

Chapter One

Pain. Heat. Burning.

She squirmed, trying to escape the agony. Her head was a fuzzy cloud of fog. *Where was she? What had happened?*

Who was she?

A shot of panic cut through the pain. She couldn't remember her name. She thrashed on the bed. She hated not knowing.

“Shh. Easy.”

It was a voice she didn't recognize. Female, soothing.

But it didn't soothe her.

The agony ripped through her like claws raking her insides. She thrashed again.

“Help her,” a deep voice growled.

That voice. She turned her head, seeking the source, but she couldn't see anything.

Everything was just a blur of shadows.

She'd heard that growly voice, filled with power, before.

It should scare her, but instead, her pulse raced. She *needed* to hear that voice.

Flames erupted inside her, like her body was trying to turn itself inside out. An anguished cry ripped from her.

“I've given her as much medication as I can, sire. Her transformation is too different. It's gone on too long.”

A fierce, masculine growl.

She sobbed through the pain. She just wanted it to end.

Big hands touched her. Heat poured off them.

“Easy, Poppy. You aren’t alone.”

Poppy. That seemed right. Yes. Her name was Poppy.

His voice was so low and growly. She turned toward the sound of it. A rough hand cupped her face, stroked.

“Hurts,” she pushed out.

The fingers paused. “I know, but you’re strong. You can make it.”

But it hurt so much.

“Her pain levels are through the ceiling,” the female voice said. “I don’t know how she’s even semiconscious.”

“Help her, Cassanra,” the voice said.

Poppy shifted her hand. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to feel linked to something and not so alone in the midst of all the pain.

“I’ve given her some aster,” the woman said.

The sounds faded. *No.* But the pain didn’t dull.

“I... Don’t leave me.” She didn’t want to be alone in the dark.

“I’m right here,” he said.

She held onto those words like a lifeline, as the pain-edged darkness swallowed her.

She had no idea how much time passed. When she stirred next, everything had that hushed feel of night. No sound, just a low flickering light.

He’d left her. Her chest clenched.

Then she heard slow, even breathing, and she knew it was him.

Poppy shoved against the sheet, and dragged in a breath. A harsh sound escaped her.

“Hey.” That deep rumble.

She finally managed to open eyelids that felt as though they were made of concrete. Her chest was tight, her belly on fire; it felt like poison was burning in her blood.

Her vision was still blurry, but in the low light, she could make out the rugged planes of his face.

A shot of primal fear ran through her. Some deep knowledge in her brain knew he wouldn't hurt her, but that he was a man who was capable of it. He was a man who vibrated with danger and coiled power.

A man who'd killed.

Something pulled her to him. She was adrift, and he was solid.

She reached out and cupped his stubbled jaw. It was strong, stubborn. Even though he wasn't old, his hair was a unique silver-gray color and long. He had it tied back, but there were a few tiny braids at his temples that made her think of Vikings. His blue eyes were a pure, jewel-blue, but when her fingers made contact with his skin, gold rolled over them.

She sucked in a breath. Some deep urge told her to look away, to drop her gaze. His eyes held pure, raw strength. Thankfully, the urge passed.

“Poppy,” he said.

“That's my name?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I...can't remember. Everything hurts.”

“We're taking care of you.”

She stroked his cheeks—the dips and bold lines of them. She couldn't remember much, but she knew she wasn't normally this bold with men. From memory, men mostly annoyed her.

“So strong,” she whispered.

She saw confidence and authority stamped on that masculine face. A man who'd rule with pure strength.

But there were lines around his mouth. She stroked them and wondered what worries had put them there.

His heavy brows drew together. He stared at her face like she was some mystery he couldn't solve.

She stroked across the dark stubble, then touched his lips. He sucked in a breath and Poppy felt something unfurl inside.

But then, in a sudden rush, red-hot pain speared through her.

She arched her back, and her hand dropped.

"Poppy!"

"It *hurts*." She cried out, her body shuddering.

She felt like she was being torn apart.

"Cassanra," her man bellowed. "Get in here. Now!"

Poppy's vision blurred again. The man gripped her hand and she held on to it like an anchor. She couldn't see anymore.

"Hold on, Poppy," he urged.

"I..." It took too much strength to talk. She bit her lip and tasted blood. "Why?"

"Because I said so. You won't die."

She heard running footsteps, curses.

"Step back, sire. Let us tend her."

The fingers tightened on Poppy's.

"No," he growled.

Hands touched Poppy and she felt a warmth on her chest. For a second, the pain intensified, and she screamed.

“I think her transformation is in the final stages,” the woman said.

“By the wolves, stop her pain.”

“I’ve given her everything I can.”

Poppy sobbed. She wouldn’t live through this. She couldn’t.

Strong arms closed around her.

“Hold on.” Hot breath on her ear. It was an order. “You can get through this.”

“I don’t want to,” she whispered.

“Fight. I’m not letting you go.”

Who was this fierce man who fought for her?

No one ever had before. Poppy had always fought her own battles, forged her own path.

But now she was so tired, and she hurt so much.

“*Poppy.*”

That deep rumble moved through her.

She heard a dual thump-thump under her ear, and realized that he was holding her against his broad chest. His heartbeat was different, but strong and unyielding.

“Hold on,” he said.

“Don’t go.” Her words were a whisper.

“I won’t. I promise.”

The burning, clawing pain hit again, and then she felt and saw nothing at all.

“Brodin.”

Emperor Brodin Damar Sarkany opened his eyes. It took him only a second to get his bearings. He was in the infirmary—he recognized the scents of herbs and poultices, and the candles that the healers liked to burn. He’d woken up here numerous times after he’d been injured in a fight or on a hunt.

He was resting in a large armchair, with a small, sleeping woman in his arms.

Poppy Ellison was wrapped in a light blanket, her blonde hair resting against his chest.

She was still unconscious, and far too still.

But he'd take it, over the screaming and thrashing in pain.

He shifted and felt some muscles had gone to sleep. He stretched his legs out to get some feeling back into them.

He shifted Poppy's weight. She barely weighed a thing. She was tiny. He was a big man, and most Damari—male and female—were tall and built strong.

Poppy Ellison of Earth was small and fine. Over the last week, she had been suffering through the Damari transformation, and it had taken its toll. She'd lost some weight, despite the healers feeding her intravenously.

Brodin looked up at his second in command. "Annora."

His First Claw stood nearby, her brow creased. She was tall, lean, with long, black hair—which she usually wore braided, or in a sleek ponytail, like today.

Her steady, near-black eyes assessed him. She never pulled her thoughts, or strikes in training or battle.

"You've been in here for two days." Annora shot an unreadable look at Poppy. "You don't even know this woman, and we have a warlord sent by your father skulking around, abducting our people."

Brodin bit back a snarl, his grip on Poppy tightening. He knew very well the danger they faced. He'd set up extra patrols around the city and the safe zone in the forest. He met Annora's dark gaze. She held it for a second before looking at the floor.

"I promised Rhain and his soon-to-be queen that I would take care of this woman."

A few weeks ago, Mallory West and Dr. Poppy Ellison had tested some experimental space travel technology. Their test had gone wrong. The women's ship had been flung

through a wormhole, and into the Sarkany system. They'd crash landed on his brother Rhain's planet, Zhalto.

Rhain had rescued the feisty and dangerous Mal, and fallen in love with her in the process. Despite the circumstances, Brodin felt a spurt of amusement.

Unfortunately, Poppy had ended up in the not-so-tender hands of the warlord Krastin.

Krastin had been sent by their *gorr*-ridden father, Zavir.

Zavir ruled the planet Sarkan. Thanks to strategic marriages, he had a son on each planet in the system. Their third brother, Graylan, ruled the planet Taln. The three brothers didn't worry about the *half* part of their relationship, and were united in their hatred for their evil, power-hungry father.

Zavir wanted his sons by his side. Not out of any sense of love. No, he wanted their abilities.

He was sending warlords from his allies, the Zhylaw. The Zhylaw scientists pushed the limits and would cross any line for a paycheck. They loved to create beasts that ripped and tore, and mindlessly obeyed orders.

Rhain had defeated Krastin, but not before the warlord had experimented on Poppy—infesting her with Damari blood. People on Damar were wolf shapeshifters. Not many survived a forced transformation.

"Brodin," Annora said, an edge to her voice.

His temper spiked, but as he'd learned to do as a stubborn, volatile teen, he wrestled it under control. When he did lose his temper, it was never pretty.

Annora was smart, strong, and often impatient. He respected her and her skills, and she was one of the few people he allowed to push him and question his judgment.

"Is there anything you can't handle?" He arched a brow.

He would never let down his people. They lived with the wild wolf inside. Without

strength and a steady hand to rule them, he was aware many Damari would surrender to their animal instincts. To the need to hunt, tear, and kill.

Brodin always reminded them that they weren't just animals, not just predators. Protecting the Damari, even from themselves, was a vow he'd made to his mother.

Annora sighed and sank into the chair across from him. "No. There've been a few sightings of Candela. My team ran them all down." She growled. "There's been no recent sign of the *gorr*-ridden witch."

Candela Salix. Brodin's lip curled. The Zhylaw warlord was ruthless, and known to torture her test subjects.

"Do we have any more missing hunters?" he asked.

His First Claw shook her head. "People are jittery, though."

"Good. It will help keep them safe."

Damar was a forest world, teeming with wildlife. They were part wolf, and hunting in the forest was a biological imperative they couldn't ignore. They needed to shed their civilized skins, and run and hunt and let the animal free in order to keep it in check.

Sometimes they hunted in packs, sometimes alone.

Candela had targeted lone hunters. Several were missing. One, Brodin knew for certain was dead. He'd been used to infect Poppy.

Poppy made a faint sound. Brodin studied the soft curve of her cheek. She was very pale at the moment, although he could see a golden undertone to her skin. She probably tanned in the sun. Her lashes and eyebrows were shades darker than her bright golden hair.

Ever since he'd brought her here to Accalia, the forest city of the wolves, he'd felt a strange, protective compulsion.

Poppy Ellison unsettled him. At first, he thought it was just because he'd promised Rhain and Mal he'd take care of her.

But over the days, watching her grit as her body fought the transformation, he felt a pull he didn't understand, and didn't want.

He had a planet to protect. People who could be dangerous, if he didn't keep complete control.

And he had a father who would burn it all to make Brodin bend.

He couldn't afford a distraction.

His gaze dropped to Poppy again. He remembered how she'd touched him in her delirium. His jaw tightened. No, Poppy Ellison was a weakness he didn't need.

She'd heal, then she'd go back to Rhain's world of Zhalto.

There was a knock on the door. Tolf, one of his cleavers, strode in. The man was tall, broad, with short hair in a silver-gray color common to some Damari.

"Emperor." The elite Damari fighter nodded. "First Claw." He glanced at Annora. "Another hunter has gone missing."

Annora hissed.

Brodin ground his teeth together. "Who?"

"Fillian. He's young. Barely out of training."

"No one is to be hunting alone," Brodin said.

"He was with a friend at the edge of the safe zone. They were separated for a few minutes."

Long enough for Candela to get her claws on him.

They'd set up the safe zone after it was confirmed Candela was on the planet. It was an area of forest close to the city, patrolled by cleavers and with sensors embedded at the perimeter. It gave Accalia's residents a safe area to indulge their wolves.

Clearly not safe enough. His gut tightened.

"Increase the patrols."

Annora nodded, her gaze hardening. She had a sister just a little younger than Fillian. Then his First Claw's gaze dropped to the human woman in Brodin's arms.

A part of him didn't want to leave Poppy. A muscle ticked in his jaw. He'd promised her that he wouldn't.

But he had a duty to his people. He had to find Fillian. He gently set Poppy back on the bed. She stirred restlessly.

"Shh," he murmured.

She settled, and he stroked her golden hair.

Cassanra, the head healer, entered. She was a few years older than Brodin, with sharp cheekbones, and dark hair pulled up in a bun.

"Watch her," he ordered.

The healer nodded.

With one last glance at Poppy, Brodin followed Annora out of the infirmary.