

ANASTASIA WILDE



OUTLAW WOLVES

BOOK FIVE

BROKEN

BROKEN

Outlaw Wolves: Book Five

by

Anastasia Wilde

Broken

Copyright © 2024 by Anastasia Wilde

Copyright © 2024 by Anastasia Wilde

First Electronic Publication: February 2024

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be used, reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, scanning, uploading, or distributing via the internet, print, or any other means, without written permission from the author.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or have been used fictitiously, and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental. The author does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for third-party websites or their content.

Published in the United States of America



Pack Bond Publishing LLC

Cover Design by Diana TC, triumphbookcovers.com

Books by Anastasia Wilde

Silverlake Shifters Series:

Fugitive Mate

White Wolf Mate

Tiger Mate

Silverlake Enforcers Series:

The Enforcers: KANE

The Enforcers: ISRAEL

The Enforcers: NOAH

Bad Blood Shifters Series:

Bad Blood Bear

Bad Blood Wolf

Bad Blood Leopard

Bad Blood Panther

Bad Blood Alpha

Wild Dragons Series:

Dragon's Rogue

Dragon's Rebel

Dragon's Storm

Darkwing Dragons Series:

Dark Dragon's Mate

Dark Dragon's Wolf

Red Dragon's Desire

Red Dragon's Heart

Red Dragon's Flame

Wild Blood Shifters Series:

Brandon's Mate

Colton's Mate

Remington's Mate

Damien's Mate

Titan's Mate

Phantom's Mate

Brock's Mate

Outlaw Wolves:

Stolen (A Prequel Novella)

Hunted

Rescued

Chased

Ignited

Broken

Chapter 1

Cole Hunter had a list of things he and his wolf hated, starting with the desert, incompetent leadership, and drunken assholes getting in their face. High up on that list were also: bats, magic, being stuck underground, and brussels sprouts. And rats. If somebody shoots you in a dark damp claustrophobic underground tunnel, you better not go unconscious or run out of ammo, because the fucking rats will eat the living flesh right off your bones.

This was currently a pertinent piece of information, because he was in one of those dark damp tunnels right now. A brick-lined former smugglers' tunnel running under the city of Louisville, Kentucky, to be exact. It was barely high enough for him to stand up in, with water dripping down the walls and the floor slick with moss, mold, and slimy shit he didn't want to look at too closely.

And rats. Scuttling in the shadows, or dropping off a ledge with a ripe *plop* right in front of him, splashing slime on his ankles and making him curse.

But this was the mission, and once he committed to a mission, he always carried it out. Ride or die. Especially if there was an innocent life at stake. Not to mention the chance to take down the one person in the world he most wanted to kill: Thomas Riker—former special forces teammate, former right-hand man of an evil wizard, traitor, murderer, and all-around bastard.

With any luck, once Cole got through this damned tunnel, he'd finally get to do that takedown and make it stick. Every rat-infested cloud had a silver lining.

Riker had broken out of the prison Cole and his team had put him in a few months ago, after they'd killed the aforementioned evil wizard and broken his hold on Cole's brother's mate, Karisma. Cole's boss at Outlaw Ridge, Thanatos, had tracked Riker to Louisville, and found out his purpose here—to locate and steal a powerful magical artifact.

Cole's job had originally been to stop him, and, if possible, retrieve the artifact.

But Riker, true to his typical MO, had abducted an innocent woman and forced her to help him get what he wanted. Some kind of magic-user—a minor witch or sorceress, probably. Someone with the knowledge and power to get Riker through any magical wards—protective spells—between him and whatever the hell it was he wanted.

So Cole's job had become more complicated, and mission priorities had shifted: extract the girl, grab the artifact, stop Riker. In that order, unfortunately. Although the third objective was murky as far as optimal execution. Thanatos wanted Riker alive for questioning. Cole wanted him dead.

It remained to be seen which of them was going to get what they wanted.

Cole paused at an intersection in the passage, pulling out his phone to check the tunnel map he'd downloaded. The light from the screen looked faint and futile, barely making a dent in the oppressive darkness of the tunnel. The smell of mold was about to choke him.

He glanced down at the screen—but it wasn't the map. It was one of the few decent photos of Riker's captive that the Ridge's techs had managed to hack off the various traffic and security cams they'd been monitoring. She was looking over her shoulder, fear and uncertainty in her wide blue eyes. Her skin looked soft, creamy, but her mouth had a firmness that hinted at strength, and her red hair hinted at temper. She had unusual slanted eyebrows that gave her a mischievous look, a quirk of humor.

Cole's stomach clenched, as it always did when he looked at the photo. He didn't know why; he could usually keep his emotions out of the job. He and the Outlaw Ridge team had rescued dozens of victims over the years, some of them from horrific situations. The only way to help them was to keep a clear head. Emotion clouded judgement, and clouded judgement led to mistakes.

Mistakes ended in dead victims.

But there was something about this particular victim. Maybe the vulnerability in her eyes, caught by the camera when she wasn't aware of it; maybe because Cole knew what it was like to have someone make you do things you didn't want to do, so they could get what they wanted.

Maybe it was just Cole's intimate knowledge of all the evil shit Riker in particular was capable of. Nobody deserved that.

But he couldn't let her get to him. What she did deserve was his total focus. All business, no sentiment. Angrily, he swiped the photo away and pulled up the map. Time was ticking, and he was getting that prickly feeling across the back of his neck that meant trouble was coming.

He had to find Riker and the girl before it went down.

After studying the map for a moment, he stuck the phone back in the pocket of his combat vest, letting his wolf vision readjust to the darkness. He needed to take the right-hand turn, then the door leading to the hidden sub-basement should be thirty feet down on the right.

He trailed his fingers along the wall as he counted paces. There it was—a barely perceptible vertical break in the brick wall. Crouching down, he ran his fingers over the wall until he felt the worn carving in one of the bricks. A circle, with a flame inside it.

He pressed on the brick, and with a grating sound, part of the wall moved away from him and slid aside.

Another tunnel—this one dry with concrete walls. And pitch dark—not even his wolf vision could see anything in this one. Cole activated the light strapped to his vest. It was a risk, making him a possible target, but he didn't have time to stumble around in the dark. His instincts said he needed to hurry.

He moved down the passage as silently as possible, counting strides again to measure his distance, alert for sounds or scents of enemies. Nothing.

At sixty feet, he stopped. There was the metal access door, right where it was supposed to be.

He turned off the light, listening again. Behind the door he could hear faint voices, but he couldn't make out any words.

He sprayed the door hinges with synthetic oil from his utility belt, then used a small wand Thanatos had provided to check for magical wards or traps. There was a faint magical residue, but nothing active. Either Riker and his sorceress had taken down the wards, or someone had beaten them to it.

The prickling in his neck had spread down between his shoulder blades. Like someone was about to knife him in the back.

He eased the door open. The first thing that hit him was a whiff of decay. Something had died in there—probably a long time ago.

A little farther, and he could see into the sub-basement.

The first thing he saw was her, and for a second the impact of seeing her in person blocked out everything else. She was dressed in black combat gear, standing in front of a wall safe with her hands pressed against the door, magic glowing warmly around them.

And she was beautiful.

The golden glow reflected off her hair where it was pulled back from her face, burnishing it like polished copper. She was in profile to him, her expression intense with concentration. On one of her wrists was a thick gold cuff bracelet, sparkling with tiny jewels. It, too, glowed with magic.

Cole's stomach lurched, and for a moment he felt suspended in time. Then he wrenched back his focus, taking in the rest of the scene.

Work the mission, he reminded himself. Assess the situation.

The sub-basement was a large room, about sixty feet across, with an ornate carved wooden desk near one wall, a few scattered pieces of smaller furniture, and an old partially clothed body on the floor about ten feet from the girl, bones picked clean. Fucking rats.

There was one access door on the opposite side from where he was standing. Probably the way the girl and Riker had come in, since there was no lingering scent of them where he was. That door was ajar, and Riker was stationed next to it, obviously standing guard—his focus constantly moved back and forth between the door and the girl.

And... hell. Riker was wearing a bracelet that matched the girl's. Most likely the way he was controlling her. Magical light streamed out of it, spreading around the two of them in a large circle.

Wards, Cole realized. They'd taken down the ones the former owner had made in order to get inside, and Riker was casting his own circle of protection. So the bracelet not only controlled her, but allowed Riker to co-opt her magic and do what he wanted with it.

Bastard.

And this was going to make extracting her much more complicated. Cole might have to wait until Riker dropped the wards and they were on their way out.

"Ireland," Riker said. "Hurry it up, can't you? I don't want to spend any more time here than we have to. I don't know whose attention we might have attracted, with the magic we expended getting inside."

The girl—Ireland—answered without turning around, her voice tight with tension. "Patience, grasshopper. I'm going as fast as I can. If I screw up, the wards on this safe will go off, and we'll end up like him." She jerked her head toward the body on the floor.

"Fine. Just hurry it up."

"Sure," she said. "Because speed safecracking was my specialty in spy school."

The sarcasm was a good sign—she still had some fight left in her.

Cole expected Riker to snap back, retain control, but he just gave a snort. "Hurry anyway. We're too close to let anything go wrong now."

Oh, things were going to go so wrong for Riker. If he only knew.

Chapter 2

Ireland focused on her magic, listening to the tumblers fall in the safe, while holding back the wards left there by the previous owner.

And trying not to look too hard at the dead body—the last person who’d tried to do what she was doing.

It would be too easy for her and Riker to come to the same fate.

It still felt odd, working with Riker. It had only been a few months since her last Protector had been killed. Since the mix of their powers had driven him insane.

Riker had saved her. She owed him. And as it turned out, there was something she could do for him. For both of them.

And it she was about to do it... right... *now*.

The last tumbler fell into place, and the safe opened with a metallic *snick*.

Butterflies filled her stomach, and she almost forgot how much danger they were in. But not quite. Riker wasn’t experienced with magic, and if his concentration failed...

She had to hurry.

Ireland began pulling things out of the safe. Cash, papers, a ledger, files—she shoved them all into the canvas duffel at her feet. None of that really mattered.

The thing she wanted—needed—was in the back. A drawstring bag made of shimmering blue velvet, with a faint glow of magic around it.

The Book of Bright Moon. She pulled it out, the magic seeping into her like cool water. She ran her hand over it, savoring the feeling. She had it. She was almost free.

Riker said, “You going to drag that thing straight into bed? Or maybe buy it dinner first?” His voice was showing the strain of holding up the wards.

“Yours is in here too.” She put the Book into the duffel and reached for the last thing in the safe. Another bag, identical except for the color—a deep black.

“Grab it and let’s go,” Riker said. “I’m getting a bad feeling—like something’s watching us.”

The magic around the safe was watching them, wanting to do what the sorcerer had set it to do.

Kill them both.

“I’ve got it,” she said. She tucked the second book into the bag and carefully withdrew her magic from the wards on the safe, stepping back. They snapped back into place, and the safe door slammed shut.

Nothing blew up.

Ireland let out a sigh of relief. “We’re clear.” She zipped the duffel and picked it up. Despite the tension, she couldn’t help grinning. She’d been dreaming of this day for years. “Let’s get out of here, and set ourselves free.”

There was an answering grin on Riker’s face. She was going to miss him—this man who’d barged into her life thinking he was taking her captive, and ended up a partner and a friend.

She wondered, after they freed themselves from the magic that bound them, if she’d ever see him again.

She’d barely taken a step towards Riker when the door to the room slammed open and three creatures burst in. Humanoid, but hugely muscled, with muzzles like dogs and glowing yellow eyes.

Terror raced through her. Fae Retrievers. They’d found her.

They ran forward, hit Riker’s protective circle and barked with pain, but it didn’t seem to damage them. Two of them circled, growling. The third began chanting a counterspell, pushing at their wards.

“Hell,” Ireland said. “Is there a back way out?”

Riker replied, “The plans said there were maintenance tunnels. That way.” He jerked his head minutely toward the wall opposite the main door, about thirty feet away from them. “If we get inside, we block the way behind us with explosives.”

Bringing the roof down behind them didn’t seem to be the best plan, but it was all they had. She could feel their circle of protection bending already. It wouldn’t last long—not with Riker’s lack of experience, and no power of his own.

She said, “Roger that. Let’s get out of here.”

“You go,” Riker said. “I’ll hold them off.”

She felt a rush of affection and exasperation. There was no way she’d leave him behind to die for her. Even if it would set her free. “That’s not how this works, boyo. We’re a team.”

He cut her a glance, his mouth twisting with a rueful grin. “Just get ready to move.”

She and Riker began edging towards the far side of the room, streaming as much power as they could into the wards. Riker drew his machine pistol and fired a blast of bullets into the nearest Retriever. The magic circle was designed to keep out people, and most magic, not weapons fire. The Retriever staggered and went down. At the same time, Riker yelled, “Raka!” *Defend.*

At Riker’s word, Ireland felt the trapped power unlock inside her. She made a throwing motion, lobbing a large ball of magic at the other two Retrievers. It sent them tumbling, slamming back into the wall.

“Go!” Riker yelled.

Ireland grabbed her bag and headed toward the far end of the room. Riker was backing up, still facing the Retrievers. The two she’d hit had bounced back to their feet with stunning speed. Her stomach sank. These things were tough, and she’d never been allowed to learn the kind of battle magic that might defeat them.

Please tell her she hadn’t come this far just to be snatched back by the Bright Fae at the last moment.

The creatures had split, stalking around their circle in opposite directions. Riker fired at the one nearest their planned exit, spraying a barrage of bullets across its upper body. It dropped.

But Ireland had stupidly taken her attention off the last Retriever. It had pulled a coiled whip off its belt, sending it snaking through the air, glowing with magic.

It cut through the protective circle. Ireland tried to dodge, but it followed her, catching her around the waist and pulling cruelly tight. The creature yanked her off her feet and she hit the stone floor hard, the breath knocked out of her.

It didn't have to get inside the circle, she realized. It just had to get her out.

Then it was dragging her across the floor, the whip burning into her side. Ireland grabbed the leg of the heavy wooden desk as she passed, holding on desperately. "Riker!" The creature yanked and the whip bit into her, pain slicing through her.

Through her bracelet, she could feel Riker losing control of the magic. If he did, their circle of protection would be toast—and so would Riker. They wouldn't bother to capture him.

He turned to shoot at the creature with the whip.

Just then, a giant hand punched through the metal air vent in the ceiling, and a fourth creature dropped into the room from above. He was a huge, hulking beast with a bull's head and thick yellow tusks curling up from the sides of his snout. His lower body was like a goat's, with backward-bending knees and hooves instead of feet. A Taurus.

Riker turned and shot him, but the burst of bullets seemed only to enrage the Taurus. He raised his own weapon, shooting a stream of brightly glowing darts at Riker.

They ripped through Riker's body armor, into his abdomen.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Riker's knees buckled, and he crumpled to the floor. Ireland felt her connection with the magic start to fade. The wards flickered.

In another moment, they would be defenseless.

Chapter 3

The circle of protection died as Riker hit the ground.

Cole was already moving—racing into the cellar with his gun in his right hand, drawing the combat knife from his belt sheath with his left. The blade gleamed with a faint magical light. He'd had it specially made—and paid a small fortune for it—as soon as the Outlaw Ridge team started fucking around with sorcerers.

He was about to get his money's worth.

As he burst from the shadows in the back of the room, the monster pulled the whip lash tight and started to drag the girl toward him. The magical rope bit into her side, and she screamed in pain.

The bull-creature who'd taken Riker down had his hands out toward the fallen man, shouting a spell. Cole was going to have to go right between them.

He ran faster, straining his muscles, trying to beat the spell. He didn't make it. Dark red light streamed out from the monster's hands, striking Riker and pulling the gold bracelet off his wrist like a tractor beam. Cole dropped into a baseball slide, right under the red beam, his knife raised to cut the whip as he slid beneath it.

His glowing blade passed through the magical light, unexpectedly cutting it off. Riker's bracelet dropped to the floor and rolled away. The monster roared in fury, and Cole, still sliding across the floor, aimed and squeezed the trigger in a burst of bullets that knocked the creature back.

But he was losing momentum—he wasn't going to make it to the girl. In desperation, he drew back and threw his knife at the taut whip cord. Everything seemed to slow down as the glowing blade rotated through the air. Then it hit the whip and sliced cleanly through, severing it.

There was a flash and a *boom* as the magic in the whip short-circuited. The creature holding it lost its balance and stumbled back.

The woman rolled to her knees, shaking off the remnants of the severed whip. She raised her hands, chanting. A ragged burst of blue-white magic appeared briefly and sputtered out again.

Cole slammed a new magazine into his pistol and fired from the floor, almost ripping the creature with the whip in half. It went down.

But the monster who'd tried to get Riker was back up, snarling. It launched itself toward the woman. She tried to do another spell, but it too fizzled and died. Cole, scrambling to his feet, barely had time to get between them.

The creature hit him like a freight train, slamming him to the ground and landing on top of him, hot and heavy and smelling of rotten eggs. It was stronger than he was, even with his shifter strength, and its claws made huge gouges in his military-grade body armor.

This thing could rip him in half.

He struggled with it, trying to keep those lethal claws away from his exposed throat. His muscles strained and tore, the veins bulging out in his arms, all his strength and will focused on one singular goal—not dying a bloody, painful death. Its burning orange eyes bored into his.

Then suddenly the creature's eyes bulged, and greenish-black blood rushed out of its mouth, hitting Cole in the face and burning like acid. With a roar and a grunt, the monster collapsed on top of him.

Cole looked up to see Ireland standing over them, face like an avenging angel. She had his magical knife in her hand, the blade dripping with the creature's blood. She'd severed the damn thing's spine.

With a great heave, Cole pushed the body off him and sat up. The skin on his face was still burning, and he used one of the few clean patches of his shirt sleeve to wipe it off. The shirt immediately started smoking, and he ripped the sleeve off at the shoulder and tossed it away.

The creatures were all down. So was Riker, lying in a growing pool of blood.

Ireland didn't wait to find out if the stranger was okay. She raced across the room to Riker's side, snatching up his bracelet from the floor as she passed. She flung herself to her knees next to him, ignoring the blood pooled on the floor and trying not to look at the mess the magical missiles had made of his lower abdomen.

Somehow, he was still breathing. "Hang on, hang on," she muttered, fumbling with the bracelet. She picked up his arm and tried to clasp the bracelet around it. It was a cuff bracelet with a hinge down the middle that allowed it to open and close. She squeezed the two halves together around his wrist. "Here you go," she murmured. "This'll work."

The Protector's bracelet had healing powers, in case the Protector was injured. Riker was still alive. It could heal him.

But nothing happened. The bracelet wouldn't lock on to him; it just kept trying to pop open. And if it didn't lock on, it wouldn't work.

"Come on," she pleaded. He couldn't die. He couldn't.

Vaguely, she was aware of the other man standing over her—the one who'd run in at the last moment and saved her. He spoke, his voice brutally quiet.

"He's not going to make it," he said. "And he doesn't deserve to. We need to go."

White-hot rage burned through her. Who was this guy, who dismissed Riker like he was nothing? Who said he didn't deserve to live? She felt a strange rippling along her skin, and a sound burst out of her that was almost a growl.

"Shut up," she snapped. "He's still alive. We can't just walk away. What kind of heartless bastard are you?"

"The kind who doesn't want to get caught by any backup these creatures brought with them." His tone grew more determined. "Now let's go."

She looked up at him, not letting go of Riker's hand. "I don't know who you even *are*," she said. "Or why you're here. But you don't get to order me around. Go by yourself, if you're going."

"My name is... Cole. I'm rescuing you. It would help if you'd cooperate."

"If you're rescuing anybody, you're rescuing us both. Help me get him up."

She looked up at the man standing over her. He was tough and handsome, his slate-gray eyes opaque. There was no hint of sympathy in his voice. "Look at his breathing," he said. "He only has another minute or two. But that minute or two could be the difference between us getting out of here—or not." He moved his shoulders uncomfortably. "There's more of those creatures on the way. I can feel it."

"I'm not leaving him."

"You're seriously going to risk getting captured to sit here and hold his hand?"

"Well, at least he won't die alone."

"But he'll still die. And if you get captured, he'll have died for nothing."

She felt that growl coming on again. "You're a bastard."

He shrugged. "Everybody knows that."

At that moment, Riker took a deep, shuddering breath and opened his eyes, looking into Ireland's face. "Rye?" he said, his voice a raspy whisper.

That was what he always called her. Rye. She didn't know how he got that from Ireland, but there it was.

"I'm here." Her voice shook a bit, and she steadied it. "You're going to be okay."

He shook his head fractionally, and winced. "I'm not. You have... to go."

She closed her eyes. Not dying. He was *not* dying. But in her heart she knew he was.

She opened her eyes again. “I can’t just leave you here.”

“You got... the book. Save... yourself.”

There was a long moment while she fought to accept the truth. Finally she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

He looked up into her eyes. “S’okay. I always knew... it would end this way.” He closed his eyes.

The other man had walked away. Ireland was vaguely aware of him moving around the room, gathering stuff from the Retrievers’ bodies like the vulture he was.

It only took him a couple of minutes. He detoured over to the safe to pick up the bag she’d dropped, and then came back over to her.

Ireland was still holding the bracelet around Riker’s wrist, tears stinging her eyes that she wouldn’t let fall. He was a brave man, and she was going to be brave for him.

Riker’s breathing grew harsher, and then struggled to a stop. Between her fingers, Ireland saw the bracelet light up briefly one more time, and then it died.

And Riker was gone.

Chapter 4

Ireland held the bracelet in her hand, the magical glow fading.

She was alone now. Free—but all she felt was desolation and grief. Riker had been a complicated man—damaged, mercenary, ruthless. But he'd also been a friend to her—almost against his will—and he'd kept his promises to her.

And now he'd died for her.

She touched his eyes gently, closing them, and murmured a few words in the Fae language. A prayer for the dead.

The other man spoke abruptly. "We have to go." And then he knelt down and began stripping Riker of his weapons.

Ireland slapped his hand away. "Stop that!" she snapped. Once again, she felt that ripple along her skin, and that scary growl came out of her. "What kind of a mercenary ghoul are you? The man is dead!"

He faced her, his eyes flat and hard. "The man is carrying weapons and valuables. Do you want to leave behind them for the enemy? Because I don't."

She didn't know if he was right about more Retrievers coming, but she knew they had to leave. Only, they couldn't just leave Riker's body here for them to desecrate. "We have to take him with us."

The man shook his head. "We can't. We have to move fast." Before she could stop him, he'd finished searching Riker and stuffed everything valuable into his bag.

Suddenly, Ireland realized what a bad position she was in. Sure, she was free—without a Protector bound to her—but with hardly any magic, either. Her own bracelet would keep most of it locked down until some other man wore Riker's bracelet on his wrist, or until she managed to get hers off.

She was planning on going with Option Number Two. But for that, she needed what she'd taken from the safe. And this mysterious, utterly heartless man had her duffel slung over his shoulder. With the book in it.

“Give me my bag,” she said.

“We’ll go faster if I carry it.” He reached down a hand to help her up. “Come on.”

He really thought she was going with him? And that he was going to take charge of her stuff, maybe even grab Riker’s bracelet for himself? He could just think again.

She’d dropped his knife next to her when she’d been trying to save Riker. She scooped it up as she let the man pull her to her feet, and then brought it up under his chin, the blade glinting through the blood on it.

“Give. Me. My. Stuff,” she said, enunciating each word clearly. “And I’ll let you walk away.”

Those gray eyes gazed steadily into hers, no fear in them at all. Then, quicker than a snake striking, he grabbed her wrist and dug his fingers into a particular spot between the bones. Her arm went numb, and he grabbed the knife with his other hand.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said with exaggerated patience, sheathing the blade. “I’m trying to get you out of here before more of those creatures arrive. Don’t you hear the helicopters heading for the top of this building?” He glanced upward as he said it.

No, she didn’t. They were in a freaking sub-basement. But... looking into his eyes, she somehow believed that he did.

“Give me my bag.” She knew she sounded desperate.

“No.” He turned away. “Because apparently, me having your stuff is the only way to get you to follow me out of here.” And he started walking.

For a second Ireland just stared after him. The sheer overbearing arrogance of the man was incredible.

And the worst part was, he was right. There was no way she was letting that bag out of her sight. She tucked Riker’s bracelet in the pocket of her jacket, touched his cheek briefly

in a final farewell. And then she ran to catch up with the man she'd never asked to save her.

He led her out through a maintenance area and down a bare hallway. She had to almost trot to keep up, and her side had started to burn like fire where the Retriever's lasso had cut into her. He stopped in front of a door set flush into the wall. After a moment's hesitation he pressed a certain spot, and the door moved inward and started to slide to the side.

He stopped it before it was open more than a crack, and listened. Then he sniffed the air.

All Ireland could smell was damp. She touched her side, and let out a hiss of pain.

The man swung around. "Are you okay?" He reached out to her. "Do you need to lean on me?" Then he ruined the offer by saying, "If you're injured, you'll slow us down."

"Thanks for your concern," she said, letting the sarcasm shine through. "But I'm fine. Keep your hands off me."

He just gave her an assessing look, and then turned back to the door. He sniffed the air again, then slid the door open the rest of the way and led her into some kind of tunnel.

It looked like it was part of the old city—brick-lined, with nasty slime on the floor. He started off without speaking, walking quickly and purposefully, glancing back briefly to make sure she was following.

What else could she do?

They walked for maybe a half a mile. The tunnels turned and branched, but he never hesitated. He had a flashlight attached to his vest that gave a little light, but Ireland still couldn't see where she was putting her feet, and a few times she stepped on squishy, foul-smelling stuff and almost slipped.

The pain in her side was getting worse, and she didn't know how much further he intended to go. "Hey," she panted. He didn't turn around. She spoke louder. "Hey, whatever-your-name-is!"

No response.

Finally, she ran forward and grabbed the strap on one of the bags he carried, dug in her heels, and held on, ignoring the stab of pain in her side. He was yanked back and swung around, facing her.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Do you *want* to get captured?”

“No,” she snapped. “But you seem to be doing it anyway.”

For a second he looked shocked, and then his face went blank. “I’m not capturing you. I told you. I’m rescuing you. That’s what I came for.”

“Wait a minute. How did you know the Retrievers would be there for you to rescue me from?”

“I didn’t. I was rescuing you from Riker.”

From *Riker*? “I didn’t need rescuing from Riker,” she said. “He was my Protector.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You were working with him *willingly*?” In the shadowy light from his chest lamp, she could see micro-expressions chase each other across his face, as though he were just putting things together. “Fuck,” he muttered. “You were partners.”

From the look on his face, it seemed like he’d just lost sympathy for her. Or at least, respect. She asked, “What do you have against Riker?”

“How long have you got?” he asked bitterly, and then said, “Never mind. We don’t have any time. Those Retrievers—” he seemed to be turning the name over on his tongue, as if it were strange to him, “those Retrievers are still after us. I can feel it. You might have convinced Riker to die for you, but if you don’t mind, I’d rather not. So let’s go.”

He turned to walk away. *Again*. Ireland was done. She kicked the back of his knee and yanked on the bag again. Pain knifed through her, and she sucked in her breath.

Cole stopped. “You *are* hurt,” he said brusquely. “Why the fuck didn’t you say?” And he swept her up into his arms.

That strange growl rose up inside her. “What the fuck? Put me down!”

“Shut up,” he said. “I told you I’m not getting killed today—and I’m definitely not getting killed because you’re too proud to admit you need help.”

Ireland wanted to argue, but she knew he was right. So she shut up and let him carry her. Maybe it would wear him out and make it easier for her to escape later.

And then she got a hint of his scent, underneath the blood, sweat, and Retriever ichor. Warm, musky, with the hint of dark forest. And wolf. He was a shifter, a creature of the Dark. And whatever he claimed, he was kidnapping her.

Cole instantly realized that carrying the girl was a mistake. Before, her scent had been masked by their surroundings. But now she was literally in his face, and her scent was overwhelming. Blood and sweat and fear—and Riker—but also an interesting hint of wolf, and something else indefinable that seemed to conjure up memories of home—warm kitchens and cookies and happy family holidays. Love and laughter and safety.

Faint, vague, long-ago memories, before his father found out his mother was a shifter, and her sons along with her.

Before he started beating them up. Before she disappeared for good.

Nothing was warm and safe after that.

He wanted to put this woman down, walk away, make it stop. And he wanted to bury his face in her skin, and somehow hold onto those feelings.

It was a relief when they came to the rusted metal ladder bolted to the wall, that led to the tunnel exit. He put Ireland down. “I’m going up first, to make sure it’s clear,” he said. “Do not knife me in the back.”

He could hear her breathing heavily, and the scent of blood wafted up from her. He hoped she didn’t pass out before she got to the top of the ladder. Afterwards would be okay—it would make her easier to deal with.

Cole reached the top, put his shoulder against the manhole cover and heaved. It moved with a grating sound, and he shoved it aside and poked his head out into the evening light.

They were in a narrow alley between two buildings, with no one there but a homeless man huddled against the wall, drinking out of a brown-bag-covered bottle.

Damn. If the creatures managed to track them this far, that guy would be a sitting duck when they came out. Cole summoned his wolf, until it was barely under his skin, knowing his eyes were glowing gold. He turned on the homeless man and gave a monster growl.

“Get out,” he said.

The man scrambled to his feet and stumbled down the alley, out into the street. One more life saved. Cole was a fucking monster hero, that’s what he was. Scaring old men.

Ireland, following him, was nearly to the top. He reached out a hand to help her, and surprisingly, she took it.

Apparently, only so she could immobilize it. She surged up off the ladder, and Cole saw the flash of yet another knife blade heading towards his throat.

Fuck. He hated being right when he hadn’t taken appropriate precautions.

His shifter reflexes saved him—he turned quickly enough so that the knife only caught his arm, slicing through his shirt sleeve and a couple layers of skin.

Ireland slammed into him, knocking him off balance, snatched her bag off his shoulder and ran off towards the street.

Cursing himself for being a fucking amateur, Cole scrambled to his feet and took off after her.

He didn’t have to go far. She only got to the end of the alley before she passed out—he made it there just in time to catch her before she crumpled to the pavement.

Cole grabbed the bag and his rescue/prisoner, depending on who you asked. He headed down the alley the other way, to

where he'd parked his van.

Sliding open the side door, he laid Ireland inside and climbed in after her. After shutting the door, he pulled out his handcuffs and cuffed her to base of the seat. He sure as hell wasn't letting her get the drop on him a third time. No matter how beautiful and brave she was.

Then he stowed the bags in the passenger seat, got behind the wheel, and started the engine.

Chapter 5

It was only about a ten-minute drive to Cole's safe house on the outskirts of Louisville. Not his, really—it was borrowed from Outlaw Ridge's allies, the Wild Blood crew, whose territory was a couple hours away. It was tricked out with both high-end electronic security, and kickass wards made by a dragon sorcerer.

On the outside, Cole was calm and efficient, driving in a way that wouldn't attract attention, keeping an eye out for anyone tailing them.

But inside, he was churning with emotions he didn't want to examine or deal with, so he chose the easiest. Anger. Over Riker once more cheating him of a kill—some closure, or retribution that would maybe wipe out part of the past, make up for the things Cole hadn't done back then.

Close some of the jagged wounds his time in Shifter Special Ops had left inside him.

He'd tried to kill Riker twice. Once long ago, at the end of that last gods-cursed mission, he'd slit Riker's throat and left him for dead.

Not sorry.

And once just a few months ago, when Riker had gone after Boomer's mate and tried to kill Cole, not to mention attempting to engineer some kind of fucking apocalypse with his sorcerer boss.

That time, Cole had shot him.

And the fucker refused to stay dead.

Now Cole had seen him die—and part of him *still* wasn't convinced Riker would stay dead. And even if he did, Cole was saddled with his legacy—this woman who Riker had somehow convinced to care about him.

That made him the angriest. The last thing Riker deserved was someone to love him.

Especially this woman, who was strong and courageous and amazing and... No. Those were the emotions he was *not* dealing with. He reached down to find her wrist and check her pulse. Was it getting weaker?

He drove a little faster.

When they got to the safe house, Cole used the remote to open the garage door and pulled inside. There was no sign of pursuit, and no one in the neighborhood who seemed like they shouldn't be there. Just a city maintenance crew in the cul-de-sac down the street, who'd been there the last couple days.

After shutting the garage, he unlocked the inside door and then went around and got Ireland out of the van.

First thing—tend to her wound and get her stabilized. She was still unconscious, and he could smell the blood starting to soak through her shirt. More than there should be—as if the bleeding had gotten worse instead of slowing down. That was a bad sign.

He felt that clench in his stomach again. He had to save her. She'd been fine, when they left the basement, and now she wasn't. That was on him. He should have taken better care of her—no matter how she acted.

He was failing in his mission. *Focus*, he told himself. *No emotion. Do the job.*

Cole carried Ireland straight to one of the bedrooms, stripped back the covers and laid her on the bed. Then he went and grabbed a pile of towels out of the hall closet, lifting her to spread them underneath her. This was going to get messy.

He'd brought his own medical kit, although he'd noticed that the Wild Bloods kept a well-stocked one of their own in the linen closet. About what he would have expected of Brandon Fierro, their alpha. The one thing about a safe house was that you could be ninety-nine percent sure that someone, sometime, was going to drag in there wounded.

He spread out the medical equipment on the table in the bedroom. Then he pulled off Ireland's jacket, and cut her t-

shirt and bra off with his combat knife rather than trying to wrestle them off the normal way.

Her skin was redhead pale and amazingly soft, her breasts generous. And in spite of the blood, her warm-sugar-cookie scent was intoxicating.

Some kind of magical defense? Pheromones that made her smell comforting, welcoming, that gave creatures feelings of warmth toward her?

Cole snorted. If such a thing existed, he had the anti-pheromones. He scared everyone, and he was pretty sure he'd never made anyone feel comfy and brown-sugar happy.

It would sure come in handy sometimes, though.

Focus on the wound.

But when he turned her to examine it, she woke up. “What are you doing?” she mumbled, batting at his hands. “Don’t touch me.”

“I need to take care of this wound.” Sooner rather than later—it was really bleeding now.

She tried to pull away. “Hey,” he said, cupping her chin in his hand and holding her still, looking into her eyes and drawing on his wolf dominance. Sometimes humans could feel it. “I’m going to take care of you. Trust me.”

She stared into his eyes for a long moment, and he felt... something... pass between them.

She relaxed slowly. “Okay.”

Cole helped her roll over onto her side—and sucked in his breath when he got a good look at the wound.

It was a long, deep slice starting right at the bottom of her left rib cage, wrapping around almost to her spine, cutting through skin and muscle. The edges were a dark, angry red—almost black in places. Poison? Or some kind of toxic magic?

He worked as quickly and efficiently as he could. Ireland was looking pale with shock and blood loss.

He checked that there were no major blood vessels to be repaired, then gave her a local injection and stitched the worst of the muscle tears. He could have sworn she was a shifter from the way she'd growled at him earlier, but if so her innate healing should have kicked in by now, unless that whip really was poisoned. He sniffed the wound, but couldn't smell any toxins he was familiar with.

All the same, he didn't want to stitch her up completely and seal any poison inside. Instead, he used an ointment that was a special Outlaw Ridge blend. Shifters didn't tend to get infections because of their accelerated healing, but this one contained some 'just in case' antibiotics for bad cases, as well as antidotes to most of the known human and shifter-specific toxins.

Then he packed the wound with gauze and taped more over the top.

When he finished, she looked a little green, and she was sweating. He changed the bloody towels underneath her, took her boots off and pulled the covers up. "You okay?" he asked her, uncomfortable now that there was no action he could take. "You want some water? You should have something to drink."

She nodded slightly, not taking her eyes from his. He got her some water and helped her sit up to drink it.

Suddenly her gaze flicked around the room. "Where's the bag? With my stuff? What have you done with it?"

Cole took the glass away and gently pushed her back down. "Relax, it's in the van. I was more worried about keeping you from bleeding out. You're welcome."

She bit her lip, and then said, "Thank you for saving me. Before, from the Retrievers. And just now. But you need to let me go."

He just shook his head. "You're in no state to go anywhere. And it's my mission to get you to safety. Also, my boss will probably want to talk to you about Riker."

She frowned. "Your boss? Who do you work for? The government?"

Cole snorted. “Definitely not.” He’d had his fill of working for the government, back in the day. When he also worked with Riker. They were worse than almost any bad guy the Ridge had ever taken down.

Ireland let her head fall back on the pillow. “Great. You’re a criminal. Figures.”

“What do you have against criminals? Riker was one.”

She pressed her lips together. “You don’t know that.”

“I do know. I witnessed it.”

She dropped her eyes. Then she said quietly, “He was good to me. He helped me. He was going to—”

She broke off.

“Going to what?” But she just shook her head.

Instead she said, “You can’t keep me here.”

Right. She was half his size. He could fold her up and stuff her in a duffel bag if he wanted.

“Just lie down and rest, for fuck’s sake,” he said. “And let me get cleaned up.”

He could have sworn he heard another growl, but he ignored it. Instead, he turned his back and stripped off his combat vest and what was left of his shirt, since half of it had gone to get the bull-man’s acid blood off him. His face still stung from it.

When he turned around again, she was trying to get out of bed. “Stop that,” he said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I told you. You can’t keep me here.”

He ran a practiced eye over her. He was used to stubborn idiots—his younger brother was one. He folded his arms. “Fine,” he said. “Go.”

She made it almost to the door before her knees buckled and she passed out again. Since Cole had expected that, he was able to catch her before she hit the floor. Shaking his head—this was becoming a habit—he carried her back to the bed,

grabbed a syringe and gave her something to keep her out for a few hours.

Then he stripped her pants off, made sure she wasn't bleeding again, and tucked her into bed.

He stood with his hands on his hips, looking down at her—beautiful, annoying, perfect and helpless. Figured that when he had the chance to take the pants off the most intriguing woman he'd met in forever, it was to tend her wounds and tuck her into bed.

And now he had to figure out what came next. He should be reporting in to the Ridge and arranging an extraction for both of them, but all his instincts were screaming not to. And—aside from his dangerous feelings for her—he didn't know why.

Chapter 6

Cole thought about that the whole time he was cleaning himself up and changing his clothes.

He thought about it while he was rerouting all the feeds from the house's security cameras to his laptop in the bedroom, so he could keep an eye on Ireland and the feeds at the same time.

He thought about it while he was cleaning and reloading his weapons, as well as those he'd taken from Riker's body. Because you always took care of your weapons on a mission—you never knew when you might need them. And the familiar, repetitive task usually cleared his mind after a mission.

Today, not so much.

After the weapons were done, he re-checked the security feeds, checked on Ireland, and then went out to the garage to get the bags out of the van. Having those magic items out of his sight gave him an itchy feeling.

But after all that doing and thinking, he'd still come to exactly zero conclusions about what to do with Ireland—or why he was resisting calling Outlaw Ridge and reporting to Thanatos. He'd finished the mission, with fairly satisfactory results—although Riker's death was definitely more satisfying for him than it would be for Thanatos.

But Riker was neutralized. Cole had rescued the victim, and most likely Riker's magical target—one of the items in Ireland's bag. Although, he was a lot less sure now if that mission had been Riker's agenda, or Ireland's.

Because she was pretty desperate to get her hands on whatever had been in that safe—desperate enough to try to get to it when she wasn't even fit to walk.

Cole wasn't used to making these kinds of decisions. He did the mission, rescued people, turned everything over to his commanders. Let them figure out what to do with the victims

—innocent or guilty. All that was above his pay grade, and he liked it that way.

But...

Yeah. But. There was something about Ireland that got under his skin; something that didn't add up. Hell, lots of things. Starting with why she'd teamed up with Riker, what those bracelets were about, and why her magic hadn't seemed to work after Riker's came off.

Maybe the items themselves would give him a clue.

He slung Ireland's bag on the table, sat down and started unpacking it. Most of what was in there was cash—the wizard who used to own that place had obviously kept a substantial stash on hand. There was also a ledger detailing his dealings with various people Cole had never heard of. He put all that aside after giving the ledger a cursory glance. No doubt the guy had had dealings with Riker's old boss Maximilian, or Riker wouldn't have known about his lair. Cole didn't need to waste time right now verifying the obvious.

The only thing left were two velvet drawstring bags—about twelve by fifteen inches each. One was deep blue, and the other black. The blue one was embroidered with a full moon, shining over an oak tree in full leaf.

The other just had two eyes looking out, red as flame, with slit pupils.

They both obviously contained books.

Cole could smell the magic on both of them—hell, he could feel it. He didn't like magic—he'd only bought the magic blade because he was going to a sorcerer's lair, and it was stupid to go off on a mission without bringing every possible defense against the weapons you might face.

If nothing else, he was a professional.

He took both the books out of the bags, touching them only around the edges. They were heavy and thick, their covers matching the bags.

Then he ran Thanatos' little wand around them, to see if they were spelled with any nasty surprises for anyone who opened them.

He got nothing, so he opened the blue one to a random spot. It looked handwritten, in a language he didn't understand, and the ink seemed to have a faint glow to it. But as soon as he touched the page, he smelled a breath of spring air, the first scent of new growth and the light returning to the earth.

Ancient, and yet joyful.

Despite himself, he took another breath, this one full of the smell of baking bread, the scent of flowers. Warm and sweet, almost like what he'd scented when he carried Ireland.

Good magic? If there was such a thing.

But it was the other book that called most strongly to him. He put down the blue one and picked up the black. The eyes on the cover seemed to be watching him. Assessing him.

If they blinked, he was going to throw the fucking thing across the room.

But they didn't. And as soon as he opened it, he felt the darkness in it. But it was a familiar darkness: night in the forest, the mystery of shadows, the rustling of creatures in the woods that came out only at night.

The smell of winter in the mountains, bright and hard. Cold stone and frost.

It called to something inside him, filling his heart with pain and joy. It was the dark night of the predator, blood calling to blood, the hunt under the full moon.

It was what made him Wolf, that spirit of night and darkness that had merged with humans and made them into shifters.

Was this what he was? The opposite of her?

And what did it matter? After this was over, he'd never see her again. That thought stabbed him somewhere in the chest. Not his heart. He didn't get his heart involved with missions.

This was a job, nothing more.

He packed up everything and put it back in the bag. Then he picked up his phone and sent a message to Thanatos through a secure channel. He meant to tell him the mission was done, but what came out was: *Mission still in progress.*
More later.

Just as he was deciding whether to send it, he heard a restless movement from the bed, and Ireland gave a little moan, as if she were in pain.

Cole sent the message, dropped the phone and went over to the bed. Ireland's face was flushed, and before he even touched her skin he could feel the heat radiating off her.

Somehow in the last forty-five minutes, her wound had gone from starting to heal, to infected as fuck. She was burning up.

He stripped away the bandages and checked it. The wound was blazing red along the center, the edges almost black, like the flesh was starting to rot away.

Damn it all to hell. There'd been some kind of toxin on that whip after all.

Over the next couple of hours Cole did everything he could think of, but her fever just kept going up, and the wound just got uglier.

He tried cleaning and draining the wound again, ice bags for the fever. Cool water and soothing talk, although he hadn't expected that to do much. He sucked at being comforting.

Brutal realism was more his style. Right now his brutal realism was telling him that she was probably going to die of this wound, but for some reason he wasn't listening.

Because he was also a stubborn bastard, and he didn't like to lose. And because she was so damn helpless, but she was fighting so hard.

By hour three, he was desperately going through not only his own med kit, but everything the Wild Bloods had in the house as well. They'd dealt with some magic in their day—

one of their best friends was a dragon sorcerer. Maybe they had something...

He found it at the back of a shelf in the linen closet—a glass jar with some kind of ointment in it. It was labeled “Anti-Magic Shit.”

Clutching it tightly, Cole went back to Ireland.

But as soon as she caught a whiff of it, she started fighting him. He was afraid to knock her out again, because depressing her nervous system might make things worse. But her thrashing around was wasting energy she needed for healing, and accelerating the toxin’s effects. She already looked thinner than before.

“Come on,” he murmured to her. “Let me do this. I don’t know what else to do.”

Once more he tried holding her down, trying to get at least a little of the ointment on.

Suddenly, she gave a wrench, and her face morphed into a wolf. Gray, with a delicate muzzle. Fur sprouted on her skin, rippling down her chest. The wound seemed to pale for a minute, to get a fraction smaller.

Holy hell. She *was* a shifter, and her wolf was fighting the wound. Maybe her wolf form was less vulnerable to the toxin?

He began whispering in her ear. “That’s it. Change. Be the wolf. Fight the magic. Heal.”

She was whining, growling, straining to come out. Didn’t this woman ever Change? Or was there some kind of spell on her that prevented it?

He didn’t care. Something told him it might be the only thing that would save her.

He let own face and throat change, his nose elongating into a muzzle, and made encouraging wolf noises.

She strained harder, fur rippling and disappearing, claws coming out and receding.

Come on, he willed her, pulling on his wolf's dominance.
Change. Change!

And then she *was* Changed, all fur and muscle and feisty will. He was so startled he lost his grip on her, and she rolled off the side of the bed onto her paws, the gold bracelet somehow still snug around her front leg. She lurched a little as the pain in her wound stabbed at her, and then faced him, lip curled, and snarled.

Cole almost laughed. It figured—she was as independent and uncooperative in wolf form as she was in human form.

He Changed his head back to human. “It’s fine. You’re okay,” he said. “You need to be in wolf form to heal. I’ll take care of you.”

She was not impressed.

He took a step forward, and she growled and lunged.

She was quick. Cole burst instinctively into wolf form and blocked her, facing her down.

His wolf was big, muscled, and tough. She was much smaller, more delicately built.

She did not seem to realize this. She stood up to him like a wolf twice her size.

Any other time, he would have admired that, but now it was the last thing he needed. She was still bleeding, still weak, and still stubborn.

He pressed forward, growling, letting his dominant energy envelop her. She was clearly not used to being in a pack—not used to other wolves at all. She looked surprised, and then pissed.

Not the time, he told her. Wolves communicated with each other primarily in feelings, not words, but she got the gist of it. She just didn’t care. She didn’t trust him, she wasn’t a pack member, and she wasn’t backing down.

Except the wound was starting to open up again.

With a mental sigh, Cole lunged.

He closed his jaws around the back of her neck and took her down. She howled in protest, and he tightened his jaws fractionally.

He wasn't hurting her, although he could sever her spine with one bite if he wanted. He just bore down on her with his weight and dominance, forcing her onto the floor.

It was the way alphas often dominated wolves in their own pack. It was also the way adult wolves disciplined cubs. Asserting their dominance, letting them know who was in charge.

It created an instinctive reaction—a feeling of safety and submission. Like being a kid again.

He just hoped that she'd respond.

She went completely rigid, and then, gradually, she relaxed under his weight. He could feel the burning of her wound underneath him, like a ribbon of fire.

He slowly pulled back, alert for her to make a run for it, but she just lay there on her side, panting. His wolf said, *She is hurting*. He stepped forward and started licking the wound.

To Cole's surprise, a faint flicker of blue light glowed around the edges of it, and it began to cool down. Maybe contact with another wolf was accelerating her shifter healing? Was it possible that her magic somehow suppressed her shifter side? Or had she done it on purpose?

He couldn't imagine that. He and his wolf had their differences, but he'd always accepted and reveled in the fact that he was a shifter.

Even when his dad smacked him and Boomer around, trying to beat their wolves out of them.

It was better than being human—the sharpened senses, the connection with the earth, the strength and speed and healing powers, the sheer glory of running in the moonlight, the hunt and the chase.

He'd wished a lot of things about him and his life were different, over the years.

But he'd never wished he wasn't a shifter.

Why would she want to give that up?

When she seemed calm, he Changed back to human, grabbed the magic ointment and spread it on the wound. This time she didn't object. Then he bandaged her up and lifted her onto the bed, pulling the covers partway over her to keep her warm.

But when he started to walk away, she lifted her head and gave a soft whine, as good as saying, *Don't go*.

Cole gave a half-grin in spite of himself. It seemed his wolf presence was comforting after all. Who knew?

"Okay," he told her. "For a little while. But I have to stay human."

He found his pants on the floor where he'd shed them when he Changed, and put them on. After he checked the security monitors again, he climbed into bed next to Ireland's wolf, half-sitting with the pillows behind his back.

She immediately curled up next to him, her head on his shoulder, and gave a contented sigh.

For fuck's sake. But Cole wrapped his arm around her and settled in.

Gradually, a kind of contentment stole over him. His own wounds and bruises began to heal up, the soreness went from his muscles, and the agitation faded from his mind.

But he didn't sleep. As usual, he kept watch.

Chapter 7

Somewhere in the darkest hours of the night, Ireland Changed back to human in her sleep. She lay on her side in the curve of Cole's arm, her naked body warm and soft next to his, her breasts pressing against the bare skin of his chest and her leg tucked between his.

Her scent surrounded him like a caress, and despite trying really hard not to, he felt a stirring in his groin.

Think about something else. Her wound. Was her wound okay?

He ran his hand lightly over her rib cage, trying not to wake her. The wound was still bandaged, but underneath the gauze the gash felt smaller, like it was healing over, and the sick burned smell of the toxin was gone. So was her fever.

The ointment had worked. Cole found himself letting out a breath he didn't even know he'd been holding.

She stirred slightly and the bandage caught against his hand, pulling some of the tape away. Ireland woke immediately.

"Hey," he said, moving a little away from her. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay." She sat up and twisted her body experimentally. "Way better, actually." She paused, looking down at him. "Why are we in bed together?"

"Ah," he said. This was awkward. "You had a high fever. You were thrashing around, and being with me seemed to calm you."

"Yeah," she said slowly. "Everything's all weird and jumbled in my mind." Another pause. "Why am I naked?" She didn't seem upset, just puzzled.

Cole wrenched his gaze away from her breasts, right there in front of him. "You don't remember?"

She shook her head. He could see her hair gleaming faintly in the light from his laptop screen.

“You had some kind of toxic reaction to the magic in that lasso that cut you. And you went wolf when I tried to treat it.”

She went so still that he thought she’d stopped breathing. “I did what?”

“You Changed. Into your wolf.”

Ireland felt like her entire world had stopped. She’d turned into a *wolf*? No. No no no no...

Cole was still talking, like any of this made sense. “Why didn’t you tell me you were a shifter?”

“I’m not.” She felt like she was going to hyperventilate. This couldn’t be happening. “I’m not a shifter. I’m Fae.”

“Fae?” he said in surprise. “You mean, a fairy? Like Tinkerbell?”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure,” she said. “Let’s go with that.”

He ignored the sarcasm. “So you’re Fae *and* shifter? I’ve never heard of that.”

“I’m not a shifter,” she insisted. “I don’t shift. It’s impossible.”

She knew it was; she had proof. She held up her left wrist, the bracelet still clasped around it. “This won’t let me.”

“But you did shift. So you must have shifter blood.” Cole gazed at her. The light was too dim to see the color of his eyes, but she remembered it. Slate-gray. Sometimes cold, sometimes warm. She wished she could tell what he was thinking, but his face was impossible to read.

It was like all his thoughts were locked up inside him, and he was afraid to let any of them out. Or just didn’t want anyone close to him.

Suddenly she found herself wanting to know what was really going on inside his head. Inside his heart, where his real self lived.

She said, “My father was a shifter. But that doesn’t make me one.”

He gave a tiny shrug, which for him was probably equivalent to a full-on eye roll and ‘are-you-an-idiot’ look. He said, “You are what you are. And if you can manifest your wolf, you’re a shifter.” He paused. “Whether you like it or not.”

That took her aback. She’d never been accepted by the Fae because of her shifter blood. Always on the outside, never belonging. Not only that, but someone who had to be put under guard, so she wouldn’t be a menace to their society.

Was it really true that if she were a shifter, they would take her in? That they would accept her as one of their own?

The thought made her shiver. Giving in to the darkness, the hunt, the killer instinct. That wasn’t who she was. She was Bright Fae, no matter what anyone said, and she revered life. Not death.

Cole was still watching her. She felt like he could see into her soul, even though his was opaque. It felt oddly invasive, and yet somehow she wanted him to *see* her.

She said, “You don’t understand. I’m Bright Fae. We’re creatures of the light, with life magic. Shifters are creatures of the Dark Fae. Predators. Killers. Creatures of death.”

She thought that would make him angry, but he just gave a little shrug, like it was no big deal. “Well, yeah,” he said. “Most of us are predators. But not all. I mean, there’s panda shifters. They mostly eat bamboo shoots, and don’t really want to get off the couch and run fast enough to kill anything. And, one of my best friends is a rabbit shifter.”

Despite herself, Ireland was fascinated. “A *rabbit* shifter? No way!” Bunnies were cute and not evil, right?

He mimicked her tone, but gently. “Yes, way. Although we do call her Murder Bunny.” Well, there went that theory. “She’s pretty fierce.”

Ireland couldn’t wrap her head around any of this. “I don’t understand,” she said, more to herself than him. “The bracelet

is supposed to keep me from shifting. Among other things.”

He reached out and touched the bracelet, his fingertips brushing her bare arm. It sent a shiver all the way through her. “Tell me about this.”

She supposed he had the right to know, since he’d rescued her and all. Ireland turned around and leaned against the headboard, tucking a pillow behind her back.

She began, “I don’t know how much you know about Fae…”

“Pretend I know nothing.”

“Okay. There are two kinds of Fae. Bright Fae and Dark Fae. Their natures are opposite. Bright Fae are born of sunrise and daylight. We champion life, growth. Dark Fae are born of night. They hunt in the darkness, and they bring death.”

He contemplated that for a moment. “They can’t just go around randomly killing everything. There’d be nothing left.”

She’d never actually thought about it that way. She’d never wanted to think about Dark Fae at all. “No,” she admitted. “But they’re the source of evil. Vampires grew from Dark Fae. Other dark creatures. Their rituals involve blood and sacrifice. Of others, not themselves.”

Cole didn’t seem upset by any of this, just… considering. “And you’re Bright Fae—and half-shifter. How’d that go over?”

It hadn’t taken him long to get to the crux of the whole thing. She looked away. “I am Outcast,” she said. “My power bound, only to be used with a Bright Fae Protector.” She held up the bracelet, feeling its weight.

“Let me get this straight,” Cole said. “That bracelet Riker had. You can only use your powers when someone else is wearing that? Like, a Fae babysitter?” He shook his head. “That’s not right. Riker was human. And if he was Fae, it would be a dark one. About as dark as they come.”

That wasn’t the Riker she knew. But she didn’t want to talk about him right now. The memory of his death was still too

raw.

Instead, she went on with her explanation. “When I came into my powers, the Bright Fae Council was concerned about the darkness in my spirit represented by the wolf side of me. So they had a meeting, and decided that their only course of action to keep me from going off the rails and turning dark was to bind my powers. They couldn’t take them away entirely, because I’d die. Like I said, the Bright Fae reverse life.”

Cole said dryly, “I see. Like, for instance, those Retrievers that killed Riker? And tried to kill me?”

Ireland had never thought about that either. She *knew* Bright Fae loved life—it was the one incontrovertible fact she’d always known.

“I broke the law,” she said. “I ran away, with Riker. They were within their rights to get me back.”

Cole gave a little snort, but didn’t argue the point.

Instead he asked, “So how do those bracelets work?”

“They make a magical connection between the wearers,” she explained. “The Protectors looked after me, and guided my magic. They could use some of my powers, and regulate what magic I was able to use. So I couldn’t hurt anyone.”

Cole looked incredulous. “Did you ever try? To hurt anyone, I mean.”

“Of course not,” Ireland said. “Only, what if someday the dark wolf took over my power, and made me do bad things?” That’s what they’d always told her would happen. And now that the wolf had come out...

Cole made a disgusted sound. “Usually shifter animals only do bad things when they’ve been locked up inside a person too long, or when they’ve been traumatized. Same as most other creatures.”

“That’s—” she stopped.

“What?”

“That’s not what they always told me,” she said softly. Was it possible that the things she’d been told weren’t true?

“Well,” Cole said, “I hate to state the obvious, but the Bright Fae Council don’t know fuck all about wolf shifters.”

That surprised a laugh out of her. Without thinking, she said, “But isn’t that just what an evil shifter would say?”

That made Cole laugh. “I guess so.” Then he frowned. “Do you think maybe you were able to Change because no one was wearing the other bracelet? To... what was it? ‘Regulate’ you?” He shook his head and muttered, “That is so fucked up.”

She hadn’t thought of that possibility. “Maybe.”

“So how did Riker end up as your Protector? Like I said, *not* Bright Fae. Not in a million years.”

She could hear the bitterness in his voice when he talked about Riker. He wouldn’t understand why she’d been with him.

“I... lost my last Protector.”

Cole jumped on that. “You mean, Riker killed him.”

“Not like you mean,” she said. “It was an accident.” A car accident, to be exact. When Riker was chasing them, trying to abduct her. But... Jorem had reacted badly to the Protector bond. He’d started to hurt her. Riker hadn’t meant to save her—at first—but he had.

“But he took advantage of it,” Cole said.

She shook her head. “No. Well, yes, but...” She sighed. “He and I made a deal. He wanted one of the artifacts in the sorcerer’s lair where you found us, and I wanted the other. We needed my magic to get in, so he had to wear the bracelet.”

That wasn’t exactly true either. Riker had taken the bracelet for himself, not realizing everything it meant.

“You mean he wanted one of those books.”

“You looked at them?” He was lucky the magic hadn’t smacked him across the room.

He obviously heard the tone in her voice. “Yes. I’m fine. Which one did Riker want, and what for?”

“The Dark one. And as for why, he didn’t say, and I didn’t ask.”

“Well, maybe you should have. Not wanting Dark magic let loose on the world, and all.”

She watched his face. “You really hated him, didn’t you.”

“With good reason.”

“I didn’t.” The grief she’d been pushing to the back of her mind rushed over her again. Riker. Brooding, reckless, filled with demons. But he’d been her partner, and he’d died to protect her. Her eyes filled with tears, and she brushed them away.

Chapter 8

Cole saw the tears glittering in her eyes, and immediately felt like a total shit.

“Hey,” he said, reaching out without thinking to brush his fingers across her arm. “Don’t cry. I suck at comforting crying women.”

She gave a little choked laugh, and brushed the tears away. “Not crying.”

That made him feel worse. “You really cared about him, didn’t you,” he said. It was hard for him to believe. Riker was too much of a bastard.

She nodded. “He was the first person who cared what I wanted, who saw how unfair it was that I was being imprisoned in the bracelets. He was the first person who tried to help me.”

That wasn’t the Riker Cole knew. But he realized it didn’t matter. Riker had helped her, protected her, defended her. Given his life for her, in the end. Maybe he really *had* been her friend.

And now he was gone, and she had no one.

He didn’t know what to say to make her feel better, so he did what he always did. Went with the practical issues.

“So I assume you can’t get it off? Or you would have.”

She nodded. “They only come off if a powerful Bright Fae—like a Council member—takes them off. Or if you’re dead.”

She didn’t say, ‘Like Riker,’ but the words hung there between them.

Instead he said, “And what are you going to do now?”

She hesitated a long time—but not like she didn’t know. More like, she was deciding whether to trust him.

Finally she took a deep breath and said, “After I helped Riker get the book, he was going to help me find someone with the power to get the bracelet off. There are renegade

Bright Fae out there. A few. One of them must be powerful enough to help me.”

He didn't even want to start on all the 'ifs' and 'maybes' in that plan. She'd had enough for one day. But he didn't see how she was going to do that on her own, with the bracelet inhibiting her magic, and no one to protect her against the Retrievers dogging her trail.

He asked, “Do you have a line on any of them?”

“Not right now.” Her voice firmed. “But I'll find them.”

He didn't say anything more. Time enough to figure out what they could do for her, if anything.

He said, “You need to get some more rest. Lie back down, and try to go to sleep.”

“Are you going to stay with me?”

“Do you want me to?”

She looked up at him with those eyes, wide and honest and vulnerable. “Please?”

It might help with her healing, if her wolf could feel him there. “Okay. But you should probably put some clothes on.”

She was already snuggling down on the pillow. “Why?”

“Because being naked in bed with a strange man is usually a bad idea? What if I was the kind of guy who'd take advantage of your weakened state to ravish you?”

“Hmm.”

She was *thinking* about it? Sheesh.

Finally she said, “I think I'd be okay with that.”

He had to laugh. “Seriously?”

“Well, okay with being ravished by you, because I like you. But probably not okay with you being the kind of guy who would take advantage.”

“Now I'm wishing I was that kind of guy.”

He thought he heard a faint giggle, but he wasn't sure. Was she just fucking with him?

She said, "I still want you to stay though."

Fuck my life. "Fine." He got back into bed. "But no ravishing." Although he had the feeling he'd regret letting the chance pass him by.

He lay there for a little while, but he could tell by her breathing she wasn't asleep, so he asked the question he'd been turning over in his mind. "Weren't you angry about being held captive like that?"

Because he didn't feel that rage in her.

She said softly, "I didn't want to stay angry with them. Anger is... corrosive. It eats you from the inside out. So I let it go."

Hell. That was some powerful shit there.

He said, "I didn't."

She didn't say anything, but she moved her head, so he knew she was listening for more. "I used to work for the government. Shifter Special Ops. Not because I wanted to, but because it was a deal I had to make. They threatened me—and they threatened my brother." Boomer had been only sixteen. "*Nobody* hurts my brother."

She nodded slightly. "What did they make you do?"

Cole shook his head. "I don't talk about that. But I never stopped being angry."

She looked up at him then, and touched his chest, over his heart. "You still haven't."

"No."

She rested her hand on his chest. After a while she asked, "Why do you hate Riker so much?"

"I don't talk about that either."

"I can't hate him. No matter what he did."

“That’s okay,” Cole said. “I hate him enough for both of us.”

She touched his heart again, gently. “Then I hope it doesn’t eat you alive.”

Chapter 9

Cole must have gone to sleep, because he woke up in daylight, to the sight of half-naked Ireland. Which would have been great, except she was just taking her zipped bag off the table, and since the books weren't in sight, they were already in it. She was obviously leaving.

She was also wearing nothing but her pants and boots.

“Where the hell do you think you're going?” he asked her.

“I told you last night. I have to go find a Bright Fae to take my bracelet off.”

“So you were just sneaking away? While I was asleep? And I thought we were getting along so well.” Despite his sarcasm voice, something twisted inside him. He'd thought... ah, fuck.

She turned to face him. “I saw your phone. I saw all the messages. You didn't tell me you work for Thanatos.” She spat the name.

Oh, shit. Riker.

Sure enough, she said, “Riker warned me about him. That he'd try to capture me. I was just starting to trust you.” Now she was the one who sounded hurt. “By the way, there's like a hundred messages from someone called Boomer.”

Fuck. That was all he needed.

Cole said, “Thanatos sent me, but we weren't capturing you. Like I said, we *thought* I was rescuing you from Riker. But he does want to know what Riker was up to. So do I.”

“I told you, I don't know. You can tell him that—I don't have to.” She looked around in frustration. “Where are my other clothes?”

“In rags, mostly,” he said. “And before you go out there the way you are, have you thought about the Retrievers? I'd bet money they can track that bracelet.”

“All the more reason to find someone to take it off me as soon as possible.” She was still searching the room. “I need

my jacket. Where's my jacket?"

He got out of bed and checked the floor underneath. There it was. He held it up.

"Give it to me."

He went over to the table and grabbed his phone, still holding on to the jacket. Yep. Messages from Thanatos, and about a gazillion from Boomer. He shoved the phone in his pocket. He had enough to deal with right now. Luckily Boomer was too far away to use the communicator on the specialized dog tags they both wore.

"Give. Me. My. Jacket." Damn it, she had her knife out again.

He took the knife away from her with a quick twist of the wrist. "Promise not to leave until you hear me out. And until you have a shirt on."

"Don't make me hurt you." She was almost in tears. Then he realized—the jacket had Riker's bracelet in the pocket. Anyone who had that could make a slave out of her. Including him—or Thanatos.

Silently, he handed it over. Then he went to one of the dresser drawers to get her a shirt. "Look, it's crazy to go out there by yourself. Come back to the Ridge with me, and..."

But when he turned around, she already had the jacket on and was heading for the door.

"For fuck's sake—" He couldn't let her leave like this. He went after her, and tripped over the bedsheets. The two of them landed on the bedroom floor, her on the bottom. And his phone started to ring.

Shit. He hoped he hadn't opened up her wound again. But at least he had a captive audience, even if her boobs crushed against him were incredibly distracting.

So was his phone. It stopped ringing, and started making a shrill noise that hurt his wolf hearing.

And then it fucking started to talk, despite the fact that he hadn't answered it.

“Emergency Alert. Outlaw Ridge. Emergency Alert. Cole Hunter, answer the damn phone or I’m having Switch send a drone to blow you up.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. It was his damn brother’s voice.

With Ireland still squirming and swearing underneath him, he pulled out the phone and yelled at it. “What the fuck do you want? I’m busy here.”

“Are you being shot at? Tortured? About to be killed?”

Ireland was pounding on his back, and he grabbed her arm with his free hand and pinned it to the floor. “Possibly.”

“Bullshit. The security system at Fierro’s safe house shows you’ve been there since last night.”

Busted. Ireland, still squirming, growled, “Tell him that doesn’t mean no one’s going to kill you.”

“I heard that,” Boomer said. “Are you under attack?”

“Not exactly.”

Ireland managed to dig her elbow into his ribs, and he grunted.

Boomer asked, “Well, are you getting laid?”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Not at this exact moment, no.”

“Then you’re not busy. I don’t call you just for fun, you know, because to be honest you’re not that fun to talk to, on account of not having social skills. And since you didn’t read my messages, I thought I better tell you that Thanatos got tired of waiting, called out the troops, and we’re currently on the plane preparing to land in Kentucky and rescue you. Or yell at you, depending on the situation. And Big T is not a happy camper.”

“Thanatos is coming here?” Shit.

“I could have told you that before,” Ireland said. “I read your messages.” She started squirming again.

Fuck.

“Thanks for the heads-up,” he said to Boomer.

“Yeah. Now I owe Switch a bottle of Buffalo Trace for hacking your phone on the fly. You’re paying for that, by the way. Because of, I’m pissed off at you.”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Yeah well, you could have been dead. See you soon. Better hide your pot and porno magazines before Dad—I mean Big T—shows up.”

The call cut off.

Cole looked down at Ireland. Now at least he knew why she’d been in such a hurry to leave. “You’re trying to get away from Thanatos, aren’t you?”

“Riker told me about him. How Thanatos killed his old boss. Maximilian.”

Fucking Riker. “Did he tell you that Maximilian had stolen the souls of several people and was feeding off them? That he kept my brother’s mate captive for years, sucking away her magic, and that he had a knife to her throat and was threatening to kill her at the time Thanatos killed him?”

She stared at him in shock, her eyes wide and bright.

“Yeah. I didn’t think so.”

She bit her lip. He could tell she was torn. “He said Thanatos would try to use me, use my magic. That if he had the bracelet, he’d use it to make me do things.”

Cole sighed.

Ireland said, “You can’t keep me pinned to the floor forever. And your gun—or whatever that is—is digging into my leg.”

She knew damned well what it was, and it wasn’t his gun.

Cole rolled off Ireland and sat up. “Thanatos wouldn’t use the bracelet,” he said. “He’d never bind himself to a woman.”

“Oh, he hates women. Even better.” She was still lying on the floor. “Can you swear he wouldn’t take the books? Use the magic for his own ends?”

That he couldn't swear to. And she saw it.

She sat up and faced him, suddenly growing serious. "All my life, I've been held captive. I've had people using me for what *they* wanted. You know what that's like."

He did. He'd told her so. He remembered the feeling—the helplessness, the rage, the explosive desire to be free, no matter what the cost.

She looked into his eyes. "Please don't do that to me."

Cole sighed again. He liked missions to be simple. A clear objective, a path to that objective. Yes, sometimes things went sideways, but he could rely on his instincts and his training to know what to do.

This was not simple. And he didn't know what the fuck to do. He owed Thanatos his loyalty. But—although Thanatos financed the Ridge's Ops team and did a lot of good in the world, Cole knew Thanatos usually had his own agenda—and wasn't above using people for what he claimed was the greater good.

But it wasn't safe out there. She had to see that.

"What are you planning to do about the Retrievers?" he asked her desperately. "I'm pretty sure they're tracking that bracelet. At least our territory is warded, and you'll have people to protect you there."

Including us, his wolf said. She needs it.

But she doesn't want to go.

We could make her.

Cole looked into those eyes... and he couldn't do it. All Ireland wanted was to be free. How could he take that away from her?

He hesitated a moment, and then got up and dug a talisman out of the pocket of his combat vest—a metal disc about the size of a 50-cent piece. "Take this," he said, handing it to her. "Supposedly, it helps keep people from being detected by magic. I don't know if it can counteract the bat-signal that bracelet gives out, but maybe it will."

She stared at him, disbelieving, and then slowly she took it and put it in her pocket. “Thank you,” she said softly. She took off her jacket to put on the shirt he’d gotten for her, and then replaced it.

Cole checked the outside security. Still no sign of any Retrievers—just the same workmen in the cul-de-sac.

When Ireland was ready, he handed her his backup handgun in its holster, and some spare ammo. “Take this too. You’re going to need it.”

She took it, and touched him gently on the arm. “Thank you. For everything.”

He hated this. Every instinct was screaming at him not to let her go out there alone, but he didn’t have any choice. She knew what she wanted to do, and he didn’t have the right to stop her. Even if she was probably going to get herself killed.

He couldn’t stand the thought of being the one who caged her again.

He reached down, cupped his hand around her cheek, and kissed her. She tasted of warm sugar cookies, like her scent, and a poignant sweetness swept through him—something found, only to be lost again. He held his lips on hers for a long moment, and then let her go.

Chapter 10

Ireland looked up at him for one last moment, tears forming in her eyes. Then she turned away, picked up her bag, and walked out the bedroom door. She was really going to go.

He stood, numb and frozen, watching her.

It doesn't matter, he told himself. In a few days, she'll be just another victim we saved. We never know what happens to them after we set them free. Not our business, not our problem.

When she passed out of sight, Cole had to hold onto the edge of the table to keep himself from following her. Instead, he watched on the security monitors as she opened the front door and walked out.

He thought she would leave without looking back—he would have—but at the last moment she turned and raised her face to the camera.

“Thank you again for saving me,” she said. How did she know he would be watching? She added, “I hope—” but she didn't finish. Maybe she didn't know what to say.

And then she walked away.

Cole felt like a light had gone out of the room. Her scent lingered, growing cold, like that promise of warmth and home was receding with her.

But that had only ever been in his head, anyway.

He kept watching as she walked down the front path to the gate in the fence, and opened it. She passed through the wards, leaving their circle of protection.

Out in the world, vulnerable. His wolf wanted to howl.

And then every municipal worker in the cul-de-sac stopped what they were doing and raised their heads, all at the same time.

A prickle went down his spine. *Danger.*

The workers' images quivered, ever so slightly, like mirages rising off hot asphalt on a summer day. For a second

he could see their Retriever forms, and then they looked human again.

Fuck. They'd known she was here, but they couldn't get in. Sometime while he was asleep, they'd replaced the real road crew and set up in the street. Gods. How could he have been so *stupid*?

Cole grabbed up his loaded weapon and ran at full speed, out the front door and down the path. He got to the gate just as Ireland sensed the danger and froze.

One of the 'workers' grabbed a rope off his belt. His image glitched like a bad holograph, and for a second Cole could see the lasso—just like the one he'd destroyed last night. The others pulled ordinary guns, aiming them at him.

Cole dove through the gate, hitting Ireland with all his weight. As they slammed into the asphalt, he twisted, putting his body between her and the creatures.

He felt a ripping blow to his leg, then they were on the ground. He continued the motion, rolling to his side and spraying the creatures with gunfire.

One fell; the others took cover. "Come on," Cole said, reaching for Ireland. "Back inside."

He grabbed her arm and went to get to his feet.

He couldn't.

His right leg was numb, paralyzed. He looked down, and saw the torn cloth and flesh across his thigh where bullets had ripped through it, shattering the bone. Blood was pouring out.

For a moment he just stared, disbelieving.

There was more gunfire, sending up clods of dirt in front of them.

Ireland pulled the gun he'd given her and shot back, and then tugged at his arm. "Can you stand?"

He shook his head, still in shock.

"Then shoot, dammit!"

He shook himself, firing at the creatures, keeping them pinned behind the cover of their truck, his mind racing. Plans. Strategies. What to do now.

“Run,” he said to Ireland. “Back in the house. I’ll cover you.”

“Don’t be an idiot. There’s still a little magic I can do. Just don’t stop shooting.” She shoved a new magazine into her gun and handed it to him, so he had one in each hand.

Automatically, he fired. What was wrong with her? She had to go. He could only protect her until his ammo ran out.

She muttered something, and a white light surrounded him.

She had to go without him. He was bleeding too bad. This was it.

Then he felt his body lift a few inches off the ground. Ireland grabbed his collar and yanked.

And he moved. She’d done some kind of levitation spell, lifting him so she could pull him along.

Cole just kept shooting, keeping the monsters at bay. He could feel Ireland straining to pull him along, the magic faint and patchy without a Protector to regulate it.

But she didn’t give up. She didn’t leave him.

Idiot woman.

Finally, they were inside the wards, and then he tilted upwards as they went up the stairs to the house. She pulled him inside and shut the door behind them. The spell broke, and he sank to the floor.

“Oh my gods and goddesses,” she was muttering. “First aid supplies.”

“On the table in the bedroom,” he said. “Never put them away.”

He heard her stumbling into the other room, as if her legs were wobbly with the effort it had taken to get him in the house.

Cole gritted his teeth and grabbed the torn scraps of his pants, pulling them to draw the mangled flesh together. Then he tried to put pressure on the wound, but his strength was draining out of him along with the blood. A coldness swept over him, creeping up from his extremities.

Ireland came running back and lurched to her knees beside him, pulling gauze pads out of the first-aid kit and pressing down on the wound. Blood oozed out the sides and soaked the gauze.

This was bad. Fucking bad.

Ireland took one look at his face and said through clenched teeth, “Oh, no. Not you too. You are *not* dying.”

“Of course not,” he said, his lips stiff. “I have shifter healing. I’ll be fine.”

He wouldn’t. He’d need a surgeon to put his leg back together before it started to heal, if he ever wanted to walk right again.

But it wouldn’t come to that.

She said, “I don’t know what shifter healing is supposed to do, but it’s not doing it.”

The cold shadow crept closer to his heart. He didn’t say anything.

“The bleeding isn’t stopping,” she muttered. “Shit.”

Spots floated before Cole’s eyes, and a wave of darkness passed over him. He tried to raise his head, and couldn’t.

“No,” she repeated fiercely. “Don’t you dare.” She slapped his cheek, a stinging blow that brought him back for a minute.

“Sorry, darlin’,” he managed. “It’s been a bad couple of days for your protectors.”

He felt her freeze, her body going completely still. Then she let go of his bandage and started rooting around in her pockets. She muttered, “I know we’re both going to regret this.”

He didn't know what she meant. His vision was going dark again. "I don't have regrets," he managed. It was a lie. He tried not to allow himself regrets, but he fucking had them. Who didn't?

She said grimly, "You will soon."

She grabbed his hand, and he dimly felt something close around his left wrist. Something cold and metallic.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then an explosion of heat and light came from his wrist, traveling up his arm and jump-starting his heart. It spread through his body like wildfire, lighting his nerves on fire, and his body seized.

The cold dissipated. He felt the flesh and bone of his thigh start to move, rearrange itself. An excruciating pain lanced through him, and he heard himself scream.

And then the world went away.

Chapter 11

Cole was suspended in a dim fog, nothing anchoring him to the ground. To anything.

It wasn't completely dark, but he couldn't tell where the light was coming from. It was just... there.

And then, floating into his view, surrounded by a faint red glow, was...

Riker.

Cole groaned. "Shit," he muttered. "I'm in hell. This is hell, isn't it?"

Riker smirked. "You had to know we'd both end up there. Unless you have a better opinion of me than I ever dreamed, or a better opinion of yourself than you deserve."

"Shut the fuck up, Riker," Cole said. "You're dead. I don't have to listen to you."

"But you do," he said, the smirk even more obvious. "You don't know what she did. Do you?"

"Tried to save me and failed."

Cole felt regret about that, so Ireland had been right after all. Regret over how much it would hurt her, seeing yet another ally die protecting her. He knew what that could do to a person, and felt his own regret that he'd left her with that burden.

And Riker, the bastard, was laughing.

"Oh, no," he said. "She saved you. That's what she does. She saves people. Even me. She drags them out of the darkness, kicking and screaming, and makes them a better person. Whether they want to be or not."

Cole snorted. "No one can make me a better person. Especially not that little pointy-eared fairy."

"Just wait," Riker said. "And the best part is, I'm going to have a front-row seat."

He faded away, but Cole could still hear him laughing...

Cole felt a stinging blow on his face, and then another. From what seemed like a long distance away, he heard Ireland say, "Don't you dare die. Do you hear me? I'm not putting up with that kind of defeatist bullshit." She smacked him again. "You. (smack). Will. (smack). Live." Extra-hard smack.

With great effort, Cole opened his eyes. He felt like he'd been pulverized with a jackhammer. "Do I have to?" he muttered.

Ireland's eyes went wide. "You're alive!" She leaned over and kissed him full on the mouth.

If he hadn't already been alive, that would have brought him back from the dead. Life and light, warm fires and bursting flowers and springtime and hope.

He'd dreamed he was in hell. Maybe it was heaven?

No. Heaven didn't hurt this much. And Riker definitely wasn't there.

He looked up at Ireland. "Jeez, Tinkerbell. What the hell did you do?"

She didn't answer directly, which was a bad sign. "You were dying," she said softly. She reached out and barely touched his leg.

"I know that," he said. "I—" He looked down at his leg, and all the words left his lips. It was healed. There was a jagged bright red scar across it, but the skin had healed over, the muscles were all in place.

And the bone was healed too. He could feel it.

"What the fuck?" he whispered. It was impossible. "How did you do that?" If she'd had healing powers, she would have used them on Riker. But she'd said the bracelet was supposed to heal him.

The bracelet.

Cole looked down at his wrist. It was encased in a cuff of gold. He raised his eyes to hers. They were wide and deep as

the ocean, staring into his soul.

Then, very slowly, he reached down and tried to take the bracelet off.

It wouldn't come. It wasn't fused to his wrist—it moved slightly, but the catch didn't work at all.

Still in slow motion, he got to his feet. His leg felt perfectly normal. He looked down at the bracelet again.

His voice dangerously quiet, he growled, “What the hell did you do?” But he already knew.

Ireland opened her mouth to speak, and then the door burst open, and men in SWAT gear poured in.

Cole turned in a flash, gun drawn. Ireland raised her hands. This time light flashed from her fingers, pure and strong, and he felt the bracelet on his wrist tingling.

Just in time, he jumped in front of the magic. It flared around him harmlessly, and then got sucked into the bracelet.

Damn good thing. “Stand down, Tinkerbell,” he said.

They were Outlaw Ridge wolves, led by Gunn, his alpha.

They all faced each other for a second, frozen, and then Gunn lowered his weapon and echoed the order to his own men. “Outlaw Ridge, stand down.”

They lowered their weapons. Now that the door was open and he was no longer dying, Cole could hear the sounds of battle outside, as Gunn's team fought the Retrievers. The Ridge to the rescue. “Do we need to get out there?”

“Not you.” Briefly, Gunn directed most of the team back outside. “We've got it under control. No thanks to you. Why didn't you report in?”

Cole evaded the question. “I was under direct orders from Thanatos.”

Gunn was obviously not pleased with that excuse. “Yeah. He's pissed about it too.” He looked Cole up and down, his gaze fastening on his torn pants and the amount of blood

soaked into them. “You’re wounded,” he said. “Dobe, check him out.”

Besides being one of Gunn’s lieutenants, Dobe was qualified as a field medic. He holstered his weapon and strode forward.

“I’m fine,” Cole said irritably. This disaster was bad enough without them fussing over him.

“Let him check it,” Gunn said. It was clearly an order.

Cole sighed. “Whatever.” He knew they wouldn’t give up until he said yes, and Gunn’s wolf was already on the edge.

Dobe crouched down in front of him and pulled back the torn cloth. He ran his hands over Cole’s thigh, poking and prodding at the scar. “Does that hurt?”

“It’s a little sore.”

Dobe moved another fold of cloth, and a bloody bullet dropped out and plinked on the floor. One that had probably previously been inside his leg. “How many bullets did you take?” Gunn demanded.

Cole shrugged. “Dunno. I wasn’t really counting.”

Dobe said accusingly, “At least six bullets tore up that leg.”

Like it was Cole’s fault. Well, he supposed it had been, since he’d jumped in front of said bullets. “Probably,” he agreed. “Shattered the bone, too.”

They were both staring at him now. “So what the hell happened after that?”

But before he could answer, the front door slammed open again, and Boomer walked in, with what seemed like half the strike team behind him.

“Are you okay?” Boomer demanded. He looked down at Cole’s blood-soaked pants. “Fuck. Your leg.”

“It’s fine. It healed.”

Dobe, still crouched in front of him, said, “Bend it for me.” Cole rolled his eyes, but Gunn growled so he did as he was

told. Dobe said, “Now jump up and down.”

As if he was going to jump up and down like an idiot in front of everyone. “Fuck you. I told you it’s fine.”

Boomer turned to Dobe. “Is it?”

He shrugged and stood up, moving aside. “Seems to be.”

“Good.”

Boomer hauled off and punched Cole in the face.

Cole staggered back, almost knocking down Ireland, who very sensibly had been keeping him in between her and the armed soldiers. Rubbing his jaw, he said, “What the fuck was that for?”

“For going off on this damned mission by yourself. For making us come almost too late to save your sorry ass. For not keeping us in the loop. For not keeping *me* in the loop. You’re always telling you you’ll back my plays. ‘With great balls, comes great responsibility’ and all that shit. What about *me* having *your* back?”

“Your balls aren’t as big as mine.”

Boomer growled. “Don’t make me punch you again.”

He was really angry, Cole realized. And hurt. This wasn’t going to be passed off easily with brotherly insults. He blew out a breath. “This one was something left over from back in the day. I’m sorry.” He paused. “Does that help?”

“No.” Boomer stalked back outside.

Gunn said, “He’s been worried about you. We all have.”

“I’m fine,” Cole said, for what felt like the millionth time. “I can take care of myself.”

“Sure,” Dobe said. “You only got your leg shot off.”

Ireland stayed behind Cole, wishing there weren’t quite so many people between her and the door. Except, she couldn’t leave—not now that she’d bonded Cole to her with the Protector bracelet.

As long as he was wearing it, they couldn't be apart—not until they'd found a way to break the bond for good, and give Ireland her all her magic back, instead of a few tiny trickles.

She didn't regret what she'd done; it had been the only way to save him. But there had been no time to think about what it would mean—that if she were to continue her quest for freedom, he'd have no choice but to come too. And if he wouldn't, then she'd have no choice but to give it up.

The thought made her cold inside.

Gunn—the leader—was saying, “There's no way your shifter healing could fix that much damage, let alone before the blood was even dry.” He looked beyond Cole to Ireland. “Did she do something? Does she have some kind of healing powers?”

“Not exactly,” Cole said. He held up his wrist. “It was this.”

Gunn said in an ominous voice, “And what does that do, exactly?”

“Good question. Ask Tinkerbell.”

Oh, hell. Were they really going to do this now? Before she had the chance to ask him if he'd help her?

Apparently they were, because he moved aside so that she was facing them all.

And then it got worse. There was a shadow at the doorway, and a strange figure moved into view. A voice like gravel said, “I would like to know the same thing.”

She knew without even asking that it was Thanatos.

Chapter 12

Cole looked over to see Thanatos standing in the doorway. As usual, he was wearing a brown hooded robe, like a medieval monk, that went all the way to the floor. The hood was so deep it made his face completely invisible.

No one Cole knew had ever seen that face. They all had bets on what kind of monster Thanatos was, and why he never allowed anyone to see any part of his body, except occasionally his hands. The skin on them was gray and mottled, and looked almost like stone.

In the ‘guess the monster’ betting pool, Cole had put down two hundred on ‘troll’.

Thanatos slowly turned his head from side to side, taking in the entire scene in the room. The hood stopped when it came to Cole, and then lowered slightly as Thanatos’ gaze fastened on Cole’s wrist. “Mr. Hunter. Remove the bracelet, if you please.”

Thanatos rarely said please, probably because everything he said was an order, no matter how it was phrased. And he always expected to be obeyed.

But this time, he wasn’t going to get his way.

“Yeah, well,” Cole said. “That’s going to be a problem.”

“Because?”

“It doesn’t come off.”

In seconds Thanatos had glided across the room and was standing in front of him. Cole held his arm out, and Thanatos touched the bracelet lightly, his fingers barely visible beyond the hems of his long sleeves.

A spark of magic flared, stinging Cole’s arm. “Ow,” he said mildly.

Thanatos turned his own fingers and looked at them, and then rubbed his thumb across the fingertips, as if he’d touched a shelf and found it to be inadequately dusted by the maid.

“Indeed,” he murmured.

He turned to Ireland and fixed the hood on her. “Remove it from him at once,” he demanded.

Cole could see the air between them shiver, like heat rising from the road. A clash of power? Maybe not. He got the feeling that inside she was shaking. “I can’t,” she said. “Only the Council of Bright Fae can take it off.”

Cole noticed she didn’t mention her plan for finding an alternative sorcerer. He didn’t say anything either. He wanted to know what Thanatos thought.

“I can see that it is bonding magic,” Thanatos said. “What is the nature of the bond?”

“It’s a Protector bracelet,” she said. “It allows us to share magic.” She held up her wrist, showing the bracelet she herself wore. “And before you ask, I can’t take this one off either. Bright Fae Council only.”

So, she also wasn’t mentioning that the ‘sharing’ pretty much went one way—that the Protector was in charge. He didn’t blame her; it was stupid to announce your weaknesses in front of powerful strangers.

Thanatos said, “And did Mr. Hunter agree to wear this bracelet that cannot be removed?”

Some of the guys in the room growled at the idea that maybe he hadn’t.

Ireland was still gazing defiantly at Thanatos, but she was scared. Panicked, almost. Cole could feel it, kind of like the way he and his brother could feel each other’s emotions at a distance, knowing if the other one was upset or in trouble.

The bracelets seemed to work something like a wolf bond, only juiced with Fae magic. Interesting.

Without thinking, he stepped closer to her, the way he would to a brother wolf who needed his support.

“Chill out, everyone,” he said. “It’s not her fault. You saw my wound, and the blood.” He gestured to the congealing red pool on the floor. “I was right there at the final checkout. The

bracelet has healing properties. She put it on me to save my life.”

“But now you’re bound to her?” Gunn frowned. “Bound how, exactly?” He looked from Ireland to Thanatos. “Is this going to affect the pack bond?”

“I don’t know,” Thanatos said slowly. “Ms... Tinkerbell, did you say?”

Asshole. He knew damn well she wouldn’t really be called Tinkerbell. But then, he didn’t really like women much.

“Her name is Ireland,” Cole said. He turned and looked at her, explaining what Gunn meant. “Wolves in the same pack or family have magical bonds. We can feel each other’s emotions, influence each other, communicate at a distance with people we’re especially close to. Any outside magical influence can mess with the whole pack. Any thoughts on that?”

Ireland stared at Cole. She hadn’t known any of that about shifter wolves, and had absolutely no idea what might happen to their bond with him wearing the bracelet. It wasn’t like she’d thought this through beforehand.

“There’s no way for me to know,” she said. “The bracelet was never intended to be worn by shifters.”

She didn’t mention that, now she’d had time to think, she was surprised it had worked on Cole at all. It was made of Bright Fae magic, and shifters were made of Dark Fae magic. She’d always been told the two were incompatible. Thus, why the Bright Fae were so afraid of her.

She could see that the wolves didn’t like the idea of their bond being messed with. Boomer and some of the others had come in behind Thanatos, and now they all started objecting to the whole idea—and to her—in loud voices. And growling a lot.

To make it worse, she was pretty sure that Thanatos was Dark Fae. She couldn’t tell what kind, except that he was extremely old and extremely powerful, and was disguising his nature with carefully crafted spells.

But she had only encountered one Fae Elder in her time—a Bright Fae—and he hadn't come close to emanating the intense aura of power this one did.

She shivered. His energy was making her a little sick, and somewhere inside her, she was aware of her wolf-self in a way she'd never been before. It was like it existed inside her as a separate entity, and it was... curious. Interested. And pulled towards all these dark creatures, these wolves, and the prince of darkness who led them.

Oddly, though, she didn't *feel* a sense of evil from him. More just alienness, like something you'd find deep in a dark cave under the earth, something powerful and unchanging that measured time in centuries rather than years.

But that in itself made him dangerous. His needs and wants were nothing like hers, and he would never be swayed by her powers.

Ireland suddenly felt like the room was closing in on her. Too much noise, too much anger, too much dark magic.

Just when she wanted to break and run, Cole gave a short, earsplitting whistle.

"Enough," he said. "Shut up."

To her surprise, they listened. Everyone stopped talking.

Cole turned to Ireland. "You said something last night about you and the Protector having to stay together," he said. "How far apart can we get, exactly?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know. A few hundred yards, maybe? Less if we can't see each other."

He gave a short nod, like it was about what he'd expected. "What happens if we don't?"

"Right away?" she said. "We lose our powers and start to get weak."

That wasn't the whole answer, and she could see he knew it. "And then?"

"And then we pass out."

His voice got that dangerous quietness again. “And then?”

She sighed. “And then we die.”

He seemed less upset by this than all the others, who’d started growling again. He said, “I thought the Bright Fae were all about lambs and butterflies and things not dying.”

He didn’t have to be snarky about it. “Well, we can be separated for probably a day.” She thought back to what the Council had told her, to impress on her that it was futile to try to run away. “They explained that it would be my choice if we died, because it would mean I broke the rules.”

Cole’s eyes widened. “They said that?” She nodded. “And if one of us was... say... kidnapped? And removed forcibly?”

If it was her, they would have taken the bracelet off the Protector, and used it to find her. She didn’t know what they would have done if her Protector was kidnapped. But she only said, “Sucks for us.”

That set them all off again, louder this time.

Cole stared at her for a long moment, his eyes unreadable. Then he swung around and gave another sharp whistle.

Everyone shut up again. Damn. Ireland wondered if he could teach her to do that.

Gunn turned to Thanatos. “Can’t you get that thing off him?”

Ireland noted he wasn’t so concerned about her.

“Not at the present time,” Thanatos said. “It will require further study.” He fixed that creepy empty hood on Ireland again.

“You will return with us to Outlaw Ridge. At that time, we will discuss what Thomas Riker was trying to accomplish, to make sure it does not come to pass. And I will examine the magic of this bond more closely.”

Ireland could feel walls closing in around her, the dreams of freedom crumbling. She didn’t believe for a moment that a

dark creature like Thanatos would be able to influence the bracelets, and she was scared of what would happen if he tried.

And what if the pack bond Gunn talked about worked the other way? What if all the dark magic of the wolves crept into her through Cole and the bracelet, and snuffed out her soul? Turned her into a killer?

But what choice did she have? She'd done this to Cole. It was her responsibility to see it through. Maybe when they were alone, she could convince him to leave with her. Surely there was someone, somewhere—a Bright Fae who would help her.

She had to hold on to that.

Chapter 13

Cole insisted that he and Ireland travel back to the Ridge on Thanatos' private plane, not the troop transport. He could feel the pack's hostility towards Ireland because of this unknown bond, and she was already scared. Being trapped in a plane with that many 'creatures of the Dark Fae' in one place might be too much for her.

He didn't want her freaking out—or wolfing out—in the middle of a plane full of other shifters. It could cause an all-out brawl—not a thing you wanted to have happen at thirty thousand feet.

Thanatos boarded first and went immediately to his private cabin in the back. He'd left Sugar, his lieutenant, dealing with the cleanup of the battle near the safe house. And figuring out what the hell to tell local law enforcement.

Not to mention what to tell Brandon Fierro, who was going to be pissed about his safe house drawing that much attention. He was probably going to have to move it now.

Not Cole's problem. Which was a good thing, because he had enough on his hands with his wild-ass Fae wolf.

No one else—not even Gunn—had seemed to sense that she was a shifter. Hopefully her magic would continue to mask it until he had a chance to talk to her alone.

In the meantime, he had to take care of her somehow. Keep her calm and human-shaped. Her emotions were like an itch under his skin, and he was starting to twitch.

Problem was, calming and comforting people had never been Cole's strong suit.

The cabin of the luxurious jet had a small conference table, a couch, and a bunch of fancy reclining leather seats in pairs facing each other. Gunn was on board, with his mate Michelangela, who'd been there with the strike team. Also Dobe, Gunn's other lieutenant, Rex, and the three Sanchez cousins—who normally didn't rate riding in the fancy plane, but who'd detailed themselves as security.

And Boomer, who'd muscled his way onto the plane and looked around with a glare that dared anyone to kick him off.

No one tried.

Cole co-opted the couch for Ireland, his own fuck-you glare keeping the rest of the guys at the front of the cabin. He found a blanket in the storage area and tried tucking it around her, but she shrugged him away. He could feel that she was now angry as well as scared, and he wasn't sure exactly why.

She took the blanket, though, so that was good, right? But she was just sitting there, not saying anything, staring out the window the same way she'd done in the limo on the way here.

Was that okay? He felt like she must need something more. Food. That was it. Food was important, and she hadn't eaten anything since the battle. She must be starving—and thirsty.

He was an idiot. He should have thought of that before.

The pilot was still preparing for takeoff, so Cole headed for the galley. What would be good for her? Water? Juice? Maybe something hot. Tea. There was already hot water ready, so he poured some into a cup put a teabag in it, putting a lid on top.

But wait. What if she didn't like tea? He grabbed a couple of bottles of juice and put them in his jacket pockets.

Boomer came into the galley, getting a beer out of the cooler. Cole said, "You're not going to punch me again, are you?"

"Thinking about it."

"I said I was sorry."

"Mmm," Boomer said. He took a swig of beer. "What's with the girl?"

"Nothing," Cole said. "She's a rescue. She's scared."

"She trapped you with a magic bracelet you can't get off."

"She didn't do it on purpose!" For fuck's sake. "She's in trouble, and she needs help. That's what we do."

Boomer was studying him, an odd look on his face. “What?” Cole asked.

“You like her,” Boomer said. “You like her a lot.”

“Don’t be stupid. There’s nothing going on there. I don’t fall for troublemaking strangers and get myself all tangled up with them. This is a job.”

Boomer got a little grin in the corner of his mouth. “Yeah. That’s what the rest of us said.” He clapped Cole on the shoulder and went back to his seat.

Now what the fuck was that all about? Cole started to go back down the aisle, and stopped. Shit. He’d almost forgotten the food.

In the tiny fridge he found roast beef sandwiches, wrapped in waxed paper. Meat was good. She might not know it, but her wolf needed meat. He put one of those in his pocket, and then added another one because he’d just realized how hungry he was himself.

The oldest Sanchez cousin—who never used his first name—growled at Cole as he walked past. “Hope you left something for us.”

“You don’t need anything,” he answered absently. “You should cut down. You’re getting fat.”

It wasn’t true, but Sanchez got distracted by looking down at his stomach in outrage, and then insulting everyone who was laughing at him for falling for it, so it took his attention off Cole and Ireland.

When Cole got to the couch, Ireland still had the blanket around her, and she’d pulled her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around them, as if she were trying to protect herself.

That gave him an odd little stab somewhere in his stomach. She shouldn’t feel like she still needed protection. Only maybe she did, because who the fuck knew what Thanatos really wanted with her?

Only thing was, she was still safer at the Ridge than anywhere else. She needed to understand that. Maybe she'd feel better when she was fed?

"Here," he said abruptly, holding the cup out to her. "It's tea. It's hot. It'll make you feel better."

She raised her eyes to him. "I don't think tea is going to solve my problems."

"Well, no." He sat down. "It wasn't supposed to. But you need to drink. You lost a lot of blood." He held it out again, and she took it, sniffing at it.

"If you don't like it you can have juice." He fished the bottles awkwardly out of his pockets and put them in the nearest cup holders. Fuck. Now she couldn't put her tea down. He moved the bottles. "But tea is maybe better," he told her. "It's chamomile. So it's calming."

"I'm very calm," she said. Which was a lie. She was upset—he could feel it.

"Not on the inside," he said. She didn't answer—just gave him a swift look he couldn't read, and looked back down at her tea. The pilot made an announcement for everyone to buckle up for takeoff. Half the guys in the front didn't, but they weren't Cole's business. Ireland was. Cole pulled the two ends of her seat belt around her and snapped them together, and then put his own on.

"Here," he said, fishing a sandwich out of his pocket and thrusting it at her. "I brought you food."

"Thanks. Also not calming, though."

"Are you mad because I'm taking you back to Ridge?"

"I thought—" She picked at the sandwich wrapper. The plane started taxiing along the runway. He waited for her to finish.

Finally she said, without looking up, "I thought maybe you would go with me. To find a sorcerer who would get me out of the bracelet. Get you out of it, too. But you didn't even give me a chance to ask. Or say *anything*."

He said, “We just almost got killed by the Retrievers. Both of us. In less than a day. They found us in the safe house, which was warded. Thank the gods they couldn’t get in, but they still tracked you there. I thought it was obvious that going around randomly hunting for super-powerful sorcerers who would help you for no good reason was going to end in certain death. I figured it was time for Plan B.”

“*You* figured. So now you’re just like the Bright Fae. Slap a bracelet on you, and you get to make all the decisions.” She looked away, out the window. The plane accelerated, and suddenly the ground was dropping away beneath them.

Like her life, he realized. Like her dreams of being free from the bracelet. Riker had listened to her. Riker had made a deal with her.

Maybe he’d intended to honor it, maybe—probably—he hadn’t. Because, Riker. But he’d made Ireland feel like she mattered.

Cole had to do better than Riker.

They’d had a connection last night, when they were talking. She’d said she liked him. Maybe he could get that back? He said, “I guess I shouldn’t have assumed that you were onboard with avoiding certain death. I promise not to make that mistake again.”

Her head turned, looking to see if he was serious. He let a small smile touch his face.

She shook her head. “You,” she said, “suck at comforting people. You know that, right?” But her face was softer, and her emotions felt... less sad. Less empty. A tiny bit less alone.

“Yes,” he said. “I do. I suck at small talk, too. Just so you know. And since I’m almost thirty, I’m probably never going to learn. Boomer’s pretty good at it, though.” He paused. “Well, no, really he’s not. He just says a lot of totally ridiculous stuff and makes people laugh.”

“I’m hilarious,” Boomer called from his seat halfway down the plane, proving he didn’t know how to mind his own business. “Ask anyone. *And* I’m charming as fuck.”

There were disbelieving hoots from the front of the plane.

“You’re delusional,” Sanchez said. “People want to kill you all the time. I’d do it now, but Thanatos would be pissed that he had to replace the carpet on account of the blood.”

Boomer gave him the finger.

Ireland was watching this exchange, a little smile on her face. Cole said to her, “See? He’s already made you smile.”

“And you don’t make people smile?”

“No. I offend them, usually. With my brutal honesty.”

Strangely enough, her smile got a tiny bit bigger. Then it disappeared again, and he could feel the sadness inside her.

He said, “Just because we’re not going to go hunting for random sorcerers right now doesn’t mean there isn’t a way to get the bracelets off. Thanatos is a powerful sorcerer, and he has a lot of contacts. So do other people at the Ridge.”

Like dragons. Gunn’s mate Michelangela was related by marriage to a whole pack of them. But he kept that to himself for the moment—he didn’t want to get Ireland’s hopes up about it. Dragons did what they wanted.

What else? Oh. He added, “You haven’t even had time to look at that book yet. At least you’ll be somewhere safe when you do it.”

She bit her lip, and shook her head. “You don’t understand.”

But in that moment, he did. She wasn’t just angry and scared. She felt totally, completely alone. And somehow he knew she’d always been alone.

Like him. He’d always felt different from everyone else. Apart.

At least he’d had Boomer. She had no one.

He wanted suddenly to wrap his arms around her and hold her like he had last night, but he didn’t dare. It might make her more upset.

So he said, “Probably not. I suck at understanding people, too. But we’ll figure it out. We can be partners.”

Like her and Riker. Only without one of them being a lying, cheating, evil bastard.

He held out his hand. “Deal?”

She hesitated for a long time, looking into his face, and then said, “Deal.” She took his hand, and an electric shock ran right up his arm. For a moment they just sat there, hands clasped, looking at each other.

Then the plane hit a bump of turbulence, and they were jolted apart.

But she picked up her sandwich after that and started eating, so that was good. And he could tell that she felt a tiny bit better inside. There was a little seed of hope there now.

So maybe this whole thing wasn’t going to fuck up too much after all.

Chapter 14

As they circled in to land at the Outlaw Ridge airfield, Cole felt Ireland start to tense up.

“You’ll be fine,” he told her. “The Ridge is one of the safest places on earth for shifters.”

Thanatos had made sure of it; Cole was pretty sure he had protections on that mountain that none of them had ever seen.

“I told you,” she said between her teeth. “I’m *not* a shifter.” But she had a white-knuckle grip on the edge of the table, so what was she afraid of? Having to admit she really was one?

But he didn’t say anything more, just sat close to her the way he would with Boomer, if he was upset. Wolves liked touch, especially if they were agitated.

They banked around and descended towards the private landing field. It was built on a level plateau about half a mile up the mountain from the main base, with hangar space for the jet, as well as their transport planes and helicopters, plus the mechanics’ shop, radio tower, and guard station.

There would be Jeeps waiting to take the team and their gear down the mountain.

They touched down and rolled to a stop. Everyone waited until Thanatos came out of his private compartment. Cole felt Ireland holding her breath, but he glided by without looking at either of them. After Thanatos deplaned, the rest of the team followed with their gear.

Cole waited with Ireland until they were out of the way, and then rose and picked up their bags. “Come on, Tinkerbelle,” he said. “You’ll feel better with your feet on the ground.”

“Sure,” she said, but she didn’t look convinced. Hell, she looked sick. She *felt* sick—he could sense it through the bracelet.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “Your wound hasn’t opened up again, has it?” She shook her head. “Then we better get on with it. It’s not going to get any easier.”

Ireland watched as Cole shouldered the bags and headed down the aisle. He was walking away with her books, again. She had to follow him. She had to get off the plane.

But it was all she could do to make her legs move. *Stop being a wimp*, she told herself. *Just go*. She made it to the doorway just as Cole was descending the stairs.

The air outside was fresh, clean and delicious, smelling like pine and rain. She could feel the raw nature all around them.

And also, the strongest wards against Fae magic she'd ever encountered, outside the Bright Fae High Castle and the borders of the Fae world itself. And there was more than that. A kind of elemental power that seemed to have seeped into the earth, the trees, the very stone of the mountain beneath them.

And yet... it wasn't what she'd expected of Thanatos. She'd been told that the Dark Fae twisted everything that was bright, beautiful and life-giving, and made it ugly and dead.

This place was... peaceful. A haven for creatures who were broken, or wounded.

Did the wolves know how much power he expended in protecting them? How did he have the energy to do anything else?

She tried to walk down the stairs—and then stopped. She couldn't go any further. It was like she'd run straight into a wall.

The wards wouldn't let her through.

Cole had stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned back. "Come on," he said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"I can't." The wards were actively repelling her, creating feelings of terror and dread.

Sanchez was also watching her. "What's the matter?" he said. "She afraid of stairs?"

Fucking wolf. "Don't be an idiot," she snapped. She looked back at Cole. "I literally can't get off the plane. This territory is warded, and I haven't been invited in."

Boomer, talking to one of the other wolves, stopped in mid-sentence and swung around, his mouth still open. “Dude,” he breathed. “She’s a *vampire*. Why didn’t you tell us? That is *so cool!*”

What? A *vampire*? “No I’m not,” she said.

“Shut up,” Cole told him absently. “I’d have known. And anyway, Fae can’t be vampires.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Boomer said. “If a Fae was bitten by a vampire, why couldn’t they be a vampire fairy?”

That immediately started an argument between him and his friend, about whether Fae magic made them immune to vampirism. Cole sighed, and looked back at Ireland. “I invite you into our territory,” he said.

It didn’t help.

“You’re not in charge,” Ireland told him. She was starting to feel like she was going to barf. “And you didn’t build the wards.”

Well, they both knew who had. “Thanatos!” he bellowed.

Thanatos, gliding toward what was clearly his special Hummer, turned around. Gunn sighed and climbed out of the Jeep he’d climbed into, walking over to them.

“Cole’s girlfriend is a vampire,” Boomer explained helpfully. “She can’t get off the plane unless she’s invited. I thought that was just houses, but I guess it includes wolf territories too.”

“She’s not a vampire,” Cole said. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Indeed,” Thanatos murmured. “And yet...”

Yeah, Ireland thought. And yet.

Thanatos said, “Do you desire to enter my lands?”

Damn Dark Fae. He wasn’t really going to make her do it, was he? Beg for entrance? Humiliate herself? Promise him whatever he wanted, for his protection? All that was his right, under Fae law.

His hood was tilted up toward her, but she still couldn't see his face—although the pinpoint of his eyes were red.

She hated not being able to read his expression, to get some glimmer of whether he could be trusted or not.

But then, of course he couldn't be trusted. He was Dark Fae.

Ireland opened her mouth. But before she could get the words out, it was Cole who spoke. Slowly, like the words were unfamiliar to him—or he was translating inside his head.

“By the treaty of Innesfree, by the magic from the—the dawn of time, as the Guardian and spokesperson for the Bright One, I request guest-rights. We—we pledge to honor the peace of your... realm, and harm none during our stay, even as we are safe from harm within these bounds.”

Everyone was staring at him, including Ireland. How the hell had he learned the words to the Fae ancient appeal for guest-rights in enemy territory?

As if sensing her question, Cole held up his wrist. The bracelet was glowing faintly. Somehow it had pulled the words from a memory *she* didn't even have. Or else it was knowledge given to her Protectors.

Whatever it was, he didn't look happy about it.

She looked back at Thanatos. By Fae law, Thanatos now either had to agree not to harm her in any way while she was here, or kick her out. And she knew damn well he wasn't going to kick her out. He wanted whatever information he could get out of her.

He gazed up at her for a way-too-long moment, and then said in his gravelly voice, “I grant you guest rights, Bright Fae. Come forth.”

Ireland felt the pressure ease. Not just the wards, but the emotional pressure. Officially, he couldn't hurt her now—although there were sneaky ways around the letter of the law, and the Dark Fae probably knew them all.

But she couldn't stay on the plane forever. Especially if Cole walked away with her book. She was not letting that thing out of her sight. Or him, either.

Gripping the railing, she made her way down the narrow steps, still feeling a bit wobbly, which pissed her off. She couldn't show any weakness, especially with all of them watching her.

She made it to the bottom of the steps without making an idiot out of herself. Both feet securely on the ground, she faced Thanatos.

Then pain shot through her body, and she screamed.

Cole felt it coming just before it happened. Ireland's body shimmered and morphed, flesh twisting and bones breaking. Her tattered clothing ripped and dropped to the ground.

And she was a wolf. An angry, unhappy wolf.

"Holy hell," Boomer said. "She's a Fae vampire shifter! Did everyone know this but me?"

"No one knew it," Gunn said grimly. "This just gets better and better."

Ireland stood stiff-legged, and looked around at the surrounding crowd, growling.

Thanatos took a step toward her, and she snarled.

"Stop that," Gunn said to her. His considerable alpha power flowed outward, authority in it.

Ireland's wolf was apparently not impressed. She snarled louder, and gave a barking howl.

Cole could see the feral light in her eyes. If Ireland was in there, she wasn't in control. Hell, how could she be? She didn't even know how to be a wolf.

Thanatos stepped back, and Gunn stepped forward. Ireland was still barking and snarling, backed up against the stairs of the plane, her eyes darting as she looked for an escape path. The fur on her neck bristled.

She looked vicious, but Cole could feel that she was terrified. Of course, no reason she couldn't be both at the same time. He had to do something, or she was going to force either Gunn or Thanatos into subduing her, and possibly end up in a cell. Which meant, because of the bracelet, he was probably going to end up in there with her.

Not the way he wanted to end this day.

He walked around Gunn, right up to Ireland, bracing himself for an attack. "Cut it out," he said, trying to reach out mentally for the connection they shared through the bracelet. Or the one they'd had last night. Or anything. He knew from the tussle over the magic ointment that her wolf responded to his own wolf's dominance—and a no-nonsense attitude.

"Nobody's going to hurt you unless you start something. Except maybe me. Because I'm sore, and tired, and I'm bound by a magic spell that's going to be a bitch to get rid of. I'm in no mood for this shit. I'm going home. Are you coming, or not?"

Everyone went still, watching. The wolf narrowed her eyes and stared at him, and then shook herself and trotted over to him, shoving her head up under his hand like he was going to pet her or some shit.

"Aww," Sanchez said. "He's finally got a girlfriend."

"Fuck off, Sanchez." He said to Ireland, "Let's go."

Thanatos said ominously, "And just where were you planning to take her?"

Cole flicked him a glance. He was in no mood for him either. "I just said. Home."

Chapter 15

Thanatos said, “Mr. Hunter. I would prefer she remain at the house.”

Meaning his mansion halfway down the mountain. As usual, it was an order, not a request.

Ireland eyed Thanatos and growled. Cole sighed. He was also in no mood for being diplomatic with Thanatos, or anyone else. But then, when was he ever?

He said to Thanatos, “If you try to keep her in the Big House, she’ll freak. She already thinks you’re some kind of evil monster sorcerer, and since we don’t know what the fuck you actually are, I’m not in a position to reassure her.”

Thanatos didn’t answer, but Cole could swear he felt an ominous rumble in the earth under his feet.

Cole went on, undeterred. “If you ever want *her* to be in a position where she can speak coherently with a human mouth, and be in any way willing to help you, I suggest you let me take her home and get her calmed down so she can Change back.” He hoped.

There was a long, heavy silence, and then Thanatos said, “Very well.”

Cole, with his mouth already open to present another argument, was taken aback for a second. Then he turned to Ireland, who was pressing against his leg, still growling faintly. “Come on. Let’s go.” He couldn’t wait to get back to his own little semi-quiet corner of the world—the cabin up by the explosives testing field he shared with Boomer.

But it seemed that wasn’t happening. As he started to go, Breanna Carter—the Outlaw Ridge administration manager—shouldered her way through the crowd.

“Not so fast, Bro,” she said. “You can’t take her home. Where did you think she was going to sleep? The foot of your bed?”

Good point. Their cabin was a one-bedroom, and Boomer and Karisma had that. Cole, being a minimalist who liked to take up as little space as possible, slept on a mattress in the corner of the workroom. When he wasn't spending the night in a hammock on the porch, or in wolf form running in the forest.

Breanna rolled her eyes. "You didn't even think about it, did you. You are such a dork."

"It's been a long day," he said. "And I've understood very little of it. Excuse me if the domestic arrangements slipped my mind. Isn't that what we have you for?"

"An *obnoxious* dork," she amended. "You all do not appreciate everything I do for you."

"We totally don't," he agreed. Breanna was a friend—or at least, as close to a friend as Cole had. Ever since Boomer had barged into her cabin not long after she'd arrived, and she'd found out he was just as much of a fan of paranormal teen TV shows as she was, she'd taken both Boomer and Cole under her wing.

Okay, possibly he and Boomer were both fans of those shows, although Cole steadfastly denied it.

He asked Breanna, "So now, who's sleeping at the foot of whose bed?"

"You're sleeping at the foot of hers," she informed him. "Assuming she wants you in her cabin at all. Switch called ahead to warn me you were bringing a rescue back—which is more than any of the rest of you idiots did—and I got one of the new guest cabins ready. It only has one bedroom, though, and one bed, which you're going to give her, because of the gentleman you are."

Boomer made gagging sounds.

Cole said, "When did you ever know me to sleep anywhere but the floor?" Last night had been an exception. Usually his wolf didn't like to sleep with space underneath them that they couldn't see. Anything could be under there. Mice. Monsters. Bombs. Boomer.

“Good point,” she said. “We can bring in another mattress for you, if you want. And by we, I mean Boomer.”

“That would be good. All I really care about, though, is if there’s coffee.”

“Of course. And food. And also cookies.” Breanna made the best chocolate chip cookies anywhere ever.

He felt a tiny smile curving his mouth. “You’re a good woman, Breanna.”

“Better than you yahoos deserve.” But she touched his arm affectionately and smiled at him. Breanna was good people, and she loved the pack. The gods only knew why.

She told them which cabin it was, and Cole said to Boomer, “Could you bring me a change of clothes too?” He thought a moment, and then added, “And also whiskey.” He definitely was going to need that.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Boomer said. “Caviar? Champagne? Anything else?”

Cole flipped him off. Which he knew Boomer knew meant, “Thanks, and also fuck you.” Then he handed off one of the bags he was carrying to Thanatos’ security escort. He said to Thanatos, “This is the miscellaneous stuff we got off the Retrievers that attacked Ireland and Riker. It should probably go in your magic safe somewhere. Have fun with it.”

He readjusted his own bag, along with Ireland’s—the one with her books in it. He hoped Thanatos couldn’t sense their magic, although to Cole’s new magical spidey-senses, they seemed to be flashing like a neon sign.

The hood gazed at him. But all Thanatos said was, “I shall need a description of the creatures, and considerably more detailed information than I have received from you so far.”

Cole knew that, but the thought of it was still exhausting. “Well, give us a minute, would you? We’ve both been mortally wounded in the last twenty-four hours, and we’re tired as fuck. So, could we have some space?”

Space was not really a term Thanatos understood, unless it was his own space. The hood gazed at him for a little longer, and finally dipped in acknowledgement.

That was another surprise. Big T had either grown a heart, or he was biding his time for reasons of his own. Probably the second one.

Gunn said, "I'll come by later and check on Ireland. With Mikey. If she's having trouble Changing back, Mikey might be able to help."

Michelangelo was half white wolf, and not only did she have some of the psychic abilities white wolves possessed, she was used to dealing with fucked-in-the-head shifters.

But right now, Cole didn't want a lot of people involved in this. It was complicated enough as it was. "I'll let you know," he said.

"You going to be okay until then?" Gunn asked.

"Sure. If everyone leaves us alone."

He turned to Ireland. "Come on, Tinkerbelle. We'll walk down to the compound. It'll be good for us."

He started to walk, and she looked at him uncertainly. He put a little alpha juice into it. "While we're still young, if you don't mind. I'm hungry." The sandwich on the plane had barely made a dent.

She shook herself again, and then trotted after him.

He hoped he could get her to Change back soon. Or this was going to be a fucking nightmare.

The main compound was about half a mile or so from the airfield, all downhill, so an easy walk. Cole stayed on the soft verge, Ireland at his heels, until the transport vehicles had rumbled by. Then the quiet closed in, and he could finally take a deep breath.

It was late afternoon here—they'd lost a couple of hours flying east—but it was still early enough in the year that the sun was dropping below the trees. The air was soft, but with a hint of frost that would close in as soon as it got dark.

He loved this time of year at the Ridge, loved the crispness in the air, loved the darkness of the sky and the brightness of the stars, with no nearby cities to ruin it.

He glanced down at Ireland, wondering where she'd grown up. Was it even in this world? He knew there were other dimensions—the Dragonlands, the spirit world, and probably some world that the Fae came from. He wondered if it was different from here. Better.

He didn't think so. Not if they'd imprison and enslave a woman just because she was half-shifter.

There had to be a way to get them both out of these damned bracelets. He'd kept the Bright Fae book a secret, because Ireland seemed to think there was an answer in there. And he wanted to know what it was before Thanatos got his stony fingers all up in the situation.

Cole was loyal to Thanatos because he'd given him and Boomer a place and a purpose, when they desperately needed both. But he wanted something from Ireland, and Cole was not at all sure he wanted to be part of that bargain.

He wanted to talk to Ireland and get a look at that book.

The cabin was pretty much like all the others at the Ridge. Open living/dining/kitchen area, bedroom and bathroom in the back.

There was a woodstove in the corner of the living room, with wood stacked next to it, and more on the porch. Also some food in containers on the counter, and probably more in the fridge, knowing Breanna.

She'd have made sure the place was stocked with everything you'd need, down to the paper towels and spare toothbrushes. Probably things he'd never have thought of until he realized they needed them.

Cole dropped the gear bags in the corner of the living room. He knew Ireland was still recovering from her wounds, so first thing was to take the chill off in here. He headed for the woodstove and built a fire, waiting for the kindling to catch before adding any logs.

Ireland's wolf was sniffing around tentatively. "No peeing in the corners," he told her. "Or anywhere, for that matter. You're officially housebroken, starting now."

She gave a little yip. Cole wasn't sure if it was agreement or a "Fuck you."

He found a spare blanket and laid it down by the stove for her. "Here," he said. "Nice and warm." As she walked over and sniffed that, he divested himself of all his personal weapons, laid out his field kit on the dining room table, and started cleaning his guns. The familiar routine cleared his mind and engaged the parasympathetic nervous system, changing it from 'fight or flight' mode to 'rest and recover' mode.

Ireland's wolf explored the rest of the cabin, and then settled down on the blanket, but she didn't take her eyes off him. It was like she was afraid he'd disappear when she wasn't looking.

After he finished his guns, he rose. So did she. "I'm going to take a shower," he said. "You'll be fine here. Boomer and the others will be coming in with the mattress and shit—try not to bite them. Okay?"

She made as if to follow him to the bathroom, and he stopped and pointed at the blanket. "Seriously? No. Down. Stay. Whatever. I need some private time."

They locked gazes, and then she went sulkily to the blanket and curled up. Sheesh. It was like dealing with a toddler. They always wanted to follow you into the bathroom. So he'd been told, anyway—he wasn't sure he'd ever met one.

There were spare sweats in the bedroom, various sizes, and he grabbed some before going into the bathroom. He kept his shower soldier-quick. The gods knew what Ireland would get up to while he was gone.

But it wasn't quick enough. He was just toweling off when he heard voices, and the front door opening.

And then a crash, and Ireland snarling.

Chapter 16

Cole, racing out naked to the living room, found it in chaos.

Boomer had in fact brought a mattress, and roped Sanchez into helping him carry it. It was now lying askew on the living room floor, having knocked over the coffee table on its way down.

Boomer was on top of it, legs flailing, wrestling with Ireland's wolf. He had one hand wrapped around her muzzle to keep it closed, and was apparently trying to keep her pinned down without actually hurting her. Blood dripped from his arm where she'd already bitten him.

Boomer's mate, Karisma, must have absolutely exploded into her white tiger form, judging by the bits of torn clothing festooning the room. She was stalking the edge of the mattress, snarling, looking for a way to attack Ireland without ripping Boomer to shreds.

Sanchez was shaking his head and rolling his eyes, while deliberately standing between the angry animals and his mate, Madison. Because his default was always to protect her, whether she needed it or not.

Madison herself was holding a brown paper bag in each hand and trying not to laugh.

Cole wasn't even trying. It was fucking ridiculous.

He gave one of his loudest, shrillest, 'stop it, everyone' whistles. They froze.

Cole waded through the mess and dropped to his knees on the mattress, putting his hand on Ireland's back. "Come on, girl," he said. "You don't want to hurt Boomer. He's such a pussy he'll probably whine about it all night."

He peeled the wolf gently off Boomer and put his arms around her, mostly so he could stop her if she went wild again. Boomer sat up and grabbed his bleeding arm dramatically. "She bit me! Your vampire girlfriend bit me, and now I'm gonna be a vampire shifter."

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Cole said automatically. “And I’m pretty sure she’s not a vampire.”

“*Pretty* sure?” Boomer said. “Fuck. When I turn into one, you’re the first person I’m coming after.”

He moved his hand. His shifter healing was already taking care of the bite, which hadn’t been deep to start with.

Cole tightened his hold on Ireland and moved backwards, seeing as she was growling deep down in her throat at the tiger. Who was now licking Boomer’s arm. “Karisma,” he said wearily, “would you please Change back? Ireland thinks you’re going to eat her.”

There was a shimmer and a crack of bones, and the tiger turned into a woman with pink and black striped hair, sitting naked on the mattress. “I wouldn’t do that,” she said. “Wolves taste like crap. Boomer excepted, of course.” She kissed him on the shoulder. “But your vampire wolf better not bite him anymore, or she’ll answer to me.”

Boomer said plaintively, “Will you still love me if I have to sleep in a coffin and can’t cook anything with garlic in it?”

Sanchez rumbled, “You’re an idiot.” To Cole he said, “Where do you want this mattress? I’m not going to stand here all night looking at tiger tits. Or your dick.”

Cole indicated a space over by the window. Sanchez lifted the mattress by one edge, dumping Boomer and Karisma off in a heap, and moved it singlehandedly over to where Cole was pointing. “You can probably get that blood out pretty easy,” he said. Sure enough, Boomer had bled on the mattress. But only a little, so fuck it.

Madison was still trying not to laugh. She gathered up the bags Karisma had dropped and took them, with her own, over to the kitchen island.

“We brought you stuff,” she said. “Clothes, which would probably be a good idea right about now. I’m sure your dick is very nice, but it’s starting to make Sanchez nervous.” She fished a pair of khaki pants out of one of the bags and tossed them to him.

“Stay,” Cole said to Ireland, and let go of her experimentally. She didn’t lunge at anyone, so he stood up and put his pants on.

Madison then went to a drawer in the sideboard and pulled out some sweats, tossing them to Karisma.

“How did you know there were clothes in there?” Boomer asked.

“Breanna and I put extra clothes near the door in all the guest cabins. In case people show up in their animal forms and need something to wear.”

Figured.

Boomer left Karisma getting dressed and went over to the island. “We brought you other stuff too,” he said to Cole. “At great risk to our lives and immortal souls, apparently.”

“It’s only you the vampire wolf doesn’t like,” Sanchez said. “I don’t know why you’re surprised by that.”

Boomer said, “You know you love me. Everyone does.” He started unpacking bags, talking to Cole. “I figured you’d want your own pants. More than one pair, even. And underwear, for the days you decide to wear any.”

“Too much information,” Madison said.

Boomer went on, “We also brought whiskey.” Cole noted it was some of the nice stuff from their cabin, which meant Boomer was feeling sorry for him. And also that he agreed with Cole’s assessment—he was going to need it.

“Beer too,” Boomer said, unpacking several sixpacks. “For non-emergency drinking.”

There was also a box of Breanna’s chocolate chip cookies. And finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a baggie. “TV streaming stick and remote,” he said. “I brought you our backup, because I’m the best brother ever. Do you need me to set it up for you? Because I know you’re a tech loser.”

Cole rolled his eyes. So he didn’t like a lot of technology with his entertainment. He liked things simple.

“I know you want to,” he said. “Knock yourself out.”

“He’s only doing that so I’m the one who has to put the sheets on the mattress,” Karisma said. “I brought you the comfy ones. You’re welcome.”

“Make sure the blood on the mattress is dry first,” he said.

She made a face at him, and then made up his bed. With pink flannel Barbie sheets. Madison, giggling, helped her. Boomer plugged in the streaming stick and connected it to the Wi-Fi, Cole picked up the coffee table, and Sanchez stood in the corner, alternating between watching Madison and glaring at Ireland, as if it were Madison she’d attacked.

Cole hoped the hectic pink and vivid pictures of toys on the sheets didn’t send his brain over the edge. Sometimes shit like that could do that to him.

Too much visual input, the military Special Ops therapist had said. The one time he saw her, before he deserted and came here, to kill people on behalf of the good guys instead of the government.

When they were all done domesticating the place, Boomer shooed them out the door, telling everyone that Cole and Ireland needed to be alone, so they could have kinky wolf sex.

“Shut up,” Cole said. “You’re a dick.”

“Always.”

“Hold up,” Sanchez said. “I need to get a couple of things straight with your girlfriend first.”

“She’s *not* my girlfriend,” Cole repeated.

Sanchez ignored that. “Can she understand me?”

“Like I know?”

Sanchez growled, then turned to Ireland, who was growling back. “Okay, pay attention,” he said. He gestured towards Madison. “This is my mate. She’s a rabbit shifter.”

Ireland turned her head toward Madison and sniffed, so she must be understanding something. She licked her chops.

“Oh, fuck no,” Sanchez said. “You listen to me, and listen good.” His alpha presence was strong—strong enough to lead a pack, if he wanted to. Luckily he didn’t, because he was a little bit psycho. But it was enough to get Ireland’s attention.

He said fiercely, “Nobody in this pack touches Madison. Nobody tries to eat her, nobody chases her, nobody even looks funny at her, or I will break their neck with my bare hands. Got it?”

She growled at him, low in her throat, and took a step forward.

Cole put his hand on her neck. “He’s serious,” he told her. “He’ll do it. And also, Madison is a friend, and we don’t eat our friends.”

Karisma snickered, and Boomer said, “Get your mind out of the gutter, woman.”

Sanchez finished, “So, remember her scent and leave her alone.”

Ireland’s ears were still back, and the growl was still there, but she took another sniff at Madison and then shook herself.

“She’s cool,” Cole said. He could feel her acquiescence. “Now *you* leave *her* alone. Everyone out—she needs to rest.”

And he needed to clear his head.

But Sanchez, the worrywart, wasn’t done yet. He stopped on the porch, with Cole standing in the doorway. Boomer and Karisma stopped too.

Sanchez said, “It was a mistake to bring her here.”

Cole sighed. “Don’t blame me, blame Thanatos. He was going to bring her back here no matter what either of us thought about it. And you know there was no other choice. If those Retrievers found her once, they could do it again.”

“Yeah,” Sanchez said. “So that means they’re probably going to come here. Thanks for that.”

That was it. He was still worried about Madison. Anything or anyone that endangered Madison was always going to get a

raft of shit from Sanchez, up to and including death.

“I’m sure Thanatos is strengthening the wards,” he said. “But I’ll talk to Gunn, and see if we need to bring in those dragon friends of Mikey’s.”

“Or maybe your Fae wolf needs to leave.”

Boomer spoke up. “When Madison came here and you bonded her, we all were ready and willing to stand up against everything her fucked-up family threw at us. I hope you’re willing to do the same for Ireland.”

Sanchez turned to Cole. “Are you saying she’s your mate?”

Of course she wasn’t. He wasn’t built to have a mate. He said, “It doesn’t matter. I’m bonded to her for the moment, however it happened, and so she’s my responsibility. I’d like to think I can count on you to help keep her safe.”

Sanchez stared at him, and then said, “Sanchezes don’t run from a fight. We lead the charge. Anybody says different, I’ll punch his lights out.”

That was about as good as Cole was going to get from him. “Thanks,” he said.

Sanchez nodded and walked off with Madison.

Karisma gave Cole a big hug, and then walked down the steps, tactfully leaving Boomer to talk to him alone.

Boomer said, “You going to be okay? I don’t like leaving you—not without knowing what that thing does.” He nodded toward the bracelet on Cole’s wrist.

Cole realized he was rubbing it absently with his other hand.

“I’ll be okay,” he said. “Thanks. For everything.”

Boomer knew what he meant: Thanks for coming to rescue me. Thanks for having my back. Thanks for bringing me food and giving me someplace to sleep.

“I always have your back,” Boomer said.

“I know that. It’s just... sometimes...” He didn’t know how to put it into words. Some things he couldn’t talk about, even to Boomer. Just like, some people he had to kill by himself.

“I know,” Boomer said. And even though he didn’t get all of it, he got enough.

It was why Cole missed him so much, now that Boomer had a mate. They still lived in the same house, but everything was different.

He was trying to fit in, to do the family thing, but he really didn’t know if he’d ever be able to.

And that made him sad, and he hated being sad. He hated feeling anything, because if you let one feeling in, then it opened the door for the rest of them, and they crowded in and piled on until you suffocated.

But Boomer got that too.

His brother gave a wry smile and clapped him on the shoulder. “Call me if you need me. For real, this time.”

“I will.”

Karisma called up from the path, having clearly been listening to their entire private exchange. “And say you’re sorry for making Boomer worry, and not letting him have your back. He was really concerned about you.”

Boomer said, “It’s okay. He already did. And I forgave him.”

“He did not,” Karisma said. “When was that?”

“Just now,” Boomer said. “It was very touching. We did it in secret manly-man speak, though, so that’s why you didn’t notice it.”

Karisma just shook her head. “Men.”

Chapter 17

As good as it was to be home, it was also a relief when everyone left. Cole didn't like too many people in his space, and even though he was used to having Boomer and Karisma around, that was when he knew he could take off and go wolf when he needed space.

Now he couldn't. He couldn't get that far away from Ireland, and she was too volatile to be running loose in the woods, even if he was with her.

He needed time to think—to get used to the idea he was tied to Ireland until they could figure out how to get the bracelets off. And to cut a deal with the Bright Fae to leave her the hell alone. If they didn't want her, fine, but he was going to make sure they got their little elfin hands out of her business.

She was a shifter, and now that she'd Changed on their turf, the Outlaw Ridge pack was responsible for her until she could control her wolf.

And that meant protecting her, as well.

He watched Boomer and Karisma walk away, Boomer bumping her with his shoulder and talking like an idiot, and Karisma saying something smartass back to him that made Boomer swing her around and kiss her.

Looking at them like that made his heart tug, just a little. He knew he'd never have what they had—no way he'd ever let anybody close enough. But sometimes...

Oh, hell. The last thing he wanted—or needed—was someone inside his head. And knowing what was in there, he wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy.

This was the only bond he was going to get—and he knew damned well that Ireland wanted out of it as soon as possible.

He felt her eyes on him, and turned to see her standing in the living room, her head cocked to one side. She gave a soft whine.

“Don’t worry,” he said, closing the door. “I’m not leaving. Some people say I have a death wish, but if I do die, I’m going out a fucking hero, not having some Bright Fae asshole magic suck the life out of me just because I walked too far across the compound without you.”

He didn’t know how much she really understood. She could pick up feelings and intentions, but her animal might be too confused to understand human language and concepts, or to share her body with Ireland’s consciousness.

It was up to him to take care of her.

First thing, they needed food. He found tubs of barbecue in the fridge, and microwaved some for both of them. Ireland wolfed hers down, and drank a full bowl of water, while Cole opted for beer.

Then he said, “I need to check your wound again, just to make sure it healed up okay and I don’t need to put any more of that magic shit on it.” He’d swiped the jar from Fierro’s safe house. They could put it on his tab. “Come into the bedroom.”

He found the med kit that all the cabins were equipped with, in a cabinet under the breakfast bar, and grabbed the ointment out of his equipment bag. Then he led her down the short hall toward the bedroom, her nails clicking on the wooden floor.

Cole sat down on the bed with the med kit beside him. “Come on up here,” he said. “I’m tired and I don’t feel like doing this on the floor.”

She understood that, at least, and jumping up on the bed next to him didn’t seem to give her any pain. At his request, she even turned so he could check the wound in her side. It looked to have healed up okay and she didn’t flinch when he pressed on it with his fingers—so maybe she’d been affected by the same magic that had healed his own leg when she bound him?

“It looks good,” he told her. “You should get some rest; I’ll turn on the space heater so you stay warm in here.” He stood up, and she did too. “I meant rest in here,” he said. “On the

bed. Do you really want to be curled up naked on a dog bed in the living room if you Change back in the middle of the night?”

She sat down, looking irresolutely at the doorway. “Really,” he said gently. “It’s better in here.”

He took the med kit off the bed and moved toward the bedroom door, and she rose to her feet again and came to the edge of the bed.

Cole sighed. “Look,” he said. “I just need some space, okay?” The chance to be alone and think.

Her eyes were still on him. He could see the vulnerability there, feel her anxiety at being left alone. Knowing she had powerful magical enemies. And knowing the wolves here might not be her friends.

He knew how it felt to be alone. He was used to it now—in a way it made him feel safe, because even if he couldn’t get close to people, even if it was lonely, it meant no one could get in to hurt him.

She was used to being alone too.

But her wolf wasn’t. He remembered, years ago, his mother soothing Boomer when he was a cub. “Wolves need touch,” she told Cole. “It strengthens our bonds, lets us know we’re not alone. Wolves weren’t meant to be alone.”

His touch had comforted her last night. And if he were honest, it had comforted him too.

Cole went over and sat back down. Ireland nosed his shoulder tentatively, and made a soft huffing sound. He put his hand on her head, stroking the soft fur between her ears, running his hand down her back. She licked his face.

“Ack! Stop that!” But he didn’t really mean it. Cole put his back against the headboard and swung his feet up onto the bed, then pulled Ireland over next to him, still stroking her fur.

It was just the job, he told himself. It was his responsibility to make her feel calm and safe.

But as he ran his hands through her fur, and she shifted position so that her warm weight pressed against his leg, he felt something inside him uncoiling and releasing, the warmth stealing inside him like it had last night.

He rubbed her fur for a long time, until they both fell asleep.

They slept through till dawn. Cole half-woke when Ireland sleep-Changed, just long enough to sleepily pull the extra blanket up from the foot of the bed to cover them, and lying back down with his arms around her.

She didn't wake at all, just turned over and wrapped herself around him, her head tucked into the curve of his shoulder. He drifted off, inhaling her scent and letting it envelop him in comfort and contentment.

Until the dream started again. Once more, Cole was floating in that dim fog. And once again, Riker was there.

Cole studied him. He looked just like he had in real life—same eyes, same scars, same attitude.

“Shit,” Cole said. “Are you seriously going to show up every fucking time I fall asleep? Because that really *will* be hell.”

Riker sneered at him. “Quit bitching. At least *you're* still alive.”

Well, there was that. But he didn't need to pay for it by having Riker popping up in his dreams. “So pass over to the other side, why don't you? Go towards the light. Or the flames. Whatever. You're the last thing I need.”

“Wrong again,” Riker said. “You need me, and you need to get your shit together. You have to protect Ireland.”

“What the hell do you think I'm doing? In case there's no windows to the outside where you are, I brought her to the Ridge.” Why was he defending himself? Riker wasn't even real.

“Oh, you took her home like a stray puppy? What good is that going to do? You need to get out there and find the spell to

get that bracelet off her. It's the only way she'll ever be safe."

"From who?"

"The Bright Fae Council. Have you not been paying attention?"

"I've been busy not dying. There really hasn't been time to chat, especially since Ireland is a wolf at the moment."

Riker shook his head. "Yeah. Didn't see that coming. When are you going to put her back?"

"I don't know. I kind of like her this way. I think she thinks I'm hot."

Riker snarled at him. "Figures you'd take advantage of her when she's in trouble."

"Isn't that what you did?"

"You don't know shit about me, Hunter. Never did."

"Look, Riker, if you don't have anything useful to say, get out of my head."

"How's this for useful? Your best buddy Thanatos is planning on breaking into one of the Bright Fae's most dangerous strongholds. And he's planning on using Rye to do it. So now that you're bound to her, and have control of her magic, he's going to sacrifice both of you to get what he wants."

"Why the hell would he suddenly want to do that?"

Riker said, "To break a powerful Dark Fae out of prison, hotshot. And it's not sudden. He's wanted to do it for centuries. But he only just now learned she can be found, thanks to offing Maximilian and taking his entire magical library. She's a sorceress, and he's going to let her loose so they can wreak havoc on the world."

Centuries? That would put a whole new light on what Thanatos was. But wreaking havoc on the world wasn't his style, and Cole didn't know why his subconscious would think it was.

Unless it wasn't his subconscious...

He said, “Even if this is true, what do you want me to do about it?”

Riker said, “Leave the Ridge. Take the book, get the spell, and get that bracelet off Rye. And then leave her alone.”

“That was the plan.” Except for the leaving her alone part. He already didn’t know if he could do that.

Riker shook his head. “You’ll fall for her. Everyone does. But you need to walk away, or you’re the one who will destroy her. It’s what you do.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t know shit about me. Or Thanatos.”

Riker snorted. “You’re too trusting. He’s a sorcerer, same as Maximilian. They don’t care who they hurt, as long as they get what they want. He’ll feed you both to the Bright Fae and sleep like a baby at night. If he sleeps.”

This isn’t real, Cole told himself yet again. It’s just my fears talking.

“Get out of my head, Riker. And don’t come back.”

Chapter 18

Cole pulled himself out of the dream, Riker's voice echoing in his head. The bracelet on his wrist was burning.

It was near dawn, a faint pale light filtering through the window blinds.

It *had* to have been just a dream. Riker was dead. And the dead didn't come back.

Except... a memory tickled the back of his mind. Sometimes they did.

Word was that Brandon Fierro, who owned the safe house in Louisville, had a ghost as a member of his crew. Two of them, actually. Mates. They appeared and disappeared at will, hung out with the crew, walked through walls. The whole nine yards.

So it was just barely possible that Riker was a ghost. But if Cole was being haunted by Riker for real, he was fucking getting an exorcist.

There was only one way to find out.

Cole sat up, dislodging Ireland, and shook her by the shoulder. "Ireland," he said softly. "Rye. Wake up."

She stirred and opened her eyes, looking sleepily at him. She looked ruffled and adorable, her hair tousled and her face innocent and childlike. "Wha'", she mumbled. "Wha's wrong?"

"I need to know why Riker came to find you," Cole said. "What was his mission? What did he want?"

Ireland furrowed her brow, scrunching it in that way he loved. "Are you even serious? You need to know that now? It's still night."

She grabbed one of the pillows and pulled it over her head. "Ask me later. Sleep now."

"It's important, Rye. I need to know—"

At that moment, there was a loud, measured knocking on the front door. Three knocks.

“Damn,” Cole muttered. “What *now*?”

The three knocks came again. *Boom. Boom. Boom.* He was beginning to suspect who it was.

Ireland’s muffled voice came from under the pillow. “Make them go away please. Or kill them. Use your best judgement.”

Cole sighed, got out of bed and headed for the front door. As he’d expected, when he opened it, Thanatos was on his front step, all robed and faceless and enigmatic as usual. With his lieutenant, Sugar, behind him.

He hadn’t expected who was standing next to Sugar, though. A tall young man about eighteen, dressed entirely in black, with jet-black hair and startlingly green eyes. DB, short for Dragon Boy, an orphaned dragon shifter that had been taken in by Mikey’s dragon relatives a few years ago.

He was wild, unpredictable, loyal to his friends, and a terrifyingly powerful sorcerer. He was also an expert in creating dimensional portals; basically he had the ability to make a magical doorway between any two places—even if they were in different worlds or dimensions.

Everyone was hoping he wasn’t planning on taking up a life of crime. He’d be literally unstoppable.

“What the fuck are you even doing here this early?” Cole asked.

Thanatos said, “I wish to speak to the Bright Fae. I need information from her as soon as possible.”

Cole didn’t even ask how Thanatos knew she’d turned back to human. Thanatos knew everything that happened on the Ridge. He was like a spider sitting in the middle of its web, feeling the vibration of everything that touched it, and knowing what it meant.

Cole said, “Ireland’s still asleep. Or she was until you started knocking on the door like the Harbinger of the Apocalypse. Let me go see if she’s up for this.”

He walked away, leaving Thanatos on the doorstep. Not that he'd stay there; Cole was sure when he came back Thanatos would be ensconced in the living room, his entourage surrounding him.

But he wasn't the only one who had an entourage. Cole swiped his phone off the counter as he went past, and texted Boomer while he walked:

Thanatos invasion. With DB. Need backup. I'll make the coffee—you and K bring Gunn and Mikey. And pastries.

Then he sat down on the bed and gently wrestled the pillow off Ireland's head. She resisted.

"It's Thanatos," he said. "He wants to grill you about Riker, and probably all the other things you know and some you probably forgot. I'm thinking we might as well get it over with."

And also, he really wanted to know if Ghost Riker had been telling the truth about Thanatos' agenda, or if he was a figment of Cole's subconscious.

He wondered if DB and the dragons knew of any good exorcists.

Ireland groaned, and sat up. "I already don't like that man. Fae. Whatever he is."

"Nobody really does," Cole said. It was kind of sad, when you thought about it. "But he's very determined. One might say 'inflexible.' Can you handle it?"

"Do we have to?"

Cole could feel her antipathy for Thanatos. Fear, partly, but more than that, a dislike that was more than personal. She was repelled by what he was, feeling like even talking to him would... he couldn't describe the feeling. Taint her in some way?

He said, "Eventually, yeah. I'm thinking it might as well be now. I'll be with you the whole time." He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face up. "And there'll be coffee. And with any luck, pastries."

She compressed her lips, and then nodded. Cole silently let his breath out, realizing only then that he'd been holding it. He really needed to know what the fuck was going on here, and it all came down to Thanatos and Riker.

He got some sweats for Ireland from the dresser, and found a shirt for himself while she dressed, since he still had his pants on from yesterday. Like Madison had said, all the guest cabins—hell, practically every building on the Ridge—were liberally stocked with sweats of various sizes. Shifters—especially volatile ones like the ex-special-ops, ex-criminal soldiers at the Ridge, had a tendency to Change to wolves suddenly, ruining their clothes.

When Ireland was ready, the two of them went out to the living room. Sure enough, Thanatos had made himself at home in one of the upholstered armchairs, sitting straight up as usual. Cole wondered if he ever lounged—hell, if he was even bendable enough to lounge.

Sugar was standing behind Thanatos' chair, also as usual. DB *was* lounging, slouched down in the other armchair with one leg over the arm, munching on a Twinkie.

Cole said to Ireland, “You remember Thanatos and Sugar. This is DB. He's a dragon sorcerer.”

Ireland, who'd just opened her mouth to greet DB, forgot to close it. Or to speak. There was a silence. “Excuse me?” she managed finally.

“I'm a Draken, of the House of Al-Maddeiri,” DB said, through a mouthful of fake cream. He swallowed. “The most powerful Draken sorcerer in a thousand years.”

And he never missed the opportunity to mention it.

Ireland looked at Cole, disbelief in her eyes. “He is,” Cole said. “As far as I know. And don't worry, he doesn't breathe fire in the house.”

“I really don't,” DB said. “It's gauche.” He wrapped up the other half of the Twinkie and put it in his shirt pocket. “What do you say, Thanatos? Should we get started?”

Cole said firmly, “Not without coffee.” And the chance for his backup to get here. He steered Ireland into the kitchen, not wanting to leave her alone with the Inquisition.

Thanatos made a displeased rumbling noise. “Time is of the essence, Mr. Hunter.”

Cole doubted it. If what Riker said was true, whoever Thanatos was trying to free had been imprisoned for centuries. He asked, “Is the apocalypse happening in the next five minutes?”

When Thanatos didn’t answer, he said, “Then we have time.”

By the time the coffee had brewed and everyone who wanted some had some, he heard footsteps on the porch. Moments later, the front door opened and Boomer, Karisma, Gunn and Mikey trooped in. “Hey, everyone,” Boomer said. “We brought doughnuts. And more coffee.”

He put two huge boxes down on the coffee table, and headed for the kitchen. Karisma followed, carrying a large thermos.

Sugar said, “What the hell are all these people doing here?”

“I invited them,” Cole said. “I felt their opinions might be helpful. And it occurred to me that Gunn, being both alpha and the commander of the Ridge, should be kept informed. Doughnut?”

Sugar shook his head. Cole passed the box to Ireland, who took one and passed it hesitantly to DB.

There was a flurry of activity while everyone greeted DB, served themselves, and found seats around the room with their coffee and doughnuts.

Then they all looked expectantly at Thanatos.

He said to Cole in his deep, gravelly voice, “I had not expected this to be a committee meeting. However, I have spent considerable time checking the items brought back from your mission and researching the Retrievers and the bracelets. Now I need to hear from Ireland.”

“Sheesh,” Boomer said to Thanatos. “Were you up all night?”

“Does he even sleep?” Karisma whispered.

Thanatos turned his hood in their direction. “No, Ms. Karisma. I am like the great eye of Sauron: watching, unblinking, never sleeping. I see all, from my tower by the Crack of Doom.”

DB snorted his coffee.

Karisma and Boomer exchanged wide-eyed glances. “Was that a joke?” Karisma murmured to Boomer in a barely audible voice. Boomer gave a slight shrug in return.

Fuckin’ Thanatos. Cole had always suspected he had a sense of humor hidden somewhere under his robe. He’d just forgotten which pocket it was in.

That didn’t make him any more trustworthy.

“If you’re all quite through, may we begin?” Thanatos said.

“Yes,” Cole said. “And to start with, Ireland and I have some questions. First, are you Dark Fae?”

Everyone in the room went still, holding their breath for the answer.

Thanatos made that annoyed rumbling noise again. “It is a pointless question,” he said. “There is no such thing as Dark Fae—or more accurately, they exist only in the minds of Bright Fae. Centuries ago, the Bright Fae set themselves apart from other Fae, claiming a high moral ground which they rarely stand upon. They proclaimed that all those who do not subscribe to their ways and follow the dictates of their Council are anathema—and designated them Dark Fae.”

Gunn said, “So, ‘If you’re not with us, you’re against us’?”

“Quite so, Mr. Jorgenson. So-called Dark Fae do not identify as such, and are made up of many and varied creatures.”

He still hadn’t said if he was one of them. “But you *are* Fae,” Ireland said.

There was a long silence. Finally he inclined the hood. “I am.”

Chapter 19

A shocked murmur went around the room. They had all been speculating so long about what Thanatos was, nobody could believe they'd gotten an answer. Boomer got out his phone and started frantically texting.

“Mr. Hunter the younger,” Thanatos said. “Please put the phone away. There is plenty of time to learn which, if any, of your colleagues had their money on ‘Fae’ in the betting pool. I take it that it wasn’t you?”

Shit, Cole thought. He really did know everything that went on at the Ridge. Boomer rolled his eyes and put his phone in his pocket.

Thanatos went on, “You may be pleased to learn that there are a large number of creatures with Fae magic that fall under the Bright Fae’s definition of Dark Fae. So you can keep your pool open a little longer.”

Boomer’s face brightened, and his hand made a movement towards the pocket where he’d put the phone. Thanatos kept the hood pointed at him, and he dropped his hand.

Cole wasn’t interested in the pool right now, though he would have to find out if ‘troll’ was still in the running as a possibility. But Riker’s words were still burned into his brain.

“Next question,” he said. “Did you arrange to have Riker escape from prison?”

Another pause from Thanatos, and then, “Yes, I did.”

“What?” Boomer exploded. Karisma let out a feral growl, and wicked claws sprouted out of her fingertips. Black and white fur rippled across her face.

Gunn said, “Why the *hell* would you do a thing like that? Without telling us?” He and Mikey were both growling as well.

They had all risked their lives fighting against Maximilian and Riker, who’d been the right-hand man who did all the

sorcerer's dirty work for him. The idea that Thanatos had just let him go without even a heads-up got to all of them.

Thanatos said, "I believed he would lead me to the knowledge I had hoped to learn from Maximilian—knowledge that died with him when I killed him." He turned his hood towards Boomer and Karisma.

"Killing him was necessary, in the circumstances." Everyone in the room knew the 'circumstances' were that Maximilian had been holding a knife to Karisma's throat, threatening her life. They also knew that Thanatos had sacrificed his mission objective to save her—although he hadn't told them what that objective was.

"A thorough search of Maximilian's notes, however, indicated that he did know that vital piece of information: the location of the person whose soul was trapped in the final sphere of the Orb of Thekate."

Karisma hissed. She'd spent years with part of her soul trapped in a section of that same Orb—and Maximilian siphoning off her shifter magic for his own use through that connection, while secretly guiding her to find the other pieces of the Orb so he could take them from her.

Thanatos went on, "She has been held prisoner for a great many years. My intention is, as it has always been, to find her and release her."

His words exploded into Cole's mind. Thanatos' mission was exactly what dream-Riker had said it was. Could he possibly have been talking to Riker's spirit? Why would Riker choose him to haunt? Because he was Ireland's Protector now, and he was hoping Cole would still undertake this mission?

No, he wouldn't want to help Thanatos. On the other hand, why would he care what Thanatos let loose on the world? Riker had worked for plenty of evil bastards himself, and he hadn't cared what the consequences to anyone else were.

So he wouldn't have a stake in preventing Thanatos from doing anything, except out of sheer spitefulness. Which wasn't out of the question.

According to Ireland, Riker had something he wanted to do with the Dark Book. If it wasn't setting this woman free, then what was it?

Cole said, "Are the Bright Fae holding this woman? Why? What has she done?"

Thanatos turned to him. "She opposed them, Mr. Hunter. Long ago, when they divided the Fae, she was one of the strongest voices against them. She believed—and it has proved to be the case—that the Bright Fae are causing a rift in the fundamental magic of their world, which has a ripple effect in the worlds adjacent to it."

Boomer chipped in here. "I think I speak for us all when I say, 'what the hell are you talking about?'"

Thanatos gave a sigh. "Simply put, the energy of the universe is a balance of light and dark, which is not a value judgement but a description of the duality of the material world. Push/pull, rise/fall, yin/yang. Too much movement towards one side makes the other side more extreme as well."

Mikey said softly, "The brighter the light, the darker the shadows?"

He gave a faint nod of the hood. "That is part of it. More important is the fact that no creature is wholly good or wholly evil, and, in fact, good and evil are subject to considerable interpretation. As the Bright Fae continued to emphasize and codify certain behaviors and beliefs, demanding that those they ruled adhere to an impossible standard, any beliefs or practices that went against their rules simply went underground. Bright Fae hid their unacceptable urges, vices and failings, indulging them only in secret. Eventually, it created a dark underbelly to the Bright Fae world that was worse than what they'd originally been fighting against."

"Shocker," Gunn said. "Like that doesn't always happen with extremists?"

"Indeed," Thanatos said. "And of course, a ruling class who interprets all their own beliefs and preferences as right and good, even divine, tends to develop excuses for doing the very

things they claim to hate, supposedly in the service of the greater good.”

He turned once more to Ireland. “For example, they would feel justified in imprisoning a young Fae of shifter blood, taking away her choices and freedoms under the guise of protecting their society from the influence of tainted blood, trapping her magic and eventually using it for their own ends. They might even try to convince her that her shifter side was inherently evil. And they might condone violence and kidnapping to retrieve her if she escaped. They might even kill those who tried to protect her, despite their claim of holding all life to be sacred.”

Ireland had gone white. “So you, a Dark Fae, are trying to tell me the Bright Fae really aren’t what they say they are? That they’re just a bunch of hypocrites?”

Thanatos said, “I would have thought you would have recognized that for yourself, Ms. Ireland. But if you need a second opinion, then yes. That is exactly what I am telling you.”

Ireland sat back, looking stunned. Cole could feel through the bracelet how confused she was. All her life, everyone around her had told her that the Bright Fae were the good guys, beyond reproach, presumably fighting the evil embodied in the Dark Fae.

It seemed obvious to him—and to Thanatos—that what they did didn’t match what they said. But when you’d had the same ideas drummed into your head since before you were old enough to ask questions, it was hard to wrap your head around the concept that it was all lies.

He reached over hesitantly and put his hand over hers. She turned and looked at him. “You okay?” he murmured.

She gave him a little headshake, but she didn’t take her hand away, so he left his where it was.

Before Thanatos could start questioning her, Cole asked her, “Can you tell us what Riker’s mission was—what he

wanted you to do for him? Did he want you to help him find this woman?”

Ireland nodded. “He said my Bright Fae magic could be used to get us to where she was being held—and that, with the bracelet, he’d be able to use the spells that Maximilan had left, to free her. This was his big score—he said she was a powerful sorceress, and had priceless magical books and artifacts. Or she could tell us where they were. Wealth and power beyond our wildest dreams.”

Figured. That’s what Riker had always been after—a way to get back at the people who’d once taken his power away. They’d taken Cole’s away, too, but he’d decided to use his anger to help others victimized by those kinds of people. Although, if the evil power-mongers ended up dead or in ruins, he hadn’t cried any tears over that.

He said to Ireland, “And in return, he promised to help you find someone to take the bracelets off you?”

“He said the sorceress could probably do it herself. That she’d once been Bright Fae, but turned against them.”

Thanatos leaned slightly forward. For him, that was a sign of great excitement. “And did he tell you the exact location of her prison?”

Ireland bit her lip, shaking her head. “I’m sorry. He didn’t.”

He sat back again, a disappointed hiss emanating from the hood. “Indeed.” His fingers tapped on the arm of his chair for a few moments. Then he spoke, almost to himself. “And yet, Maximilian knew. So the knowledge is there to be found.”

There was another silence, and then he went on, “I wish to make the same bargain with you. If you agree to undertake the mission to free the sorceress from her imprisonment, in return I will do everything in my power to help you remove the bracelet once the mission is done. To show my serious intentions, I brought with me the most powerful dragon sorcerer in a thousand years, with access to centuries of Draken research into all branches of magic. I am sure that

between us, we can find a way to counter the bracelets' magic."

Cole felt Ireland's intake of breath, the surge of hope that lanced through her. It almost hurt, how eager she was. Not that he didn't understand it, but he suddenly realized that he wasn't necessarily as eager to get the bracelet off.

To sever their bond, and go their separate ways.

He also didn't want Ireland going on a suicide mission, just to get the help that any decent person should offer her.

He said, "What if she turns down the mission? We don't even know what's involved yet. Do you mean you won't help her get the bracelet off, if she won't do it?"

Thanatos went silent. Cole could feel him wanting to coerce Ireland into doing what he wanted.

Mikey finally broke the silence with a sputter of laughter. "Geez," she said. "He really wants to mean that, but he can't make himself say it." She turned to Thanatos. "That's what happens when your Grinchy heart grows three sizes. It stays that way." Her voice turned smug. "We're a good influence on him. Especially us girls."

This time Cole definitely felt the ground rumbling under their feet.

"Enough," DB said equably, from his place in the chair. "Stop picking on him. A woman's had her soul stolen and her body imprisoned, for fuck's sake. No shame in wanting to put that right. But since I'm the one who's most likely going to be doing the bracelet removal, I get the final say. Ireland's in prison too, practically speaking. I'll figure out how to help her regardless."

He turned to Thanatos. "You really can't expect her to agree to anything until we find out what's involved."

Then he added, to Ireland, "That said, there is a caveat. From what we know so far, your magic will be needed to get into the place where the sorceress is being held. And from the research Thanatos and I did while you slackers were all sleeping, it seems that the bracelet—and your bond through it

with Cole—can be used to augment your magic. Shifters form unique magical bonds with people they're close to. Since you're also a shifter, you and Cole may be able to use the bracelets to make you more powerful than you would be alone—or even with a Fae Protector, who would be using your magic against your will. If that turns out to be the case, then you would have to leave the bracelets on until the mission was over.”

Gunn had gone very silent during this exchange. Now he said, “If Cole and Ireland agree to this mission, I’m willing to put it to the men and see if some of them would volunteer to go as well. But I’d need a lot more intel before doing that.”

Thanatos nodded. “I will apprise you of any progress we make.”

He turned to Ireland. “Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Cole deliberately refrained from looking at the bag that held the books. So did Ireland. She shook her head ‘no.’

The feelings Cole was reading through the bracelet were a mass of confusion. “The two of us will discuss whether or not to do the mission,” he said. “That’s all I can say.”

Chapter 20

After the meeting broke up and they shut the door on everyone, Ireland leaned against it and blew out a sigh. “That was... a lot,” she said.

Cole, heading for the kitchen, gave her a look over his shoulder. “You’re telling me,” he said. “But I’m not discussing it on an empty stomach.”

“You had about six doughnuts.”

“Pssh,” he said with that little sexy half-grin. “Those don’t count. We need wolf food.”

He opened the fridge started pulling things out of it. Ireland got more coffee, and then perched on a stool at the kitchen island and watched Cole as he whipped up scrambled eggs and fried thick slices of ham. She didn’t want to be critical—especially because her former Protectors would have expected *her* to cook—but...

“That’s a lot of protein,” she ventured. “I usually eat more fruits and vegetables. It’s a Bright Fae thing.”

He stirred the eggs. “Now that your wolf is manifesting, you need protein. *She* needs protein.”

Ireland didn’t know how she felt about having an alien entity inside her that needed things she wasn’t sure she wanted.

Cole dished up eggs and ham and set the plate in front of her, with some silverware. “Try this,” he said. “See how it feels.”

It did smell good. “You’re kind of bossy,” she told him.

He gave her that smile again. “Yeah. I saw a cantaloupe in the fridge though—if you eat your eggs and ham, I’ll cut you up some of that for after.”

“Add in some banana and you have a deal. I loooove bananas.”

The sexy grin got a little bigger. “You have no idea how much I want to make an inappropriate remark right now.”

She said primly, “Mr. Hunter. I’m shocked.” She took a bite of ham. Satisfaction flooded through her, as if something inside her had just been waiting for that. Huh. He was bossy, but also possibly right.

He laughed at her remark, knowing she was messing with him. “Yeah. I’m sure you are.” He leaned his hip against the counter. “Do the Fae have a lot of sexual taboos?”

Now that she’d started, Ireland found herself eagerly shoveling eggs and ham into her mouth. She managed to swallow and say, “Other than consorting with Dark Fae?”

“We were taking that one for granted.”

“Then... nope. Hardly any. Sex is healthy and life-affirming.”

“Really,” he said, in a speculative voice. His gray eyes had gone smoky, and Ireland felt a shiver right down her spine.

“Really.” She paused, and then said, “And I believe *you* owe me a banana.” She drew out the word suggestively.

The smile slowly grew wider. “If you insist.” He held her eyes for a moment, and then turned away to get her fruit for her. By the time she’d finished her ham and eggs, he had a bowl of cantaloupe and banana in front of her, and was standing on the other side of the island eating his own breakfast—a huge mound of ham and eggs.

But the look in his eyes was making more shivers run up and down her spine—and into her lady parts.

When they were finished he took the dishes and put them in the sink, and then came around and perched himself on the barstool next to hers, swiveling it around to face her.

“So, what do you think?” he asked. “About Thanatos’ mission. Do you want to do it?”

Ireland had been waiting for that question. In fact, she’d barely been thinking about anything else—except maybe Cole’s eyes. And possibly his banana.

She raised her gaze to his, hoping she'd be able to read his expression. He could be so closed, like he'd spent years perfecting the ability to keep everyone from knowing what he was thinking.

But at least she'd have an idea what he was feeling. The bracelet would tell her.

"I think... I think I want to do it," she said. "Assuming there's any chance of success."

"Which we won't know until they have all the intel," he said. "Are you sure Riker didn't tell you anything?"

To her surprise, she was getting very little information through the bracelet. Except a feeling of caution, and something else he was hiding from her.

How was he doing that? Was it because he was used to wolf bonds, and had practice hiding his feelings from the other wolves?

That was certainly going to make things more difficult, if he was holding back from her. It would get in the way of the magic.

She shook her head, wishing Riker *had* told her something. "Not details," she said. "Just that it was a Bright Fae stronghold. That's why it needs Bright Fae magic to get in."

"Makes sense," he said. "We'll have to use our own sources to find out more." There. He was definitely holding something back.

"There's something you're not telling me," she said.

He looked surprised, then speculative. "Just an idea. I don't want to talk about it until I see how it pans out."

"I hate it when you're inscrutable," she told him. "Also, if you keep shutting down the bond between us, we're going to have a hell of a time making this magic work. Just sayin'."

His eyes met hers, and his expression softened. He reached out and lightly touched her cheek—just the briefest feather touch. "I'll keep that in mind, Tinkerbell."

The air seemed to shimmer between them, and then he broke their gaze. “But you want to do this? Risk your life for Thanatos’ sorceress, whoever she is?”

Ireland worried her lower lip between her teeth. “I’ve been imprisoned by the Bright Fae my whole life,” she said finally. “I can’t turn my back on another Fae in the same situation.” She paused. “But it’s not just up to me, is it? As long as we’re wearing the bracelets, you’d have to come too. Risk your life.”

Cole gave a little half-shrug. “I do that every day,” he said. “Well, not *every* day, because I get days off. But it’s my job. Taking down bad guys. Rescuing people.”

Ireland nodded. That might be hard to get used to—the danger he put himself in. Except... as long as he was tied to her, he wouldn’t be able to do those missions with the team. She wondered if he’d thought of that.

She said, “The only thing I worry about is... what if she really *is* evil? She must have done something, for them to have imprisoned her all this time. Besides disagree with them.”

“They’re keeping you prisoner, and you’re not evil,” Cole pointed out. She flinched. His eyes narrowed, and then he said gently, “But they told you that you were. Didn’t they.” It wasn’t a question.

Ireland bit her lip as old feelings flooded into her. The shame over who and what she was, and the constant fear that the darkness lurking inside would take her over.

And now it had. The wolf had come out.

She felt like she was eight years old again, standing in front of the Bright Fae Council. Tall, stern, beautiful beings who radiated power, who seemed to loom over her, ready to crush her at any moment.

“They told me I would be, if I let my wolf out. That shifters were evil.” She lifted her eyes to his. “But... you’re not. Everyone here has been kind to me. Except maybe that Sanchez guy.”

That got a wry grin from Cole. “How could they not? Sanchez doesn’t count. He doesn’t like anyone except

Madison, and his cousins. And maybe Breanna.”

He took her hands in his. “You’re not evil. You’re brave, and loyal, and determined. And you have a—a light inside you, and a warmth, that makes people feel better when they’re around you. Even *be* better, maybe.”

His sincerity took her breath away. She could see it in his face, hear it in his voice. Even feel it through the bracelet. “Really?”

“Really. And I’m always right. You might as well know that up front.”

She gave him a little smack. “That was a beautiful moment. Don’t ruin it.”

“How about I give you another one?” He slid off the stool and moved closer to her, reaching up to stroke her hair back off her face, trailing his finger down her cheek.

“You’re not evil. You’re full of light and life, like a real Bright Fae should be. And so is your wolf.”

Slowly, he leaned in and brushed his lips across hers. Wild energy fizzed through her—like the feeling of sharing magic through the bracelet, only ten times more. It was exciting and comfortable at the same time—like coming home after a long cold journey, only to a surprise party.

She leaned into the feeling, bracing her feet on the footrail of the barstool and sliding forward, one arm around Cole’s neck, the other around his waist. He was warm and solid, all hard muscle in contrast to the softness of his lips on hers.

He pulled her closer and deepened the kiss, his tongue exploring her mouth, tasting and teasing. Ireland heard herself growl, and for once was completely in agreement with her wolf. *Wow.*

After a few moments—or maybe an eternity—Cole broke the kiss. Just barely.

“This is probably a bad idea,” he whispered against her lips. The light touch sent fizzles of sensation all through her body.

“Mmm-hm,” she said, not moving away from him.

“It could just be the bracelets talking,” he went on, his lips still against hers. “Right? Making us feel a connection.”

She tried to make her brain work. “Maybe?” But he smelled so good. And touching him felt right. “It could make it easier to share the magic. If we had a closer connection.”

“Mmmm.” He pulled her closer, plundering her mouth again, this time like he really meant it. His lips moved across her cheek, down her neck, pressing her tight against him. Ireland’s wolf growled again, and got an answering growl from Cole.

The sound set something loose inside her. She pulled him even closer, wrapping her legs around him and losing herself in him, the feel of his hands on her, the way the muscles of his back felt under his shirt. Cole’s kisses felt like they would devour her—and she would exult in every minute.

Power and energy surged through her, and she felt a tingling in the wrist that wore the bracelet. The room lit up with blue magic.

Cole jerked his head back, staring at the bracelets, and then at Ireland.

“Did that ever happen before?”

Ireland watched the blue light, flickering in an aura around them. “Um. No. But then, my Protectors didn’t kiss me?”

“I don’t know why not.”

She smiled. “It was against the rules. And also, I think they thought my dark magic would rub off on them.”

Cole smiled wickedly. “You can’t corrupt me, Tinkerbell. I’m already full of dark magic.” He pulled her close to him again, whispering against her ear. “Dark, wild, predatory magic.”

He clenched his fist into her hair, pulling her head back, and plundered her mouth once more.

Chapter 21

The bottom dropped out of Ireland's stomach, and she wrapped her arms tightly around Cole so she wouldn't go flying off into space.

He tasted amazing, wild and wolfy and delicious, like something forbidden and yet familiar. She drank in his scent, heard her wolf growl, and felt electricity sizzling through her body.

Cole nibbled on her lower lip, gave it a tiny bite, and then soothed it with his tongue. Ireland whimpered, wanting more.

His hand was up under her sweatshirt, cupping her breast. She didn't have a bra, since hers had been destroyed, and there was nothing between her skin and his hand. He teased her nipple with his thumb, smiling against her lips when he felt it harden.

His mouth moved down the side of her neck, kissing and tasting and biting. Every bite sent another shiver down her spine, uncurling something inside her she'd never known was there.

She wanted more.

Ireland pushed up against Cole, moving her hand up under his shirt, tracing the taut muscles of his back, scratching it lightly with her fingernails.

His growl grew louder, so she pushed his shirt up and kissed his chest, running her tongue around his nipple and then giving it a little bite.

"I love bitey women," he murmured, so she did it again—a tiny bit harder.

He laughed. "Vixen." He lifted her up, arms under her butt, so she had to wrap her legs around him, putting their hips on a level. He was huge and hard inside his pants, making her gasp, and he deliberately ground his hips against hers, his shaft between her open legs, pressing on her sweet spot.

Ireland moaned. "Do that again."

He did it again, harder, his eyes going golden at her reaction.

The wolf.

She nipped his neck.

He carried her over to the mattress and laid her down, then stood, looking down at her with his legs splayed, the huge bulge nearly bursting out of his pants.

The sight of him standing over her, hot and sexy and dominant, sent a rush of wetness between her legs.

A voice inside her said, *want*.

Ireland sat up and walked her hand over the mattress and up his leg, unzipping his pants and pulling them down.

“Commando,” she said. Like Boomer had warned her about. “I like that.”

His dick sprang free and she wrapped her hand around it, giving it a long stroke. He growled, his eyes growing more golden. She licked the tiny drop off the tip of his shaft, and took him into her mouth.

He swayed a little on his feet, giving a soft groan. She smiled up at him, pulling back and running her teeth ever so lightly down the length of his shaft. Not *quite* enough to hurt. That got a tiny sexy snarl.

“Bad girl,” he said. “No teeth.”

She did it once more to tease him, and then took his shaft in her mouth again, farther, running her tongue around it.

She sucked on him, moving her head in and out. With another snarl, he wrapped his fist in her hair, holding it tightly but not—quite—hurting.

It gave her an exciting little frisson of fear, knowing he could immobilize her and take control, give her more than she could take.

But he let her set the pace, looking down at her with those feral eyes, his muscles bunching as he moved his hips.

It made her so wet, watching him watch her.

Finally he gave a shudder and pulled away from her, dropping to his knees and taking off her sweatshirt and his. He pushed her back onto the mattress and took the top of her sweatpants in his teeth, pulling them down and then shoving them off her legs.

He was on her again at once, sliding his hands up the backs of her thighs, cupping her butt, kissing her hip, her stomach, her breast, her lips.

Then he ran his lips down her chest and belly again, breathing in her scent before he dove his head between her legs, lapping at her wet pussy, making sounds of pleasure deep in his chest.

Her body was on fire, every touch almost too much. Cole began kissing her clit, using his tongue, licking her until she was shaking. Her nails dug into his shoulders, she couldn't stand it, she couldn't—

And then she was exploding in an orgasm, losing herself in the sensation, the feeling of his strong arms still wrapped around her thighs. He sat up, on his knees with his legs folded under him, his the tip of his dick right against her pussy.

“Cole, please,” she whispered.

Hands around her legs, he pulled her toward in and plunged into her slowly, as if he were savoring every second. His head tipped back, and he let out a breath as if everything inside him was coming to rest.

Then he began moving, pulling out and thrusting inside her, filling her with himself, his desire, his passion. She reached up and pulled him down until he lay on top of her, elbows on either side of her head, driving into her with a relentless intensity that brought her to the brink again—so fast—but then he kept her there, the rhythm letting her go just so far and no farther.

She wrapped her legs around him. “Harder,” she murmured. “Deeper.”

That finished his control. She felt the wolf let loose, driving into her, and he cupped the back of her head and kissed her deeply. They were kissing when they both came, exploding together with an intensity that made her see stars.

Cole was buried deep inside her, throbbing. He kissed her again, more slowly, gently, again and again, until he settled down on top of her with a long breath.

They lay holding each other for a long time. Cole had no words—he'd never imagined sex with her being like that. Making him *feel* like that. Wild, crazy, almost out of control—and at the same time, deep inside this feeling of... he didn't even know what. Gentleness?

Eventually, Ireland fell back to sleep. Cole wasn't surprised—she'd had a rough couple days, and not much sleep for the last couple nights.

And he was just as glad. Besides not knowing what to say to her, or how to deal with the newness and strangeness of the way she made him feel, there were things he needed to think through.

The first was what to do with Ireland's damn books. He still suspected that Thanatos could sense them—and there was that little “do you have anything else to share with the class” comment he'd made before he left.

Cole needed to look through those books before Thanatos got tired of waiting and came and took them.

He put his pants back on and built up the fire, so it would stay warm for Ireland while she slept. He didn't care one way or the other—his wolf didn't feel the cold much—but she might.

Then he got the books out of her bag and sat down at the table with them. The first time he'd looked at them, the Fae writing made no sense. But he hadn't been wearing the bracelet then. If it could give him knowledge of ancient Fae customs and translate the words into English, it ought to be able to help him understand what was in the books.

He opened the Book of Bright Moon first, since that was the one Ireland believed would tell them how to remove the bracelets. At first, the writing was just incomprehensible squiggles like before, but as he focused on it, it seemed to shimmer and rearrange itself, so he could understand it.

He'd expected a collection of spells, like a recipe book. But it wasn't that. It was more a book on the theory of magic—more specifically, the theory of Bright magic, interspersed with spells.

And there was a whole section on binding magic. The frustrating thing was, it kept referencing other sources, as if the spells were incomplete. Why not just add the material from the other sources in here?

He was still puzzling through it when Ireland woke up. As she pushed back the blanket over her, her scent washed over him, setting his nerve endings glowing, and filling him with that odd tenderness.

After a bit she came over and slid her arms around his neck from behind, which made him smile deep down inside. She'd also put on her clothes, which was a little disappointing but probably for the best, since they had work to do.

She gave a little gasp when she saw the book, and pulled back to look at him. “Can you read that? Since when do you read Fae?”

“Since this.” He held up his wrist. “I figured that if we're going to do this mission—or even just get out of these bracelets—we better take a look at these books before the Eye of Sauron figures out we have them, and tries to take them away. I found the section on binding magic, but it seemed strange to me. Take a look.”

She sat down and pulled the book over to her, handling it reverently at first, and then getting absorbed in what it was saying. While he was waiting, he pulled the Dark book over and started looking through it. It, too, had a section on binding magic. Why repeat it in the two different books?

He was just getting into it when Ireland looked up from the Bright Book. “You’re right,” she said. “This *is* weird. Only half of the information seems to be here—and it keeps referencing other works.”

Cole looked up from the section he was reading. “Not other works,” he said. “This work.” He tapped the Dark book. “The bracelets are designed to bind both Bright and Dark magic—your Fae side and your wolf. To do that, they needed to use both kinds to make them work—Bright and Dark magic.”

Ireland stared at him. “That can’t be, though. Because it would mean that when the Bright Fae Council put them on me, they used Dark magic to do it. Besides their own magic, I mean. Every time they bound a new Protector, they did Dark magic. And every time a Protector used the bracelets to control me...”

“They used Dark magic.”

Ireland’s eyes went wide. “That’s why Jorem went crazy,” she said. “My last Protector, just before he was killed. He—he just lost it. Started to hurt me. Either the Dark magic did that to him...”

“Or being forced to use Dark magic when he’d been told it was evil did it to him,” Cole finished. “That Bright Council is really a piece of work.”

“It was Bethiaz, mostly,” Ireland said. “One of the Council members. He was the specialist in this kind of magic. The others might not have known.”

“They knew they were holding you prisoner,” Cole said grimly. “And telling you that you were evil and worthless.”

Ireland gave a little shrug—not as if it didn’t matter, but as if she were pushing that knowledge away. Cole let it go. Baby steps. It wasn’t easy giving up ideas you’d taken for granted your whole life.

“I’m wondering,” he said now, “if these books were written right when the schism was happening—when the Fae were trying to separate one kind of magic from the other.”

“But these make it seem like they couldn’t,” Ireland said. “At least, not all the kinds of magic. So why didn’t they give up?”

“Who knows?” Cole said. “Fanaticism. Power. People can do all kinds of mental gymnastics if the alternative means giving up things they really want to believe.”

“But then, even if I find a renegade Bright Fae, they might not be able to take the bracelets off.”

“Unless they work with Thanatos,” he said. “Or unless the dragons can come up with something. But I think Thanatos needs to see this. Not only because of you and me. But because if the sorceress is bound into that prison with spells like this, it’s going to take both Bright and Dark magic to get her out. And he needs to teach us how to do it.”

He could feel her indecision. She didn’t trust Thanatos. She didn’t want to let go of the books. But she knew she didn’t have the expertise to use all the material that was in them.

But it had to be her choice. If he tried to make it for her, she’d never trust him again.

Finally she said, “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Chapter 22

Cole called up to the Big House, where Thanatos lived, and informed Sugar that he and Ireland were on their way. He hung up before Sugar could tell him Thanatos was busy.

He wasn't too busy for this, and Cole didn't feel like arguing.

He also called Gunn, who met him on the front porch of the Big House. It wasn't just big, it was enormous—a mansion made of huge timbers, with high gables and small windows, like something you'd see in a Bavarian forest—or a fairy tale.

The columns holding up the roof of the two-story porch were sections of polished tree trunks, with the bark removed, and the carved front doors were big enough for a dragon to pass through.

Sugar met them at the door with his usual sour face, and escorted them into an enormous Great Hall, big enough to throw a ball in, and up the curving staircase and down a hallway to Thanatos' large book-lined study.

Thanatos was not waiting for them. Thanatos did not wait for people—they waited for him like he was fucking royalty.

At least he had the decency to have one of the soldiers on duty bring them coffee while they waited. And chocolate chip cookies. Clearly Breanna kept the Big House supplied, as well as her friends.

He wondered if trolls ate cookies. Or whatever Dark Fae Thanatos was.

He glided in about ten minutes later, escorted by two soldiers, who remained outside the door as if one of the wolves might try to assassinate Thanatos at any minute.

Not that most everyone hadn't wanted to, at one time or another. But if they did, who would pay the bills?

Thanatos took his place behind the ginormous wooden desk, rested his forearms on it and clasped his hands, the

forefingers making a little steeple. Sugar took up his usual place behind him.

“I am here,” Thanatos announced. “Azúcar has informed me you have a piece of information for me?” Azúcar meant ‘Sugar’ in Spanish, which was the language in which Sugar had first acquired the nickname.

“Several, in fact,” Cole said. “We have these.” He glanced at Ireland, who compressed her lips, and then nodded. Cole unzipped the duffel bag he’d brought in, and took the books out one at a time, in their bags. He pushed them across the desk to Thanatos.

It was always hard to read Thanatos’ emotions, but Cole could practically see his hood quivering. He touched the bags, then took the books out of their wrappings one by one, and held each one in his hands for a moment before opening it.

He glanced through their tables of contents, and then raised his head and looked at Ireland. “Where did you get these?”

“Out of the safe in the sorcerer’s lair where Cole found me,” she said. “They’re what Riker and I went there to get.”

Thanatos gave a hiss of satisfaction. “Do you have any idea what you have here?”

“Some,” Cole said. He explained how the two books cross-referenced each other when it came to the binding magic.

“Since they’re trying to separate Bright and Dark magic, we thought they might have been written just when that schism was happening—when the Bright Fae were trying to separate themselves from everything they classified as Dark.”

“It doesn’t seem like they succeeded very well,” Gunn said. “If the spells you’re talking about need both books to work.”

“You are correct, Mr. Jorgenson,” Thanatos said, looking down at the book and turning a page. “And so are you, Mr. Hunter. These books were indeed written just prior to the Bright Fae officially breaking away from the rest of the Fae. They claimed to be able to separate Dark and Bright magic successfully. It is the underpinning of their entire society, the root of their power.”

He surveyed the room.

“Illyria was one of the few who dared to tell them they were mistaken, but they would not listen. She studied many sources, did many experiments, and wrote her findings into a new book—the Book of Twilight. Then she went to the newly formed Bright Fae Council to try to tell them once more that what they were doing was wrong, and would end in disaster. And when she showed them the proof...”

“This Book of Twilight?” Cole asked.

Thanatos nodded. “They attacked her.” Thanatos rarely showed any emotion in his voice, but there was a bitterness in his words that spoke of long-held anger.

He’d known Illyria, Cole realized. This was personal to him. It was why he’d spent so long looking for her.

Thanatos went on, “They said they did not believe her, but of course they did deep down, because why silence her if nothing she said mattered?”

“But they didn’t kill her,” Ireland said. “Why not?”

“It was not because they did not try,” Thanatos said. “They were unable to destroy her. Instead, during the battle, one of her allies encased her with a shield of protection—her and the Book together, so it would not be destroyed. Before doing so, he trapped a part of her soul, separate from her body, so she could not be killed.”

“And that’s what was in the Orb of Thekate?” Cole asked.

Thanatos gave a jerky nod of his hood. “It was later stolen. But her ally was unable to get Illyria away. Too much of his power had been spent saving that piece of her soul, and the Bright Fae cursed him into oblivion.”

Ireland nodded, her face lighting up. “People still tell that story,” she said. “I heard it as a child.” She quoted, “And such was the spell that was wrought, at such great cost, no sorcerer was able to break it. So she was entombed in a prison of rock, fresh and young as the day she was imprisoned, and there she still lies, from that day to this.”

“Indeed,” Thanatos said, bringing them back to earth. “We can only hope so, and that we can find her.”

He tapped the Dark book. “But unless the Book of Twilight is found, these books are the only known proof that the Bright Fae are wrong. They will do anything to make sure they never come to light.”

Gunn gave a whistle. He said to Ireland, “Do they know you have them?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I thought they were after me, when they sent the Retrievers. I didn’t know the full significance of the books. I don’t think Riker did either. I thought the Bright Book would help me learn how to get the bracelets off, is all.”

Thanatos said, “You are incorrect. As you can see, both books will be needed. And, I believe, both books will be needed to help us free Illyria from her prison. Bright and Dark magic were used to imprison you both, and that is what we will need to free you.”

He looked from her to Cole, and back again. “The two of you must master the power of your bond as quickly as possible. We will begin tomorrow.”

Master the power of your bond. It sounded like such a good idea. But over the next week Cole found out it wasn’t as simple as it sounded.

He’d always been good at the things he tried—at least, the non-interpersonal ones. Athletics. Military training. Hand-to-hand combat. Tracking. Shooting.

But he apparently sucked at magic. Because eighty percent of the spells they tried, he fucked up. And a twenty percent success rate sucked in pretty much every endeavor except junk mail marketing.

Sure, Ireland made some mistakes. There were the expected timing and power regulation issues, between the two of them.

But mostly it was him. There they’d be, out in the middle of the explosives testing field, since that was the safest place on the Ridge for large bursts of power to go very wrong.

Thanatos would be standing there in his damn robe—which didn't even move when it was windy, which was fucking creepy. He'd explain what he wanted—for them to lift an object, or destroy it. To freeze a person in their tracks. To raise wards in various configurations, or dismantle them, or temporarily bypass them, like Ireland had been doing with the safe. Or just blast other people's wards into oblivion.

Usually, it would start out fine, Ireland taking the lead because she understood what to do. He'd feed her power, and memorize what she was doing. When it went well, they'd practice passing control to him.

And then.

Cole would feel the barriers going down inside him. The ones he used to hold back his memories, his emotions, his feelings. To hold back his visions of Riker. To not feel the intensity of the connection between him and Ireland—the immensity and totality of it.

To do what he needed to do with the magic, he had to join with her completely. And he just couldn't make himself do it. Those walls were high and thick and they were there for a reason.

If they went down, they'd annihilate him—and maybe everyone close to him.

So he'd pull back, and the spells would collapse. Except the ones that blew up, making craters in the testing field that pissed Boomer off, because he only liked the craters where *he* put them.

And it wasn't any better when DB tried to work with them.

Cole had never felt like such a fucking failure since he was a teenager, before he punched his dad in the mouth and left home.

Chapter 23

Ireland's first week or so at Outlaw Ridge was better than she expected—in most ways. She'd never been part of a community before—her Protectors had kept her isolated, whether they were in the Fae world, or here on earth.

But now she was finding out what Cole said was true—if she was a shifter, than she was one of them. Gunn had told her that since she was a new shifter, never having learned how to handle her Changes, then by law Cole—since he'd found her—and Gunn, as his alpha, were responsible for her until she learned to control her wolf and only Change when she wanted.

Which they hadn't even really started working on yet.

What was even more unexpected, though, was that they welcomed her. Boomer jumped in with both feet, him and Karisma—more for Cole's sake than hers, but she still appreciated it. And Boomer had friends. Switch and Breanna, Sanchez and Madison the bunny shifter, Sanchez's cousins Cisco and Mateo, Dealer the former con man and thief.

“Not so former, really,” Breanna told her. “If you have any valuables, hide them, or he'll steal them just for practice. Every now and then we have to go over to his cabin and take all our stuff back.”

They were a tight group, always having TV watch parties or barbecues, or gathering for a meal in the mess hall when they didn't feel like cooking, or hanging out in the Rec Center in the evening, or trooping up to the testing field to watch Boomer set off some crazy explosives experiment.

The women were especially nice to her. There were so few of them at the Ridge, they tended to stick together, and they pulled Ireland into their group. Breanna, a former fashion model, was talking about hosting a mani-pedi day in her cabin, and Michelangela, a licensed tattoo artist, offered to give Ireland a tattoo.

An offer she accepted, like a crazy person. Thinking wickedly of Cole, she picked a sexy Tinkerbell design, where

Tinkerbelle had huge boobs with lots of cleavage, and her skirt was waaaay too revealing.

Mikey was halfway through putting it on when she said casually, “I can make it magical, if you want.”

“What?” Ireland didn’t even know why you’d want a tattoo to be magical. “What would it do?”

“Well, a really complicated one could actually be protective, or contain a certain kind of spell. But I don’t do those without a dragon to help me. I was thinking about something more fun.”

“Like this,” Madison said. She pulled up her sleeve to show the tattoo on her arm—a cartoon rabbit, with the words, “Liberated Forever. Domesticated Never.” As Ireland watched, the harmless-looking rabbit face popped out of her skin and turned to a wicked snarl.

Ireland jumped. Luckily Mikey had pulled the needle away before she did.

The tattoo went back to being a harmless bunny.

“Oh my gods that’s awesome!” Ireland said. “What can you make mine do?”

Mikey thought a minute, and then whispered something in her ear that made her crack up.

A few hours later, the guys arrived, having been at the Rec Center watching a hockey game—well within the bracelets’ circle of safety. “So?” Cole said, indicating her bandaged arm. “Let’s see it.”

Ireland peeled back the bandage. When he saw Tinkerbelle, he grinned. “Sexy,” he said, with a little growl. “I like it.”

She gave the magic a little juice. Tinkerbelle flashed her boobs, and the words, “Show me your magic wand” appeared underneath.

Cole laughed his ass off—the first time she’d ever seen him full on break into laughter. It made her feel warm all the way through. Then he wrapped his arm around her. “You can see my wand any time.”

He proved that later that night.

The only part of her life that wasn't working was the most crucial one—the magic.

She could feel Cole resisting when they tried to work together. The connection between them would be strong, the magic flowing—and then he'd pull back, and it would all come crashing down.

She knew why. He was a lone wolf—he didn't want anyone close to him. Even though he cared about her, even though they were sleeping together, they didn't have what the other couples had with their mates.

He didn't care about her that way, and he didn't want to bond with her.

And she didn't know if they could ever make the magic work without it.

She got so frustrated, she finally talked to Karisma about it. Karisma knew Cole better than anyone else at the Ridge besides Boomer. She knew what the brothers had been through.

“I try to talk to him about it,” Ireland said. They were walking along one of the trails that ran around the rim of the main compound, making sure they didn't go out of bracelet range from Cole, who was sitting on the front porch of their cabin. “But he just shuts down and I can't get *anything* out of him. It's like talking to a stone wall.”

“He's always been that way,” Karisma said, her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket. “Worse. He'd go all silent and deadly. And then he'd turn wolf and go run in the woods.”

“He can't even run in the woods now. He's shackled to me, and my wolf is too unpredictable to go with him.”

He had taken her running in the woods close to the valley a couple of times. She'd loved that—it was so exhilarating being a wolf. But he was afraid to take her too far.

“So what does he do instead?” Karisma asked.

“He goes outside and paces around the cabin. Or runs his wolf in fucking circles around the compound in the dark until he’s exhausted.” She turned to Karisma, miserable. “This is my fault, isn’t it. I’m hemming him in, and it’s making him crazy.”

“It’s not your fault. For one, he’s always been crazy. You make him less crazy.” Karisma thought for a minute. “You could try grabbing him and fucking him silly. That usually works with Boomer.”

Ireland sighed. “We do that after. And it’s amazing. But…”

“But he’s still holding back.”

“Yeah.” She kicked a pile of leaves. She didn’t know what she was doing wrong. And apparently, neither did Karisma.

Karisma shook her head. “I am so there with you, girl. Boomer was like that too. He and Bro are really different on the outside, but on the inside they’re a lot alike. Wounded, and never feeling like they’re good enough. Like they have to prove they have the right to even exist, let alone be loved.”

That was *exactly* what it was like. “Yes. That.”

They walked in silence for a minute, and then Karisma asked, “Do you love him?”

Ireland froze. Because she’d never said the word to herself, about Cole. Not like Karisma meant it—for real, forever love. Karisma added, “Because it would be cool if you did.”

Ireland didn’t know what to say. But Karisma took one look at her, and a smile spread across her face. “Oooh! You do!”

“I think yeah,” she said shyly, and then her spirits dropped. “I don’t think he loves me, though. Just because we have great sex doesn’t mean he has feelings for me. Not like you and Boomer.”

Karisma was still smiling. “It doesn’t mean he doesn’t, though. And why would he be so worried about showing his real self to you, if he didn’t care?”

Chapter 24

Two more days went by, and Cole was losing his mind with frustration. The problems with the magic weren't getting better—they were getting worse.

At least Riker wasn't appearing in his dreams anymore. But he had the feeling that was because he was locked down so tight, he wasn't letting anything through.

And if that was the reason, it meant Riker—or what passed for Riker in his mind—really was linked to the bracelets somehow. But the idea of Riker possibly being aware of everything he did with Ireland was too disgusting to contemplate.

Cole wanted to help Ireland. Hell, he wanted to use the magic. When it worked, it was like nothing he'd ever felt before—one step down from making love to Ireland.

But if he were being totally honest, he was afraid of it, too. Of opening up too much. Letting her get too close. Because that would only hurt her. Once she knew what was inside him, she wouldn't want to be around him anymore.

And then they wouldn't be able to do the magic anyway.

The next day after practice, Cole was out in the field, filling in yet another hole he'd made in Boomer's testing ground.

He was about halfway through when Boomer showed up, carrying a shovel. He stuck the shovel in the ground and leaned on it.

"You should have gotten DB to do this." DB had been in charge of today's disastrous practice. "He could move that dirt with a flick of his little scaly finger."

Cole knew that perfectly well. "I need the exercise," he grunted. More like, he needed to work off his anger and frustration.

"Not getting enough exercise at night?" Boomer inquired. "With Ireland?"

“Don’t you start.” He threw another shovelful of dirt into the hole.

“Me start what? You are boinking her, aren’t you? I can tell.”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mr. Romantic. I’m ‘boinking’ her. But that doesn’t…” He sighed. “Forget it.”

But Boomer, being Boomer, did not go away. “Doesn’t what? Doesn’t help with the magic?”

“Clearly not.” Cole kept shoveling. “It doesn’t help with anything.”

Boomer said, “You know, when I was first with Karisma, it was the same. I was crazy about her, but I just couldn’t… couldn’t let her in.” He paused, and then added, “I didn’t want her to know what I’d done. You know.”

Cole did know. Boomer had killed their father. The bastard had gone into a murderous rage and tried to kill Boomer when he’d finally gotten old enough and strong enough to fight back instead of taking the beatings their dad thought they deserved. For being shifters, mostly.

“Yeah,” he said. “But that wasn’t your fault. It was self-defense.”

Boomer said, “Okay, well. Here’s the thing you don’t know. Killing that shithead wasn’t the part I was most ashamed of. It was the part where I let you go off into Special Ops and let them do what they did to you, to protect me. I shouldn’t have let that happen.”

Cole stopped shoveling. Boomer was right—he hadn’t known that. “I chose it,” he said. “I never blamed you. I’m the one who let them break me.”

“I blamed me,” Boomer said. “And I didn’t want Karisma to see that I was the kind of person who would do that. I figured she wouldn’t love me anymore. Who would?”

“But she did.”

“Exactly my point, Bro.”

Cole said patiently, “But Karisma is your mate. That’s different.”

Boomer rolled his eyes so hard, for a minute Cole thought they would get stuck. “You’re trying to tell me that Ireland isn’t your mate? Why else would you be so twisted up about her? Why else would it matter so much what she thinks of you, that you can’t even let down your barriers enough to do these magic spells, in case she might see who you really are?”

No. That wasn’t what it was. Ireland didn’t feel that way about him. She couldn’t. “It’s different for you,” was all he said.

“Bullshit,” Boomer said. “It’s the same. Sooner or later, you’re going to have to let her in.”

He took his shirt off, grabbed his shovel, and started shoveling dirt with his brother.

That evening, when Ireland and Cole were in the mess hall with the usual suspects, Boomer pointed his French fry at Ireland and said, “You two need a day off from magic.”

Gods, did she ever. The strain of trying to handle the magic and handle Cole’s frustration was exhausting.

He would probably be dying to get away from *her*.

But no. Cole shook his head. “We need to keep at it.” He looked at Ireland. “Don’t we?” She hesitated. She wanted to just tell him to stop running his head into a wall, but he already thought he was letting her down. She didn’t want him to think she’d lost faith in him.

“I agree with Boomer,” Breanna said. “Shocking, but true. Nothing works if you keep pushing at it until you’re exhausted. You need a break.”

“Why not ask Ireland?” Sanchez chimed in, speaking to Cole. “Last I heard, you’re not the boss of her.”

Everyone looked at Ireland. “A break would be nice,” she said slowly.

Madison started jumping up and down in her seat. “I know! I know! Girls day! Lunch in town, clothes shopping...”

Cole and Sanchez said together, “You’re not going alone. I’m coming.” Then they glared at each other.

Mikey rolled her eyes. “Do you not understand the concept of ‘girls day’?”

Sanchez said, “There could still be Retrievers out there.”

Mikey said, “Oh, and Karisma and I aren’t badass enough to protect the others? Please.”

That was true. Mikey had been raised in a pack of the most respected and feared Enforcers in the country—shifter police and security. Plus, her uncle was commander of the Wolf Hunters, a legendary clandestine ops team that liberated captive shifters. She was better trained and more lethal than half the guys at the Ridge. And Karisma was a tiger shifter and thief who’d survived on her own for years, fighting her own battles. Cole would back either one of them against almost anyone.

But it didn’t matter. “I *have* to go,” Cole pointed out. “Bracelets?” He held up his wrist. “Town is too far away.”

Sanchez added, “And *I* have to go. Because.”

No one argued with him—not even Madison. She knew he’d follow her no matter what she said; he was the most overprotective sonovabitch on the Ridge.

Cole said, “We don’t have to even eat with you, if you want girl time.” Ireland’s spirits fell a little. He really was dying to get away from her.

Sanchez added, “We’ll just lurk in the corner of the café.”

“As one does,” Mikey murmured. Breanna giggled. Sanchez was a famous lurker.

Cole said to Ireland, “But I *would* like to take you shopping. You must be tired of sweats. You need real clothes. Pretty ones.”

Her spirits shot up into the air again. He wanted to buy her pretty things. “Okay.”

“I’m consultant!” Breanna said, raising her hand. “But he can pay.”

“That’s the idea,” Cole said. “We’ll pick out some nice stuff.”

Chapter 25

Cole was amused and a little bit enchanted at how excited Ireland was about going to town. Even about grocery shopping, which they also needed to do.

“I know this is boring,” he said, as they got a cart, “but at least you can get what you want, to have in the cabin. Food. Makeup and shit. Snacks.”

“Really? Anything?” She looked around the small market that served Rockhaven, the little town at the foot of Outlaw Ridge. It was safer than going out to the highway, and everyone here knew they were shifters.

“Sure,” he said. “Haven’t you ever gone grocery shopping before?”

He was kidding, but she shook her head. “Not really. I always lived with a Protector, and usually a housekeeper. They got all the food. I just ate what they said. And Riker and I mostly ate at diners, or got takeout.”

He stared at her. “You seriously never got to pick out your own snacks before?”

“Snacks weren’t really a thing at all.” Bright Fae Protectors believed in healthy living.

“Well, that’s just wrong. Here.” He set her loose in the snack aisle. She got cheese crackers and Fig Newtons and put them tentatively in the cart.

“Damn. I need to teach you how to spend money,” he said. “And snack. Although, Boomer is the champion snacker in our family. I might have to call him in as a consultant.”

She whipped her head around. “I get a snack consultant? Awesome!”

“You’re a desperate case. But I’ll do the best I can.” He put two bags of dark chocolate sea-salt caramels in the cart, along with one of those big plastic jars of cheese balls, and one of peanut-butter-filled pretzels.

He also bought some steaks and everything to go with them, plus bacon, ham, and eggs, and then filled the cart with anything else Ireland expressed an interest in, even the vegetables. He supposed it wouldn't hurt him to eat some. He hoped she knew how to cook them, because he sure as hell didn't. Maybe Madison did. She was a rabbit, after all.

When they got to the front, he picked up two packs of cigarettes. Ireland frowned. "Those are terrible for you."

He shrugged. "Old habit." He found it calming, especially after a mission. "And I have shifter healing, remember? It repairs any damage to my lungs."

"No reason to make it work overtime."

He grinned at her, but he put the cigarettes on the belt anyway. "You're not the boss of me, Tinkerbell."

"Humph."

He wondered how long it would be before the cigarettes mysteriously disappeared.

Boomer had come into town with everyone else, and they stowed the groceries in his truck, because he was headed back right away.

"Don't let any Retrievers take a bite out of my girl," he said to Cole as he climbed inside.

"Don't make me kick your ass to prove I can take care of myself," Karisma muttered. Boomer just grinned, took her face between his hands, and gave her a big smacking kiss. "Love you too, babe."

They had lunch at the café, the girls at a table in the middle, and Cole and Sanchez, as promised, eating steak and eggs in the corner and leaving them to their girl talk of clothes, nail colors, and the best handgun to carry in your purse.

Afterwards, Cole was planning to take Ireland to the boutique and drop a pile of money on her. The other girls had gone on ahead. But on the way, they passed the window of the thrift shop, and she stopped, mesmerized. "Look at that!"

All Cole could see was junk—old clothes, battered furniture and toys, sports equipment.

“I can afford to buy you new clothes,” he said, amused.

“But... the fringed leather jacket. And the red cowboy hat!” She turned those magical blue eyes on him, begging him to go inside. Sheeyit. She’d never even gotten to shop where she wanted before. “Knock yourself out,” he said, and held the door open for her.

She immediately made a beeline for the jacket, and the hat. Within minutes she’d added three shirts, a fuzzy sweater, two pairs of jeans, and some leather boots. And she had a bright green bowler hat perched rakishly on her head. “You look like a leprechaun,” he said. “A sexy one.”

She grinned. “I need to try this stuff on.”

“You really can have new stuff.”

She shook her head. “This is way more fun.”

“Have it your way,” he said. “I’m grabbing a cart before you disappear under a pile of other people’s clothes.”

She piled her things into the cart and they found the fitting room, which was basically a corner with a curtain across it. He watched it move and bulge as she pulled off her sweats and tried on the other stuff, trying to keep his mind off thinking about her naked. Fail.

She showed him everything and asked him to help her decide, which was also a fail because he told her to get everything. It all looked adorable on her. She put it all in the cart again, except for one of the shirts.

“What’s wrong with this one?” he asked her. “It’s a great color on you.”

She gave a little shiver. “Bad juju,” she said. “The person who used to own that had some seriously bad energy.”

He couldn’t resist giving her a hard time. “Worse than shifters, even?”

“Stop it.”

She gave him a half-smile, but she still looked troubled. Without thinking, he reached out and smoothed the scrunch mark between her eyebrows. “Can you really feel the energy in the clothes?”

She nodded. “They touch people’s skin, day after day,” she explained. “Their energy kind of... soaks in. Same for things like a watch or a ring people wear all the time.”

“And you can tell what they’re like from that?”

“Sure. There’s humans that can do it too, but it’s easier for Fae. Sometimes I don’t want to know, though.”

“Yeah.” He wondered what she’d feel if she wore any of his clothes. Maybe he didn’t want to find out. They meandered towards the checkout, but then Ireland got distracted by the stuffed toys. She picked one off the pile. “Aww. Look at this one. Can I have him?”

It was a wolf—similar colors to his own wolf, in fact. Part of its fur was rubbed off, one ear was ripped, and there were holes in some of the seams where stuffing was coming out.

Cole looked him over dubiously. “He’s in pretty bad shape.”

“I don’t care. I like him. Someone loved him a lot once. I could fix him up.” She turned him in her hands, poking the stuffing back inside. She deliberately wasn’t looking at Cole.

Shit. “You can’t fix me,” he said quietly.

She smoothed the wolf’s fur. “Who said I was trying?”

He took the wolf from her. “You think if you get me to talk about the things inside me, it will fix everything. It won’t.”

She looked up at him then. “How do you know this is you?” she said. “I’m a broken wolf too.”

That right there broke his heart. He’d never meant her to feel like she wasn’t good enough.

He put his hand under her chin. “You’re not broken. You’re perfect.” He leaned down and kissed her, and then took the

wolf from her and put him in the cart. “Maybe you can fix him up,” he said. “Can’t hurt to try.”

She took some time picking out a ridiculous board game to make everyone play the next time they came over, while Cole surreptitiously looked through the rest of the toys. He found a khaki doll’s jacket that looked like it would fit her wolf, and tucked it into the cart before Ireland saw.

They moved on to the books. She started picking out cozy mysteries and beachy romances, and Cole found a cookbook that looked decent. Boomer had learned to cook from recipes; he didn’t see why he couldn’t do the same. Then he started hunting for something to read.

He found a cart of different books all mixed in together—old and recent, kids’, adults’, paperback and hardcover. He was going through a pile of thrillers when he came on a battered old children’s book. *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

He almost put it down again. It had been one of his mom’s favorites—she’d read it to him and Boomer countless times, even though Boomer kept saying they should eat the rabbit.

He was just about to put it down and bury it under the other books when Ireland came up behind him. “What’s that?”

“Something my mom used to read to my brother.”

“Not you?”

He shook his head, even though that was a lie. “I was too old.”

She reached out and touched the cover, as if she could read the energy that was soaked into the book from the old owners. “What’s it about?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Some shit about a stuffed animal becoming real.”

She took the book from him and put it in the pile with her own. “What’s that for?” he said. “Your wolf isn’t going to become real.”

“I want to read the book,” she said. “And the wolf is going to be my friend. I’m naming him Wilbur, and he’s going to sit

on my bed. Sleep with me at night. Tell me his secrets.”

“What if some secrets are better left buried?”

She gazed at him for a long moment. Then she said, “He can be my friend anyway. I’ll still love him.” And she headed for the checkout, leaving him standing there with his heart feeling like a little piece of it had already been sewn back together.

After the thrift store, they went down to the boutique, where Cole and the girls between them persuaded Ireland to get more clothes. And underwear. And socks, and pajamas.

He just kept watching her face, the way it lit up when she found out she could have nice things. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had so much fun.

Chapter 26

It was getting dark by the time they convoyed back to the Ridge—the four girls in Mikey’s truck, Cole and Ireland behind them, and Sanchez bringing up the rear, driving alone, because he wasn’t taking even a chance of being left hanging in the rear during an attack, with Madison in the truck.

Most of Cole’s attention was on Ireland, who was still giddy from the shopping and socializing. He listened to her talk without really hearing what she said, just smiling a little because he was happy.

He should have been more like Sanchez.

The three of them stopped at the gatehouse that stood at the entrance to the Ridge. This was the only way in for vehicles—a one-lane road with a reinforced metal arm that raised and lowered. The trees were thick on either side, so there was no fence.

No point—anyone could get through on foot pretty much anywhere on the Ridge. Which was why there were wards, although all the outer wards usually did was detect intruders. It took too much power to keep everything out all the time, although Thanatos had recently done some upgrades because of the possibility of a Retriever attack.

The gate guard lifted the arm, and Mikey started to drive through. Retrievers seemed to step out of nowhere on either side of them, followed by a whole shitload of Fae warriors, who opened fire on the trucks.

Cole’s window shattered, spraying him with glass. The bullet passed by at an angle, thunking into the back wall of the cab.

Sanchez shot a Retriever out his window, with a P-90 machine gun he just happened to have in his cab. Naturally. All three of them gunned their motors, Cole almost running up Mikey’s backside to get inside the wards, and Sanchez saying “fuck it” and barreling through right next to Cole, taking out his side mirror, a Fae, and a few saplings on his way past.

They all swerved into the parking lot just as the defense wards came online, rising up from the ground in a curtain like a sci-fi forcefield.

Dobe's voice came over the loudspeakers scattered across the compound.

“Attention all personnel. The Ridge is under attack. This is not a drill. Outer wards have been breached. Enemy squads attempting to breach inner wards at the main gate and behind the Rec Center.”

Cole had pushed Ireland's head down as soon as the gunfire started. Now he pulled her out of the truck, and behind an armored Hummer. Bullets—or those magic missiles—would tear right through the truck, but the Hummer should hold up for awhile.

Dobe continued, “Defense squads Alpha and Beta to the gate. Gamma and Delta to the Rec center. Reserve Squads, take your defense positions around the inner perimeter and report any further enemy action.”

Men were already flooding out of the admin buildings, the Rec Center, the mess hall. Because of Ireland, the Ridge had been on low-level alert for days—everyone was armed, even off-duty, and carrying field radios or communications earbuds.

There were also racks of tactical weapons in all the main buildings. But no one had really expected to have to use them.

Cole pulled his own earbud out of his pocket and jammed it into his ear, so he could hear the reports from the squad captains and Gunn's orders. He'd been wearing his weapons all day.

“Stay down,” Cole said to Ireland. “Wait till I see what's going on.”

Cautiously, he poked his head up far enough that he could see through the Hummer's windows.

At the gate were three Retrievers and a Taurus, leading their squad of Fae warriors. Cole counted fifteen of them. All the Fae combatants were armored, making bullets less effective.

He relayed that to Ireland, and said, “It looks like one of the Fae warriors was standing on the wards when they activated. He went down, but there’s a break in the wards now. They’re concentrating their attack there. They’ve got conventional weapons and those magic missile things, though, which can shoot through the wards.”

“Where’s Thanatos?” she said. “He has to seal the wards.”

“Don’t know. I’ll find out.”

Cole said into his comms, “Command, this is Boomer’s Brother. I have Tinkerbell. There’s a breach in the wards by the gate, one combatant wide. Where’s Thanatos?”

“Offsite,” Gunn said grimly. “Following a lead.”

Fuck. More like a purposeful diversion.

Gunn said, “Bring Tinkerbell to Command. Advise location; I’ll send assistance.”

The Command Center had a bunker underneath it, that was the most secure place at the Ridge except maybe the Big House. Ireland would be safe there.

Cole relayed Gunn’s message to Ireland, who shook her head. “We have to fight back. Seal the wards.”

“Do you know how?”

She bit her lip. “I think so.”

Cole said to Gunn, “We’re pinned down in the parking lot by the motor pool.”

“Sending assistance.”

“Wait,” he said, as Ireland glared at him. “Do you have an ETA for Thanatos? Tinkerbell says she and I can seal the wards.”

Gunn’s voice came back. “Can, or might be able to?”

Cole sighed. “Might.”

Gunn said, “Thanatos is on his way. ETA fifteen to twenty minutes.”

Both of them knew that a lot of damage could be done in fifteen minutes. A lot of wolves could die. They were holding back the assault, but if the breach became big enough...

Rex, Gunn's other lieutenant, came on. "Breach at the Rec Hall perimeter. One combatant wide. Defense is holding."

Cole said, "We're going for it. Tell Alpha Squad to cover us—I don't want those goons to blow up a Hummer in our faces." He paused. "And if it works here, we'll need a squad to get us up to the Rec Hall."

"Roger that. Do what you can."

Cole told Ireland the revised plan. Then he opened the back of the Hummer to access the equipment locker. Punching in the code, he came out with a semiautomatic rifle, which he slung over his shoulder, and a spare earbud for Ireland.

"Put this in," he told her. "Try not to let all the voices distract you. But you need to be able to hear what's going on."

She did as she was told. He took her hand to lead her into position, and she pulled him back. "Cole," she said. "You have to open up to the magic. If you hold back, it won't work."

Fuck. He checked the battle by the gate again. Two Outlaw Ridge soldiers were down, although they were still moving. The breach was getting wider.

He'd rather face the guns. But all he could do was his best. "Let's do this," he said, and tapped his earbud. "Alpha squad! Magic commencing in three... two... one..."

He and Ireland stepped out to where they had a clear shot at the perimeter breach, but were still partly sheltered by the Hummer. She activated her magic, sharing it with him through the bracelet like they'd done so many times before. He stared at the break in the wards, looking at the way the magic was woven together. He could almost see what they needed to do to fix it...

A barrage of bullets hit the Hummer's armored hide, a scant foot from them. He pulled Ireland back against his chest, turning, and saw one of Alpha Squad take out the shooter.

He kept her in his arms, feeling the connection building between them. She said, “Now!” and pulled on the magic.

He felt the barriers between them open, magic filling the gaps, felt the connection between them that was almost as profound as sex. His hand over hers, they stretched their arms out, palms toward the gate, sending a stream of magic to shore up the wards.

The magic hit the ground at the base of the breach, knocking back a Fae warrior about to step through. It began to push up the sides, weaving a wall connecting both sides of the breach.

The Fae sorcerers fought back, trying to negate their magic. Others shot bullets and missiles their way.

They all went wide. Partly because of Alpha Squad’s defense, and partly, Cole realized, because they wanted Ireland alive.

Without intending it, he was using her as a shield.

Shame and fury swept through him, and with it, the gates of memory cracked open. Battles he’d fought. Horrors he’d seen; horrors he’d perpetrated. Things Special Ops had made him and his squad mates do.

Mutilated bodies. Screaming children. Mothers weeping in despair...

He tried to shove it away, close it off. The stream of magic faltered and sputtered.

Cole! Ireland said inside his head. *Give me the power. Take down the barriers!*

I’m trying!

Riker’s voice in his head said, *Try harder, motherfucker! Are you going to let your packmates die for you because you can’t face who you are? Are you going to let her die?*

Cole gritted his teeth, focusing on Ireland, on his brother, on his pack. He had to come through for them.

The magic began to flow again, as he tried to shut out the memories, tried not to think of Ireland seeing them.

Slowly, slowly, they built up the patch in the wards until it was complete. The Fae and the Retrievers were still attacking it, but hopefully it would hold.

Ireland was shaking. Cole held her, hearing the gate defenders reporting the success to Gunn. Gunn said, “Boomer’s Brother. Good work. Ready for transfer to Rec Hall?”

Cole felt Ireland give a nod. He was churning with a strange, sick energy, as if his body was a wave machine and all those memories and emotions he’d let loose were sweeping back and forth inside him, throwing him off balance. He could feel his wolf just under his skin, about to bust out.

Not now, he said. For fuck’s sake, keep it together!

Through the comms he heard Rex’s voice. “Perimeter breach! We need the Tinkerbell Twins NOW!”

“Ready,” he said through stiff lips. “Lay down cover.”

Alpha Squad, led by Sanchez, streamed over to surround them, carrying combat shields. “Let’s go,” he said.

They headed off for the Rec Hall, Alpha Squad between them and the battle. Even though they were getting farther from the gate all the time, Cole still hated being out in the open ground in the center of the valley.

He felt that prickle on the back of his neck, as if he were being watched. Had something somehow slipped through one of the breaches, or made another one the defenders hadn’t seen? But where?

He looked up just as a dark creature appeared in the sky overhead. Some kind of flying bat-monster, with a Retriever on its back.

Chapter 27

The fucking sky, Cole thought. Did the wards cover the sky?

“Incoming! Airborne!” he shouted.

Alpha Squad raised the combat shields overhead just as the creature let loose a barrage of gunfire. Bullets ricocheted off the shields. “Keep moving!” Sanchez yelled. “Take cover in the Rec Center!”

Apparently, the wards did cover the sky. They lit up as the creature skimmed off them before wheeling around and heading back for another pass. So it couldn’t land—but it could still do damage.

As it flew back overhead, the Retriever used its magic missile gun, bullets of fire lodging in the shields and melting the metal wherever they touched.

A couple more passes like this, and the shields would be Swiss cheese.

The squad returned fire. There were some hits, but the creature didn’t seem affected—it just roared in anger.

They kept moving as fast as they could, but they weren’t going to make cover in time—and the Rec Center probably couldn’t withstand the magic missiles anyway.

And then another creature swooped into sight. Fuck. How many did they have?

That one was intercepted by a group of armed defense drones, shooting large-caliber bullets. The creature dodged, and they began herding it towards the perimeter. Some of the drones broke off and headed their way.

Before they got there, Ireland’s bracelet lit up like a beacon. What the fuck was she doing? But she looked as surprised as he was.

The night rider swooped down, skimming the wards once more, firing the magic missiles again—right at the shields over him and Ireland.

Shit. It *was* a beacon. Some kind of fail-safe built into the bracelet, to give away her exact position.

The shields shredded. A few of the missiles got through, wounding Alpha Squad soldiers.

The night rider set off a barrage of missiles at the drones, and then turned and flung something down at Cole and Ireland.

Another one of those gods-cursed lassoes that went right through wards. Including theirs.

Cole threw himself at Ireland, knocking her out of the way of the lasso. The lash hit him with a glancing blow. He felt like a mule had kicked him.

The flying creature had pivoted in mid-air, hovering. Waiting. And then Cole saw the dark end of the lasso snaking through the grass, headed for Ireland.

He drew his magic knife and threw it, pinning the rope to the ground. Magic flared and part of the lasso dissolved, with an almost human scream.

Ireland was yelling something in his head, trying to pull the magic through him, but Riker was yelling too, and Cole couldn't make sense of anything. The waves of emotion and memory were washing over him again. He couldn't get his balance. Couldn't focus.

There were shouts and a spotlight in the sky, and a combat helicopter roared overhead. Switch, with Boomer on the turret gun. They swept past the flying creature, spraying it with bullets.

The Retriever in the saddle slumped over. With a furious scream, the creature dropped, skimmed against the wards, and used the momentum to propel itself away.

Switch was already headed for the second flyer. He chased it high into the sky, and Boomer shot it with a grenade launcher. The creature was ripped apart, but its flailing tail smashed into the helicopter on the way down. One of the rotors tore off, and the helo tilted and began to fall.

“Cole!” Ireland screamed. He jolted back to himself, and they grabbed hands. All he could think of was Switch and Boomer—his friend and his brother—exploding in a fiery crash. It couldn’t happen. *No*.

A picture flashed into his mind: Thanatos freezing a leaping tiger in mid-air with his magic.

He shoved the picture into Ireland’s mind. *This!* She jumped on the image, manipulating the magic. He let her take the lead again, blocking his bracelet’s programming to direct all magic through the Protector.

Take it! He pushed everything he had back through the bond, like he’d push love and support and healing magic to Boomer if he were hurt or in trouble.

The beam of magic hit the helicopter and slowed its fall. Cole dug frantically for every scrap of power. More, more—but it wasn’t enough. He could feel the magic slipping from their grasp. The helo could still crash.

Cole could feel Riker pounding on his mind, hammering on the barriers he’d erected. There was a shimmer, and Riker appeared in front of him, translucent as a ghost, shouting in his face. *Stop being such a stubborn bastard!*

Cole felt his ears pop, as the magic from the bracelet ramped up. Ghost-Riker grabbed his arm. *Let it go!*

Energy surged inside Cole, moving of its own volition, latching onto his wolf bond. The wolves! *Gunn!* he shouted mentally, reaching out to his alpha. He felt Gunn clutching the alpha amulet he’d been given by his predecessor, pulling in the power of the pack through the bond they all shared.

The barriers in his mind swept open, and pure magic poured through. From his pack brothers to Gunn to Cole, into Ireland, accepting her as one of them.

The helicopter slowed to a stop. The men inside were frozen too, looks of shock on their faces.

Now what were they going to do? Cole could feel that lowering it to the ground without dropping it was going to take more control than they had left.

But they were going to have to try, before they ran out of strength...

And then Thanatos was there, speeding down through the valley like a freight train, DB behind him. Dragon Boy leaped into the air, Changed, and flew up to the helicopter, grabbing onto it and guiding it to the ground.

Thanatos stopped and flung both arms out, one toward each of the breaches in the wards. The ones by the gate snapped into place, not just patched, but whole and restored.

He shouted three words ringing with magic power, and from his palms came twin bolts of magic.

Cole, sinking to his knees from exhaustion, watched the nearest bolt somehow miss all the Outlaw Ridge defenders, pass through the wards, and strike the ground outside the gate.

The earth opened up like a mouth, swallowing the Fae that hadn't already started running. Then the ground rippled back to where it had been, trees and grass and roadway, until you couldn't tell it had ever been disturbed.

From up the hill by the Rec Center, there were shouts and then silence, and then one small, faint, "What the fuck?"

Cole would have laughed, if he hadn't been so wrung out. The magic had taken every ounce of energy he had.

He tried to stand up, and everything tilted around him. He was hit with another wave of emotion and memory, this one worse than the first.

Stop! But it wouldn't stop. He felt hot and cold, shamed and small, cruel and arrogant, deadly and evil. The images were coming so fast he couldn't keep track of them, more and more and worse and worse.

His wolf growled, pushing through his skin. Fur rippled down his arms and across his face, and then receded. He couldn't Change. He couldn't run. If he got too far away from Ireland she'd be hurt.

But his wolf was hammering at him. *Run! Run!*

No!

Gradually, voices penetrated through the maelstrom. Boomer first, with his familiar touch and scent, his arm around Cole's shoulders. "Bro? You okay? I got your back. I got you." And turning to someone, "What the fuck is wrong with him? Where's Thanatos?"

But in his head, there was Riker. *I knew you couldn't handle this. Pussy wolf. Why the hell are you alive and I'm dead? Rye needs me.*

Ireland. Where was Ireland?

There. He felt her hand on his shoulder, heard her voice. The memories rose up again, washing over him. The connection between them was wide open, sharing everything he felt with her. Everything he saw in his mind.

She couldn't see that. Couldn't know it. *NO!*

His wolf ripped out of him, and he ran.

Chapter 28

Ireland lost her hold on Cole as he wrenched himself out of her arms and headed for the woods.

“Fuck,” Boomer said. “He’s heading for the cliff path.” He pulled off his clothes, went wolf, and took off after his brother.

Karisma moved over to Ireland, putting a sisterly arm around her shoulders. “It’s okay,” she said. “Boomer knows how he gets. He’ll take care of him.”

Ireland shook her head. “No,” she said, stepping out of Karisma’s grasp. “I appreciate your support, I really do. But he’s *my* mate. It’s my job to take care of him. And if *he* doesn’t understand that, I’m going to set him straight right now.”

A slow smile spread over Karisma’s face. “You go, girl.”

Ireland spun around, looking over the group gathered around them. “I need some clothes. Men clothes. And food.” She stopped and thought. What else? “And blankets. In a bag or basket or something.”

For a second everyone just stared at her. “For Cole,” she said. She didn’t have time to go around finding things. She could feel the bond between them stretching, feel the weakness starting in her. She held up her wrist, the bracelet glinting in the arc lights dotted around the main buildings. “Do it! He’s already too far away. And someone tell me where he’d go. What’s that way?” She pointed in the direction Cole had gone.

“The cliffs,” Sanchez said. “There’s a path that leads to an overlook, where some people go when they have mate crises.”

He glanced at Breanna, who was hanging on to Switch, still clearly freaked out at how close he’d come to death.

Sanchez gave an order, and people went running to collect things.

Ireland closed her eyes, trying to sense Cole through the turmoil in his emotions. She got a glimpse of a wide grassy

area that ended in a rocky cliff, with the lights of a town far below.

He was right where Sanchez said.

“How far?” Ireland asked. It was dark, and she was sensing she didn’t have a lot of time. Cole was having a major crisis, and she needed to get there *now*.

“A couple miles?” he said.

Ireland thought, and then spun around and found DB in the crowd, human again. “You,” she said, striding up to him. “Dragon Boy.”

“Me?” He looked around, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“You can fly. Or make those doorway thingies? I need you to get me to the top of that overlook. Now.” She tried to modulate her voice to one less bossy, but it didn’t work very well. This was too important. “Cole’s in trouble, and he needs me.”

His face softened. “We’ll fly,” he said, and then raised his voice. “Clear, everybody. I’m going dragon.”

Everyone backed off and he Changed. Even as worried as she was, Ireland had a moment of awe when she got a good look at him. He was huge, with spiked ridges along his back, wicked sharp teeth, and bright green eyes with slitted pupils, like a cat’s.

Normally she would have been terrified to go near him, but right now she only had a moment of hesitation. She had to get to Cole. Madison appeared from somewhere and handed her a full duffel bag. “How do I get on?” Ireland asked, figuring she was going to ride on his back.

Instead, the dragon sat back on his haunches, reached out with one of his huge front claws and picked her up, setting her in the palm of his other ‘hand.’ Then he spread his enormous wings, bunched his muscles, and leaped into the air.

Any other time, Ireland would have been transfixed in wonder at flying through the air, the stars above her, and the

shadowed ground below. But right now, all she could think about was Cole.

It was warm in the palm of DB's dragon hand, and he kept the other one cupped loosely around her so his claws made a kind of safety cage. In a minute or two, they were past the forest and out above the cliff, and he was banking around to come straight at it.

They soared downwards. Just before they got there, he pulled his tail end under and backwinged to slow himself down, like a duck landing in a pond. He settled on the edge of the cliff, setting her gently on the ground.

Cole was still in wolf form, crouched down about twenty feet away. Boomer was kneeling next to him, arm around him, trying to talk to him. In the light of the moon, with her enhanced wolf vision, Ireland could see him worrying at the paw that wore the bracelet.

Boomer tried to stop him, and Cole snapped his jaws at Boomer, and then went back to gnawing at his leg. Even at this distance, Ireland could smell the blood.

Gods, she thought, as understanding swept over her. He was trying to get the bracelet off. Trying to break their bond—even if he had to gnaw his own paw off, like a wolf in a trap.

Her heart shattered.

He was so desperate, so broken, he'd do anything rather than let her inside him.

She ran over, dropping the bag, and slid to her knees beside him, tears running down her face. Boomer was holding on to Cole, frantic, trying to stop him from hurting himself.

She put her hand on Boomer's arm. "Boomer. Listen to me. I know you want to help him, but this time you can't. This is between us. Him and me."

Slowly, Boomer raised his head to look at her, his hand still on his brother's flank. "You're his mate, aren't you." It wasn't a question.

She met his eyes squarely. “Yes. And we’re going to get through this. But you have to leave it to me.”

He bit his lips, and she could see the indecision in his eyes. She knew he’d always taken care of his brother. They always had each other’s backs. For most of their lives, they’d had no one else.

He couldn’t stand the thought of walking away when his brother was like this.

“I know,” she said softly. She put her hand over his. “You’re a good brother. The best. Cole loves you. But it has to be me.” She tried to smile. “I’ll take care of him. I promise.”

He looked into her eyes for a long moment. Then he said to his brother, “Don’t throw this away, Bro.” He reached over and hugged Ireland, hard, and then got up and walked over to DB.

Turning back to face her, he said, “Don’t fuck it up. Either of you.”

DB changed to human form—somehow wearing clothes—and fished a gold coin out of the pocket of his leather vest. “If things go sideways, I can come back. Just hold onto this, think of me, and say ‘Twinkies.’”

Ireland didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Thanks.”

He flipped the coin from his fingers, and it flew over to the duffel bag and slipped inside. DB said, “Come on, Boomer.”

He changed to dragon form once more, picked up Boomer, and they were gone.

Cole had pulled away from Ireland while she was talking to DB, and was growling and pacing, his golden wolf eyes fixed on her. He walked a couple of steps away, then back. Wanting to run away. Wanting to stay.

She could feel the emotions surging through him—shame, despair, and more than anything, that terror of opening up to her, of letting her see what was happening inside him.

She sat down on the ground, and held her hand out. Then she opened herself to him—through the bracelet, through their

wolves—and reached for him with the connections that bound them.

That always would, whether he decided to stay or run.

“Cole,” she said softly. He stiffened. “Come here.”

Ireland waited. She couldn’t force it, couldn’t make him come. He had to choose.

“Come here. Please.”

He tipped his head back and gave a mournful howl, full of sadness that tore at her heart. It spoke of his years of being alone, how he’d stopped even hoping for anyone of his own. Because he believed he didn’t deserve it.

“Cole.” It was almost a whisper. She reached out to him with her own loneliness, her own feelings of shame, and her own despair.

And most of all, her hope.

Everything around them seemed to go completely still.

Slowly, he walked toward her. A step. Then another one. She opened her arms, and he walked into her embrace, resting his head on her shoulder, his fur soft against her cheek. He wanted this, but she could still feel the resistance in him. The belief that if she ever saw what was inside him, she’d never love him again.

She whispered to him, “You’re a good wolf. A good man, a good brother. A good partner.”

He stiffened, and she stroked his back. “Don’t give me that. You are. Whatever you did—whatever they made you do, in Special Ops, holding it inside is killing you. It’s blocking our magic. It’s blocking our bond. You have to let it go.”

He started to pull away, and she tightened her arms around him. “You have to let me see.”

She felt one last push of resistance, and then his barriers dropped. Memories hit her like a tidal wave. A kaleidoscope of secret, unsanctioned missions, in parts of the world they should never have been in.

Ambushes. Assassinations. Bombings. Destroying half a village to get to one person. Each time eroding a bit of his soul, annihilating who he should have been.

He was a weapon in the hands of people he hated, and he couldn't stop. If he stopped, they would frame him for the murder of his father—and then take his brother and do to him what they'd done to Cole.

And she saw Riker, fighting beside him, not comrades in arms but slaves chained together by circumstances, hating themselves and hating each other. Forcing themselves not to care, not to feel.

She watched as Riker gave in to despair, acting out his rage and hatred in acts of unnecessary violence and cruelty.

And then the day that ended it all. An innocent family with information they needed. Riker threatening children to force their parents to speak. Two young girls, dead on the floor—and the information that would send them to another village of innocents.

Cole confronting Riker. Telling him this was where it ended. Riker shoving him away, snarling that it was the mission, that it would end in the greater good. Telling him he wasn't the only one who had a hostage he cared about, people under threat.

That it wasn't going to stop, it would never stop, and if Cole and Riker didn't do it, someone else would.

Ireland felt it all as if she were inside Cole: the moment he snapped, flinging himself on Riker in a red haze, not even knowing what he was doing as his body went through the motions they'd trained into him. Just knowing it had to stop.

And then Riker on the floor, his throat cut, still barely alive. And Cole walking away.

He'd deserted, found his brother, and eventually brought him to safety at Outlaw Ridge. Put the people they'd been behind them.

Made himself disappear. Even his name. For years he'd been known only as 'Boomer's brother.'

She held him through all of it, feeling the pain of his broken soul. Cole howled his anger and rage up to the heavens, and Ireland Changed and howled with him, his pain and hers, merging through the power of their bond.

She pressed herself against him, wanting to let him know that she understood. She was with him. And that there was still good in his soul.

I can't, he said through their bond. How can I deserve love after that?

Maybe none of us deserves love, she said. But you have it. Turning your back on us doesn't make us stop loving you. It only stops you from feeling it.

Feel it, she said. Let it in.

And without knowing what she was doing or why, she sank her teeth into his wolf's neck, just where it met the shoulder joint. Hard, deep, until she tasted his blood in her mouth.

Their connection opened all the way, and she fed into it every ounce of love she had inside her. More and more and more, until the night air glowed blue around them, and something snapped into place.

Something that had always been meant to be, like two pieces of a puzzle suddenly fitting together.

I claim you. You are my mate.

Chapter 29

Cole felt a moment of shock, as the world seemed to hold its breath. And then a rush of incredulous joy and love. *Mates. Forever. Mates.*

She let him go, and together they Changed back into their human forms, staring at each other.

“What did you just *do*?” he asked.

“I—I don’t know,” she said uncertainly. “My wolf...”

But he knew exactly what she’d done. He just couldn’t believe it.

He touched the wound on his shoulder. It had already healed. “You claimed me.”

“Is that okay?”

In response, he pulled her into a kiss. Deep. Wild. All his feelings behind it, nothing held back. “Yes,” he whispered, and kissed her again. Longer.

They broke apart. “Blanket,” she said.

“Right.”

He swept her up in his arms, carried her over to the duffel bag, and grabbed the blanket stuffed on top. When it was spread on the ground he laid her down, naked under the stars, and then he was next to her, devouring her with kisses and love bites. Shoulders, neck, breasts, belly. He thrust her legs apart, nipping at her thighs.

Ireland growled, wanting more. Cole loved that growl. He moved his tongue between her legs, tasting her pussy, teasing her clit, sucking on it.

Ireland threaded her fingers into his hair. *More.*

But he just gave a soft laugh, and began to tease her. He loved to make her crazy. Light touches around her core, then deep ferocious kisses that made her buck her hips wildly.

Finally, when she was close, so close to coming apart, he moved his lips and tongue to her hips. Beneath her ribs. He sucked her nipples, licking them slowly, one after the other, until she was on the edge again.

She moved against him, rubbing his burning shaft, trying to capture him inside her, but he just shook his head. "Not yet."

"Yes," she snarled. "Now." And she shoved his shoulder, rolling him onto his back, and climbed on top of him.

She sat, straddling his hips, running her hands up his chest, setting him on fire for her.

She leaned over and kissed his lips, softly, softly, and then gradually deepened the kiss until he was groaning. She was all heat and light, the scent of wild wolf, the warm sweet scent of home.

His dick was between her legs but not inside her, and she rubbed her slick core up and down its length, gasping as it hit her clit. Tantalizing him.

His fingers tightened on her hips, his head tipped back as he drank in the pleasure.

His wolf was a constant growl in his chest, and he knew his eyes were glowing gold. He was hers. Her wolf.

She moved again, sliding him inside her. He wanted to fill her completely, the way her love filled him, the way their bond completed him.

Mates.

He felt the word reverberate through him, still unable to quite take it in. She'd seen everything inside him, his entire ugly past, and she still loved him.

Still wanted him.

Ireland moved on top of him, taking her time now, sheathing him over and over, building the intensity with excruciating, exquisite slowness.

He moved his hips, thrusting deeper inside her, feeling the heat of her core and wanting it to last forever. *This. This. Only*

this.

The passion built, and his thrusts grew faster, more desperate for release. Ireland gave a little whimper, and he gathered her close, skin to skin, her breasts against his chest.

He pressed one hand to the base of her spine, curving her back so he could go deeper still, touch all of her.

He felt the tension as she reached the utter edge, and then shattered around him, murmuring his name over and over. *Cole*. He was finally himself again, after all these years, here in her arms.

One last thrust, and he was there with her, exploding with sensation, as if their bodies had turned to pure pulsing energy. His head was buried in the crook of her shoulder, and he bit the tender skin, the big muscle at the base of her neck, deep and hard, claiming her back.

Blue light shone through the night. They were one.

A long time later, they were sitting wrapped up together in the blanket, wolfing down the sandwiches some kind person had packed in the duffel. Cole finished his last bite and balled up the sandwich wrappings, then kissed Ireland on her bare shoulder.

“We should probably go back to the cabin,” he said. “At some point.”

“Mmm,” she said. “Meat really is good, you know?”

“Yeah. You’re a creature of the Dark now.”

“And proud of it.” She kissed his shoulder this time. “I brought clothes. I think. So we can walk down.”

“Yeah. I just hope all my friends aren’t standing around waiting to pounce on us and talk about our feelings.”

“Like a walk of anti-shame?” He laughed. She said, “You could always call Boomer on your dog tags.” She flicked one of them. “And tell them all to go the fuck away. Plus, you could put his mind at ease. That you’re okay.”

“He knows.” But he picked up one of the tags and pressed a tiny button along its edge. “Boomer. Hey. It’s all good—we’re on our way back down. But can you get everyone out of the way? Because if there’s a bunch of people keeping me from getting to the cabin and boinking my mate again, it’s going to end with me punching someone.”

She could hear Boomer’s big “Woo-hoo!” on the other end, and then “Affirmative, Bro. Boomer out.”

They dressed, and walked hand in hand down the mountain path, not hurrying. By the time they got to the compound, it was nearly deserted, the few people they could see in the distance pointedly ignoring them.

As soon as they were on the cabin porch, Cole swept Ireland up and carried her inside, straight to the bedroom, pausing only long enough to close the front door.

They ravished each other all over again, slowly this time, reveling in the taste and feel of each other until they lay, exhausted and exhilarated, in each other’s arms.

After Ireland fell asleep, Cole lay awake thinking.

About how everything had changed.

And about what he had to do next.

Then he got quietly out of bed, tucking the covers around Ireland, and went out into the living room.

He sat on the couch, breathing slowly and deeply, like he’d been taught to do in Special Ops to keep himself calm before a mission.

Then he cleared his mind, focused on the bracelet, and called out Riker.

Moments later, they were floating in that dim nothingness, Riker looking just the same. But Cole was totally different.

“What the hell did you do?” Riker said. “The bracelets just got, like, twice as powerful.”

Well, that was the answer to question number one. And two. The mate bond did enhance the power of the bracelets,

and Riker couldn't see what he and Ireland did in private. Thank the gods.

"Ireland and I bonded for real. We're mates. In case you don't know anything about shifters, that's magic. Apparently, connecting our wolf sides adds to her power. Probably the reason they didn't want her fucking around with other shifters—literally or figuratively."

Riker frowned, thinking about that. "Well, hell," he said slowly. "So maybe putting that bracelet on you wasn't the stupid, sentimental move it seemed like."

"Maybe," Cole said. "But maybe it gives you less of a chance to take over the bond and use it to do what *you* want."

Riker didn't say anything.

"That was the point, wasn't it," Cole said. "It's why you still want her to go on this mission to find that sorceress, even though you're dead. So you can get your revenge on me. If it all goes right, you can free her, free yourself—or your spirit, anyway—and get me killed."

Riker just shrugged. "Figures that's what you'd think."

"Yeah. I know you. So what is it that you're going after? Why free this sorceress? Surely there's plenty of other ways to get me killed without sending Ireland into the heart of Bright Fae territory."

"It's the only way," Riker said. "For her. Thanatos and the dragons can't get the bracelets off her. You heard what he said. The binding magic in those bracelets is ancient, from before they split from the Dark Fae. They can't even make them anymore, because it's a mix of Dark and Bright magic."

"I know that."

"Think about it, though. Illyria was entombed with the Book of Twilight. It was her life's work—explaining why the Fae needed both kinds of magic to keep the balance in their society, but also to keep their magic strong. That thing is worth a fortune—"

Cole shook his head. “It’s always about money with you. What you can get.”

Riker sneered. “And it’s also the key to unlocking the bracelets. So if Ireland’s going to be free of the Bright Fae Council, that’s where you have to go. The Fae world. You just have to make sure Thanatos doesn’t get you both killed on the way.”

“As opposed to, you getting only one of us killed? Namely, me?”

“You just got done telling me you’re more powerful than me now. Still scared?”

“I was never scared of you, Riker. Definitely not now that you’re a ghost. So now you’re going to fucking tell me everything you know about this prison—where it is, who’s guarding it, how to get there. Because I know you know.”

“Finally. I thought you’d never ask. You were so busy running and hiding from everything.”

Cole growled.

Riker said, “But there’s one thing you should know up front, when you’re thinking about Thanatos’ loyalties. Illyria wasn’t just someone he knew. He was there when it all went down. Illyria was his girlfriend.”

Chapter 30

Late the next morning, Cole and Ireland marched up to the Big House once more, this time with Boomer, Karisma, Gunn, Mikey, DB, Switch, Rex, Dobe, and the Sanchezes at their back. He'd already briefed them with everything he'd found out, and what he meant to say to Thanatos.

For the first time, Cole went up the steps and straight in without knocking. He might as well let Thanatos know right off that they weren't leaving until he'd heard what they had to say.

As he expected, they were intercepted in the cavernous Great Hall by Sugar. Thin—almost cadaverous—with a shock of white-blond hair, he looked like you could knock him down without even breaking stride.

But he was strong, fast and deadly, and no one messed with him.

He'd been Thanatos' right-hand man since anyone could remember.

They all halted. Sugar crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows. "Have you mistaken this for the Rec Center? Because that's down the hill about half a mile."

"We need to see Thanatos."

"Have you ever heard of the phone?"

"Just let us talk to him." Cole held up the dispatch bag he was carrying. "I have the location where Illyria is imprisoned."

Sugar wasn't usually impressed by anything, but Cole had sort of expected him to be a little excited by that. Instead, Sugar ran his hand through his hair—and for the first time since Cole had known him, he looked uncertain.

He said, "Before you go storming into Thanatos' study like the barbarians you are, there's something you need to know."

"Is it the part about Illyria's prison being in the heart of Bright Fae territory? Or the part where she was Thanatos'

girlfriend?”

Sugar winced. “Girlfriend is such a... juvenile term. Fae don’t have mates the same way wolves do, but...”

“But they were in love,” Ireland said softly, putting a hand on Cole’s arm. “That’s what Cole meant.”

Well, yeah, he supposed he did. Although, he still couldn’t wrap his head around the idea of Thanatos being in love. They’d just recently discovered he might possibly have a heart.

Sugar nodded. “He was with her when she went to see the Council, to try to tell them that what they were doing was wrong, and would end in disaster. And when they attacked her...”

“Thanatos fought them,” Gunn said.

“Of course,” Sugar said. “But it was only the two of them against the whole Council, and Illyria didn’t want to harm them.”

“Oh my gods,” Ireland breathed. “Thanatos was the ally. He did the protection spell.”

Cole said, “And he’s the one who took that piece of her soul. And then lost it.”

That was a crap-ton of guilt. He couldn’t even imagine how he’d feel if something like that happened to Ireland, and he was responsible.

“Yeah. But there’s even more you don’t know. Obviously, Thanatos and Illyria lost the fight. He did cast those spells—both of them—but he used up most of his power doing it. He was away from his mountain—”

“Excuse me?” Sanchez said. “What mountain?”

Sugar ran his hand through his hair again and lowered his voice. “Thanatos is a Bergmönch.”

“A what, now?” That was Boomer.

Sugar rolled his eyes. “They embody the spirit of a mountain, and can call on its power. In a sense, they *are* the

mountain. Only, he'd used himself up protecting Illyria. One of the Fae—or maybe more than one—did a forbidden curse. It tore him away from the connection with his mountain and cast him out of the Fae world, stuck in the most hideous of his forms.”

They all went silent. Holy shit. No wonder Thanatos was so bitterly against the Bright Fae.

Cole said slowly, “So they were hypocrites right from the beginning. And, ironically, they used violence against Illyria, who really did follow their supposed values.”

Sugar shrugged. “Yeah, well. Unlike you do-gooders, I’m never shocked when people turn out to be liars and assholes.”

Ireland said, “The Bright Fae destroyed everything Thanatos cared about. Do you think he wants revenge?”

Sugar said, “I don’t know what he wants. But try to keep him from destroying himself on this mission, would you?”

Someone in the back muttered, “Fuck.”

Sugar took them up to the study, and Thanatos joined them a few minutes later.

“Sugar says you have something to tell me, besides the fact that Mr. Hunter the elder and Ms. Ireland are now mates.”

Of course he already knew. He did not offer congratulations. Cole wondered how he felt about a Bright Fae joining his pack.

Everyone looked to Cole, so he started the briefing. “Okay. I have news that’s going to piss you off, and other news that, well, won’t so much. The news that’s going to piss you off is that I’ve been holding something back.”

“I’m shocked, Mr. Hunter.”

Boomer murmured, “We should never have taught him to use sarcasm.”

Cole snorted, but plowed on. “Okay. The bad news—remember how I tried to kill Riker twice, and he didn’t die?”

Thanatos kept the hood fixed on him without speaking. Cole continued, “Well, turns out it’s not just me. He didn’t die when the Retrievers tried to kill him, either. At least, not all the way. He’s a ghost.” He tapped the bracelet around his wrist. “And he’s in here.”

This was one of those times that he really wished he could see Thanatos’ face. The hood gave nothing away.

“Indeed,” Thanatos said. “And why is it you did not mention this before?”

“At first I didn’t think it was real—I thought I was just dreaming about him. And by the time I knew it was, the shit had hit the fan. But last night, I realized what he was really after. So as soon as I got the chance, I had a little chat with him, to find out what he found out when he worked for Maximilian.”

He faced Thanatos. “He knows about Illyria and the Book of Twilight. More important, he knows where she is: a place called the Door to the Mountain. They built it after you... um. Left the Fae territory. But Riker knows where it is.”

He gestured to the group. “And we’re going to go in there, get her out, and get the key to removing these bracelets so the Bright Fae will leave Ireland alone once and for all.” He paused. “Oh, wait. There’s other bad news. Sorry. The Door to the Mountain is in a sacred valley, right smack in the middle of Bright Fae territory.”

There was a deep silence in the study. Then Thanatos leaned forward in his chair, his elbows on the desk. “Tell me.” They all gathered around, and Cole opened the dispatch bag and gave Thanatos everything he’d gotten from Riker. Maps, coordinates, magical and military defenses.

“Are you sure this is accurate?” Thanatos said. “Riker is not precisely a trustworthy source.”

“As sure as I can be,” Cole said. “He had some of the intel in a bank safe deposit box. DB was kind enough to go get it in the wee hours of the morning.”

DB smirked.

Cole leaned forward. “Look. I admit I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him. But he has a thing for Ireland. He wants her to go free. And he thinks maybe if he can do a good thing before he crosses over, he might even get into heaven.”

There were snorts of disbelief around the table, but that wasn’t Cole’s problem.

“This is all we have,” he said. “And the best we’re going to get. I say we go with it.”

Gradually, the plan came together. After much discussion and studying of maps, DB said, “Okay. We know the Door to the Mountain is in this sacred place called the Valley of Silence, here.” He pointed to the map.

“Since having a powerfully magical Dark creature like a dragon suddenly appear inside the Fae world will likely set off all kinds of alarms, Plan A is that I worldwalk Ireland and Cole as close to the edge of the Valley as I can, outside its wards, and they use her Bright Fae magic as a cloak to sneak down there like brave little hobbits before the Council senses them or knows what they’re up to. Then they plant an anchor so I can bypass the wards and gate myself and Thanatos straight into the Valley.”

“Right,” Gunn said. “But because no plan survives contact with the enemy, we also prep Plan B. Where, before they sneak into the Valley, they anchor two separate gates for the Outlaw Ridge troops to come in as backup. We’ll have devices that can open the gates even when DB isn’t there.”

“Exactly,” DB said. “Best case, we use Ireland and Cole’s magic to get us through the Door, pull Illyria out, and disappear before the Bright Fae know what hit them.”

Cole said, “And if the best case doesn’t happen?” Because it never did.

“Then I throw down some supersonic shields to keep the Bright Fae off us until we have Illyria. Worst case is that Thanatos and I and you two will have to fight our way out, with the Ridge soldiers to back us up. I’m hoping that because

the Bright Fae haven't dealt with dragons for so long, they won't have adequate countermeasures against my magic."

Thanatos said, "There is one problem with that last scenario, which I see as the most likely. The Bright Fae might well attack us, and we might well have the magic to defeat them. And there is nothing I would like more than to see the destruction of the Bright Fae Council."

Cole could hear the truth in his voice.

Thanatos went on, "But the Valley of Silence is ancient, and has its own powerful magic—magic of life and peace."

"We've heard that before," Sanchez muttered. "And it was bullshit."

"Indeed. But the Valley is not a live being in the same sense as you or I—or the Bright Fae. It has a pure elemental power. The Bright Fae may have bent it to their purposes, in creating a prison at its heart—an act of violence, if you will—but its true nature will be uncomfortable with that state. If we perpetrate more violence there, the Valley may act to rid itself of all of us. Not in a vindictive or necessarily conscious manner, but more as a body rids itself of a disease or bacteria."

"Great," Boomer said. "We're not just creatures of the Dark—now we're bacteria."

"Be careful," Thanatos said ominously. "Or the mountain you call home may be persuaded to feel the same way."

Meaning Thanatos, Cole realized with a shock. Sugar had said Thanatos was the protective spirit of a mountain. And when he'd been cast out of his homeland, he'd still needed a mountain to anchor him. He'd chosen this one. He drew his power from the whole fucking Ridge.

He was literally the heart of the mountain.

Mikey had been thinking, tapping her fingers on the desktop. Now she said, "I think I might have an idea about that. The problem, not the bacteria." Boomer gave her the finger, but she ignored him. "I know some people who are really, really good at talking to rocks."

No one had any clue what she was talking about, except DB. His eyebrows went up, and then he started to smile. “Do you think they’d do it?” he said to Mikey.

“Can’t hurt to ask,” she said. “Anyway, Mikah still owes me one.”

Chapter 31

Three days later, the final logistics and contingencies had all been settled, and the plan was complete. They would move on it the next day.

Late in the afternoon, Ireland and Cole left Gunn, Mikey, Dobe and Rex executing the final pre-mission logistics, with DB and Thanatos.

As they walked down the steps of the Command Center, Ireland still felt anxious, even though she knew her part by heart.

“Shouldn’t we still be in there?” she asked Cole. “There must be more we can do. What if they need us?”

“Then they’ll call,” he said. “They’re down to how many guns they need and where to place the Ridge’s troops. Let them do their jobs.” He put his arm around her. “You need to rest, Tinkerbelle. That’s the best thing you can do right now.”

She stopped, facing him. “I’m just... it’s so big. And so many people. I can’t believe I dragged you all into my mess like this.”

“You’re my mate,” he said simply. “One of us. And this is what we do. This time, if we do it right, it’s probably going to be the least dangerous mission we’ve ever done.”

If it worked the way they planned. But Gunn’s words from a few days ago were ringing in her ears. No plan survives contact with the enemy.

“But, everything depends on us. You and me. Especially me.”

“Worrying about things that are someone else’s area of expertise isn’t going to change that. You can do this. *We* can do this.”

He cupped her chin in his hand and looked down into her eyes, his voice very serious. “I’m not saying it’s not risky, but we’ve done everything we can do to mitigate that. You need to trust the plan, and when it goes wrong, you need to trust

yourself.” He leaned forward, kissing her lightly on the lips. “I trust you. My wolf trusts you. And I’ll have your back. Always.”

“I know.” She wrapped her arms around him. “I guess... I just don’t want to face a long evening trying not to think about everything that could go wrong.”

“Would I do that to you?” he said. “Hell, would *Boomer* do that to you?”

It turned out Boomer would not. Almost as soon as they’d walked in the door of their cabin, he and Karisma showed up. They’d brought popcorn, snacks, and a queue of epic TV episodes to watch.

“In which the good guys totally smash the bad guys and take their power back,” Boomer said. “To get you in the mood.”

Switch and Breanna arrived next, bearing enormous tubs of barbecue. Boomer’s friend Dealer was behind them, with beer.

Sanchez and Madison came in after that, with Sanchez’s cousins Cisco and Mateo. Pretty soon the cabin was full of friends and family—eating, drinking, cheering on the heroes.

Just being there.

During one of the breaks between episodes, there was a knock on the door. Cole went to answer it.

It was two people Ireland didn’t recognize—a tall, dark-haired man with a hard face, and a lovely woman in her twenties, also dark.

Cole’s face split into a smile when he saw the woman, and moved back to let them inside. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on both cheeks in the European manner.

“Who’s that?” Ireland asked Mikey, who was in the kitchen with her, pouring herself a beer. She glanced over her shoulder. “Oh! That’s Hawk and Ariana. Hawk used to work for Thanatos, but now he’s the sheriff down in Rockhaven. He’s a friend of Gunn’s. Ariana is his mate.” She waved, and Hawk waved back. Ariana was too busy talking to Cole.

“We don’t want to intrude,” Ireland heard Ariana say. “We cannot stay long. But we wanted to wish the mission success.”

They were quickly surrounded by the others, who all seemed to know them. Ireland watched from the kitchen as Ariana pulled Cole aside, talking to him quietly in the corner by the wood stove. His face had a softness she’d never seen before—except when he looked at Ireland.

What were his feelings for this woman? Ireland saw her touch the bracelet, and then briefly touch Cole’s chest, over his heart. Why had Ariana felt like she had to come all the way up to the Ridge to speak to him, tonight of all nights?

But Cole was hers. She knew that. She didn’t want to go rushing over there like a jealous mate.

After another minute, Ariana gave Cole a big hug. Hawk—who’d seemed unconcerned by this exchange between his mate and another man—wandered over spoke to Cole, giving him a handclasp and a bro hug.

They headed for the door, and then Ariana said something to Cole. He raised his head and gestured to Ireland to come over.

She had to, she realized. It would be rude not to.

Cole introduced her to Hawk and Ariana, and then Ariana said they had to go. She turned to Ireland and said with a pretty Spanish accent, “Would it be too much of an imposition for me to speak to you before we do?”

There was no graceful way to refuse. They all walked out to the porch and the men continued down the steps and out under the trees, talking, leaving Ireland and Ariana together.

Ariana began, “I just want to tell you how happy I am for you and Cole.” She gave a little laugh. “I cannot get used to him using his name. You know he just used to be Boomer’s Brother?”

Ireland nodded. “He told me. I like Cole better.”

“So do I,” Ariana said. “When I met him, I was newly mated with Hawk, who helped me escape from my brother’s

drug cartel. Cole and Boomer were standing watch over me, to keep my brother and his men from harming me. I felt wrong just calling him Boomer's Brother, so I named him *El Vigilante*."

Ireland had to smile at that, even as she wondered where this was going. "It fits him."

"Better than you know," Ariana said seriously. "He explained to me that in English it is someone who fights, taking the law into his own hands. As the two of you are doing, with this mission. But in Spanish, it means... Watcher. Guardian." She paused. "Protector."

A little chill went down Ireland's spine.

Ariana said, "That is his nature, to protect. And our mates... they wish to be our protectors. It is important to them."

"I'm not sure I understand," Ireland said.

"As your mate, this—" she touched Ireland's bracelet— "is not a burden to him. Being bound to you is not a burden, but a joy. It gives him a sense of purpose."

Tears filled Ireland's eyes. Ariana smiled. "He loves you very much. I'm very happy for you both."

"I love him too."

"Yes. I can see. And like Hawk and me, I believe that Fate would not bring you together as mates, just to tear you apart. If you fight hard, if you believe in each other and the love you share, your mission will prevail. I feel that here." She touched her heart.

Impulsively, Ireland hugged her. "Thank you. Thank you for coming here to say that."

Ariana hugged her back. "All will be well. You will see."

After everyone left, Cole could feel Ireland retreating back into herself. She was scared, about the mission, and feeling guilty that so many people were putting themselves on the line for her.

He hadn't convinced her that she was one of them, that this was what they did—as Outlaw Ridge operatives, and as a pack.

She was too used to not belonging. It was a hole in her that it would take time to fill.

Finally, she fell asleep, but Cole was still awake. He needed a task to fill the dark night hours, the time before a mission when he calmed everything inside him, stilled his mind, made peace with himself.

Usually he cleaned his weapons and checked his gear, but he'd already done that. Tonight he wanted to do something else.

He took Wilbur the Wolf from Ireland's bedside table, went out to the living room, and got out the sewing kit he used to sew on buttons and make small repairs on his fatigues. Carefully, painstakingly, he stitched up the rips and holes in Wilbur's hide, adding bits of stuffing where needed. Then he got out the little army jacket he'd found in the thrift store, almost forgotten after the battle. He embroidered it with a tiny replica of the Outlaw Ridge patch they all wore on their uniforms, and put it on Wilbur. It fit perfectly.

When he was done, he felt at one with himself. This mission—protecting Ireland, freeing her to truly be his mate—that's what he was meant to do.

However it turned out, they would be together. And if this was his last mission, at least it would be the one he was most proud of.

That's what she'd given him, what he might never be able to articulate to her. She'd given him back himself—the good, the bad and the ugly—and made him whole.

Given him something to live for.

No matter what happened, he'd always be grateful for that gift.

Chapter 32

All too soon for Ireland, it was morning. And it was time.

They had the final mission briefing: Plan A, Plan B, and “the shit hits the fan.”

Ireland hoped that was enough plans.

The Outlaw Ridge wolves were ready. DB and Thanatos were standing by. Mikey’s secret weapons were on board: three giant, impossibly hot men who were apparently fire dragons. Cazbek, Zakerek, and Mikah. Who Mikey called her uncles, even though they didn’t look any older than she was. Apparently, you couldn’t tell with dragons.

Now it was all up to Ireland and Cole.

They stood with DB in the middle of the Outlaw Ridge compound, all the wolves around them: some in human form, with conventional weapons, and some in wolf form with gear packs on their backs.

Ireland’s hands were clammy and cold, and she slipped her hand into Cole’s. He smiled down at her. “You’ll be fine,” he said. “You’re a badass. An Outlaw Ridge wolf.”

Yeah. She was no longer that scared, helpless Bright Fae girl who’d always been told she was worthless—worse than worthless. Bad. Wrong, just for existing. She wished she completely believed that.

Cole tightened his hand. He believed in her. They were going to do this. She straightened her shoulders.

“Ready?” Gunn called out.

All the commanders of the different squads sounded off, then the leader of the dragons, Zakerek. Then Thanatos. Then DB. Cole squeezed her hand, and Ireland said, “Ready.”

DB made the first magical doorway to the Fae world. Cole and Ireland stepped through together. It was a grassy field in Bright Fae territory—full of sunlight and wildflowers and butterflies, with great spreading oak trees in the distance.

Farther still, in the other direction, they could see the peak of a small mountain, looking like it rose straight up from the grass.

The smell hit her like a slap in the face—the scent of the Fae world, subtly different from anything on earth. Fresher, sweeter. Tears suddenly prickled her eyes.

But they were here to do a job, she reminded herself. She dropped a small coin engraved with a dragon on the ground. Very carefully, Ireland did the spell DB had taught her, imbuing a tiny bit of magic into the coin. Since a Bright Fae was casting it, hopefully it wouldn't set off any alarms.

Once they left, the coin would serve as an anchor to allow Gunn to reopen the doorway without DB's help.

When she was sure the spell was set, they went back through the doorway, and DB closed it. They didn't test the re-opening. They'd done it dozens of times in practice, and it had worked every time. Opening it unnecessarily could draw too much attention.

Then they did it again with the second door, closer to the Valley. Two doorways, in case one was compromised. Redundancy—that's what the mission commanders called it. Just in case.

But after they'd placed the second anchor, DB closed the door behind them, starting the mission clock. They had to make their way to the Valley.

The sight of the door disappearing gave Ireland a lurch in her heart. She felt trapped. What if they were caught? What if Cole were killed? What if she were stuck here forever, a prisoner?

Cole put his hand on her back. "We'll be fine," he said. "They've all got our backs. Now we need to do our part."

He looked totally normal—dressed in his mission gear, looking exactly the way he had the day she met him. She could sense his feelings, and he was perfectly fine.

"How do you stay so calm?"

“Lots of practice,” he said. “And trust in my team. Come on. Clock’s ticking.”

They walked across the empty field in the direction of the mountain peak, her back prickling. Anyone could be watching. But no one was—or if they were, it was no one who cared they were there.

After about ten minutes, they saw some rock formations in front of them, and in ten more minutes they were at the edge of a cliff, looking down into the Valley of Silence.

It was a canyon, really—maybe a quarter of a mile across, rimmed with rock. To their right, a hundred feet away, was a steep trail leading to the bottom. The whole perimeter was of uniform height, except directly across from them, where the valley abutted the side of the mountain.

The Door to the Mountain was obvious—two ornate carved half-pillars of stone set into a vertical rock face, with a semicircle of flat rock in the ground just in front of it.

The whole valley floor was level, most of it covered by a short thick green lawn that looked like it was mowed twice a week—but there was no one there.

In the center was another large flat rock surface. This one was circular, with a pair of two-foot-high pillars in the middle. They had shackles and chains attached. In a half-circle around them were seven carved stone chairs, set up on twenty-foot plinths.

Where the Council sat...

Ireland felt a sudden, terrifying sense of déjà-vu.

“What is it?” Cole said, clearly feeling her emotions through the bracelet.

“I’ve been here before,” she whispered. “Down in that valley. Chained to those pillars. This is where they put the bracelet on me.”

Cole took her cold hands in his warm ones, pulling her around to face him. “Then this is the perfect place to retrieve the person who’s going to take it the fuck off,” he told her.

“You listen to me. Those Bright Fae are liars and hypocrites. You are not what they said you were. Even if they were here—even if they come—we have people on our team who can kick their asses back to wherever the hell they came from.”

She tried to quiet her breathing, and she felt him sending calm, certain energy through the bracelet.

Cole went on, “You are brave. And badass. And you can do this.”

She looked into his eyes, saw the certainty there. Felt it through their bond. He really believed they could do this.

“We’re fucking unstoppable,” he said. “Now, first things first—you have to get us through the wards at the top of the trail.”

That went fairly easily—as far as they could tell. They weren’t trying to deactivate the wards—yet—just use her presence as a Bright Fae to persuade them that she and Cole were authorized to enter. Nothing to see here.

No alarms went off, and no other Bright Fae appeared, so they made their way down the narrow trail—her first, and Cole covering the rear.

They encountered another set of wards near the circle of thrones. Ireland walked them through these as well, making sure to keep well away from the manacles and chains—they brought back that sick feeling of helplessness.

There was a third set of wards around the semicircle of rock in front of the door, but these parted before them as well. It was almost too easy.

Ireland dropped the coin and prepared to set the final gate anchor for DB, who would be waiting in the spirit world—a dimension that lay between the Fae world and earth. Just as she was about to start the spell, she heard a small popping sound. Cole was already aiming his P-90 as Ireland whirled around to see a silvery door appearing in the air. A Bright Fae portal.

Two Fae stepped through, wearing blue robes: Bethiaz, Bright Fae Council member, the one who’d put the bracelet on

her so long ago, and had been in charge of her ever since. The other was Sakir, one of his chief lieutenants.

“So it *is* you,” he said to Ireland. “The half shifter. I always knew the Dark would take you over one day. Did you really think I wouldn’t know you were here?”

Chapter 33

“Stop right there,” Cole said. “We don’t want to harm anyone, but we will.”

Bathiaz burst into laughter. He gestured to Sakir, who waved his hand negligently. The machine gun was yanked out of Cole’s hands and flew through the air.

Immediately, Cole joined his magic to Ireland’s and yanked it back. Sakir, startled, lost control of his spell, and the weapon returned to Cole.

“My power has grown since the last time you saw me,” Ireland said. “And I have a new Protector now.”

Bathiaz’ gaze darkened with anger.

Ireland moved her arm in an arc, and a half-circle of protection rose around them. “Can you hold it?” she murmured to Cole. “I have to set the anchor.”

He gave a curt nod. She could feel him splitting his attention between Bathiaz and Sekir, knowing they weren’t going to give up without a fight.

“You are fools!” Bathiaz called to them. “Your Dark power is nothing to ours!” He pulled a round disc like a pitch pipe from a pocket in his robe and blew into it.

A musical note filled the air, growing louder and louder even after he lowered the pipe.

The air over the semicircle of high stone chairs began to shiver.

Ireland was working the anchor spell as fast she could, but it was harder this time because of the power Cole needed to maintain the protective circle. “Should I shoot them?” Cole asked. She knew he wouldn’t hesitate.

She shook her head. She could feel the power of the Valley beneath her and all around her. A slow dark feeling of being trapped, with an anger built up over centuries.

Thanatos was right. Violent bloodshed could set it off like a volcano erupting.

A quick glance told her the shimmers over the thrones were intensifying into holographic figures. Bathiaz had called the Bright Fae Council, and they were dialing in to the Valley from wherever they were.

Bathiaz chanted a spell that thundered through the air. Out of the depths of her memory, Ireland recognized it as the activation spell for the bracelets—only in reverse.

Before she could warn Cole or finish her spell, the magic shut off like a spigot. The protective circle dropped.

And the Council was there.

Cole gripped her hand tightly. “Did you set the anchor?” he asked, barely loud enough for her to hear.

She shook her head minutely.

“Plan B,” he said.

She knew what he meant. Play for time; the Outlaw Ridge team was on the way. But that might mean guns and blood and death, and the Valley itself in revolt.

The High One, the head of the Council, looked down on them from his lofty perch.

“Outcast One!” he thundered. That would be her. According to them, she wasn’t worthy of a name; she’d chosen her own. “You have defied us, and allowed this creature of the Dark to convince you to come into the heart of our dominion and free the worst of our enemies. You are guilty of crimes against the Bright Fae. Come forth to the place of judgement!”

Ireland waited for the sense of withering shame that used to come over her when the Council spoke to her in that tone.

It didn’t happen. Their words had no power to shame her anymore.

She lifted her voice to reply. “Walk out there to be chained to those pillars, just because you told me to? I don’t think so.”

The Council was not used to being defied to their faces. For a moment the High One just stared at her.

“Keep them talking,” Cole said.

“Come forth!” the High One thundered again.

Ireland tightened her grip on Cole’s hand. “Or what?” she asked. “You’re going to kill me? Or maybe just him, because I’m kind of valuable, actually. A mix of Bright and Dark magic, which—as you well know but would like to forget—is more powerful than either of them alone.”

“Silence!” the High One said. “Or we will destroy you!”

“Yeah,” Ireland said. “You keep trying to do that, with your Retrievers and all. How’s that working out for you?”

That stunned them into silence. But not for long.

“We will destroy your companion,” Bathiaz said. “You care for him.”

“Yes, I do. He’s my mate. And for people who supposedly champion life at all times, in all forms, you sure do use a lot of death threats.”

“Creatures of the Dark deal in death. They deserve what they deal in.”

Ireland tried to follow that logic and failed.

“Don’t even try to harm him,” she said evenly. “Or we will make you regret it. I’m not your creature anymore.” She reached up and pulled her shirt collar away from her neck, showing her claiming mark. “He’s my mate. I’ve bonded with him.”

“Anathema!” Bathiaz spat. “You are defiled, and your magic must be cleansed, or destroyed.”

He pointed at her. “Now come forth!”

“No. You have no power over me.” Shit. This was escalating fast. And the wolves weren’t here yet.

Bathiaz gave an ugly laugh. “But we do.”

Together, the Council uttered a Word of Power.

Cole felt himself ripped away from Ireland like they'd been pulled by giant hands. The bracelet was torn off his wrist, and he flew through the air and landed painfully amidst a group of rocks protruding out of the ground.

Before he could get his breath, the boulders grew and changed around him, until he was trapped in a barred cage made of stone.

Looking across the valley, he saw that Ireland was on her knees on the flat rock, her wrists fastened to the low columns with golden chains.

Bathiaz gestured to Cole's bracelet where it lay on the ground. Ireland was still wearing hers. Sakir strode over and picked up the bracelet, putting it on his own wrist.

Bathiaz chanted the spell, and the bracelets lit up briefly.

The High One said, from his throne, "You have defied us for the last time, Outcast One. We will teach you the error of your ways."

He lifted a hand in Sakir's direction. The Fae held his hand out and activated the bracelet. Ireland's body seized in pain, and she screamed.

Fucking bastards. Cole threw himself at the wall of his prison, but the stone was strong with magic, and even his shifter strength wouldn't budge it.

He tried reaching out with their bond, trying to take some of the pain from Ireland. Sakir broke off the punishment, and Ireland collapsed between the pillars.

I'm with you, he said to her, feeling her pain, her anger. But for the first time, no shame. She didn't blame herself.

Sakir activated the pain again, and Cole roared with fury, connecting with her through the mate bond. *Just hold on. Plan B. Hold on a little longer.*

He could feel her reaching out to him, trying to fight Sakir. He pushed all his love and support through the mate bond, helping her to fight the magic coming through from the Protector bracelet. And then he felt something else there.

Riker.

Riker was still in the damn bracelet.

Chapter 34

Without hesitating, Cole grabbed the connection to Riker. He could see him clearly in his mind.

Help me! he demanded. *Help her! Give me the power!*

Riker hesitated for a long moment, his eyes boring into Cole's. And then he closed his eyes, yanked the magical flow away from the Fae, and shoved it through Ireland into Cole.

Cole felt like he had when Ireland first put the bracelet on him. All his nerve endings exploded at once, and the power lit up his skin from the inside.

He pushed it outward, exploding his stone cell into a million pieces. The backlash of power knocked the two Fae on their asses, stunning them.

Cole raced over to Ireland, sliding to his knees next to her. But he couldn't get close to her—intense, deadly heat poured from her skin. She was glowing from the inside out, the chain around her left wrist melted away. She had her other hand wrapped around her bracelet, as if she could somehow stop it from bleeding power.

But she couldn't. It was shining through her fingers, brighter and brighter—and when he looked across at Sakir, the twin bracelet glowing too.

The fucker wasn't trying to take the power back. He was feeding his own power into Ireland's bracelet. He was going to kill her.

Ireland's skin glowed brighter, her left hand turning into a ball of energy that was almost too bright to look at.

A sun going supernova.

She was reaching out to Cole, silently begging him to help her.

And then, to his horror, he saw the hand on the bracelet begin to dissolve. The power overload was turning her body into pure energy.

Faint and far away, he heard the shouts of the Council. Bathiaz was backing away in horror.

Ireland's arms grew brighter, more nebulous in form. Then her chest. Sparkling energy filled her.

He had to do something. He had to bring her back—or go with her.

Because they were together. Bonded. Wherever they were, whatever happened, it would happen to both of them.

Dimly, he heard Riker in his mind. *Do it. Pull her back.*

If Riker was telling him to do it, it meant he would probably die. But it didn't matter.

Cole gathered his power—and threw himself into the heart of the star.

Heat roared around him, and for one terrifying second he thought he was dead. It took all his focus and willpower to keep his form—to focus the magical energy to keep him on the physical plane.

His wolf rose up in him. *We are real. We are here. We feel the earth.*

That was it. Grounding. Paws on the earth. Air and water and stone. Arms and legs and breath.

But Ireland was still dissolving beneath him. She didn't know who she was. She'd never known. They'd taken that away from her.

Faintly, he could still feel her heartbeat, sense her blood flowing. But it was getting fainter, slower, fainter, slower...

And it stopped.

He couldn't let her go.

Without thinking, he reached into her chest and wrapped his hands around her heart, holding it with infinite gentleness.

Dropping all his barriers, he became one with her, one with her wolf.

They were part of each other, like they were always supposed to be.

We are here, he told her. We are real. We are Dark Fae, and the earth is our home. Come back.

Between his hands, he felt her heartbeat start again.

Cole. You came for me.

Always.

The energy changed—he could feel it coalescing. Carefully he withdrew his hands, watching her body grow solid once more.

She was alive.

He fed the excess energy back through the bracelets in one vicious push. Ireland's exploded into tiny golden shards. He looked across and saw Sakir on the ground, the same tiny flecks of gold bursting into a cloud above him. For a moment he thought he caught a glimpse of Riker, and then he was gone.

But Bathiaz wasn't. He drew himself up tall, power crackling around him, with the Council to back him up.

"This does you no good," he said. "Even together, you are not powerful enough to stand against us."

Portals began to open in front of the Council seats. They were coming here in person.

Cole drew Ireland to her feet, facing them, a circle of protection rising between them and the Council.

"We've done pretty damn well so far," he said. "Just two little shifters. Creatures of the Dark Fae. Evil killers."

He bared his teeth.

"You haven't seen anything yet." He put his head back and howled.

And from the top of the cliff came an answering howl—the full-throated call of the pack.

Chapter 35

The Council turned, craning their necks. Outlaw Ridge troops began appearing at the rim of the canyon, near the trail.

Wolves and armed soldiers, primed for battle.

The earth underneath their feet gave off a tremor. There was violence in the air, and the Valley didn't like it one bit.

Bathiaz gave the wolves one contemptuous glance, and spoke a word of power. Wards sprang up across the trailhead.

"Your allies are helpless. They will never get through the wards in time." They were working on it now, though, with items DB had left them.

But just in case... Plan C. Happening now. Cole said, "They don't have to."

Gunn had his amulet in his hand, and Cole and Ireland pulled on the power of pack, feeding it into their magic. Their power surged.

Then Ireland threw a ball of magic at the Door to the Mountain. It took the shape of a dragon and sped toward the gold coin on the ground.

Cole held his breath. DB had taught them this one too, for an emergency. It had *almost* always worked.

But Bathiaz sent a ball of magic of his own. It struck DB's spell and dissipated it.

The Council members began stepping through their doorways. The ground rumbled again, louder.

There couldn't be any more violence.

Ireland spoke in his mind. *Not violence. Love.*

With Cole, she tapped deep into the pack's magic—not the anger, but the love and loyalty that was at the heart of what they were.

The ground stopped rumbling.

Ireland reached out to the anchor point with their magic... and suddenly Riker appeared on top of it, in ghostly form. Connected to Ireland, and through her, to Cole and the pack; connected to the spirit world through death. He pulled the magic to the anchor point, channeling it into the ground with his own energy, and on to the spirit world where DB and the others were waiting.

Damn. The fucking bastard had really loved Ireland, after all.

A vertical strip of green light appeared.

Ireland called out, “The Son of the Mountain, consort to the Sorceress Illyria, demands a parley.”

All the Bright Fae froze, their eyes darting sideways as if they wanted to check what the others thought, but didn’t dare.

Cole almost laughed. He knew that the parley request was sacrosanct; Thanatos was supposed to be able to arrive and speak to them unharmed.

But the Bright Fae Council had proved time and time again that they thought the rules didn’t apply to them. Now they were all trying to figure out if they could get away with killing Thanatos.

The ground under their feet rumbled again, sobering Cole up. If the Council tried to kill Thanatos and the pack opened fire, this place could still blow.

The strip of light widened into a large doorway.

Through it stepped DB, followed by the three Red Dragons of the House of Al-Maddeiri in human form, their slit-pupilled eyes glowing flame-red.

Last of all came Thanatos.

He glided forward as the other four ranged themselves behind him, and stopped, facing Bathiaz and the High One. Slowly, he pulled back his hood.

His head looked like a gargoyle’s—the color of stone, with a muzzle almost like a cat’s, and bony ridges instead of eyebrows. His ears were long and swept back, and another

bony ridge ran up the center of his forehead, dividing into horns that curled backwards like ram's horns.

Holy shit.

The pack let out a collective howl. Thanatos raised his hand, and they went silent.

The Bright Fae Council looked distinctly nervous now. "Son of the Mountain," the High One said. "You haven't changed. As before, you bring war to those who only revere life, and peace."

"Is that what I've done?" Thanatos said. "I have no desire to begin a war with those who call themselves Bright Fae. Release the sorceress Illyria, who you have unlawfully kept captive these many years, and I and my people will go."

The High One laughed shrilly. "Do you think we are fools? Once you have what you want, you will kill us all!"

He made a gesture, and the Bright Fae all attacked at once.

Thanatos didn't move. DB waved his hand, and a magical forcefield rose up between their group and the Bright Fae spells—and another sprang up to protect the wolves.

"Do your worst, you coward!" Bathiaz shouted. "The Council of Bright Fae will defeat you!"

The ground beneath them started to shake and ripple. A crack appeared in the earth in front of Bathiaz.

Thanatos made a tiny motion to the red dragons.

They Changed to dragon form, opened their mouths—and began to sing.

It was a song like no other Ireland had ever heard. It shook the Valley, resonated into the deepest places of her wolf soul.

The ground stopped rumbling.

The dragons sang to the heart of the earth, molten lava and cooling rock, speaking of mountains that thrust themselves into the sky just to feel the sun on their shoulders.

Collecting a skin of earth and trees and moss, cracking and shifting under growing things.

Yet, holding in their hearts a hidden beauty—underground rivers, veins of gold and silver and copper, sparkling gemstones, creatures that belonged to the earth and darkness, whose power was as old as the earth itself.

The song spoke to the mountain with love and respect, and the whole valley vibrated with its beauty, deep voices blending in harmonies that sounded like a full choir.

Then they turned to face the Door, and the song changed—it grew softer, coaxing, asking everything before it to change, to open up. Asking the mountain itself to move.

The door didn't open. But as the song went on, Ireland suddenly realized what they were doing.

The entire rock face was moving.

The mountainside stretched like a live thing, molding itself like clay, moving to the sides so that a cleft appeared in the rock face. The carved pillars were swallowed up, bits of Fae magic sparkling and disappearing as the ancient power of the Valley released it.

As the cleft grew deeper, the rock around its sides began shaping itself, as if being sculpted by giant hands. Figure after figure appeared.

Dark Fae. Giants and ogres, trolls and vampires, gargoyles and dragons, every creature the Bright Fae had repudiated, had claimed to be above. Pixies. Goblins. Gnomes.

The mountain continued to open, to sculpt itself. And then more voices joined in the song. Wolves.

Ireland whirled around. While everyone was staring at the mountain, the Outlaw Ridge pack had come down off the cliff, all Changed to wolf form. Now they were adding their voices to the song. And Ireland and Cole sang with them.

The mountain continued to open, bit by bit, but now there were more figures added to the massive sculpture.

Shifters.

Wolves and panthers, lions and leopards and cheetahs, eagles and owls, bears and lynxes. Ireland even saw a panda, and in between the paws of one of the wolves she could swear she saw a rabbit.

The song swelled. The mountain opened wider, a v-shaped tunnel leading into its heart—and suddenly, a light burst out.

They'd reached the cavern. Illyria's prison was open.

The Bright Fae Council looked like they were about to have a collective aneurism. But there was nothing they could do—DB was using all the power of the greatest Draken sorcerer in a thousand years to do one single thing—encircle them in shields.

The whole battle was being fought with defensive magic—and with love.

Against self-proclaimed superior creatures who claimed to revere life—and who were trying their damndest to kill them all.

Thanatos turned and glided into the mountain's entrance. Glancing at each other, Cole and Ireland followed him.

Now was the time when Thanatos would need their magic.

The chamber inside the mountain was huge, but it contained only one thing: a waist-high table of rock with what looked like a curved glowing glass coffin on top of it.

Thanatos stopped at the entrance. Ireland could feel the binding spells the Fae had laid there: Bright and Dark magic, entwined. She and Cole raised their linked hands and sent their own joined magic into the spell.

Slowly, carefully, they dismantled it, and walked into the chamber, Thanatos behind them.

They reached the glass coffin. Inside, like Sleeping Beauty, lay a woman with tawny blond hair, dressed in a robe the color of the sky at dusk, a large book cradled in her arms.

The sorceress Illyria, with the Book of Twilight.

There was more binding magic surrounding the coffin. They dismantled that too, and then stepped back so Thanatos could approach.

He laid his hand gently on the top of the surface, as if cupping the woman's cheek. Ireland asked, "Are you going to release the spell?"

He gave a tiny shake of his head. "Not here. It is not safe."

Instead, he cast a levitation spell, and they pushed the coffin off the table and floated it out of the cavern.

The dragons' song changed once more—to a song of respect for the sorceress who'd been trapped in there so long.

Then the song ended, and there was silence.

Thanatos pushed the coffin through DB's doorway. The wolves streamed through next, skirting the circle of wards DB held around the Council. The red dragons Changed back to human and went next.

Only Ireland and Cole were left with DB.

Ireland turned to face the Council.

"I, Ireland, declare myself Twilight Fae—Bright and Dark together in one, free of the jurisdiction of the Bright Fae, no longer answerable to their Council." And then she added, "Deal with it."

And they turned and went through the gate, DB following and closing it after them.

Chapter 36

Back at the Ridge, the starlit valley was full of wolves, mixed with naked operatives who'd just Changed back to human. Everyone was whooping, hollering and howling.

Ireland was swept up into Cole's arms, and he held her tightly against him, his face buried in her hair. She just wrapped her arms around him and held on. They'd come so close to losing each other, and that edge of fear was still raw.

"Hey," she said, when he finally loosened his hold. "Look at us. We did a mission. We kicked ass! And we even did it in a so-called Bright Fae, non-murderly kind of way."

"Yeah," he said, smiling down at her. "But it was still pretty good."

"Bad wolf," she said.

"That's what you love about me."

And then they were caught up in other hugs and celebrations—Mikey, Boomer and Karisma, and so many others Ireland couldn't keep track. She even got up the nerve to hug the red dragons.

"Thank you for what you did," she said to them. "We couldn't have done it without you."

Mikah clapped her on the shoulder. "Mikey's my favorite niece—not to mention, she saved my mate's life one time." He tousled Mikey's hair like she was twelve years old. "Anything she wants, I'm there."

"Great!" Mikey said. "I have a list..." Mikah just laughed.

Boomer said, "That sculpture was absolutely epic. Way to rub in the ass-kicking by the Dark." He shook his head. "Too bad they'll probably destroy it before the day's out."

Zakerek smirked. "They can try," he said. "We infused a shit-ton of dragon magic into that thing. I think it's going to be there awhile."

“Especially because the mountain likes being that way,” Cazbek added. “Nobody argues with a mountain.”

“Untrue,” Thanatos said, coming up behind them, his hood back in place. “People argue with me all the time. It’s extremely annoying.”

He bowed to the dragons. “Brothers of Fire,” he said in a formal voice. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“Glad to help,” Zakerek said.

Exchanging a glance with Cole, Ireland followed Thanatos towards the place where Sugar, DB and a couple of soldiers were standing guard over Illyria’s Sleeping Beauty coffin, still floating at waist height. It glowed faintly in the darkness.

She touched Thanatos’ arm gently, and he stopped. Ireland asked, “Is she going to be okay? Will you be able to get her out of stasis safely?”

He turned to her, and for the first time since she’d met him, he sounded tired. And... sad. “I do not know as yet. Part of her soul has been parted from her body for a long time, and the protective spell is centuries old. It is difficult to tell what effect these factors may have had on her. I will have to consult my research before attempting it.”

Her heart went out to him. Everyone else was celebrating, and he couldn’t. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Centuries of searching, waiting, hoping—and all of it might have been for nothing.

She said to him, “I still have my magic. If there’s anything I can do—”

“Anything *we* can do,” Cole amended, coming up behind her. “Just let us know.”

The hood nodded slightly. “I will do that.”

Impulsively, Ireland put her arms around Thanatos and hugged him. It was like hugging a stone pillar. He stayed very still, but he didn’t pull away.

Ireland let go. Everyone held their breath. Finally Thanatos said, “Your... sentiments are appreciated.” There was a long

pause, and then he added, “I am obliged to you for your efforts. And...” Longer pause. “I am pleased that you were not harmed.”

He turned and glided away.

Ireland turned to see Karisma staring at her, eyes as big as saucers. “He *thanked* you!” she said. “And he even cared that you didn’t die.”

Boomer called after Thanatos, “We’re having a *Wild Wolf Lake* watch party at my cabin on Saturday. New season! You should come.”

Thanatos raised a hand briefly, but didn’t turn around. DB made another doorway, and he and the soldiers pushed the coffin through it.

“Think he’ll show?” Cole asked, only half-seriously.

“You never know,” Boomer said. “I think his heart might have grown another size. Someday it could be normal.”

The party mostly moved to the Rec Center after that, although half the pack stayed in wolf form and continued running around the valley, play-fighting and howling at the moon.

Somebody put out a couple of vats of beer for them at one point, which ended in drunken wolves howling at the arc lights and thinking they were the moon.

Also peeing in a lot of places they shouldn’t.

Cole and Ireland were inside, where everyone was just as drunk, but hadn’t reached the peeing-in-the-corner stage.

Ireland learned to play pool—badly—and came this close to taking Cisco Sanchez’s left ear off while trying to throw knives.

After that Cisco kept catching them in mid-air before they got to the target, just to be a dick.

Cole, after winning a fifty bucks off Cisco’s cousin Mateo at knife darts, found a seat in the corner out of the chaos. Breanna and Madison, looking for something to keep them busy while everyone was off on the mission, had prepped a

ridiculous amount of food and drinks, and Roomba-based mechanical waiters were zooming back and forth, delivering refreshments until the junk on the floor gummed up their sweepers and they had to be cleaned out.

The two women had banked on everyone coming back okay. He respected that level of faith, especially from Breanna. She'd been there for the aftermath of a mission that went badly wrong, and helped in the Med Center for hours, tending the wounded and grieving the dead.

It was hard to be the one left at home when your mate went into danger.

He wondered how Ireland would feel about that, now that they weren't bound by the bracelets. Whether she'd want to go with the team on missions that could use her magic—and when they couldn't, how she'd feel about him going into danger without her.

But that was a problem for another day. Right now she was having the time of her life, partying with the pack, finally having a home and a place she belonged. And a mate.

Mate. The word fizzed through him like champagne. The thing he thought he'd never have. A mate, a home of his own, and for the first time in his life, peace of mind.

It was going to take some getting used to, but he was damned sure willing to try.

Cole let Ireland enjoy herself as long as he could stand, and then he went over, swept her off her feet, and carried her out of the Rec Center.

“You've had enough to drink,” he told her. “Any more, and you'll be barfing.”

“Unh-uh. I have a shifter metabolism now.”

“Only when you're a wolf. I'm taking you home to be ravished.”

“Oh.” She snuggled into his arms. “Okay, then.” She started nibbling on the side of his neck, in the exact place that made him crazy.

He tripped over a rock on the path.

“Yeah. How much have *you* had to drink?” she asked.

“I’m perfectly sober.” It was a total lie. Between the whiskey and her scent, he was drunk as fuck.

He put her down, and together they staggered back to their cabin. “Are we going to stay here?” she asked, as they negotiated the steps. “In this cabin? Because isn’t it supposed to be for guests?”

Cole paused on the porch. “I kind of miss being near Boomer and Karisma,” he admitted. “Maybe we can build our own cabin further up? By the testing field?”

She leaned on him, her forehead scrunched up in that way he loved. “You mean, where the bombs go off? Um. That sounds peaceful.”

He laughed. “Maybe we can magically soundproof it?”

“Maybe we should wait to decide until after I’ve been ravished.”

“Good plan.”

He opened the door, followed her inside, then closed it and walked her backwards until she was up against the living-room wall. Then he pinned her arms over her head and started to kiss her.

He started slow, tender, gentle. Because he wanted to savor every taste of her, every scent, make every touch last as long as possible.

Forever.

She made little noises in her throat, contented and happy. *Love*, he said to her wolf. *True love. Forever love.*

Her wolf echoed it back. *Forever love.*

The kisses deepened, both of them wanting to get closer, feel more. He let go of Ireland’s wrists and lifted her up until her legs were around his waist, his already-hard shaft pressing into her.

And then he kissed her some more, because it would never be enough, and he loved the sensations fizzing through him.

They'd come through danger. They'd survived. They'd won a battle. They were invincible. Together.

He slid one hand under her shirt, teasing her breast until she moaned and rolled her hips against his. Bracing her against the wall, Cole grabbed at the waist of her pants and tore. He shoved his hand in between her legs, finding her slick wet core, pushing his fingers inside her and sliding his thumb over her clit.

She shivered, and he accelerated the rhythm—kissing her mouth, her neck, biting all the places that made her wolf come out. Her eyes went gold and she growled, moving against him.

He took his time, until her climax built and she came, her body clenching around his hand. He loved making her crazy, loved bringing her pleasure.

She clung to him, arms around his neck, and he carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. He undressed her slowly, with more kisses, and then pulled his own clothes off and tossed them.

Stretching out beside her, he pulled her on her side with one leg over his, facing him. He slid slowly inside her, watching her face, pulling her hips toward him to enter her as deeply as he could.

She gave a soft whimper, holding him to her, cupping his face in his hand.

“I love you,” she whispered. “Love you always. My heart is in your hands.” Literally. He'd literally held it, kept it beating. And he'd do it again.

“You make me whole.” And he let his love for her carry him away.

After they got their breath back, Cole sat up and started collecting the various pillows and bedcovers, which had scattered in all directions.

Ireland reached off the bed and picked up Wilbur the Wolf, who had tumbled off the bed and landed on his head. She sat him on her chest and started fondling his ears.

Cole put the comforter over the rest of her and lay down beside her, propping his shoulders up with a pillow. “You like Wilbur, now that he’s all fixed?”

She smiled to herself, still petting the wolf. “I love that you fixed him for me,” she said. “It makes me feel all squishy inside. But he didn’t have to be fixed for me to love him. I loved him when he was broken and messed up, too.”

He knew they weren’t talking about Wilbur. He leaned over and kissed her softly.

She was still toying with the wolf, a little line between her eyebrows. Finally she said, “What do you think happened to Riker? Do you think he crossed over?”

Cole didn’t know what to say. He went with, “I hope he’s not still in the spirit world, planning to haunt us. Because grateful as I am for what he did, I draw the line at him walking through our bedroom walls when I’m going down on you. Just sayin’.”

That got a small smile out of her. She said softly, “I hope he got to heaven.”

Who knew what the criteria really were, for that? Cole did know there were real afterlives for shifters, and for humans too. He said, “Maybe he did. He did change.”

And if Riker had made it, maybe there was hope for him too.

He hadn’t said it, but Ireland seemed to read his mind. “You were already going to heaven.”

Emotion rushed through him. She always thought the best of him. “You think?” he asked. “Even though I corrupted you with dark wolf magic, and made you into a wild Twilight Fae?”

“I think you might actually get extra Heaven points for that.”

“Then I’m not trying hard enough to corrupt you.”

He turned and bit her lightly on the shoulder, bringing a growl out of her. “That’s my beautiful wolf.”

He kissed her deeply, over and over, wanting to make her wild with love for him, the way he was for her.

The way he always would be. Forever.

* * *

Thank you for reading **BROKEN**! I’ve wanted to write Bro’s (Cole’s) story for so long! He really needed a mate to love him, so I’m glad he found Ireland. I hope you enjoyed reading it!

Stay tuned for more Outlaw Ridge books! (Mateo? Cisco? Thanatos?) You’ll have to wait and see... In the meantime, you can learn about the **Wild Blood Shifters** and Brandon Fierro (owners of the safe house in Louisville and friends of DB) in their own series, starting with **Brandon’s Mate**!

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B083PWTMSF>

Or if dragons are your thing, you can read about the red dragons and the rest of the Al-Maddeiri clan in the **Darkwing Dragons** series, starting with **Dark Dragon’s Mate**:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07N4N86TX>

To learn about upcoming releases and other fun stuff, make sure you sign up for my newsletter!

<https://www.subscribepage.com/wildebooks1>

List of Anastasia Wilde Books:

Silverlake Shifters:

Fugitive Mate

White Wolf Mate

Tiger Mate

Silverlake Enforcers:

The Enforcers: KANE

The Enforcers: ISRAEL

The Enforcers: NOAH

Bad Blood Shifters:

Bad Blood Bear

Bad Blood Wolf

Bad Blood Leopard

Bad Blood Panther

Bad Blood Alpha

Wild Dragons:

Dragon's Rogue

Dragon's Rebel

Dragon's Storm

Darkwing Dragons:

Dark Dragon's Mate

Dark Dragon's Wolf

Red Dragon's Desire

Red Dragon's Heart

Red Dragon's Flame

Wild Blood Shifters:

Brandon's Mate

Colton's Mate

Remington's Mate

Damien's Mate

Titan's Mate

Phantom's Mate

Brock's Mate

Outlaw Wolves:

Stolen (A Prequel Novella)

Hunted

Rescued

Chased

Ignited

Broken