



THE REJECTED BOOK TWO

CLAIMED

BY MONSTERS

ROMY LOCKHART

Claimed by Monsters

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Author's Note

Sweet Omegaverse Series

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Foreword

This is the second and final book in The Rejected Duology, which is a slow burn paranormal romance, with most of the steam contained in this volume.

The story is set in the same paranormal world as my Hybrid Shifters novels but doesn't feature any character crossovers or interwoven storylines.

Content Warnings: The main character is deaf and has been made an outcast in her pack. The storyline contains some bullying, rejection, violence, death, suggestions of sexual assault. The violence, death and threats are graphic and there are multiple instances in this volume. Please also note this is a reverse harem novel and there are steamy scenes with all of the main characters together in this novel.

Chapter One

SCAR

Alphas must rely on their instincts if they are to turn into effective leaders. I learned that lesson many years ago, when I became guardian to my brothers as a young child. There was no room to doubt myself while I was protecting them, and no space for mistakes while they were relying on me to keep them alive as infants.

Lightning-fast responses developed from trusting my gut, and I was very rarely proven wrong.

That is why I know the sense of unease that fills me while we wait for the portal to appear is not a feeling that should be ignored. It is tied to my instincts. My gut is telling me something is wrong.

Everything inside of me goes tense.

When I look upon my brother's faces, I can tell they are having the same gut feeling.

As soon as the portal opens, we must seek out our mate.

I will not be able to erase this feeling until I know Lita is safe.

“We should never have come back here,” Fox mutters, folding his arms under his chest.

Snake hisses, as usual in agreement with our feline brother.

It feels as if the portal is taking longer than usual to appear. I know that cannot be true. It is always open at the same moment in time, every night. It only seems like it is taking forever tonight because we wish to be in Nightshade now. It is extremely difficult to be patient under these circumstances.

The dismal landscape of The Abyss remains unchanged as seconds seem to stretch out into minutes.

Scratch moves to my side, and murmurs, “What if the portal does not open?”

The thought is not a good one, but that is all it is.

“The portal is going to open,” I assure him, loudly enough to reassure Fox and Snake at the same time. “It is almost time.”

“That is not good enough,” Fox complains. “We are trapped here waiting while our mate is out there without us.”

He is right, and I will not allow us to be trapped here a second time.

This barren place is no longer where we belong.

It is not our home. It was never meant as one.

“Patience, Fox. It will not be much longer.”

Scratch growls quietly as Fox frowns at me.

“I am never coming back here,” he proclaims. “This place is cursed.”

“*We* are never coming back here,” I correct him, apparently to his surprise.

“We ... We are not?” Scratch asks, sounding uncertain.

My fellow wolf has been ready to leave The Abyss for some time, but it is also the only place he has ever really known. This transition will be hardest on him. I put my hand on his shoulder.

“We will earn our new home, Scratch, and it will be a real home. Not a prison.”

He nods slowly, but I can tell he is still processing the idea of leaving The Abyss behind.

It is where I raised him from a day-old baby with sharp little nails and a habit of scratching me whenever he was upset. He may have since seen parts of the small town we were ejected from through the trees, but this is where his important milestones happened.

Everything up until he met Lita in Nightshade’s forest.

“Yes,” Fox says, nodding. “A real home, with a mate.”

Snake hisses his agreement, adding something unfamiliar at the end.

Fox smiles at him. “Yes, and with many children of our own.”

Snake adds something else, which I believe contains the word for 'light'.

Fox snorts. "You are obsessed with those streetlamps."

"You will have many chances to stand under them once we have found Lita and dealt with the chimera," I tell him, making it clear he is not to be distracted when we arrive in Nightshade.

He hisses unenthusiastically, his eyes flickering at me.

"He knows we must find our mate first," Fox scoffs. "We never should have left her on her own out there."

Snake hisses his agreement, adding something less clear at the end which I believe is his version of bad language. It sounds much prettier than some of the ugly words we are familiar with.

"She is not alone," I remind Fox. "And we will be with her soon."

Though not soon enough, by any of their standards, including my own.

Time feels as if it is slowing to a stop.

For many seconds, we are left holding our breath, waiting for the portal to appear where it always appears. I refuse to allow myself to believe it will not open tonight, but I am beginning to fill with heavy, silent apprehension right before the first signs of its presence show up.

The faint glimmer of witch-magic fills the air.

An oval image of Nightshade's forest slowly opens up until it is big enough to step through.

We breathe out a collective sigh of relief before I lead my brothers toward the open portal.

Finally, we can leave The Abyss, but we must be careful if we are to do what needs to be done to save our mate and this town we will claim as our own.

I assess my surroundings before I move forward and gesture for my brothers to follow me.

In the couple of seconds it took me to figure out we aren't alone, I can see in my brother's faces that they were able to do the same. They regard me silently, awaiting instruction.

Fox looks as if he is ready to burst, but he does not make a sound.

He knows how important this is.

Our mate is nearby, but so are the Alpha's sons.

My instincts were not wrong. Lita is in danger.

I do not wish to alert them to our presence, so I motion to my brothers to follow me in single file, following the sounds of our father's accepted son's voices. Surrounding them would perhaps be better, but it sounds as if they are close enough together that it will not matter.

The voices quickly get clearer, and the things they are saying make my blood boil.

It is clear that they have our mate with them, though she is not making any sound.

I do not need to hear her to know where she is. One inhale and I can taste her scent.

“You’re the one obsessed with this reject, Orion. Just fuck her already. I don’t know what you’re waiting for.”

It is the voice of Apollo, the little boy named after a God.

The child who pissed himself when he laid eyes on a real Alpha.

I can see him now, through the trees, standing naked with his hands on his hips and an air of swaggering bravado around him.

“Yeah,” a lower voice adds. “Take your turn with the virgin reject, Orion. Make it count before I wake her up screaming. She’s going to wish she never crossed us. It’s time she learned a lesson ...”

Apollo snorts. “We’re going to kill her after we use her up, Thor. She won’t have any use for your lesson.”

“You’d better go second.” This voice sounds low too, but not quite as low as Thor. “Thor intends to cut her pussy up with his claws. You wouldn’t want to get your dick covered in her blood.”

“I want her to feel intense pain before she dies,” Thor says, coming into sight, his gaze on the ground.

He doesn't look any more like a man than his brother. These children are playing at Alphas out here in the woods. They really think that's what they are. It's pathetic.

"Every one of you can shut the fuck up," a more commanding voice rings out. This one sounds like their leader. "No one touches her until I say so. Now, get the rope, or I won't tell you where I stashed your clothes for the walk back to town."

Two more steps lead me out to the spot where the Alpha's sons are standing around our unconscious mate. The crunch of twigs under my foot makes all of them turn toward me, and my brothers who are moving to stand at either side of me.

I get the pleasure of seeing horror grow rapidly in Apollo's eyes once more.

"Don't bother with the rope," I tell him, the sound of my command making him stumble backwards.

He backs into a tree and stands there frozen, staring up at me, and then my brothers, his body beginning to shake.

"What the fucking *fuck* ..." Thor exclaims, his eyes wide as he looks our way.

He's standing close to Lita, and another boy who looks exactly like him is a few steps behind him. The other boy shakes his head.

"No. No ... It's not time for the portal to open ..." he murmurs in his low voice.

"Shush, Fenrir," the one with the commanding voice says.

“But, Orion ... It’s not time ...” Apollo murmurs.

Orion rolls his eyes. He is the only one who doesn’t seem afraid.

“It’s been an hour, you dumb fucks. Your mom only bought us that much time, Apollo.”

“My ... My mom?” Apollo asks, his teeth beginning to chatter.

Well, we definitely know who the leader is out of this group.

Orion is the only one out of the four who has the energy of a real Alpha.

Not that it’s going to help him once I’m ripping out his entrails.

“Yes, your mom,” Orion tells him. “She can manipulate the weather. So that’s what she did. She did it to help us trick Lita. To make her think she would be saved if she ran out here.”

Apollo looks as if he can’t work out what his brother is talking about.

“I don’t ...” He shakes his head. “My mom’s a witch?”

Orion laughs. “Yeah, sure. She’s a witch.”

He thinks his brothers are idiots.

Clearly, he knows what he is, what they all are, even if they don’t.

“Step away from our mate,” I growl at all of them, my gaze fixed on Orion.

“Your *mate*?” Orion asks, looking down and back up at me.
“That’s funny. I don’t see a mark on her.”

“What the fuck ... what the fuck *is this*, Orion?” Thor barks.

He shudders as his gaze moves over us, but he looks at his brother for his instructions.

Orion stares back at him. “This? This is your test, Thor. Prove you’re an Alpha or die at the hands of a reject mutant who should have been killed the second he was born. I’d wish you luck, but I already know you’re no Alpha. I hope your death isn’t too painful, brother.”

He spits out the last word, and it is crystal clear that these so-called brothers do not have any love for one another. By the reactions of his brothers, it looks as if Orion may have hidden his true nature up until this moment.

Thor frowns at Orion as if he is waiting for his brother to reveal the punchline of a joke.

Orion stares back without uttering another word.

“Fuck this!” Thor snaps, before he shifts forms and takes off, bolting into the woods.

Fox rushes after him without a second of hesitation, and I know which one of the two I would place my bet on for coming back alive. Thor won’t get away.

Fox heard the same conversation I did.

He knows what that creep threatened to do to our mate.

My feline brother will take great pleasure in making sure Thor experiences intense pain before he dies. I have no doubt he will get what he deserves.

I move my gaze back to the remaining brothers, expecting to see Orion beginning the shift into his true form. There is a thoughtful look on his face, but he has not moved, and I do not think he is about to. The other boy who looks like Thor is standing as if he is frozen in place.

The last brother I expect to see move is Apollo, and yet he is the one who surprises me with an attack. He springs to his feet and lunges, arms out and partially shifted to bring out his claws.

I move forward and capture him by the shoulders before he can hit me, my claws sinking into his skin as I hold him away from me. He lets out a wail, and he kicks his feet toward me, but there is nothing he could do to hurt me physically. I am disgusted that this idiot has blood in common with me.

He talked so casually about hurting my mate, and he was ready to attack her while she was vulnerable. While she could not defend herself.

My rage ignites afresh as I stare at him.

I have no qualms with ending his pathetic excuse for a life.

Staring back at him, I flex my fingers, making the wounds in his arms bleed a little more.

His breath catches when his wail ends. He stares up at me, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Even in this sorry state, I see hatred in his eyes.

I feel that same hatred in my heart for him.

“Any last words before I rip your sorry body into shreds?” I growl at him.

“You ... killed my ... father ...” he gasps out.

I grin at him. “And now I’m going to kill you.”

Even though he knows I’m telling the truth, his stare doesn’t change.

He hates me as deeply and viciously as I hate him.

The sudden flurry of movement when Thor’s twin shifts into his wolf form momentarily splits my attention. He sprints off in the direction of the portal.

Apollo uses the distraction to flail and kick, trying vainly to get me to drop him.

It is mildly annoying, but I try to ignore him.

“Scratch,” I order, turning my head and nodding at my brother.

Scratch takes off after Thor’s twin, and I no longer need to worry about him getting away.

I’m ready to give Apollo my full attention, when Snake hisses at my other side, asking for orders.

It would be easy to hand Apollo over to him, but I’m feeling greedy tonight.

I want to kill this idiot, and his leader, Orion.

“Go help Fox,” I tell Snake, knowing he’ll have more fun with Fox.

Snake hisses excitedly as he climbs the nearest tree and swings out of sight.

Fox will take his time with Thor, and Snake will help him make it more interesting.

My youngest brothers are bloodthirsty, and Scratch is not.

That is not to say he will not do what needs to be done.

He will just not take any pleasure in it.

I intend to enjoy every moment.

I did not expect to feel this way about killing, but these idiots deserve what’s coming to them, and I will be doing the town and the world a favor by getting rid of two parasites who have to hurt others constantly to keep themselves alive.

Apollo scratches my arm and I flex my fingers, moving them down and digging them into his flesh, hard, for the second time. He grits his teeth and muffles his own scream of pain.

“I’m going to make this hurt,” I tell him, as I move my right hand down to a lower point on his arm before I yank and twist in one swift movement. The sound of tearing flesh and muscle is sickeningly loud and wet. His shriek is one of ear-splitting anguish as I rip his limb from his body and toss it to the ground.

Blood gushes out of the wound, and he passes out within seconds.

He's almost gone already, and that is disappointing.

The shock might have already started the process.

If it hasn't, the blood loss will do it soon enough.

I release him to the ground, where I crouch and slap him hard in his slack-jawed face.

He does not waken. My claws score red divots across the pale surface of his skin.

This was too easy a death for him.

He deserves worse. They all do.

I get back to my feet and look at the last brother standing, the leader.

Orion smirks at me from where he's standing over my mate's unconscious human form.

"You think you can take me on alone, mutant?" he asks.

"I think it's time you died an ugly death," I tell him, as I step on Apollo's head, crushing it under my foot. Blood splashes up over my ankle and sprinkles the grass at Lita's toes. "That is what you deserve for planning to hurt our mate."

He kneels in the grass, and lifts Lita's hair back from her pale, slender neck.

"You know, you keep saying that, but I don't see a mark on this pretty virgin's throat."

He looks up at me, grinning with glowing eyes and lengthening fangs.

“The first mark is the one that counts, Scar, and this little wolf is mine, not yours.”

His head goes down, and I rush toward him, my heart pounding in my ears.

Chapter Two

SCRATCH

I run through the woods, chasing down Fenrir's wolf, still dazed by what I just heard and witnessed with my own eyes and ears. The casual viciousness, and the vulnerability of our innocent mate was enough to stun me into inaction. Seeing Lita lying there in the grass while those evil men talked about what they wanted to do to her made my head spin.

I am glad Scar was able to take charge, because I was frozen in that moment.

His order is what it took to get me to move, to force me into action.

Now, I'm close to capturing one of the men who would have tortured and killed my mate, and I know exactly what needs to be done to him once I've caught him.

He runs as fast as he can run, but I can run faster.

I push myself hard and I catch up, ready to kill.

It's as easy as hunting small animals for dinner.

I launch myself at him and snap my jaws over the side of his neck. He moves, and I tear off a chunk of his face instead. He squirms under me, panic setting in as he tries vainly to push me away. He does not believe it is too late, but it is over for him now.

I bite down on his shoulder, his side and his chest.

He is missing several strips of flesh when I stop using my fangs.

He takes the moment's reprieve to return to his human form, perhaps expecting to speed the healing process of his wounds. He is breathing hard when he looks up at me, fear in his eyes.

His injuries are verging on fatal. If he was merely human, he'd be dead already.

As a shifter, he is holding on to life by the tips of his fingernails.

This petrified thing does not know he is a chimera, and he does not deserve to be told.

Not after what I heard he and his brothers planned to do to my mate.

For that he should die alone with no advantages.

“What are you?” he whispers.

“I am who you could have been,” I tell him. “Who you never were.”

He frowns, not understanding. There is no time left to help him.

He's slipping away now. Soon he'll be gone.

"Do you regret anything?" I ask.

He lays back and stares up at the night sky.

I'm not sure if he can hear me.

His eyes are glazing over.

He is almost gone.

"I wish things had been different ..." he murmurs, before he turns on his side and coughs up blood.

He stops moving a few seconds after that, and I wait a moment to check his pulse.

He is dead, and it does not feel like a good thing.

He got what he deserved, but ...

I thought I would feel good about killing those who tried to kill me.

There was a time, not so long ago, that it seemed like something I would enjoy.

That was a violent fantasy I was able to imagine because I didn't see our enemies as people.

The reality feels much different. Even knowing what this boy had planned with his brothers is not enough to make me feel as if I was righteous in killing him. It is simply something that needed to be done. It was necessary, but it was not fun.

He can no longer be a threat to Lita, and his kind will have one less chimera in Nightshade which will make it much

easier to destroy the remaining parasites.

I will be glad when this is over.

Though I would do anything for my pack and my mate, I know now that I do not enjoy killing. It is simply a necessary evil.

Sighing, I lift the dead body over my shoulder.

I should bring him back to the clearing.

Scar will have fresh orders for me.

Our night has only begun.

Chapter Three

FOX

I did not know I would enjoy playing cat and mouse, but this chase is oddly invigorating. Thor is of course the mouse, even if he looks like a wolf right now. All of his vicious, nasty words flood through my head as I hunt him through the woods. He was desperate to defile my mate and cause her as much pain as possible. I cannot say I would like to do the first of those things to him in return, but I will make sure he is in as much pain as I can give him before I end his life.

He will scream, and he will bleed, and eventually he will die.

It does not surprise me when Snake joins me, swinging from the trees overhead.

He moves past me, and I know what that means. My reptilian brother will stop the chase and help bring it to its natural, blood-spattered conclusion. I cannot wait.

As I expect, Snake drops down in front of the shifted wolf, making Thor crash into his body and tumble at his feet. I

growl as I advance on the now trapped wolf. He launches himself at me and scratches my arm with his little wolf teeth. I grab him, yanking him away from my arm before biting into his shoulder deeply enough to taste blood.

I have marked him, but the intent makes him my prey.

That is all he is now. Nothing more.

I move back at the sound of his whimpering.

I believe he knows what I have done.

Marks are a wolf shifter thing, and he has been raised as one of those, even if it is not the truth of what he is. He does not seem to know that truth and I am not prepared to tell him. It is unlikely that he would believe me, besides. He does not seem smart enough to know he is different from the other wolves.

“Shift back into your human form, Thor,” I snarl at him.

He ignores me, and I say it a little louder.

It is very difficult to ignore a true Alpha’s command. The irony is, if he were actually an Alpha, it wouldn’t work on him no matter how loudly I demanded it.

Knowing he is as far from an Alpha as it gets, I am certain I can command him.

Chimera or not, he is spineless.

Thor shifts back to his human form, but he partial shifts a second later, bringing back his claws and his teeth. It’s oddly amusing.

He is not going to get very far with either weapon.

I am much bigger, and stronger than he is.

“How does it feel to be helpless?” I ask him.

He snarls at me. “Fuck you!”

“No thank you, however, if you insist on some sort of fucking, I can find something big and sharp to fuck you with to make sure you bleed profusely.” I glance at Snake. “If you wouldn’t mind, brother, I think we need a stick. A fat one with sharp branches ...”

Thor swings his claws at me, narrowly missing my chest.

“Never mind,” I tell Snake, who only shook his head at me when I asked him for the stick anyway.

My brother knows when I am serious, and when I am not.

Thor is not familiar with my sense of humor.

I can smell fear under his anger.

“It feels too easy to kill you,” I admit to Thor. “It’s not satisfying at all. You’re no challenge. You’re much too weak.”

He kicks me, and growls, his face turning red with the effort he’s exerting to try and get free of my grasp. He manages to scratch through my fur with his claws. It tickles, a little bit.

“You should be dead!” he roars, as his hands curl into fists at his sides.

“Well, clearly, I’m not dead, but you will be, soon.”

Just as soon as I figure out how it should be done.

Slashing his throat isn't vicious enough, but it might be my only option if he keeps wriggling around in my grasp, kicking his legs and slashing with his arms.

That would be disappointing, but it would also be effective.

Ugh. No. It's too much like something Scratch would do.

He is the efficient one. I prefer to show a little creative flair.

Snake hisses close to me and I look at him, blinking slowly at the bundle in his hands.

"Where did you get rope? Never mind. Yes. We'll tie him to that tree over there."

"Put me down and fight like a man," Thor growls.

I laugh at him. "Fight like a man? That is the sentiment you wish to express now? Where was that sense of fairness when you were talking about doing vile things to our mate? No. You do not deserve to be given a fair chance to live."

I bring him to the tree and push his worthless body against it.

Snake ties his right wrist up, earning a slashed open forearm in doing so.

I wince at the sight of my brother's blood. He does not heal quickly. I do not like that he is injured, no matter how small it seems.

He hisses, telling me he's fine as he wraps the rope around the tree.

I press Thor against the tree one handed, my claws sinking into his chest.

He tries to scratch me with his free hand, and I crush it in my fist, squeezing harder until I hear something snap.

His face pales and he groans, his head rolling back and bumping against the bark of the tree, before it sinks forward. I hold my breath for a moment, almost afraid that I went too far too soon. Then, his chest rises slowly, and falls. Rises and falls. I exhale in relief. He is not dead yet.

Snake gives me a questioning glance as he holds the end of the rope near Thor's arm.

I slap Thor's face hard with my free hand, and he wakes back up with a pained groan.

“He is alive. Do not worry.”

Snake hisses to let me know he is waiting for me to move so he can wrap the rope around the wrist of Thor's broken hand. A shard of bright white bone juts out of his skin, surrounded by crimson.

Snake is careful as he secures the rope tightly around his wrist.

Thor stares at me, and I can tell there are vicious thoughts inside his head.

I imagine there are many nasty things he would like to do to me, and my brothers.

He will not get the chance to act on those thoughts.

“You will regret this,” he growls at me.

“I can assure you, we will not,” I tell him.

“My brothers will make you regret it.”

“Well, I do not mean to lower the tone of this moment with a pissing contest, but my brothers are much bigger and stronger than yours, and they are killing your brothers right now.”

Snake hisses, turning his head to the side and nodding before hissing some more.

“You’re kidding. You can tell?”

He nods and I shake my head.

Thor is staring at me with narrowed eyes when I look back at him.

“Two of your brothers are already dead,” I confess. “The one that looked like you, and Apollo.”

Apparently, Snake felt it when those two were gone.

I’ll have to ask him to explain that to me fully later.

Right now, we have more important things to think about.

Like which piece to cut off of Thor first.

“No!” Thor blurts. “They can’t be dead. We’re Alphas ...”

“No. *We* are Alphas. You were playacting as Alphas. There is a big difference.” I move in closer. “You obeyed me when I commanded you. In what world can one Alpha be commanded by another? We are not equals. We are not even close.”

Snake hisses emphatically as I step back.

I take the knife out of my pouch and pass it to my brother.

I have had my fun with Thor. It is time to give Snake his chance.

He takes the knife from me and issues a soft, questioning hiss of surprise.

I nod at him, and he takes it, hissing out his plans enthusiastically.

I can't help but smile as I look back at Thor.

“Yes, I think you *should* start by removing his manhood.”

Thor pales again, but this time he does not faint.

“Wait. No! Please, God, No! I'll do *whatever* you want ...”

There is nothing he could do that would please us.

I watch as Snake moves in close with the knife.

It is time to make him bleed.

Chapter Four

SNAKE

I am glad Scar asked me to help Fox. I know that Scratch is disgusted when we are too gleeful in our hunts, and I am feeling very happy about this one. The man we are hurting was going to do terrible things to our mate. He deserves to be punished before he is sent to whatever hell exists for his kind.

Fox gives me the knife he made for me.

He insists on carrying it because my skin is too easily broken, but I am keen to find a way to carry it on my own. My brother knows I envy his razor-like claws and fangs, and that is why he made me this weapon forged out of bone. It is small but it is extremely sharp. It is perfect for this task.

Fox backs away from our prey, giving me space.

The human trembles, his body shuddering as if he is trying to shift forms.

I examine him for a moment, but it is okay.

He is only trying to turn into a wolf.

He is not aware that his shifter self is an illusion.

I doubt he knows how to turn into his true form.

None of them seem to know what they are.

If they did, they would not be dead now.

“Dick and balls,” Fox instructs, folding his arms as he watches me from the side.

I hiss back at him that I know what a manhood is, and I let my eyes flicker before I crouch down in front of Thor and put the blade of the knife against the skin on his pubic bone. I kneel on his feet to keep him from kicking me while I am working.

“Take it slow,” Fox murmurs.

I do not answer him this time, as I am absorbed by the act of cutting.

The knife is so much more precise than a claw. I have enjoyed using it in our hunts.

This is very different than chasing and capturing small animals to fill our stomachs.

It is thrilling in deeper, more satisfying ways.

This terrible person would have hurt our mate.

It felt good to see Fox break his hand, and it feels even better to be the one who gets to carve off an offending piece of his body. He would have violated our mate if he'd had the chance. He does not deserve this pink lump of flesh that gives him his designation as a man.

He will not be a man for much longer.

I am overtaken by the need to hum as I slice my way under his sac and around his penis.

The happy sound is as close to singing as I can get. It is a wordless expression, but it is full of joy.

The human's screams don't seem so loud as I cut deeper, and Fox begins to hum along with me.

I take my time, severing his manhood slowly, and enjoying the sight of his blood as it starts to trickle, before I get deep enough to make it pour, and then gush. His legs are painted brightly in the scarlet color when I am finally done.

I only realize his screams have stopped once I am cutting through that last connecting thread of flesh.

The pale pink blob of useless skin covered in wiry hair plops to the ground and the open wound continues to gush blood down his legs, and between them, to stain the tree's bark.

“Good work, brother,” Fox tells me, admiration in his tone.

He is not disappointed at allowing me this kill, because we experienced it together.

I hiss back in satisfaction, and then make a joke.

He laughs. “Yeah, I don't think a slap will wake him up this time.”

But he moves over to the corpse and slaps him across the face anyway. This time he puts enough force into it that he snaps Thor's neck.

There is a bone sticking out the side of his throat when his head rolls back. Blood drips from it thickly, and I notice the blood is starting to thicken in the wound I gave him, too.

Perhaps cutting his manhood off took much longer than I thought it did.

It seems as if he might have died quite soon after I started to cut into him.

That is a little disappointing, but it does not matter now.

He was a threat to our mate. He is no longer a threat.

“Okay, let’s get back to Scar,” Fox tells me. “See if he needs any help with the last one.”

I hiss at him, telling him he is forgetting about something.

It is a boring maintenance issue, but we must deal with the body now that we have killed him.

Fox pulls a face. Now that the fun part is over, he would rather leave the mess for someone else to clean up. That is not the way Scar raised us, and he knows it.

“All right. I suppose you’re right. We shouldn’t just leave him there,” he grumbles.

Sighing, Fox goes to the body and unties the rope from Thor’s right hand.

The body slides to the ground, and he uses the rope to drag our victim through the grass.

It is lazy, but it will stop him from getting covered in blood.

“Got a problem?” he asks, when he looks back at me.

I nod quickly, darting to the base of the tree and picking up the blob of hairy flesh that Thor called a manhood. It is even smaller than it looked while it was hanging between his legs.

Fox screws up his nose as I hold it up.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to ...” Fox starts, trailing off when I bring it over and cram it into the dead man’s mouth. “Oh. Okay. Yeah, I like it. Good one.”

I shake my head at him. He always thinks I’m going to put gross things in my mouth.

I hiss, and he shrugs as he apologizes.

“I didn’t *really* think you would eat it,” he murmurs.

I flicker my eyes and start climbing the nearest tree.

Swinging from tree to tree will get me back to Scar faster.

Fox can drag Thor’s body through the woods on his own since he offended me.

Chapter Five

SCAR

Knocking Orion's head back from my mate, I am relieved to see he has not broken her pale skin with his fangs as he intended. He crashes to the ground and smirks at me as he moves slowly back up onto his feet.

"You are very easy to goad, brother."

"You are not my brother," I tell him, denying the blood link we share from our father.

That man intended to kill me, and this boy tried to hurt my mate. We will never be brothers.

"I guess not," Orion says. "Because you were born to die, and I was born to rule."

He is swift on his feet and dodges my hand when I reach out to grab him.

"You will never rule this town," I promise him, knowing I would die if it were necessary to drag him to his own death. His brothers were weak, but this one has a cunning streak that I do not like.

“No.” He shakes his head. “You will never rule Nightshade. You will die, and Lita will be mine.”

He says such things, yet he shows no sign of changing form. His body remains small and human. If he is fully aware of what he is, it does not make sense that he would not shift into his chimera form to gain the advantage in our fight.

It is troubling, but I should not question it for too long.

I may lose my own advantage.

“You will die, and Lita will never have to see your face again,” I growl at him.

He laughs, dodging me again with those swift feet of his.

He will only elude me for so long, considering how quickly he is backing himself into a tree next to a cluster of bushes with sharp leaves. His fragile skin would be shredded up nicely if he tried to escape me through those bushes.

“She likes my face a lot more than she does yours,” he snaps back, scowling at me. “How could you think for one minute that a girl like her could fall for a monster like you?”

His expression is smug, up until he backs into the tree and realizes he’s trapped in a corner.

The sliver of white-cold-fear that shows in his eyes only lasts for a moment, but it’s enough to show how he really feels about getting into this fight with me.

He is as helpless as his brothers.

He may have Alpha energy, and he might know what he truly is, but that does not mean he is able to shift into his true form. If he could, I'm sure that would be his move. Since he is not, something must be stopping him.

He stares back at me defiantly. "Kill me, then, brother. Spill my blood on the forest floor where yours should have spilled before I was even born."

I take his head in my hands, and he remains stoic.

A true Alpha would be, in this situation.

But a true Alpha would never threaten an innocent the way he and his brothers threatened my mate.

Whatever he is, he is no longer permitted to draw breath.

I sink my claws into his skin, making him bleed.

He shivers before I move his head, yanking and twisting until his spine is severed.

When I let go, he slips to the ground, his body an empty sack of flesh and bone.

Sinking to my knees, I crouch over his limp body and tear his chest open with my claws.

Blood spatters over me, like hot rain burning through my fur and staining my skin.

I break his ribcage, cracking sounds loud in my ears as I stare into his body.

My rage is subsiding, but the instinct remains to rip out his heart.

It no longer beats, but I tear it out of its home and crush it in my hand, piercing it with my claws.

Once that has been done, I am able to think more clearly.

The anger that fuelled me when I got out here is gone.

I have ended the lives of two of the men who threatened my mate.

They tried to hurt Lita, and I stopped them.

We stopped them.

My brothers will be back soon, bringing the corpses of the others back to me.

I let Orion's heart drop back into his ruined body, and I wipe my hand on a clean patch of grass.

There is blood all over the ground, all over my body.

It's everywhere. I can taste it in my mouth.

I get to my feet slowly.

Crimson drops drip to the ground, spilling from my blood-soaked fur.

As I stand and observe the carnage I've created, I do not feel good.

It is a monstrous, inhuman thing I have done. A violent, feral act.

Given the circumstances, I do not regret it, but I am afraid of how our mate will respond.

She did not see a monster when she looked at me before, and I do not wish for her to see one now.

It pains me to think I may have disappointed her.

Moving to her side, I can see that she is still unconscious on the ground, looking as if she is sleeping peacefully in the grass. Careful not to get close enough to drip anything onto her, I crouch down and inspect her pale body.

She is breathing normally, and her heartbeat sounds steady. There are no visible injuries until I find a spot of skin on her upper leg that looks like it is just starting to bruise.

When I find the tranquilizer dart on the ground a moment later, it is easy to piece together what must have happened.

Our mate was chased, likely while she was in her wolf form.

They were only able to make her stop because they sedated her from a distance.

It is a cowardly act that stirs up my anger.

I do not like that our mate was out here alone with those vicious men.

A decision I made caused this, and it could have turned out so much worse.

We never should have left Lita in Nightshade once we found her.

I will not make that same mistake twice.

I drop the empty dart to the ground.

From now on, Lita has our protection here in the town where we were all born.

I get to my feet and try to think about what needs to happen next.

There is still much work to do before we can ensure our mate's safety.

A rustling of foliage makes me look up from her peaceful face.

One of my brothers has completed his task.

Scratch walks through the trees and dumps a body down on the grass, next to Orion's.

He shudders before he stalks toward me. He barely has a spot of blood on him.

My wolf brother has always been a little squeamish about killing.

He is not overly fond of blood, and I am fairly well coated in it.

Concern fills his bright blue eyes as he sinks to his knees at Lita's back.

"How is she?" he asks, his voice soft.

"It seems they shot her with a sedative," I tell him, knowing he might not fully understand the concept. I have memories of watching movies with my mother where wild animals were hunted by humans, but he does not have any frame of reference for this.

“So, she is sleeping because they made her ... consume something?” he asks. “Not because she is hurt?”

“I believe so,” I admit, not bothering to try and explain the dart. It isn’t important.

“That is a relief,” he murmurs.

“There is much to do,” I tell him.

He nods. “There are at least three other chimera to deal with, and it is doubtful that they will be unaware of what they are like their sons were.”

He is right. The faster we deal with those women, the better.

But we must clean up this mess and look after our mate first.

Lita is our priority now.

“Go find Fox and Snake,” I tell him, unwilling to leave Lita’s side to do it myself.

It is my duty to protect her. I will not leave her alone again.

I can tell Scratch is not keen to go looking for Fox and Snake, and that is probably because they will have taken great pleasure in whatever they have done to their captive.

He would prefer not to see it.

“Fine,” he mutters as he gets to his feet and walks into the woods.

“This won’t ever happen again,” I promise Lita.

I will spend the rest of my life ensuring she is safe and secure.

I know my brothers will do the same.

Chapter Six

SCAR

After we have dragged the bodies into The Abyss and taken turns cleaning the blood out of our fur in the river, I am ready to take Lita home where she can re-cooperate in comfort from this ugly ordeal.

When I come back from my turn at the river, I find Fox snuggled up against Lita's back in the grass, one arm around her middle while he rubs his face against hers. Snake is hovering over them, looking as if he is trying to find a place to lay down and join them.

The grass is too bloody. He can't settle on a spot, so he just hovers over Fox, hissing softly with quiet complaints.

Fox cracks one eye open to look up at him. "You are cold blooded, Snake. She would not appreciate your lack of warmth right now."

Snake does not seem pleased with this answer, but Fox is right.

I stay out of the argument for now, glancing around to locate our other brother.

Scratch is leaning against the nearest tree that is free of blood-spatter.

He looks over at me and sighs. “Fox lay down there the second he got back from bathing, and he point blank refuses to move.”

This does not surprise me.

“You are just jealous,” Fox murmurs. “I found the only clean spot in the grass next to our mate.”

Snake hisses with more complaints. I do not think Scratch is jealous, but Snake clearly does not enjoy being left out when it comes to our mate.

I am glad Fox has been keeping Lita warm. I did not consider that she might be cold in her human form. It will take some time to discover and get used to our differences.

Unfortunately, it is not the time for reflection.

“Well, you can get up now,” I tell Fox. “There is still much to be done tonight.”

It will not be possible for us to truly rest until we are certain there will be no repercussions from the mothers of the men we just killed. I will not put Lita in more danger for any reason.

Fox acts as if I have not spoken, ignoring me as he usually does when he is having too much fun.

I must admit, if I were holding our mate, I would be reluctant to let her go, too.

“Get up, Fox,” Scratch grumbles. “You are slowing us down.”

Sighing, Fox rolls away from Lita and gets to his feet. “I do not wish to make the boring part of this night last any longer than it needs to. What is next?”

He looks at me expectantly, awaiting my orders.

“I need to know if their mothers are where they should be, in the first instance. I want all three of you to go and find out where they are and who else is around them.”

“We know where they are ...” Fox complains.

“We know where they are supposed to be. We do not know for certain where they are, or what it looks like where they are. Find out if we’ll have to lure them out of their homes to get them away from others. Stick together. Come back to my mother’s house afterwards and tell me what you have found out.” I give out the orders and Scratch nods.

Snake’s hiss is vaguely reluctant.

Fox frowns at me. “Why do you get to take Lita home?”

“Because I am taking her there to recover from this ordeal. Not to wait for her to wake up so we can start the mating process.”

“Just because I am hormonal, does not mean I have no patience for our mate,” Fox tells me. “I know this is not the

time for mating rituals, and I resent the assumption ...”

“I’m sorry. I did not mean to imply anything,” I cut him off. “Now, I’d rather our chimera killing task didn’t take all night. So, if you are ready, I would appreciate it if you would begin.”

He is highly strung tonight, but I do not blame him.

All of us are a little on edge.

I am still shaken by the sick words of the men we found surrounding our mate. I did not expect to be gripped by such a strong, violent urge to kill, but I know it is a primal shifter trait. Experiencing it first hand was eye-opening to say the least.

I crouch down and pick our mate up. She is light in my arms, and her back is warm to the touch where Fox was snuggled up against her. He is watching her with sad eyes when I look back up at him.

“The sooner we are done with the chimera, the sooner we get to spend time with our mate.”

Fox nods. “Let’s go. I want to be at Lita’s house before Scar even arrives.”

That is seriously unlikely, but I do not tell him so.

Scratch rushes to catch up when Fox takes off at a sprint, and Snake disappears into the trees above.

They are a worry, but I know they will do what is asked of them.

Lita sleeps in my arms as I carry her through the woods.

Chapter Seven

SCAR

The instinct that told me something was wrong when we were waiting for the portal to open comes back as I set foot in my mother's yard. The house looks dark, and I know it must be late enough for my mother to be inside. Dread fills me as I think about what I just saved Lita from.

It was too early for Lita to be in the woods.

She should have been at work.

There is no way my mother would not have noticed her absence.

If she'd had any inkling that Lita would be in danger, she would have done something.

I am not certain what, and now I am worried about what I am going to find inside her house.

Setting Lita down on the grass, I move toward the back door and try the handle.

It is locked. I tap my hand on the wood, knocking quietly.

I do not hear any sounds in response, and when I peer through the window there are no lights shining inside the building. I do not know if my mother is home. If she is not ...

No. I cannot think of that. Not now.

I must think of Lita and ensure her safety.

It is not difficult to break the door. Very little effort makes the old wood snap and splinter around the lock until I can apply more pressure to push the door open.

Lifting Lita back into my arms, I hold her close when she shudders in her sleep.

It is getting colder out here. She needs to be warmed up.

Stepping into the house, I close the door as much as it will close before I make my way around the kitchen table and bring Lita into the hallway and into her bedroom.

I lay her down on her bed and adjust the blankets until she is cocooned.

She moans softly in her sleep, but she does not waken.

It takes me a moment to walk away from her.

She is safe now, and I am not leaving the house.

I close her bedroom door, and I go back to the kitchen.

Pushing the table out, I move the chairs and place the heavy, solid wooden object in front of the busted back door. It will keep it closed, and I will hear it if anyone tries to enter.

Once that has been done, I close the door to the kitchen behind me, and I check the living room.

It is empty. There is a candle on the coffee table that was lit recently, and my mother's scent is strong in this room. I find blankets on one end of the couch, and I pick them up. Lita could use the extra to keep her warm tonight.

Leaving the room, I see the bathroom door is open, and the room is dark.

My mother's bedroom door is closed. I move across the hall and say a silent prayer to Artemis that I will find her safe and sound, sleeping in her bed. The door creaks when I open it, the sound making me pause, breath held, waiting to find out if I've woken her up.

If I did, she isn't ready to talk.

I can hear raspy breaths being taken. They do not sound like her at all.

"Mother? Are you awake?" I ask, keeping my voice low and soft to avoid startling her.

There is no response. All I can hear are her raspy breaths.

I take a couple of steps into the room and move my hand over the wall until I find the light switch by touch. A moment later and I am blinking against the sudden illumination of the room.

When I see my mother's trembling form on the bed, I am instantly alarmed.

Her skin is red and patchy, and she is breathing out of her open mouth.

She looks and sounds as if she is sick.

Her eyelids flicker, and she mumbles something under her breath as she begins to stir.

“Mother, are you okay?” I ask, kneeling by the side of the bed with the blankets.

She blinks awake, squinting and covering her eyes from the light.

“So ... Sol ... is that you?” she asks, her voice rough and scratchy.

“Yes, it’s me.”

She turns onto her side and takes my hand in hers. “Tell me you found her. Please?”

She looks as if she is ready to cry.

I nod, and she lets out a choked sob.

“Oh, thank the Goddess! Is she okay? Can I see her?”

“She is okay,” I tell her, believing it is the truth. “But she is sleeping now. I brought her home.”

She wipes at her eyes. “Oh, Artemis, I’ve been beside myself since it happened.”

“Do you need me to get you anything?” I do not think she is sick now that I know she has been worried about Lita, but she has been in pain, not knowing if Lita was hurt or safe.

She shakes her head. “No. I’ll be fine. I was just so worried. After the announcement, after the new Alphas said they were going to kill her ... I don’t know how I got through the rest of

the day. The other women from the work had to stop me from chasing them.”

I suck in a breath. It makes sense that my mother would want to fight for her surrogate daughter, but it is also troubling. She is much older and frailer than she was when I was a child. I would not like to think of her involving herself in a physical altercation.

“At least, they had to stop me until Apollo’s mother decided to add a warning to everyone. She told us the forest perimeter was going to be monitored from that moment on, and that anyone who chose to go near the woods tonight would be imprisoned with their fate determined by their new Alphas later. Considering their new Alphas just made it clear that they were about to ...” She shakes her head, tearing up just thinking about it. “Everyone knows she meant it as a threat of death.”

“She wanted to stop you from helping Lita. She must have known where they would chase her, or where she would run to.” I let that information sink in, and it starts to make sense.

They planned to kill our mate because we killed their father.

Apollo knew where I’d come from, even if he didn’t know about his father’s true form, or the truth of his lineage. Someone must have known that Lita was our mate. Otherwise, they wouldn’t know she would run toward the portal.

And they knew she would.

They chased her as wolves, but they also had a tranquilizer gun and rope, even clothes, stashed out in the woods close to where the portal was going to open. They planned to trap her there.

“I think Maria realized that more people might be willing to help Lita than the Alphas expected,” my mother says, smiling. “The women I work with, and some others ... They were horrified when it happened. I think they would have come with me if Maria hadn’t stopped us.”

“I am glad she did,” I admit. “Maria is a chimera. If she had come after you ...”

“Believe me, I know,” she says. “The threat she made would never have been enough to stop me. But knowing what she is, I couldn’t risk the lives of my friends on the chance that we’d somehow find a way to overpower a chimera. I had faith that Lita would find a way to survive, like you did all those years ago. I had to trust in that feeling.”

“And you knew we would save her,” I add, certain that wouldn’t have slipped her mind.

“I did think of you, but they tricked us, Sol.” She frowns at me. “The announcement happened about an hour before the portal was due to open. The sky was darker than it should have been, but I realized the clouds were just dark after we were sent back to work, and I saw what time it was. I think Maria can control the weather.”

“Just like my father,” I murmur. I am disturbed to think of Lita running scared from those wolves an hour before the

portal opened. She must have had to give them the run around for a while before they were able to sedate her. We are lucky our mate is so smart and determined.

“I didn’t see either of the other chimera there. I looked after I realized I couldn’t run. I’m not sure where they would have been. The whole town is supposed to come out when there’s an announcement.”

“That is a little strange.”

“It is,” my mother says. “Where are your brothers?”

“They are checking where the chimera are now so that we can prepare our attacks and finish this tonight. Do you think any of them will be expecting to see their sons tonight?”

She shakes her head after a moment of thought. “Those four have never spent much time around their mothers. They probably had to involve Apollo’s mother before the announcement. She was the closest thing to a Luna while his father was alive. It’s possible the other two didn’t show because they weren’t happy about that.”

She pulls back her sheets and gets out of bed.

“You should rest,” I tell her. “I did not mean to wake you. I was worried that you might be sick.”

She smiles wryly at me. “I am well, and I will feel even better once you’ve defeated the chimera. It’s time the people of this town knew what it was really built for. Are those for Lita?”

I look at the blankets in my hand. “Yes ...”

“Then you’d best take them to her while I make some tea. I get the feeling it’s going to be a long night, and I won’t get through it very well without something to keep me alert.”

I get to my feet, and move out of the room, allowing her to exit, too.

She waits for me to disappear into Lita’s room before she moves into the kitchen.

I take the blankets to the side of my mate’s bed and place them on top of the covers she’s already under. Her arm is out of the sheets, and it does not feel very warm. I start to lift it, to rearrange the sheets and cover her fully once more, when she lets out a soft moan.

I lift my gaze to her face as her eyelids flicker open.

She blinks up at me.

I smile back at her.

My mate is awake.

Chapter Eight

LITA

*G*oddess, *I must be dreaming.* To wake up in my own bed with one of my beautiful monsters hovering over me is too good an ending to the night I've had. It can't be real.

I reach out to touch his arm, and he moves closer, crouching down beside the bed.

He lets me touch him, his bright eyes closing briefly when I reach a little higher to stroke the side of his neck. I feel the faintest hint of a rumble against my arm when I touch him, a sign that he's growling lightly.

I sit up, letting the sheets fall away.

I'm not exactly warm in the room, but he is, and I would much rather be wrapped up in his arms than a whole pile of sheets and blankets. I touch his chest, confirming that he's growling and enjoying the feel of that vibration.

When I look back up at his face, I know it will be difficult for us to communicate.

His mouth is shaped differently from a human mouth. It is more canine.

It will take time to learn to read those dark lips.

The thought of talking when I haven't in so long is daunting, but I can't think of any other reason why I would want to use my voice. I stopped because people were mean about how it sounded. I don't feel worried about that right now.

"What happened?" I ask, letting my hand fall away from him.

He moves back and curls his hand into a fist, and I blink as he uses ASL to indicate Yes, and then No.

It's so unexpected that I burst out laughing.

I cover my mouth with my hands as my eyes tear up.

I don't need to ask him if he learned that for me. I know he did.

A lump swells up in my throat while I try to find the words for questions he can answer with a yes or a no. He cocks his head to the side while I pull myself together.

I take a couple of deep breaths and remind myself I need to talk.

He won't know much ASL if he's only picked up a few simple words so far.

"Did you find me in the woods?" I ask.

He signs yes, nodding his head along with his hand.

"What about the Masters brothers? Were they there?"

He pauses before he gives the same answer again.

Now, I feel a little stuck. I want to ask what happened when he found them, but that's not a yes or no question. I remember the awful things those boys were threatening before I passed out and I get a little squirmy. I don't think I'm hurt. I'm a kind of cold, but I can't feel any pain in my body.

Goddess, please tell me he found me before they did anything to me.

“Did you hurt them?” I ask, getting another yes in response.

He hurt them and saved me.

It feels too good to be true.

A splash of light bathes him suddenly, making him look even more like a heroic figure.

I follow his gaze to the door, where Alina is standing with a cup in her hand.

The light is coming from the hallway, and my guardian looks so happy to see me.

I smile back at her.

Somehow, she knew about him. She knew about all four of them.

The beautiful monsters from The Abyss. My fated mates.

She told me to run to the portal.

She knew they'd find me and protect me.

She holds up the cup and points at it, which is something she's always done to indicate it's time to come to the kitchen for a drink, or a snack.

I nod at Alina, and she leaves, not closing the door.

"We can talk better in the kitchen," I tell him, knowing the light will help, and Alina can tell me when he's saying things I can't understand.

He nods and gets up, looking so out of place in the small room. He's bent over slightly because of the low ceiling, and he has to crouch to get through the doorway. I get up once he's out of the room, and I throw on a few layers of clothing in the hopes of warming up.

Getting food in me would probably help. I hope Alina has cookies to go with the tea. I missed dinner earlier, and it feels pretty late now.

I move through to the kitchen when I'm bundled up in a thick sweater and warm pants.

Though we're not strictly supposed to take anything from the communal kitchen, all the women who work there take a little something home from time to time. Leftovers, or a couple of spare vegetables to make something of their own when they feel like they need it.

Lucky for me my guardian had some supplies at the ready.

Alina has three bowls of stew set out, sides of some sort of vegetable dish, and a few small loaves of bread. There's also a jug of water on the table and cups of tea have been laid out.

The table itself has been moved for some reason, and the wolf man is sitting on the floor by the far side of it. I guess he'd probably break our chairs if he tried to use one. He's all muscle.

And I probably shouldn't keep staring at him as if he's the meal I really want.

Tearing my gaze away is harder than I expect.

This guy is actually, honest-to-Goddess, meant to be mated to me.

Fated mates aren't exactly common, and he isn't exactly a regular shifter.

He's so much more of a man than any of the guys that live here.

I force my attention back to the table, and then I raise my eyebrows at Alina while she puts the cutlery down. It seems like more than we've had before, and the rolls are basically a luxury item that we never get the chance to have, at home or at work.

"The girls felt bad about what happened today," Alina explains when she turns back to me. "They kept this aside for me and told me to eat later when I needed to."

I step forward and hug her tightly. I know she must have been worried about me.

When I let go, I move over and sit down in the seat across from where the wolf man is sitting on the floor. My usual side

of the table is pressed up against the door, which looks a little busted up.

It's broken. Is that why the table is wedged against it?

I look at Alina expectantly, and she lets out a sigh.

“Lita, meet my son, Sol.”

My eyes widen as I connect the story Alina told me to the man who saved me tonight.

He says something I can't work out, and a glance at Alina gives me the answer.

“Sorry,” she tells him, before she looks at me. “He goes by Scar ever since he was sent to The Abyss.”

Now I have a name for my hero. Scar seems to fit him a little better than Sol, but I suppose I don't know him well enough yet to say that for sure. I'm guessing he picked the new name because of the large scar that runs across his chest.

“Hi, Scar.” I say the words out loud and sign them at the same time.

Alina blinks at me as she sits down in her usual seat to my right.

I look at her, and she says, “Did you just talk?”

Oh, that. I guess it's been a while since my guardian heard my voice.

“I wanted to speak with Scar,” I admit. “It seemed easier to use my voice.”

He grins a little when I look over at him.

I'm still not able to tell what he's saying when he talks, but I feel my face flushing with heat when he signs, "You are beautiful."

I look at Alina. "What did he say?"

"Aside from the compliment?" Alina teases.

I roll my eyes at her. I'm definitely turning red.

This is so embarrassing.

"He said he wishes he'd had time to learn more ASL before he saw you again."

Goddess, I wish I didn't need a translator for this, especially not when she's the mother of the guy I have a fated connection with, and coincidentally the woman who also raised me.

"That's okay," I admit. "I'm used to adjusting."

He doesn't seem pleased by that confession, and for some reason his troubled expression gives me butterflies in my stomach. It must be because I'm overdue to go into heat, and I'm already beyond sure he's meant to belong to me.

"Eat," Alina prompts me, picking up her fork.

I nod, even if I feel a little self-conscious about eating in front of this guy.

Scar, I remind myself.

Even if I didn't know where he'd come from, he looks like the kind of guy who hunts for his food. He doesn't just have it provided for him by the people who are tasked with rearing

and slaughtering the livestock here in Nightshade. He works for every meal he eats.

Alina prompts him to eat, and he shakes his head.

I think he's telling her he's not hungry when he talks.

His gaze barely moves away from me. He's watching me so closely I keep dropping my fork into my bowl. I don't know how I'm managing to avoid splashing myself with the gravy.

A few bites in, and I'm too hungry not to finish every last drop.

I'm mopping up the last of the gravy with the final end of my roll when Scar moves forward and pushes his bowl toward me.

I recognise the word when he says, "Eat."

That's why he didn't touch his bowl.

He wants to take care of me.

Like a mate.

I nod and take the fresh bowl of stew from him.

I know enough about courting gestures to understand that I shouldn't turn this one down if I intend to accept his mating mark.

Goddess, I've barely spent any time in his presence, and I'm already completely and utterly sold on the idea of us.

It should freak me out, but it doesn't.

He's been nothing but kind to me.

Sweet, even.

I smile at him before I start to eat again. I'm not that hungry for food anymore, but I eat every last bite, wanting to please him with an empty plate. A good mate is always satisfied when his woman is well taken care of. I was never sure if that was a romanticized version of what true mates could be, or if it might be real, with the right person or people.

Everything about him tells me it's real.

Chapter Nine

LITA

My guardian talks with Scar while I eat, and I interject whenever she says something that needs to be explained. Apparently, I missed some things the night I was taken over by Artemis. Including the fact that our Alpha was a chimera, and Scar and his brothers were the ones to kill him.

It should be shocking, but when I think it over, it's not.

Our pack is isolated from the rest of the world, and it's run in such a tightly controlled way.

The Abyss was used as the reason for this, and Alina believes the chimera created it to have a reason.

Everything I thought I knew about Nightshade is a lie.

My town is a feeding ground for chimera. It was created to keep them alive, and to create more of them. They chose to mimic the forms of wolf shifters because that would be the easiest way for them to create a place that would fit their needs.

All they needed was someone who was convincing as an Alpha.

Fortunately for us, whoever that person originally was, his descendant was arrogant enough to believe the children he sent to The Abyss would be easy to kill if they survived that harsh place. He made his own death possible when he stopped the rituals that kept his hybrid children from entering his town.

I'm glad he's gone, and I doubt I know the full story yet, but it seems like we have more chimera to worry about before Nightshade's pack is safe from their kind.

"How do we kill the chimera?" I ask, feeling as if I missed that part when Alina confirmed that Scar and his brothers killed the Alpha. I look from Scar to Alina, waiting.

There's concern in my guardian's gaze when she looks at me. "This isn't your battle, Lita."

I blink at her. "Of course it is. This is my town ..."

"You don't have any fighting skills," she reminds me.

Scar leans forward and it's clear he's backing her up even if I can't make out what words he's speaking. I look from him to her, and I know I'm not going to win this argument.

I sink back in the chair. "What if Artemis possesses me again?"

"If that happens, we'll deal with it," Alina assures me.

This is so frustrating. My pack is in danger. Everyone in Nightshade is being used by the chimera.

We should be out there right now, hunting them down.

There's no time to waste.

I get up, and Alina frowns at me.

I sign that I need to go to the bathroom.

The wary look in her eyes fades, and she nods.

I don't intend to use the bathroom, but I realize I do need to once I'm in the hallway. I should probably take care of that before I try to convince Artemis to possess me again.

I wouldn't want the Goddess to be bothered by my mortal functions.

It's not until I'm washing up that I notice how tired I look.

My hair is a mess, and I probably have grass stains in unusual places.

I shake out my hair over the sink before I pick up my hairbrush.

There are little bits of grass and leaves to be washed down the drain after I'm done.

I splash water on my face next, helping to wake myself up and make my skin look a little brighter.

When I'm done, I step out of the room and pick up my old boots from where they're sitting at the right side of the front door. They're a little worse for wear, but I'm glad I decided to keep them as a backup when Alina had new ones made for me.

I don't remember exactly where I abandoned my new ones along with my clothes, and I doubt Scar thought about

searching around the forest for my clothes after he saved my life.

He probably doesn't think much about clothes at all, considering all he seems to wear is a strategically placed loincloth. I'm impressed he was able to make that. I wouldn't know the first thing about making leather, and I'm sure I've read about it in one of Alina's books.

I'm about to cross the hall to the living room when the kitchen door opens beside me, and I drop my boots in surprise. Alina gives me a knowing look, and I press my lips together before I use a foot to push my boots to the side of the hallway.

There's no point giving her an innocent look.

She knows I was up to something.

"Lita, you are not going out there tonight," Alina says when I finally look back at her.

She moves past me, not waiting for an answer because it wasn't a question.

I realize she's headed toward the door a moment before she unlocks it.

Oh, Goddess, Scar's brothers are here.

I can feel my cheeks burning as Alina steps back and lets them into the house.

The cat guy is the first to slip into the hallway, his lizard-like brother right behind him.

Fox, and Snake, I remind myself, as Fox's vibrant green eyes meet mine.

Then, he smiles, and I remember what those jet-black lips felt like pressed against mine.

The smoky-sweet taste of his tongue comes back to me, the feel of his strong arm closed around my body, the sensation of his furred torso rubbing against my clit ...

It suddenly feels a lot hotter in this confined space.

He moves straight to me, holding his hands out.

I take his hands in mine, glancing over to see Snake blocking the way to the kitchen for Alina and Scratch when he stops right beside his brother. His dark green skin sparkles where the light from the other room hits his body. He has a similar build to his feline brother, and a very unique forked tongue that I remember the touch of, vividly. As if he can read my mind, his mouth opens, and the twin tips of that red tongue flick out. He tugs one of my hands out of Fox's grasp, and I have a hard time looking away from his slitted, reptilian eyes when Fox's hand squeezes mine lightly.

I tear my gaze away from Snake, glancing back when his tongue slips out of his mouth again.

My body reacts to the sight of it this time, my clit pulsing inside my underwear as I'm reminded of how aroused I was right before he helped push me over the edge. My skin prickles and my nipples harden.

Goddess, I want them. Both of them. Right now.

It takes a second to get my head clear enough to realize Fox is trying to talk to me.

His lips stop moving and he shakes his head, looking at Snake.

Snake's tongue comes out one last time before he lets go of my hand.

I raise my eyebrows at Fox, and he looks back at me.

"We are happy to see you," he says, giving me a smile that seems a little wry. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," I tell him, making him blink in surprise.

Right. I didn't speak before, when we met in the woods.

"I can talk," I admit, giving him a wry smile. "I just prefer not to."

"Well, it is nice to hear your voice," he tells me. "I am glad you are feeling good."

He turns his head and sighs before turning to me. "*We* are glad you are feeling good."

A dark hand lands on his shoulder, and I turn slightly to see Scratch looming over us.

I was barely able to coax this wolf man into the start of a kiss. He seems much more reserved than these two, and for some reason that makes me want him even more.

I can't help wondering what it would take to make him lose control.

Snake moves swiftly from my side to slip behind me, and I look back at Fox's lips in time to see him say, "Sorry, but we were only making sure our mate was feeling okay."

I look back at those clear blue eyes of the tall, dark and handsome wolf man who's a little hunched over because the ceiling is too low for him. He has a slimmer face than his older brother, and I think his fur is a little lighter than Scar's, too. It's a deep, dark grey, rather than black.

I'd like to touch him again, even just his hand, but I feel a little intimidated when I look back at him.

I smile at Alina as she passes, going into the kitchen and holding the door open for them.

Scratch moves past, hesitating for only a moment.

He doesn't try to speak to me or touch me.

Snake wraps his arms around my middle from behind, and his head rubs against mine. He's probably messing up my hair, but I like how it feels when he's hugging me close like this.

Fox gazes at my lips when I turn back to face him.

He looks up after a couple of seconds and says, "I'd like to kiss you, but I keep being told we have more important things we should be doing before we are allowed to begin courting our mate."

I can't help the smile that forms on my lips. "A kiss would be nice."

He leans down and I push onto my toes to get a little closer.

These two might not be as tall as their brothers, but they're definitely at least a foot taller than I am. I can't help thinking it was much easier to make out with them when this guy had me wrapped around his middle.

Goddess, if I don't stop thinking about the last time we were together I'm going to drive myself completely crazy with lust. I already feel like my body's thrumming all over with arousal.

One little kiss from those black lips and I know I've gone into heat.

All it takes is our mouths to collide and I'm back in that forest, all of my senses on overload.

I wrap my arms around his neck and my sweater rides up, letting Snake's cool, smooth hand glide over the bare flesh of my stomach. The swell of desire that rolls over me is enough to make me forget that anything else exists.

All there is now, is the three of us.

I release one hand from Fox's neck and put it over Snake's hand.

I run my fingers over his, feeling one thumb and two big, thick fingers.

He has short, rounded claws, and I shiver as I ease his hand into the waistband of my pants.

Anticipation fills me as he takes the hint and moves those thick, smooth fingers inside my underwear.

I feel a gasp of air at the side of my head as he moves his fingers over the fine patch of hair above my pussy. I keep it trimmed short, but I'm hit with a sudden wash of self-consciousness that he might not like the feel of it. He strokes through the hair, moving his fingers around, but not dipping lower.

Fox breaks our kiss with a soft exhale. "We're being summoned."

I blink at him. It takes a few seconds to realize what he means.

He looks up. "That means you, too, Snake."

I move away from Fox as Snake's hand withdraws from my underwear. He's slower to drop his other arm, but he manages to do it. I let out a breath, halfway relieved, and halfway disappointed.

Fox smiles at me. "Later."

I really hope that's a promise.

Moving into the kitchen, I tug at the hem of my sweater, avoiding meeting Alina's gaze. It's probably the biggest room in the house, but it feels incredibly small with all of my mates crammed into the space. The table's kind of in the middle of the room, wedged up against the door. Scar is still sitting behind it, and Scratch has moved past him and is sitting next to him.

Even sitting down, Scratch is a little hunched over.

I don't think he's completely comfortable.

He has a fish-out-of-water look about him.

I sit back down when Alina signs at me to do so.

She closes the door and takes her own seat once I'm in mine.

Fox takes the seat next to me, moving it closer, first.

Snake looks around before sitting down on the table, in the space Fox created by moving.

I catch Scar shaking his head, but Snake leans back, resting on his hands, clearly not intending to move from his chosen perch. He cranes his head and closes his eyes, looking completely contented.

I shrug at Alina when she looks at me, as if she expects me to explain his behavior.

They haven't been living the same way we have, and she knows it.

It's not as if he knows sitting on a table isn't polite.

Her lips flatten and I can tell things are about to take a turn for the deadly serious.

"Whatever the plan is," she starts, looking around at all of them. "It does not include Lita."

Scar nods, and as I look around, I see all of his brothers agree with the sentiment.

I can't lie. It hurts to be instantly excluded when this is something that affects all of us. It doesn't matter that they're built like warriors, or that they've already killed a chimera. I

don't want to be left behind while they go out risking their lives for my pack.

"I'm not completely useless," I complain, folding my arms as I sit back in my chair.

"No one's calling you useless," Alina tells me. "But you don't have fighting skills, Lita."

"I didn't need them with the Alpha's sons," I start, before I remember how that ended up.

She raises an eyebrow at me, and I shrug.

"Their wolves were really dumb. I would have beaten them if they'd played fair."

"They were chimera," Alina says. "And if they'd known what they really were then you would have been in real trouble."

She's not wrong, but I don't have to like it.

I keep my mouth shut while they discuss what Scar's brothers discovered, only moving a little to watch Fox's mouth as he insists on relaying most of the information so that I'm not left out of the loop.

The more I hear, the more I want to be a part of the plan.

I know none of them will agree to that.

But I can't help wishing that they would.

Chapter Ten

SCAR

Going by what my brothers have discovered, it seems that we have two chimera that should be easy to draw out on their own to battle, and one who may be problematic due to where she is living.

Lita looks worried when we talk about the third chimera.

“You’ll need to be very careful with Maria,” my mother says. “I wouldn’t have put it past her to hurt the kids if anyone threatened her, and that’s before I knew what she really was.”

“I shouldn’t have made Adam go back with her,” Lita says.

“Adam?” I ask my mother, wondering why there’s a child they know of by name.

Sighing, she explains, “There’s a little boy with a stutter who likes being around us because we can use ASL, so he doesn’t have to talk when he’s with us. It seemed like he was unhappy the last time we saw him, but all the children are raised in the nursery, and he wouldn’t tell us what was wrong.”

She turns to Lita. “There is nothing you could have done about that.”

“He’s in danger now,” Lita says.

“That isn’t your fault.”

The assurance doesn’t seem to make Lita feel better.

Clearly, my mate is worried about this child.

I will not feel as if our job has been done until we have personally ensured his safety.

Getting to my feet, I ask my mother if I can speak with her for a moment while my brothers wait outside. Scratch moves past me and leaves the room without a second of hesitation. I do not think he feels entirely comfortable inside the house. He has seemed agitated since he arrived.

I glance at Fox and draw him a look.

He sighs before he gets to his feet.

Lita’s gaze is still on the door.

I know she wishes to come with us, but it is not safe.

We do not know what abilities the chimera possess.

It seems likely that Maria can control the weather like my father could, but other than that we are in the dark, and the possibilities might as well be endless. Our hopes of winning the fights are built on our ability to work together as a team.

Fox stops at Lita’s side and takes her hand in his.

He kisses her knuckles before he murmurs a promise, “We will be back soon.”

She smiles, but her eyes are still full of concern.

Snake jumps down from the table and hugs our mate from behind for a moment before he forces Fox to get moving along. His hisses remind Fox that the hard work will be over sooner if we start now.

Lita follows them out of the room.

My mother peeks into the hall and lets out a relieved sigh.

“Lita has gone into the living room.”

The front door closes, and I relax. “I need you to teach me something I can tell Lita before I leave.”

“Something in ASL?”

I nod. “She is feeling left out, and I do not like to leave her here feeling that way.”

“She’s been left out of things her whole life. This feels different.”

“How does it feel different?”

“She’s been feeling protective of the pack and the town. More than she should considering how badly so many of the people here have treated her. She can’t ignore those feelings. I think she’s meant to be the Luna here.”

I nod slowly. I do not think myself and my brothers would have been fated to a shifter who was not meant to become a Luna, and Lita has all of the qualities of a female Alpha.

“She is not just any Luna. She is our Luna.”

“That doesn’t mean she should go with you to slay those chimera.”

“She does not need to come with us. I need you to teach me how to say this ...”

Chapter Eleven

LITA

I sit down on the couch and light the prayer candle. I feel restless and agitated, and I seriously doubt praying will help, but there is little else that I can do, and there's always the tiniest chance that Artemis will see fit to possess me again. If she thinks I should be out there fighting the chimera, then Alina won't stop me from going out there.

The Goddess of Wolves is a force of nature. There's no stopping her when she decides something is meant to be so.

All I need to do is relax enough to close my eyes and start the prayer.

That means letting all of my other thoughts go, so I can remember the words and focus on them.

Easier said than done.

The living room door opens suddenly, and the candle blows out on the gust of air.

If I was looking for omens, that wouldn't be a good one.

I look up and see Scar come into the room.

I stand up and he gets onto his knees in front of me.

Looking down at his hands, I see he's getting ready to tell me something in ASL.

It's still incredibly sweet that this beast of a man is trying so hard to communicate with me, but I don't know if it'll help with how I'm feeling right now. I'm not sure anything will.

He starts to make the gestures, going slow and being slightly hesitant.

"You have to go now," I say out loud, translating what he's saying and watching him nod in agreement before he moves on to the next part. "But you'll be back ... To claim me as your mate and ... As your Luna."

He bows his head, a sign of respect that shows he's serious about that last part.

He sees me as a Luna, a female Alpha, and his equal.

Looking back up, he gets to his feet.

"But I can't come with you?" I ask.

He shakes his head, signs, "Not safe."

Something about the way he looks at me as he signs those words makes me feel a little better.

It's not that he doubts my abilities to think on my feet or help in any physical way.

He's being protective, wanting me to stay out of the fight to make sure I'm not hurt.

Considering what he already had to save me from, I guess I can see where he's coming from.

“Okay,” I tell him, nodding. “Promise you'll look after each other out there.”

He nods, and I hug him before I let him leave.

His scar lines up with my lips and I kiss it before I move back.

“Come back to me.”

He signs, “Yes, beautiful.”

I can't help smiling as he leaves.

Chapter Twelve

SCRATCH

I feel as if I am in a trance as I lead my brothers onwards through the dark streets, toward the small house next to where Nightshade's vegetable crops are grown. We quickly discovered Valerie, mother of Orion, and third in line to become pack Luna before our father by blood was killed, was going to be the easiest to get close to without endangering any other lives, so she is the first chimera we intend to challenge and defeat.

We do not know what her special abilities are when she is in her true form, but Scar is determined that it does not matter. He is convinced we are capable of defeating her, based on nothing more than the fact that we got lucky enough to kill her unofficial mate.

Fox has already given Snake his knife, and he has filled his pouch with nightshade.

There are no guarantees that we will get that same chance to poison her that we were able to grab with our father, but it is sensible to prepare for the opportunity.

Snake is also carrying the bloodied length of rope that those stupid boys left in our forest.

I was not surprised to see what they had done to the one they caught, but it did make me wish for a swift end to this night. I know that chimera are dangerous parasites, and that they have been hurting the people of Nightshade for a very long time, but I am keen to see the end of the bloodshed.

“This is the house,” I tell Scar, motioning to the cabin in front of us.

The street is dark all around us, and the lights are out inside.

“Wait here, and be ready,” Scar tells us.

He goes to the front door and knocks loudly.

I glance around, but other than the barns for the crops, there are no buildings close enough to this one to worry about awakening the residents of. The chimera also have the people of this town well trained to stay indoors after dark.

The streets are empty. Everyone is home. Many are likely already asleep.

“I don’t see why we don’t just burn this place down,” Fox mutters.

I let out a sigh. “We can’t risk losing the crops, Fox. The pack need to be able to survive when we’re done with the chimera.”

“They would still have their meat supply,” he complains.

I shake my head, and even Snake doesn't agree with our feline brother this time.

We both know he is simply over-eager to return to Lita.

Snake feels the same, I'm sure.

I saw how close the three of them were getting in that hallway.

It's obvious she's ready to take them as her mates.

Fox has the unfair advantage that she is able to read his lips, and Snake is overconfident because he has that double-barrelled cock under his loincloth.

I cannot compete with either of them.

They are so certain she is our mate, and I cannot deny my own attraction to Lita, but spending time with her will be difficult while I cannot communicate or connect with her as well as my brothers can.

Even Scar seems to have a connection with her that I don't fully understand.

He was able to reassure her before we left with a few new hand gestures his mother managed to teach him very quickly. He was still practicing some of them after he left the house.

They seemed more complicated than the ones we learned together in The Abyss.

I push thoughts of our mate out of my head as Scar grows weary of waiting for a response at the chimera's door and instead smashes his fist through one of the woman's windows.

“Well, that’s one way to wake her up,” Fox murmurs.

A light goes on inside the house while Scar is knocking shards of glass from the now empty frame.

I steel myself for the first of our battles.

It is about to begin.

Chapter Thirteen

SCAR

Orion's mother appears at the front door about a minute after I break her living room window. She looks like a petite female shifter with her eyes glowing gold as she stares me down in anger.

“What do you think you're doing here, reject?” she snaps at me.

“So, you know who I am.”

She glowers at me. “You killed my mate. Of course, I know who you are.”

“Then you know why I'm here.”

The glow fades from her eyes, and she doesn't blink as she locks gazes with me.

“If you're here to kill me, go ahead and try.”

She makes no move to take her true form, throwing down the challenge and then stepping back inside her house, leaving the door open.

I look back at my brothers and hold my hand up, asking them silently to wait out here while I go into the house.

The only light inside is coming from a room near the back of the cabin. She's stepping into that room when I enter the hallway.

It feels like a trap, but if it is, she's trapping herself inside the house along with me.

I move along to the doorway of her bedroom, and I find her sitting on the bed, a lit cigarette in between her lips. She takes a drag and gives out a long exhale.

"I've been alive a lot longer than I look like I have," she tells me. "This town has been under our control for centuries now, and it took our only male this damn long to decide it was time to raise children. We could have made our own mates a long time ago, but he wouldn't let us. He was the one who was supposed to make the decisions to help create more chimera, and he didn't want to have any damn kids. That fucking asshole."

"This is not how I expected this meeting to go."

She laughs. "Of course not. You expected me to show my true form and fight you and your brothers to the death. Well, I'm tired. And I can see how things are going. I'm not interested in helping our sons retain power, so we can keep this pathetic nothing of a life going."

"Your sons are dead," I tell her, wondering if the news will change her mind.

She seems unmoved by it, simply taking another puff of her cigarette, and then tapping the ashes into the mug that's sitting on her nightstand.

“That would be nice,” she mutters, as she takes one last drag and drops the butt of the cigarette into the mug. She smiles at me as she gets to her feet. “I fed from people’s pain. I killed two of your brothers’ mothers while they were grieving for their surely dead children. I don’t know how many others I killed, and no one else knows either. That’s why we separate children from their parents at birth. We sever that connection. We make sure everyone around us is as isolated from their support systems as possible. Then we feed, and it’s endless. Well, I’m ready for it to end.”

She stands in front of me. “End my life.”

I feel a little suspicious at how easy she is making this, and I wonder just how much easier she would be willing to make our night, if she is being honest.

“If you really wish for this to end, you’ll help me end all of it.”

She laughs. “Fine. Candace feels like I do. She might put up a fight, but she wants this to be over, too. If she fights, she’ll fight with visions. You’ll see things that aren’t there. Ignore them and they can’t hurt you.”

That does not sound good, but it is helpful information to have.

“What about Maria?”

“She controls the weather. She’s not as good with lightning as William was. She’s more likely to use excessive amounts of rain to try and drown you. Or crazy gusts of wind to throw you around.”

“Does she feel the same way you do?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head and laughing. “Maria wants to rule this town. She wants to make her own mate and have a million little baby chimera to send out into the world. She’s a crazy fucking bitch, and she’ll fight you with everything she’s got.”

That is not good news. Maria is the one who works at the nursery, and she lives there, too.

“What would bring Maria out of the nursery?”

“I could call her. Tell her you killed her precious little Apollo. She’ll come out here to kill you for that. She thinks the sun shines out of that boy’s ass.”

“Call her.”

She nods and moves back to the side of the bed where she picks up the receiver of the phone.

The call takes all of two minutes, and then she hangs up and smiles at me.

“Now, will you end my torture?” she asks.

“It will be my pleasure.”

Chapter Fourteen

SCAR

I lay Valerie's body down on her bed when I've slashed open her throat. She looks as if she's sleeping peacefully, a small smile still on her lips. Even as her blood soaks into the sheets, and her skin grows pale, she looks happier than she did when she was alive.

She died in her chosen human form.

If her sister chimera would die this easily our task would be simple.

As far as being a parasitic being who fed on the pain of others to the point of causing their deaths, Orion's mother did at least one thing right in her life, at the end. Choosing to help end the suffering of this pack by helping us with information about her sister chimera, it was the least she could have done.

I leave the house and walk over to where my brothers are standing in the street.

"What happened?" Scratch asks.

“You were not gone for long,” Fox says, while Snake seems to confirm that Valerie is dead before I even get the chance to tell them.

“She asked me to end her life.”

“That’s unexpected,” Fox murmurs.

“Why would she do that?” Scratch asks.

“She was old and tired,” I tell them, not wishing to speak about her confession regarding Scratch and Snake’s mothers. I will take that information to my grave. It would only cause them pain to hear such a thing when there is nothing we can do about it. “It was a mercy for her, and it saves us wasting our energy when there are other chimera we will need to fight.”

“Strange,” Fox mutters. “But I guess that means we’re one down, two to go.”

“She said Candace has the ability to use illusions, so we must be careful around her. Anything strange that we see will need to be ignored, otherwise it will have the ability to injure us.”

“That sounds very bad,” Scratch admits. “Is there a chance she might not shift into her true form?”

“Valerie admitted that Candace is growing weary of life here, too, but she also said she would likely try to fight us anyway. It does not matter right now, because we will be facing Maria first.”

“We will?” Fox asks. “How exactly do you intend to draw that woman out of the school?”

“Valerie called her. She knows we are here and she’s on her way.”

“Called her?” Scratch asks, narrowing his eyes as if he is trying to remember that word.

“There is a device called a telephone that some of the people in this town have access to. It means you can speak to someone in another building without leaving to see them. You will understand it better once you’ve tried it.”

“Forget it for now,” Fox adds, nodding toward a light in the distance ahead.

The figure of a tall woman is coming our way.

“She is almost here,” I murmur. “Remember, her abilities are tied to the weather. I was told she likes to use water to drown people, and wind to throw them around.”

“Great,” Fox complains. “Prepare for a wet and windy night.”

Snake hisses that it is great, actually, for him.

Considering he can breathe under water, and he will aim for the nearest tree branch if he is tossed into the air, I can understand his enthusiastic attitude.

Maria is not going to know what hit her.

I walk toward her, ready to start this fight.

And that is when Lita rushes out of the closest side street, her eyes wide, and her breathing ragged as she stops beside me, her hand reaching for my arm.

“Oh, Scar, I’m so glad to see you.”

There is something a little different about her voice, but perhaps that is just because she’s worn out. It looks like she’s been running.

“Lita, what are you doing here?” I ask, frowning at her.

Maria is getting closer, and I do not like the thought of our mate being in danger.

“I couldn’t just stand around at home while you’re out here fighting for the future of my pack. I had to come find you. I need to help.”

“Scar,” Fox calls out.

I turn around and see I’ve moved further away from my brothers than I thought.

“Come with me,” Lita says, her eyes wide. “I need to show you something.”

I blink at her as she turns away. She can’t read my lips.

She was watching my mouth closely while we sat together in the kitchen, but she wasn’t able to work out what I was saying. She kept having to asking my mother to translate.

How did she know what I was asking her just then?

“Lita?” I call out, knowing I’m right once she turns around, giving me an expectant look.

My mother never would have let Lita come out here. This isn’t Lita.

The moment I question her existence, she fades into smoke.

“You didn’t think I’d come alone, did you?” Maria asks, making me turn her way.

She has stopped walking, and she looks as if she is ready to shift forms.

“You brought Candace.” A quick scan of the immediate area doesn’t reveal her friend, but it’s dark, and there are plenty of places she could be hiding out here, even in her true form.

“I see Valerie has been running her mouth,” she says, her expression tightening.

“You really shouldn’t talk ill of the dead,” I warn her.

She raises an eyebrow, looking me over as if she’d never believe someone like me could ever beat someone like her. She’s just as arrogant as my father was.

“I don’t smell burning chimera,” she murmurs as she looks toward her friend’s house. “But I see you brought your little pack of rejects. Well, three of them at least. I’m sure my son is busy taking very good care of the deaf wolf right now.”

“Your son is currently pushing up daisies in The Abyss.”

She blinks at me, her self-assured expression faltering.

“You’re lying!” she snaps. “You’re no match for Apollo.”

I stare right back at her, thinking of all the terrible things her son said about Lita.

He didn’t deserve a fair fight, and I don’t regret killing him.

“I tore off his arm, and then I crushed his head beneath my foot.”

She roars in anger and begins to change form in front of me.

My brothers rush to surround her, and I move quickly as her lower half finishes its transformation and she attempts to hit me with her reptilian tail. I feel a whip of air as I avoid the sharp slap of her scaly skin.

Her chimera form is a little smaller than my father's was, and the rain that begins to pelt down from the sky is nothing compared to the lightning he made strike the ground that I miraculously managed to avoid twice.

I nod at Snake, and he moves from his position with the rope, disappearing behind her.

She lets out an ear-splitting roar before the rain gets heavier above us, smacking the mud in thick blobs. It's going to feel like we're fighting her in a swamp soon enough, and I for one do not wish to experience her signature drowning power move.

I glance at Scratch and nod. Our plan to overwhelm the chimera is simple, and that is why we hope it will work. Running at her middle, we lunge at the same moment. She attempts to move her tail, to swipe it at me again, but Fox is there with Snake's knife, and he slams it into the end of her tail at the precise moment when she is about to make her move. Snake's rope misses its target, but we're already slamming into her body, pushing it to topple over onto the ground.

The cry of pain she lets out makes me wince.

She fights our plan, but our momentum has already carried us over the tipping point.

We send her crashing to the ground, where Snake slips the rope around her neck and tightens it.

Scratch and I dig our claws in to her flesh as she tries to shake us off.

We need to hold her down. It's the only way we'll be able to kill her.

“Fox! Now!” I yell through the thickly falling rain.

My feline brother staggers to Snake's side and fumbles with the pouch on his loin cloth.

I glance at Scratch, and he shakes his head at me. He doesn't think the same trick's going to work twice, and I'll be honest, it's not looking good to me, either.

The chimera shrieks and screams and makes all manner of painfully loud noises as she wriggles under us, trying vainly to shake us off. I dig my claws deeper into her flesh, determined to keep her pinned down until we've defeated her.

And that's when everything changes.

The sound of a second chimera shrieking makes Scratch curse under his breath.

I look at my brother and we both know we're in trouble.

Fox opens his pouch, and it's whipped out of his hand by a sudden gust of wind.

Fox's mouth opens in shock as he's thrust into the air a second later, yelling out a curse as he's thrown backwards across the street.

Snake holds onto the rope tightly as he starts to slide back.

He's pulled into the air, his grip staying on the rope.

The pressure of the cold air that's blowing so fast and hard is painful to fight against, and I can tell it's only a matter of time before Scratch and I are thrown across town, too.

"What now?" Scratch yells back at me.

"Decapitation?" I yell back, making him laugh.

"For her, or us?" he asks.

"Didn't you say there are tools in those barns?" I ask.

"Yeah, but I think we're about to be blown far away from them."

He has a point. Still, considering fire is out and we just lost our stash of poison, there's only one option left to us, and it's not going to be the easiest one to execute.

"Let go when I say so," I yell.

He nods, squinting his eyes against the crazy wind.

"Now!"

Chapter Fifteen

FOX

Being lifted off the ground and thrown into the centre of town is a hell of a way to test the premise that cats always land on their feet, but I'm glad to report I did manage to land on them. I stumbled forward onto my hands and knees after, and it wasn't the easiest thing in the world to stand back up, but I made it after a few seconds.

The town square seemed further away, but I guess it felt like I was being launched at the speed of light, so maybe that is exactly what just happened.

Staggering back there in the howling wind and blisteringly cold rain does not feel like an easy task, and I sure as hell am not returning to the site of two chimera without some kind of weapon or plan.

Looking back at the Alpha's old house, I wonder if there might be something helpful inside.

I run toward the house, feeling as if I'm moving in slow motion.

Once I'm breaking in via the glass-free poorly boarded up window, I have protection against the weather and I'm able to move around quickly.

"If I were a weapon, where would I be hiding?" I ask as I look around.

There's a sharp metal stick by the side of the fire.

I pick it up, and I decide it'll do.

When I step back out into the rain, I brace myself for the walk back, and then I find myself frozen in place as I watch Scratch and Scar soar through the air and land in a heap on the hard stone of the town square, crashing into a wall together and taking a few seconds to untangle themselves and get up.

I wave from the house's porch, and they come rushing over.

"I found a weapon," I tell them, shaking the metal stick at them.

Scar's eyes light up as if I just told him I found an easy way to kill the chimera.

"Is this thing *that* good?" I ask, taking another look at it.

"No," Scar says, shaking his head, "But I might be able to find something that is."

He runs into the house, leaving Scratch and I standing on the porch.

"It's a nice stick," Scratch tells me. "Did they have any more?"

I shake my head. "Just this one. Feels pretty solid."

“It doesn’t really look sharp enough for a decapitation, though.”

“Uh ... I guess it’s probably not.”

Damn. That is what we’re going to have to do here.

Cut off the chimera’s head.

We can’t light a fire that’ll burn while it’s raining so hard that the whole town might be at risk of flooding soon, and we can’t poison them without poison.

That leaves decapitation.

Great.

Scar comes back out of the house with a weird looking object.

“What is that?” I ask, not sure what it could be.

There’s a cylinder and a handle, but it is small, and it doesn’t look like anything I’ve ever seen before.

“It’s the same thing those guys we killed used on Lita. There’s a sedative in the barrel. When I pull the trigger, it’ll shoot out.”

“A seda ... Oh,” Scratch says. “You’re going to use this on the chimera. That way we can kill them while they’re drugged.”

“That is clever,” I tell them. “I like it.”

“Where’s Snake?” Scar asks, looking around.

“If I had to guess, he’s still holding onto that rope,” Scratch says.

“Then we should get back there as quickly as we can.”

I lead the way, moving as fast as my legs will carry me.

Chapter Sixteen

SNAKE

The chimera seems frustrated with her own abilities when she straightens herself up and cannot figure out the best way to drag me down from the air. Despite the fact she can exert control over the weather, she is not able to calm the winds she summoned.

It is an oddly amusing situation.

I am hanging onto a rope that is tied securely around her neck, and she begins to choke every time the windy weather whips my weight around.

It is too bad strangulation is not one of the things that can cause a chimera's death.

If it was, this would simply be a waiting game.

Since it is not, even though I am enjoying myself, I know I must think of a way to keep her attached to the rope until my brothers are able to get back here. She is beginning to claw at it, and her nails are very sharp.

I decide to move down the rope. I take it slowly, inching forward one hand at a time.

I will get closer to her head and attempt to injure her enough to give my brothers another chance to poison her. I do not know where they were thrown to, but I know they are close. They will not waste any chance they are offered to destroy this chimera.

She begins to thrash around wildly the closer I get toward her head, and I have to stop moving to clutch the rope more tightly several times. I cannot risk losing my grip.

My hands hurt more the longer I'm forced to hold on tight.

I suspect my body will ache all over in the coming days.

It does not matter.

We must end the lives of the chimera of Nightshade.

I look down and see Scar rushing into our path. I cannot see what he is doing, but he comes closer, his hand raised. A moment later, Maria jerks backward swiftly, throwing me forward and almost causing me to lose my grasp. My hands burn as I hold on tighter.

She bucks and thrashes, making tortured sounds.

It feels as if she is losing her balance.

Whatever Scar is doing with his arm raised in front of her, it is having a spectacular effect.

The wind stops suddenly, dropping me down and sending me slamming into her back right before she collapses to the

ground, falling forward.

I hope Scar moved out of the way, because she hits the ground fast and hard.

Looking around, I see my brothers moving toward me.

“Snake, are you okay?” Scar asks.

I sit up on the chimera’s back, nodding my head and hissing out my answer.

I still have one hand on the rope. The other is throbbing. It looks as if a few layers of my skin have been worn away. That is annoying, but it is not as bad as suffering a cut.

“You can let go,” Scar tells me. “We’ve got her sedated.”

“I’ve got the poison,” Scratch says, holding up a pouch.

Strange. Fox lost his pouch, and I know Scratch is very possessive about what he keeps in his.

I look at my wolf brothers carefully, suspicions aroused.

“Drop the rope, Snake. Let Scratch finish this.” Scar makes his order, and I shake my head.

I look past them at Fox. He is just standing around looking bored.

These men are not my brothers.

Well, Scar might be, but not the other two. The second chimera is staying out of sight for a reason. She is trying to trick us from a distance. I hiss at Scar, knowing he is the only one who can understand what I am saying. Chimera may be

part reptilian, but I do not think any illusions they create are very sophisticated. If they were, I may have been fooled.

Scar blinks at me, then nods slowly. He understands what I'm telling him, and he doesn't want to alert the other chimera that he knows. The illusions stand there, waiting.

Where are Fox and Scratch, really?

I do not know, and I can tell Scar is having the same worry.

We must end this chimera to move on.

“What is he waiting for?” Scratch gripes.

Scar looks at him. “Keep the poison. I want to be-head this one.”

Scratch frowns at him. “Why?”

“Do not question your leader,” Scar says, before he moves closer, leaning down where her throat is.

He looks up at me. “You'll have to loosen the rope to let me do this.”

I do as I'm asked, but I remain wary.

I know my brothers are alive, but I do not like this feeling of not knowing where they are while there are illusions of them standing near us, pretending to be them.

It is not difficult to see why chimeras are dangerous creatures, but this trickery feels as if it is on another level. I will be glad when this night is over.

Scar bites a chunk out of the chimera's throat.

Her body judders under me.

For a moment I think she's about to awaken.

Then Scar finishes the job, with three more vicious bites, and her head rolls off into the woods.

Her body deflates under me, and I tug the rope back to roll it up as I turn.

The illusions of Fox and Scratch are gone.

They didn't get what they wanted, which was probably to wake up this chimera before we could kill her.

"We have to find Fox and Scratch," Scar murmurs to me. "Follow me. Closely."

I understand his meaning. I do not wish to let him out of my sight.

We have one last chimera to kill, and she is a tricky one.

Chapter Seventeen

FOX

I hear Lita's voice when we're following Scar back to the chimera. She's crying out for our help. I look at Scratch, and I know he hears it too. Scar moves out of sight in the second it takes us to stop and turn our heads toward the sound of our mate's voice.

She hadn't wanted to stay home while we did this.

She'd wanted to help us.

I don't think twice about rushing down the dark street that leads away from the chimera's destination. Scar has a weapon he thinks will work to incapacitate her. Between that and Snake's determination, they will take that chimera apart in no time.

Lita has the heart and soul of a fighter, but she is not used to physical battles.

She needs our help. Even Scratch cannot deny that.

He follows me as I run, stopping when I do just before the nursery building comes into view ahead.

The chimera is carrying Lita over her shoulder as she slinks off toward the trail to the woods.

I share a worried glance with Scratch, and then we rush forward at the same time.

I stab the metal stick into the chimera's tail.

“Let her go. Now!”

The thing growls as it turns its big, black feline head toward us.

“Help me!” Lita cries out, struggling in the chimera's arms.

She looks beat up. There's a gash on her head, and her clothes are torn.

She's dirty and she can't seem to stop crying.

It hurts my heart to see her like this.

“I said, put her down,” I demand, using my Alpha voice and staring back at the creature without blinking.

Scratch puts his arm on my shoulder. “Fox.”

I frown at him, not wanting to take my eyes off our mate, and feeling annoyed that he is trying to get my attention in this moment. “Will you help ...”

He pulls me back, moving me away from them. “I am trying to help.”

“Well, you're awful at it,” I tell him. “So, stop, and let me deal with this.”

I turn to march back to the chimera.

“It is not real!” Scratch growls.

Not real? What is he talking about?

“Our mate is in trouble, and you’re wasting our time ...”

“No,” he says. “The chimera who can make us see things is making us see this. Remember what Scar told us.”

What Scar told us?

“Who cares? She’s taking Lita into the woods!”

“That’s *not* Lita!” he yells at me.

I frown at him, glancing back at the chimera, who’s just standing there waiting for us to come back.

That’s a little odd, I guess. Lita looks like she’s sobbing her eyes out as she yells for our help again.

“Our mate is not this helpless,” Scratch says. “She was only knocked unconscious by those boys because they had sedatives they used on her. She fought, Fox. She wasn’t intending on waiting around to be rescued.”

God of Wolves.

He is right, but I couldn’t see it until he said it.

All I saw was my mate in trouble.

All I felt was the urgent need to save her.

I didn’t stop to question anything. I didn’t take Scar’s warning into consideration. I just reacted.

The moment I tell myself the girl crying over the chimera’s arm isn’t Lita, no matter how much she resembles my mate,

they both disappear as if they were made out of thin air.

“I ...” I start, shaking my head. “We need to get back to Scar and Snake.”

“I was fooled for a second, too,” Scratch assures me as he leads the way back.

“Only when we heard her voice.”

He shrugs in reply.

I manage to reel my panic back in by the time we get back to the spot where we were fighting Maria’s chimera. The creature is gone now, a headless woman lying on the muddy ground in its place.

I realize the rain stopped at some point while we were rushing after Lita.

The wind is gone, too.

“It looks like they killed her,” I tell Scratch, waiting to see if I’m right.

I cannot be sure about anything now that I was tricked so easily.

Scratch nods slowly. “The weather is back to normal, and I would guess that is her body.”

“So, where are Snake and Scar?”

“We will follow their scent trails,” Scratch tells me after a beat. “I do not wish to encounter any more illusions.”

“You know what, I really don’t, either,” I mutter as he starts to sniff around.

He decides on a street and starts moving that way.

I keep him in sight as I follow, hoping there are no more illusions waiting nearby.

I am still reeling inside from that last one.

It makes me want to get back to see Lita so badly, to make sure she is okay.

Our task is not yet complete. We have one last chimera to kill.

Chapter Eighteen

SCRATCH

That was unnerving, and I'm not entirely sure what it was that made me almost instantly question the illusion that felt so real. Instinct, maybe. For a split second, hearing Lita's cry for help made panic swell inside my gut. I could never have ignored that cry. If there was even the vaguest chance it was real, I would have had to run to her.

Realizing it was an illusion was a relief but knowing it could seem that real is worrying.

Fox was completely reeled in by that fake version of Lita.

He was too upset to even consider it might be an illusion.

This last chimera is far more dangerous than the others.

She can attack us with visions of things that aren't real.

A single illusion that's too compelling to ignore could be all it takes for her to win the fight.

Considering we've met our mate, and we're all feeling extra protective toward Lita while there's such a palpable threat

around, we're all going to have to be wary.

I glance back at Fox, making sure he isn't getting distracted by anything else that might not be real.

His expression is sour, but he is keeping up with me while I lead us toward our brothers.

I slow down a little when I see their trail has led us back to the town's square.

That's where all of this began with our father, so it seems fitting that it would be where it ends with the last of Nightshade's parasitic chimera.

The town square is empty, save for our brothers who are presently standing in the middle of the square, gazes moving around as if they are waiting for something.

Scar sees us first and blows out a breath. "Where were you?"

"We saw something that wasn't there," I admit. "Have you seen the other chimera, yet?"

He shakes his head. "We saw some things, too, but she's still hiding."

Fox and Snake start a hushed conversation next to us that I easily tune out of.

"What do you think she's doing?" I ask.

"Waiting around for us to fall for one of her traps and get stuck," Scar mutters.

"She separated Fox and I from you," I realize. "Maybe she has to split us up for her illusions to work."

“It’s probably easier for someone to notice what’s wrong with them if there are too many people around.”

“Then we should stick together.”

“We should, but we also need to find a way to track her down.”

He’s right, but I don’t know how we’re going to do that.

She’s hiding from us, and we just killed her friend.

She’s not going to come to us. She’s trying to avoid meeting the same fate as the others.

“Where would she hide?” I’m thinking out loud, but Scar gets a look on his face that makes me think I just said the wrong thing. “What is it?”

“If she’s as much of a coward as it seems like she is, where do you think she would hide?” he asks.

It takes a second to connect what he’s saying to a place, but once I do, I know I’m right.

“The nursery,” I murmur.

She’d hide there because she’s surrounded with the most vulnerable members of the pack.

She has no qualms with using them as cover. Why would she? Chimera don’t care about anyone other than themselves. It won’t bother her if any of the children get hurt.

“How do we handle this?”

“Carefully.”

Chapter Nineteen

SCAR

Instinct is what leads me to my conclusion, and I am certain we will find Candace hiding in the nursery. She has been cowardly enough to make her attacks from a distance, not even making a real appearance to help save her friend's life. She is afraid of us, and she knows we called Maria out to get the chance to kill her without causing any harm to the children in her charge.

It might be tricky to get her away from the children, but if she thinks she is winning, we should be able to get close enough to end this. We're almost at the finish line.

My brothers listen to my plan with concern in their expressions.

It is a delicate operation. We will need to work fast and be ready for surprises.

"I do not like this," Scratch murmurs.

"It will work," I tell him.

“I will need your pouch for the poison,” Fox says, holding out his hand toward me.

I remove it from my loincloth and pass it over to him. “Be careful when you are picking the berries.”

“I know how to pick nightshade. I’ve done it twice already without dropping dead.”

“Then, make sure the third time is no different. Take your time.”

He ties the pouch to his loincloth’s belt and looks at me. “Are we going now?”

I look at Snake. “Are you ready?”

He hisses that he is.

“We may all be affected by the chimera’s illusions but remember your job and do not deviate from it. All of us have our parts to play. We cannot forget that.”

“Let’s go,” Fox says, clearly anxious to get it over with.

Snake hisses in agreement.

Scratch sighs. He is not sure about this plan.

“The children are at risk every moment they are around a chimera,” I tell him. “It is not ideal to have to evacuate them from the building, but hopefully it will not be for long.”

Hopefully, the chimera will not destroy the building, but there may be nothing we can do about it if she shifts into her true form while inside.

“I will feel better when this night is at an end,” Scratch says.
“Let us get it over with.”

Leading the way, I approach the front of the building with Scratch.

Snake stays outside of the gates. Fox moves around to the side of the back yard, where he will find more poison and help Scratch to lead the children away from the building once they have been gathered together.

The front door is locked, but the wood breaks with little effort when I push on it.

The ceilings are a little higher inside than they are in my mother’s house. I do not have to walk stooped over once we are past the door. However, the long corridor branches out into various rooms with closed doors, and we are going to have to wake every child who is sleeping to get them out of the building.

That task is mainly on Scratch’s shoulders. I will be looking for Candace while he gathers the children.

I open the first door to discover an empty classroom.

The second is an empty dining hall.

Scratch opens the third, which is the first door to the right.

It is full of beds. Most of them small and every one of them occupied.

I nod at him, and he slips inside, wincing as he closes the door behind himself.

I keep going, opening doors to empty rooms and wondering if I might be wrong about Candace.

Scratch had the same thought I did when I asked him where he thought she would go.

The only trouble is, if she's not here, then she could be at my mother's house.

The thought makes me shudder.

I do not think Candace is powerful enough to make that kind of move. Her abilities seemed impressive until we got closer to those illusions and saw them for what they were.

It was not difficult to shatter them.

I think there is a reason she is hiding, and it is not simply because she is afraid of us.

Valerie was honest and ready to face her death.

Maria was arrogant enough to believe she could win the fight her mate lost, despite having lesser abilities.

Candace is running scared because she knows she is not strong enough to survive.

She is the last of the chimera. Her friends are dead. She is on her own now.

I follow my instincts along the corridor, leaving open the doors that have nothing inside.

I'm not sure if it's something I hear, or something I feel, but I get the shivers as I reach the door to the last room of the

house. It's the kitchen, the room that looks out into the back yard.

I know this is where she's hiding. I can sense her presence before I hear her continually hitching breathing. I crouch past the door frame and spot her cowering in the corner of the room, eyes squeezed shut as she breathes as if she's trying not to hyperventilate.

I don't think she has seen me. I don't think she even knows I'm in the room with her right now.

She looks as if she is in a trance. She is murmuring under her breath, her lips shaking.

I move closer, crouching down in front of her.

"Candace," I murmur, making her gasp.

I can see now that her eyes are glowing.

It is not the golden-amber glow of a wolf's enhanced sight.

Her eyes are silvery and flecked through with a multitude of vivid colors that are swirling too quickly to focus on. It hurts to look at her eyes directly, so I move my gaze down.

"You're not supposed to be here," she whispers.

"No," I tell her. "You're the one who's not supposed to be here."

She blinks and her eyes return to their normal human color. It is a relief. I do not know what was causing her eyes to glow, and I do not wish to find out.

“We made this town,” she tells me, her voice emotionless. “Why do you think there’s nightshade all around us? It grows where chimera live, as if the earth itself wants us to die. We’re an abomination. Three parts don’t make a whole. They make a mess. I am part wolf, yet I am not loyal or caring like your species. I have no reason to live, yet I’m afraid to die. Why is that? I do not understand this feeling.”

“Come with me,” I offer, getting to my feet and holding out my hand.

Valerie was right that this woman was having some of the same feelings that she had.

Candace is too afraid to face her fears head on. That is the only difference.

She takes my hand and stands up. “You will kill me.”

“You don’t want to hurt people any longer.”

“I shouldn’t want to stop,” she murmurs, “I never used to care if other people had to die to keep me alive. I do not know what has gone wrong with my brain. It is as if humanity has infected me. I feel things I don’t want to feel. I am broken.”

“It is not bad to feel things.”

“I don’t want to feel anything anymore. I am the last one left. You were right. I should not be here.”

She moves past me, going to the door to the back yard.

I watch as she unlocks it and steps outside.

I follow her into the garden, where she goes to the edge of the fence and sinks to her knees.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I am done with this life,” she tells me, as she picks berries from the plant that’s peeking through the fence.

I will not stop her if she wishes to end her own life.

She has done many terrible things.

It was in her nature to do them.

There was nothing inside of her telling her it was wrong.

I do not know how she managed to figure that out for herself.

She has grown more than the others, but that doesn’t mean her nature won’t win out in her struggle if she is left here to try and become something better than the sum of her parts.

It is too late for second chances.

Change is only possible to a certain extent, and it seems she has reached her limit.

“You cannot fight who you are,” I tell her.

“This is my fight,” she says, putting the berries into her mouth.

She chews and swallows swiftly, wincing at the taste.

“Existence is misery,” she murmurs as she leans back against the fence.

She reaches for more berries, but she doesn't live long enough to put them in her mouth.

I let out a sigh as she slumps over, her body sliding to the ground.

It is over. The chimera are gone.

Chapter Twenty

FOX

I am helping Scratch direct the children out onto the street when Scar steps out of the front door and comes toward us. I can tell by the look on his face that it is done, and Snake's hiss confirms it.

I move toward him quickly. "It is done?"

He nods slowly. "She poisoned herself."

Another unexpected death. Clearly, there is more than one reason why chimera are not over-running this world. They do not seem to be very good at self-preservation.

"Then we can let the children back inside," I realize.

The shifter kids were not afraid when we woke them.

They reacted as if we were their guardians, not asking any questions as we ushered them outside.

We did not have to make up a lie to get them out here. They simply came with us when we asked.

It is bad that they do not question anything, but tonight I cannot complain.

The woman who was sleeping in the same room as many of the children is talking to Scratch.

She had questions, but she didn't hesitate to follow him, either.

He moves over to the front path where I am standing with Scar.

"Fox," he starts, looking vaguely awkward.

"What is it?" I ask, wondering why the woman is looking at me that way.

Surely, Scratch told her we have a mate.

"It is your mother," he blurts, glancing back at the woman.

"My mother?" I ask, as the memory of Scar's mother telling me my mother is alive floods back to me.

I blink at the woman with renewed interest. She is short and slim with long, auburn hair.

She smiles as she approaches. "I'm told your name is Fox. Could we talk?"

This woman is my mother. I am astounded by the emotion that rising up in me on recognizing that truth. Of course. I was told she worked here, and here she is.

"We can talk," I tell her, not asking Scar.

He will understand. All of my brothers will understand.

“I can’t talk for long,” she tells me, as Scratch begins to let the children back inside. “I have to get back to them.”

“Of course,” I tell her, as we move off to the side of the garden.

“I thought about you a lot,” she says, her eyes misting up with unshed tears. “I felt in my heart that you survived. I tried to go into the woods many times at night, and I was always caught and dragged back to town. Eventually, I stopped trying. I knew if I persisted, one of those monsters would drain me.”

“You know about them?” I ask, barely able to let it sink in that I had a living parent who cared about me the whole time while I was being raised in The Abyss.

“I knew Maria was something evil. I had a ... well it was described as a heart attack, not long after you were born. I knew she’d done something to me. I felt it when she put her hand on my shoulder.”

It makes me angry to hear that the chimera hurt her, but if I am honest, it is more surprising that she survived their treatment. It seems likely that Scratch and Snake’s mothers were subjected to the same thing. The chimera probably did not want anyone left alive who might oppose them.

“Can I hug you?” I ask, not sure if it’s appropriate, but wanting to touch her to know she is real.

She smiles at me. “Of course.”

She steps closer and I wrap my arms around her.

She is real. She is my mother, and she is alive.

It is a gift I did not expect to see her again.

She breaks the embrace after a few moments, wiping at her eyes and smiling at me.

“I am so proud of you,” she says. “You will make a wonderful Alpha.”

I smile back at her. “You will like my mate. She is ...”

“Lita,” my mother says, nodding. “Her guardian is Sol’s mother. Word spread quickly when Alina told Lita to run to her mates in the forest. I prayed for all of you to beat those awful sons of the Alpha.”

“We were successful in that endeavour.”

“The people of Nightshade have much to thank you for.”

“They may see us as monsters ...” I start, watching her shake her head.

“Some, maybe, but most of us know we’ve been living with the real monsters for a very long time. You’ve saved us, Fox. Everyone will know that soon enough,” she promises. “Now, it’s up to me to look after the children, but we can speak again soon.”

“I will bring my mate to meet you properly,” I promise.

She smiles. “Good night, Fox.”

“Good night, mother.”

Chapter Twenty-One

SCRATCH

Seeing Fox embrace his mother is a bittersweet moment for me as I lead the children back into the building. I am happy for him, but sad that I do not get a similar reunion with my own mother.

She is dead, and I would be surprised if that didn't turn out to be because she was drained of her lifeforce by the chimera. It must have been more convenient for them to kill her than let her live.

It makes me angry, but there is nothing I can do with that feeling.

There is no where for my emotions to go.

The chimera are dead.

We have defeated all of them.

Nightshade no longer belongs to our enemy.

I stand by the door and watch the children climb back into their beds. Some of the older ones help the younger ones

before they go into their own beds.

One little boy looks up at me curiously after spending a moment staring at my feet.

I am surprised that my presence tonight did not frighten them. All I really experienced from these children were a few curious looks. They are used to being told what to do, but I would have expected them to be a little afraid because I do not look like they do.

I crouch down and ask the child, “Do you need help?”

He shakes his head and bites his lip.

Then he nods. “I n-need to use the b-bathroom.”

“Do you know where it is?” I ask.

He nods and holds out his hand.

He wants me to come with him.

It makes me smile. I’m reminded vaguely of when Snake was little.

Fox would do whatever he liked whenever he liked, often without asking or telling anyone, but Snake preferred to be carried or to have his tiny hand held whenever he wanted to go from The Abyss into the forest, or to visit the river for a swim.

I take the boy’s tiny hand in mine carefully, and I walk crouched down, so I am not too tall or walking too fast. He giggles, and I cannot help but grin at how ridiculous this must look.

When I walk him along the hallway, he lets go of my hand and stands in front of the bathroom.

It's dark inside. I remember seeing light switches on walls near doors, so I stand up and put my hand inside the room, feeling around until I hit the switch, and the room fills with light.

The little boy does not immediately go inside.

He looks at me with a serious face and says, "W-will you check for m-m-monsters?"

I nod, and step into the room, looking around and stepping back out.

"No monsters," I tell him.

He lets out a relieved sigh and rushes into the room, slapping the door almost closed.

I can't help but smile as memories of Snake and Fox flood through my thoughts.

I was not so much older than they were, but they acted so much younger.

I was never a monster to them, and it looks as if I am not a monster to these children, either.

It makes me feel a little more at home to know that we are not going to be treated differently here, like Scar always suspected we would. I am sure some people will have other reactions to us, but I do not think I care about those people.

The boy finishes up in the bathroom and steps back out with a big sigh.

“Okay, now I can go to bed,” he tells me, his stammer gone.

“Okay,” I tell him, letting him lead the way.

Chapter Twenty-Two

SNAKE

As soon as Fox's mother is inside the nursery with the children, Fox looks as if he is ready to go running back to Scar's mother's house, where our mate will be waiting for us.

I shake my head at him before Scar even gathers us to go over the next part of the plan.

"It's time for the clean-up," Scar says, looking at Fox pointedly.

My feline brother's face falls. I do not know if he genuinely forgot about the dead bodies of the chimera, or if he would just *like to* conveniently forget about all about that part of this task.

"Can't it wait?" he complains.

I hiss in agreement that it is a tedious task.

It is also something that needs to be done, but Fox does not wish to hear that, so I will let Scar deliver that bad news.

“It has been a long night,” Scar admits. “But it will not be over until we have tidied up our mess.”

He is right. We cannot leave the bodies lying around to be found later.

It would traumatise one or more members of the pack we’re supposed to be protecting.

“It will not take long,” Scratch adds. “There are only three bodies to drag back to The Abyss this time.”

“Only,” Fox mutters, frowning at me. “We’ll barely have time to get them to the portal before the sun rises.”

“There’s time,” Scar assures him.

“Well, I’ll take the one that’s closest,” Fox says.

“You and Snake will take Maria’s body to The Abyss,” Scar says, looking from Fox to me. “She’s in two pieces and they aren’t that far away.”

Fox mutters something inaudible under his breath before he looks at me. “Okay, come on, let’s get moving.”

“We will meet you at the side of the nursery when you are done and have washed up in the river,” Scar calls out, making sure we know we are not to go straight to Lita.

“Yes, Sir!” Fox calls back.

He looks at me as I lead him back to where Scar killed Maria.

“Can you believe this?” he asks.

I nod, and then tell him I am ready to be done with this task, too.

He sighs. “Lita’s probably sleeping by now, anyway.”

He may be right, but that does not sound so bad.

If our mate is sleeping, we can rest beside her.

All I care about is being near her.

And we will be near her again soon.

Chapter Twenty-Three

FOX

The clean-up is the roughest part of the night. I mean, besides freaking out over a fake version of Lita crying out for my help. I may have nightmares about that for some time. It hurt my heart to hear my mate in so much pain. No part of me was able to take a step back and think about anything logically when that was happening.

I shudder as I move through the long grass slowly, looking for Maria's severed head.

Apparently, Scar literally had to bite her head off when illusions of me and Scratch showed up and tried to stop him from killing her. Snake swears the fake version of me was not quite as handsome.

He also swore that the head could not have gone very far.

Yet, I've been picking through the grass where he said it rolled for at least five minutes and so far there has been no sign of it.

It's too dark to see if there's a bloody trail or not.

All the blades of grass look black.

“You’re sure it went this way?” I call back to Snake.

He nods as he lifts the headless body over his shoulder. I didn’t turn him down when he offered to carry that part. It seemed disgustingly messy, but he will be able to clean the blood off his scales much easier than I will be able to get it out of my fur.

Now, I’m starting to regret my choice to carry the smaller body part.

“It may be lost forever,” I tell him, lowering my voice as he moves closer to where I am.

His head bobs around a bit, and then he points to a section of grass that is a few footsteps further into the woods. I move toward it and her skin becomes visible like a spot of light in the darkness.

I identify her hair and pick the head up gingerly, using it like a handle.

It feels wet, so it’s likely covered in blood.

Too late to care now. My hand is already doused in the dark liquid.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Despite letting Snake carry the messier body part, when we walk under the streetlamps I can see that I still have some bloodied patches of fur. My feet and hands feel the worst, but I

still have some splashes in other places. It's annoying. I will need a long soak in the stream to get cleaned up.

I do not wish to look or smell bad for my mate when we go back to the house to tell her of our victories.

Scratch already walked past us to get Valerie's body from her house, and again to take her to The Abyss in the time it took Snake and I to decide who was carrying what, and for me to start the hunt for Maria's elusive head.

Scar must have taken Candace. She was closest to The Abyss.

Typical. They're probably almost there by now, meanwhile we're just getting to the spot by the side of the nursery where we're supposed to meet up again before we go to Lita's house together.

"Can you run with that thing?" I ask Snake, trying to find a faster way to get this done.

The head drips and I hold it further away from me as I look back at Snake.

He hisses that we can run if I want to. I think he is waiting for me to turn away before he flickers his eyes. I'm being impatient, and it's been a tiring night already. He probably doesn't really want to have to run while that headless corpse bleeds all over his back.

"Sorry," I tell him. "We don't need to run."

I sigh softly as we trudge into the woods with our bloodied body parts.

Scar and Scratch are probably already at the stream by now.

I tell myself it doesn't matter.

They're going to wait for us.

It's not a race.

Snake hisses as we walk, asking me how it felt to meet my mother.

I can't help but smile. "It felt good. She's nice. I guess I never really thought she would be because of what happened."

It didn't even occur to me when I was younger that she might have been like Scar's mother.

I just assumed she threw me away like the rest of the pack.

Now I know the truth, and I'm glad she's still around to get to know.

Snake admits he is curious about his own mother.

I feel a little guilty that she is dead, and mine is not.

Somehow my mother escaped that fate at the hands of the chimera.

"I think your mother would have been nice, too," I tell him.

He nods, hissing in agreement. He tells me our mothers probably would have been friends.

"I bet they would have been."

If they are anything like us, they would have been best friends.

It is a nice thought.

I let my arm drop a little and the head gets its goop on my shin.

“Ugh,” I sigh, holding it back away from me. “This thing is disgusting. I don’t know Scar did this with his teeth.”

Snake hisses in agreement, adding that I was lucky I wasn’t the one who had to do it.

He is not wrong. I did not think I was squeamish, but I would prefer to make my enemies bleed without getting covered in their bodily fluids in the process.

This head-carrying experience has driven my hunger from me. I can’t imagine eating while I’m still thinking about how disgusting this feels, and I was definitely ready for a big dinner before we started fighting.

“I think I might have to reconsider giving up meat,” I admit.

The thought of it turns my stomach.

Snake makes his laughing noise and hisses his disbelief at me.

“Yeah, yeah,” I tell him. “Don’t tell me this doesn’t disgust you.”

I thrust the head at him. He jumps back, almost dropping the body he has over his shoulder.

I snort, and he makes a small noise of complaint.

“Sorry, that was too far,” I admit, keeping the head a safe distance away from us both.

He shakes his head at me and assures me I will never give up eating meat.

He is probably right.

I am just eager to get rid of this severed part.

Snake hisses again, more softly this time.

He is wondering what might happen when we get back to see our mate.

“I would guess that she’ll be sleeping,” I tell him. “If not, then I’ll ask her if you can give her a good night kiss.”

He hisses again and I shrug. “I know you would rather ask her yourself, but I don’t know how you’re going to do that when you communicate in hisses, and she can’t hear you.”

He hisses a little more, and it takes me a second to realize what he means.

He has one strange hiss that he uses as a describing word for a ‘thing’ which he uses for literally any ‘thing’. His knife was the last time he used it, and the excitement in his actions clued me in that time.

This sounds less enthused and more serious.

“You are talking about the book Scar brought home. The one with the sign language in it.”

He nods and gives a hiss of agreement.

“We can grab it when we are in The Abyss,” I tell him. “But we should be quick. I do not like the thought of being trapped in there when the sun sets.”

I have had quite enough of being stuck in that nothing land.

I'm sure Snake has, too. There are much better things to be found out here where we will be living from now on. I do not like that we have to go back there to be rid of the bodies, but Scar is insistent that we clean up our messes so that we can have a fresh start and for some reason that means filling The Abyss with dead bodies instead of letting them rot in the ground out in the forest somewhere.

I suppose if we did leave them out here, Scar would tell us we have to bury them and that sounds like even more work. The Abyss is better than having to spend hours digging.

Finally, the portal is within sight, but I find myself pulling a face at the thought of stepping through it.

I keep walking, but I don't want to go back inside.

"Remember hours ago, when we were waiting to get out here, and we all thought for a minute that the portal wasn't going to open?" I ask, feeling that same dread tugging at me.

Snake hisses, telling me just to throw the head if I do not wish to step inside.

He makes a good point. It's light enough to throw.

I don't need to set foot back inside that place.

Snake stands back a little, waiting for me to get rid of the head and keeping himself out of the way.

I swing my arm back and let go, stepping back to watch the head soar through the air and disappear into the portal that

leads into our old prison.

“Would that be considered a touchdown, or a goal?” I wonder out loud, trying to remember the ball games Scar taught us when we were kids. I don’t remember the names of them now. They were never particularly exciting with so many rules to try and remember.

Snake hisses, guessing it would be a goal.

He disappears into The Abyss with the rest of the body next, and I wait around outside. It takes him a few very long minutes to ditch the body and find the book.

My gaze is on the sky, feeling that it is about to start getting lighter.

Any moment now.

I can feel it, the same way I feel it when the portal is about to open from inside The Abyss.

Snake steps out with the book in his hand, and the sun begins to rise.

The portal’s opening gets smaller and disappears within seconds of Snake’s exit.

“Well, that was cutting it close,” I tell him.

He shrugs, thrusting the book at me as if I will be able to help him with learning how to ask Lita if he can kiss her. I shake my head, and he looks deflated.

“There is one person who can read that thing, and I am not that person,” I tell him, a little sad about that fact. If I could

read, I would be able to learn new ways to talk with my mate much faster than relying on waiting for Scar to teach us. I've already started to forget what we learned last night.

It has been a long night.

Snake makes a disappointed sound and clutches the book close to his heart.

I wipe my bloody hand on the ground and wince at how dirty I still seem when I look down at myself.

I need to get this blood off me. Snake could use a good scrubbing, too.

“Let's get to the stream so we go visit our mate.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

SCAR

The sun is rising when I get to my mother's house with Scratch. She has always been an early riser, but I doubt she has slept well tonight. I doubt my mate has gotten much rest, either.

It is my mother who answers the door when we arrive, cleaned up after our long night.

"What happened?" she asks, worry on her face. "Where are your brothers?"

"They are safe," I tell her. "They are just cleaning up before they come here."

We ran into Fox and Snake at the stream, when we were done, and they were just about to get started. When I told them we would meet them at the house, they did not complain.

"Oh, thank the Goddess for that," my mother says. "You're all okay."

I nod slowly. "We are all okay, and it is done. The chimera are dead."

A bright smile breaks out on her face. “I knew it! I knew you would do it.”

She steps out onto the porch and wraps her arms around me in a fierce hug that feels good.

I hug her back more carefully, and I feel as if I am finally home.

Not at this house, but in this town.

I know I would never have been accepted the way I was before, but I feel as if things will change now that I am back and the threat to Nightshade has been eliminated.

I let my mother go, and I look her over. “Please, do not tell me you have been up all night?”

She steps back, into the house, and I can tell whatever her answer is going to be, she has most certainly not slept.

“There’s no way I could sleep, Sol,” she tells me. “Not with you out there fighting chimera, and Lita pacing around in here as if she might bolt from the house to help you at any given moment.”

“How is ...” I start, before I look past my mother to see my mate come out of the living room.

She lets out a relieved sigh when she sees me.

Then she steps closer and asks hopefully, “You did it?”

I nod, raising my hand to make the same motion.

It is perhaps a redundant move, used along with the nod, but Lita seems to enjoy it.

The smile on her lips only brightens as my mother opens the door wide to allow us entry.

“Or did you want to go to the tower and make the announcement first?” she asks, clearly joking.

“I am in no rush to alert the town,” I assure her.

From what Scratch told me about the children, they did not seem to be afraid of him, only seeing him as an adult, not a reject. That is a good start, but I know at least some of the people here will not be pleased that the rejects are taking over. I do not know if they will believe what has been happening here once it’s been explained. There will likely be people who do not wish to stay in Nightshade’s pack any longer, and we cannot force them to do so, even if the chimera who ran this town made it close to impossible for the people here to function in a real pack.

Last night may have been arduous, but the real work is yet to begin.

“What about the nursery?” Lita asks suddenly.

“I spoke to Fox’s mother last night. She was relieved to see her son alive, and she knew something was wrong with Maria. She will run the nursery until we have alerted the town. Everything will start to change as soon as we do that.”

I wait for my mother to tell Lita in ASL what I’ve just explained.

She does so faster than I expect and Lita smiles brightly when she’s done.

“I should go to work,” my mother says, telling Lita in ASL at the same time.

“No. You should go to bed,” I tell her, knowing she needs to rest.

She shakes her head. “No. Everything should run as normal today. I’ll rest a little more and let the others carry some of my load today, but I need to go to work.”

She turns to Lita and makes some more hand gestures.

Lita talks with her in ASL for a minute, before her pretty face flushes and she glances out at us.

My mother picks her coat off the rack by the door.

I move so she can step out of the house.

She smiles back at me. “If the announcement needs to wait, then you’d better get inside before someone sees you out here.”

She has a point, and I nod at Scratch to get inside.

He hesitates before he does so, and the soft sigh he lets out does not get past me.

I know he is going to have the most trouble adjusting. We have gone from having nothing, to claiming a whole town as ours to rule over. It is a lot, and that is why I am trying to control how quickly things happen.

I step into the house after Scratch and close the door behind me.

Lita's face still seems red while she gazes thoughtfully at Scratch.

It occurs to me that it is not going to be easy to communicate with our mate while my mother is gone, and while we are still waiting for Fox to arrive with Snake.

She smiles at Scratch, reaching out to touch his arm.

It's instinctive to want to touch each other, but I notice it makes my brother flinch.

He is not used to this kind of attention.

None of us are, but that does not explain his reaction.

Lita pulls her hand back and crosses her arms under her chest.

I look at him until he looks back at me.

"What is wrong?" I ask, in a low growl.

"Nothing is wrong," he snaps back.

He moves past Lita, going into the living room after a second of hesitation.

I move toward our mate, and I touch her upper arm.

She looks up at me. "Thank you for saving our town."

Our town. Hers and mine.

It belongs to us now.

All we have to do is claim it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

SCRATCH

I do not know how to feel when our mate touches me. We are alone with her, and she seems to be interested in us, but I cannot make myself believe any of this is real.

It is too perfect. Leaving The Abyss and finding a true mate was my dream for so long, and yet now that it is beginning to come true it feels like it is an illusion that might shatter if I try to hold onto it too tightly.

So, I move out of the hallway, where my mate was attempting to make some sort of connection with me. Even if she cannot hear anything I tell her, she is open and willing to find a way to communicate with me.

I should not have walked away.

It is not what any of my brothers would have done.

I know if Fox was here, he would have her halfway to her bedroom by now, drowning in kisses and making her beg for more. Snake may be content to follow his lead, but I know he would have grabbed the chance first if he'd had it, too.

Now, she is in the hallway alone with Scar, and I know he will be making sure she is feeling better after I was rude to her. I clasp my fingers around the stone I've carried since I was a small child. It is a simple grey stone with a smooth surface that I have been attached to ever since I laughed for the first time that I can remember. Scar had taken me out to the forest that night to hunt, and we had failed at capturing a meal, but he made me feel better by carrying me out to the river where he taught me how to skim stones across the surface of the water.

I kept this one when I found it, enjoying the texture of it in my hands.

It became an item of comfort that made me feel better whenever I was unhappy.

Holding it has always reminded me that no matter how bad things are, there is always something to be grateful for.

It isn't working today, probably because I have been holding it ever since I gave Fox my pouch.

I open my hand and look at it, wondering if it was always just a pretty stone.

It does not seem to contain the healing power it once did.

Sighing, I curl my fist around it and lean back against the wall.

I look up as Scar walks into the room.

He shakes his head at me, clearly disappointed.

I do not try to explain myself. I simply look down at the ground.

He sits next to me, muttering, “If you hurt her, I will kill you.”

I frown at him, and it takes me a moment to understand what he’s saying.

It was rude to flinch away from our mate.

I hurt her feelings with that response.

It probably only made things worse when I walked away.

“What was I supposed to do?” I ask him, instead. “Let her arouse me with her touch and then take her roughly against the wall?”

“Well, that would have been an improvement on walking away.”

He isn’t even joking. I force myself to look up as Lita steps into the room.

She sits down on the couch, perching on the edge a little tensely.

Then, she gets up and goes to the bookshelf.

She brings the sketchpad over to the coffee table and opens it.

It takes her a second to find a pencil, but once she does, she turns the pad to a fresh page and picks up the writing tool. I glance at Scar, but he is watching her with the same pride in

his stare that he used to get every time Snake or Fox learned something new as we were growing up.

She holds up the pad. She has written something.

I do not know what any of the letters are.

Nothing Scar tried to teach us about writing sank in.

It always seemed like a meaningless exercise. Now it feels like a necessity that I missed out on.

I am mad at myself. It is nothing new, but it is doubly frustrating with the knowledge that it is something I could have learned if I'd only tried a little harder.

Lita's smile falls when she looks at me.

Scar captures her attention, making a writing gesture.

She passes him the pad and the pencil.

"What did she write?" I ask as he positions the pencil on the paper under her words.

"She is asking if we can write," he tells me. "It will allow us to communicate for now until we are more proficient with her sign language."

He writes something under the words, in a heavier script with more jagged edges.

There is so much variation that it is hard to tell if there are any of the same letters in what she has written compared to what he has written.

"And what have you written?" I ask.

“That I can write, and I will translate for you all.”

He passes the pad and pencil back to her and she smiles at him after she reads it.

“Alina told me you liked to read, when you were young,” she says.

Scar nods, making the “yes” gesture with his hand at the same time.

“I like to read,” she admits. “I always enjoyed fairytales. What were your favorites?”

It is no surprise to me that they share a common interest. They were both raised by the same person, after all. Scar’s mother seems to enjoy books. There are some stacked under the coffee table, and the more I look around, the more I see. There is even one hidden under the lamp table at my side.

I pick it up and look at the cover.

A young, dark-haired woman is in the arms of a devious looking man, her body giving off obvious signs of arousal while he gazes down at her chest. She is not naked, but she might as well be, for all the coverage her clothing is providing her body.

I hold the book up to Scar. “What is this, exactly?”

It does not look informative in any meaningful way.

Scar snorts as he glances at it, barely pausing as he answers Lita’s question in writing.

“That is a romance novel. It is a fictional account of two lovers uniting.”

“A fictional account?” I do not understand. “What is the point of that?”

“The point is to be entertained,” he explains. “To go on the journey with the characters almost as if you are experiencing the things that they are going through.”

“So, you would read this to enjoy yourself?”

He smiles as he turns the pad back to Lita.

“I have read several romance novels, and they were quite informative about what a woman wants.”

I blink at him, taking it in and trying to remember a time when he passed that information on to us.

I don't think he ever mentioned anything. Perhaps because until recently it was highly unlikely that we would ever meet a woman to need that kind of information.

“Beauty and the Beast is one of my favorites, too,” Lita tells him with a smile.

Her voice sounds warmer now, as if she is pleased.

She has found a way to connect with Scar that has shown her they have even more in common than they might have thought. I cannot help but feel a little jealous. I do not have any favorite books. I do not know how to read or write.

There is no reason for her to be interested in me.

I am not unique or special. I am just Scar's brother.

“Did you ever tell stories in ... Where you grew up?” she asks, glancing at me.

She is very sweet to try and include me, but I shake my head slowly.

It is not entirely true, but I doubt she wants to read one of the many tales Scar told us as children to teach us something. There are too many to choose from, anyway. I would not know which one to pick.

Scar glances at me before he starts writing something down.

I might as well not be here. Perhaps I should go and look for Snake and Fox.

They’ve been gone a little longer than they should have been.

They could be out there getting into all kinds of trouble.

Especially now, when the sun has risen, and the shifters of Nightshade are going about their daily lives. I am about to make this point to Scar when he turns the page and shows his answer to Lita.

“I am telling her how much you loved to hear the story of how you saved Fox when he was abandoned outside the portal. You were too young to remember it, but Fox has always known it was you who saved him, not me.”

“That is only because you taught me to be careful and check around when I could hear something strange. I would not have known otherwise.”

“Scratch, you learned everything so quickly. You were always noticing things I missed. You saved our lives many times over the years because of your keen eye and your fast responses.”

“I ... I don't think I have ever heard you talk like this.”

It is true when I think about it, but I don't know what this feeling is inside me at the pride in his words. There is something bitter-sweet about it.

Scar looks at me and it is as if he is really seeing me for the first time in a long time.

“I am so sorry, my brother. I did not know it was important to you to hear such things. I should have realized. I thought you knew.”

“I ... I have always felt the need to be useful,” I admit. “I do not know what my life is worth if I am not fighting to hold on to it. I believe that is why I am feeling strange now. I do not know what my life is if I am not going to have to fight to survive anymore.”

“Your life is worth fighting for, Scratch, and we have many battles ahead of us. They will just be very different from the battles we are used to fighting.”

He is right, but I still do not see a connection to our mate, and I do not know how to make one.

It is too embarrassing to admit to this, so I nod and let it go.

Scar deserves to enjoy this time with our mate.

I will not try to ruin it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

SCAR

It feels good to get to know my mate better, but I did not expect to realize one of my brothers is not entirely comfortable with the thought of our new life outside of the prison we grew up in. Scratch has always been more serious than Snake and Fox. He is cautious, thoughtful and patient. These qualities have made him a fine hunter, and they have helped to keep our younger brothers safe.

I never considered that the traits that helped him survive so well in The Abyss might be the very same ones to make him wary of a life outside of that place.

We have much work to do before we can settle well in Nightshade, and now I know Scratch needs help to accept this new life. Finding common ground with our mate will make it easier.

I turn the page on the pad and start writing.

Fortunately, I can reveal a little of how my brother is feeling to Lita while he cannot tell what I am writing, and I am

hopeful that it will help him if she can tell us about a time when she was afraid about something when she should not have been.

It would be easy for me to reassure him myself, but that is not what he needs right now.

When I finish writing, I pass the pad back to Lita.

She reads my words and glances at Scratch before she puts the pad down and nods slowly.

“I stopped talking a long time ago,” she says. “I learned to talk when I was young, and it seemed like the easiest way to communicate with other people. Most of the pack don’t know ASL. I thought I could find a way to make friends if I could talk. It didn’t work out that way. They made fun of me, so I stopped trying to do things in a way that helped them. I didn’t talk again, until last night. I didn’t want to. I was afraid, but I realized the people who care about me won’t make fun of me, and I was right.”

“I already do not like this pack,” Scratch grumbles. “They do not treat our mate well.”

He is angry on behalf of our mate. It is not quite the reaction I was hoping for, but it is a start.

“People can be stupid,” I tell him. “It does not mean they are not capable of change.”

“What if they are too stupid to change?” he asks.

“Then they are missing out.”

He frowns at me. "You are talking about me."

"Do you think you are too stupid to change?" I ask.

He sighs. "Change feels difficult. I do not like the thought of it."

"This is a good change, Scratch. It does not have to be difficult."

He is trying to understand what I'm saying, but I am not sure if it is really sinking in.

I don't get a chance to try and convince him further.

The sound of our brothers at the door brings him quickly to his feet.

"I will let them in," he tells me as he leaves the room.

I look back at Lita. She watches him go and turns back to me with a wry smile on her pink lips.

"I'm guessing that didn't really work?" she asks.

I'm about to answer out loud, when I realize I'll need to write it down.

I tell her it was helpful, but that he is still feeling strange about everything.

She nods as she reads the message. "These things take time."

I can hear Fox arguing with Scratch in the hallway before our feline brother steps into the room and sinks quickly into the space next to Lita on the couch.

Snake looks around before he decides to sit on the floor at the side of the couch.

For a second, I'm not sure Scratch is coming back, but he steps back into the room a moment later, clearly just taking his time. I'm not sure what I'm worried about.

He can't go back to The Abyss right now.

The portal is closed.

There is nothing to go back to.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

LITA

The energy in the room changes almost instantly with the arrival of Fox and Snake. Scar has the calm, confident air of a true leader. Scratch is feeling anxious, but he seems less fraught than he did when they first arrived. Fox is playful from the moment he arrives, with Snake sort of echoing that energy in a slightly more toned-down way.

Fox leans in and rubs his head against mine.

It's the lightest touch, but it wakes up all those primal urges I felt when we first met.

I'm sure he can tell the effect he's having. He looks pleased with himself when he moves back.

"We missed you," he says.

"I missed all of you when you were gone, too."

"But especially me, right?" he asks, grinning.

I can't help but smile. I don't answer him, and he doesn't need me to.

When I look back at Scar, I see Snake has my guardian's ASL book in his hands, and he's thrusting it at his older brother, his mouth and tongue moving.

Scar takes the book from him, shakes his head, and opens it.

He shoots me a hint of a smile when he catches me looking.

Scratch doesn't look amused, but Snake seems happy once Scar starts flipping through the book.

Clearly, there's something he wants to say.

"You could write it down for him," I remind Scar.

He nods and pauses to write on the pad.

When I see his note, I understand.

Snake wants to ask me something himself.

Scar goes back to checking through the book.

I look back at Fox, because it seems like the easiest way to give Scar and Snake a moment.

"Did you sleep while we were gone?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I couldn't. I was too worried."

I prayed with Alina when they were gone, all the time hoping Artemis would possess me one more time. Waiting was torture. Knowing my mates were putting their lives on the line for me, and for Nightshade, there's no way I ever could have gotten into bed and actually slept.

"Then you are overdue to go to bed," he tells me.

“You were out all night. Wouldn’t that mean you’re also overdue for bed?”

His vibrant eyes light up. “You make a good point. Perhaps ...”

He trails off with a sour glance at Scratch, who clearly interjected some kind of protest.

“I was not about to suggest anything untoward,” he says, shaking his head and putting his full attention back on me. “I just think you should rest, and we should be close to you while you are sleeping. It would be much safer than allowing you to sleep alone.”

Somehow, I doubt we would actually sleep if we went into my bedroom together.

My heart races at the thought of being in bed with them.

I don’t know what would happen, exactly, but considering we’re fated to be mates, it would be something new and interesting. Something I’ve never done before.

There’s only one problem. My bed is barely big enough for one.

If I want to claim them as mine, I’ll need to gather up all the spare blankets I can find and make a new bed on the floor, where there’s more space.

Even then, it might be a tight squeeze.

“What are you thinking?” Fox asks.

“I’m thinking I’d like to relax in my bedroom with you.” I glance around. “All of you, I mean. If that sounds like something you’d ...”

I trail off in relief when they all start to nod at me.

It would have been awful to have that offer turned down.

I get to my feet. “I’ll go make the bed. I’ll come back when I’m done.”

I slip past Fox and out of the room.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

LITA

I take my time making up the bed, spreading the sheets all over the floor of my bedroom. It doesn't feel very soft when I'm done, but without a mattress there's nothing more I can do about that.

I head into the bathroom and change into a nightdress, feeling strange about doing this during the day while I should be working in the kitchens with Alina. The whole town thinks I'm dead, which is the official reason why I'm home today, but she made me flush when she told me to be careful in ASL before she left for work.

She trusts her son and his brothers. She wouldn't have let them into the house if she didn't.

I don't think she was worried about leaving me alone with them.

She knew they were my mates before I believed they were real.

I'm pretty sure she was only warning me so I wouldn't rush anything I wasn't ready for.

But the truth is, I feel ready for a mate.

I've been ready for that for a while now.

I just didn't expect to find out I have four of them.

Especially not four huge, beautiful monsters of men.

They've already proven themselves to me, by saving my life and taking care of a deadly threat to my pack. I trust them, with my heart and with my body.

I don't want to be careful with them.

I leave the bathroom and step into the living room doorway in the flimsy nightdress.

It's probably obvious that I'm not wearing underwear, but I'm still more covered than they are.

"I've made the bed," I tell them, before I turn and go back into my room.

I close the drapes, but it's bright out and some light still gets in.

It's nowhere close to dark in here.

I move into the middle of the 'bed' I've made with the blankets, and I sit down, waiting.

Shadows move in the hallway before Snake walks into the room.

He looks at me and signs, "Can I kiss you?"

It's so sweet. I nod, and motion to him to come closer.

He comes over and sits down across from me, sitting cross-legged like I am.

I lean forward a little and he does the same.

I'm about to close the distance myself when he leans in some more and his lips finally meet mine.

His skin is cool to the touch and my lips tingle just a little where they touch his.

When the tip of his forked tongue flickers over my lip, I open my mouth.

He reaches up and touches my hair, being gentle.

I feel his tongue vibrate lightly and I wonder if that means he's hissing.

He explores my mouth with his lightly vibrating tongue, and I take in little licks of his, enjoying the tingly feeling I'm getting from his cool skin and his interesting tongue.

When he removes his tongue and backs up a little, I see Fox leaning in the doorway, watching us with a smile on his black lips.

"Is there room in the bed for anyone else?" he asks when he sees I'm looking at his lips.

"There's room," I tell him, watching Snake's mouth open slightly and his tongue move.

I think he's hissing. When I look at Fox, I see he's shaking his head.

“I am not here to steal your place,” he says to Snake.

He must understand the sounds his brother is making. They must translate into words.

Interesting. Snake does not seem to talk like his brothers. His different physiology might make it impossible for him to speak like Fox does. It doesn't seem to matter to them.

I smile at Fox as he lays down at my left side, resting his head on his hand.

He's pulling a sexy, stretched out pose beside me.

Snake's eyes flicker when he turns his head to look at his brother.

I don't think he's impressed.

He pushes Fox's arm and Fox moves back until his back bumps against the base of the actual bed.

“Better?” he asks Snake.

Snake nods and moves into the space between Fox and I.

I try to hide my smile, but it's impossible.

At least, it is until I look up and see Scratch stumbling into the room as if Scar has just given him a push from behind. I hurts a little that he seems so reluctant compared to his brothers.

I have to remind myself what Scar told me.

It's not that he doesn't want to be here with us, it's just that he's having a hard time with all of the changes in his life. He lived in The Abyss his whole life with only nightly trips into

the forest to retain his sanity. He hasn't been out in the world like this before.

None of Scar's brothers have. Scar is the only one who got to be raised out here.

I move a little and Scratch turns as Scar comes into the room and closes the door behind him.

They're clearly having a serious discussion and it's frustrating that I don't know what's being said.

I look past Snake at Fox, and I gesture at his wolf brothers when he meets my gaze, giving him pleading eyes.

He seems to think about it for a moment before he starts repeating their words for my benefit.

“Scratch wants to stay watch outside the door.”

It's not that surprising given how Scratch has been since they've been out here, but it makes me feel a little sad all the same. I've connected so easily with his brothers. It feels like there's a wall up between us, and I don't know how to get around it.

“Scar is telling him the battle is over. That we no longer have an enemy to defeat.”

“Scratch wants to remain cautious. Scar is reminding him he is the leader, and his word is final.”

Oh, Goddess. He really doesn't want to be here.

I don't think my heart can handle this.

Scratch sits down on the edge of the blankets by the side of the wall.

He's closer to the door than he is to me, and his attention stays straight ahead. If the drapes were open, it might look like he's staring out of the window. Considering they're closed, I know he's not really looking at anything. He's just trying not to be present.

Scar shakes his head as he sits down at my right side.

I need to do something, and I'm not sure what.

It takes a few moments of sitting around feeling awkward before I get to my feet.

I move to Scratch's side and sit down next to him, on the cold, hard floor so I'm closer to the door than he is. My butt goes numb pretty fast, and he turns his head slightly, looking like he's frowning.

"It's hard to feel alone," I tell him, as I put a hand around his arm and lean my head against his soft, furry shoulder. I don't look to see if he is still staring at the wall. I just sit with him, touching him.

His body feels tense, his posture rigid, until I've been lying against him for a while, clinging to him as if he's a life-preserver and I'd drown without him.

I'm starting to get warm from the heat of his body, and he's beginning to relax.

"I'm still here," I tell him, stifling a yawn and fighting the urge to nod off.

It would be kind of weird if I actually brought them in here to sleep.

Then again, all of us were up all night ...

He has me in his arms when I wake up goddess only knows how much later because I'm drooling.

Well, that's embarrassing, though he doesn't seem to mind.

I wipe at my mouth one-handed, clinging to him with the other.

"Stay close to me," I plead with him. "Please?"

I see his lips move, but I can't tell what he's saying.

My eyelids blink closed, and I let myself fall asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

SCRATCH

Lita is sweeter than any of us deserve. She came and sat with me after I acted like a jerk. Having her snuggle up against me until she fell asleep was a strange kind of wonderful, and when her hands grasped at my fur and she told me to stay close when she was barely conscious, it was like a wish come true.

She's stronger than any of us.

She knows who she is, and she has the biggest heart of anyone I know.

I may not know a lot of people, but the ones I do have more heart than the rest of this world.

Scar saved us and named us as brothers even before we knew we were joined by blood.

He taught us everything he knew, kept us safe and showed us how to protect ourselves and others.

I may not have known Lita for very long, but she's already helping me see that change can be a good thing.

“Head on the pillow,” Scar tells me as I lay Lita down in the middle of the bed she made for us to share. It’s the biggest bed I’ve ever seen, with the most blankets. Pillows are not something we ever had in The Abyss, but Scar spoke about them. She grasps hold of my fur as I attempt to let her go, somehow even maintaining a tight grasp in her sleep.

“I can’t believe she fell asleep next to *you*,” Fox mutters quietly, sounding jealous.

Snake hisses quietly at him, a warning that he’d better not wake her up.

“Just lay down beside her,” Scar murmurs behind me when I can’t figure out how to let her go without waking her. “That’s clearly what she needs.”

He’s right. She does seem to need to be held.

Scar moves the pillow that’s next to hers and I curl my body around hers, letting her stay with her face and hands close to my chest. Her hands relax finally when I’m lying down. Scar gives me the pillow. I am about to protest. It’s another thing I’m not familiar with, and all of this is strange enough, but when he moves my head and slips it underneath, it feels good. Soft. Better than the hard floor under the blankets.

“Thanks,” I murmur.

“Thank me by keeping our mate company while she sleeps,” he tells me, before he gets comfortable at my side, laying on his back with his gaze on the ceiling.

“I do not think I can sleep,” I admit.

“We do not need to sleep,” he mutters. “Just relax. It is enough. There will be much to do in the morning. We have earned a rest.”

He is right. I listen to my mate’s calm, peaceful breathing as I wrap my arm around her upper body.

She stirs a little in her sleep, but she doesn’t wake up.

She is beautiful, even when she is sleeping.

I know then that my resistance to this place is temporary, and it will pass.

We are meant to be here, with Lita.

She is my mate, and I will never let her go.

Chapter Thirty

LITA

I wake up feeling warmer than I've ever felt, and for a moment I wonder when I got blankets made of fur. Then, my memory returns and I realize it's Scratch I'm snuggled up against, and he actually has his arm draped around me. His head is close to mine when I turn to my other side and realize he's sort of curled around me a bit. I kiss his jawline impulsively, waiting to see if he's awake or asleep.

He doesn't move after the first kiss, but he stirs after I brush my lips against his.

His hand rubs against my back, and he brings it up into my hair when I start to pull away.

Kept close by his demanding hand, I enjoy the embrace, eager to see where it's going to lead.

I don't think I slept for that long. There's still light coming in through the flimsy curtains.

When he loosens his grasp on my hair, I break the kiss to draw breath, and I find out all of my mates are awake. It's

almost as if they can sense it's time to claim each other.

It feels like the perfect moment. We're alone together, and all of us are relaxed.

Goddess, it's so different to anything I ever imagined.

When I used to dream about losing my virginity, it looked nothing like this.

I don't know what I did to please the Goddess of Wolves so much, but I won't waste time questioning her wisdom. These men were made to be mine, and I want to make it official.

I move back onto my knees and tug the skirt of my nightdress up, feeling Fox's brazen gaze on my bared flesh. Snake is hissing, I think, and that tiny flick of his forked tongue makes my body tremble all over. I pull the garment over my head and throw it onto the bare mattress of the actual bed.

"Does anyone in this room not want me as their mate?" I ask, needing to know that this is what we all want, beyond any shadow of doubt.

Scar sits up and holds out his hand to me.

I'm not sure what he's offering until he raises that same hand to his mouth and pantomimes biting it.

He offers it to me again, and the sincerity in his bright eyes takes my breath away.

"You want me to mark you?" I ask.

He nods. It's an offer that would put me in charge of these Alphas.

It shows that he sees me as more than an equal, as well as his mate.

"It would make me your Luna," I tell him.

I look around, when he nods again, patiently.

Scratch is sitting up, and he nods at me, too. Snake is nodding and hissing.

Fox smiles. "You *are* our Luna, Lita. You are also our mate. You are our everything."

I feel my teeth sharpening in response to their overwhelming agreement.

Everyone in this room wants me as their mate and their leader.

I hold Scar's hand as I bite into his wrist, marking his dark skin in one of the few places where there is no fur. Marking him is a power exchange that gives me a heady hint of euphoria and makes me wish we were already in the throes of claiming each other as mates.

I'm already wet with arousal, and the anticipation of what's going to happen next is enough to make my juices drip down my thighs.

Moving back from Scar's wrist, I get a little bit of a headrush, and fall back, right into Snake's patiently waiting

arms. I gaze up at him and watch as that red tongue flicks in and out of his mouth.

I don't need to know what his hisses mean to know what my answer is.

“I want you to lick me.”

He doesn't take any convincing.

His tongue whips out of his mouth and stretches until it's long enough to reach that aching, wet place between my legs. The twin tips flick over the lips of my pussy before his length begins to roll against me, making me gasp every time he bumps over my clit.

It's soft and rough at the same time, and I don't want him to stop.

I stretch out under his touch, opening my legs wide and holding his arms steady with my hands.

I feel my other mates moving around me. Scar and Scratch with their hands on my ankles as their tongues stroke my inner thighs, cleaning me up and pushing me closer to the edge.

I almost don't care that I had to be the girl no one ever wanted for my whole life, if that's why I get to have all of this now. Almost, because I would have given anything to have this sooner. If only I'd known what was in The Abyss. If only I'd gone into the forest at night before.

Fox runs his tongue over my right nipple, and I gasp in a breath. I know I must be making some strange noises right

now, but none of them seem to care. They're all totally focused on me, on making me feel good.

Goddess, I feel incredible.

I don't know how many times I've made myself come on my own hand, but this ... This is a whole other level of pleasure. I'm getting closer and closer to the edge, and Snake is perfecting his movements, focusing his tongue on my clit.

Everything else helps inch me closer to my climax, and I know I'm about to get there when he rubs over that sensitive area a tiny little bit harder. The first sparks of my orgasm hit, and then Fox sucks my nipple into his mouth, and I feel two thick fingers pushing into my opening just as I hit that peak.

It's the most intense feeling I've ever experienced, and I know it's only going to get better.

I'm breathing hard as Snake's tongue slithers over my quivering belly before it snaps back into his open mouth. Fox lets go of my breast, and when I look down, I see Scar and Scratch each have a finger buried in my pussy. They look up at me as if they're waiting for instructions, and it doesn't matter that I can barely think straight right now.

"Don't stop," I breathe out, enjoying the feeling and knowing I'll need more before I'm ready to feel anything bigger pushing inside me. Their fingers feel thick enough for my drenched slit right now.

I've tightened up from coming. I'm clamping around their fingers, and they can definitely feel it.

They all watch me, waiting for orders.

“Open me up,” I tell my wolf men. “Make me ready to be claimed.”

Chapter Thirty-One

SCAR

It is the sweetest kind of torture to taste our mate on my tongue and to feel her tight walls around my finger, while my cock weeps under my loincloth, bursting with the need to be buried inside my true mate. The desire to claim Lita is primal and so strong it is hard to resist.

But I must fulfil her wishes and use my fingers to open her up until she is ready to be mated.

I look at Scratch, but my brother is feeling the same things I am feeling, and there is no way he will move from where he is to allow me to do this for her on my own.

She wants both of us. She wants all of us.

We must give her exactly what she craves.

Snake moves out from behind her, and he and Fox help her to lay back down, her head propped up by the pillows we slept on for several hours while she napped in Scratch's arms. Snake is now at her left side, and Fox at her right. They both have the same idea at the same time, moving their hands across the

swell of her stomach and down through the fine hairs above her sex. Fox pushes a finger in front of mine, and Snake pushes one of his thick fingers in above Scratch's.

Lita lets out a deep moan that makes my cock so hard it might as well be made of steel.

God of Wolves, our mate is perfection made flesh.

When we begin to move our fingers, the sounds she makes are guttural and needy.

Watching and feeling her opening get slicker, I know she's already stretched enough to be claimed.

But it is up to her to tell us when she is ready, and she is not there yet.

It feels as if I might soak the bed she made for us with my spend if I have to watch her moaning as we move our fingers inside her body for too much longer. She tasted sweet when I licked her thigh, and I find myself craving more of her juices as her scent gets stronger under our touches.

"I am going to lose it," Scratch murmurs. "She is going to come again, and I am going to erupt."

"So?" Fox asks. "I came before when I was sucking her nipple. My cock is already hard again."

Scratch gives Fox a disgusted look.

"Oh, come on," Fox murmurs, flashing a sly little grin. "Loosen up a little."

“You can come as much as you like,” Scratch tells him. “I will save my seed for our mate.”

“Good luck with that,” Fox tells him, shaking his head.

Snake hisses his agreement with Fox, before he leans in and lets his tongue flick out across our mate’s breasts. Her pink nipples get a little darker and she gasps as he places his attention on licking and spanking those pretty tips with that deviant tongue of his.

Scratch squeezes his eyes closed. I don’t blame him. Her expression is euphoric.

She looks like a Goddess laid out before us.

She’s our mate. Our Luna. Ours.

Her body tenses up suddenly, her back arching and her walls squeezing around our fingers.

Snake’s tongue flicks back into his mouth as she cries out, coming for us for the second time.

“God of Wolves,” Scratch mutters, his voice shaky.

She falls back against the pillows and Fox rubs the side of his face against hers.

The moment she takes to compose herself is short, or her appetite has only just been awoken.

She sits up. “I’m ready.”

We remove our fingers.

Fox immediately sucks her juices from his hand, and Snake makes an interested hiss before he does the same. Scratch has

his head down and his eyes closed for a moment. He is struggling to keep himself together and it is wearing on him.

When he looks back up, I turn to him, keeping my voice low.

“I think you should do as Fox suggested. Otherwise, you will risk disappointing Lita when you cannot last.”

In truth, I do not think there is anything we could do to disappoint our mate, but that is not what Scratch needs to hear right now. He is being too serious when he needs to relax more and enjoy this moment. It will take off the pressure if he comes at least once before there is any demand made of him from our mate.

He frowns at me, and glances at Lita before he turns away from us.

Lita smiles at me when I move back toward her. “I think it’s time you got naked.”

I smile back at her as I untie my loincloth.

Letting it fall away, I watch her eyes widen as she takes in my manhood.

“Oh, wow,” she whispers, sitting up and moving onto her knees.

She wraps her hands around my cock. “Maybe I’m not ready.”

“We can wait if you need to,” I tell her, before I realize she can’t tell what I’m saying.

Fox taps her shoulder and tells her, and she smiles, moving her gaze back up to me.

“I was only commenting on your size,” she admits. “You’re bigger than I expected.”

She leans in and runs her tongue over my pre-cum covered tip.

My whole body feels that one little touch.

I shiver as she continues licking, making my cock throb in her touch.

She wraps her lips around me and moves down a little, running her tongue along the underside of my dick as she moves. It is an incredible feeling, and it is unlike anything I have ever experienced before.

Fox is staring when I look up to try and compose myself.

He looks as if he cannot believe his eyes.

When he catches my gaze, his stare helps cool the heat I’m feeling.

“How does it feel?” he asks, as if he’s desperate to know.

I shake my head, because there are no words.

“Wow,” he murmurs, his gaze moving back to Lita.

She moves up and down my shaft, her eyes closed, and soft, muffled moans making the sensation even more difficult to ignore. I do not wish for the first time I fill my mate with my cum to be while she is tasting my cock. Unfortunately, I do not

seem to be getting much of a choice in that matter, because she shows no signs of slowing down.

I stroke the sides of her face until she looks up at me.

That euphoric expression she wears when she does is enough to push me over the edge.

It is too late to stop now. I spill into her mouth and her eyes widen as she realizes what is happening.

I try to back away and she stops me, pulling me back with her hands and closing her eyes as her head bobs in place. She's swallowing. Several times. Drinking down every drop before she frees my cock from her mouth. She gasps in a breath and beckons me to lay down with her.

I am powerless to refuse.

Chapter Thirty-Two

LITA

Scar seems shocked as he lays down with me, sharing the pillow and moving his head to get the angle right when I ask him to kiss me. I know exactly what I want and how I want it. He's too big to kiss me while he claims me, and he won't be able to mark me while he claims me, unless I let him mark my wrist.

That's not enough for me.

I want his mark on my throat, where it belongs.

I want all of them to mark me there, to show I belong to them.

Our kiss is messy and passionate, little bites and licks interspersed with deeper, toe-curling breath-stealing moments that make my heart-race and my whole body tingle with anticipation.

This is it. I'm with my mates, and I'm about to claim the first of them as mine.

Mine. Goddess, that feels good.

These men belong to me, and we're about to make it official.

In the shifter world, mating bonds are a forever deal.

It means so much more to take a mate than it does to marry someone in the human world.

There's no such thing as a 'divorce' where mates are concerned.

Once that bond is made, it's never broken.

I smile at Scar as he breaks the kiss.

"I want you to mark me, before you claim me."

He nods, and I can tell he's asking where I want the mark when he reaches out and touches my arm.

I shake my head.

"My throat," I tell him, bringing my fingers up to touch the spot. "Right here."

It's higher than where his brothers will mark me, because he's the leader among them, and if I'm ever not around he's the one they'll take orders from.

He kisses me one last time before he moves his mouth to my throat.

The nip of pain I feel when his fangs sink in is swallowed quickly by a rush of pleasure initiated by the bond we've just made. He's mine, and I'm his. There's just one last step, and we're about to take it.

It's my last chance to slow things down.

When he moves back from my throat, I know it's already too late.

I've given these men my heart.

All that's left is my body and it's all theirs.

Everything inside me wants this.

My wolf is pleased, and I've never felt more certain about anything in my life.

“Make me yours.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

SCAR

Lita is not shy about what she wants, and I am eager to give her exactly what she asks. My brothers surround her as I move back and look down at her pale body. Her legs are spread wide, and I can feel how much she wants to be claimed. Even so, one look at my thick, dark cock resting against her pale thigh and I can't help wondering if this will hurt her.

I push my fingers carefully into her slit, finding her tight, but very slick.

She takes two fingers easily, but a third would be a squeeze.

She is not as ready as she thinks she is.

And I will not attempt to fill her with my cock until she is stretched enough to handle it.

Even if she gives me pleading, desperate eyes like she is giving me right now.

I shake my head slowly at my mate and look to my brothers for help to make her ready.

“Our mate needs to be more relaxed,” I tell them, looking at Fox to translate what I am saying for her.

He touches her to capture her attention, and then he repeats what I just said.

“I’m relaxed,” she protests.

I thrust my fingers forward and she gasps lightly. I move them as I would my cock, and she moans as her head drops back to the pillows. The mark I’ve made on her throat stands out starkly against her pale skin and reminds me that this moment is about more than physical pleasure.

We are forging a bond that will last a lifetime, tying ourselves to each other as mates.

There is no shred of doubt in my mind over what we have done.

She is mine, and I am hers.

“Scratch, get over here and kiss our mate to help her relax.”

Scratch moves as if I have given him a command. He is used to obeying orders and it shows.

I think he will enjoy the orders I give now that we have a mate to protect and satisfy.

Lita smiles at him, her hand stroking through the fur on his throat as he leans in to put his lips on hers. She starts to get wetter a few seconds later, and I slip a third finger into her tight opening.

The muffled moaning sounds that come out of her make my cock throb.

When I run my free hand over my shaft, I can tell I am ready for my first knot.

I have never felt this swollen before. I'm bigger than usual, and my mate is only beginning to loosen up. It is hard to go slow when I am so desperate to be inside her, but I want her to enjoy this. I do not wish for her to experience a bad first time, as so many of the heroines in the romance novels I devoured while I was living in this house seemed to.

This is too special a moment to rush.

“May I lick our mate?” Fox asks, displaying unusual patience.

He's breathing heavily, watching Scratch and Lita together, but he is managing to keep his impulses under control. I am impressed.

“I believe she would like that,” I tell him.

He grins as he turns and dips his head above my fingers, his tongue grazing my knuckle lightly as he moves it up to the soft pink mound that is one of the most likely places to make her come.

I understand that there is a spot inside her that could do the same, but as my claws are sharp and I do not wish to damage her, I am not keen to go searching for that spot. I am sure my knot will locate it easily when my cock fills her pussy.

Snake gives out an insulted hiss that tells me I haven't given him any orders yet, and he is feeling left out. It would be easy to tell him to use his tongue on her upper body, but his tongue is not all that he is good for.

“Use your teeth on her shoulder,” I tell him. “Softly.”

It wouldn't really matter if I told him to be soft or hard, his teeth are not sharp. She will enjoy the sensation, without the risk of broken skin or being marked by accident.

He gives out a curious hiss before he starts to do what I ask.

Lita responds well, and I believe it is time to give her what she desires.

Removing my fingers, I position my cock at her entrance. The tip encounters a little resistance before I push in. Lita breaks her kiss to gasp. I'm about to ask if she is okay, when she wraps her legs around me to drive me deeper. I glide in, after that, only stopping when I feel as if more might be too much.

She pulls me in to the hilt with her legs and moans low and deep when I'm filling her up.

It is an incredible feeling that only grows as the base of cock expands into a knot to keep me buried deep inside of my mate. Fox does not stop licking her clit while I move my hips in a rocking motion.

I hold onto her legs and keep my movements slow and steady.

She cries out suddenly, and Fox stops licking her to watch her face.

I slow to a stop, allowing her to catch her breath when her climax passes.

She is grasping Scratch's fur and stroking Snake's head when Fox makes a suggestion.

"Maybe it would feel good if we marked you while you are being claimed."

He says it directly to Lita, his gaze fixed on her once she is looking at his lips.

"Oh, Goddess, yes," she murmurs. "All of you?"

Scratch looks up. "Snake's teeth are not sharp enough."

"His tongue is," I remind him.

With the right force behind it, Snake is able to use the forked tips of his tongue to cut.

I look at our reptilian brother, knowing he would want a way to mark her that doesn't require help from us. He nods slowly at me, hissing in agreement that his tongue could be used to mark her as his mate.

"Do you want all of your marks on your throat?" Fox asks Lita.

"I would like them where people can see them," she admits.

"Then I will wait my turn," he says with a smile, before he reaches for her hand and kisses her wrist.

"Oh," she murmurs, realizing what he meant.

They could all mark her at once. It is probably a tempting thought.

It would make for a powerful swell of feeling, if she accepted their marks all at once.

Especially if she did that while I'm still knotted inside her.

"Mark my wrist," she tells Fox.

"You're sure?" he asks, in a teasing tone.

She smiles. "I'll make sure I always wear short sleeves."

"Then, your wish is granted," he says.

I nod at my brothers, and they position themselves to mark our mate.

She rolls her hips, rocking into me as she waits. Then, they all begin to mark her, and her eyes roll back in her head. "Oh, my Goddess ..."

She comes for the second time on my cock, this time contracting hard, squeezing around my knot until I feel my own climax starting. I growl as I finish inside her, spilling out thread after thread of cum before my knot even begins to slacken off.

We stay joined while she recovers from the thrill of being marked.

She snuggles into Scratch when my knot goes down enough to tug my cock out of her drenched opening. Cum spills out of her, and I push it all back inside while she makes out with Scratch, her hands moving down his body.

I have claimed Lita as my mate.

It is time for my brothers to claim her as theirs.

Chapter Thirty-Four

SCRATCH

No doubts enter my thoughts as I kiss my mate, knowing we are about to claim each other. Lita accepted our marks without having to think twice about it. She accepted us from the moment she stumbled upon us in the forest. I was a fool to question her then, and I will never do it again.

She was made to be ours.

She breaks the kiss and pushes me lightly until I roll onto my back.

I push up onto my elbows to watch as she moves down my body.

Turning to face me, she straddles my legs and shoots me a smile.

Nervous energy fills me as she unties the loincloth and my cock springs free.

I saw her devour Scar's cock and I know I will not last as long as he did in her mouth if she does that to me. She looked

too good while she was doing it, her expression and her moans showing her appreciation for his taste.

She takes my shaft in her hand and strokes her fingers up and down the length.

It's a lighter touch than I would ever feel from my own hand, and I enjoy it a little too much.

Her gaze moves over me slowly, and she stops touching me when she notices how tense she is making me. I feel as if I am on the edge of a climax and one simple touch will push me over.

I cannot communicate this to her, but she seems to feel it.

“Lie down,” she tells me.

It sounds like an order, and even if it is not, I obey.

She is about to become my mate, bonded to me in all ways.

I will never not do as she asks. That is the promise I am making by bonding myself to her.

I can no longer see what she's doing, but I feel it when the tip of my cock gets wet.

For a moment, I think she is beginning to use her mouth on me, but when I push back up, I see she is in my lap, rocking the tight entrance of her cunt over my dick.

“Fuck,” I curse, knowing I'm not going to last once she sinks down.

We will be lucky if my knot even has time to expand before I lose control of myself and come.

She sinks down slowly, and I lose my breath.

She takes all of me in, and I see her stomach bulge lightly as my knot forms inside her.

There is no going back now, and I would not want to.

I offer her my wrist, mimicking a bite the same way Scar did when he offered her his.

She smiles at me as she brings my hand up to her face.

Kissing the palm, she starts to rock lightly on my knotted cock, bringing sensations within me that are surely about to push me over the edge. I feel as if I am made of raw nerves, exposed and sensitive to every little movement and touch.

I am trying to hold on, but that is creating a hint of pain.

She erases all of my aches when her fangs dig in to the skin of my wrist.

The feeling of knowing we are mated and bonded for life helps me to let go.

I give in to sensation, and time seems to slow down.

She licks the skin she wounded lightly making her mark on me.

Her hips rock, burying my cock deeper in her wet warmth with every completed movement.

I come inside her as she kisses my mark, her gaze searing into mine.

Everything about her is possessive in that moment.

I am hers. She is telling me that with every look, every movement.

She truly is a Luna, and I am very lucky to be one of her Alpha mates.

My knot does not go down after I have come, and she smiles as she strokes her hand down her belly, the touch making my knot swell just a little more.

“You’re not done yet,” she tells me, not asking.

I nod in agreement, bringing my hands to her hips and controlling her movements.

She has shown me I am hers. It is time I show her she is mine.

Chapter Thirty-Five

LITA

When Scratch takes over after I've marked him, and my needy body begs his knot to stay locked in place, he takes full advantage of my sway over his cock, gently but firmly taking control of my movements and moving me around little by little until I give out a gasp.

I think that must be my g-spot he's rubbing against as he rocks me on his knot.

Goddess, that feels good.

Why is this the first time I'm feeling it?

Maybe the angle was wrong with Scar.

They both have huge cocks and even bigger knots.

Fox moves close when I look over to see what my other mates are doing. I know Scratch feels differently than they do about some things, but I hope sharing me in bed isn't one of those things.

It takes me a few seconds to focus on his lips so he can tell me what he's thinking.

“He's doing something you really like, isn't he?” Fox asks. “You look like you're about to come.”

“Mm ... I think it's my g-spot,” I tell him, hoping he knows what that is.

I don't think I could explain it coherently right now.

Not while Scratch is pushing me toward a new kind of climax.

I've only ever made myself come with my fingers, stroking my clit.

Those romance novels I've read, the same ones Scar had access to, are how I learned about the g-spot, but when I tried to find it on my own, I got nowhere.

I guess it's a little further up than I expected.

Fox nods his head. “Do you want us to help make it feel even better?”

“Only if Scratch is okay with that,” I tell him.

Scratch stops moving me, and the incredible sensation ends.

I see Scratch's lips moving, but it's too hard to tell what he's saying.

I look at Fox. He gives me a wry smile.

“He says he accepted sharing you when he accepted you as his mate. If there is something you wish to try, he is interested. And of course, so are we.”

Snake is nodding when I glance back at him.

Scar moves behind me, and Fox says, “He is saying he will keep you from falling over while Scratch makes you come.”

“Then, what are you and Snake going to do?” I ask.

“I am going to kiss you,” Fox says, without skipping a beat. “And Snake is going to do what he is best at and lick you wherever he can reach.”

I smile back at him. “Yes, to all of that.”

Scar wraps his arms around me from behind, his claws lightly stroking the skin on my left shoulder and my right side. He feels warm, and his scent makes me feel very possessive.

They belong with me. No one’s trying to take them away, and if anyone ever did, they wouldn’t stand a chance. It doesn’t stop my wolf from growling at the thought of it.

Snake moves around to my left side and Fox stays at my right.

Scratch starts controlling my movements again, and rolling his own hips along with mine, getting me to take his fat knot even deeper. My breath catches as Fox leans in to kiss me.

Snake’s tongue flicks out over my breasts as Fox captures my lips with his.

I moan into my mate’s mouth as I start to come.

Goddess, I don’t know how much more of this bliss I can handle.

But I'm going to take as much as they'll give me before I let myself rest.

Chapter Thirty-Six

FOX

Our mate has a ravenous appetite for sexual activities which does not surprise me in the slightest. It would be strange if she didn't need more than the average shifter, considering she has four fated mates instead of one. It is enthralling to watch her take so much pleasure in everything.

She is enthusiastic and unashamed to ask for what she wants.

So, I do not know why I am suddenly feeling a little uncertain.

We are fated. She is ours, and we are hers.

Yes, yes, Fox, but what about that weird cock of yours with the hooks at the end?

Right. There is that.

I do not have the same anatomy that Scar and Scratch have.

They are well endowed with the ability to get even bigger once inside our mate.

I am well endowed with a strange feature that might not be pleasant.

Scar had no insight to offer me when I started to ask about my hooks.

He simply told me it was a superficial difference that didn't mean anything.

Well, now it means something.

It means I am afraid I might hurt my mate. I am also afraid she might be disgusted.

She is a wolf shifter. She will know what to expect with wolves.

She will not know what to expect with me.

I do not wish to disappoint her.

Scar lifts her off Scratch's cock once he has come inside her for the second time and his knot has finally gone down. I panic a little bit when he places Lita next to me and she reaches for my hand.

Excuses rush through my mind, but I know making one would be lying to my mate, and for what?

There is no way to conceal my weird cock from her forever.

It would be torture in too many ways.

“Are you okay, Fox?” Lita asks.

I nod my head slowly. Then I make sure I am looking at her, so my mouth is visible.

“There is something I have not told you.”

“Okay,” she says, reaching out and stroking the side of my face. “What is it?”

“It is probably better if I show you, but I do not want you to be alarmed.”

Her eyes widen, but she stays silent and just nods.

She probably thinks you have a battering ram under your loincloth now, you idiot.

Even better, two disappointments rolled into one.

I untie my loincloth and squeeze my slowly flagging cock back to life, coercing the hooks out of the skin around the tip. I am too afraid to look at my mate and see her face now that she knows I am not like my lupine brothers.

Her hand moves close to the hooks on the right side, and she gasps when they brush against her palm.

I steel myself, looking up while she has her attention on the hooks.

Her eyes are wide in amazement as she moves her hand around.

She looks at me. “Does it feel good when I touch them?”

I am filled with relief that she is not disgusted or disappointed, but her question takes me by surprise. I realize I have never really thought about it.

I shake my head. “They are not very sensitive. I believe they have a similar function to my brother’s knots. A sort of

locking ability while we are mating. I do not know if they might cause pain or discomfort.”

“They feel soft,” she says. “If they work like a knot, then they might enhance our pleasure.”

She’s right, and when I think about it like that, I realize it’s more likely that’s what they’ll do.

I doubt they were designed with a shifter’s human physiology in mind, but that may not even matter.

“At worst, I won’t feel them at all,” she says, as she leans down and runs her tongue over the tip of my cock. She looks up at me as she moves to kiss one of the hooks. It curls under her lip and tugs it down, opening her mouth a little.

I can’t help but smile at the amused expression it gives her.

“Still think it would be bad thing if you couldn’t feel them?”

She nods and moves back. “I want to feel all of you, Fox. Every last inch, including these hooks.”

Snake hisses in delight beside me, clearly anticipating what Lita’s reaction will be to his own less than regular penis. Or should that be peni? Penises? I don’t know what two cocks in one is supposed to be called, but I could have told him she’d like it before I saw her reaction to my hooks.

Having two cocks is just another way to be well endowed.

She moves up and kisses my mouth, before she turns around, legs spread from behind.

The position she’s in is so very tempting.

I can clearly see her dripping wet cunt, stretched by my brother's cocks and looking entirely ready for mine. I also have a nice view of her rounded buttocks. God of Wolves, if I hadn't marked her wrist, I'd be tempted to mark one of these cheeks. I start to purr as I move closer, leaning down to kiss the soft skin of her ass.

I move my mouth before I'm tempted to bite that swell of flesh.

It's beyond time for me to claim my mate.

She has waited long enough to feel me inside her.

I rub the tip of my dick against her slit and my hooks retract so I can slide in smooth and bury my length inside the wet warmth of her channel.

She moans softly, and my cock pulses.

I feel the hooks tugging through my skin. They feel longer than they do when I am touching my cock alone. Lita sucks in a breath as they stroke down her walls, rubbing parts of her that my cock can't reach. I wrap my arms around her stomach as I start to thrust in and out, while my hooks explore the soft walls inside her pussy.

She makes many pleasing sounds as I move inside her, claiming her as my mate.

I look over at Snake and nod. "Move in front of our mate, and undress when her eyes are on you. I want her to see what she gets to have when my hooks are done pleasuring her."

Snake hisses in enthusiastic agreement before he moves in front of us.

I look at Scar and Scratch. “Help me move her body up, so she can watch Snake and have her breasts sucked until she comes all over my cock.”

Scratch stares at me in shock before he moves. Clearly, he is not used to taking orders from me, but he will need to get used to it, if we are going to give Lita the satisfying sex life that she deserves.

Scar smiles as he goes to the other side of our mate. “Hand under her arm and move her up on three.”

Scratch nods, back at ease now that he’s taking orders from our natural leader.

Lita’s body moves up slowly, her pussy tightening around my cock as she rests her back against my front. She wraps her arms around my back, holding her left with her right. The added constriction of her touch makes me purr harder.

She sighs deeply, her eyes closing as my wolf brothers begin to lick and suck her nipples.

Snake stands in front of her, loincloth stretched out, ready to reveal his surprise.

Our mate is too consumed by the pleasure we’re giving her to notice, but he does not need me to do anything to get her attention. He is more than capable of capturing that on his own.

He opens his mouth and his tongue whips out, slithering over her thigh before it traces the trails my hooks are making inside our mate. She shivers in delight and raises her head, opening her eyes.

I thrust a little harder, the anticipation of her reaction adding to my excitement.

She moans as my hooks stroke her a little harder.

And she goes completely still when Snake's loincloth drops to the ground.

His cocks start from the same place ours do, but they jut out to the left and the right when they are hard, as they are now. I am not sure how he will use them to claim her, and I am very curious to find out.

"Oh, my Goddess," she murmurs. "You have two cocks!"

Her pussy tightens around my cock, and she starts to breathe heavily.

She's getting wetter, and I have no idea if it's because of what my hooks are doing, or because her nipples are being sucked on, or because she's incredibly turned on by Snake's unusual manhood.

His tongue whips back into his mouth.

He moves in close, getting to his knees.

He rubs the head of one of his cocks against her clit and she shivers again, holding her breath until he keeps going, making

excited sounds as he helps get our mate closer to another climax.

“Oh, Goddess,” she murmurs, starting to rock a little against his movements.

The last thing I expect to feel is the tip of one of his cocks pushing in beside mine, but as soon as it happens, I know it’s what Lita wants. She gives out a needy moan and he pushes all the way in, his other cock left out, wedged against her clit.

It’s a much tighter fit now that we’re both inside our mate, and I don’t know what will happen when Snakes pheromones hit me. It is not a good idea to be close to him when he is about to come. It always leaves me in a strange, aroused trance.

“Please,” Lita begs, her voice husky. “Can I mark you both while you’re inside me?”

God of Wolves. I forgot to offer her my wrist.

I offer it to her now, getting in before Snake in case I become too distracted by his pheromones to offer it again after he has let her mark his easily punctured skin.

It feels as good as it did to mark her as mine.

No, it feels even better, because now I am hers, too.

My climax comes when she licks the wound after she has made it.

I thrust in deep, and my hooks go still, retracting before I fill her with my come.

I do not want to let go or pull my cock away from its new favorite place, but I must give Snake his chance to claim our mate without my interference.

I withdraw my spent cock from her, but I stay where I am, waiting for instructions from Snake.

He hisses after a moment of thought, and it takes me a moment to translate what he's asking.

I give him a look. "If Lita does not like it, I will stop."

He gives me an insulted hiss that tells me she will love it.

It's his turn to claim her, and I know if she asked me to do this, I would, without thinking twice, so I unwrap her arms from my back, and I sink down low, temptation already making the blood flow to my cock. Snake's pheromones aren't even present yet, and I want more from Lita.

She is not going to have a very restful day.

I hope she is prepared to be extremely tired tonight.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

SNAKE

Our mate gasps when Fox's tongue begins to lick her from behind. I watched when she presented her cunt to him, and I saw that tight, pink hole above. It enflamed my senses before I really knew why.

I do not think it would ever be big enough for one of my cocks, and I am not sure if that is something Lita would like, but I am curious to lick and touch every part of my mate.

She is becoming mine and I wish to know her intimately.

I watch her face carefully for any signs of discomfort, but she does not seem to find Fox's tongue anything other than arousing. I pull my left cock out of her channel, and she looks at me in worry.

She thinks something is wrong. It is not, so I shake my head slowly.

It will be easier to reassure her when I have learned more of her sign language.

I press my cocks closer together and make my first attempt to enter her with both.

Her mouth opens and her eyes widen as I rub the heads of my cocks against her.

She is slippery with her own juices and those of my brothers.

It is a tight fit, but both of my cocks enter her with little trouble.

I inch in slowly, making sure she is ready for all of me.

Once I am more than halfway in, I thrust with my hips, burying myself to the hilt.

She cries out, eyes closing as my cocks spread out inside her.

Her pussy clenches tightly, and I realize she is coming around my cocks.

It feels so good to watch her gain so much pleasure from one thrust that I almost forget she hasn't marked me yet. It would not be something I would think about at all if it were not for my brothers.

I do not think marking is something my species are familiar with.

I believe if it were a custom of ours, we would have sharper teeth.

But I was raised to put my faith in the God of Wolves, and because Scar always made sure I was safe and well, I have always been happy to go along with the customs of his people.

I do not know if my kind would have saved me if they found me the way he did.

I know nothing about them.

But I know about wolf shifters.

They mate for life, and that is what I wish for with Lita.

So, I thank Apollo for this wonderful day, and I offer my wrist to my mate while my cocks are still buried deep inside her. She is careful, but she makes me bleed. It is worth the nip of pain for what the mark means between us, and I cannot say I don't feel something after it is done.

My heart feels like it is soaring.

I have never been happier in my life.

This beautiful, sweet, strong woman is my mate.

In all my dreams I never imagined this would happen.

I do not know if it is a miracle, or fate's hand, but I know our bond is special.

I have a mate, and we are a family now.

A real one.

I can already feel the first flutter of a new life present in our mate's belly.

She is going to give us children who never need to worry about being abandoned like we were.

I stroke my hand over her stomach, and she holds it there as she rocks on me, slowly inching me toward my climax. I am

used to stroking my own sex and feeling nothing other than pleasure when I come, but claiming my mate is a very different sensation.

The pleasure is there, and it is more satisfying than it has ever been, but there is also something else.

A deeper feeling that drives me over that edge far more easily than any sexual fantasy.

We have just sealed our fates and our futures together.

That is something more than a fleeting pleasure.

It is something no one can ever take away from us.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

LITA

Goddes, every time I think it can't get any better, it does. My mates are all very different, but they all committed to being with me without hesitation, and every single second that we spent becoming mates was pure heaven.

My body is worn out now, I can't lie, but I feel good.

It's the best I've ever felt. Sleepy, and worn out but somehow rested at the same time.

Happy with a sense of inner peace and feeling like everything is as it should be.

I have my mates, and they have me.

We're going to take charge of this town and fix everything that was done wrong by the chimera, but first, and most importantly, we're going to eat, and sleep, before we wake up and do all of that over again.

"Is anyone else hungry?" I ask, as Snake helps me to my feet.

I notice that his wrist is still bleeding, and I take his hand in mine.

“Oh, no. Does that hurt?” I look up at him and he shakes his head.

Fox touches my shoulder and explains, “Snake’s skin does not heal the same way ours does. It will take longer, but he will have a more obvious mark than the rest of us.”

Snake is nodding when I look back at him.

“Well, we should wrap this, at least.”

There will be supplies for that in the bathroom. And I definitely feel like I need to go clean myself up.

If there’s one slight downside about having four mates, it’s probably going to be the messy factor.

My skin burns when I realize Alina’s going to know what we’ve done when she gets back.

Scar is her son, and she raised me like a daughter. It feels a little weird that she’s going to know what we’ve been doing in her house. Add in the fact that I’m also mated to Scar’s brothers, and suddenly it feels all kinds of awkward. There’s no real way to hide it, even if we wanted to.

Wolf shifters have enhanced senses and even if we didn’t, the smell of sex in this room is not going to fade quickly. I’ll have to open the window, after I’ve had a shower and bandaged Snake’s wrist.

She’ll still know, but I don’t think it matters what I do here.

She knew they were my mates before I did.

It's obvious we were going to end up claiming each other.

We're fated mates. Nothing would have stopped us.

"Snake is fine," Fox says when I look back at his lips.

"I need to use the bathroom. I'll see if there are bandages while I'm in there. I'll be back in a few minutes." I add the last part so that they don't come looking for me while I'm cleaning up, thinking I'm taking longer than I should be.

My legs are pretty much drenched in come by the time I move from the hallway into the small bathroom. It's definitely time for a shower.

It's starting to get dark outside. I noticed when I was in the hallway.

It's nightfall, but it's early. There are still a few hours until Alina's due home.

That means I have plenty of time to clean up, air out my bedroom, and make it seem less like we've been having sex all day.

We definitely need to get our own place together.

Just not the Masters' brothers' house.

I know that's been the Alpha's home for the entirety of Nightshade's history, but I don't want anything to do with a place where those vicious boys lived. They didn't even know how truly monstrous they were, and I don't mean they didn't know they were chimera.

I shudder to think about how close I came to a nasty ending at their hands.

Running the hot water, I try to push thoughts of those idiots out of my mind.

I pull a towel out from the cabinet under the sink and set it down on the side of the sink.

I step under the shower's spray as soon as it feels warm.

My body aches just a little all over.

My mates gave me a real workout today.

I had no idea sex could be so athletic. It usually seems more relaxing in romance novels.

I smile as I lather my body up with soap. Despite all those little aches and pains, I want more.

The marks on my throat and wrist make those spots feel more like erogenous zones when I brush my fingers over them. Even the water raining down on me is making me shiver in that same anticipatory kind of way. I've read about mating marks feeling this way, but I had no idea it was for real.

Experiences are so much more powerful than fiction, it would seem.

When I wash between my legs, I feel a little raw and I'm not the slightest bit surprised.

I just had four ... no ... five cocks inside me, for who even knows how long.

That sounds crazy. It also doesn't sound possible, at least, not all at once.

I guess I could be wrong. It's not like I would know.

Maybe, one day ... Probably not today.

I take my time rinsing off the soap, and then I stop water and grab the towel.

My stomach is growling, and I have no idea if there's any food in the kitchen.

If I'm hungry after what we just did, I can't even imagine how starving my mates must be.

They're so big and muscular. They must need to eat a lot more than ordinary shifters do.

I dry off standing on the bathmat and wrap the towel around myself when I'm done.

The first aid kit in the cupboard under the sink is small, but there are bandages inside.

I bring it with me as I step out into the hallway.

Some of the lights are on now that it's getting dark out, and the first thing I see when I look down the hall is Scar in the kitchen. He's got his loincloth back on and he has some of the kitchen cupboards open while he looks around inside them.

I head to the kitchen doorway, not encouraged by what I see when I get there.

"I'm guessing you can't find any food?" I ask.

Scar turns to me, and shrugs.

“That’s the trouble with Nightshade,” I tell him. “Everyone eats at the cafeteria. No one’s supposed to have anything extra in their home. Alina grows the herbs to make tea in the garden, but we only have anything else when there’s extra brought home from work.”

Alina might think about bringing food home tonight, considering she knows her son and his brothers are here to stay. There’s no guarantee there’ll be anything left at work, but considering there are at least four less mouths to be fed in the cafeteria all day, that’s probably not going to be an issue.

Still, it’s a maybe, and I’m not sure any of us really want to wait around for a maybe.

“Alina might bring food home, but it won’t be for hours.”

Scar closes the cupboards and nods slowly.

He looks up and clicks his fingers, his eyes lighting up.

He’s had an idea. That much is obvious.

There’s practically a lightbulb hanging over his head right now.

“What is it?”

He moves toward me, and I step back to let him exit the kitchen.

He goes straight to the living room and comes out with the sketch pad and pencil.

Leaning the pad against the wall, he writes down a question.

Will anyone be working at the food stores now?

My lips twitch into a smile. “No. Everyone finishes up before it’s time for dinner service at the cafeteria.”

He grins at me, as he writes something else below his question.

Then we’ll go raid the stores.

“That sounds like fun.”

I guess I’d better go get dressed.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

LITA

When I return to the bedroom, I find my mates have folded up the blankets and set them down on the bed with the pillows. They all have their loincloths back in place, and Scratch is on all fours on the floor for some reason.

I raise my eyebrow at Fox. “What’s Scratch doing?”

Fox opens his mouth, looks at Scratch, and closes it again, shaking his head at his brother.

I wait for an answer and Fox seems conflicted.

Scratch gets to his feet and gives Fox a warning look.

“Did I miss something?”

Fox shakes his head. “Only Scratch being a pain in my neck as usual.”

He sits on the edge of the bed, and Snake sits down next to him.

I move over to the closet and remove my towel. I realize I don’t really have a place to put it once I’ve folded it up, but

Scratch is standing near me, and he takes it out of my hands when he sees me looking around. My face flushes as I thank him, feeling kind of shy about being naked all of sudden, which is completely crazy after everything we just did together.

It's because of the way he's looking at me, as if he wants to do all of it all over again.

Right now.

All I'd need to do is ask.

Goddess, that sounds like heaven.

My stomach complains, and I flush even redder, knowing it must be making noise.

Alina used to tell me she could hear me in the other room if I was hungry as a child.

I believe her. She always seemed to magically appear at my bedroom doorway whenever I could use a cookie or two at night. Dinner wasn't always enough when I was going through a growth spurt.

I turn away from Scratch to hide my reddening face and to throw on some clothing so we can go get some food before the day gets any later. When I'm dressed a minute later, I close the closet and find out Scar is standing in the doorway, probably telling his brothers the plan.

Fox nods, getting to his feet after Snake does.

Scar is still talking when I get closer.

Fox shakes his head and turns to me.

“You want to come with us, don’t you?” he asks.

I raise an eyebrow. “I assumed we were all going.”

“Scar thinks he should go with Scratch, and we should wait here.”

I look at Scar, and I shake my head. “We’re *all* going.”

He doesn’t look sure, but I am, and I’m not going to be left waiting around again when something needs to be done. Not even something as simple as getting food.

“You meant it when you took me as your Luna,” I remind him. “I say we all go, so we all go.”

Fox smiles at me, and Snake looks just as pleased.

Apparently, it’s just my wolf mates who need to get used to having someone else make the rules.

Scar’s been their leader for so long that I know it might take a while to adjust, and I’m not going to ignore his advice when it matters, but this trip we’re about to take is nothing.

“I don’t need fighting skills to help carry food, right?”

He can’t argue with that, but he does say something more to Fox.

I look at our translator’s lips.

“He doesn’t think it would be smart for you to be seen by anyone who might be going to or from the cafeteria while everyone thinks you are dead.”

Oh. Right. Damn. I kind of forgot about that.

There's never anyone around when I'm walking home from work, but it isn't that late. Not yet.

"We can avoid the main streets," I tell them. "And I'll walk between you. Anyone who sees us will see you first. I doubt they'll even notice me if they see you."

Scar nods slowly. It's no more of a risk than they're taking going out there.

People will freak out if they see the monsters from The Abyss walking around.

I doubt they would do anything about it while it's dark out, considering the chimera have basically turned the whole pack into the kind of wolves who fear nightfall. These shifters are deathly afraid of monsters who don't even exist.

They wouldn't dare challenge even one of them, much less four and their new mate.

The worst that might happen would be someone going to the Alpha's house to report seeing us, but they would do that in the morning, when it's safe.

And it won't get them anywhere considering the Alpha's sons are dead.

We'll be declaring our new position in the pack tomorrow, anyway.

Once we have our plan worked out. We can't iron those details out on empty stomachs.

I smile. “What are we waiting for? Let’s go find dinner.”

Chapter Forty

SCAR

It is not difficult to avoid others when we begin our walk. Nightshade's main streets are contained within a small area, leaving the parts closest to the forest dark and empty. The route we take is free from the streetlights that Snake is fond of, and the risk of encountering any members of the pack out here is extremely low.

Everyone stays away from the forest's edge after dark.

This pack have been so well controlled by lies that I am not sure how we will tackle untangling the web the chimera put in place to keep their victims trapped. They are likely to be resistant to hearing a new truth from those they think of as rejects or monsters, and that is before we even begin to propose changes to the way of life out here.

I have faith that Lita will have a way to get through to them.

They are her people more than they were ever mine.

She seems to care about what happens to them.

I do not like that they were targeted and used by chimera, but I do not feel connected to the pack in the same way that she does.

Despite how they have treated her, she has compassion for them.

She will make a fair and worthy leader.

I stop outside of the barn that houses the livestock.

“Sounds like dinner,” Fox murmurs.

Snake shakes his head. He hisses something about the other barn, the one full of crops.

Fox pulls a face at his brother. “You’re serious. You would rather have carrots than meat? That is disgusting.”

“It’s not disgusting,” Scratch murmurs. “It’s all food.”

“Speak for yourself,” Fox mutters, before looking at Lita.

He moves closer to our mate. “What would you like for dinner?”

I watch her reading his lips, and I wish she could read mine.

She smiles. “Anything that is ready to be cooked. I don’t know how to prepare meats.”

Nothing alive, then. I don’t fault her for not knowing. She hasn’t lived the same life that we have.

I break the lock on the barn, and step inside. The sounds and smells of the animals stored inside are strong but not unpleasant. My brothers wander in behind me and Fox is instantly enthused, gasping when we hear a loud moo.

“That is a cow, correct?” he asks me.

“It is a cow, yes.”

“I have never tasted cow,” he murmurs.

“And you will not taste cow tonight,” I tell him, watching his face fall.

“What?” he asks. “Why not?”

“We must find prepared meats for Lita.”

I leave Fox grumbling to himself as I move past the stalls of cows and sheep.

There are chickens in pens beyond the stalls, and there are a few sealed off rooms beyond that.

Lita moves to the side of one of the stalls. She leans in and picks up an egg.

“I can make something with these,” she tells us.

“You can?” Fox asks, sounding astonished.

She nods at his shocked face and looks around.

There are baskets on a shelf next to the other pen.

She picks one up and puts the egg in it.

Then she finds another couple of unguarded eggs close to the edges of the pen.

“I will check these rooms back here,” I tell everyone.

“I will come with you,” Scratch volunteers.

I lead the way and do not bother trying the door for the first room when I look in the window. It looks like a room where animals are killed. The smell of death is clinging to the air here, and it does not look like the room contains anything other than tiled walls and a floor with a drainage system.

I shake my head at Scratch, and we move on to the middle room.

It looks exactly the same as the first.

Our last hope lies behind the final door.

There's a humming sound coming from the room on approach. Scratch slows down when we hear it, but I am relieved when I see the large counter and what looks to be a few refrigeration units at the back of the room. This must be where they store meats that have been prepared for consumption.

The door is not locked.

“What is this?” Scratch asks.

“It is the meat store,” I tell him. “In the human world there are people designated to killing animals and others who deal with preparing meat for consumption, so that most humans never have to hunt like we have had to.”

“That is ... interesting,” he says.

I walk over to the first refrigeration unit and open the door. There are many packets inside of different cuts of meat, all of which are labelled as beef.

“This is meat cut from a cow. I believe you will enjoy it.” I take several packets out of the freezer.

“So, we do not have to kill anything ourselves in order to have a meal,” he muses. “I think I will like living like these other shifters.”

“You were always less enthusiastic than Snake and Fox on a hunt.”

He gives me a wry smile. “They were always overly enthusiastic, you mean.”

“It is all the same.” I nod at the door. “Let us move along so we can eat soon.”

He opens the door, and we step back out into the main part of the barn.

Lita has a basket full of eggs now and Fox is at the front of the nearest stall, petting a cow’s head.

Snake is standing by the front door of the barn, clearly ready to leave.

“Do not tell me you have found yourself a pet.” I give Fox an amused look as he turns away from the cow, letting his hand drop.

“Well, he is awfully cute,” Fox admits, “But I do not think he would fit inside a house.”

I do not think he is joking. “What about the chickens?”

“They are definitely not cute, and they are afraid of everything,” he says. “Well, not Lita, but they went a little

crazy when I got close, and they pecked at Snake when he tried to help collect the eggs.”

That explains why Snake is waiting at the door.

It probably explains why Fox decided to make friends with a cow, too.

“Well, we have meat now so we should keep moving so we can eat soon.”

Fox moves away from the cow, and Lita rubs his back in consolation as we head out of the barn.

It is still quiet outside, and dark away from the streetlights.

I cannot fix the lock I broke so I simply ask Scratch to wedge the door closed with a brick.

He does so, and I ask him to lead the way to the other barn.

Chapter Forty-One

SCRATCH

My senses are on high alert as we move from one barn to the next. It feels strange to still be sneaking around while our plan is to take over the town as Alphas under Lita as our Luna.

It also feels strange to have Lita with us.

I can barely believe we're all mated to her now.

I keep rubbing at the mark she made on my wrist, feeling it to check it's real and it's still there.

It's real, I tell myself. It's not going anywhere.

So, stop overthinking everything and stay focused.

You're out in Nightshade walking around with your new mate and your brothers. You need to be ready to defend your mate against any potential attacks.

Any sounds I pick up are in the distance.

People talking as they walk home from having dinner.

Doors closing. Little bursts of laughter, echoing footsteps.

Nothing close enough to be worried about.

Lita's safe. No one's out here looking for her.

All we need to do is get food and go back home.

It's not going to take long. The barn where the vegetables are grown isn't far away.

I glance back to see Lita is walking with her arm around Fox's middle.

Snake is close to her other side, his gaze on that basket she's carrying.

Scar is walking behind us, his arms full of packets of meat.

He is glancing around, as we walk, keeping a look out for signs of trouble.

I do not think it's likely that we are going to encounter anything, but my instincts refuse to switch off.

The only reason I can think of for feeling so worried is because I have a mate to take care of now.

A wolf's instincts are supposed to be sharp. We're supposed to know if there's going to be trouble.

Well, it feels like there's going to be, but everything is quiet.

There's no reason anything should go wrong.

We killed all the chimera.

I let out a soft sigh.

I will be glad once we are back at Scar's mother's house.

Being out here in Nightshade after dark is making me paranoid.

Chapter Forty-Two

FOX

I stand watch outside of the vegetable store with Scar, holding Lita's basket of eggs and trying not to swing it around too much. Apparently, eggs are breakable. I had no idea until she gave me the basket and I tipped one out by accident. It splattered on the ground, making a gooey mess.

"I am not sure I like the look of eggs," I admit.

"They are very different when they are cooked," Scar assures me.

"Hm," I murmur, not sure I believe him.

He has never lied to us before, so I suppose I should give eggs a chance before I dismiss them as inedible before I have tried whatever dish Lita intends to make with them.

"Would it be okay to walk past the nursery on the way back?" I ask, thinking of my mother. "If we take the longer way, around the woods, I mean."

"You want to visit your mother?" he asks.

“I want to make sure she’s still doing okay.”

It would be nice to get another chance to talk to her.

Especially now that I have the good news that Lita is mated to me.

“I don’t know,” Scar starts. “We have to plan our announcement for the morning. There will be plenty of time once that is done to spend with your mother.”

“No there will not,” I complain. “We will have to convince these people we are no threat to them, and there will be opposition and possibly multiple challenges issued. Weeks will pass before I can ...”

“Fine,” he says, letting out a sigh. “We will walk that way and if it looks as if lights are on inside, we can stop for a quick visit.”

“That will be nice,” I tell him.

“It will not take weeks to settle this town,” he murmurs, clearly in denial.

“You would know better than me, I guess.”

The barn door opens, and Lita steps out with a small sack containing several vegetable items that we have sometimes come across discarded in the woods. I screw up my nose at the bag.

The carrots were vaguely edible, but unsatisfying.

Potatoes are just plain disgusting.

I have no idea what the rest of the items are called.

We found them too infrequently to bother committing their names to memory.

“We are going to stop by the nursery,” I announce, smiling at Lita.

“We are?” she asks, as Scratch takes the bag out of her hands.

Snake has another small sack in his hands.

How many vegetables do they think we need?

“I am not eating any of those,” I tell them.

Lita rolls her eyes. “Just wait until they’re cooked. You can try a little before you judge too harshly.”

“Well, only because you have asked this of me.”

“Good. So, we’re going to the nursery?”

“Just to see my mother for a second.”

She nods slowly. “Right. Good idea. Sneak in a visit before we divide the town’s opinions.”

“Exactly,” I tell her.

I knew she would understand.

I shoot Scar a superior look and he shakes his head at me.

“Let’s get moving,” he says. “We’re already hungry and we need to cook all this before we can eat.”

Chapter Forty-Three

LITA

Snake and I both nibble on carrots as we start the walk along the edge of the forest to the back yard of the nursery. Fox pulls a face when we offer him one. Scar thinks about it before he shakes his head.

Scratch tries a bite of mine and decides to wait for the meat to be cooked.

All the more for me and Snake, I guess.

I finish the one I'm eating as we get to the side of the nursery.

There's a streetlight pretty close to where we are, and people are coming along the path from the cafeteria, heading home for the night.

We stay silent where we are, hidden in the darkness, until they pass.

Then, we move on.

The back of the nursery building looks out into a fenced off yard.

We stop halfway along, and Fox jumps over the fence, darting over to one of the windows.

It doesn't look as if the lights are on inside, but Fox seems to know where he's going.

Scar shakes his head. Clearly this wasn't what he'd agreed to when he told Fox we could stop here.

The woman who comes over to the window is slender and pretty, with thick auburn hair.

She climbs out, and Fox catches her before she can drop to the ground.

They hug, but then her face turns serious, and Fox takes her hand, bringing her over to the fence where we're standing. She smiles at me, but she shakes her head a second later.

Her lips move so quickly that I don't know what she's saying, but I can tell when I look at Scar's face that it's something bad. I touch Fox's arm to get his attention.

"I can't tell what's being said."

He nods, before he takes my hand in his and starts to calmly tell me what I'm missing.

"She said one of the new Alphas' appeared and took one of the children away."

I blink at him. "What? That doesn't make any sense."

"I know. They're dead. But she said she saw him herself."

How is that possible?

Unless ...

Unless one of them didn't die.

Shifters can heal from a lot of different injuries, so I guess it's possible.

“Who was it?” I ask.

“Orion,” he tells me, frowning. “It doesn't make sense. Scar ripped out his heart. There's no way he should still be alive.”

I look at Scar, and he turns to his brothers before he drops the food he was carrying and takes off into the woods with Snake. I turn to follow, and Scratch puts his hand on my arm, shaking his head.

I look back at Fox, eyes wide with panic.

“They're checking on the bodies. We need to stay here and wait for them.”

I look at Fox's mother and back at him. “Orion took a child?”

I don't understand. Why would he do that?

She nods. “He didn't say why. He just walked straight in and yelled for Adam to come to him. The little boy was badly shaken when he went with him. I tried to stop Orion, but he ... He did something to me. My chest hurt and I was afraid that he might kill me.”

Goddess, he must have drained her.

She knows what he is, and she did the right thing.

But I feel cold inside knowing that Orion is alive, and that he took Adam.

He's a vicious, evil creature, and that little boy is completely innocent.

I need to find them before anything terrible can happen.

"Where did he go?" I ask, dropping the basket of eggs and letting them roll into the grass.

It's time to be the Luna this town needs.

It no longer matters if I have fighting skills or not.

Someone needs to stop Orion, and he has a fixation on me.

His brothers would have killed me outright.

He's the one who had a different plan.

There must be a reason for that.

Oh, Artemis, please don't let him hurt Adam.

Fox's mother shakes her head. "I don't know. I locked up quickly and made sure the rest of the kids were okay. I tried to call Alina, but I realized she must be at work. I wasn't sure what else I should do, and then you all showed up."

Fox looks at me, as if he knows what I'm thinking, and he isn't sure if it's wise.

Scratch point blank shakes his head.

Too bad if they don't think we should hunt Orion down.

He needs to be found before he can hurt Adam.

I shift into my wolf form and let instinct guide me onwards.

I'm heading straight toward trouble without a plan.

Chapter Forty-Four

SCAR

I killed Orion Masters. I know I did. I snapped his ribcage open and tore out his heart afterwards, because he dared to attempt to mark my mate's throat while she was unconscious. I crushed his heart in my hand, piercing it with my claws before I dropped it back into the useless cavity of his chest.

He can't be alive. There must be another explanation.

I race toward the portal that leads to The Abyss, feeling the air rush around me as I move.

Snake is swinging from tree to tree overhead, moving even faster with long jumps and spins above me. He drops down in front of the portal before I get there.

He waits and moves aside for me, letting me get into The Abyss first.

The charred flesh smell hits me before I see the smoke rising from the huge pile of ash that's starting to drift away on the wind.

The bodies are gone. Someone, or something set them on fire.

Snake hisses next to me, complaining at the smell.

I move over to the pile of ash, crouching down to see if there are any recognizable remains.

It doesn't take long to determine there's nothing but ashes beneath the smoke.

"Orion could not have survived what I did to him," I start, before I realize my logic is flawed.

A shifter could not have survived what I did to him.

They can heal many injuries, and even regrow severed limbs, but they could not survive having their heart torn out. There are not many species who could.

The chimera are not shifters. Their ability to take other forms for trickery makes them seem similar, but in reality, they are very different. There are many different types of chimera. Many subspecies.

If Orion has the special ability I think he must have, he is a very rare subspecies with a very specific talent.

I get back up. "He didn't survive it. He died and came back to life."

Snake hisses, telling me we need to get back to our mate's side.

He sounds worried, and I cannot lie, I am feeling the same way.

We did not take care of the threat properly because we were missing a vital piece of information.

Lita is still in danger.

I turn, ready to exit the portal.

A hand pushes me back inside, and a woman steps into The Abyss with a tranquilizer gun in her hand.

Valerie. Orion's mother. Of course. They must have the same special abilities.

She smiles. "Back right up boys, and don't make my trigger finger itch unless you want to be added to our little ash-pile."

"You are a phoenix chimera."

"I would clap to make you feel clever for working that out, but I don't want to put this pretty little gun down."

Snake hisses nastily at her, making threats to her life.

She rolls her eyes at him. "Predictable little reptile. No, you're not going to murder me a second time. It wouldn't do you any good, considering I'll just come back again. Besides, I'm the one who can put you to sleep for several hours or drain every last drop of your life energy with a single touch."

"What is it that you want?" I ask, while I assess the best way to gain the upper hand here.

She is right that she has it now, with that gun full of sedatives and her life-draining abilities.

"I want my son to be in charge of this town," she says. "It's what he deserves. Those other children were not worthy of

being named Alpha, but Orion always has been.”

Snake hisses out some choice insults, but I stay quiet.

I do not think goading her will distract her.

I am not sure anything will.

We are going to have to rush her, and hope for the best.

Getting out of The Abyss is the smart move.

She’s clearly here to trap us, separating us from the rest of our pack and from Lita.

I glance at Snake, but he is too irritated to see I’m trying to catch his attention.

He keeps hissing at her, making threats and insults and trying to get her to do something to him. It dawns on me that he is doing this so that I’ll have a chance to attack. I realize this a split second before she seems to, and I lunge at her, foot raised to kick the gun out of her hand.

She shoots before it’s kicked away from her, letting the dart shoot through the air toward my torso. It comes dangerously close to hitting me, right before Snake snatches the dart out of the air with his tongue, avoiding the needle part.

I tackle Valerie to the ground, and she grabs hold of my arm, her eyes going dark as she uses her life-draining ability on me. The icy cold grip of death makes me go still in her grasp.

It feels as if my breath is being stolen.

I can’t move, and I can’t breathe.

She smirks at me and pushes me away, her body starting to change, to get bigger.

I fight to catch my breath and Snake grabs my arm and drags me out of The Abyss before she can finish her transformation. He drags me to my feet, and we start to run through the forest.

The ground shakes under us as she escapes The Abyss.

Now we have two phoenix chimera to kill, and once we do, we have to find a way to make them stay dead. I hope to hell Fox and Scratch have managed to keep our mate safe, and I hope they're still close by, because we're going to need all the help we can get.

Chapter Forty-Five

LITA

I race home, running on adrenaline and instinct. I know this is where I'll find him. I don't need to think about it. He's been playing games, but it's all to get him to an end point where he gets everything that he wants.

I'm proven right when I leave the back yard and shift into my human form to walk around to the front of the house. I catch his scent trail and find him sitting on the front porch alone.

He gets to his feet and pulls on a bright smile as he comes down the steps toward me.

"Lita. I wondered when you'd get here."

I stare back at him, knowing I need to figure out exactly what he wants from me in order to end this.

He's not just going to tell me if I ask. That would be too easy.

It seems like he enjoys making things complicated.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, ignoring the fact that he should be dead.

He clearly isn't. How that happened doesn't matter right now.

“I'm here to see you,” he says, his expression full of concern. “I was afraid for you, being left alone with those monsters.”

I don't know what it is, exactly, but he's not being sincere. I can tell even before he starts to smirk at me.

“I was right to be afraid, wasn't I? You liked what they did to you. I can still smell them on you.”

He takes in a deep breath and stares down at my crotch.

When he looks back up at me, his eyes are icy cold.

“You let them defile you.”

He puts his hand to my throat and scratches his claws over my marks.

“You let them mark you.”

I ignore the stab of pain as he makes me bleed. I will not show him he's hurt me.

“I know you really want *me*,” he says, before his jaw clamps shut tight.

He's delusional, but I decide it's better not to tell him so.

It doesn't look like he's interested in getting answers out of me anyway.

His eyes are glazing over, and his gaze has moved down to my chest.

“You thought I was dead,” he muses, nodding as if he’s convincing himself that that’s the reason why I claimed my mates and let them mark me.

Goddess, he’s crazy.

“You never would have let them touch you if you hadn’t been grieving me.”

My nails sharpen into claws at my sides. I stay silent, because he doesn’t need to hear a word from me. He’s made up the story of us inside his own head.

All I have to do is play along and wait for my moment.

“I forgive you,” he says, laughing and moving back. “I mean, I will. At some point. Not right now. Right now, I’m wishing my brothers were still here to punish you for your sins. If there’s anything they were good for it was making a woman regret opening her legs.”

Anger sparks inside me at his vile words, but I don’t let it out.

Instinct tells me it would make things worse.

Whatever he’s leading up to here, I can’t just think about myself.

I need to protect my town.

I need to find out why he took Adam and where he is so I can save him.

“If you come with me now, without any questions, I’ll start to forgive you a whole lot easier.”

“It’s early,” I tell him. “People are still walking around town.”

He laughs. “What does that matter?”

He looks me over. “Are you afraid they’ll be able to tell like I can that you’ve been fucking around with monsters? Or do you actually think they all want you dead?”

The first question doesn’t bother me, but I flinch at the second, because for a few nerve-shredding seconds while I looked over the crowd of faces of people I see every day in Nightshade chanting for my death, I did actually think the people here wanted me to die.

Goddess, that hurt.

I can see now it really wasn’t about me.

It was about how tight a grip the chimera have on this pack.

He smirks. “The people here are mindless drones, Lita. They do whatever they’re told to do.”

I steel myself to do it, to just go with him, but I can’t.

Not without asking about Adam.

I need to know he’s okay.

Goddess, please watch over him wherever he is.

“Like Adam?” I ask, seeing his expression fall. “He went with you when you took him out of the nursery.”

“That was supposed to be a surprise,” he says, frowning.
“You’ve ruined it now.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He looks me over with suspicious eyes, before nodding.
“Yeah, okay. Good. Now, come with me.”

I know I won’t get anywhere if I try to ask about Adam again, and I won’t win a fight against him alone if I start one. He could decide to drain me to kill me, or to use his special ability, whatever that might be. His sheer size if he turned into his true form would make a battle impossible to win.

I can only beat him by outsmarting him.

That means I have to play his game.

He nods at me and starts to walk.

I follow without question.

Chapter Forty-Six

SCRATCH

Scar calls out when Fox and I are running after our mate. He needs help with a chimera, which convinces us to come to a dead stop. It's already obvious Lita is running home.

We will catch back up.

“Did he yell chimera?” Fox asks, looking back the way we came.

“He did,” I agree. “It sounds like they need help.”

“We can't let our mate go off on her own,” Fox reminds me.

“One of us should go back and help Scar. He wouldn't call out like that without good reason.”

Fox groans. “You want me to go, don't you?”

I shrug. “You can understand Snake better if he's the one you catch up to first.”

“Damn it,” he curses. “Fine. But go get Lita before she does something crazy.”

He takes off and I do the same.

My mate's scent trail is still fresh and that makes it simple to follow. I race through the forest, assuming she is headed home, and it seems I am right when I arrive in the back yard.

I sense she is close by, but I am now also picking up another scent.

That of the boy Orion.

Shock floods through me, freezing me in place at the back of the house.

If he is here, then who is the chimera Scar was yelling about?

Did they all come back from The Abyss somehow?

God of Wolves, I hope not.

This boy coming back is bad enough.

He is doing a lot of talking at Lita, and she does not seem to be reacting much.

She is worried about the child Orion took. I hear it in her voice when she asks about him.

Orion evades her question, telling her it is a surprise. He does not sound pleased with her.

I break out of my shock and make my way around the side of the house, trying to be quiet.

It feels like a delicate situation, and Lita has handled it without risking harm.

I do not wish to mess things up by attacking.

Starting a fight that I cannot win on my own would be unwise.

So, I follow them when they move away from the house, keeping a safe distance back and sticking to the shadows as they get closer to the centre of town.

They are going to his house.

I watch from across the town square as he escorts her inside.

People are walking in and out of the cafeteria across the street and I do not wish to raise any alarms by moving across Orion's front yard which is lit up by the lights that are on inside his house.

Instead, I stick to the shadows, moving around to the back of the property as quickly as I can.

It's dark here so I will be able to sneak into the house without being seen once I've decided on the best way to break in. It is not as simple as I hope. The door is locked, the windows are closed, and in all likelihood, I am walking straight into a trap.

I charge at the door, smacking into it with all my weight. The lock breaks on the second try.

I am in, and it does not sound like anyone is rushing toward the sound of my break in.

I steel myself, ready to land a killing blow on Orion as soon as I get the chance.

There will be no time for hesitation.

I must save my mate.

Chapter Forty-Seven

SNAKE

When the nasty woman with the gun turns into a bigger, nastier looking monster and chases us through the forest, I rush toward the forest's edge, hoping to entice her to squirm right over a whole bunch of Nightshade plants. I do not know if the contact with her skin will be as quick to kill her as swallowing the berries, but it seems like the best plan we could come up with on the fly.

She will think we are running scared, so hopefully it will take her by surprise.

Scar is too far away to tell my plan to, and he is already calling out to the others to warn them and most likely to also get their help. I climb the closest tree and begin swinging across the forest, hoping to get closer to the edge where the plants grow in big patches faster than Scar.

I drop down by the side of the nursery, and Fox comes running toward me, leaping the fence into and out of the yard and breathing hard as he lands at my side.

“What happened?” he asks.

I tell him it’s Orion’s mother, that they must both be phoenix chimera, and that my plan is to get her to squish a bunch of the poisonous plants with her tail.

“Orion’s mother?” he asks, shaking his head. “So, there are two of them. Shit. That means Lita and Scratch could be headed toward the other one right now.”

Scar leaps the Nightshade plants and looks at us.

“Where’s Lita?” he asks, glancing around. “And Scratch.”

“Lita took off in the direction of her house,” Fox says. “Scratch went with her. I was going too, but then you yelled, and we assumed the chimera was Orion so here I am.”

The chimera is getting closer. She has already felled a couple of trees coming after us, and I can tell she is not looking where she is going. We enraged her in The Abyss. She is extremely angry.

I grab Fox’s arm and hiss.

We’ll be running toward people. Nightshade’s pack.

They’ll think we’re monsters, but the thing chasing us is the monster.

I dart out under the first streetlight, and my brothers catch up.

We turn as the chimera crashes through the trees and crushes several plants worth of poisonous berries with her tail. She smears the mess into the ground as she slithers forward.

Someone sees something and screams. More people start screaming.

A group of teens run past us, and a woman stops close by to stare up at the chimera with wide eyes.

I ignore the compulsion to relax under the light, and I whip my tongue out at the chimera's torso when she begins to tilt forward, ready to collapse. I knock her back and she bumps into the building that's a few feet away from the nursery.

She roars at us as she falls over, crashing to the ground and returning to her chosen human form.

The woman who stopped to stare lets out a gasp.

“Valerie! Oh, I knew something was wrong with that bitch.”

She shakes her head and walks away.

Scar takes in a breath. “One of you find a way to decapitate her. Be careful about where you stand. We can't let her rise again. This needs to end tonight.”

He darts off in the direction of Lita's house.

I look at Fox. He lets out a sigh.

“We'll get this done faster together. You watch the body. I'll ask my mother if she has a knife or something we can use.”

He leaps over the front yard fence and goes to the door of the nursery.

I go stand near the body. A few people are curious, moving closer.

I hiss at them, shaking my head.

“What are you?” one boy asks, staring at me.

I hiss to tell him. Even if he doesn't understand now, maybe one day he will.

“Leave the man alone, Jason,” a woman says, moving the teenager along.

“What was that?” another teen asks, pointing at the dead woman.

“It's one of the monsters from The Abyss,” another teen suggests.

“No, it's Valerie. She wasn't from The Abyss.”

“She was from hell,” someone jokes, laughing.

I laugh along with her, and some other people join in.

It is strange to not experience this town the way I've been told for many years it would be.

The people here do not seem so terrible.

Fox rushes back to my side with a large knife in his hand.

He passes the knife to me and looks at the crowd.

“Everyone should go home and lock their doors,” Fox tells them, raising his voice. “This was a chimera, and we must ensure it is disposed of properly to avoid it's return. There is another chimera already in this town that we must destroy. It will leave you alone if you stay indoors. So please do so and we will make sure the town is made safe for you to venture back out in the morning.”

A few people move quickly. A couple stand and clap before they walk away.

One teen stops in front of us. “She was a chimera? Like half-cat, half-snake or something?”

“Something like that,” Fox tells him.

“Don’t they eat people?”

“In a way,” Fox says. “So, you should hurry home.”

He nods. “I’m going. I just ... Too many people die here. She saw a lot of them before it happened.”

He walks away, and I realize a lot of the people in this town might have been more aware that something was wrong than perhaps Scar realized when he told us stories of this place.

I move around the dead woman, and I hiss at Fox.

“Okay, okay,” he tells me. “I’m helping.”

Chapter Forty-Eight

LITA

Orion stops at a door with a complex looking panel of locks. He brings a set of keys out of his pocket and begins unlocking it. I watch the sequence carefully, afraid that I might need to know it later.

He looks me over when he's slipping the keys back into his pocket.

A sly smirk appears on his lips before he pulls the door open.

It's dark inside and there's a scent I don't exactly recognize but am somehow able to identify as witch-magic. Strange, until my memory connects the dots.

The ritual, I remind myself. This same fizzy, treacly scent was always there at the forest's edge when the magic was active and in place to keep Scar and his brothers from entering Nightshade.

"You're going to like this," Orion tells me, gesturing to me to enter the room.

“I’m not stepping into a lockable room while you stand at the door with the keys.”

He throws his head back and laughs.

I have a moment where I think I could take a shot at killing him before he can shift into his true form, but I’m not sure it’s long enough, and I don’t know what he’s done with Adam. I need to know where the little boy is before I can be sure I’m not risking his life by killing his captor.

Orion shrugs and steps into the room.

The lights go on inside a second later.

He glances back at me. “Don’t bother trying anything in here, Lita.”

Define anything, I can’t help thinking. I don’t answer him. I just follow him inside.

It goes against all of my self-preservation instincts to follow him down the stairs into his basement, but my wolf knows this is what needs to be done.

He has something to show me.

Some grand plan to explain.

Until he does that, I won’t know exactly where his weakness lies.

I won’t know where to stab him to make him bleed to death.

So, I follow him down the stairs, stalking slowly to keep space between us.

He gets to the bottom, and I hear glass crunching under his boots.

He turns and smirks at me. “The lights are low down on this level for a reason.”

I stop on the bottom step and let my enhanced shifter sight explore the room.

All I can tell is that the floor is covered in broken glass and there’s a passageway behind Orion.

“You’re taking me to your witch,” I guess out loud.

He shakes his head slowly. “That old hag is dead, but we did bury her bones in this basement, so the magic she created to protect this section of the house is still active. Still in service to her masters, even after her long overdue death.”

Well, there’s something else I’ll have to put right after he’s gone.

I’m not surprised, I’m just disgusted.

“Then why did you bring me down here?” I ask.

“I brought you down here because I have a proposal to make.” He holds out a hand to me. “Once you’ve proven yourself worthy, you can see Adam.”

I blink at him. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t offer to make you my mate, without seeing how much you trust me, Lita.”

Goddess, I’m so ready to be done with this charade.

“What do I have to do?” I ask.

He smiles, as if my question means I'm interested in becoming his mate.

“Walk over broken glass for me and go into this room.”

“I'm not sure I want a mate who is keen to injure me,” I tell him.

“You'll hardly feel it,” he says. “It's three steps, max.”

“And the room?”

I look past him. This section of the basement might be poorly illuminated, but it's completely pitch dark back there. There could be anything inside that room. It would be foolish to agree to any of what he is asking.

Yet, my wolf believes it is the only way to make sure he dies.

Instinctively, I know I should do it.

The more I hesitate, the more suspicious he will become.

Right now, he's delusional enough to believe I might be interested in becoming his.

“What comes after the room?” I ask.

He smiles. “After the room, I'll turn on the lights and we can begin.”

“Begin?”

“The ritual to make you a chimera.”

He says that as if it's obvious.

It wasn't, but now that I know, I can guess what's in that room.

"I'm ready," I tell him, putting my hand in his so I can walk over the glass with less weight going on my feet. It still hurts like hell, but I can deal with it.

He looks pleased when I glance at his face.

I can feel bits of glass stuck in my feet as I get onto the solid ground outside the room.

There's a door I couldn't see before because it was dark.

I feel around checking for a lock.

There isn't one.

I let out a breath and grab the handle.

A plan starts to form in my head as I turn the handle.

Let's just hope this works, because I don't have anything else.

Chapter Forty-Nine

SCRATCH

The cry for help sounds far away, and I do not think it is Lita, but I cannot ignore it. I have checked the downstairs rooms and have not come across my mate, or Orion. It is time to check the upstairs part of the house, and that is where the cry came from.

I move quickly, not wanting to waste a single second.

Slowing down, I take my time checking the rooms until I hear another cry, louder and clearer this time.

It is a child. A little boy. Adam!

Orion took Adam from the nursery.

I rush toward the room the cry came from and push open the door. At first, I don't see anything, but then I hear him whimpering and I move quickly toward the left side of the bed.

He is on the floor there, crying and clutching his arm.

He jerks back when I crouch down next to him, but when he looks up and sees me, he lets out a gasp.

“It’s you!” he exclaims.

“You are hurt,” I tell him. “Will you let me see?”

He grimaces as he removes his hand from his arm.

It takes a moment to realize what I’m seeing. He has a shackle around his wrist, and it looks like the shackle has cut his arm pretty deeply. There is a lot of blood on his arm, and his clothes, and the floor. Too much blood. I put my hand over the cut, applying pressure.

“Adam, I need you to do something for me,” I tell him, trying not to sound as worried as I am.

“Uh huh,” he mutters, his face pale.

“Shift into your wolf.”

It is the only way he might survive this injury.

Shifting will trigger the healing process.

“Nuh uh,” he murmurs, looking as if he is about to pass out.

I cannot allow this to happen.

He is only a young boy.

I use my Alpha command voice, “Shift into your wolf, Adam.”

He passes out, and I hold my breath, waiting to find out if my command got through.

Please, let it get through.

God of Wolves, don't let this child die.

Chapter Fifty

SCAR

I start out running toward my mother's house, but then I pick up Lita and Scratch's scent trails, and those lead me into middle of the town square. The Alpha's house.

Of course. This is where it started.

This is where I killed my father. Orion's father.

It's where I learned what he truly was and what I was made for.

It feels right that this is where it will end.

I walk up the path to the house, and I find the door unlocked.

Stepping inside, I call out, "Orion Masters. Show yourself."

I look around the hallway, and I pick up Scratch's trail, but not Lita's.

That is odd. I go back outside, and I find Lita's trail very clearly.

She is here. I know that she is.

Orion has done something to mask her trail, that is all.

I will find Scratch and we will look for our mate together.

He seems to be upstairs.

I dart up there, and find him in a small room, crouched over with his back to me.

“Scratch! What are you ...” I trail off when he turns and I see he is sitting with a small wolf, a child.

The child looks dirty. No. He looks bloody.

There is blood on his light-colored fur, but he pounces happily at Scratch and clambers up to wet his face with baby wolf slobbering kisses.

Scratch gives me a smile, but his eyes remain serious.

“He was badly hurt,” he tells me in a low voice. “I thought he might die.”

There is blood on the carpet, some of it dried in, along with a torn set of clothing.

“You used your Alpha command voice to get him to shift and heal?” I ask.

He nods. “And now that he is no longer in danger, we must find Lita.”

“I will find her,” I tell him. “You look after the child.”

We cannot bring a small boy to a fight with a chimera.

“Adam,” Scratch tells me, as he picks the little wolf up, carrying him.

“Adam.” The little wolf looks at me. “I will have to meet you properly later, little man. I have a mate to rescue.”

He barks loudly before he shifts back into his human form, his eyes wide.

“L-l-lita is in danger. He spoke a-a-about her. He’s got her in the b-b-basement.”

“Thanks, Adam.”

Now, I can find our mate.

Chapter Fifty-One

LITA

The dark room is cold, and my feet hurt from the glass, but I ignore the discomfort and I step right into the middle of the room anyway, knowing exactly what's in here before a thick, scaly body slithers past my leg.

I'm fuzzy on all the details of making a chimera, but I know it can only be done once and it requires sacrifices of the animals that are needed to become a chimera, as well as an accepted bond with a full-blooded chimera.

Orion will never get me to accept a bond with him.

As for the animals he planned to sacrifice, well, I have other plans for them.

My heart is racing in my chest as I count down the minutes in the dark space, closing my eyes and getting ready to open them again once Orion enters the room to start the ritual.

I barely have to wait five minutes before the room gets bright.

Blinking my eyes open, I give them a few seconds to adjust before I attempt to take in my surroundings.

The snake is even bigger than I suspected. She looks like a python, of some kind.

The cat is a black panther. She's sitting on the ground, licking her paw, looking as if she doesn't have a care in the world.

Orion walks around to face me, a smile plastered on his face.

"You passed the test, Lita. I knew you would."

I ignore all the come backs I want to blurt out.

"They're pretty," I tell him, talking about his chosen victims.

The snake already likes me. I put my hand out and she moves under it, letting me stroke her skin.

The cat might not be on my wavelength. I'm not sure. It's hard to tell.

Considering I'm bonded to men with feline and reptilian genetics, and I'm a Luna, I have high hopes that my command voice will work on at least one of them.

It's possible it could even work on Orion but given that he has some sort of spell in place in this basement, the animals feel like a safer bet.

"A lot of animals have command structures," I tell him, as he crosses the room, and takes a machete from a hook on the wall.

“Yes,” he says, making sure he looks at me. “They do, and guess which species are at the top of that chain?”

I smile at him. He really believes that.

“Wolves,” I tell him, my eyes starting to glow.

He laughs. “Wolves are as low as humans.”

“You have no respect for any living thing.”

“You’re right,” he tells me. “I don’t.”

“Where’s Adam?” I ask, as anger rises within me.

“The child is upstairs. Don’t worry, I’ll take you to him once you’ve become my chimera mate. You’ll be hungry after. He’ll make a good first meal.” He grins at me.

I know I must be growling at him by now. I’m fully enraged. My wolf is ready to tear his damn throat out, and his words are only making it worse.

The snake slithers around my legs, and I put all my rage behind my command as I issue it.

“Kill Orion Masters!”

He blinks at me, and his eyes go unfocused.

His hand, the one with the machete, rises and falls, just once, and then he lets go of the weapon.

He heard my command and he’s fighting against it.

It won’t do him any good now. The panther and python heard it, too, and neither of them want to ignore me. They’ve recognized me for what I am, and what I represent.

I am a Luna. I lead, and others follow.

The snake is quickest to strike. It slithers around his body, squeezing harder and harder.

The cat moves over to where he is and slashes her paw across his throat and his face.

It's a quick and efficient attack that leaves him limp and lifeless on the floor.

My instincts tell me it isn't enough, and my anger agrees.

I open the door to set the wild animals free, and then I walk to where he is and pick up the machete from the floor at his side.

“This is for all the awful things you've threatened me with!” I cry out as I start to chop him into pieces. “This is for all the awful things you've already done to this town, and this ... This is for kidnapping Adam!”

He's an unrecognizable pile of blood and severed limbs when my arms are aching and the machete is soaked in his blood, but I'm still not done. It won't be enough until he's been reduced to a pile of ash.

I go over to the cupboard in the corner where I find lighter fluid and matches.

Setting his dismembered body on fire, I smile down at the flaming pieces as they begin to roast.

“Burn in hell, Orion.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

LITA

I close the door on the burning pile of crap that used to be a chimera. The panther and snake are already gone from the basement when I jump over the glass covered bit of floor and make my way up the stairs on my tip-toes.

I open the door and find Scar standing in the hallway.

He looks confused when he sees me.

I can tell he's wondering where I was, and probably why I'm sort of blood speckled.

"In there," I tell him, pointing to the ... wall. I touch the door, and it appears.

That must be what the active magic is for, though I can't smell it on this side of the door.

"It smells like magic on the other side of the door," I go on, wiping the blood off my hand onto the door. I do the same with the other. I'm probably a bit more covered in the stuff than I think. It just looks like little spatters here and there

when I look down, but there's a glob of something on my arm that I have to shake off.

I squint at Scar as he looks me over. "Can I lean on you a sec?"

He holds out his arm, and I wonder what else he needs to know.

Oh, yeah, right. The biggie.

"I killed Orion," I say, as I lift my foot and pick out a few shards of glass. "Well, I commanded his snake and panther to kill him. You might have seen them leaving the basement? Then I hacked him up with a machete and set him on fire."

He nods when I mention the animals and his bright eyes widen when I mention hacking Orion up.

I lift my other foot.

Ouch. This one feels way worse than the other.

It takes a half dozen picks to get the glass out, and when I'm done it still feels like there's some in there. I'll probably have to get tweezers to get the rest out. Once we get home.

I take a breath as I set my foot down and look up at the staircase. "Shit. I don't know where Adam is. Orion said he was upstairs ..."

Scar taps my shoulder to get my attention just as I'm thinking about trudging up the stairs on my sore, bloody feet. I look at him expectantly.

He signs one word at me, "Safe."

“You found Adam?”

He nods, and I let out a sob of relief.

“Oh, thank Artemis! Where is he?”

He leads me to the door, where I see Scratch is carrying a small sleeping wolf in his arms.

My heart swells as I move over to his side and watch him with the little kid.

Scratch smiles at me. I smile back, and then Scar lifts me off of my feet.

I could pass out for about a week.

It's been one hell of a night.

It's definitely time to go home.

Chapter Fifty-Three

SCRATCH

We walk back to get Fox and Snake. It's on the way to the nursery, so I guess I should take the kid back to Fox's mom. He wakes up when I'm opening the gate, and shifts back into his human form, sitting up to check where we are.

He shakes his head vehemently.

I stop walking. "You don't want to go home?"

He puffs out a breath. "T-t-that place isn't home."

"It's not?" I ask, wondering what he means.

I look around before I look back at him. "Where did you want to go?"

"With you," he says, his voice low.

"With me?" I ask, surprised.

He nods slowly. "I d-d-don't have a dad. Or a mom. They both d-d-died."

"My mom and dad are both dead, too," I admit.

“Where do you live?” he asks.

“Um, I’m not sure yet. I used to live someplace where I didn’t have a house, but I’m going to stay in Nightshade now.”

“Can I stay with you?” he asks, putting his pudgy little kid hands together and making a squishy cute face at me.

“I’ll be living with Lita, and those guys over there,” I warn him, pointing them out.

He looks and nods. “I like Lita.”

I can’t help but smile. “I like her, too.”

And I guess I’d better go see what my new mate and my brothers think about having a little kid around while we’re settling into Nightshade together.

Chapter Fifty-Four

FOX

I'll admit I was a little alarmed when Scar showed up outside the nursery with Lita in his arms. My mate looked like she'd showered in blood, and it turns out she kind of had. Snake gave out many impressed hisses when she explained how she killed Orion, including a new one that I hadn't heard before. I'm filing it under 'wow' for now. We'll see when it crops up again to compare.

"But you're really okay?" I ask Lita, making sure I'm close enough that she can read my lips.

She smiles back at me. "I'm fine. I'm just tired, and my feet are a little sore."

"I give good foot rubs," I tell her.

She laughs. "Maybe later, once I've got all the glass out."

"Glass?"

"Long story," she says, looking like she's a little tired to tell it.

I look up as Scratch approaches with a small wolf still in his arms.

“I thought you were putting Adam to bed?” I ask.

“So did I,” Scratch admits, ruffling the little guy’s hair with his knuckles. “But this little one asked if he could come and live with us. He said his mom and dad are dead.”

“That’s so sad,” I murmur.

Lita touches my arm and I look back at her.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Oh, um the little kid ...”

“Adam,” she corrects me.

“Adam,” I correct myself. “He wants to live with us.”

“He said that?” she asks, clearly touched by it.

“He seems to really like Scratch for some weird reason,” I tell her, making sure I say it loudly enough for Scratch to hear.

She looks at me. “What does everyone else think?”

Scar nods, and she smiles at him.

“I think Scratch is annoying,” I tell her when she looks at me. “But the kid seems cool.”

Snake hisses in agreement, and shows Lita ASL for, “Yes.”

She beams back at me. “I already love you guys so damn much.”

She looks like she’s about to cry, and it makes me feel emotional, too.

“We feel the same way,” I assure her.

I look at Scar. “Can we go home now, or do we have to drag the body to The Abyss first?”

He rolls his eyes. “Get some rope or something from your mother and cordon off the body so no one goes near it. The damn thing is covered in poison. We’ll see you at my mother’s house.”

Damn. Oh, well. I guess at least we don’t have to drag our asses to The Abyss this time.

I look at Snake. “You heard the boss. Let’s get moving.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

SNAKE

Getting rope and sealing off the body only takes ten minutes. Fox doesn't even complain, but that is probably because his mother brought us cookies, and something called milk. I did not like the milk, but the cookies were delicious. Perhaps that is what the word cookie means.

I will have to ask Lita one day, when I am more proficient with ASL.

"I don't think it's going to be so bad living here," Fox says, as we start walking to Scar's mother's house.

I hiss my agreement. This place is far superior to The Abyss. Even with the forest attached, The Abyss was an awful place to live. There was nothing in that place but rocks, rocks and more rocks.

The forest has trees, sure, but it's also full of small animals that tasted awful.

It is like a joke to spend hours hunting only to catch a small creature with very little meat on its bones and that meat tastes

like nothing.

We have our arms full of the items we could find to salvage of our earlier raid of the food stores, and I am pleased to say that none of the vegetables were lost. The eggs did not survive, for which Fox was glad. They seem to be a very fragile item, and quite gooey before they are cooked.

I am not sad that we lost them.

I stand under the streetlamp nearest Scar's mother's house for a few minutes, enjoying the heat before Fox nags me to keep moving. He does not like to be apart from our mate.

I prefer to be near her, too, so I dart out from under the lamp and follow Fox the last few feet to the house's front door.

Scar's mother opens it before we even get to the porch, and we walk straight in.

Her eyes widen at the food in our hands. "What's all this?"

"We raided the food stores earlier," Fox admits. "This was what we got."

"Well, bring it in and I'll store it away somewhere. I brought stew and soup home from work so there is plenty to eat." She closes the door behind us, and we follow her into the kitchen where the food smells are strong and make my mouth water.

Lita is dressed again and looking more awake and alert than she did when she had just been carried to us from where she killed Orion. From what she told us, she severed his head and set him on fire.

I hiss a reminder at Fox to check with Scar's mother if we did enough tonight to ensure the permanent deaths of these irritating phoenix chimera.

He nods. "Right. While we were out there a passerby told us phoenix chimera can't come back if you use at least two of the methods that are supposed to kill regular chimera. Can we verify that somehow?"

Scar's mother nods. "It's true, as far as I know. I read it in one of my books."

"We will find out soon enough for sure," Scar says, giving us a wry smile.

He is clearly not worried, and that is good enough for me.

I hiss in relief. I do not wish to perpetually have to kill chimera until I am old and grey.

Fox laughs at me. "You can't go grey."

I hiss at him, asking why. It is a phrase Scar used often when we were young.

"It is the color hair goes on humans when they get old," Scratch explains. "Scar thought it was funny to say it because he and I are already a shade of that color."

I suppose it would be weird if my scales changed color.

"My hair is black," Scar says.

"It is dark grey," Scratch tells him.

"It is black."

"It is very dark grey."

“Look what you’ve done,” Fox tells me, shaking his head.

I laugh a little. Everything is different here, but it is also the same.

I know we are going to be happy in this place.

We have each other, and we have our new mate.

There is nothing more that we need.

Chapter Fifty-Six

SCAR

My mother puts a lot of food on the table, and all of it gets eaten. I attempt to give mine to Lita again, and she refuses this time, insisting that she is full, and more importantly that I need to eat.

She looks at me with concern in her gaze until I take the bowl and start to eat.

The food is miles away from what I'm used to.

I think I was afraid to taste my mother's cooking again, to know it was something I missed out on for a couple of decades. *God of Wolves*. That's how long it's been since I've had salt in a meal. This stew is the finest thing I have had in my mouth in quite a long time, with one exception, but my mate's juices are not polite dinner table talk.

I finish quite quickly, and Lita ensures there is a bowl of soup waiting for me next.

My mate is very good at taking care of me. She is very good at taking care of all of us.

I must make sure we are doing a good job in return.

She deserves to be very well taken care of.

When dinner is over, Scratch is holding a very sleepy little wolf in his arms.

Our newest family member is going to make getting time alone with our mate a little difficult, but none of us could ever have said no to taking him in.

“Okay, Scratch,” my mom says, as Fox and Snake clear the plates from the table. “Hand over my new grandchild and help your brothers clean the dishes.”

“Um ...” Scratch murmurs, looking down at Adam.

The kid is very attached to him already.

He stands up, staying hunched over as he carries Adam over to my mother.

“I think it’s long past time for him to go to bed,” Scratch admits.

She nods. “He can sleep in my room tonight. You’ll need to move into the Masters’ house or one of the other empty buildings in town soon.”

“Thanks,” I tell her.

“No problem,” she tells us. “I could use some sleep now, too. Big day in the morning.”

Big day indeed. We are going to announce we’re running this town.

My mom turns around and hands Adam back out to Scratch.

“He wants to say goodnight to his dads.”

I don't know how she knows, while he's still in his wolf form, but she knows.

Scratch hugs him close and earns a licked cheek.

The kid is passed to me, and I give him a hug, earning a sleepy yawn in return.

I pass him to Fox, who spins him around before giving him a hug.

He lets out a squeal before Fox passes him to Snake.

Snake licks his ear, making him giggle.

Lita leans in and kisses his cheek, stroking his back before she passes him over to my mom.

She takes him into her room and closes the door.

Lita smiles at me, moving in for a hug.

I know there is still work to be done, but standing here in this kitchen with my brothers and my mate makes me well and truly feel like I'm home.

It only took twenty years.

I would have waited forever for Lita.

I'm lucky I didn't have to.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

LITA

No matter how dark the night, the sun always rises in the morning. I understand those words now, a whole lot better than I did six months ago. It doesn't matter how awful things get, the good always outshines the bad. At least, that's how it is when you're around the right people, all day, every day.

My mates know how to make things better for me.

And I know how to do the same for them.

I'll forever be grateful that they came into my life.

I don't think I would have had the confidence to keep going as Nightshade's new Luna if I didn't have them by my side, fighting in my corner. It wasn't an easy road to acceptance, but we got there, one step at a time, until we managed, piece by piece to gradually undo all of the harm that was done under the rule of the chimera.

About seventy percent of the people who live here are behind us now that they've seen the improvements we've put

forward. The rest, well, they might leave when we get finished with the road we're working on that'll connect us, finally, to the rest of the world.

I'm looking out over the part of the forest we've been working on from the back yard of our new house, hand raised over my brow to keep the bright sun out of my eyes. Scratch and Scar made quick work of taking down several trees with the power tools we borrowed from the vegetable store. It's digging up the stumps and flattening the ground that's going to take forever.

Still, we're making progress, and that feels good.

"Are we sure this is a good idea?" Fox asks, getting most of the ASL right as he does it alongside talking. Generally, I know what he's trying to say even if he does it without talking, but I do so love to watch those sexy black lips move.

"You sound like Scratch," Snake tells him, using ASL like a pro.

Fox pulls a face. "Do not say that. I am nothing like Scratch."

Snake flickers his eyes, which he always does when he can't believe what Fox is saying.

It's still kind of a novelty for me to see them wearing real clothes instead of the loincloths they used when they lived in The Abyss. Snake likes to wear dark green to match his skin. It's a bit trippy sometimes, but it does kind of suit him. Fox has developed a fondness for polo shirts and khaki pants

which kind of suits him, too. Honestly, I prefer the loincloths, but the pack are more comfortable around them when they're dressed in the same kind of stuff everyone else wears, so that's what they do now.

They still have the loincloths for ... special occasions.

Movement catches my eye from my side, and I wave across at Alina as she moves across her yard with her gardening shears. She waves back and takes a look at the site where the new road is eventually going to be, connecting us to the nearest town, and beyond.

She gives me a smile and a thumbs up.

Fox slips around behind me and puts his hands around my growing belly.

I'm only six months gone, and already I look ready to burst.

I also feel ready to burst, pretty much ninety percent of the time.

We have no real doctors or nurses in nightshade, so I don't know what I'm having, but pretty much everyone has decided it's more than one baby, and by the amount of kicking that goes on inside there, I'm willing to agree that there has to be more than one kid in there.

Scratch steps onto the back porch, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans.

He stretches and comes over to kiss me, like he always does before he goes to work.

“How are you feeling?” he signs when he steps back.

“Ready to burst,” I answer, making him laugh.

Fox’s hands stop rubbing my belly when I feel a kick.

No. Wait. That wasn’t just one kick.

I gasp. If I needed any proof that I was having a multiple birth, this is it.

“What is it?” Scratch signs, looking a little worried.

I turn my head and see that Snake is darting into the house.

I put my hand up, knowing he’s rushing off to get Scar and Adam.

I put my finger over Fox’s lips when he moves around to my side.

He kisses my finger, then my hand.

He’s not going to spill it.

It’s probably not big news, anyway.

They all think I’m having at least two babies.

Scar’s wearing jeans like Scratch, and Adam is in jeans and a t-shirt. As usual, our babies’ older brother is in his bare feet, because none of his daddies wear shoes, and his mom’s feet are too big right now to fit into shoes. We’re the only shoeless family in town.

Maybe that’ll change once we have this road set up to connect us to other towns.

“What’s happening?” Scar signs.

“I felt two kicks at the same time,” I admit. “At either side of my belly.”

Adam gasps. “I’m going to have twin brothers!”

I have to laugh. Scratch does, too.

“You don’t know they’ll be boys,” Scratch signs to him.

Adam stays still and signs back, “I do too. They like to kick. That’s a boy thing.”

Aw, that’s so cute. Little kid logic.

Scar shrugs at me, signing, “Maybe he’s right?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Snake signs. “She’s having triplets.”

I blink at him. “Um, what?”

“Yeah, Snake, what?” Fox asks, looking too shocked to sign anything.

He flickers his eyes, and signs, “There are three heartbeats in Lita’s belly.”

“You can feel their heartbeats?” I ask, shocked if it’s true and even more shocked that it’s the first I’m finding out about it.

He nods, and shrugs. I look at his brothers. Scratch and Scar are stunned.

Fox looks as if he’s just remembering something.

“Oh my God,” Fox says. “He knew when those guys were, you know, D-E-A-D in the forest. He felt it, or something.”

“So, this is real?” I ask, not believing it.

Triplets? Three babies. Oh, my Goddess.

Snake nods and reaches out to touch my belly.

I feel another kick, this time in the middle.

Goddess, how did he do that?

“I think we should start making another two cribs,” Scratch signs.

“Yeah,” Scar signs. “The road can wait. This feels a bit more urgent.”

He kisses me and retreats into the house.

Scratch does the same.

Snake and Fox get roped in to playing catch with Adam.

I’m still stunned by the news that I’m having triplets, in a good way.

“I can’t wait to meet you three,” I tell them, stroking my belly.

Sitting down on the porch, I let myself enjoy the sunshine.

I can’t imagine another night so dark that I might think I’ll never see the sun again.

Those days are long gone.

There’s nothing left in The Abyss but ashes and rocks.

The chimera are dead and gone. They’re dust on the wind.

All that’s left are sunshine soaked days and sweeter nights.

Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed *Claimed by Monsters!* I loved writing about Lita and her beautiful monsters.

This story is set in the same universe as my Hybrid Shifters world, though it doesn't have any of the character crossovers as any of the other books in that series, so I've chosen to list it as its own thing.

If you loved this book, please consider leaving a review.

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Sweet Omegaverse Series

You may enjoy this series if you enjoy my *Hybrid Shifters* books, however, please be aware that unlike all my other books, some of the main male characters have intimate relationships with each other as well as with the female main character in this series.

Secret Omega is the first standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Secret who moves to the big city for college and quickly discovers that pretending to be a Beta is harder than she realized.

Note: The Alphas have intimate relationships with their male Omega in this book.

Lost Omega is the second standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Ember who is grieving the loss of a mate when her life at the academy is suddenly turned upside down.

Note: There are no intimate relationships between the men in this book.

Broken Omega is the third standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Brooke who escapes the academy and drives her mates crazy as she builds a new life for herself.

Note: Most of the male characters have intimate relationships with each other in this book.

Stolen Omega is the fourth standalone in this new series, about popstar Omega Zelena who gets kidnapped on the way to her next tour stop.

Note: Most of the male characters have intimate relationships with each other in this book.

More books in this series are coming soon.

So far, I have books planned for Leanne, Beth, and Lana!

Hybrid Shifters World Books

If you like my *Sweet Omegaverse* series, you may also enjoy my *Hybrid Shifters* world. These are suspenseful and steamy new adult reverse harem paranormal romances. The novels can be read as standalones, but the following reading order is recommended if you'd prefer to avoid spoilers!

Vicious Love follows Cheryl, a witch being sent to a wolf academy against her wishes.

Shifting Hearts follows Rachel who needs to escape a boyfriend who's trying to kill her.

Hybrid Rejected follows Amanda, a hybrid who's rejected by her true mate.

Runaway Mate follows Jillian as she rejects a chosen mate and runs away to find a better life.

Hybrid Hearts brings Amanda, Rachel, Jillian and Cheryl back with their mates for a novella that hints at how their stories will continue in future standalones!

Necromancer Bitten follows necromancer Kelly as she travels to a facility and meets vampires.

Moon Cursed follows Cheryl's pack as when Oscar is accused of murder by another pack.

Shifting Spirits follows Rachel and her mates into a mansion full of ghosts on New Year's Eve.

Vampire Bait follows Roxy as she adapts to life on her own now that Kelly no longer needs her help.

Hybrid Forgotten follows Amanda and her mates as they're tested by a memory-wiping spell.

More books in this series are coming soon.

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