

Author's note:

***Oh, hell no! It can't end like that. – Edward***

Edward was talking about PRIMAL, the first book of this series.

You're right Edward, it does not end that way. I would not be so cruel to the people who have shared Katie's story as to leave you without “the rest of the story”.

Katie's Return by William Starfox

Chapter 1 - December 2076 - A visit to the Big House

Katie looked through the window of the limousine at holiday shoppers and businessmen as they rushed through the wintry weather. The mix of snow and rain reminded her of the pack's territory in the mountains west of Bear Lake. Adam and the pack were there, probably in the lower valley regions along with the game.

The chattering of her co-passengers intruded on her thoughts of home. The women complained bitterly about the weather and how they had to bundle up in heavy coats to survive. One gave Katie a jealous look, dressed as she was in nothing more than leather shorts that were generously called skimpy and a vest that was worn more as an accommodation to social convention held closed by a single braided leather loop and bone toggle. The only concession she had made to the weather were booties. They were much like the foot coverings she wore to keep from slipping on hard flooring. These that Niabi had made, were much thicker and extended up her leg ending well above the ankle. They were much better at protecting her foot pads against the ice, snow and cobblestone sidewalks. She made a mental note to thank the teenager when she went back west.

Katie mentally shook her head at the complaining women.

*You waste effort complaining about things you can do naught about.*

Reaching out mentally, Katie found her cub's father snug in a den with Pup and Wind Glider, the pack's alpha bitch. Adam growled his displeasure at her being so far away. Mentally she caressed his head and reminded him that she would be home as soon as she could. Adam

grumbled that it wouldn't be soon enough. Katie laughed and suggested that he play with the pack females to take his mind off her.

She let the connection go as the limo turned through the east gate of the White House. Driving up the slight rise they were treated to a view of the beautiful holiday lawn decorations alongside the ugly defensive measures that had been implemented around the President's residence. It was a stark reminder that some MORFS survivors were not happy with the country's government and took unpleasantly direct methods to petition for redress of their grievances.

When the vehicle stopped, a smartly dressed woman opened the door and directed them through a set of double doors, guarded by a pair of Marines in their Service's dress blue uniform. Adam had good memories of the Marines who had worked alongside him on long missions in the bush doing things he'd rather forget but couldn't. She had to control the urge to return the pair's salute as she walked through the doors.

Just past the door, the group was held so they could remove overcoats and check their umbrellas and scarves. The cloak room attendant looked at Katie expectantly. Katie shrugged slightly and stripped off the wet, beaded booties and slid them into a large paper bag and handed it to the attendant. From there an usher and a pair of cheerfully bright faced teenaged interns herded the group from the cloakroom towards the interior of the building.

Together the group was passed through a security checkpoint that was no more than a pair of velvet ropes hanging from short, portable brass posts. Katie felt the tickle of a telepathic scan as she passed through a second, more obvious security station. Since no alarms sounded and the three Secret Service agents standing nearby didn't close in, Katie assumed that the fake mental persona she used to shield her own mental abilities and memories hadn't tipped anyone.

Katie garnered more than the usual passing glances by staffers going about their business as the group was led down a long hallway.

It was plain that they were not used to seeing someone her size or dressed in homemade clothing walking about the White House. Leather, either real or faux, had become socially unacceptable in the time since she was last in civilization. Meat, real meat, had come off the menu at many fashionable restaurants in the Capitol Region, including the hotel where she was staying. It had been replaced with textured vegetable protein. The mere idea of calling reformatted soybeans, celery and carrots *meat* was enough to sour the woman's appetite.

Katie was glad there was a butcher shop not too far from the hotel and that the head chief was happy to put his five-star caliber culinary skills to use for a barbaric meat eater.

The group turned into a hallway that ended in a pair of very large, very impressive, floor to ceiling doors. As they approached, Katie could feel the pressure of a psionic suppressor field building against her temples. The suppressor field was weak, more of an annoyance than a real impediment to using her ability.

Large, framed oil paintings hung on two walls in the reception hall while windows, no doubt armored, running from just above the floor almost to the ceiling made up the outside wall. A large stone fireplace was the centerpiece of the fourth. In the corner by the windows, a chamber music group played quietly. Throughout the room were holiday decorations. Christmas 2076 was only two weeks away.

The women who had entered with Katie immediately headed for the snack tables set up along the wall from the fireplace to the windows. Katie circulated around the outside of the room, avoiding as much as possible, the various clusters of people. There were thirty or so people in the room and all were MORFS survivors. Most were hybrids of one form or another.

Katie recognized many from her internment camp. Slight nods from each of them acknowledged the others' presence. The camp had very strict restrictions on residents talking among themselves. Violators had been punished swiftly and brutally, some fatally. Three years later the inhibitions, enforced by the guards' extreme cruelty, remained.

The suppression field ratcheted up in intensity just as the chamber quartet struck up an abbreviated version of Hail to the Chief. Katie and the others in the room turned towards the doors to watch President Iris Pratt stride into the room trailing an aide and a security agent. A few people applauded while the President smiled politely and started shaking hands and speaking with her guests. Katie watched the woman as she circulated around the room, then moved so that she was positioned in an open area in the President's path.

The aid whispered into the President's ear as they approached. Katie could see through the professional mask the aide wore to the contempt hiding underneath.

"Miss Miller, how do you do," President Pratt said a friendly smile on her face.

"I'm well, Madam President; it's Milner." Katie said taking the offered hand. "I want to thank you for your actions in pardoning all of us who were held in those so call education camps."

"I was my pleasure, Miss Milner. It was a short-sighted program that the previous administration thought would solve the problem of MORFS victims who believed they were outside the laws of civility. I understand that you weren't a resident when the pardons were issued."

"*Resident*, I see that the real term for us never made it this high." Katie said. "We were prisoners, Madam President. As you said, it wasn't of your making, but I know we're all glad that you corrected it." she said reaching into the pouch hanging on her hip, "I have a small gift to remind you of the residents of those prisons, something that reminded us, every day, of how *this government of the people* viewed us."

Katie brought out a leather wrapped package from the pouch she wore, bound with a rawhide thong and handed it to the President. Mrs. Pratt took the package and tugged the wrapping off.

“Very interesting covering,” the woman said pulling it open. “Leather?”

“Elk hide,” Katie replied. “My pack mates and I brought the animal down. A local Shoshone tribe tanned the hide for us. My pouch and clothes are made from the same animal.”

“There are no elk in Georgia,” the aid blurted out.

“Neither are there any Shoshone, Miss Kates,” Katie said looking at the aid. “My pack lives in the Tetons.”

“The Tetons?” the aid repeated, “That’s all wilderness. Guns aren’t allowed there.”

Katie chuckled.

“We’re wolves Miss Kates. We don’t hunt with guns, only fang and claw.”

“That’s barbaric,” the aid said quietly, looking slightly queasy.

Katie gave the woman a wolfish smile.

“That’s Nature, Miss Kates,” Katie said staring into the woman’s eyes, seeing the fear there. The same fear she had seen in other eyes, the camp guards and staff, and more than a few mundanes she’d met in D.C. while walking the streets around the hotel.

It was the same fear Adam had seen in the eyes of his targets during his years of military service, just before he slaughtered them. Seventy years of living with the MORFS epidemic hadn’t eased the unconscious, primal fear most normal humans had of the syndrome’s survivors, especially hybrids like herself.

Katie turned her attention back to the President who had unwrapped the box and paused a moment to look at the wolf’s head carved into the lid. The woman looked inside and lifted out the battered leather and metal collar.

“That,” Katie almost spat the word, “is what I wore, every day, for nearly three years while held in the camp, Madam President.” Katie said her voice dropping almost to a growl. “Most all of your guests here wore something like that. It has a locator, so our keepers could find us, spikes on the inside so they could shock us when they thought we needed it, and an explosive to decapitate us. A number of my fellow residents were murdered with a device like that during our confinement.”

The aide looked as if she was going to be sick.

“That, Miss Kates,” Katie nodded towards the collar, “is truly barbaric.

A number of people at the reception had gathered around the trio. Several murmured their agreement.

“You are a danger to the public,” Miss Kates hissed. “You should all be locked away.”

The President turned towards the aide, a surprised look on her face. She thought she knew her staff better than this.

“According to whom?” Katie replied simply. “I wasn’t tried in a court of law; no evidence was presented against me. When I was kidnapped by Homeland Security shock troops, the court had just dismissed charges against me for killing a man who’d attacked members of my church. The sitting grand jury, a group of ordinary, everyday citizens, hadn’t been persuaded by the district attorney’s office that there was enough evidence to prove the charges against me and returned a ‘no bill’.”

“That just proves that you’re a danger,” the aide said, venom in her voice.

“It proves nothing, Miss Kates. I didn’t know until a year after my escape that I never touched the attacker. The brother of the infant girl being baptized electrocuted him. I was caught in the blast and knocked unconscious. Simply put, I was collateral damage. But, because of my past, I was the one investigated and charged. I’m pretty certain you can find videos of the incident on Furtube.”

“We have a right to our existence, Miss Kates,” Katie continued, shifting slightly to look directly into the woman’s eyes. “It’s written in the Declaration of Independence of this Nation that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all* people are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

“My Life, Liberty and pursuit of Happiness doesn’t include being locked in a cage and beaten like an animal, punished at the whim of some sadist, or killed by a rabid fundamentalist who thinks I’m an affront to God,” Katie said evenly, staring at the aide, her expression hard. “I cannot be deprived of my life or liberty without the due process of law and conviction of the jury of my peers.” Katie took a step forward, deliberately invading the aide’s personal space. “Or, does the Constitution and the other guarantees the Founders put into place not apply to humans like us?”

A few people in the group applauded and there were several amens as well. The aide swallowed nervously and looked away.

“My apologies, Madam President,” Katie said, turning to the dark-skinned woman. “I seem to be standing on a soapbox.”

President Pratt and several of people standing around them chuckled.

“No, no, your feelings are certainly justified, Miss Milner,” Mrs. Pratt said, “We all need to be reminded, at times,” the President gave her aide a pointed look, “of our basic freedoms and that we in government serve the people, not the other way around.”

The President moved past Katie to greet other guests until a second aide came in and whispered something. Automatically, Katie focused her ears on the pair.

“... they could be anywhere by now, Madam President,” the new person whispered.

“Find them and be quick about it. We don’t need the press telling the world that two six-year olds outsmarted the Secret Service,” the President said hurriedly.

The aide nodded and started to walk away. Katie cut the woman off and bent down to deliver her own message. “Start in the kitchen.”

The woman threw a questioning look at Katie, who just nodded.

By the time the reception ended the aide was back, working past the other guests who were being led back to the public entrance. The aide walked directly to where the President was standing and whispered into her ear. They both glanced over at Katie and the President nodded. The pair walked over where Katie stood alone by the window.

“I assume the children were found?” Katie asked quietly as they got close.

“Yes,” the aide said, “right where you suggested. How did you know?”

“It’s afternoon, about the time most kids would be getting home from school. Snack time,” Katie said simply.

Before either of them could say anything, the door to the room was pushed open and two children hurried in, closing the door after them. The children were giggling mischievously then turned to see Katie and the other women looking at them.

The President and the aide were forgotten as the children focused their attention on the tall wolf. Their mouths dropped open in surprise or shock, Katie wasn’t sure which, but she had seen the look often enough from children in the past. Dropping to all fours, Katie approached the young boy and younger girl stopping when she was nose to nose with them. She gave each one a sniff then licked their cheeks which got the typical little kid reactions, *ewwww*’s followed by giggles.

Katie sat down on her haunches and stared quietly at both for a moment before reaching into her bag and pulling out a pair of small boxes. She handed one to each child who quickly opened them and pulled out beaded necklace inside. Hanging from the necklace was a stone carving of a running wolf.

They had just put the necklaces over their heads when the door opened, and a Secret Service agent walked in followed by a woman. It was obvious from the children’s reactions that they had been caught by their mom, again.

The mother, a tall, leggy woman dressed in a business power suit and wearing expensive high heels looked down her nose at Katie, disgust plain on the woman's features. She snapped her fingers at the children. Katie stood and stretched to her full height. She looked down at the woman and gave a faint growl. It was only seconds before a look of fear flashed over the woman's face and she dropped her gaze.

Katie motioned to the children and they carefully walked to their Mom and took hold of her hands. They both waived as the woman led them out into the hallway leaving the agent with the President and her aide in the room.

Once the door was closed, Katie let loose with a rumbling growl.

Katie turned and saw the President and aide giving her surprised looks.

"Some people should not be raising children," Katie said quietly, gathering up the discarded boxes.

"Excuse me?" the President asked.

"Oh, Ms. *I'm the second assistant diplomatic liaison to BFE* who just left." Katie motioned with her thumb over her shoulder. "She was making plans to beat those two wonderful children once they got home for embarrassing her on the tour." Katie said looking weary. "I explained to her what would happen if she did."

"How will you know if she did, or not?" the aide asked.

"Miss Carrolton, if I can reach the Tenkei orbital city from Yellowstone Park, I can reach their Georgetown brownstone from my hotel room." Katie said, then smiled, "Once I get out from under this psi field," Katie thumbed her temples.

"You're that powerful?" the woman asked, her eyes betraying her alarm.

Katie nodded.

"Then what's to stop you from reading my mind?" The President asked.

"From this distance, technically nothing. The security types would have to turn up the suppressor field to the point where mundanes couldn't function, or drug me unconscious." Katie eyed the slightly nervous Secret Service agent standing behind the President. "On the other paw, it's ethically wrong to wander around in someone's head without their permission." The woman smiled at Miss Carrolton's surprised look. "Shocking isn't it, that some of us actually play by the rules."

"Don't condemn all of us, Miss Milner," the President commented, a note of tiredness in her voice. "This is Washington after all and the...political realities make ethics an unaffordable luxury at times."

“Which is why I live in the wilderness, Madam President,” Katie replied quietly.

“If I might ask, Miss Milner,” the President began, changing the subject, “Why didn’t you stay on Tenkei after your escape? You could have stayed there and lived comfortably until the pardon. The governing body there had made it abundantly clear through the press that they would not have extradited any of the escapees.”

“Tenkei is a lot of things, lots of people, lots of space,” Katie looked at both women, “but, it’s not natural. I spent as much time as I could up there before I had to return to the wild.”

The blank looks on the woman’s faces prompted her explain further.

“Under all this fur, I’m more wolf than human. The lupine part of me won’t be tamed, it fights being in captivity, it has to be free. It’s the reason I live in the wilderness, where I don’t have to live by anyone’s rules other than mine and Nature’s.”

“Is that why you were such a problem resident?” Miss Carrolton asked.

“It’s not in my nature to submit willingly to anyone or anything, Miss Carrolton,” Katie replied, “except my mate.”

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Miles away, in a small business office in The Crystal City Underground, the chime on a desk computer signals the arrival of an email. The man standing at the desk slips a colored folder into collapsible keeper and closes the flap. He stares at the monitor for a moment, debating whether to open the message or not. Stepping away from the desk, he walks to a wall safe, opens the unlocked door and places the keeper inside. After securing the door, spinning the combo lock and removing the cylindrical key, he steps back to his desk and opens the message.

A picture of his target fills one screen of the dual monitor setup, he scans, line by line the description and other information his handler has provided. With a mouse click, the man shifts to the target’s MORFS registry record. He absorbs the information on his target’s psionic abilities, physical evaluations and ratings. Of special interest are the entries covering the deaths before being taken into custody.

Another mouse click brings up an internment camp record. For the first time, the flicker of a smile touches his lips. He closes the file and brings up the email that carried the original files.

He types one word before clicking the SEND button.

ACCEPTED.



## Chapter 2 - Who says you can't go home again?

Katie was the last of six passengers to deplane from the medium sized Gulfstream jet, into heavy drizzle. Her co-passengers had also had business in the Capitol Region at the invitation of the Federal Government. Once out of the plane, she looked around and knew they weren't at Atlanta Hartsfield International.

*Welcome to Briscoe Field* was printed on the weathered sign hanging over the door to what looked to be the passenger's waiting area. The pilot had landed them at a regional airport between Atlanta and Athens, rather than the large international airport south of Atlanta. Once inside, she shook to rid her fur of the small amount of accumulated water and followed the other passengers to collect her one bag. Katie was surprised when there was a shuttle van to Athens waiting in the parking lot.

"You've always been here?" Katie asked as she paid the driver and climbed into the shotgun seat in the front of the van.

"Yep. We've been making runs from here for oh, three years now," the driver answered good-naturedly, "Where have you been?"

"You don't want to know," Katie replied quietly.

Once the van was on the road, she reached out to her Mom to let her know she was on the ground and on the way home. Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift.

*Adam had moved the pack from the series of dens they had built up in the mountains down towards Bear Lake. The storm had gotten worst, and the pack needed shelter further down the mountainside where it was warmer. They were getting close to the lake itself, but it was the rugged side, where no one lived, and few humans ventured. Adam knew of caves where the pack could hold up until the worst of the storm had passed. They could hunt game then move back into the highlands where they would be safer.*

Katie pulled her awareness back as the shuttle made several sharp turns and pulled under the portico of a hotel. She stepped out into the cold drizzle and looked towards the street. The area hadn't changed much from before her incarceration. It was about two miles by road to her home from where she stood.

Normally, a two-mile walk would be just a good stretch, if it were in the woods. But in civilization, two miles, across Interstate, State and County roads would be difficult, if not fatal. The darkness, the rain and rush hour traffic made the trek from the hotel too dangerous.

Katie chuckled as the thought crossed her mind. She had taken on large prey regularly with nothing more than fang and claws, animals twice or three times her size and power. She knew

how elk, moose and deer would react; when they would stand their ground and when they would run. She also had the scars to remind her about what happened when she misjudged an animal.

But humans, driving cars and trucks, there was no telling what they would do. Some would pay attention, most wouldn't. Her lack of civilized clothing would draw the attention, and no doubt the ire of the local police, many of whom were church going, God fearing Purists and would love an opportunity to at the very least hassle her, and at the most, jail her on some trumped-up charge. Her minor celebrity status might give her some protection, but she didn't want to put that to any type of test.

She reached out mentally and got hold of her Mom, who wasn't home, but with her friend. Katie let her know where the shuttle had let her off and that she needed to be picked up.

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Colleen Milner rounded the curve that led to the well-lit portico of the hotel. She didn't need the blue white beams of the high intensity discharge headlamps on the H-two powered hybrid to spot her daughter standing next to the large sliding doors.

Jamming the gear shift into park, she jumped out and ran around the car, feet slipping on the wet pavement, to embrace her daughter.

"Mom!" Katie cried as the pair embraced.

They both cried, saying nothing, just holding each other after so many years of being forced apart.

Colleen had seen a fleeting glimpse of her daughter on a national news program, a human-interest story about the numerous MORFS survivors who'd been pardoned by the President.

But none of that mattered now. Her baby was home.

Slowly their universe expanded from just each other to encompass the mundane world. Colleen felt the chill of the soggy night air, having left her jacket in the car. Katie felt the irritation of the patrons that walked past, their emotional reunion having taken place directly in front of the hotel's doors.

Holding her daughter at arm's length Colleen looked at her daughter for the first time in six years. She could see maturity in her daughter's eyes. She could also see the wolf that resided just under the fur. Katie was no longer her little girl.

"You've grown," Colleen said, looking up into her daughter's yellow eyes.

A subtle clearing of a throat brought their attention to the doorman standing a discrete distance away. The pair looked at the elderly gentleman as he nodded towards the car. Other vehicles were backed up behind it.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” Colleen apologized. Taking her daughter’s paw, she walked them to her almost too tiny hybrid.

*Welcome back, Miss Milner.*

Katie turned and looked at the white-haired man dressed in the hotel’s livery while she waited for her mother to unlock the door. The sentiment he ‘pathed was genuine, the burn of the man’s shame at what the government had done to some hybrids coming across their link in crystal fashion. He touched the brim of his hat and nodded. Katie nodded in return.

There was little conversation during the drive. Katie was tired after such a long day in Washington and the flight home. When they turned off the main roads, Katie got to see what she had missed while she was gone. Houses along both sides of the street were dressed for the holidays. Lights draped over bushes, snowmen, sleighs and jolly elves dressed in red suits decorated lawns and rooftops. There were more than a few that held both Nativity scenes and Menorahs.

Katie’s nervousness built as Colleen drove past their house, made a couple of turns and pulled into the driveway of a familiar house.

“Is he here?” Katie asked as her mother turned the car off.

“Go in and find out, honey.”

Katie looked sharply at her mom, tempted to reach out and pulled the information from her mind, but refrained. It wouldn’t be proper to invade her privacy like that.

As they walked up the driveway, there were more cars than she remembered Linda owning and there were at least five people in the front room of the house. She deliberately kept her paranormal senses fuzzy, limited to knowing there were people in the house, but nothing more.

Katie opened the front door and stepped into the foyer. The last time she had stood inside this house was the week before she’d been taken. It had been summer and the two families had a get-together that had included a lot of after dark cuddling in the back yard.

Taking two steps down the marble tiled foyer, she turned and walked into the living room. The pine scent from the live, decorated Christmas tree standing in one corner was oddly comforting, a reminder that she’d run through the local woods. As had Greg.

Her eyes fixated on the big man on the far side of the room. Ignoring everyone else in the room, she rushed towards him and all but leapt into his arms.

The world disappeared as Greg held her and she buried her head into his broad chest breathing in his scent. No one else existed while they stood together. Emotions, bottled up for six long years flowed between them in a torrent, relieving the other’s anxieties, their worries, their fears of not seeing each other ever again.

She felt his anger, his frustration, knew it was because of stonewalling by the government that had told him little enough in the beginning, then said nothing as his demands for information became insistent, strident.

Their parting was slow, reluctant, unwilling, as if they separated, let go of each other, they would never again hold each other again. Greg kept ahold of her, sliding his hands down her arms as she stepped back, gripping her wrists.

“Hi honey, I’m home,” Katie said quietly, looking up into Greg’s dark eyes.

Greg opened his muzzle to say something, but the sudden movement of his head alerted Katie to something on her left.

“He’s mine, bitch!” a woman yelled. The hatred and fear contained in the high-pitched horse scream was unmistakable.

Katie turned to look at who had yelled, and the hesitation let the attacker land a hard blow to her head. Katie stepped back and shook her head once. She growled loudly, focused on the attacker.

The growl turned into a full-throated snarl as Katie focused her stare on the heavy chested equine hybrid standing between her and Greg.

With a leap that carried her across the room, Katie took the filly to the floor. Katie barely heard the horse screams as she shredded the hybrid woman’s clothing, the claws that had torn the tough hide of moose and elk slicing through the synthetic fabric easily.

Instinctively, Katie rolled and came to her feet as she landed across the room. The filly had managed to land a kick to her middle, giving both only a small respite.

“Mine, prey,” the wolf woman’s voice was a dark, threatening growl. Katie’s hunting instincts came forward full force as the other woman stood her ground. She licked her lips in anticipation of the sweet coppery taste of blood.

The filly tried to run for the door. Katie easily caught the hybrid’s long chestnut brown hair in her paw. Yanking her back, the filly fell backwards to the floor. Katie pounced, pummeling the filly, easily landing blow after blow on the other’s face, breasts, and other tender places.

*SUBMIT!*

The psychic blast was heard by everyone in the room.

“Submit,” Katie growled, having pinned the other beneath her, “or you will not live.” The words were almost indistinguishable growls, and their meaning was crystal clear.

Slowly, the filly lifted her head, baring her throat to Katie.

“He...is...mine!” Katie growled, biting the filly’s throat and giving her a shake.

The filly nodded only slightly.

Katie kept her teeth on the defeated woman’s throat a moment longer before planting a paw directly on the filly’s bare breast, giving it a hard squeeze and using it to help her stand.

“I hate the taste of plastic,” she commented as she gave one more look at the filly, then went to where Greg was standing, turned and backed into his chest.

Greg slid his big arms around the wolf woman. The filly dropped her head as it became clear, very crystal clear that she had lost. Slowly, she got up from the tile floor, gathered her things and made her way to the foyer. The sound of the door opening, and closing was very loud in the silent room.

“Mine,” Katie growled.

“I have no problem with that,” Greg said, nuzzling her neck.

“There’s not that much to tell,” Katie said after everyone recovered from the altercation. “We had been contacted by a group of MORFS survivors that hadn’t been picked up. They gave us the date for the break and that night, there were explosions to knock out the camp’s power generators and someone opened a portal inside the compound. We ran through and ended up on the Tenkei space station. Most of us got through before the portal had to be shut again.”

Katie’s voice hitched as memories of that night surfaced again. She had to stop and wipe tears from her eyes.

Between bite-sized chunks of cheese and other finger foods and sips of sweet Southern Tea Katie told both families an abbreviated version of what had happened in Washington. Everyone at the house was interested in the visit with the President with questions like was she the same in person as she was on the vid and such. Katie told them that Mrs. Pratt was a pleasant woman to talk with and left out the encounter with Mrs. Kates, the aide.

No one asked for more details about her time in the internment camp. For that, Katie was grateful.

Once the curiosity of everyone was mostly satisfied, Katie asked Greg outside. She took him by the hand and led him to the dark back yard. Katie sat on the end of the picnic table while Greg stood in front of her. Neither cared that the temperature was below freezing, and everything coated in ice from the earlier rain.

“You Mom told us what happened at the courthouse, Katie,” Greg said. “Then nothing, not a word from you.” He looked down at her, his eyes full of pain.

“It was something I couldn’t help. We didn’t have phones and our letters were censored or burned. We could barely speak to each other.”

“You’re a ‘path, you could have called me that way!”

“I would have died if I had. The collars we wore had bombs in them. We were told it would detonate if it sensed us using our powers.”

“It was like you had died.” Greg said. The words came out strained, with difficulty, the speech lessons taken years previously fleeing, showing his emotional distress.

“When I escaped, I didn’t dare contact anyone. I didn’t want any of you in danger.”

Katie petted the large man’s chest, trying to soothe him. She rubbed her muzzle against his chest, scent marking him, breathing in his scent

Katie pulled his head down, placed her forehead against his.

*I know you’re mad, Greg, frustrated, full of guilt and anger and everything else. It’s all jumbled up inside and you don’t know who to be mad at more, me or the government.*

Greg didn’t say anything. It wasn’t hard for Katie to feel the emotional turmoil inside him.

*I don’t know who to be mad at either. But you can’t bury your emotions, can’t let them fester.*

*Hold me?* Katie suggested softly.

Greg didn’t need a second invitation. He wrapped his muscled arms around his girlfriend and held her tightly. He whickered when Katie nipped his chest.

Greg lifted her head and kissed her hard.

She felt the tinge of shame that colored the emotions pushing their way forward in Greg’s mind, the desire to reclaim, to possess again what had once been his.

*Katie?*

She felt the question growing in his mind as something else grew against her.

*You’re mine, remember* she ‘pathed into his mind, and drew him against her with her legs around his waist.

They were glad it was a very sturdy table.

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I didn't want to wake up. The dream I was having was too pleasurable. I was warm, loved and wrapped in arms big enough to keep anything bad from happening. As I opened my eyes, I realized the large arms weren't a dream after all. Greg held me possessively, protecting me even while we slept.

Last night came back in rush, the Trantor's, the fight with Felicia, the picnic table and afterwards. When we were figuring out arrangements back to our house, Greg performed a magician's assistant trick and squeezed his equine frame into the rear seat of Mom's car. Mom looked like she was going to say something; then decided not to. She drove us home and Greg followed me up the stairs. I didn't even have a chance to say good night as I was asleep almost as soon as I stretched out on the bed.

It felt so good to lie there, wrapped in safety; the man that I loved snuggled against me.

That kicked me fully awake.

*Loved?*

A wave of relief washed through me. The camp guards hadn't beaten it out of me. Three years in the wild had only pushed it into hiding. I could still feel real, human love.

I snuggled with my mate as long as I could then worked my way out of his grasp and padded to the bathroom. Once done with immediate needs, I got into the shower. One of the things the hotel in D.C. didn't have was Mane and Tail. What they did have was not made or sized for a furry and took forever to rinse out. I was halfway done when Greg came in and did what he needed to do before getting in the shower with me. We kept things to the business of getting clean. Mostly.

In high school we were eye to eye, now I had to look up to look him in the eye. He had filled out as well, showing the influence of the Shire draft horse that had contributed its DNA. Muscles played under his thick dark chestnut coat, muscles that I wanted to take my time exploring. I think Greg wanted me to explore them right then, but the water spray was cooling. We would make time to play later.

My conscience pinged me about Adam and the pack. I'd think about them later.

Once the blowers were done fluff drying us, we went back to my room to dress.

Greg had surreptitiously brought along a change of clothes and was dressed quickly. I looked at the hide clothes I'd worn at the White House and on the plane ride home. The vest was ripped beyond repair and the shorts didn't meet anyone's idea of decent anymore.

There was no way Mom was going to let me go into town in just fur, and I couldn't borrow any of her things. I dug into my closet to see what was there. Most hangers had school uniforms. I giggled silently at the thought of going out dressed as a naughty schoolgirl with a white blouse

tied under my breasts and the skirt hem shortened to some nearly indecent length. Greg would have enjoyed that, but Mom would have pitched a full blown Southern hissy fit.

I tossed that idea and dug further into the closet and found my church clothes towards the back. The skirts were nearly ankle length and the blouses long sleeved. Both were well out of style from what little I had seen since being back in polite society. But they would fit. Undies were found in the same dresser drawer as my bras, just as I remembered.

Greg was almost forgotten as I went about the business of dressing. He surprised me, sliding his big arms around me and taking hold of the front hooks.

“Which ones?” he asked holding the bra closed. “Like this?” he asked, then pulled the strap tighter, “or is this better?”

“You’ve done this before,” I teased as he worked the tiny hook and eye closure with surprising ease. I felt the wash of his embarrassment as his reflection looked away. When he started to pull away, I grabbed his hands, held them in place against my breasts.

“Don’t do that,” I told him sharply.

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t beat yourself up about Felicia.” I said, turning to face him directly. “You couldn’t put your life on hold forever waiting for me. You were starting to move on, I get that,” I looked up at him and smiled. “I won’t hold it against you, too much.”

Greg pulled me close and I could hear the thumping of his heart.

Suddenly I was back at camp, in the barracks, on the floor where they made us sleep.

*A new group had arrived, their first night, frightened, in shock, scared out of their wits, the world as they had known it having been turned upside down.*

*A fox morph lay on the ratty mattress next to mine, trying to hide her tears. The guards would hear her whimpering and drag her out to ‘give her something to really cry about’. I pulled her to me and let her snuggle into my fur. She quieted down enough that the guards wouldn’t do anything to her.*

*In the morning when the guards woke us up the girl was still in my arms. She looked up at me with a childlike expression.*

*“I can hear your heart, Mommy.”*

I was snapped back to reality by a shake and Greg shouting at me.

“I... I’m okay, Greg;” I said weakly. “It was nothing.”



“Nothing my hoof!” Greg snapped. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened!” I snapped back. “I don’t want to talk about it.” I pushed out of his arms.

I saw the muscles in Greg’s jaw working, he wanted to say something more, but just nodded.

It was easy to feel his anger, his confusion and overriding all of that, his concern and love. Being an empath was a bitch at times.

~ \* \* \* \* ~

Breakfast was an eat-out occasion. Mom drove us to a place she knew that catered to hybrids morphs like Greg and me. It was a country styled restaurant that had long tables for seating and several different style of chairs, some that were actually tail friendly. Our waitress, an older grandmotherly type, was genuinely friendly. She took our orders and came back quickly with coffee and sweet tea. I took a long sip through the straw and sighed. Georgia made Southern Sweet Tea is like no other tea anywhere. It was one more thing that reminded me that I was home. I leaned against Greg and he slid his arm around me. For the moment, the world was as it should be.

When our waitress came back, she set a large bowl of what looked like mixed oats in front of Greg and a cheesesteak omelet in front of me that was heavy on the steak with just enough egg and cheese to hold it altogether. Six large sausage patties were on a separate plate. The smell was wonderful!

Greg tried to get his arm back from me, but I held onto his hand, smiling as we had a playful tug-of-war over it. I relented since I needed my hand to eat breakfast. Going face first into the pile of food like an animal wasn’t an option now.

Mom caught me up on home news while we ate. Dad was still at Tenkei. He had been hired away from his old company and the new company had transferred him on a semi-permanent basis to the orbital city. He was doing systems engineering on space stations that could only be reached reliably from there. Mom had refused to move to Tenkei while I was at the camp in case I wrote or called. Then once I escaped, she stayed hoping I would contact her.

Once the pardon was announced, Mom knew I would contact her eventually.

“You’ve been sitting at home, waiting for me all this time?” I asked around a mouthful of sausage. “What about you and Dad?”

“It’s not like we would have been together very often, even if I had moved to Tenkei, honey. He’d be off gallivanting around the LaGrange point stations, Armstrong, Toyohiro Akiyama, or Chiaki Mukai. He stays on a station for three weeks or a month, then does a week in the office on Tenkei, he’s home for a week, and then starts all over again. If I’d moved to Tenkei I would have

been surrounded by strangers while your dad was gone. With me staying here, I have friends around to keep me company.”

“Like Linda?” I asked pointedly.

Mom gave me a surprised look across the table.

“Yes, like Linda,” Mom said lowering her voice a bit, but not her eyes. “Your father and I talked after you were...taken. I admitted to him what you already knew. He asked what taken me so long to admit that I was bi. I guess I hadn’t been fooling him all those years after all. Anyway, to make a long story short, we decided that while he was there, and I was here, we could each be a little less... monogamous.”

Part of me wanted to snap *how dare she* betray Daddy like that. But I had been living the same way for the last three years. Adam was the head of the pack, he was the father of Pup, but I wasn’t the only one he mounted when the pack bitches were in season. When I was in season, he wasn’t the only male that had mounted me.

“Katie?” Greg asked, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“I’m okay Greg.” I said looking up at him. “What little human remains in me wants to jump all over Mom for what she’s done, but I can’t. Despite what’s on the nature shows, wolves aren’t bastions of monogamy themselves.”

Thankfully the subject changed to something we all agreed on, shopping.

Well Mom agreed to it, Greg and I just groaned.

“Oh, come on you two spoilsports,” Mom teased, “Katie needs to update her wardrobe. She can’t run around dressed like a teenager forever.”

~ \* \* \* \* ~

*We were being herded to the mess hall for our morning meal, the fox vixen was still clinging to my arm. I had no trouble reading the fear coming from her. A person would have had to have been brain dead not to feel her near panic.*

*“Is it going to be okay, Mommie?” the girl asked nervously as we approached the guards near the door.*

*“Yes, little one,” I soothed, “It’s different from what you’re used to, but it will be okay.”*

*“Yes, Mommie.”*

“Katie?” Greg asked quietly as he sat down next to me.

We were taking a break from our shopping for lunch.

“Sorry,” was all I said.

I pulled Greg’s arm around me.

*Hold me.*

He tightened his arm around my shoulders and I felt almost safe. I snuggled into his side and tried not to let my emotions boil over. Tears leaked from my eyes anyway.

I could feel Mom’s emotions, love, concern; worry about her little girl.

*Memories coming back to haunt me.* I ‘pathed to her and Greg.

“Katie, you need to talk to someone about these... flashbacks.” Mom said looking across the table at me.

I shook my head, even though I knew Mom was right. One of Adam’s memories surfaced. He was talking to a board of officers about a just completed mission, then talking to men in white coats, breaking down, sobbing about the horrible things he had done to ensure its success. Sometimes it took several sessions to quiet the demons, to allow him to sleep without nightmares.

“I’m not crazy,” I said evenly, banishing the ghosts of Adam’s past.

“We know that, honey. Sometimes people have to talk out their experiences with someone they trust, someone who knows how to help them,” Mom said quietly.

I nodded.

Once we finished lunch, we continued our shopping trip. We passed a shop that specialized in things for furrries. Greg was reluctant to go into a woman’s shop. I took his hand and all but dragged him inside.

The dresses and other clothing were about what you would expect for someone already covered in fur. Minimal. What had changed was how minimal was defined. Before I was taken, what had been considered minimally acceptable was a lot more than now.

One of the few pleasures in the camp had been listening to the radio during the evening meal. We could listen to the daily news most of the time and could follow the politics of the day. News that the moralistic fanatics that had been in place for so long were slowly losing their grip on power had been welcomed, even though we didn’t know if it would change our day to day conditions. It had given us hope that things would change eventually.

I chose and modeled several different skirts and tops for Greg. It was easy to see what he liked me wearing, as little as possible. I wanted to wear nothing but fur, but even with the more permissible attitudes of the general public, I couldn't go that far. We walked out of the store with me wearing a skirt that was more of a wide belt with a strategically placed carry pouch and a bra top that blended well with my fur, making it look as if I wasn't wearing anything.

Mom raised an eyebrow when she saw what I had on, Greg just smiled.

### Chapter 3 - No, you're not crazy...

It had been a long time since I had last sat in the chair across from Alice Baker. The small woman had changed only a little; her white hair was shorter than I remembered, showing off her tall elflike ears. Dressed in a very professional pants suit she sat next to me with a pen and a yellow pad, taking notes.

"Flashbacks?" she asked.

I nodded.

"They don't last long, sometimes only a few seconds, but it's like I'm back in camp all over again, the sights, the smells, emotions... the fear, everything. It's frightening." It would be useless to try and hide the truth from the woman, who like me, was both an empath and telepath.

"I can feel your fear, Katie," the woman said. "How severe are they?"

"After the first one, it was once a month, or less. Now I get one every couple of days, sometimes more than one a day."

"Is there something common to them?"

The question surprised me. I opened my mouth to say no automatically, then stopped and slowly nodded my head.

"A morph, a vixen," I say not looking at the woman.

Anna's face flashed in front of my eyes.

*"Mommy, why are they keeping us here? Why can't we go home?" she cries, clutching at me. It's our quiet time before lights out and she's having another meltdown.*

*"The government thinks we're bad people, so they put us here." I tell her, holding her close to me. "We know we're good, that we haven't done anything wrong, we just have to be strong until they let us go."*

*"But..." she starts again.*

*"No buts baby. We need to be strong. I'll help you be strong; you listen to Mommy, okay?" I said quietly, reassuringly.*

*She looked up from where she clutched at me and nodded, tears still wetting her eyes and fur.*

*We lay down together on our mattresses and a moment later, the lights were turned out. I felt her rooting against me and when I pulled my top to the side, latch on to my nipple. She sighed quietly, and her breathing stilled. She had fallen asleep.*

“Another one?” Alice asked as the world came back into focus.

I nodded slowly. At least this one wasn't too bad.

“Tell me about it?”

“Anna was teenaged at least, but she acted if she were a barely weaned pup. That first night she was there, she was put on the mattress next to mine, and I became Mommy. I had to take care of her, protect her; the guards would have brutalized her otherwise.”

The vixen's face flashed in front of me from the night of the escape. Guilt welled up in me. Guilt, rage, anger at an unseen Goddess that would let this happen to us, to Anna flooded through me. I walked past Alice stared out the window to the woods that backed up to the office park. Leaning my head against the cool window, I felt tears leak from my eyes.

It was a while before I could get my emotions under control again.

We talked about Anna and other things; I guess Alice was trying to find the edges of my problem, seeing how big it really was. I was surprised when the chime sounded, signaling the end of our session.

I didn't want to schedule another session. I wanted to see if this talk with Dr. Baker had any effect on things. Before letting me go, Alice stood in her chair and gave me as hard a hug as she could.

*You will get through this, Katie. You are a strong woman.*

I nodded and hugged her in return.

Greg was waiting for me in the reception area. After making my next appointment for two weeks out, just in case, we walked out of the office and made our way outside into the afternoon sun. There was no place we needed to be, and there was no place I really wanted to go.

Greg drove us to the central park; the same one I had visited with my friends just after my change and where Dad and Kevin had played catch for the last time. I wandered throughout the green space with Greg walking next to me.

There wasn't a way for me to block his emotions, I felt his concern, his fear like it was written on a billboard. I also felt his love, and his frustration about not knowing how to help.

*You are helping* I whispered mentally to my lover. *You're here, with me. That helps more than you know.*

"I want to do more, Katie," he said quietly.

I heard what he didn't say. I stopped walking, turned and looked up at his handsome face, then buried my head against his broad chest.

*You can't fix me, Greg. Only I can fix me. And Alice is helping me fix me. What you can do is wrap those big arms around me, hold me tight and be there when the demons come.*

Greg did just that. We sat on the ground for a while, me between his heavily muscled legs, leaned back against his broad chest, with his strong arms around me. I closed my eyes and let the warmth of his love and protection soak into me. I almost felt safe. Part of me wondered if I would ever feel completely safe again.

*So different from being with Adam and the pack,* I thought to myself. Adam loved me, but it was instinctual love, not emotional love. He loved me as a bitch for his pups, as a supplier of food for the pack. But as an individual... he wasn't capable of that, not anymore.

Way back, Goddess it felt like two lifetimes ago, when we met the summer I changed, his humanity was still there, just buried under layers of guilt and dire wolf instinct. Our time together in the woods and the incident with Traci brought Adam's humanity into the light for a while. But after I left Bear Lake, his human side slowly faded again, buried by his lupine instincts. By the time I was captured, escaped from the camp and returned to the area after leaving Tenkei, his humanity had all but disappeared again.

I dove deep into his mind, blew through the blocks he had built around his memories, his life as a human, a black ops leader for the military and dragged his soul out of the darkness where he had hidden it, locked it away from himself.

He was pissed at me, for dragging things up, reviving the demons of his past that he had almost extinguished. I didn't blame him, but he was the only one I could trust, the only one who could help me. I was hurting mentally, physically and was being an A Number One Bitch to boot. At that moment, I didn't care about the cost, to him or me.

We were together that fall and winter. When we weren't hunting, we talked. Sometimes we would talk about what happened in the camp, things that I had seen, things that I wanted to forget and couldn't. When we went to ground for the night, I would get caught in Adam's nightmares, reliving portions of his team's missions, too often, the worst parts. I asked him about them, sometimes he would tell me, sometimes not. I knew I could have dived into Adam's head and find the answers, but I didn't. Once had been enough.

The chill of the air and the cold damp from the ground was enough to get Greg and I up and walking again. Almost unconsciously I reached out to find David; he was home with Millie and Luma. I told Greg that we were going to visit friends.

~ \* \* \* \* ~

The sky had lightened up a lot since the morning, as had my mood. The Andersons had moved again after the incident at church. Now they were further out in the country and well off the main road. We turned into the driveway and I was surprised at both the house's size and the lavish stonework. A massive granite wall shielded the front of the property from the roadway.

*Someone's doing well* I thought as we got out.

David peered out the front window then opened the front door as we walked up the short flight of steps to the recessed doorway.

I felt surprise coming from him as we hugged. He led us into a large living room that was furnished in an eclectic blend of heavy oak furniture with One Hundred and One Arabian Nights accents.

"Kevin!"

I turned in time to see Millie run into the room and into me, knocking me back several steps.

"Millie!" David scolded, "Be more careful."

"It's okay, no permanent damage," I said hugging the tween-aged girl. "Goddess girl, you're sprouting like a weed," I teased. When I left Millicent was still a gangly little girl, now, six years later she was a solid bodied tween whose head rested just below my ribs. She gave me a hard hug then stepped back to look up at me.

"It's so good to see you, Kevin," Millie said looking up at me. Her eyes had changed color. They used to be blue but were now brown and gold.

"My name is Katie, you know that," I said smiling. "Maybe I should start calling you Millicent."

"Just so you don't call me 'stoner'," the girl said, flipping her long, light russet hair over her shoulders.

"Stoner?" Greg asked his face mirroring the confusion I was sure was on mine as well.

"MORFS," Millie said, picking up a grey granite sphere from a decorative display on the coffee table. She held it in her hand and we watched it flow and change shape, going from a sphere into a cylinder then stretch into a long rod. The rod curled into a spiral, coloring following the spiral, through the spectrum from red at the bottom to purple at the top.

"WOW!" Greg exclaimed as Millie handed me the reshaped stone.



“Wow is right, Millie. That’s incredible,” I tell the girl, hugging her again. What she had done with the granite explained why her body was so solid. Her power was centered on earth, metals, minerals and stone. Depending on her power level, she would be able to shape solid rock like a potter shaping clay on a wheel.

“When did that happen?”

“Two years back, just before school let out,” Millie said a smile creeping back to her face. “A crappy way to spend your tenth birthday.”

“Watch your language, Millicent,” David snapped. “You don’t want Luma learning that.”

Millicent sighed and nodded. She bent down and came up with the youngest member of the family.

“Here’s our little parrot now.” Millie said poking the girl in the tummy.

“Parrot!” the girl shouted, then giggled.

“See what I mean. She hears all, remembers all and spits it out at the worst possible time,” David said chuckling.

“Yeah. Remember when you and Casey Everson were home, supposedly babysitting little Lumie?” Millie asked, bouncing the little girl on her hip.

“Don’t even go there, Millie,” David warned good-naturedly.

“BJ!” Luma shouted, giggling like the little girl she was.

Everyone laughed while David turned red. Luma giggled even harder.

“See what we mean?” Millie said.

“A girlfriend, hun. Is she cute?” I asked looking David’s direction.

“Oh, he’s quite cute,” David replied, a look coming to his face that told everyone he was in love.

“How’s it working out?” Greg asked.

“So far so good, we’ve been dating a year.”

“Are you out at school?”

“Yeah,” he snorted, “I had more friends bail after I went through MORFS than after Casey and I came out.”

“David, the ones that bailed were never your friends to begin with,” I said, stepping over to wrap an arm around him.

“Mom said the same thing, but it still hurt,” David complained.

I nodded. “It sucks royally.”

“I found out about what you did at church that day,” I continued. David dropped his head and I reached down and lifted his chin up, so I could see his eyes. “Thank you.”

*Do not blame yourself for what he did. You defended yourself, your family, and everyone in the church, me included.*

*Then why do I feel like crap about it?* he replied, his face showing the still raw emotions the subject engendered.

I felt David’s gut twist as his mind replayed the scene, searing blue white bolts of lightning converging on the shotgun carrying man, a soul rending scream as his mother’s new husband exploded, scattering offal and body parts throughout the church’s sanctuary.

*You feel sorrow at taking another’s life, no matter how justified, no matter how well deserved the outcome. In other words, you’re a good person who had to do something horrible. Forgive yourself.*

David nodded, and I hugged him like I had when he was younger, and I was his babysitter. The four of us sat and caught up on events while Luma wandered between us, spending most of the time with Greg, climbing up to stand in his lap patting his chest. Eventually the girl sat down and fell asleep in his arms.

David got up to get us drinks while Millie caught us up on the social life of a tween. She was telling us about a boy who was making eyes at her in school when she stopped in mid-sentence.

“Mom’s home,” she announced.

She must have seen my confused expression as I hadn’t heard anything. Millie tapped her bare toe on the tile floor.

“Vibrations. I can recognize Mom’s car when she’s coming up the street,” Millie explained.

“That has to come in handy,” Greg remarked.

“It does, quite often,” Millie said, smiling, looking at David who looked embarrassed.

Mrs. Anderson came in a few minutes later carrying grocery bags. I helped the others carry the remaining bags into the kitchen while Greg was trapped on the sofa with a sleeping Luma.

“Never thought I’d see the day when she’d sleep in someone’s arms she didn’t know,” the woman whispered as she gently gathered her daughter into her arms and walked towards the back of the house.

When she returned, she had changed out of her business clothes and into a pair of comfortable looking jeans and sweater and had pulled her hair back into a pony tail. We visited for a while, catching up on our respective lives, my retelling about my visit to the White House and other things.

“You must be doing well,” I commented waving a hand about at the house.

“Barrack bought this place. He couldn’t legally get title to the land and house without my name on the paperwork since he wasn’t a US citizen. His family tried to force a sale once he was... gone, but the court ruled that since my name was on the title, we were never legally divorced and there was no will, I was heir by default. It’s a bit much, but a fitting revenge on that... person and his family.”

I had a feeling that Mom wanted to talk to us. Greg followed my lead and we said our good byes and promised to keep in better touch.

## Chapter 4 - Up, UP and AWAY!

While Greg drove us home, I contacted Mom wondering what she had to tell me that was so important.

*Your Dad was able to end his trip early and is back on Tenkei. I've made arrangements for us to go through the Atlanta portal tomorrow.*

*Can Greg come with us?*

*I don't see why not. You need to ask him, honey.*

I let Mom fade from my head. We were pulling up to a stop light, so I didn't think we'd endanger too many people when I asked Greg.

"You want to take a trip, Greg?" I asked as we pulled up to the intersection.

"With you? Anytime. Where are we going?"

"Tenkei. My Dad's back on the station. Mom and I are going up to see him."

"Don't you want to go up there by yourself? I would just be in the way, wouldn't I?"

"Please, Greg?" I asked, putting a hand on his arm.

"Sure. I go where you go."

*Mom can you get a ticket for Greg too?*

*I'll call and make it three tickets.*

When I came back to the outside world, I slid over and snuggled with Greg as we drove home.

"Thank you."

I was nervous as a cat in a dog kennel as the three of us stood in line waiting to clear passport control. Emigration didn't take long at all. I didn't need to be a telepath to tell the official for the United States was just about beside himself with malignant excitement as he stamped my passport out of the country.

*Good riddance to bad trash I hope you choke on a hairball.* The hate tinged thoughts came through loud and clear as he handed my passport back through the glass divider. I took the little blue book and made my way the forty feet to the entry point for Tenkei.

There the official, a slender Japanese woman with long midnight black hair that dropped to her waist, asked for my paw print then had me look into the retinal scanner.

“Will you be staying long on Tenkei, Ms. Milner?”

“I’m not sure how long we will be staying.”

“Your refugee status will expire in two hundred twenty-six days and with that your temporary citizenship,” she tapped a few buttons on the screen built into the desk and the page refreshed. She looked up with a smile, “You’ve been cleared to enter Tenkei, Miss Milner. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

I thanked the woman and joined Mom and Greg who were waiting for me on the other side. We walked to the end of the concourse to the Tenkei portal area. Some two hundred people were already waiting for the noon portal. We found a place to settle and wait.

The waiting area looked like any of the regular jet terminals at Atlanta’s Hartsfield airport. It had shops for snacks and drinks and the seats were uncomfortable. The only difference between a regular aircraft gate and where we were currently were the large floor to ceiling doors built into the wall.

At the moment, the doors were closed. If they were open, you’d be able to see out onto the tarmac and watch the planes as they taxied to and from the other concourse buildings.

Tones sounded from hidden speakers just before a woman’s voice started the departure announcement.

*Ladies and gentlemen, gentlebeings all, Tenkei Transport Service wishes to announce that the portal to Tenkei Orbital City will open on time. Please ensure that you have all belongings before crossing, as returning to Earth after arrival at Tenkei will not be possible. Please be advised that cargo and package mail will have priority for transit to and from the orbital city. Please keep the yellow pathway from the portal boundary clear until all cargo has passed through. Thank you for your co-operation.*

I stayed with Greg, my nervousness about being on the station coming back full force. I hadn’t been able to tolerate station life for long. After the camp escapees had been processed, assigned quarters and allowed free run of the public areas, they scattered to the four winds. I had no one to run with. I pulled my memories away from that. Shuddering, I pressed myself hard against Greg, breathing in his scent. He was my mate; my pack, my anchor going back to that artificial place.

“You okay?” he asked concern on his face.

I nodded and when the skeptical look crossed his face, I smiled.

“You’re with me, Greg. I’ll be okay this time.”

Before Greg could say anything, another set of warning tones sounded.

*Ladies and gentlemen, gentlebeings all, Tenkei Transport Service wishes to announce that the portal to Tenkei Orbital City will open in one minute. Please, stand clear of the yellow pathway to allow the free transit of cargo and package mail. The portal will remain open for thirty minutes to allow all persons adequate time to make the transit to the orbital city. Thank you for your co-operation.*

A warning horn sounded just before there was a loud thump and the two large pressure doors opened. There was a loud whistling and a strong breeze from the terminal towards the doors. Tenkei maintained their atmosphere at the same ‘altitude’ as Denver. The lower pressure allowed the orbital city to gulp natural air every time a portal was opened anywhere on Earth. Besides getting real air onto the station, it helped the Tenkei residents maintain their immunity from earthbound airborne sicknesses.

From where we were seated, we could see the interior of the Tenkei gateway. Once the doors were fully open, flat bed transport carts pulling several trailers each came from the Tenkei side and disappeared through other, smaller doors that had opened to either side of the portal. After all the carts and trailers moved from the Tenkei side, similar carts and trailers drove to the station. Mom, Greg and I watched as the small army of cargo handlers worked quickly to move dozens of baggage trains to and from the station. In less than twenty minutes all the cargo had been moved and pedestrians were allowed to cross.

The three of us moved with the rest of the travelers. With the three steps it took for us to move between the colored tiles on the floor indicating the demarcation between the United States and Tenkei, we had traveled over twenty-two thousand miles and were now on the orbital city.

I remembered this part of the terminal from the night we escaped from the camps. Like then, the full spectrum lights in the grid work high above us were on maximum, simulating high noon. It was never dark when you arrived at Tenkei. The three of us made our way out of the portal area and looked for Dad.

He wasn’t hard to find. Dad greeted Mom with a hard two arm hug that left her breathless. He did the same to me, just as hard and I returned his hug with just as much vigor. He had been off to one of the other stations when I was here previously and wasn’t able to get back until after I had gone groundside.

After all our greetings we started down the concourse that would lead us away from the passenger terminal. We had taken only a dozen steps when we came upon a young woman waiting for us.

As soon as I got a good look at her, I knew who she was. A memory flashed up, from when I first 'pathed to my Dad from summer camp those many years back. She was the attendant in the public bath.

“Colleen, Katie, Greg,” Randy said, holding his hand out to the small woman, “this is Mei-Lei, my personal assistant.”

I snorted knowing just how personal her assistance had been. My parents looked at me, but neither said anything.

Pleasantries were exchanged all around. The small woman took the lead in our procession from the terminal to the tube station. Greg looked askance at the transport car but got in with only a little difficulty. Mei-Lei kept up an almost constant stream of chatter during the ten-minute ride to the Echo Eight dome.

When we exited the tube station into the block of apartments, the first thing I noticed was the tang of sulfur in the air. One of the tidbits of information the refugees had learned during our orientation after our escape, was that the orbiting city had started as an uninhabited, volcanic island in the Pacific Ocean. The smell, and the natural terracing of the apartments seemed to confirm that.

We stopped in front of an apartment. Dad opened the door.

At my questioning look Dad pointed up the walkway.

“Your apartment is that way. Mei-Lei will show you.”

“We’re not staying here?” I asked.

Dad chuckled.

“I only rate a one bedroom and it’s not built for someone your size, honey. You and Greg will be much more comfortable in the apartment Mei-Lei will show you.”

I caught what Dad wasn’t saying, he and Mom were going to be busy for a while.

The woman led us to the next lower level of apartments.

“This is your apartment. Please touch the scanning plate,” the woman requested politely.

Greg was first to put his hand on the sensor plate, then it was my turn.

“Thank you. The door is now programmed for your use. All other information can be accessed via the terminal inside.”

“Since you remain in refugee status, Miss Milner, you will have access to modest amounts of local currency. There is an electronic transfer card in the apartment along with the assigned personal identification number. The possessions you left behind from your previous stay have been moved to the apartment along with your luggage.”

I nodded and the woman hurried off.

Greg and I went inside to check things out. There was an almost Spartan living room, a kitchen/cooking area and one bedroom with an attached bathroom. The quarters were no doubt larger than what Mom and Dad had, but still snug for Greg and me. At the best of times living space on an orbital city was tight. I went into the bedroom and started unpacking the suitcase. Mom had me pack for an extended stay, so I had clothes for a week. If I needed clothes or other things, I could purchase them in the shops I'd become familiar with during my last stay.

When I opened the closet, I saw what I never wanted to see again in my lifetime.

*Hours of riding from where we had been loaded. The trucks were hot, humid, dusty, never comfortable, the jostle of bodies packed too close together for too long. Weak from not being fed. Hours of rough roads. Stopping inside a camp, guards yelling at us to get out and line up. More guards around us with hybrids beyond. Ordered to strip, leave everything you had in a pile at your feet. Men separated into a different group. Herded into concrete buildings with nozzles coming from the ceiling, getting sprayed with icy water. Voices yelling “get clean you filthy animals!” Pushed and shoved from the shower to another, with different spray heads suspended from the ceiling. Another dousing, this time with disinfectants. Bitter, stinging eyes and noses. Interminable time there before the doors on the end open and we were quick marched, still naked and wet to the far side of the camp to supply buildings. Women yell and throw clothes, shoes, underwear, bras, and the grey, sailor suit style smock, exactly like what was hanging in the closet.*

I came back to the world in Greg's arms. We were on the carpeted floor, he was holding me, stroking my fur with his hand, speaking quietly to me, telling me it would be okay. I buried my head in Greg's chest and let the tears come. The pain, the emotions bottled for so long, boiled inside me. The rage couldn't be held any longer. It exploded out of me.

I don't know how long my mate held me, his arms around me. When the crisis had passed, the rage finally burned out, I could smell blood. My claws were smeared with it. Pulling away from Greg, I saw the rents in his shirt, the spreading stains.

“Greg!” I yelled, pulling away from him. I hurried into the bathroom to grab a towel to press against the wounds. “I'm sorry! I'm sorry!”

“It's okay Katie. I'll be fine,” Greg soothed as I ripped his shirt all the way open to get a better look at the wounds. The gouges in his chest weren't long, but they were deep and bleeding. Luckily nothing major had been nicked.



I pressed the towel against the claw marks whining loudly and wiping tears from my eyes with the back of my paw.

“Sorry, sorry...” I whined over and over as I tried staunching the blood.

“I’ll be fine Katie,” he said gently looking me in the eyes. He held me with those gorgeous brown orbs and pulled me against him with arms that were strong enough to keep the whole world away. The growing panic receded. There was anger in him, not at me or what I’d done, but at the people who had engendered my panic, my flashbacks. I laid my head on his chest, listening to his strong heartbeat and felt the almost overpowering love inside him.

I don’t know how long we stay that way on the carpeted floor. A chime sounded in the front room. It chimed a second time before I recognized it. Pushing myself up slowly out of Greg’s arms, I made my way to the communications panel and pushed the accept button. The screen lit up with Dad’s face. His expression changed from all smiles to concern when he saw my condition.

“Honey?”

“Hi. Sorry, was a little overwhelmed by coming back.”

“I understand. Colleen has been catching me up. You two up for a late supper?”

“Give us a bit to clean up.”

“Okay, Katie,” Dad said into the video pickup. “I love you honey.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

Dad disconnected, and I went back to the bedroom. Greg was standing next to the bed, stripping off his clothes.

The bloody towel was nowhere to be seen, already in the recycler, no doubt. When I checked his wounds, they were almost healed.

He must have seen the question in my eyes.

“One of the good things that came out of my change,” Greg said as his pants hit the floor and he stepped out of them. “I heal quickly, but I can’t help anyone but myself.”

I slid my arms around him.

“You do help others, love. You help more than you know.”

~ \* \* \* \* ~

Dinner was a nice affair in a quiet upscale establishment in the next dome over.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived last time, Katie,” Dad said once our meal was served.

“Nothing to apologize for Dad; our arrival was pretty unplanned. One of the station techs explained that you were out on a LaGrange point station, and the only portal tech that could reach that far for an unscheduled departure was unavailable.” I said, cutting into a warm and very bloody Angus steak. “I’m just sorry that I couldn’t stay on station long enough for you to get back on the next shuttle run.”

Dinner conversation revolved around what I had been doing since escaping and coming back to civilization.

“Remember when you told me to go be a wolf, Dad?” he nodded, “It was like that, for three years. The pack’s territory was around Bear Lake and since I knew Adam, I went there. Katie faded out, I’d go for months without surfacing while I was with the pack.” I chuckled, “I wonder if Mrs. Kleck would think I was being a pretend wolf now?”

Dad and Greg chuckled at that.

“It would make a good what I did on my summer vacation report,” Greg said, smiling at me.

“Yep, how to track and take down dinner, wolf pack family relations and child rearing,” I added.

Mom looked at me, a question on her face.

“You’re going to ask me something, Mom?”

“Child rearing?”

“Yes,” I said. “Firsthand knowledge.”

That got me silence all around the table.

“I know what you’re going to ask. Why didn’t I bring him home so you could meet your grandson? It’s simple; Pup is a wolf, a Dire Wolf, to be exact, but first and foremost, a wolf. He’s right where he needs to be, with his Pack, in the wilderness.”

“Will we get to meet him?” Mom asked.

“Maybe next summer, right now, you’re prey, nothing else.”

At the looks I was getting from Mom and Dad, I continued.

“Pup is not quite a year old, and its winter at Bear Lake. His mind is running on lupine instinct. He’s hungry and you’re not a wolf. In his, and the other pups’ heads, if you’re not Pack, you’re the enemy or you’re dinner.”

We were waiting for desert to be delivered when Dad asked how I had found out about the pardon.

“Almost by accident,” I replied. “Ranger Zack, the Park Service Ranger who worked the area, would come by to get the Pack’s help in finding lost campers and other simple things.”

“The Park Service asks wolves to hunt for lost campers?”

It was all I could do not to laugh at Dad’s surprised expression.

“Dire wolves, Dad. They’re like me, only way more wolf. They’re bigger and tougher than natural wolves and more vicious,” I replied easily. “And it’s not really the Park Service. Zack is the only one who can approach them without too much worry, mostly because Zack knew Adam, the pack’s Alpha, before he changed.”

“But Zack came into the pack’s territory to ask for their help finding a group of hikers that had been missing. The weather was getting bad and the regular searchers would have been forced to pull back. We found the hikers several hours later and Zack found a porter to get them and me, back to Bear Lake Lodge.”

“That’s where I found out about the pardon and the invitation to the White House. A week later I was in Washington meeting the President.”

After dinner we strolled around the dome, going all the way up to the top level where we could see out into space. The lights on the overhead grid were turned all the way down. The only light came from pathway lights and the spillage from the next dome over. Above us was a sky full of brilliant stars, even brighter than when it was full dark in the hills around Bear Lake.

My stomach knotted and I grabbed Greg’s hand in mine and wouldn’t let go. In my mind I was outside, but my instincts knew that here, on the station, ‘outside’ meant death. It was a conflict that my brain couldn’t fully resolve. Even when I was ‘inside’, away from the domes, the conflict never fully went away. Greg’s presence helped. I trusted my mate, he wouldn’t take me someplace dangerous. That’s what I told myself anyway.

We crossed the grassy park to where a story teller sat, surrounded by a group of children and their parents. The old man was telling the Christian Christmas story.

“It was a night like this, dark, wintery, with stars from one side of the sky to another. Mary and Joseph were in a stable, for there was no room for them at the inn. And during the night, surrounded by the animals, Mary gave birth to Jesus.”

“The little baby Jesus was wrapped in a swaddling cloth and laid in the straw of the manger. The three wise kings arrived, ending their long journey from the east, following a bright star in the sky. They bore gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and knelt to worship at the feet of the child they knew, when he grew into a man, would change the world for his followers forever.”

“In the fields outside of Bethlehem, angels appeared to the shepherds who were frightened at first, but the angels said, ‘Be not afraid, for this night, in the City of David, is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord’. The glory of God shown around them, and the shepherds knew that the Redeemer had arrived, as had been foretold by the prophets of their fathers, and their fathers’ fathers.”

“And that, children, is why Christians from all over, here on Tenkei and on Earth, celebrate tonight as one of the holiest nights of the year.”

There were smatterings of applause as the children got up and ran back to their parents who were standing nearby.

I turned in Greg’s arms and looked up at him.

“Merry Christmas, Greg. I don’t have a present for you.”

“Merry Christmas, Katie. You’ve already given me the best present ever. You came back to me.”

## Chapter 5

### Karma is a Bitch... A Wolf Bitch

Greg and I were left to our own devices while Mom and Dad got reacquainted. It wasn't hard to tell what they had been up to when we met for breakfast. They looked at each other more like newlyweds than a couple well into their third decade of marriage. The same way I looked at Greg, no doubt.

With Greg in tow, I went exploring. My last visit had been brief, less than two weeks, before I had to get off-station. There were rumors that if a person wanted to get lost, live off the grid so to speak, you went to dome Alpha Three. While not completely lawless, it was the place where local law enforcement focused only a myopic eye. As long as the tourists were relatively safe, Tenkei PD was happy.

Thoughts of Traci had been haunting me since we had arrived. Tenkei used a number of micro-singularities to generate power and local gravity for the station rather than more conventional means. Due to some random weirdness with the way the micro-singularities worked, it severely dampened my mental abilities. My range was extremely limited, tens of yards rather than tens of thousands of miles. It was both a blessing and a curse, a blessing that I didn't have the pressure of the million or so minds on Tenkei beating against my shield and a curse that I couldn't find Traci or feel Mom and Dad if I couldn't see them.

That I hadn't found even a whiff of Traci the few times I had looked when I was groundside suggested that she was somewhere here in the orbital city. That my thoughts had been drifting towards her suggested was still alive.

When Greg asked me about her I gave him the only answer I could.

"She's Pack, Greg."

We talked on the rail car ride to the Alpha Three dome. Thankfully I was able to figure out how to call up a larger transport than the one we took when we first arrived. Greg didn't have to sit with his head on his knees to close the bubble top.

"We met the summer after my change, during camp. Actually on the hike out to the camp, I discovered her secret and promised I'd keep her safe. I found out later her parents were getting a divorce and her mom sent her to camp to keep her away from dad who's a rabid Pure. When the assassin—"

"Assassin?" The surprise in Greg's voice was plain.

"Yes, assassin. When he came, I kept her safe. It was one of the few times that year my wolf and I were in complete agreement with each other."

I had to pause and let the memory of those dead eyes staring up at me fade.

“Traci’s mom came and took her away. They went underground and Mrs. Whitmore asked that I not try to contact them. They were afraid that the husband would try again, so I stayed away. Then I got picked up.”

“It’s been six years; Traci is well over eighteen now, so legally she’s free of her dad. But I doubt that little fact will get in the way of The Reverend Mister Whitmore trying to do away with his shame.” I shuddered, the echoes of Traci’s memories coming to the fore in my mind.

“And you want to find her.” Greg said, looking down at me.

“Yes, if nothing more to know that she’s safe.” I caught the tone of my mate’s look. I leaned over as far as I could in the transport. “She’s Pack, Greg, family. She’s not a lover. You alone hold that spot.”

There was an echo in my mate’s mind about lovers. I had a feeling this subject would come up again.

The transport slowed to enter the Alpha Three terminal, effectively cutting off more discussion.

We walked out of the terminal and were face with our first decision, left or right. Looking both ways, I closed my eyes and let instinct make the decision. We went left. The corridor was probably one hundred meters wide and maybe ten meters high, the walls were a pastel rose color and something rubbery covered the floor. We walked only a short distance, passing through a set of pressure doors before the corridor opened into a wide boulevard with all sorts of shops lining both sides. Garish lighting fronted a lot of the establishments, hawking everything from live nude girls and live nude boys to things more decadent.

One establishment, The Petting Zoo, caught my attention. Holding Greg’s hand, we made our way across the wide walkway into the front of the establishment.

“Welcome to The Petting Zoo, my name is Marie. Is this your first time here?” the well-endowed woman asked from behind the hostess stand. Her smile was friendly and refreshingly genuine. The silk halter dress was open from neck to navel, showing off her gravity defying breasts. An idle thought went through Greg’s mind wondering if they were natural.

“Yes, our first time here.” I replied.

“It’s always nice to meet new customers,” she said snapping paper bracelets around our wrists. “Come right on in, since this is your first visit, your first drink is on the house.”

We were led through an intimate restaurant section into the more adult part of the establishment. A large stage was the centerpiece and occupied by dancers in various stages of undress. The name “Petting Zoo” fit. All the dancers and the wait staff were animal hybrids,

furries. The music was at a moderately loud level, probably because of the numerous hybrids in attendance and their more sensitive hearing. I smiled at Greg's reaction to the displays of feminine nudity by the dancers and the wait staff. He looked halfway embarrassed and half like a kid in a candy store with his parents' bank card.

Once settled, a tiger morph approached, tray in paw. She approached quickly but with the grace that was the hallmark of her animal. The only thing she wore besides her impossibly high platform heels was a small apron that carried an order pad.

"Jambo," she said over the noise of the crowd, smiling.

I cocked a look at her, looked at Greg then replied smoothly, "Sijambo. Habari yako?"

It was her turn to look surprised, I smiled.

"Jina langu ni Mwindaji."

"Jina langu ni Katie, nimefurahi kukutana nawe."

She nodded her head.

"Your Swahili is good," the waitress said shifting back to English.

"Thank you. I had lots of practice."

"What can I get for you?" Mwindaji, the name translated into Hunter, our waitress, asked.

Greg ordered for himself and I wanted a beer, and other things. The waitress smiled pleasantly then departed to get our order. I swatted Greg's arm playfully as his gaze followed Hunter's retreating tail.

"Swahili?" Greg asked. "An odd choice for a foreign language."

"Not my choice. The camp ran a school. The school said we needed a foreign language. The only teacher they had that spoke something other than English spoke Swahili. So, we learned Swahili. Some of us were fluent enough that we could insult the guards and they didn't have a clue. One of our little rebellions. Mr. Mujonnie was one of the few nice people there."

By station time it was early afternoon and the bar was only moderately busy. I had a feeling it would be packed by the station's night time. A good thing we were here now, instead of later where I might not be able to talk with the people who might know people.

It didn't take long for Hunter to come back. She sat the two bottles on the table.

"I'm free in ten minutes if you would like something more private," she said, her eyes shifting between us. A nod was all she needed from me.

We spent the time watching the dancers. On the stage in the far back, a heavily muscled male whose other endowments were quite generous, danced to the music while women danced on the other two stages. I was surprised to see both men and women watching the male as he strutted and swayed seductively to the music.

True to her word, Mwindaji was back in ten minutes. She led us to a secluded booth away from the stages. Inside the light was low, just enough to see the table and the loveseat that took one side of the booth. Music was piped into via a hidden set of speakers that Hunter turned down while we got comfortable.

“Sixty will get you twenty minutes; one fifty will get you a full hour,” the waitress said keeping a professional air about herself. It was a business transaction, nothing to be ashamed of.

“Cash or ET?”

“Plastic is fine.”

I pulled out the Tenkei money card. The woman pulled out her order pad and I swiped the card, punched in the amount and my pin code. She smiled when she saw the amount.

At this close distance, I could ‘path with the waitress and explained what I wanted. She smiled and nodded. She turned the music up and began to dance. She focused on Greg, her smile and movements for his enjoyment. He looked at me and I put a hand on his leg, letting him know that it was okay, that this was something special for him.

The woman danced slowly, sinuously, putting my lover in thrall. I smiled, understanding the power she held over him. Memories floated up from camp, parties where I had been forced to do the same. I pushed them away. This was nothing like that.

After watching Hunter for a few minutes, I got up and slid behind her. The booth was just large enough to let us stand together, our bodies brushing each other. As she danced, I mirrored her movements my hands caressing the short fur of her shapely body. Hunter’s interest in me as more than a customer grew.

Greg’s eyes grew wide and I could feel waves of lust coming from him. I smiled seductively over the woman’s shoulder. My lover groaned.

*It’s okay.* I ‘pathed to him. With relief, he unfastened his pants and let his growing erection out. It was easy to feel Hunter’s interest in Greg grow.

As we danced together, I ‘pathed to Hunter, letting her know I wanted to find Traci. I sent her a mental picture and told her how she could contact me. I felt her concern that I was with the police and I eased her fears, playing my memories of Traci and our time together from summer camp.



The music slowed. Hunter and I turned so we danced face to face, arms entwined, bodies pressed together, slow dancing as lovers would. I felt the tiger's smoldering emotions. She wanted more than my Tenkei credits. I turned again, so that I was now looking at Greg. His hand was around his cock, his eyes glazed over. He was more than aroused by the sight of us dancing and touching each other.

Hunter's hands came around and danced up my body, caressing without touching, until she reached the curves of my breasts. With the ease of practiced fingers, she popped open the one button holding my top closed. I focused on my mate's face as Hunter caressed me. I wanted my lover's big hands on me. Greg groaned as the tiger teased and tweaked my nipples while I smiled mischievously at him.

Leaning into the other woman I tipped my head back. Hunter's cheek caressed mine. I closed my eyes and let the tiger woman's fantasy float into my mind. Her yearning was so strong for a playmate she didn't have to hold back with that I didn't have the heart to tell her that Greg and I were exclusive.

In a last ditch effort to persuade me, Hunter pinned me against the wall. She leaned close and kissed me, hard. I saw in her mind how she wanted me to respond. I pretended to fight her advance and then surrendered, moaning as the woman's kiss became hotter, more demanding. I let the woman's lust flood my mind and carry me along.

Drawing my claws down her back, not hard enough to break skin, I reminded her she didn't have a mundane woman in her arms.

That was enough to set her off. She roared, loud enough to be heard over the music. She forced her way between my legs, pressing her sex against mine. She dipped her head to lick me from shoulder to cheek as she rubbed our breasts together. Pulling back she eye-locked with me then attacked, crushing her mouth to mine, invading my mouth with her tongue.

I cupped her ass and pulled her hard against me. She broke the kiss off and bit my shoulder as she ground herself against me. Her moans and cries were drowned by the music as her body shook, in the throes of a powerful orgasm. I held her close, nuzzling her neck as it slowly ebbed. It took a while before she was steady enough to stand on her own.

She pulled back, shame in her eyes. She had pushed things too far and was afraid of what I would do.

*No guilt, Mwindaji, no shame. I'm not sorry about what happened.*

Mwindaji searched my eyes then nodded. She kissed me one more time and gathered up her things. I asked if we could stay longer.

"Stay as long as you'd like," she replied.

The door hadn't closed behind her before I was attacking Greg, diving into his lap.

There was no foreplay. Foreplay had been what happened between Mwindaji and me. I might have been on top, but my large lover was the one in control. He held me easily in his hands and controlled the pace.

As I had teased Greg, he exacted his revenge. Holding me by the waist he flexed his hips, impaling me, moving in and out at a tortuously slow pace. I growled and snapped, first demanding then quickly pleading with him to go faster, to rut like we had during our runs in the woods in high school. My babbling must have convinced him as he stood, turned me around then bent me over the low table and gave me what I wanted.

I howled as he repeatedly plowed into me with the strength of his powerful Shire-influenced body. My feet did not touch the floor. My only contact with anything other than Greg was my hands on the low table. He held me as we rutted. My mate was taking me, hard, pounding into me the way my animal needed.

He grew larger inside me, his cock stretching me in pleurably painful ways. I was skewered, a wolf kebab on a very large spike. Greg bugled and I felt the first blasts of his seed deep inside. Howling again, my brain seized as my body shook, overloaded with sensations as the world faded into darkness.

~ \* \* \* \* ~

I woke alone in bed. Noises in the next room told me Greg was in the bathroom. I thought about joining him and winced. Lying back on the sheets I relived the night before, Hunter, then Greg. The ache in my muscles and middle made me smile. I understood what Wind Glider meant by 'delicious hurt'. With slow, deliberate movements I got out of bed and joined my mate in the shower.

Greg was half-heartedly sheepish about my suffering. Underneath the public display of guilt and contrition he was ecstatic. He knew now, for certain, he didn't have to hold back and more than a little relieved that he hadn't done any permanent damage.

Greg helped me into the water spray and didn't waste any time sliding his large hands over every part of me.

"I didn't know you were bi, Katie."

"I'm not, not really," I pulled his arms around me. "I love being held in your big arms more than being with another woman." I nipped him on the chest.

"Then what was that last night with Huntress?" Greg's confusion was easy to feel as we continued to soap each other.

"Acting, mostly, and her name is Hunter." I turned the water off and backed into my mate. Greg slid his arms around me and pulled me into his chest. I shuddered as my rump made contact with Greg's sheath. Images of the previous night flashed before my inner eye.

“At... at the camp... the guards would have... parties. They would make the girls dance with each other... like last night. It was a way of controlling us, of breaking us, especially the churchy girls.”

“How you mean, hon?” Greg asked, brushing his muzzle against my cheek. The rumble in his chest was making it hard for me to keep my mind focused on what I wanted to say. My body was warming to the idea of more attention from the big guy, never mind that he had loved me into oblivion not so long ago.

“For the more religious girls, being forced to touch, dance with and kiss another girl was mentally devastating. In their mind they were damned to Hell by laying with another woman, even though they were being forced. The guards would taunt them, calling them lezzies and beast lovers. They knew I could feel the other girl’s distress and tried to guilt me for what they were doing.”

“It didn’t take them long to realize that taunting me with the distress of others didn’t work, so they used Anna to keep me in line. As long as the guards were satisfied with what I was doing, they left her alone. Anna was... fragile.”

“Being a twisty made it easier. No built-in hang ups about touching or kissing another woman, not like the straight, genetic girls. The guards liked watching girls kiss and touch each other. We told each other that we were just acting, straight girls that were playing a roll, like in the movies.”

“It was something they could hold onto to keep from being completely broken.”

“Did they...” Greg’s voice faded, but I knew what he was asking.

“Have sex with us? A few of the girls decided to go that way. But it was their choice. It was easier for them to deal with being a guard’s play toy, than to face having sex with another girl. We weren’t forcibly raped. It was one of the few things where we had iron clad protection. But there are a lot of ways to brutalize a school girl without taking her clothes off.”

“You let them abuse you because of this Anna?” Greg’s voice had lost some of its edge, but the anger at what had happened rolled off him like heat waves off a summer sidewalk.

“Anna was a child Greg. She was just as much my child then as Pup is now,” I twisted in Greg’s arms to face my lover. The anger at what had happened to her, to us, welled up inside me. It was all I could do to not dig my claws into Greg’s chest. “I was ‘Mommy’ and she depended on me to keep her safe.” He tightened his arms around me as I trembled with unresolved rage. I pushed slowly away from his chest, willing myself not to lash out and looked up into his dark eyes. “Greg, I would have bitch banged every girl in camp during morning formation, if that’s what it had taken to keep her safe from those monsters,” I said coldly.

*And when it mattered most, you failed her.* I stomped on that accusing voice in my head.

I turned the water on and we finished our shower. Afterwards, I took the man's slicker brush and curry comb and groomed his coat. The activity, the long strokes, the touching, helped dispel the anger in both of us. By the time we were dry I wasn't looking to bite heads off and Greg wasn't itching to kick someone through a closed spaceside airlock.

When he turned to open the closet, I got a long view of his naked back. Oh Goddess was he a hunk. And a half. My middle tightened as the thought of having him for breakfast flashed through my mind. Then my stomach growled, loudly telling me it needed more than nibbles of horse.

We met Mom and Dad at a restaurant near the transport tubes. Most of the shops catered to the morning commuter crowd that populated the majority of the dome. When my parents spotted us I easily read their emotions. Concern, fear, joy flowed across their faces and minds like ink in water. Greg and Dad stayed at the table and order from the menu while Mom and I went to the breakfast buffet table.

Her only question was, "Any regrets?"

My look must have given her the answer.

"Are you sure you're in love with him, honey?"

"As sure as you are of being in love with Dad. Greg's been my friend forever, Mom, even before I changed." I looked in her eyes. "I feel safe with him."

Mom nodded.

"It's easy to see that he loves you, Katie," Mom paused as she placed a slice of fruit on her plate. "But can you live with him?"

I knew I could live with Greg. Her question should have been could Greg live with me? I had been back in civilization only a few weeks, and I already knew it would be difficult for me to stay. Urban living was out. My lupine half cringed at the thought of living inside a city. Suburban might be okay, but I would still need room to run, lots of room.

Wilderness would be the best, away from people and cities. There I could be the wolf I was and not panic humans other than the occasional backpacker. I wondered how Greg would feel about living in the middle of a million square acres of wild.

After we finished, Dad said he had a special treat for us. He led us to a transport station and we took a transport to the 'Earth side' of the city. He wouldn't tell us what it was, just that it would be spectacular.

The ride around to the far side of the city took nearly an hour and two transfers. Not once did Greg or I draw anything but curious looks from toddlers. A funny look or a finger wave would get us a giggle or smile in return. Way different then what would happen groundside.

Tenkei was such a different environment than what I was used to. The Southern United States had its history of Jim Crow and the Black Civil Rights movement. It might have been a century in the past, but it always remained in one form or another. Instead of blatantly posting signs reading *Humans Only* the discrimination was more subtle. No doubt the bigots and separatists had a presence on station as well, but they weren't as vocal, or visible, as they were dirtside.

When we reached our destination, we followed the crowd into another entertainment district, one that was much smaller than Alpha Three. We continued through the main area where hawkers barked out their attractions in a turn of the 19th century carnival like atmosphere. Kids walked past with cotton candy on paper sticks and fried funnel cakes in paper holders.

We could see where Dad was leading us, to an attraction near one of the service airlocks. There was already a line in place and the sign visible at the ticket booth said there were tours leaving every 30 minutes. We were going to have a bit of a wait for the next tour. An old fashion carnival fortune teller machine stood along the path. Greg looked at me and nodded at the machine with a question on his face. I smiled and nodded. He took a coin, dropped it in the slot and pulled the handle. The machine clanked and whirled and the gypsy woman's eyes flashed a few times before spitting a card out the front with a maniacal laugh.

Greg read the card quickly, then handed it to me.

*Beware the wolf among the sheep and the sheep in wolf's clothing.*

I giggled at it and handed it back to Greg, who put it in his pocket. We joined the queue with everyone else and waited only a short while before the attendant came by with a data pad. Greg chuckled as she was dressed like a stereotypical "alien girl" from the last century's science fiction movies. A pair of star tipped antenna poked up out of her hair which was arctic white, dressed in a silver glitter bodysuit and white knee high boots.

"You got anything to cover those claws, honey?" she asked with a real thick accent, pointing the stylus at my hands? "You don't want to poke a hole in the suit, it would really ruin your day."

"You mean we actually go... out?" I asked, a flutter starting in the pit of my stomach.

"Sure honey, it's a walking tour, it makes a loop through some of items that were on the island when it was lifted into orbit and machines and other things used to build the domes. It's very exciting."

The uneasiness... hell call it what it was...fear, reared its head once more. I started to back away and was stopped by Greg's solid body.

“It’ll be alright,” Greg whispered in my ear.

The spacesuits were a throwback to ancient science fiction. They were all silver, with clear bubble helmets with a little antenna looking thing on the top and a backpack. There was a group picture taken with everyone dressed up before we were herded into the airlock. As we decompressed, the handlers checked each of us to make sure we were airtight. According to the spiel they gave over the radio, the airlock could go from vacuum to station normal air pressure in fifteen seconds.

“Now, when we step outside, I want everyone to clip onto the safety cable. We don’t want anyone floating away,” the lady leading the group held up the clip and the handlers all showed us where to find it on our suits.

“Isn’t there gravity everywhere on the station?” It was a man’s voice, but which in our group, I couldn’t tell.

“Inside the station, yes, unless something happens to the regulators. Once outside, we get away from the artificial gravity and get to experience what space scientists call micro-gravity. At the furthest point of the trail, you will weight only five percent of what you do inside the station. I know that will make some of you happy. In microgravity, weight is not important, mass is. Who here, has ever tried to push a heavy object, like a large box or trunk?” A few hands went up. “Outside, that trunk might weigh only five percent of what it would inside the domes, but its mass remains the same. That means if it was outside, you would have to push on it just as hard to move it, and more importantly, to stop it from moving. Never, ever get between a moving and stationary object. The results could be very messy.”

A red light flashed and the outer door started to open.

“Watch your step, and remember to clip in.”

Greg and I were the last out of the airlock.

It was a bit comical to watch the space suited people trying to walk in the quickly diminishing gravity field. Twenty feet from the airlock door, the effects of the micro-singularity generated pull lessened dramatically. The assistants were demonstrating how to get around using the moon bounce gait. Anyone who’s seen the old films from the original moon landings made a century ago, would recognize the hopping style of locomotion. The biggest danger was building up too much momentum and ending face first in the pumice like dirt. A scratched helmet could spell deadly trouble for the wearer, as could even the smallest tear in the millimeters thick silvery fabric.

The first thing that struck me was just how crystal clear everything looked. There was no haze, no pollution in the air, since there was no air, save the little bit that surrounded my head in the fishbowl helmet. The ground around the station showed signs of heavy equipment travel, but

further out, it was undisturbed rock. There were no sharp edges, just the rounded flows that I'd seen on recovered meteorites. I guess the effects would be the same, no matter which way a rock was travelling through the atmosphere.

We had gone maybe forty feet down the well-worn trail, the tour guide was droning on about how the domes were constructed over the radio when I turned to look and caught my first glimpse of the Earth. It was peeking around the edge of the dome, just hanging there, in the night sky. It was enough to take my breath away.

I had seen pictures of our planet taken from space before, but they were nothing compared to seeing it like this. On some level you knew a picture was artificial, this wasn't artificial. This wasn't a picture of Earth, this was The Earth. Our home.

It was a big blue and white marble. Seeing it like this, you couldn't see the squabbles that were going on between nations, the arguments and bloodshed over things as insignificant as skin color, being morphed or how people worshiped their Creator.

You could see how fragile it was. Reaching out my paw, I covered the whole planet, blotting it out. If only it were that easy, I thought to myself. Punch the RESET button, wipe out everything and start over. Maybe we'd do better the second time around. But this was our second chance, I doubted we'd get a third. Would the cockroaches do any better than we had?

A quiet sob escaped. I grabbed Greg's arm and held on. We were so fragile and didn't realize it.

*Are you okay?*

The words slipped through my head and the top of my head itched.

A boy was staring at me as the rest of the group moved away, looking like skipping children as they did the low-gravity bounce on their way to the next marker.

*I'll be okay* I 'pathed back. The mental itch that always accompanied an active connection didn't go away. I slammed my mental shields down and saw the teen stagger his hands stopped from reaching his head by the fishbowl helmet.

Wagging a finger at him, I keyed the suit's radio.

"No peeking."

His eyes went wide in surprise that he'd been caught violating one of the most ingrained rules of telepaths. Turning, he tried to run, but instead moving away, he went flying. When he hit the end of the safety cable, the rebound started him spinning in three directions at once. A scream of terror came over the radio. Greg and I were the first to reach the boy's cable. Greg wrapped a leg around a stanchion to hold himself in place, and held on to me, while I pulled on the still screaming teen's safety cable.

The handlers made their way to us as quickly as they could reaching us as the boy's feet came within grabbing distance.

“Are you okay?” asked one of the attendants over the common channel of the radio.

The boy's answer was more retching and spattering the remains of his last meal all over the inside of his helmet. He was grabbed by two of the assistants and hustled quickly towards the airlock.

Once the excitement was over, we continued along the circular trail. The last stop was in front of a darkened set. The guide went into a short explanation about how Tenkei is a popular vacation spot that people from all over the Earth come to the station for rest and relaxation.

“And some of our visitors come from even farther away.”

Behind her lights suddenly snapped on, showing a classic domed flying saucer sitting on three spindly legs. Walking away from the craft were three little people, Daddy Gray, Momma Gray with Baby Gray in her arms. Daddy Gray wore a touristy Hawaiian flowered shirt and hat and was carrying a suitcase in one hand and a beach umbrella in the other.

We all got a laugh from that.

It was a relief to get out of the spacesuit once we were back inside the dome.

“Thank you for taking me out there Greg.”

“Wasn't sure you wanted to go, I know how uneasy you are about being up here.”

“Having someone with me helps,” I told him as we walked through the main part of the circus midway.

*You broke him* slipped into my mind. The boy was back.

*Broke who, Tommy* I 'pathed back.

*You know my name?*

*You don't shield your thoughts very well. And you were very noisy while crawling around inside my skull. I see you're feeling better.*

I could feel the flush of his embarrassment across our link. The last time anyone had seen him in that state was after his first beer bust with a friend's older brother and frat buddies. He'd gotten totally wasted. The older boys all laughed and cheered as he made offerings on his hands and knees to the porcelain goddess.



*Who did I break, Tommy?* I asked, while guiding Greg over to a long picnic table built for people our size.

*My dad.*

In the background I could hear Greg order three ales, two turkey legs and a feed bag from the busty woman dressed as a tavern wench.

I got a glimpse of the man from Tommy. I knew him. We had only met on two occasions, but both times were memorable.

*You're going to fry for killing those two innocent boys!* And the red wave of pain that followed, caused by the stun belt around my middle, the control box clutched by the hospital guard, Thomas Covington.

"Katie?" Greg's voice brought me out of the flashback, it was his large hand on my wrist, not hard restraints tying me to the bed.

"He tried to break me," I told the teen boy now sitting across from us. "The stun belt was there in case I got free. I was tied to the bed, couldn't get free, and your father zapped me anyway."

That bit of information was a revelation for Tommy.

"A few months later, I ended up in the same hospital. The guard on duty was your father. I'd just woken up and was laying on the bed talking to a police detective when he came through the privacy curtain, intent on stunning me. I stopped him and wasn't too gentle about it. Even the nurse on the ward commented that he used the device too freely."

"My dad wasn't a bad man," Tommy said emphatically. I wondered who he was trying to convince, me, or himself.

Before I could say anything, he stood up and walked back into the crowd.

## Chapter Six

There was a message waiting on the comm board in the living room when Greg and I got back from the dome. *Pavilion 19:00 Tickets at Will Call.*

When we arrived at the transport station, we turned in the direction opposite from The Petting Zoo. According to the station map, the Pavilion Theater was located was the more ‘family friendly’ section of Alpha Three.

It was after dinner by station time and the promenade was full of families out for a night of entertainment. The Pavilion wasn’t hard to find, we followed the groups of families with younger children to a large building that backed up against the dome wall.

We made our way, slowly, to the front of the queue and picked up our tickets. Like the other families, we got drinks and popped corn before making our way to our seats. We looked at each other as the theater filled up with small children and their parents.

The house lights dimmed, and music drifted out of the speakers. It was brightly paced as a little girl and her small dog walked out from stage left. The music shifted to sinister cords as different groups of baddies appeared on each side of the stage, trapping the girl in the middle.

Guns were pointed by both sides, with flashes of light, puffs of smoke, as the gangsters fought each other. Baddies flew in all directions in an entertaining and exaggerated show of acrobatic skill.

Then, the main character came floating down from the rafters. Dressed in silver tights with blue flashes, she blasted both gangs with lightening from her outstretched hands, saving the little girl and her dog. I knew instantly who was inside the costume.

The show had lots of audience participation and the expected whistles and cheers as the little girl and her dog were reunited with her parents. Greg and I laughed and applauded just as loudly as the kids in the audience.

I almost dragged Greg backstage after the final curtain. Traci’s emotions were easy to feel this close. Stopping in front of a door, I touched the sensor and waited for the door to slide open. She was sitting at a makeup table, her back to us.

Traci looked in the mirror, her hand stopped, hovering in mid-air. A range of emotions swept over her face before she jumped up and ran into my arms squealing like the little girl she resembled.

Traci buried herself in my fur, her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. She was so open, her emotions and memories flooded through my mind. I couldn't stem the feelings that came from her, the terror of her escape, close calls with the more radical members of the Church of Genetic Purity. Mixed in were other emotions and memories, the breakup with a boy she thought loved her when he found out how MORFS had changed her and the satisfying revenge on a girl who'd fucked over a freak.

The flood ebbed slowly. Traci pulled back, looked into my eyes and hugged me even harder.

"Shhhh, little one. It's okay," I whispered.

I carried her over to the short loveseat and sat down with her, drawing her legs up into my lap, cradling her like I had done in the camp shower, so many years ago.

"Why didn't you contact me?" she asked, murmuring into the fur of my neck.

"Your mom asked me not to. She said that you were going away to get away from your Dad. I searched for you a couple of times but couldn't find you."

"Probably because we were already up here," Traci replied. "Less than a month after camp, we shipped ourselves up here."

"Shipped?"

"In coffins, to be cremated in the sun," Traci shuddered. "As far as Earth is concerned, officially, Traci Whitmore and her mother are dead. Mom found a man whose specialty is making people disappear."

"For being God fearing, church going people, your parents know some strange characters. First an assassin, now an eraser," I commented, chuckling.

"Mom and...daddie" she spat the word like a curse, "knew people who knew people. There's a whole other side to the Genetic Purity church that the regular congregation doesn't see. Nobody knows anyone, but everyone knows people who knew people that did."

"Why the cloak and dagger? I wasn't sure Hunter would come through. She could have just as easily taken the money and blown me off."

"A girl can't be too careful, Katie, especially when there's a pot full of rabid Pures after her." Traci's attention turned to Greg. "Who's tall, dark and yummy?"

"Greg, this is Traci, Traci, my mate, Greg Trantor."

"Mate, as in friend?" Traci asked.

"Mate as in Alpha," I replied.

“Alpha?” Traci repeated looking at Greg. “You must be something.”

“He is. He’s been my best friend for a long time, Traci. He knew me when I was Kevin and I whipped him regularly at Commando Raid 6. I love him.”

“That’s obvious, but can you live with him?” Traci asked looking between the two.

“The question should be can he live with me,” I looked up into his dark brown eyes. “I can’t live in the city, Greg, it would kill me. I need someplace that’s open, away from everything, where I don’t have to hide my nature.”

“Katie, where you go, I go. The Goddess brought you back and I’m not letting you go again.”

“Even if that means we live where the only neighbors are wolves?” I asked.

“As long as they know I’m not on the lunch menu.”

“I’m the only one you have to worry about nibbling tender things.” I said, taking hold of his hand.

Traci gave me a look of mock disappointment, “Not going to share him with your bestest of friends?”

“Does the little girl want a horsie ride?” Greg asked giving Traci a slow easy grin.

“It better be with a saddle and bridle,” I warned, the Alpha Bitch in me raising her head up. Traci might be my friend, but I wasn’t going to let her poach on my territory.

“Ohhh, kinky!” Traci replied, then laughed at the look I gave her.

A triple beat chime sounded from the makeup table, then repeated as Traci got up. It kept repeating until the small woman tapped the clock display on the mirror.

“I’ve got to get moving, Lightning Girl has an appointment with a little girl.”

“Your daughter?” Greg asked.

“Not this lifetime.” Traci said a note of sadness coming to her voice. “She’s in the Medical Center and goes into surgery in a few hours and wants a visit from the bestest superhero ever,” the small woman said as she quickly removed the remaining stage makeup from her face.

“For someone wanting hide from gangs of rabid Purists, you sure put yourself out in the public eye,” Greg said.

“That’s the best way to do it, hide in plain sight,” Traci replied as she combed her hair back then pulled a balaclava mask over her face that left just her eyes uncovered. “It’s also good

protection, ‘cause no one is going to mess with Lightening Girl!” Traci put her hands together, drew them apart slowly then threw a ball of light that hit Greg square in the chest.

“HEY!” he yelled and swatted at where it hit.

He looked around and Traci was nowhere to be found.

“Good trick,” Greg said, looking around some more.

“Thanks,” Traci’s disembodied voice sounded from near the door. “It took a bit for me to work out the disappearing part.” Traci faded into view.

Traci walked us out through the actor’s entrance and we separated there. Traci waved a goodbye before she broke into a jog towards the local transport station.

~ \* \* \* \* ~

When the elevator doors opened, I all but dragged Greg through the hallway. The phone call was alarming enough, but I could feel Traci now. Her distress was palpable.

Turning a corner, we walked past the nurses’ station and stopped outside a door. I opened the door slowly and found the woman, sitting at a table, her face wet with tears. She was alone in the small lounge, her Lightening Girl mask lying on the table in front of her.

“It’s him,” she cried, “the bastard found me!”

I knew who the bastard was without being told. It was Traci’s father, The Reverend Mister Whitmore, pastor of the largest mega-sized congregation in the Church of Genetic Purity.

“I’d just finished talking with the little girl going into surgery. The floor nurse stopped me on the way out and asked if I can make another visit. Hospice care. I get to the nurses’ station to get information about who I’m supposed to see and it’s him. I freaked and have been hiding here.”

“If he’s in hospice, he’s terminal,” Greg said quietly, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“I know, but having to face him, after...”

*You can do this Traci* I ‘pathed to my friend, pushing all the confident feelings she could at smaller woman. *I’ll be there with you, Greg too, if you want. You’re not alone.*

“You stood up to a Park Ranger for me, it’s time I returned the favor,” I said openly.

We made our way to the Reverend’s hospital room. Traci stopped outside, her hand poised on the handle. It didn’t take any empathic ability to know that she was steeling herself for the coming confrontation with her father. She took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

Greg and I followed her inside.

The man was lying on his back, the bed tilted up slightly. Monitors beeped and tubes ran from bags hanging from poles on either side of the bed into his arms, and tubes filled with blood ran out from under the sheets to a machine next to the bed. He looked old, his face wrinkled, the skin hanging loose from his bones. A man in a dark suit and dark glasses stood next to the bed. A Pretorian for the man in the bed.

“Reverend,” Traci said. Her voice carried the contempt she felt for the man.

“I’m your father, Traci,” the man in the bed wheezed, “and you, are, my daughter.”

“Your daughter? Not your shame, not your abomination?” Traci almost spat at the man, her voice quietly intense. “You tried to rape me after I changed, then paid an assassin to have me kidnapped and killed, Daddy,” the sarcasm in her voice changing to acid. “What father would do that to his daughter?”

The bodyguard stepped forward, his hand reaching under his coat. I got in his face, growling and baring my teeth. I pushed every bit of intimidation I could. His machismo wilted like a hothouse flower.

“Steven,” the man in the bed wheezed again, “wait outside. The only thing my daughter can do is hasten the outcome the cancer has already promised.”

The man nodded and I let him walk past. I queried Traci with a look and she barely nodded. Touching Greg’s hand I drew him out the door with me.

As tempted as I was, I didn’t listen in on their conversation, but I did keep part of my attention on my friend’s emotions. They were understandably mixed, pain, revulsion, hatred were there in spades. Having experienced Traci’s memories of what had happened, it was understandable. There was another element in that poisonous mixture. Love.

No matter how much of a bastard Reverend Whitmore had been to MORFS survivors, he was still her Daddy. Despite what he’d become, what he had chosen to do with his life, Traci still felt love for him.

The three of us stood outside the door for a long time before alarms sounded at the nurses’ station. Several medical staff rushed into the room one dragging a large red cart. Ten minutes passed before the door opened again and Traci came out. She walked stiffly into my arms.

“He’s gone,” was all she said.

The nurses directed us to a private room where an older, silver haired man joined us.

“Miss Whitmore?” the older, white haired man asked looking between Traci and me.

“I’m her,” Traci said.

“I’m Mr. Herring, your father’s attorney.” The man stepped over to where Traci sat.

I didn’t follow what the man had to say to Traci. It wasn’t my business. The pair talked for a while before Traci stood up, slapping her hands down on the table in front of her.

“Mr. Herring, that man stopped being my father when I was seventeen years old. I’m not interested in his will, his testaments or his last wishes. For all I care, he, his church and every one of his parishioners can rot in Hell.” Her voice carried the anger and fear she had been living with for the past half-decade.

“Miss Whitmore, I don’t think you understand—“

“I understand all too well, sir, what my deceased sperm donor is trying to do.” Traci spat.

“The estate was last appraised at approximately seventeen million dollars.”

“I don’t care! You can take all of it and throw it out an air—“

Greg put his hand on Traci’s arm, surprising her into silence.

“Miss Whitmore needs time to think over the proper way of disposing of her late father’s estate. She shouldn’t make any permanent decisions while still in shock from his passing.” Greg said, looking at the lawyer.

The lawyer looked at Traci, then Greg and nodded.

“I’ll be on station until the end of the week. After that, I’ll be in my office on Earth,” he handed Traci a card. “You can reach me at any of these call codes.” He got up and closed his briefcase.

“I am truly sorry for your loss, Miss Whitmore.” With that, the man left quietly.

“I don’t want his money,” Traci said weakly.

“Think about it later, Trace,” Greg said. “Nothing has to be decided this second.”

She nodded, leaning into his arm. I fought down the growl that threatened to break free.

The three of us were finding our way back to the front of the hospital when I felt a familiar presence and heard a voice I’d thought had been silenced forever.

“Mommy!”

I turned and had only a second's warning before a little girl leapt into my arms, wrapping her arms around my neck, her legs around my waist and covering me with kisses.

"Oh Mommy! Mommy!" Tears filled her eyes and mine.

I hugged the vixen, hard, relief flooding through me, tears coming to my eyes.

A nurse ran towards us following Anna.

"Anna!" she cried, sounding cross.

I looked over Anna's shoulder and shook my head. *Its okay* I 'pathed to the woman. We stood in the middle of the hallway for a bit before I felt Anna's grip loosen. I stood her on her feet and she buried her head in my chest.

"You were gone so long Mommy," she wailed, looking up at me then snuggling again.

"I know honey, I'm so very sorry." I had to wipe my eyes.

The girl had changed since our time in the internment camp. She was a bit taller, her body maturing in a way her mind never would. Anna would always remain a simple, innocent child. Her reddish fur had darkened slightly, but the biggest change was in her eyes. They had lost the perpetually haunted, frighten look.

The nurse approached slowly, her gaze shifting between the vixen and me.

"You know her?" the young nurse asked.

I nodded, still stroking Anna's fur. She'd had handfuls of my fur and wasn't about to let go.

"She and I were together in one of the MORFS camps, on Earth," I said quietly, looking at the girl in my arms. Anna took that moment to look up and lick my cheek.

"Anna, honey, we're playing a game of hot potato in the big room. You want to play?" she asked like she would ask a five year old. "Danny and Danielle are there too."

Anna looked at me for permission. I nodded, "Go play, honey."

"Mind if I join you?" Traci asked, still dressed in her Lightening Girl costume.

Anna's eyes lit up and she squealed like a happy five year old unwrapping a much wanted present on Christmas morning. All thoughts of me flew out of her mind as she focused solely on the live storybook character standing in front of her.

The nurse first looked at Anna, who nodded her head quickly, giving the nurse a hopeful look.



“Sure. I think the other children will love a visit from Lightening Girl.”

Anna squealed and took Traci’s hand and led her down the hallway to a door. Traci opened the door while Anna turned and waived at me. Squeals from the other children could be heard from the playroom, just before the door closed.

The nurse looked relieved.

“Goddess be praised,” the woman said tiredly, “I thought she was going to throw another tantrum.”

“Get her to sing a song when that happens,” I commented almost absently. “Itsy Bitsy Spider usually distracts her enough to calm down.” I mimed the hand motions.

The nurse gave me a surprised look. It wasn’t hard to hear *How would she know that?* in the nurse’s head.

“You have a few minutes to talk?” she asked.

“You said you knew her from the camps?” the nurse asked while leading us to a couch in the empty waiting area.

“Not long after I arrived, she was brought in at lights out, terrified. The guards dropped her on the mattress next to me and ... suddenly, I was Mommy.”

“Thank you for taking care of my daughter,” a new, masculine voice interrupted. A voice I knew only too well.

A growl broke free as I stood and turned to stare at person who’d been at the same internment camp. One of the staff.

“Katie,” Greg said firmly, putting himself between us. “No.”

“He’s one of them,” my voice a threatening snarl, “from the camp.”

“Not by choice,” the dark haired man replied. “I was recruited at the point of a gun, much the same as you and the other residents.”

“You helped them kill us!” I yelled.

“I saved as many of you as I could!”

The wolf in me leapt forward taking over and I tried pushing past Greg. I was going to tear the man apart. Suddenly, I was pinned against the wall, grabbed by the ruff of my fur and a large arm around my waist holding me in place.

“Katie, NO!” rang in my ears.

I don’t know how long it took to push back the wolf and get my own emotions under control. Too many...too many of the girls in the camp had gone into the clinic and had come out in bags.

The rage faded, color returned to the world slowly.

Greg was slowly stroking the back of my neck, trying to quiet me, making soothing noises.

I slowly went limp in his arms.

“Katie... no,” was almost whispered in my ear.

*I’m okay Greg* I ‘pathed to him, letting him know I was back in control.

He put me down gently, setting me on my paws. Greg held me loosely against his chest. Not to restrain me, but to anchor me, a reminder that I wasn’t alone. I looked at the doctor, unspent anger roiled inside me, but I held my wolf in check. The wolf bitch didn’t care for explanations, it wanted to destroy the man and the threat he represented.

“You were at the camp?” Greg asked. The man eyed my mate and nodded. “Why?”

“Not by choice, I assure you. I had a family medicine practice, in a small town in Kansas. I was out with friends,” the man smiled slightly as he spoke, “a bachelor party for one of the other doctor’s sons. On the way home, I saw a car hit a pedestrian. The car kept going. I stopped and gave what aid I could. He was an obvious hybrid. He had leg and hip fractures, painful but not life threatening. There was nothing I could do on scene except keep him comfortable. I called for an ambulance and stayed with him. When the ambulance got there, they barely looked at his injuries. Their treatment was a humane destruction device, something a veterinarian would use on a suffering animal.”

“I got up in their face about it, and the cops had to pull me off. ‘What’cha gett’in all upset for doc, ‘taint nothing but a damn animal.’”

The man’s face showed the anger I could hear in his voice.

“After than I started speaking out about the laws, trying to get them changed. Stirred up quite a hornet’s nest. I was arrested, and the city’s kangaroo court gave me a choice, life in jail or volunteer to staff the camps.”

“And Anna?” Greg asked.

“She was ten years old when I hauled off to the camp. She had always been mentally challenged. Going through MORFS didn’t change that like my wife and I had hoped. The SHAME militia didn’t care about her mental state. Anna was a hybrid, classified as an animal. Mary, my wife, was killed when they raided the house and took her. An accident they claimed,

one of their flechette rifles malfunctioned. The cowardly bastards left her bleeding on the living room floor.”

I remembered the day I was taken, the squad of Homeland Security troops at the courthouse. No doubt the troops were just doing what their commanding officer ordered. It was the leader that was truly a bitch. The leaders of the SHAME militias were just as bad but for a different reason.

SHAME stood for Soldiers of Humanity for Animal MORF Extinction, an extremely violent offshoot of the Church of Genetic Purity. The men and women in the SHAME organization were fanatical true believers in the divine righteousness of their cause, the genocide of human-animal hybrids like me. Their supporters and sympathizers had infiltrated the government, including law enforcement, at the local and State levels in Kansas. As state representatives, they were able to couch their anti-hybrid laws and regulations in terms of “child protection” and “public safety” all while camouflaging their true intent, until it was too late.

“The state court couldn’t order her euthanized for being simple minded, they do have some limits on what they can do in the public’s view, so they held her and sent her off to the camps. By design or accident she ended up at mine.”

“You knew she was there?” I asked.

He nodded.

“And you said nothing?” I growled.

“What would you have had me do?” he responded testily. “I wasn’t the good little company myrmidon blindly following orders and regulations. I complained about the conditions and the treatment, or in the case of some patients, their non-treatment. It made the company people uncomfortable. When they told me to shut up, I didn’t. I started writing to people I knew in the press on Earth and here on Tenkei. What do you think would have happened to Anna if the camp commander had known she was my daughter?”

“They would have used her to control you the way they did me,” I said slowly.

The doctor nodded.

“And the camps would still be in operation and the government would still be rounding up hybrids like you and malcontents like me,” he said quietly.

“We heard nothing like this in the news,” Greg said, “not even rumors.”

“You really think the news media would be allowed to publish stories about that? They operate in the public’s interest, which means the government’s interest, because, ultimately, it’s the government that decides what’s in the public’s interest,” the doctor replied. “There hasn’t been a truly independent media on Earth in over a century.”

“What about the bloggers and other small media?”

“How’s an internet blog with a few thousand readers, or even a popular blog with tens of thousands of readers going to compete with a large media chain with audio, video and print outlets that reach tens of millions of readers and viewers on a daily basis?”

A crowd of young people in white coats came through the door behind the doctor. Doctors in training no doubt.

“I would like to talk more with you, but it’s time for rounds. I truly did the best I could in the camp. One day, in the here, or hereafter, I’ll have to answer for my shortcomings. Excuse me.”

The man turned and addressed the group of student doctors, as a group they flooded past where we stood.

I took hold of Greg’s hand and led him to the playroom door. Standing outside, I could see Anna with a dozen other children. Traci had them enthralled with her light tricks, fingertips that shot sparkles and playing hot potato with balls of blue flame that exploded into colored bubbles.

My heart squeezed looking at my little girl.

I started at that revelation, my little girl. Anna was... my little girl. The years of taking care of her in the camp, holding her when she cried, laughing at her antics, smiling and praising her successes, of being Mommy... Anna was just as much my little girl as she was the child of the woman that birthed her.

How could I leave her?

*How could you leave Pup?* my wolf accused.

Pup was more my child than Anna ever could be. I had birthed him, nursed him. My face had been the first he saw when his eyes opened. That Wind Glider and the other pack bitches cared for him along with all the other pups, didn’t make him any less my child.

I couldn’t stay here, not even for Anna. Tenkei was too artificial, too enclosed. I needed to get back to the wild places.

I buried my head in Greg’s chest. He held me, stroked my back, tried to comfort me in his own silent way.

“Momma?” Anna asked, leaning into my side.

“Yes baby?” I replied, wiping the wetness from my eyes.

“You have to go?” She looked up at me, concern in her eyes. Concern, not fear.

I took her hand and sat down on a nearby couch.

“Yes baby, I have to go. I can’t stay up here in Tenkei.”

“Its okay, Momma. My first mama had to go away too.”

“You remember her?” I asked trying so hard not to burst out in tears.

Anna’s face broke out into a smile that was like the sun. “She was so pretty Momma. She tried to protect me when the bad people came. Just like you did,” she hugged me hard. “Don’t be sad Momma. Mama Nattie and Nanna Karen take care of me here. They make me brush my teeth.”

I chuckled through my tears.

“You’ll be back?”

“Yes, Anna I have to come back to visit my little girl.”

“Goodie.”

Anna was gone back into the playroom with the other children before anything else could be said.

“We need to go,” I told Greg as I walked away.

## Chapter Seven

I needed to get off the station, back to the wild places... back to the Pack... back to Pup. I fought down the blind panic that threatened to overwhelm me. During the transport ride back to Echo Eight, we got a mixture of looks from other people who boarded and departed the transport along the way. Guess my being in Greg's lap, clinging to him could be seen a number of different ways by the locals. Not that I noticed or cared.

I was deep inside Greg's head during the entire ride, using the unflappability of his equine half to keep me grounded.

By the time the transport pod entered the dome's main station, my emotions were bottled up again. That didn't keep me from pressing myself into Greg's side, draping his arm over my shoulder and keeping my arm around his waist as we walked to the apartment.

"I can't stay here, Greg. I need to go back."

"And what, Katie? Disappear for another three years?"

His voice was a low rumble, holding a smattering of reproach.

"I can't ask you to move into the middle of the wilderness with me Greg. It wouldn't be fair to you."

"Not fair?" he stopped walking, spun me around and pinned me with his hands on my shoulders against a station bulkhead. "What's not fair Katie, is you running off without me again."

"I can't ask you to give up your job, your life, for me."

Greg stared at me a moment then lifted his head and gave out with a real horse's laugh.

"Katie, honey, I work in a distribution warehouse. I unload tractor-trailers, stack pallets and move hundredweight bags of pet foods, rabbit and horse pellets. It's not a job with a lot of upward potential."

Greg slid his hands down my body, deliberately across my breasts and cupped my ass. He looked directly into my eyes with his large chocolate brown orbs. I whimpered, my knees threatened to fold...and...felt my nipples crinkle. With the slow deliberateness of an unstoppable force, he drew me to him, pulling me tight against his hard body.

“The Goddess answered my prayers when she brought you back to me. You beat Felicia to a pulp to win me. So now, you’re stuck with me.”

My Alpha had spoken.

The rest of the walk back to the apartment was less dramatic. We passed a few people and couples, humans and obvious morphs, along the way. Greg palmed the scanning plate and we both stopped, surprised by what had been left just inside the door.

A plastic table had been set in the short foyer, with several stacks of cash. An envelope was propped against one of the stacks, my name written on the front in very fluid script.

I picked up the envelope and sniffed it. The scent that lingered was human, male, but it was so faint that it was just an impression, nothing definitive. The paper wasn’t the inexpensive grocery store greeting card type paper. The flap was sealed with purple wax and embossed with a design I’d not seen before.

I scored open the seal and removed the card. Gold foil was used for the simple border and the note handwritten.

*Miss Milner;*

*Please forgive my crude attempt at gaining your attention.*

*I would very much like to speak with you about your near and long term future. I have taken the liberty of reserving a private room at the Forbidden City, in Lambda One at 2000 hours, station time tomorrow evening. A reservation is waiting for you in your communications inbox.*

*The comrade of a mutual friend.*

“Whoever it is, wants to get your attention in a big way,” Greg remarked as he restacked the packets of bank notes. “That’s half a year’s pay for me in Tenkei yen, and the same amount in Earthside cash.

I called up the station email service and saw that there was a confirmation from the Forbidden City for myself, plus one. I knew from my exploring on my last visit that Lambda One was the uber-rich district, like Manhattan Island on Earth. Tetsuo Sakamoto, the businessman that was the driving force behind building and launching Tenkei city, used the entire Lambda

Three dome as his private residence. One sentence caught my eye on the reservation. Dress code: formal wear required.

Formal?

“How formal, honey?” Mom asked, the link to their apartment had the video blanked. I could guess the reason she answered audio only when I heard another woman giggle in the background.

“It’s for dinner, tomorrow night. Greg’s taking me to a restaurant in Lambda One.”

“Lambda One? The Forbidden City, a very good restaurant, very formal, very strict,” Me-Lei’s voice came through the link.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” I complained.

There were a couple of very feminine giggles on the far end of the link, and then Me-Lei’s voice came through much louder, probably having stepped closer to the communications panel.

“I know exactly who you should talk to.”

The address was in the Alpha Three dome, and not too far from The Petting Zoo.

“Ask for Hiroshi when you get there. She is very good at what she does. Trust her. Tell her I sent you and she will know you’re not tourists.”

“It’s a what?” I asked, shocked by what the small Oriental woman standing in front of me said.

“The Forbidden City is a fetish club, very exclusive,” she replied patiently, her voice taking on a very patient tone. The woman’s black hair was shot through with grey, giving her the look of a retired school teacher. None of my teachers had dressed in long sleeved, wrap around black silk blouses with a phoenix embroidered on the front.

“Fetish, as in whips and chains?” Greg asked.

“No. Fetish, not porno skin club. You want that go to Whip Me Beat Me club three blocks over,” her answer telegraphed her disgust at the idea. “Fetish...”she muttered something in a language I couldn’t understand mentally or verbally. “Master, mistress, slaves... you know... fetish.”



I nodded my head, finally understanding what she was trying to say. Forbidden City alluded to more than a Chinese theme.

All morning we learned about this new lifestyle and crafted an image that would not make Greg or myself look like complete novices. Hiroshi pulled me away from the leather corsets and bondage harnesses and back to the chairs where Greg and I sat.

“Whips, flogs, toys... props. Mistress doesn't need such things. Mistress power is attitude, grace... control slave with a look, a word, a thought. Mistress must project power, her confidence, her absolute authority over slave. But only slave, not public. In public she confident, graceful, gracious to all, Mistress only to her own.”

“So, slaves obey out of fear,” Greg stated, putting a riding crop back on the display shelf.

“No!” Hiroshi snapped, pinning my lover with a glare. “Never... never fear. Fearful slave is no good. Bad master will beat slave to force obedience. Big enough whip get obedience for a time, but master will lose slave in the end.”

“Slave obey from love,” she continued, her voice dropping its harsh tone, “must trust Mistress with all heart, soul. Mistress must earn trust of slave, must earn respect. Mistress must control with love, not with whip, not with flogger. But, Mistress must also respect slave, know needs, limits, soft and hard, when to push new limits, and when not. Must obey rules.”

“You make this sound like a game,” Greg said, his attention split between Hiroshi and a multi-tailed flogger.

“You right, very right. Is game. Is very much game,” the woman nodded. A smile crossed her lips and disappeared just as quickly. “But is serious game. This game is life to many, and very much so to ones that go to Forbidden City. Most that go there, good people, Mistress and Master take very good care of slave.”

“Others,” Hiroshi continued, I could feel the intensity of her emotions and knew she'd had firsthand experience with a very dark place, where whips and floggers weren't toys of play, but tools of torture. “Others are bad people, very dark souls, cruel and dangerous. Yakuza. You mock them, you breathe vacuum.”

That sobered me. I had known there were people that took this seriously, made it their lifestyle. But Yakuza? Gangsters? It made sense in a twisted way, kingpins wanting to feed their ego, displaying their power in a very public way.

The woman was staring at me, waiting for me to make the final yes or no decision. I glanced at Greg, then nodded.

“What do I need to know?”

“First, you must know you are Mistress—”

“And why does she get to be the one in charge?” Greg asked, challenging the woman decision on whose role would be what in our little charade.

The small woman turned and stared at Greg. She stood up straight and her eyes narrowed as she focused on my mate. The transformation was immediate...and amazing. Gone was little shopkeeper lady. In her place was a powerful dragon lady, whose countenance was regal and ice cold. I had no doubt that if she were standing in front of an army of followers, every one of them would be on bended knee, heads bowed in respect, or fear.

It took only seconds before Greg dropped his head and turned away, his resolve crumbling like a sand castle hit by a tsunami.

Just as quickly as it had come, the ice-cold dragon lady was gone and the little shopkeeper was back. She stepped over to Greg and put her hand on his chest.

“You good man, you strong, you brave, but you not predator,” her voice was low, soothing. “Because you horse, you won’t stand and fight for you. Prey instinct is run. If you run from people in Forbidden City, you show weakness. Weakness to be used against you. But you stand beside and fight to protect the woman you love. She predator, she alpha bitch,” the woman looked over her shoulder at me, “she Mistress.”

By the time we were done, it was very late in the day. We had plenty of time to take our purchases back to the apartment, get cleaned, dressed and make our way to the Lambda dome. Greg was quiet on our trip from Hiroshi’s store. I could feel the turmoil in his head. His self-confidence as a man had taken a major blow. He felt shame at being so completely cowed by just a look from such a small woman.

If Hiroshi was right, then Greg’s present state threaten whatever it was that we needed to do tonight. I had to show Greg, that no matter what had happened, that he was a strong male and that I loved him unconditionally, that he was still my Alpha and that I was still his.

By the time we got back to our apartment, I knew exactly what he needed, and how to make him take it from me.

When we exited the Lambda One tube station, it was like stepping into Japan, or what Westerners would picture when they thought of the Orient. It was evening, station time, and the overhead lights were dim. We walked through a large gate that straddled the cobblestone roadway.

Lanterns lit the street and front courtyards of houses and businesses along the thoroughfare. It was quiet, serene, unlike the Alpha Three dome, which would be filled with raucous noise by this time of the evening.

The air was warm, fragrant, the scent of jasmine and sandalwood incense floating in the breeze.

When the entrance to the restaurant came into view, I stepped in front of Greg and put a hand on his bare chest.

I stretched up to give him a quick kiss and reminded him silently that I loved him.

*Greg, I know you're uncomfortable, but this isn't us. We don't play this game.* He kept looking away, looking over my head. I swatted his flank with my hand, he looked down at me. *I need you to focus. You read the message, heard Hiroshi talk about this place. I don't know what we're going to walk into in there, so I need you to keep your wits about you and watch my back.*

And image of my anatomy flashed through mind. I swatted him again.

*I said my back, not my backside.*

The humor broke the tension growing inside my mate.

After a second quick kiss, I turned and started walking away.

*Showtime.*

Two large men dressed in brown martial art gi each with a pair of scabbarded swords in their belts stood beside the open gate. They let us pass with only slight nods to acknowledge that they noticed us. A path led us through a stand of bamboo into the main portion of the compound.

The three buildings were laid out in a horseshoe around a central garden. Two women, dressed in elaborate kimonos were leaning over a pool, dropping something into the water. From the boil of water at their feet, I would guess they were feeding koi.

The path led us to the building at the bottom of the horseshoe. Two different women stood at the entrance of the restaurant proper. Greg showed the greeter our reservation on his eCom and after a moment, the other, dressed in a similar kimono, escorted us down a narrow walkway to a small private dining room. The architecture surprised me. The outside walls seem to be made of flimsy paper, decorated with symbols and painted flowers. The interior wall was much more substantial, being composed of what looked like wood timbers. I had thought that it would be the other way around.

The hostess knelt and slid open the bamboo and paper door. Greg and I both ducked under the low lintel.

Several Chinese lanterns hung from the ceiling, giving the light colored room a cheerful glow. I glanced around the room and was surprised to not find a single wall shackle in sight.

I was relieved to find a man was sitting at European styled table sipping tea rather than a chabu-dai, the traditional Japanese low dining table. He stood as we entered and motioned that I should take the seat on his left. My first impression of him was big, big in both stature and presence. The way his suit coat stretched across his body, the man had either been morphed into the size of two English rugby forwards or spent hours in a gym working with weights. His blue eyes were sharp, his gaze flicking from place to place on me. Adam's memories told me he wasn't checking my curves, but to see if there was an out of place bulge that signified a possible hidden weapon.

Greg stepped around me and pulled the chair away from the table. Our host's attention was drawn to the glint of light off the thin steel bands that encircled Greg's wrists. Greg finished assisting me into the chair and stood back, clasping his hands in front of him.

I turned my attention back to the man seated across the table. There was something very odd about him. I could see him, scent him, but I couldn't hear him. I looked at him and mentally it was as if he wasn't there. He was a headblind! My mental abilities would be of no use with him. Damn.

"Good evening Miss Milner. I'm pleased that you accepted my invitation." He talked like Greg had in high school just after his change. The words came slowly and with some difficulty. His forehead above his left eye was scarred, as if someone had operated on his skull.

"You made it difficult to refuse," I replied, nodding to the young lady who'd brought a wooden tray laden with small porcelain cups and a pot of hot cha.

"My aunt will be glad that you accepted her help and were such a good student." A slight smile played across his face. "You wear your costume and persona well."

I had come dressed in a black leather almost knee length skirt, a white strapless corset covered by a grey, leather business cut jacket. The only nod I'd given to this being a fetish club was the metal handled horse hair flogger that dangled from my wrist.

"Hiroshi is a good teacher," I replied taking a sip of tea while the server withdrew. "As is Adam."

The man's movement stuttered very slightly as he raised his own tea cup.

"I see that you remember him, Henri," I continued, having dragged his name and history out of Adam's store of memories. "Your first mission with him was in Peru. How did you like Lima?" I smiled at the man's growing discomfort.

The man may have been a headblind, but that didn't stop my other senses. I could hear his increase breathing, scent his agitation. Hiroshi had done her job too well, my inner bitch was having entirely too much fun being, well, a bitch.

"We're not here to discuss my past," Henri said, "but your future, Miss."

“Ms.,” I corrected, firmly. “It’s Ms. Milner.”

“Apologies, *Ms. Milner*,” Henri said, the shift in the tone of his voice and the emphasis on the Ms. betrayed his slight annoyance. “My employer is looking for someone with your skillset, a person who can provide secure, undetectable, instant, unlimited range communications.”

“And how would I do that?”

“You are a telepath, are you not, Ms. Milner? According to your MORFS records, one of, if not the highest rated ‘path on the planet.”

“Why come after me now? My initial testing was eight years ago. Why wait so long.”

“Telepaths that are rated seven or above are uncommon, not quite as rare as say, portal jumpers, but enough to be noticed when they’re identified. Until recently, there haven’t been enough high rated ‘paths to make a viable network. Then there was the matter of your incarceration.”

“While my employer has numerous contacts in grey agencies around the planet that might have spirited you away, there was too much interest in the camps to do so without severe repercussions to my employer. Nothing could be done until the President issued the pardon and ordered the camps dismantled. By then you had escaped to Tenkei and before we had a chance to contact you, disappeared into thin air. Again.”

“So I come back here, pop up on your grid and we’re sitting here making our *how de do*’s. What is it you want from me?” I reached for my cha and took another sip. It was very good tea.

“My employer is in need of special communications operatives. People who are quick thinking, resourceful, adaptable, discrete and have...reach.”

“An interesting idea. But why me? You must know the government thinks me a danger, they will keep eyes on me. And don’t discount the religious fanatics. No doubt I’m on their list of abominations that need to be eradicated. Plus, I don’t take well to working in a cube farm.”

“You’ve shown you’re quick thinking, and adaptable. In less than twenty hours you’ve become more of a dominant than most of the people sitting on the other side of that screen. You’ve shown you’ve got reach. Discretion, we have to work on.” The expression on the man’s face barely hinted at a smile.

“I can be discreet,” I said, a bit derisively.

He chuckled.

“Ms. Milner, bragging to the President of the United States that you can read her thoughts through one of the most powerful psi shields manufactured, is not, being discrete.”

My ears flattened.

The man almost laughed. “I do hope you don’t play poker, Ms. Milner.”

A face flashed in my mind’s eye of someone else telling me that exact same thing years ago.

“And I wouldn’t worry too much about having to work in a cubicle. This would be the ultimate work from home job. With your telepathic rating, you could be of use to us, no matter where on the planet you were at any given moment.”

“I would need a home to work from. I doubt that my parents will be staying on Earth much longer, now that I’m a free wolf. A house in the wilderness, since suburban and urban living is out of the question.”

“All of that can be arranged and a cover job.” He pushed back from the table. “My employer will contact you to work out the details.”

We both stood up. Our young hostess slid open a different door than the one we’d entered from and the three of us exited into the public dining area. Screened alcoves lined the walls while European styled tables dotted the central aisle. As we turned towards the entrance, there was a shout, the unmistakable sound of a slap just before a young woman came crashing through a bamboo and rice paper shoji, a screen, from one of the alcoves, landing on the dark stained wood floor. A man followed, stumbling drunkenly to where the girl lay and grabbed her by the front of her elaborate kimono, raging in what could have been Japanese, or Mandarin, I didn’t know.

He was young, no more than his late twenties, and slightly built. He pulled the serving girl to her feet and reared back with a fist intending to batter her again. I growled.

“Iiya!” I barked. “No,” I repeated, blocking his swing with the metal handle of the flogger.

He stared drunkenly at me for a moment, not sure who I was or why I was interfering. I wasn’t sure why I was interfering either, other than I couldn’t stand to watch a woman being battered.

It took only an instant to ping his mind and get his name.

“Mika-chan, why are you treating this girl so roughly?” I asked, looking down at his sake reddened eyes. Our height difference didn’t seem to bother him. His gaze never got higher than my breasts.

“The bitch touched—”

I slapped him across the face with the flogger. When the impact finally registered, Mika had no problem looking up at my face.

“Such language in public, I’m sure your parents are very proud of you,” I replied. At this short range, I had no problems feeling emotions and reading surface thoughts. “Henri, please see to Etsuko.” I kept my eyes and senses focused on the small salaryman.

Henri lifted the girl from where she’d landed on the floor and helped her away. She looked at me, her eyes wide. Her emotions were confused, mixed, happy that I had intervened, but also frightened as to how I knew her given name, since we had never met before and she didn’t use it at work. I caught a fleeting impression from her that I was one of the pantheon of demons from Japanese culture come to her defense. Greg stood behind me, facing the other patrons.

“Hey, that’s —”

I hit him across the other cheek, cutting off his reply.

“No, she is not,” I replied, lowering the flogger slowly. “If you can’t play nicely with your toys, they will be taken away.”

“You can’t—”

I struck him again on the cheek. This time, little beads of blood dotted his cheek.

“I just did.” The words came out frozen.

The man stood as upright as his inebriation allowed.

“Do you know who I am?” the man raged.

“Yes Mika-chan, I know exactly *what* you are. You are a little child that hasn’t yet learned how to act in public,” I chided, keeping my voice ice cold. “How can you do this, Mika-chan,” I emphasized the ‘chan’, the term used when addressing a child, “embarrass yourself, your mother, your father, your ancestors? Eh?”

Indignation welled up in me and I focused it on the man-child standing in front of me.

“You have brought shame upon them. You bring shame upon yourself, acting as you have in public. You disrupt the calm of the others in the restaurant and bring shame upon the owner. Is this the way of a man?” I stared into his eyes, waiting for a reply. When none was forthcoming I continued. “No, this is the way of a willful, petulant, child.” I kept my voice cold, frozen.

His anger crumbled as he realized I wasn’t intimidated by his family’s name and standing on the station. That realization triggered a near panic as his attention darted from table to table, taking in the reactions of the other patrons. I could feel their attention turned solidly on the small man in front of me.

“Actions have consequences, Mika-chan. There are men here. Men that do business with your father and his keiretsu. What shame they must feel, seeing how you treat others, how you

treat yourself. What shame they must feel, having to deal with your father, who raised such a poor son.”

“See how your actions affect others, Mika-chan?”

“For...forgive me,” Mika voice was barely above a whisper.

I straightened up to my full height, towering over his much smaller stature. I glared down at him. A whimper came from the man.

“Forgive?” I asked disgustedly, “Mika-chan, how can you ask for forgiveness? Forgiveness comes after apologies, and acts of contrition. You have done neither of these things. It is not from me you need to beg forgiveness. It is from the people you have wronged, the girl you struck, the owner of the restaurant, and the diners seated around you. You need to beg forgiveness from your ancestors for bringing shame on them, from your father, for not heeding his teachings on how to be a man. And from your Mother, for not being a proper son.”

As I continued, Mika’s bow deepened, then he knelt, then finally placed his head on the floor at my feet.

“I...I am...sorry... Mistress,” his voice muffled by his outstretched arms.

I stood over the prostrate man. He was terrified, like Scrooge after the visit of the Spirit of Christmas Yet To Come. It was time to throw the man a lifeline.

“No doubt you are, Mika-chan,” I let my emotions, and voice warm a bit, “And it is now time to show those you have shamed, that you are indeed, truly sorry.”

Mika looked up from his prostrate position and I motioned with a finger for him to stand. He did and I stood behind him.

The people in the restaurant had left their tables and were starting to crowd close. Greg had taken up a defensive stance keeping them at a respectful distance.

“You will apologize to every master or mistress here, and ask their permission to apologize to their companions,” I put my paw on his shoulder. “You will ask from each Dominant a task, to show your contrition. Only then will you beg their forgiveness. You will do the same with every other person you have wronged. Then, and only then go to your Father, and your Mother and beg their forgiveness. You will then go to the shrine of your ancestors and beg their forgiveness.”

“Hai! Yes, Mistress,” Mika said, voice still trembling with fear.

“The Dominants will not harm you. They will not lash, brand or mark you in any permanent way.” I said, addressing the group as much as I was reassuring Mika.

“You may begin now, Mika, starting with Etsuko, the woman you slapped.”



“Hai, Mistress.”

Mika bowed and disappeared into the crowd.

The crowd parted as I walked towards the front of the restaurant, Greg trailing behind. We exited the building and I let my impromptu tonotono, ichi-ban persona fade with a long sigh.

“Damn it,” I swore under my breath. Greg slid his arms around me in a comforting way. I wanted to get back to Earth, not get entangled with power games here on Tenkei. But I couldn’t just abandon the man, walk away like tonight hadn’t happened. An image of Adam flashed through my head, he was explaining why his unit was going back into a hellhole for a return engagement.

*We broke it, we gotta go back and fix it.*

I broke Mika. I had to stay and fix him. Or find someone that could.

Goddess I wanted off this station!

“Let’s go home.”

“Yes, Mistress,” Greg said, deadpanned.

## Chapter Eight

Greg was gone when I woke up. Again. This hadn't been the first time he'd gone missing in the morning over the last month. Casting about mentally, I didn't feel him that way either. My jaw muscles tightened in aggravation. This was supposed to be our time together, to relax and reconnect before the agency whisked me away to rural Virginia for training and orientation. I didn't relish the idea of going three months without Greg.

He finally did show up, just as I got out of the shower. I glared at him and he ducked his head guiltily. There wasn't scent that didn't belong, so he wasn't stepping out with someone else. I was sorely tempted to look in his head, but that would've broken a promise I'd made to him back in high school. Unless it was an emergency of some kind, I wouldn't use my abilities to wander around inside his skull. Annoyed curiosity wasn't an emergency.

He disappeared again just after getting out of the tube station. Greg told me to head on to the restaurant and he would be there in a few minutes. He joined us again as Mom, Dad and I were setting down to breakfast. The man with him looked very official and was carrying an expensive looking data tablet. He stood back while Greg got close to us and went down on one knee.

"Mr. and Mrs. Milner, Katie, this is Mr. Kondo, from the Tenkei Office of Records," Greg said keeping his focus on me. "He's here in his official capacity as Recorder." Greg paused a moment, then took a deep breath.

"Katie, we have known each other since we were in school together. We were friends, then we were lovers. We were separated for years, and the Fates brought us back together again. In front of these witnesses, I ask that you join your life to mine, forever. Katie Milner, will you to marry me?"

I didn't say anything, just stared in shock, playing back what he'd just asked me in my head. Then I was in his arms, holding him, and his arms were around me and I couldn't see because I was crying. Mom was there, crying on us as well. And I could hear people applauding and cheering.

The noise all faded, until all I could hear was Greg, his breathing, and his heart, beating.

I knew. The wolf in me grumbled cantankerously, but she knew too. He was the right one. It wasn't a joke when I called him 'my Alpha'. I had known him from before his change, just like he knew me. And he was still here.

"Yes." I said simply.

Greg straightened up and I stood with him.

Mr. Kondo approached, motioned for us to open our mouths and took a quick swab of the inside of our cheeks.

“Congratulations,” the man said with a slight bow. “Your betrothal has been recorded.”

“Betrothal? That’s a bit archaic,” Dad asked coming over to stand next to Greg.

“No, sir,” Greg said. “I’ve been checking it out. A betrothal on Tenkei is the same as a civil union anywhere down below. There’re a few places that wouldn’t honor it, and we’re not going to those places anyway. Here, you have to be betrothed for six months before you can get a marriage license.”

“The owner of the station wishes to give couples legal protection while they have a trial marriage.” Mr. Kondo supplied. “A failed betrothal is much easier to dissolve and does not carry the social stigma or legal complications of a divorce.”

“It also allows me to give you this,” Greg said, handing me a small black book with a very familiar looking crest.

“A passport?” I asked, looking up at my minutes-new husband.

“Look inside.”

I opened the book and there was my picture, the same one as was in my blue passport. The name was different.

“Mrs. Katherine Milner Trantor,” I repeated slowly. “Citizenship, Tenkei?”

Mei-Lei appeared next to Mr. Kondo.

“Your temporary citizenship as a refugee has been made permanent since you are now betrothed. Mr. Trantor is now a citizen as well, as he is your husband-to-be.”

“But don’t I have to take a test, or swear an oath?”

“Tenkei does not have those requirements for citizenship, Mrs. Trantor,” Mei-Lei replied.

I hugged Greg again, then suddenly, pulled back.

“You oaf,” I swatted him on his broad chest, “you forgot the ring.”

Three days later, it was an emotional group that gathered at the portal terminus. Mom and Dad were there. Mom was trying very hard not to cry and not succeeding well. She fingered the

silver titanium bracelet on my left wrist Greg had purchased in place of a finger ring and hugged me again for the nth time.

Dad had mixed emotions about my going back to Earth, and my now legally cemented relationship with Greg. He knew my new husband wouldn't hurt me, but still gave Greg the *take care of my little girl, or I will bring the wrath of the gods down on your head* father of the bride speech.

We had to promise both of them that we would have a full blown wedding ceremony once our future settled.

There were hugs and tears all around when the final departure announcement was played over the loudspeakers.

A familiar scent caught my nose. I looked around and saw Mika walking towards us with Henri. I could see how much happier the smaller man was. Mika wasn't a submissive in the normal sense, he needed a strong male role model to emulate. I had no doubt that Henri would keep him on a very short leash and make sure that all the tasks set I'd set for him were completed. I also had a feeling Mika would be wearing a collar the next time we saw them.

The warning tone sounded and we felt the familiar thump of the portal being created.

"Be good for Henri," I told Mika.

"I will Mistress, I will."

We said our final goodbyes, then Greg and I grabbed our little bit of luggage and together we made our way into the crowd and down the ramp. The trip was just as quick as before and when we walked out the other side, there was a banner hanging from the ceiling welcoming everyone to Atlanta.

We were home.

## Chapter Nine

I walked out the front door of the Bear Lake Lodge into the late summer afternoon carrying the last of my belongings. Not that I ever had much with me to begin with. Ranger Zack was waiting for me in the parking lot with what looked like the same battered Swift aircar he'd been using when I first met him nearly a decade ago. The engine sputtered a couple of times when I opened the passenger side door.

"You sure this thing's safe?" I asked while tossing the hard sided, rough duty overnight case into the small cargo area.

"Safe enough for what I need," Zack replied as I buckled the harness. He looked over at me with a smile on his face. "We're not going to Casper, are we?"

I laughed, and held up my arms, and twisted my wrists.

"See, no handcuffs. I've been a good wolf, Mister Ranger," I teased using my best little girl voice. He laughed heartily throwing his head back against the seat rest.

The last time Zack flew me to Casper, I was in handcuffs and got a very personal tour through the wrong side of the adult detention center. Not an experience I want to repeat.

Zack throttled up the engine and we took off. This time I could enjoy the view out the windows. I don't know how high we got, but it was enough that I had a wonderful view of the wilderness that surrounded the lodge. Zack took a different route this time, going the long way around the lake, before landing in the open backyard of Greg's and my newly finished home.

I invited Zack to tour the house with us, but he declined saying something about having to check a tip about illegal trapping near the edge of the park. The engine spun up and he was off again.

Walking around the side of the cabin, I paused to take in the view. It was breathtaking, the lake, the mountains, the fresh, clean air. And the lack of people. There were probably less than a hundred people in the tens of thousands of acres that surrounded the lake. Letting my mental screens thin, I closed my eyes and opened up completely.

The feelings flowing through me were unbelievable. I wasn't standing by and observing nature, I was part of it, surrounded by it. I felt the squirrels running up the trunks of trees, the startle of a rabbit as it bolted from its hiding place, and the squeak of its life being extinguished.

Another presence caught my attention, one with a familiar feel. I turned my attention towards it then realized who it was and pulled away.

Later, Katie...later, I told myself, as I pulled back into myself. There would be time to run through the woods and meet the neighbors later.

I continued my walk around the house, still amazed at the size of it from the outside. Greg was standing with a tall human on the front porch. The older man was dressed in everyday western work wear. A brown Stetson rested on his head with a black raven feather sticking out of the beaded hat band. Mr. Raven had been out a few times previously, usually when some big milestone in the construction plan was hit, or a major inspection had to be accomplished. He was our local contact with the Shipman Agency.

“Nice to see you again,” I said stepping up to the porch.

Mr. Raven took his hat off with one hand and held it against his chest. The man was typical of the men born and raised in the area and the rural west in general, hardworking, and with old school chivalrous manners. He accepted me and Greg, as we were, without hesitation or exception.

“Nice to see you too, Mrs. Trantor,” he replied.

I started to correct him, then stopped. It will still strange to hear people address me by my married name. Married. Me. Oy Vey!

“I’m here to do a final walk-through inspection,” Raven said.

Raven stopped to remove his boots and left them in the bathroom just inside the front door. Together we walked into the main living room, past the large stone fireplace. The room was open to the second story roof and large skylights let in lots of natural daylight.

The whole house was beautiful. The logs were western red cedar, giving the whole place a warm, rich glow. The ceramic tile flooring was rough textured. The original plans had called for a smooth finish. When I pointed this out to the builder, he was more than happy to change the material.

“You already know about the electrical system.” Raven commented as we passed through the large living room.

“I talked to the contractors as they were putting it in,” Greg said. At my look, he continued, “What? I was curious about the geothermal setup. Besides, they needed someone to haul the trailer after their ATV was wrecked.”

“It’s tapping the Yellowstone Caldera as the heat source, so you won’t have to worry about running out of fuel.” Raven continued. “The power should be as regular as Old Faithful.”

“The kitchen is fabulous,” I said, taking in its size and the commercial grade appliances that had been installed.

“It won’t always be you two by yourselves out here. The agency expects that you’ll be receptive to hosting company guests with little or no warning.”

“Don’t have a choice do we?” Greg asked.

“You always have a choice,” Raven replied. “It’s more can you live with the consequences of your choice that should guide your actions.”

“The stove and ovens are gas fired, the refrigerator is dual powered, gas or electric and the deep freezer is electric. The house is heated via a radiant floor system whose boiler is in the basement. The boiler is also dual fuel and supplies hot water to all the fixtures. A recirculation pump makes sure that you’re not waiting five minutes for hot water to make it to the upstairs showers. Three one thousand gallon fuel tanks are buried in the backyard and the valve controls are in the basement. There should be enough fuel to easily last you through the winter with a decent reserve. Once the snows set in, you’d be hard pressed to get a fueling truck up here until after the spring thaw.”

We continued our walk through the house both upstairs and down, making sure all the lights worked, doors closed and latched, everything you’d do on a final inspection of a house being purchased. The cellar had just as big a footprint as the rest of the house. Utilitarian shelving units were pushed up against several of the walls with large quantity of long term storage food in canisters and other containers stacked on the shelves.

The whole place was divine, something that you would drool over in an architectural magazine, but never dared dream of living in.

“That’s the grand tour,” Raven said stopping in front of a door. He held his wrist to a blank wall plate and the door slid open. Inside the lights came on as well as a bank of monitors that showed various views of the surrounding grounds. Two large monitors in the center remained dark. “This, is the business office.” The man turned and looked at me, hand propped on a chair that looked like it had been designed for some futuristic dental office. “This will be where you spend most of your mission hours. The chair has controls for all the monitors, and microphones for both local voice recordings and communications with home base.”

“This is also the safe room.” He smacked a large red button next to the door and a metal clad pocket door slammed closed. “The outside key pad is now deactivated,” Raven explained. One of the large center monitors came to life.

“This is Mabel six one four, what is your emergency?” The woman’s voice coming through a set of hidden speakers was very professional, and very familiar.

“Hi Mabel. Communications check. We’re doing a walkthrough of a new facility,” the man replied.

Raven motioned me over and I stepped into range of the video camera.

“Tabby!” I exclaimed when I saw the woman’s face.

The expression of pleasantly shocked surprise on her feline face couldn’t have been more complete.

“You know her?” Greg asked coming to stand behind me.

*Do they know?* I asked, reaching out to the woman mentally. It was easy enough to find her since I had her image to focus on.

The slight nod of her head on screen was her answer.

“Tabby was with me in the camp. The staff all thought I was a terrible discipline problem. Tabby had me beat paws down,” I said putting a hand up to the monitor. A sad look came over the woman’s face. She was another MORFS survivor who’d gotten on the wrong side of someone and had not taken well to the years of confinement.

“How the little girl...Abby?” Tabby asked.

“Anna. She’s fine, with her father on Tenkei.”

The woman smiled. “That’s good, real good.”

There was a buzz in the background and our feed was cut off.

“Mabel’s an operator in our communications and monitoring center. They will be your primary link if an alarmed is raised here.”

“If her name’s Tabby, why do you keep calling her Mabel?” Greg asked.

“We call all the op center comm techs Mabel when they’re on duty, a call sign of sorts.” Raven chuckled. “The name came from an old comedy skit about a telephone operator.”

“Do I get a call sign?” I asked.

Raven nodded.

“Overwatch. The big heads expect to use you for deep penetration and extraction teams, missions where radio communications can be intercepted, but you can get tagged for any type of assignment.”

Raven turned to a large wood cabinet nestled into a corner opposite the desk.

“And then there’s this. We hope that you will never need any of the contents, but all of our outposts are designed with self-defense in mind.” The small man wiped his wrist across what



looked like a blank cover for a wall switch below an alphanumeric keypad. There were several audible clacks and the man opened the double doors to a large gun safe.

“Whoa,” Greg muttered.

I growled as I took in the contents.

“You don’t like guns?” the man asked as he removed one of the rifles. He gave it a quick inspection before setting it back in the door rack.

“Bad memories,” I replied, trying to control the emotions that the stink of gun oil stirred up. The last time I was this close to this many rifles was the day I was marched off to an internment camp and the rifles were pointed at my head.

“Ten Mark Seven flechette rifles,” Raven pointed out each piece of equipment in turn, “four preloaded magazines for each weapon and three cases of spare ammunition. Ten semi-auto pistols, 13 millimeter caliber with the same complement of ready access magazines and cases of boxed ammunition. Grenades, fragmentation, flash bangs, sting ball, smoke and tear gas canisters. Very simple to operate, pull the pin and toss. Each has a six second fuse.”

“That’s a lot of hardware,” Greg commented.

“This is an agency safe house. We don’t expect it to happen often but you should be prepared to accept agency guests with little or no warning. Most will be very benign, while others will have others actively pursuing them. You also may be called upon to house agency personnel in transit. Hence the quantities of medical supplies, cots and other items down in the basement.”

“The code for getting into the safe is 2525,” he demonstrated the keypad. “You should change it. Anyone that visits and needs unescorted access can use the ident chip embedded in their arm. The hostage code is four nines, punch that into any keypad in the house and you raise a silent alarm. The on duty Mabel can listen to any room in the house to gather intelligence for the inbound rescue group.”

The man reached into the safe and pulled out a thick plain brown envelope.

“Running money,” he said shaking out three thick bundles of cash and two gold colored cards. “No, that does not mean ‘running to the store’ money.” He laughed as my ears drooped. “My daughter thinks an emergency is not having the right dress for a dorm party and uses daddy’s bank card for all sorts of things. Ostensibly this is for you to use should you have to bug out and there’s no time to arrange a pickup. If you have a legitimate, short fuse requirement, then use what you need and let the office know as soon as you can.”

“You’ll have a few days to settle in before the agency puts you on the clock. I’ll send a text to your eCom with the heads up and you can get the details via the office computer.”

All of us walked back out to the front porch. Raven handed me the keys then walked down the stairs and off to his waiting SUV.

The next few days were busy for us. Mercury, a portal jumper I knew from when I'd been here for summer camp in high school, was able to get Greg and I to a local car dealer he trusted.

We walked the lot and after picking out something that would meet our needs, Greg started the age old ritual of haggling with the salesman. It wasn't hard to see the fun my husband was having forcing the salesman to back down on the asking price. Both of them knew it was a game, each man challenging the other. Greg started to walk out twice when the salesman wouldn't budge on a point.

The third time Greg stood up, the salesman stood as well. Both had hit the spot where they weren't going to give another inch on the price. Greg smiled and put out his hand.

“Deal.”

“If you'll step this way to the financing office, we can get the loan paperwork started,” the salesman said.

“No need. We'll pay cash,” I told him, holding up a bank bag.

The salesman's plastic smile melted. A man at another desk started laughing and slamming his hand on the desktop.

“Damned if that wasn't the best entertainment I've seen in quite a while,” he said as he maneuvered from behind the desks. “Toby James, I'm the sales manager here,” he put his hand out to shake Greg's. The younger salesman started to get up. Toby waved him off. “Don't worry Angus, I'll take it from here. Next time, don't give away price hoping to make it up on financing. You never know if a customer is going to use ours or bring their own. Get Jimmy to run the paperwork for a cash sale and bring it to my desk.”

We were off the lot an hour later with a new all-wheel drive, commercial grade pickup truck with a four door cab and a two and a half ton cargo capacity.

“Where in the world did you learn to haggle like that?” I asked as we pulled into a fuel station to fill the nearly empty twin diesel tanks.

“The warehouse,” Greg replied as he pumped the diesel fuel. “Some independent truckers have to buy the loads they haul from shippers. Since they own the cargo, they can sell it for whatever they can get for it. Mr. Kauffman would haggle with the driver right there in the breakout area. It was fun watching him take on some of the more obstinate drivers.”

We made the rounds of the stores to get the things we would need immediately. When we got home and put everything away, we were both wrung out and spent the last few moments of daylight watching the sun set behind the mountains. I sat between Greg's legs, leaned back against his strong chest, with his arms around me and felt...content?

Is that what this strange feeling was?

The last time I sat with Greg like this seemed a lifetime ago, a damp dreary day, fighting demons from my past. I'd wondered then if I would ever feel safe again. This moment was as close as I'd come to feeling safe in a very, very long time.

## Chapter Ten

Summer blended into the short fall season. Weeks later, the first dustings of snow were visible along the ridges of the mountains. Between the Agency and the Forest Service, I was kept busy. The Agency jobs were quick. In and out protection runs that worked because of the extensive prep work before and intelligence the team leaders had during the operation.

The Forest Service cover job was fast becoming the more favored of the two. I was with Zack, doing the things that Rangers do. Whether it was spot checking wilderness hikers and campers to ensure they were okay, or performing urgent repairs on trail shelters, I enjoyed being outside.

Greg kept himself busy going to town for things a new house would need, and the perpetual list of heavy chores around the house. Trees that had been cut when the house was built had been pushed into a pile. I watched one morning as he grabbed the trunk end and dragged the whole thing down off the pile. Using an old-school double bladed axe, he denuded the trunk of branches for a brush pile he was building away from the house.

Less than an hour later, the remains of the tree were in neat three foot sections and Greg was grabbing another tree. This time I helped clear away the branches as Greg lopped them away and stood back as he went to work on the trunk.

There was a guilty pleasure in watching my heavily muscled husband swinging an axe in nothing but shorts. My imagination ran off on its own, replacing the thunk of the axe hitting wood with the slap of skin on skin. I shivered with the naughtiness of that image.

“Enjoying the view?”

Greg’s voice shattered the daydream, but not the feelings it had engendered.

“Yes,” I said, moving to stand in front of him. “You have no idea—

“Yeah, I do,” Greg interrupted, and he closed the distance so we were touching. “I know exactly what you want.”

He kissed me, hard. One hand wrapped around me, cupped my bottom and pulled me into him. There was no doubt about what he wanted. His free hand mauled my breasts. I never felt us hit the ground, or remember being flipped to my hands and knees. I do remember though the delicious feel of my alpha’s body covering mine and moving my tail to the side as he mounted me.

When the world came back into focus I was laying on my side, panting. Greg was braced on his arms over me, huffing and blowing like he’d just run the track at Churchill Downs. I tried to pull his head down to face me, but his attention was locked on something behind me. Straining

my neck, I looked in the same direction and caught sight of four wolves no more than fifty feet away. All of them were pacing, and I got the impression that they were rather agitated.

I nudged Greg silently and he let me up.

\*Get to the house\* I 'pathed to my husband. \*Walk backwards, keep eye contact. Don't turn around and don't run.\*

"What do they want?" Greg asked as he stood next me. The man was being stubbornly noble and wasn't going to let 'his' woman face this danger alone.

"Me," I said.

"You?" Greg lowered his head to sniff between us. "You're in heat."

"Tis the season," I quipped.

"Not going to happen, Katie," he said, stepping in front of me, facing the several male teens bouncing excitedly near the edge of the back clearing.

"Greg Trantor get that silly thought out of your head right now," I elbowed him in the ribs. "I am not going anywhere with anyone other than you."

He said nothing, but I could feel his rational mind slipping away. Equine instinct was taking over, the animal pushing out the man.

I had to stretch to get a handful of ear to twitch it. The sudden pain drove the 'noble' thoughts out of his head. I walked him around to the front and inside.

"Greg, you don't have to worry that I'm going to run off back to the Pack," I held my wrist with the metal bracelet. "See, married, to you." He nodded and pulled me into a hug.

Whatever Greg was going to say next was interrupted by a shrill tone from the office, signaling an incoming call. I ran to tap the 'accept' button. Tabby's face came on the screen.

"Overwatch, this Mabel six-one-four."

"This is Overwatch, go ahead."

"Hi Katie, sorry for the short fuse. Expect a hot arrival within the hour, with principle and family. Expected stay is unknown right now."

"Acknowledged, six-four-one. We'll be ready for them." I caught a look in the woman's eye. "You okay Tabby?"

“Ronnie bailed,” the professional façade on the woman collapsed like a brick wall during an earthquake. “Said I should be over what happened in the camps.”

“What happened?”

“He...he wanted me to wear a...,” she stopped talking. I reached out to the woman, connecting. I could see what happened from her point of view as it replayed in her head. The scene ended with them screaming at each other and her boyfriend slamming out the front door.

“You’re not far from me. I know some guys who’d love to get some stalking practice with a live target,” I commented out loud. “They could be up there in a couple of days, to teach him a lesson.”

“Katie!” A shocked look instantly replaced the near tears. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would, Tab, and wouldn’t think twice about it,” I replied. “After what we went through in the camp, he doesn’t have the right to be pissed because you won’t wear a collar, even a play one.”

“How do you deal with it?” Tabby asked getting some of her upset under control.

“One day at a time, Tabby-cat, and lots of help from someone who loves me, no matter what.”

Tabby signed off to take another call.

Greg and I got busy, putting together the large commercial coffee brewer and doing the other necessary things to get ready for the arrival of an Agency team.

Greg and I were outside when the team arrived. The distortion formed in a large open area near a short marker that indicated the cutoff to one of our three, deep water wells. That it was in the shape of a gold star, the standard indicator for a teleporter’s landing zone, was simply a coincidence. The distortion grew to about eight feet across, the center cleared and we felt a strong blast of hot, humid air. Whoever was arriving was going to be shocked by the temperature difference.

A four man team was the first out of the portal. They quickly took up defensive positions while the principles came through followed by a six person team. The second team hurried the family into the house, followed by the original group.

Mercury fell through the collapsing portal, landing on his side in the dirt. I helped him into the house and parked him in a chair next to the fireplace.

“He can’t stay here,” one of the security team barked.

“I’m not going anywhere for a while,” Mercury replied wearily. “Not under my own power anyway.”

I hurried to get Mercury a couple of protein bars and an energy drink. Being a portal jumper was one of the most energy draining abilities someone could get, right up there with high end TK’s and bio-elementals. With him set for the moment I counted noses.

“Coffee’s in the kitchen, and there’s a tray of sandwiches in the fridge. Help yourselves.”

The family had been herded into the dining room which was in the back of the house. There were four of them, mom, dad and two kids, a boy and a girl. The girl the older of the two. When I got to the door, dad was in the back of the room fiddling with his e-com and the mom looked at me, suspicion in her eyes.

“That won’t work out here,” I commented at the husband.

“Why not. The da— the thing is supposed to work anywhere on the planet,” he gripped, his attention flicking momentarily to his wife and children.

“Coded jammer. E-coms within a two mile radius of the house are blanked unless they are coded into the system that controls the jammers,” I reply turning my attention to the children who were huddled against their mom. Both were dressed in lightweight swimsuits, like they had been evacuated directly from a water park. Mom wasn’t much better off, a light sundress that would be great for a tropical getaway, but not for the forty degree weather we were having.

“Let me get you some blankets,” I said then hurried to the living room and pulled the throw off the sofa. When I got back I offered the wrap to the mother. It was big enough to engulf her and both kids. “That should help until we can get you some warmer things.”

Greg came in right behind me with mugs of hot chocolate for the kids and two big mugs of coffee for the adults.

“Thank you,” the children said together as they each took a mug and sipped the contents.

I walked back to the front room where the person in charge was handing out assignments.

“One four man team in the rear. Two covering the front,” the leader said.

“There are wolves in the area,” I told the team leader.

“Wolves don’t scare me any,” someone on the far side of the room spoke up.

“You’re sure of that?” I asked. “The wolves that roam this area are not your normal *Canis lupus*, they’re Dire wolves.” I looked around the room, and only one team member recognized the name. “Think of a creature larger than your average timber wolf, intelligent, reasoning, all

claws, muscles and teeth, and a hair trigger. The smallest adult female can take on an elk, and win.”

“If they threaten my men—” Alice, the team leader, started.

“If your team feels threatened,” I cut her off, “by not yet year old puppies and just over year old teens, then they’re cowards,” I growled. “I doubt you want to deal with the fallout from the adults if your team does something rash. You think a momma bear is fierce in protecting her cubs, a pissed off Dire wolf female makes an angry bear look like a pussycat. Think of what six of them would do to you. They’d shred you and leave your ghost standing there asking ‘what the hell just happened?’”

“Why six?” the man standing by the door asked.

“That’s how many females are in the local pack. Two adult males, six adult females, five juveniles and two litters of puppies.”

“The older pups will be curious. Don’t be surprised if they come close enough to catch your scent. The teens may charge and brush against your legs as they go past. It’s not an attack, it’s their version of counting coup.” There were looks of ‘hun?’ from the group. “It’s a test of their courage.”

Alice got her teams set while Greg and I got a hot meal started.

My heat had nowhere been satisfied by our horizontal pas de deux in the back yard. My husband’s nearness, musky scent and his brushing against my bottom as he moved about the kitchen kept me in a state of frustrated arousal. If it had been just us in the house, Greg would be taking care of it right there in the kitchen. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d braced against a kitchen counter while he had his wicked way.

But there was a house full of adults and two small children, none of whom needed to see that type of dog and pony show.

The team had extracted early due to the deteriorating situation on their end. The early retrieval had mucked up the timetable due to a hard constraint for the next step in the family’s return to the office for debriefing. The necessary resource wouldn’t be available for a while. No one would be going anywhere for at least 24 hours.

It took some creative thinking to get everyone settled for the night. The recovery team spent the night spread out through the living and dining rooms on cots. Alice had pulled the guards back into the house and the team relied on the security sensors around the house to keep watch overnight.

The children had been taken care of as well. Surprisingly we were able to find clothing in the storage bins in the basement for the principle and her children. They weren’t the most up to date fashions, but they fit and were warm.



A shower didn't help my increasing horniness. It made it worse. Greg pushed in behind me as I was getting wet. It didn't take being a telepath to know he wanted more than sudsy play. I faced the shower controls and tried to keep my mind on getting clean. Greg had other ideas. He spun me around, pushed me into the corner and lifted me off the floor.

My legs went around his waist and his cock rubbed against all the swollen, sensitive places below my waist. I growled with need. His antics in the kitchen earlier had fanned embers into a small fire that had grown through the day to a raging need. There were children in the house. They did not need to hear us going at each other like animals.

Reaching back, I slapped the controls to turn off the shower.

*Outside, now* I pathed, not trusting my voice.

The Goddess was with us as we made our way down to the basement, still dripping wet through the heavy door and out into the night. This time I wasn't stalking Greg, he was chasing me. A half mile up the rounded shoreline, was a small clearing kayakers used from time to time. The foliage had been carved out by the human activity and the surrounding scrub kept activities private from everyone other than people paddling on the lake.

Greg pushed me from behind and I landed face down on the ground. He picked me up, flipped me over and pinned me to the ground. His eyes reminded me of our time in the Petting Zoo. So much the better. I parted my legs, slid them around his waist. His hand mauled my breasts, his heated breath in my face, his cock, heavy, fully engorged, pressed between my thighs.

He was just as worked up by the day of teasing as I was. This was going to be heaven.

Greg lowered his head and captured a nipple between his lips. The tingles of pleasure only fanned my own need. He changed to the other and continued with his torture. My frustration grew to the point of my wanting to push him off and satisfy my need on top of him.

He suddenly lunged forward and buried himself deep inside. I gasped and tightened my legs around him. He had me, I had him and I wasn't going to let him go until we were both done, a long time from now.

Coherent thought stopped. Feral need took over, the need to be bred, to answer Nature's most basic, most primitive need. Greg did that, his body over me, thrusting in me, the sound of his breath in my ears, the sensations of his cock buried between my legs.

Part of me reveled in the feel of him on top of me, the physical closeness. Another part danced with joy as my alpha claimed me, marked me, proving to the world in a more indelible way than the band of metal around my wrist that I was his, and that he was *mine!*

My mate, my husband, my alpha fucked me like a steam engine. His muscular body not tiring, the fire in his eyes as high and as hot as ever. I arched my back and howled as he pushed

me over the cliff into an orgasm. He wouldn't stop, driving me to higher and higher levels, with a second and third howling cum. I was close to my fourth when I felt his tempo quicken, his body tighten and his cock swell even more in my pussy. He lifted his head and bugled his finish as his fire shot into me.

When his body loosened from the rigor of his finish, he rolled to his side, then his back, carrying me with him. I draped over Greg, my head under his chin. His scent filled my nose and it was comforting.

*Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine!* My wolf bitch was happy, ecstatic even. The last thing I felt as sleep descended was Greg's arms around me and hearing a rumbling "I love you".

I woke as the sky became brighter behind the mountain ridge to the east. Greg was still underneath me, and asleep. My heat was in full bloom and telling me my last attempt at baby making was too long ago.

Greg was still asleep, but I knew that didn't matter. There were ways of getting his important parts interested.

I teased his cock from his sheath as my body made itself ready to ride 'em cowgirl. Raising up, I lined Greg up and sank down, shivering as he filled me. All you school bitches he turned down, eat your hearts out, he's *MINE!* I started slowly, but quickly picked up the pace, closing my eyes and focusing entirely on my rutting.

Greg moved and bucked under me, but I held on, I wasn't going to get thrown off since I was so close to peaking.

He rolled again and I slammed face first into the ground. Not hard enough to do damage, but enough to slow the climb to my orgasm.

A large hand between my shoulder blades held me down while an arm slid around my waist and lifted me to all fours. He lunged forward and I was impaled, fully. My shocked yell dragged on as Greg withdrew slightly and slammed home again, and again, fucking me like a horse would take a mare. Like before, I had no say, I was trapped between his arms and powerful legs. He did with me what he willed, and at the moment it was what my wolf wanted, and all of it intensely pleasurable.

I yipped and howled through two mind numbing orgasms, then collapsed to the ground. Greg continued to pound away at me. He bugled and I felt his seed pulse up his cock and empty into me. He fell to his elbows and knees, which kept most of his weight off my back, but kept me pinned. Not that I actually wanted him off me.

By the time we recovered enough to actually move, the sun was full up and we were casing long morning shadows. Greg was the first to move. I heard his wading into the lake water and the splashing. I rolled over and sat up.

The shiver that ran through me was unexpected, but not unfamiliar. It was the same one that had ran through me the first time I'd really looked at Greg back in high school. How had I landed such a hunk?

Greg waded back ashore and helped me to my feet. I leaned into his hard chest for a moment. He surprised me no end by bending down, picking me up and tossing me up to his shoulder like a sack of dog food.

I protested his brutish tactics, pounding on his back, kicking my legs. My laughter, however, belied my faux anger at him. I was set back on my feet where we had dropped our clothes the night before.

Getting back into the house without anyone spotting us was a bit trickier than us getting out. Team members were posted near the shed we had to walk past to get to the basement entrance. The grins and knowing looks said they knew what we'd been up to. Just as we entered the kitchen through the basement stairway door, the little girl came bursting in.

“Mommy! Mommy! Did you hear the wolf howling this morning?”

“I sure did sweetie,” the woman said picking the child up and setting her on her lap.

“Sounded like someone was getting lucky,” the husband said under his breath, standing at the coffee urn.

Not long after we came down from a quick clean up and change of clothes, we got the call that the team and principles would be departing. Just before lunch, a teleporter arrived, talked with the team lead and everyone departed for their next destination.

The next two weeks were relatively normal. I worked with Ranger Zack as liaison between the Forest Service and the local dire wolf pack. A trio of criminals had managed to escape the Supermax prison in Colorado and were reported to have made their way six hundred miles northwest to the wilderness area beyond Bear Lake.

Zack picked me up in the large clearing behind the house. Greg was splitting and stacking lengths of wood for the fireplace. I would have much rather been spending the day at home, with him, rather than chasing criminals through the woods.

We lifted straight up and I made a grab for an air sick bag.

“You okay?” the Ranger asked as he eased back on the climb.

I nodded, folding the unneeded bag, keeping it handy, just in case.

“I’ll be fine,” I told him, wondering for the nth time what was wrong. I was never sick.

I watched out the window. The snow on the not so far away mountains was creeping further down the sides. Already the temperatures were dipping into the chilly range overnight. It wouldn’t be long before we’d be up to our eyebrows in snow. Up to my eyebrows when running around on all fours anyway.

Flashes of my life then zipped through my inner eye, pouncing through drifts playing chase, running down game with the pack, laying curled up nose on tail in a snug den with the rest of the pack in a large fur pile. Pup suckling then falling asleep against me. Wonderful memories, but I had a new life now, away from the pack and the hardships of living in the woods. Greg was my pack now.

Zack landed at the edge of the packs claimed territory just long enough for me to jump out and strip down. I tossed my top and shorts through the window and waived as he spun the engines up to lift off again. I let my instincts pick my direction and set off on all fours. Less than ten minutes later, I picked up an escort. Whoever it was remained hidden, but that didn’t stop the noise of their passing through the brush. I didn’t ping their mind. That was something I’d promised I wouldn’t do when the pack found out I could touch their minds. With the passing of another mile, I got a second escort, and ten minutes later, three large males blocked my path. Two were new, the third I knew, very well.

“Pup?” I asked focusing my attention on the very large male in the middle.

*I am Shadow Runner.* The large male stepped forward, and raised his snout, to catch my scent from the breeze that was coming from my back. His mental voice was deep, resonant. Oh, he was going to be a handful when he was full grown in another year.

He loped towards me, stopping a foot away. I looked him in the eyes, he didn’t look away, neither did I.

“You have grown much since I saw you last, Shadow Runner. I am here to talk to Adam.”

*His spirit is no longer in his body. I am pack leader now.*

That news surprised me. I knew how broken the military had left Adam and why he’d secluded himself so far away of others. Adam was at peace now, his death allowing others to live, as he wanted.

“I know you will make a good pack leader, Shadow Runner.”

*Thank you...Mother.* The wolf stretched out his head and nosed my face, licking my chin and cheek the way he’d done years before when he was a puppy and I lived as a gamma bitch in the pack. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face into his thick fur. He was my son, no matter what the alpha bitch believed. I carried him, I gave birth to him and it was my breasts that nourished him. I was the first person he saw when his eyes opened.

By now others of the pack had gathered closer, but keeping a respectful distance. There were a few I recognized, including Wind Glider, the pack's Alpha Bitch.

"We need your help," I said, and told him of the escaped prisoners.

*Why should we help humans?* a gray male with brown pattern markings asked.

"Why would you not help us find lost humans? The pack has helped in the past. These men are dangerous and need to be found and captured."

*How are they dangerous?*

"They broke the laws of men. They killed many people before they were caught and put into jail. They broke out of jail killing others and traveled here."

There were mental murmurings between the wolves. I wasn't sure if they would help or not. Adam wasn't averse to helping Zack, or me, when we asked for help. But Zack knew Adam from before MORFS changed him, and I had been one of the pack. But neither applied to Shadow Runner. He may have been of my flesh, but he had been raised by the alpha bitch and the other pack members. I wasn't sure of my standing with them at the moment.

"Shadow Runner, if the pack will not help, then more humans will come to find the criminals. They will search everywhere, leaving their spore, their scent markings. In their drive to find the criminals, the herds will be scattered, the pack and your pups will go hungry. The winter will be long and cold."

There was silence for at least a minute before Shadow Runner spoke.

*The pack will help.*

The pack's scouts were sent out with instructions to check the wilderness area where a trio of humans could hold up. I made my way back to the clearing where Zack had dropped me off. We made a short hop and set down in a clearing next to the Ranger's base camp. I put on my shorts and carried my top in my hand.

"The Bear Lake pack will help with the search," I told the coordinator. She nodded to her assistant who added the Pack to the list of search assets on a large whiteboard.

Rangers left in pairs and groups on horseback to check summer cabins and trail shelters partnered with local law enforcement and National Guard personnel as backup. By mid-day, more elements from the local Guard armory had arrived to set up a full field headquarters and kitchen. Looked like they were planning on staying a while.

I longed to go out, run with the pack scouts, hunting down the escapees, but my job was to be the go between for humans and wolves. I spent time with the search coordinator, keeping up with the progress of the search teams, both human and Pack.

The nausea that had dogged me the last week came back with a vengeance. Every time someone walked past with something other than a sandwich, my stomach flopped. As the day darkened into twilight I made my way to opposite end of the camp and stared at the woods. Lights bobbing in the distance signaled the return of the horse teams. Several of the riders made wide turns keeping me downwind. Another approached the camp, loping at a good pace.

I didn't have to use my powers to know who was coming towards the camp.

*Greg, find a bucket and bring some clean water* I 'pathed to him.

He arrived just as Wind Glider slowed to a walk and approached warily.

"Wind Glider, you are welcomed to my camp," I spoke openly and held out my hand to the alpha bitch. Wind Glider stopped and sniffed my hand. She shocked me when she lowered her shoulder then rolled on to her back in submission. I rubbed her belly and growled back at her. She jumped to all fours and crashed into me, knocking me to the grass. We rolled and tumbled a bit, playing as one time pack mates, and Wind Glider trying to exert dominance over me.

When I was living with the pack, Wind Glider was the top female, the alpha bitch, as she was Adam's chosen mate. The other females kowtowed to her. Our ranking was in order of who took the longest to fully submit. Between the rest of us, the pecking order was fluid and always changing.

Greg was understandably nervous, as Wind Glider and I play fought. To his credit, he resisted his instinct to bolt. That would have led to a chase and someone possibly getting hurt rather badly.

Wind Glider stopped the play suddenly, walked up to me and put her nose on my belly, she backed away slowly then put her head between her forepaws.

*I will be your Guardian.* Wind Glider's voice in my head left no doubt about what she said.

"Greg! I'm pregnant!"

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