

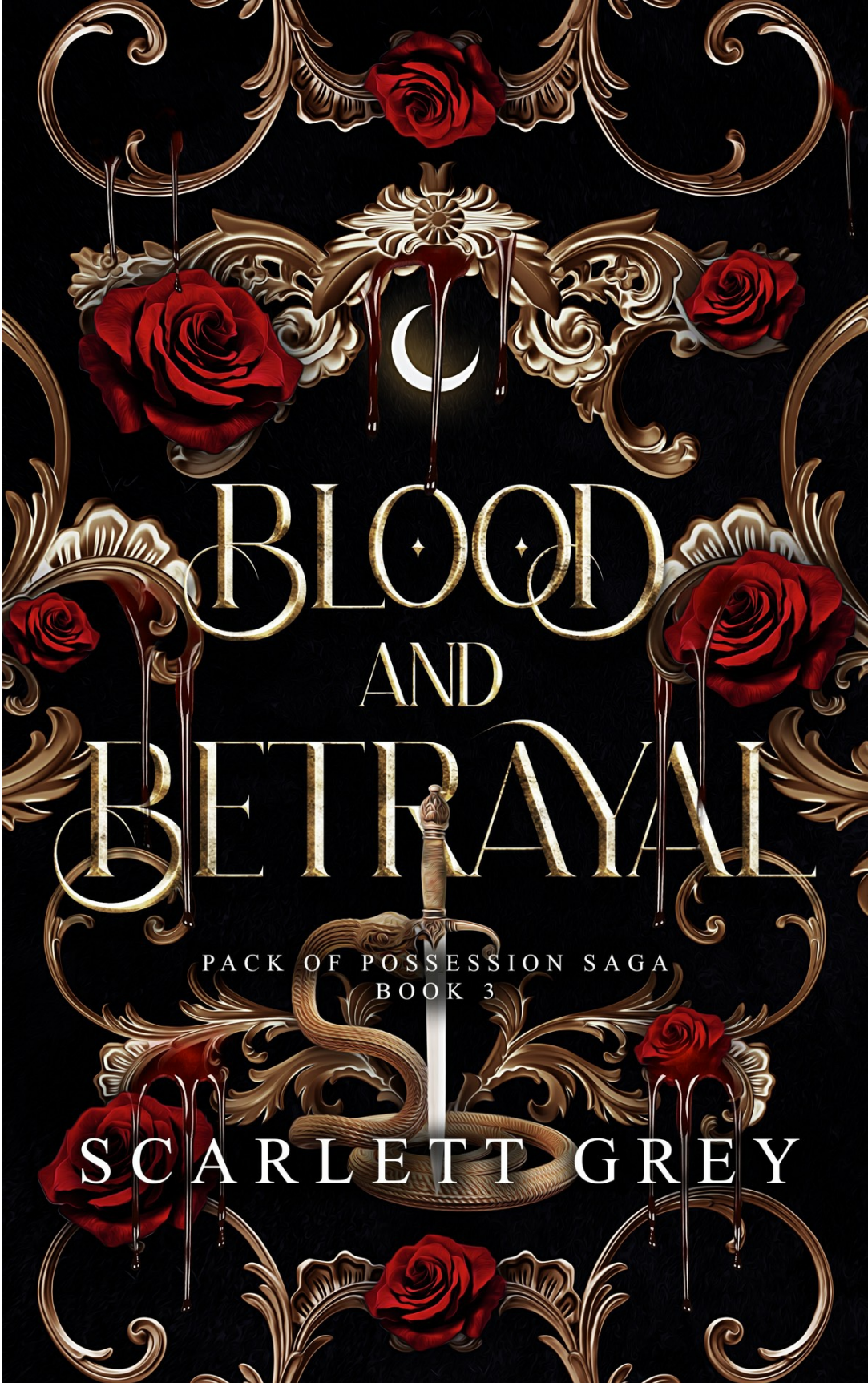
BLOOD

AND

BETRAYAL

PACK OF POSSESSION SAGA
BOOK 3

SCARLETT GREY



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SCARLETT GREY

CONTENTS

1. [Freya](#)
2. [Adrya](#)
3. [Embyrlyn](#)
4. [Freya](#)
5. [Adrya](#)
6. [Embyrlyn](#)
7. [Freya](#)
8. [Adrya](#)
9. [Embyrlyn](#)
10. [Kent](#)
11. [Matthyw](#)
12. [Embyrlyn](#)
13. [Freya](#)
14. [Adrya](#)
15. [Kazu](#)
16. [Freya](#)
17. [Adrya](#)
18. [Embyrlyn](#)
19. [Freya](#)
20. [Matthyw](#)
21. [Kazu](#)
22. [Freya](#)
23. [Adrya](#)
24. [Embyrlyn](#)
25. [Freya](#)
26. [Adrya](#)
27. [Embyrlyn](#)
28. [Freya](#)
29. [Adrya](#)
30. [Embyrlyn](#)

[Did You Like Blood & Betrayal?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

FREYA



*W*ard.

I was Kent Byron's Ward.

Why did that word feel so...dirty? It probably didn't help that I was living with him. The thing was, I didn't feel weird about that. It felt...I wasn't sure what the word was, but I felt comfortable being around him. I knew he didn't want anything from me, and he clearly had no problem telling me how he felt about me — most of which wasn't favorable — which proved to me I could trust him.

When the next morning rolled around, I slinked out of the room as quietly as possible. I still hadn't memorized my schedule, so he wasn't wrong. I pulled the crumpled slip of paper from my folder and tried to straighten it as best as I could all while attempting to dodge students who lingered in the hallway.

Taskier King, Literature

I frowned. I wondered if he had any relation to Viktor King. Viktor was unnerving to say the least. I couldn't believe Kent let him in, though I supposed he was in a position where he had to.

I made a left down another hall, only to find that was the wrong turn, and then turned around. I practically jogged the rest of the way and slid inside as a Dwarf stood on a stool and wrote something on the whiteboard. For a

moment, I did nothing but stare at him. Like an idiot. Of all the things that had happened so far, this was what threw me off? A Dwarf?

He turned, almost as though he could feel my eyes on him, and his lips quirked up. I wouldn't say he was smiling, but he wasn't frowning either. It was almost like it was a smirk but without the smugness.

“Good morning, Freya,” he said.

He had a rich baritone that was surprisingly warm. My insides fluttered and I realized I still hadn't found my seat yet. There were a couple of hushed whispers behind me, and someone laughed from the back. Typically, stuff like that didn't bother me all that much, but the last thing I wanted was for my new professor to assume I was making fun of him in some way.

I cleared my throat and shook my head, brushing hair over my shoulder with one long sweep.

“Feel free to sit where you'd like,” he reminded me. “We don't have a seating chart.”

I nodded, still mute. He probably thought something was wrong with me, but luckily, he didn't seem to go out of his way to comment on it, even if he thought that were the case. Instead, he turned and continued to write on the board. Meanwhile, I turned to look back at any available seats. Because I had gotten here later than I would have liked, there were only a few seats near the front that were still unoccupied. Knowing I didn't have a choice in the matter and resolving to get here earlier tomorrow, I slid into the one in the second row, two spaces left of the middle. I let my hair fall back in my face, hoping it would mask myself from any curious onlookers. After being poked and prodded this morning, I wasn't in the mood for stares, although I doubted it mattered what I wanted considering someone I liked had been murdered.

“I heard her body was completely desecrated,” someone whispered from behind me. “People are saying it's the Vrykolakas.”

“Why would a Vrykolakas kill her?” another voice asked. “She's just some maid. She wasn't a student. She wasn't part of a squad. It doesn't make

any sense.”

I leaned down and pulled a notebook from my bag. I didn't want to hear them continue to debate on what actually killed Lucy. On the one hand, it wasn't me. I supposed I should be grateful for that –

“Plus,” the second voice continued. “Everyone knows that someone with dark magic has to be in control of the Vrykolakas for it to do something like that. Do you know anyone with that kind of magic?”

“Do you think Dade did it?”

I might not be looking at the girl, but I wouldn't be surprised if she was raising her eyebrows, emphasizing her point.

Until something else struck me. I didn't realize that the Vrykolakas had to be controlled through magic. I thought they were simply monsters who attacked as part of their base nature. Which meant, there was another reason Rainey was looking into running tests on me. And it wasn't just because of Viktor King.

I swallowed, grabbing a pencil and forcing myself to take notes. What the hell did that mean? What happened if my tests came back showing I did have that sort of magic?

But no.

That was impossible.

It means someone wanted your mother dead, a voice pointed out. No wonder there wasn't a mess of blood and bits of body parts everywhere. If the Vrykolakas could be controlled, then their brutality was also a choice... right?

“...page two hundred and ninety-four.” Taskier's voice cut through my thoughts and I scrambled to pull out the book Kent shoved in my bag for this class. I still hadn't cracked it open, despite my curiosity of reading Shakespeare. “Now, it helps to think of Shakespeare as a guy who had no problem criticizing society in a flourishing way to the point where even the royals couldn't tell what he was doing, and he did it so well that those that

could didn't care. His bawdy jokes are easy to find once you understand the humor he possesses. Take for instance, in your assigned reading, *Taming of the Shrew...*"

I pursed my lips, sighing as my eyes scanned the page. I didn't understand how we could be sitting here, reading some play from centuries ago, when Lucy's killer was still out there.

By the time we finished with class, I hadn't grasped a single word Taskier King had said. Part of me felt bad about this. He didn't seem like one of those professors with a stick up his ass, and by the way he walked up and down the front of the room, it was clear how much he genuinely enjoyed the subject he taught. I just couldn't find myself paying attention to these characters and Shakespeare's bawdiness when Lucy still haunted me. More than that, the thought that I could have somehow caused this with some kind of magic in me I didn't know about was beginning to seem less impossible and more unnerving.

"Miss Foster, a word?" Professor King said as the rest of the students around me began to gather up their books and shuffle papers into their school bags.

I swallowed. I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, and yet there was this prickly feeling cast around my body that seemed to imply that I had, I just didn't know what.

Instead of going over to him, I continued to put my materials away and then remained at my desk, waiting for everyone to file out. When the door finally closed, he glanced over at me and gave me a small smile.

"I'm sorry for putting you on the spot like this," he said. "I just wanted to inquire about how you were?"

I furrowed my brows before I could stop myself and he chuckled.

"No need to act so surprised," he said. "As a professor here, it's my job to be concerned about a new student. I know Lucy was found in your room, and I know that must be harder than most things any teenage girl would have to

deal with. And that's not counting what happened to your mother."

I remained silent, though my eyes began to mist up in the most obnoxious way. I blinked hard, hoping it would deter the tears from falling down my face. I wasn't a victim here. My mother was. Lucy was. The last thing I wanted was to make this about me when it wasn't.

"Anyway," he continued. "Your Alpha is a good man. Kent is loyal and protective of those he cherishes."

I snorted before I could stop myself. It wasn't as though I didn't believe him. I did, actually.

"I doubt Captain Byron cherishes me," I said as I stood, hoping this conversation was coming to a close. I grabbed my bag and slung the leather strap over my shoulder. "In fact, I think I'm a pain in his ass more than anything."

"To be fair, it's easy to be a pain in the ass for Kent," Tasker said, tapping his chin.

A giggle bubbled out of me before I could stop it, and I slapped a hand over my mouth, as though that was going to somehow reign it back in.

The pale green in Tasker's eyes softened. "Well," he said. "Should you need anything, please know my door is always open. If anyone understands what it's like being a misfit, it's I." He touched his chest. "And I commiserate with ale and – Well, despite the fact that you're of age, we don't need to go into details. Just know I'm here if you need a friend."

My lips turned up despite myself and I nodded once. "Thank you," I murmured.

"Of course."

There didn't seem to be anything left to say so I wrapped my fingers around my strap and headed out of the classroom. It was only then did I feel confident enough to pull out the slip of paper Byron had given me so I could look at what my next class was.

Stephen Barnes, Alchemy

I clenched my teeth together.
Great.

* * *

I WAS SURPRISED that Barnes didn't even spare me a single glance during class. In fact, I was almost certain he had forgotten all about me, despite seeing me last night in order to ascertain whether I wanted to drink some kind of potion that might reveal my magic.

I was practically smiling as I gathered up my papers, partly because of this but also because class was over and Alchemy was way more complicated than anything I had ever done before, when his deep voice called my name.

"Stay a moment," he said.

A couple of students who happened to be in my last class began to whisper. I wished I had the ability to remove the blush I knew was staining my face, but it seemed such a talent currently escaped me. Instead, I heaved a soundless sigh and waited at my desk, chin tucked in my hand, elbow resting on the surface.

Two times in a row.

I could probably have gotten away with it once, but twice? I could only imagine what other people thought of me at this point.

Barnes waited for the door to close, just as Professor King did. Unlike King, he waited a few minutes after that. These were some of the longest minutes of my life only because it was difficult to try to not make any noise that would then call any attention to myself. Instead, I sat in my chair and listened to the clock over his whiteboard tick each time in time with the beating of my heart. Barnes had no qualms about staring at me, either. Not in a weird way, but in a curious way. Like I was some riddle he was trying to decipher. I looked anywhere but at him, tapping a finger against my desk, stretching my legs out before crossing my ankles. Anything to distract me

from his piercing stare.

Finally, after what felt like hours, he cleared his throat. My eyes trailed to him on their own accord. “Have you given some thought to whether you want to drink the concoction or not?”

“I thought –”

“I know what was discussed in the room,” he said blithely. “But you’re of age. You have autonomy over yourself. You can choose what you want.”

Despite his cold voice, I appreciated the sentiment.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked.

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a response,” he muttered.

I inwardly rolled my eyes. “If I had this-this ShadowSide magic, could I unknowingly cause someone’s death?” I asked.

Barnes stared at me, a blank expression on his face.

I was ready to take it back. It was stupid. I shouldn’t have even asked it.

“Honestly, there’s so much about magic we don’t know about that, at this point, I’m of the mind to say anything is possible,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean this particular thing is.”

I nodded slowly. “Can I...can I think about it?” I asked.

It was a cop-out, I knew, but I didn’t feel comfortable giving him an answer. Not yet.

“Of course,” he said. “But let me know soon. The concoction takes time and precision, two things I might not have if I’m to be looking over the body of a murder victim. If you could tell me by the week’s end, I would appreciate it.”

“I can do that,” I said as I grabbed my bag.

But as I left the classroom, I couldn’t help but wonder if I could make a heavy decision like that in only a few days.

ADRYA



“*A*re you fucking kidding me?”

I winced at the brutality in Matthyw’s voice, the way it echoed through my father’s quarters. It didn’t help that we were discussing something so intimate, so private. My cheeks turned pink at the thought of having to indulge something that would expose me in such a way...

I couldn’t even think about it.

My eyes were cast to the floor, and even though Matthyw stood beside me, his piercing glare was on my father instead of me. In fact, he hadn’t looked at me once, not since entering the room, not since my father insisted I stay after her told me what his plans were for me.

“Where did you even get such a ludicrous idea in the first place?” he asked, shifting his gaze over to my father’s eventual wife, my professor who always hated me, Megan Chamberly. “Did your new cunt put you up to this?”

Chamberly’s eyes widened at the insult, though I wasn’t sure why. This insult was milder than most Matthyw threw around.

My father narrowed his eyes. If he had the forbidden ability to wield magic, Matthyw would either be frozen or dead.

“You will not speak to your Queen in such a disrespectful manner,” my father said, his voice cold but firm.

“That bitch isn’t my Queen, nor will she ever be,” Matthyw declared.

“And you have yet to answer my question.”

“Don’t you *dare* deign to assume you can question me about *anything*,” my father barked. “You didn’t have a bedding ceremony with your first wife, and while a tragic Vrykolakas attack took her life and...released you from the bonds of matrimony, I will *not* allow anyone to attempt to annul a marriage you so carefully drafted of your own design. The Stone pack is this close to waging war with our pack. The only reason they refrain is we would have the backing of the other three packs at Bloodmoon Academy, and Stone pack’s numbers are dismal. But don’t think they’re not going to try and attempt to fracture our pack, and you, *son*, are giving them the tools to do just that. A proper bedding ceremony would prevent questions from arising in regards to the validity of your marriage.”

Marriage. To Matthyw. It was still difficult for me to wrap my head around, even a few days later.

When my father told me I had no choice in the matter, I wasn’t sure how to respond. I had hated him, especially after he humiliated me by leaving me in that brothel by myself

Sure, Adrya. Let’s ignore that dark fire he stokes within you and reduce that to a simple thing like hate.

My lips tugged into an annoyed frown. I would not allow myself to indulge it simply because my father had given it to me. It was one thing to want Matthyw, to imagine what life might be like from afar, but being forced to marry him was something else completely. I didn’t know how to feel because I didn’t know what to expect. I wasn’t there when my father informed him of this decision. In fact, I hadn’t seen him until this very moment, when he was summoned here and then informed, bluntly, that our marriage would result in a very public bedding ceremony.

“You may have screwed over the Stone pack,” my father continued. “Or not — we’ll never know, considering we only have your word to go by. But you will *not* sully the Fire Pack with claims of consummation only to then

deny it when it's most convenient for you. More than that, you will not dishonor my daughter in that way."

I flinched at being brought up by my father in this conversation. I didn't want my father to speak of me at all, especially in this context. My stomach knotted itself up, and I swallowed, hoping to curb any desire to heave up the empty contents of my gut.

"So, this is how you've solved the problem?" Matthyw asked, taking a step towards my father. His hand was already on the hilt of that permanent sword at his hip, a threat if I ever saw one. "You intend to whore out your daughter to a collection of greedy eyes, watching her embark on an intimate moment meant for her husband and her husband alone? You wish to have everyone watch her getting fucked like she's no better than a common whore?"

"Well, you would know, wouldn't you?" my father snapped, his teeth elongating into deadly fangs.

"You care about the pack, don't you?"

My eyes shifted to Chamberly, standing proudly by my father's side, as though she was already Queen. Her fingers laced with his, and my nose wrinkled in disgust. Under normal circumstances, I would have at least attempted some sort of control over my emotions, especially ones that could be misconstrued as disrespectful to my father. But I couldn't bring myself to care. Let them see how I truly felt about *this*. I didn't care about schooling my features and hiding my emotions simply to make someone else feel comfortable.

"This will solidify your relationship to her," Chamberly continued. "It will ensure no one questions the validity of your marriage to her, and since you have a history of not adhering to tradition, Viktor thought it best if you complied in this way."

"Don't think for one second I believe Viktor came up with this perverse plan," Matthyw snapped. "Do you truly think he wants to see his daughter get

fucked by anyone, let alone me? I highly doubt it.”

“And yet, after your little foray into the brothel, you left us no choice,” my father barked, slamming his hand down on the obsidian table. Despite the heaviness of the material, the force of my father’s hit caused the table to vibrate with an unspoken threat. “Rumors would fly. I was *forced* to marry her to you because no one else would have her. You are the last person —“

Chamberly gave my father’s hand a squeeze, halting his speech altogether. I hated her in that moment. I hated that she knew my father well enough to know what to do to calm him down. I didn’t think I had such power over him, and I was his daughter.

“Anger at the past does not resolve where we are in the present,” Chamberly pointed out. “I would hope for you to direct your temper into something more constructive, my love.”

Surely, Chamberly knew my father well enough to know he wouldn’t take kindly to being directed by someone else, especially a woman who he deemed beneath him because of her impure blood. And yet, his face softened as his eyes flickered over to her, and while his lips didn’t tug up into a smile, there was something to the way they appeared on his face. He completely changed when he looked at her, and I absolutely hated it.

“So, that’s it then?” Matthyw asked, and part of me was tempted to grab his hand, to do something that would shut him up before he made this even worse. “You’re fine with embarrassing your only child? You want people to witness me fucking her? Will you be there to ensure it’s finished yourself? Is that something you wish to see to personally?”

I knew he had gone too far. I knew *he* knew it but wouldn’t admit it.

“*Kepus.*” Before I could stop myself, I reached out and wrapped my fingers around his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. I didn’t look at him even then.

“Quiet, *baela,*” he snapped without looking at me. It would seem his ire was directed towards my father and solely my father.

I clenched my teeth together. I was already furious with everyone, from my father to my professor. I didn't need to be furious with Matthyw on top of everything else. He was my only ally, even though I had no idea how he felt about the fact that we were suddenly engaged. Even though I hated him for what he did.. This had been his plan, hadn't it? It was why he took me to that brothel, why he...why he kissed me in the first place do publicly.

He was also the same person who ran away. Who fled. Who left me when I needed him the most. I didn't understand what he had been planning at the time, but now that I was fully aware of what that was, I realized that there was a chance my father was right. There was a chance Matthyw was doing this to have some kind of control over the pack he had always longed to rule over, and I was simply a pawn in his scheming.

My heart squeezed painfully at the thought. This wasn't something I wanted to believe, but I didn't have much of a choice. Matthyw's actions spoke for themselves, hadn't they?

He could have done so much more to you, and you would have let him. But he didn't. He left.

He ran away, I corrected the voice in my head. I didn't want to dress it up and pretend otherwise. At the end of the day, he used me and left me and that was it. And because of that, because of what happened, my father was compelled to marry me to Matthyw, to not only save my reputation but my pack's as well.

My father's eyes flickered between us. They lingered on me, waiting to see how I would react to Matthyw's tone. I could read him easily, surprisingly enough. How he wanted me to snap at Matthyw for talking to me in such a way. But I refused. Matthyw was going to be my husband, and even if I didn't agree with how he spoke to me, I wasn't going to snap back. Matthyw had always been hotheaded, and I needed to be a smooth, cool presence in hopes that it might calm him down.

"Don't tell me you're okay with having to debase yourself on the whims

of that cunt,” Matthyw all but growled, still refusing to look at me. He spoke in our family’s ancient language, something he had learned thanks to my grandfather. Chamberly didn’t understand it, but my father certainly did.

“*There’s no point in fighting for something that won’t change,*” I pointed out.

He huffed, his teeth gnashing together. “*You are not this weak, baela,*” he said. “*You might as well get on your knees and offer your neck. If you won’t fight for this, what else will you give up? Unless parading yourself around in such a display is what you want. Tell me, shall I give the highest bidder a vial of your virgin blood as well?*”

“*Stop,*” I snapped at him, tilting my head to the side so I finally looked at him. “*For once, I’m not the one you’re angry with. And you snapping at me isn’t going to do anything.*”

Matthyw clenched his teeth together so hard, his jaw popped. I resisted the urge to squeeze his forearm or take his hand in mine. Just because we would be married didn’t mean we were on that level of shared intimacy yet. Our relationship shifted, and I wasn’t sure what that meant or how to go back to that.

I wasn’t even sure I wanted to go back to it. But I didn’t know what I wanted anyway. I thought I did. I thought I wanted Matthyw. And I did. I wanted him *now*. But I wasn’t sure if this was part of that wanting, or if Matthyw was a fantasy I never thought I’d have, and that was why I allowed myself to want him in the first place.

“*Fine.*” Matthyw shifted his eyes over to me before snapping them back to my father and Chamberly. I would *never* consider her a parent to me, even if she and my father did get married. “*I hope you’re happy.*” He sneered at my father. “*Your cunt has more balls than you do. Maybe you should take notes on how to be a man while I fuck your daughter and make her call me Daddy, hmm?*”

Before my father could respond, Matthyw turned and headed out the

door, slamming it shut behind him. Instead of being annoyed at Matthyw for leaving, I leaned into the anger at the situation we were in — Matthyw and I were in. I followed him in a huff, hoping when I slammed the door, one of Chamberly's precious pieces of art fell from its hanger and splintered.

EMBYRLYN



I dreamt of Kazu. I dreamt of his fingers around my throat and his cock buried deep between my legs. I dreamt of his teeth breaking my skin and his tongue licking the wound. I dreamt of my climax, of him filling me up with his seed, of taking me in so many different ways.

When I sprung up the next morning, my body was in a cold sweat and it felt like I didn't sleep at all.

This is just nerves, I reminded myself. I'm nervous about the mission and that's it. I'm doing what Kazu always says I do and making it more than it is. It's just sex. It had to happen. If it hadn't...

I shook my head. I didn't want to think about what would have happened, how my first time would have gone, if Kazu hadn't been the one.

My stomach growled, demanding some kind of sustenance. I threw on my uniform, knowing I'd be leaving soon. I wanted to grab a quick bite before I had to pop into Grey's office for one last briefing before I headed out.

I bounded down the stairs and over to the dining hall. The room was still sparse; everyone must be sleeping in, especially after the full moon. I was surprised I was even awake after what happened last night. Even now, my bones were liquid and I couldn't seem to move the right way without a slight ache in my pelvis, reminding me of Kazu, of how he touched me, his fingers pressing in my skin, claiming me —

No.

I had to stop this.

It was a one-time thing.

My face flamed with heat. I grabbed a tray, forcing my feet to move, to take me where I wanted to go but I couldn't move.

My pelvis throbbed. I let out a whimper. And then...everything went black.

* * *

“...SHE JUST FAINTED.”

“It *was* the full moon. She needed to replenish her energy. The transformation itself is hard for anyone, especially when The Heat hits.”

“But so young? She's only nineteen. I thought it didn't happen until early twenties unless she was bonded.” A pause. “She's not bonded, is she?”

“I doubt it. She's supposed to go on a mission in a few hours with Shiroiokami. If she were bonded, I highly doubt she'd be sent, especially during her Heat. It's practically suicide.”

I had no idea what they were talking about, how any of it related to me. Heat? Bonding?

I groaned, trying to sit up. My head throbbed, but this time, I bit my bottom lip to keep another one from coming out of my mouth.

I wasn't supposed to be weak.

“Stop.”

I cracked open an eye. There was Viktor King himself, looking over me with a perplexed purse to his lips and an annoyed wrinkle between his brows.

“Do you remember what happened to you?” he asked.

I rubbed my eye with my palm, shaking my head. Heat burned through my flesh. It was way too hot. Sweat beaded down my neck. I reached up and winced. The bite from last night twinged in pain.

“You fainted.” A softer voice.

I turned my head. Taskier, Viktor King’s younger brother and lieutenant.

“You’re here.” The words fell from my mouth before I could stop them.

“Of course.”

“We ushered you from the dining hall right away,” Taskier said. “Do you remember fainting?”

“What time is it?”

My stomach rumbled.

My cheeks flooded with even more heat, and I was sure my face was redder than the sun as it broke the dawn.

“Just after lunch,” Taskier said. “During, I suppose, if you want to get technical.”

“I was hungry,” I said.

“You’re sweating,” King said, not bothering to hide his disgust.

“Brother, I —“

“Is there a reason you’re going through your Heat?” the Alpha asked, ignoring Taskier completely. He kept his icy-blue gaze narrowed on me.

Despite the fact that I was an Elite, he still somehow caused discomfort to gnaw at my chest. More than that, he wasn’t wrong. I *was* sweating. My armpits itched. My clothes stuck to me like a shadow. And I desperately wanted something to clear up the ache between my thighs.

“Have you shared a Bond with anyone?” Viktor asked. “Because I’m certain that you aren’t in the Marriage Lottery, what with your position as an Elite. And yet, you aren’t of age where you would be smelling...like that.”

Like *what*?

I *smelled*?

If it was possible for my face to get any redder, it was. I knew it was.

“I think there was a better way to phrase that.”

“I’m not going to mince words with someone in my pack,” King said with a snide sneer. “Well? Answer me. Did you Bond with someone?”

“What? N-no.” I shook my head, but that did nothing for the pain.

Taskier gave me a long look. His eyes seemed pointed on something in my hair or on my shoulder before he turned to look up to his brother. “Could she have been forced to —“

“The Bond is all about consent,” King said. “Both parties have to be willingly engaged in intimacy.”

“Yes, but what if she didn’t know the consequences —“

“That *cannot* be a viable excuse, Taskier,” King said before clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth. “There’s so much information out there. Hell, we have a class about this specifically for the Third Years. You can’t possibly tell me she’s unaware.”

“Yes, but there’s a difference between learning it from a clinical aspect and experiencing it —“

“Look, girl, did you have sexual relations during the full moon —“

“What’s this now?” Both men stopped and turned. Though the two looked completely different, they moved with the same surprised stoicism that if I wasn’t overheated and ignorant, I would have laughed. “Ms. Mackenzie, imagine my surprise to find you in the infirmary the morning you’re supposed to leave for an important mission.”

Master Grey glided through the room until he was at the foot of my bed.

“Sorry, sir, I...” I didn’t even know what to say. “I was going to breakfast and then fainted.”

“So early after the full moon?” His eyes pinned me to my place on the bed.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said. I swallowed, hoping to moisten my raw throat. “I, uh, I was nervous about today.”

Master Grey’s eyes never left mine. “Viktor, Taskier, thank you for seeing to your student so quickly,” he said, “but I shall take over for now. There is something I need to speak to Ms. Mackenzie about.”

King opened his mouth to argue, though why he would care one way or

the other, I didn't know, but Master Grey gave him a look. It was difficult for me to describe. There was nothing overtly aggressive or threatening, but there was something about it, something that indicated he wasn't going to tolerate any back and forth.

For a second, I thought King was going to speak despite the clear warning Master Grey gave him. Instead, he pressed his lips together and flared his nostrils, huffing out a breath. He stalked off without a backward glance. Taskier had left the second Grey dismissed them, and he was already out the door.

The second King shut the door — surprisingly, he hadn't slammed it, which at least indicated while he was arrogant, he wasn't petty — Master Grey turned to me and took a seat next to me. I stiffened as his eyes dropped to take in my body. The majority of me was covered by the blankets — as stiff and as uncomfortable as they were — but he kept his gaze roving until —

“Your neck,” he stated.

I swallowed, and his eyes caught that subtle gesture as well.

There was no way Grey knew what I did. No way at all.

Right?

“What happened last night?”

There was no warmth in his tone, and while he wasn't being rude in any way, he was direct and pointed; the same tone he used with King.

I rolled my shoulders back and looked at him. I forced myself to. I tried to think of a lie, something that was going to help me say something believable while keeping Kazu out of it. For some reason, I didn't think Grey would be happy about what had happened and Kazu would take the brunt of it.

At that moment, the door slammed open. Kazu-sensei sauntered in like he didn't have a care in the world.

“What's up,” he said nonchalantly.

“Kazu,” Master Grey said. “Just the person I wanted to see. Maybe you

know what happened with our dear Ms. Mackenzie. It would seem she has a very interesting mark on her neck.”

* * *

KAZU

The second Kazu got back to the academy, he went to his room to shower. He had to get her scent off of her. He was too damn distracting, and if they were going to leave today, he needed to clear his head in any way he could.

Except, the shower did nothing for him.

Embyrlyn lingered on him like a damned tattoo.

He shouldn't have —

But no.

He couldn't regret it now.

What happened happened, and he was just glad it was him. If it had been anyone else, even Rocky, even Felix —

He growled at the thought. He didn't want to think of anyone else touching what was his. He would shred them to ribbon.

Fuck.

He fucking *hated* this.

He never wanted to possess her.

Sure. Keep telling yourself that, Bakazu.

Kazu rolled his eyes at the voice in his head, grabbing a tray. After last night, he was ravenous. It was probably a good thing Embyrlyn was nowhere in sight. Now that he had had her...

Again, he couldn't think about that, didn't want to remind himself of the way her body felt in his hands, of the heavy breathing, the way she scratched his back, the way her perfect cunt milked him dry of all that he had...

Another growl slipped past his clenched teeth. His knuckles turned white

as he gripped the tray, trying to figure out what he wanted to eat that didn't include a pink-haired wolf.

"...just fainted, no one knows why."

"Does Felix know? He came by looking for her. Something about training..."

"...sent him to the infirmary but I think he was sent away..."

Embyrlyn.

They were talking about Embyrlyn. He knew it in his bones.

The tray clattered to the floor. He hadn't realized he dropped it until he moved to the hallway that would take him to the infirmary.

What the hell was she doing there? What had happened to her after...after everything?

He nearly bumped into Viktor King on his way to the door. King didn't even look at him, something Kazu didn't particularly care about. He shoved his hands in his pockets, trying to come across as casual. Whatever had happened to her wasn't going to change simply because he showed up. At the very least, he knew she was safe by being here, and that was the only thing that mattered.

Until he walked into the infirmary and found both Master Grey and Embyrlyn gawking at him like he was the Chosen One himself had walked into a room in order to save them from the Vrykolakas.

"Kazu," Master Grey said. "Just the person I wanted to see. Maybe you know what happened with our dear Ms. Mackenzie. It would seem she has a very interesting mark on her neck."

Kazu narrowed his eyes at Embyrlyn's neck as though he had no idea what Grey was talking about.

But he knew.

He could still taste the lingering metallic scent, could still smell the vanilla and the rose. Could still remember every damn detail of the previous night.

“You wouldn’t happen to know why she has a Brand on her neck, would you?” Grey asked.

“What’s that?” she asked, looking between the two.

Grey slowly fixed his gaze on Embyrlyn. “Surely you’ve been educated on what a brand is,” he said. “A wolf has left his mark on you, claiming you. Whoever this wolf is, Ms. Mackenzie, you belong to him now.”

FREYA



A punch to my jaw jolted me out of my thoughts.

“Come on, girl,” Reedys sniped, backing away from me while keeping his fists up. “You ain’t even trying.”

I blew out a breath, trying not to wince at the pain his hit inflicted on me. He wasn’t wrong. Despite school being done for the day, my mind was still in a fog over everything that happened, and I still didn’t know if I should drink the concoction.

“I’m distracted,” I said.

“Clearly,” he snapped. He stopped moving and began to crack his knuckles. “You wanna talk about it?”

I glanced around. Despite the December twilight, the warmth of summer still persisted. I wasn’t sure whether I was annoyed or begrudgingly respectful. I flicked the strands of hair that escaped my ponytail away from my sweat-coated neck, trying to slow the erratic beating of my heart, knowing my face was flushed and not seeming to care one way or the other. I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to just come out and tell him about what happened that morning, about what Barnes said after class, but it smothered me nonetheless. Maybe there was some kind of way to get around it without actually saying anything directly.

“Have you ever wondered if there’s this part of you you don’t know?” I

asked slowly.

I pulled out the ponytail and began to comb my fingers through my hair. From where I stood, I could hear the clanging of metal on metal and knew the others in my training hour had advanced to weaponry while I was still stuck doing hand-to-hand combat. I didn't think I'd move to weaponry for the semester, if not the year.

"Like...like a dark side?" I continued.

"Everyone has a dark side," Reedys said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. He trodded over to where his canteen was and he popped the cork before taking a swig of water. "You might as well just accept it."

"But what if you needed some special drink to show you that?" I continued. "Do you think it would have to be your responsibility to drink it, to see what you're capable of?"

Reedys's midnight blue eyes flashed into mine. Everyone wrote him off as some kind of hick, but the truth was, he knew much more than he said, and he was much smarter than he looked. Just because he dressed in ripped-sleeves and had hair that fell into his eyes and that twangy accent didn't mean he was an idiot. And I swore, right now, he could see through every single wall I tried to build up to keep this inside of me.

"Look," he said, setting down his canteen and shifting his weight before turning his gaze back to me. "I know exactly what I am. I ain't no saint, but I'm not something evil either. Just because my body has two forms don't mean shit. And I don't need a drink to tell me that. You need to accept who it is you are – not who you wanna be or who you *think* you are – but who you are, and you'll realize that anything anyone tells you will roll off of you like rain in the spring."

I let his words sink in, unsure if they helped with the precarious decision of whether or not to take Barnes on his offer. I sighed, nodding, not because I agreed with him but because I acknowledged his words. I tried to smile but I

didn't think it did anything other than make me look constipated.

Oh well.

I couldn't change my face.

"Ready to go again?" Reedys asked, perking his brow. His left arm reached up and he moved some hair so he could grab a rolled cigarette from behind his ear.

"Are you really going to smoke that while we fight?" I asked doubtfully.

"It's not like you're giving me any kind of challenge," he said with a shrug.

At least he knew how to get me to focus better.

* * *

KENT

"You wanted to see me?" Kent had been at the Alpha's office so many times the last few days, it felt like he came here more often than he came to his own room. He had no idea why Master Grey needed to see him this time, but if he had to guess, he wouldn't be surprised if it had to do with Lucy's death or any funeral arrangements. Lucy was *his* packmate despite being human. She was *his* responsibility. And he let her down.

Master Grey tilted his chin up from his papers and offered a small smile. Even from where Kent stood, he could easily detect the strain in the smile, which surprised him. Master Grey wasn't one to sugarcoat his emotions. This couldn't be good.

"How are you, Kent?" Grey asked, his voice filled with more exhaustion than Kent thought he had heard from the old man before.

"I'm not sure how to answer that," Kent replied. "Lucy's dead and I have no idea who did it. We don't even know if she was the intended target. On top of that, I got straddled with a Ward I never wanted nor do I know what to do with. I have to say, I've been better."

Master Grey's smile only widened, and it seemed much more genuine than before. "I'm not surprised you find the humor in your current situation."

Kent narrowed his eyes. "Forgive me, Master Grey, but I'm not laughing." A beat. "And I'm sure since you've pulled me from my training hour, you have more unfortunate news to give me."

"No, not unfortunate." He shuffled some papers on his desk before opening a drawer to his right. From there, he pulled out a stark-white scroll, wrapped up with green ribbon.

Kent froze. The significance of a scroll was known throughout the academy. They were mission assignments. Once a student graduated, he was paired up with three other students and assigned an instructor to carry out missions for Master Grey and the academy. Some students weren't assigned to teams because they were average or below-average in all areas needed to create a well-rounded agent. Kent used to head up a team, but Master Grey shuffled some people around a few years ago and Kent hadn't been outside the boundaries except during a full moon. He missed it, missed the freedom, the quiet. But he didn't miss the personal training with the kids.

For Master Grey to procure him a scroll...

"What is this?" he asked, refusing to take it until Grey told him what was going on.

"Have you really been out of the field for so long that you've forgotten what an Ivory scroll is?" Master Grey asked with obvious amusement.

Kent grunted in response.

"I need you to go to Kantori and gather information for me," he said. "There are rumors that a Light Bringer is in their midst and I need to know the truth of that."

"Light Bringer?" Kent asked. "Dade?" Master Grey said nothing, but Kent knew the truth. "You believe he might have conjured the Vrykolakas that killed Freya's mother?"

"I believe nothing until I have some fact in front of me pointing me in a

direction,” he said. He cleared his throat as Kent took the scroll in his hand. “That has your mission objective and any information you need.” A moment passed. “Kent, I must inform you that the new Marriage Law passed late last night. It won’t be long before I’m forced to start handing out a new type of scroll, a silver one, in order to protect our students. Do you understand?”

Kent pressed his lips together but said nothing.

“There will be those who prey on our students because of their knowledge, their power,” he continued. “And if we are to achieve our goal in eradicating Light Bringers and Vrykolokas, marriages might need to be arranged in order to continue on.”

Kent’s mouth went dry. He didn’t like what the old man was implying.

“You would force a girl to marry a boy in order to ensure –”

“They don’t fall into the wrong hands,” Grey said before Kent could finish that sentence with his own thoughts. “You must understand, Kent, that there are people even within our ranks at the school that are collecting information in order to report it back to their true master. Until I can sniff them out, I trust no one save for a select few. I also must warn you that Scarlet scrolls might have to make a comeback –”

“No.” The word was quick, a slice from a rapier too fast to pivot away from.

“There is no room for argument,” Grey said. “If I need information on the Light Bringers, I will do whatever it takes to protect our academy.” He paused. “I already have. If I need to send out any more females in order to acquire delicate information, I will. I’m telling you this as a courtesy, Kent. In case –”

“Not her.” His words were firm.

“No,” Grey agreed. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Not *ever*. She hasn’t graduated. She’s not on a team. She’s barely eighteen –”

“If she’s touched by magic, she might be a weapon that would protect

another girl, many of them –”

“I don’t care.” His voice was gruff now, almost unhinged. Kent knew he needed to collect himself, but it was difficult to do. “We don’t even know if that’s the case. And even if it is, how could you sacrifice her, after all she’s gone through –”

“Don’t deign to tell me about sacrifices,” Grey snapped. It was one of the few times Kent had heard him speak in such a way and it caused Kent to stop even though that was the last thing he wanted. “I have a duty to protect this academy, this village. It’s my job. And the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one.”

“She’s my Ward –”

“The only thing that would save her from such a fate is marriage,” Grey said. “And even then, that’s not as stringent in times like these.”

“Have any Scarlet scrolls been assigned?” Kent asked, flaring his nostrils.

“That’s not for me to say.” Grey shook his head. “I’m letting you know as a courtesy. There might be a chance she’ll be called upon to aid this village, and I expect you to help her get prepared if such a thing were to happen.”

“I cannot allow this,” Kent growled, taking a step forward.

“And you forget you don’t have a choice,” Grey said, standing up. “This girl’s only been here a few days. You hated her, loathed her presence as a burden. And yet, you shield her from this? What about your other students, the ones you’ve known –”

“They were not assigned to me as a Ward,” Kent pointed out through gritted teeth. “I am not bound to protect them the way I am with her.”

“Is that it?” Grey perked his brows.

“What are you implying?”

Grey said nothing. Instead, he simply stared at Kent for a long moment before sighing and slowly descending back into his seat. “I don’t revel in sending women out to seduce information out of nefarious characters,” he said slowly. “Nor do I revel in marrying them off to protect them from other,

more dangerous enemies. But I will do what I must in order to protect this village. As of now, nothing has been assigned. But the Silver scrolls will start to go out, along with marriage proposals.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Kent asked.

“Take your Ward with you,” Grey said, nodding at the scroll still in Kent’s hand, though sufficiently wrinkled thanks to the way his grip tightened on it.

“It’s too dangerous,” Kent said.

“My boy,” Grey said, his tone exhausted once more. “There’s a good chance it will be much more dangerous here, and at least with you, I know she’ll be safe.” He perked his brow. “Leave tonight after dinner.”

There was nothing left for Kent to say, so he quitted the room. For a moment, he considered throwing the scroll in Grey’s large fireplace so the flames could eat it until it was nothing, but he knew if he were to do that, a different scroll might find its way to Freya, and he couldn’t risk that.

ADRYA



*M*atthyw must have heard me leave because he sprung on me the second I left my father's quarters. His hand gripped my arm and, without saying a word to me, began to lead me down the familiar pathway that would take us back to my rooms. As much as I wanted to ask him about what the hell was going on and who he thought he was, I bit the inside of my bottom lip in order to prevent me from doing just that. I wouldn't risk drawing attention to us. The walls had ears, and wolves were especially notorious for indulging in pack gossip, with a focus on the royals.

It was only when we were back in my room, when the door was tucked safely behind us, did I finally turn a glare on him. As much as I wanted to burst out with something, the energy drained from me.

But I wasn't exhausted.

Instead, I wanted him to talk, to explain. I wasn't going to push him, but I also wasn't going to give him a reason to lash out on me any further than he already had.

"So quiet, *baela*," he said as he paced the length of the room. His hands were tense behind his back, shoulders swept out and forced down. He might not have been my father's blood son, but there was something regal about Matthyw nonetheless. "Have you nothing to say? Your father just treated you the same way a farmer would treat a broodmare. And you say nothing to

him?”

“What should I have said?” I asked, placing my hands on my hips.

“Anything,” Matthyw spat, throwing his arms out with exasperation. “Anything at all! Instead, you keep quiet.” His eyes darkened. “Do you want them to watch me while I take your purity? While my body savages yours, while I bathe my cock in your virgin blood. Is that what you want?”

“Of course it isn’t!” I exclaimed, throwing my arms out. So much for being measured. “But what would you have me do?”

“You will be Alpha of this pack,” he pointed out. “I expect you to fight when someone challenges you. Even if it is someone you feel dearly.”

“Not anymore,” I said through gritted teeth. I balled my fingers into fists, the nails pressing against the flesh part of my hand.

Matthyw stopped pacing for a moment to take me in.

“How are you?” he asked after a moment.

I pulled back slightly, despite the large gap of space between the two of us. It wasn't a question I expected from him. He had always been cold and cruel; never had he cared how I felt.

“Hurt,” I said before I could stop myself. I didn’t even have to think; the word simply came out. “Angry.”

“I can tell your father and his whore of a fiancée to both fuck off if you want,” he said. “I will not fuck you in front of any man, especially when this isn’t to protect you but to humiliate me.”

I furrowed my brows. “What do you mean?”

Matthyw clenched his teeth together, shifting his gaze over to my bed. They took in everything, and everything that wasn’t there. He was always perceptive, noticing not only what was presented to him but what was missing.

“Your father is punishing me for what happened between us,” Matthyw said, shifting his eyes back to me.

“At the brothel?” I asked. “You left before anything *happened*.”

Matthyw looked like he had been struck for the briefest of seconds before his cool mask of indifference reappeared on his face. “I would not defile you in a brothel where anyone could look upon you,” he said with a sneer.

“Then why take me there in the first place?” I asked.

What had once been a discussion of the bedding ceremony, something we could equally loathe, something we could agree on, twisted into this, into an argument I never thought we’d have. I didn’t think he would explain himself and I didn’t think I was bold enough to ask.

But apparently I was wrong.

“You wouldn’t understand.” He turned, ready to resume his pacing, when I surprised myself even further by reaching out and grabbing his wrist.

“I’m not a child,” I insisted. I inwardly cringed because I sounded just like a child, but I refused to back down. “You’re about to get intimate with me in front of people, and yet, you treat me like I’m not the woman you’re going to marry.” I clenched my teeth together, my face turning red, but I wouldn’t let myself stop talking even if it would be more convenient. “I know marriage might not be something you wanted, but this is where we are. And you brought it up. You took me to that brothel. You led me to believe...” I wasn’t even sure how to finish that sentence, so I didn’t. “And now, because of both our actions, we’re here. I’m asking, *kepus*, you treat me like your equal and not the child you still see me as.”

For a moment, he said nothing. Instead, his hooded gaze fell over my face, overwhelming me in a way I didn’t know was possible. I sucked in a breath as subtly as I could, trying to control my heart. It was still too fast to be considered steady, and it had been this way for a while.

“You think I don’t see you as the woman you are?” he asked instead, cocking his head to the side and taking a step towards me. “You think I see you as a child? I wouldn’t marry you if that was the case.”

“You’re just...you’re angry,” I said. “At performing our duty, and I know you probably didn’t with-with your first wife, and maybe you didn’t want to

do it with me —“

He placed a finger on my lips, effectively shutting me up. The only thing he could have done that would have worked faster was kiss me.

“You think I *don't* want you?” he asked slowly. He cocked his head to the side again, pressing his finger against my bottom lip, eyes dropping to watch himself do just that.

I swallowed. Heat pooled in my pelvis, and I squeezed, trying to gain control over myself. I throbbed with need, with a heaviness that was both wanting and uncomfortable. His blue eyes turned grey as his nostrils flared, like he could smell me.

And, I realized, he could.

“There are too many wicked things I want to do to you, *baela*,” he said, leaning even closer to me. If he tilted his head down, we would be kissing. “Things I have thought about for a long time. Wicked, vile things.” He pulled back slightly, dropping his hand from my face. “That doesn't mean I want anyone else to watch me do such things to you. As my wife, you're mine to protect. More than even that, you're *mine* and *mine alone*. I don't want anyone to witness you in a state of undress, nor do I want them to watch your eyes roll back with pleasure or the moans and sighs that will no doubt come out of that pretty little mouth of yours while I'm inside of you. I don't want anyone scenting your arousal, the tinge of your purity blood all over me, over my cock. I would kill anyone who was privy to any of that, and yet your father insists —“

“I don't wish my father to send you away,” I said. My voice shook. After every depraved thing he said, how could it not? I was certain I was now pinker than Embyrlyn's hair, and there was nothing I could do to remove the color from my cheeks, my face. “I know he could whenever he wanted and you would be forced to obey. I...I want you to stay.”

I didn't tell him I felt exceptionally alone after everything that happened. I lost both my father and Rianne to this situation I found myself in, and I

couldn't pretend otherwise. The only person I had left was Matthyw. I knew Uncle Taskier was here too, but he couldn't possibly understand. Not in the way Matthyw did.

“So,” I said, forcing myself to continue. “I don't...it's not like I want to do *that* in front of people. But given the choice between that and having you by my side, I'd choose the latter every time.”

Matthyw said nothing. Instead, he lifted his hand up, my fingertips brushing the skin of my neck. I closed my eyes as they closed around my throat, the tip of his thumb cradling the point of my chin. I stilled under his touch. I was certain he noticed my pulse throb against his palms, telling him just how nervous he made me. What scared me even more than his mere presence was his domineering touch. Not because I believed he was going to hurt me, but because I knew he wasn't. He would never hurt me.

And if he did, it was because he could somehow extract more pleasure from me in the long run.

“Sweet girl,” he murmured. He brushed the length of his nose against my cheek, giving my throat the gentlest of squeezes. “You have no idea how badly I want to claim you on your bed, giving you a proper fuck before taking you from behind on your couch, and then teaching you how to ride me on the floor. But your honor means more to me than my pleasure—for now. I will not have anyone think you were ruined before that bedding ceremony.” He clenched his teeth. “Perhaps *that* is why your father agreed to such a thing. Because he knew I would honor you before I claimed you.”

I wasn't sure if my father was that selfless. I wanted to believe he was, but I still thought Chamberly was at the heart of this, and Matthyw's initial explanation for what he was expected to do made sense; they wanted to humiliate him after he dared attempt *something*. After he tried to help me gain some kind of freedom from an arranged marriage in his own twisted way.

“You never answered my question,” I said, slowly opening my eyes so I

could look at him directly. My boldness appeared without any warning, and even though it did nothing for the intimidation I still felt around him, I held his gaze. “What did you intend by taking me back to The Tulip and then leaving me there?”

“You truly wish to know?” he asked in a voice just above a whisper.

My mouth went dry at the sound of it. As much as I wanted to answer, to say *something*, I couldn’t bring myself to do so. Instead, I nodded once, strands of white hair falling into my face.

“I would have claimed you publicly so your father was forced to allow me to marry you,” he said.

“And yet, my throat is still intact,” I said.

“For now.” His eyes flickered to my throat, down the long slope of it. Would I ever feel comfortable enough to present him with it so he could mark me as his? It was as binding as a marriage ceremony we adopted from the humans. The assimilation wolves went through to appear more docile than savage astounded me; it felt like going against our very nature. “I never intended to force your hand. You’re still a child.”

“Yet you intend to be intimate with me in front of people,” I said.

His fingers pressed against my skin. “Not by choice,” he said. “I would have you all to myself.”

I sighed and Matthyw dropped his hand. “There’s nothing we can do, *kepus*,” I misdmured. “We have to perform.”

“Are you all right with that, little wolf?” he asked, and I could see a flicker of concern buried deeply in his eyes.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied.

“It does.” A beat. “To me.”

I released a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “If they want a show,” I said, my lips turning up slightly. “We’ll give them a show.”

EMBYRLYN



“*W*hat?” I didn’t mean to shriek. I hated that I was raising my voice, especially in front of *him*. But I couldn’t help it.

I belonged to...Kazu?

I locked eyes with him, giving him an accusing glare. He looked back at me, eyes at half mast, shoulders still slouched. But there was something... something rigid. Like he wanted to appear casual but he wasn’t actually feeling that way.

“This changes things,” Master Grey said.

“It does?” Kazu straightened, though his hands still remained in his pockets.

“Well, if a wolf belongs to another, I can’t, in good conscience, send her into a mission that would require her to betray that bond,” he said, rubbing his chin. “It would go against everything your instincts tell you to do. It would feel impossible.” He gave me a long look. “I understand before you were assigned a Scarlet mission, Ms.Mackenzie, you might have been more innocent than I expected you to be. It might have been suggested to you by someone with good intentions to take your innocence in your own hands so it wasn’t forced from you by someone both brutal and relentless. Do you happen to know who the wolf you chose was?”

It took everything in me not to look at Kazu. Something prickled at my

chest, something...protective. I highly doubted Master Grey would be okay with what happened between the two of us, even if he could understand it. And honestly, I didn't want anyone to know about me and Kazu, even if he had done something as stupid as leave his mark on me to claim me as his own. I had so many questions for him, and yet, I couldn't ask him myself. Not in front of Master Grey.

Not until we were alone.

But the thought of being alone with him again was...

I didn't want to think about it. My cheeks turned red and I dropped my gaze to my lap. Without realizing it, I had bundled the covers in my hands, my knuckles white.

"Well, my dear?" Master Grey gently pressed.

"N-no," I said. "I don't...I wasn't really thinking about who. I just...I wanted it to happen before...I didn't know he was going to..."

I wished I could have finished one sentence. Just one. Especially in front of Kazu. Stuttering and stumbling around what had happened to me didn't show I was strong. It showed just how naive I was, how stupid.

"Some wolves take advantage of young girls in need of acceptance and love," Master Grey said. "While I know that didn't happen with you, it's concerning someone you don't even remember would leave their mark on you."

"Would it matter if he was found?" Kazu asked. His tone was lazy, but I knew better.

"No." Master Grey shook his head. "Unfortunately, the mark has been left. The bond has been formed. I was hoping to find out who it was in hopes to speak to them about what Ms. Mackenzie must do. That, and keeping him distanced from her would help."

"Help what?" I asked.

"A mark meant to claim a wolf essentially establishes a tether between the two," Master Grey said, gesturing with his fingers to make it easier to

visualize. “The closer the two are in proximity, the more the bond will be felt. For example, if you knew the wolf in question and another female wolf started preening for him, you would feel a surge of...let’s just say, protectiveness in you.”

I wanted to ask him to elaborate. I wanted to know exactly what he meant by that.

“And it would only be worse for the male,” Grey continued. He stepped back and looked over at Kazu. “Wouldn’t you say, Kazu?”

Kazu shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Hmm, well, I suppose,” Grey said. “But a claim is as good as a marriage. Not that you would have been in the lottery anyway, but this would forfeit you from participating.”

“Wait,” I said, holding up a hand. I couldn’t possibly have heard him right. “Wait. Are you saying I’m *married*?”

“To someone you don’t even remember,” Master Grey said with a nod. He went over to the window and pulled back the curtains. The light shot in like a bullet and I flinched back. “See, that’s my concern. If you’re still to do this mission, Embyrlyn, and I hope so, I should like to talk to him and —“

“But what difference would that make?” I asked. My stomach rumbled and I realized that I still hadn’t eaten. “Even if he knew, he couldn’t stop me.”

“Actually, he could.” Master Grey turned from the window and leaned his slight frame against the sill. “You *belong* to him, Embyrlyn. Just as he belongs to you. Essentially, because of the nature of the mission, I would require his permission —“

“But *I*’m giving you permission,” I insisted.

“And I appreciate it,” Master Grey said. He took his seat by my bed and took my hand in his. He patted it a couple of times in a fatherly display of affection. “I do, my dear. And perhaps if we don’t find out who this is in the next couple of hours, we could send you off — with Kazu, of course, as your

handler. But it would be good for him to know you're gone and what you're to do."

"But why?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"There are side effects to being claimed," Kazu said simply, still not looking at me, the *bastard*.

"I thought you said you didn't know," I snapped.

"I didn't know from experience. I still have common sense and an education." He arched a lazy brow, almost as though he was insinuating I didn't have either of those things.

I ripped my gaze away from Kazu to seek answers from Master Grey. He wouldn't lie. He wouldn't play games.

"I'm afraid it's true, dear," he said. "Think about it like this — when newlyweds are first married, the way they show their love is through physicality. Part of it is excitement and the newness of everything, but another part of it is related to passing along a legacy and —"

"Pregnant?" I yelped. This time, I didn't care one way or the other if I did it in front of Kazu. This was *too* much. "I can't get pregnant. I don't *want* —"

"Of course not, Ms. Mackenzie." Grey held up a hand, hoping to calm me down. "But our mind can't rationalize away our natural instincts. In fact, there's a good chance the wolf that marked you didn't even know what he was doing when he claimed you. He was acting on instincts."

"But fated mates don't exist," I said drolly. "We all know that."

"Do we?" Master Grey perked his brows. "In truth, I don't know the answers. I just know people act based on instinct. Could it be fate driving them to do such a thing? I don't know. It's not for me to say. What's important is that it happens, and it happens when a bond is formed because now, producing an offspring is of the utmost importance — besides protecting each other, of course."

My head pinched. I didn't want to think about fated mates or the fact that Kazu-sensei of all people was the one to do this to me.

I thought he hated me.

What if he hated me *more* because of this?

“If we don’t find him in the next two hours, we’ll have to send you off,” Grey concluded. “And any unnecessary unpleasantness will just have to be dealt with...for both parties.” He gave me a warm smile and moved to head out of the room. “Kazu, a word.” He brushed past Kazu without even looking at him, clearly indicating that Kazu had no choice in the matter.

I held my breath, waiting for both of them to leave. The second the door closed, I burst into tears. Except, I pressed my hands to my mouth. The last thing I wanted was for either of them to pick up on my distress.

I just hated how this had happened.

Any hope for me and Dade was completely gone, and there was nothing I could do about it.

* * *

KAZU

The soft mewling whimpers and the heady scent of salt told Kazu Embyrlyn started to cry. He didn’t want to care. He was in the same boat as she was. It wasn’t like he wanted to bite her; it just happened. He hadn’t realized what he had done until he found Master Grey checking the mark. Or maybe it was the overprotective mess he unexpectedly felt...

More overprotectiveness, he should say. He had always felt *something*. Perhaps that was why he was so insistent at keeping her at arm’s length; he didn’t want to let her get close, didn’t want to know why —

But it was too late for that now. Now that they were bonded. *Married*.

What the hell had he done?

“Care to tell me why your scent smothers hers?” Grey asked the second the two of them were out of the room and somewhere prickling ears wouldn’t be able to pick up the conversation.

Kazu leaned back against the wall behind him, shoving his hands back in his pockets. He should give an answer — it was the respectful thing to do. As it was, he didn't, letting the silence do all the speaking for him.

“See, I might be inclined to believe that you have her best intentions at heart, Kazu,” Master Grey continued. “I might believe you masked her scent last night in order to prepare her for today. To protect her. Everyone knows that a mixture of scents tells anyone who can smell the subtleties in scent to understand she's not to be touched because she's under someone's protection. This happens a lot to fathers and daughters when their daughter has their debut until she comes of age to marry and procreate, and then his scent is lifted to attract potential suitors. But then there's the mark.”

He stopped and looked at Kazu pointedly. Kazu continued to stare at him. He had no *inclination* to respond. If anything, it wasn't Grey's business.

“More than that,” Grey continued. “Your lack of reaction tells me you already knew about this.”

“Well, Embyrlyn did walk into a tavern, claiming to want to lose her virginity,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “Maybe she succeeded.”

“Oh, I don't doubt she did.” Grey smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. He took a couple of steps closer. “She did exactly as you suggested in order to prepare for the mission. I'm curious *whom* she chose to give it to. And I have my suspicions.”

Say it.

Kazu wanted him to say it. Wanted to hear it spoken out loud.

Instead, he waited. The only response he gave Grey was a raised eyebrow.

“Either you know who the wolf is or you were the one who took it from her,” Grey said. He tilted his head forward, almost like he needed to get closer in order to read Kazu better.

Kazu said nothing. He kept his face passive.

“I am betting on the latter,” Grey continued, dropping his voice even further. “Because if it were the former, even you wouldn’t be able to control your emotions the way you normally do. Because when it comes to her, you can’t seem to control yourself. It’s always been this way, hasn’t it? And you pretend it’s because she’s inept or that there’s something wrong with her. But the truth is, she’s always belonged to you, hasn’t she?”

Kazu straightened. He towered over Grey. Not only did he flinch, he shifted his gaze. Words didn’t fall from his mouth, but he didn’t feel like he had to say anything for Grey to understand.

She *did* belong to him.

And anyone who dared challenge that would regret even thinking such a thing.

“I should recuse you from the mission,” Grey said. His entire face contorted into a sneer, and Kazu realized then that the genteel, wise old man was nothing but a mask. *This* was who Grey truly was — a beast, just like the rest of them. He just hid it better.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Kazu said.

“You know I would,” Grey snapped. “But even if I did, I know you would leave anyway, especially after bonding yourself to her. Gods, Kazu, I expected this from everyone but you. We are so close to achieving our goal and you’ve done the one thing I never expected from *you*. I’m going to have to arrange a potential backup.” He snarled, jutting his finger in Kazu’s chest. “You better hope you didn’t ruin *everything*.”

FREYA



*K*ent's eyes burned a hole in the back of my head all throughout lunch. I refused to look at him. What if he knew about what Barnes said to me? What if he knew I contemplated taking the concoction despite everything that occurred in that room earlier this morning? Luckily, he couldn't ask me anything considering he sat at the head table and I was at the Earth pack's dining table by myself, but still. The feel of his eyes on me made me feel like I was nothing more than glass.

I managed to finish my dinner and stand up, ready to deposit my dishes at the collection counter when a hand clamped my shoulder. I stiffened, ready to throw my potential attacker over my shoulder, when a distinctly familiar low drawl said in a gruff tone, "I need to speak to you."

A chill took hold of my body.

Kent Byron had the ability to make my heartbeat quicken and slow to a painful thud simultaneously. It also didn't help the fact that his hand was overwhelming my shoulder and that this was happening in the dining room where people could look in our direction should they choose to.

I cleared my throat. There was no reason for me to respond because we both knew it wouldn't matter anyway. I was beholden to him even if I wanted to run to my room and hide away from him for the foreseeable future.

Instead, I rolled my shoulder back – only the one he wasn't holding – and

he led me outside the dining room. I thought we might discuss whatever he wanted to discuss here, even if it was rather open and available for someone to stumble upon, but he pushed me forward gently until we reached the staircase leading up to where his room was. Where I was staying for the time being, until I either got my old room back or was assigned a new one.

We didn't stop until we were tucked inside the room. Kent closed the door and locked it, almost as though he didn't trust someone not to listen in on the conversation he was about to have with me. It must be serious, which only put me more on edge.

This was it.

He knew about my discussion with Barnes. He was going to lecture me or tell me I wasn't allowed to do it or...or arrest me for Lucy's murder. I didn't know. I just wished I knew how to prepare for it so I could defend myself because, judging by the scowl on his features and his cold, narrowed eyes, I was positive I wasn't going to like this conversation whatsoever.

"I have a mission," he said finally.

I blinked, waiting for more.

Instead, he cocked his head to the side, waiting for me to speak.

"Um," I said. "Okay."

"You're coming with me."

This did surprise me. "What?" I took a step back. "Why?"

He gave me a dry look. "You realize, most students would kill to be taken on a mission with a Alpha," he muttered.

"I don't even know what the significance of this mission is," I retorted, crossing my arms over my chest.

Kent looked like he wanted to argue with me, but he couldn't. Instead, he clenched his jaw so it popped before inhaling deeply and grabbing to the nearby chair located in his minimal dining room. His knuckles turned white, though I didn't think he was actually frustrated with me. I hadn't done anything, especially if this had nothing to do with the potential ShadowSide

within me and Barnes's concoction.

"We are one of four packs within this academy," he said slowly. "We obviously have smaller packs within the grand pack, but Bloodmoon Academy is its own village, if that makes sense. Other packs might hire our graduates in order to assist with conflict or matters if they can't do it themselves."

"But don't they have their own academies with their own trained wolves?" I asked. I ran my fingers through my hair, pulling the strands over my shoulder.

"There are two other academies within our region," he said. "Each one has their own reputation. We tend to specialize in physical prowess and stealth investigation while Nightshade Academy is more prone to concoctions and potions, alchemy if you will, scientific research, that sort of thing, and Silver Star Academy is better with assassinations."

"So, you were assigned this mission because..."

"It deals with a problem the other academies can't accommodate," he said.

I glanced over at him, an annoyed frown tugging on my lips. "I get that," I said. "What I'm asking is, why *you*? And, along those lines, why *me*?"

Kent blew out a breath. His annoyance with me seemed to be fading, which I could only assume was a good thing. "I shouldn't be going," he admitted. "Considering I am an Alpha within the academy. There are other teams made for this, but I, myself, have a particular specialty..."

"Which is?"

Kent was silent for a moment, and I thought for sure he wasn't going to say anything. In fact, I was counting on it. I brushed my hair over my shoulder, glancing over at the plastic bags, still filled with the small amount of clothes I had. It was almost pathetic. My entire livelihood could fit in two plastic bags.

"I can track the Vrykolakas," he said in a low voice.

My brow raised. I wasn't sure what I was expecting but it certainly wasn't...that.

"How?" I asked. "I thought they didn't have a scent."

"Everything has a scent," he said. "Even water. I can distinguish the Pacific Ocean from the Atlantic and everything in between. And I can pick up the scent of a Vrykolakas."

"Why do you have to take me?" I asked. "I'm sure I'd just slow you down –"

"You will," he grunted.

I rolled my eyes.

"I wouldn't expose you to such danger if it was my choice," he said slowly, glancing down at his hands. "I was ordered to do it."

"Ah." A pause. "Why do you think Master Grey is doing this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you think it's strange?" I asked. This was dangerous territory. I wasn't intending to question the man who gave me a place to stay after my mother died, free food, and an education on how to defend myself. But the choices he made regarding me and Kent left me curious about what his endgame was. "Why would he assign me to be your Ward? Why would he have me live with you in your quarters? Why would he have me go with you on a mission I have no experience with?"

"Because it would be far more dangerous for you to stay," he said quietly.

I opened my mouth, but I couldn't figure out how to ask my next question. In fact, I wasn't sure what I wanted to ask in the first place. I just hoped Byron would expand on that, though I doubted it, considering he was notorious for remaining tight-lipped on everything.

"You are...vulnerable," he continued, still not looking at me. "Without any family to protect you, your assignment to me is in your best interest because he knows I will protect you."

"Whether you like me or not?" I asked. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to

be teasing him or if I was looking for something else. I refused to think I wanted evidence that he didn't hate me, but I didn't want to come across as desperate, especially in front of him.

“My personal feelings about you aren't important,” he said, which cut me worse than I imagined it would. I knew he didn't like me but he didn't need to agree so easily. “What matters is I follow orders, and that means I need you to pack up for three days. It'll be chilly at night so...” He let his voice trail off.

“I don't have much,” I said.

“Yes, I'm aware,” he snapped. “I'll make sure you'll have appropriate attire. I'll also have food and drinks for us. What you must do is pack what you do have. Rest up. We leave in a couple of hours. Expect a day's walk.”

“Wait.” I took a step forward. “You haven't told me anything about what to expect. What's going on? You're tracking a Vrykolakas and that's it?”

He didn't answer for a moment.

“Is that all?” I pushed.

“If we spot it, if I can successfully track it, I'm to kill it,” he said.

I stepped back, raising my brow. My heart sped up at the thought of encountering a monster as dangerous as a Vrykolakas, especially if this was what was supposed to have killed my mother. Granted, after Lucy's death, I wasn't sure if that was the case any longer, but still. I knew enough about them to know I should be afraid. And there was no way I'd be able to defend myself against one.

“Why you?” I asked again. “Why not just send you with a team of Elite captains or whatever?”

“Because I am the best at what I do,” he said. “Because I work best alone, and, on top of that, this mission is supposed to be discrete. The Stone Pack doesn't want to alert any of their villagers to something like that potentially stalking their immense territory.”

“Wouldn't your presence basically alert them something was wrong?” I

asked.

“Not if they see you with me,” he replied. “Another reason I’m sure Grey has you going with me.” A beat. “Hopefully, the weather remains favorable.”

“It’s been clear all week –”

“Yes, but I sense clouds coming,” he said. “If we’re fast enough, we might be able to avoid the oncoming storm. Which means you’ll remain in this room until we leave, *packing*. Not gallivanting with the alchemy professor, drinking a highly dangerous potion.”

My mouth dropped open. “Gallivanting?” I demanded. “I would never –”

One look cut me off, and I knew I couldn’t continue to argue. Instead, I huffed a breath. “Fine,” I growled. “I’ll be here.”

“There’s a spare bed –”

“I remember,” I said.

Kent cracked what might have been a smile if it was on anyone else. “Good night, Freya.”

My name on his lips.

Odd.

The sensation it stirred within me...

But I ignored it. Brushed it off. I wouldn’t even look at him. And then he was gone.

ADRYA



I wished the random spurts of boldness that overtook me on occasion stayed with me much longer than they did.

The next hour or so went by in a blur.

I avoided dining with my father during lunch and found myself frequenting the dining hall. Unfortunately, this also meant putting myself in plain view of my classmates who were accustomed to my absence during meals, sparking rumors already. My sensitive ears picked up the whispers as though they sat at my table. In truth, I was alone. Matthyw made himself scarce, and I knew he was handling the shock not only of our impending marriage but our duties after the ceremony in his own way. That, or he had been sent on his own mission and had left without informing me. I refused to believe my father would send him away, though I wouldn't put it past him.

The sound of a tray being set down caused me to snap myself from my thoughts. Uncle Taskier was in front of me. It would seem he possessed some semblance of boldness as well; these benches weren't made for someone with such a short stature. He risked even more humiliation sitting with me.

"What are you doing?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"My dear niece, what tact you have," Taskier replied with a wry grin. He settled himself on the bench, though he had to frame his neck back in order to look at me. "Can't an old man sit with his favorite niece?"

I hugged a laugh, the first time I'd smiled in days. "I'm your only niece," I reminded him.

"So you are," he agreed. He took a long sip of his coffee and I couldn't help but wonder if he had doused the hot liquid with some kind of alcohol. When he finished, he set the mug down and began to cut up his grilled chicken.

"Why aren't you dining with Father?" I asked.

"I prefer to dine with you, if given the choice," he said.

"There's a choice?"

Taskier smiled — *really* smiled — and for a second, I could see why there were women who whispered about his beauty. "My, my, niece," he said, setting his fork down and giving me his full attention. "Where did this snark come from? Viktor marries you off to Matthyw and suddenly, you have a sense of humor?"

"My father didn't *marry me off*," I said, dropping my voice. I didn't want anyone to overhear, though I wasn't sure why. It wasn't like I was ashamed of Matthyw, but there were certain proprietary considerations we were breaking, and there was a level of unease stemming from it since some people truly believed Matthyw was my brother. "We aren't married yet." I gave him a long look. "You haven't commented on it."

"Would you like me to?" Taskier asked, lifting up his mug and eyeing it.

I sighed, pushing the hand-eaten tray of food away from me. "Has my father sent you here to spy?"

Taskier snorted. "While Viktor would be that petty, I have better things to do with my time," he said.

I gave him a look.

"You wound me, niece." He placed his free hand over his heart. "No, it's true. I'm to prepare myself. Haven't you heard? I'm to be entered in the Marriage Lottery."

My eyes widened and my breath vanished. "No," I whispered.

He forced a smile, this one tight, and tilted his mug in my direction.

“It’s because Matthyw and I are getting married, isn’t it?” I asked even though I already knew the answer. “I was supposed to be a royal placement to show everyone else some kind of good faith. That just because of my status, I was not immune.”

“Your father too,” Taskier said tightly. “But we know Viktor would never let that happen. Unfortunately, no one wishes to wed me despite my status. So I will be that placement of good faith.”

“I am so sorry, uncle,” I said, meaning it.

He held up a hand. “This isn’t your fault, Adrya,” he said sincerely. “I can’t even imagine what you must be going through. Your professor is marrying your father, you were manipulated into marrying Matthyw, and um the bedding ceremony —“ He cleared his throat, and for the first time since I could remember, I witnessed my bawdy uncle blush. “Well, I don’t have to repeat it. It’s already bad enough. How are *you*?”

I laughed. The sound was hollow and there was nothing funny about the situation I found myself in, but I couldn’t find it in me to react differently. “I don’t know,” I said. “I didn’t have very many friends before this.” I shook my head. “I know I’m supposed to be gritty and I’m supposed to be strong, so I won’t let myself be a victim about it...but I feel alone.” I sighed, but my shoulders sagged down and my lips curved up, though I was hardly smiling. “It’s good to be able to say that.”

“You’re not alone, child,” Taskier said. “I’m here. When I’m not indulging in curiosities, of course.”

“You just told me you’re going to get married,” I pointed out. “I would hardly want to come between you and your new wife, whomever she may be.”

Taskier blinked at me. “Look at me, Adrya,” he said. “I don’t think you realize not everyone is going to want me, despite my rugged good looks. I highly doubt my new wife would care about where I was and who I was

with.” He shook his head. “No. I expect a marriage of convenience — *inconvenience*, I should say.” He tilted his pint to the left and then to the right, careful not to spill any of the liquid — if there was anything left — out. “I will always be here for you, niece. Whether I’m married or not.”

My heart swelled. I had taken Taskier for granted, too caught up in dark fantasies with Matthyw and my duties as the sole heir to my pack. I chewed my bottom lip, overtaken by the thought of being replaced as heir.

“What is it?” Taskier asked.

I glanced at him quickly, completely forgetting he was there in the first place.

“It’s nothing.”

Taskier rolled his eyes. “I’ve known my fair share of women, Adrya, and I’m well-versed to know that anytime they bite their bottom lip and reply with the word *fine*, they are most certainly not fine.” He gestured at me. “Well? Tell me what troubles you and I’ll see if I can help fix it. Unless this is one of those problems that requires only listening?”

“I think Father will replace me as heir,” I said.

Taskier’s eyes widened slightly before he frowned. This time, when he did pick up his mug, he took a generous drink from it. He set it down and leaned forward.

“Where did you hear that ridiculousness and what were they drinking when they told you because I’d like to stock up my alcohol cabinets,” he said.

I crossed my arms over my chest, not in the mood for his dry humor any longer. “I’m not lying,” I said. “I know I wasn’t...perfect, and there were times I dreaded taking on the role...but to name Chamberly as heir?”

“Who informed you of this?”

“Father,” I insisted. “He said I wasn’t fit to be heir because he couldn’t marry me to whom he wanted. He thinks me marrying Matthyw is me throwing a tantrum, twisting his arm to get my way.”

“But that’s not true...” He arched a brow instead of asking me outright.

I looked away, propping my elbow on the surface of the table.

“Adrya?” he asked tentatively.

“I don’t know anymore,” I admitted. I bit my bottom lip, then remembered how he was quick to notice such an innocuous gesture and I instantly released it, hoping he didn’t pick up anything by it.

“You *wanted* to marry Matthyw?” he asked, then glanced around when he realized just how loud he had really been. He leaned even closer. “You know he has a wife, don’t you?”

“*Had*,” I said. “She died.”

“*What*?”

“How do you not know this?” I asked. “It happened a few days ago. She was attacked by a Vrykolakas.”

“She was attacked?” Taskier looked at me like I had fangs hanging over my lips. “You’re telling me she was attacked a few days ago...?” After Father sent Matthyw away initially?

“What are you saying happened?” I asked, glancing at my food that had no doubt gone cold.

“I’m not quite sure.”

I shifted with unease. The suspicion in my uncle’s tone left me with more questions than answers, and I had a feeling it had to do with Matthyw.

“He’s not as bad as you’re making him out to be, you know,” I said.

Taskier downed the rest of the mug before setting it back on the table. If he had doused it with alcohol, he was certainly holding his own quite well. Then again, he wasn’t unfamiliar with alcohol so I was certain his tolerance was high.

“Matthyw?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Matthyw has never been anything but a rogue,” Taskier said. “But for all his nefarious schemes, his rude demeanor, his blunt witticisms, and his depraved reputation, he has always treated me with respect. But even I would

be suspicious, Adrya. His blood isn't ours; he's an outsider —“

“He's family,” I said, then looked away once more. “That's not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant,” Taskier said softly. “How do you feel about this?”

I sighed. “I don't know,” I said. “Sometimes, a fantasy is a fantasy because there's this expectation it won't become real. I'm not sure I like that it came about in the way it did. We're forced to marry instead of...”

No. I didn't want to be too romantic, even if it was the truth.

“Anyway. It doesn't matter how I feel. What matters is doing my duty, even if I don't understand what might happen or why it's happening. Even if it means everything I grew up to be, to have, would be taken from me.”

“I wouldn't worry about that until it happens,” Taskier said. He picked up his cup and tilted it in his direction, closing one eye to closely inspect it, as though he didn't quite believe his drink was already gone. “Until your father himself tells you he's disinherited you directly, there's no reason to assume otherwise.”

“What happens if it does happen?” I asked. I wasn't even sure why I asked because I sure as hell didn't want to know the answer to that. “What if he does disinherit me?”

Taskier gave me a long look. “I wouldn't worry about it until you have to,” he said. “But...if you want me to say something, I would encourage you to fight for what is your birthright. And don't ever give it up, even when it gets hard.” He narrowed his eyes. “And it will get hard, Adrya. Be prepared for that, at least.”

Easier said than done.

EMBYRLYN



While I had been tempted to linger and try and pick up bits and pieces of their conversation, I realized there was something I wanted to do before I left.

If you still leave.

I refused to entertain the possibility. I had given myself to Kazu completely in order to be able to do this mission to the best of my abilities. I had been in the training pits, pushing hard, doing everything I could in order to get stronger so Kazu would see me as more than a whiny girl still in love with —

Except...was I still in love with Dade?

I shook my head. This was the wrong time.

I found myself in the training pits, looking for someone, though I didn't know who, exactly. I hoped the second I saw them, things would click into place.

“What're you doing out here, Pinky?” Rocky's voice took me by surprise but I was proud of my ability to keep myself from jumping. “And why do you smell like...*that*?” He wrinkled his nose.

Though I was able to stop myself from showing how startled I had been, I couldn't stop the blush from filtering onto my cheeks. Damn Kazu. If he just hadn't bit me, this never would have happened.

“Well?” He perked his brows before taking a step closer. “You still need *help* with something?” His lips tugged into a smirk and his hands hung loosely from his pockets.

“No!” I snapped. Clearing my throat, I added, “Thank you.”

He took another step forward and reached out. His fingers brushed my hair from my face, pushing it back.

“Actually, I’m here because I’m looking for —“

“What the hell is that?” His eyes narrowed on my neck.

“What do you —“

“*That.*” He pointed. “You’re...you’re *marked*, Embyrlyn.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I could feel a couple of the teams glance over in our direction, and I swallowed, trying not to pay them any attention.

“I...”

“What the hell? Who did that to you?” Rocky took a step forward. “Did you consent to that? I mean, you would have to, but still...”

“Wait, what?” I asked.

“Because if you didn’t,” Rocky continued, “you tell me and I’ll fucking kill him. It’s the only way to release you from the bond, and —“

“I’m looking for Kayleigh Barnes,” I said. By now, my face was the color of Rudolph’s nose. I had to stop it before it got worse and the training teams would hear what’s going on.

“Wait, what?”

“Kayleigh Barnes. I heard she was...” I stopped myself. “I heard she was an Elite, and I was told I could talk to her about some things.”

Rocky looked like he was going to argue. I knew he wanted answers about the mark, about what Kazu had done to me, but I wasn’t going to give it to him. He wouldn’t understand. Hell, *I* didn’t understand. And honestly, I didn’t want anyone to know. Granted, thanks to my scent being completely messed with and the fact that I had a mark on my neck, I couldn’t escape the stares or the rumors, but I could refrain from indulging anyone’s curiosity. As

far as I was concerned, it wasn't anyone's business.

"She's in the admin building." He jutted his thumb over his shoulder. "Tiny little building just north of the academy."

"Thanks." I followed the direction he pointed to.

Rocky got in front of me at the last moment, one hand going to my wrist to stop me. His eyes locked with mine. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

I nodded. "I am," I said. "But I appreciate your concern."

He dropped my hand and took a step to the side, letting me pass.

I ignored the lingering stare he gave my back as I made my way through the iron gates. Snow had yet to fall, something I was grateful for, especially if I was going to travel up north. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to heat up.

Kazu suggested I speak with Kayleigh Barnes because of her experience. Maybe she could give me some pointers, anything that might help me. I still wasn't sure what to expect, but I hoped she could give me some insight so I didn't feel so...powerless.

The only thing I had done that made a difference was *choosing* Kazu, was letting him touch me, kiss me, fuck me, *claim* me.

I shuddered at the thought.

I shouldn't think about that, not now. Not when I had a mission. Not with Dade being so close to being found.

But I couldn't help it.

There was something primal about what happened between us. The fact that he bit me —

My pelvis squeezed.

I had wanted it.

I might never admit it to anyone, and the fact that I even admitted it to myself said a lot, but I wanted Kazu.

I forced myself to keep walking. The soft crunch of my feet over thin

twigs and hard ground focused me. Hair that Rocky had just pushed away, revealing the mark to him in the first place, trickled over my shoulder again, but I couldn't be bothered to move it now.

I emerged from a thicket of the forest where a small, flat field was located. For a moment, I stared. I had never been here before, and the only reason I knew of its existence was because someone had mentioned in passing that a student's records could be located in the admin building. It was still close enough to the academy a quick, brisk walk would cover, but if one wanted to access something, they had to put the effort into getting there.

The building wasn't really a building at all, but as small and as quaint as a cottage. It was much more practical in appearance, however. I tapped my knuckles on the door, taking a step back. I glanced up at the cloudless sky. December had been warmer than expected, but as it bled into January, I expected more snow, more cold, everything wolves were supposed to love but I had never been a fan of.

The door creaked open a few inches before a woman on the other end asked, "Yes?"

I cleared my throat. "Hi," I said. "I'm Embyrlyn Mackenzie and I'm with the Fire pack. I'm here to see Kayleigh Barnes, if she's available. I, uh, needed to talk to her about something important."

"One moment."

The door closed. I rubbed my sweaty palms on the front of my skirt. I had changed into my uniform, thinking this was the best thing to wear on a mission, but doubt clouded my mind. As Elite, the uniforms provided us good cover stories. Even Kazu had to wear some kind of uniform to blend in with us, and no one gave us a second look. We were simply academy students, and that was it. But maybe a Scarlet mission was different. Maybe —

The door opened, and there stood a beautiful woman with dark brown hair, light makeup, and a burn on the left side of her face. I was so shocked by the contrast, my mouth dropped open before I could stop. What was worse

was my eyes lingered on the burn.

“I’m sorry!” I exclaimed the second I realized I was staring. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t —“

“You’re Embyrlyn Mackenzie?” she asked in a low, melodious voice. There was something soothing about it, something that put me at ease. “Please, come in. I checked your file just now. Very impressive.”

I curled stray hair behind my ear and tentatively followed her into the office. Besides the woman who opened the door — now behind the desk, writing something in a large book — no one else was present. It seemed like it was too early for a break, but I could be wrong.

“You said you wanted to speak with me about something?” she asked.

I glanced over her shoulder at the woman writing before looking at Kayleigh. “Scarlet missions,” I whispered. “I’ve been assigned one and my captain —“

“Kazu sent you to me, did he?” The corners of her lips quirked up, even if she sounded annoyed by this. “I can’t believe Master Grey — well, it’s not my place to question him. Certainly, I’d be happy to talk to you. Let’s sit in the back. Would you like some coffee, tea?”

I wrinkled my nose at the thought of tea. I had had enough tea for a lifetime.

Kayleigh laughed, a sound even more musical than her voice. “Yes, I’m not fond of tea either,” she said.

We made our way to a small room tucked out of sight. Kayleigh gently closed the door and gestured at the small table. I took a seat while she made herself a coffee.

“We won’t be disturbed here,” she said. “I’m glad Zuzu saw fit to send one of his students to me. I didn’t think Master Grey reinstated Scarlet missions. Not after...” She let her voice trail off.

I might have asked her to continue had I not heard her nickname for Kazu. *How the hell did Kazu know her?*

This burst of internal vitriol took me by surprise. I wasn't a jealous person, especially not over Kazu of all people. I wanted him to find someone. Maybe that would help get the stick out of his ass. And yet, every time I thought about Kazu with *her*, with *anyone*, I snarled. My inner wolf pushed against my skin and I was ready to kill someone.

I forced myself to take a breath, to focus.

"I think I will take some coffee," I said, my voice shaking.

"Of course," she said. "I'm sure Zuzu warned you that Scarlet missions aren't for the faint of heart. They require mental and physical capabilities, but also something else. They require seduction at every level." She moved to take another mug and poured black liquid into it. The strong scent of the roast filled my chest with a warmth I hadn't realized I'd been anticipating. "Are you comfortable with doing that?"

"Seducing someone?" I asked, watching her pour some cream into the cup without asking me. "I've had sex before, if that's what you mean."

She chuckled, and I bristled, even though I knew she wasn't laughing at me.

"Well, that's a good thing," she said. She handed me the cup before piling heaps of sugar into hers. How she stayed so fit and consume that much sugar, I didn't know. Another thing to hate her for, even though that seemed like an impossible feat. "Unfortunately, in that line of business, having complete control over yourself in your personal life is crucial. It's easy for your work to bleed into your personal life, but it's important you don't let that happen. Try to keep them separate."

"Do you have any advice?" I asked. "Kazu-sensei says it's the worst type of mission. He didn't want me to go on it at all."

"I don't blame him." She rubbed her lips together, her eyes suddenly reflecting something that implied she was now far away, back in memories that turned up as nightmares. "Your body will be your weapon, but expect it to get used. And enemies will take advantage of that. Your pain will be their

pleasure. And there's nothing you can do." She locked eyes with me. "Expect the worst."

"Wouldn't the worst be death?" I asked. I wasn't trying to be a smartass; I genuinely wanted to know. She might have that scar on her face; she might have to live with it forever, but she was alive.

"There are some things on this earth that are worse than death."

KENT



“*Y*ou seem troubled.”

Kent glanced over his shoulder to find none other than Kazu Shiroiokami sauntering onto the training field. Kent wasn't surprised to see him here. As team captain of one of the Elite squads given regular missions, he practically lived here. What did surprise Kent was his lack of a squad. Then again, it was after lunch, as Kazu pointed out in his distinctive lazy drawl.

“Avoiding something?” he asked. “Or someone?”

There was no lecherous tone, no amusement in his slate eyes. If anything, there was only mild curiosity, like he wasn't even sure he cared enough to follow through on said observation.

“I could say the same thing about you,” Kent said, arching a brow. It wasn't challenging, per se, but it was still enough to hint at a type of curiosity that didn't breed well with others.

Kazu said nothing in response, and that seemed to be answer enough.

After a moment, he pulled out a book from his back pocket and cracked it open, careful not to break the spine. Kent wasn't surprised by this; Kazu was known throughout the academy as aloof.

“I have a mission,” Kent muttered. He didn't know why. One of the reasons he liked Kazu – if Kent could like anyone, really – was because

Takeshi wasn't the type to talk, especially when it wasn't needed. He didn't force conversation and he certainly didn't say anything he didn't mean.

"A scroll?" Kazu didn't look at Kent; it was clear he was looking for someone, but there was genuine curiosity in his tone.

Kent shook his head. "You've heard Master Grey is reinstating them?" he asked.

Kazu flared his nostrils. Otherwise, he looked as impassive as he always did.

"Your team get one yet?" Kent asked. That mild curiosity had grown slightly. Kazu was a squad leader of three – two men and a woman. Well, a man and a woman after Dade betrayed the academy by leaving. Granted, they couldn't be much older than Freya herself was, but they were highly trained and had been since fourteen years old.

"Not that I'm aware of," Kazu said slowly, but there was an edge to his voice that made Kent question the validity of the statement. "I am... concerned. With the Scarlet scrolls back in play..." He allowed his voice to trail off.

Kent grunted his assent. "Not everyone can handle them."

"Not everyone should."

Kent tipped his chin down, the only sign of his agreement.

"I've heard you have a Ward," Kazu stated innocently enough.

Kent knew exactly what the captain was doing: trying to extract information. He was being obvious about it and Kent was certain Kazu knew it. Still, it felt good to talk to someone about this stuff. Being captain, to him, meant shouldering the burden alone, and he wasn't too keen on the other three academic captains he could have sought out for a chat. Kazu seemed safe. His assignment was elsewhere within the pack, but he was discreet and Kent knew he wasn't a gossip.

"Not by choice," Kent muttered. He took a seat on one of the rocks and stretched out his legs, trying to cool his muscles down after the vigorous

workout he forced himself to complete.

“Are they ever by choice?” Kazu asked, scratching his chin.

Kent shrugged. “Not like I can do anything about it,” he said. “Grey ordered me to take her along tomorrow, but...”

“But you don’t think she’s ready?” Kazu guessed.

“She’s a skinny thing, barely old enough to be an adult, and a human at that,” he said. Now that he was speaking, it was easier to get everything out, which surprised him considering how long he had bottled everything up inside. “She can’t fight. She can’t do anything. She’s a liability. I’m positive I’m going to be more concerned with watching her than accomplishing the tracking mission Grey has me doing.”

Kazu was silent for a moment, taking everything in. “Perhaps he sent her with you on purpose,” he said slowly. “It’s not safe here, especially not for the humans.”

He would know, Kent realized.

“Your subordinate –”

“The girl,” Kazu said. “She comes from human parents. But she fights harder than Felix. More stubborn than him, and that’s saying something.”

Kent could almost detect something akin to affection in Kazu’s tone, but he was positive he was mistaken. One of the things about Kazu that made him stand out from other wolves in the pack was his indifference to finding a mate and starting a family. He didn’t particular care about keeping his clan alive, even though he was the last person in his family. He didn’t even seem all that interested in sex. But there was something there, something Kent picked up in relation to his team that made him sound like he cared...as much as Kazu Shiroiokami could care about anything.

“You’re concerned she’ll receive a-a scroll?” Kent couldn’t bring himself to specify the color. He knew he didn’t have to, not with Kazu.

Kazu finally gave Kent his full attention. “I know she will be,” he said, staring up at the sky. “Embyrlyn has youthful innocence and isn’t worldly.

She can defend herself but certain scrolls require vulnerability rather than brute strength.”

“You don’t think she’s ready for it?”

“I’m not ready for it,” Kazu said. “These are my students. I’m duty-bound to protect them.”

“You’re duty-bound to the pack as well,” Kent pointed out.

“And if your Ward received one?” Kazu’s face was still emotionless, save for that silver eyebrow arched.

Kent scoffed. “She wouldn’t,” he said. “She’s too –”

“Naive?” Kazu shoved his hands in his pockets. “Innocent? They all are. Do you think Master Grey cares about an individual when he has his pack to think about? The entire village? What do you think he instated captains for? And then lieutenants? So he wouldn’t have to worry about the individuals. And assigning you a Ward? You might not like her very much, but I know your honor, Kent.” There was a brief pause. “For your sake, I hope she doesn’t get the assignment. Her only option out of it would be to marry, and none of those choices seem particularly pleasant options.”

Kent nodded once before slowly standing back up. This was the most he had spoken to Kazu in one sitting. He wouldn’t exactly call it pleasant. In fact, if Kent was being honest, he would guess Kazu himself was out here for the same reason Kent was, though the silver-haired captain would never admit to such a thing. He did have reputation to uphold, after all.

They all did.

* * *

FREYA

I was exhausted. This wasn’t fair. Why did I have to go on this stupid mission? Kent was right. I wasn’t going to help him. If anything, I’d be a burden and this would be just another excuse for him to hate me even more

than he already did.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I forced myself to stand up. I heaved this weird combination of a sigh and a yawn out of my mouth. My eyes widened when I realized there was more to it than the two wrinkled uniforms I had been given my first night here. There were pants, long-sleeved shirts, even a jacket. My eyebrows raised, and I wondered who was responsible. Lucy knew my sizes, but this wasn't her. It couldn't be her –

Before I could stop them, images of her desecrated body flashed into my eyes. I pressed my lips together and stepped back, nearly tripping over myself.

There was a blunt knock, interrupting my train of thought. "Let's go," came the distinct growl on the other side.

I rolled my eyes and started pulling off my uniform. Clearly, someone was in need of caffeine. Then again, it wasn't like some magic elixir. Kent Byron always seemed to be in a mood. Then again, maybe I just brought that out in him.

Smirking, I finished tugging on warm clothes and throwing a couple of extra outfits into my bag before stepping out of the room. I wasn't surprised to find Kent ready to go

"You ready?" he asked. Each word was a grunt, and I was surprised I could distinguish some kind of meaning from them.

I nodded once. Without warning, he thrust a thermos at me. I brought it to my nose, not bothering to hide my suspicious glare.

"It's coffee," he said flatly. "If I wanted to poison you, I'd still have to carry your body everywhere, and something tells me you weigh more than you look."

"Ass," I muttered as I brushed past him. I brought the thermos to my lips and downed a good inhale of the coffee.

I had to press my lips to keep myself from moaning out loud. How he was still a grump when he had the magic to concoct this, I had no idea, but there

was no way in hell I was going to let him know that.

“Do I get to know any of the details?” I asked as he easily caught up to me. We descended the stairway, passing the kitchens. My stomach growled and I had to place a hand over it. It smelled like they were just starting to clean up the mess from lunch.

Kent frowned down at me. “Be lucky you got coffee,” he muttered as we headed away from the kitchen and out the front door.

The chill in the air attacked me like some kind of wild animal, causing the muscles in my body to tense up. I wished I had some kind of scarf or even a beanie to keep myself warmer than I was. All I could do was tuck myself even further into the heavy jacket I wore and lift the hood, making sure my ears were covered. I noticed movement to my left. The guards, all in black, opening the gate for us. They must be on duty right now.

“Thank you,” I called to them.

Kent almost choked on his coffee.

“What?” I asked in a low voice as the gate clanked shut behind us. “Can’t I show my appreciation for the job they’re doing or is that not allowed?”

Kent gave me a long look. “If we survive this mission, it’ll be a miracle,” he muttered.

I took another sip of my coffee. I didn’t particularly care what he thought. I knew I wasn’t some kind of protege, like most of the students here were. I knew I wouldn’t be able to offer anything if we were attacked by something. But I was determined to learn as much as I could. More than that, I wanted to start protecting myself. I was sick of feeling helpless, watching those around me get hurt.

I wouldn’t do it again. I wouldn’t let another face haunt my dreams at night.

MATTHYW



*M*atthyw wasn't prone to slinking, but right now, he needed somewhere to be outside the academy grounds. He needed space from his father, from that fucking cunt of a professor Viktor deigned to marry, and even Adrya herself. His heart palpitated at the thought of her — of his soon-to-be *wife* — and he instantly forced her from his mind. He wouldn't allow himself to be gleeful at the thought that he had her...that this was exactly what he wanted.

Because it wasn't.

As much as he would enjoy taking her every night, feeling her warm, slick walls coat his cock as he engaged in defiling her in every way his twisted mind could think of, he also knew that it cost Adrya. And there was a good chance it would cost her her inheritance.

He wouldn't apologize for taking her to The Tulip. Nor would he apologize for leaving her behind. He needed to get out of there before he did something he would regret. And fucking her against a wall, in front of these fucking human peasants, was not fit for the goddess she was. He wouldn't debase her in such a way, refused to let anyone see her in such a state of impassioned undress.

No.

That sight was for him and him alone.

And Viktor had fucking ruined it because his cunt of a bitch-mate

suggested a public bedding ceremony all because he decided not to fuck his first wife. And he didn't regret that either. His cock thanked him for it.

He strode into the brothel, needing a drink. Maybe two. He needed to think. Too much was happening too fast.

He strode over to the bar and took a seat. For the most part, it was empty, too early for customers to come in and patronize it.

"An ale," he stated as the bartender wiped down a cloudy glass.

"We're actually closed," the bartender said, giving Matthyw a long look.

"Bryson, give the man his ale," a familiar, alluring voice said from across the room. Matthyw refused to look at Sally. "I'm sure with everything he's endured in the last twelve hours, he needs it." Footsteps soft, nearly silent, crossed the room. "Though, if I'm being honest, I'd say your betrothed needs one more than you, aye?" She reached his side, looking at his profile, arching a brow.

"What do you know of it?" Matthyw growled, staring at the wall in front of him. He didn't want to look upon Sally, didn't want to hear the smug voice or see the sparkling, knowing eyes.

"You wound me, Matthyw," she cooed, reaching out and touching his cheek. "You know I know *everything*." She placed a hand on his shoulder, leaning in close. "I know you brought your sister to my brothel with the intention of ruining her for everyone to see. I know you left her here by herself when something frightened you. And I know you're set to marry her because your father found out about what you tried to do here. I know everything."

"Release my shoulder or you'll pull back a stump," he growled.

The bartender placed a glass of ale in front of him, but Matthyw didn't reach for it. Instead, he stared at the amber liquid, trying to think about what he could do to get he and Adrya out of having to perform in front of an audience. He had always been fiercely protective of her, even as a young girl, but now that he was going to marry her, there was an edge laced with that

protectiveness, something that made it deeper, even more personal than before.

Sally chuckled, a bell-like sound, but did as he commanded her to do. “I’ve never seen you so put out, Matthyw,” she commented. “This girl really has you, doesn’t she? Is that why you pick so many girls that look just like her?”

Matthyw’s eyes narrowed and he turned his head slowly until Sally was in his sight. “How do you know what she looks like?” he asked in a low voice.

Sally’s feral smile widened even more. “Well,” she said. “After you left, I thought it was only fair that I reach out to her, make sure she was okay. You know, it can be fairly traumatic for a girl like her to be left alone in a brothel. She could have been mistaken for one of my girls. Can you imagine? The thought of someone touching a girl as innocent as —“

Before Sally could finish the thought, Matthyw latched his hand onto her neck and gave her soft, fleshy skin a tight squeeze.

“You will not speak of her,” he warned through gritted teeth.

Sally’s eyes widened, though he could easily tell it wasn’t because of the pain she was in.

“Tell me,” he said, leaning forward so his face was an inch from touching hers, “what did you do to her?”

How could he have been so careless? He had only been acting for his own selfish gain. The entire plan revolved around him, and what he wanted. And when he realized he couldn’t follow through with the plan of his creation, he left Adrya. He left her in the snake’s nest, especially considering that the viper in his hand managed to sink her fangs into Adrya. He would kill Sally if he had to. He wouldn’t hesitate. And he would be in her blood like a warrior celebrating a victory.

“I offered her my friendship and nothing more.” How Sally was able to speak at all, despite the vice grip on her throat, amazed him. If she hadn’t

inadvertently threatened Adrya, he would have respected her more.

“Your friendship always comes with a price,” he growled.

“One she wouldn’t have to pay until I assisted her with getting her inheritance back,” Sally said. She coughed once, twice, her face turning redder than the rouge her girls wore to entice foolish men for their coin.

“I should kill you for even talking to her,” he said before finally releasing her. The fingerprint bruises he left on her neck caused pride to stir within him.

“And what of you?” she asked, arching a brow even as a hand came up to touch the raw skin. “You take her here and then abandon her. What does that say about you?”

Matthyw growled but didn’t respond. As loath as he was to admit it, she was right. He ripped his gaze away from her and brought the pint up to his mouth, taking a long sip. He ran a hand down his face, shaking his head. He came here to think, but what he really wanted was a fight. Perhaps he should see Master Grey in order to find out if he was assigned another mission soon.

Coward.

“Was there a different reason you came here?” Sally asked, brushing his hair from his ear. He glared at her, a silent warning. “Don’t give me that look, Matthyw. You’ve always enjoyed yourself here.”

“Not. Anymore.”

A quirked brow decorated her sharp face. “What’s this?” She dropped her hand and placed it gracefully onto her lap, crossing her legs in a disgustingly sensual way. “Might you actually have a heart, Matthyw King? All for your little sister?” She leaned forward again. “Strange happenings over at the Stone Pack, unfortunately. I hear your wife died unexpectedly. Apparently, she was attacked by a Vrykolakas and they’ve sent Kent Byron to track the beastie and kill it. Why not you, I wonder?”

“Hmm,” he grunted.

“You don’t particularly care?”

“Not really, no.”

“Some world say it’s quite a coincidence —“

“I don’t give *a shit* what some people say,” he said. “I came here to relieve my mind with ale and nothing more.”

“After your consumption of ale so recently, you would think you’d have enough,” she said.

“There are plenty of other taverns I could patron,” he said. “What do you want, Sally?”

“I know things are set in motion,” Sally said. “Your dear sister’s inheritance is flimsy at best, not with that impure bitch at Viktor’s side, feeding him whispers he only hears with his eyes. I want to help her succeed at getting what has been her right since birth.”

His fingers curled tightly around the pint, and he considered cracking it on her head to get her to shut up. “So this is the truth behind your benevolence,” he muttered. “Why am I not surprised?”

“You used to like my brand of benevolence, if I remember correctly,” she pointed out with a purr. “You know I’m good at what I do. You know I could easily help her acquire —“

“No.” The word was out of Matthyw’s mouth in a firm, thin line.

Sally slowly pulled her head back, but she remained silent. Tilting her chin down, she narrowed her eyes.

He held her stare but remained silent, just as she had. He wasn’t going to play these games with her. He had never indulged them before, and he wouldn’t do so now.

“Do you care to explain why?” she asked, the first to relent.

“No,” he repeated.

She pressed her lips together before flipping her hair over her shoulder coquettishly. “You’re not as scary as you think you are,” she said. “Certainly, you know what I can do and who I can hurt. I may not have the strength to wield a sword, but I’m sharp enough to wield knowledge. And it’s always

knowledge that will bring a King, an Alpha, to his knees.”

“Are you threatening my family?” Matthyw asked.

“I’m merely reminding you what I’m capable of, Matthyw King,” she said. There was no mirth in her tone; it was cool and jaded. “You must have been gone too long, or else I’m sure you would remember such a thing. You want me as an ally. You don’t want me as an enemy, I assure you. I let your sister know the same thing.”

“You spoke to her of a deal?” Sally had dug her grave, she realized. To involve Adrya in politics when she had more than enough to concern herself with.

There it was, that burst of protectiveness.

No.

Territory.

Someone dared to make a move on Adrya without speaking to him first? It was akin to stabbing him when his back was turned. It wouldn’t be tolerated.

“She knows her mind,” Sally said. “And ultimately, she would be Alpha of the pack. You would be her Consort.” Her lips twisted, like that role meant nothing in comparison.

Matthyw flashed her a grin that revealed all of his teeth. “Is this your way of revealing your jealousy, Sally?” he asked. “She is just a child, and yet, you treat her like she’s a fly caught in your web. Why play politics when there’s no guarantee her father will give her her birthright.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, my love.” She grabbed his cheeks the way a mother might do to her child. Not that Matthyw would know, considering he never knew his parents. “Why not give me a chance to show what I can do for you and your intended?”

“And what’s that?” Matthyw asked. He didn’t actually care what she had to say, but he was furious as to what sort of game she intended to play.

“I can ensure she inherits her pack,” Sally said, squeezing his cheeks and

giving him a blinding smile. “All I need you to do is to whisper those lovely wicked things in her ear, telling her to trust me, to use my services when she becomes Alpha.” She released her hold on him.

“And how do you intend to do that?” he asked lazily. He took a sip of the ale and swished it slowly in his mouth.

“I can arrange the Alpha’s wife’s death,” she said. “And, should you ask it of me, the Alpha’s as well.”

Matthyw clenched his teeth together and slowly stood up. He took the pint in his hand and threw it across the room without taking his eyes off of Sally. She flinched the second it shattered into pieces on the floor; he didn’t.

“The Alpha is my *father*,” he said in a low voice. “You even look at him the wrong way, I’ll pluck your eyeballs out of their sockets.”

He turned in the direction of the door with no intent to ever return.

“Mark me, Matthyw,” Sally called after him. “You’ve created an enemy for you and your pack.”

Matthyw didn’t give a shit. He would worry about that when he was forced to. Right now, he had a bedding ceremony to dismantle.

EMBYRLYN



*I*t annoyed me that Kayleigh didn't really tell me anything I didn't already know about Scarlet missions. She regaled her last mission, how she was expected to give her body for information, how they already knew what she was and that the whole thing had been a trap, how they were going to drown her in a barrel of magic-infused substance similar to acid but much more painful, how, if it wasn't for Kazu, she would have died. As it was, she managed to escape with this burn on her face.

I wasn't sure what to think. The jealousy hadn't gone away, which I hated. There was no reason to be jealous of her. Even if the two hooked up, she didn't have the mark on her neck,

I did.

And then I was hit with the realization that that was something I *wanted*, that I was proud of. Because it wasn't. I didn't want him to claim me. Why would he have claimed me when he could have claimed *her*? Kayleigh was much more beautiful, and that wasn't me feeling insecure; it was the truth. I knew what I was and what I lacked, and I had no problem coming to terms with that back when I was sixteen. It was much easier to do when the one person I loved had disappeared.

But Kazu messed all of that up.

I still circled back to *why*?

I shook my head as I stepped back into the academy building. Thanks to the meal I grabbed with Kayleigh, my hunger was satiated for the time being. Now, I needed to pack.

I tried to remember if Kayleigh had any advice, but all I could remember was she insisted on packing light. Travel, especially up north, would be long and arduous.

On the way to my room, however, I found Kazu, shoulders dropped, hands in his pockets limply.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Collecting you,” he said in that lazy monotone. “We have a mission to go on.”

I knew that; I did, but I still managed to forget it at the same time. I was still thinking of Kayleigh, of what she warned me about, of whether finding Dade was worth what she went through.

Of course it is. You love him, don't you?

Somehow, my eyes shifted over to Kazu, to the delicate makeup of his face, to his slate-colored eyes, and something inside of me shifted. My gut twisted. Something changed...and it was all his fault.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You have a lot of nerve.” I pushed open my door.

Luckily, classes were in session so I had the room to myself. I didn't think I could come up with a believable scenario where it made sense for me to yell at my captain like this. And I definitely didn't want anyone to know that he was the reason for the mark on my neck.

“Oh?” He followed me into the room without waiting for an invitation.

“What the hell did you think you were doing when you left *this*” I pointed at my neck “on me?”

Kazu glanced away like this wasn't a big deal. His hands remained where they were. He barely moved at all.

“Well?” I brushed past him to go to my dresser. I still had no idea what I

was going to pack, but I knew I needed some clothes that would keep me warm since it was December and we were going north. “Don’t you have an answer for that? You didn’t hold back when you told Master Grey I shouldn’t go on this mission at all.” I yanked open a drawer and grabbed a long-sleeved shirt. “You had so much to say about my incompetence, didn’t you?”

“I stand by what I said,” he murmured.

I glared at him over my shoulder. “You haven’t answered the question,” I said.

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know.” I grabbed another shirt and dropped it to the floor. “Maybe why you did it in the first place. What am I supposed to say when someone asks about it? It’s not like you volunteered that information to Grey, by the way. When he asked.”

“I wanted to see what you would say,” he said.

“So, it was a test?!” I threw a third shirt in his direction that didn’t even reach him. He stared at it blankly. “Is this just some kind of game to you?”

“This?”

“Yes, this.” I gestured between the two of us. I sighed. “Look, I know you never wanted me as your student —“

“Who said that?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No.” I wagged my finger just to emphasize my point. “No. You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to pretend. The great White Wolf probably wanted nothing to do with a civilian wolf. I wasn’t like Dade who came from a prominent pack and I wasn’t like Felix who could learn anything fast and had the power to back it up. I was just some girl, a grunt, with pink hair who had the audacity to be more than who I was supposed to be.”

Kazu continued to give me a lazy look. “And what’s that?”

I wanted to strangle him. Anything to get some kind of reaction from the man. Here I was, pouring my heart out, and he had nothing to say, not any

indication on his perfectly chiseled face that he cared about what was coming out of my mouth. I hated him with such a passion I was surprised I wasn't consumed in flames by it.

"A soldier," I said. "An Elite." I knelt down to grab some pants from my bottom drawer. "You know, I might not be as powerful as those two, and it might take me a little bit more time to learn things depending on what they are, but I work just as hard, if not harder, to follow exactly as you say every single time you deign to give me your attention. And it's still not good enough."

"Why do you care so much about what I think?" he asked after another heavy moment of silence.

"Because you're the great —"

"Don't." He narrowed his eyes before clenching his teeth.

"Don't, *what?*"

"I get that everywhere I go," he said, taking a step towards me. "It's all people see, and I don't want to hear it anymore."

"What are you talking about?" I grabbed two more pairs of pants and dropped them into the traveling bag I had specifically for missions. "Why wouldn't you want to hear people admire and adore you? You were one of the first wolves to ever kill a Vrykolakas without the use of your weapon. That's a big deal."

"I don't want to be known for bringing death, even to monsters," he said.

I opened my mouth to say something but then stopped. How could I even contradict that?

I stood up, slinging the bag over my shoulder. I wasn't sure whether to look at him, at something else in my room. I just couldn't look at his eyes. Because the truth was, I didn't know what it felt like to be known that way for something. I didn't know it was as much of a burden as it was a curse, and there was a good chance I'd never know. I was just an ordinary wolf trying to make a difference. I didn't come from a pack. I didn't come from power. But

I was trying to be more. And Kazu seemed to want to be *less*.

No wonder he's always reading and slouching. No wonder his voice is always that heavy, boring tone.

"Why did you bite me?" I asked in a low whisper as he continued to make his way towards me.

I didn't know why I remained exactly where I was, but I did. I should move. I should run. Especially since he *was* the great White Wolf. But my feet remained planted where they were. I doubted I would be able to move, even if I tried.

"I don't know," he replied.

"That's not good enough," I said through clenched teeth. I dropped the sack of clothes to the floor so I could gesture without swinging it around.

"It's all I can offer," he said. He stopped moving, only when he was directly in front of me.

"That's bullshit," I said. "You know it is. I'm sure you've had other... experiences. I didn't see your mark on Kayleigh Barnes."

He wrinkled in nose, jerking his head back like I had slapped him. "Why would I mark her?" he asked.

"Are you blind?" I threw up my hands. "She's beautiful. And obviously she's skilled, if she was sent on Scarlet missions. And she must be smart. And she clearly has a thing for *you*."

He blinked. "What?"

My heart hammered in my chest. I took a step back, tugging at my hair. I reached for my wrist to try and sweep my hair up in a ponytail only to realize I didn't have a band for it. I dropped my hands awkwardly to my sides, clearing my throat.

"Oh, come on, Kazu-sensei," I said, rolling my eyes. "I don't know what happened between the two of you but it's clear something did. She was practically mooning over you as it was since you saved her life and all."

The left corner of his lips lifted. "You sound jealous."

I scowled, unwittingly giving him my attention once again. “Please,” I said. “Just because she’s prettier than I am doesn’t mean I’m jealous of her.”

“She’s not.”

“Not what?”

“Prettier than you.” He took a step towards me again, closing up the distance I managed to forge between us. “And you are. Jealous. I can smell it. Your scent changes from vanilla with the subtle scent of strawberries to vanilla, strawberries, and something citrusy.”

I swallowed. I shouldn’t have looked in his eyes. Not when he had the ability to pin me in place. Not when I should be finished packing by now.

“Stop smelling me,” I said, but my voice came out weaker than I wanted it to.

“Would that I could.”

I clenched my teeth together, balling my hands into tight fists. They shook at my sides. “This is all your fault,” I said, snapping up a hand so I could point an accusing finger at him. “If you hadn’t bit me, we wouldn’t be in this...this state. We could focus on the mission. You could be telling me how to successfully get information on how to get Dade back —“

“*Fuck Dade,*” Kazu snarled, throwing both hands up and slamming them against the wall behind me. With that one gesture, he had effectively boxed me in, so I couldn’t escape. “I don’t want to hear his gods-damned name coming from your mouth again.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do or what to say,” I said.

My heart’s beating only increased at how close he was, at the way his shoulders moved as he kept me contained. He was a predator, and I was his prey, but there was no way I was going down without a fight.

“Aren’t I your sensei?” he asked in a low, slow drawl. It did things to my body, shot little bolts of lightning straight to my core, caused my flesh to erupt with goosebumps. “There are so many things to teach you, Embyrlyn.”

He released one hand in order to brush hair from my throat. His eyes

narrowed, and I couldn't remember why until he took his middle finger and dragged it across my mark.

My pelvis squeezed painfully, filled with anticipation. I tried to hold back a whimper but couldn't.

He stiffened at the sound, his eyes turning even darker.

He leaned forward, and I knew he was going to kiss me. I *wanted* him to.

What was wrong with me?

I wanted Dade. I was in love with *Dade*. That was why I was going on this mission in the first place. It was why I...I chose to lose my virginity to Kazu — so I could succeed at this, at getting Dade back.

But.

But.

When his lips brushed mine, I was powerless to do anything but succumb.

FREYA



I wasn't sure how long we had been walking for, but the sun was high in the sky. It didn't feel like it, though. It still felt cold, like the chill had seeped into my bones and refused to let go. The only thing I had eaten was a few scraps of jerky Kent handed to me. The coffee had already been consumed – in fact, I drank it too fast when I should have nursed it. It had done a good job at keeping me warm at the time, but now, I was cold again.

I sighed, watching as my breath blew in front of me.

“That’s the fifth sigh in the last three minutes,” Kent said from a few feet in front of me. He hadn’t even turned around.

“I didn’t realized you cared enough to notice,” I said, not bothering to hide my sarcasm.

He grunted in response.

“Can you, like, I don’t know, teach me something?” I practically skipped so I could walk next to him instead of behind him. He kept his steely gaze in front of him rather than look at me, which I expected.

“Like what?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “How to tell direction in the forest? How to hunt for food? How to track an animal? How to –”

“You’re not a wolf,” he said as though it was obvious.

I narrowed my eyes at him and nearly tripped over a gnarled tree root.

“Clearly,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t learn.”

“Why would you want to?” Kent asked, finally stopping. “Why not just enjoy the trip?”

“Enjoy...the trip.” The words came out slowly, like I couldn’t quite believe what he had said and needed to repeat it in order to hear the stupidity for myself. “First of all, this trip sounds incredibly boring. All you’re doing is checking to see if you can find evidence of a Vrykolakas, right? Which means a lot of sitting around, doing nothing. So, boring.” A beat. “Second, why would you assume I didn’t want to learn?”

“Why would you want to?” Kent asked, gently pushing his brows together.

My nostrils flared. I didn’t want to admit that I was annoyed about his assumption he made of me, but I was pretty sure he could see that from the look on my face. “What kind of person do you think I am?” I asked.

I stepped around a branch, careful not to let it drag across my face. The leaves were beautiful shades of color – red, yellow, orange, and brown. There were still some green ones left, but those were few and hard to find. The brown ones were stiff, falling easily from their perch on a branch while the colorful ones seemed moist and full of life. The leaves made up most of the ground we currently walked through. I had no idea how Kent did it, but he managed to still walk as stealth as ever, even as he trudged through piles and piles of them, while I sounded like an elephant throwing a tantrum.

“I know plenty of girls your age,” came Kent’s answer after a moment. “You’re into boys and fated mates and how romantic howling at the moon is.”

I started laughing, despite the offensive response. “As you have so eloquently pointed out,” I said. “I’m not a wolf. Why would I find any of those things romantic, especially...” I let my voice trail off. For a moment, I wasn’t going to say anything. Then, I decided against that. “Especially after my mother and Lucy.”

Kent didn't respond. He didn't stop walking either, like the entire thing wasn't something he was concerned about. I knew that was a lie. I was sure he was worried about that, even if his concern was in regards to how those deaths affected him or his students.

"I want to learn these things because I don't want to be helpless," I continued. I doubted he cared one way or the other about my preference, about what I wanted and why, but once I started, there was no stopping the words from flowing out of my mouth. "I...I was helpless with my mom, and my mom taught me a lot. It just...it wasn't enough. *I* wasn't enough. And I don't want to feel that way ever again. But I did. With Lucy. She was my only friend at the academy. She made me feel welcome. And...and something happened to her." I glanced down at my hands. I wished I had a pair of gloves, especially with how cold the weather seemed to be, but for now, I endured the bitterness. "Do you think...do you think I could have -?"

"No." The word was soft but somehow forceful. Without warning, he whirled around. The action was so fast and graceful, I nearly ran into him because I didn't have the time to react to it. "Get that out of your head."

I frowned. "Is this...is this your way of saying I was incapable?"

It was a stupid question. I knew this because I should be glad he didn't believe I could have done something so terrible to Lucy or to my mother, but I also knew he regarded me as weak, and I wanted to hear him tell me himself. It shouldn't matter to me. I didn't understand why it did, but his opinion of me was important, and I hated myself a little because of that.

"You're stupid, not incapable," Kent said.

My frown only deepened. I didn't like my intelligence being questioned so bluntly either. Actually, he wasn't questioning my smarts, he was outright saying I had none.

"I'm not going to get into another discussion with you in regards to ShadowSides and dark magic," Kent said, his voice low. "But I don't think you have the capacity to kill someone you care about. And that could be your

weakness because it's usually the ones closest to you who betray you." Something flashed across his eyes but it was gone before I could tell exactly what it was. "I understand your desire to better yourself, but being on a mission doesn't entitle you to lessons on things you might not pick up at all. One of the reasons wolves are excellent trackers is because of our nose. You don't have that gift."

"But certainly there are other ways to track?" I asked, arching a brow.

Kent gave me a long look. I wasn't sure what, exactly, he saw when he studied me, but whatever it was, it meant...something. Because he sighed.

"Now who's the one sighing?" I asked before I could stop myself.

His eyes narrowed a fraction. "The first thing you need to learn about tracking is, it's both an art and a science," he said. "You're looking for patterns. If you realize that's all you're doing, it'll relieve any pressure you might feel, and it'll be easy to accomplish."

My heart stuttered in my chest. He was helping me. He was...teaching me. A smile broke out onto my face before I could stop it. I didn't want to seem like that desperate, eager kid excited for Christmas, but it couldn't be helped. As it was, I stepped forward, intent to listen and learn. I wouldn't let myself be helpless again. No matter how long it took, I would be better.

* * *

BY THE TIME NIGHT FELL, I was able to pick up disturbances in my surrounding environment I wouldn't otherwise have noticed before. It was like someone pulling off a mask of ignorance I chose to wear for my life before this point. It was my job to track our dinner and his job to hunt it. If I was successful, he'd teach me how to hunt next, something I looked forward to.

Until we found the rabbit I had managed to find, recognizing the scat and the footprints. I was surprised the rabbit was out this late in the winter season,

but it was, and now, Kent was going to kill it and it was my fault.

“You look...upset,” Kent said as he pulled out one of his throwing knives. It glistened under the glow of the moon.

“I mean...” I shrugged. Was I really going to tell him I didn’t want to kill the rabbit? Wouldn’t that only add to the point of view that I was weak?

Without warning, Kent reached across me to grab my arm. It wasn’t a tight grip, but it was firm enough to stop me in my tracks, to cause me to look at him with a question on my face. He wasn’t the type to touch if he could help it.

“There are going to be things you’ll have to do in order to survive, things you might not want to do,” he said. “But you *must*. You might have sympathy for the creature, but you must be prepared to put it down if consuming it will sustain yourself. It’s...it’s a cycle. Life and death. Some death is necessary. Others aren’t. But we must always choose to live.”

“What if I choose life for both?” I asked.

“Then someone else will choose death for you,” he said. “Don’t allow someone the opportunity to do such a thing. You are the master of your life. Not even I can interfere.”

“And a rabbit is a deciding factor in life and death?” I asked. I wanted to have more disbelief in my tone. I wanted to have an attitude, to show him I didn’t care, but I did.

“It can be,” he said seriously. “And if you’re squeamish about it now, when the time comes to make a split decision, your instincts won’t have sharpened to allow you to make the right choice. You’ll be racked with guilt over an animal who doesn’t care less about you, an animal that can provide you with nourishment, a full belly, energy to fight. You can’t be sentimental and strong, Freya. Surely you know that.”

I furrowed my brow. “Of course you can,” I said as though it was obvious.

“Possessing weakness will get you killed,” he said. He finally released his

hold on me and stepped back.

“Who am I to decide who lives and who dies?” I asked, scrambling to catch up with him. “Wouldn’t I be arrogant to assume I had any right at all to such a thing?”

“You have a right to life,” he said. This time, he continued to move, his back towards me, like he couldn’t even be bothered to look at me.

“Couldn’t I say the same thing about the rabbit?”

He stopped again. This time, he stepped into my personal space. His eyes were narrowed, such an icy blue that I was frozen looking into them. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t do that,” he said in a low voice. “Don’t deign to compare your life to that of a rabbit’s when we both know you are much more valuable than that.”

I swallowed. I had no idea why, but my throat went dry, and I found myself drawn to Kent in a way I hadn’t been before. I wanted to touch his face, to run my fingers over his impossibly sharp cheekbones, to drag the pad of my thumb across his bottom lip, just to see what it might feel like. Just to see if he possessed flesh and bone like the rest of us. Sometimes, it felt like he was nothing more than stone, as cold as his eyes. And there were other times, like now...

Something scuffled across the leaves, catching our attention. I was about to turn, to look, when Kent snapped his arm out and grabbed my forearm once more. He said nothing but his glare essentially told me not to move. So, I didn’t.

After a moment, he released me but held up his hand. Crouching low, he moved past me. I followed, standing on the balls of my toes so as to make as little noise as possible. He pointed ahead of him, and I followed with my gaze to find the rabbit. The innocent creature was hopping over a branch when Kent threw out a blade. It struck true.

I didn’t think the rabbit suffered. Hell, I doubted the poor thing even

knew he was dead at all. Was that a blessing? I wasn't sure, but even I couldn't stop the swirl of guilt from knotting up my stomach even if Kent's words did resonate.

If I wanted to be strong, did that mean I had to become hard? Couldn't I remain as I was and still be strong? I didn't know the answer to that. And I wasn't sure I could figure it out before I elected to remain as I was...or I decided to change.

ADRYA



“Don’t pout, Adrya,” Chamberly said as she fluffed out the skirt of the ivory dress. “It’s unbecoming.”

I wrinkled my nose, carefully ensuring I didn’t glance at her, even in the mirror. I didn’t want her to have any reason to run to my father and tell him if I was misbehaving in some way. Just because I saw her as my equal, even if she wasn’t my friend, didn’t mean she acted as such. If anything, she took on a maternal role much more quickly than I would have liked.

“I thought you’d be excited,” she went on, taking one of the pale-green vines that wrapped around the skirt and untwisted it.

This time, I *did* look at her. How could she think that?

“Because it’s Matthyw?” I asked before I could stop myself.

I hadn’t wanted to engage with her in this farce of a bonding experiment between soon-to-be stepmother and stepdaughter, but my father insisted. He wanted us to get used to our new roles so by the time everything was official, we knew exactly what was expected from us. When I asked him if he would invite Matthyw over so he could get used to the fact that Matthyw would soon be his son-in-law, he threatened to whip me should I mouth off again.

“Already rubbing off on you,” my father had muttered to himself. “The disrespectful boldness isn’t as cute as you seem to think it is.”

I wished my father knew me better than to truly believe Matthyw was the

cause of my new-found courage. I deserved the proper credit, but my father would never see me as someone fully capable of choosing my words, of standing up for myself.

“Do you deny it?” Chamberly asked, smoothing wrinkles in the back of the skirt and taking a step back.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” I replied.

“Come on, Adrya.” Chamberly quickly maneuvered around the platform my father had brought in to his quarters so I could be fitted in wedding dresses without the public scrutiny. The fact that it had only been a day since my father told me I’d marry Matthyw left me off-kilter “We used to be friends. We can still be friends!”

“What delusion have you been living in?” I said. “We’ve never been friends. We can’t *ever* be friends. I didn’t bother to hide my glare, crossing my arms over my chest to keep my hands from gesticulating wildly.

Chamberly looked at me for a long moment. “And why not?” she asked.

“Why do you think?” I asked. I dropped my arms to my sides before shoving them behind my back. There was too much tension in my body to keep still, but I had to be careful not to damage this dress. I wouldn’t want my father to have to pay for something I might not wear. “You’re literally going to marry my father. And you knew about it, you *knew*, and you didn’t tell me.”

“What could I have said?” she asked, taking a step forward.

I took a careful step back, wrinkling my nose in disgust. I didn’t want her to touch me. I didn’t want anything to do with her. And her trying to force it on me was the worst thing she could do.

Chamberly flinched, hurt dancing in her eyes. She held up her hands, remaining where she was. “Look,” she said. “I wanted to tell you. I did. But your father insisted that I couldn’t. He was worried someone would find out and rearrange The Marriage Law and prevent us from getting married.”

“Like, I don’t know, restricting an Alpha and a professor from getting

married?” I snapped.

Chamberly raised a surprised brow.

“What?” I asked. “Are you going to tell me how surprised you are by my boldness? Because I’m sick of being told I’m supposed to smile and keep my mouth shut.”

“I would never say that to you,” she said.

“Yeah, and I thought you’d never *fuck my father* but I was wrong about that too!” I exclaimed. Any semblance of control I thought I had, I lost. It shattered like glass, and I was too damn angry to pick up the pieces.

Chamberly looked around, like someone heard my outburst, even though we were tucked safely in a guest room in my father’s quarters.

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” she said, her voice still low. “You got out of that lottery, didn’t you? Your father made sure to get you out —“

“My father was ready to marry me off to some random Alpha’s son from some random pack in order to make sure I didn’t marry a human,” I said. “And yet, he’s on track to marry you, a wolf with two humans for parents.”

“Yes, and now you’re on your way to marry *your brother*,” Chamberly said with a sneer. She jutted her finger at her chest, poking herself two, three times. “I did what I had to do in order to ensure I was going to marry a wolf, someone like me, who could understand me. I didn’t have a father who could pull me from the lottery with a snap of his fingers —“

“Just mine,” I said, placing my hands on my hips. “Stop pretending like you’re so oppressed. We both have the same way to get out of the lottery — through marriage. And we’re both doing it. I don’t know what you did to my father to get him to agree to this because there are plenty of women who would be better suited —“

“You mean pure wolves?” Chamberly arched a brow, daring me to say it. Daring me to give her any reason to run back to my father and play the victim.

I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

“Someone who grew up with our traditions and customs,” I said.

Chamberly opened her mouth, and I thought for sure she was going to bite back. Instead, she clenched her teeth together, jerked an arm up, and curled hair behind her ear. She walked stiffly away from me and over to the edge of the bed. She took a seat, more graceful than I remembered her. Had she always been this way, and I just hadn’t noticed? Or was she trying to be something she wasn’t, to fit in this world she didn’t belong in?

“I’m not here to argue with you, Adrya,” she said, and while her voice sounded strained, it was clear she was making an effort to keep control over herself. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about...well, about your wedding. And your wedding night.” She cleared her throat.

My face reacted beyond my control. She was going to discuss sex with me? The idea was laughable. She couldn’t possibly expect that I would want to talk to her about something like that, especially since there was a good chance she was only here because of my father.

“Why would I tell you anything about that?” I asked.

I shifted. I wanted to pick at the dress, even though it was a beautiful design and, under other circumstances, there was a good chance I would have selected it as my own wedding gown. Instead, I released my hands back down to my sides, flexing my fingers to keep myself from doing something with them.

“I just...I want you to be prepared.” Chamberly stood up, smoothing down the wrinkles on her pants. It was odd to think we had classes only a couple of hours earlier. “Matthyw has...well, he has a reputation. He’s vicious and brutal and —“

“Are you speaking from personal experience?” I quipped even though I knew the answer to that.

Honestly, I didn’t even know if she had had sex before. She knew my history — I had none — but I didn’t know anything about her.

She frowned. “I just want you to know that, as a wife, it *is* part of your

duty,” she continued, as though I hadn’t interrupted her, “but there are ways to avoid it, if necessary. It *will* hurt. Your first time will hurt. Unfortunately, there’s no getting around it, and I doubt that Matthyw will be gentle or concern himself with your feelings. It’s just, you need to be prepared —“

“Why do you have such little faith in him?” I asked, reaching up to finger the necklace he gave to me.

Chamberly glanced over at me. “What?”

“You make him out to be a monster —“

“Adrya, he is,” Chamberly said. “Do you know where he goes when he gets sent away? It’s not adventures, it’s —“ She pressed her lips together. “Your father forbade me to tell you but I think, in this, he’s mistaken. Matthyw is a killer, Adrya. Did you notice his fingers when he came back most recently? That wasn’t dirt crusted on the skin. It was blood. He gets sent off to murder people.”

I had the sudden urge to defend Matthyw. I didn’t know anything about the work he had to do or why he chose to do it. Maybe there wasn’t a choice at all. And I knew Matthyw well enough to know that he was a warrior, that he fought with everything he had, that he had a temper and he didn’t care what others thought of him. And Chamberly was comparing him to someone who would brutalize me and laugh while doing it.

“If I could save you from this marriage, I would,” she said, and I believed her. “But you made a choice, one that ruined everything your father was trying to build for you —“

“Come on, Chamberly,” I said. “We both know that’s not true. I was supposed to be his heir, but I’m not. Matthyw isn’t either. *You* are. My father didn’t want his only child married to a human. He was more worried his the pack would view that, not how I feel.”

“And do you think you put any thought or consideration in this pack or your father with what happened between you and Matthyw?” She shook her head. “I never thought you were this irresponsible. Sure, you snuck out every

now and then, but what eighteen year old doesn't? But to go to *The Tulip* of all places with *him*? What did you think was going to happen?"

If Chamberly hadn't been engaged to my father, if she hadn't been the one who suggested a public bedding ceremony — from what Matthyw believed, anyway — her words might have affected me more than they did. I might have cared about the implication of them, of her perception of me and how it might have changed because of choices she deemed as poor.

But the truth was, I didn't care anymore.

"Were you the one who suggested the public bedding ceremony?" I asked.

Chamberly jerked her head back at the abrupt change of subject. "What?"

"You heard me." I wouldn't repeat myself. Not for her.

Chamberly looked away, clenching her teeth. Her tawny eyes searched the wall, like it had the right answer.

But I already knew the truth.

"I'm trying to protect you," she said finally. "If someone questioned the validity of your marriage, especially to Matthyw —"

"I think we're done here," I said. "I'll wear this one. Unless you tell my father I should wear something else."

If she had a response, I didn't want to hear it. I carefully stepped from the platform and made my way to the large bathroom, slamming the door behind me. It was petty, I knew, but I certainly felt much better than I had in a while.

KAZU



*K*azu knew he shouldn't kiss her. He was certain Grey waited for them, and he was also certain that kissing Embyrlyn would lead to other things. It was beyond his control at this point, and he had no intention of fighting it.

The second he felt her respond, he pushed into the wall so he could deepen the kiss without touching her. He wanted to see what he could get away with, how far he could go before she inevitably pushed him away.

He had never believed in soulmates or fated mates or any of that bullshit. He had been around long enough and with enough girls to not lose his head about whether this girl was the one or whatever. He could care less, and in his profession of being an Elite, a warrior, for the academy, it was the smartest way to live, considering he could die at any moment.

But with her...

Kazu remembered always feeling protective over her, ever since he first met her. At the time, he thought it was because she was the only girl on his team. He never saw her as anything more until she got assigned to that stupid Scarlet scroll.

And then everything changed.

He would have opposed it either way. He knew that. But the thought of her risking her life for that *traitor* bristled him and wouldn't let him go. His blood boiled at the thought of her easy acceptance of it because she was too

far gone to realize Dade didn't love her and never would. She had always been that idyllic romantic, but this was so much worse. Because, by agreeing to this, she *hoped*. She still believed in Dade, and that boggled his mind because Dade did nothing to fucking deserve it.

Kazu's tongue swiped her bottom lip and she opened up for him like the good girl she was. Her hands lifted, tentatively touching his shoulders. The innocent gesture nearly brought him to his knees.

One hand dropped from the wall to grip her waist while the other hand snaked behind her, gripping the back of her head, fingers tangled in her hair.

Their tongues dueled for dominance, and he forced himself to commit this feeling to memory, the way his insides were like frogs jumping up and down. The way her heady, sweet scent consumed him until he was delirious with want for her.

When they had to breathe, she turned up those grass-green eyes, dark with desire, and asked, "Why?"

Kazu shook his head, forehead nearly grazing hers but not quite. He knew exactly what she was asking even though she hadn't elaborated. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

Because the truth was, he didn't. And he wasn't sure what to do with that. He knew what he wanted, but that didn't mean anything.

* * *

EMBYRLYN

"We should...we should stop." I didn't want to say the words. They didn't want to come out of my mouth.

But I had to.

We needed to focus. Even so, I couldn't stop myself from closing my eyes and indulging in the memories from the night before. I wanted that again. I wanted to immerse myself in the woodsy scent that clung to his

frame like a lover, like I had. I wanted to feel him plunge deep inside of me, filling me up and making me forget even my own name. And it scared me more than anything in the world, because this was Kazu-sensei, and I was nothing to him. I didn't want to feel this way. This was a guarantee of my heart breaking, and it would be my fault.

“Yeah.”

His eyes dropped to my mark and he leaned forward. Instead of touching me, he inhaled my scent and sighed.

That shouldn't have any sort of affect on me, and yet, my entire body coiled at the thought. How did he do that? He barely touched me, and my entire body was on fire for him.

“We should. But.”

“But?” I tilted my head to the side, furrowing my brows.

He pulled back, like I had slapped him. I wasn't sure what caused the reaction, but whatever it was seem to weigh heavily on his mind. He took a step back, and then another, like he needed space. Like he didn't trust himself around me. He carded his long fingers through his silver hair and glanced at the door.

“We should go,” he agreed.

He made for the door.

I should've let him leave. It was my choice to stop. I was the one saying we needed to get ready for the mission. But my feet move before I could stop them and before I knew it, I was standing in front of the door, back, pressed against the wood, blocking him from doing so.

“Why did you bite me?” I demanded to know.

“I already told you,” he said through clenched teeth, “I don't know.”

“That's not good enough!”

“There's nothing else I can tell you,” he said.

“Did you mean to?”

“Absolutely not.”

I shouldn't have been surprised by his flippant tone, but it still hurt. I jerked back, hoping that by giving us more space it would lessen the blow. I shouldn't care whether or not he wanted to do this to me in the first place. I knew how he felt about me before all of this. I shouldn't be surprised.

His eyes narrowed, immediately taking in my reaction. "Did you want me to?" he asked, dropping his voice.

I hated how moist and uncomfortable my underwear had become. I hated how his voice made my body react without any compliance from my mind. He had complete control over me, and I couldn't let him know it.

"Of course not," I said. "I...I don't think of you that way."

He clenched his teeth. Anger rolled through him like an unexpected storm. I wasn't sure why he was mad in the first place. He just said he didn't want to do that to me and I was just agreeing with him.

"Is this going to be a problem?" I asked, tilting my head to the side. I didn't have to gesture or verbalize the mark for him to know what I referred to. "For the mission in getting Dade back?"

"You think I give any kind of *shit* about getting Dade back?" he asked tightly. His muscles coiled with every word, and I could tell he was actively restraining himself.

My heart skipped a beat, though I wasn't sure why. I knew he wasn't going to hurt me. I didn't know why I trusted him so completely, but I did. My reaction was about the anger itself. I was nervous about it...but I was also excited. And that was also something that worried me. Jealousy wasn't something I liked in a mate. The thought that I could belong to anyone, let alone a man, was enough for me to want to fight someone.

But witnessing Kazu-sensei react like this made me realize I wasn't as against jealousy as I thought.

Or maybe he was the exception.

"You should," I forced myself to say. I needed to focus. I couldn't let him distract me, whether intentionally or not.

“And why should I?”

I sneered. “That’s rich, coming from *you*,” I snapped. “You trained him. You took time out of your day of reading romance novels and doing whatever else you do during your time off to train him *by yourself*. You spent more time with him than anyone. You *should* care —“

“Dade is a little shit,” Kazu growled, “too selfish to think of anyone else and too blind to see what was in front of him.”

“His entire pack was slaughtered in front of him,” I said.

“And my older brother killed himself because the civilians of Ankora wouldn’t let him forget what an utter failure he was because he didn’t complete a mission,” he barked. “And you know who walked in on his body? Me. Everyone’s got problems. Everyone’s going through things. That doesn’t give us a reason to betray the packs that took him in, offered him a family, a sense of belonging, in order to chase a dream of blood and revenge. He wants to risk his life, try and be a Light Bringer? Let him. And if we want to find him and stop him, even better. But he is *not* allowed to come into my home like he never left. He can be put in prison or die, for all I care.”

I couldn’t believe it. Kazu took time out from his day to train Dade, and he was so quick to cast him —

I stopped the train of thought and sat with it. Really sat with it.

What if he was frustrated because he took that time and dedicated it to Dade? What if he felt more betrayed than I or Felix did?

“It’s not your fault, you know,” I murmured, eyes on the floor.

“What are you talking about?” he asked stiffly.

I looked up at him, catching his eyes. The slate color was dark, and I could still feel the anger rolling off of him like thunder, but there was something else. A flash of light. It was almost fear, but I couldn’t use that word when describing him. I was on the same thing here, and whether Kazu sensei wanted me to figure it out or not, it didn’t matter. I would push him, the same way he pushed me when I was his student, the way he pushed me as

his teammate.

“What Dade is doing isn’t a reflection of you,” I said. I shook my head. “Did you know I was there the night he left?” I didn’t wait for him to respond. In fact, I moved away from him so I could lean against the wall. If I was going to tell the story to him, of all people, I needed support. I knew he wasn’t going to give it to me and I was okay with that, but it meant I needed to find it myself. “I followed him. I knew he was going to do something drastic after what happened and I knew I needed to try to stop him. It was raining, I remember that. I was only in my flimsy pajamas, and I was soaked. I got sick right after; I don’t know if you remember that.”

Kazu nodded, but said nothing. Everything about his face was stoic. It did nothing to encourage me to continue, but now that I started, I found I didn’t want to stop.

“I begged him to stay,” I continued. “I cried like a baby. I told him I would do anything, I would be whatever he needed me to be. I would love him and support him and all of that.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Kazu snarled. “Why would you think I want to hear this coming from you?”

“Because at the end of the day, it didn’t matter what I offered him,” I said, pushing into the wall to ground me to this moment. “I even asked him to take me with him, and it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered to —“

Without warning, Kazu’s hand was on my throat and he leaned into me, face inches from mine. “Stop,” he said. “Your words make me furious. I don’t want to hear about you going with *any* man. You’re —“

He cut himself off.

I narrowed my eyes.

“It’s not your fault,” I repeated.

I still wasn’t scared of him.

He gave me one last glare before dropping his hand. “I know that,” he snapped. “But this?” He gestured between us. “This is.”

And with that, he left.

FREYA



*I*t wasn't long before Kent found a small clearing where we could make camp and still have the shelter of the trees.

"Always make camp by a body of water, if possible," Kent told me as he set the rabbit down by the fire. "Not only will you have a source of drinking water and a place to bathe, but if you're being hunted, you can jump in the water and it'll hide your scent."

I nodded, unable to speak yet. I was still consumed by my thoughts, tugging at my fingers, trying not to show my nervousness at potentially losing who I was in order to be who I wanted to be.

I could feel Kent's eyes on me, watching me, dissecting me. I was surprised he had yet to lecture me about my unwillingness to kill an innocent creature, even to nourish my body, more than he already had. I heaved a sigh, glancing away, as Kent began to collect twigs and sticks. Though he didn't ask for my assistance, I started to do the same. Getting some space from him was something I needed, if only to clear my head a little bit.

I shouldn't be upset by him or what he was trying to teach me. At the end of the day, I needed this information in order to achieve the goal of taking care of myself. If I didn't want anything merely given to me, I needed to learn how to hunt on my own, even if that meant slaying a rabbit, a squirrel, even a deer. If it meant my own survival, I needed to be able to do it. Already

I was failing myself. I knelt down to grab a few twigs, my nose wrinkled. If I couldn't even pull the trigger on something so terribly basic, how was I to do it with something on a much grander scale? How was I going to do that to a monster?

By the time I finished my small collection, I tossed the twigs I found into a small pile Kent had already created. It looked like he was satisfied with the amount the two of us had gathered because he hummed as he began to study each twig before tossing it back in the pile. Finally, he settled on a thick one before grabbing a flat board I hadn't seen him pull out and setting the stick on top of it.

"What's that?" I couldn't help but ask.

"It helps start a fire," Kent said. He nodded. "Come over here. I'll teach you."

I hesitated. Already, I felt like a failure. Why would he continue to waste his time with me when I didn't pass the first test between us? However, my legs moved before my head gave permission and it wasn't long before I found myself sitting next to him on the log he had moved close to the fire pit.

"It's imperative you know how to start a fire," he said. I was careful not to get too close to him, even though the air took a chill and he radiated much more heat than I imagined. It must have something to do with the fact that he was a wolf. "Not only will it keep you warm, but it'll cook the meat or fish you might have caught. Or, in your case, found already dead."

I narrowed my eyes but I couldn't help the quirk of my lips. If he could tease me about my failure, that had to be a good thing. Maybe even I could learn to laugh from it.

"This board stabilizes the stick as you move it between your hands," he said. "It's imperative whatever stick you choose is fit for the job. It's like choosing a mate: choose the wrong one and your very survival comes into question, you'll work harder than usual, and there's a chance it might not work in the first place. Choose the right one, and everything will naturally

fall into place.”

“For someone who has no mate of his own, you seem to know a lot about the process of finding one,” I pointed out, shoving my hands under my thighs, careful not to scratch my skin on the bark of the log.

Instead of being offended by the observation, Kent smiled in his own, small way. I was surprised I noticed it at all. “That’s true,” he said. “Perhaps I’m more adept at selecting perfect sticks than I am mates.”

“And how do you know what a perfect stick is?” I asked. I didn’t understand why, but it was easy to talk to him like this. Back at the academy, he was blunt, cold even, like he didn’t want to speak to anybody unless he had to. But out here, he almost seemed freer, like he could allow himself to relax. Like he didn’t have to pretend to be anything he wasn’t.

“Obviously, anything wet is going to make your life much more difficult,” he said. “But don’t think the solution would be to pick a dry stick either. Dry weather and dry tools cause runaway fires. What you have to remember is this forest is filled with natural resources offered to us in exchange for respect. Whether it’s the animal we slay for nourishment or the twigs and sticks we use to build a fire, it’s your responsibility to take what is given and no more than what you need.”

My eyebrows raised to my hairline. Though his voice was low in the usual rough way he normally spoke, there was a passion there I couldn’t help but be drawn into. Something about him, something underneath what he was, it was difficult for me to explain, other than the fact that he reminded me of an onion and it was my job to peel back the layers. To realize there was more to him than some grouchy captain who didn’t care about anyone and anything.

He did care. He just didn’t show it. I couldn’t help but wonder if that was something that could be applied to other aspects of his life.

“...recommend putting a small hint of sap at the end of the stick, so once the fire stops, it’s controllable, to a degree,” he was saying.

I blinked. I needed to pay attention. Right now was the worst time to let myself get distracted by the sound of his voice or the fact that he was willing to teach me something even after I completely messed up his last lesson.

“Then, you take the stick, place it firmly in this small board, and twist it between your palms,” he said. “Here. You try.”

My eyes widened but I didn’t say no. How could I? He was giving me another opportunity. I couldn’t run from it.

I did exactly as he explained, but even after a few minutes, nothing seemed to happen. I frowned, trying again. I couldn’t fail at *this* too, could I? I wasn’t sure how long I tried. While I was busy doing this, pinching the skin between my hands, Kent sat next to me, skinning the rabbit. I was suddenly glad I wasn’t a wolf because I wasn’t sure how I’d feel about that strong scent overwhelming my senses the way I was sure it was doing to him.

“All right,” Kent said. Without warning, he reached out and placed his hand over mine. “You aren’t going to get it on your first try, or even your second, or your third. Building a fire takes time. Hand calluses helps –” He tilted his head to the side as his thumb brushed my palm. He must have felt said calluses because his eyes lifted to mine with a question in them.

“My mother,” I said. “She trained me. I don’t know all that I can know. I’m clearly not perfect at many things, but we didn’t just run away from things. She wanted me to be able to fight. To protect myself.”

Suddenly, her image came into my mind, replaying the look of fear that crossed her features before I saw her mangled body.

Something warm tightened on my hand, and it was only when my eyes snapped open did I realize they had closed in the first place.

It was Kent’s hand. He hadn’t let me go. In fact, his thumb seemed to trace tiny patterns into my skin, as though he was branding me. But I didn’t think he knew what he was doing, at least, judging by the intense look he gave me.

“Do you remember when you asked me if I thought you were capable of

killing your mother?” he asked in a low voice.

I swallowed. I wanted to tell him something witty, a smart retort that would level the playing field because, right now, it felt like he had the upper hand and I was like that rabbit he slayed, trying to get away from him and finding myself unable to run, even if it meant surviving. Instead, all I could do was nod.

“You aren’t,” he said. “I know that now.”

I swallowed. I wasn’t sure if this was another way he was insulting me or if he was reassuring me. I wished his tone would soften. I wished his gaze wasn’t so terribly intense. All I could do was look at him until he looked away, trying to understand this man wrapped up in an enigma.

“Did you see it?” he asked. “The thing that killed your mother?”

His question snapped me out of my thoughts, and I shook my head. I carefully closed my eyes and found a tear curving down my cheek. *Fucking great.* I was crying in front of him too. I was a real piece of work. After this little mission, I was sure Kent never wanted to be near me again, and would do everything he could in order to ensure he was never placed on a mission with me, even if I was his Ward.

“It happened so fast,” I whispered. I stared at the ground beneath my feet, rather than at him. It was easier. I was less distracted. “She told me to run, but I couldn’t. And by the time I got back, she was already gone. The only thing I remember is she told me to find the academy, to find Master Grey.” I picked my head up. “Do you think Lucy...”

I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to ask.

He seemed to understand, though. He shook his head. “Lucy wasn’t killed by a Vrykolakas,” he said. “We have too many protocols in place to ensure such a thing is impossible.”

“So,” I said, “someone...”

“Not you.” His eyes were as sharp as his words and his grip on my hand tightened in order to emphasize his point.

“How can you know that?” I asked, almost desperately. Because I didn’t know that, and I needed some sort of reassurance that I didn’t have a target on my back, drawing death closer to me. Not because I was scared of death, but because I didn’t want anyone else to die.

“There’s a reason Grey told me to take you with me,” he said finally. “And it has nothing to do with you now being my Ward. The academy itself is safe for students, but it does have its own dangers. In fact, there are times the academy itself is much more dangerous than the Vrykolakas. And you... you would be safer with me than confined within its walls.”

ADRYA



The night came and went without preamble. Matthyw still wasn't around and I couldn't figure out if that was a good thing or not.

I spent most of my time with Taskier. The great thing about him was that I never had to be something I wasn't. Most of the time, he didn't speak at all, preferring to keep his head in whatever book he was reading. We didn't speak of the Marriage Law, of my impending marriage, of Chamberly, of my father. I could pretend I was a normal girl.

Sunday evening, I sipped on a mug of hot coco, trying to keep my eyes open while reading a romance book, when Taskier cleared his throat. The flames from the fireplace crackled and pop, a subtle song in the background of the heavy but comfortable silence.

I glanced over at him, raising a brow. I had spent more time with Taskier in the last few days than I had in the last few months. I realized I should have been spending *more* time with him because I didn't have to fall into line or worry about certain expectations placed on me. In that time, I got to know him much better than before, and I knew that innocent little cough wasn't as innocuous as someone else might think.

"I feel I need to ask..." The pained expression on his face gave me pause, but it was only when he placed a bookmark in the pages of his book and set the book on the coffee table near him that I realized this conversation would

be more than something superficial and polite.

“Yes?” I said when he hadn’t finished the thought.

“Well, I know you know what’s, um, what’s expected of you on your wedding night, and I just, well, I want to know if you, well, if you have any questions. I know you have, um, well, I imagine you have female friends to help you with this but I’m not sure if they know what to expect since purity is still regarded as ideal in this type of situation. But…” Another clearing of the throat, and he couldn’t quite look at me. “Anyway, as someone who *is* experienced in that area, I’m happy to…” He pinched the bridge of his nose, taking his goblet of wine into his hand. He didn’t bring it to his lips, not yet, but he held it tightly like a crutch. “Look. I know I’m your uncle and probably the last person you want to talk to about this, but I’m here if you need to talk, if you have any concerns, or if you have any questions.”

I closed my book and let it sit in my lap. I chewed my bottom lip, contemplating his words. Warmth filled my chest at his concern. It was much better than how Chamberly approached me about the same subject.

“Do you think Matthyw will be cruel?” I asked. Not because I worried, but because I wanted his opinion on the matter.

Taskier pressed his lips together, cocking his head to the side. A golden brown curl fell into his forehead and he set his goblet down.

“I think Matthyw cares a great deal about you, Adrya,” he said. “That much, I do not doubt. I think he would never do anything to intentionally hurt you either. In fact, I think anyone who attempted to do such a thing would find themselves on the end of his cutlass, Night Blade, or strung into ribbon should he allow himself to unleash his wolf. And, if it came to you, I wouldn’t doubt he’d go for the wolf immediately because of how protective he is over you.” A pause. “But he does have a reputation. And he does have a tendency to be…animalistic when it comes to physical activity. I just… I want you to be prepared.”

My cheeks pinched with heat, but I couldn’t help but imagine what

Taskier meant when he considered Matthyw animalistic. It should have frightened me, certainly, but it didn't. A quake rippled gently through my pelvis and I had to look away, afraid he might read the curious, heated look on my face.

"Of course, the problem is, how do you prepare?" Taskier continued. His fingers drummed on the surface of the table, shaking his head. "I could give you book recommendations, certainly, but that won't suffice. The best knowledge in this particular circumstance is experience, unfortunately. But... but I am here, like I said, should you have any questions."

I nodded once. "Matthyw has a reputation of taking the virginity of many women." I wasn't sure whether I was asking a question or stating a fact. And I wasn't sure why I felt compelled to even bring this up with Taskier because...well, because I didn't want to discuss Matthyw's sex life with Taskier. "Blood Beast."

But I was curious.

"He does have that reputation, yes," Taskier said, bringing the goblet to his lips and downing a generous amount. "Does that bother you?"

I bit my bottom lip and played with the spine of the book. "Truthfully, no," I admitted. "What bothers me is having to do something so intimate in front of...everyone."

"Yes, well..." He rolled his eyes and settled back down against the chair. "Truthfully, as much as it upsets me you have to endure it, I do understand the necessity. Matthyw made it very clear he never consummated his marriage with...what's her name? He always referred to her as — well, it wouldn't be proper to say it in front of you. Anyway, it doesn't matter. What matters is you and what's going to happen."

"Father wouldn't have cared," I muttered more to myself than to him. I wrapped my fingers around the seat, balancing the book on my thighs.

"I'm not so sure about that," Taskier murmured. He picked up the goblet. "Your father and Matthyw have always had the strangest relationship, truth

be told. They are as close as a father can be to a son and hate each other as rivals from two different packs vying for the same mate.”

“Why?” Maybe I didn’t understand because I didn’t have a sibling, but it didn’t make sense why they would hate each other.

“Your grandfather was always hard on Viktor because Viktor was his heir,” Taskier said. “He couldn’t let himself coddle Viktor nor joke with him. There was a coldness between them, though your father did everything he could to earn your grandfather’s approval. He married your mother because your grandfather suggested it. When Viktor had a blood heir, he had no more need for Matthyw. Matthyw never officially became your father’s heir because you were a nice surprise that gave Viktor what he wanted. However, Viktor and Matthyw resented each other.”

“And you?” I asked.

Taskier smiled wryly. He took another long sip of his wine. “Look at me, Adrya,” he said. “I’m not a wolf a father or a brother would be proud of. So, like now, I was ignored.” He set the goblet down. “But enough talk of such depressing things. The important thing is you are to be married, and while it’s unfortunate that you must adhere to barbaric bedding ceremonies, once it’s over, everyone will forget until the next one.”

“Here’s to that,” I said, picking up my book.

* * *

IT WAS LATE by the time I went back to my room. I began to tug at the necklace I wore around my neck, the book I had been reading plopped onto my bed.

“Where were you?”

The familiar voice set me on edge. The fact that I hadn’t smelled him sooner irked me; I needed to get out of my own head. I turned slowly, and there stood Matthyw, tall, lean, hulking over like his wolf was on the verge of

emerging from his skin. His ice-blue eyes narrowed on me, pinning me in place like a butterfly. His nostrils wrinkled.

“Wine and old books,” he said. “Taskier?”

I nodded, unable to find my voice.

Matthyw continued to stare at me, and though I couldn't seem to figure out what, exactly, he wanted, I couldn't move.

“Tell me what you said to Sally,” he commanded. “And what she said to you.”

I furrowed my brow, my hands dropping to my sides when I realized I was holding onto my shirt still. “Who?”

Matthyw clenched his teeth. “The woman from the brothel.”

“Oh.” I furrowed my brow. “You mean the night you left me?”

He arched a brow, surprised by my audacity probably, just like everyone else seemed to be. He took a step forward, still silent, which startled me, considering Matthyw also had a reputation for his fiery temper. If I was anyone else, he would have barked back something so dreadful, I might have scurried out of the room with my tail between my legs.

But I wasn't anyone else.

He continued to cross the room until he was right in front of me.

“Tell me, *kepus*, was this what you wanted?” I asked. I managed to look him in the eye. I still didn't understand the boldness that took control of my tongue, but I didn't stop it either. I didn't *want* to. “Is that why you took me to that place?”

“If I recall, you went to that place before alone,” he said in a low voice. “If I hadn't found you in that flimsy thing you called a disguise...”

He reached out, fingertips brushing against my chest. They toyed with the chain of the necklace he gave me that night, the one I still wore now.

“I didn't know what I was doing that night,” he finally said. “I thought I knew but...” He clenched his teeth again. “I don't regret what happened.”

“Did you kill your wife to marry me?” I asked in a voice just above a

whisper. I ignored the way my heart fluttered, my stomach bottomed out, all because his skin brushed mine.

His eyes widened in surprise before they narrowed again. He inched closer to me, my heart skipping a beat at his even closer proximity. Images of what happened between us, his lips on mine, his hands on my body, threatened to heat my face and distract me from the conversation.

“And what if, *baela*, I did?” he asked, cocking his head to the side. “What would you say then?”

My mouth went dry. I blinked. All that boldness flickered out like a flame.

He leaned forward, pressing his nose against my cheek. He took in a deep breath, inhaling my scent.

“The lavender and sage didn’t do you justice,” he murmured, his lips a ghostly touch on my skin. “Not the way your natural musk does. I never want you to mask yourself that way again.”

I found myself nodding even though it was hard to wrap my head around the abrupt change of our relationship. We didn’t dance around forbidden attraction. Not anymore. Here he was, in my room, touching me, his face caressing my own. If I turned to the right, we would be kissing again.

I wanted that.

Gods, I wanted a lot more.

“*Kepus*, is everything all right?” I asked, my voice shaking.

“I just...I wanted to see you,” he replied. “And when you weren’t there...” He dropped his hand from my chest. “Has the consummation continued to trouble you?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

“What amuses you?” he asked, his eyes softening.

“You aren’t the only one who’s asked me about that,” I admitted, reaching up to cup the back of my neck. “Between Chamberly and Taskier, I’m surprised they haven’t given me a full-on demonstration of what’s

expected of me.”

“The only one who will be teaching you pleasure is me, *baela*,” he said firmly.

I shuddered, nodding once.

“I should be going,” he said. “I intend to discuss Sally with you; count on that. But I can’t be around you right now.”

“Why not?” I dared to ask.

He stared. “Because if I’m here one more moment, I’ll shred your clothes to pieces and fuck you so hard against your door, we’d break it down, and I can’t stomach the thought of anyone seeing you like that but me.”

I couldn’t speak.

“Until next time, *baela*.” He brushed a soft kiss on my forehead and was gone in a second.

I remained standing until darkness filled the room and the only sound that could be heard was the pounding of my heart.

EMBYRLYN



I wasn't sure what to say to him about Kazu admitting he was terrified of this, so, once I met up with him at the gates that night, I said nothing. Instead, I focused on anything Master Grey was saying — *be ever vigilant because one never knows who they'll run into on the road, make sure you protect each other, and don't do anything that will strengthen the bond I have with my mystery stranger because that will only make the mission harder* — and looked anywhere but at Kazu. Luckily, Kazu didn't seem too keen on looking at me either, so it worked out.

“Do you have any questions?” Master Grey asked once he finished.

I wanted to ask him what he meant by strengthening my bond. I thought the only way to do that was to be intimate with the person who gave that to me, and there was no way Master Grey would have said that unless he knew Kazu had given it to me in the first place.

But that too seemed impossible. Would he really let Kazu go on a mission with me if he knew such a thing?

Maybe he doesn't have a choice. Maybe with how the job works, he has to let Kazu go with me or something bad will happen.

Or maybe I was just overthinking things.

As usual.

“How long will the mission last?” I asked, tucking a strand of hair behind

my ear.

Master Grey gave me a long look. “Scarlet missions don’t have an end date,” he pointed out gently. “They’re endured as long as it needs until the information required is discovered and verified. From there, you’ll request being pulled. Once we review what you have through your handler, we’ll make a decision.”

I glanced over at Kazu before I could help myself. He still refused to look at me, and that bothered me though I couldn’t say why.

But this wasn’t the time or the place to dwell on that.

I nodded, acknowledging what Master Grey said.

“Take care of one another,” he said. “After what happened to Lucy, I worry there’s something terrible at the academy that I must uncover. But at least I’ll know the two of you are safe.”

And that we didn’t murder the poor girl, a bitter voice pointed out.

“What about Felix?” I asked suddenly, turning back to look at Master Grey. Kazu opened the iron gates, slipping through them before they could moan. “We’re just...leaving, without saying goodbye or explaining what’s going on.”

“I’ll speak to him,” he replied. “I promise.” He glanced over at Kazu, waiting with his usual nonchalant slouch, hands in his pockets. I never would have imagined he had been boxing me against a wall, so close to taking me there that I could still feel the warmth on my skin –

“We have to go,” Kazu said. For some reason, his voice was rough.

I clenched my teeth together. I didn’t want to think about his voice and what it did to me. I didn’t want to think about why it was rough in the first place. The only thing that mattered was leaving, was finding Dade and bringing him back.

I nodded. Master Grey looked like he wanted to say something. Instead, he seamed his lips and stared long and hard. Whatever it was, he expected me to be the one to figure out what that was.

Turning from him, I stepped outside the academy grounds. I glanced over at Kazu once more. This time, his eyes were on me, burning a hole on my skin, marking me with just a stare. My pelvis throbbed, and for the third time that morning, I wished more than ever Kazu had taken me in my room, against that wall. I didn't understand why it felt so necessary to have him inside of me, but it was. My skin crawled at the thought of not having him, at not touching him. Everyone knew I was his, that I belonged to him thanks to the mark on my neck, but did they know he was mine?

We walked through the forest together. For the time, neither of us said a word. I could feel Master Grey's stare on us as we moved, though we didn't turn around and acknowledge him either.

The tall trees that made up the forest blotted out the setting sun. A chill swept through my body. The ache between my legs only intensified, and I had to slow down or else it would hurt. I sucked in a breath, trying to be silent, trying to force myself to hurry as much as I could because the last thing I wanted was for Kazu to know something was going on with me. I didn't want to be the weak girl that needed his help. I didn't want to be any of it. I wanted to show him I was strong and nothing could get to me, but in order to do that, I had to ignore my body. And the thought of doing that was too much to bare.

Kazu glanced behind him. Eyes widened when he realized just how behind I was. "What's going on?" he asked.

I opened my mouth, but I didn't even know what to say. "It's nothing."

Kazu stopped completely. "You're lying."

I clenched my teeth together again. "No," I said. "I'm –"

"I can smell you, you know," he said. His eyes glared at the hard dirt under his feet like it was anyone's fault but ours. His hands were tight in his pockets, and it was only then that I realized there was nothing nonchalant about his posture. Now that I was closer to him, I could see the muscles taut and pulled against his skin.

My face flushed at his comment and I looked away. Not because I was embarrassed – though I was definitely embarrassed – but because I couldn't look at his eyes without the throbbing intensifying. Everything about him made me hurt but in the best way, and I had no idea what to do about it.

“Kazu,” I breathed out, suddenly finding it difficult to do something as easy and as natural as breathing.

“*Don't,*” he snapped, taking three purposeful steps towards me. He swallowed. “Don't say my name like that.”

I swallowed. If he could tell me not to say his name a certain way, I needed him to stop talking altogether.

“What's going on?” I forced myself to keep walking. I wasn't sure how long we had been moving, but it had to be an hour. I couldn't see the academy building on the horizon anymore. “Why do I feel like this?”

My skin pinched with heat. I needed something, anything, to fulfill this... this strong desire, but I wasn't sure what the solution was. I didn't know what to do. And each step I took caused friction to rub against my core, and there was a vibration that ran through me because of it.

What the hell was going on?

“It's your...your heat,” he said through gritted teeth. His eyes were squeezed shut, like he couldn't do this, couldn't even look at me.

“My...?” I was sure my face was on fire at that point. My heat...my ovulation cycle. “I thought that didn't happen until twenty-one.”

“Usually,” he said. “It's why we insist sex doesn't begin between wolves until you hit that age, but we're also aware hormones start to shift and change when you hit fifteen, sixteen. But you were marked, which could kick-start it unexpectedly. The mark causes pheromones to run through your body and start the mating process. Any...any cycle you used to be on has shifted because...because of yesterday.”

“Because of the mark,” I said, needing to understand. “Not the...the sex.”

“The mark.” Without warning, he turned around and punched the nearest

tree.

I jumped.

“What are you —?”

He held up his fist, scratches already peeking over with blood. “The pain is a distraction,” he said.

“Why?” I asked again, dropping my head into my hands. My feet continued to stumble forward but I didn’t think that was a good idea either. I felt *too* much, and despite the cool air, I burned. “Knowing what you know, why did you do this?”

“I couldn’t help it,” he snarled, dropping his hand to his side. “I was caught up —“

“But you’ve had sex before,” I said. I wasn’t afraid of him. Maybe I should be, knowing what he could do, but I wasn’t. “I’m sure of it.”

“Yes, and?”

“Well, have you ever marked someone before?”

He snarled. “Absolutely not,” he snapped. “I could never.”

Why was he so offended by the question? I didn’t understand.

“Then why —“

“I don’t know,” he snapped. “What about that don’t you understand?”

I caught my breath. There was something wild about Kazu-sensei that I had never seen before. Normally, he was cool and calm, even aloof. But now, he was raging, uncontrolled. Even he seemed surprised by the passion because every time he gestured with his hands, he would look at them like he was surprised he moved them at all and forced them to his sides until they would creep up again and the process would start once more.

“It was...it was *right*,” he said. “Natural. Everything in me said to claim you, to mark you. And I tried...I tried so hard to resist, but then I thought of your mission and what you were supposed to do and I...” He growled again, though this time, it was louder, almost a roar. “The thought of you with *anyone* else...I would kill them with my bare hands.”

Something flooded my system and it wasn't fear. I stepped closer to him. Stupid, because of the heat, because of the need to feel him inside of me again, but his words were like a spell cast over me, compelling me to do things I didn't understand, things I couldn't control.

"You knew about the mission," I said. I shook my head. "Why couldn't you let it be Rocky? Or, or the guy from the bar —"

I couldn't even finish my sentence when Kazu was in front of me, fingers wrapped around my throat, squeezing just enough to show me he was in charge.

As if I doubted that for one second.

"It had to be me," he said. "Something in me wouldn't let it be anyone else. It...it wouldn't happen, and if anyone did, I would...I would kill them too, just for thinking about it." His thumb pressed against my lips, like he wanted to keep anything I might have said from spilling out of my mouth. "I don't want to hear their names coming from...your lips." He leaned his head forward and I knew he was going to kiss me. I knew he was going to, and I wanted it.

Gods, I wanted it so badly.

I pressed my lips against his thumb. His eyes widened. The gesture stopped him from moving forward. Instead, his gaze burned my face, watching me intently, curious to see just what I intended to do.

My tongue darted out to touch his thumb. I didn't know how, but the salt from it tasted sublime.

I closed my eyes, letting a small moan fall from my lips.

I didn't mean it; I really didn't.

My eyes darted to his. His jaw was locked so tightly, it looked like it was going to become unhinged.

"Don't." But this time, the word sounded like a please.

Like this strong, powerful man was begging *me*.

Like *I* made him helpless.

I could have pulled back. I thought about it.

But this fire inside of me consumed me completely, and there was nothing I could do to extinguish it.

I locked eyes with him. And he knew.

He moved his head an inch, like he was telling me no.

But I refused to listen.

Instead, I held his gaze and slid his thumb into my mouth.

FREYA



There wasn't much to say after that.

I wished I was witty to find something, but Kent released his hold of me and started the fire with ease. I almost threw a stick at him, noticing the arrogant twinkle in his eye. He could reassure me all he wanted, but he liked being able to do things. That much was clear.

We ate in silence. I tried not to think about the fact that I devoured the cute rabbit I couldn't kill, but Kent was a wizard with cooking and I couldn't stop myself from eating it. After we finished, we took turns to relieve ourselves, and I brushed my teeth as best as I could.

The water was quiet as it ran beside us. There was something soothing about the presence of it, and I was suddenly glad Kent was here and that he was still willing to teach me things I would otherwise not know.

Once we were finished, the fire had all but dimmed. Kent rolled out our sleeping bags and I slipped in. We were side by side, though he hadn't moved into his yet.

"Aren't you going to sleep?" I asked, trying and failing to stifle a yawn.

"I'm going to wait until the fire dies," he said, his back to me as he returned to the log. "Stay warm, Freya. It'll be cold tonight."

I nodded, and almost instantly, I fell asleep to the sound of running water and the cackling fire.

* * *

KENT

Kent stayed up long after he heard Freya's breathing even. He sat perched upon one of the logs like a bird, watching the black forest through the shadows the flames of the fire produced. Hands on knees, he tried to relax. He knew he'd take watch, at least until he could rationalize sleep, but the fact that the two of them were out in the open left him with unease. More than that, there was something peculiar about the way he responded to Freya that left him shifting with discomfort.

In fact, he was hard-pressed to look anywhere but at her. He didn't want his eyes to linger, didn't want to allow any analytical thoughts to enter his mind, now that the only sound was the chirping crickets and the subtle snaps of the flames. The moon was blotted out as it waned, and in a few days, they would be under the power of the new moon. There was usually some sort of celebration in honor of the new moon – Grey could never help himself if it was an excuse to celebrate something – though Kent couldn't help but wonder if they would still celebrate it after what happened to Lucy.

His eyes narrowed as he continued to look into the fire. The problem was, he didn't know what happened to Lucy. One day, she was alive and well. The next, she was slaughtered within the confines of Freya's room. Already, he knew whispers were swirling the school about her. It didn't help that Rainey determined she might have a powerful ShadowSide or that Barnes confronted her after class and offered to brew the dangerous concoction so they could find out. Kent knew she wanted answers, especially since she, herself, wasn't sure if she had done something so ruthless.

He didn't think so.

Freya was many things, including a giant pain in the ass, but he didn't believe for one second that she was capable of such an attack. Not when she was kind. Most of the time, anyway.

He heaved a sigh and picked up a long, thick stick before prodding the fire to keep up the warmth. He would have to enlarge it slightly. It would be cold, and while the sleeping bags they brought were sealed tight, it wouldn't be enough to keep the chill from lingering below if it managed to sneak through.

Of course, there were other ways the two of them could keep warm, but Kent refused to entertain the thought of body heat, especially with her. She was his Ward, for goodness' sake. A student. So terribly young. There was no way he intended on crossing that line, ever, if he could help it. And yet, there was this traitorous part of him that already began to see her as belonging to him. It wasn't anything romantic. In fact, Kent didn't think he had one romantic bone in his body, judging by the lack of relationships he managed to participate in for the long duration of his life. Though he did have relations, nothing more came from it, and commitment was impossible, not when his focus was on the school, on his pack.

In fact, he had every intention of wading home through the Stone Pack, where one of his conquests ran a bed and breakfast. It had been weeks since his last foray into any physical intimacy, and he could tell he itched for release. Jade was beautiful, experienced, and she didn't cling to him or make things more than what they were. It was one of the few reasons he kept coming back to her when he otherwise would have avoided the situation at all costs. He didn't like leading anyone on and he certainly didn't like having to feel as though he owed anyone any explanation or was required to play some childish game. He knew what he wanted, what he didn't, and he took care to find those with similar interests.

Before he could help it, Kent's gaze flickered back over to Freya. He didn't know what type of girl she was, but judging from her story, he could say she didn't have experience with relationships of any kind, especially if her mother was constantly on the move.

But why?

What was her mother avoiding? And did it have anything to do with Freya?

His eyes lingered on her sleeping form. The more Kent stared, the more he realized she actually didn't look too obnoxious as she slept. She looked infinitely younger, and that was saying something. The girl had always looked young, with her string blonde hair and wide blue eyes. A pale complexion, but rough, callused hands. And skinny. So damn skinny. She needed to eat more, especially if she was going to survive the unforgiving winter. He would have to make it a point to ensure she was getting more than her fair share.

In fact, as he stared, the warm glow of the fire cast particular shadows across her face, highlighting her sharp cheekbones, the graceful curve of her neck. She could be pretty...if she was asleep.

He wouldn't be surprised if boys took notice of her, though that thought made him frown and grip his knees tightly. He didn't want to think about Freya and boys. Something inside of him bristled at that particular fact, though he couldn't understand why unless it was just him being an overprotective guardian. But that didn't make much sense, since even he could admit he wasn't particularly fond of her and was barely assigned to be her guardian a couple of days ago.

It probably had to do with the fact that Grey enlisted his help in caring for the girl. It wasn't as though Kent needed that type of pressure on his plate by any means, but now that he had it, it must have sunk in to the point where Kent found himself battling other Alpha captains regarding her consuming a dangerous concoction and rejecting the thought of Freya even dating the best sort of boy. She insisted she train, hadn't she?

Perhaps if he had her focus on that, she wouldn't let herself get drawn in by the temptation of romance.

Kent poked the fire a couple more times before tossing the stick to the side and standing up. There was one other thing he refused to think about,

something he didn't want to give any attention to, even if he probably should. As much as Kent loathed Rainey for what he put in Freya's head, there was a chance the arrogant bastard wasn't wrong. What's more, the thought that Viktor King might find out about her, might get it in his head that she could be full of untapped ShadowMagic, was enough for every muscle in his body to completely stand at attention.

Because if King even thought as much, it wouldn't be long before he attempted to manipulate Freya. Hell, Kent wouldn't put it past the bastard to try to force her to marry King himself. And if that scenario played out, Kent wasn't sure what he would have to do in order to ensure Freya's safety.

Because, as much as she annoyed him, as much as he wanted her to be anything but a Ward, someone within his protection, he *would* protect her. He *would* keep her safe.

Kent finally crawled into his sleeping bag. There was a half a foot between the two of them, something he made sure of. The last thing he needed was waking up in the morning with her pressed into him. He refused to even entertain the notion. Even if the thought wasn't as disgusting as he initially thought it would be.

Fuck.

He really needed to get laid. That was it. He had waited too long, and now, he was having ridiculous thoughts about his Ward.

That was a problem.

He shouldn't even be allowed to entertain such a thing, considering he was her guardian. He needed to keep her safe. He just never thought he would have to keep her safe from himself.

Stop acting like a girl. Kent's eyes widened at Reedy's voice in Kent's head, all brash twang and blunt words. *You lying down and keeping warm next to a body isn't a bad thing. Stop getting your panties twisted into knots.*

Kent rolled his eyes, but it was enough to curb his hesitancy. In fact, he considered moving his sleeping bag on the other side of the fire, but that

wouldn't do either, because what if something had happened and he couldn't reach her in time? What then?

Perhaps training her was his only option. Not just in survival, but in fighting, in defending herself. He had been hesitant before. Judging by her slender figure, he wasn't sure she'd have the strength, but if he could work with her to build it, maybe then...

He just hated the thought of her fighting, of her even being in danger. And at the same time, he hated the notion of her being helpless. It was his responsibility to look after her. And there would be times he wasn't around. Could he justify refusing then? He wasn't sure.

He situated himself within his sleeping bag, shifting and moving until he felt settled. He kept his eyes on the sky above him, rather than on the girl to his right. Her face was turned to him and there was this lock of golden hair that had fallen into her face. If he wasn't careful, there was a good chance he would be forced to remove it from her person, to push it back so it wouldn't bother her.

But then, why would he even care about something like that? Why would he even notice in the first place?

He didn't understand himself. He didn't understand this stark contrast of wanting absolutely nothing to do with the girl and then wanting to protect her with every piece of who he was.

This was Grey's fault, he decided. He would have to talk to the academy master when he got back, if only to understand why Grey picked him, out of all capable wolves, to leash her to. It didn't make any sense.

Before he could help himself, he turned so he was facing her. Something in his chest niggled, but other than that, a sense of peace enveloped him, like a hug from a lover after being parted for so long. He should hate the feeling. He should run from it. But as his eyes closed, Kent did something he never thought he would: he embraced it.

MATTHYW



There was only one person Matthyw could speak to about this bedding ceremony, and he highly doubted it would do any good. However, he forced himself to try. Just as long as the cunt wasn't there, trying to whisper in his ear, Matthyw thought there might be a sliver of a chance.

Viktor's rooms were coated in silk and oak. Dark crimson and fire-gold lined the designs, whether the intricate diamond patterns on the walls or the curtains hanging closed over windows. Everything was polished, flowing even under the dim lighting of the flickering candles that made up the crystal chandelier hanging overhead.

"I might offer you a wine if I didn't think you hadn't indulged before coming." Viktor was dressed in all black save for the pack emblem — a wolf surrounded by a flame — embroidered on the left corner of his black shirt.

"I am perfectly sober," Matthyw said, and meant it. His fingers curved around the high back of the chair directly across from where Viktor sat. Though Viktor offered him a seat, Matthyw wasn't quite ready to take it just yet, if he took it at all.

"What is this about?" Viktor asked. He reached to the center of the table and pulled a grapefruit from the glass bowl.

"You know what this is about," Matthyw said. "You can't possibly expect me to go through with a bedding ceremony, Father."

“It has come to the attention of the council that there is a question of whether you intend for this marriage to be legitimized, since you make no secret your last one was not,” Viktor said without looking up from his task. He pulled out that small dagger and began to peel the fruit.

“I am quite capable of consummating my marriage to Adrya,” he snapped. “Shall I get her and give you a demonstration?”

That got Viktor to pause, and he looked up, flashing an icy gaze in Matthyw’s direction.

Good. That’s the sort of reaction he should have in regards to fucking his daughter so publicly.

“You know putting her through this will traumatize her,” Matthyw said, his grip on the wood tightening.

“*Everything* you’ve done will traumatize her,” Viktor spat. “She gave up any hope of *choosing* her husband after she let you lead her to that brothel. What did she expect?” He clenched his teeth, pausing. “No. She did this to herself. She has to know there are consequences, even for her.”

“And this is how you’d like to prove that point?” Matthyw asked. “By parading her around like some breeding cow? Tell me, did this suggestion come from you, or did you get help?”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Viktor demanded.

“You know exactly what it means,” Matthyw said. His temper began to flare as the wolf inside of him began to growl and snap. “That bitch of an intended —“

“You will *not* speak of her —“

“—is looking for any way to punish Adrya —“

“—and whether you agree with the selection or not —“

“—and you are too blinded by your own lust, by your cock’s desire to fuck her —“

“—she is your Queen.”

“—to see the havoc she has caused this family.” Matthyw furrowed his

brow. “Queen? She will never be *my* Queen. Only Lady Ilyna could take that title. Until your daughter does.”

“My daughter,” Viktor said. “Your *sister*. I knew the second she was born that bringing you into our lives was a bad idea. We have no idea what you are or where you came from, and yet, I raised you like my own son. And now look. You’re here, ready to debauch your sister in order to get access to the pack. You realize I cannot have Adrya as my heir because of her involvement with you, yes? You are not a *true King*. The pack cannot fall to you. I won’t risk it. I won’t risk you killing my daughter and taking the pack for yourself.”

Matthyw curled his fingers into a fist and slammed the marble table so hard, it cracked. “You truly believe I have it in me to kill Adrya?” he asked in a low voice.

“I have known you since you were a pup,” Viktor said. He placed his knife on the table and resumed peeling the grapefruit with his fingers. “I know you long for power because you had none before we took you in. And now, since you can’t get what you truly lusted for, you intend to steal it from my daughter.”

“I would marry her even if she wasn’t inheriting the pack,” Matthyw snarled, hunching his shoulders. He leaned forward, ready to leap over this table and attack Viktor simply for saying such things.

“I doubt that very much,” Viktor said. “Is that all you wanted to speak to me about? The bedding ceremony?”

Matthyw clenched his teeth. His teeth turned into fangs and hung over the side of his lips. Not once did he break the stare with Viktor, and Viktor didn’t either.

“Do you love your betrothed?” Matthyw asked.

Viktor looked down at the fruit. “We both know love has nothing to do with marriage,” he finally said. “At least, for those in our positions. And honestly, why ask a question I know you don’t care about? It’s not as though you love Adrya.” He picked his head up to look at Matthyw. “We are both

doing our duty. My marriage to Megan removes me from the lottery as does Adrya's marriage to you. I would have rather married her off to someone who could provide our pack with an alliance, but the arrangement we have will have to suffice."

"That doesn't answer my question," Matthyw pointed out.

"No," Viktor agreed. "It doesn't. But that is all I'll say on the matter." He pulled a piece of the tart fruit and placed it in his mouth. He didn't even react to the sour taste. "Matthyw, if you hurt her, if you attempt to make this some kind of show —"

"Don't," Matthyw said in a low voice. "You know me better than that."

"I used to think I did," Viktor murmured, dropping his gaze, "but now, I don't know what I know anymore."

* * *

ADRYA

When I wasn't at school or training, I found myself in the library, doing my own form of research. I checked out nothing. The last thing I wanted was for anyone to know I was reading books on sexuality, pleasure, and marriage duties. I wasn't sure if it would help with anything but reading about what to expect helped me feel slightly better because it felt like I was doing something to prepare. I even read about bedding ceremonies themselves as a way to understand what happened historically.

I would return the books around closing time and then head straight to the dining hall. I still avoided dining in my father's rooms. I didn't want to see either of them, but especially not Chamberly. I couldn't stomach the thought of what I might do or say. I wasn't afraid of her reaction save for the fact that she might tell Father and Father might find a creative way to punish me. He still had yet to officially remove me as heir, but there was more to it than that. What if he sent me away? What if he did something else?

That unpredictability was what bothered me the most.

In fact, the more that I thought about it, the more I realized everything had changed since that Marriage Law. I was raised with expectations, knowing what my duties were and how to fulfill them. Now that I was set to marry Matthyw, everything changed.

My wedding was slowly coming up. Father would marry first, and then I would the following weekend. I wasn't asked to be part of the wedding, and even though it freed up the time I craved to put into my training, I felt myself grow angrier with each passing day. With this new wife, would he forget that he had a daughter?

I sighed, flipping the book shut. It was already late, and the glow of the waning moon filtered through the high windows. I stood up and slowly began to make my way to the stacks where it belonged. After I replaced it, I turned around and placed my back against the shelves, giving myself a moment.

“There you are, little wolf.”

The feminine voice filled the space, and I sprang forward. My shoulders dropped and I tensed. My wolf was ready to spring into action, but I needed to be careful, needed to wait. One of the things I learned in my training was not to act so hasty. Not many wolves had the sort of control to hold themselves back, but I made an effort to slow myself to learn just that.

I turned to my left, lifting my nose and wrinkling it to try and take in the scent. It was familiar, but I couldn't say how I knew it.

Until she melted from the shadows.

Sally.

I stiffened. Her willowy frame seemed to tower over me even though I was stronger than she was, and the way she narrowed those dark eyes that pinned me in place had the power to intimidate even the strongest of wolves. I wished I knew where she got her power because I wanted to use it for myself. Maybe then I'd actually be taken seriously and boldness wouldn't be so surprising.

“Shall I guess what you’re reading?” she asked. Her eyes seemed to look through me, as though she could read the book titles despite my body blocking them. “Something that might have to do with your wedding night? Or perhaps how to get used to people watching you perform your duty?”

She knew.

How could she know?

“At least, that’s what Matthyw has told me,” she continued.

My chest squeezed painfully. Matthyw told her that? I should know that this was to be expected. I should know that he would spend time in brothels after our engagement because that was what he had done before; that was what he had *always* done. Even so, it pained me to think that he would find himself wrapped up with another woman. Certainly, she would be much more experienced and he wouldn’t have to teach her anything. And I knew from whispers around the academy that it was common for men to take lovers on the side while wives raised their pups. I just didn’t think that would be within my own marriage.

So naive. You’re so naive.

“Oh, did he not tell you?” Sally reached out and cupped my cheek in her cold hand. “Did you truly think he was loyal to you, princess? He didn’t love his first wife. Rumor had it he killed her so he’d be free of her at last. Why would you expect to be any different when all he wants is the pack?” She took a step closer, dropping her hand back to her side in an elegant swoop. “This is another reason why you and I should form a friendship. It would behoove you to know who you can trust.”

“If you’re truly...*fucking* my betrothed, why in the world would I trust a thing you had to say?” I asked in a low voice.

Her eyes widened and I took a step back. “I know how to select my friends, thanks,” I said. “And I’ve considered your offer. I have to decline.”

I forced my feet to move, forced myself to look straight ahead of me. I wouldn’t turn around. I wouldn’t give her that satisfaction.

“You’ll regret that, princess,” she called after me, though her voice didn’t raise. “Mark me, you’ll regret it.”

I kept walking, my footsteps in time with the heavy beating of my heart.

KAZU



“Embyrlyn.”

He hadn't meant to say her name. In fact, he hadn't meant to touch her at all. Not with her smelling like *that*. Not with the way he knew he wouldn't be able to control himself. He needed release...so soon after last night, but he needed it, and the only person who would bring him satisfaction was her.

And they were alone in a forest. No one would see them. They had traveled north, an hour from the academy, an hour and twenty minutes away from the nearest village. There was nothing out here that would witness them – and if there were, Kazu wouldn't hesitate in killing them with his bare hands. He hadn't been lying to Embrlyn when he told her such a thing. He wouldn't lie at all.

Her tongue flicked against his thumb, and he couldn't help but widen his eyes. How had she rendered him so completely useless with a simple touch?

His stomach filled with tiny little needles, touching him in a way he couldn't comprehend, couldn't describe. He had been with women before, and none of them had been able to make him feel like this, even as he fucked their cunts.

His mouth contorted into a frown. Even the thought of his body entangled with someone else made his stomach turn, like he was ready to throw up.

This was a problem. He knew it, and he knew they had to figure out what they would do in order to accomplish their mission without anyone even looking at Embyrlyn.

Master Grey's eyes flashed in his mind. *What were you thinking, Kazu? You're much more in control under normal circumstances. There's a good chance you've botched the only lead we'll ever have when it comes to retrieving Dade and getting intel on the Light Bringers.*

Kazu didn't care about any of it. All he wanted was Embyrlyn. He wanted to take her back to his room and rut in her until he knew she carried his child.

It was such a shock to his system, the thought that he *wanted* to be a father, that it made him grip onto Embyrlyn's throat even tighter. When she moaned, he was undone. He couldn't help it and didn't want to. His cock was already hard. There was no reason not to keep going. She was his mate, she was his *everything*, and he had a duty. She must be going through such pain, dealing with her heat, and the only way to satisfy it was with him, with his cock, and he wanted to.

Gods, he wanted to.

Gods, he *would*.

Kazu ripped his thumb out of her mouth. Her eyes looked up to look at him, half-lidded, and his cock throbbed at the sight of it. At the way her green eyes darkened, filled with an insatiable lust he knew was mirrored in his own visage.

He used the hand gripping her throat to push it to the side so he could get a better look at the mark on her neck. *His* mark. A flurry of pride poured over his chest, and it tightened in response. He moved his hand so it held her shoulder and he used his other hand to trace the mark again. He had to touch it, had to see that it was real for himself.

The second he did, Embyrlyn reached out to take the front of his flap jacket in her hands, twisting it in order to give her more stability.

"Kazu-sensei," she breathed out through a moan, and it was the way she

said it, the formality she tacked onto it...how could he deny her anything? If she wanted his heart, he would have cut it out himself and handed it to her, not caring what she did with it just as long as she did *something*.

“Tell me what you want,” he managed to say. It was difficult for him to be in control of any of it, not when she spoke to him like that, begging for release only he could give. His voice was rough, like sandpaper. “Tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you.”

And he meant it.

“*Please.*”

She was practically sobbing. And that scent, that heady scent drove him absolutely wild, like they had tiny tendrils that clutched to him. He needed her. He needed to be inside of her as desperately as she needed it.

He dropped his hands from her only to replace them in the waistband of her pants. He yanked them down, and she gasped, probably because her bare skin hit the cool air. But he knew he would distract her from that. It would be minutes, and she’d completely forget it all.

“Embyrlyn,” he breathed, clouded eyes gazing at her pelvis.

The scent was even stronger now that he had removed one of the barriers, and he could see the discoloration despite the black color, telling him just how wet and ready she was for him. The panties were practical and they still looked sexier on her frame than anyone wearing a lace thong or nothing at all. Everything she did enticed him, and the scary part was, she wasn’t even trying.

He wanted nothing more than to rip the last barrier between them apart, to take the flimsy cotton and leave it in the dirt the same way lovers carved their initials in the trunk of a tree. But he knew she’d be pissed, and it wouldn’t be fair to make her travel without any underwear. More than that, there was a good chance it would distract him from the mission, and as much as this mission was a waste of his time, he wouldn’t do that. Especially not when there was a chance the chafing would hurt her.

Instead, he looped his index fingers through the thin material and slowly pulled the panties down, exposing her sex to him. She let out another sob, but this felt like one of relief more than anything. His mouth watered as he took her in, but he refused to stop until her legs were completely void of the pants and the underwear. That way, he had unfettered access to her as a whole.

He slid to his knees, staring up at her. And Gods, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. The way her chest heaved as she tried – and failed – to catch her breath. The way her legs trembled. The way her eyes were still filled with desire for him.

How did he get so lucky? How did he know to pick her above all else, all those who came before her?

“Kazu-sensei,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper. “I don’t think...I can’t wait any longer. *Please.*”

She sounded so perfect, begging him.

He gently spread her legs apart and tilted his head back, swiping at her sex with his tongue. Catching her scent up close was the same thing as injecting nightshade straight into his bloodstream: the result was immediate, and there was no going back. Her taste overpowered any rational thought, and the only thing he could do was follow his instincts, urging him to mark her again with his seed, with his pup causing her flat stomach to fill.

His tongue danced across her swollen nub, and he slid his finger into her. How he could fit in something so tight, he still didn’t understand, but he did, and it was glorious. Her slick juices coated the digit, and it took everything in him to not grab her waist and fuck her against the tree.

Not yet.

Instead, he moved at a steady pace, back and forth, all while pumping her with his finger. The squelching noises were positively unseemly, and he was sure they could be picked up at least a mile away, but he didn’t care. His only focus was Embyrlyn and Embyrlyn alone.

He could already anticipate her noises, the way her body would react to

him. She was close...and if he was being honest with himself, so was he.

But he refused to spend anywhere else but her cunt.

What a gods-damned waste that would be.

From this point out, if it wasn't her cunt, the only other acceptable place to find his release was her mouth. And just the thought of that, of her on her knees looking up at him with those hooded green eyes, taking him all the way in her mouth...

He let out a moan.

It seemed to be her undoing because her fingers found his hair and she held onto him as tightly as she could, releasing her climax with a breathy cry. He didn't let up until he knew she finished, and even then, he needed every last drop of her to be completely satisfied. She had to physically push him away, too sensitive to be touched.

He stood up and grabbed her face, kissing her. She needed to taste herself on his lips. Her eyes widened until he coaxed her into this, and he realized just how innocent she truly was.

Mine, mine, mine.

"Kazu-sensei," she breathed out. The sensei honorific should have aggravated him, should have embarrassed him that she used to be his student.

But it didn't.

It turned him on.

His tongue plundered her mouth, spreading her taste where it went. She opened for him, eager and needy. The mewling sounds she made was like her fingers stroking his cock up and down. He tilted his head, deepening the kiss, even more, as his hands went to his own pants, and began to pull them down. He had no need to remove them completely, he didn't have time for that, but he needed to get himself out so he could burrow deeply inside of her wetness.

Not breaking the kiss, he pressed himself inside of her. He saw for a moment that she might need time to adjust to him. But she didn't even flinch. Her fingers grabbed his shoulders, and she spread her legs, as his hands

gripped her backside and lifted her up into a more comfortable position for them both.

Embyrlyn threw her head back, letting out a loud moan. The fact that she was so reckless, so free, with her pleasure just added to his.

He didn't start slow, even though he probably should have. It was hard for him to remember that this was only their second time together, and it was only her second time completely. But she was so wet, and so tight, that the fact that he had as much control as he did, was a surprise.

“Oh, Kazu, *please.*”

“Say it,” he demanded. “Say all of it.”

“Kazu...Kazu-*sensei.*”

His pace was unforgiving.

Gods, who taught her to speak like that?

No, he didn't want to think about that, didn't want to think of anyone teaching her anything.

He was her teacher. *He* would be the only one teaching her *anything*.

Her words blurred together until they were nothing more than f grunts and groans of pleasure.

And then she burst like a dam, overflowing with her own need, spasming uncontrollably. He had no way to pull back, to keep himself at bay.

“Come.” Her voice was filled with exhaustion, her back probably hurt being scraped by the tree, but he didn't care. He cared about nothing but this moment. “Come inside of me. I want to feel it. Please, Kazu-sensei. Please. I need it. I need *you.*”

She was his undoing, his weakness, everything he never wanted.

“Mine,” he growled. “You're mine, mine, *mine.*”

He released himself deep inside of her cunt, not stopping until she drained him of every drop. His head hit her shoulder and she ran her fingers through his hair, gently scratching at his scalp.

The sex was...he couldn't adequately describe it,

And this part? After everything? In the silence when they were trying to slow their hearts?

This felt good too.

FREYA



The last thing I expected was being woken up by a rough tug on the shoulder. I frowned, not even bothering to open my eyes as my arms shot out and tried to hit whoever had the bright idea to wake me before my alarm went off.

I groaned. “What do you –”

Before I could finish my sentence, a gloved hand pressed over my mouth. My eyes sprang open, only to find Kent kneeling beside me, an intense look on his chiseled face. But his gaze wasn’t directed at me; it was somewhere else. Somewhere within the forest.

Suddenly, I was awake.

I knew that look. Something was happening. Something was going on. And if I didn’t shut up, there was a good chance I was going to get us killed.

I pressed my lips together, not trusting myself to make any sort of noise at all. Even my breathing became as silent as I could muster. I looked back at Kent, knowing whatever he saw wasn’t something my human eyes could make out. Instead, he gestured for me to get up before placing his finger over my lips. I froze. Despite the fact that there was a glove on his hand, the fact that he was so willing to touch me, touch my lips, was enough to catch me off-guard. It was more intimate than I expected from him.

My heart hammered in my chest as I slipped out of my sleeping bag. I

tried to be as quiet as I could, but I nearly toppled over as I laced up my boots. Catching myself required scuffing the dirt, and it didn't escape my notice that Kent sent a withering glare in my direction as he began to roll up my sleeping bag. I held his gaze, hoping he saw that I was apologetic about the noise. Once I finished, I straightened and waited for further direction from him. My heart continued to beat against my chest, my hands sweaty. I began to rub them on my thighs, only to remember I had slipped on gloves to keep myself warm, and stopped.

It was only then did I hear the hooves against the hard dirt.

I tensed. My eyes shot over to Kent, hoping he could give me some sort of direction, hoping he could tell me what to do. I felt like a sitting duck. Someone – or something – was coming. The sky itself was still black, though there was a midnight blue piercing the sky, telling me it was early morning. I wasn't sure how early, but I knew dawn would break soon, which meant I'd be able to see better. As it was, I was running blind, only trusting my senses and any inclination in Kent's stoic face.

I thought for sure he was going to order us to move, to do something. That had to be why he woke me up so quickly, right? But no. We remained where we were. It was almost as if Kent knew whoever these people or things were, they were coming right for us, and, to him, there was no point in running.

Maybe not for him – the guy who could literally transform into a wolf, but me? What about me? I was a weak chink in Kent's armor. I didn't want to be used as some kind of example. I didn't want Kent to have to worry about keeping me safe if there was a chance he needed to fight or extract some kind of information out of whoever it was that was coming.

What if these were the Vrykolakas? What if –

I never got to finish my train of thought because, suddenly, the stampeding hooves stopped. I straightened my spine, and before I could stop myself, took a step closer to Kent. I forgot about the cold, but being next to

him provided a warmth I needed to focus on, and I shook my head to focus. I couldn't let myself get distracted by the fear coursing through my body. I wanted to help, to protect Kent, but even he nudged me so I was slightly behind him. As always, protective.

I wished so badly I knew how to return the favor. If we survived whatever this was, I *would* train as hard as I possibly could. I would learn how to fight.

Suddenly, a man on top of a sleek black horse stepped forward. It was difficult for me to make him out, considering it was still dark and there was no light from the moon overhead. Even the stars somehow lost their twinkle overnight.

"I thought I smelled a dog," the man quipped, steadying the horse as it shifted back and forth. "Though I didn't realize the dog would bring some kind of treat." The strange man's eyes lingered on me more intensely than I would have preferred, but I forced myself to hold my ground. I might not know how to successfully fight just yet, but I could refrain from being intimidated.

Kent said nothing.

"Well?" the man pushed. "Is she yours?"

Kent continued to be silent.

The man rolled his eyes, making a show of it by getting his head involved as well. "Well, dog, *speak*."

"Don't you have a skirt to sniff up?" Kent finally drawled. "Or has your mother kicked you out of the house, Kensington?"

There were chuckles in front of us by other men, though I couldn't see where they came from. Everything was too dark, and the men knew how to hide amongst the shadows.

"So, he speaks," the man, Kensington, said. It could have been my imagination, or the way the shadows crossed his face, but there seemed to be a touch of amusement in his wry tone. "Tell me, what's an Earth wolf doing in the forest overnight? You must know how dangerous these woods are."

“Not so dangerous that the Stone Pack sent you lot out to patrol,” Kent said. “And on horses too. You must be ashamed.”

“Yes, well, you heard what happened to Reese Stone, I take it? Not everyone traveling in these woods is a wolf,” Kensington pointed out. “We could smell you from a mile away. Odd, because you’re so terribly clever at masking your trail. Seems like you wanted to be found.”

“Never by you lot,” Kent replied. “I’m here on assignment.”

“Figured.” A quick snap of the chin. “And the girl?”

“The girl has a name,” I snapped before I could stop myself.

It was petulant, but judging by the way Kent and this man spoke, they clearly knew each other. More than that, they seemed to be on civil terms. If these men posed any danger to us, I would have kept my mouth closed. Probably. But I still didn’t like the lingering look he sent my way. Not because it was lecherous, but because it implied he knew more about myself than even I did. And standing up for myself would hopefully make him understand that I wasn’t as weak as he expected me to be, at least not when it came to using my mouth as a weapon.

At least Kent hadn’t reprimanded me.

More chuckles filled the silence, this round more boisterous.

Kensington chuckled himself, his pale eyes sparkling. I couldn’t make out the color from where I stood, however, and it didn’t help that Kent’s broad shoulder pilfered a clear view of him as well.

“And, may I ask, what it is?” Kensington asked.

“Freya,” I said. “You may call me Freya.”

He gave a mock-bow, even while sitting on his horse. “Spoken like a true princess,” he said.

“She certainly acts like it,” Kent muttered. If the men had been anything but wolves, the comment would have passed without being heard. Since their hearing was better than most, they laughed again.

“And why is such a damsel on a mission with you?” Kensington asked,

cocking his head. "I doubt Grey is sending children out with Scarlet scrolls? It hasn't become that dire over at your academy, has it?"

"We're doing recon," Kent said. I wasn't sure if Kensington could tell, but I instantly picked up on the tight tone, even though it was subtle. "Apparently, the Vrykolakas have been seen in the area."

"Yes. Apparently Reese was slain by one during her swim." A beat. "And so soon after her husband was spotted in the woods nearby."

The insinuation lingered but no one spoke on it.

"And your Alpha thought to send you with a girl?" Kensington asked doubtfully.

"Not to engage," Kent said. "Simply to gather information."

Kensington snorted. "If that was all he wanted, he shouldn't have sent you," he said.

Kent ignored the barb and glanced around. "Your men are out farther than your territory," he pointed out. "Why?"

Kensington huffed a breath. "Sightings," he said. "Reports. My own Alpha is worried. Our pack isn't as resourceful, as riding on horseback has shown you. We don't have your numbers, but we do what we can to ensure the protection of our people." A beat. "We lost two people a few nights ago from an attack. A mother and a child that happened after Reese."

I paled.

"They attacked your people?" Kent asked. "I'm surprised they would venture so close."

Without warning, Kensington dismounted his horse and strode over to Kent until he was about a foot away. "There are rumors, Byron," he said in a low voice. Now that he was closer, I could make out tawny spacks of gold in his eyes. "Something is controlling them. They're not...they're not acting the way we know them to behave. I can't explain it."

"And you believe these rumors?" Kent asked, doubt in his tone.

"Not initially," Kensington said, shaking his head once. "Not until I was

made aware of the attack. But now...I don't know what to think. It is possible, after all. The ShadowMagic has only grown stronger."

"But to control the Vrykolakas?"

"You must remember they, too, were born from Dark Magic," the wolf said. "They weren't just born, though, they were created by the Light Bringers."

"I thought they resulted from some kind of injection that was supposed to suppress an illness," I said before I could stop myself.

Kent tilted his head, a small frown on his face, but said nothing to chastise me.

Kensington chuckled. "Who is this girl?" he asked. "I know she isn't a wolf. I'm certain my sister would be quite jealous to hear you've run off with some kind of child bride – and a human, no less."

"It's not like that," Kent said. "She's...she's a student."

I frowned. I was more than just his student. I was his Ward. Granted, that still made me sound rather childish, but still. Who was this man's sister? Why would she be jealous of *me* unless...

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend," I said.

This time, the laughter was boisterous.

"Ah, an innocent," Kensington remarked. "How I've missed those. I don't remember the last time I saw one myself. You, Byron. A girlfriend." He laughed again.

I shifted again. It was clear Kensington and his men were laughing because of me but I didn't understand the joke.

"What?" I asked. This time, I made sure to keep my voice low. I didn't need more laughter directed my way.

"I have no girlfriend," Kent remarked, his tone surprisingly gentle.

"But he said his sister –"

"Come." Kensington's voice interrupted us. "You must come back to town with us. We can get you a hot meal and provide a room for you

overnight.”

“I must insist –”

“Please, Byron,” Kensington said. His voice sounded serious. “I only ask this of you because I know you’ll help us. The Stone Pack never leaves anyone behind, even those from a different pack. I can show you the bodies and you can speak to the witnesses. If you feel the need to return to your recon, you can, but please. Take the information I have with you. At the very least, it might help your endeavor, and you can then find a way to inform us of what you’ve come up with.”

Kent was silent for a moment. I doubted he would take Kensington up on his offer, even if it was tempting. A hot meal? A bed? My stomach rumbled just thinking about it, causing Kensington to laugh again.

“Does she belong to anyone?” he asked, much less serious than before.

Kent’s jaw popped. “*Me*,” he growled. “She belongs to me.” A beat. “Lead the way, then.”

“I can offer you a horse –”

“We’ll walk.”

I wanted to argue, but this was something Kent clearly felt strongly about, and I wasn’t going to question it.

“As you say.” Kensington nodded and mounted his horse once more. “I’ll make sure you have food waiting for you at the inn.” He gave Kent another long look. “Thank you, my friend.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said. “I still don’t know if there’s anything to be done.”

ADRYA



*M*y father's wedding crept up quickly. The lottery was still this weekend. I couldn't help but wonder if Taskier was relieved by this or annoyed. Did he want to know who he was supposed to be marrying right away or did he want it to drag on forever as much as possible?

The next day, a guard came and retrieved me. At first, I thought he belonged to my father up until I realized the emblem for our pack wasn't stitched on his shirt. Instead, he murmured something about Master Grey and him wanting to see me.

I followed without saying much only because it was already a rare occasion that Master Grey wanted to see me in the first place that I didn't quite know what to expect. In fact, I didn't even know where his office was. The guard had to take me there himself.

By the time we arrived, I had gone over every scenario in my head and I still couldn't fathom as to why he would want to see me at all.

I gently knocked on the door. A warm "Come in" followed shortly after, so I opened the door and slid inside. The guard didn't come in after me but he closed the door, leaving me alone with Master Grey.

"Miss King," he said from behind his desk, pressing his hands together. He quickly stood up and gestured to me. His face was wrinkled with a warm, genuine smile. "Thank you so much for coming. So good to see you. Come,

come. Please, have a seat. Would you like some tea? I strongly recommend the tea.”

“Sure.” I didn’t want to refuse him outright.

“Oh, good. Good.” He scurried over to a cart adjacent to his desk as I sat down on one of the chairs. “I brewed this myself. Rosemary. A bit sweet. Not as strong as I prefer. But I enjoy it in the afternoon as a way to calm myself rather than allow myself to get overstimulated. Too much caffeine, and I won’t be able to sleep.”

I nodded once, folding my hands in my lap and glancing around. He had a large window behind his desk that overlooked the forest. Because his office was on the upper level of the academy building, the view was of the top of the trees and the horizon. I could only imagine what the sunsets and the sunrises looked like from here.

“Cream and sugar?”

I pulled my gaze from the view to look at him. “Just cream, please.”

“Too right.” He poured a generous amount of the cream in my teacup and began to stir it.

While he did that, I looked back at the bookcases, all lined with books. Judging by the creases in the spines, they had been read before. I wondered if Master Grey had read everything here. It wouldn’t surprise me; though I didn’t know the man personally, he had a reputation for being wise beyond his years, and I assumed he was older than most would expect, though he didn’t look a day over sixty.

“Here you are.” He offered me the cup with a saucer and I took it, murmuring a soft thanks.

Master Grey took a seat, elbows resting on the scattered papers covering his desk. He picked up one, clicked his tongue against his teeth, before picking up another.

“Ah, yes, here it is,” he said. “It looks like an application to have you married to Matthyw. Is that correct?”

I nearly spit out the tea. I cleared my throat, trying to swallow it without killing myself. That was what he wanted to discuss with me? My marriage? To Matthyw?

Once I settled myself down, I took the teacup and saucer and leaned forward to place it on the surface of his desk. “Y-yes,” I said.

“It looks like your intended filled out the application.” He showed me the paper he held before quickly facing it towards him once more. “His penmanship has always needed improvement, even when he was a pup. Tricky thing, these marriage applications. Matthyw has never filled one out before.”

“Oh?” I wasn’t sure where he was going with this. My suspicion was instantly triggered, though I didn’t know why.

“It would seem he’s very intent on marrying you, my dear,” he said.

There was a twinkle in his eye, one that both amused and intrigued me. Again, I was unsure where he was going with this, and I tried to figure it out so it didn’t feel like he was a spider, stringing me along until I fell into some kind of trap. Perhaps it wasn’t fair for me to assume this about him, but I had been raised to believe that because of who I was, everyone wanted something from me, even someone with as much status and acclaim as Master Grey.

“Well? Awfully quiet, my dear. Everything okay?”

I cleared my throat, twisting my fingers. “Yes, sir,” I said. “I’m just not sure how to answer...” Except, he hadn’t asked the question.

“Well, how do you feel about marrying Matthyw? He’s very close to your father, isn’t he? They share a familial bond.”

“Not by blood,” I snapped. My face turned red and I looked away, back at the bookcases. Why I felt the need to say that, I had no idea.

“No,” Master Grey agreed. “Your blood does not run in his veins.” He placed his palms on his desk, lacing his fingers together. “Do you know what Matthyw does for the academy, Miss King?”

What Matthyw does...? I shook my head. “I know he’s some kind of

warrior,” I said. “Or was, when the academy was attacked years ago. I’m not sure what his responsibilities are now, only that they take him away for long periods of time.”

Master Grey nodded. “Yes,” he said. “They do. His first marriage was arranged in a way that benefited his obligations to the academy. Granted, I understand he never wanted to be with his lady-wife, so it made things all the easier, but I don’t think the same can be said for you.” He paused. “Will you be okay without a husband over the duration of your marriage?”

I blinked. Instead of answering, I grabbed the teacup and took a generous swallow.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He will be gone the majority of time, Adrya,” he said seriously. All warmth was gone from his face. I was surprised by how serious he was. Whenever I saw him within the academy, he was always friendly, always warm. But this...this felt like a completely different person. “I understand one of the reasons your father paired you with him was because he would die to protect you. That isn’t in question. But he won’t be able to do that if he’s gone. You will be even more of a target due to the...familial relationship the two of you already share. And I’m positive some of the other packs who had hoped to marry you wouldn’t take to hearing you married from within. The Stones, I’m sure, are already livid because of it.”

“What are you saying?” I asked. “Are you telling me I can’t marry Matthyw?”

My heart skipped at the thought. I wasn’t quite sure how I felt knowing I would marry him, but the thought of anyone taking him from me was not something I wanted. My wolf growled at the thought. I doubted Master Grey meant it, but there was a threat in his words, whether he intended for there to be or not. And my first instinct was to snarl and defend what was my own, even against him.

“I’m not saying anything of the sort,” he said in a placating tone. “I just

want you to know —“

“Did you speak to my father about this?” I asked. It was rude for me to cut him off like that, but I didn’t care. I sat up, reaching for the tea before thinking better of it and shoving my hands under my thighs once more.

“No,” he said, and I believed him. “I don’t think it matters. Your father arranged this to protect your reputation. The details don’t matter. I’m speaking with you because you have more power than you realize, and I want to ensure you know what you’re getting into.”

I wanted to take the teacup and throw it against the wall. Everyone seemed to be concerned about what I was getting into, about my virginity, about Matthyw’s reputation. No one considered I was more than capable of handling things myself.

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me that Matthyw frequents brothels and doesn’t take his duty seriously as well?” I asked, arching a brow. I took in a deep breath, trying to control my flaring temper.

“No.” Master Grey shook his head once. “What he does in his personal time is his own business. What you’re willing to put up with is your choice. At the end of the day, I think it important you understand what you’re getting into. Sometimes, we’re blinded by...lust or other emotions we don’t always understand. But when we sit with ourselves, we realize that we felt more strongly than the matter deserved, and the choices we made weren’t the right ones.”

“You think Matthyw is the wrong choice,” I stated.

“That isn’t for me to decide,” he said. “Only you can determine that. My job is to give you the information to make the best decision for you and your family.”

“Is it?” I asked, lifting my chin up. “If that’s the case, certainly you sat down with Professor Chamberly and warned her about the expectations she should understand concerning my father. But I don’t think you did that. Your concern is in regards to Matthyw. Why?”

“As I said before, my concern is to *you*,” he said. “To this day, we don’t know Matthyw’s pack of origin. We don’t know where his loyalties lie.”

“They lie with the King pack,” I said firmly. “He’s fought for his pack, married for his pack. He would do anything for his pack. Even marry me.”

“Oh, I think he intended to marry you,” Master Grey said. “Matthyw came from nothing and was taken in by the most powerful wolf in your pack. All men want power, and you are a key to provide that.”

“Matthyw cares for me,” I insisted, leaning forward slightly.

“Without question,” he agreed. “Without question. But that doesn’t mean he also doesn’t want power. Those two things can be true and exist together.”

“I never expected to marry for love,” I said, leaning back. My gaze dropped to my lap.

“Oh? I thought your father initially gave you a choice in who you could marry, even if he made it a requirement that you did marry.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. Surely, even he knew that just because I could choose didn’t mean I would fall in love with my selection. The fact that I was to marry Matthyw was nothing short of miraculous...or a calculated manipulation, as most assumed it was. I was a pawn, not only used by my father but by Matthyw as well.

I didn’t know what to believe.

“Was there anything else you needed?” I asked, slowly standing up.

“You never answer my question,” he said.

“You never asked one,” I returned and held his stare.

A tick in his jaw was the only reaction on his face. But it smoothed over so quickly, I couldn’t be sure if I had seen anything in the first place.

“Will you still marry Matthyw?” he asked.

I gave myself a moment before responding. “I will do what is required of me,” I finally said. “Thank you for your concern.”

And then, I left the room.

EMBYRLYN



The rest of the journey was silent. I didn't think my heart managed to return to its normal beating process after...that.

Just thinking about it still caused my cheeks to flush. I hated how juvenile I was acting. I wouldn't look at Kazu, didn't want to see him see me acting like a child, embarrassed, curious about the next time we would join our bodies together.

I needed to learn more about being marked and what to expect. I ached for Kazu because of my heat, but ever since we had been intimate against that tree, the flames inside of me simmered.

Walking was difficult simply because of the ache he left between my legs. Despite the pleasure he gave me, it had only been my second time, and since there was a passion between us that couldn't seem to be contained, it was easy to lose ourselves in it without thinking about the consequences.

"What if I get pregnant?" I asked before I could stop and think of the words, of what I wanted to ask him.

Kazu didn't even flinch, wouldn't even look at me. "There's a good chance you already are."

It was like I had been slapped. I stumbled forward, not because I had tripped over a tree or some kind of pebble in the dirt. "W-what?"

Kazu stopped then but his slate-colored eyes wouldn't look at me. "Don't

you know anything about being marked?” he asked in a huff, annoyed with my ignorance.

This only made me blush even more fervently, which I hated. “I only know what was taught at the academy,” I snapped. “I doubt anybody expected a wolf to be marked by nineteen, okay? I’m sure there’s literature somewhere in the library, so I can just go read that once we’re back.”

Something grabbed my wrist, and I blinked when I realized it was him. “I...” He clenched his teeth together. “I know this isn’t your fault. I also know I’m angry that...that you have to be tied to me for the rest of your life. It was done unintentionally. I’m sorry.”

I knew he was trying to be nice, which, for Kazu, was a big deal.

But.

I didn’t like it. I didn’t like the words coming out of his mouth. I didn’t want to hear him apologize. And while I never wanted to be marked, had never thought of the implications of it all, I didn’t like that he clearly regretted what he had done.

“I’m not forcing you to...to be loyal to me,” I said, gently pulling my wrist out of his grasp. “Like you said, you didn’t mean for this to happen. I’m not expecting that or anything from you, for that matter.”

“Don’t say stupid things like that,” he snapped. His body rolled with anger, causing me to react to it. “It’s my fault you were bit –”

“You told me you were acting on instinct,” I pointed out. “Can you really look at me and tell me this was what you wanted? I know how you feel about me. You’ve never liked me; you’ve never respected me...and that’s fine. I get it. You’re entitled to feel however you want about me. I can’t change that. But that doesn’t mean I want to hear you would rather have bitten anyone else.” I looked away, hating how vulnerable this made me even though I wanted to be strong. “It’s stupid, I know. And terribly romantic. But I don’t like thinking about you wanting to bite anyone else –”

“I already told you, I never have.” His throat was raspy, rough.

“Well, it doesn’t feel good to hear you didn’t want to bite me,” I snapped, “even if it’s true. Even if I understand.” I carded my fingers through my hair, craning my head back and staring at the sky overhead – the little slivers of grey I could make out through the leaves of the trees. I wondered when they would fall and the trees would be barren. It had to be soon. “And now, you’re telling me I’m pregnant, and there’s no reaction. You’re just...I don’t know.” I shrugged. I still wouldn’t look at him. The ground was much more forgiving. “I don’t know what to think.”

“It’s better if you don’t,” he said. He wouldn’t look at me either, and I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. If that made talking to him easier or harder. But all I felt was empty. It was such a significant change, going from completely filled up and whole when we were in the throes of passion to whatever *this* was. And I didn’t like it. “We have a mission.”

“You’re right,” I said. “You’re right, I just –”

His hand caught my shoulder, and I was forced to look at him.

“I regret tying you to me,” he said, each word taut and forced, like this was something new for him, “when you deserve so much better.”

I swallowed. “You’re the White Wolf,” I said. “You’re a legend. How can you think that?”

“I’m a bitter old man who refused to have anything to do with you because you were so young and so innocent,” he said. “With Dade, I recognized his anger. With Felix, his desperation to belong somewhere. You were untouched, this girl who had her head on right. There was nothing wrong about you, and I didn’t want that to change.”

I clicked my tongue against my teeth. His warmth radiated through my body.

“I always wanted to be strong for you,” I said. “I thought you thought I was some weak girl holding the team back.”

“Embyrlyn, I’ve watched you fight,” he said. “There’s nothing weak about you except your affection for Dade.”

Dade.

The name hung between us like a murder weapon. Neither of us wanted to touch it, to peel the layers back of what that meant. But maybe there was something we needed to work through, if whatever was between us was going to work.

“Kazu...”

“We need to keep going.” His words were blunt, each one of them another slap on the face.

I knew he was probably uncomfortable with everything going on. I understood it; I was uncomfortable too. But to completely ignore it?

“Yeah, sure.”

He brushed past me, refusing to look at me.

We continued to move. The trees passed in a blur. Everything I did was unconscious, natural habits I didn't have to think about. Instead, my thoughts turned toward being a mother.

I had never thought about having children before. Among wolves, I knew it was an honor as a woman to be able to carry a legacy, especially if it was to a prominent pack in the community. One of the reasons why Dade was so coveted was because he was the last Gregory. He *had* to reproduce in order to continue his pack, and whomever he chose would be revered as assisting in doing that.

Being a mother meant giving life, and to give life was a *huge* deal.

I knew I'd want to get married and have a family. But now? With my former teacher? I couldn't wrap my head around that. And even more than that, it didn't feel like he even wanted this. Like, he was more concerned with his biology and natural instincts and things outside of his control. It made everything between us feel like we had no choice in the matter. Was my attraction to him, my desire, a figment of fate, something that would have happened no matter what? Or was there something in me that wanted Kazu outside of the drive my inner wolf had in consuming Kazu as a whole?

There was no denying he was attractive. Like Dade, he was last in his line and had yet to settle down. He was the White Wolf, a legend. I was sure women threw themselves at his feet constantly, and just the thought of him being with them, of having children with them, infuriated me to the point where I let out a long growl and didn't even realize it. It was only when Kazu asked if I was okay did I realize anything had come out of my mouth at all.

"Sorry," I said, shaking my head. I didn't want to tell him; I knew he didn't want to talk and being jealous of an idea was ridiculous.

"We'll make camp in the next hour or so," he said. "We'll be out of the forest by morning, I would expect, if we sleep for six hours and keep up the same pace."

I nodded but didn't respond.

"You don't seem worried about the Vrykolakas," he said after a few more minutes had passed. The fact that he didn't even seem to be winded aggravated me more than I expected.

"I thought that was just a rumor," I said, hoping my face wasn't as red as it felt. "I didn't think there were actual sightings of them in the forest."

"Why do you think Byron left?" he asked.

"He took the new girl," I said. "If that were the case, why would he take the human and risk her?"

Kazu lifted a shoulder. "Maybe there's more to her than we know."

I doubted it. Not in a mean way or anything like that. I knew people could be surprising, but I had a feeling Byron was forced to take her with him for another reason. Lucy's murder was still unsolved, and even though everyone blamed it on a Vrykolakas that had somehow gotten into the academy, I didn't think so. It didn't make sense. Why would a monster with no brain only kill Lucy and leave? And how could us as wolves not scent it...unless a Light Bringer used ShadowSide and masked it? But what Light Bringer would target our academy?

Unless...unless it was Dade.

I kept myself from speaking to Kazu at all until we stopped for the night. He managed to find a small cave, hidden deep in the forest. Apparently, he had used this place before on other missions he had been part of and insisted it would protect us against the elements. I made a fire while he hunted for dinner.

The snapping and crackling of the flames were enough to focus on so I wouldn't be distracted by my thoughts. I wanted to touch my stomach but I didn't want to be obvious nor did I want...

I was scared to become attached to this thing that *could* be inside of me.

What if it was nothing?

What if I wasn't pregnant at all?

Kazu seemed certain, but was that Kazu assuming? How did he know, especially if he hadn't done this before?

What if...what if he had been lying?

I bristled, standing up. I wiped my butt with my hands, trying to give myself something to do. I shouldn't focus on him lying to me. Because what came before didn't matter. What mattered was now.

Why did everyone say that?

It was such a lie.

Of course it mattered.

It always mattered.

By the time Kazu came back with two rabbits, I was pacing the small length of the cave.

"Embyrlyn —"

"Why are you so calm about this?" I demanded to know. "About the mark, the heat, the-the pregnancy. Be honest with me, and I promise I won't get mad: have you done this with someone before?"

"I already told you that I didn't," he said, his voice low and biting. He moved to sit in front of the fire, pulling out a small dagger in order to skin the rabbits.

“Then why are you so calm?” I demanded, throwing my arms out. “You refuse to talk about it, and you seem so gods-damned aloof. I have no idea what you’re thinking, and I just...I need to know!”

“What do you want from me, Embyrlyn?” he asked, his voice rough. Gone was the cool demeanor he normally possessed. “Do you want me to tell you how fucking scared I am? Because I am. Can’t you see? I’m fucking terrified.”

FREYA



The second the men rode off, Kent turned and gave me a glare I was beginning to associate was one reserved solely for me. “Must you open your mouth at every opportunity you get?” he demanded to know.

“You’re the one keeping secrets,” I snarked back. “I didn’t realize any woman could tolerate you enough to allow you to be their boyfriend.”

He jerked his head back as though I had slapped him and turned to look at me. His blue eyes were surprisingly wide and his eyebrows wrinkled his forehead as they pushed high towards his hairline. It was the most expressive I had seen him in...ever, I thought.

“I’m sorry, did you just use the term boyfriend in reference to...me?” he asked, generally confused by the concept. I couldn’t tell if he was laughing at me, and I didn’t want to deal with being teased, especially since we were following these strange men to some strange town and I was in no mood to see the humor in something that wasn’t exactly funny to me.

“Well, what else do you call it?” I all but demanded, keeping my gaze straight in front of me. I refused to continue to acknowledge those laughing eyes, the utter confusion rippling across his chiseled face. Like there was no way I could even know what I was saying.

I huffed a breath. If I didn’t need my arms to move back and forth as we walked through terrain unfamiliar to me, I would have crossed them over my

chest. As it was, I wanted to get wherever we were going, and soon. A hot meal I didn't have to hunt first sounded utterly divine, but a bed and a washroom sounded even better. If Kent had to meet whatever she was to him, all the better for me. I needed space from him. I didn't think it was a good idea for the two of us to be hanging around each other on such a consistent basis. Every time I thought we were good and getting along, he had to say or do something so entirely offensive that we take three steps back further from where we were. And I didn't want to squabble in front of these men, and have them ridicule me for my youth and inexperience.

"Not that," he said. "You're not...jealous, are you?"

I nearly tripped over a tree root I hadn't made out through the dim lighting. The sun was starting to get ready to make its ascent in the sky so shadows grew long and tried to cling to their physical counterpart. The sky was slightly brighter, but the darkness lingered, clearly unable to take a hint that it was no longer wanted.

"Jealous?" I asked. There was no way I could have heard him right.

Certainly not.

Me, jealous? The fact that he even used that word, which was said with such disdain, was enough for me to choke on my own saliva. It was like he couldn't fathom someone feeling such an emotion in the first place. And honestly, when it came to him, I agreed. Because I couldn't imagine being jealous of some woman I didn't even know. So what if she got to see a softer, more vulnerable side to Kent, one that I would never see. It wasn't as though I liked the guy in the first place. Why would I care one way or the other?

"Please," I snapped, trying to keep my voice down. I wanted to look at him, I wanted to make him explain to me exactly what he meant by that because there was no way he was using that word and applying it to me, but I also didn't want to protest too much and then have him start to doubt my denial. "There's no way I'm jealous of some woman who...well, it doesn't matter."

From the corner of my eye, I could have sworn Kent cracked an amused smile, could have sworn his eyes softened as he looked at me, but it had to be a trick of the dawn because there was no way Kent Byron would react in such a way, especially not to me.

“Good,” Kent said. “Just wanted to be sure. I can’t have you making a scene everywhere we go.”

I clenched my teeth together, my fingers pressing into the fleshy part of my palm. His voice grated on my nerves, despite how low and alluring it was. I didn’t like what he said, the fact that he reduced my concern as to making a scene, as though I was nothing but a toddler throwing a tantrum.

Ass.

Instead of responding to the obvious point, it took everything inside of me to keep my mouth shut. I wasn’t going to open my mouth and prove his point. In fact, from this point on, I had every intention of acting the opposite of how he saw me, and that meant being quiet no matter what he said. It seemed like an impossible task, especially considering I was a reactive, defensive person. But I would not make a scene – as Kent so kindly put it – and I would not be the reason he laughed at me, or that these men saw me the same way they looked upon a child.

* * *

WE TOOK a break after another hour. I was grateful for the rest, but I couldn’t help but wonder when the hell we’d get to this town. Was this some kind of trap? Were we being led to our deaths?

I glanced over at Kent, deeming it safe to do so once I realized he searched his satchel for something. Considering everyone seemed to be doing the same, I could only assume they were forging for food since it didn’t look like we were going to build a fire and linger. Some of the men led the horses away, and I imagined there must be some sort of stream nearby. I considered

stripping and jumping in myself, if only to wipe the second layer of sweat and grime accumulated on my body, but the last thing I wanted was anyone happening upon me, especially not Kent, and knowing my luck, it would be him.

“Here.”

I blinked, my thoughts disappearing the second Kent handed me an apple. I arched a brow, taking it in my hand.

“It’s an apple,” he said slowly.

I scowled. “I know what it is.”

“Do you know how to eat it?”

I didn’t even bother responding to him, and to prove a point, I took a large bite, carefully chewing it so I didn’t look like some barbarian, nor would I choke on any piece.

“We’re about thirty minutes outside of town,” he said in a low voice, settling in beside me.

I wasn’t sure why he felt the need to make conversation, but I didn’t dissuade it either. I took another bite of apple, glancing around. The men handed out jerky; some took seats on rocks, others leaned against the trees. It was clear they knew each other well and had the ability to chat amongst themselves.

At this point, the sun had touched the sky, forcing it to change colors. Now, instead of darkness and pointed blues, yellow and gold were starting to take shape on the canvas above us. There was still the softest of breezes, and if I tried really hard, I could still make out the stars that lingered in the sky.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

I glanced up, surprised to find Kent looking down at me with such a piercing gaze. He always had this uncanny intensity about him, but there was something about it now, something that seemed fixated on me, for a reason I didn’t quite understand. For a moment, I could do nothing but look at him, take the strange expression on his face in. Words escaped me, something that

rarely happened. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was as though he was emphasizing me, as if to say, *It's you. I'm talking to you.* It made me feel terribly seen, and I wished there was some kind of way to turn his eyes off.

"Byron." The man I knew as Kensington interrupted us, but Kent didn't immediately break eye contact. Not yet. "I need you to see something. Come quickly."

His gaze continued to linger until he let out a small grunt of assent. I highly doubted Kensington, a human like me, could have heard it. Then again, maybe that grunt wasn't meant for him. Maybe it was meant for...

You? And how the hell would that make sense?

It didn't. I refused to entertain it further.

The second Kent left to check out whatever Kensington wanted to show him, I was able to take a deep breath of air. I didn't understand it, but Kent had this uncanny ability to completely freeze the air in my lungs and incapacitate my breathing ability. It didn't make any sense.

Sure, it does. You may not like the guy, but even you have to admit he's good looking.

Maybe, and then he opened his mouth and proved what an ass he was.

I took another bite of apple, glancing at the other men. I refused to think of Kent. Not right now. Not when I could seriously think of anyone else. The men didn't seem terribly concerned, which was a good sign. There was an ease between them, a camaraderie. I tilted my head to the side, watching them pass out food and canteens, watching as they chatted amongst themselves. It was almost like we could pretend that there wasn't anything hanging over our shoulder, like we weren't trying to hunt for monsters. I didn't understand how they could be so calm about everything.

Or maybe that was just the kind of effect Kent had on me.

At that moment, twigs snapped and leaves cracked under heavy feet. Kent emerged from where he had initially followed Kensington. He tilted his head, clearly searching for something, until his eyes landed on me. For the briefest

of moments, his shoulders sagged down in what looked like relief, but I couldn't understand why –

And then, a loud roar shook the trees, and the brittle leaves, desperate to remain in their homes throughout winter, shook to the ground. The sound was worse than nails on chalkboards, than the screech of a bird being absolutely decimated, than anything I had heard before. My shoulders bunched up to my ears, trying to protect myself, trying to lessen the sound, but it was no use.

Hands touched my forearms, and suddenly, I was swept back into my present reality. Kent was here. He was touching me, almost as though he wanted to assure himself –

“...must go with them.”

I shook my head, trying to understand what he was talking about. It was difficult to make out the words when the men themselves were rushing and speaking quickly in a low murmur.

“Kensington showed me tracks,” he said.

“Do they belong to –?”

Kent didn't even have to nod. One look at his face and I knew the answer. I tugged on my bottom lip.

“Don't do that.” Before I knew what was happening, Kent took his bare thumb and pressed gently down on my bottom lip, freeing it from the grasp of my front teeth. I froze. He must have heard my heartbeat. It pounded against my chest, but I couldn't move away from him.

Part of me didn't want to.

“You have to go with them,” he said. “They'll take you into town. They'll keep you safe.”

“What about you?” I asked. I wanted to keep the worry out of my tone because he didn't deserve it, but I couldn't help it and I was too concerned to care.

His eyes widened slightly but he recovered just as quickly. “Don't worry about me,” he said. His fingers traced my cheekbone, and before I knew what

I was doing, I leaned into the touch. “I’ll be all right. I’ll meet you there. You need to go.”

And before I could argue, before I could tell him my mother promised the same thing and couldn’t fulfill it, someone swooped me up and placed me on a horse, already in mid-gallop.

I watched Kent for as long as I could until he became a speck on the horizon. The man who had me was muttering what I thought was reassurances, but it didn’t matter. All I cared about was Kent being safe, and I wasn’t sure that was possible if a Vrykolakas had made such a terrifying sound.

ADRYA



I ran. I wasn't sure where I was running, but I needed to get out. It was too much. It was all too much.

I ran down the staircase and through the long hallway. I ran until I bumped into the doors and pushed them open. I ran into the forest, not caring that I left the academy behind in my haste. I just wanted to run, and the wolf inside of me wanted to run as well.

I only stopped when I couldn't hear the academy, couldn't hear the training from the fields or the footsteps of the perimeter guards. I couldn't hear the silent hallways or the gentle snoring of students tucked safely in their dorm rooms.

Instead, all I heard was stillness. It swarmed me.

I opened my eyes. I was in the same field we used during our full moon ritual. There was a small open field, somewhere I could roam without bumping into one of the many trees that lined the forest. The tall evergreens blotted out the sun, though there were no clouds in the sky. The cold pinched my cheeks as I caught my breath, my chest heaving up and down. I sucked in a breath, then another. When I finally calmed myself down, I dropped to my knees and looked overhead.

Peace.

I was surrounded by peace.

I took a moment to revel in it. Kicking off my shoes, peeling off my socks, letting my toes wiggle against the blades of grass...

I hummed in contentment.

After another moment, I sat down completely before stretching onto my back. My white hair flared around me like a lion's mane. I was sure if my father was here, he'd make a remark about the grass getting stuck in my hair or staining my uniform.

I didn't care.

"What's this? A princess offering herself up to the forest like some kind of sacrifice?"

My mouth went dry at the familiar voice, the way the silky, low timbre made my skin crawl with anticipation, and every single hair to stand completely erect. My first instinct was to move, but I couldn't bring myself to do just that. Instead, I stayed completely still. I couldn't even breathe. The only sound was the obnoxiously loud beating of my heart as it pounded against my chest.

Footsteps on grass.

He wanted me to hear him. Matthyw had a way of being light on his feet. He could be completely silent if he truly wanted to.

But not now.

A shadow crossed my form. A tall silhouette blotted out the sky from my vision. Suddenly, he stood over me, peering down with hooded eyes. They scraped the length of my body, from the top of my head all the way down to my feet.

"You ran from the academy," he stated, an unasked question in his tone.

I didn't deny it. In fact, I didn't say anything at all.

"Why?"

I looked away, even as he placed his feet on either side of my thighs, boxing me in without touching me.

"I tire of the games and the expectations," I murmured to a lone wild

flower, growing next to me in the field.

“That’s the nature of your role as heir,” Matthyw said. “You can’t run from that.”

“If Father keeps me as heir,” I pointed out. I picked the flower from its roots and brought it to my nose. The scent was subtle, almost too subtle, but a hint of sweetness tickled my nose.

“Of course he will,” Matthyw said. “Don’t be daft. Just because he’s marrying that cunt doesn’t change the fact that you’re his daughter.”

“Perhaps not.” I plucked a petal, then another. “Perhaps it’s my engagement to you that’s changed things.”

I risked a glance up at him and found his hard eyes scrutinizing my face, as though he was trying to read me. Instead of looking away this time, I held his gaze with my own.

“Do you wish you weren’t bound to me?” he asked.

I sighed. That wasn’t what I wanted to hear from him. “It isn’t about what I want,” I began.

Before I could elaborate, Matthyw slid down over me. Knees planted on either side of my body, hands resting on either side of his face. Annoyance touched his perfectly pale skin and he leaned forward, eyes narrowed.

“*Of course it’s about what you want,*” he said in our native language, his tone both intense and filled with frustration. “*It’s always been about you. Can’t you see that?*”

“*Just because I’m young doesn’t mean I’m naive,*” I snapped back. “*Everyone I know has pulled me aside and asked if this marriage is what I want, if I know what to expect from our wedding night. They claim you are savage, brutal. That you’ll hurt me.*” Matthyw clenched his teeth at the mere suggestion of him harming one hair on my head. “*They say you will forsake me because it’s you and that is what you do.*”

“Who says that?” he spat, eyes like the blue flames.

“Everyone.” I continued to hold his stare. “Everyone reminds me of your

reputation. And everyone reminds me of mine. How we clash because we are two opposing forces. How you orchestrated this simply for my position as heir to the pack.”

“And you believe them?” he asked. He searched my face for something, though what that was, I couldn’t say.

“I don’t know what to believe,” I said. Somehow, my voice dropped an octave, though I knew we weren’t near anyone who could overhear our conversation, even with sharp wolf hearing.

“Yes, you do,” he whispered, leaning forward.

My heartbeat accelerated. It almost leapt into my throat, choking me.

His fingers brushed against my necklace just like he had before.

“I don’t know what to expect,” I amended.

“Then ask,” he said. “And I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

I paused, tilting my head to the side. “Did you arrange this so you could get the pack?” I asked.

“And how am I to do that, *baela*?” he asked, his gaze dropping from my eyes to gaze at my lips. He lifted a finger from the necklace and began to trace the outline of my mouth. “You are the true heir. I would be merely your Consort. And even if you were to die, it would revert back to your father, and if he wasn’t around, the council would name someone new. We both know they would never let the pack fall into my hands.”

“That isn’t an answer,” I pointed out.

“No,” he said.

“So, if my father decided to remove me as his heir, you would still marry me?” I asked.

“Do you truly doubt me?” he asked.

“You’re slick as a snake, *kepus*,” I said, huffing out a sigh. “How easily you dodge direct answers.”

Matthyw leaned forward until his mouth was next to my ear. I froze, feeling his weight dip into me, but not enough where I was uncomfortable.

“I would marry you regardless,” he said, his lips gently caressing the crest of my ear.

I closed my eyes, ignoring the way my skin tightened, the way little lightning bolts shot straight to my core. My entire body was on fire, and it was entirely Matthyw’s fault. I didn’t know what to do about it, except stay still and see what Matthyw would do to me.

“But I can’t deny there’s something about the power you were born into that doesn’t entice me,” he continued. “We’re gods, *baela*. You and me both. It would be uncouth for us to marry anyone below what we are.”

I turned my head so our foreheads brushed. His lips were so close to my own. It would be so easy just to close my eyes, to tilt my head back slightly...

“Will you take a lover after we’re married?” It was the worst question I could have asked, but I needed to hear him say it.

“You question my loyalty?” he asked, pulling his head away until he could easily lock eyes with me.

“It’s not a question of loyalty, but a judgment based on previous habits,” I pointed out. “I know I can’t command you to stay true to me, but I would like to know what I’m getting into.”

It would do nothing to ease the pain but at least I wouldn’t be a fool.

“Why would you question such a thing, *baela*?” he asked. If it was anyone else, his voice might have been construed as soft, maybe even warm. But this was Matthyw. He narrowed his eyes. “Who have you been speaking to?”

I looked away. “Does it matter?”

Matthyw’s fingers grabbed my face and tilted it back to look at me. “*Who*?”

“Sally basically insinuated that you and her are still...” My cheeks filled with color. “It doesn’t matter. But you told her my position as my father’s heir is in question.”

“She spoke to you? When? *Where*? Did you leave the campus?”

“She was in the library,” I said. “I was doing...research. And she was there.”

“Did anyone see her besides you?”

I shook my head, bringing my fingers to my lips. “I don’t think so,” I said.

Matthyw clenched his teeth. His nostrils flared, fangs slipping past his lips. “You can’t believe a single thing she says, Adrya,” he said. The use of my name caused me to pause. “She has her own motives for trying to befriend you, but clearly, she wants to get between us.”

Us.

Like we were a unit.

“What do you do for Master Grey?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he asked. His voice was on edge, holding suspicion.

“He told me —“

“Grey spoke to you?” Now, he didn’t care about masking his frustration.

“He asked me if I wanted to be with a husband who would probably be gone a lot because of the various assignments he would be sent on,” I said. “He seemed to think Father arranged us to be married in order to protect me because I’m his heir. I don’t think he realizes Father has changed his mind about that.”

“Or the old bat knows something we don’t,” Matthyw muttered. He sat up, his eyes going to the trees.

“Will you tell me?” I asked, sitting up as well.

He had yet to pull away from me, so though he was sitting on his heels, his knees still straddled my hips and I had to lean on my hands to keep myself in an upright position.

Matthyw leaned close to me once again. He cupped my cheek with his palm and extended his thumb until it pressed against my bottom lip. There

was an intensity in his gaze, one that set my body aflame again. How he had this ability over me with barely a touch, I didn't know. I just knew he pulled me to him without using his hands, and the fact that we would marry opened so many possibilities about how to explore that...

"Don't," he whispered, his breath ghosting across my face, only adding to the heat. "Don't look at me that way and expect me not to do something about it, *baela*. I don't think you realize what little self-control I have when it comes to you."

I swallowed but it did nothing to moisten my dry throat.

"I need to speak to him," he said. "Grey. He will not warn you off marrying me if he wants to continue to use me as his tool."

He pulled away from me and offered me his hand.

"Shall I walk you back to the academy?" he asked. "Or are you worried about me ruining your reputation?"

"I've already ruined myself," I said, placing my hand in his. "I'd rather have the company."

EMBYRLYN



I pressed my lips together, taking a stick I found on the cave floor and pushing a couple of the sticks around in the fire. Some of the wood caved in until it was nothing more than ash, causing the fire to crack and snap. The smoke moved up to the ceiling of the cave before it was forced to trickle out.

I didn't know what I wanted from Kazu. Knowing he was scared relieved me because at least it meant I wasn't the only one scared.

But what did we do about this? About any of this?

"We need to figure this out," I said. "I don't know anything about this, about what to expect, and if I don't know things, I can't make the best decisions for them."

Kazu remained silent. He began to skin the rabbits, slate eyes on his task instead of me. I didn't mind, though. It was easier this way.

"What do you want to know?" he finally asked.

His tone was softer than before. In fact, it reminded me of the way he used to speak – bored almost, which took pressure off of trying to figure this out right away. Even if Kazu told me everything about what to expect when it came to being marked, I highly doubted that we would be able to create a plan of action we could enact immediately. We needed to know how this affected the mission and what to do about it.

"Will I be able to successfully accomplish this mission?" I asked.

The scent of metal filled my mouth, and I glanced over at Kazu. The rabbit's skin was off and now he was getting any excess fur. My inner wolf howled at the thought of devouring the thing whole, while my stomach churned at the same thought. It was so strange being two things at one time; I wasn't quite sure what to do about it most times. Which one did I ignore? Which one did I listen to?

"I don't know," he finally said. "That depends on you."

I caught his eye. He looked away.

"You can still continue the mission the same way you normally would," he explained. "There's nothing stopping you from doing what's expected of you, and, truth be told, now that you've agreed to the mission, you can't take it back. That's just not how these things work."

"But..." I rubbed my lips together, pushing my hair back from my face, over my shoulder.

"But," he agreed. "It will be...difficult."

"Can you tell me what those difficulties are?" I asked. "What they mean?"

Kazu sighed. "I'm not sure," he said. "I've only studied this. Once you come of age at twenty-one, you take a specific class to ensure you're well-aware about what being marked or marking someone means, what your heat means, how to get scent blockers if you're male and heat suppressants if you're female. You learn what being bonded is like, what to expect from it." He paused. Somehow, I knew he wasn't finished talking, so I didn't jump in with my questions. He sighed, taking the body of the rabbit he finished with and setting it aside so he could do the same thing to the next one. "The truth is, just because I know things doesn't mean I've experienced them. I never thought it could be...like this."

"Like what?" I all but whispered.

He shifted in his seat. Whether it was uncomfortable for him because of the rock he sat on or if he was buying himself time before answering my

question, I didn't know. But I watched him. There was something beautiful about the way his body turned red against the glow of the fire. And every move he made was graceful, even though it was as brutal as skinning an animal.

Gods, I had it bad. There was no saving me, and I didn't even care.

"Your scent..." His words were tight again, like he had difficulty speaking them. "I...It's intoxicating. More so than any drug."

"You've tried drugs?"

He looked up at me, and it was only then that I realized how juvenile that sounded. I looked away, poking at the fire.

"No," he said. "It's always been important to me to keep my body free from any stimulants. Although, I've had the occasional sake."

I ignored the way my cheeks flushed. I knew he didn't mean to, but I thought of getting drunk a couple of nights ago, of announcing my virginity to a packed tavern. I couldn't believe I had done something like that. What the hell had I been thinking?

"It's enough for me to lose control over myself," he continued. "And that scares the shit out of me, Embyrlyn, because I never lose control. And yet..." He snapped his eyes into my own. "It's taking everything I have to stay where I am, to not rip off your clothes and claim you again. And that isn't conducive to accomplishing what Grey wants us to do. It wouldn't be smart even if we had no mission. You're still in school. I'm your captain. And now...now, I'm your mate and there's nothing we can do about it to change that."

"You would?" I pressed my lips together. I hadn't meant to speak at all, but I couldn't help it. I didn't want to think about it. "You would change it?"

"Wouldn't you?" he asked. He scoffed, turning back to the rabbit. His strokes got rougher as he continued to remove the skin, his jaw clenched. "You think I'm any good for you, Embyrlyn? Don't be naive. I'm old and –"

"You aren't old," I said in a soft voice. The heat from the flames masked

the blush that still remained on my cheeks.

He clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Fourteen years your senior is old,” he said. “Don’t flatter me.” He shook his head. “You should be with someone younger, someone kind and not withering away because of battle. The things I’ve seen...I would lock you in my room for a multitude of reasons, but one of them would be in order to keep you from having to experiencing any type of hardships. I don’t want the sweetness to leave your eyes.”

“But isn’t that what life is?” I asked in a low whisper. “It’s about hardships and getting through them.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but that doesn't mean I wouldn’t do everything in my power to keep you from having to endure any of it.”

“You’d rather I be with someone like Dade?” I asked.

He growled – actually growled – at the mere mention of Dade. My heart sped up, and another now-familiar ache pulsed between my thighs.

“I don’t want you to even say his name in my presence,” Kazu managed to get out. “He can rot, for all I care, but the fact that you would even consider him as a mate...I would fucking kill him and I would bathe in his blood.” He stopped himself before he could say anything else, like he was surprised he had said what he said.

“You’re the one who said you wanted me to be with someone younger,” I said.

“Not him,” he insisted. “Not anyone but me.”

“You’re contradicting –”

“I know!” His exclamation caused me to jerk back.

“This is what I’m talking about,” he said. “The fact that I can’t think straight around you.” He shook his head. “I would let you go in a heartbeat if I was a good man...but I’m not a good man. I’m selfish. I want to keep you to myself, despite the fact that this...” He gestured between us with his free hand. “This is wrong. And I have no idea what to do about it, especially now

that you're marked...now that we've consummated the bond during your heat." He dropped his head. "Gods, I'm in trouble."

I swallowed. I knew he wasn't upset with me, but it still felt like he regretted what happened. And even though I didn't want this either, I also didn't want to hear that he thought this was a mistake.

"And the fact that you're..." He glanced over at me, but his eyes weren't on my face. They were on my stomach. "I can't even look at you."

I clenched my jaw. "You know, you're not helping," I said. "I know that I'm probably the last person you wanted to do this with but what you're saying is insulting."

"You want me to baby you?" he demanded. "You want me to lie? You're my former student. I've never seen you in that way."

"Then what changed?" I demanded to know. "Because just yesterday, you were willing to fuck me so Rocky didn't."

The fact that I said such a crude word caused everything in me to freeze. I wasn't expecting that from myself. Even so, I wasn't going to take it back.

"Don't say his name –"

"Why not?" I stood up, my legs protesting because of the position I had held them in for so long. "You said it multiple times that you regret this –"

"I never said those words," he insisted.

But I didn't care. "That you don't want to be with me. How hard this is *for you*. Imagine what it's like for me! I mean, I'm the recipient of this. I have no idea what's going on. I don't know how to even be. I know I have a mission, and the only reason we did what we did was so I could accomplish that mission easier than if we didn't. But...but the thought of being with anyone else makes me want to throw up. And yet you're here, telling me you'd rather be with anyone than me and –"

I didn't know how it was possible, but Kazu moved so quickly and so silently, I didn't realize he vanished until he was directly in front of me. His finger pressed against my mouth again, like he was shoving everything I just

said back inside.

“I can’t even entertain the thought of being with anyone but you,” he said. “And it drives me fucking crazy because I know this is wrong. Don’t you realize that? It is. What I fight against is how much I don’t care.”

I swallowed. I wanted him to kiss me so damn badly but I was too chickenshit to make the first move.

“There’s something else you should know,” he said, “about being marked. As a male, they say you don’t know who your soulmate is until you mark her. It’s like this drives inside of you that you can’t control. And what I did to you, I do regret it because the last person I want with you is me. Like I said, you deserve so much more than me. But I couldn’t have stopped myself, even if I tried. Being inside of you caused irrevocable desire, and I had to claim you. I couldn’t let anyone else have you. And I’m selfish for that. But you’re mine. No one else can have you. And the fact that you’re carrying my child? I’m going to marry you when we get back.”

“But...”

He shook his head. “We’ll figure it out,” he said.

My heart thundered in my chest. “I don’t want you to be with me because you have to,” I said. “I want you to be with me because...”

“Stop,” he said. “Don’t do that. What’s done is done.”

“Are you saying you never could have desired me before?” I asked. Because I was a masochist. Because I just had to know.

“You were my student,” he said. “How could I have ever desired you in that way? What happened between us was biology. I couldn’t fight it. And for that, I *am* sorry.”

That should have made me feel better. Honestly, it should have. But as he started cooking the rabbit over the fire, all I felt was dejection coiled in my stomach like a snake, refusing to let go.

FREYA



*W*e reached the town less than a half an hour later. Nothing chased us.

Everything happened so fast. The men shouted orders at each other while the women began to cook and ready rooms. People began to whisper about monsters and death, and I was trying to find something constructive to do so I wouldn't be sitting around, feeling sorry for myself or worrying myself silly about Kent.

I washed bowls. I scrubbed pots. I collected spices, and if my measurements were wrong or I grabbed the one wrong entirely, my hand got smacked. Suffice to say, by the time dinner rolled around, my knuckles were red.

And there was still no sign of Kent.

“You keep chewing that bottom lip, you'll run it raw,” a low, feminine voice said from beside me.

I glanced up, only to do a double-take. The woman was a few years older than I was, though she could have been thirty for all I knew. The only thing that mattered, though, was her beauty. Her violet eyes sparkled and her dark hair was pulled up from her face in one of those trendy top knots I could never seem to master.

“You're The Girl,” she continued. “The one who journeyed with Kent.”

I cleared my throat, surprised by the reaction I had to merely his name

coming out of someone else's mouth. A shot of possession burst forth, and I had to remind myself I didn't want to possess someone like Kent. I didn't even want to mark my territory over his name.

"I'm Lily," she continued. "I think you met my brother. He was with the traveling party?"

Oh.

Oh.

This was Kent's...friend.

"Freya," I forced myself to say. Unfortunately, it came out of my mouth like a shrill chirp. I felt so childish around her. So...unwomanly.

I wasn't one to compare bodies because, well, all women were women. There wasn't any particular defining trait to be a woman other than biology. Women came in all shapes and sizes, and there was something beautiful to be found in every single one.

Still.

Standing next to her made me feel completely...unworthy. It was no wonder Kent would go for someone like her. She was curvy, a sensuous smile that seemed to imply she knew exactly what she was doing, and there was something in her presence that called attention to herself. What I didn't understand was why he didn't want to be her boyfriend or keep her for himself. Was he the jealous sort? Even now, men glanced over at her with hunger in their eyes, some more obvious than not. She either didn't notice or she ignored the stares, something she probably had to do her entire life.

Why wouldn't he settle down with her? Was it because she was a human? Was there someone else? It didn't make any sense. Then again, I was completely basing my judgment on the way she looked. I had no idea what sort of personality she had. What if she was a bitch? What if she was only good for one thing? There were too many possibilities, and while I could appreciate the distraction from worrying over Kent, I didn't like to think about him with anyone, let alone a woman like this.

“Freya,” she said, the word coming out of her mouth like a lyric in a folk song. “It sounds exotic. No wonder he keeps you close to him. I’m sure you fetch quite the attention back home.”

I honestly had no idea what she was talking about, and I had no qualms about telling her as much. I didn’t need her kindness. I didn’t need her to go out of her way to say something that might make me feel better about myself. Just because I thought she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen before didn’t mean I needed her pity. I had my own strengths, my own earthy beauty, and I didn’t appreciate being condescended to.

“I’m his Ward,” I said, not bothering to hide my annoyance. I wasn’t sure if that was something I could tell her, if that was common knowledge, but it came out naturally and there was no taking it back now.

Lily arched a brow in disbelief. Judging from the expression on her face, I didn’t think she intended to be so candid about her feelings regarding my simple statement.

“His...what?” she asked.

I turned, peeling my eyes away from the door of the inn. Currently, I sat at a table with Lily next to me. She had a silver pint of a warm drink in front of her that smelled sweet and cidery but I couldn’t guess as to what it truly was. Men continued to bustle around the inn while an old, stout woman barked orders at her staff, and the scent of meat and vegetables seasoned in spices and salt began to fill the room, causing my stomach to grumble.

“His Ward,” I repeated. Surely she knew what that meant.

“What does that mean?” she asked. It was the first time since we first began to speak that she had lost that touch of sensuality to her tone. There was no one to impress, no pretense to keep up.

“I...” I wasn’t sure how to answer that. It wasn’t as though I was his child or someone in his family he had inherited. “He watches over me. He’s responsible for me, I suppose.” That was the best way I could explain it so it made sense.

“Hmm.”

She tilted her head and brought the cider to her lips. Her reaction to this information was odd; she didn't seem to be casual in her reception of it. And yet, for the life of me, I couldn't understand why she was suddenly quiet. It wasn't like I was Kent's wife. Certainly that would cause more of an issue than anything else.

“He never told me about you,” she said in a low voice, hands dropping in her lap.

Part of me wanted to point out that it wasn't her place to know certain things. Their relationship seemed to be nothing but physical expression of connection without any ties to each other before and after. Monogamy wasn't expected. There was no reason for Kent to tell her anything. He didn't owe her that based on the little information I knew about him. However, I didn't want to be cruel either. There was no reason for me to be so terribly petty, especially to her, especially since I didn't have any reason to be, other than a strange protective instinct I felt in regards to Kent that was definitely not jealousy. Maybe it had to do with being given the label as being his Ward? I didn't know, and I refused to even entertain it in a thorough manner.

“It happened quite recently,” I said instead, tapping a finger on the surface of the table. I needed to do something that would keep me from staring at the door, waiting for Kent to come in. Each time it opened, it made my breathing pause, only to realize it wasn't Kent. And then my chest choked with disappointment and I looked away, promising myself I wouldn't care enough to look up again.

“Oh.”

I wasn't sure what to make of her tone so I said nothing. Hopefully that meant this conversation was over and I could stew in silence.

One of the attendants brought me a bowl of the stew and I devoured it. I didn't even care that the vegetables tasted old and the meal was over peppered. It was something hot, it warmed me to my bone, and it didn't

require any skinning or hunting on my end.

When I finished, I stood in order to deliver my bowl to the attendant when the door opened again.

I told myself not to turn, that it wasn't him. It hadn't been him the first eighty times people came and went; it wouldn't be him now. But my traitorous heart made me give him one last chance because what if *this* time, it was him? So, I looked, and it was. It was.

I froze. I wanted to go to him. I could make out sweat lathering his brow and dried blood on his face. There was an intensity to his look that almost screamed desperation, though what he was desperate for, I wasn't sure. He was searching for someone, I realized. His eyes scanned the small group eating in the dining hall. This was the look of a man who had survived something perilous and needed physical release to contain the adrenaline coursing through his body.

He was looking for Lily.

Until his eyes found mine, and he stopped looking.

At first, he tilted his head down, checking my person. There was a hint of concern in those blue irises, but it was nothing compared to the burning inside of him. He was making sure I was okay, I realized. That there was nothing that had happened to me. When he finished his perusal, his eyes met mine again.

A woman went over to him with a bowl of stew while Lily herself greeted him in the doorway, moving her hips from side to side in a way that drew attention. He waved both of them away, his gaze on me still unwavering.

When he began to move, I felt pinned in place, as though this was some kind of cat-and-mouse chase, and I was the poor mouse. But as he grew closer, I found I couldn't move. The only thing that changed within me was the beating of my heart, the way it increased in both speed and expression. By the time he was before me, too close to me and yet not close enough for us to touch accidentally, I had to crane my neck back in order to look him in

the eye.

Again, he did nothing but stare. Then...he reached out and cupped my cheek with his rough palm. There was a sticky liquid on his fingers, and I knew it was blood, though I couldn't be sure that blood belonged to him.

“Are you all right?” he asked me.

I nodded, careful not to jerk my head. Then, he might release his hold on me, and that was the last thing I wanted. “You?” I asked.

Before he could respond, there was a commotion at the door, and then, Kensington's voice filled up the room: “Behold! The monster terrorizing our village has finally been restrained. We can sleep easy tonight! We have captured the Vrykolakas!”

ADRYA



I held Matthyw's arm as he escorted me back to the dining hall. Eyes followed us the entire time. It wasn't terribly unusual for Matthyw and I to be seen together. We were, after all, family, and most believed he was my brother.

The second students saw me, however, they leaned towards each other and began to whisper. I couldn't figure out if they were human or not, because I imagined wolves knew I could listen to their conversations even if they were whispered, but I tried to shut them out all the same. I didn't want to hear what they thought of me walking with Matthyw so publicly. It wasn't as though we were doing anything inappropriate; he was acting as my escort, and I was holding his arm, the way someone in my station would.

Unless...unless they knew. Unless they knew about me and Matthyw.

Was it possible? Besides my father and Chamberly and Master Grey, I didn't think anyone knew.

Then again, Chamberly could have leaked it —

Sally.

She could have leaked it too. Especially after I rejected her offer. She had all but threatened me...though how having the academy know about me and Matthyw would be an issue —

It wouldn't be just you. It would be the pack, and how the marriage

affects the pack.

They would know eventually, of course. They would have to.

“...professor is going to marry her father.”

“Do you think she knows?”

“I would be embarrassed. The fact that she’s walking through here —“

“Maybe she *doesn’t* know.”

“How could she not? Professor Chamberly has been showing off that ring since she got here. It’s a damn fine ring too.”

“You know what’s damn fine? Her brother. Matthyw, I mean.”

“*Obviously*, Matthyw.”

I wasn’t sure whether to drop my shoulders in relief or to wrinkle my nose in frustration. My eyes scanned the dining room, looking for Chamberly, to see if she was still here or if she had already left.

Matthyw tilted his head to whisper in our native language, something they might overhear but wouldn’t be able to understand. “*It would seem the cunt has revealed the truth,*” he said.

“*So it would seem,*” I replied.

“Adrya.” There she was. To the right.

“*Shall we pretend we didn’t hear her?*” Matthyw asked.

My lips curved up despite myself. “*I think we should see what she wants,*” I said. “*I don’t wish to upset my father, and I’m sure this would just get back to him. Plus, she might make a scene.*”

“*You know, baela, there will be times you must make a scene in order to stand up for yourself,*” he said as we began to cross the room towards Chamberly. “*You can’t just allow everyone to walk all over you simply because you don’t like confrontation. You’ll be eaten alive as Alpha if that were the case.*”

“*And what would you have me do if they did disrespect me, kepus?*” I asked, curious. I ignored the heavy stare Chamberly gave me and turned to focus on Matthyw’s profile. The sharp edges of his face highlighted his

delicate bone structure and only added to his allure.

“If they disrespected you?” he asked. *“I would slice them in half and make an example of them.”*

My pelvis pulsed with shock, like the ripples of a steady stream being disturbed by a heavy rock breaking the surface. There was something primal in his tone, something that was difficult for me to control within myself. It couldn't be that I enjoyed such discussions of violence...and yet, what more could I say? My body responded. My mouth went dry. All because of a promise I knew my brother would keep if it was necessary.

“I'm glad to see you, Adrya,” Chamberly said when we were directly in front of her. She sat with the other teaching assistants, but other than that, I had no idea who these people were. She didn't spare a glance at Matthyw. This didn't surprise me; I knew she never liked him. She probably never would. “I wanted to show you the ring your father gifted me with.”

I glanced down at the hand she offered, at the ruby shimmering off the candlelight. I knew she didn't mean it as an insult, she wasn't trying to rub my face in her conquest. There was a genuine hope in her tone that maybe we could still be cordial.

How naive I had been back then.

I glanced back up at her but said nothing about the ring. What did she want me to say? If she wanted a reaction, she wouldn't get one.

“I believe it was your mother's,” Chamberly said.

Until those words came out of her mouth.

I tensed. Matthyw stiffened. I was surprised he had yet to say anything about the comment when he normally would have, until I realized he was waiting for me to dictate how he would handle this.

He was letting me take the lead.

“I'm so glad my dress will match it perfectly,” Chamberly continued. “I want to honor your mother, of course. I know what a vital part she is to your family and to your pack. I would never want to disrespect her memory.” She

paused. “Perhaps the seamstress can make you a gown similar to my own?”

“I would rather wear an outfit crafted from my own vomit,” I said.

Chamberly tilted her chin down. The two girls on her left and the one on her right tittered off, obeying the silent command. When they were gone, she locked eyes with me once more, her face as smooth as a stone.

“You command them so easily for someone born to humans,” Matthyw pointed out. “You must have been practicing for a long time.”

“My parents may be human, but I’m still a wolf,” she said.

“Barely.”

“Interesting, coming from you.” I had no idea how Chamberly wasn’t scared of Matthyw. Everyone else was. “You could have human parents too and just not know the truth because you were abandoned as a pup until my husband took you in.”

“You aren’t married yet,” I pointed out.

“And neither are you,” she said, her eyes flashing. “Don’t you find it odd that your father would rather marry you to your brother in order to protect the flimsy reputation you currently have based on the irresponsible choices you’ve been making.” Her eyes narrowed and she slowly stood up so she was level with me.

“He has a name, you know,” I replied.

“Ever since he’s returned, you’ve changed,” Chamberly continued. “You’ve been blunt to the point of rudeness. You don’t seem to care what you do or how it affects those around you. You make choices based on selfish, emotional whims rather than carefully considering the repercussions of what they might lead to. And you’ve taken a childhood crush and manipulated your father into marrying you off to *him*.” She leaned in closer. “He killed his first wife, Adrya. No one can prove it, but everyone knows. He was there. He watched her die and did nothing. What do you think he’ll do to *you*?”

Matthyw’s nostrils twitched. It was the only warning I had that he was going to do something. She had overstepped, and this time, he wasn’t going

to wait for me to take action. I managed to catch his hand just in time, before it reached out to choke her or go for his weapon, I didn't know.

But I had to diffuse the situation as quickly as I could before it turned into something I couldn't control.

I gave his hand a firm squeeze without overstepping my place. Matthyw might technically be my Consort, but he would also be my husband. Just because I would have more control over the pack didn't mean I was going to disrespect him or his position within our marriage.

"Matthyw would never hurt me," I said. "Everyone knows that."

"Do we?" She arched a brow. "Just because he buys you trinkets doesn't mean he wouldn't do what he had to do if he considered you a threat. And with you in the running as heir to your father's pack, you are a threat to him."

"What do you mean, *in the running*?" I asked. "I *am* my father's heir... unless he changed something and hadn't had the time to tell me?" I peeked my brows, daring her to answer.

I knew what my father discussed with me already, but I wanted to see how much Chamberly knew. Did he trust her with this type of information? Or was she the one who was making the calculated decisions with him? Even for him?

"And I've never been his heir," Matthyw pointed out. His voice was like needles, tiny and deadly, piercing Chamberly in every way possible. There was a lingering warning to his tone. "The thought of killing my favorite sister in order to take something that doesn't belong to me and never had is the most idiotic thing I've heard all day."

Chamberly clenched her teeth together. Finally, her eyes flashed at Matthyw, a warning there too. But she could never hope to be as intimidating, and the thought of her standing up to him was almost pathetic.

"I will be your Queen after this weekend," she said.

"You can put the crown on your head and I still would consider you less than the carcasses of my last meal," he said with a sneer.

“Will you not control him?” Chamberly turned to me. “He’s to be your intended, after all.”

Matthyw stiffened. I clenched my teeth together. News of our betrothal wasn’t supposed to be revealed until after my father’s wedding. My father had issued that command himself. He didn’t want students to gossip about me, about our family line, until I was officially protected as Matthyw’s wife.

I wanted to look at the others surrounding us. They hadn’t been paying attention to our conversation, not really. Sure, it would’ve been gossip to see me and a teaching assistant I always loathed discuss her upcoming nuptials to my father, but this? This would be bad for me. People would have their opinions. Some didn’t know that Matthyw wasn’t my brother by blood. They would think things about our pack, things that my father had hoped to explain himself, but that Chamberly had ruined. And if I was still heir to my father’s pack, this marriage to Matthyw might paint a target on my back. If they didn’t agree with the marriage, what would they do to me in order to free up the pack and give it to someone else?

But that was only if I still would inherit the pack. I wasn’t sure that was the case.

“He is,” I said. I wouldn’t be ashamed of him. I wouldn’t be ashamed of this marriage. Especially when I wanted him the way that I did.

“*Would you like to do something to cause a fuss, intiyenta?*” Matthyw asked, his eyes bright. I was certain he was having much too fun speaking in a language Chamberly couldn’t understand.

I glanced up at him, only to find his lips curved into a smirk, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. My heart skipped a beat. I hadn’t seen that look on Matthyw’s face in a while. I didn’t realize I missed it until now.

“Yes?” I asked.

And then, in front of everyone, without a care in the world, he leaned down and captured my lips with his.

EMBYRLYN



We woke early the next morning and headed out almost immediately. Kazu had packed protein bars, and as we ran through the forest, we scarfed them down. I tried not to think about what he said, how he truly believed that he would have never been attracted to me before this. Logically, I knew I shouldn't care. I should realize that he was older, he had been in a position of power, and there was a good chance I wasn't even his type in the first place.

Had I ever considered him attractive before this?

Yes, of course. Saying Kazu wasn't attractive was petty because it was a fact. Kazu had a symmetrical face, he was six foot four, and he had muscles that corded his body without overwhelming it. Everything about him was perfect. Even if I hadn't been attracted to him, even I could recognize and acknowledge that.

But that didn't mean *I* was attractive. I was pretty, certainly, definitely cute, but someone wanting me sexually simply on the basis of my looks?

Then why did he have to be the one to claim your virginity? If he's adamant that he never saw you in that way before the bite itself, why did he have to be the one to do it?

I couldn't answer that, and I doubted Kazu-sensei would either.

Instead, we focused on making our way through the forest and to our destination. A couple of low-hanging branches thwacked my cheeks, causing

my skin to snip apart. I was certain I was bleeding, but I refused to tell Kazu we needed to stop. Not because he wouldn't but because I refused to let him think I was weak. Even after all this time, there was still a small part of me that didn't want him to think that way of me, even if I shouldn't crave his approval.

“Stop.”

The word was urgent, insistent, even. I wasn't sure how long we traveled for, my sweat accumulated on the back of my neck and knees, my hands were clammy, and it was difficult to catch my breath. The sky was still overcast, so telling the time by the position of the sun was practically impossible. I hoped it was more than a few hours, though. I wanted a hot meal and a room to myself. The inn Master Grey mentioned before, the one we would stay at until we had a lead as to the whereabouts of the Light Bringer nest, was a beacon, leading me further and faster to the unknown. Anything to put some distance between me and Kazu-sensei, to keep myself from getting distracted by how he looked or what I wanted him to do to me the next time we came together.

“You're bleeding.” He said it like it was some great offense, like I had ruined his day by getting a small cut on my face.

“It's nothing,” I insisted. I hoped he couldn't hear the struggle as I tried to slow my racing heart. I only wished I could turn off the color to my face so I wasn't as red as the base of a pimple. “I ran into a couple of trees. It's not a big deal.”

Kazu took a step closer to me, then another. His movements were jagged, uncharacteristically so for him, like it was difficult to move in my direction at all. But he did anyway until he was directly in front of me. His slate-eyes were hard and unflinching as he looked at the two lines that cut into my cheek.

“You're bleeding,” he said again.

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to that, so, this time, I stayed quiet.

He lifted his fingers and reached for my face. I wanted to pull away. To let him touch me was a dangerous game, one I wasn't sure I even wanted to play. But my feet were rooted to the ground, and I couldn't find it in me to follow through. Despite my mind screaming at my body to do just that, my body wouldn't listen.

And then, his fingers brushed my cheeks until he swiped at the blood before staring at it. I wasn't sure if he needed to touch me in order to see the truth of it, or if it was something else entirely..until he placed his fingers into his mouth.

My pelvis throbbed at the sight of him doing that. The way his eyes closed, the way his chin tilted up to the sky like my taste filled him with such...pleasure. I swallowed before licking my lips. My body was in complete control at this point. My mind was muzzled; I couldn't understand it even if I wanted to, and I didn't. I didn't care that he had insulted me earlier – whether it was his intention or not – because he was here and he smelled like sulfur and Christmas trees and he belonged to *me*.

Without warning, he dropped his hand from his mouth and leaned even closer to me. I tilted my face up in order to give him better access to my cheek, to whatever part of me he wanted. His eyes widened just slightly; he must have been thrown off by my actions, but he didn't slow down. Not until his tongue slid past his lips and brushed the cut.

I stiffened. A strange sensation waffled through me. Part of me wasn't sure what was happening other than I felt like a kitten getting cleaned by its mother. But another more feral part of me wanted his tongue all over my body.

A moan slid past my lips. I hadn't meant it. In truth, I hadn't meant to make a sound at all. But it filled the space between us, and in that silent forest, it could have been a scream.

“Don't,” Kazu said.

I clenched my teeth together, suddenly sick of it, of *him*. “No, Kazu-

sensei,” I said, thrusting a finger between us. “No. You don’t get to tell me what to do anymore. Even now, this is *my* mission. You’re just an escort, a contact person. You can touch me like that and then have the gall to taste me in some strange, erotic way, and the second I respond to it, you have the nerve to tell me no, like I was the one in the wrong when *you* started this? What do you want from me?”

“I don’t want anything from you,” he practically snarled, but he didn’t back up. “I already told you, this wasn’t part of the plan. It was instinct.”

“And yet, *you’re* the one who keeps touching me,” I pointed out. “You’re the one invading my space and bringing us closer together. If you truly didn’t want me, I get that. I know you’re not in the habit of wanting your students, but then why not let Rocky do it? Why not let Rocky take my virginity so you wouldn’t turn us into this?”

I barely got the question out before Kazu snarled, “Because you’re mine. You’ve always been mine. I just...I didn’t know. And when you suggested doing anything with him, with *anyone*, murder seemed too easy and the only right path. I can’t explain it. I don’t want to explain it.”

“Well, we all have to do things we don’t want to do,” I said. “And you denying the truth isn’t going to help us.”

My nose twitched. Something like smoke touched the air, and I looked up, hoping to see where it came from. If there was smoke...

“We’re close to the north village,” he said softly, his voice low. There was still a dangerous edge to it, but there was also something soft. “The inn.”

I sighed in relief. I was almost worried we would run into a Vrykolakas. Their sightings were more frequent, their actions bolder. I wasn’t sure what we would do, but between the two of us, I’d like to believe we could take them on.

“You have to tell me what I’m supposed to do,” I continued. “Because we both know I only had sex with you because of the mission, to make it easier. There’s an expectation here that...that I’ll have to engage in the same activity

with –”

“Fuck,” Kazu growled, ripping away from me and turning around so he could stomp towards a tree.

“You know this,” I said.

“Of course I know it!” he snapped, whirling back around to face me, throwing his arms out. “You think I like hearing it, knowing I’ve fucked myself by bonding with you?” His eyes dropped to my stomach and he flicked them away, like he couldn’t stand the sight of me. Of what was inside of me.

I flinched. Once again, his words were like bullets, striking exactly where he knew they would hurt. And that look...

It took everything inside of me not to wrap my arms around my stomach and hide myself from him. It was hard to imagine the baby in there, so small, so unassuming, growing inside of me like a seed. But it was his fault. All of this was his fault, and the fact that he tried to keep running from it was both infuriating and exhausting.

“What does this mean?” I asked slowly, softly, because I didn’t want to scare him off. If anything, I wanted to work this out before I started, before we entered that village and I started this Scarlet mission. If we were to work together, we had to figure out the right course of action, something we could both agree on. “What do we do? It’s not like we can turn whatever is between us off. Not with the mark. Not with...other things.”

Kazu clenched his teeth together, his fingers curled into tight balls at his sides.

“And it’s not like we can go back to the academy,” I continued. “We need to do this.”

“Why?” he finally bit out, eyes nearly black, as they moved onto me. “For Dade? To bring Dade home?”

I ignored the way I wanted to lash out. Dade was his student too. And just because he betrayed all of us to avenge his pack didn’t mean he was allowed

to speak to me like this.

“You know he belongs back at the academy,” I said.

“You still love him.” His voice was flat, almost monotonous. But his eyes...his eyes were weapons, holding me in place, filtering out information from me.

“I don’t.” The words fell from my lips before I could even think about the right answer to that question.

He jerked his head back. “What do you mean, you don’t?” he demanded to know.

“Kazu, all I can think about is you,” I snapped. “You touching me. Your children inside of me. Everything that has to do with you. I can’t think of Dade. Not after what happened between us. And I hate it because I never wanted to be that girl that turned sex into love. I knew love was never a guarantee with sex, and, gods, I’m not saying I love you now because we definitely don’t know each other to love each other, which is ironic since you’ve implied that you’ve impregnated me, but the thought of any other man touching me makes me want to throw up.” Finally, *finally*, I was able to catch my breath. “I’m asking you what to do because I need to know what you want me to do. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t either,” Kazu said. “How many times have I told you this has never happened to me before?”

“Stop getting defensive with me,” I said, frowning. “It’s not my fault.”

“I know.”

“Then why do you treat me like it is?” I asked.

Kazu gave me a long look. When he finally opened his mouth, ready to answer, another voice filled the air.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting *you*, though I’m not sorry for the reunion.”

Kazu growled again.

Slowly, I turned.

I lost my breath again.

Dade.

DID YOU LIKE BLOOD & BETRAYAL?

As an author, the best thing a reader can do is leave an honest review. I love gathering feedback because it shows me you care and it helps me be a better writer. If you have the time, I'd greatly appreciate any feedback you can give me. Thank you!

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Thank YOU, dear reader, for spending some time in my world. I hope you enjoyed it and want to keep coming back for more!

And thank you, Universe, for helping me get this book into readers' hands. I hope it moved you.