable.

The captain shrugged irritably as Andra got the senator's attention by ungently tugging her arm. His first responsibility was to his crew and he didn't care for the discomfort in his stomach that was telling him otherwise.

He had torn people apart with his teeth, slung others into very unsavory prisons without enquiring very closely into their guilt. He had nothing else to do.

The senator, Cereza -- didn't that mean "Cherry" in some language or other? -- shook Andra's arm off with a disdainful curl of her red, luscious lips.

"Treat our guest with politeness, Andra," he warned. "Remember right now she's all that's keeping you alive."

Andra snorted and bowed elaborately. "If the lady would condescend to follow me."

The lady hesitated. He thought she wanted to test her power by insisting on staying here. And possibly she felt safer here from the wolf. Her tongue darted out, wetting the corner of her mouth and the captain's loins stirred again without permission. It was an interesting reaction considering his usual one to her race, but it was damned hard to be analytical around her.

He needed to sleep. He needed something to take his mind off sex. Instead of looking for such a thing, he watched her barely hidden curves disappear through the bridge door. At the last moment, as if she couldn't help it, she darted a glance over her shoulder -- looking for him? Or for the wolf?

"You're bleeding," she said abruptly.

Automatically, the captain felt at his stinging shoulder. It had been burned by one of their weapons. No matter. He healed quickly. What seemed more important was that when she'd gone, the exotic light seemed to fade from the bridge, leaving it bare, monochromatic, and dull.

Shit, this was complicating matters. He wasn't a randy kid, he was a ruthless pirate with a reputation for brutality. He should not be getting schoolboy fantasies about Gardenian Senators.

"Isn't she too young to be a senator?" he said in annoyance.

Farco shrugged. "Comes from the right family. Some of them go in at puberty and draw their salary faithfully until death, having never done, or even said, a damned thing."

"She's given them a kicking though," Garrech added unexpectedly. "They hushed most of it up, but some got out, and the underground broadcasts are always full of her."

Underground broadcasts... they didn't just come from Gardenia and its allies, though, and Garrech's words reminded him that he'd been in the middle of reading one from a distant world when the flagship had finally flown across their bows.

He checked the readings and the viewscreen, and stood up. "Why?" he asked reluctantly. "What's her grumble?"

"Everything." Garrech grinned. "Corruption, laziness, waste. She wants to reform Gardenia, so Gardenia sent her away to found a new home."

"Well, looks like we've held that up."

Or had they? What if they simply went without her?

And what was it to him if they did? He had plenty to fight about right here. For the moment, the entire Gardenian fleet appeared to be following him. As he set the watch for the next few hours, he grinned to himself, thinking of a few excellent places to lead the fleet to.

But restlessness stayed with him as he entered his own quarters. A sense of homecoming had grown recently, but there was no deep-seated welcome from this place, no recognition in his own soul. If he had one.

He left the door open to signal he was available to the crew, and slapped on the computer on the built-in desk on his way to the chest that contained his meager clothing. Reaching inside, he found a clean shirt -- hell, it was a new shirt bought among other things with the gold they'd nicked from the Gardenian freighter last month. It wasn't exactly the high life for a pirate, he reflected sardonically, spending stolen gold on a new shirt. It wasn't even silk or whatever the hell fabric counted as silk in this neck of the woods.

Holding the shirt in his hand, he glanced back at the screen and saw the Earth broadcast he'd picked up just before he'd attacked the flagship. He moved closer and saw that he'd been right in that one glimpse. It really was a wolf. Like him.

Chapter Four

Cereza looked inside the tiny cabin. "I have to sleep in here?"

"Be grateful," said Andra. "Last time we took prisoners, five Gardenians slept in here."

"What happened to them?"

"The wolf ate them."

Cereza pushed inside with an irritable little jerk of her shoulder. "Do none of you ever answer a straight question?"

"Maybe if you answered a few of ours we'd feel more inclined."

Cereza's sense of unreality heightened with every passing minute. Perhaps that explained why she wasn't more afraid. Or perhaps she was still in bed on the flagship, dreaming. She sat down on the bare mattress, took the blanket that Andra held out to her and shivered.

"Will the wolf eat me too?"

"Up to the wolf." Andra sounded amused.

"Why are you doing this? What's it all about?"

"Money," said Andra, apparently surprised. "Captain's never led us wrong yet -- except to your ship, of course. But even that's working out all right. We should get a queen's ransom for you."

"Is that all he wants to do? Steal?"

"And kill Gardenians," Andra amended with a hint of malice.

"Why? Why does he hate us?"

Andra blew her a kiss. "What's not to hate?"

As she turned away, an upsurge of panic broke through Cereza's numbness. "Are you going to lock me in?"

Andra glanced over her shoulder in surprise. "Oh, no. You can go where you like."

"Where's the wolf?" Cereza asked uneasily. "In fact, where the hell did it come from? How did it get on our ship? Did you bring it?"

Andra hesitated, then, "Yes, we brought it."

"How?"

"Hell, ask the captain."

"Does he come from Earth?"

"I've no idea where he's from."

"What's his name?"

Andra shrugged. "Don't know. And if you ask me, neither does he. Sleep well."

She didn't sleep at all. After several minutes staring into space, mulling over Andra's answers, and coming up with only bizarre theories -- *Some who've survived say he's a wild animal* -- she stood and drew the blanket around herself to go exploring.

There wasn't much to discover. The ship was tiny, bare and basic apart from some unexpectedly bright cushions in the communal eating area. She found two of the pirates there, eating and playing games of chance. They showed little interest in her, although one of them said negligently, "Hungry?"

Cereza shook her head and went on her way. Next, she discovered the main living quarters, which weren't so much larger than her own. She caught a glimpse of Andra through an open door, sitting cross-legged on her bed, reading. She didn't so much as glance up as Cereza flitted past.

At the end of the cramped passage, another door stood open. Cereza peered in and immediately wished she hadn't.

It was the captain's living quarters, complete with bed, desk and some kind of computer. Worse, the captain himself stood behind the computer, still wearing nothing but pants and the leather vest over his naked chest, although he did have a shirt in one hand as if he planned to put it on at some stage, when the screen no longer interested him.

Cereza's stomach flipped. There was something very physical about him, creating a powerful reaction in her. Perhaps because he was so different. Even his chest had black hairs, almost like an animal. But the weird thing was, despite having encountered only smooth, hairless male chests before, she knew a powerful urge to rub her hands and her cheeks all over this one...

Don't go there! She whisked herself out again.

"The door's open, senator. That means I'm available."

Even his voice did things to her body, seeming to vibrate through her to every nerve-ending. Despite the harshness of his accented Gardenian, it was a good voice, deep and quiet, not the loud, vulgar one she expected of criminals.

Since she was out of his sight, she let her eyes close, briefly. "Maybe I'm not."

"Then why are you wandering the ship like a wraith?" His voice was too close. "Looking for a way off?"

She opened her eyes to find him standing in the doorway, with his shirt over one shoulder, watching her. "Maybe."

"We only have escape pods. I have to release them."

She gave a twisted smile. "Then there's no hope for me?"

He didn't answer for a moment, then, "Come in. I want to show you something."

"What?" she asked with suspicion.

His lips quirked. "About Earth."

He turned and walked back into the room and after an instant, Cereza followed. Her mission might be over in abysmal failure -- temporarily at least -- but she hadn't forgotten it or her plan to learn as much about the place's politics as she possibly could before losing the invasion. If she could bring about a swift and easy transition to peace, she'd count it a success.

"What?" she said again, approaching the captain and his computer.

"Well, what do you know already -- how many of the Earth broadcasts have you seen?"

She glanced at him uncertainly. "Broadcasts *from* Earth?" she repeated.

He nodded, watching her steadily.

"None," said Cereza. "Earth is not a technically advanced society. They have space colonies, but like the planet itself, they're all very distant from this sector. Their communications don't stretch this far."

"You have a signal booster in the Empty Zone. It works for any race, any language."

She frowned. "But I've never seen anything at all from Earth -- certainly nothing that isn't from our agents there. None of our people have."

"You have to look in the right place. They use different frequencies, different systems that your equipment doesn't always recognize. Mine does."

She stared at him. "You *are* from Earth. So is your ship and your computer."

He shrugged. "None of that matters beside the fact that you appear to be ready to invade a planet and exterminate a people you know nothing about. But then, I suppose it's easier that way."

"We're not planning to exterminate anyone!" Cereza exclaimed. "We bring them the benefits of technology and interaction with other species, in return for a share of their planet. Do you have any idea how overcrowded Gardenia is? We need space."

"Senator. There are thousands of unoccupied planets."

"They're not suitable for Gardenians. Earth is the only one we've found that is."

The captain's smile was lopsided. "The only one that's pretty enough? The only one that combines any kind of technology and industry with forests and flowers and fruit?"

"Essentially, yes."

"Then you know it's pretty crowded itself. Apart from a few sparsely populated areas, some of it inhospitable without any trees at all."

"With the benefits we bring, they will be able to migrate all over space, not just to the puny colonies they have already. They are great explorers by nature."

The captain reached out and dragged over a chair which he placed in front of the computer. "You get all this from your agents' reports? Those agents who have been

infiltrating Earth secretly over the last few years, whom you're relying on to cripple any defense systems?"

"Broadly speaking."

"That's a politician's phrase. Almost the first I've heard you speak."

"Is that bad?" Stupid question.

"I haven't made up my mind. Tell me, senator, has it ever entered your mind that the Earth people, explorers or not, might prefer to keep their own planet?"

"A few might. We're happy to share with them."

"And if they're not happy to share?"

"There is no sign of that."

"Isn't there? Look at this. I've been reading the unofficial and underground news from Earth, which has been rife with rumors of alien threats. But this says more than any of them. Watch."

The screen fluttered to life. Cereza saw a cellar of some kind, full of caged animals that looked both miserable and familiar. She sank into the chair without meaning to and watched as the camera panned around the cages. Some of them held not the huge wolf-like animals but colorless men and women like the captain.

No, not like the captain. He was dark, but vigorous, vital, nothing like these listless, unhappy creatures whose eyes held nothing but pain and fear.

"What...?"

"Do you hear the voice? It's speaking in English, Earth's major language, and it belongs to one of your agents, a woman called Rose Winter, who disguised herself on Earth for years as a native journalist."

"She's missing, compromised..."

"Let's say she's reached a new understanding. These caged creatures show you the extent of Earth's fear and abhorrence of invasion. They won't give up their planet. On the contrary they'll do anything to keep it, even reduce their finest soldiers to these creatures you see caged. Hear that? That's the voice of an ex-army officer identifying his former comrades. They turn them by some crude genetic modification into these." He

reached over Cereza's shoulder to touch the computer screen, pointing out the caged wolves. "Hybrid human-wolves who can smell out and kill aliens. Gardenians."

Her heart thudded with the sudden understanding, and with it came a new fear, that her ridiculous speculations earlier were not so ridiculous.

"Like your wolf," she whispered, turning slowly to stare at him. He met her gaze steadily, yet oddly, there was a hint of something like defiance in his eyes, as if he was daring her to run from him, screaming. "Was... it you? It *was* you."

"It is me. But I've only just understood why."

She frowned, a hundred questions trying to spill from her lips at once. But before she could ask any of them, he said, "But you get the point? That is how far Earth is from happy at your coming."

He gave one of his unexpectedly charming lopsided smiles. "Of course, the raid has complicated matters. The project was developed in secret by the Earth Government. Your agent together with two Earth people and a Gardenian android -- the one you showed me, in fact -- have blown it all wide open, causing widespread outrage and rebellion against their own government. But even the rebels won't tolerate invasion. They're forming guerrilla groups, organizing mass production of weapons and trying to develop more."

Cereza licked her lips. The situation he described bore so little resemblance to what she'd learned for herself that they might have been talking about completely different places. "Seems to me," she said slowly, "that Earth technology is farther on than we thought. It made this ship, didn't it? Sent you out here, with this computer, those weapons, that targeting system..."

"To be fair, I tinkered with those a little. Added bits I found as I went on."

Cereza let her breath out slowly. "I knew I was being set-up, but... can I look around here some more? Do you have a translation device?"

"Sure. And I'll get one."

Her eyes refocused on him. "Are you trusting me?" *Am I trusting you?*

He didn't answer the question directly. "You're not who or what I expected to be leading the invasion of Earth."

"No," she agreed bleakly. Worse than a scapegoat, a cipher. She was a dupe. In fact, she began to think they were all dupes. Her breath shuddered as she drew it in. "I used to annoy the government, the senate, my elders and betters by accusing them of blind obedience to custom and orders, of not questioning. If you want the truth, that's why I was chosen to go to Earth, to get me out of their hair. And now it looks like I'm as guilty as everyone else -- guiltier, because I *know* to look below the surface."

He stirred beside her, making her very aware of his nearness. "We're all limited by the information available to us."

"You're not," she said at once, and then wished she hadn't. She didn't want to admire him, let alone have him aware of her admiration. She felt the color rise to her face, but before she could look away she caught the odd expression on his. It might have been stark disbelief that twisted his sensual lips and drew in his brow. But what she read in his eyes looked more like -- desolation.

It was he who turned away, rummaging in the desk drawer beside her.

"Are you?" she said with a hint of doubt.

"Limited? More than anyone. Here." He took a small, standard translation box with a bizarre connector and fixed it to the computer.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I have less information."

She stared at him. "But you have all this, awful as it is. You've been through all *that*." She waved one hand toward the computer screen, where the wolves and humans were now leaping out of cages. "And come here..."

"That's the point. I don't remember any of it."

Her lips came apart without permission. He turned abruptly away. "I'll leave you to it."

"No, wait," she said urgently. "What do you mean, you don't remember any of it? You don't remember being there? That's probably a blessing!"

"Any of it. I don't remember what went before. I don't remember coming here."

In the silence, she stood and followed him across the room. When she touched him, he jumped.

"You really don't know your name, do you?" she whispered. "You have no identity, no goal but the instinct to kill my people."

His arm, thick with muscle, was rigid under her hand. He didn't look at her. "I can live with that. I can't live with your pathetic, sentimental pity."

She snatched her hand back as if stung and he let out a groan and seized her elbow, swinging her into his arms, muttering incoherent words in a language she didn't understand. She tried to answer, to ask him to explain, but his parted lips touched the side of her face, slid down her jaw to her mouth and fastened, and she was silenced.

For an instant she hung there, stunned, bombarded by her senses. The blanket she'd clutched around herself slid, ignored, to the floor. Only when she found herself flinging an arm up around his neck to draw him closer and kiss him back, did she make an effort at defiance.

"So kill me," she gasped into his mouth.

"I've gotten over that. It's the desire to fuck you I can't get past."

She moaned aloud, as if the very coarseness of his words fed her lust. Whatever fanned it, the flame burned wildly, out of control, consuming her in its heat. Somehow, every moment since she'd first seen his dark, frighteningly unfamiliar face on the viewscreen had been leading up to this. It didn't seem to matter what he'd done. Pirate, enemy or victim, they were all part of him and her body made no distinction.

His hands roved up and down her body from her waist, down over the curve of her hips and back up to the sides of her breasts where they lingered, cupping. Shivering with delight, she covered one hand with her own, pressing it closer, rubbing against his skin in desperation.

His knee parted her thighs for his erection to slam between, and galaxies, that felt good too, his hardness grinding into her hot, moist tenderness. She moaned again, thrusting her tongue into his mouth, twisting it around his teeth.

With a muffled growl, he tore his mouth free and released her. His breath was ragged, panting, his brown eyes black with lust

“Get out of here,” he said harshly. “Now!”

She stared at him, fighting the hurt that suddenly chilled her to the bone. On top of which her body, celibate for so long, since she’d first entered the Senate two years ago, still clamored for fulfillment. Wildly, she wondered if she was above begging. Or if she should just laugh carelessly and walk away and hope her knees didn’t buckle from trembling.

But he wanted her. She knew he did. That’s what the strange flirtation in the interview room had been about, and the clinch in front of the viewscreen to show Azale...

“Cereza, go,” he snarled, and at that, his very desperation gave him away. He’d kidnapped her, hurting, maybe even killing, her comrades in the process of escape. Fucking her when she was at his mercy broke his code of honor.

She smiled, a little tremulously, and walked to the door. She let her hips swing, but although she felt his eyes burn into her back, he didn’t follow. She reached out and closed the door.

“Say my name again,” she whispered as she turned to face him.

A baffled frown flitted across his face and was still. But his pants tented, telling her all she needed to know. In one movement, she shrugged the nightgown off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. “Cereza,” he all but pleaded, “Don --”

“Thank you.” She walked to him, holding his ardent, almost frightened gaze until she stood naked in front of him, his laboring breath on her cheek, the heat of his body burning before she even touched him. “Again,” she whispered. “In your voice it sounds... special.”

Slowly, she lifted her arms and placed them around his neck and reached up to brush her mouth across his. As if he couldn’t help himself, his lips moved, accepting, kissing back, until she pulled free. “Again,” she pleaded.

His hands came up, cupping her face. "Cereza," he whispered, wonderingly. "Cereza." And his mouth sank into hers, invading, claiming until a sound like a sob escaped her. This time it was he who teased, drawing back to say, "Are you seducing me?"

"Yes," she said boldly, and reached down to unfasten his pants. "You may take me to bed, if you wish."

"I'd rather take you right here."

"Like a pirate?"

"Like a wolf." The breath hissed between his teeth as she finally closed her fist around his cock and drew it free. "Doesn't that frighten you?"

"Everything about you frightens me. Being in the same room as you frightens me, because I want this so badly."

His eyes widened. Golden flames seemed to dance in them, mesmerizing her, and then he swooped, seizing her mouth with his. He muttered something that might have been "Me too," against her lips.

His arms enveloped her in warmth. When she came up for air, she kissed and nipped the skin of his shoulders instead, pushing back the leather waistcoat to get at his chest. Smooth and hot to her touch, dusted with those fascinating black hairs. She could taste the salt of fresh sweat on his skin, and something else intense and spicy that drove her on, licking and grazing his nipples.

Almost violently, his fingers tangled in her hair and forced her head up for his open-mouth kiss. He bent her backward with the force of it, until her upper body lay over the desk and his naked cock jutted between her slick thighs. Somehow he'd kicked off his trousers, and with the waistcoat hanging off his powerful shoulders he'd never looked so piratical, or so indescribably sexy. She almost came just looking at him, just imagining him making love to her.

"I can feel your wetness already," he growled in triumph. "How often will you come for me?"

"How often would you like?"

"I'll tell you when to stop."

"Can I tell you when to start?"

He smiled, rolling one hard, aching nipple between his finger and thumb. "Is that impatience?"

"Oh yes."

His smile widened as he bent his head over her other breast and took the nipple into his mouth. She arched into him, threading her fingers through his soft, thick hair, and when he began to suck, let out a moan of bliss and need. Lifting her legs, she wrapped them around his waist, drawing him as close as she could, encouraging him to enter her body at last.

At last? How long had she known him? This was madness...

And she'd take it any day over sanity.

Still sucking one nipple, his hands slid under her bottom, kneading her cheeks, sliding his fingers round to bathe in her wetness. She gasped as they explored the sensitive folds and valleys, and softly rubbed against the hard, swollen nub at the center. As if he sensed the desperation of her clamoring body, he slid a finger inside her, stroking around the pulsing walls of her pussy until he found the spot that drove her over the point of no return.

Galaxy, she was so close now... She writhed on his finger, trying to push farther on to it while his thumb stroked her clitoris over and over. He pumped her gently but relentlessly, sucking harder on her breast until she fell headlong over the edge into bliss.

Through the convulsions, she was aware of him lifting his head, watching her face avidly while his free hand caressed her breast. It was part of the joy to drown in his eyes at last, to soak up his fierce pleasure in her ecstasy.

But she wanted, she *needed* him to feel it too.

"Please, come inside me," she whispered. "Now, quickly..."

Unexpectedly, he took hold of her arm and yanked her up against him so they stood together, her buttocks pressed into the desk as he kissed her deeply. Then he

spun her around until she dropped dizzily over the desk, face down. His cock, huge and rigid, probed between her cheeks and slid inside her in one long, sweet stroke that left her panting.

Pulsing around him, her pussy reignited, so when he began to fuck her in earnest with slow, hard thrusts, she reached, sobbing, for the climax, as if she hadn't come only moments before. His strokes quickened, pounding into her, gathering the pleasure in an ever growing arc around his plundering cock and finally shooting her over the edge into another raging orgasm. Ruthlessly, he held her there while he climbed higher with every frenzied push. Her own wild, animal noises mingled with his increasing groans and pants until she couldn't tell one from the other.

At last, with a sound like a howl, he wrenched her upright closing both hands around her breasts and devouring her mouth. Hot liquid spurted deep inside her, deepening her pleasure beyond any she'd ever imagined. But his groans didn't stop. They seemed to get louder. He thrust again and again, his penis quivering and throbbing inside her as his arms and body shook against her.

Suddenly frightened, she reached up and behind her for his face. "What? What is it? Oh, galaxy, are you -- changing?"

Chapter Five

Lost in orgasm, in the beauty of the exotic creature who took his fucking and his seed with such pulsing, passionate joy, he couldn't be still. Her clinging softness, her hot, velvety wetness hugging his cock kept him pushing it into her. Visions sprang into his head, flooding him, overloading him until she was his only reality, gripping his cock with muscles of warm steel, gazing into his eyes with fear.

Fear. He didn't like fear, not in the woman he was screwing. With a huge effort of will, he concentrated on what she'd just said.

"Changing?" he gasped out. "No... that is, yes, but not to the wolf... Not at all. Cereza... I think... I think I'm remembering."

Twisting, she tried to face him properly, but since he couldn't bear to leave her pussy just yet, he held her where she was, merely stepping back with her and sinking into the chair with her in his lap, still impaled on his cock.

She turned on him, sending pleasure pangs shooting once more and took his face between her hands, searching his eyes.

"Yuri," he blurted. "My name is Yuri Grigorovitch Nikitin. I really am a captain, in Earth's army. I'm a pilot. I tested new ships."

He couldn't keep up with his thoughts, couldn't blab them all and didn't want to. This amazing, lovely red woman sat on his cock and right now that seemed more wonderful than anything else. She curled into his chest, and he held her softness to him, accepting the rush of protectiveness along with the shame. He'd been blindly killing and imprisoning her people from a planted impulse, and he had to face the fact that they didn't all deserve to die. Stuck in some massive stagnation, they needed education, not another fight, another enemy.

Which didn't mean he'd be happy to educate them from Earth. The bastards who'd done this to him had been right about that. The Gardenians couldn't have Earth.

"What will you do?" Her voice sounded tiny, breaking into his thoughts, and he realized all over again the value of the gift he'd just received. She didn't seem like a woman who gave herself easily, and yet she'd done this with a man who was her enemy and a terrifying werewolf to boot. A man she guessed was about to cast her aside. Was he? Was that what he did? Is it what he *should* do for both their sakes?

Putting off the decision, he kissed her hair. "I don't know yet."

"Are you married?" she blurted and closed her eyes as if ashamed of the question.

He stroked her hair, but wouldn't take the easy lie. "I don't know. It isn't all back yet. But I don't think so. If I was, I wouldn't feel so --" He broke off, urging her chin upward so he could kiss her and lose the words he had no right to think let alone say. After all, he hadn't known her twenty-four hours. "Did you ask me to take you to bed some time ago?" he asked huskily.

She smiled, and her eyes were like the Northern Lights. "I might have."

"My name came to me at the moment of climax. I'm hoping it might be a pattern -- and I suspect I have a lot of remembering to do."

"I'd like to help," she murmured and slid off him at last to kneel between his knees. Since she immediately took his cock into her mouth, he decided not to object, and merely gave himself up to the astounding pleasure of her sucks and licks. Her wicked hand drew back his foreskin, gently, rhythmically pumping him while her sucks grew stronger and harder. She had a light, sensual touch that was beguiling, eagerly accepting his thrusts into her mouth until she swallowed him, drawing him swiftly toward climax. The thrill was so sweet that he waited until he hovered on the brink before seizing her once more, breaking the suction so that his cock popped out of her mouth. He hauled her into his lap and thrust up into her.

Orgasm broke, rushing on him with all the force of a starship crash, but she didn't leave it there. She rode him fiercely, determined to find her own pleasure which extended his beyond anything he could remember experiencing in his checkered past.

To the enchanting sound of her cries and screams of orgasm, Yuri retrieved his life.

* * *

Cereza woke with him still inside her. They'd finally made it to the bed for one more slow, lazy lovemaking, after which they'd fallen asleep like this.

Cereza opened her eyes and gazed into his face. In sleep it seemed to lose all its rough edges. He looked contented and vulnerable, and for some reason she wanted to smile and weep at the same time. There had never been a feeling like this. For her, this closeness went beyond the exciting bliss of good sex, even if this was the best she'd ever known. Waking in his arms with his semi-erect cock twitching inside her, she never wanted to be with anyone else.

It was all wrong, but even if he'd never been anything more than the pirate he was now, she would still have done this. Everything in him called to her, his darkness, his mystery, his hard, muscled body, his lopsided smile, the unexpected glimpses of humor he let slip.

Sex with Yuri made her feel like a queen, powerful and elated. Ridiculously, this felt more important than joining the Senate, more necessary to her even than the acclaim of the people she was beginning to reach on Gardenia.

She smiled, remembering his urgency, his tenderness mixed so beguilingly with fierce, rough passion. He'd certainly been in no hurry to sling her out of his bed, and instinct told her there was more to this coupling than a one-night stand to release a little of his sexual tension.

For her, there had always been more. She'd never been so aroused or so attracted to a man. And no man had ever given her such pleasure. Her whole body ached with it.

She moved her head on the pillow so she could feel his breath on her lips and smiled. She stretched out her lips and kissed his, a soft caress that brought immediate response. His lips parted, smiling, waiting for more.

She didn't even know if he was awake, yet her heart seemed to plunge straight into her stomach, spreading warm emotion to her very core. Without permission, her pussy clenched around his lethargic cock, which immediately began to grow again.

Since his eyes were still closed, she kissed his mouth in earnest, allowing her hips a little sensuous gyration. He growled into her mouth. His arms moved, holding her tighter, rolling her underneath him and his eyes looked into hers at last.

It was a moment of truth. Would he be aghast or pleased to find her still in his bed, the source of his sexy awakening? She didn't doubt he'd be prepared to finish what she'd started -- few men of any race would draw back from this position -- but she'd see in his eyes if there were still feelings for her beyond the animal instinct to fuck.

His dark gaze fixed on hers, widening as she held her breath. The waking smile in them began to die, and she held her breath.

"Cereza," he whispered. It sounded like wonder. His hands came up to touch her cheeks and lips, to cup her face. "Cereza." And his mouth fastened on hers.

Within her, his cock continued to grow, but he kept it still. He seemed content just to hold and kiss her, and Cereza's throat closed with tears of joy. Ignoring them, she kissed him back with enthusiasm, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Something buzzed loudly, dragging her from the moment. Yuri's lips stilled and released hers. "Fuck," he said, and reached above her to press a button on the wall. "What?"

"Entering the asteroid field, Captain," said a disembodied voice.

"I'll be there," he said with resignation, and pressed the button once more. "Sorry," he said. "You'll never know how sorry."

She smiled. "I might."

He grinned and eased out of her at last. "Go back to sleep if you want." With appreciation, she watched his long, muscled legs stretch across the bed to the floor until he stood naked and magnificent before her. "I'll be back."

He turned, pulling on his pants while she admired his taut, rippling buttocks. He reached for the shirt he'd never quite got around to putting on earlier, slipping it on while adjusted the bulge in his pants. "Stop looking at me or I'll frighten the crew."

She laughed and rolled out of bed to walk into his arms. He held her gently, carefully, like valuable porcelain, as if afraid to come too close. Wickedly, she rubbed her breasts against him as she kissed him. "Hurry back," she said huskily and stepped out of his arms.

He swallowed. "Count on it." He shrugged himself into the leather body warmer and sat on the bed to pull on his boots.

Cereza's gaze slid beyond him to the computer. Reality. Things -- great things and smaller ones -- had to be sorted out. "Can I use the computer?" she asked, as if a guest rather than a hostage. What the hell was she now?

"Sure." He stood up and glanced at her. His lips parted as if about to say more, then they closed on silence and twisted into a rueful smile. He walked to the door and went out, closing it behind him.

Cereza put her nightgown back on, flung the forgotten blanket around her shoulders and sat down in front of the computer, to learn more about Earth. She still had a mission and a duty.

* * *

As Yuri expected, the Gardenian fleet didn't follow them into the asteroid field. Their ships were too many and too big for safety. Instead, they lined up at the edge and waited for him to come out.

"It's stalemate," Azale's voice said over the communicator. "We can't come in, but you have nowhere to go. You have to come out eventually." There was a pause, then, with more difficulty, "We want our senator back. We are prepared to negotiate."

Farco grinned. Andra looked over her shoulder at Yuri, her eyebrows raised in question.

Yuri shook his head, drawing his thumb across his throat in a gesture for communications-silence. "We have to work out what we want for her. In the meantime, edge forward into the field, and keep moving in case their sensors can pick us up."

"We going all the way through?" Farco asked. "Come out the other side and arrange to meet them somewhere safe to make the drop?"

"It crossed my mind," Yuri admitted. But then a lot of things were crossing his mind just now. He glanced at the two crew members he knew best. They'd allied in a bar fight on the first place he'd landed his ship. For more than two months these people had been all he had, past, present or, it seemed, future. One thing was certain -- he owed them.

He drew in his breath. "She was right. I do come from Earth. I've started to remember things."

"Wow," Farco said, apparently impressed. "You crossed the Empty Zone alone?"

"I crossed it asleep," Yuri said wryly. It wasn't strictly true. After waking, he'd spent days alone with the stranger who was himself, without coming across any ships or inhabited planets, wondering if he was the only being in the universe or if he was insane and hallucinating. "The point is, I need to decide what to do about it."

"What's to do?" Andra asked. "You left, you're here now."

"We have a hostage. A senator leading the expedition that plans to take Earth."

"You think they'll give up the idea in return for her?" Farco said dubiously.

"I don't know. In the short term, they might chase her for a bit. In the long term, they might just send some other politician to figurehead the expedition. We have to figure out which."

"Or just sell her for gold."

It was one solution. It would pay off the crew and leave him free to do whatever he needed to about the Earth invasion.

And Cereza herself... What would she do? Accept her place in the exchange and carry on? Would what she learned here not influence what she did? She was a rebel, a maverick who thought for herself. And yet what a career boost it would be to finally secure her people another "garden."

"I need to talk to her."

"Talk, is it?" said Farco wryly.

"What does that mean?" Andra demanded, gazing from one to the other.

"It means she wasn't in her cabin when I took her breakfast two hours ago."

Shit. Breakfast. She'd be starving. He realized he was. Breakfast with Cereza...

"She's in my quarters," he said abruptly. "Using the computer. Watch those asteroids, and keep me informed."

He strode out, only too aware of Farco's salacious grin and Andra's stare. Behind her habitual hardness, she looked oddly stricken.

But he couldn't consider that now. Cereza's scent was in his nostrils, growing stronger with every pace. It was new, he realized now, this powerful sense of smell. It had come with the wolf, during those dark days in the project that had taken from him all that he was, except the quick reactions of a soldier. He doubted he'd been meant to get the rest back. He should have carried on a mindless slave to instinct, killing Gardenians for the benefit of Earth.

He paused in the kitchen, grunting at Garrech, who was nodding off over a bowl of stew. It smelled good, so he took two more bowls, stuck them on a tray with a jug of water and two cups, and departed.

Coffee, he thought with sudden longing. *I want coffee.*

Remembering was a mixed blessing.

When he opened the door to his quarters, her scent seemed to consume him. Once, it had urged him to kill her, and he still felt that instinct -- well buried beneath the desire and the tenderness, but still there.

The first time he'd seen her, outside the docking bay on the Gardenian ship, her unique scent had filled him with ferocious lust -- for blood and sex in almost equal

measure. He'd nearly shifted on the spot, so powerful had been his reaction to her. It still was, but he had the wolf well in hand. And even if he did change near her, he knew now he'd never kill her. He wondered if his reaction to all Gardenians had altered for good. Time would tell. But at least now he understood it, he could control it. Control himself.

She sat in front of the computer, staring at the screen. He couldn't tell if she was reading or thinking, but either way she was so lost in concentration she didn't hear him come in. Fuck, but she was beautiful. Just looking at her melted his insides. And turned his cock to stone. He closed the door and walked across the room to lay the tray down on the table. She jumped, looking quickly up at him.

"Yuri." He loved the sound of his name on her lips, the way her eyes relaxed suddenly into a smile of such warmth that he felt burned.

He said, "I need to talk to you, Cereza."

"I need to talk to you. Mmmm, what is that? It smells delicious."

"Stew. Andra made it." He dragged over the other hard chair and sat in it. Cereza had already grabbed the fork and tasted the stew.

"Galaxy, that's good. I didn't realize I was so hungry."

Now, he thought, watching those luscious lips draw vegetables off the fork into her mouth, *would be a good time to talk*. Except the way she ate made him think of oral sex. And when a splash of sauce landed on her chin, he leaned forward without thinking and licked it off.

Her eyes smiled. A hint of heat sprang into them, urging him on. He took a forkful and held it to her mouth. She took it with such deliberately sexual provocation, making great play with her tongue, that his pants strained over his cock. He fed her some more, this time leaning forward to share the forkful with her when it was halfway into her mouth. Kissing her and eating at the same time seemed an excellent use of time.

Perhaps chocolate, or even fruit would be sexier. Yuri didn't care. He'd use what he had, so long as he could still taste her in among the vegetables. She didn't object when he drew the nightgown off her shoulders and drizzled sauce on the swell of her

breast. And when he licked it off, she made a tiny noise like a moan. Lingered, he felt her quickened breath and pulse. He emptied another forkful over her and brought up his hand to catch it before it dripped farther than her nipple.

That took a wonderfully long time to clean up, and by the time he'd finished, she was naked on the floor, pouring stew over her own belly button. Voraciously now, he dug that out with a stab of his tongue, cleaning as he went, while his free hand trailed stew down her stomach and thighs.

She was writhing under his consuming mouth, arching up into him, her hand floundering for the bowl. But he didn't want it now. The scent and taste of her pussy was more than enough and he could wait no longer to feed.

Pushing her thighs farther apart, he settled between and probed delicately with his tongue among her moist folds and valleys, swirling over her entrance and back to her swollen clitoris. When he fastened his mouth to her lower lips, she cried out, jerking up into his mouth and he sucked relentlessly until she hovered on the brink of orgasm. Then he released her and reached over to help himself to a little stew from the bowl.

Her eyes, dazed with lust and frustration, watched him, uncomprehending. He winked, swallowed, and returned to the better meal. God, she tasted good, sweet and strong. He lapped up her cream like a starving man, driving her on toward bliss with his tongue and lips, and yet couldn't resist another tease. Her orgasm would be all the sweeter when he let her have it.

"Bastard," she said distinctly as he finished up the stew from the bowl.

"Want some?" he asked huskily.

"I... I want... oh Galaxy!" she finished as he latched his mouth to her pussy and sucked hard. She drenched him, writhing so hard in her convulsions that he had to hold her hips steady in both hands in order to draw the last ounce of pleasure from her.

Her bliss excited him beyond belief. He could remember other lovers now, passing affairs as well as women with whom he'd had some kind of relationship. With none of them had he felt this overwhelming joy in their pleasure. Despite the raging beast still enclosed in his pants, he felt he could watch her orgasm all day.

Except that she had other ideas. After she quieted, he pulled himself up her body and kissed her mouth.

"My turn," she said throatily and pushed him over on to his back.

Which was when something struck the ship with the force of a bomb, rocking it wildly. He and Cereza were flung across the floor. Crockery crashed around them.

"Fuck!" Yuri didn't know if he was angrier about the damage to his ship or the frustration of his lust. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she said, dazed. "What just happened?"

"I don't know," he said grimly, springing to his feet, "but get dressed and come to the bridge."

He strode to the door, pausing only long enough to glance at her over his shoulder. "Next time -- if there is a next time -- I must keep my hands off you long enough to talk. No seducing me."

He closed the door before she could deny it. Even through his anxiety, he was smiling, because he'd made her come and made her laugh.

"What the hell just happened?" he demanded, running onto the bridge ahead of Garrech and the others.

"Asteroid," said Farco briefly.

"Damage?"

"Considerable. Hamt and Gore have gone to investigate a possible breach."

"Fuck," Yuri said again. He realized he was saying it in English. It made a more satisfying swear word. Throwing himself into his chair, he called up all the information he could on damage and status. "All right. For the duration, I've passed control of the escape pods to each of your codes too. If it goes bad, just get the fuck out. You guys are too ugly to die."

He leapt to his feet and ran off the bridge, just as Cereza stumbled on. They almost collided. Then, for an instant, they stood staring at each other. She looked wide-eyed and anxious with the ridiculous blanket still clutched round her flimsy nightdress. They should get her some proper clothes, if they lived long enough.

“Asteroid collision,” he said tersely. “With possible hull breach. Listen for the order to abandon ship. I’ll find you.”

He touched her face, once, as if to remember what she felt like, and then ran on.

“Yuri?” she called after him, but he didn’t answer and didn’t stop.

Chapter Six

"These would do," said Andra, some three hours later, holding a pair of soft, silken pants against Cereza's body. They were considerably finer than the ones Andra herself wore, but she was clearly determined to give Cereza the best.

A lot had changed during the hours of the emergency. In many ways, they had been even stranger than the time she'd spent being dragged through her own ship in the company of a giant wolf. Since the attention of those on the bridge was focused on avoiding any more asteroids and on carrying out Yuri's orders as barked over the bridge communications, Cereza quickly left them to it, and tracked Yuri down.

He lay on his back with his head in a maintenance tunnel, swearing at Hamt for not tracking the surrounding asteroids. When she spoke, he bumped his head and levered himself out to swear at her for not staying on the bridge.

Ignoring him, Cereza sat on the floor. "Is the hull breached?"

"We've contained it," Yuri said reluctantly. "But the collision damaged vital sensors."

And so she stayed, while his temper cooled, and Hamt regained his insolence. She passed them both tools and instruments as they asked for them and tried not to look smug when Yuri seemed surprised that she knew what he was talking about.

"I've flown ships since I was twelve years old. My father insisted we knew how they worked."

He glanced at her. "Someday you can explain this one to me."

For Cereza, it was a curiously enjoyable emergency. Besides the tingle of danger in the pit of her stomach -- which seemed to have been around one way or another since she first encountered the captain -- she got to know Yuri better. She got to impress him by re-routing some wiring all by herself. And she got to watch his deft hands working,

remembering how they'd felt on her body, and to hear his caustic humor as he bantered with his crew.

I like you, Yuri Grigorovitch Nikitin...

And when at last they were finished, she entered the bridge arm in arm with Hamt and Yuri as if they were old comrades. That felt good too, and not at all as if they were pirates and she their hostage.

"Panic over," Yuri declared. "Hamt is officially Arse of the Month and the rest of you are promoted over his head. I'm going for a shower -- don't bang into anything else while I'm gone!" He glanced at Andra. "Find Cereza something to wear?"

"Sure," said Andra, rising with alacrity. And moments later, they were here in Andra's cabin -- not much larger than Cereza's -- while the pirate rummaged among her best clothes for something that would fit.

"Seriously, just give me something old. It'll just be good to be dressed!"

"Dressed's overrated," Andra declared, coming up with a creamy tunic. "Surprised the captain wants it."

Heat galloped through Cereza's body. She supposed that on a ship of this size secrets were impossible to keep. "He has a lot of things on his mind," she mumbled. "He's starting to remember his past."

Andra paused in the act of holding the tunic against Cereza's breast. Her gaze flickered upward. "You knew him before?"

"Of course not. He shouldn't even be in this part of the galaxy, according to our admittedly faulty information. But he does come from Earth. In fact he's a soldier who once swore to defend it."

"Try those," Andra said. And while Cereza modestly pulled the pants on under her nightgown, Andra added, "I guess that makes your position a little awkward. Unless you're just screwing him in an effort to get back to your own people."

Cereza didn't dignify that with an answer, although she couldn't prevent a quick glare.

Andra was watching her intently. "You do know that he's the wolf?"

Cereza nodded. "He told me. It was done to him by his own people, in the same process that took his memories."

"Doesn't that scare you?"

"The wolf thing? Not now, to be honest. Does it scare you?"

"I confess it freaked me out the first time I watched it happen. But since it was in the middle of a brawl and he seemed to be on our side, I got over it. He never threatens us. In either form, he protects us."

For a pirate, it was a declaration of loyalty. And a warning.

"And let's face it, he's a damned fine secret weapon." Andra kicked idly at the base of the bed. "Do you care for him at all?"

It wasn't a question she was prepared to answer to a stranger. Not when she couldn't answer it to herself. Logic stated she couldn't really care for someone she hadn't known two days. And yet she'd already made love with him several times. She was a politician. She knew how to evade an uncomfortable question, but before she could do so, something in Andra's too-neutral eyes caught her attention.

"Do you?" she countered.

Andra looked away and shrugged. "Doesn't matter, does it? I'm crew, so I'm off-limits. Apparently hostages are in a different class."

Cereza sank onto Andra's bed, won over by the other woman's pain as she would never have been by her sympathy. "I'm sorry." Worse, something horribly close to jealousy twisted through her with the knowledge that in the long run Andra had more chance with him than she had. She had a duty to invade his planet or betray her own people and deprive them of the only suitable new home they'd ever found.

But there was a higher duty, one she'd always tried to follow -- to do the right thing. And her reading of Earth broadcasts had taught her a lot. She wasn't sure yet what could be done with it, but she had to try. The notion forming before he'd distracted her with delicious food and even more delicious sex rushed on her now with a vengeance.

She said abruptly, "I need to go back."

"He won't let you." *Even for a fuck.* The words hung unspoken between them, along with Andra's bitterness and her own uncertainty. Why had he relaxed his principles to screw her? Did it make her worth more than Andra to him? Or less? In all her dealings with him, she'd gone on blind instinct and wishful thinking, but now it frightened her how little she really knew him.

Andra said, "We're going straight through the asteroid field to find a planet to exchange you for gold."

Pain sliced through her. She was just a hostage after all... "I can't wait that long. The invasion might go ahead with someone else." She stood up, tearing off the nightgown and throwing the tunic over her head even as she strode across the room. "He has to let me go back."

"Cereza." Andra's voice stayed her before she even reached the door. "He won't let you go."

Cereza turned and stared at her. She was trying to hide her own pain and that cut Cereza even more.

"I've seen the way he looks at you," Andra said, low. "He never once glanced at me that way. He won't let you go because he wants you here."

Warmth flooded her, even as the impossibility of her situation pressed down ever harder. "Even if I can save his Earth by going? He'd rather hand me over for gold?"

"That's a decision he doesn't have to make yet. A lot can happen in a few days."

Cereza closed her mouth, letting the idea whirl through her head. "Perhaps it's a decision we have to make for him," she said slowly. She could make use of Andra's pain to lessen it, to give him a real choice.

"How?" said Andra with suspicion.

Cereza drew in her breath. "You still have control of an escape pod, don't you?"

* * *

He was on the bridge, where he'd smell her easily if she walked past. Andra took her to the pod bay by a more circuitous route through engineering tunnels.

While Andra programmed the pod from the ship's navigation computer, Cereza watched her like a hawk. Though they'd reached an understanding, Andra was a pirate and Cereza was sure simply bumping her off had at least crossed her mind.

"It should emerge from the asteroid field right in front of your own fleet," Andra said briskly. "The pod itself will adjust course to avoid large objects -- like asteroids. This is for communications -- and this to open it."

Cereza nodded. Excitement hummed because she was doing something at last, had taken back control. And because she had a mission truly worth fighting for, beyond her own career and another garden for her people to play in. And yet as Andra nodded and prepared to shut the lid on her, a sudden wave of loss rose up like a tide. It felt almost like terror.

"Andra." Reaching up, she caught the other woman's wrist. "Andra, will you tell him..."

"What?" she asked in a small, hard voice.

Good question. Damned good question. What the hell could she say? *Great sex but I have to dash? Need to sneak away to my own people? I'm not betraying you, honest?*

I love you?

She caught her breath. "Just... tell him, I'll find him." It was what he had said to her when he thought the ship might blow. Would he remember that, connect it to whatever they'd found together and trust her?

If they really had something, if she was right about him, then surely he would.

Andra stared at her. After an instant, her hand twisted, not to escape but to grip hers. Her eyes gave away a confusion of compassion, jealousy, and reluctant friendship, leaving her looking unexpectedly vulnerable. "I'll tell him," she said. "Good luck."

* * *

Yuri watched asteroids on the viewscreen with an attention that amounted to paranoia, while his plan to use Cereza's presence with him to deter the invasion circled in his head. All he needed was her agreement and cooperation.

He shifted in his seat, desperate to see her again, talk to her again. And yet afraid to abandon his station and endanger the ship. As soon as they were out the other side of this damned asteroid field...

In front of his eyes something spun away from the ship at high speed. He blinked, immediately targeting and scanning it. "What the..." He checked the internal readings, and hit the communication button with force. "Andra? Where the hell are you?"

"Kitchen."

Relief flooded him. "Your pod's just launched. Roll call."

One after the other, the crew called in.

"Cereza? Cereza, communicate!"

"She can't, Captain." It was Andra again, her voice both nervous and heavy. He knew what she was going to say.

* * *

By the time Andra dragged her feet onto the bridge, he had himself back in hand. Inside was a raging emptiness that seemed worse even than the dark early days when he'd first wakened on the ship. But he only let the anger show.

She was right up to him before he even looked at her. God knew what was in his eyes because for the first time since he'd known her, she flinched. "What the hell did you think you were doing?" he asked quietly.

"She wanted to go back." She was like a surly child. "You'd never have sent her, so I did."

"She was all I had."

Her brows contracted, the sudden pain in her eyes before she looked away reminded him of that brief stricken look he'd glimpsed once before, when he'd more or less admitted to taking Cereza to his bed.

"To halt the Earth invasion," he finished.

Her gaze fluttered back up. "She made no difference. She told me that. She said the Gardenians would negotiate for her return but in the meantime send someone else

to figurehead the invasion. I knew you'd never negotiate for gold, not now. So I saved you the trouble and sent her back."

"What the *fuck* do you know?" He bit back the rest of the tirade boiling on his tongue like acid and dragged his fingers through his hair in an effort to regain control, to think beyond this disaster. Lowering his hand again, he waved her away.

She turned on her heel, sharply.

"Andra."

She stood very still.

He drew in his breath, trying to ask, trying not to care. "Did... did she say anything else?"

Andra turned slowly back. He saw understanding, almost compassion flit across her face before it was replaced by the more usual hard cynicism. "No. Nothing else."

Chapter Seven

"Captain Nikitin."

Yuri hadn't expected this to feel so much like a homecoming. But after the two anxious weeks spent crossing the Empty Zone, it was surprisingly comforting to hear an Earth voice speaking English.

The speaker's harsh, handsome face flashed onto the screen, and Yuri recognized it instantly, not just from several recent Earth broadcasts, but from the dark, still blessedly vague days as part of the project. Major Maynard was a wolf too. "Good to see you."

"You too, sir, though I could wish there wasn't a Gardenian fleet between us."

"What's your status, Captain? Since you introduced yourself with your own name, I presume you remember everything?"

"Most of it."

Maynard nodded. "Most of us do remember, one way or another, though apparently we were never meant to. Do you have everything under control?" He meant the wolf, of course.

"I believe so."

Maynard gave a faint yet genuine smile. "Glad to have you back. What's your position?"

Yuri gave him it precisely, adding, "I'm out of their sensor range. They won't know I'm behind them. They've ignored all the colonies and come straight to Earth, so I've gathered all the colonial ships I could to stand with me. We can harry their rear and slow them up, but I can't pretend we'll make any real difference to the outcome." His lips twisted. "I'm hoping you have a plan, Major, or a secret weapon."

"Maybe I do," Maynard said unexpectedly. He reached out to something beyond the camera's focus, and an instant later, drew someone else into view. A beautiful Gardenian woman with long thick amber hair and golden eyes. She looked familiar too. "This is our best weapon. My wife."

"Rose Winter," Yuri said slowly. Although her eyes had been different then... "Earth journalist and compromised Gardenian agent."

"He compromised me," Rose said with a jerk of her head at the Major, then almost immediately, she added, "Actually, living on Earth compromised me as it did several other agents. We're still in control down here, despite the fact that all agents should have been activated by now to take over vital installations. Many of them just didn't. We have several agents with us."

Yuri frowned. "Who exactly is 'us'?" he demanded. "Is there still a government?"

"In name," Maynard said. "In practice, it's paralyzed, ceased to function. The rebels -- like us -- are in control."

"So how do we defeat the bastards?"

"We send my weapon to talk to them."

Yuri dragged his fingers through his hair. "Sir, there's nothing talk can do. It doesn't matter how much sympathy you'll find in their leader. This was a decision made long ago. To them, it's already a fait accompli. They believe they need this planet and every other consideration is secondary to that." *Including love.*

Yuri laughed at himself, bitterly, for even letting the glancing thought into his head. Love wasn't a few urgent fucks and an escape without so much as a goodbye. Not to him, and clearly not to Cereza, whatever softness he'd chosen to see in her at the time. He didn't like that her desertion had hurt him so much, with a sharpness that hadn't faded with the long, boring journey across the Empty Zone in the Gardenian wake. He didn't like the vulnerability it implied either.

In truth, he was looking forward to a fight, if only to ease his aggression. The loyalty of his crew who had chosen to come with him on this probably final, suicidal

and non-profit-making mission, was the one warmth in a life that had gone as cold as his first awakening as the wolf.

"Nevertheless," Maynard said implacably. "It does no harm to share a few views. Rose has already talked to their senator and found her -- understanding."

"She is," Yuri snapped. "But she'll annihilate you just the same. It's easy to be understanding with a massive fleet at your back." Or when you're the captive of a pirate...

Maynard's brows drew together and up. "You speak as if you know the senator."

"We've met," Yuri said shortly.

The two on the screen exchanged glances and muffled words with someone off-view. Then Maynard said, "It might be a good idea if you were to accompany Rose to their flagship..."

"Hardly," Yuri barked. "Our meeting was in the line of rather less honorable business -- on my part. I attacked her ship and held her hostage."

"Ah. Understood. Very well, Captain. We'll keep you informed. Stand by."

"Yes, sir."

Yuri broke the connection and rose restlessly to his feet. He was sure Rose would fail, and not just because he couldn't stand the thought of another doing the job his own charms hadn't. Cereza really was trapped by her own position. Her one chance to do the right thing would have been to cooperate with him as his prisoner. But she had a lifetime of loyalty to her own people, and so did Rose. It wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that instead of persuading the Gardenians to back off, Rose would simply return to them. Making it doubly-hard for Maynard to attack them, or to rely on the other Gardenians he'd said were with him.

Yuri kicked his desk with frustration and strode to the door.

There was nothing for him to do but wait and watch. He couldn't fight anyone, let alone kill anyone and his wolf wanted to do both.

At least, he was blaming the wolf, but in truth his rage felt only too human.

Perhaps he could persuade Hamt or Farco to a round of boxing.

* * *

Cereza regarded Rose thoughtfully. To orthodox eyes, the woman was a traitor who'd not only failed in her duty but had chosen the enemy over her own people. But her reasoning, her decision-making, came very close to Cereza's own.

Of course, their positions were very different. Rose was from an obscure family, had been little more than a servant of the state, however valued and trusted she had risen to be by her own intelligence and ability. Cereza was a senator, someone with a right to make decisions that affected her people. Rose was infected by the people she'd lived among for nearly six years. Yuri's people. And his odd egalitarianism was reflected in her speech.

Cereza nodded slowly. "Very well. I'll come to Earth."

"Senator," Azale began in clear alarm. He and his senior officers sat around the conference table with her, Rose, and the android Louis whose picture Cereza had once shown to Yuri. To Cereza, it said a lot that an android's logic had chosen to oppose his makers. Even though it shouldn't have been possible, he -- it -- didn't appear to be malfunctioning.

"We'll guarantee the senator's safety," Rose said quickly.

"I don't see how you can," Azale snapped. "By your own admission, there is no government. Such rule as there is, is held by small groups of rebels who cannot possibly control a people hostile to the senator."

"I can guarantee it," said Louis unexpectedly. He had made little contribution to the discussion, except to supply points of information and statistics, and at this intervention, everyone gazed at him in surprise. "My sensors will detect any unauthorized weapons, or anyone charging weapons. And I will protect her with my life as I am programmed to do."

Azale curled his lip. "You've done a lot you're not programmed to do."

"I'm more than my programming, not less," the android said calmly. "And I'm still protecting Gardenians. My logic has merely chosen a different path for the greater

good. The senator will be safe on Earth. So will you be, should you choose to accompany her."

"I think you should," Cereza said seriously. She turned back to Rose. "You will broadcast the meeting all over Earth and its colonies?"

"As you will to Gardenia."

Cereza nodded and glanced down at her notes. "One last thing. You have had contact with the Earth pilot Captain Nikitin."

Rose's lips parted. "He didn't think you monitored those frequencies."

"We do now," Azale said grimly.

It was all part of Cereza's new efficiency drive. But it wasn't her chief point of interest right now. "It would be beneficial," she said carefully, "if Captain Nikitin were to attend our conference on Earth."

A quick frown marred Rose's brow before it smoothed once more. "Captain Nikitin believes otherwise."

Cereza's stomach twisted. She had hoped against hope that Rose's companion at this meeting would be Yuri, and now it seemed he planned to stay away altogether. Did he hate her for leaving? Had he not understood her message? Or had their brief affair meant nothing to him after all? Just a release of sexual tension, an unexpected means to retrieve his memories and his identity which he had taken full advantage of?

Louis said, "Do you wish his presence for reasons of punishment? Or understanding?"

"Understanding," she said with difficulty. But she held her gaze steady and, hopefully, neutral under the observation of Azale and the other Gardenians.

Rose nodded. "We'll talk to him. And do our best to get the President there too, as you suggested."

"Good. Tomorrow morning then." Cereza stood, signaling the end of the meeting.

"Tomorrow morning," Rose agreed.

When the delegation had gone, suitably escorted to their shuttle, Azale turned to her abruptly. "It's a risky strategy, senator. Damned risky."

"But if it works, I think we win a lot more. In the long run."

"If it works."

If Yuri's people don't kill me and Azale. If my own people fail me... "It will work," she said fiercely.

* * *

"It's like an arena lined with soldiers," Azale reported as their shuttle approached the meeting point on Earth. "Well guarded, patrol craft all around. Armed to the teeth, but at least not threatening. Yet."

Cereza nodded. Her attention was on the viewscreen, showing the environment in which they were landing. It was a city, not the open country -- chosen, she was sure, to convince the Gardenians that this planet was not so attractive as they'd believed.

"Ease her down," Azale instructed, the unnecessary order betraying his nervousness.

Tall buildings and patrol craft flashed by the screen like moving pictures, until their shuttle landed softly in a more open area and the engine was cut.

Cereza exchanged glances with Azale. This was it, the moment of truth.

She rose and smoothed out her white, flowing skirts. She wore the formal dress of a Gardenian senator, without jewelry as was her own custom. But she'd taken care in the dressing of her hair, in the soft creams and perfumes she'd applied to her face and body. It was a delicate balance she was looking to achieve, somewhere between splendor and friendliness for the people of Earth. And yet the beauty, the allure she'd strived for, was for Yuri.

Let him be there... Please, bring him to me...

She came to a halt in front of the shuttle doors beside Azale. Behind them, several armed soldiers lined up, weapons at their sides.

"Open them," she commanded.

The doors slid open in silence, save for the sound of the descending ramp easing down to the ground. A heady breeze whipped over her, almost dizzying, reminding her of how long she had been in space without fresh air. She could smell distant grass, flowers, a few tantalizing food scents.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and walked down the ramp. Azale kept to her pace, quick enough to appear eager, yet slow enough to give no impression of threat. The shuttle doors closed on her soldiers, and she and Azale were alone with the people of Earth.

The shuttle was ringed with Earth soldiers. Beyond them, an arena full of Earth people, come to gawk at the aliens. Cereza had never felt so vulnerable in her life. Or so powerful, she realized suddenly. She held the fate of two peoples in the palms of her hand and for the first time it seemed to her that she had been born for this.

From the huddle of dignitaries, uniformed or otherwise formally dressed, three people detached themselves. Her heart lurched. Yuri?

No. None of them walked as he did, and one of them was definitely a woman. At first two of them appeared to be almost propelling a third, although after the initial movement he walked alone, slightly ahead of the other two. As he drew closer, Cereza recognized the Earth President, little more than a figurehead nowadays but a necessary one for her purpose. His escort, she noted, was Major Jon Maynard, Rose's rebel wolf husband, and a petite female soldier who also looked familiar.

The President came to a halt. Someone ran in from the side and placed two microphones on stands. The cameras came closer, and Cereza had time to hope that her own people were picking it up and relaying it to Gardenia as ordered. And then she arrived opposite the President and slowly extended her hand.

The man looked petrified. For a moment, she feared it would all founder on his terror. "Sir!" the woman at his side hissed. The President raised his hand, which trembled slightly, and gingerly touched her fingers. It was Cereza who closed the grip, and a huge sigh went up, swelling until it turned into a cheer that grew into a shout of

pure relief. Whatever the culture, it seemed a joining of hands was symbolic. You didn't kill the man whose hand you took.

Or woman.

Cereza spoke first, both because she had a lot to say and because she was fairly sure the President was floundering in a situation he neither understood nor approved. The galactic gods alone knew how they'd got him here.

People were drawing nearer, not crowding but joining the group. She wouldn't let herself look for Yuri, but one of them was the android Louis, who stood beside her as he'd promised with every intention of giving his life for hers. He nodded, in a serious, reassuring way to the female soldier beside the President.

Cereza said, "This is a historic meeting. Thank you for inviting us to visit your planet. First, let me introduce myself, Senator Cereza of Gardenia, and our Senior Commander Azale."

They all bowed and Jon Maynard took over, introducing the President, himself, and Captain Linnet Lewis.

Cereza lifted her other hand, in which she held the paper documents. "I have here two petitions to the people of Earth," she declared. "One is a request to let us colonize whichever empty area you feel is appropriate. The other is a petition for friendship and alliance and cooperation to terraform the empty planets of the huge space between Earth and Gardenia."

That was when she saw Yuri, standing at the edge of the inner circle, staring at her with hard, sardonic dark eyes. Her stomach plunged, her heart soared because he was here, because she was looking at him. And yet everything cringed because it was massively clear he hadn't come because of her. They'd made him come, as they'd made the President.

But she couldn't take her eyes off him. He slouched between Farco and Andra, more like the pirate she remembered than the soldier she knew he had been. He wore much the same clothing too, a clean white shirt, perhaps, but worn under the

disreputable black leather waistcoat. His hair had been combed and his face was clean-shaven, making him more handsome than ever. Her heart turned over with longing.

But there was no response in his hard eyes, no lightening smile, not the remotest tug of the lips that had taken hers so passionately a few weeks ago.

He turned deliberately and walked away toward a distant building.

Cereza felt as if she'd been punched. He didn't trust her.

* * *

Yuri leaned his shoulder against the wall and watched her in action. She was impressive, damned impressive. She'd looked amazing stepping off the shuttle, exotic, splendid, beautiful and brave. He could almost feel the people falling under her spell. As he once had.

But here, sitting around the table inside the room where the hard negotiations took place, she had really come into her own. And he had to hand it to her, she was good. Her idea was brilliant -- even better, he freely allowed, than his to use her as a hostage for peace -- and she sold it well. The President looked unhappy, of course, but the Earth people were buying.

"Your people have ideas and drive that my people desperately need to inspire them," she said. "And we have existing technology that can make it work faster and better."

"And how would we make it secure?" Maynard asked. "For both our peoples -- and the other peoples of the galaxy who live in your sector."

"I would propose some kind of association, a federation to which we all contribute and which we all employ to keep peace and security and discuss issues as they arise."

Yuri's gaze lingered too long on her beautiful face because as she stopped speaking, her eyes moved and trapped his. He left his stare where it was, let it grow insolent. He wanted to crush her in his arms and make her remember him. He wanted to run away and lick his wounds like a kicked cur.

"Much as we began the Federation of Earth," Maynard observed.

Nice move, Cereza. You really have done your homework now. The weird thing was, while part of him wanted to pull her down, hurt her as she had so carelessly hurt him, the other part was actually proud of her. It could work. It really could. Except for one inconvenient fact.

He stirred, electing to point out the fly in the ointment if no one around the table would. "May I ask the senator a question?"

All eyes turned on him, even Andra standing so uncharacteristically silent at his side as she watched and listened to those around the table.

"Of course," said Cereza at once.

He eased his shoulder off the wall. "How much of this have you actually sold to the government of Gardenia?"

Her eyes didn't waver. She'd been waiting for someone to ask the question, but the faintest twitch of her lip told him she didn't quite like it.

"None of it," she said.

As the stunned silence fell into gasps, Yuri smiled bitterly. Like herself, her proposals had no substance. It tore him apart. Part of him didn't even believe it.

But she hadn't given up. Leaning forward, she said urgently, "My friends, we are at a major crossroads here! The Earth government is struggling with new ideas, with rebellion and new leadership. My own is not so different. I lead a growing party of opposition in Gardenia. Your de facto government today is formed from the rebels of yesterday. Peace, stability and elections will regularize that. But as you know that you speak for the will of the vast majority of your people, so do I speak for mine. My party is even now marching on the senate with demands, including a petition of peaceful coexistence with Earth on the terms we've already discussed. And if that doesn't produce results, my 'rebels' will unite with yours, as Gardenian agents have already united with you to bring about truth and right."

The room listened. Yuri had a feeling the whole galaxy listened. But she spoke to him, directly into his eyes, and he couldn't prevent the soaring of his heart. She spoke to convince him. Or perhaps to convince all skeptics.

"Would you win?" Major Maynard asked quietly.

And she smiled, at last detaching her gaze from Yuri's. "Oh, yes. You see I have one very important advantage. I have the support of the armed forces."

Almost for the first time, Yuri glanced at Azale on her left hand side. The commander inclined his head in acknowledgement. Not just a stooge, Yuri realized. Not just there to humor and protect her. She'd seen his importance at once and convinced him to ally with her. Nice.

She said, "Along with just about all of my people, I was in complete ignorance of Earth at the start of this mission. I was placed in charge of our necessary expansion into a planet that was believed to be backward and inferior, whose people would move quite happily to the sort of place we higher beings disdained. And if they didn't want to, their death was considered an acceptable price to pay for our comfort. We lived in an isolated bubble of our own making.

"Captain Nikitin changed that for me."

Fuck, don't bring me into it! But at least she wasn't looking at him.

"He taught me about Earth, the real Earth and its actual people with all their faults and abuses as well as their bravery and independence, and led me to think of the situation from a new perspective. Yours. And when I brought my knowledge back to the troops, I knew we could make this work."

Now her gaze was back on him, open, vulnerable, almost desperate for his understanding. "That's why I left your ship."

He couldn't doubt her. She'd had a mission, and now she was crediting him with showing her the right thing for both their peoples. But *she'd* found the way, his amazing lover. He smiled at her as his throat constricted. "I know."

He couldn't fight it. He didn't want to. He dragged his eyes free and regarded Maynard. "My recommendation, for what it's worth, is to accept the senator's proposals."

"Seconded," said someone else at the table. Yuri didn't care who. He could see in Maynard's brief, grateful glance that the crisis was passed, at least for now.

"Agreed," came another voice.

"Sign," said one of the watchers farther along the wall and before long the room was in uproar, everyone desperate to shake the hands of their new, alien allies. Yuri felt battered, by pride in her, by relief that they'd found a way to move forward, to save Earth, gladness that his comrades had shown sense and maturity.

It was a happy ending -- or at least a bloody hopeful one -- so why did everything inside him ache as he watched her acclaimed and feted?

Everyone from the table had risen, mingling with the watchers who'd lined the walls -- largely officers and journalists, administrators and politicians. She moved through them, smiling, courteous, gracious. Splendid. No sign now of the passionate, vulnerable creature who'd melted in his arms so sensuously and writhed under him so wildly as he'd brought her to orgasm over and over.

Yuri didn't move. Even Farco went forward to renew acquaintance, although Andra lurked at the door, ready to leave. She was right. But Cereza was making her way through the throng, and sooner or later she'd get to him.

The ache constricted and sharpened into pain. He at least would say goodbye.

Is that what hurt? That she hadn't trusted him enough to tell her what she meant to do? That she'd put a damned good fuck second to her duty? They'd hardly known each other. He was being ridiculous, childish. But as she finally stepped into the gap in front of him and the moment was upon him, he realized what truly pained him. Not that she'd put whatever they had second -- in the circumstances that was only right and proper. It was that she hadn't acknowledged it had even existed. What had meant so much to him, meant little or nothing to her. And he had to get out of here before it tore him apart.

She didn't even offer her hand as she did to everyone else. She held it tightly in the other as if afraid he'd snatch it and show the watching world what they'd done together. Her lip quivered slightly as she smiled at him, straight into his eyes like a blow to the stomach. She had never looked so beautiful, her ruby eyes sparkling with

euphoria, her face full of vitality, hope and determination and just that hint of neediness that had so fooled him.

"Yuri," she said, a shade breathlessly.

"Senator." He inclined his head. "Glad it's all worked out."

Her eyes searched his. "Thank you for showing me."

"Thank you for learning." He'd been playing a pirate for months. It really was easy. He winked. "Go kick your government. So long, senator."

A frown puckered her smooth brow as he turned away. "Yuri? Where are you going?"

Apart from those following her every move so avidly, several more people turned their heads to listen. She wasn't shouting, but her voice had definitely been raised. It sounded almost panicked, a fact that made him childishly, reprehensibly glad. Part of him wanted to hurt her even while shame washed over him.

He glanced back and shrugged with deliberate carelessness. "Don't know. But I've got a ship and a crew. I've got the whole galaxy."

He grinned, and shouldered forward to the door. Farco, he left to follow in his own time, but Andra stood leaning against the door, glaring at him.

"You can't mean to leave now?" she hissed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Er -- leaving." He reached behind her for the door button.

"Captain, listen," she said with odd desperation.

But Yuri couldn't take any more. He needed to be away from here, away from Cereza to lick his wounds and his hurt pride and lash himself with his own stupidity until he got so bored with it all that he'd pull himself together.

"Out," he said, and pulled her aside by the arm, opened the door and yanked her into the empty outer hall. There were no soldiers here; it was like a no-man's-land between the soldiers inside the conference room and those outside the building.

He meant to release her as soon as the door swished closed behind him, but Andra never gave him the chance, wrenching her own arm free with fury.

"What is the matter with you?" she raged. "Are you blind? You can't just leave her like that!"

Yuri curled his lip. "Watch me."

But again she seized his arm, shaking it like a terrier with a rat. "Will you fucking listen?" Interesting, he thought, distracting himself from what really mattered. She swore in English, like him. Even more interesting, he could almost swear there were tears in her eyes.

Frowning, he hesitated long enough to let her say more.

"Go back in there. Please."

Andra never said please. Yuri stared at her. The lump he despised began to rise up his throat once more. "I can't," he got out.

"Just because she left you once?"

Yuri cast his gaze at the ceiling. "Because she left in silence."

"Oh fuck, is that all it is? Shit and shit and shit. Captain, she didn't leave in silence. I chose not to pass it on because I could see how you felt about her. I encouraged her to go and she asked me to tell you... that she'd find you."

Yuri dragged his gaze back to her face, afraid to misunderstand, afraid to hope. "She said that?"

"She said it, and she did it. And you're behaving like an arse. And it's all my fault."

Yuri dragged his hand through his hair. "Yes. Yes it is." He caught his breath on a laugh, grabbed her and kissed her full on the mouth, hard and brief. "I forgive you." Thrusting her aside, he stabbed the door button, more impatient to get back in than he'd ever been to leave. The door slid open and he stepped straight into Cereza.

She staggered, forcing him to catch her in both arms to keep her from falling. "Yuri? Yuri, you can't go, please don't go. I need to talk to you."

Her eyes were soft and pleading. Somewhere, he couldn't quite believe she was looking at him. "I was coming back to find you," he said. Andra pushed past them,

shoving them toward the empty green room. She brushed Cereza's clinging hand and closed the door, locking out the noise and the people.

They were alone.

Cereza clutched his elbows, slid her hands up to his shoulders. "Were you?"

"I need to talk to *you*," he said ruefully.

She searched his face, a frown between her brows that slowly relaxed and vanished. She smiled, the smile that went straight through his heart to his cock. "I need to kiss you," she said, and did.

With her lips on his, her heady scent invading his whole body, sense disintegrated. In an instant he had her up against the wall, grinding his hardness into her soft, pliant body, plundering her mouth like a drowning man seeking air. She opened wide to him, giving him her tongue, grazing his with her teeth. She seized his hand, guiding it to her breast, but it wasn't enough to feel its plumpness through her dress, even though her pebbled nipple poked through the fabric to meet his caressing thumb. He slid his hand inside the gown, finding warm, soft skin and the puckered hardness of her areola around the pleading nipple. He longed to taste it, to have her naked all to himself. He wanted to push himself into her right now, take her and pleasure her right here...

He groaned. "How long have we got?"

"How long do you need?" she gasped.

He laughed breathlessly and seized her mouth once more. Somehow, his hands were under her bundled skirts, caressing her naked thighs and hips. "Days. Seconds. Anything."

"Take what you like," she said shakily, reaching for the fastening of his pants. "The door's locked and Andra's got the key."

"How do you know?"

She had his cock in her tight, teasing hand and it felt so good he thought he'd explode on the spot. "I gave her it."

His breath of laughter turned into a groan of anguished pleasure as she wriggled and pushed him blatantly inside her. "God, I love you," he whispered.

Her eyes glistened as they gazed into his. "I've dreamed of you saying those words to me."

"While doing this to you?" He began to move inside her, circling, thrusting and she met him halfway.

"Oh yes," she gasped, and then they let their bodies speak. Later, there would be all the time in the world to talk.

* * *

Every news screen on Earth, and every broadcasting channel in Gardenian space, carried colorful pictures of the amazing summit held between representatives of Earth and Gardenia. The President shaking hands with the senator in front of the still, tense crowd lined with armed soldiers; the delegates around the table talking. The senator posed with the one-time Gardenian agents, including Rose Winter and the android Louis. Commander Azale and the Earth rebel soldiers Jon Maynard, Linnet Lewis and Yuri Nikitin standing in a crowd with raised glasses in a toast to peace. Whether serious or relaxed, there was no shortage of pictures.

But only one Earth news screen, Rose Winter's former employer, the iGazette, carried a rather unusual, still picture of three large wolves against the fading red and gold of the sky at sunset. The animals were just about to break into a run, their powerful backs rippling with bunched muscle. But on the neck of each lay a Gardenian hand -- Rose Winter, the android Louis, and Senator Cereza herself.

The iGazette thought it symbolic.

Marie Treanor

Marie Treanor was born and brought up in Scotland, but for some years moved around the UK working and studying. Now she is back home and happily married with three young children. Having grown bored with city life, she lives these days in a picturesque village by the sea where she is lucky enough to enjoy herself avoiding housework and writing stories of romance and fantasy.

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