



KINGDOM OF
WOLVES

FOUND

SILVER FALLS UNIVERSITY
BOOK FIVE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M. SINCLAIR

FOUND

SILVER FALLS UNIVERSITY

M. SINCLAIR

LOST & BOUND PUBLISHING

IMPORTANT NOTE

Found is book 5 in the Silver Falls University series. Readers can find *Lost*, *Forgotten*, *Discovered*, and *Pursued* (books 1-4 in the series) as part of the Kingdom of Wolves Universe Collection.

Please note, *Lost*, *Forgotten*, *Discovered*, and *Pursued* should be read FIRST before *Found* in order to read the series in proper order. <https://geni.us/SFU-1>

Found: *Silver Falls University #5*

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The Union of Love & Madness

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DESCRIPTION

*Five broken alphas.
One lost wolf.
A fate she never expected.*

Our timeline is growing shorter by the second. Our race to open the gates to the divine realm lands us in the shadowlands, ruled by the dark god. What we discovered there—the truth of what happened between the creators of this universe—and my history comes to a startling head as I realize I'm so much more powerful than I could have ever imagined.

The truth only fuels my determination to open the gates, to correct the balance and save those being wronged. The only other option is to lose everything—including our future.

I'd found my true home with my mates, and I wasn't going to let anyone rip it away from me.

Join Effie Harlow on the final part of her journey at Silver Falls University.

This slow-burn reverse harem paranormal romance features five protective and possessive shifter mates who are bound and determined to keep Effie by their side, no matter what. To prove to her that she is so much more than anyone has ever given her credit for. Will they be able to convince her of her place at Silver Falls and in their lives? Or will Effie get lost in the

university crowds like she was lost in her pack back home? Find out in this fifth and final installment in the Silver Falls University series!

Important Note: *Found* is the fifth and final book of the Silver Falls University series. Readers can find *Lost*, book 1 of the series, which is part of the Kingdom of Wolves Universe Collection. Please note, *Lost* should be read FIRST before *Forgotten*, *Discovered*, and *Pursued* in order to read the series in proper order. <https://geni.us/Lost-SilverFallsUni>

Warning: This PNR university-style RH will contain swearing, adult sexual content +18, elements of PTSD and mention of prior emotional, sexual, and physical abuse, violence, and additional darker themes.

EFFIE HARLOW

THE SHARP SENSATION of the lycan's claws digging into my throat as I plummeted towards the icy surface of Lake Michigan was absolutely nothing compared to the pure panic radiating through every inch of me.

Not fear for myself, but rather a powerful and unrestrained fear for my mates—specifically Ryder who was feet above me, falling towards the same deadly fate. His vibrant eyes, normally burnt orange but now a metallic gold, held my gaze as his orange and red magic shimmered around him like flickering flame. He seemed to be on the verge of shifting, and I would have considered it beautiful if I hadn't been terrified of what would happen once we hit the lake.

Maybe his magic would allow him to survive the icy depths.

Maybe it would shelter him in warmth or he would shift before reaching the surface.

I felt sick at the thought of him getting hurt, especially since the only reason he was in danger was because of me. Because he'd jumped off the cliff after me...*because he loved me*. And now I could easily be the cause of his death.

I couldn't allow that. I wouldn't allow that.

I didn't care what happened to me, but I could see how furious and panicked Ryder was. The scent of copper filled the space between us as we dropped through the air, each second feeling like an eternity. The attacking lycan's weight accelerated us faster and faster towards our fate, his claws digging deeper in my throat to the point that I gasped—

Right as we hit the surface of the lake.

The weight of the lycan forced us through the thin sheets of ice on the surface, and the cold, cruel grasp of Lake Michigan pulled us into its depths. I attempted to shut my mouth as water tried to force itself into my throat, nose, and lungs, the cold stinging my eyes like knives. I began to panic, my actions driven more by instinct than conscious thoughts of trying to save myself. I fought against the shifter, trying to kick and shove away from him. I had to swim up. I had to reach the surface. But our combined weight took us deeper and deeper, the sunlight dimming with each inch we sank.

My body locked up, the cold infecting every nerve ending, and time came to almost a complete halt as my chest compressed painfully. A burning sensation worked its way from my sternum up my throat as my body begged me to inhale, even if it meant certain death. My wolf howled in my head as the lycan's hold on me tightened to the point that his claws had probably punctured something vital—

Where was Ryder? Had he saved himself?

Hope bloomed in my fuzzy thoughts at the idea that he hadn't followed me into this watery grave. My magic was weak, even with my wolf howling in agony, and I couldn't feel my other mates' magic. I couldn't reach out to them, couldn't tell if they were okay, which was what bothered me the most.

I felt isolated and alone. Lost in the frigid depths of Lake Michigan.

Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe it meant they wouldn't feel my pain when my lungs eventually expelled my last bit of air.

Was this how I died? Was this truly the end?

For so long I'd been lost, and now, right when I found my mates, discovered my true home and everything I'd once forgotten...I was going to lose it all? We'd been hunted by Hastain and made the foolish mistake of coming back here because *I* had wanted to—because a part of me hadn't believed he would do something this extreme. Now we were going to pay for it.

Or at least I was. That thought gave me a smidge of comfort, that only I would be punished for my mistake. My mates weren't in the water; they would be alright. They would survive, just without me. They would be able to escape Hastain and move on.

I knew they wouldn't want that, but there wasn't really an option anymore...

What if Hastain hurt them again though? Chained them up and tortured them with lycan attacks, or sent one of the other blood-bonded packs after

them to fight? I wouldn't be there to heal them. Ryder wouldn't be there to help me get them out.

That singular thought drowned out all other considerations, and in one moment everything changed.

My spine surged with electricity, flames licking up every vertebra as my newly uncovered kitsune magic burst from my skin in a detonation of power.

Rays of energy soared in all directions through the water around us, pushing through the heavy lycan on top of me and forcing him to shift back into an unconscious young man—a college student like myself. I gripped onto his form as our descent slowed, my gaze moving over his shoulder towards the surface of the water...or what I thought was the surface. We had sunk deep enough that I hadn't been able to tell, at least until now.

My power created a trail of blue flames that warmed the water around us, the visual effect like a path leading back to the land of the living. The ice at the surface had melted completely, and purple and blue magic covered the top of it like oil on fire.

I could feel my skin begin to tingle as warmth returned to my limbs and the pressure in my chest eased just the smallest amount, pulling on a reserve of oxygen I hadn't realized I had. I kicked my legs once, twice, and suddenly my body was in full gear as I pushed upwards, the weight of the student against me annoying but not impossible to move with—

His frame began to slip from my fingers, so I slowed just enough to get a better grip on him. I may have been a bit fuzzy, but I recognized that if I let him go, he would keep sinking and be lost forever. He would die. If he wasn't already dead... No. I wouldn't think that. I was angry that he'd tried to kill me, but my rational side recognized that he was only here because Hastain had used him. I had known that from the start, but seeing him like this brought that concept home.

If I was going up, he was coming with me.

But how was I going to make it all the way up there? Panic hit me fresh once again and my chest tightened painfully, making me close my eyes as I tried my best to relax. My wolf whimpered in my throat as I began to kick again, straining my drained muscles as I struggled to continue to pull from that reserve of energy I'd found.

Suddenly, an orange and red light form broke through the flickering surface of the lake.

Ryder.

In a mere second, his massive kitsune form dove towards us, carrying a brilliant inferno of flames that turned the waters almost tropical.

Is this how he'd saved me before, when I'd fallen through the ice caps?

Exhilarated at the sight of Ryder alive and well, I kicked harder, wanting to get as close as possible, desperate to feel the familiar brush of his magic against mine. The burst of energy gave me just enough strength to swim a couple of feet closer, and Ryder's magic collapsed over us in a powerful vacuum, pulling us upwards. I sagged in relief, my grip on the lycan nearly slipping again. Recognizing the problem, Ryder slowed his magic and moved next to me to help. I wrapped my free arm around his neck as he gripped the student's shirt collar between his teeth, taking the burden from me. I wrapped my other arm around him and his magic ramped into full gear once again, jetting us towards the surface.

One moment I was under water and the next I was breaking through ice, sucking in air like my life depended on it. Because it did.

My lungs felt like they were filled with icy blocks and my eyes burned, but Ryder kept everything else warm, my body nearly collapsing at the relief of no longer being under the water. I knew I would hurt later, I could feel the effect that type of cold would have on me, but for the moment I was just thankful.

So thankful.

A mix of magic and confusion swirled around me, but I felt Ryder stop on the rocky shores of the cliffs before crouching down and using his tail to better secure my body onto his back. I didn't know how he was carrying the other shifter since my eyes were squeezed shut despite not having meant to let them close, but the sudden shift in air told me we were moving upwards and fast. My stomach churned with the movement, but the minute I buried my nose in his wet fur, his familiar scent surrounding me, I felt ten times better.

It wasn't until moments later that I nearly cried in relief, the sound and feeling of my other mates beginning to filter back in as their magic rushed against mine. The connection between us that had been severed by pain and cold was lighting up, and I let out a pathetic whimper as the sound of a heavy form being dropped on stone made a solid thump.

Ryder immediately shifted back into human form, and I briefly remembered him saying something about his form hurting the gaze of others. Even now he was trying to protect our small family.

“Fuck. Did she force him to shift back also?” Tore’s voice was far more rough than normal, and it took me a moment to realize that he was talking about the lycan shifter. Had I forced his shift? I guess I had. And what did he mean ‘also’? Had the other shifters shifted back? They hadn’t even been in the water with me.

“Yes,” Ryder said as he pulled me into his chest, keeping me cradled against his muscular torso, my head buried against his neck.

“Effie?” Julian’s voice was soft in my ear as Coffin appeared in my subconscious, relief echoing through our bond as he curled up with my wolf, insulating her in warmth and protectively shielding her. “Can you hear me?”

“Her lips are blue,” Tore said in a way that made me want to open my eyes to see the expression on his face—his tone was far too careful.

“Caedmon,” Dakota’s voice was hard. “Keep it together—”

“I’m fine. I’m fucking fine,” Caedmon snarled, his voice tinged with pain.

My eyelids were heavy but I forced them open, now *needing* to see the faces of each of my mates. My mates who were surrounding Ryder and me.

Caedmon’s deep green gaze flashed yellow, and he had brutal gashes across his left cheek and neck. There was agony in his eyes, but I didn’t know if it was physical or something else.

Julian’s hand brushed over my cheek as I met his darkening gaze and saw his attempt at controlling the pure fury surging through him—not just Coffin’s anger, but his as well. There was a slight tremble to his hand, and I knew that if Hastain came back in here right now, Julian would kill him.

Although the same could be said for Dakota, who was completely expressionless, his hand wrapped around my wrist as he felt my pulse. I could feel his wolf lurking in the back of my head, his energy violent and lethal.

In some ways, though, Tore was the hardest to deal with—his gaze was painted with so much concern and guilt my chest felt like it would shatter with pain. I could feel his protective instincts on overdrive, and I knew that Ryder felt much the same, his grip on me like a vise.

The one thing that upset me more than anything, though? My mates were injured. Badly.

They were trying to hide it, but I could see it. I could feel their pain. Blinking, I inhaled sharply and looked around, my gaze moving about the cave that was now painted in blood. Four large bodies of unshifted lycans lay amongst the mess, all bleeding and unconscious. Tears welled in my eyes at

the unavoidable truth that these ‘attackers’ were students just like us. And they were going to die. They were going to bleed out here in this cave.

Hastain wouldn’t save them.

Struggling to get down from Ryder’s arms, ignoring my mates’ protests, I moved towards one of the most damaged bodies as tears broke from my bottom lash and leaked down my face. A sick sense of disgust and guilt collapsed over me despite knowing that Hastain was to blame.

Pure and unadulterated fury slammed into me at the injustice, the control Hastain had over everyone and everything at Silver Falls University. This wasn’t okay. This wouldn’t stand.

I wouldn’t let it.

An almost eerie sense of calm pulsed through me as my eyes snapped shut, my magic slipping off my skin and filling the room in a pink glow that I could see from behind my eyelids. I let it coat everything—my mates, the other students, even myself—and like a warm blanket, I allowed it to heal every injury and savage wound.

I gave a piece of my magic—something I was now realizing was the balancing act of two immense powers—to heal those around me. I did it happily, willingly. Anything to save the lives of those who’d fallen victim to Hastain.

I vowed that this would be the last time I’d have to do so. This would be the last time I had to heal someone because of this vile monster’s actions—I wouldn’t let this go on any longer.

With every ounce of my being, I pushed the last of my magic out.

And only then, darkness surrounded me.

JULIAN DE LEÓN

“SHE’S GOING to drain herself if she keeps doing this,” Ryder murmured. My chest tightened with concern because he was absolutely right.

Still, it didn’t stop me from looking around the cave in awe. Even Coffin appreciated the sight, the warm pink glow that slowly settled over the unconscious bodies, the rocks, and ourselves, like the faintest membrane. It seemed to sink beneath the surface of everything it touched, disappearing as it fixed everything it touched.

Not only did Effie’s magic heal, but it returned everything back to the state it had been in before the fight. From the blood that had coated the cave walls and floors, to the nearly dead shifters laid throughout—all were purged of any signs of the fight. In seconds, it appeared nothing had happened, that the lycans were simply sleeping instead of on the verge of death.

It blew my fucking mind if we were being honest.

“Plus, the wrong people already know she can heal others,” Tore said in thought, looking around the space as well before continuing, “And it seems that her magic affects those she heals—like that other BBP. They were far too interested in Effie afterwards, and I worry it’ll be the same with these assholes.”

“Could just get rid of them. Shifted or not, they fucking attacked us,” Dakota spit. Caedmon made a sound of agreement, something that surprised me considering he knew exactly how shifting as a lycan affected one’s thought process and rationale.

While I would never fully experience it or understand it to the extent he did, my understanding was that a lycan became far more beast than man in

that state. I may have had my issues with Coffin, but I was sure as fuck glad to not have to handle that duality.

Then again, I more than understood Caedmon's lack of fucks to give about them since they'd outright attacked Effie—damn near killed her. That thought had my hands tightening into fists, but I tried to not mull over it too much. My gaze moved back to Effie in Ryder's arms, so damn thankful that she was okay.

I wanted her to be better than okay, but I wouldn't be able to claim she was until she opened her eyes.

"We can't," Ryder admitted begrudgingly. "Effie nearly drowned trying to pull this bastard to the surface; we can't just turn around and kill him." He huffed a sigh. "It's not like we're staying on campus anyway. We'll probably never see them again."

And if we did—if for some reason they tracked us down—we'd have the perfect excuse to kill them.

"Then I'm going to move them and cover them in a short-term protective heat ward until they wake," Ryder said, shifting Effie into my arms since I was the closest to her.

I buried my nose in her damp hair, though it was far more dry than I'd expected. Something that had to do with her magic, if I had to guess. Even her clothes were only slightly damp. I was glad she wasn't covered in ice like I would've assumed after that dive she took, but I still wanted to cover her in more than she had on, an irrational anger rising at the icy winds touching her skin.

Even if her skin did seem warm to the touch.

Stepping towards the metal door at the back of the cave, which still hung open after the fourth lycan had busted through it, I paused to listen for Hastain or anyone else that could be waiting for us. I was relieved when I heard nothing, but we weren't completely in the clear yet—the door at the end of the corridor that led to the outside world was probably locked. Call it a hunch, but I didn't think Hastain would've risked his secret weapons escaping and running towards campus.

I turned and watched as the others shifted the students to a corner away from the cliffside, Ryder coating them in gold magic.

My gaze darted to the place Effie had been chained, capturing the image in my mind. I'd already planned on killing Hastain, but remembering how she looked chained up, the disgust and fear on her face at the bastard's plan

to mate with her...well, it was all I needed to fuel my fantasies on just how I planned on killing the motherfucker.

“Let’s get out of here,” Dakota said, shooting the lycans one last disgusted look. He and Ryder led the way out, and Tore and Caedmon followed behind me as I kept Effie as insulated as possible, my ears tuned to her soft rhythmic breathing while still listening for signs of danger ahead. Not being able to tell what would greet us outside was giving me anxiety, but now that we weren’t chained up, we’d be able to handle anything that fucker tried to pull on us.

My suspicion, though, was that Hastain was hiding on campus or wherever the hell he lived, thinking that we either hadn’t escaped alive or that he didn’t want to be there on the chance that we did make it out.

The sudden sound of a car door slamming echoed through the passage, making us all freeze.

“If that’s Hastain, I’m not holding back,” Dakota warned.

Hell, if Coffin wasn’t so fucking content right now protectively wrapped around our mate’s wolf, I’m sure we would’ve already shifted in preparation to face the potential threat. As it stood, I much preferred having Effie in my arms, feeling like I had the smallest bit of control over her safety after having had it ripped away from me so many times before.

“It’s not, I recognize the magic signature,” Caedmon said, not bothering to moderate his voice’s volume. “It’s Aaren and the others. We should back up though.”

Nodding, I stepped back with the others as Dakota approached the closed door, a familiar voice calling out from the other side of it. “Caedmon? It’s Aaren. Everything okay in there?”

What kind of question was that? Of course we weren’t fucking okay.

“It’s me, and no.” Dakota chuckled cynically. “Can you get us out of here?”

The sound of a lock clicking preceded the door swinging open, and we filed out of the tunnel along with a wave of voices, questions and half-explanations being thrown around as I pulled my mate tighter against my chest.

Normally I would’ve been the first to explain what happened and the threat we were still under, but the deeper Effie’s breathing became, the more I wanted her to be in a real bed so she could get the rest she desperately needed.

“We saw what happened to the house.” Ruby said, her hands fluttering over Effie as if not knowing how to help. “We followed your scents here—what the hell happened? How did you get here?”

“Hastain,” I spit out, unable to provide more than that. Luckily, Ryder stepped in.

“Hastain trapped the five of us in there with shifted lycans. One plunged off the cliffside with Effie, nearly killing her—she’s fine and everyone is healed, including the four lycan students. I would prefer we wait to explain more until we get somewhere more private though,” he said, casting suspicious glances all around. He was right to be cautious—Hastain probably had cameras everywhere.

“We have two cars with us, and we grabbed your bags and some of your other belongings,” Warwick said.

“And her necklace!” Ruby added. “It was tucked into the top of her bag, almost fell out—but we have it.”

Thank fuck Effie hadn’t been wearing it after the meeting with her mom, because Hastain undoubtedly would have taken the opportunity to steal it away from her.

“Thank you for coming to help us,” Tore said solemnly. “Let’s get everyone somewhere safe so we can talk about this more.”

Vox tossed Caedmon a set of keys and nodded towards two dark SUVs. We moved swiftly and quietly, the forest around us almost too silent. I got into the warm car with Effie as the rest of the group discussed taking a long detour to avoid being tracked up to Milwaukee. It would still get us up to the city in under two hours, which was good—Effie needed as much rest as possible after using so much magic.

I felt a serious sense of fucking guilt because of how good her magic healing made me feel. I knew she wouldn’t have it any other way—our mate was just that damn selfless—but I didn’t like what it did to her. Now she was the one in need of healing, and I wanted to have the ability to do that for her.

“We can do a lot, but not that.”

“No shit.” Coffin’s mental commentary did *not* improve my mood. Nor did it stop me from wishing for abilities I didn’t have.

“Where do you think Hastain went?” I asked as we pulled away onto an icy forest road, the other SUV in front of us moving cautiously on the uneven terrain.

I had a feeling we were much farther away from campus than the other

time we'd been put in a *huler*, because Hastain would've wanted to hide what he was doing as much as possible. There was a lot he could get away with on the Silver Falls campus, but tonight had been different. It wasn't about punishment, it was about death, and if the other families found out about this... Let's just say it would be bad, and he knew it. Which is why he had gone for a 'kill' instead of threatening or punishing us. Too bad he'd fucking failed.

"Probably to fucking hide until he thinks we are all dead," Dakota snarled.

"He needs to die," Caedmon stated quietly. "He's a danger to everyone."

Coffin perked up at the idea of killing the bastard, and the others continued to talk about his possible next move. Instead of joining in the conversation, I relaxed back into the seat and tried to keep my thoughts from going down that violent path.

My eyes grew heavy as my adrenaline dipped, and I focused on trying to merge with Coffin and enter Effie's mind like I had before. I didn't know if it was possible again, but then the world around me turned fuzzy and a warm light filtered over my eyes before everything shifted—

"JULIAN?" Effie's soft voice filled my ears in a delicate hum that had my eyes snapping open. I nearly groaned, unable to handle the perfection of my mate as she looked down at me with large star-filled eyes, much like the cosmos above us.

I had no idea where we were, a warm breeze brushing over us, but Effie's form was coated in silver light, her veil of multicolored hair making her look like some...goddess.

Which was exactly what she was.

"Preciosa," I murmured, cupping her jaw in a light but firm touch, reminding myself that she was here and safe. Despite being unconscious, her magic was extremely vibrant and alive. Healthy.

"I'm so tired," she whispered, leaning down to brush her nose against mine. In an easy move, I rolled us and gently cradled her so the soft ground didn't hurt her in any way. I loved having her over me, but right now I wanted to cocoon her in my protection, and there was something so damn secure about having her underneath me.

Assured of her health and safety, I took a quick moment to look around us

better. We were in an open field with low, soft grass, and the night sky coated us in a sense of privacy and isolation, like a heavy blanket. It was just us here, wherever that was, and the moon that seemed to warm our skin.

Somewhere in the distance I could hear crashing waves, but it was hard to focus on anything outside of the way that Effie was running her fingers along my chest, as if assuring herself that I was here with her as well.

“You healed everyone,” I said in awe, kissing her gently. “Everyone—even the students who attacked us—so it doesn’t surprise me you’re exhausted. We’re heading up to Milwaukee right now, so you have all the time in the world to sleep, okay?”

Effie nodded before her brow contorted in concern. “What about Ruby and her mates? We said we would wait for them—”

“They found us in the cave. We’re all heading up together,” I explained, relieved to have an answer for her.

Effie relaxed and reached up to touch my bite, an intense hum of desire and contentment vibrating between us from the simple touch alone. “Will you stay here with me? At least until we get up there?”

“You never need to ask for me to stay.” I brushed my lips over her forehead and rolled onto my side, tucking her against my chest. Breathing in her scent, I closed my eyes and allowed myself to float between the conscious world and this dream realm, flashes of Coffin and her wolf curled up together merging with us riding in the car in a weird, trippy effect.

Eventually my breathing evened out and the quiet lull of our travel made me fall into a true deep sleep, only broken by the stop of the car.

BLINKING AWAKE, I looked outside to gain my bearings. We were parked in front of a luxury building, a group of attendants helping to unload bags as valets stood by to park the SUVs. Tightening my hold on Effie, I slid out of the car, and Tore dropped a coat over Effie as I rushed to get her inside.

As I waited for the others to join me, snow started to fall outside, casting the city in a peaceful silence that was so different from what we had just experienced.

I hoped it was still snowing when Effie woke up—I wanted her to see the snow globe-like beauty of it. I wanted her to see that not everything was as bleak as Hastian would make it seem.

I already planned on killing him, but I would make it extra painful if he

removed the light and hope from her eyes—*the hope for her very own snow globe.*

EFFIE HARLOW

SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

First of all, I was *cold*. Physically shivering, my toes curling uncomfortably against the icy sheets despite having the covers pulled up to my chin...which meant that none of my mates were in bed with me. That paired with not being able to easily pull on their magical signatures—four of them were so faint that I knew they were in a different room than myself—and the absence of their deep breathing made the conclusion easy to come to.

Considering what we'd just gone through, even my hazy mind came to the conclusion that something wasn't right. Normally they would never leave me alone after something so intense had happened to all of us.

Although I wasn't entirely alone. One of my mates was still here, not in bed but in the room...and it was the biggest reason I knew something was wrong. I could feel Caedmon's emotions like they were my own as they hit me in a hard wave, panic, anger, self-hatred, and trepidation suffocating me. I nearly groaned at the impact, forcing my eyes open to find the man in question.

I was in a massive bedroom on an equally large bed, wrapped in an orange velvet comforter. The absence of lights made the room so dark that the only way to see was by the light of the crackling fireplace and a single sliver of faint moonlight that made its way through a gap in the curtains.

That's where I found my lycan mate, leaning against the window as he stared out into the night sky. He was standing so still that it took a moment for me to see him fully, and even then his expression was hidden from me in the shadows.

As I sat up slowly, the sheets pooling around me, Caedmon tensed, his posture rigid. His hair was messy on the back of his head, like he'd been running his hand over the nape of his neck, and while I still couldn't see his face very well, I knew that look in his eye. It matched the feelings of self-loathing that swirled through our connection, and I wanted to banish it.

Still in bed, I looked over the rest of him, relieved to see that he was perfectly okay after everything that happened—he was standing, alive, and no longer injured. The absence of the scent of blood was a huge relief to me. I'd been so worried that my mates—

I stopped myself right there. I couldn't afford to get pulled down by those thoughts right now. *Caedmon needed me.* Returning my attention to my mate, I noticed that his shirt was untucked and hanging as if unbuttoned. As if he'd wanted to get into bed but hadn't brought himself to do so yet. Why hadn't he joined me?

Shifting towards the edge of the bed, I didn't say anything, expecting him to turn around when he heard me moving. But when he held his posture, seemingly imprisoned in thought, I got out of bed and quickly crossed the room, worried about my lycan mate and determined to make him feel better. I needed to touch him. I needed to reach him. I hesitated only momentarily, my steps catching as the thought crossed my mind that maybe he wasn't turning around because he didn't want my comfort...

No. I wouldn't think like that. Caedmon loved me, I knew that now. He loved me and he needed me at this moment.

"Caedmon?" I kept my voice soft, raising my hand to gently graze his back.

Less than a second later I was pressed against the wall next to the window, breathless and surprised at the sudden movement. He was so damn fast, and I couldn't help my sharp inhale at the small thrill of fear that ran over me. I knew Caedmon wouldn't hurt me though, and I needed him to believe that as well, so I forced myself to relax into him.

My gaze moved up his bare tattooed chest to his stunning face, his green eyes nearly black as they stared down at me, his expressionless features cast in shadows. He looked indifferent, but I knew he was anything but. The air around us vibrated with the intensity of his emotions about everything—about me.

I struggled for a moment, unsure what to say to break the wall he was trying to erect between us. He probably didn't even realize he was doing it.

So I pulled on everything I knew about my mate and slowly let my hand smooth up his chest before I trailed my fingers up to his jaw, the scruff there causing my toes to curl. His eyes closed in response to my touch, seeming to savor it for a long moment.

But then his gaze snapped open and he tried to pull back from the moment, a surge of frustration moving through our bond as if he was mad at himself for giving into my comfort. But why? I seriously didn't—

The fear in his gaze, layered beneath so many complex emotions, caused a lightbulb to go off.

“Caedmon, I'm okay,” I promised. “I am perfectly okay, and I'm here with you.”

Caedmon's forehead pressed against mine as his thumb smoothed over my lip, quieting me, his other hand capturing my hip against the wall. “You are far from fine, *mon ange*. All of this is far from fine. Four...four lycans. They could've ripped you to shreds. I could've attacked you by accident—”

“You absolutely would never let that happen—none of you would.” I tightened my grip on his jaw, desperate to topple the mountain of anguish in his gaze. “And you would never hurt me; I know that. I know *you*.”

“I let one of them take you off a damn cliff,” he snarled, a tremor working over his frame as he tried to calm himself down. I knew it was essential, but I wasn't sure how to help him. I needed to find a way to make him understand that the responsibility didn't fall on him—that he'd already changed my life so damn much, and for the better.

“He came out of nowhere; that isn't your fault—”

Caedmon's lips seared to mine in a demanding kiss that silenced my protests. Pure desire like a shot of adrenaline ran through me, and my fingers slipped back down to his chest and bit into the skin there, unable to help but want to be as close as possible. When he suddenly pulled back from the kiss, I felt dazed enough that he was able to continue his argument without protest.

“That's where you're wrong, Effie. It *is* my fucking fault. You're my mate, the woman I love. How the hell am I supposed to protect you from all of this when I can't even control myself? How can I keep Hastain and my father away from you when three lycans were able to distract us enough that one nearly killed you? You went off the fucking cliff and into Lake Michigan. You—” His words cut off, his grip on me tightening, almost bruising—before he seemed to force himself to relax his grip.

“I've spent my entire life being weak,” I said softly. “The entire time I

was in the Whitepaw Pack, I was looked over, picked on, and abused. I have never felt more safe and protected than I do now, Caedmon. From the moment I met all of you, I knew my life was about to change.”

I kissed his lips softly when he went to say something, not letting him interrupt. “What we’re dealing with right now isn’t normal; even I can recognize that. When all of this is done, we’re going to look back on this as the hardest thing we’ve ever had to deal with. We just have to get through it and figure out how to stop them.

“And the responsibility to protect me does not just fall on you. I know you don’t believe that, but it falls on me as well. I finally have the ability to stand up for myself. I kept myself and the other shifter alive long enough for Ryder to help us; I never could have imagined I was capable of that! I healed everyone! I need to know what I’m capable of, Caedmon, so what you view as messing up is actually a chance for me to realize everything I can be.”

A low rumble came from his chest, and I softened my voice. “What I need from you is to stand by me. To help us get past this. To figure out what we need to do to make this end so we can start our real life. Because when I thought I was going to die, it felt so horribly ironic because I’ve only just found my home with the five of you. I’m not going to give that up easily, and I know you won’t either.”

With a slow exhale, I held his gaze. “I don’t just need you to protect me, Caedmon, I need you to fight with me for our future.”

My words hung in the quiet room as Caedmon’s eyes filled with a burning determination I’d never seen before. After a long moment, he spoke, his voice rough. “I will do more than fight with you, Effie. I will fight with every ounce of my being, until every person that has ever threatened you is gone—until I can ensure that we can live in peace.”

I felt a sense of victory—he had not only understood me but *agreed* with me—and my heart lit up at his savage vow. Going up on my toes, I pressed a hard kiss to his lips, causing a deep groan to rumble from his throat, both of his hands tightening on my hips. Between our words and the neediness of the kiss, my spark of desire turned into an absolute inferno.

“I need you,” I whispered against his lips.

“Effie.” His voice was filled with so much need that it rocked me, his hard length pressed against me telling me he felt the same intense urge as I did.

“I want us to claim each other in every way possible,” I said softly.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He pulled back, examining my face. “You have to tell me if I take anything too far.”

“Always.” I stepped back into him, wanting him as close as possible. “But I trust you, and I need you to trust yourself as well. You would never hurt me.”

I would say it again and again.

“Fuck,” Caedmon snarled and surged forward, literally diving into the moment, one hand tangling into my hair. The taste of his minty breath against mine had chills breaking over my skin and my nipples hardening against the loose shirt I wore. I had no idea when I’d changed, but I was more than thankful that so few layers separated Caedmon and me.

As he deepened the kiss, I greedily ran my hands over his chest and tried to push the shirt off of his shoulders...which landed me with both of my hands held against the wall above my head. “Your touch drives me crazy, Effie. I have to be careful or else I’m going to end up taking you on the floor like a fucking animal.”

A shiver of desire rolled over me as he groaned and dropped to his knees in front of me, pushing the long shirt up to my hips. I whimpered as he inhaled my scent before looking up at me, a nearly feral look in his eyes. I could feel how needy I was, how wet I was getting, as he tugged my panties down and tossed them to the side, leaving me bare to him.

“I’ve wanted to taste you again for way too fucking long,” he said, tugging one of my ankles up and over his shoulder before burying his face between my legs. A whimper of relief left my lips as I whispered his name, my fingers tangling in his hair. The way he held me was so possessive, as if he was worried someone would steal me from his arms, but the way he explored me was slower, as if he were savoring the moment. In what felt like seconds, I was so close to coming on his lips, chills and a flush spreading over my skin as my head fell back and my eyes closed.

“Eyes on me, *mon ange*,” Caedmon demanded. I looked back down right as he sucked on my clit, causing me to absolutely detonate. My entire body melted, and then the world around me shifted and I was suddenly flat on my back on the bed.

Caedmon loomed over me, his shadow protective and possessive. I let my legs fall open so that there was no ambiguity in what I wanted, hoping to dispel any hesitancy as I pulled him down for a hard kiss. At some point he’d shed his shirt, and I shivered as his hard length slid against my slit, realizing

that he'd freed his cock as well.

"Effie." He nipped my lip, the sharp sensation causing me to nearly come again, his voice gravelly as he said, "I need you to be sure. I need you to promise me that if I go too fast, or too hard, or too rough—"

"Caedmon," I said, breathless. "I need you—please."

Apparently the *please* was enough because Caedmon slid home in a hard thrust, his thick, rigid cock pushing into me in one pump. I arched off the bed with a moan, my walls squeezing around him as my legs wrapped around his hips. A deep guttural sound left his throat as he sank further into me, making me realize he was even bigger than I thought. A string of curses left his lips as he pressed his forehead against mine, pausing to give me time to adjust.

"Damn it, you feel like heaven," he groaned, pulling back to look down at the place where we were connected, another growl vibrating his chest. The sight of us like that seemed to light something inside of him because all at once he was determined to meld us together. A whimper left my throat as he began to pump into me, his hands pushing off my shirt before grasping my wrists, not allowing them back down.

When his head dipped and he tugged one of my nipples between his lips, I cried out and shuddered around him, a small climax collapsing over me as my magic expanded through the room, fueled by the pleasure rocketing through me. Which is how I realized—

"You're holding back," I complained as he continued to stroke deep and hard, the darkness in his eyes telling me that I was absolutely right.

"I won't hurt you," he growled, his voice taking on an almost inhuman quality.

"I want all of you." My voice sparked with a demand that had never been there before. "I need it. I need to have all of you."

Caedmon froze, his length pulsing inside of me as he searched my face for a long moment.

"Then you're going to get all of me, *mon ange*."

That was when the snap happened. All at once I was flipped onto my stomach and my hips were tugged back, just like in the cave when he had kidnapped me. But this time, he slid into me immediately, hard and deep, without reserve. And Caedmon gave me absolutely everything.

Screaming into the sheets, I realized just how much power he'd been hiding. An orgasm ripped into me as he hit a white hot point of pleasure and continued to stroke it, his hands on my waist hard and unyielding, almost

bruising. And when his fingers shifted into claws, biting into my skin, I spread my legs wider to take him deeper.

Turning my head against the sheet as I moaned his name, I felt him swell inside me even larger and realized he was partly shifting. I whimpered at the stretching sensation as a euphoric pleasure took over everything, making me dizzy. Any pain that could have been there was absent, and instead I basked in the victory of having all of him at once—

His elongated teeth sliced into my shoulder, pain hitting me for a long second before my world imploded. I came hard around him as a primal noise vibrated from his chest, which pressed against me as he pinned me down while spilling inside of me. So much. I cried out his name as pressure built in my abdomen from how much he was giving me—

Our bond snapped into place

A wave of pure bliss washed over me, and I melted against the bed, loving the feeling of him buried inside of me both ways. *This* was exactly how we were meant to be.

Caedmon pulled out of me slowly, and I felt his claws turn back into hands as he turned me in his arms, protectively pulling me against his bare chest. Letting out a murmur of his name, my eyes grew heavy as I gave into the sensation.



HOT WATER against my skin was the next thing I felt. Caedmon's hands were gentle on my skin as he carefully cleaned his bite mark, his much larger frame wrapped around me possessively. I turned my head, only able to see the edge of it on the soft part of my shoulder. Caedmon had been worried about marking me, but the mark was big enough that I would always see it. *Everyone* would see it.

I loved that.

“Effie.” The sound of my name pulled me from my foggy thoughts as I realized he had asked me several times how I was doing.

“I feel amazing,” I whispered. He let out a breath of relief and kissed me gently before continuing to clean off my skin. I knew he was concerned because of how hard he took me, but he really didn't need to worry about that—I felt better than I had when I first woke up. My magic felt replenished.

I could also tell from our bond that the thoughts from earlier were still weighing on him, and while the hum and buzz of our mating rang strong, there was other stuff we needed to talk about. Caedmon was far too trapped in his head right now; I just didn't know if I should push him to tell me or—

“My father contacted me.”

I froze, but Caedmon continued massaging soap over my skin, his gaze far away.

“How?” I asked carefully.

“My new phone. I replaced all of ours when we touched back down in the US, but it appears he was able to get my number once again.” Caedmon's brow dipped. “The bastard is everywhere. Always has been.”

“After we handle Hastain.” I swallowed, not fully knowing how to deal with what I was about to imply. “Then we will handle your father. I promise.”

Caedmon's gaze darkened. “I want to kill him, Effie. I want to kill him with my own hands.”

My chest seized at the thought, worried that it would end up as just one more thing weighing on his conscience...but maybe it wouldn't. Maybe it would do the exact opposite.

Running my fingers through his hair and pressing a kiss to his lips, I gave him permission that I think he needed. “Then we'll make sure you do.”

Because if anyone deserved to die, it was the man who'd convinced my mate that he didn't have worth—that he couldn't be loved.

EFFIE HARLOW

THE NEXT TIME my eyes opened, the atmosphere of the room was vastly different. Instead of being freezing and alone, I was surrounded by the familiar scents of all my mates, and the warmth radiating from their bodies told me that more than one of them was in bed with me. A content sound left my lips. There was literally no other way I would rather wake up than surrounded by the men I loved.

Letting out a yawn, I stretched out and noticed that I was slightly sore—not in a bad way, but there was a deep muscle ache that came from both the overexertion of my magic...and Caedmon. Totally him as well. I also had the sneaking suspicion that I'd slept far longer than I'd intended to. I felt extremely well rested, which wasn't something we had the luxury of recently.

Hopefully I hadn't slept so long that we'd missed the new moon...

That thought spurred me to open my heavy eyes. I was greeted by the same room as before, but this time a brighter light filtered through the partly opened curtains, telling me it was morning, if not afternoon. It also allowed me to see the full luxury of the room, leading me to believe that we'd made our way to one of Ryder's many properties. The more time I spent at each one, the more I realized that he had a specific style he gravitated towards—masculine, expensive, and still managed to feature some cozy elements.

That was one of the things I'd loved about the London property.

A muffled snore had a smile flitting to my lips as I moved my gaze to where Julian was spread out next to me. Although 'spread out' was only partially correct, because the man's arm was wrapped around my hip possessively as he laid on his stomach, showing off his muscular golden

back. I loved how he was practically glued to my side, so I didn't hesitate to run my fingers over his skin in a way I hoped was soothing, a soft sigh of my name leaving his lips as he continued to sleep. I couldn't help but blush at the way he said it, and I had to force myself to sit up just slightly or else I knew I would stay in this bed forever. I was entirely too cozy.

My fingers continued up his back to his neck where his dark, nearly navy hair lay messy and a bit longer than when we'd first met. It was also damp, like he'd showered before falling asleep next to me. A barely-there smile lifted his lips, and I could almost see exactly where his dimples would be, the faintest indent apparent. I moved my fingers to trace the spot before pulling my hand away, knowing that if I kept touching Julian, I would never stop.

I mean, you could hardly blame me. The bitten wolf was charismatic and charming. From the day I'd reunited with him on the train, I'd been engrossed in everything about him, and that didn't even account for the other side to Julian, the one Coffin inhabited and brought out in him—the one that was more feral and primal, an intoxicating mix of two contrasting personalities within one man. A man that I absolutely loved.

It had been easy to fall in love with Julian, and not just because of our recently discovered shared history—no, it was everything about him. Which is why I was continuing to stare at him like a lovesick idiot, just waiting for him to open his golden brown eyes and say 'good morning.' Maybe if I just woke him up—

No. *He needed sleep.* All of them needed sleep.

"You should be sleeping as well, little wolf. I know your magic isn't fully replenished yet; I can feel it," a deep voice rumbled from my other side. I turned my head to find Dakota propped up on one elbow, staring at me after having just woken up. His obsidian eyes were filled with a hazy lightness that told me he'd been sleeping for a while and had me wanting to curl up against his chest—a chest that was currently covered in a tight white shirt that showed off every single inch of the muscles underneath. My toes curled as I looked fully over him before meeting his gaze again. His eyes were filled with a knowing light, and a slightly embarrassed smile stole onto my face as I tried to recall what he had *just* said.

"I have a feeling I've been sleeping for quite some time now," I reasoned, my fingers darting out to smooth a piece of hair that fell against his brow. I loved that his hair was getting longer. It made both him and Julian look a bit more relaxed, a bit more wild. Something about that really appealed to me.

“Nearly a day and a half,” Dakota admitted. “I would’ve been worried if I wasn’t aware that Caedmon checked up on you last night.”

“Is that what we’re calling it?” Julian chuckled sleepily but didn’t open his eyes, causing me to snap my gaze over to him. My cheeks were bright pink, but I wasn’t really embarrassed that they knew, just a little flushed at the idea of them hearing us.

“For now,” Dakota mused, running his fingers over my arm and drawing my attention back. I could tell that despite his teasing he viewed the Caedmon thing as a positive step, and I more than agreed. I mean, it was more clear than ever to me where we stood now. Before last night I’d known he loved me, but now we’d given every part of ourselves to each other, and there was a true completeness to that. Our bond was strong and vibrant, shimmering with magic.

Which meant Caedmon was nearby... Where was he?

“Couch.” Dakota nodded towards the sitting area on the opposite side of the room from the windows. I smiled at the sight of Caedmon’s tall frame spread out on the couch, his rich brown hair glinting in the firelight. Ryder was nearby in an armchair, both of them sleeping deeply, their faces peaceful and relaxed.

“They should be in bed,” I murmured as I slipped from the bed myself, Dakota’s hand grazing my hip in passing as I made my way towards my other two mates. Both of them were still dressed, and while I wished they’d changed into pajamas, they’d both taken steps to make themselves more comfortable. Ryder had a blanket pulled over his lap and had propped his feet up on an ottoman in front of his chair, a book nearby as if he had fallen asleep reading. Caedmon’s shirt was unbuttoned and his shoes were off, but I still put a blanket over him while taking a moment to appreciate just how gorgeous my mate was.

The firelight made his olive skin seem to sparkle like the wealth I knew he came from. The man breathed luxury; it was just an innate part of him. But as I was finding out, wealth didn’t remove the darkness in people, it often just allowed them to hide it better, which is why he didn’t view it as a good thing.

Then again, that insecurity regarding his wealth had been mostly put to rest at this point. Which is why I would never stop him from giving over-the-top gifts. It seemed to not only make him happy, his forest-green eyes filling with contentment with each gift I accepted, but it also seemed to satisfy a part of him that I didn’t fully understand.

Once covered in a blanket, I brushed a kiss to his lips, right by the thin scar there. He continued to sleep, his breathing deep. He was truly and deeply relaxed, which meant that he felt safe. I couldn't express how happy that made me.

I let out a surprised noise as I passed by Ryder, his arm shooting out to grip my waist and pull me down onto his lap. I sighed happily as he nuzzled my neck and let out a low deep rumble. When I turned my head and found his eyes closed, I realized he was at least partly asleep still...although harder parts of his body would make me believe was more than awake.

"Morning, kitten."

His voice was rough, and the way it vibrated against my neck had me curling against him as his hands tightened on me possessively. When he pulled back after a moment, his orange gaze looked far more alert than I would have expected, filled with a not-so-subtle amount of heat.

"Morning." I brushed my nose against his. I wasn't positive if it was just time or everything we had been through, but I felt more and more emboldened to express myself to these men. I mean...they loved me. I wasn't going to overthink it anymore.

"How do you feel?" he asked as he ran a hand through my hair. "You healed nine adult shifters; I can't imagine you're fully recovered."

"I healed all of them?" I asked. I was mostly unsurprised because I'd *meant* to heal all of them, but I also hadn't considered the consequences of that at the time. "And maybe not completely, but mostly. I am hungry though —"

"I'm on it." Tore strode out from the bathroom, my gaze eating up his massive frame. *Truly massive*. A tattoo of my handprint over his heart showed prominently on his shirtless chest, and I found myself nearly sighing because my mate just looked like something out of a fantasy book. A man you would see on one of those romance covers at the bookstore.

His dark blond hair was damp as he tugged it back into a knot, and his icy blue eyes ran over me as if examining me for injuries. My reason for examining him wasn't for nearly as innocent a reason. My eyes darted down to the 'V' of his abdomen where low-rise sweats hung from his hips, and I had to tear my gaze away and back up to his face. Ryder chuckled, but I tried to ignore him, not wanting to give away my not-so-subtle checking out of Tore.

Then his words clicked.

“You don’t have to go get me—”

“You’re eating,” Tore rumbled, walking over and pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Actually, I’m going to take you right to the kitchen. It’s been way too long.”

“I agree,” Ryder said, his voice portraying his worry.

“Okay,” I huffed, “but I’m going to shower really fast.” After sleeping for so long I was relaxed and well rested, but a shower would both be refreshing and help me wake up. “Don’t wake the others yet though. I want them to get as much rest as possible.”

“Got it,” Ryder said. “I could use a bit more sleep myself to be honest.”

“Come on, lil bit, up you go.” Tore easily lifted me from Ryder’s lap, but not before Ryder stole a kiss, nearly causing me to let out a giggle. But in the next second I was huffing as Tore prodded me into the bathroom, and I knew I didn’t have much time—if there was one thing my mates were obsessively focused on, it was my wellbeing.

I would never complain about it though. It made me feel...well, a lot of things. Cared for. Safe. Loved. The list could go on and on.

After a longer shower than Tore probably preferred, which included vigorous scrubbing to get rid of any physical reminders of the cave and the lake, I stepped out and wrapped myself in a robe. I dried my hair with a towel before putting some lotion on and then realized that I had absolutely no clothes with me. Luckily, Tore must’ve come to the same conclusion. A quick knock preceded the door opening, Tore handing me a pile of clothes.

“I feel anxious that you haven’t eaten for nearly two days,” he grunted. It was his way of trying to apologize for ‘rushing’ me, but he didn’t need to—it didn’t feel like that to me, and I completely understood being worried about your mate. I mean, I had woken up during a snowstorm because I didn’t like the idea of all of us sleeping during it in case anything happened; I could hardly blame him for feeling a way about this.

“One minute,” I promised, quickly getting dressed and returning to the bedroom. The others were still sleeping, allowing my wolf to relax, and I intertwined my hand with Tore’s as he led me into a small foyer-like room that led into the bedroom itself. Two heavy double doors closed behind us as we turned down a long hallway, and I let out a small yawn in the comfortable quiet between us, Tore’s lips brushing on top of my head.

“How long have you been up?” I asked him curiously, looking around the lavish modern hallway. Light carpet ran down the middle like a runner, with

dark wood on the sides. The walls were a neutral gray with modern art that stretched every few feet, a small info panel to the side of each making me assume that these were...*originals*? I didn't even know how you got something like that.

"Few hours." Tore brushed his lips over the top of my hand. "I was paranoid about the food thing so I went to work out at the gym to get my mind off of it. I was fucking thrilled when I heard your voice."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you."

He stopped mid-stride and met my eyes, bending to brush his nose against mine. "I'm just a crazy bastard, lil bit, and insanely in love with you. Don't apologize for that."

I sighed into his kiss, then had to skip-step to catch up as Tore hurried our pace down the hallway.

Passing a few large archways, I tried to look into the rooms we passed—the setup more traditional than the open concept of our dorm. I had a feeling that the building was much older, and considering the view from the few windows we passed, we were in a skyscraper.

When we neared a door at the end of the hall, Tore paused for a moment before nodding towards a set of french doors to the side. "Head through there. It's an indoor greenhouse—you'll love it. I'll bring your food to you."

"Thanks, Tore." I went up on my toes and pressed a kiss to his lips before doing as he instructed. It was odd for him to leave me alone like this, but I knew that Ryder's apartment was safe and that Tore would keep an ear out for any potential danger.

When I opened the french doors, I found two things—one, a gorgeous indoor greenhouse with a glass ceiling, just as he'd described.

And two...Aanya and Ruby sitting there drinking coffee.

EFFIE HARLOW

“YOU’RE AWAKE!” Aanya jumped to her feet, her chair screeching against the stone floor as she nearly rushed me. I let out a surprised laugh as her long elegant arms wrapped around me in a tight hug.

I hadn’t realized just how much I’d not only missed her, but how much I’d been worried about both of them, until I felt the relief at seeing both her and Ruby completely unharmed. I also hadn’t recognized how close I’d grown to them until this very moment. I’d never had female friends before, and I couldn’t explain just how valuable their friendship had become.

As I pulled back, I could read their expressions with far more clarity than when I first met them—from Aanya’s determined gaze and obvious relief to Ruby looking over me as if inspecting me for injury, undoubtedly because of how she’d found me in the caves.

“I’m just shocked they let you leave that room,” Ruby said with a mischievous smirk. She motioned for me and Aanya to join her at a small black iron table for four, already set with coffee mugs and some light breakfast snacks. “Although after what you went through, I wouldn’t blame them—especially after you slept for so long.”

I had no doubt that the entire time I’d been sleeping, my mates had been insanely protective—something I absolutely loved.

“We were getting worried,” Aanya agreed. “Not only because you literally fell into Lake Michigan”—her voice quieted as if someone could be listening—”but because you healed all of them, even the students who attacked you.”

“I did. Still getting used to that, to be honest.” I wasn’t quite ready to talk

about it, so I inhaled and looked around, changing the subject. “Also...this is stunning.”

There really wasn't any other way to describe it. The snowy frigid skies soared above the greenhouse's glass ceiling, but the room itself was warm and humid, like we were in the tropics rather than a Wisconsin winter. The sound of trickling water told me that there was a fountain nearby, and there were several stone paths leading through the garden, weaving between plants and trees that stretched towards the roof. The space breathed lush luxury and vibrancy, the air more pure and clean than I'd experienced so far.

Maybe we could do something similar in London...

“By far one of my favorites of his properties,” Aanya said, Ruby nodding in agreement as she lifted a mug of coffee to her lips.

Looking back at both of them, I offered a soft smile. “I'm so glad both of you are here. With everything going on, I really didn't like the idea of anyone staying on campus. I know I've explained a lot of what's going on to Ruby —”

“I updated her on everything I know,” Ruby said before I could finish, and my chest relaxed. I really didn't have the energy to do a full rundown right now, so I was thankful for her help. “Including how you almost fucking died.”

Aanya's gaze lit with anger. “That bastard has to go. Hastain has always given me the creeps.”

I looked down at the table in thought. “He even floated the idea of us mating.”

Bile filled my throat as both of my friends made sounds of disgust. “I want him gone too, but we have to handle this gate into the god realm first. I may not like how we got to this point, but I believe Mona. This shifter trafficking scheme is too large a problem for us to handle on our own—we need help, and they can give it. Though I'm not sure why they would want to...”

“Because they used to be the ones to handle it,” Aanya said, her gaze going distant for a moment. “At least from what I can remember in the mythos I read back home. Before the gate was closed, there was a council of gods who would hold anyone disrupting the balance of power accountable and administer justice. They ruled as a governing body and overall—well, at least according to written history, which could be biased—were considered to be ‘just.’”

One group serving as judge and jury didn't sound 'just' to me, but maybe there was something I was missing.

"Hastain should be the very first on trial," Ruby bit out. "Although he hardly deserves that fair of treatment."

I nibbled my lip. "And I have a feeling that what he's doing is so much worse than we even realize."

"Well, if the entire drugging thing is anything to go by, I would have to agree," Aanya hissed.

"Drugging?" I looked at both of them in panic as Ruby's gaze darkened.

"We found out that he was the one who sent the order for me to be drugged and left on the side of the road. That night, someone came up behind me while I was parking my car on campus, and the next thing I felt was a sharp prick, and everything went dark. He used enough to kill me—or so he thought. The asshole didn't realize just how much magic I have. Not even including the protective wards I have on myself..."

My thoughts filled with rage, my hearing going static at the concept of Hastain trying to kill one of my friends. Of course it didn't surprise me that he would try something like that, but we'd thought we were going to lose Ruby that night, and to know that he was responsible...somehow it hit differently than when he was after me. He kept going after people that meant the world to me, and I wouldn't allow it. I *couldn't* allow it anymore. My wolf offered a rumble of agreement, stalking back and forth in our subconscious like she was ready to attack.

"And all because he's angry that you're the mate for his son's BBP," Aanya spit out. She was right; the entire situation was absolutely ridiculous. I was ready to do whatever was needed to make sure he was held accountable for his actions, but I knew that trying to do anything about him right now would be pointless. While Hastain was a large part of 'our' problem, he wasn't the only element in the big picture. After unlocking the pendant, I was acutely aware that there was a massive network of people just like him.

People who exploited those they considered weak, who would do absolutely anything to ensure the final outcome was the one they wanted.

"Ruby may have already told you, but when I was searching for the Homura and Fengari stones," I said, wrapping my hand around the pendant, "I was given visions of how bad the situation was in the past and how intensely it could escalate. We have to intervene before people like him become the majority rather than the minority."

“And we want to help one hundred percent, any way that we can,” Aanya said with absolute conviction.

“No matter what we need to do,” Ruby agreed.

I couldn't put into words my gratitude for their support, but before I could even try to express that, Tore's large shoulder pushed through the french doors, his hands full with a large tray of food. My stomach rumbled right on cue, causing a panicked look to flash over his face. Ruby made an amused noise, but my cheeks were so pink that I kept focused on my mate, refusing to own the embarrassing sound that left my stomach.

“Eat,” Tore rumbled, setting everything out before pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “Morning,” he said to Ruby and Aanya, the word almost a question, as if he had forgotten they were here—or maybe he hadn't known. “I'll be right back, lil bit.”

I watched him disappear before turning back to my friends, who were both watching the interaction with different levels of surprise and confusion. I figured I should explain since Tore was acting a bit more gruff than usual.

“He's worried that I haven't eaten since the night of Hastain kidnapping us, so he wants me to eat all of this.” I motioned to the enormous breakfast tray with a small giggle.

“We can help with that.” Aanya flashed a smile. “That way he won't worry.”

Thank goodness, because it was the perfect amount of food split between the three of us. I had no idea how he expected me to eat all the food on that tray on my own. Maybe *he* could've eaten all the pastries, fruit, eggs, and assortment of other dishes, but me? Not so much.

For the next hour or so, the three of us caught up as we ate, talking about everything else that had been going on—which included finally getting some information about Reaper and how he was with them almost all the time now.

I explained the process of unlocking the pendant and told Aanya about seeing her parents, and I honestly found myself wishing I'd spent more time with them because her focused gaze, absorbing every word I said about them, told me she missed them a lot.

Which was how we got on the topic of why she was avoiding her grandfather. Of course I'd heard the story from Ryder, but hearing it from Aanya and how oppressive his traditional viewpoint tended to be made me feel that much more relieved that her parents and Ryder had fought for her to be raised here instead of with him.

It wasn't until my mates as well as theirs slowly began to join us in varying states of wakefulness that we talked about our plan moving forward, and I was relieved to find out we only had to wait hours until evening and the new moon. Life had been crazy recently, but I couldn't fight the feeling that we needed to act fast, that we didn't have a lot of time before Hastain started something that couldn't be stopped.

As we talked, I noted the way Aanya's mates sat nearby, their posture relaxed even as they watched her like a hawk. Ruby's mates talked to mine, going over the plan for tonight with Reaper...and it suddenly hit me that everyone was aware of how big this was and on the same page as us that we *had* to stop Hastain. They were truly invested as well. There was far too much to lose, and everyone knew it.

In that moment, a feeling washed over me that I wouldn't soon forget. The familiarity, the comfort of our large group and how it felt like a true family. The way it gave me a sense of true belonging. With that sensation, though, came a memory that I'd repressed, a simple thing that stung in a way that Theresa probably hadn't even realized.

“WHAT ARE YOU WATCHING?” Theresa asked, her voice steeped in boredom and annoyance as she walked out of the bedroom. I didn't know where Gerald was, but I had to assume he was still in there. They had both slept in fairly late after their fight last night...something that I didn't want to think about.

“It's a movie about a small Christmas town, and right now she's out with her friends telling them about her family plans for the holiday. Apparently they're doing a friends Christmas party as well.”

I loved the concept of 'friends-mas,' although I doubted I would ever have enough friends to celebrate something like that.

“Ridiculous.” Theresa shook her head while pouring a cup of coffee from the pot I'd made for her. “Family is the only true family you have—friends don't count. Friends will always leave you. Friends only want things from you.”

AND AT THE time I'd believed that. Now her words didn't make sense

because the people in this room felt far more like family than the two of them ever had—even with how they interacted with one another. And they were *literally* family.

No, Theresa was wrong.

I had found my family, and I was going to protect them.

EFFIE HARLOW

“ARE you sure this is what I should wear?” I asked. Not that I thought the outfit was bad in any way...but it wasn't really my normal style, so I worried it looked weird on me. Mainly because of the cropped shirt.

For so long I'd worn baggy clothes to avoid attention, and I really had no reason to do that now. I knew my mates would always keep me safe and protected, plus I knew they loved how I looked...it was more of a mindset that had stuck with me. One that warned me that any type of attention resulted in violence or unwanted advances, and at the time I really hadn't known which was worse since both were awful in the Whitepaw Pack.

“Listen. If I can't go,” Aanya drew out dramatically from where she was sitting cross legged on her bed, sorting through a series of bags she had delivered from shopping yesterday, “I need to know that you're wearing something certifiably badass for this type of mission.”

And I wouldn't lie, her calling it a 'mission' did make it seem more badass.

“Plus, it's fairly hot down there, like high 80s if not 90s,” Ruby said as she came out of the closet wearing her own new outfit, bending down to slip on and lace up her combat boots. “Humid also—nearly tropical in some parts. Except at night. Then it gets cold, and the rainstorms can be insane.”

Aanya and I stared at her in confusion, and she shrugged. “It's a temperamental place.”

Apparently.

“So will this work?” I motioned to my outfit and looked in the mirror once again. The crop top was kind of like a vest made of a ribbed material in

lavender that came to sit right above my belly button. Then the shorts, a black cargo style, hit right under my belly button. The outfit was definitely cute, but it made me feel a lot more exposed than I probably actually was.

It didn't help that the shorts, while hitting mid-thigh, were tight enough that my butt looked...well, not how it normally looked. I turned around to check it out in the mirror one more time, deciding that I liked the outfit—I just wasn't sure I was completely comfortable in it.

Or maybe that wasn't it. Maybe I just wasn't confident enough to pull it off.

With that being said, Ruby was dressed essentially the same for this 'badass mission' into the shadowlands, so I'd trust her and Aanya and go with it. Plus, I needed all the confidence I could muster right now. In the face of traveling to a new realm, my newfound confidence was wavering.

"Yes, plus it's mainly for travel," Ruby said. "Once we get to Reaper's family castle there, they'll have clothes for us to change into. It's a bit more...old fashioned down there."

"I'm thinking I'm glad I'm not going now," Aanya teased. "Although playing dress up does sound sort of fun considering I'll probably spend most of the time angry at my mates for putting their foot down on this."

She fell dramatically back onto the bed and then offered us an amused smile. Unlike last time, I didn't see *actual* frustration there. I wasn't positive how it happened or why, but I had a feeling she'd started to accept her mates' protective edge as of late. A few of the comments she'd made throughout the day and the way her mates were being more vocal about their concerns only contributed to that feeling. But I also hadn't been around them a ton...so maybe I was wrong.

"You would hate it," Ruby agreed before looking towards me with a bright smile. "But I am excited to be showing you around the shadowlands, Effie, especially because you didn't even know it existed until recently!"

"I think I just thought it was 'hell.' Didn't you say that's the mythos that humans attached to it?" I looked towards Aanya and she hummed a sound of agreement, having filled me in on that little connection. It made a lot of sense that the concept of hell had been pulled from somewhere. I didn't follow human religions very much, but the idea of hell was pervasive in television and in books.

In a lot of ways I felt far less prepared than everyone else on this journey, although that wasn't terribly surprising—I still felt like I was playing catch-

up after years of being essentially shut in my bedroom all day long. Despite that though, my mates and friends had been doing their best to explain everything to me, and while I hadn't been involved in the logistics like deciding what to pack and our plans once we got there, I felt well informed on what we were about to face and what to expect.

Although the travel aspect was still throwing me a bit—apparently we were using a portal? I'd never heard of anything like that before, at least not outside of books and movies.

Despite my concerns, I knew this was necessary and would be completely worth it if we could open the gate and fix everything—and at this point I wasn't willing to consider any other options. Not when we were about to take such a giant step. A step I was really glad to have my mates by my side for. I couldn't imagine any of this without them. I also could tell they weren't *exactly* thrilled about this journey into the shadowlands, so I was hoping it was not only successful but fairly easy.

“Yep,” Aanya agreed to my statement about hell. “Although in mythology I suppose it could have also been the underworld. Either way, it's always considered something ‘evil’ and ‘bad.’ To be fair, until recently I'd mostly thought the same even though I knew what it was.”

Ruby and Aanya shared a look, making me know that whatever tension had been between them before was resolved now. I knew that Aanya's concern came from a place of worry and affection, but I also could tell that Ruby had good judgment. I mean, she approached literally *everything* with caution, even from when I first met her. I highly doubted that she would continue to go to the shadowlands if it wasn't safe.

Or as safe as somewhere like that could be.

“Kitten—”

Ryder froze in the doorway, heat turning his eyes a bright gold before his gaze narrowed on his sister, who just shrugged. Before I would have been insecure about his reaction, but as I was learning about Ryder, he never thought I looked bad...he was just possessive.

“She looks great.” Aanya got up and sashayed past Ryder and into the hall, Ruby following. Just like it did any time we were alone, the energy around him shifted and my toes curled as I tried to control my reaction to the way he looked at me.

“That was never in question.” Ryder's commanding tone had me blushing, and when he curled his finger towards me I didn't hesitate to walk

up to him and lean against his large frame. I loved the sensation of his large hand sliding over my waist and onto my butt, gripping me possessively as I savored how hard he was against my much softer, curvier body. I didn't know how to explain it fully, but I loved knowing how easily he could take control—how easily he could dominate me.

“Plus, Ruby said that it's warm down there, so I would be more comfortable in this...and then your sister said it was a badass outfit,” I explained.

“I don't disagree with either of those statements,” Ryder rumbled as he looked me over, his hand tightening on my butt again. “Just going to do my damn best to stay focused instead of staring at your ass the entire time.”

My cheeks lit up as I turned out of his arms in a quick movement, offering him a small smile over my shoulder as I stepped into the hallway. “I wouldn't mind that though.”

I knew it was bold of me and more than flirty, but after the man had said he loved me and, well, after everything we'd done, it was easy to slip into that. Natural.

I was immediately rewarded for my words when Ryder caught me up against him and pressed me against the wall. His hand ran over my throat and tilted my head back to plant a hard, possessive kiss to my lips. His other hand tightened on my waist, and I savored the moment loving how he held me, how much need he pulled from me.

“Then I won't bother controlling myself,” he growled against my lips, causing me to tremble.

“I would prefer if you controlled yourself for now though,” Caedmon drew out from the end of the hall, just a hint of amusement to his voice, “or else we may miss our opportunity to go to the shadowlands.”

“Wouldn't want that,” Ryder grumbled as he released me. I slipped ahead, tossing him another smile as I walked towards Caedmon. The man took my hand gently, brushing his lips over it, as the three of us walked down the somewhat familiar hallway towards the greenhouse, my body still buzzing from his touch as I tried to focus.

“Why the greenhouse?” I asked.

“The ceilings open, which means Reaper can easily open a portal without attracting too much attention from humans,” Ryder explained, “I don't fully understand how his magic works, but from what he explained he pulls on the energy from the new moon to create the portal.”

“Knowing the humans, they’d probably claim it was an alien abduction or something along those lines.” Caedmon chuckled softly, the sound causing my chest to squeeze. He was probably right, too. I didn’t know what this portal looked like, but I could only imagine what humans would think of the magic.

“By the way, I really like the greenhouse,” I said, looking between them. “I didn’t even know you could have a garden indoors, which probably sounds silly, but it’s the best of both worlds. Even if it’s snowy outside you can have somewhere beautiful to sit and feel like you’re outside.”

Ryder’s eyes lit with interest as Caedmon murmured, “Should add one to the London house.”

“That’s an option. In fact, the entire top floor is mostly storage space—we could transform all of it.”

I felt a surge of excitement that I couldn’t completely contain as I nibbled my lip. “I mean, only if everyone else thinks it’s a good idea.”

“I just care what you want,” Ryder countered.

“And if that’s what you want, then you should have it,” Caedmon agreed.

“I would love that then. I would love a greenhouse.” And I was loving my ability to sound so firm when it came to expressing what I wanted—so decisive. It wasn’t a quality I was used to.

“What would you love?” Tore asked, stepping into the hallway through the greenhouse doors. He was dressed similar to the other two in a casual shirt and jeans, but he wore combat boots like me, which made me feel even more confident in my outfit choice.

Moving past my two mates, I wrapped my arms around Tore’s neck as I pressed a kiss to his lips, his massive frame having to lean down to meet my lips. I pulled back before I wanted to and flashed him a small smile before slipping into the room, knowing I couldn’t handle another conversation about ‘giving Effie anything she wanted’ without turning bubble gum pink again. These men were just...something else. In the best way possible.

Most of that fell away though as I walked into the room, a cool wind brushing over me through several glass panels of the roof that had been lifted to let in the smallest of flurries—the dark new moon sky above us standing in contrast to the snow. Dakota motioned for me to come stand between Julian and him, the first kissing the top of my head and the second wrapping a secured arm around my waist as I snuggled in between them.

I wasn’t fully positive about what was going on, but it seemed Reaper and

Ruby were having a serious conversation. My friend looked over everyone, making sure we were all accounted for, before offering a nod to Aanya and her mates who closed the greenhouse doors.

“Alright,” Reaper said, calling the attention of the room. “When I open the portal, you will need to enter in groups of two to three. From there, it will go completely black. There is no way to control where you go or how you’ll land, so when you feel like the space around you is growing warmer and you start to see light, I suggest bracing yourself for impact. Especially because you don’t have the type of magic that the shadowlands will recognize.”

Then Reaper turned around and looked upwards, not wasting any time in creating what could only be described as...well, true magic.

Reaper stood in the center of the room, and in a quick second his form was shed for something much larger and made mostly of shadows that darkened the edges of the room. The dark void-like sky seemed to converge on him all at once, the shadows gathered on his outstretched hands in a black orb that grew with each second. One of my mates cursed and pulled me back against him as the orb grew so large that it was double my height. I stared wide-eyed as a snap sounded and the orb turned into a swirling vortex that seemed to solidify on the edges and stand on its own.

It was beautiful and clearly lethal.

“I’ll go first.” Reaper looked back and took Ruby’s hand, her other holding onto Eryx. “Make sure to follow in groups of two to three like I said—more than that could be dangerous.”

I stayed securely between Julian and Dakota as Aaren, Vox, and Warwick followed Ruby’s group through the portal. Then it was our turn.

I turned around, addressing all of my mates. “I love all of you. Please be safe.”

It was the first time I had said it that boldly and out loud, but I didn’t overthink it. I needed them to know it was true, for all of them, before we stepped into the unknown. And when Julian and Dakota led me forward and through the inky texture of the portal, I was glad I’d done so...because everything went absolutely silent all at once.

This was truly the unknown.

DAKOTA CLAYMORE

THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, I had experienced a fair amount of ‘true magic.’ In fact, I would claim I’d experienced more true magic than most of my pack mates. Although, now that I knew the BBP bond was formed with true magic, I wasn’t sure that was entirely true anymore.

Still, the way totemic shifters bonded with our counterparts was innately tied to true magic in a way the others wouldn’t have experienced.

And knowing now that Hastain had true magic, even to a small extent, and used it in the worst way possible...I wondered how much of that occurred on a daily basis and how often we turned our gaze from it. How had we gone so long ignoring what a problem this bastard was? Why didn’t I know more about his magic and true magic in general?

Right now I was completely regretting my lack of knowledge, especially since portalling was absolutely nothing like I’d ever experienced before. It felt like all the air and light had been sucked out of the world, sealing us in a black void that felt like velvet—soft but almost suffocating. I couldn’t see or hear anything; the only sensation apparent to me was the feeling of Effie’s hand intertwined with my own, the soft texture in a firm vise grip of my own doing—worried that if I lost my grip even the slightest bit, she would be lost to the darkness.

Honestly, if it wasn’t for being able to feel her hand in mine, I would have been losing my shit, but my wolf felt moderately calmed by the familiarity of her touch. Although it was minor compared to our discomfort with having no control over or idea of where we were going.

It didn’t help that because of Reaper’s warning about our rough upcoming

landing, I felt completely unprepared to do what I needed to in order to protect Effie. I wanted to shelter her frame in mine, and I couldn't do that unless I knew when I needed to break our damn fall. Right now it seemed like we were going to be floating in this damn limbo forever.

As if the void itself heard my words, the air around us shook with a deep melodic bass drumbeat that had me wincing. My sensitive ears felt raw from only a few moments of the noise, and its increasing volume would have been enough to drive me crazy if my attention wasn't suddenly diverted by warm wind hitting us right in the face as a crack of thunder sounded. The faintest light sparked up ahead, and I pulled Effie closer to me, her back to my chest, knowing we were nearing the shadowlands—

Our exit came out of nowhere.

Protecting Effie, I turned my back towards our downward descent as we broke through the portal and began a twenty-foot fall to the ground. Julian held tightly to her as well, wrapping an arm around her chest so she was supported from all sides during impact.

We crashed onto the rocky ground in a collision that would have fucking shattered a human body. *Holy fuck.* I groaned, a series of curses leaving my mouth at the pain radiating through every part of me, my head having snapped back and hit the ground as well. The world around me was spotty, and I had a serious moment of not being able to hear or see anything before Effie's sweet voice finally broke through the pain.

"Crap, crap." Effie leaned over me, perfectly uninjured, her hands fluttering over my body like she wanted to check on me but was afraid to touch anything. "Are you okay? Both of you landed way harder than me, that must have hurt—"

Tugging her down to me, I kissed her hard before releasing her, Effie's gaze flashing pink as her wolf surged forward to look over me as well. She looked panicked at my lack of response, or at least verbal one.

"That was the point," I told her. Julian chuckled from where he lay nearby, groaning in pain.

"I would have been fine." Effie eyes narrowed. "Now you're freaking hurt—"

"Totally fine," I assured her, not liking the guilt brewing in her gaze. "See?" I said as I slowly sat up—or attempted to, only making it halfway

"No, you look like you're hurting," Effie said, her soft concern and her wolf's intense protectiveness over her mates shining through.

Before we could argue more about it, muffled voices and groans broke through the space along with the shaking of the ground, a tell-tale sign that the others were landing. Not gently either. I was glad we weren't the only ones, but it also wouldn't do us any good for everyone to be fucking hurt. Effie darted away from us as I slowly sat up fully, ignoring the pain in my back, as I categorized our surroundings and gathered my bearings.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected in the shadowlands, *but it wasn't this*.

The landscape was absolutely beautiful, and I rarely said that about anything aside from Effie. We'd landed in a clearing filled with lush, vibrant greenery that was a tone darker than in the real world, the grass a dark emerald rather than spring green and the tree bark a deep chocolate shade rather than a simple brown. Above was a series of suns and moons, crowding the sky in different levels of transparency that allowed the lavender-streaked sky to shine through. A dark forested paradise—that was exactly how I would describe it.

“Castle.” Julian gestured in the opposite direction of my gaze. We'd landed ourselves right outside of the city gates.

“Big one at that,” I said. Beyond the perimeter wall was a medieval style town made of one- and two-story stone homes that created a visual pathway towards the silver stone castle that stood sizable in comparison to an even larger mountain behind it. The stone glistened in the light from the celestial beings in the sky, shimmering in a way that made the structure appear to change in size depending on how I looked at it. I'd never seen anything like it before, and to say I was captivated by the illusion was a bit of an understatement.

Which wasn't good, because we couldn't afford to be distracted in a potentially dangerous environment, especially with Effie here.

Slowly standing and brushing myself off, I checked that everyone had landed, needing to know my pack was safe before moving towards Effie who was talking to Ruby and Reaper. The latter was pointing to the castle in the distance as I approached my mate from behind, wrapping an arm around her waist as she leaned back into my frame and looked up.

“It's beautiful here,” she said softly.

“It is,” I agreed, my ears picking up on the conversation my other pack mates were having with Aaren's pack about potential dangers and how to handle them. I wasn't fully in the mood for that shit right now, so I let them keep at it while I kept Effie tucked into my side.

“How far is the walk?” I asked Reaper, trying to decide if I wanted to carry Effie and weighing how much she would fight me on it compared to my concern about her getting tired. While she seemed to have recovered, I had felt how much that magic usage had drained her the other night and I had absolutely no idea what we were about to face.

She probably wouldn’t fight me on it a ton unless I told her I was worried about her getting tired—then she’d probably protest and get worried about *me* being tired. Shit.

“Around twenty minutes. We can’t portal directly into the city because it has a defensive ward,” Reaper explained. “It should go by fairly quickly, though. It doesn’t look like it, but it’s night here, so we won’t garner as much attention as we normally would.”

“Does your father know we’re coming?” Warwick asked, the bitten wolf’s gaze tracking his own mate, as we made our way towards the gate. I had a feeling that while his BBP had followed Reaper down here with Ruby, that they still didn’t trust him completely.

Then again, I had absolutely no idea what their dynamic was.

“He doesn’t know why we’re here, but he knows that you requested an audience.”

I hoped he was open to what my mate had to say because considering everything we had been through and how much pressure Effie had put on herself for all of this...well, let’s just say I wasn’t positive how I would react to any perceived disrespect towards my mate. Especially if he wasn’t willing to hear her out.

Effie and Ruby chatted as they led the way through the gate accompanied by myself, Reaper, and Warwick, but my attention was focused on the village around us. It appeared Reaper had been right about it being nighttime. All of the doors were shut and windows closed, any sign of movement completely absent. It was peaceful, and I had to imagine that with the number of houses and shops we passed, it was much busier during the day—in fact, it was probably a bustling city rather than the town I originally took it for.

Effie’s next question pulled me from those thoughts and back into the conversation at hand though.

“Reaper, do you know the full story of what happened? I know there are some rumors about the dark god and a moon goddess and how that played into the gate closing in the first place, but I don’t have the full story. I want to be prepared for what to expect.”

And that was exactly what Effie deserved—answers. How did Mona play into all of this? How did she know so much about the situation? Why had the gate been closed? Obviously because of the slaughter of the lykos, but Ryder had said there were other reasons as well.

I looked down at Effie and kissed the side of her head, feeling frustrated on her behalf. It took a lot for my mate to ask something so directly, so she must have been extremely nervous.

And to be fair, I wanted to know more before meeting the asshole who had single-handedly cut off the connection between the divine realm and Earth, allowing for this massive upset in balance.

Reaper paused, offering both of us a look and sighing. “I know more than what’s out there, mostly because I’ve read my father’s personal documents from our library, and of course I’ve asked him...but it’s never been all laid out for me. I haven’t brought myself to ask him for the full story, because I could tell it caused him pain, and honestly until this point it didn’t really matter to me.”

Effie nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“My understanding is that my dad was in love with this moon goddess, and they had a falling out that led to the creation of the humans—a temptation for the lykos and kitsune, which resulted in wolf hybrid species. Which of course led to the slaughter of the lykos by the kitsune and resulted in the gate closing...an action my father took to stop the influence of the divine realm, hoping that it would mitigate the problem since it had originally started there.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Apparently there was a god, undetermined but probably the sun god, who encouraged the kitsune to take the action they did.”

Seemed a bit drastic...or maybe it didn’t. I wasn’t sure how insane I would be if someone tried to take Effie from me, but considering the rage I felt towards Hastain—yeah, I could see shit getting messy pretty damn fast.

“The part that isn’t common knowledge,” Reaper continued, “is that he was more than willing to be civil in the situation at first, when it was just a dispute between lovers. Essentially, he wasn’t asking her to pick, he was asking her to be with both of them, but when the sun god convinced her otherwise he created the humans in revenge. At least that was what my father’s journal says. It’s definitely biased, but he did take a large part of the blame, explaining it was a revenge tactic. He ended up loving the humans,

but it didn't start that way—at first it was far more personal.”

“And then because of the love he had for the moon goddess he wanted to protect the lykos when the kitsune started to kill them in jealousy,” Effie murmured to herself. I let out a concerned noise at the sadness painted in her gaze.

“How do we know that he'll tell us everything?” I asked.

“He'll tell you,” Ruby said with certainty. “The dark god is a lot of things, but a liar isn't one of them.”

“It's why I've never asked him,” Reaper admitted. “I don't know what his answer will be about the key, Effie, but he will give you the information you ask for.”

A thoughtful silence filled our group as we neared the castle, the others having stopped their conversations to listen as well. The great silver heights of the building grew larger in front of us, its shine emphasized by the contrast of the stone road leading to it. Dark green banners hung from the windows, emblazoned with a simple crest of two swords crossed over a moon. It was almost intimidating in its simplicity, and I had to wonder if the moon represented the dark god's love for the moon goddess. If the story was right, that would make the most sense.

“I've never seen a castle before,” Effie murmured.

“When we get back, we can go see some in England,” I suggested, a bright smile banishing some of the tension that was running through her.

Pulling her closer to my side and breathing in her scent, I watched as Reaper walked ahead to greet a guard. As the rest of the group caught up to us, my mate's smile disappeared, replaced with a nervous expression.

“How do you feel about all of this?” I asked. “About what he said?”

“I really don't know what to think, Dakota—and that scares me.”

I wouldn't admit it to her, but I was worried as well.

EFFIE HARLOW

TO SAY I was nervous was more than an understatement, and not just because of the imposing way this castle stood above us, looking down on us as we entered through a three-story set of wooden and metal doors that creaked open on the guards' commands. My brows raised as Ruby and Reaper led us through a wide hallway with statues nearly the height of the ceiling lining the sides, each of the sentinels holding a gigantic lantern in its outstretched stone hand.

"These are the shadowland guards," Reaper explained. "In times of battle they can be pulled from sleep to defend the castle, but most of the time they appear as statues."

My eyes snapped up again, the cold, stoneless gazes of the statues taking on a new meaning. This...this was both really interesting and very different than I expected. I felt like I'd been transported right into a fantasy landscape, and I supposed I sort of had.

It only served to make me more nervous, though. It seemed like this story was growing more complicated by the moment, and Reaper's information hadn't helped. I didn't know who to classify as the 'bad' guy in this situation—at first I thought it was the dark god, but now that I knew he may have closed the gate to protect the lykos, I really had no idea.

"*Preciosa*, just say the word." Julian's familiar voice steadied me as he approached my other side, he and Dakota insulating between their two large frames. Something that helped distract me from the guards at the end of the hall, their assessing gazes evaluating us as threats rather than because of simple curiosity. Luckily, Reaper and Ruby were handling all of the talking,

and it was very clear how comfortable my friend was here.

“I need to do this,” I said to Julian quietly. “I need to get the key, but I also need to figure out what else is going on. I don’t enjoy feeling like a pawn for Mona, which is what this feels like even though we agree that there’s a problem. I don’t like feeling like my life is out of my control—I dealt with that enough in the Whitepaw Pack.”

Julian examined my expression, understanding clear in his gaze. I was thankful to have my mates’ support in this even though they were hesitant about involving ourselves with Mona. They had been by my side through our travels and all of the danger that had come with it, so no matter what this brought, I knew they would be there with me to face it. The security in that was indescribable.

I would admit, though, that I felt guilty knowing how on edge my mates were. Tore was directly behind me, and I could feel the tension rolling off of him, much like Julian. Dakota’s hand was wrapped around my own, and I knew that while he seemed calm, there was a lethality that could surface at any time, especially if he felt there was a threat to me. Caedmon seemed oddly the calmest out of my mates, along with Ryder, his cautious gaze holding mine as I looked back at him and tried to offer a reassuring smile.

I wasn’t positive it helped.

Ryder wouldn’t even meet my gaze because he was trapped in thought, staring at the ground, making me think that Reaper’s story had affected him. I wanted to know his thoughts on it, but when his gaze suddenly snapped up to glare at the guards ahead of us, he seemed more angry than anything.

“Ryder?” I asked, letting go of Julian and Dakota and taking a spot between him and Caedmon. “You okay?”

“Yes.” Ryder gently touched my back and sighed. “I just have a feeling that we’re about to learn a lot more about my family than I even knew, and none of it good.”

I had a feeling he was right.

Before I could ask him his theories, the final set of doors opened ahead of us, the sound echoing through the passageway. We stepped into a four-story dining hall nearly double the height of the hall we had just come from, a huge chandelier casting a warm light on the long, empty wooden tables. Four gigantic fireplaces also ran along each of the side walls, causing the floors to glint with a dangerous light and casting shadows everywhere else, including the front of the room, which soon had my complete attention.

The dark god.

I knew without a question that the ten-foot man sitting on a large black throne with a curious expression on his face was the dark god. First off because he looked just like Reaper but with silver in his hair, but also because of the power he radiated, shadows filling the space behind him like a living organism.

“Father,” Reaper called out.

“Son! It’s good to see you—and you brought Ruby,” the man said as we came to a hard stop in the center of the room, his voice a deep rumble. He offered Ruby a bright smile, his gaze turning critical on her other mates behind her before moving to the rest of us. “You said you were bringing others, but I find myself confused by the magic coming off of them—who are they?”

“The magic is their blood-bonded pack bond,” Reaper said, motioning to Ruby’s BBP and then ours. “I can explain all of that later, but I know it’s the middle of the night—so before we do anything else, Effie has requested to speak with you.”

“And please be open-minded!” Ruby chirped. The man offered her an amused arched brow before moving his attention back to me. His gaze was dark and critical, enough that my wolf sparked underneath my skin, before something like realization dawned in his gaze.

“Anyone who Ruby considers a friend, I am open to hearing,” he said, sitting forward and offering me a knowing smile. “But I’m already aware of who you are, Effie—you’re Mona’s daughter.”

The breath whooshed out of me as I stood frozen momentarily, seeing the blatant truth on his face.

I shifted on my feet. “Yes...well...at least that’s what she’s saying.”

How did he know Mona? I mean, she was from the divine realm, so it wasn’t impossible I’m sure...but the way he spoke about her was unusual. There was something I wasn’t understanding about it.

“But you’re hesitant to believe her. Smart. She’s not lying though.” The dark god said it so easily, as if it were absolutely nothing—as if it wasn’t the life-changing confirmation I’d been looking for. “But before we get to that part, tell me what you need to first. The name is Alcuin, by the way.”

“Alcuin, it’s nice to meet you,” I offered, happy to have a name because I didn’t really feel comfortable calling him ‘dark god.’ “This is a bit complicated, but I’ll try to explain the best I can.” Looking back at my mates,

they all offered expressions of encouragement, understanding my silent plea for aid in case I forgot something. Knowing they'd speak up and help went a long way to ease my mind.

"I promise I can follow." Alcuin chuckled, not in a mean way but seemingly actually amused.

So I explained. It was a story I was growing used to telling now, beginning with the moment I arrived at Silver Falls University to Hastain admitting that he had purchased me from the Whitepaw Pack. I gave a simplistic explanation of blood-bonded packs and even how I had landed myself with the Whitepaw Pack to begin with—at least what I could remember. I told him how Hastain had planned on separating us and how that led to Mona appearing to us, Alcuin's attention riveted from the moment I said her name out loud. I even explained my frustration with her and the journey we had to go on, taking out the pendant to show him as I explained the visions it had given me—the darkness that was quickly taking over Earth.

The small smile that had appeared on his lips at Mona's name disappeared quickly at that.

"To put it simply," I said, "if we don't open the gates, which she believes you have the key to, then the balance will never be restored and men like Hastain will continue to hurt women."

After a long moment, Alcuin's gaze moved from me to Ryder. "Yes, there have always been men—much like Ryder's extended family—that have taken advantage of those they view as weak. Not just them, though, humans and wolf hybrids as well."

He sighed, and I squeezed Ryder's hand. Alcuin wasn't blaming Ryder, but I had no idea how he knew who Ryder was. Maybe it was just that kitsune were that rare, or maybe his family had a recognizable magical signature?

"But no matter; you're not wrong about the problem. It seems as though it's escalating past what I could have expected...what I had hoped would never happen again," Alcuin finished.

"So...so you believe me?" I asked, immense relief invading every part of me.

"Of course I do," Alcuin said. "You don't lie, and if you tried I assume it wouldn't go well. But before we talk about the key, I think we need to address something that would naturally lead me to be hesitant to open the gate again."

“Why it was closed in the first place?” I asked, feeling more comfortable as the conversation went on. The dark god was much different than I’d expected him to be—than Mona had made him out to be.

“Exactly.” Alcuin said. “And more importantly, why I recognize you, Effie. I can’t justify moving forward without you knowing the truth.”

I would gladly take more information, even if it was going to be hard to swallow like Reaper predicted.

“Okay,” I said, leaning back into Tore’s large chest and straightening my shoulders.

“Right.” Alcuin’s gaze went momentarily distant. “Long before anything else existed, there was just the three of us—the moon goddess, myself, and Samson, the sun god. The latter was distracted for eons, completely focused on the growth and expansion of our universe, leaving me—the darkness—and the moon goddess on our own. As time went on, the two of us fell in love and began to create a life together in our small pocket of the universe, ignoring the fact that there was another one of us out there—until he returned.

“Samson and the moon goddess began to spend time together, and I didn’t fault her for wanting that connection. It was a lonely existence, and I even craved to have a friendship with another power. But then he chose to claim her for himself completely. He trapped her, cutting off her ability to see me. At least that was what it felt like...I’m positive my vision was skewed by hurt and anger at the time, especially once they started creating lykos and kitsune.

“I grew so angry and decided that to counter their creations, I would create my own—humans. Beings to tempt theirs. I hadn’t meant for it to turn so ugly, though, and when I realized that a force from the divine realm was persuading the kitsune to hurt the lykos as punishment for mating with humans, I quickly tried to correct the issue. I shut the gate. I shut out the divine realm because despite helping in many ways, I couldn’t risk the continued death of the beings created by the woman I loved. I couldn’t even justify kitsune death.”

My chest seized. Something in my gut told me that everything he had just said was true, and I really didn’t know how to feel about that.

“I realize now, centuries later, that it didn’t really help. Not truly. That there wasn’t some godly influence, it was just one particular line that was set on destroying the lykos.” He paused, taking a deep breath and steeling himself for the rest of the story. “But it was too late. I had already locked the

divine realm, blocking anyone who wanted to cross to Earth to help. All I could do was hope that the situation would settle itself, but clearly that never happened.”

“And how does this relate to Effie?” Tore asked.

“Well, because Mona is Effie’s mom...”

“And how is Mona part of this—”

“She is the moon goddess.”

My mouth dropped open. “Wait, like the one from the story?”

“Yes, and you are the product of her and Samson, just as Reaper is the product of Mona and myself.”

There had never been a more intense silence than in that moment as the world shifted around me. Mona was not only my mom but the legitimate... moon goddess? The one that had been around since the start of the universe? I was the child of the sun and moon gods...

My knees almost broke, Tore tightening his arm around me to keep me from collapsing.

“How is that possible? The gate has been locked for longer than either of them have been alive,” Dakota demanded.

“Of course, that requires a bit of explanation,” Alcuin admitted. “After centuries passed, Mona and I found that there was a singular way to still see one another—much like how she visited you at school. She came to visit me, and that was how Reaper was brought into the world. She brought him to me the next time she was able to visit.”

Reaper swore as I continued to focus on Alcuin, only one thought crossing through my mind—Mona could have visited and contacted me a lot more than she had.

“You, on the other hand, were born in the divine realm and lived there with Samson and Mona behind the locked gate...until everything went wrong, that is.”

“Wrong?”

“When Reaper began to ask about his mother, I got frustrated at Mona not being here to be part of his life. One of my advisors took personal affront to her actions, that she chose to raise her child with Samson but not with me. I’m sure at the time I wasn’t saying the kindest things... Effie’s birth announcement caused me to be...angry,” he offered with a sad smile. “Still, the advisor took it into his own hands to arrange for one of our ambassadors, who had been stuck in the divine realm for centuries, to use magic to remove

you from the equation. To drop you onto Earth. Of course I immediately gave Samson permission to kill him, but it didn't change that you were stuck on Earth without a way to get back home. I felt horrible. No child deserves that."

My temples throbbed as I closed my eyes and tried to sort through the story. The one thing I did know for sure? *I was a child of the moon and sun—a child of gods.*

"Yes, you are," Alcuin said, clearly having heard my mumbled words. "Just like your half-brother, Reaper. A child of darkness and moon."

EFFIE HARLOW

UNEASY.

That was the word for how I felt right now. More than a bit awkward and honestly a bit angry because at the heart of this situation, the women of our world were facing a severe threat because of what amounted to a domestic dispute. Sure, he may have been closing the gate for what he thought was the right reason, but all of this happened because of miscommunication and hurt between lovers.

How the heck hadn't they figured this out yet? How has this not been fixed?

"If all of that's true, why couldn't my mom just ask you for the key herself instead of asking me to do it? Why didn't she do that in the first place when she realized it'd mean not seeing her son?" I tried to not use Reaper's name because I wasn't sure how much anger he harbored towards Mona. I could already see Ruby moving closer to him, as if she could shield him from the truth.

"Because it's not possible for me to give it to her, and she knows that. And even if she did have it, she would have to be physically outside of the gates to open it," he explained simply.

Did that mean he didn't have the key, or he just couldn't give it to her in general? And how did that work if she was clearly 'there' enough to conceive a baby but not to open a gate? What counted as physical?

"You understand this is all fucking ridiculous, right?" Dakota demanded.

"Of course," Alcuin said, "but we can't change the past, and now you at least know the story from my side, whether it seems to make sense or not.

Emotion doesn't always abide by the laws of logic."

That was beyond accurate.

"You said you can't give her the key. Is that because of what happened, or..."

"No, not because of what happened. Honestly, I'm not sure where the three of us would stand if we were all put in a room together. With that being said, I understand why you want the key, and I can deal with whatever follows because your reasons and concerns are valid. Ones I can respect."

"So you'll give us the key?" Caedmon asked.

"Yes." A concerned shadow crossed Alcuin's face. "Or I would, if I had it."

I stared blankly at him and took a deep breath, inhaling slowly and exhaling in a long, drawn-out puff. This back and forth was driving me crazy. I just needed an answer at this point, because if he didn't have it, where was it?

"It's in this realm," Alcuin said, shifting to sit back. "It's within a garden on top of the mountain range, guarded by a system that is specifically set up to keep everyone out...mainly me."

"Shit," Tore murmured. If it was designed to keep him out, I couldn't imagine what that entailed.

"A system?" Julian asked.

"Yes. It's a series of illusions that changes on its own—it's sentient and usually pries on your biggest concerns or weaknesses. For example, I always see Mona, and each time I fall into a trap and end up back at square one."

In a weird way, that was really sweet. I also had a feeling he hadn't tried very hard to make her *not* his weakness.

"If you want the key, then you'll need to brave the mountain range and retrieve it," he said, addressing his next statement to Ruby and her mates. "Besides, it seems like we have a lot to catch up on here."

Letting Reaper handle that clearly complicated situation, I turned to my mates, speaking in a hushed tone. "Is this something we want to do?"

"It's something we can do. I know we can get that key," Ryder said.

"But do you *want* to?" Caedmon asked, looking concerned. There were a lot of elements to consider, but the one that got me was that there were still women to keep safe. That trumped everything.

"Yes," I said with clarity. "Yes, I want to do this."

"Then we will," Tore assured me, his eyes flashing with determination.

Julian's gaze went distant for a moment, then he said, "Coffin suggests that we eat and rest before leaving at dawn. That way we'll have light to travel by but not many people to watch."

"That's a good idea," Dakota agreed, looking around the space, probably wondering if we should rest in here or if we could ask for somewhere—

"So what will it be, Effie?" Alcuin asked.

"Yes," I said, meeting his gaze head on. "We will get the key."



"I'M NOT sure how I feel about taking an exploratory backpacking trip through an unknown realm," Ryder said as he crouched in front of me to tie up my laces. Tore was putting my hair into two long braids, so I appreciated the help since we were running close on time.

I wasn't exactly a morning person, as I was learning, and after some sleep...well, it had been a struggle to get up so early. But here I was, sipping coffee and nearly ready, trying to make sense of not only Ryder's words but how he was so awake right now. I had no idea where he pulled that energy from.

"I know we can keep you safe," he continued, "and I know we can beat these illusions, but I'm concerned about the extremes they may go to to keep us out and how they'll affect us. I want to reach our end goal, and more than anything I want to give you what you want, kitten."

I couldn't help but smile at his sweet words delivered so casually.

"It's going to be fine," I promised, hoping I could keep my word on that. "Besides, Caedmon packed enough that we'll be prepared for anything."

I hadn't meant it sarcastically at all, my cheeks instantly heating as I looked over at the man, concerned that Dakota's chuckle and Julian's amused expression would make it seem so. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make it sound like a bad thing."

"I know, *mon ange*," Caedmon said, his lips lifted in the faintest amused smirk as he looked at the other two. "These two are just assholes."

The lighthearted way he swore had me smiling because I could tell he wasn't actually mad, and that made all the difference to me when it came to cursing.

When Tore was done with my hair, I stood up and stretched, taking my

coffee to the master suite to change quickly. Everyone else was already ready, and I didn't want to be the reason we were late. If Coffin thought we should leave at dawn, then that's what we'd do.

The master suite we'd been given had surprised me, and it probably shouldn't have given what I'd seen of the realm so far, but it was so incredibly medieval. The stone walls hung with heavy, artistic tapestries, and the lanterns in the hall were the only source of electricity. Even our bath water had to be brought in. It was surreal, and that was before we'd seen the clothing.

I didn't know much about horseback riding, but I knew it required different clothes than normal. These clothes though...the soft leather pants that laced in the front and the loose shirt worn under a green vest with matching boots... They felt somewhat...excessive? Or maybe it just felt heavy. I think heavy was a good word for it, especially since it wasn't particularly cold outside.

Ruby must know something I didn't because she'd sent the clothing over herself, and it was clear she had a really good grasp on the realm. She and Reaper had also been the ones to create a packing list and send the supplies that Caedmon had methodically organized.

"Good to go?" Tore asked, leaning against the doorframe. I gave myself a once-over in a heavy gilded mirror and nodded.

"Yes, all I'm ready."

"Good, because we're eating before we leave." Tore wrapped an arm around me and directed me towards the table, pulling me onto his lap and placing a plate in front of me. I wasn't complaining—the food here was delicious, and I didn't know how much time we would have to eat while traveling.

While I ate, I listened as my mates went over the map they'd been given, noticing a series of towns we'd have to pass through on the way to the mountains. I knew it would be early morning when we traveled through that area, so not many people would be out and about, but *a part of me wanted to see who exactly lived there.*

"I'm sure on our way back we can meet some of the people who live there," Tore said, making me realize that I'd shared that particular thought out loud.

"Maybe... Or maybe it's better not," I murmured, not wanting to derail our plans.

“I think we should be able to reach the mountain base by late afternoon.” Ryder’s gaze moved towards the dawn sky visible through the windows, making me eager to leave. “Assuming we don’t have any delays. Then again, this map is less detailed than I would prefer.”

Which meant there could be surprises along the way. I didn’t necessarily mind surprises, so long as they weren’t the kind that would prevent us from completing our mission or put the group in danger.

“I think the sooner we leave the better,” Dakota said, standing when he realized I was done eating. The rest of us followed suit, my mates picking up the map and packing some of the leftover food. Julian and Dakota were talking about how they were going to travel shifted in their wolf forms and found myself wishing I could join them. But it would probably be better to have four horses on the off chance that one or both of them needed a break, so I didn’t mention it.

Besides, my wolf was being a bit of a baby right now because we weren’t in the snow back in Wisconsin. It was ridiculous, but I also didn’t blame her completely, especially since we had just been getting used to the freedom of being away from the Whitepaw Pack and able to shift whenever we wanted.

A few minutes later we made our way to the front entrance of the castle where four horses waited for us, as well as Reaper, Aaren, and Ruby.

Ruby held out a bag to me. “I packed some extra stuff for you.”

I offered her a thankful smile, and while I didn’t know what was inside, if she thought I needed it, I probably did.

“Do you guys need anything else?” she asked, looking over all of us.

“I don’t think so, just eager to get on the road.”

She nodded and looked back at Reaper. “Do we need to give them a heads up about anything?”

“Yes,” Reaper said, concern flashing over his gaze. “If it looks or smells like it’s going to storm, don’t question it. Just get into a sheltered spot. The weather here comes on fast and can be very dangerous.”

“Does it storm often?” Dakota asked.

“At least every other day,” Ruby answered.

“Right.” I nibbled my lip.

“We better get on the road then,” Ryder said as Caedmon led me towards my horse. The others were speaking as he said in a softer tone, “Let me help you up, *mon ange*. You’ve never ridden before, right?”

My cheeks flushed. I knew he was talking about horses, but of course my

mind went elsewhere...

"I've never even seen a horse in person," I admitted, approaching the tall silver creature who stared at me with large dark eyes. Honestly, until you were standing right next to one, it was hard to imagine just how much bigger than you they were. I was positive falling off of one would be a horrible experience.

"The basics are somewhat intuitive," Caedmon assured me as I reached out to touch the silver horse. I breathed a sigh of relief when it eagerly bent its head down to nuzzle its nose against my outreached fingers. Despite its size, it was extremely gentle. I moved closer, and the horse bent further to rest its head on my shoulder, my arms wrapping around her neck.

I didn't know how I knew it was a female, but I did.

"I'm literally getting jealous of a damn horse," Ryder grumbled.

"I'm going to shift before I do too," Dakota said, chuckling. He and Julian distanced themselves from the horses before shifting into their gorgeous wolf forms. A smile pulled onto my lips, my wolf nearly breaking free herself before I felt Coffin's magic surround me, calming my wolf. I had no idea how he did that, but I was thankful for it.

Oddly enough, the horses didn't seem spooked by the wolves, and as Caedmon helped me into the saddle, I watched the two of them going up to each horse to greet them individually. It looked from the outside like they were just having a stare off, but my magic told me it was more than that and that there was no tension between them.

Once I was settled on the horse with the reins in my hands, Tore and Caedmon taught me the basics, Ruby adding in a tip here and there. It was a lot to take in at once, but I felt confident I could do this—plus, if I had questions, I would be able to ask them pretty easily. Satisfied that I would be okay on my own, Caedmon, Tore, and Ryder mounted their own horses, which were even larger than my own.

"Good luck! We'll be here when you get back," Aaren said with a friendly smile. I waved goodbye to Ruby as we departed, leaving the protection of the castle's shadow. The horses followed my shifted mates' lead as I breathed in the crisp morning air, the heat from yesterday mostly gone. Thank the goddess for that.

"Ready for this?" Tore asked.

I nodded, knowing that whatever lay ahead was going to be the start of something big—something that would change everything.

TORE HANSEN

“I WAS TOTALLY okay riding on my own.” Effie smiled up at me before wiggling further back and pressing her perfect ass against me. I nearly let out a growl at that but instead just tightened my hand on her hip, trying to ignore how turned on I was from the simple press of her body. This woman drove me absolutely crazy.

I had absolutely no doubt that she was fine riding by herself, but if I was growing tired after hours of riding through the countryside, I had to assume she was as well—especially since neither of us were seasoned horseback riders. Both Caedmon and Ryder had far more experience than we did, especially Caedmon who’d been taking lessons since he was very young. So I reasoned that they could handle leading Effie’s horse while I focused on our mate.

Plus, I hadn’t realized how long this journey would be. After hours on the road, we had only been through the first three towns out of six, and it was already early afternoon already. The realm seemed far larger than the map portrayed.

“Seriously,” Effie said, her tone making me realize I’d never responded back to her, caught up in my own thoughts. But if I told her I was worried about her, she would probably worry about all of us and how Ryder and Caedmon were doing as well. Actually, she was probably already worried about that, so if I admitted worry, she’d just worry even more.

So instead I offered my other reason for pulling her onto the horse with me, one that wasn’t even a lie. “I know, lil bit. I want you close though. Way too many men looking at you.”

I tightened my grip on her as a town became visible in the distance, her eyes filling with subtle heat at my tone as she bit down on her lip, trying to hide a smile. She nodded and looked back towards our destination as I caught the faintest scent of her desire on the wind, my cock hardening more than ever.

It was a real fucking issue, the men in these towns. In each of the three we'd gone through, every single eye had been directly on Effie. I didn't blame them—Effie was impossible not to look at, and I knew she didn't even notice their attention—but I did feel the now-daily violent urge to remove the ability of those other men to see her...but I kept that to myself. My mate may be willing to deal with some levels of violence, especially when it came to Hastain, but these were 'innocent bystanders.' Supposedly.

"I don't know if they're staring at us, and I don't think it's because of me if they are," she countered. Dakota offered a literal bark of disagreement from where he walked ahead, causing me to smirk. "No, I'm serious. I mean, the five of you are intimidating, and we're all strangers to the land. I'm sure we don't look like we fit in. I'm not sure I would be able to help but look if a dangerous-looking group like ours walked by."

We were dangerous, but I understood her point.

"Doesn't explain why they keep fucking looking." Ryder narrowed his eyes at the people coming out of their houses in the upcoming village, all of them curious about who was approaching. At this rate I was worried we wouldn't get to the base of the mountain by nighttime.

"They seem nice," Effie said, causing me to bury my nose against her hair in an effort to keep my mouth from opening to offer my thoughts on the towns.

She wasn't wrong...mostly. I just didn't trust them, and the risk to Effie was far too much. We didn't know these people or what they were capable of. Honestly though, most of the towns did appear rather calm and amicable. We hadn't had any animosity directed towards us, just farmers and shop owners curious about who we were and where we were going. There was also the occasional group of children that would follow behind us, giggling and trying to ask us questions. Even I had to admit that part was sort of funny, especially when one of them asked if Dakota and Julian were our pet wolves.

I don't think they found it nearly as funny as I did though.

I also couldn't help but notice that this place was severely lacking in

technology, and while most of the people appeared to be human, there was a strong signature of magic that seemed innate to the land. So while I wasn't very concerned about the individualistic threat, the signature of energy that filled the shadowlands had me feeling on edge.

Effie was right that they should be worried about the threat we posed.

For the longest time following my sister's death, I felt uncomfortable at the prospect of the violence I enacted and how easily it came—how easily I had hunted down and killed her mate. Still, no remorse filled me at the memory.

BLOOD COATED the granite counter of the bar I'd followed the bastard into, the one where he'd been hiding. He'd known that I would come looking for him, that I would find him for what he'd done. That the pain he'd caused my sister and our family wouldn't go unpunished.

I don't think he'd realized that it would mean the end of his life, but I felt no guilt about that—just like he'd felt no remorse over killing my sister.

What did I feel guilty about? My mom sobbing into my father's chest as the two of them looked at the carnage I'd caused. In their eyes, this made the situation worse. They believed he should have faced 'just' punishment, that two wrongs didn't make a right. But a bastard who would kill his own mate was a 'wrong' that needed to be removed from existence.

My mom was also crying because she worried that this would mean losing her son when the rest of the pack found out. We were supposed to be better than this; we were supposed to be more civil. The pack would worry how this would reflect on me as the future alpha...I just didn't give a fuck.

Standing from my seat at the bar, I turned to face my parents, but it wasn't just them anymore. The majority of the pack was here, at least the adults, staring on in shock and fear. Where was this reaction when my sister had been murdered? What, because they hadn't seen the carnage themselves, it was easier to ignore? I hoped they had this shit imprinted in their brains and saw it every single night before they went to bed.

This was minuscule compared to what Isabella had gone through.

"Tore..."

"No." I held my father's gaze. "No. Everyone here knows the truth. He murdered her—mutilated her. He deserved far more than what I gave him, and so much fucking more than whatever punishment you would've decided

on. If you don't agree, that's fine, but I won't listen to anyone's bullshit."

Having said my piece, I left the bar and walked home, wanting to wash his blood from me. My time on the pack lands was limited. Politics would weigh heavier than truth in the morning, and it would win out over the actions I'd had to take to right the wrong.

I was a violent creature; I knew that now—and I didn't plan on changing.

IT WAS something that I'd felt a nagging sense of shame for at first, but over time had diminished, largely because of my pack mates, especially Dakota's easy acceptance of violence, and even Julian. Hell, especially Julian.

When I met Effie, it had only solidified what I knew to be true—what you were willing to do to protect someone you loved changed *everything*.

"Tore?" Effie's voice was soft as she intertwined her fingers with my hand that had moved to splay over her abdomen possessively. Looking down, I noticed that the late afternoon light was highlighting her features and the faintest pink in her gaze. Shit. How long had I been trapped in my memories? How many towns had we gone through? I was relieved to see my mate was safe, but it made me uneasy that I'd been so focused on the past that I'd forgotten the present.

"Trapped in thought," I explained, glancing around at our surroundings. We were approaching the base of the mountain fairly quickly. "Sorry, lil bit."

"Just was worried," Effie admitted, her brow dipping. "I called your name a few times."

Fuck.

"Everything's fine," Ryder called out from in front of us. "The other towns were peaceful—no one seemed as interested that we were passing through. Word has probably traveled throughout the day."

Holy shit, I was zoned out for that long?

"What were you—"

Effie's words were interrupted by Julian's sudden shift back into human form. He stood frozen on the path ahead, staring up at the mountain and skies with concern marring his expression.

"What?" I asked, on alert, my gaze darting around to try to locate the potential threat he was sensing.

"There's a storm coming. Coffin agrees. I don't see shit, but I can feel it."

"We should find shelter," Effie said without hesitation.

Inhaling, I tried to smell moisture in the air, but there was absolutely nothing. Still, Reaper's warning rang in my ears, so I quickened the pace of our horse. "Let's try to find shelter in one of the caves—just in case."

"Maybe a slightly elevated one," Caedmon agreed, his gaze on the horizon.

We began to travel up the base of the mountain without delay, the shallow incline leading to a series of caves that seemed to be there for this exact purpose—shelter from the realm's storms. And not a moment too soon, because just then the sound of thunder bellowed in the distance. Swearing, I slipped from the horse and led the creature into the largest of the caves, retreating as far back as we could.

Moments later, the rain began to pour from the heavens.

"Good timing," Dakota mused once he'd shifted back, the others already tying up the horses and unpacking our things. Effie moved closer to me as thunder and lightning filled the sky and wind began to howl past our cave, moving east to west so that it was blowing against the cave rather than pushing the rain into it. I brushed my lips over the top of Effie's head as I looked around the cave. It was relatively clean overall, with the exception of some rocks and branches that had probably been brought in by animals.

"I'm going to get a fire going," Dakota said, he and the others gathering the scattered branches. The skies outside were growing so dark that we wouldn't be able to see well if it continued to darken.

"We should plan on staying the night," I said, everyone responding with various sounds of agreement. Continuing on wouldn't do us much good anyway since night would fall soon. We didn't need to explore an unfamiliar territory in the dark.

"I like the idea of stopping and getting some rest," Effie said. I knew she was talking about the others, but her words solidified our plan. I sat down and pulled her against me, my fingers unbraiding her hair so I could easily run them through it.

"Want to come help me get branches from up front before they get too wet?" I asked. We'd need as much as possible to get through the night, and I didn't want to risk her getting cold while sleeping.

"Sure."

We grabbed all the branches we could, the thunder making me tense as Effie jolted in surprise. I knew she wasn't afraid of storms, at least from what I could tell, but this one seemed particularly bad.

“Hey Tore?” Effie paused from where she was gathering wood next to me. “What were you thinking about earlier?”

“Hmm?” I looked down at her in confusion before I realized what she was asking. “Earlier? I was thinking about the night my sister died and the revenge I took...and everyone’s reactions to it. The disappointment I felt about their priorities, I guess, but that feels far too soft of a word to describe my fury.”

Effie’s gaze filled with understanding as she leaned into me. “I wish I’d a chance to meet her. It sounds like you guys were really close.”

“You two would have loved each other,” I said softly. In some ways my sister and Effie would have been polar opposites, but at the end of the day they were both *good*, and that would have made for a bond that wouldn’t easily be severed.

“You aren’t planning to go back to your pack, but your father wants you to?” Effie asked, repeating the basic story I’d told her. I didn’t think she was asking because she was worried I would leave—she knew I wouldn’t—but I could tell she was curious.

“No, I can’t forgive them for what they did.”

“I understand,” she murmured. “Well, if you ever do feel like going there and talking through it, let me know. I promise we can do it together.”

I pressed a kiss to the center of her forehead as we stood with supplies in our arms. “I’m not sure what could bring me to do that—to see all of them again.”

“Is there anything that would make you feel better about the situation?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe to publicly recognize how wrong it was. I don’t care if they agree with my actions, but the bastard should’ve been erased from every fucking document and record having to do with our pack.”

Effie considered my words, nodding. “He deserved it, Tore. He did. I know you know that; I just want you to know that I agree, and I don’t blame you for your actions.”

It felt damn good to hear her say that.

As we carried the branches back, I thought about her question, whether there was a way to fix the hurt between my parents and me. Not because I particularly cared to do that, but because I knew family was important to Effie—real family, like the one we were building. And if we had children... would I want my parents to meet our kids? I wasn’t sure. Would Effie want

that?

I didn't have the answer to that—but I had a feeling I would need one.
Possibly soon.

EFFIE HARLOW

I WASN'T positive *what* woke me up, but it didn't feel like I'd been sleeping for long before my eyes opened to watch the flames from our campfire flash light across the ceiling of the cave. Groggy, I picked my head up to look around at my sleeping mates, trying to gather myself and establish where I was.

The shadowlands. How could I forget?

There was no way I could forget who I was with though. No, my wolf and I were constantly connected to my mates now, even in a state of sleep. Tore and Dakota were on either side of me, the first spread out and turned towards the fire, protectively shielding me, and the other had his head buried against the back of my neck, his arm wrapped securely around my waist. Sleeping on a rocky cave floor with only a blanket wasn't exactly comfortable, but somehow I'd managed to sleep deeply and without dreams even if for a short amount of time, leaving me feeling oddly alert as I began to wake up fully. As I gathered my bearings, my magic reached out to Caedmon and Ryder nearby, both of them sleeping deeply as well. Good.

Where was Julian though?

Sitting up slowly, wincing at the dull muscle ache I had from horseback riding, I adjusted the oversized shirt that Ruby had packed for me to sleep in. Thank the goddess, because I can't imagine having to sleep in those leather pants. I hugged myself and rubbed my arms, missing the warmth from my mates, and looked around the cave, seeing four handsome faces highlighted in the burning campfire.

But Julian was nowhere in sight.

Carefully standing and stepping from between my two mates, I was relieved when I looked towards the front of the cave and found Julian keeping watch. He seemed to be caught in thought as a flash of lightning lit his muscular frame, making me realize he wasn't wearing a shirt. I would never complain about that, but I did find myself concerned he would be cold...

Walking towards him, I realized just how far back we'd moved to shelter ourselves from the storm, and I was thankful we'd found the seemingly perfect resting place. While the storm had lightened through the course of the night, it was still raining fairly heavily. Another flash of lightning revealed the plain we'd just traveled across. I bet it'd be stunning from this vantage point especially on a clear night or sunny day. It was neither of those right now though, and the storm almost made me feel like we were in a protected cocoon.

When I reached the entrance of the cave and Julian turned to offer me a curious look, I felt a sense of exhilaration from the breeze that rolled over my skin. I did hope the storm calmed down before morning...but for now it didn't bother me.

"I didn't expect you to get up," Julian said, tucking me into his side. Looking out over the stormy plain, I realized that everything about this place and my time here was surreal. *What would old Effie think of this?* I don't think I could have even conceived a place like this, let alone imagined I would be here.

"What's on your mind, *preciosa?*" Julian asked.

"Just thinking about how different...well, all of this is. How the last time I experienced a rainstorm like this would've been back at the Whitepaw Pack with Gerald and Theresa and how different life was then." A deep rumble pulled from Julian's throat at the mention of my former 'guardians' names, and he brushed his lips over the top of my head.

"I used to look at the moon and think about how lonely I was. I wondered if anyone else was as lonely as me," I whispered. "But now when I see the moon, loneliness is the last thing I think of."

Julian tilted my chin up gently. "Every time you look at the moon, I want you to see it as a reminder of everything to come and not what happened in the past."

Loving the intense affection in his golden gaze, I pressed forward to kiss him, his quick tug on my hips landing me straddling him. The faintest drizzle

of rain hit my skin when the wind shifted, and it only had me leaning further into him to avoid getting wet, brushing my lips against his.

“I don’t think I could ever view it the same,” I said as he ran a hand over my jaw and down my throat, the touch both soft and commanding, even when he ran this thumb over my bitten mark—or what I thought had been my bitten mark. “The five of you haven’t just changed my perspective on life, Julian—you’ve changed everything. My entire future.”

“You *are* my entire future.”

Julian’s words had my entire body warming as I slammed my lips against his in a hot, deep kiss, his rough growl crawling over my skin and making me shiver. When he touched me, I couldn’t help but melt into his embrace, his tongue sliding against my lips as he deepened the kiss and demanded more—always more. It was so easy to give into his natural dominance that was hidden by a veil of something lighter.

I loved both sides of Julian, but right now I craved the wilder side of him. And my wolf agreed, because it wasn’t just us doing this dance—our wolves were as well, and the way they seemed instinctively connected, moving around one another in an intoxicating way had my magic lighting up and covering myself and Julian. Coffin’s magic intertwined with ours as well, my own delighted by its savage appearance, its primal nature calling to a part of me that I still didn’t completely understand.

I knew Julian would help me understand it though.

A needy moan left my lips as one hand moved from my waist to the back of my neck, his thumb brushing over my bitten mark and causing me to tremble. I could tell he was holding back though, and I didn’t know how to explain that control was the last thing I wanted.

I wanted more from Julian. I wanted all of him.

I could feel how much he had to give, his hard cock pressed right against my center making me want to rip off the layers between us.

It was clear he wanted that as well because in a fast movement, Julian twisted us so that I was laid out beneath him on the cave floor, the rain cooling my heated skin. His burning gold eyes ran over my body and a primal sound left his chest, causing my nipples to tighten almost painfully. I tried to control the urge to shift closer to him, wanting to rub against him.

“Julian,” I whispered breathlessly, nearly in pain from the lack of contact between us. His lips dipped to brush against mine in a teasing way before retreating again, and I made a sound of complaint as he drew his fingers up

my ankle, teasing me.

“Shh,” Julian murmured as he pushed my oversized shirt up to my waist. “Wouldn’t want to wake the others when we’re finally getting some time alone, *preciosa*.”

As much as I loved the idea of another of my mates joining, the chance to be alone with Julian wasn’t one I wanted to risk, especially when he already had me so incredibly worked up that I felt like I was going to explode with just the right touch. His touch.

Using a rough finger to tug aside my panties, a deep groan rattled from his chest, making it clear that he could see how wet I was. The snap of my panties as he tossed them aside exposed my hot center, and the way he stared at me was nearly reverent—before absolutely devouring me.

“Julian!” I moaned as he buried his face between my thighs, his hot tongue running up my slit as I buried my hands in his navy hair, tightening hard enough that a growl left his lips. I whimpered at the way it vibrated my delicate skin, and my center tightened as he thrust his tongue inside of me, licking up every inch of my wet heat.

“You taste so damn sweet.” His voice was so rough it was almost hard to understand. His tongue circled around my clit and his piercing electrified my skin, the cold nature of it against my body nearly causing me to come on the spot. My abdomen spasmed, begging for release, as he continued to switch between piercing me with his tongue and teasing my clit, working me up so bad that I was a trembling wet mess.

I was close enough that I almost begged him to let me come—which is right when he gently brushed his teeth over my clit and I came—hard. I felt dazed as the climax railed into me, leaving me breathless at the control the man had over my body, liquid pleasure invading every bone in my body.

In my moment of dazed pleasure, Julian appeared above me, caging me to the ground as he ordered, “Open your legs for me, all the way.” I didn’t even hesitate, wanting to welcome him into my body completely. He released his hard length and gripped it at the base, the heat in his gaze a reflection of just how much he needed me in every way—physically, emotionally, and mentally.

When the tip of his cock brushed my center, I arched up and against him, the sight of him caging me to the ground as he entered me causing a more primal part of me to appear. One that loved that he was taking me on the floor of a cave, the loud thunderous noise of the storm outside making the moment

feel more private despite being out in the open, as Julian claimed me. I whimpered as one of his hands caught both of my wrists and held them captive against my chest as he began to slowly sink into me. My body had to stretch to accommodate him as I opened my legs further, a moan leaving my lips.

“You’re so big.”

“And you’re going to take all of me.” Julian leaned down, sinking further inside me and nipping my lip. “I need to claim you, Effie—I need to know I’ve had all of you.”

“You do have all of me.” *Forever.*

With a wicked look, Julian bottomed out inside of me, the sky rumbling with thunder and crackling with lightning as if in celebration of our union.

Holy hell.

I squirmed to adjust to him, his grip on me tightening as a low, satisfied groan left his throat. His expression was marred with a bit of pain as if being inside of me was painful—or maybe it was because he wasn’t moving yet.

I really needed him to move.

“I need you to move—”

“I know, *preciosa*, just need a minute,” Julian rumbled. “Don’t want to hurt you. You’re being so good taking all of me like this, just like I knew you could. We’re fucking made for one another.”

I knew we were—absolutely—and the approval and satisfaction in his voice had me squeezing around him. Pleasure soared through me at the sensation of being so full, and as he pulled back for the first time and then pumped forward again, I felt his cock swell even larger inside of me. I felt like he was everywhere at once, like he was the only other person in existence.

Moaning loudly, I squeezed around him as his lips skimmed against my throat, his strokes growing faster and faster. My clit pulsed, and my nipples were hard against my shirt that was growing progressively more wet and see through. The sound of him pumping into me, our wet skin sliding against each other, was intoxicating, making me want to live in this moment forever. Where I felt completely connected to Julian in every way possible.

“Harder,” I begged, seeing that he was right on the edge of breaking. My words absolutely did it. Julian sat back, letting go of my hands and pushing my knees into my chest. The way he pounded into me was demanding and controlling, the world spinning around me as thunder cracked in the sky and

charged the air around us in an electrifying pulse. Even our magic was forming a union in the purest way possible as we mated in the most base and natural way possible—it was absolute euphoric pleasure.

“Fuck—fuck.” Julian’s voice was lost as the storm seemed to grow more intense, my arms looping around his neck to kiss him hard, unable to stop myself from biting down on his lip. Blood exploded between us, and I felt my body key up for a climax that was going to absolutely destroy me.

Julian groaned, moving down my neck and licking my bite mark, his voice uneven and deep. “I’m going to mark you. I’m going to fucking mark you from the inside out.”

His words were lost to me as his cock hit a white-hot point of pleasure, my nails digging into his back and breaking skin. I came hard as he buried his teeth over my bitten mark once again and lodged himself so deep inside of me that I felt like I was going to explode. I could feel Julian spill every ounce of his seed inside of me as the world around me turned into a true explosion of magic. Colors seemed to light up the skies, and our mating bond snapped into place, surging power through me as I cried out, tightening around him.

A roar of my name left his lips as he continued to come inside of me, maybe even for a second time. A tremble overtook me as another climax pulsed over me as well, taking me into a hazy river of pure pleasure. My body shuddered in relief as my eyes closed, feeling like I had transcended into a new level of magic. *Something different.*

“I love you.” A hum of happiness left me at Julian’s whispered words, and then everything went dark. That was okay though because I was bonded to all of my mates, and a part of me that I hadn’t even recognized I was missing felt complete.

EFFIE HARLOW

“THIS FEELS REALLY NICE, I PROMISE,” I told Caedmon as I knelt on the bank of a freshwater river, gently splashing my face in hopes it’d wake me up a bit. Both of us had walked down the base of the mountain in search of the river Dakota found earlier this morning. While he and the others had woken up early, Julian possibly not even going to bed, Caedmon and I had slept in. So they were packing up while I took a moment to brush my teeth and get ready for the day.

It was actually a really peaceful moment, between the bright sunlight sparkling down through the trees nearby, to Caedmon’s comforting presence right next to me. Although he was staring at me with such concern that I wondered if his face was going to get stuck that way, his brow permanently furrowed.

It had crossed my mind that maybe he’d been upset about Julian and me last night. I knew it was a silly thought because everyone was acting extremely normal...but it did cross my mind. Instead of letting the concern build, though, I’d simply asked him what was wrong and he immediately told me.

Caedmon was upset because I didn’t have warm water to freshen up with.

I know. I hadn’t been able to stop smiling at his sweet concern, and while I appreciated that he even thought about that, I wanted to assure him that I was perfectly fine. Not only was this water crystal clear, but it felt refreshing after sleeping on the cave floor most of the night, and well...everything Julian and I had done near the entrance to the cave...

The storm itself had carried through most of the night before completely

disappearing as if it had never existed in the first place. If it wasn't for the puddles of water and broken branches that we'd found on our way down here, I would have wondered if I'd imagined it.

"I don't like not having access to the normal resources I usually do," he grumbled. "Hopefully finding this 'garden' won't be nearly as bad as he made it out to be, and then we can leave. Besides, with the six of us there's no way it'll be able to present illusions that at least one of us won't be able to see through."

I nodded in agreement, but before I could add my own thoughts on the matter, the soft clomp of horse hooves announced the arrival of the rest of our group. I stood up as Caedmon wrapped an arm around me, brushing his lips over the top of my head before going to help the others tie up the horses. I loved how casually yet intimately Caedmon now touched me.

"Why are we tying them up?" I asked curiously.

"I scouted the path ahead, and it's narrow," Julian explained. "Figured this would be a good area for them—it's off the path, in the shade, and has fresh water."

"Plus, we have no idea what we're going to face," Ryder added. "I'd rather not risk them getting in the way."

Or have them possibly get hurt. They'd been nervous during the storm last night, but now they appeared to be relaxed, one of them even sitting down to enjoy the shaded spot.

Aiding in the efforts to make them comfortable, I pulled some apples and carrots that the castle staff had packed and fed each of the four horses, feeling far better at the prospect of leaving them for a few hours.

I didn't think it would be more than that, at least...

"Alright," I said, patting my horse on the head. "I think we're good—I promise to be back as soon as we can." She made a noise that sounded like she understood before our group of six left the river and began up the base of the mountain again, Julian leading the way towards a trail. I stopped only momentarily in front of our cave, my attention snagged by what I had assumed would be a gorgeous sight—the foothills the mountain overlooked.

"It really is beautiful here," I said softly. "I hope we can come back after this." Next time for more of a vacation.

"It's a lot different than I expected," Tore admitted, gently leading me forward where the others were waiting on the path. It wound upwards through the forest, disappearing into the darkness of the trees. Stepping

through the arched branches at the head of the trail felt like entering a different, more sinister world, the creepiness enhanced by the faintest scent of magic coming off the trees. Like the air itself was charged.

“I’m glad we left the horses,” Caedmon murmured, and I had to agree. My wolf eyed the path cautiously, making me want to put on a brave face for both of us.

Julian and Ryder led the way as Caedmon walked next to me, fingers intertwined with mine, while Dakota and Tore walked behind us in quiet but tense conversation. At first I tried to listen in, but as we walked through the heavily vegetated area my attention shifted to the space around us, realizing that this may have been one of the only times I’d been in a true forest before. It wasn’t exactly common in the urban sprawl I’d grown up in—and the Whitepaw Pack rarely left their lands.

Although there was one time...

“IF YOU CAN’T BEHAVE, we’re leaving.” Theresa yanked my ear, bending over to whisper her demand, though it felt like the sound echoed through the trees in the forest preserve, broadcasting her anger. “Now go play with the other brats.”

As soon as she let go I scampered away, not wanting to make her mad. Or more mad. Although in the few weeks I’d been with her, it felt like I was always doing exactly that. Glancing back, I saw her watching me with a narrowed gaze before she lit a cigarette and turned her back to talk to her friends, effectively dismissing me.

Which left me to interact with the other kids.

I hesitated before approaching the two girls, and the minute I came within a few steps of them they both offered me scowls. I think they were sisters, but I was still trying to figure out how everyone was related here. They all looked so similar. Maybe the reason they didn’t like me was because I looked different from everyone else.

“What?” the first demanded, looking me over dismissively.

“Theresa wanted me to come over here and talk to kids my age,” I said softly.

The other girl’s gaze moved over my shoulder before something seemed to occur to her. “She’s married to Alpha’s brother, right?”

“Yeah.”

The two of them exchanged a cautious but knowing glance. “Okay, cool. You can hang out with us.”

I wasn’t dumb. I knew they only wanted to hang out with me so that they wouldn’t get in trouble from Alpha, and for the first thirty minutes I thought maybe it would be fine, that maybe I could deal with that. We’d even gone on a walk down one of the paths...

Which is when they ditched me.

I HADN’T EVEN BOTHERED CALLING out their names after the first few times. The forest had gone quiet around me, and it had taken me nearly an hour to find my way back on my own. I could’ve gotten back faster if I shifted, but I was scared to—fenrir wolves didn’t fully shift, so it would only alienate me further.

When I’d found Theresa, exhausted from my hike, she hadn’t even noticed I’d been missing. I should’ve seen the writing on the wall, because that had been one of the lesser forms of mistreatment I’d suffered...

“Little wolf.” Dakota appeared on my side, stopping my movement and capturing my jaw between his rough hands. “You good?”

I blinked and realized that the world around us had grown substantially darker, and silent, leaving me feeling confused as I stared up into his dark eyes, trying to figure out why he looked so upset. Then it hit me.

“I keep forgetting you can see my memories.”

“We can all see them,” Ryder said, his eyes filled with darkness. “Far more clearly than before, probably because you’ve completed all five mating bonds.”

Julian offered me a heated look, but I could see sadness lurking in his eyes. The memory had really upset him, and I got that. Sometimes the simplest of memories were filled with the most sadness.

“Let’s keep walking.” I looked around and inhaled, trying to steady myself. “How long have we been traveling?”

“Fifteen minutes at most, but there’s a sign up ahead.”

Peeking around Dakota, I spotted the moss-covered wooden sign Ryder was talking about. It stood between a split in the path, one of the forks wide and the other much narrower. Oddly enough, the sign pointed towards the more narrow path—the path looking less worn than the other. I looked up at Ryder, who had followed behind me, his eyes filled with caution.

He hesitated, suggesting, “We could split up.” But I shook my head.

“It clearly wants us to go this way,” Dakota said. “Illusion or trick, or whatever, it doesn’t matter—if we go down the other and there’s nothing, we’ll just have to backtrack. Better to face it head on.”

“He’s right,” I said softly. “Let’s just handle this.”

And I would try to hide my nerves.

As we traveled down the small path, I stayed next to Ryder, Dakota and Tore taking the front and Julian and Caedmon taking the rear, making me feel insulated. The path continued to get narrower up ahead, to the point where we had to walk one by one, and while I didn’t notice anything particularly odd or dangerous—not even sensing any unusual surge of magic—I couldn’t help but feel on edge.

Then we broke into a clearing.

“What is it?” I asked, stepping through Ryder and Dakota to get a better view. In the center stood a medieval stone tower nearly four stories tall. The sunlight cast a glow on it, and while it appeared abandoned, no one in sight, the landscaping around it was neat and trim. Like someone was maintaining the space.

“A military post?” Ryder offered. “It’s clearly abandoned, but the sign near it says something about the military—although it’s faded, so it’s hard to tell.”

“How do you know what language that is?” I asked curiously. None of the symbols on the sign remotely resembled the characters from any language I knew.

An amused hum left my mate’s throat. “I’ve had a lot of time to study... pretty much everything I could get my hands on. I was bored until recently, kitten.” Until he met me, he meant. He was bored until he met me.

“It looks like there are more signs inside, on the wall,” Julian called out. He and Tore stood near the entrance of the keep, peeking through the ‘windows’ on either side, which were basically just openings in the stone walls. As I placed my hand on the stone, I felt a flash of magic roll over me, and my wolf instantly projected the image of her jumping upwards.

She didn’t offer any other information, looking confused herself, but she continued to look up, so I followed suit. My gaze ran over each stone as it traveled upwards, all the way to the top where there was a window.

Well, clearly something was up there...something my wolf was trying to tell me was important.

“It doesn’t look abandoned on the inside,” Tore murmured, stepping through the door. Some of us followed while Dakota and Caedmon stood in the doorway to keep an eye out for threats. I looked around the main floor of the keep and noticed that tables were set out, the tops shining as if recently polished. The place *really* didn’t look abandoned, but even I could sense no one was here.

“Do the signs say anything?” Caedmon asked Ryder, who stood at the far wall near a staircase...if you could call it that. I walked towards him, examining the one piece of the tower that *did* appear in disrepair.

While the stairs’ stone foundation wound all the way up to the top of the tower, there weren’t many ‘stairs’ to speak of, many of the stones having crumbled to create what appeared to be more of a stone ramp than anything else. And that wasn’t even including how narrow it was!

In fact, the entire staircase was only as wide as maybe two or three of me, attached to the side walls of the tower and jutting out from it a few feet at most. The other side was completely absent of railings, so trekking up the staircase would be a dangerous endeavor. One wrong step and you were either sliding down with broken stone to the bottom *or* falling off the side to the bottom floor. I swallowed nervously at the imagery.

It was also the moment I decided that I didn’t want any of my mates doing something so dangerous.

Ryder shook his head. “Just some brief military history—almost seems like a museum, like something you would find on a guided tour.”

“My wolf is saying I need to go up,” I said, my words echoing softly in the empty chamber. “I don’t know why, but I think she’s right—I think I need to go up there.”

I wasn’t lying, she really was being adamant—but I also didn’t want any of them volunteering to do it. They were much larger than I was, so it made more sense for me to do it, and I felt empowered by the knowledge that I would actually be able to help with this.

“It could be a trick,” Dakota warned.

“It could be,” I agreed, “or it could be the right thing to do. I didn’t get the urge to go up there until I touched the building, so maybe it’s instinct? I’m still figuring out how all of this works.” Because my magic was so much more complicated than I could have ever guessed. I thought I’d been nothing when I lived with the Whitepaw Pack, but now that I knew the truth...well, it made sense that there were so many layers to my magic.

“We can’t exactly just walk up there,” Julian said, eyeing the staircase.

“And I would love to say I could scale the outside,” Ryder began, “but the only windows I saw were at the very top, so that would be a difficult feat considering there’s really nowhere to grip onto.”

“If we’re going to do this, I think at least two of us should stay outside, just in case—like when we were in Bardelina retrieving the Fengari Stone,” Tore suggested. “That way if anything does happen, we can help.”

I nodded in agreement and then tilted my head back, trying to get a better look at the staircase to see if it got any better towards the top.

“Effie...” Caedmon said, drawing out my name in a way that said he knew what I was thinking and didn’t like it.

“I need to be part of this. My magic is really insistent on it.” I looked towards them, holding their gazes and hoping to infuse as much confidence as possible—it wasn’t often I was so adamant about something, but I *needed* to do this.

“I don’t like it,” Dakota rumbled, “but I agree. If your magic is giving you the go-ahead, then it’s probably alright—it’s never steered you wrong.”

I blinked, realizing that he was right. Even when I had allowed myself to be mistreated by the Whitepaw Pack, my magic had been extremely against it. Maybe I really did need to trust my magic more.

“So who’s staying outside?” Caedmon asked, clearly upset but not arguing about the decision. I was glad my mates were trusting me on this because as much as I knew I needed to do this, I was still nervous, and I worried I would fold easily if they pushed too hard. After all, how the heck was I going to get up four stories with no stairs?

“You,” Dakota suggested. “Julian and you can both shift if we need help, but I also think having three shifted wolves in a confined space could be dangerous. So between Effie, myself, and you two, it would be better to split it.”

Julian chuckled and shook his head but didn’t seem to disagree, coming over to me and pressing a light kiss to my cheek. “Be careful.”

“Why are you laughing?” I asked.

“Because Dakota is selfish,” Caedmon mused, squeezing my waist and following Julian out. Dakota offered an unrepentant shrug, and I loved that he was so willing to find any way to be close to me, even if the others thought he was a bit selfish.

I didn’t mind each of them being selfish with me occasionally—then

again, I pretty much loved anything they wanted to do with me.

“So how the hell are you getting up there, kitten?”

I looked at Dakota, Ryder, and Tore and then back at the stairs. “Shift—I’m going to shift.”

And pray to the goddess it was going to be that easy.

EFFIE HARLOW

“BEFORE YOU DO THAT, we should probably talk about the fact that more than half the stairs are missing.” Ryder cursed as I let my wolf explode out of my skin, unable to contain her eagerness and determination—literally.

My paws hit the stone floor as a bark left my throat, causing Dakota to chuckle. Tore crouched down, and I rubbed against him and circled both of them before going to sit back by Ryder, his gaze moving from me to the stairwell in concern and distress.

“And we have no idea if the other ones will crumble the minute you try to walk on them,” Tore added, Dakota making a noise of concern from the back of his throat.

Moving closer to the stairs, I examined the problem through the eyes of my wolf and determined that my original plan was the best chance of being successful here. We would have a better chance of successfully reaching the top in our wolf form—especially with being lighter on our feet and able to move faster when some of the stairs inevitably gave way. And while I was a bit nervous, my wolf didn’t seem concerned in the least, which bolstered my confidence in a way I hadn’t known I needed.

“Effie...”

Without explaining myself, I looked over the first four stairs, eyeing which pieces looked the most stable before jumping towards the first one to test my weight. Landing on the stone, I was relieved when it didn’t give underneath me, and actually seemed rather solid. Maybe all of the pieces left were still here because they were the strongest. One could hope.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” Tore infused his voice with a bit of

dominance, not exactly trying to change my mind but also making it clear that he hated this idea.

“If her wolf thinks she can do it, she probably can,” Dakota countered. His confidence in me had me jumping to another stone step and then three more—until I finally reached one that wobbled slightly. Not enough to crumble or fall, but my heart stuttered momentarily as we froze on it, waiting to see what would happen.

When it stabilized—I jumped three more stairs before landing on a larger piece of stone that jutted out a bit more than the others. Slowly turning my head, I found all my mates watching me with concern. I offered a bark of reassurance before I looked ahead with determination, willing myself to finish this first section—I could see there was a solid stone platform up ahead, almost like a small landing I’d get there and then figure out the rest after. *One step at a time.*

And that mentality actually worked. I jumped six more steps before reaching the first landing, where the stairs took a hard right before the next flight, if you could call it that. Only four out of the twelve steps that were supposed to be there were recognizable, the rest a sloping pile of gravel. It appeared there would be less and less as I went up.

That wasn’t good.

“If you need to come down, just say the word. I can catch you,” Tore called. “Seriously, lil bit.” I barked in understanding, refocusing myself and backing up on the landing as much as I safely could before sprinting forward and jumping towards the first solid step, nearly six stairs up. My back paw momentarily slid on the rocky ramp underneath it but I quickly recovered, doing my best to not look down towards my mates or focus on how close I was to the edge.

I could do this. I knew I could do this.

Luckily, the next four steps out of the twelve were a bit easier to jump too since the distance was smaller, but they were a bit less steady. Each time it wobbled or small bits of stone crumbled downwards, echoing when it hit its final resting place on the first floor, adrenaline surged through me. I felt immense relief when I finally hit the second landing and realized I was halfway there.

Which of course is when my magic would have a problem. A small bolt of energy went through me, and I suddenly shifted back into my human form. It was like my wolf was just...gone. She wasn’t, though. I could feel her in

my subconscious, but I couldn't reach her. My heart was racing, and panic stuck in my throat as I opened my eyes, trying to figure out what had changed

A ward of power protected the rest of the way up. I didn't recognize the type of magic, and when I looked down at my mates, I could see that they were yelling up at me...but I couldn't hear them. I grabbed the stone underneath me, glad the landing was at least solid while trying to get my bearings, not feeling the best after shifting back so suddenly.

"This is bad," I said to myself, looking back down. The fall seemed a lot farther down than I had climbed, especially in this form without the benefit of my wolf's reassurance. Turning my attention away from the lethal plunge, I analyzed the third flight of stairs. There were three stone steps that looked solid enough... Could I do this in human form?

I could, right? I had to.

Even though my magic was buried right now, the instinctual need to get to that top floor still buzzed under my skin. Nodding with determination, I tested the first stone with my boot, my hand braced against the wall, and shot a small prayer of hope up that it would be stable before leaning forward and lifting my other foot to meet my first. I froze as I shifted on the stone, not sensing any weakness and feeling relieved that I could at least count on this to be a solid platform to reach the other two. Although they seemed much farther away than they should have been.

I could feel sweat on the back of my neck and a slight shakiness to my frame, but mustering all the bravery I had, I took the largest step I could, still bracing myself against the wall as my toe brushed over the surface of the stone. Muttering a small frustrated noise, I pushed forward with my back leg and used the momentum to reach the stair, my foot hitting some stones on the way up as they crumbled back towards the landing. I wouldn't lie, it freaked me out, but I was glad it was stones instead of me...

Going through the same process with the third step and then again to hit the landing, I nearly cried in relief when reaching it and went to my knees, feeling a bit dizzy from the height I was now at. *I was so incredibly close.*

Resisting the urge to look down, I eyed the fourth flight and was surprised to see that there were eight stairs...which should have been a good thing, but they didn't look nearly as stable. Right as I began to test my weight on the first stone, the sound from the bottom floor returned with a palpable pop, as if a bubble had burst, and my wolf vibrated underneath my skin, glad

to be back. I didn't even try to think how weird that had been—or what had caused it—instead focusing on my mates' voices below.

“Effie, what's going on? Are you okay?” Tore boomed. I didn't dare look down at him, not yet, but I could tell he was seconds away from trying to climb up himself to get to me. We couldn't afford that. These stones may have lasted under my light jumps, but all of my mates were much larger than myself, and I still needed to get down from here after.

“There was a ward in the middle of the staircase that forced me to shift back into human form,” I called out, halfway up the final staircase—the first four steps were surprisingly stable. “I'm nearly there!”

Almost as if cursing myself, the fifth step immediately gave way when I put weight onto it. I groaned as instinct kicked in, grabbing the sixth step's stone while falling flat on my stomach, the rocky rumble hitting my body in a bruising manner. I lifted my other hand towards the sixth step as I moved my feet around the area below me, finding the fourth step again and getting onto stable ground. I tried to ignore the open air sensation of being so close to the center opening of the staircase, also tuning out what my mates were saying. Instead I straightened myself up and got to the sixth stair, then the seventh, before finally reaching the eighth without incident.

“Yes!” I groaned in relief as I reached the landing, nearly collapsing onto the ground.

“Is there anything up there?!” Dakota asked. I looked over the edge while staying on my knees because I was *not* standing right now and found all of them staring up at me, Ryder moving his gaze from me to the stairs, clearly wanting to join me..

“The staircase is super weak. Don't do it, Ryder.”

He let out a low growl but nodded. Feeling relieved he wasn't going to try anything, I sat up and looked around—feeling a sense of accomplishment. *There was something up here.*

“There's a chest right in the center of the room. It's small but made of stone.”

“I would say not to open it...” Ryder drew out. “Maybe throw it down so we can open it outside?”

“What if it breaks?.” My fingers grazed over the stone, and a surge of joy and energy ran over my skin, my wolf barking eagerly inside of my head. I heard Tore protesting below, but I almost couldn't control the instinct to open the little jewelry box. So I didn't even try.

“I opened it!” I shouted, unable to contain my glee.

“What’s in it?”

“A diamond,” I said, examining the perfectly clear stone cushioned in simple black cloth. It was several carats, but it was also so incredibly perfect. I didn’t understand much about the cut of jewels or their clarity, but this one seemed...so incredibly special.

Reaching forward to pull the stone out, my hands grazed the cold gem... and everything shifted.



NOT JUST EVERYTHING, but me as well—I *shifted*. Into something I had never been before.

For the longest time I’d assumed that my wolf was exactly that—my wolf counterpart, a part of me that had to do with my wolf magic. When I thought I was a bitten wolf, that had made all the sense in the world. But now? I suppose I should have realized that if I had both lykos and kitsune magic, that I’d also have both forms as well.

I mean, even Mona had said I should have both—that I should have my father’s abilities.

Still, we’d been so busy that it had never occurred to me what that form would look like or how that shift would occur. But now I understood.

My wolf was not just my wolf...she was my magic—pure magic—and she had the ability to shift into both wolf and kitsune forms. As my body jolted and seized, fire licking up my skin, I had flashes of other forms as well, ones that merged the two together, but right now my magic surged the exact opposite end of the spectrum and forced my body into a shape it had never held before.

Kitsune.

In a singular moment, everything stilled, and while I could hear my mates distantly in the background, all I could focus on was the burning around me, the purple and pink flames. I opened my new eyes and saw my paws, small like my wolf’s but with fur that was orange and pink, flashing like a light show along the flames surrounding me. *It was beautiful.* But before I had time to admire my new form more, the landing underneath me seemed to shake. The magic that surged through me had been enough to make it

unstable, rocks starting to crumble and fall.

I had to get down—now—or else that would be me.

Turning towards the box, I grabbed the diamond between my teeth before backing up and taking a true leap of faith. I could feel an energy like never before rolling through me, and I felt so extremely powerful, my body rocketing through the air like a comet. Was this how Ryder felt all the time? I could feel the addictive appeal and the adrenaline coursing through me.

I didn't even falter as I saw the ground approaching, the forty-foot fall nothing as I put complete trust in my magic. I could feel how powerful we were, and I knew that there was nothing else to do but completely surrender to it. When my paws hit evenly, landing solidly on the floor, I felt a sense of pride in my abilities, bolstered by the knowledge that I'd been right to trust myself.

To trust my magic.

“Shield your eyes until I can get her to shift back,” Ryder warned. “I'm serious.”

Turning towards my mates, I saw Tore and Dakota partially shield their gazes before dropping their hands in realization. I couldn't verbally express that my magic wouldn't hurt them, but it was clear both they and Ryder realized it, their concern replaced by shock and awe.

“Holy shit,” Dakota said. “You're fucking magnificent.”

Offering a sound of happiness, I placed the diamond on the floor before looking around the space, wanting to see what this form of mine looked like. Tore knelt down to pick up the stone, but I was far too distracted to pay attention to that, trying to figure out a way to see myself before I shifted back. When I spotted an antique mirror in the far corner I trotted towards it, stopping dead as I came into view.

Dakota was right—this form was *magnificent*.

My pink eyes roamed over my fire-wreathed form as my tails—*multiple* tails—fluttered behind me. Ryder approached and watched me with fascination, kneeling down and running a hand through my fur, flames running up his arm in greeting.

“Are you okay, Effie? That power blast—”

I barked and nuzzled against him, my tails brushing over his skin. His smile grew and his eyes flashed gold. “I shouldn't be surprised you have nine tails, kitten. You've always been extraordinarily powerful, but I think you and your magic are finally realizing it.”

He wasn't wrong. *Nine tails though? That was crazy!*

"Everything—" Caedmon's voice sounded choked as he stood in the door with Julian, both of them staring at me in surprise. I immediately ran over and rubbed my scent over them in this new form between doing the same to Dakota and Tore *again*. We were way too excited right now, but I couldn't control it. Their voices surrounded me, a mixture of relief and surprise and awe.

I knew I needed to shift back, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

Well, until Ryder spoke up.

"This diamond, Effie—this was the only thing up there?"

Knowing we needed to talk, I forced myself to shift back, groaning as my arms gave out and I laid on the floor, feeling like my muscles were putty.

"Yes, only thing—Julian!"

I giggled as he lifted me up, and I rubbed my nose against his neck, melting into his chest. "But yes, that was the only thing. We need to hang onto it. I don't understand why, but my magic is telling me it's important." *And I was trusting that.*

"Then we should keep moving," Caedmon said evenly, trying to moderate the nervous edge to his tone. "The forest was too quiet while you guys were in here—almost as if it was only acting 'normal' while you were around."

"Best way to put it," Julian agreed. "Shit was unnatural."

"Let's go then," I agreed. Julian gently put me down and I stretched, my muscles feeling sore in a very different way. Shaking myself slightly, trying to get out of the weird haze of magic that shift had caused, I followed my men out and back into the clearing with an involuntary smile tugging at my lips.

"That was really cool," I said as we stepped onto the path.

"Nine tails," Ryder mused. "Very fucking cool, kitten."

My toes curled at the way he swore, something about it very appealing to me. Caedmon looked over, his eyes filled with interest. "I didn't even count how many, although it shouldn't surprise me."

Both of them kept saying that, and it made me feel...well, a lot more powerful than I probably was. Then again, Ryder had said that he was very powerful, and he had eight tails. So what kind of power would I have with nine? I just wished I understood more about those powers overall...

"Shit," Tore cursed as we came to a hard stop. A massive tree had fallen

across the path about ten feet in front of us. I didn't know if it had fallen before the magical explosion, but I felt like we would've been able to see it before...I was going to bet it was because of the magic I'd unleashed.

I didn't say 'massive' lightly, either. The thing had to be forty feet in width alone, creating a gigantic wall that severed our path in all ways—meaning we couldn't climb over, crawl under it, or go around it. As we slowly approached the tree, I realized that there was something off about it. The energy coming from it wasn't natural.

“Do any of you feel that?” I asked my mates.

“Doesn't feel real,” Dakota said.

Turning back to the tree, I slowly lifted my hand to press it to the wood... and my fingers slipped right through the surface like a hologram, an action that triggered our entire world to shimmer and shift all at once.

“What the hell?” Tore growled as the ground fell away, everything disappearing except the small island of land that housed the six of us. The sky, the wall of forest around us, the ground, the massive fallen tree—all gone to reveal a white void of emptiness. The only other thing that existed was another tiny island maybe forty feet ahead of us, with absolutely no way to reach it.

“What do we do now?” Julian asked.

I focused inward on my magic, hoping for another clue like at the tower, my face scrunching in concentration. Only to realize that this time, it was giving me absolutely no help. We were truly stuck here, in the middle of nowhere.

EFFIE HARLOW

I HAD ABSOLUTELY no idea how to get us out of this situation. I looked around for solutions and was met by the simple void of white space, my magic offering me a confused look that didn't help in the least.

"It's probably an illusion," Ryder reasoned.

"But which part? Because I don't want to step off this island if the illusion was the forest being there in the first place," Julian said, and I felt my chest flare in panic. We knew so little about how the magic here worked and what could be in store for us if we made the wrong move. Or not in store for us, if our decision was fatal.

"I don't think there have been any illusions so far," I said. "This one felt different, and we all noticed it...I think this may be the start of the illusions. I just wish my wolf was being a bit more communicative." Although she wasn't really just a wolf, was she? Could I switch away from thinking about her like that? I wasn't sure.

An idea popped into my head.

"Can I have the diamond, Ryder?" If it had aided in my bringing forth my magic before, maybe it could help again...I mean it wouldn't hurt to try, right? Ryder placed the diamond in my hand, and I cupped it as I closed my eyes, trying to focus on the energy coming from it.

At first I felt absolutely nothing, but then, like a small ignition, my magic wrapped around the stone, and I knew if I opened my eyes, there would be flames surrounding it. That was when it revealed our path forward. Despite my eyes being closed, I could see a single red path directly ahead of me, and while it led directly off our island and into the void, I had to trust that it

would keep us safe.

I had to trust my magic.

I would keep repeating that exact thing to myself because it was something I had avoided for so long, scared to give into my natural instincts, but time and time again it had helped others around me, saved others around me, not to mention myself.

“We need to go forward,” I said softly but clearly. “I know you probably can’t see what I do, but the diamond is showing me a pathway forward. I think we should trust it.”

“We trust you,” Dakota said, “but one of us should go first.”

That would only complicate things. Shaking my head, I stepped forward and trusted in my instincts. My foot came off the edge of the solid surface underneath me and crossed into the void.

But I didn’t fall.

Instead, my foot hit solid ground. I didn’t dare open my eyes, not knowing how I would react if it appeared I was walking on air. So I continued with my eyes squeezed tight, careful to keep to the path.

“Stay directly behind me, the path is narrow!” I called out to my mates, hoping they were already doing so. Considering I could feel their strong bonds behind me, I was hopeful nothing bad had happened yet.

“We’re following you, Effie. You’ve got this,” Tore assured me. I felt like I had walked for hours, even though it had probably been only moments. The unknown of when this would end had me feeling queasy. There was a shakiness to my legs, and I could feel a cool breeze running over my skin, making it prickle uncomfortably.

Suddenly, two warm hands wrapped around my arms, and I jolted, terrified that something had gone wrong. My eyes snapped open to find Caedmon in front of me and the world around us...restored. Completely.

A shaky breath left me as my knees broke and tears of relief swarmed my eyes, so incredibly happy to see all my mates safely around me and the void gone. I leaned into Caedmon as he whispered assurances against my ear, causing me to squeeze him tighter.

“You did amazing, lil bit,” Tore said, rubbing my back.

“I hope that’s the last fucking illusion,” Dakota murmured. “I don’t like how much danger this bastard dark god is putting you in.”

“Considering we aren’t at a garden yet...doubtful,” Ryder said, his brow furrowed in frustration.

“We should keep moving,” I said, looking up and finding Caedmon and Julian right next to me, his eyes dark and filled with worry.

“Do you need a minute? We’re in no rush. Whatever pace you want to take this at, Effie, is what we’ll do, gods be damned.”

I loved Julian—I loved him so much, especially when he said stuff like that.

“I want to finish this,” I said evenly. “Let’s find this garden—”

The rustling of bushes ahead betrayed that we weren’t alone. Panic hit me square in the chest as we all looked forward, and it was only when the sound of someone yelling ‘HELP’ rang out that I was broken from the trance.

I didn’t hesitate to shift into my wolf form and sprint ahead.



Ryder Bosu

I’D ABSOLUTELY NEVER CONSIDERED myself a ‘good’ person by any stretch of the imagination.

In fact, I’d been called a cold-hearted bastard and asshole more often than not, especially when I was working in stock trading. It was something I’d been more than comfortable with because it keeps others at a distance and made people think that I wanted nothing to do with them—which until recently had been mostly true.

Then my kitten came along and changed everything.

Effie was the type of ‘good’ you didn’t find often—her compassion and empathy something you only heard about—and I found myself constantly wanting to rise to her level. To improve myself to hopefully live up to her standard of belief on how people should act towards each other.

Of course she would never ask that of me—she probably didn’t consider herself ‘good’ at all—but she had the strongest moral code of anyone I knew. I had been around a lot of shitty and corrupt bastards, so the difference was startling.

Which was why I also wasn’t surprised to see her shift and sprint ahead the moment someone shouted ‘HELP’ at the top of their lungs. Surprising even myself, I didn’t even hesitate to follow. I would love to say it was only because of my love and fixation on Effie, but there was a small part of my

heart that had melted while around my kitten—that had started to be concerned about others outside of myself and the few people I cared about.

I also knew that she wasn't thinking about what type of danger could lay ahead, so when Dakota and Julian shifted as well, sprinting ahead to catch up and surpass her, Caedmon, Tore, and I brought up the back. Effie had given the diamond back to me, and I could feel it vibrating with warmth in my pocket, as if the forest itself was fueling it. Or maybe it was because of Effie's magic that had grown in intensity when she shifted into her new form. Her *kitsune* form.

Fucking beautiful. She was an absolute masterpiece. I still couldn't believe everything that had happened since entering this forest, especially with those damn illusions, but the kitsune form...that had been something else.

The six of us burst through a thick wall of vegetation and into a clearing where we all came to a solid fucking stop. *What the hell...* In that moment it was never clearer that I had absolutely no understanding of the magic around here or this realm in general.

"This is just *in* the damn forest," Caedmon murmured in confusion.

"Unbelievable."

In the center of the clearing, was a sticky tar-like creature that had created a flat hill surrounded by a valley that stretched down into an unreachable abyss. The organism was moving and shifting, holding its prisoner captive at the top of the hill. The older woman's face was chalky, her eyes wide in authentic terror.

"Thank the dark god you're here," she said, her words coming out in a jumbled rush. "I didn't expect anyone to hear me."

"What is that..." I drew out quietly, more to myself than anything.

"No idea," she said, her eyes welling with tears. "I was walking the path like normal and cut through the clearing to get back faster in case there was another storm. Then all of the sudden, I was lifted up into the air by this...this thing!"

Thing. That was a good word for it.

Effie shifted, the instantaneous transformation startling the woman, and offered us a questioning look. "Do we think this could be an illusion?"

"It's possible," I admitted, "but then when she touched it, it should have disappeared."

"Unless this is what happened after she triggered the illusion?" Dakota

suggested.

“I can’t hear you well from up here,” the woman shouted down at us.

“We’re talking about what it could be, if it’s the result of an illusion,” I said loudly as I smoothed the diamond between my fingers, wondering if it could help us again. *We also hadn’t considered if this woman was part of the illusion...*but her terror seemed very real to me, so I doubted it.

Effie was clearly on the same page as me, approaching me and offering her hand out. Since I wasn’t getting anything from it, I placed it in her soft hands and watched as she pressed it between them, the woman staring on in awe. Wind rustled over my mate, and I was mesmerized by the way her skin seemed to light up in rivulets of magic, like cracks in lava rock. Little flames even danced on her fingers.

I was hoping she was getting something, but when she opened her eyes she looked disappointed. “Nothing.”

“Maybe the person in the illusion has to use it,” Tore suggested. Julian barked in agreement as he and Dakota inspected the perimeter of the illusion, trying to gain a better sense of what the hell this shit was. I didn’t like the idea of it being within twenty feet of Effie, let alone this close.

“Which means she would need the diamond.” Effie bit her lip. “How would we get it up there? I don’t want to risk throwing it.”

The woman’s sudden pitched scream had us snapping our gazes up. The organism pulled her knee-deep into the sticky tar, tears streaming down her cheeks. *Fuck.*

“How do we know this isn’t a trap?” Caedmon asked.

“We’re here to be tested in the first place, so we don’t know,” I said.

“But we have to help,” Effie insisted. “We have to help her; I don’t care if it’s a trap.”

“Who can jump that high without scaling?” Tore asked, looking at Julian and Dakota.

“Me.” I answered immediately. “I can do it.” *So could Effie in her new form, but I wasn’t about to remind her of that.*

Effie looked up at me with concern, as if reading where my thoughts went. “I should try—”

“I’m doing it,” I said in a harder tone than usual. I couldn’t handle watching her place herself in danger again, not after that damn staircase.

Looking at the others, I warned, “I don’t know why Effie’s kitsune form didn’t affect you, but mine will probably burn your vision, so I would suggest

looking away.”

Before I could shift, Effie tugged me down and a surprised noise left my throat as she kissed me hard and then stepped back, determination turning her expression fierce. It pushed me to step back and shift immediately, wanting to give my kitten exactly what she wanted. Also, after the intensity of that kiss, I didn't trust myself to stay in my human form.

The minute I shifted, the woman's scream rang out again. Now she was waist-deep in the tarry substance. Grabbing the diamond from Effie's hand, I approached the organism, staring up at the distance between myself and the top, knowing I would need to jump over the abyss. I didn't think I would sink into its surface right away when I landed, but I tightened my hold on the diamond, not wanting it to be dropped in the process.

Luckily, the woman couldn't see me, and she was too busy panicking about her own situation to try, so I wasn't worried about her vision as I circled the organism, stopping when the woman's back faced me. Without overthinking it much, I backed up...and then sprinted forward. I surged forward hard and fast, leaping upwards at the last possible moment and angling my body to hit the very top—right at the exact angle I needed and thankfully making it over the abyss. I groaned, shifting back as my shoulder hit weird, and I rolled onto the oddly solid surface, one that didn't match its appearance or the woman's state of being half buried within it.

“Oh, thank the gods.” The woman stared up at me hopefully as the others opened their eyes and gathered as close as possible.

Kneeling down, I spoke to the woman in what I hoped was a calm voice. “We're going to try something that's worked for us before. I need you to hold this diamond and close your eyes, and tell me what it's trying to tell you.”

“I promise it worked for me!” Effie called out.

The woman let out a shaky breath and took the stone, holding it over her head and trying to calm her breathing. I watched her intently as she closed her eyes and focused on the diamond. My brow furrowed as I felt the surface beneath me start to soften just the slightest bit. I had a feeling that in a minute or so I would start sinking as well.

“What did it say?” Effie called out as the woman's eyes opened.

“I'm not sure it's working for me,” she murmured, looking torn and not meeting my gaze.

“What's it saying?” I asked quietly.

“It's saying to throw it...down into the abyss. Or to let it sink with me.”

I had to resist the urge to rip it right out of her damn hands. Effie had worked too damn hard for this stone. What if we needed it? What if this was a trap? I could think of a million fucking reasons why this was a bad idea.

“That doesn’t make sense; we need the diamond,” Effie said softly, but my ears picked it up.

“Why don’t I try to free you and bring us down—fuck.”

The tarry surface gave way beneath me, a sense of dread seeping into my chest as my frame sank halfway into it. The woman’s small squeak of worry had panic filling my bond with Effie, and I tried to take a deep breath, wanting to reassure my mate but knowing I had limited time—*seriously* limited fucking time—and clearly I wasn’t going to get us down from here in any normal way because this shit was like quicksand.

“Let me see it,” I demanded, holding my hand out.

The woman reached over to place the diamond in my hand she sank further, the tar nearly over her shoulders. Closing my eyes, I squeezed the diamond hard, willing it to give me another fucking answer—but she wasn’t lying. Images of throwing it down or letting it sink under the surface played through my head.

This was fucking bullshit.

“Ryder! Just do it! Let it sink underneath.”

“Kitten...”

“Do it, Ryder, *trust me!*” Effie’s voice was firm, more serious than I’d ever heard it before.

And of course I fucking trusted her.

So I did it. I took the diamond in my hand and thrust it down into the creature, releasing it and letting go of our one hope of making it through this situation alive.

We had just lost the one thing that would help us get through this forest and to the garden.

We had just lost the one thing that would help me give Effie everything she wanted.

EFFIE HARLOW

MY STOMACH SANK AS I watched Ryder sacrifice the diamond. The woman was almost completely pulled under by the organism by now, the black tar right at her chin and her tears dripping onto its surface. Thunder cracked loudly in the distance as Ryder continued to sink as well. I didn't regret our choice, but as I stood there, frozen in time, I wondered if maybe it had been the *wrong* choice—if maybe we'd been meant to do something else.

A bright flash of silver light shook the earth beneath me, a sonic boom of power blasting me back into Tore. It all happened so fast that I felt dazed and confused, blinded by the intense flash of light—before panic slammed into me.

Ryder.

The woman.

Opening my eyes, I struggled to surge forward, Tore catching me around the waist and easing me up as the space around us cleared from a plume of smoke that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

“Ryder!” I called, running forward and sliding onto my knees, finding my mate face down in the grass...by himself. No woman. No sticky black tar creature. It was like they had never existed, the clearing completely at peace and undisturbed.

“I'm good,” Ryder groaned, rolling over and slowly sitting up, my fingers sliding over his shoulder in concern as the others joined us.

“What the hell is that?” he asked, drawing all of our attention to the far edge of the clearing where a set of bronze gates had appeared. They stood open, welcoming us into what could only be described as a different realm

within the realm—a picturesque garden that was very different from the wild forest around us.

“That’s it,” I murmured as I stood, Ryder doing the same. I slowly walked towards the gates, feeling an exhilarating surge of energy as hope began to seep back in. I’d truly thought we’d lost our chance of finding the garden after sacrificing the one element that had safely led us through the illusions.

“I can’t be sure without the diamond, but I don’t think this is an illusion,” I told my mates. “It doesn’t feel the same at all.”

Then again neither had the creature we’d just faced.

“If you want to go through those gates then, we will,” Tore said gently. I let out a shaky breath and nodded, knowing that it was the right move. It was instinct guiding me mostly as we walked up to the gates, and I couldn’t help but send a little prayer up to the goddess that we were meant to be here—that *this* was how we found the key.

Although praying to the goddess had taken on a much different meaning now...

Taking a step through the gates and into what amounted to a secret garden, I couldn’t help the smile that stole over my face, paired with relief when nothing changed. Everyone was okay, and I had to assume this was the garden the dark god had wanted us to find...*right?* I couldn’t believe anything else at this point because this process had already been far more than what we’d signed up for, in my mind. I knew it was essential, but I was ready to find this key and move on.

The gate shut behind us, hard.

Before I could start to worry about that though, my pendant began to warm against my skin. I looked around the manicured landscape, searching for what was causing it to react this way. It didn’t take very much effort, though. I immediately located a glowing object in the distance, the light emanating from it visible above the hedges around it.

“Hopefully there’s another way out,” Caedmon said. The bond between my mates was relatively relaxed, which went a long way to relax me as well.

“I think I see something ahead.” I clasped my pendant between my hands and began to walk forward. “There’s something glowing right up ahead, and my pendant started to warm the minute we were shut in here.”

My mates kept near, Tore and Dakota flanking me from behind, staying super close in case anything went wrong. Luckily, nothing happened as we

passed tree after tree, hedge after hedge, going deeper into the garden to find the source of the glow.

Between two ancient-looking trees decorated with runes similar to the ones on the medieval tower was a circular stone tower that had matching carvings. The tower's magic created its own gravitational pull, drawing me towards the tall, skinny structure. My fingers darted out to touch it, and a surge of magic greeted me.

DARKNESS SWARMED AROUND ME. From the darkness grew a glowing silver light in the distance, its beams soaring through me like a merger of darkness and moonlight. Images of my mom and the dark god laughing and embracing flashed through my mind in quick succession. I wanted to smile, seeing the intensity of their love for one another—

There was a shift in the light, and new images—darker ones—rushed over me like a deadly tidal wave.

Darkness. Despair. Disappointment. Pain like I hadn't imagined and heartbreak that had tears streaming from my eyes. The dark god had been devastated by Mona, and the only light, the only gift that came from any of this was...Reaper. Their son. I could feel the overwhelming amount of love Alcuin had for him, and I was touched that I'd been trusted to see into this very vulnerable part of the dark god, which was intertwined with his magic to protect the key.

To protect the key from himself.

"EFFIE," Julian said softly, his hand running up my back as I blinked my watery eyes open. In front of me, the stone pillar had transformed, a small square at the front opening to reveal...the key. My hand tightened on the pendant as I reached forward with the other to grasp the small object.

Delicate, intricately carved black metal. It wasn't very impressive on the surface, but my pendant responded to it immediately, gears turning as it opened to reveal a compartment I hadn't known existed—one that fit the key perfectly. I didn't know if it was my magic creating this or the magic of the garden, or maybe it had always been there...but I didn't hesitate to place the key exactly where it belonged.

Before I could say a word, the key locking into place, a bright silver flash collapsed over us. I couldn't scream or call out to my mates; instead it felt like the ground from underneath me had dropped away completely—

Before reappearing.

“Fuck.” Dakota's curse was hard as he caught me in his arms, stopping me from nearly faceplanting against the stone floor underneath us.

What just happened?

“We portalled,” Ryder explained.

“To the castle, it seems,” Caedmon agreed.

I blinked, my eyes adjusting to the firelight casting shadows in the throne room. I tightened my hold on the pendant, which had closed once again, and laid it back against my chest, keeping it securely pressed against my heart. After all, this could just be another illusion.

Although I really hoped not. The sudden portal had left me feeling not only sick to my stomach but completely drained, my knees feeling weak.

Suddenly, the doors of the throne room creaked open to reveal Alcuin. The dark god.

“You did it.” He looked exhausted, as if he hadn't slept since we'd left, but the sad smile playing on his lips hinted at his relief. “You actually did it.”

“No thanks to you,” Dakota bit out. “All of that was completely unnecessary.”

“No,” Alcuin responded firmly. “I don't disagree that I perhaps took it a little too far for its original purpose, but I think *this* was needed. Effie has changed through the process; her magic has changed. I know all of you can see that.”

I examined my mates' faces, finding no disagreement, and I couldn't find it in me to argue either. He was right—not only had I learned more about my magic and what it was capable of, but I'd learned to trust my magic and myself. I had a confidence in myself that I'd never had before.

“The fates work in odd ways,” Alcuin said, “but maybe this is exactly what Effie was meant to do.”

It sounded exactly like what Mona had said—she'd even said I was *prophesied* to retrieve the key.

Not allowing my mates to get a word in edgewise—they were *not* happy with the danger I'd been put in and were ready to explode now that there was no immediate threat—I asked, “Is there any way we can rest for the night—or day—before we leave?”

“And have food sent up,” Tore added.

It took a lot for me to ask this favor of him, but I knew my mates, and they wouldn’t take the time to rest unless I said that I needed to rest—and I really did. I was still resting in Dakota’s arms, my body melted against him.

“Of course. You can return to the same room you were in before, and I’ll send for food,” Alcuin agreed.

“I don’t understand how we got here,” I said softly, thinking back on everything that’d happened. Then something occurred to me. “The horses! We left them tied up by the stream—”

“They have been retrieved,” Alcuin said before I could get too upset. “I sent a unit of my guards after you in case you ran into any trouble after that storm. When they saw you were gone, they gathered the horses and took them to wait for your return in a town nearby. I’ll send word to them that you’ve come back safely.”

Letting out a small exhale, I tucked my head against Dakota’s neck, thankful that my mind could now rest easier. As we made our way out the door, Alcuin’s voice suddenly rang out again.

“Effie?”

“Yes?” I asked, barely able to get the word out through my exhaustion.

“Take care of my creations—they don’t deserve what’s happened to them.”

I nodded—I was too tired for anything else—silently promising that I would continue to help in any way I could—*no matter what it took*.

As we made our way back to the bedroom suite, I fell in and out of sleep, Dakota laying me down on the couch and draping a blanket over me. I could hear all of them talking around me, but I couldn’t keep my eyes open...well, until the scent of food filled the room. A table was brought in and set for us, a feast laid out for our enjoyment. I silently moved to a chair, mostly zoned out, and ate small bites of everything, unable to fully focus. I hadn’t realized just how drained I was until that moment, but now it was hitting me hard.

“So, where to next?” Julian asked.

“We’ll most likely portal back into Milwaukee,” Ryder said.

“And then I think we need to go to the gate as soon as possible,” I said, taking a sip of water and focusing on each one of them. “I know it seems like a lot, but the longer we delay, the worse it’s going to get. I want this to be fixed—I *need* for this to be fixed. And I’m already nervous about having been gone for so long.”

“And that’s assuming there isn’t a time difference between realms,” Ryder agreed.

I bit down on my lip, really hoping that wasn’t the case. “Is that a possibility?”

“Let’s not go down that path until we need to—you’re stressing her out.” Dakota narrowed his eyes at Ryder on the last part, and my kitsune mate rubbed my back in apology.

I didn’t blame him for bringing it up—if that was a possibility, it was an important one to discuss—but Dakota was right too. No need to stress about something that wasn’t a reality yet. Especially when there were plenty of other things to be stressed about.

“The more time that passes, the more time that gives Hastain to come up with a better plan. He already suspects we are up to something, and I don’t want him to try to stop us before we even get to the gate,” I explained.

“We’ll go to the gate,” Julian assured me. “We won’t let him fuck this up.”

“And while my father’s reach is large, I highly doubt he has access to any extra information that would help Hastain,” Caedmon said, putting down his fork as he finished his plate. It gave me a measure of comfort to see that all my mates had eaten dinner as well—I wasn’t the only one that had expended a lot of energy.

“Plus, the sooner we figure this out, the sooner we can go back to normal life.” Tore squeezed my hand gently.

“And onto our future,” I finished, offering him a small smile. I was determined to have that, to finally be in a state where my mates and I could relax rather than look over our shoulders.

After that, our conversation turned lighter, talking about the location of the gate and if Mona was going to give us further direction. Once I was done eating, though, I excused myself to take a shower, not really wanting to think about my mom right now. Plus, it seemed the warm water was exactly what I needed as I scrubbed and soaked my body, letting my mind wander free. When I did, I realized the connection between my magic and me was much stronger than it’d been before we entered the shadowlands.

Right now she was in wolf form, but instead of having one tail, she had nine. That was sort of cool.

Her voice was clear in my head, surprising me a little. ***“Thank you for trusting me.”***

I couldn't help but smile at that.
“*Always.*”

EFFIE HARLOW

THE NIGHT SEEMED to fly by quickly, my dreamless sleep making it feel as though it lasted seconds rather than hours—eight hours, if not more. Which I felt both relieved at, because I knew we needed it, but also panicked because instinct told me we needed to get back on Earth and to that gate as soon as possible.

Yet even after splashing my face with cold water, brushing my teeth, and drinking half a cup of coffee, I couldn't seem to shake off the haze of sleep as we made our way down to the dining hall for breakfast. Hopefully Ruby would be there with Reaper and her mates.

Traversing the long halls tucked between all my mates, I allowed my mind to wander. My mates already had everything packed up and ready to go—as in they were carrying it with us to breakfast, clearly ready to get on the road. I was glad they were alert and prepared, because even as I drained the last of my coffee, I wasn't any closer to being awake.

“I assume they'll be coming back with us,” Dakota said to Ryder. They were mid-conversation, but it was easy to figure out that they were talking about Ruby and her mates. Tore took my empty coffee mug from me so I didn't have to worry about holding it, and I smiled up at him for the sweet action.

“I wouldn't assume that,” Caedmon said evenly. “Reaper seems to be part of their group officially, and I'm not sure how Alcuin feels about that. They may have more to work out while they're here.”

“Ruby said she wanted to help us; I think she'll want to come back up,” I said, “but I also understand if she doesn't. They've already helped us so

much.”

I mean, there was no way we would’ve gotten the key without her and Reaper.

“How are you feeling?” Caedmon asked suddenly. Apparently I hadn’t hidden my yawn very well, and Caedmon seemed to think it was important enough to take the conversation in a completely different direction.

“Just tired,” I said. His hand ran up my back as he pulled me into his side, the action making me sigh happily. “Honestly, the amount of magic I was exposed to was way more than normal, and I know it’s not going to get any easier with this gate, so I’m hoping that by the time we get to it I’ll be back to feeling one hundred percent.”

And if I wasn’t, I was still going to give it everything.

“Nothing is more important than your health,” Caedmon responded. “Nothing, Effie.”

All I could do was nod and lean into him a little harder. I didn’t have an argument to that—after all, I viewed their health the exact same way.

“Effie?” Ruby said as we reached the entrance of the dining hall, my friend standing from her table and offering me a wave, relief and happiness clear on her face. I hadn’t considered she would be worried about us while we were gone, but I should’ve known better. All of her mates, including Reaper, were with her and in travel clothes, their own bags stacked at the end of their tables.

“Hey.” I offered her a sleepily smile. “I was hoping we’d find you here.”

“Same, actually. Pain in the ass phones don’t work down here,” she grumbled. I hadn’t even noticed, but I rarely used the phone my mates bought for me unless it was an emergency.

“Are you guys planning to come back with us?” I asked, not wanting to assume even though I was pretty sure the answer was yes.

“Of course,” she said as we both sat down at the breakfast table, a long line of food laid out in the center like a buffet. “I want this to end as much as you do. I’m invested now—especially knowing that Hastain, or at least others like him, probably played a part in how I came to Chicago in the first place.”

I hadn’t heard that story. I nibbled my lip for a minute and decided to ask. “How *did* you come to Chicago?”

Julian slid a plate of food in front of me, and I looked up just long enough to see that all of our men were talking amongst themselves and giving us a moment—which I had a feeling was needed. When I returned my attention to

Ruby, her expression was somber.

“Yeah, that was an entire thing... Essentially the people who were caring for me at the time—not my parents but my guardians—lost track of me at a fucking club they ran, and next thing I know I’m on a bus with a bunch of other teens heading to Chicago to be placed in a new pack. I didn’t stay in it for long—as soon as I heard they bought me, I ran. Of course I didn’t recognize it for what it was at the time, but later it was pretty easy to put the pieces together.”

I put down the piece of toast I’d been eating. “That sounds terrifying, Ruby. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“It was, but it wasn’t as scary as some of the shit that happened around my guardians. Plus, it landed me here today, so I can’t be completely upset,” she finished with a small shrug.

“Are we good to leave at ten?” one of her mates asked the table, and I nodded along with Ruby.

Continuing to eat, Ruby moved onto lighter subjects and caught me up on what they’d done while we were gone. Apparently the dark god was more of a softy than he let on, holding a celebration for Ruby being here and even honoring her other mates at it. It made me think about his own experience with relationships, how he’d wanted to share Mona with Samson.

I hadn’t met the latter, but I wouldn’t lie, I felt sorry for Alcuin. It was hard to view him as the ‘bad’ guy in this, even if they had *all* done a lot of wrong.

Minutes later we were standing and leaving as a group, the dining hall growing more crowded as people woke. They stared at us but didn’t try to stop us to talk, even as we walked out of the castle doors and into a much more crowded town than when we’d first arrived. Luckily, Reaper had returned from procuring carriages for us, so when the group was split between four carriages, I was able to relax fully, tucked against Ryder’s side.

“I’m surprised we didn’t see Alcuin on the way out,” I said to Ryder, Caedmon, and Dakota, who all rode in the carriage with me.

“I think that he’s probably a bit more cautious about what’s going to happen next than he lets on,” Ryder said.

“I...I know he did some crappy stuff, and I know I haven’t heard Mona’s full side of the story, or Samson’s...but it’s hard to view him as the bad guy.”

Dakota chuckled. “I think they’re all pieces of shit, but I can see that.”

“Just because they’re your biological parents doesn’t mean they need to

be anything you don't want them to be, *mon ange*," Caedmon said. "Just remember that."

Ryder made a sound of agreement, and I nodded in understanding. He was worried about me feeling some sense of debt or guilt towards them just because they were my parents, but if I'd learned anything from Ryder's or Caedmon's families, it was that blood didn't mean anything. Actions did.

Minutes later we reached the portal location and the city gates, Tore offering a steadying hand as I jumped down and looked around the clearing we'd originally landed in. Oddly, there was a large stone structure that hadn't been there when we first arrived, a rock archway that appeared natural.

"Does it matter if it's not a new moon this time?" I asked.

"It only matters on the way down," Reaper answered. "Once we're down here I have the power to do pretty much anything." The way he said it was nonchalant, but I suspected the type of power it took and there was nothing casual about it.

"Will this send us back to my greenhouse?" Ryder asked.

"Figured it was the best place—I assume Ruby and Effie will want to talk to your sister about what happened."

I nodded as Ruby bounced on her toes, eager to get home as well.

"And hopefully," I said, "Mona will let us know where to go from there."

"Yes," Reaper agreed. "I did ask my father where the gate was, but apparently the location changes often—makes it harder for someone to try to break in. So he doesn't know the current location—or if he did, he wasn't willing to tell me."

I felt a stab of disappointment at that. I was disappointed with myself for not even having thought to ask him, and I was even more disappointed that he didn't know the answer. I didn't mind talking to Mona, but after everything I'd learned...well, I would have preferred to do it in person at this point.

"Let's hope for our sake it can stay stationary for a while," Ruby said, and I couldn't agree more. The last thing we needed was to be running around on a wild goose chase, especially after what we'd just gone through.

Before I could respond, Reaper's magic surged through the air towards the stone archway, a dark, oily substance drawing from a shadowy void that grew to completely block the view of the castle and the perimeter wall, making it almost appear to be a black mirror. I swallowed nervously as Reaper and Ruby disappeared through the surface moments later, two of her mates following, and then two of mine...

My hand intertwined with Caedmon's and Julian's as we stepped into the black surface, plunging forward despite my apprehension.

Almost immediately though, I could tell something was different than our last experience.

A FLASH of bright moonlight filled the space around me, and I lifted my hands to shield my eyes. Why were they free? It was as if I'd never been attached to Caedmon or Julian in the first place. A chill rolled over my skin as a cool blast of air hit me from all directions. My chest seized up with true panic... until a familiar magic appeared.

Mona. Thank the goddess it was only her and not something worse. *Then I remembered what I was saying, a strong wave of tension rolling through my body as I slowly lowered my hands from my eyes to find the woman in question. My mom. The moon goddess.*

And she really did look the part right now. I didn't know where we were, floating in a navy sea of stars. I tried to not focus on the absolute nothingness in all directions, but her magic filled so much of the space around us that it was sort of distracting anyway. Her silver hair went out in all directions and her gown seemed far longer than before, sparkling with small twirling moons. I would've been in awe if it wasn't for everything I'd learned.

Mona's demeanor turned apprehensive as she examined my expression. "You know, don't you? He told you everything."

"Yes," I said, my teeth biting down on my bottom lip. "You're my mom... my actual mom. You weren't lying. You're also the moon goddess. One of three creators of this entire universe—" I stopped myself, hearing the panic and awe in my own voice and not knowing how to feel about it.

"I am both of those things, and both your father and I are here in the divine realm waiting for you to return," Mona explained softly.

"Talking about that..." I took a deep breath. "The gate, where is it? Alcuin mentioned it moves?"

"It does." Mona offered a small smile. "Right now it seems the universe is working in our favor, because for the last two lunar cycles it's been in Chicago—almost as if it was waiting for you."

That seemed extraordinarily lucky, but it was more than likely magic, not luck.

"Where in Chicago?"

“Where you first fell—to the north.”

Before I could ask for an exact location, I was hit with a string of images. The forest I’d broken out from, running from a threat I hadn’t understood, the unbridled fear I’d felt that night replaying through my brain. Before Julian had found me, before I’d asked him to bite me.

I went to open my eyes to thank her—

“SHIT.” A crash echoed as I nearly landed right on the stone floor of the greenhouse, one of my mates cursing as Caedmon caught me in his arms, both of us tumbling to the ground. *This was happening much more than was normal, I felt like.*

I groaned, then quickly climbed off of him and searched his muscular frame for injuries. His eyes were dazed, making me worried he’d hit his head or something just as awful.

“I’m fine,” Caedmon promised as he slowly sat up. Only then did I realize that everyone else was already out of the portal, making me wonder how long I’d been in there.

“An extra few minutes,” Aanya said, crouching down next to us. “We were worried, but Reaper mentioned that it felt like a strong power signature that delayed you, so we assumed it was Mona.”

“It was,” I breathed out, my hand tightening around my pendant. “It was Mona. She even showed me where we need to go. The gate has been in the city the past two lunar cycles, and now that we have the key...”

There was absolutely nothing stopping us.

“I can’t believe you’re already back—it’s been less than a day,” Aanya said after my words trailed off, Ruby staring at her in surprise. “But I am really, really glad you’re back because we got some news—really bad news.”

“What? What happened?” I asked, one of her mates rubbing her back in comfort as I stared at her, pleading for her to tell me.

Aanya offered all of us a dark look. “Sixty-three girls. Sixty-three have gone missing from all around the city. All within one night.”

No.

My chest tightened with anxiety as I gripped my pendant tighter, knowing that was the source of urgency I was feeling to get back—somehow my magic had been aware of what was occurring. “Hastain. That sounds like something he would do—”

“If he was panicking,” Aaren finished for me. “It sounds exactly like my father.”

Which meant we needed to move, immediately. I didn’t know what he was planning, but I knew without a doubt that all of those girls’ lives were in danger.

EFFIE HARLOW

“HEY, seriously, the weather could be a lot worse,” I assured Tore, his jaw clenched with tension as our car sped down the highway towards the city. I knew his thoughts were solely focused on the last time we’d driven in the snow like this, so there wasn’t much I could do besides curl up against him and continue to reassure him. Besides, the weather wasn’t nearly as bad this time around, and my magic was pleased with how snowy it was, making me realize how much we’d had missed it while in the shadowlands.

Knowing now that I was essentially both lykos and kitsune, it made me wonder why my magic loved snow so much since she really wasn’t an arctic wolf species...but we’d thought of ourselves like that for so long, and it was the only form of identity she was able to assume for years, so I couldn’t fully blame her for continuing to feel that way.

The others were nearly silent as we drove onward, and I knew they were probably either stressed themselves or trying to not compound the issue and upset Tore even more. As a result, though, the car felt tense, and it was making me a bit anxious. So instead of focusing on trying to reassure all my mates that everything would be fine, something that probably wouldn’t be achieved until we reached our destination anyway, I let my gaze wander out the front windshield to the SUV two cars ahead of us.

Luckily there weren’t many other cars on the road, so we were able to keep pace with Ruby and her mates who were driving a hair faster than ourselves. I was glad Mona had given me such a direct location though, because trying to coordinate and communicate in separate cars on the highway in the snow probably wouldn’t have been very fun.

When we'd realized just how quickly we'd need to leave Milwaukee, we began to talk about just how far Ruby and her men were going to come with us since opening the gate with them nearby was potentially dangerous. Actually, I suspected it was far more than *potentially*, and so did most of the group. Aanya's mates had convinced her it was better to stay in Milwaukee in case something bad happened and we needed backup. Which of course had me worrying about Ruby coming in the first place...

Luckily though, after some conversation, they agreed that they'd only go so far as the entrance to the forest we needed to travel through, letting us take the last leg of the journey on our own. It was the best move because if opening the gate followed the same destructive pattern as the rest of the things that had happened so far, I predicted it would be rather explosive.

"We're maybe thirty minutes outside of the city." Julian turned around in his seat. "Once we're off this damn highway, all of us will feel a hell of a lot better."

"Agreed." Dakota exhaled. "I used to think I was partial to the city, that I would prefer it compared to where I grew up... I'm not so sure anymore."

Nibbling my lip, I considered how I felt about it. "I didn't mind London—at least where your house was, Ryder. It seemed a lot more spaced out than normal for such a big city."

"Talking about London..." Ryder turned from the row in front of me and examined my expression, trying to disguise the hope and excitement that arose any time the topic came up. "I want to redecorate the property if we're planning to live there. I want you—hell, all of us—to have input on where we're going to spend every day. Would you be okay with that?"

"Okay with redecorating?" My brows shot up. "Of course I am, but I have no idea where we would even start with that. All of your furniture and decor is beautiful...I mean, I didn't even know how to decorate my dorm, Ryder."

Seriously, the idea of decorating such a huge property felt intimidating to say the least.

"There are a few people we can hire to help," he promised. "I'd just need you to sit down with them and tell them what you like."

Looking at all my mates, locking eyes even with Caedmon in the rearview mirror, I nodded before adding the stipulation, "As long as all of you are part of the process as well."

"Whatever you want, Effie—you know that." Tore said, my head tilting back so he could brush a kiss over my lips.

“I’m excited to go back. I really loved London,” I said lightly, my gaze moving out to the Chicago skyline, the gray skies highlighting how differently I felt about this place. I think Chicago would always hold an important piece of me—after all, it had impacted me *a lot*, and not always in the best of ways—but if I stayed here, I’d always feel like there was a whisper of my past following me around. A whisper of when I felt ‘less than.’

After our conversation the tension eased slightly, the car ride noticeably lighter as we finally pulled off the highway and onto a city street. Tore shifted next to me and rolled his shoulders as if releasing the tension he was holding. I had to imagine that hadn’t felt good for the hour plus we’d been in the car.

“It’s going to be weird going back to where all of this began,” I murmured as we turned several more blocks, finally arriving at the large, empty parking lot of the forest preserve. The skies were darkening further with clouds as if it was going to storm, and I felt a nervous energy invade my chest, wondering where exactly I’d been dropped off in the middle of this. I mean, if I was to believe Mona and the dark god, I’d essentially fallen from the sky. And why had Julian been in the forest in the middle of the night when he was so young?

Questions began to tug at the back of my mind, but I forced them away for now as I slid from the vehicle. Ruby and her mates had already taken their positions in the parking lot to wait for us, the guys leaning against their vehicle with the doors open and music on.

“This isn’t where I came out of the forest,” I told Julian. “I remember I had a much clearer view of the city when you came towards me.”

“It may be on the opposite side,” Ryder said. “From what I can tell on the maps app, it’s a pretty large preserve—bigger than any other near the city.”

I could also tell it was near the lake. I couldn’t see the body of water, but I could smell it in the air, along with the upcoming snowstorm.

“Hey.” Ruby appeared in front of me as I pulled on a backpack. “Be safe, and remember that if you need anything at all, we’re right here.”

In response, I simply hugged her tightly. I would never call for help, would never bring her into danger, especially an active threat—unless I felt like it was absolutely necessary. Squeezing her again, I stepped back and offered a small smile before turning towards the edge of the forest. Julian’s hand intertwined with mine as we walked forward, the others following, our

group growing quiet and our bond simmering with apprehension about what we were about to face.

“I want you to know something,” Julian said softly. “No matter what happens and no matter what we find in here, remember that everything leading up until this point was worth it.”

I stared up into his gold eyes and found myself nodding, though his words made me slightly nervous.

The world went silent around us as we stepped onto the preserve, the path we traveled along well maintained with signs that you would normally expect for hiking...but there was something else to it. Something I began to sense about twenty minutes into our walk.

“Does anyone else feel that?” I asked.

“Yes,” Tore rumbled.

“It feels like magic,” Caedmon said, “and a lot of it.”

“The gate,” Dakota suggested. “It’s possible it’s from the gate.”

“Although it would surprise me if it were this close to the entrance,” Ryder pointed out.

Julian stopped hard and stared off into the distance, his eyes going wide. I followed his gaze, my head tilting slightly in confusion.

“A house?” I asked. “Is it a guide house or something? It looks larger than that.”

Julian didn’t hesitate, veering right off the path in his rush to reach the building, climbing over fallen trees. Tore picked me up, not giving me a chance to follow on my own as he easily kept pace with Julian. Instantly, my theory on it being a guide house fell flat because this was a house with a fence and garden.

“I didn’t realize houses were allowed in a preserve...” Dakota murmured, staring at Julian’s expression, which was filled with confusion and something much more intense.

“It’s warded; it can’t be seen unless you have magic,” Ryder explained. “I still don’t think it’s the gate, though.”

“It’s not.” Julian’s voice was almost soft, much more serious than normal. I squirmed out of Tore’s arms to go stand by his side as he reached the door. My bitten mate lifted his hand, and instead of knocking, turned the knob. The door creaked open, the wind pushing it to give way faster and revealing...a home.

The exterior had been slightly run-down, but the interior looked like it’d

been preserved in time.

“Wow,” I whispered, stepping across the threshold. Everything from the carpet to the candles on the table—extinguished but clearly having been used before—were set up as if someone had lived here recently. But the dust told a different story. The main room consisted of a small cottage kitchen and a sitting space with an empty fireplace, three doors along the back of the room closed to hide their contents.

“It’s abandoned.” Tore started towards the kitchen, looking around. “Although I’m not sure for how long.”

“Long enough,” Ryder said.

I followed Julian’s now slow steps to the far-left door, which he opened slowly, tension rolling up his frame as he grabbed the doorframe hard. I came up behind him and gently ran a hand up his back before ducking under his arm and coming face to face with a child’s bedroom. One with posters and drawings, small carved wooden wolves, and a twin-size bed with dark blue sheets. It was simple but felt like a well-loved space.

“This...” Julian exhaled long and hard. “This is where I grew up.”

My shock was echoed by our bond suddenly lighting up with magic as memories surged into me hard, fast, and unyielding. I gripped onto my mate as Julian’s memory echoed his words, showing me that he’d not only grown up here but that he hadn’t been alone. A woman in her mid-sixties was in all of them, either in the background or with him directly, her dark brown and silver hair creating a halo around her golden face. She was radiant, and while the memories flashed by quickly, her love for Julian was clear as day. Guilt began to build heavily in my chest, and the only thing that distracted me was one of the last memories right before they cut off.

One of her writing a note in a similar sized but different bedroom.

“Effie,” Julian murmured. I blinked, snapping out of the haze of memories and turning towards the other door, striding over and throwing it open. On the far wall was the desk from the memory, a neatly folded note covered in dust and pinned down by a stone paperweight the only thing resting on top.

I picked it up with shaky hands and turned to find Julian in my space, his gold gaze cautious as he took the paper from me, keeping it between us.

Julian,

I don't know if you will ever read this. I hope that if you do it's because the gods have brought you back here—that they led you home for a reason. My only regret is that I'm not here to welcome you back.

I knew from the time you were born that you were destined for something great—that you were meant to be a protector. I can't imagine the man you have grown into today, but I know I would be proud of you no matter what.

When you went missing all those years ago, I was devastated. I asked around; I searched. I even contacted human authorities. But it wasn't until I was blessed with a vision by the gods themselves that I realized you were where you needed to be—that you were on the path to protecting someone important. That eventually you would come home, and it would be because of your journey.

I hope that they were right.

Just know that I've thought about you every single day.

I love you forever.

Grandma.

TEARS welled in my eyes as I looked up at Julian, his jaw clenched tight. The emotion surging through our bond told me that the others had caught on as well, their surprise evident. I pressed into Julian, trying to comfort him as he whispered a soft curse and dropped the note, wrapping his arms around me so thoroughly that it felt like he was trying to meld us into one. I couldn't tell you how long we stood like that, but eventually I found some words, even though they weren't very good ones.

"I don't even know what to say," I whispered, my voice shaky.

Julian caught my jaw between his rough hands and brushed my nose against his, bending down so we were so close I could easily kiss him. "I'm not sure there's anything to say, *preciosa*, but this confirms for me that everything happens for a reason. I may not remember a lot about my grandma, but even she knew I was meant to be here for you—to find and protect you. That's all that matters to me."

The conviction in his voice had me tearing up even more as I kissed him gently. "I love you, Julian."

“I love you,” Julian replied. “So damn much, Effie.”

A quiet knock on the door moments later had both of us turning to look at Tore, who looked at Julian in concern before glancing at the note on the ground. “I can’t imagine how you’re feeling, man. If we need to stay here for a bit longer, we can. The gate is important, but this...”

“Nah,” Julian said, picking up the note and tucking it into the pocket of his jeans. “On the way back I would love to stop here again, but I’m good for now. This is a lot and sort of insane. I don’t even understand why we were living here...but I was brought into Effie’s life for a reason, and that’s all that matters to me.”

Smiling up at him, I kept my hand intertwined with his. As we left the room, I realized that Julian’s emotions were far more solidified and settled than ever before. I think in a weird way that this moment had even given him some closure, a sense of contentment. As if he was no longer searching for answers, even in the back of his mind.

I just hoped I could find the same closure when we finally found the gate.

CAEDMON MOROZ

IT WAS clear that Julian was feeling a bit off about what we'd found in the house, but to his credit he seemed to be handling it well—far better than I would've been able to. Then again, if I found out that I had a relative that actually loved me, I would more than likely be in a state of shock. That wasn't feasible when it came to my family line. Cold bastards.

Standing on the other side of Effie as we continued along the same path as before, I smoothed a hand up and down her back, not bothering to join in the light conversation the others were attempting. The forest was growing more and more silent as we continued on, the lack of noise hanging heavy in the air as an inkling of apprehension tugged at the back of my mind.

It wasn't so much that something was wrong, but it felt like something was trying to gain my attention, to warn me of something that could potentially happen. I just had no idea what the hell that was.

"How will we know what it looks like?" Effie asked. "I assume we'll be able to tell, but do you think it'll be an actual gate? Or will it be more like what Reaper created to get us down in the shadowlands?"

"I hope for an actual gate," I said. "None of us can open portals."

Well, Effie probably could, but obviously that wasn't something we would ask of her. I had no idea how the hell to even suggest she attempt that—our magic was worlds apart.

"I've seen pictures of what it's supposed to look like," Ryder said. "They were old drawings though, and we know those can be misleading."

Understatement of the century, especially when it came to authors trying to talk about different wolf varieties and species that they weren't themselves.

I nearly shook my head thinking about all the false information and inaccurate illustrations I'd seen of lycans over the course of my life. Probably more than any other species, if we were being honest. While many were fascinated with lycans and the rage we could be sent into—the duality of our existence—most didn't care to learn anything past that.

Our group grew quiet after that, as if we were all looking for a gate to suddenly appear, and when it began to sleet, signaled by the pattering of frozen rain droplets on the heavy foliage above us, I started to grow frustrated. I didn't like the idea of Effie out in weather like this, and the only thing worse than sleet would probably be hail. I would haul her ass back to the car if that happened...

My concerns began to disappear, though, as a wave of heavily saturated magic slammed into me and we stepped through an archway of trees into a small clearing...if you could even call it that. I looked up, the sky above us growing into a stormy charcoal, almost black color, and the sensation of the hairs on the back of my neck rising had me looking over my shoulder—an empty pathway greeting us. Something wasn't adding up here.

“Is...is that it?” Effie's voice was soft, and I looked towards the stone archway at the far end of the clearing, barely visible beneath the vines crawling up it. It almost looked like a trellis rather than an archway.

“It feels like it,” Dakota said.

Effie took another step forward, and I grunted as memories began to surge through our bond, the overwhelming fear associated with Effie's arrival on Earth seeming to make her hesitate for a moment, her body swaying at the unexpected memories. The sound of her footsteps and her sobs as she ran through the forest made my chest squeeze in pain, wanting to shelter her from the moment even though it was so long ago. I was starting to understand why she felt so intensely about protecting me from my own past—it was an almost unstoppable, desperate urge.

“It feels off though,” Ryder said. “Like it doesn't have enough magic.”

He was right. The gate felt dull, like there was barely anything fueling it. Which if it was locked, I supposed that made a lot of sense.

“When we open it,” Effie said as we slowly crossed the clearing, “we need to stay close together. I have no idea what's going to happen when we open it.”

Or how we opened it to begin with.

Before I could respond to her, the rustling of leaves brought a sense of

dread, a familiar scent causing a nearly feral noise to break from my throat as I turned sharply to the left. *Fuck.*

“That won’t be a problem, because you won’t be opening it.”

A growl broke from my throat at the sight of my father stepping towards us, my vision turning red. I could feel Effie vibrating with power against me as she said something in a low tone, trying to soothe me, but all I focus on was the fact that he was here—right at the fucking finish line, looking like the arrogant bastard that he was.

But he wasn’t alone.

“Speechless, that’s a first,” my father drew out as Hastain stepped out from behind him, the two of them radiating a level of malicious intent that had me wanting to open up my chest and hide Effie inside of me. I wanted to keep her safe from this shit. I didn’t want her to even have to see them.

“Not speechless,” Dakota growled, “just trying to determine the best way to finally kill you.”

“That won’t be happening.” Hastain smirked as we circled to find the source of the movement around us, a series of wards dropping to reveal the other blood-bonded pack. They stood there looking lifeless, their gazes completely focused on Effie in a way that had me nearly shifting out of my skin.

“Give me the key, girl.”

I wanted to rip Hastain’s tongue out for daring to use it to address Effie directly.

“Absolutely not,” Effie growled, her voice far more deadly than I’d ever heard it before.

Hastain chuckled. “You already know about the girls, Effie. Each time you deny me the key or anything else I want, one of them dies.”

He lifted his phone, the image on the screen one of devastation. Effie froze in horror at the sight of a warehouse full of young women tied up on the cement and crying. It didn’t surprise me they were capable of this, and it sure as fuck didn’t surprise me that my father was part of it.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Ryder snarled.

“What’s wrong with *us*?” My father’s voice was amused. “None of you are better than any of us, which is exactly why opening this gate is a bad idea—for you as much as us.”

“What are you talking about?” Julian demanded, Coffin’s magic subtly making an appearance as he directed his power towards the other blood-

bonded pack so they didn't take us off guard. Considering I kept forgetting about them, hyperfocused on my father, it was a good move.

"What do you think will happen when those gates open?" my father asked, looking at me. "Do you think you'll be spared? The divine intervention of the gods means everyone will be brought to justice, equally. All of you have blood on your hands—especially you, Caedmon—and each of you belong in the darkness. If you open those gates, you lose everything."

I realized with startling clarity that my father truly believed that—it wasn't a line he was feeding us. It also made me realize...

"You're scared," I said evenly. "You're fucking terrified."

His gaze darkened. "None of you are old enough to realize what will change when that gate opens. None of you realize the trouble you're inviting in."

"I don't need to understand it if it stops bastards like you," Tore spit out.

"Bastards like us." Hastain chuckled. "You came to Silver Falls after the slaughter of a pack member, Tore. You *are* one of the bastards."

"No."

Effie's voice was absolutely lethal as she stepped forward, her gaze narrowed with disgust. "They are absolutely nothing like you two—nothing like any of you. If they deserve divine justice, then so do I, and I'm willing to give up everything to ensure that you're stopped. What you're doing is sick. It's wrong. And I'm done waiting."

My mate's words were hard and final as she turned towards the gate, and all at once everything broke into action.

The blood-bonded pack surged forward upon my father's sharp whistle, and without a second thought Dakota shifted as Julian's bitten magic was completely swarmed by Coffin, his sharp word echoing. "Stop."

Weylin and his pack stopped. Immediately. Effie had paused momentarily but continued towards the arch as my father chuckled, the noise strained as the blood-bonded pack hesitated and began to look around in confusion.

The command Coffin used was followed by a short and even, "Leave," which was all it took. The four bastards fled like a spell had been broken. It made a fuck ton of sense how Julian was so powerful now, considering what we knew about Coffin, but I wouldn't lie—sometimes it even freaked me out.

My gaze moved back to my father and Hastain as the five of us spread out to allow Effie the time she needed to figure out how to open the gate. I knew they wouldn't just leave like the BBP had; they were here and fucking

determined to see this gate kept closed.

“Effie is opening that gate and you will not be stopping her,” I growled. “No matter what.”

Hastain offered a dark sneer before lifting his jacket and taking out a gun, loading it and pointing it right at Julian—clearly deciding he was the threat here, especially to his control over people. My attention was on my father, though, who offered me a huge grin and slid off his dress coat, letting it fall onto the ground.

“Very well, Caedmon,” my father mused, “we’ll do this your way. I’ve been looking for a reason to kill you for some time now.”

My body tensed as I realized that the fucker was about to shift. I had no idea how he could control it. I had determined I could because of my bond with Effie...but how the fuck was he able to?

I hadn’t seen the bastard shift in years.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Hastain asked.

My father offered him a dry look. “I’m more than capable of controlling myself. After all, we aren’t animals—right, son?”

But he was. He was a fucking monster.

“I may need a minute.” Effie’s voice was a whisper in the wind, as I nodded sharply and did exactly what I knew I had to. *I shifted before he could.*

For the longest time I would have explained my experience shifting as a blur of emotions and violence, the mere action of shifting causing absolute chaos as my bones and muscles ripped themselves, rearranging my body into a hideous monster that Effie somehow loved. Yet this time, as a howl broke from my throat, a savage primal noise of war—I felt more in control.

As if my bond with Effie had anchored some part of my magic. As I grew in height and size, my jaws snapping loudly, I looked towards Hastain and my father. Both stared at me with caution—good.

“How the fuck can he control it?” Hastain bit out.

Ryder chuckled at that as I crouched down and began to move towards them, Hastain raising the gun as my father narrowed his eyes on my form with disgust.

“Because he has a lykos mate.” But Effie was so much more than that.

Hastain’s first shot went straight through my chest—ineffective because it wasn’t silver—and the entire scene devolved into chaos.

I couldn’t explain what happened next because the savage animal inside

of me was incensed that he'd not only shot us, but that the bullet could have hit our mate. I barreled towards Hastain and was only stopped when my father shifted and hit into me hard enough that the world shook around us. I moved quickly to get out his grasp and threw him against the wall of trees nearly thirty feet back, the sound of their trunks cracking extremely satisfying.

Hastain let out a bellow as three more shots rang out. I couldn't look to see who, if anyone, had been hit before my father appeared out of nowhere, his claws wrapping around my throat as he threw me against the ground, creating a crater. I dug my claws into his chest as deep as possible, so that he let out a howl of pain that had me smiling even in this fucking form. I wasn't sure that was even possible, but I managed.

How often had he caused me so much pain? So much more than this?

"Watch out—fuck!" Tore's voice was filled with pain as two more shots rang out. I looked to the side, seeing that others had joined us. My father's men, and lots of them—nearly twenty—all had guns trained on us.

When Effie let out a whimper of fear though, everything else stopped mattering. I turned my head to see Ryder shifted and standing defensively in front of her as three men approached from the wall of trees. *That was when I snapped.*

Blood. Chaos. Absolute carnage. I no longer thought; I just killed ruthlessly. I was allowing Effie to see more of the monster I was, but I wouldn't put my pack, my mate, and everything we'd worked for at risk because of my father.

"Caedmon!" Effie's high-pitched scream of my name broke through the mindless bloodlust, and when I looked up to see who I needed to kill next for making her so scared, I noticed the piles of bodies around me. The others were surrounding Hastain, who was pinned against a tree with a broken arm. My father was on the ground, shifted back into his human form, his face bloody and Dakota's teeth at his neck.

"We need to open the gate," Effie said gently. "You killed them—you did it. We're safe."

I didn't see or feel judgment, just concern...for me.

"You killed them," my father mocked. "A fucking monster just like I—"

A bloody gurgle interrupted his speech as Dakota bit down on his throat and tore—hard.

Shock at the fact that my father was bleeding out had me shifting back to

human form so quickly that it was unsteady and clumsy, causing me to fall. I groaned as I hit the ground, staring at my father as his head fell to the side, blood saturating the ground as his eyes flickered with light before just... extinguishing.

Dead.

The bastard was dead.

“Holy crap.” Effie’s voice was stunned. I swallowed, trying to process the reality.

Dakota shifted, offering the man a sneer and spitting on him before offering me a hand to stand. He clapped my shoulder and walked towards Effie as if it was fucking nothing. I looked back at the bastard that had tormented me for years and couldn’t help but smile in fucking relief.

Gone. Fucking gone forever.

“Do not open that gate!” Hastain snarled, looking far less intimidating than before, broken and leaning against the tree, the gun that had been his only defense lying feet away from him, out of reach.

“Open it,” I told Effie evenly. “Let’s let the gods deal with him.”

“Fuck, ” Hastain snarled, trying to get up but unable to. Grabbing a gun from one of the slaughtered bodies, I pointed it towards the bastard and shot him right in the leg. His howl of pain caused Julian to chuckle as I offered a sharp nod and turned towards Effie.

“Let’s bring him with us,” Tore said, as Julian and Tore dragged him forward, the three of us joining Dakota, Ryder, and Effie. Hastain’s cries and begging were muted to me as I examined the stone arch, feeling an odd sense of calm considering what had just happened—what I’d just done.

When I reached Effie, she squeezed my hand, not bothered by the blood it was covered in. Then she returned to examining the arch, which she’d cleared of vines on the right side during the fight, revealing carvings. She’d also shifted some of the stones, revealing key-shaped holes—all of them different.

“I think this is the right one,” she said, opening her pendant and taking the key out. That was when Hastain really started on his shit.

“Please, Effie—I can give you anything. Fucking anything—”

“I want nothing from you.” Her eyes cooled to ice blue before looking at all of us as she whispered, “Let’s do this.”

She paused and inhaled, her face warming slightly. “I love you. I love all of you.”

Her ending words were soft and sweet—what happened next, though, was

anything but.

EFFIE HARLOW

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT COULD ONLY BE DESCRIBED one singular way—a bomb detonating. As the key turned and clicked into place, there was a single moment of calm silence before the gate exploded outwards, sending me flying back into Ryder. He turned his body to shield me from the deadly inferno, his magic wrapping around the group of us protectively. Raging winds and thunder cracked through the air, the scent of fire and smoke permeating my senses. I could only pray that my mates were okay, that they weren't being hurt.

Then the screams started. Loud screams, seeming to come from the heavens themselves, and the sensation of rushing water that ran over us in a cooling yet chilling effect. I felt dizzy from the contrast, and my chest compacted tighter as my own magic expanded out, supporting Ryder in his effort to keep my mates safe. But the power that had been unleashed was so intense that it shook me to my core, and that was before the magic pulled on me.

“Effie,” Ryder bellowed as a sudden vacuum yanked me forward, a shot of pink and blue energy coming from the swirling vortex where the gate had been. I cried out as my body lifted from the ground and my head snapped back—

Memories of every kind began to assault me. Except these weren't the memories or experiences of others—they were my own. Ones featuring Mona and a man that I hadn't recognized at first but I now realized was my father. Happy ones. Sad ones. Memories of me exploring the divine realm; memories of interactions with other gods and ethereal spirits that sheltered

me from danger as I grew up as if they loved me like one of their own. Hot tears ran down my face at all of the answers I was receiving at once, at the realization of how much I'd left behind...

How much I'd been *forced* to leave behind.

As the memories receded, my body relaxing in relief, I was thrown into another cycle of power that had everything to do with the future and nothing to do with the past. Just as Mona had predicted, the opening of the gate directly shifted my mating bond. Almost as if welcoming me home and promising me protection alongside my mates, the magic from the divine realm ran over each of my bonds and hardened them into solid diamond, making them unbreakable and permanent. My whimper of pain at the shocks of power from each instance weren't enough to counter the joy and contentment I felt at knowing nothing could ever separate the six of us.

Finally, the fear of men like Hastain being able to hurt us would be gone.

Dropping hard onto the ground, the space around us vibrated and shook, my mates surrounding me as the magic from the gate spread through the clearing and arched towards the sky. It changed the evening light to a vibrant electric blue as explosions of colors burst from the portal like spirits rising from the grave. My breath stuttered as I realized that those were the gods from the divine realm, flooding back to Earth to reap justice on this planet.

It was almost a peaceful moment despite being intense, and only the sudden blood-curdling scream of Hastain broke it.

Sitting up, I watched in awe as two of the gods' ghostly forms circled him in an almost taunting way, fear evident on Hastain's face as they converged on him, their magic causing him to convulse. My eyes widened as they dragged him forward and through the portal, his screams echoing as he begged for us to help...but there was nothing we could do. Not that we wanted to help anyway.

I felt everything still as the portal transformed into something *more*...an actual gate leading into the divine realm, the entire scene spread out in front of us like something in a movie. Around us the world was shattering and changing, transforming into something new, something far more...balanced. And all I could stare at was Hastain begging and pleading as he was pulled up the stairs and disappeared into what I had to assume was the divine realm.

Or heaven. That was what it really looked like. It looked like we were at the legitimate gates of heaven, or at least the images of heaven I'd seen in human illustrations. Orange and white clouds floated in a lavender sky, light

from a massive sun and moon reflecting off the white marble of the staircase that ascended upwards. A shaky breath left me at the thought that we would need to go up those stairs to face what lay beyond the gate.

“Let’s go,” I whispered as I stood shakily, Tore wrapping his arm around my waist as we slowly made our way forward. I couldn’t even find the strength to tell them that we were bonded, truly bonded, but I had a feeling they’d felt the change as well because despite the nervousness associated with all of this...there was also hope. *Hope that we could officially move on from the fear that had plagued us.*

“Nothing will change unless you want it to,” Julian reminded me. I nodded hesitantly, our ascension up the stairs slow but steady. Once we were halfway up, though, my body went rigid as I stared in shock at the two individuals standing a short distance away.

“The sun and moon goddess.” Ryder’s voice was filled with tension.

“My parents.”



DANTE’S *PARADISO*. It was after a long moment that I realized *that* was what this realm reminded me of. The white marble stairs were covered in a light, pearly fog that had the softest floral scent, and the light around us was muted yet somehow brilliant at the same time.

The sky above transitioned from morning to night from my right to left, stars sparkling throughout all of it and creating a lavender hue in the center which had been my original vantage point. I was captivated by the sky alone, but that didn’t even account for everything else I could see, and despite the fact that most of it was in the distance, I could see it with startling clarity.

Trees in shades of orange, purple, and pink stood tall like great pines and shifted in a breeze I could tell wasn’t natural but instead filled with magic. There were natural stone paths off the staircase that led over silver grass hills, and while I couldn’t see *perfectly* clearly, in the hazy, foggy, very far distance I was almost positive there were houses or buildings, their small statures not taking away from the way they sparkled under the sunshine and moonlight at the same time.

Dreamy. This place was absolutely dreamy, but my heart began to beat louder as I recognized that I could only distract myself for so long.

I turned my attention to the two individuals at the center of all of this—my parents. I honestly didn't know how I felt about that label to begin with, but the way they were watching me, the small smiles and emotion-filled expressions that beamed from them, told me they felt the intensity of this moment as much as I did. A moment I never expected to have.

Of course I'd wondered about my past, but I never expected to have this type of answer to it—or any answer, really. I also couldn't deny that I bore an uncanny resemblance to both of them.

Mona was unsurprising to me because we had very similar coloring overall, from our hair to our eyes, but my father—Samson, apparently—and I shared the same features. We both had a slightly more rounded face with high cheekbones, and while his features were more masculine in nature, I couldn't deny that we did resemble one another. Especially when he smiled.

That smile was the same one I saw in the mirror every single day.

When I was less than ten feet away, Mona flashed in front of me and pulled me into a tight hug. I couldn't help but automatically hug her back, feeling torn on the way she'd orchestrated this, but at the same time understanding that Mona, Samson, and Alcuin had made a mistake. It had cost a lot and resulted in some really bad stuff, but it seemed—and I wanted to hear it from the two of them—that they recognized that and had been trying to correct things.

I may not ever consider them to truly be my mother and father—not in the close, familiar sense like I had when I was little—but I couldn't find it in myself to be as angry or confused or even hurt as I'd been before. Mona had left some things out and hadn't exactly been straightforward, but she hadn't lied about the permanent bond with my mates. Plus, it appeared that the gods were already doing what she'd predicted—fixing the balance in our world.

And honestly, after seeing those memories and experiencing those emotions again, I had no doubt they'd loved me—a lot—and while I didn't understand why they didn't try to contact me, it was clear they hadn't wanted to be away from me all these years.

“You're here, you're really here,” she said, her eyes watering, joy and relief evident in her expression.

“I am,” I said and then looked up at my father, finding his attention focused on the men behind me, his gaze critical and cautious. “And you must be Samson—my father.”

Samson's eyes moved down to me, warmth filtering into his gaze. “Yes,

little moon, I'm your dad. I know you probably don't remember a lot—"

"I actually do. When the bonds with my mates solidified, I received a lot of my memories from my childhood."

"Oh, good." Mona offered a small sound of relief. "I'm so happy to hear that."

"Is there anywhere we can go to talk?" Ryder asked, eyeing the gods and people around us—reminding me that we weren't truly alone right now. No one was super close and I didn't think anyone cared what we were talking about, but I wouldn't mind the chance to sit down and take a moment to check up on my mates after that had just happened.

"Absolutely, let's go home." Mona motioned to the castle behind them, her words directed towards me rather than Ryder. The castle actually looked like more of a fortress, serving as a safeguard and barrier between the gates and the rest of the realm. Following my parents, I kept myself insulated between my mates as I refamiliarized myself with so many things about this place that I'd long forgotten, including the several-story lavender-colored doors to the castle that were embedded with orange gems that made them appear to be on fire in the sunlight.

My childhood home was gorgeous.

My home was with my mates now though, and no matter who these people were to me, parents or not, my mates were my future. I knew that with every ounce of my being. As we stepped through the doors, I was hit with a memory—an occurrence I predicted would continue to happen as I made my way through this realm.

"MOM! DAD!" My voice was filled with panic as I ran quickly through the halls, holding a small creature against my chest, the little thing mewling in pain. I wanted to get it to the medical healers as soon as possible.

My dad appeared out of nowhere, surprising me to an extent. Usually in the evening he was getting ready to go to bed and my mom was just getting up, but he looked like he was wide awake. "Honey," he said gently as he crouched down, "What's wrong?"

"I need to show you something," I said as my mom rushed into the room. "I just saved this kitty. She's badly hurt, and I need to take her to the healers." I just didn't know how to get there. It was a very large castle for a five-year-old to navigate on their own, and the healers had their own

building.

“Oh,” Mom said, joining my dad in crouching down. “Let’s see her.”

Gently opening my arms to reveal the kitten, I let out a concerned noise at the way her paw was actively bleeding. Other than that she looked pretty healthy, and her long fur was the prettiest sparkly blue shade I’d ever seen.

“Looks like she may have been bitten,” my dad said as he examined her paw.

“Her name is Misty,” I said softly.

“Naming her?” Mom gave Dad a knowing look before offering me a curious look. “Did you want to keep Misty, Effie?”

“Yes,” I said emphatically. “I want to protect her, and if she sleeps in my room I can do that way easier.”

“Well let’s get our new family member to the healers then,” Dad said.

I breathed out a sigh of relief—I knew that my parents would understand. They always did.

EMOTION CLOGGED MY THROAT, remembering just how much I’d loved Misty. I fought the urge to ask my parents about her as I looked around the four-story foyer featuring large marble pillars and a sparkling floor embedded with blue and orange jewels. On the ceiling were translucent lavender and pink curtains that floated in the breeze as we walked through an exit pathway into a large grassy corridor and covered patio space.

There was a long table already prepared for us with food and drinks, but that wasn’t what caught my eye.

“Misty!” I sprinted ahead and knelt down on the grass, pulling her into my arms. Immediately she began to purr loudly as she nuzzled my neck, and tears filled my eyes, nearly breaking down my face. A little sob caught in my throat as a warmth infiltrated my chest with pure joy. In that moment, seeing Misty made everything worth it. I knew it was silly, but I hadn’t realized just how much I’d missed her until I’d gotten my memories back.

“She’s been waiting for you,” Mona said lightly, motioning to the long table. Dakota helped me up, and I sat between my mates, keeping Misty on my lap.

“I missed her,” I said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head before looking around. “And I recognize...all of this.”

“This was your home,” Samson said quietly. “Effie, this is your home.”

Examining both of their faces and looking at my mates, I offered the truth—even if they weren't going to like it. "I may have grown up here...but my home is with my mates."

And it would be that way forever.

EFFIE HARLOW

“YES, YOUR MATES.” My father offered them a skeptical look. “I didn’t realize you’d found them.”

“I may have not mentioned that,” Mona offered, squeezing his arm, “but they are wonderful.” I examined her expression for a long moment, realizing she meant that.

“This is Tore and Dakota,” I said, motioning to the two men in question, “and this is Caedmon and Julian—”

“Don’t forget Coffin,” Mona added, offering him a narrowed look. Julian’s eyes widened and I reached over to squeeze his hand, imagining it was weird to have people addressing the wolf that lived inside of you as a completely separate individual rather than the part of Julian he now inhabited.

“Yes, I recognized that. I thought he was taking a different form...” Samson drew out, “but it appears he’s part of Julian now?”

“You can tell all of that?” Julian asked. My mates were a bit tense, and I understood it completely. I hadn’t felt exactly relaxed about meeting their parents, but they had no need to worry—as important as it was to know about my past, the opinions Mona and Samson had about my mates had no bearing on my feelings for them.

“I can tell a lot about all of you,” my dad answered, then moved his attention towards Ryder. “And this must be Ryder Bosu.”

Ryder’s brows rose. “I’m assuming you know my family?”

“Yes, I am well aware of all the pure kitsune bloodlines left.” Samson sighed, offering a tight smile. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been around any of my creations.”

“Right.” Ryder nodded slowly. “It’s good to meet you.”

“And I think it’s good to meet all of you.” Samson’s assessing gaze moved around the group. “As long as Effie is happy.”

“Never been happier,” I said honestly. I felt slightly bad about the sadness my words brought to their gazes, but it was true. I’d been happy as a child, but those emotions had faded and couldn’t compare to the current reality of being with my mates. I hadn’t meant it in a hurtful way though.

“I’m glad you found your mates, especially ones that clearly love you so much,” Mona said softly.

My dad slowly exhaled as if coming to terms with the situation. “Your mom’s right, and it’s a bond that shouldn’t be ignored—which is something I should’ve been more understanding about when it came to your mom. If I had, we wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with.”

I couldn’t help but nearly smile at the thought that my dad considered both himself and Alcuin to be my mom’s mates, and I suppose they were, in a sense. I also was happily surprised by his resigned and clearly reflective perspective on what had occurred. This situation was going to be a lot easier to sort through if he truly felt that way.

“Effie has met Alcuin and Reaper,” Mona told him. “It was how she got the key from the shadowlands.”

My father hummed in understanding, although I had a suspicion he was at least partially aware of what had been going on, even if Mona hadn’t shared everything with him.

“Yes, my half-brother,” I said, examining both of their expressions. My father immediately nodded, sadness in his gaze. I didn’t see any anger, only regret.

Mona instantly was asking questions though. “How is he? Is he doing well? I’ve watched him from afar, but I’ve never been able to contact him. I was able to watch you from afar for all these years, Effie—I tried to give you pleasant clear nights to watch the moon and even some happy dreams, especially when you were little, but I couldn’t actually reach you. It wasn’t until you started to connect with your magic that I was able to push past the barrier between us.”

“And you had almost no connection to me,” my father said, “since until recently you didn’t even recognize the other half of your magic.”

Emotion caught in my throat. “So it wasn’t that you didn’t want to help me or try to contact me...you just couldn’t.”

A fierce expression covered Mona's face. "If I'd been able to contact you in any way more than I did, it wouldn't have been a question. If I'd been able to warn you or tell you to leave that horrible fucking pack—"

Mona stopped her furious words and took a steadying breath as I nodded in understanding, reaching over to squeeze her hand before smiling at my father. "Thank you for telling me that...I needed to know. I wondered for so long why I'd heard nothing, but that makes sense.

"And Reaper is good," I added softly. "He'd found his mate and is part of a blood-bonded pack situation as well."

"Blood-bonded pack?" my father asked.

"An attempt at bringing the hybrid lines together," Caedmon explained, his gaze filled with heavy emotion at the discussion of family. My mates were allowing me to take the lead on this, and their quiet support meant everything to be right now. I wasn't positive I would be able to face the truth if they hadn't been here.

"Fascinating," my father hummed. "I'm glad the boy is doing well—although he's probably far older than a boy by now."

"I hope to see him soon," Mona admitted.

Suddenly a boom in the distance had all of us looking in the direction of the gates, the sky shifting and changing into a stormy pattern before reverting back to normal—almost like a glitch in reality. Could that be a result of what things were like on Earth right now?

"The guardians are already correcting the balance," my father said easily.

"About that," Dakota drew out.

"What exactly will they be doing?" Tore finished.

"Let me show you."

I'd thought Samson was speaking metaphorically, but Mona snapped her fingers and the sky above us darkened like a blanket being pulled over to shade the patio. Stars lit up the sky and the moon disappeared completely, making me almost breathless. I had no idea how this was going to result in them showing us anything, but it was gorgeous.

"You loved it as a child too," Mona said wistfully. "The more experienced you grow with your magic, the more control you'll have over elements like that—you may even be able to do this same thing for your child." I couldn't help but smile slightly at the image she painted of a projected nighttime sky on a nursery ceiling, the slow lull of falling asleep in a rocking chair.

“You have the ability to do so much, Effie, things you haven’t even started to unlock, I suspect.” My father smiled slightly. “Although you do seem to favor your mom’s magic more than my own.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Ryder said, speaking up. “She has elemental magic and has kitsune marks on her back. When we were in the shadowlands, she shifted into kitsune form for the first time, even.” The pride in Ryder’s voice had my chest fluttering with happiness as I watched curiosity grow on Samson’s face, clearly excited at the prospect of me favoring aspects of his magic as well.

“Right.” He nodded and then seemed to shake himself. “Before we focus on that though, let me show you what exactly is happening down on Earth.”

I really wanted the security and confirmation to know that something was going to change—that we could truly move on from this. Plus, we could talk about my magic later.

My father motioned through the air with his hand, and a golden screen appeared out of nowhere. The images in the center were vibrant, softly fading on the edges. It was like a television but somehow more realistic.

At first I couldn’t make sense of the images playing out in front of us. Colored energy colliding with buildings, surrounding and converging on certain individuals. Buildings falling and screams echoing loudly. It was terrifying and beautiful in a way I didn’t fully understand.

“The divine realm is inhabited by two types of gods—those deemed as the guardians, who fall under us in the hierarchy, and those who live their somewhat ‘normal’ lives here, similar to how you would if you chose to.”

“Guardians—those are the colored energy spirits?” I asked, not quite knowing how to describe them.

“Yes. They are lesser gods and more representative of energy, pure and determined to enact justice through the world. The gods who live here each represent different cultures, but the guardians protect all, which is what you see them doing here. They’re evaluating the current state of things and extracting those who need to be removed from the equation...much like that Hastain bastard,” my father explained easily. “They will face justice in the divine realm for their actions.”

“And the innocents who were captured are being released,” Mona added. “The guardians will help them find a safe haven.”

“How can they tell?” Julian asked. “How can they tell who’s deserving of what?”

“The guardians have a sense of right and wrong that even we don’t have. They are pure and incorruptible, only executing the actions that are best for the balance of those on Earth. Their role is one that all three of us decided was necessary when we created the Earth and the divine realm. We knew we weren’t perfect, and we wanted to have checks and balances in place—even we aren’t immune to their justice. Something we had to answer for when the gates were first closed.”

My eyes widened. Someone held the creators of this universe accountable...I mean, I was glad for it, but the concept was somewhat insane.

“They also have an innate connection to those around them and the land itself. They will seek out any problems and instantly correct them—which was why it was so essential to release them. Only gods like them can provide the balance that we truly need,” Mona finished.

My gaze moved back to the screen as I continued to watch the images flashing across it, one building even tumbling to the ground. I may not have understood all their actions, but I could sense a difference...a change occurring. I didn’t fully know what it meant yet, but I think it was a good thing.

“And the gods that live here?” I asked.

“Not perfect by any means, but they also view Earth as valuable,” my father said.

“The innocents involved in all of this—ones that are stuck in those buildings they are demolishing...are they not being injured? You said they were released, correct?” Caedmon asked, his eyes darkening on the screen.

“You mean the women that Erik Hastain captured? Or the children your father victimized?” Mona asked. “All of them will be fine—the same cannot be said about Erik, though.”

“Your father, if he’d survived, would’ve faced a far worse punishment than even Hastain,” Samson offered and then shrugged. “But it would have resulted in the same ending—death.”

“If you can, destroy all of it—the entire town. All of their headquarters. All of their buildings...just all of it,” Caedmon said harshly. “Especially anyone that helped him.”

My parents held his gaze before nodding, seeming to agree and not view it as a concern. I had a feeling they had a way to communicate with the guardians. I had no idea how, but it was just a guess. I continued to watch the screen, my attention pulled back as lights blinked in and out of existence

amongst the chaos. I couldn't imagine the world we were going to come back to after this.

"How do we know that more evil won't replace the current—that it won't just create a vacuum of power?" Dakota asked, causing my chest to tighten once more with nervousness.

"It's not that it won't," my father said, "it's just that no evil will have the chance to upset the balance past a certain point—it won't be a game of amassing wealth and power and using it to hurt others. There may be bad individuals, but they will never grow as powerful as they were...at least that's the hope. Before the gates closed the balance was far better, and when those that broke the balance were brought in, they faced a judicial council for sentencing. For many like Erik Hastain, death will be the answer, but for others there's a prison here that can contain them."

Sitting back, I let out a long exhale, feeling like everything was set up the right way...I just hoped that it worked. *I really hoped that it would work.* There was one last question that tugged on my mind, though.

"Hastain was using divine realm magic, or at least that was the rumor... was someone helping him?" I asked. My parents' expressions turned tense and angry.

"That is another reason why I have no doubt he will receive the most severe of punishments. He was illegally siphoning magic from a divine realm item that one of his ancestors stole," my father said. "The bastard has no true magic himself."

Feeling relieved by that, I admitted, "I don't think he deserves anything less. I'm not sure how I feel about saying that out loud, but he's hurt a lot of people and I know he planned on hurting so many more."

"I promise we will handle him." Mona squeezed my hand.

"Right." I nodded and then offered them both a hesitant smile. "This... this has been a lot. I don't even know what to say, and I don't mean that in a bad way—I'm just a bit overwhelmed."

Tore's lips brushed against the side of my head, and I melted into his embrace, feeling better with the reminder that he was right here with me—all of them were.

"I'd love for you to stay the night while you digest all of this, and it'll give us a chance to celebrate your accomplishment and welcome you back," Mona said, then addressed my mates. "All of you. I wasn't lying when I said a mating bond deserves to be celebrated, and you haven't had a chance to do

that yet—not really.”

“What do you say?” Samson asked hopefully.

I could tell that none of my mates were exactly against the idea, but they clearly wanted me to decide. Something that was confirmed by Julian’s words. “Whatever you want, *preciosa*.”

“Then yes.” I turned towards my parents. “We will stay.”

I just hoped they understood it was for only one night.

JULIAN DE LEÓN

“I DON’T THINK she likes me,” Tore mused as Effie’s blue cat Misty narrowly avoided the hand he’d extended for her. Instead she laid down on my feet, and I offered him a triumphant smile. I didn’t really think that Misty didn’t like him, but I did find it funny as fuck.

“To be fair, there are five strangers in her bedroom, so she may be a tad defensive,” Dakota added, taking a long sip of his drink. The five of us were relaxing while we waited for Effie to get ready for tonight, all of us already dressed in dark formal wear that had been delivered to us. I wasn’t nearly as good at passing the time as my pack mates, though, and instead I found myself randomly shifting and adjusting my position, ready to get tonight over with.

And I wasn’t alone.

For once Coffin and I were perfectly aligned in wanting to get our mate out of here as soon as fucking possible. There wasn’t a specific problem I could pin down as being the reason why I felt so uncomfortable here, but I knew it derived from the intense sense of possessiveness I had over Effie. I wouldn’t let them take our mate from us—it didn’t matter to me if they were her parents or not. I could give a shit about that.

And I believed that Effie had no intention of staying here. If she wanted to, I would stay as well, but as it stood she seemed perfectly happy with our plans to leave tomorrow. And maybe that’s where my paranoid thoughts were coming from.

For the past few weeks we’d been dealing with people who didn’t care what we wanted or what Effie wanted, and I was worried her parents would

follow suit, even if I had no reason to think that. I just didn't trust them. And while I wouldn't allow them to take her, I also didn't fully know what I was getting into when it came to literal fucking gods.

Which is exactly what they were, for the record. Their power saturated every element of this space, even the bedroom suite, making it feel like they had constant eyes on us. It also didn't help that Coffin was extremely uncomfortable with their ability to recognize him and the familiarity with which they spoke about him.

Apparently he hadn't interacted with them nearly as much as they made it seem. Their knowledge of him had surprised me, but didn't really make me super uncomfortable—well, except that it showcased how powerful they were. I knew how powerful they were, but seeing it in action was a different story. Essentially, I was finding it hard to balance the reality of them being both Effie's parents and the creators of the universe.

"I actually think this is Effie's old bedroom, not Misty's bedroom," Ryder pointed out, pulling me back into the conversation. I tried to see what he was seeing, but nothing particularly stood out to me—there were no personal elements or items left behind. It was expensive and clearly luxurious, but past that it looked like any other guest suite.

"Why do you say that?" Caedmon asked. For the first time ever, Caedmon almost seemed relaxed. I knew it had to do with his father being gone, and I couldn't blame him—I was glad Dakota had killed the bastard.

"Because of how comfortable she is in it. Didn't you notice she knew where everything was?" Ryder asked. A chuckle left my lips because he wasn't wrong. Upon arriving, when she was sorting through the dresses delivered by a castle staff member, I noticed that she carried her choice in the bathroom and began to pull things out of drawers. Like she had lived here her entire life.

Hell, there were four doors attached to the suite as it was—two for closets, one for a bathroom, and the other I hadn't looked into yet—but Effie hadn't even hesitated. She immediately knew which one was the bathroom.

"You're right," I agreed, leaning down to pet Misty, who purred and hopped onto my lap.

"Right about what?" Effie asked, stepping into the room. She held her dress up with one hand and used the other to brace against the door of the bathroom as she slipped into her heels. My heart nearly came to a stop in my chest as I stared at her, wide-eyed, wondering how it was possible that she

was this fucking perfect—this beautiful. It was impossible, right? It had to be. It was painful to look at her, but I couldn't fucking stop.

Effie's perfect form was wrapped in lavender and pink silk that hugged her curves, thin diamond straps holding the dress up. Her hair was brushed out and long, her makeup light and barely noticeable so that it highlighted the beauty she naturally exhibited. On top of her head was a diamond headband that almost looked like a crown...which I'm sure was the point.

The woman looked like a legitimate goddess, and the best fucking part is that I could tell she felt good, a light pink blush stealing over her cheeks as the others rained compliments on her. I couldn't speak though. I stood, gently removing Misty from my lap, before approaching my mate and cupping her jaw.

"You look magnificent, *preciosa*."

"Thank you," she whispered, raising to her toes and pressing a soft kiss to my lips. "I'm excited for tonight...I just don't want it ruined."

"Ruined?" I asked, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

"I want to enjoy being back here, even if it's only for a small amount of time. I just hope they understand why I want to leave. Of course I would love to return every now and then to visit and see Misty...I just don't want them to be offended or hurt that I don't want to stay."

I absolutely loved the compassion and softness Effie had for those around her, even if I don't think they deserved it, but in this case I didn't want her to second-guess herself.

"If they really want to reconnect then they will let you set those boundaries. They'll accept what that means for the future, even if they would prefer more from you," I told her honestly. "And if they don't like it—fuck them."

Effie giggled, her eyes widening at my curse before she melted into me and nodded. "You're right. I know you're right—I'm just nervous."

Before I could reassure her more, a knock on the door interrupted our moment. Ryder dragged open the door to reveal an attendant who'd come to gather us for the feast. Effie bent down to pick up Misty and place a kiss on top of her head before asking, "Oh, what was Ryder right about?"

"Everything." He flashed a smile as Caedmon scoffed, causing me to chuckle.

"Just that you seem familiar with this room. Was it yours before?" Tore asked, slipping a shawl over her shoulders.

She looked around thoughtfully. “It doesn’t look super familiar, but you’re right. I sort of know where everything is...”

“They probably put your things away or packed them up for you. Maybe ask,” Dakota suggested. “Wouldn’t hurt to bring some things back with you, if you want—we can put them in the London house.”

Effie’s eyes lit up at that idea as she led the way to the door where the attendant waited patiently. I tried to not find it annoying that there were people expecting us because I knew that we would have to share Effie’s attention tonight...but I still found it frustrating. I had a feeling that this was going to be much more than some small feast.

Moments later it was obvious that I was absolutely right. While the guardians were on Earth exacting justice, many of the other gods were in attendance, the party already in full swing as we approached the dining hall.

I kept Effie tucked between myself and Dakota, Coffin trying to stay relaxed to not alert our mate to how much he hated this, but I think she could feel everything through our bond. I loved and hated that because it would mean she knew exactly how much I fucking loved her, but also would let her know when I wasn’t comfortable with something.

“Wow,” Effie whispered as people parted for us. We stepped into a festive space that looked like it belonged right in a painting of Mt. Olympus. Open with large white columns that allowed the evening light in, the sunset turned everything on the right side into shades of gold and bright red, making it seem like it was a flickering live flame. The other side was bathed in twilight, the line down the center an almost exact split. Her parents’ thrones were perched on either of their respective sides, showcasing their powers to the truest extent. I couldn’t deny it was quite the scene, and I even noticed there was a long dining table out in front of them with a chair right in the center—one I had to assume was for Effie.

“We should go up there—” I started to say, but I came to a hard stop, surprised at the vision in front of us.

Effie looked up at me and then followed my gaze to the right, a squeak leaving her lips. “Ruby? Aanya?”

What the hell were they doing here?



Effie Harlow

“EFFIE!” Aanya appeared in front of me in a flash, hugging me tightly. “You did it—you opened the gate!”

“Of course she did.” Ruby appeared next to her, both of them looking thrilled at my success. “I didn’t doubt it for a minute—plus, you couldn’t really ignore the results.”

I was guessing she was referring to what was going on Earth, but I would ask about that later. I briefly noticed their mates were with them, dressed similarly to mine, and instantly my gaze scanned for Reaper to see if he’d been welcomed in the divine realm...but I didn’t see him. That didn’t sit well with me.

Then again, I didn’t even understand how my friends had gotten here in the first place.

“How are you here?” I asked. “When did you arrive?”

“When you opened the gate, the guardians found us. They wanted to inform Aaren about what was going on with his father—I have no idea how the bastard got past us when we were right there in the parking lot,” Ruby growled in frustration before shaking her head, adjusting the skirt of her black dress and causing me to be momentarily distracted by the stars that seemed to be embedded in the fabric. That had to be from the divine realm; I had never seen a fabric like that before...

Then her words hit. “Oh, Aaren knows then? That they took him into the divine realm?”

That relieved me in a way I couldn’t explain. I really didn’t want to have to break that type of news to Aaren. I didn’t think he would want his father around anyway after what he’d done to Ruby...but he was still his father at the end of the day.

“Yep. He went to say goodbye to him. Reaper even went with,” Aanya explained. “Ruby mentioned to the guardians that we would want to be here as well, so they came to get us. Of course we were totally freaked out because the sky itself looked like it was burning when they arrived...but it all worked out. Plus, look at the dress they had for me! Isn’t it so pretty?”

“It really is,” I agreed, looking over the vibrant orange and red ombre material, the gold sparkles making her look like she was on literal fire. Considering she was a kitsune, it was a very cool effect. I also couldn’t help but love the ease she was handling this entire situation with—although both

of my friends had experienced more ‘true magic’ than myself, so maybe this wasn’t that odd to them.

Then I asked my other question, unable to contain myself. “Is Aaren okay with what happened?”

“Yes. He would’ve killed his father himself, honestly, especially after the shit he pulled with all the young women across the city...but yes, completely fine. I’m just so glad we can be here with you,” Ruby said softly. “This is... this is crazy! Your parents are the literal sun god and moon goddess!”

“I know,” I whispered.

I looked around the ballroom, noticing my parents staring at us, and admitted, “This entire place, this entire experience—It’s something really special.”

“Are...are you planning to stay?” Aanya asked softly, the concern in her voice clear.

“No,” I said with conviction. “I want to go back to London and start to really live. I don’t think I can go back to Silver Falls after everything that’s happened.”

“I get that,” Ruby said. “We’re returning, but only because Aaren wants to figure out someone to take over his father’s position—the guardians promised to help him with that. After that, we were thinking maybe Europe or exploring for a bit.”

“What about you three?” I asked Aanya.

“I think we’re going to stay at Silver Falls for a while.” Aanya shrugged. “I love my program, and I figure it gives me some time to sort out where we want to go after. Plus, then I can keep everyone updated on whoever takes over.”

That settled a part of me I didn’t realize had been anxious. I may not have wanted to go back to Silver Falls University, but it still was a special place to me. I wanted it protected.

“Your parents want us up there,” Dakota said, appearing behind me and gently running a hand up my back “As far as I’m concerned they can wait, but people are staring and probably wondering who we all are.”

“Especially since we’re the only non-gods here,” Aanya agreed. “Well, except for Effie.”

“I still can’t believe that,” I admitted before looking towards my parents, Mona sitting up straight and motioning for me to come to the table. Inhaling, I decided to take the plunge and stride forward with my mates following, my

friends deciding to watch on from the center of the room. I think I knew that my parents would be making some type of announcement, but after they both hugged me and asked me to stand with them, motioning for my mates to sit at the head table, I still found myself surprised by my dad's voice that boomed through the celebration hall.

"Gods and goddesses! Thank you for joining us on such short notice!" My father spoke clearly, my gaze catching that Aaren had slipped into the hall and was now standing behind Ruby, talking to her and the others quietly. He didn't look upset—in fact, if anything he looked relieved.

I looked up at my father as he continued, "After decades of being cut off from the realm of our blessed creatures, we have been reunited. The gate has been opened, and our daughter who was taken from us so many years ago was the one who succeeded in doing so. Tonight we celebrate her accomplishment and the honor of having her in our home once again."

I smiled at his sweet words as he squeezed my shoulder. "It's wonderful to have you back, little moon."

"Glad to be here," I responded, hoping that the happiness in their expressions wouldn't dim once they realized having me 'back' here didn't mean I was staying long-term. Maybe they did understand that though, because he hadn't exactly said I was back...just that they were glad to have me back in their home. I was hoping that was the case.

"That isn't the only thing we're celebrating, though." Mona's voice rang clear and even. "We thought it was fitting that with the opening of the gate and the change being brought throughout the realms that we bring some change here. A long time ago, the gates were closed because of a mistake that we—"

"That I made," my father interrupted. "I made a mistake of selfishness and jealousy."

Mona offered him a small smile. "But those years are long gone, and we want to live in harmony with our fellow creator. Alcuin, please join us."

My brows shot up as the dark god appeared in the center of the room, the crowd parting as people gasped in surprise and awe. He wasn't paying attention to any of that, though. His gaze was purely on my mom, only moving to Samson for a moment to offer a polite nod of understanding.

"Alcuin and his son Reaper have lived in the shadowlands for years now..." Samson motioned to Reaper who stood near Ruby, looking unsure about all of this. "But I want both of you to know you are welcome here."

After all, I would like to consider us family.”

A cheer of excitement rang out, and I softened at the tears pricking my mom’s eyes, her gaze on Reaper who looked a bit lost. My dad swallowed down his own emotion and added in a clear voice, “Please! Enjoy dinner, all of you, and let’s make tonight a celebration to remember.”

Now that the speech was over, I squeezed my mom’s hand and turned my back to the room to talk to both of them. “Would you like me to introduce you to Reaper?”

I already knew what my mom’s answer would be, and I couldn’t imagine how hard this was for her. I mean, that was her son, and she hadn’t seen him in far longer than she had gone without seeing me.

“I would love nothing more, little moon.”

EFFIE HARLOW

“YOU WANT me to take her with me?” I whispered in awe, holding Misty in my arms. Don’t get me wrong, I was thrilled—especially because she seemed so comfortable around all of my mates, having slept with us for most of the night. I don’t think it bothered her that there were even more people than she was used to being around, as she graced each of my mates with the privilege of acting as her bed, happily purring away.

I also was more positive than ever that Misty had some type of magic. It may not have been a type I understood fully, but she would randomly glow blue, and sparkles would puff off her fur and fill the air with a floral scent... so I was pretty sure there was something to that. I hoped that meant she would be around for a long time—already she seemed to be much younger than she should have been considering when I’d found her and how long I’d been gone.

“Of course,” Mona said, smiling sadly. “While I would love for you to stay here, I know that’s not what you want, so it’ll make me feel better knowing that you have her with you. She’s been your guardian since you first found her—since you first bonded—and she’s missed you greatly these years.”

“Guardian?” Tore asked, echoing my exact thoughts.

“Yes, like a familiar,” my dad explained thoughtfully. “I think that’s the easiest example that’s close enough to the truth. Because Effie has three different true forms, plus others that are a mixture of each, Misty aided Effie in channeling and controlling her ability to shift as a young child, something that can be a complete overload to such a young god, especially considering

her parentage.”

“I think the way you managed without her all this time was by choosing just one form, the one you were most familiar with—you shifted into a wolf far more often than a kitsune back then.”

I nodded in understanding, burying my nose against the top of Misty’s head. What my parents said had explained a lot, because the connection I had with Misty felt like more than just an affection for her.

“With that being said,” Samson continued, “I really hope that you come back sometime, Effie. I would love to teach you more about your magic and everything you’re capable of.”

“And to get to know this version of you,” Mona said softly. “This situation was...complicated. But don’t doubt for a minute that we want to know you and the woman you’ve become. We love you, little moon, and always have.”

My heart warmed. “I would really like that.”

Something must have occurred to Mona then because she snapped and put her finger up. “Actually, that isn’t the only thing I’m sending with you—you have your pendant on you, right?”

Nodding, I pulled it from beneath my shirt where it laid against my chest. Mona stepped forward, gently holding it and examining the lit-up halves before pushing power into it. Two flashes of energy much like the guardians’ surged into it and disappeared, my eyes widening at the exhilarating energy rush that rolled over my skin. My mates tensed, and Tore’s hand on my waist tightened as if he wanted to pull me away. I couldn’t open my mouth to explain that I was perfectly fine, just surprised by the influx of power—

“I’m okay,” I promised them finally as she stepped back, offering a small nod as if she was happy with her work.

“Now you have your own guardians with you—ones assigned to you,” Mona explained. “We absolutely trust you to make the right decision on what justice needs to be enacted, and they will be there to help you accomplish that as well as protect you.”

“She has protection,” Tore rumbled, causing my lips to press up slightly. He was right, I did have plenty of protection, but the trust my parents were putting in me was not only substantial but a bit surprising. It was clear these guardians were capable of nearly anything.

“Of course,” Mona agreed, looking back at me with a little bit of mischief in her gaze at his disgruntled tone.

“When you need to call on them, just use your power to pull on the magic inside your pendant and bring them out, then tell them what you think needs to be corrected—they will handle the rest.” The way Samson said it was so matter-of-fact when I felt like it was anything but. I just hoped that these guardians truly had the sense of right and wrong my parents said they did so they could help guide my decisions. I may have known when something was wrong, but that didn’t mean I knew how to fix it, and I really didn’t want to be the sole arbiter of justice.

“I will keep that in mind, thank you,” I said to them with a small smile before saying, “I think we’re going to head out.”

Mona pulled me into a tight hug that surprised me momentarily before I relaxed into the comfortable, simple action. My father squeezed my shoulder and offered me a smile, the moment with the two of them settling the last piece of the puzzle for me. The part that hadn’t understood my past. The part that had felt confused on what or who I’d forgotten.

I’d found my home with my mates, but I was happy to know where I’d come from.

After my mates said goodbye to them as well, we took a long, slow walk back down the steps towards the gates, the forest on the other side looking completely cleared of any evidence of the violence and bloodshed caused by Hastain and Caedmon’s father. Which was good, because I didn’t really want to be reminded of that right now.

“When did Ruby and Aanya leave?” I asked. I knew they’d been planning to leave early in the morning, so we’d said our goodbyes last night after a whirlwind of good food and celebration—but I was still bummed I hadn’t been able to say goodbye again. I had a feeling it would be a while before we were all together again, before we all got things sorted in our respective situations.

“Early this morning,” Caedmon said. “I went to go get you some breakfast and ran into them. Ruby mentioned checking your phone once we got back to Earth.”

I nearly laughed at that, a small smile tugging on my lips. I literally had no idea where my phone even was right now.

“Are we ready to go back?” Julian asked, the group of us pausing before stepping through the gate.

“Things are going to be different,” Ryder warned. “I can feel it.”

“But it’s for the good,” Dakota said softly, examining the forest. “I have

to believe this is going to be a good thing.”

I’d heard him be serious before, but I could see the hope there. I reached out to squeeze his hand, wondering if he was thinking about his family and pack.

“It will be,” Caedmon said, his eyes darkening. “Anywhere is better if it doesn’t have bastards like my father in it.”

“And now you have your own guardians,” Tore murmured, looking at my pendant. “So what do we handle first, lil bit?”

The answer came to me almost immediately.

“The Whitepaw Pack.”



AS WE STEPPED out of the gates, the wind shifted. It felt as if it was carrying us back down to Earth, welcoming us in a soft embrace. Upon landing I could immediately feel the difference, the shift that was taking place. My gaze moved skyward, and my breath caught. Through the trees, I could see comets streaking across the sky in all different colors. Somehow I knew those were the guardians, and I had to wonder how that appeared to humans because to me it was magnificent and awe-inspiring. It was probably a bit scary to those that didn’t understand what was going on though.

“Do you still want to stop at your old house?” I asked Julian, the group of us making our way through the forest preserve, down the familiar path that had taken us here. It felt like forever ago, not merely a day.

“Yeah,” he answered. “There’s some stuff I’d like to grab.”

When we reached the cottage, I tucked my pendant back into my shirt, laying it against my skin, and watched as Tore and Caedmon went inside to help grab whatever Julian wanted to bring with us.

I wanted to help, but I quickly found myself snuggled and trapped between Ryder and Dakota as the first draped a jacket over my shoulders, their conversation turning to our plans to get back to London. It was something I would normally be excited about, but instead my thoughts kept going back to the Whitepaw Pack.

The state of the pack had bothered me from the start, but now that Hastain was handled, the small nagging concerns I had about it were growing. After all, not everyone in the Whitepaw Pack had been the same level of horrible—

some had been stuck like myself, especially the younger children.

Slipping from between my mates, I sat down on a nearby tree stump and stretched my legs out in front of me, my thoughts racing about everything I'd seen and experienced during my time with them. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and accepted the memories, ones that showed just how bad the Whitepaw Pack could be. The abuse I'd suffered. The abuse I'd witnessed. The dark and mutated version of 'normal' that Gerald and Theresa represented. How children were treated in the pack—how they were left completely to their own devices, going hungry for nights on end...

I realized with despair that I had absolutely no idea how to even begin to fix something like that.

"Effie."

My eyes snapped open suddenly in surprise, as I found a woman crouched before me, a man standing a couple of steps away as he scanned the area. *Guardians*. They looked mostly human, but they were transparent, a light purple and deep blue that seemed to glow silver. The man offered me a small head nod before looking towards my mates, Ryder and Dakota making their way over without pause.

"You're the guardians assigned to help me?" I asked the woman.

"Yes," she confirmed. When she stood, I followed suit, her gaze moving skyward. "And we have seen the injustices that you have suffered and that others have suffered at the hands of the Whitepaw Pack. We have the ability to correct those."

Biting down on my lip, I considered what she was saying and decided to ask the question that was weighing on my mind. "If you do that, there may be children left without parents. The pack may not be able to function without the amount of people it currently has. They barely make it day to day, let alone with less resources."

The man's expression filled with understanding. "We will ensure that each child finds a home that is right for them. We will also ensure that what is left of the Whitepaw Pack is absorbed into one of the other packs. Many in the city aren't as hostile towards other species of hybrids."

"We won't remove everyone, especially those who have been following orders, but the most dangerous predators will be dealt with and the rest will have the ability to choose a different life," the woman added.

"Just make sure they know that it can be different. I know they will doubt that—I doubted it at first."

“Absolutely,” the woman agreed. “It’s our job to do this, and when we are done, we will come back to you.”

Then they were gone, and I felt relief echo through me as I leaned back into Dakota, Ryder’s hand running over my cheek gently.

“I can’t handle knowing how many kids are in the same position I was, living their entire lives without love, and that’s not even including those that may not be there by their own choice. If Hastain could buy me so easily from them, who knows how many are in the same position.”

“That pack is an abomination,” Dakota agreed.

Before I could hear Ryder’s response, magic surged from my pendant into me and my knees broke, my body sagging between them. I couldn’t tell you what happened around me in that next moment because my mind was being assaulted by images, vibrating my very bones and causing my head to pulse in pain. Tears streamed down my face from the sudden influx of pain before the realization hit me that I was flying over the Whitepaw Pack, as if viewing it through one of the guardian’s eyes.

That was when the reckoning began. I couldn’t even call it violence because somehow it was more whole than that, more complete. I felt and heard the fear from Gerald and Theresa as they were brought to their knees alongside many of their friends, disappearing under the intensity of a bright flash of light—most likely being delivered to the divine realm.

I saw the guardians forcing Alpha to give the order to bring all of the children forward, and I realized in horror that there were older children, nearly teenagers, with chains on their wrists being brought up from the basements of some of the apartment buildings. He tried to explain himself, begging for understanding as the sky cracked in anger, the guardians telling him he would face justice in the divine realm for participating in the illegal trade of shifters.

My throat clogged with emotion as I watched the guardians ask each child if they wanted to return to their parents—if they felt safe with their parents. I didn’t hear all their responses, but many chose not to stay. Many asked for help.

True to their word, the guardians didn’t remove everyone from the pack, just those who had truly been the most dangerous, the ones who didn’t have potential to change.

All of these visions hit me in what felt like a millisecond, allowing me the proof I needed that change would be enacted, but when I opened my eyes, I

realized it had been much much longer than that.

I stared up at the ceiling, recognizing it as Ryder's apartment in the city, more specifically the master bedroom. My mates surrounded me, some asleep, some drifting in and out. I could feel through their bonds with me that they were worried, but the bond also assured them that I was okay, that I was just witnessing the guardians' justice. They may have even been able to see some of it themselves.

Letting out a small breath, I propped myself on my elbows so I could see all of them, the crackling of the fire making me feel comforted. Safe. That's what I was now—safe and able to move on from all of this. The guardians would help...they were already helping. So much.

What I hoped more than anything, though? That each of those in the Whitepaw Pack would find their own small piece of happiness like I had—their own snow globe.

EPILOGUE 1

EFFIE HARLOW

Two months later...

So much had changed in what felt like so little time.

In a matter of a few weeks, my entire world had been altered. Much like the end of winter, a fresh spring breeze had rolled in, bringing with it a new start not just for myself but for the whole of the supernatural community. My gaze moved to the muted news playing out on the television, my lips pulling up into a small smile.

It probably shouldn't have been amusing, but following the three nights of colorful stars soaring through the sky as the guardians traveled the globe, the humans had come up with an array of theories on what had happened, everything from aliens to foreign military technology. They never came remotely close to the truth, and it was interesting watching it play out.

Although, truth be told, I hadn't been very focused on what was going on outside of our small family for at least a month now, especially once we'd started planning this wedding. Well, I hadn't actually done much of the planning myself, instead handing it off to Aanya who'd asked to be my wedding planner—a job I hadn't fathomed the existence of until she told me everything she could do to help.

Considering it meant hanging out with my two friends, especially since she and Ruby were bridesmaids, I didn't hesitate to say yes. And now, a month later, the big day was here. I sat at the vanity in a bridal suite as a nice woman curled and twisted my hair into an intricate style, adding delicate wildflowers here and there. I had to admit, while I didn't understand the

process of planning a wedding, Anya had managed to capture exactly what I wanted.

The wedding had a blue and purple color theme and featured wildflowers for all the centerpieces alongside candles. Even my dress had embroidered flowers on it that added a bit of color to the ivory garment. I hadn't even tried any other dresses on after seeing this one—I had known immediately that this was 'the one' for me, and I'd wanted my bridesmaids to feel the same, telling them to pick any dresses they wanted. Ruby had chosen a stunning royal blue and Anya a bright pink, both of them somehow matching the theme perfectly while looking exactly like themselves.

It was a balance I had entirely my friend to thank—just like how she'd found the venue, which was my favorite element of this event so far.

Since we now lived in London, we'd decided to hold the wedding about two hours south, on an estate in Hampshire. Bright spring flowers bloomed all around, bringing color to the mansion's stone exterior. There was even a farm and equestrian center attached, making the past few days here an absolute adventure and at the same time very relaxing.

We'd rented the entire property, so it had just been my mates, myself, and our family and friends since Monday, and after the chaos of everything that had been going on, it was *exactly* what I needed. I think it was what my mates had needed as well.

In the past when I thought about our wedding, I hadn't considered what we would do about our families attending. I mean, I had liked the idea of my parents being there, but I also knew there had been a lot of hurt between my mates and their families, so I'd been hesitant to ask their opinions on it.

Luckily, before my mates had even proposed to me, their families seemed to understand that the tide was changing, and the value they put on their relationships with their sons began to outweigh the hurt from the past.

Tore's father and mother had traveled to London to visit us the first week after we arrived, something my mate hadn't initially been happy about because they'd come during a chaotic time when we were still settling in and making changes to the property, like adding a greenhouse on the top floor. But once the four of us sat down to talk and they'd had an open and honest conversation about what had happened when his sister died, even apologizing for their lack of action, the tone changed completely.

They'd even invited us back to the pack lands for the memorial they were planning to honor his sister. One that her mate's family had completely

funded, writing a letter to Tore that I hadn't chosen to read. I could tell though that whatever they'd said had shifted something in my mate's mindset and feelings over it because he'd accepted his parents' invitation for this summer, meaning that we'd all be taking a trip stateside following the wedding.

That wasn't the only reason we were going back, though. After a few conversations with Catori, Dakota decided to talk to his father on a video call, and what I'd assumed would be a short call had ended up lasting nearly five hours. While I hadn't been there the entire time, I'd checked in on him often, and each time he seemed more and more relaxed, making me know it'd been the right choice. And that was even before I heard about the decision they'd come to.

Dakota was going to be part of a ceremony to give up his spot as the next alpha of the pack, abdicating in favor of his sister, Catori. I hadn't been able to contain my glee at the announcement because while I didn't know her super well, it was clear she loved their pack and had been thrilled at the turn of events. Apparently though, because of the type of wolves they were, there was an actual ceremony they had to do to un-bond Dakota from the position and give it to Catori—so I was going to have the opportunity to not only see where Tore had grown up, but also Dakota.

Between those trips and the honeymoon we had planned, this summer was going to be very busy.

"Mom, she's fine," Aanya grumbled as Ryder's mom appeared in the bridal suite, interrupting my thoughts. Ruby looked up from where she was slipping into her dress before offering Aanya's mom a small smile. I may have had my...*issues* with Ryder's family, but that didn't extend to his parents. They'd both announced that they were moving to London the minute we had chosen to, and I think they hoped Aanya would do the same when she was done with school.

"I just wanted to check, do you need anything?" she asked, her warm gaze making me smile.

"I think I'm good," I assured her. "Has everyone arrived?"

"Yes," she huffed while sitting down.

"Even grandpa?" Aanya asked in surprise. She was leaned over, getting close to the mirror as she applied her own lipstick, much to the frustration of her makeup artist. My friend was particular about certain things, so it didn't really surprise me that she wanted to do the finishing touches herself. Plus,

the makeup artist had spent two hours on my face, so maybe she would view it as a break? One could hope.

“We all knew he and your uncle wouldn’t miss it.” Ryder’s mom pursed her lips and shook her head. “The man is all pride and ego.”

It wasn’t something I’d understood fully until she’d taken the time to explain why exactly she’d returned to Kyoto with Ryder’s father to live there...and honestly, it had been eye-opening. Apparently Ryder’s grandfather had been sick for nearly three years now and hadn’t told anyone except his uncle—who of course had told Ryder’s parents. While none of them really agreed with how he ran things, they also hadn’t wanted him to be alone in his final years, so they’d stayed by his side.

Well, until recently.

At the sudden change in dynamics after the appearance of the guardians on Earth, Ryder’s grandfather panicked and began to try to exert control over his family once again. It had bothered me enough that my parents noticed something was wrong, and his grandfather had received a personal visit from my father. I wasn’t there for the conversation, but from what I’d been told, he reminded the kitsune leader of where his power originated from and essentially threatened that if he chose not to change with the times and accept that kitsune were a *part* of society rather than at the top of it, the guardians would bring him in for his own hearing.

The change in tone had been almost immediate, Samson’s visit serving as the wake-up call it was. That talk had taken place only a week ago, and already we were seeing the results in action. He had come to our wedding, and I had to believe that was a positive sign. After all, even my own parents, alongside Alcuin, had been here for the past week, something that I think everyone was getting used to. I mean, it wasn’t often you went on vacation with the three creators of the universe...although it was hard for me to think of them like that, especially as I spent more time with them.

“Completely accurate. But the little talk Samson had with him seems to have worked,” my mom said, appearing out of nowhere and echoing my thoughts. “Oh, Effie—you look absolutely stunning, honey.”

“Thanks, Mona.” I stood and gave her a big hug after my hair was finally finished. That was just one more element that had shifted—the closeness to my parents. I hadn’t known what to expect after leaving the divine realm, but my parents had come to visit us twice during the first month, and after that we started to have dinner weekly. They never just appeared, they always

called ahead—which was sort of funny in its own right—but they were trying to respect our boundaries, and I appreciated that a ton.

Adjusting to living with my mates had been much easier than I had even considered—probably because we’d been living together from the start... And well, having so much alone time together was amazing. I moved my thoughts from that as my cheeks flushed pink. Now was totally not the time to think about what we’d been up to in our alone time, let alone this morning with Caedmon and then with Julian right before coming here to get ready...

“Alright, let’s get you into this dress!” Ruby said, pulling out the garment. Its shape was mermaid style with long sleeves, elegant while still making me feel sexy and beautiful. As my friends helped me put on my dress, zipping up the form-fitting material, I couldn’t help but appreciate the way it clung to my curvy frame. One that I had come to love completely.

“Beautiful!” my mom said softly. “I love that dress—it’s so perfect for you.”

A small meow had me giggling as I looked over to see Misty seemingly agreeing with my mom. When I’d said everyone was here for the wedding to support us, I hadn’t been lying—even Misty was here. I was excited for the ceremony and the reception, to celebrate the love I had for my mates, but what I was even more excited for?

The big news I had to share with my mates once we were on our honeymoon. Before, I’d been nervous about starting a family and having kids because of everything going on...but not anymore. This world was a much safer place now, and I knew that my mates would always protect our family from any threats that remained.

Our soon to be growing family.

A knock on the door had me looking over as my dad stepped through and offered me a soft smile. “You ready, little moon?”

“Absolutely.”

I was ready for everything the future would bring.

EPILOGUE 2

EFFIE HARLOW

“Mommy.” Skylar gently pulled my hand to get my attention, my gaze having moved towards the storefront window display we were passing. It was decorated in a flurry of snowflakes falling on blue, silver, and white décor, the centerpiece a snow globe surrounded by the toys they were selling this holiday season.

“Yes, honey?” I asked curiously as she stopped in front of the window herself, the sounds of my family all around us, laughing and talking as we walked towards our destination. Skylar was our second oldest girl, and at five years old she was much quieter than her older and younger sisters, so I made sure to always try to really listen to what she was saying. Especially because I’d often watched her hesitate to finish her thought if someone interrupted her.

“Could we make cookies with grandma and grandpa tonight?” Her tone was serious, as if the fate of the world rested on my answer, her dark eyes examining my expression. Between her golden complexion, ink-colored hair streaked with purple, and dark eyes, she looked a lot like Dakota and Julian. She was much more sensitive and reactive to others’ emotions than most of our family. Not to say we didn’t listen to one another, but with how many of us there were—ten now, after the birth of our son—it could get rather *loud*. It was something I’d come to love.

“I think they would love that,” I told her, knowing that my parents would be thrilled. They were coming over tonight, their planned visit one of the reasons we were going on a walk to a nearby park to get some fresh air despite the heavy December snowfall. With the arrival of so many friends

and family members coming into town for the winter holidays, we were soon going to be very busy.

“Mommy, mommy!” Penelope’s voice had me snapping my head to the right as our three-and-a-half-year-old sprinted towards me, nearly tripping over her own feet before throwing herself into my arms and letting out a giggle. I looked over her pink and blue hair to see Tore offering me a small head shake and knowing grin as he walked towards us and scooped her up.

“You need to eat something before we play in the park, kiddo,” he said as she tried to wiggle out of his arms. Taking Skylar’s hand, I followed them towards the rest of our group, unable to hold in a smile at how much energy our youngest daughter had. She kept all of us on our toes, especially Tore who seemed to always be the one sprinting after her.

“I want to play. Not hungry.” She sighed dramatically before offering me a big smile over his shoulder and holding a bag of goldfish away from her defiantly, her green eyes—so much like Caedmon’s—lit up with affection. “Hi Mommy.”

“Hi.” I tapped her nose, Skylar giggling at the action before running ahead towards the rest of the group, leaving the three of us. Taking Penelope from Tore, I let her walk between us, each holding one of her hands as she began to babble on about something regarding the snow, her snack long forgotten. I didn’t catch all of it, but the mixture of the snowy London streets, the holiday decor, being all together as a family, and her sweet voice filling the air had my chest filling with happiness.

Although it was hard to not feel happy this time of year. It was our eighth holiday season together, and every single year felt better than the last.

“Everything good?” Caedmon asked as we caught up to the rest of them, Skylar clinging to his hand happily.

“She wants to ask my parents to make cookies later,” I explained, flashing him an amused smile. “Prepare for the kitchen to be a mess.”

Caedmon chuckled, his smile much more relaxed and easier to come by than when we’d first met—something I absolutely loved. Plus, considering he did the majority of the cooking for our family, his newfound interest ignited when I was pregnant for the first time, it really was a warning. The last time they made cookies...well, let’s say my parents hadn’t hesitated to pull out the edible glitter.

“Maybe no glitter this time?” Tore offered.

Skylar offered him a sad look. “What?” she asked. “Why no glitter?”

“Glitter. Glitter is happening,” Caedmon assured her.

“Crap.”

A familiar voice and the sudden sound of a car door shutting had me looking over to the street where three dark SUVs pulled up. Breaking away from my family, I waved to Ruby as she began to unload her kids from the car. They’d been in town and staying with us for the past three days, but they’d gone to buy gifts and I’d texted her to meet us here—I could tell by all their faces that they needed a break. Luckily, the park was the perfect place for that.

For the first time in years, I’d managed to get my shopping done before anyone got into town, but that had been an absolute fluke because I happened to get a shopping bug and went on a little spree for all of our kids’ gifts before deciding I would get a snow globe for everyone else. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought of doing that every year, but I had a feeling it was a tradition that would carry forward. After all, we had an entire room of snow globes at our house that everyone loved...so now they would have one of their own.

“Finally.” My eldest, Isabella, appeared next to me, crossing her arms in a bit of a sassy fashion. “Michael said he would be able to hang all day—clearly that wasn’t true.”

In some ways our eldest was the most interesting mixture of my mates because she had so many unique features and characteristics, from her pink hair to the bright orange eyes that she totally got from Ryder. She was stunning, all of my daughters were, but watching her grow into a confident girl was absolutely amazing. Especially once she’d started to have strong opinions on things, like Ruby’s son, Michael. Their oldest and her best friend—she very much had an opinion on him.

And that opinion was that he wasn’t around enough to hang out with her. He was in total agreement with her, and I couldn’t wait until he suggested they move from France to London. I knew it was eventually going to happen; Ruby and I joked around it all the time.

“I know, I know—I didn’t realize it would take forever,” he grunted. “I’m here now though.”

Isabella scoffed but took his hand and dragged him towards the playset as Ruby reached me, her hand on her baby bump—her little girl only a few months away from being born. I think she was planning on it being their last because with two boys—one Isabella’s age and one Penelope’s age—who

had such intense magic, she'd mentioned several times now being done, and I totally got it. It felt like life was only getting busier.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as her mates walked with their younger son Alec to the playset. We walked a bit slower because I could tell Ruby was tired.

"I shouldn't have been on my feet that long," she admitted. "That was a lot."

A sudden cry had me looking up to see Julian adjusting Louis in his front carrier as Ryder tried to appease our six-month-old son. I nearly smiled at their slightly panicked expressions because after four kids, they still didn't like it when any of them cried, even if it was somewhat inevitable. I mean, he was literally six months old.

"Want me to take him?" I asked Julian. He shook his head, Ryder finally managing to soothe him. Knowing they had it more than under control, I sat down next to Ruby on a cement bench after brushing the snow off of it and watched our kids run around the play equipment, loving the laughter that filled the air.

"I don't think I'm going to go back to work this time," Ruby said softly. She was watching the playground, thoughtful. "I don't know what I want to do, but trying to have a normal job isn't working for me. I want to be home more often."

"You could start your own business; you know I would love to work together," I said, though I didn't think her answer would change—I'd made the same offer many times before. Starting a business was one of the ventures I was more comfortable with, our family now having six or seven of them under our belt, along with real estate investments.

It had happened mostly by accident, but between wanting to be home and spend time together while also wanting to keep ourselves busy with something we loved...the idea of not only starting our own business ventures but financing others made a lot of sense. Between Caedmon and Ryder on the finance end and Tore's graphic design skills, the six of us had been more than successful, and it was something I was really proud of.

Especially because two of the businesses had been my idea. The first had been a sneaker collection embellished with hand-drawn images of my own designs but with empty space for the owners to draw their own artwork as well. The second had been my own line of snow globes that weren't just winter themed. From beachy ones inspired by our honeymoon to the cherry

blossom spring-centered one inspired by the time of year they'd proposed to me nearly eight years ago, it had been a really fun project.

I completely understood what Ruby was saying, though, because even I had taken a step back from all of that, especially with only two of our kids being in school right now.

"I wouldn't even know where to start," Ruby admitted, "but maybe. I also was thinking of applying to work with the ambassadors and council."

"Really?" I asked, turning to face her. It made sense—I mean, one of her husbands was the heir to the shadowlands—but she'd never mentioned an interest in it before.

Following the guardians' correction of the balance, a program had been set up between the shadowlands, divine realm, and Earth to create a council to handle any large-scale problems or societal development issues. I'd served on the council on occasion, so I knew that Ruby would be really good at it, helping to make those hard decisions and to come up with ideas to further the supernatural community.

"I just want to feel like I'm helping more," she said. "We've already come so far, but I know it can get better...and eventually the humans need to know."

It was true; it would make things far easier.

"Talking about humans..." Ryder sat down next to me. "Sorry to interrupt, but Michael and Isabella just ran into someone from her class and they're arguing. I have no problem intercepting but the kid happens to be that boy from her class I don't like."

Crap.

Standing up, I made my way around the bend of the play equipment to find Michael standing in front of Isabella protectively.

"You're always doing this—always!" she said, her voice nearly a shriek. "Just leave me alone if you're going to be mean."

The human boy in question—Travis—was an interesting kid. He wasn't a bad kid, but he argued a lot with my daughter, and I had a feeling I knew why—my daughter hated it. She'd even wanted to be his friend at first, but after half a year in school together, she came home almost every day upset about him. And it was clear Michael knew.

"Then get out of my park. I live right across the street," he said, his eyes narrowed on Michael. "No need for you to be here."

"She can be here if she wants," Michael countered as I saw a flash of

magic surround him and Isabella. It was only for a moment, but it was enough for me to step in. While I loved the bond they had, very close knit and like actual siblings, I didn't want this to escalate—especially in front of a human child.

“Everything okay?”

“Hello.” Travis offered a polite smile. “Everything is totally fine.”

I had a feeling it was a lie he uttered to his parents often. His mom was never around, and his dad was a total piece of work, so I couldn't help but feel a stab of sympathy for him.

“Clearly not.” My daughter crossed her arms, looking hurt.

“Whatever.” Travis shook his head and walked away, towards where his dad sat with some woman I didn't recognize, not paying attention to his son in the least. Sighing, I looked down at Isabella, who was telling Michael that he wasn't worth getting mad over. I wasn't sure Ruby's son agreed, though.

“Maybe it's better we head out soon,” I suggested to Julian as he appeared next to me, running a hand over my waist. “I can tell Ruby is tired too.”

Luckily, everyone seemed in agreement because moments later our kids were piling back into their SUVs with Julian and Ryder to accompany them back to the house, the rest of us choosing to stroll back down Main Street.

If I thought I'd loved the house when I first visited, it was nothing after having lived in it for years now. From the greenhouse up top to all the personalized touches we'd added throughout the years, down to the crayon on the walls from our kids, it was my true home. My true center. We traveled a lot as a family, but nothing would ever be better than being home with my mates and kids.

It was also a large enough property to fit everyone during the holidays, which I loved. And as our kids got older we would need more and more space, especially as they came into their lykos and kitsune forms. Already Isabella had shifted, and it had been both shocking and more than a bit awesome.

That day I'd been working on my own magic with my dad out in the back yard, finally taking the time to learn more extensively what I could do—what I was working with outside of what came naturally to me. Isabella had been outside playing with her toys, and something about the magic I was using had prompted her to shift—out of freakin' nowhere.

One minute my daughter had been standing there, and the next there was

a pink and blue wolf with little flames coming off of her. I still had no idea what lykos normally looked like—I hadn't been able to find a cohesive image through all my research—but I had to assume her form was normal...well, except for maybe the flames? I didn't know.

My dad had been thrilled, and I was glad he was there because it had taken nearly an hour to coax her back into her human form. Since then she'd shifted a few times more but hadn't fully gotten the hang of it, her shifts usually prompted by someone else's magic rather than her own ability to control it. Which worried me with school...after all, the humans might freak out if a wolf appeared in the classroom. I nearly winced, imagining how scared she would be if that happened.

We would have to keep tabs on it, but I hoped to keep them in school instead of homeschooling. If only the humans knew, it would make everything far, far easier. Already kids had started to comment on her hair and eye color, accusing her of wearing contacts or dying her hair. While the teacher mitigated it on the whole, I knew it bothered her to feel different.

Something I more than empathized with—I'd felt similar growing up in the Whitepaw Pack.

"What are you thinking about, *mon ange*?" Caedmon asked, wrapping an arm around me. Dakota and Tore walked behind us, deep in conversation.

"Just Isabella shifting and the possibility of it happening in school."

Caedmon nodded in understanding. "You know they really don't tell you that no matter how old they get, you're constantly worried about your kids. I don't think that will ever go away."

"No, probably not," I mused, leaning into him.

My mates were far more relaxed about parenting now than they had been at first. In fact, when I first told them I was pregnant on our honeymoon, I had worried about a few of their reactions. Julian, Tore, and Dakota had all been thrilled. Tore in particular had *really* been excited, so animated and happy, and Dakota had looked so proud of himself—as if he had been freakin' solely responsible! I still loved his reaction though. Julian had been unbearably sweet and talked for the first few weeks about how excited he was about this new part of our life. And then, when he'd first seen Isabella he had even teared up, causing me to cry of course.

But their reactions weren't the ones I'd been worried about. I had, however, worried about Ryder and Caedmon. The first had immediately gone into 'what do we need' mode and ordered everything I could possibly want or

need for my pregnancy before calling and arranging for the best possible doctors he could find. The man didn't rest for nearly three weeks until everything was exactly sorted how he wanted it, and even then, until he saw the first ultrasound and heard the baby's heartbeat, he'd been an anxious mess.

Then there was Caedmon. He had been both so incredibly happy and extremely worried—terrified of messing up because of how horrible his own father had been. It had taken a while, but I think I'd managed to convince him before the birth of our daughter that the idea of him being anything like that man was preposterous. But once he actually held Isabella? It was clear that Caedmon was a natural at parenting. All my mates were amazing fathers, but over the years he had turned out to be a constant source of comfort and understanding for our kids. I think they came to all of us for different things at different times in their lives, but if someone was upset or crying, they almost always ended up in Caedmon's arms.

I knew he understood what an amazing father he was now, but it had taken time.

One element I don't think any of them ever got used to though was me being pregnant. In fact, I think all of them both hated and loved it. Loved it because we were expanding our family and they were more than a bit possessive over me, but hated it because naturally I spent a large amount of my pregnancy uncomfortable. I mean, considering how large they were and how short I was...well, I was just glad I had three daughters, because our son had been over ten pounds when he was born.

That hadn't been very fun, to put it mildly, but it had been completely worth it. I wasn't sure if I wanted more kids in the future, but with the birth of our son, there had been something that had settled in me that told me our family was complete. I planned on listening to that unless we decided we wanted something else as a family.

As we turned on our block, an SUV pulled into the driveway in the distance and disappeared. I knew they had made it back, but I had a feeling a few of our other guests may have arrived.

"Misty?" I called out as a streak of blue darted towards me. I bent down and immediately swept her up as she licked my face and began to purr. How the heck had she gotten out?

"That's my bad!" Aanya's voice echoed down the block as she flashed me an apologetic smile. "Sawyer let him out—he kept saying 'kitty go

play.’”

I couldn't help but laugh because if that wasn't a one-and-a-half-year-old I didn't know what was. Aanya's son Sawyer was absolutely adorable and so incredibly smart. I was excited to see his cute little face light up when he saw the little snow globe I got him. Plastic, of course—I had avoided getting glass for any of the kids.

Aanya and her mates still lived stateside, so we didn't get to see them as much as I wanted. But the minute I gave her a hug, I recognized that it didn't matter if we saw each other once a year or every day—we talked enough and had a close enough friendship that time didn't make a difference. Plus, I knew how busy the four of them were.

Especially now that Aanya and her mates were running SFU.

That had been a surprising decision, but she'd explained it so simply to me that I couldn't deny it made sense. She loved SFU, and she wanted to be in charge of an institution that she knew could be amazing—for our kids and any other kids like ours. So now, three years into it, she was the president of SFU and the school had gotten academic recognition each and every year, becoming one of the best schools in the country, competing alongside human-run universities.

It was no longer just there to have people meet their mates—it was the real deal.

As the group of us went inside and I scooped up Sawyer, giving him a snuggle and hug hello, I realized that everyone *had* arrived. Walking into the large parlor, I couldn't help but smile. All of our kids. My mates. Our friends. Our families—including my parents talking to Dakota's father and sister—were all sitting around talking and laughing as holiday music played from the sound system in the corner. The large windows were open, and snowflakes swirled down from the sky as the fireplace crackled in the center of the room.

It was perfect—my very own snow globe—and I wanted to capture the moment forever. But I didn't need to, because this was our reality and my home. This wasn't going anywhere.

I'd found my place in the world, and I wasn't letting it go.

The End

AUTHOR NOTE

Ravens,

When I began writing Effie's story, I had absolutely no idea how much I would fall in love with these characters. I feel absolutely honored and lucky to give them the ending they deserve.

M. Sinclair

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M. SINCLAIR

USA Today Bestselling Author

M. Sinclair is a Chicago native, parent to 3 cats, and can be found writing almost every moment of the day. Despite being new to publishing, M. Sinclair has been writing for nearly 10 years now. Currently in love with the Reverse Harem genre, she plans to publish an array of works that are considered romance, suspense, and horror within the year. M. Sinclair lives by the notion that there is enough room for all types of heroines in this world, and being saved is as important as saving others. If you love fantasy romance, obsessive possessive alpha males, and tough FMCs, then M. Sinclair is for you!

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