



MAKE ME

A UNITAM REALM BOOK

SUNNY HART

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CONTENTS

1. [Description](#)
2. [Author's Note](#)
 - [Chapter One](#)
 - [Chapter Two](#)
 - [Chapter Three](#)
 - [Chapter Four](#)
 - [Chapter Five](#)
 - [Chapter Six](#)
 - [Chapter Seven](#)
 - [Chapter Eight](#)
 - [Chapter Nine](#)
 - [Chapter Ten](#)
 - [Chapter Eleven](#)
 - [Chapter Twelve](#)
 - [Chapter Thirteen](#)
 - [Chapter Fourteen](#)
 - [Chapter Fifteen](#)
 - [Chapter Sixteen](#)
 - [Chapter Seventeen](#)
 - [Chapter Eighteen](#)
 - [Chapter Nineteen](#)
 - [Chapter Twenty](#)
 - [Chapter Twenty-One](#)
 - [Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
 - [Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
 - [Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
 - [Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
 - [Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
3. [Acknowledgements](#)
4. [Other Books by the Author](#)
 5. [About the Author](#)

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DESCRIPTION



In a time when the Unitam Realm teeters on the brink, Bethany stands at the crossroads of duty and desire. Her best friend, Claire, is facing a long road to recovery while she tries to rebuild a fragile Realm. But before she can step up and lead, chaos breaks out and half the prisoners they captured escape. Bethany is tasked to find them along with two men who make her life heaven and hell. Cody Clawmoon and Zack Ashcraft.

HER LIONESS CLAIMED both of these men as her mates, but she's not allowed to have them. She's the Alpha Heir to her pride, and the Realm still requires a leader's blessing for an intermixed mating. Her mother's first, second, and third priorities are creating a strong pride and she couldn't care less about what Bethany's lioness wants.

THE LIES BINDING the Unitam Realm are beginning to crumble, and Bethany must navigate the treacherous waters of politics, power, and passion, as her choices not only risk the wrath of her mother but could also unravel the very fabric of the Realm. Will she choose forbidden love, risking everything, or will the unraveling secrets of her world destroy her chance at happiness?

"MAKE ME" is the final installment in the Unitam Realm series and should be read after the first four books. It is a MMFM with a HEA.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Thank you so much for reading my Unitam Realm series! This is the fifth book in the series and will follow Bethany's story and will conclude the Unitam Realm series. Unlike the previous books, this book will jump around a bit on timeline to help explain how Bethany, Cody, and Zack got to where they are when Claire's story starts. I'm so excited to share this story with you and I know you all are excited to read it as well as you've told me how much you loved Bethany in the earlier books. I will also say that this story started as a 10,000 word novella and ended as a 60,000+ word book as Bethany demanded her time in the spotlight. Enjoy and as always, if you catch any mistakes, please let me know by emailing me at sunnyhartauthor@gmail.com

CHAPTER ONE

BETHANY

Age 20.

Late summer/early fall

After battle in Beyond Her Sight

“Bethany.”

She still wasn't used to seeing Claire's sightless eyes. Even though she hadn't had her sight very long, Claire's eyes had deepened into a sky blue over the last few months. Now they were so pale, you could hardly tell they were blue at all.

“Yes?”

Bethany was headed back to the pride lands. To say the last few weeks had been a lot was an understatement. Especially when she was navigating the two added complications that waited for her twenty yards away. She waved Cody and Zack

towards the portal on the Fae lands and headed back towards Claire.

She would rather have started tracking the escaped prisoners right away, but her mom would have kittens if she just disappeared after the battle. Instead, they were going to rely on their new “Ambassadors” titles to get their parents to not cause a huge fuss. Well, Alpha Bryson, Cody’s father, probably wouldn’t throw a huge fuss, but Bethany’s mom was not going to like it. Especially because she would be traveling with Cody and Zack.

She bit back a growl of frustration. She glanced over her shoulder to see that the guys hadn’t moved. She should have never had sex with them. Sex always complicated things. Well, not always, but sex with her fated shifter mate and the wizard her lioness couldn’t get enough of definitely complicated things. She had fought the mate pull for years. Keeping her lioness in check hadn’t been easy, but it had been necessary. Giving into a physical relationship without mating them had the pull intensifying instead of easing like Bethany had expected. And she had only given in a couple of times.

When she had turned eighteen and her lioness had demanded Cody was her mate, Bethany had run to her mom for help. Intermixed matings were not only frowned upon, but they were also rare. Instead of help, though, her mom forbade her from telling Cody they were mates, insisting that the pride and the Realm would never accept it. And she hadn’t been wrong. Intermixed matings weren’t just frowned on by the Realm. After the Great War, they were forbidden as the wr had called every loyalty into question.

Not that it was worth it, in Bethany’s opinion. As she and her friends had discovered, the Great War was built on lies. How many other things had they taken for granted? So many things they thought were true were built on lies. It didn’t really matter, though. The Realm was set in their ways, and her mates were firmly out of her reach. Both men were way too attractive for their own good. But she had succumbed to the pull this summer at the Summer Solstice celebration at Brandlevine in the only way she could let herself. Then again

at the Dragon Mountains. Then again at the Fae Lands while they waited for Claire to go through the Traditio.

Okay, so she had given in a lot.

But it had to end now. All she was doing was setting them up for heartbreak later. Her pride would never accept a non-shifter mate, let alone a wolf shifter mate. Cats were a bunch of elitist snobs. Instead, Bethany was getting pressure to take a consort, or an arranged partner, before she took over the pride. But she wasn't ready to let them go just yet. Maybe that's why she had volunteered the three of them to go find the escaped prisoners.

"Bethany." Claire's voice was amused.

Bethany blushed. She had been lost in thought, staring at Cody and Zack. In her defense, it had been a busy few weeks. They had gone with Claire to the Fae lands to look for more information about her father and discover the clues her mother had left her. During which, Roland and Vanya and the rest of their traitorous followers attacked the Fae barrier, searching for the last ingredient to build their ultimate weapon, which turned out to be Claire.

"Sorry." Bethany whipped around. "Was just thinking about the escaped prisoners."

Claire hummed, not convinced. Her light blue eyes seemed amused, even if she couldn't see out of them. Claire had sacrificed her sight to defeat the traitors and had only woken up a few days ago before the Fae had sent word that her father was waking.

"What can I do for you, Queenie?" Bethany teased, trying to get Claire's mind off it. She hated hiding things from her friends, but what was left to say?

"Stop that." Claire rolled her eyes. "You know I hate that title."

"I know. I hate to tell you this, but it's inevitable."

Claire was already Queen of the Elves and Fae, but in the aftermath of the battle and the destruction of the Council, Bethany had heard rumblings that she should become Queen

of the Realm. Something that Claire was going to hate for sure, but that would be why she would be the best person for the job.

“The Realm is changing,” Claire mused. “In more ways than one.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you insist on calling me Queenie, then I feel like it’s my duty to tell you that if you want to choose Cody and Zack, I would support you.”

Fuck.

Bethany didn’t intentionally hide it from her friends, but she’d also tried not to broadcast it. “I don’t know what you mean. Choose them for my team?”

Claire smacked her arm with an amazing degree of accuracy for a blind person. “Don’t play dumb,” she chided. “I’ve let you avoid the subject way too long. I know you feel things for them. I also know about your pride and the way they look at things. I’m saying that if you want them, choose them. We’ll back your decision and support you either way. You would have my blessing.”

Bethany’s heart warmed. She didn’t know what she would do without her friends. “I appreciate that, but you know how the pride is. You need unity among the groups if you’re going to rule.”

“If you don’t choose your mates because of that, I will never forgive you.”

Bethany’s eyes widened.

“Of course I know they’re your mates. You were the one who encouraged me to go after mine; well, now I’m encouraging you to go after yours. Don’t let the lies *they* spun prevent you from choosing them.”

“It’s not that easy,” Bethany said, her shoulders slumping.

And it wasn’t. Even if Claire gave her blessing, it would cause too much unrest among the pride and pack, and they were two of Claire’s biggest allies right now. Claire needed them, and

Bethany wouldn't risk that because of a fantasy she really needed to let go of.

"As you like to say, 'bullshit,'" Claire said.

Bethany couldn't help but laugh. "I'll think about it."

Claire hummed but let it go. She threw her arms around Bethany's neck. "You'd better. Now go. And be safe, please."

Bethany hugged her back tightly. "I will. You'd better be safe, too. No more heroics or sacrificing yourself. My heart can't take it."

Seeing Claire's lifeless body on the battlefield was still seared into Bethany's brain. The fact that the magic it had taken to destroy the ultimate weapon had only taken her sight and not her life was a miracle by a fluke of intention.

"I think my Triad's about to put me in a magical bubble," Claire said, her lips quirking.

"Good, they need to." Bethany said. She reluctantly let Claire go and backed away.

"Be careful," Claire said again.

"We will," Bethany promised.

She turned and jogged towards Cody and Zack. "I am perfectly capable of making it to the portal myself." She sighed as she narrowed her eyes at them.

Ever since they'd started sleeping together, they had been treating her differently. Like she was fragile. Like they were getting attached. None of them could afford to get attached. And she was not fragile; she was a badass Alpha Heir.

"We didn't mind waiting," Zack said with his sweet smile. It melted through her annoyance. Her wizard had that charming ability to make Bethany forget all the problems they were facing. "Holly and her mates are headed back to the Academy."

Bethany nodded. "Let's go then."

They walked towards the portal.

“Are you sure your parents aren’t going to be mad that you disobeyed the travel order?” Zack asked, eyebrows furrowed.

Bethany and Cody exchanged looks. She didn’t know how it had been for him when he had traveled back, but she definitely had some trouble waiting for her. Not that she would ever tell the guys. Her mom had been willing to listen to her. But the pride’s Delta warriors she had beaten up when she and Cody escaped had been a different story. Hopefully, there would be no welcoming committee when they went through the portal.

“I think now they see it was necessary,” Cody said. “Or, at least, my dad does.”

Bethany could feel Zack’s gaze as they approached the portal. “My mom was fine with it once I explained,” Bethany said simply.

Two Fae guarded the portal as they approached. They kept wary eyes on them but didn’t stop them as Zack activated the portal between the stone columns. Bethany braced herself. Cody and Bethany hadn’t left home on the best of notes, and even if their parents came to their aid, it didn’t mean they were forgiven for how they left.

The clearing on the neutral grounds was empty when they arrived. Bethany let her lioness flood her senses to make sure no one was waiting in the trees for them. It would be just like cats to lay an ambush. Even if she couldn’t sense anyone, she wasn’t going to risk it.

“Cody, take Zack with you,” she said firmly. The pride would not like a wizard wandering around, and she didn’t want to chance his safety. “We’ll meet back here in an hour.”

Cody looked like he wanted to argue, but Bethany strode off before he could say anything. She headed straight to the main meeting hall. Some of the houses had black curtains in their windows, and her stomach panged. They had suffered losses coming to Claire’s aid. She made a mental note to check in on Calen’s family and try to send word to him at the Academy. The cougar shifter had mated a witch and been banished from the pride, but Bethany still tried to keep him updated on his family here.

Thankfully, she made it into the building without interruption. Her mom's door was closed, and Bethany steeled her shoulders and took a deep breath before knocking.

"Come in."

Bethany pushed open the door. Alpha Sadara was sitting at her desk. She was a striking woman. Her sharp face held no softness. Any trace of that had died when Bethany's dad had died of a strange illness when she was younger. Her mom had been left to run the pride alone, and she had done so with a spine of steel and a sharp brain. Her mom had always been the logical one, her brain deep in so much strategy it made Bethany's head spin.

She looked up when Bethany entered. Her long blond hair, so similar to Bethany's, was pulled into a low bun that did nothing to soften her sharp cheekbones. Her golden eyes narrowed. "You're back early."

Her mom had been pissed when Bethany had first reached out from the Fae lands for their aid. But that anger turned to understanding, and—she had to give her mom credit—she'd shown up with the pride's warriors and helped them in battle. It probably had something to do with the grudge her mom held against the former-council member Roland, but she was still grateful. From what Bethany had been able to glean growing up, Roland had slighted her mom in some small way that she never got over. Like a true feline shifter. After the battle, her mom had wanted Bethany to come home, but she'd needed to protect Claire and help with the cleanup. She couldn't imagine her mom was going to be thrilled that Bethany was about to leave again.

"There's been a change of plans."

Bethany explained the prisoner escape and the new task that Claire had asked them to take on as her Ambassadors. Well, Bethany had volunteered them for it, but her mom didn't need to know that. Her mom perked up at the Ambassador title, and Bethany tried not to roll her eyes. Anything that lifted the pride's power and prestige made her mom's eyes light up.

When she finished, she prepared herself for her mom's response.

"How long will you be gone?" Sadara asked.

Bethany wasn't expecting that. She expected her to forbid her from leaving, but maybe the prestige of the Ambassador position was working in her favor.

"I'm not sure. A few weeks, maybe? It depends on who helped the prisoners escape and where they're hiding."

Sadara nodded. "Tell me about this Ambassador position." Her golden eyes gleamed. Called it.

Her mom was a brilliant strategist, but the safety and security of the pride were her first, second, and third priorities in life. She was already strategizing about how to use the Ambassador position, and Bethany hadn't even officially accepted it yet.

"We didn't get a chance to talk a lot about it, but Claire is appointing several Ambassadors to serve as her advisors."

Sadara hummed, eyes glazing over as she thought. Bethany fought not to fidget and mentally ran through the list of reasons she should go. But Sadara surprised her when she smiled.

"I'll put out some feelers to the other shifter groups and see if anyone has noticed anything."

"Really? You don't want me to stay here?"

Bethany didn't want her mom to change her mind, but she was confused and more than a little wary of her mom's easy capitulation. Any time that was not taken up by the Academy, Sadara usually required her to be at the pride. And with the Academy's closure for the foreseeable future, Bethany had been sure her mom was going to order her to stay close to home. But the Ambassador title must hold more weight for her mom than she thought. She wondered if that was Claire's intent when she created it.

"You need to. If you help the Queen with this, she'll owe you a favor for later. The Realm is unstable right now, and we'll

need all the help we can get to ensure the pride comes out on top. A favor from the new Queen will help with that.”

Bethany pitied her mom. Always thinking about ways to get ahead and never having a meaningful connection with anyone. She wanted to tell her that she would do this for Claire because she was her friend, but her mom wouldn't understand that. Worse, she would think Claire was a vulnerability for Bethany because Bethany was displaying emotions. Her mom was stuck in the old ways of thinking that power ruled all, which meant the pride was stuck in the old ways of thinking.

Bethany had a feeling that power was going to be defined differently under Claire, but who knew when the pride and her mom would get on board? Either way, she didn't want to get into it. Not when Claire and her friends needed her. She would find the escaped prisoners for her. She just wished she could escape her duties to the pride, or, at least, escape this version of the pride.

“Okay, I'll pack up and head out,” Bethany said, rising from the chair.

There was a knock on the door. “Message for you, Alpha.” Nik, one of the Deltas, poked his head in. “From the Academy.”

Holly was at the Academy. Was something wrong?

Sadara gestured him in, and he handed her the message and left. Bethany waited and kept her face carefully blank.

“It seems the Queen's other Ambassadors are on their way here,” Sadara said, reading through the message. “They'll be here tomorrow. Come.” She stood up. “We'll reach out to Bryson. We'll need to throw a celebration for them.”

Bethany groaned internally. So much for a quick retreat. But she stood up and followed her mom out the door. Thankfully, Zack was staying with Cody, so he would be fine for the night. Cody could protect him. Then they could head out after the party tomorrow.

Bethany followed Sadara through the pride's territory into the neutral grounds. The trees around her were as familiar to

Bethany as the back of her hand. She had many memories of these woods, including some of her most important ones.

CHAPTER TWO

BETHANY

Age 11

Neutral grounds at the pack and pride land

Her nose twitched.

The afternoon sun beat down through the trees, camouflaging her tawny coat against the bark of the trees at her back. Her whiskers brushed the leaves next to her. Bethany wrinkled her nose. It twitched again.

The first time was normal, but the second time indicated that a sneeze was imminent. She mentally willed her lioness form to keep it in as her prey crept closer. She had been tracking him for the last half hour now, watching his gray pelt slink through the woods, unaware he was being stalked.

Almost there...

Silently, she sprung from the branch and jumped onto the unsuspecting wolf below. He yelped and crumpled to the ground under her. She grabbed the back of his neck between her teeth and gave it a playful shake before springing off of him.

The wolf growled and shifted back to a gangly twelve-year-old boy. “Bethany,” Cody complained, a pair of pants slung on his hips from his shifting charm. “That’s not fair.”

She shifted back as well, her own charm falling against her chest above her tank top. “It is too fair,” she said, hands on her hips. “Just because you can’t climb, doesn’t mean it’s not fair.”

“It is too not fair,” Cody stepped up to her. His recent growth spurt had him towering over her. “You cheated.”

“I did no such thing,” Bethany gasped, clenching her hands into fists. Her lioness growled in her chest. “If you didn’t want me climbing trees, you should have said it in the rules before we started the game.”

“That’s exactly what a cheater...”

Bethany tackled him, and they fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs. “You take that back!” She rubbed his cheek in the dirt. “I am not a cheater!”

He grappled with her, flipping her over and pinning her to the ground with both his hands on her shoulders. “Fine, fine, you little hellcat. You’re not a cheater. But next time, no fucking trees.”

“Oooo! You said a bad word!” Bethany teased him.

Cody had just turned twelve to her eleven, a fact he had teased her about for months. But she turned twelve next week, and they would be back to the same age again.

He rolled his eyes as he got off her, sprawling next to her on the ground. “So what? Are you going to tattle?”

“Hmmm.” Bethany pretended to think about it. “What’s it worth it to you if I don’t?”

Cody groaned. Her gaze caught on the healing cut on his eyebrow, and she decided to take it easy on him. She shoved

him playfully on the shoulder. “You owe me a favor later.”

“I’m sure you’ll collect.” He grinned at her, then looked back up at the sky.

The land they were lying on had just been designated neutral ground for the pack and pride that bordered it. Even though both their grandparents had arranged an alliance decades earlier, the peace was still uneasy; shifters’ hot tempers often got the best of them. Bethany bet that she and Cody were the only ones who used the land since cats were snobby and wolves were brutish. Neither group saw any reason to use it when they had their own lands already.

Despite all of that, her and Cody’s parents still encouraged their friendship. At first, they had grumbled about being forced together but soon realized that it was actually kind of nice. As heirs to their respective shifter groups, there was a pressure on their shoulders that the other kids didn’t understand. Unlike the other shifter kids, these hours they got to play were few and far between. Starting at ten, their parents had started training them to take over the pack and pride one day. There were extra lessons at school and extra training sessions by the Deltas. The rare free afternoons they got, they usually spent playing together instead of with the other shifter kids.

The other cat shifters wouldn’t play with her the way Cody did. Especially not the males, as they wanted to ‘impress’ her instead. She wrinkled her nose. Alonzo was one of the worst. He was a tiger shifter who was related to one of the council members and thought his scat didn’t stink, as her mother would say.

Cody had different problems. The wolf shifters his age were constantly challenging his dominance, even in simple games like tag. Recently, he had been showing up to their hangout with more and more cuts and bruises, like the one adorning his eyebrow.

He caught her staring at it again. “Stop worrying, you worrywort.”

“I was just staring at how ugly your face was,” she said primly.

“Yours is uglier!”

“You take that back!”

She tackled him again. He threw her off and shifted into his wolf. He barked at her playfully. She shifted into her lioness and leaped at him. He batted her away and dipped into a play bow. He barked at her again, and she hissed at him before leaping.

They tussled under the trees for the next hour before collapsing in a pile for a nap. One day, when they turned eighteen, they would both find mates, then, when they turned twenty-two, they'd take over as Alphas. It was a destiny that was written in the stars, whether they wanted the responsibilities or not. But today, they were just two best friends asleep under the trees.

CHAPTER THREE

CODY

Age 18

Shifter lands

His feet moved silently down the familiar path. Cody knew the trees lining the path better than he knew his own packmates. A fact he was sure his dad would be thrilled about if he knew. He rolled his eyes.

He glanced behind him, sure he would see the man himself, but the coast was clear. He had just escaped from his dad's office and yet another lecture about all the ways Cody could take more responsibility for the pack. He'd turned eighteen today, and his dad had wasted no time adding to the responsibilities already heaped on Cody's shoulders.

Cody had always known what was expected of him as Alpha Heir. He had been in training since he was ten years old and

had been sitting in on strategy meetings since he was fifteen. While his dad had no plans on giving up leadership for a few decades, the Great War had caused many leadership shifts, and Alpha Bryson was determined Cody would be ready to lead at any time.

But Cody didn't want to deal with all that right now, and out here in the woods, he didn't have to. Not when the other person waiting at the end of the path knew exactly what it was like to carry that weight and didn't judge him for it.

"Happy Birthday, wolf-boy!" Bethany called out as he entered the clearing.

She held a small paper bag with the most delicious scent of raspberry and cream coming from it. His wolf surged inside him, clawing his way out with a ferocity that had Cody stumbling.

"Glad to see that turning eighteen hasn't automatically made you graceful," Bethany teased.

He rolled his eyes at her, but the words caught in his throat. Because he had just gotten another whiff of that sweet raspberries and cream scent, and it wasn't coming from the bag.

Mate! His wolf practically pranced around inside him. *Mate!*

The word nearly caused him to stumble again. Bethany was his mate? His best friend was his mate? How was that possible? His wolf howled in his head. His wolf was sure Bethany was his.

His fangs pierced the inside of his mouth as his wolf fought to shift to go to his mate. He appeased him by striding towards Bethany and pulling her into a big bear hug.

She stiffened against him and then relaxed hesitantly.

"Hey, you big oaf, I'm only allowing this because it's your birthday. You know how I feel about the touching!"

Bethany's mom and pride leader, Alpha Sadara, was a stern woman. Growing up, he and Bethany would always joke about which one of their parents was more of a hardass. Her mom

had a spine of steel and didn't allow any emotion through her blank mask. He had never seen her give Bethany any kind of affection, and now it made Bethany twitchy when she received it.

But more importantly, Bethany didn't react to the hug at all, other than to express her usual displeasure of being touched. *She didn't react to him like a mate.* Did she not feel it?

He pulled back and looked down at her. By the Realm, she was beautiful. She had always been a pretty girl, but she had grown into a beautiful woman. Cody hadn't noticed it until a year ago and had buried his attraction at the time. Bethany was his best friend and the one person in the Realm who understood him. And now the beautiful lioness was his mate. But how?

"What?" she asked. "Do I have food on my face?"

He must have been staring at her without saying anything for too long.

"No," Cody said. "Do you feel anything?"

"Like emotions? Did turning eighteen make you sappy?"

She didn't feel anything. Ignoring his wolf howling in his head, Cody thought quickly. It's possible that his wolf was wrong, but from the incessant howling, he likely wasn't. Did cats discover their mates differently? He had never really asked anyone before; he'd assumed his mate, if he found one, would be a wolf. But his wolf was insistent that Bethany was his mate. But Bethany didn't seem to feel the mate bond. Fuck, both of them were heirs to their future shifter groups. How was that going to work? But maybe it was still a fluke.

His wolf continued howling in his head, and he held in his wince. His dad would know. He needed to talk to his dad.

"Hello?" Bethany waved a hand in front of his face. "Is Cody in there?"

He couldn't tell her anything. Not until he was sure. "I just remembered something. I have to go."

"Go?" Bethany's brow wrinkled up. "But I brought scones."

She held up the bag, and now that Cody was closer, he could smell the blueberry scones in there. Cody loved scones, especially the ones that the pride's cook made, but if he didn't get out of here right now, he was going to have Bethany on the ground with his teeth buried in her neck and very likely cause an all-out war between the pack and pride. He needed to go. Now.

"I know. I'm sorry, but I need to go. I forgot something."

"That eager to get away? You can't stay even for a little bit?" The light in her eyes faded a touch.

Cody stumbled over his words, trying to come up with an excuse. "I forgot... Mom wanted me to meet some people for lunch..."

"Some people or some female wolves?"

Rumors flew fast across the border, and Bethany's claws had come out to play. Regardless of whether she felt the mate bond, her lioness clearly felt something and was getting possessive. Cody stifled the purr in his throat at her possessiveness.

"No, hellcat, it's not like that." Cody tried to explain, but in her typical hothead fashion, Bethany was hearing none of it.

"No, it's fine. You're a hotshot eighteen-year-old Alpha Heir now. You're too good for our hangouts anymore." Her words seemed teasing, but there was a bite to her tone.

"No, that's not..." He caught her arm and then immediately dropped it when his wolf wanted to yank her to him. For the Realm's sake!

"No, it's fine," Bethany repeated, her tone stilted, and her earlier sass gone. "Here." She thrust the bag of scones at his chest. "Happy Birthday."

His wolf about forced a shift as Bethany walked away from him, and he stumbled sideways, holding her in by sheer willpower alone.

We just have to talk to the Alpha about this, he promised his wolf. We just have to talk to the Alpha and then we can go to

her.

That calmed his wolf down enough that he was able to turn and stumble back to the pack lands. He hoped Peter and his friends weren't out right now. Not because he wasn't confident in his abilities to win a fight. With age and the aggressive training his father had put him in, he was a formidable opponent and had recently begun winning matches against Trenton, his father's Beta, but if Peter and his friends tried to stop him today, he might actually lose control. His father didn't discourage the dominance fights, but he would frown upon him killing a packmate with 'no reason.'

Luckily, no one bothered him, and he strode quickly across the pack commons and into the main house. His wolf had tunnel vision, forgetting to knock as he opened the door to his father's office. His father's warning growl finally got through to his wolf. He froze in his tracks and shook his head, shaking off the fuzziness as his wolf fought him to go back to his mate.

"Son, what is it?" His father looked at him, concerned. He got up from his desk and rounded the corner.

Cody's wolf growled, and his father's wolf answered, low and threatening.

"Sorry," Cody gasped. "I don't know what's gotten into him."

"It's okay." His father placed a hand on his shoulder and guided him to the chair. "What happened?"

Cody sunk into the seat and dropped his head in his hands. "Bethany's my mate," he mumbled.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" his dad asked sharply.

Cody looked up. "Bethany's my mate."

His father's face was frozen, but he watched as the concern slipped away until only the Alpha mask remained. "You're mistaken."

"I'm not. My wolf practically shifted and claimed her on sight. It's exactly how you said it would be if I met my mate. But she didn't react. Do cats recognize their mates differently?"

His father's face didn't change. "Even if your wolf is claiming her, you can't mate her. You have responsibilities, and the pack will never accept it."

"*She's mine!*" Cody leaped to his feet, his wolf growling out the words.

"*Sit down!*" The force of the alpha command slammed into him, and his knees buckled.

"Sorry," Cody rasped. "But she's mine, Dad."

"She can't be yours. You're the Alpha Heir to the pack, and she's the Alpha Heir to the pride. Besides, intermixed matings are forbidden."

His father stood up and began pacing behind the desk. His face was a cold mask as he delivered the words that felt like punches to Cody's gut. His father's own wolf was at the surface, his muscles seeming to bulk before his eyes as he paced behind his desk.

"It isn't when we have our leaders' blessing," Cody shot back, his wolf clawing at his insides at the thought of not being with his mate. "I have a fated mate! You and Mom always talked about it being the greatest thing in the world, and I have one."

"You can't mate with her. I won't allow it."

"You won't allow it? You have no right. *She's my mate.*" Cody's voice threatened to break, but he stayed strong.

"She's not your anything right now," his dad yelled back. "And if you mate her, you risk the pack. They'll never accept a cat as Luna, and she has her own pride to think about. Think with your head here. We can't risk the pack like that."

"So what do you want me to do?" Cody cried out. "I won't abandon her."

"No, you can't do that." His father had a calculating look on his face as he walked back behind his desk, his eyes shining with his wolf. Cody's own wolf rose at the show of dominance. "No, you can't do that, or you'll risk going feral if you can't control your wolf; but you also can't mate her."

“I won’t string her along.” Cody growled. “She doesn’t deserve that.”

“No, but you can be friends with her while you take a mate from the pack. Your mother is arranging some meetings with eligible female wolves.”

“I won’t disrespect Bethany like that,” Cody said, drawing himself up taller. Claws sprouted from his fingers as he flexed and drew them into fists.

“It won’t be disrespectful because nothing will change. You’ll remain friends with enough contact that your wolf won’t go feral, but you will not mate with her.”

“You can’t keep me from her,” Cody protested. “She’s my fated mate. I have to tell her. She deserves to know.”

His father’s eyes hardened. “I can, and I will.”

“No—”

“You are forbidden from telling anyone, including Bethany, that she is your mate. You will have enough contact with her that you do not go feral, but you are forbidden from mating with her or anyone without my prior approval.”

The Alpha command slammed into Cody. His wolf rose to fight it, and Cody released a howl as he tried to prevent it from taking hold, but it was no use. The command settled onto his wolf, who let out a keening howl as the mate bond muted. Devastation filled his body even as he glared at his father.

“I’ll never forgive you for this,” he snarled at his father, who simply stared at him.

“Maybe not. But one day you’ll understand that Alpha’s do everything for the good of their pack.”

He didn’t want to sit there and listen to anymore of his father’s self-righteous bullshit. He slammed the door to the office so loudly the house shook and stormed down the hallway.

“Cody, whatever is going on?” His mother poked her head out from the sitting room. “Come here, darling. I have people I want you to meet.”

He looked past her at the expectant female wolves she had assembled. Even without his wolf's snarl of revulsion, he had no interest in them. "No thank you, Mom," he gritted out.

He didn't let her reply as he stormed up the stairs into his room. Growling, he kicked the trash can over, sending things clattering everywhere. Fuck, fuck, fuck! He had gone to his dad for advice and instead ended up with an Alpha command that prevented him from claiming his mate. His wolf paced, agitated at the betrayal and agony of being separated from his mate.

A glint of gold from the spilled trash caught his eye. It was an invitation to the Realm's Academy. An invitation he was going to decline because it would take him away from Bethany and the pack, but now... A bit of separation might work out for the best. He pulled the invitation out from the trash and ran his thumb across his fang. Pressing a bloody thumbprint on the word yes on the invitation, he felt the magic take hold. Maybe after four years at the Academy, he would be strong enough to challenge his father and break the Alpha command that separated him from his mate.

CHAPTER FOUR

BETHANY

Age 18

A few months later

The empty clearing stared back at her. Mocking her for her false hope.

She didn't know why she had come to their spot. It wasn't even their spot anymore. She could count on one hand the number of times she had seen Cody in the last four months. And the times she did see him? He was growling more than usual, and her cat had taken it like a challenge, and that led to feeling even more irritation toward him.

She hadn't expected him to completely ditch her after he'd turned eighteen, but he had. Threw away twelve years of friendship like it meant nothing to him. And maybe it had. Maybe she was the one imagining that they had bonded over

shared pressure as the next Heirs and problems that only someone high up in pack politics could understand. He had vented to her about his dad, and she had vented to him about her mom. She thought it had meant something to him. But it clearly hadn't.

Yet for some reason instead of being in a strategy session with her mom right now, she had sneaked away. All she'd thought about during her birthday celebration last night was that he should have been there, and she hated that she was so weak for wanting him there. And that weakness ruled her even now as her feet had carried her to their spot. Maybe the gods were mocking her for her weakness. Her mom would if she knew. *Weakness has no place in our pride*, her mother always said. Her mom considered any form of emotional weakness.

But here she was, anyway.

She sighed as she stared up at the sky, rubbing her chest.

Rustling leaves caught her attention. Someone was walking towards her. A stupid strand of hope sprang up inside her, but she squashed it down. It was probably someone else.

A few seconds later, Cody appeared. Tension in her muscles she didn't even know she had melted away as she took him in. Her cat started purring in her chest. By the Realm, she had missed him, even if he was a butthead. It looked like he had been hitting the training arena. His muscles were larger and more defined, and Bethany hated how her eyes traced them. He looked *good*, like he hadn't abandoned his best friend for four months.

His brown eyes drank her in like he had been thirsty for days. She'd had a growth spurt in the last few months and had filled out and even grown an inch. She looked good, and she knew it, but surely Cody wasn't looking at her like that.

He came to a stop a few feet away, his hands in his pockets as he awkwardly rocked back on his heels. "Happy Birthday, hellcat."

"Don't call me that," Bethany said automatically, but there was no heat behind her words.

“Sorry.” Cody rubbed the back of his head and looked away.

The Alpha Heir was uncharacteristically quiet. Granted, she was the loud one of the two of them, but he usually had more to say. What had happened to them?

“Thank you,” she said quickly. “For the birthday wishes, I mean.”

“Of course.”

The silence grew between them, and Bethany realized she didn’t recognize the man standing before her. It was funny how in four months he had become a stranger. He clearly was working out more. His already large muscles seemed larger, and his handsome face looked like it was carved out of stone. His messy brown hair softened his look, otherwise she would have thought she was looking at a statue. But his appearance wasn’t the only reason she didn’t recognize him. The old him would never have let the silence drag this long. And he would have hugged her. He had always been a hugger.

“How have you been?”

“I got you something.”

They both said at the same time.

“Sorry, you go,” Cody said.

“No, you go,” she said.

“I got you something. For your birthday, I mean. It’s not scones, but I thought you might like it.”

Cody pulled his hand out of his pocket. Gold and green glinted at the end of a fine gold chain. It was a small paw print with a tiny green jewel in the center of it that matched the color of her eyes. Her lioness loved shiny things and was purring as she reached for it.

Their fingers brushed, and she sucked in a gasp as her cat surged inside her. *Mate*. Goosebumps broke out on her skin as she stared at the wolf in front of her. He was her mate? Her best friend was her mate? She couldn’t believe it!

His expression didn't change, and her heart sank. Wolves knew the instant they turned eighteen who their mates were. She had asked around after Cody had started avoiding her, thinking he had found his mate, but he was never seen alone with a girl. Wolves also couldn't avoid claiming their mate, so he definitely would have claimed her if he'd found her. Did he not feel the bond? Was her cat wrong?

Mate. Her cat insisted again, but Bethany shoved her down. He couldn't be her mate. He didn't even flinch when they brushed fingers. Cats found their mates by touching them, but Cody didn't react. He would have claimed her already, so her cat was just delusional. It must be because she hadn't seen Cody in months. Ignoring the snarl her cat gave her, she cupped the necklace in her hand and drew it to her.

"It's so pretty," she said, pretending to examine the necklace more closely.

She wasn't lying. The golden paw print matched the color of her cat's pelt, and the green was a dead ringer for her eyes.

"Thank you." She looked up at Cody, who had an odd expression on his face. He probably wanted to get out of here.

"Of course," he said gruffly, looking away from her.

"I guess you have to get going," she said.

That was his new routine. She would see him for a few minutes and then he would come up with some excuse as to why he had to leave.

He hesitated but nodded. "I should."

"Okay." She took a step back, her cat yowling inside her and fighting her every step of the way. Her cat didn't want him going back to the pack lands for another female to claim, but he couldn't be her mate. Her cat had to be mistaken.

He turned to leave, and her hand shot out to touch his arm. He turned back to her, eyes wide, and she threw her arms around him, squeezing him tightly. Her cat purred inside her. Cody's body was stiff, and his wolf let out a low growl. She stumbled backwards.

“Sorry... I just... Sorry.”

She turned and fled from the clearing. For the Realm’s sake, that was so stupid. She looked desperate and weak, throwing herself like that at him. She didn’t look back, just speed-walked back to the pride lands and found herself standing outside her mom’s office. Maybe her mom would know why her cat was acting like this?

She knocked on the door.

“Come in!”

She looked up when Bethany entered. “Ah, Bethany, what do you need?”

Bethany sank into the seat across from her mom’s desk and paused for a moment. Her mom was bent over some paperwork; the long blond hair that looked so much like Bethany’s was tied in her usual tight bun at the nape of her neck.

“My cat thinks Cody’s my mate,” she blurted.

Her mom’s head snapped up, and her golden eyes narrowed. She got up and closed the door behind Bethany before coming to sit on the desk in front of her. “Repeat that?”

“I think Cody’s my mate. I met him just now, and he gave me... Our fingers touched, and my cat insisted he was my mate.”

Her mom shook her head. “That can’t be possible. Your cat must be mistaken.”

“I don’t think she is.” He might not want her, but her cat hissed at the idea that he wasn’t hers.

“I don’t think you heard me. That *can’t* be possible. You’re the Alpha Heir. You can’t mate with a wolf. The pride will never accept him. And intermixed matings are forbidden.”

“Mom, I know all of that, but I’m telling you, my cat insists he’s my mate.” Bethany’s stomach sank.

She wished she was surprised by her mom’s reaction, but she’d known her mom wouldn’t give her blessing. Intermixed

matings were forbidden, as they destabilized alliances during the Great War because mates could be on the wrong side. Her grandparents, in particular, were against them, as the pride had been directly affected during the Great War. The only exception to the law was if their leader gave their blessing.

Her mom shook her head again. “He’s not. You might think he is, but he’s not. There’s no bigger weakness to the pride than having the wolves’ Alpha Heir as your mate.”

“I don’t think you can strategize this one away,” Bethany said slowly, trying to figure out how to explain this to her mom so she understood. But that was the problem. Her mom didn’t deal in emotions, she dealt in cold logic. “My cat insists he’s my mate. I can’t just ignore that. We can’t just ignore that.”

“We can, and we will. You can’t afford any weaknesses if you are to lead the pride one day, and he’s a big one. Your cat will get over it when you make her understand. You’re in control, not her. You just have to be strong.”

Bethany wanted to argue. She did. But she had never won an argument with her mom in her life. And Cody hadn’t recognized her as a mate, so maybe her cat was wrong. And even if her cat wasn’t wrong, unless her mom gave her blessing, she couldn’t do much about it unless she wanted to challenge her mom for dominance. Sadara had been training Bethany since she was a child; there was no way Bethany would win in that fight. Not that she was really sure she wanted to lead the pride, anyway, but unless she wanted to be exile—which, for a shifter, was a fate that was sometimes worse than death when they were cut off from their pride—she had to fall in line.

“What do I do?” she asked, her body sagging in the chair.

She wanted Cody. For a few brief moments on the way back from their clearing, she had dreamed of what it would be like. But her mom was probably right. She had to be practical. There were too many things in the way.

“Nothing. Well, actually, you can’t change anything. You have to stay friends with the boy. Our alliance is tentative enough without you two having an immature fallout. Can you control

your cat?” Hard gold eyes stared into hers, and Bethany nodded. If she had said no, her mom would make her go through another three months of training, which would be more like torture.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about. You control your cat around him, and no one will be the wiser. Besides, his father tells me he’ll be mated to someone soon, and we can find some eligible matches for you in a few years before you take over the pride.”

It was customary for Alpha Heirs to take over leadership when they were twenty-two. Usually, in familial relationships, parents passed leadership along to their Heirs via a ceremony. In rare cases, it came down to a challenge. Passing over leadership while the Heirs were young allowed the retired alphas to provide guidance to the young leaders. It was a smart system that worked with the shifter groups. But nowhere in there did it say she had to take a consort to lead.

Bethany barely kept in the snarl that her cat threatened to release. She didn’t want anyone else, and she had no doubt eligible matches included every egotistical male cat in the Realm. But it wasn’t worth trying to win the argument. Maybe she could change her mom’s mind later? That was a big maybe, though.

“Fine. Is that all?”

Her mom gave her a long look before nodding. “I don’t think I have to remind you of what’s at stake here. Even if the Great War is over, you need to be thinking about the pride. We can’t risk our standing in the Realm, or we could become a target. The pride is relying on you. Do you understand?”

Bethany jerked her head in a nod, and her mom dismissed her with a wave of her hand.

Bethany kept her movements steady as she exited the office. It wasn’t until she was in the safety of her own room that she shoved her face into a pillow and screamed. When her throat was dry and scratchy, she curled up in a ball on her bed, clutching the pillow to her aching chest.

As much as she hated it, her mom was right. Even if Cody was her mate, which he couldn't be by his lack of reaction to her, they could never be together. He was destined to lead his pack, and she was destined to lead her pride. And despite being two of the only shifter groups in the territory to have an alliance, it wasn't a strong one. Wolves and cats just didn't get along, and her mom and Cody's dad were always smoothing out problems. They would never accept her and Cody being together, even if intermixed matings weren't forbidden after the Great War.

But she didn't think she was strong enough to sit back and watch him parade wolf girls around. Her cat was already shredding her claws against her chest, demanding they go find Cody. A glint of gold on her desk caught her eye. It was an invitation to the Academy. Her mom wanted her to go but ultimately left it up to her, one of the few decisions she got to make. Five months ago, she couldn't have imagined going and leaving Cody behind, but now maybe it was for the best.

Pricking her finger with the tip of a claw, she pressed her print over the *yes* box and watched as the blood shimmered and disappeared. Four years at the Academy sounded like a great escape. Maybe by then her cat would be under control and would give up on this whole mate business.

She pulled out the necklace Cody had given her and eyed it. She should get rid of it, but her cat yowled at the thought. She eyed the thin gold chain. That would snap within a week. She turned to her small jewelry box and fished out a thin strand of leather. She threaded the pendant onto the leather and tied it behind her neck. It was long enough that it would be hidden under most shirts and away from curious eyes. Maybe her cat would accept this small piece of him, because she would never be able to have Cody as a mate.

CHAPTER FIVE

ZACK

Age 20

Late summer/early fall

After battle in Beyond Her Sight

Gold fabric shimmered and danced in the evening twilight. The dress sparkled against the firelight. But it dulled in comparison to the woman who wore it.

Zack took another sip, letting the sweet wine slide down his throat. The sights and taste of the wine threw him back to another bonfire not too long ago. Bethany threw her head back and laughed at something Holly said. The gold dress clung to her like a second skin, highlighting every curve and making her green eyes pop.

As much as he wanted to keep watching her, he let his eyes slide away, instinctively finding Cody in the crowd. The

handsome Alpha Heir was standing at the edge of the crowd, talking to one of Holly's mates. He drank in the sight of him. In black pants and a white linen shirt, Cody had done the bare minimum to dress up, but he still looked good enough to eat with the buttons on his shirt opened to show his tan chest. He felt a distinctively wolf-like growl rumble in his throat as he caught sight of a pair of female wolf shifters eyeing Cody with interest.

He forced his eyes away. He had to be careful not to let his eyes linger too long. Not in a crowd of observant shifters. Tensions between witches and shifters were always high. The last thing he needed to do was display his interest for both Bethany and Cody openly. It would be one thing if they were regular shifters, but both were Alpha Heirs to their respective groups, and there was more at stake in the eyes of the Realm. The Council's ban on intermixed relationships in the Realm was a direct consequence of events during the Great War. The Great War itself was ignited by a fabricated lie but that didn't mean the rest of the Realm would accept an intermixed relationship between the two Alpha Heirs and the wizard they met at the Academy.

Something bumped into his elbow.

"Oops! Sorry." A very drunk wolf shifter swayed next to him, the contents of his cup sloshing onto the ground. "Oh hey, you're that wizard who's *friends* with our Alpha Heir. And the pride's Alpha Heir."

Zack didn't like the way the shifter said friends. Same-sex couples weren't as rare as intermixed mates, but they were treated almost the same. Zack would shout from the rooftops that Cody and Bethany were his if he could. Cody would as well, if he could break the Alpha Command his father had put on him. Bethany, on the other hand... Well, he couldn't tell where she stood. Her mom followed the law to the letter about intermixed matings and had never given her blessing for one, from what Zack knew, but it was hard to tell where Bethany stood on it. Lately, she seemed to be softening to the idea, but still... He and Cody wanted her, and she had to want them back.

He wasn't going to say any of that to this drunk wolf, though, so he simply took a sip of wine and nodded. "I am."

A few paces away, someone scoffed. His lean frame and mannerisms had Zack guessing he was a cat. "It's bad enough that our Alpha Heir is friends with a *wolf* but a *wizard* too?"

"And I bet you think she would be better off hanging out with you?" Zack asked, bemused.

The cat shifter's face darkened. "Listen here, *wizard*. Beth is my intended consort, and she will not be sullyng herself with a magic user and a dog."

The drunk wolf next to him burst out laughing. "Alonzo, you wish she was your consort. I heard Alpha Sadara hasn't arranged anything yet."

"It's only a matter of time," Alonzo snapped at him.

"You think Alpha Sadara would let you be her heir's consort when you're related to that traitor, Roland?"

Alonzo snarled and stepped closer. Zack stiffened. He could hold his own, but if Alonzo shifted, and others got involved, that could potentially ruin relations between the pack and pride. Cody had told him how strained they were on a good day.

"What is going on here?"

Zack relaxed as Cody's voice came over his shoulder. Cody stopped next to him and took in the group with a keen eye. Cody's happy-go-lucky personality made people underestimate him, but the eyes that took in this scene were all alpha.

"Sampson, get out of here and get some water," Cody barked at the wolf.

Sampson backed away, hands in the air.

Alonzo stepped up till his chest was almost touching Cody's. He was bristling with anger. Zack let his magic rise in his center, ready for anything. "Both of you need to stay away from Beth!" he demanded.

Cody's eyebrows furrowed at Alonzo's nickname. Bethany *hated* being called Beth. Alonzo had to know that.

"Are you going to make me?" Cody asked calmly, folding his arms across his chest. He was a half a head taller than Alonzo and almost a foot broader. But Alonzo didn't back down. Just what this situation needed.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?" Bethany hissed, stepping next to Zack. Zack held in a sigh as her arm brushed his. "Alonzo, what the *fuck*?"

Alonzo reluctantly tore his eyes away from Cody's. "I could ask you the same," he hissed at Bethany, and Zack stiffened at his tone. "Why would you bring *them* here?" He waved his hand at Cody and Zack. "As Alpha Heir, you should know better."

"First of all, as Alpha Heir, I can do whatever the fuck I want." Bethany's green eyes were blazing. "Second of all, I don't answer to you. Third of all, not only are these my friends, but they are also Ambassadors to the Queen, so you should shut your mouth before you insult anyone else further."

Alonzo's hackles went up at her words, and Zack took a step closer to Bethany when Alonzo did. Before the confrontation could escalate further, Alpha Sadara was calling the celebration to order. Alonzo stalked off and Zack relaxed slightly, although he kept his eyes on the male shifter till he disappeared in the crowd. Bethany stared at his retreating back, and Zack would have paid gold to know what she was thinking. Was her defense of them just an Alpha Heir preserving an alliance, or did it mean something more?

* * *

Bethany's POV

What was Alonzo thinking? Bethany glared at his retreating back. He could have jeopardized their alliance.

Sure, that's the only reason you intervened, a little voice taunted inside her head. It had nothing to do with her lioness bristling in rage that her mates had been disrespected in that way.

They are not our mates, she told her lioness sternly. All she got from the cat was a snarl. Clearly, she and her cat were not on the same page. Lovely.

At the front of the crowd, Holly began speaking. Behind her, her mates fanned out protectively, keeping one eye on Holly and one eye on the crowd. She thought about the conversation she and Holly had before the party. She had tried to grill Holly on her mates to prevent Holly from grilling Bethany about hers. Witches often overlooked intermixed matings if the pair was powerful, but Holly's dad could be a real piece of work. She hoped it would work out for her friend, though.

Cody stepped up on her left and she was sandwiched between the men. She shoved away thoughts from her lioness about how else she would like to be sandwiched. *Down, girl*. She glanced quickly at each of them. What had happened with Alonzo? She hadn't heard all of it, but she'd heard Alonzo warning them away from her. And what was Cody doing taunting Alonzo? He was acting like a mate, not a friend with benefits.

By some cruel twist of fate, Bethany's cat had insisted Cody was her mate, but she wasn't his. Male wolves were super possessive, and if she actually was his mate, he would have claimed her by now. Instead, he had treated her totally normally since her eighteenth birthday. Her cat pined after him, and after meeting Zack, pined after the wizard as well. The pull had gotten more uncomfortable over the years, which is why Bethany had given in to the friends-with-benefits situation. But maybe she needed to rethink that situation. Especially if her lioness acted like this in group settings.

If anyone had been looking closely, they probably could have seen her cat flash in her eyes, and that would have raised questions. Tensions were already strained enough between the pack and pride. If her lioness started acting like they were her mates publicly, she could put their lives at risk from the pack and pride members, and she couldn't do that.

The restlessness of the crowd brought her attention back to the present moment. Shifter tempers ran high, and with two different groups this size, tempers were already running hotter,

as Alonzo proved. Someone shouted a question about what would happen to Roland and Vanya, and the pot started boiling over. Bethany stepped in front of Zack instinctively and ignored her lioness's purr. She would protect any of her friends like this.

Up front, she could see the tightness around Holly's eyes as she started working her Empath magic, trying to cool off tempers. Her mates stepped in front of Holly, which riled up some of the shifters at the front of the crowd more. Her mom and Alpha Bryson stepped forward and shifted just as a few of them lunged. Holly wavered on her feet, face pale. Fuck.

"Watch Zack," she threw over her shoulder at Cody.

She darted through the crowd, using a dominant snarl to clear herself a path. She reached Holly's side and took her elbow gently. "This way," she murmured in Holly's ear.

Holly squeezed her eyes tight and let Bethany lead her away from the crowd and into the trees. Holly didn't talk about her Empath magic much, but Bethany knew it hurt her to use. She found Holly a private spot and stepped away, knowing she would want to be alone. Someone was coming through the trees, and Bethany relaxed when she saw it was Synora.

"Take care of her," she murmured as she left Holly in Synora's capable hands.

The violence was contained by the time she got back to the clearing, and she relaxed when she spotted Cody and Zack standing on the other side of the clearing, unharmed.

"Bethany," Sadara's voice came from her right. Two of the pack Deltas were hauling a struggling man between them towards the pride's dungeons.

"Alpha." Bethany used her formal title in the crowd. "What can I do?"

"Prepare to leave tonight," Sadara said, a frown on her face. "Time is of the essence if there were any sympathizers in the crowd that might alert some of your escaped prisoners."

Bethany nodded. "Okay, I'll tell the others." She turned and headed towards Cody and Zack.

“Bethany,” Sadara said again. Bethany turned back. “Be careful.”

That was the closest Sadara was ever going to be to showing concern. “I will.”

Bethany headed towards Cody and Zack. She ignored the way her lioness purred as she approached the men. Her cat should have learned by now. It simply wasn't possible for more with everything stacked against them. The events of tonight proved that. The pack and pride could barely get along during a celebration.

She sighed heavily, and Zack frowned at her. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine she would be standing here with the two of them when she escaped to the Academy two years ago, but here they were. And now they had a job to do.

CHAPTER SIX

BETHANY

Beginning of first semester

Year 1, Semester 1.

The sun beat down on her as Bethany crossed the courtyard of the Academy. Her mom had dropped her off a few hours ago and, unlike the other parents, departed as soon as Bethany's bags were in the room. She had never been a particularly warm person, but Bethany had expected a little bit more emotion as her only daughter was dropped off for the next year at the Academy. It was the longest time Bethany would ever spend away from the pride, and even if cats weren't touchy-feely, shifters were social creatures.

Restlessness set in, and she unpacked, stowing the few boxes she had brought under the bed as soon as she was done. The Academy provided uniforms, so she hadn't brought too many clothes, just the school supplies from the list the Academy sent

and a few knickknacks from home. She touched the necklace that lay hidden under her shirt. A pang of longing speared through her, but she shoved it away. The distance away from him was going to be good.

Unable to stare at the stone walls anymore, she grabbed her key and headed out to explore. The courtyard was large and open, with a few large shady trees dotting the expansive grass area. She wove between the other excited students and their families, nodding at the few she had met over the years as Alpha Heir. The Academy prided itself on educating the best and brightest of the Realm. The education here was top-notch, but the networking was even more so. That had been all her mom talked about on the way here: how Bethany could secure the pride's position in the Realm with her presence at the Academy.

Leaving the bustles of the four dormitory buildings behind, she checked out the class buildings, wrinkling her nose slightly at the smell of old paper and spilled ink. She wasn't the best student. Her brain moved too fast, and she often got bored in lectures. The Academy was known to be strict, so maybe she could find someone to study with quickly.

She turned the corner and slammed into someone.

"Sorry!" they both said at the same time.

She had run into a familiar-looking girl. Her long brown hair cascaded around her face, and her warm brown eyes looked weary for a moment before they cleared and a bright smile replaced the shadow.

"I'm so sorry," the girl said again. "I didn't think anyone else would be in here."

"No, it's my bad," Bethany said. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

"I'm Holly Brandlevine," the girl introduced herself, sticking her hand out. A witch, and a strong one at that. Her earthy scent tickled Bethany's nose. If she was in lioness form, her nose would be twitchy.

"I'm Bethany Thorncrest."

“Sadara Thorncrest’s daughter?” Holly asked, clearly savvy about Realm politics.

“That’s me,” Bethany said awkwardly.

“It’s great meeting you.” Holly said warmly, placing a hand on Bethany’s shoulder, and her worries faded away. “Are you exploring?”

“I am.” Bethany hesitated, but this could be a chance for a new friend. “Do you want to join?”

“I’d love to.” Holly looked relieved as well. “It’s a big school.”

“It really is. Have you seen the size of the combat arena?”

“Only from a distance. Have you checked it out?”

“Not yet. We can head that way now if you’d like?”

“Sounds good. And I wanted to check out the gardens. Someone in my coven said they were amazing.”

“Let’s hit that first, then,” Bethany suggested. “I remember seeing it on the map, and I think it’s on the way to the combat arena.”

Holly linked her arm with Bethany’s as they headed outside. The conversation was light and casual, and Bethany found herself relaxing more and more as it went on. She had a feeling she and Holly would become fast friends. Underneath all that sweetness was a spicy sense of humor that had Bethany laughing often.

Soon, their shadows stretched long in front of them as the sun began dipping below the sky.

“Do you want to join my friend, Zack, and me for dinner?” Holly asked, as they headed in the direction of the dining hall.

“That would be great. How do you know Zack?”

“He belongs to a neighboring coven,” Holly explained as they pushed the doors open to the dining hall. “But we’ve always been friendly at gatherings. He’s trying to get an apprenticeship with a witch at my coven for next summer.”

“That’s interesting...” Bethany trailed off as they approached a table with two men sitting at it. One of the men had a lean build, but she would know the other man’s silhouette anywhere.

“What are you doing here?” The words burst from Bethany’s mouth before she could stop them.

Cody turned in his seat. His eyes widened as he saw her. “What are *you* doing here?” he said, ignoring her question.

“You two know each other?” Holly asked as she took a seat across from the man who had to be Zack. He had messy brown hair and silver eyes that were hidden behind black-rimmed glasses.

“We grew up together,” Cody said, wide eyes still locked on Bethany.

“Wow! What a happy coincidence,” Holly said as she tugged Bethany down to sit next to her and across from Cody.

“Mhmm... a happy coincidence,” Bethany mumbled.

Holly either didn’t hear her or acted like she didn’t hear her as she gave Bethany the ordering orb and showed her how to order dinner.

Zack cleared his throat shyly and looked at Holly meaningfully.

“Oh my Realm, I totally forgot. Zack, this is my new friend Bethany. Bethany, this is my friend Zack and his new friend Cody, who you apparently already know.”

Bethany chuckled awkwardly and kept her eyes off Cody as she took in the wizard. He had a lean, lanky build that looked a bit uncomfortable folded into the dining room bench. She guessed standing up, he would be taller than her 5’10”, and her lion purred slightly at that. She wrinkled her brow briefly at her lion’s reaction but dismissed it. Zack was cute, for sure, in an adorably awkward way, but she had a mate. Well, she had a something. She couldn’t even say she had a best friend anymore with how Cody had abandoned her this summer. She glanced over at Cody briefly as Zack extended his hand for her

to shake. His jaw was clenched. She looked back at Zack. She gave him a friendly smile, and he swallowed audibly.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she purred, ignoring Cody’s grinding of teeth.

A swell of anger rose inside her at his reaction. He didn’t get to be annoyed that she was making friends other than him. Not when he abandoned her all summer. He could fuck right off with that attitude.

Zack’s palm was warm in hers, and her cat rose to her feet when their skin touched. Bethany stifled the purr that threatened to explode from her chest as she shoved her cat deep down inside her. Nope. Her cat had gotten her in enough trouble already, and she didn’t need her expressing interest in anyone else.

Their meals appeared suddenly in front of them. Bethany and Cody jumped in their chairs and Holly and Zack laughed.

“Don’t worry, it happens to everyone the first few times,” Holly assured them. “We got here a few days early.”

“You get used to it, though,” Zack said quickly.

“Magic is so cool,” Cody breathed. “We don’t see a lot of it in the shifter territory.”

Bethany wanted to tease him about his awed tone, but it felt awkward to fall back into old habits like nothing had ever happened that summer.

“So, give us the need-to-know on everyone here.” She changed the subject. “The who’s who.”

As they ate, Holly and Zack filled them in on the important players at the Academy. The Stonemont Triad, who were in their last regular year, were the most powerful players, but they generally kept to themselves. Holly did let slip that Desmond was her cousin, but Bethany couldn’t figure out if they were close or not. The other big players were Vivienne and Brent, both witches and first years as well. Brent was from Zack’s coven, and from Zack’s expression when Holly said his name, she was guessing the Ashcraft heir was a real gem.

When they finished with the who's who, they moved onto comparing class schedules. Holly and Bethany had one class together, Runes, while Bethany, Cody, and Zack had one class together, Potions. Cody and Bethany had Combat class together, while Zack and Holly had Elemental Magic. She wasn't thrilled to be sharing two classes with Cody, but at least she had a buffer in one of them. Schedules set, they cleared their plates and then headed out of the dining hall. Holly and Zack had to head to the library to meet with their witch advisor, so Cody and Bethany were left standing awkwardly by themselves.

Bethany turned and exited the dining hall, determined to just ignore Cody as she headed back to her dorm. Except the fates had other plans.

"Bethany, wait!" Cody called from behind her.

She debated not stopping for him, but it was better they got this all out in the open.

She swung to face Cody. "What?" Her voice came out icy, and she hid her wince. Her cat yowled its disapproval at her tone towards her mate, but she had to remind her cat that Cody couldn't possibly be her mate.

Cody stopped a few feet from her. "You didn't tell me you were coming here?" He rubbed the back of his neck but couldn't keep out the bite in his words.

"So? You didn't tell me you were coming here either. And besides, to be able to tell you would mean you would have to have acknowledged me in the last... I don't know... six months!"

Cody didn't respond, just stared at her, clearly fighting an inner battle with his wolf, if his clenched muscles were anything to go by. Bethany was fighting her own battle with her animal, who was demanding she go to Cody.

"You know what?" Bethany said. "This isn't going to work. I'll tell Holly I'll sit somewhere else at meals, and we can just ignore each other in classes."

She turned to leave, and Cody grabbed her arm. Her cat purred at the contact, but she yanked her arm out of his grasp. His eyes flashed yellow with his wolf, and he held up his hands.

“No, please don’t... my father.” He gasped out the last part, gritting his teeth in pain and squeezing his eyes shut. “Please... I would really like us to sit together,” he said, like he was out of breath. “I know I’ve been a dick, but I’m really glad to see you here. Please.”

It was the last word, a whispered plea, that got her. She missed her best friend. He was the one person who knew her better than anyone in the Realm. Their friendship had been a comforting constant until this year. She should stay away, but she missed him. Bethany knew she was signing up to break her own heart by being this close to him, but if she only got to be around him for these few years at the Academy, the heartbreak would be worth it. But she couldn’t lose sight of the big picture. Her mom’s words echoed in her head. She had to stay focused on learning what she could so she could lead the pride. She had a life waiting for her when she got back. A life that didn’t include Cody.

“Fine,” she said. “But I don’t like you, and I won’t pretend to.”

Instead of rising to the challenge in her words, Cody threw his head back and laughed. She ignored how achingly handsome he was as he did so. “I wouldn’t expect you to, hellcat.”

She rolled her eyes at him and hissed when he tried to throw an arm around her shoulders. She smacked his shoulder. “No touchy.” Her heart wouldn’t be able to take it if he constantly touched her.

Cody held up his hands but stepped into pace beside her as they made their way back to the dorms. Hopefully, she could survive this. She would have to.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BETHANY

Year 1, Semester 1

A few months in

“That’s it. I can’t read anymore,” Cody complained dramatically, throwing himself onto his back on the couch he was lying on. “My eyes are crossing!”

Bethany’s and Holly’s eyes met, and Holly giggled at Bethany’s eye roll. The four friends were in various studying positions around a low table in the library. Cody had claimed the couch, while Holly curled up in an overstuffed chair. Bethany and Zack had ended up on the floor going over their history reading together.

Bethany was trying to ignore the heat of Zack’s body pressed against hers as they read about the Realm. That was hard to do as her cat purred so loudly she was worried that someone was

going to hear it. She had shoved her cat down so deep inside her after the events of this summer she scarcely felt the animal for a few months. But something about the wizard had her cat climbing back to the surface. But she brushed off her cat's reaction to the wizard next to her. Shifters were usually tactile creatures and being without her pride for the last few months had Bethany realizing how much she missed it. Her cat was determined to form a new pride with her new friends here, and that's why she was resurfacing now. The four of them just fit so well, even when she and Cody fought like cats and dogs.

Since their tentative truce, she and Cody had stopped avoiding each other, but that didn't mean Bethany had forgiven him for abandoning her. She still poked at him all the time, and he poked right back. They took turns riling each other up until Holly or Zack intervened. Holly was usually more direct about it, but Zack had taken to just placing himself between the two of them until they stopped picking at each other. And that hadn't helped Bethany get over her crush on him.

The wizard was just so kind and quiet and understanding. He was an excellent listener and was always doing small things that had her cat purring and wanting to curl up and take a nap next to him. For her animal to be that drawn to him when she had a mate... She flicked her eyes over to Cody before bringing them back to the book in front of her. Was it possible to have two mates? Ugh. Why was love so complicated? Woah, wait, not love. Attraction? Men? Life. Why was life so complicated?

She allowed herself a brief moment to think about what life would be like if she weren't the Alpha Heir. If she was just a regular shifter. Maybe she could have claimed Cody, and they would be living in the shifter territory. Maybe with the pride or maybe with the pack. As she thought about the cottage they would have, her brain put Zack into the mix. He was there, eating with them and tending the small garden they would have.

Zack bumped her shoulder gently to draw her attention. She turned her head, and he blushed at how close their faces were.

He pushed up his glasses nervously and tilted his head towards Holly, who was speaking.

“Sorry, say that again. All this reading is scrambling my brain.”

Holly laughed. “I was saying that Cody and I were going to raid the dining hall for snacks. Do you want to come?”

“No, I’ll stay here,” Bethany said. “I only have a little bit left of this chapter, and I want to finish it.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Zack volunteered.

“Okay. Come on, Cody, let’s give your crossing eyes a break.” Holly tugged on his arm playfully, and Bethany stifled a growl from her cat. Even though Holly was fast becoming one of her closest friends, her cat still didn’t like other females touching Cody.

Holly quickly let go of Cody as he rolled to his feet, and Bethany’s cat calmed. Zack gave her a quizzical look, but she ignored it and looked back down at the book as Holly and Cody left the room. In the empty library, Bethany became hyper-focused on the heat emanating from Zack’s body against her own. Her breath hitched as his hip brushed hers. This crush was really getting out of control.

She turned her head, and her breath caught in her throat again. Zack’s face was inches from hers, and he looked at her with a furrowed brow.

“Is everything okay?” he asked quietly.

Bethany was distracted from the question when her eyes dropped down to his pale pink lips. Zack’s breath stuttered this time. She wasn’t sure who leaned forward first, but suddenly their lips were touching. His lips were warm as they tentatively moved against hers. One of his hands came up and touched her cheek gingerly, and the soft touch sent a bolt of heat all the way down to her toes.

Her cat came scrambling up to the surface. *Mate!*

No, that wasn’t possible. She had a mate already. Her cat was just confused. She couldn’t have two mates, could she?

After only a few moments, though, Zack pulled back suddenly and dropped his hand like she was on fire. She opened her eyes, not sure when she closed them, to see his eyes wide and panic lighting his face. Shit. She must have misread his intent and basically mauled him all because her cat wanted a mate.

“I’m so sorry.” Bethany ducked her chin. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No... I’m sorry...” Zack stammered. “It’s not that. Not the kiss, I mean... I’m... I just... I don’t do that,” he blurted out.

“I...” Bethany stopped when Holly and Cody entered the room, their arms filled with snacks.

She glanced at Zack, but his gaze snapped down to his textbook, his glasses slightly askew on his nose. Shit, she had fucked this up. She kissed him without his permission because of her cat, and he didn’t have the same feelings at all. Plus, she’d jeopardized their budding friendship and not just hers and Zack’s but also hers and Holly’s, since Zack was Holly’s friend first. Her shoulders slumped. Fuck, she needed to apologize.

“Hellcat.” Cody waved a bag of crispy bread sticks in front of her. His tone made her realize that he had been trying to get her attention for a while.

“Thanks,” she said distractedly as she took the bag, sneaking a glance at Cody as a wave of guilt slammed into her. She hadn’t just fucked things up with Zack, but she’d also cheated on her mate.

But had she? She couldn’t ever have Cody as a mate. The pride would never allow it. And they would never accept Zack either, even if her cat was right. The only way they would be happy is if she mated another cat in the pride. Now she felt doubly guilty about leading Zack on. Fuck, her mom was right; emotions made you vulnerable, and vulnerability sucked.

She must have zoned out, staring at her textbook. Shuffling around her got her attention. Everyone was packing up for tonight. Zack was very studiously not looking at her, his

cheeks still dusted red, and Bethany bit the side of her lip. She needed to apologize. She waited until Cody and Holly were packing up the snacks and distracted before she touched his arm softly.

“I’m sorry. I won’t ever do that again.” She slung her bag over her shoulder and walked to the door to wait for Holly there. Holly must have picked up on her urgency as she finished up and looped her arm through Bethany’s as they silently exited the library.

Once they were halfway to the dorm, Holly broke the night’s quiet silence. “You and Zack seemed cozy tonight. But I always thought there was something going on between you and Cody.”

Bethany let out a broken laugh but didn’t say anything. Holly didn’t push as she tried to find the words to say.

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t ever have either of them, so I would rather not talk about it.”

Holly squeezed her arm silently and laid her head on Bethany’s shoulder, offering a silent comfort Bethany wasn’t sure she deserved.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CODY

Age 19.

End of first year at the Academy.

Cody's jaw clenched.

Standing about fifty yards away, his mate stood flirting with another *wolf*, and he couldn't do a damn thing about it. Bethany's golden hair shone in the sun as she stood next to one of the class buildings talking to Christopher, who was another Alpha Heir although from a much smaller pack than the Clawmoon's. Her throaty laugh carried along the breeze to Cody's ears, and he fought with his wolf to not go storming over there and snatch her away from Christopher. The pull between them was excruciating to fight, even if he was the only one feeling it. It had gotten worse over the last year, and Cody was close to breaking, Alpha Command be damned.

“Cody.”

He turned towards another voice that had his wolf tied in knots. Zack came to a stop next to him. Over the last year, Zack had become a good friend and someone Cody relied on a lot. The handsome wizard was quiet, which most would confuse for shy, but he was powerful. More powerful than he let on, but he had a feeling it was because of the Coven Zack belonged to. The Ashcraft coven was a shit show on a good day, always power hungry and backstabbing, so it made sense that Zack laid low. Especially when the Coven Leader’s son, Brent, was attending the Academy as well.

Zack’s eyes drifted past him, and he frowned. He must have caught sight of Bethany and Christopher as well.

“I take it you’re not a fan either,” Cody said, turning back to watch Bethany.

He knew Bethany had had a crush on Zack when they first started at the Academy. Still did, though she did her best to hide it. Something had happened six months ago when they were studying in the library. He and Holly had left to go get snacks, and when they had come back, the scent of desire was strong in the air, but Bethany and Zack were studiously ignoring each other.

He had expected his wolf to flip out like he did when any male talked to or was near Bethany, but his wolf had settled at the sight of the two of them. In fact, his wolf really liked Zack, and Cody didn’t blame him. With his silver eyes, thick-rimmed glasses, and lean muscles, the wizard was definitely attractive.

His attention was drawn back to Bethany when she placed a hand on Christopher’s arm. His wolf let out a low, threatening growl. Zack glanced at him worriedly and placed a hand on his arm, tugging him away from the scene and behind one of the dormitory buildings. He let Cody go once they were alone, and Cody paced back and forth, fighting with his wolf to not go back out there and rip Christopher’s throat out.

“What does she see in him anyway?” he gritted out, pacing. He ran his hand through his hair aggressively, snarling when

his fingers caught on his curls. He yanked, and the pain helped ground his wolf.

“She’s your mate, isn’t she?”

Zack’s quiet question had Cody drawing up short. He started out into the woods behind the dormitory building, bracing himself for the pain of defying the Alpha Order as he nodded. A faint tug at his gut was all he felt, though, and he turned to Zack, eyes wide.

“Yes,” he said quietly. A low headache started, but it was manageable. His father’s Alpha Order must be fading. It naturally faded some with distance and time, but not usually this quickly. His father wouldn’t be pleased when he learned that.

“Does she know?” Zack asked.

Cody shook his head. “My father forbade me from telling anyone. My pack...”

Zack nodded. “I understand.” He looked down at the ground, his cheeks red, and Cody had a feeling he knew what he was about to confess. “I kissed her. Or she kissed me. Six months ago. It was...”

“Hey.” Cody stepped closer to Zack, and the wizard tensed, expecting the worst from an angry wolf. “It’s okay. I knew about it.”

Zack looked confused for a moment before his face relaxed. “Smell?”

Cody nodded.

“And you’re not mad? Shifters are usually really territorial.”

It was Cody’s turn to look down at the dirt, cheeks red. He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand and turned to lean his back against the side of the building. “No, I’m not mad.”

Zack was right. Shifters were usually very territorial. But Cody’s wolf *liked* Zack. He knew Zack liked guys. He had caught Zack kissing another guy a few weeks before the kiss with Bethany in the library. He had thought Zack only liked

guys until he and Bethany had kissed. Now his wolf just wanted them both.

“Why?” Zack stepped closer, his eyes studying Cody’s face. “Your wolf should...”

“He likes you too.” Cody stared at the ground, his cheeks on fire. “That’s why he didn’t mind. He likes you too.”

Zack took another step, so his feet touched Cody’s, and Cody looked up from the ground.

“Just your wolf?” Zack asked softly.

Speechless, Cody shook his head. This close, he could smell the musky wildflower scent his wolf associated with Zack. The wizard crowded closer. He was almost as tall as Cody, but with Cody leaning against the wall, Zack’s face was a few inches taller than Cody’s as he crowded him.

As Alpha Heir, Cody had never felt delicate until that moment. Zack placed a hand on Cody’s shoulder, and his wolf practically purred. He traced the line of the muscles up to Cody’s neck, cupping the side of his neck in a way that had Cody leaning into him. The wizard brought their lips together slowly, giving Cody plenty of time to pull away, but he didn’t want to. The first brush of their lips together had an almost embarrassing whine slipping through his teeth. Zack smirked and brushed their lips together again.

His lips were warm and smooth against Cody’s. They pressed harder with each brush of Zack’s lips against his, and when he drew away again, Cody growled and tugged him closer by his hips. Zack laughed against his lips but deepened the kiss, tilting his head and running the tip of his tongue along Cody’s lips. Cody opened to him, sagging back against the stone even more as Zack took control of the kiss.

It felt like an eternity had passed, or maybe just a few moments, Cody wasn’t sure. He was lost in his first kiss. He hadn’t wanted anyone but Bethany growing up, but he could never have her. After a few more moments, they broke away, both men breathing heavily.

As the glow from the kiss faded, a wave of guilt rose in Cody. What was he doing? He couldn't have Bethany, but he couldn't have Zack, either. His pack would never accept it. His father would never give his blessing to an intermixed mating, regardless if it was with a lioness or with a wizard.

"I..." he started. "I don't want to lead you on when I'm the Alpha Heir," he rushed out.

Zack laid a finger over his lips.

"Hey," Zack soothed. "I knew who you were when I kissed you. I understand."

Cody nodded, closing his eyes and groaning. "I ruined the afterglow, didn't I?"

Zack laughed. "We'll work on it."

"What about Bethany?" Cody asked. He wanted her, but he wanted Zack too.

Zack smiled gently, as if knowing where his thoughts went. "I like her too. But I'm not sure if she's ready for us. She tends to shy away from feeling anything."

Cody groaned. "Her fucking mom."

Zack arched an eyebrow at him.

"Her mom's a... tightass is a word that comes to mind. She lost her partner when Bethany was young and turned off all feelings almost overnight, according to my father. She had to continue leading the pride, but she... Bethany's never really been raised with any kind of warmth. Her mom views emotions as a vulnerability that she's determined her daughter won't succumb to."

Zack nodded. "That makes sense."

Cody rubbed a hand over his face. "It's a lost cause. I know it'll never happen. We'll never happen, I mean. She's the Pride Heir and I'm the Alpha Heir and..."

"It can happen," Zack said firmly.

Cody's brow furrowed. Did Zack mean that he and Bethany could be together? Or the three of them could be together?

That could never happen. The pack and pride wouldn't allow it.

“I thought you understood about the pack...” he started.

“I said I understood, not that I wouldn't fight for you. I'll fight for both of you.”

CHAPTER NINE

BETHANY

Age 20

Beginning of second year at the Academy.

She was so thankful to be back at the Academy. Even if Cody was currently being a pain in the ass.

Bethany took a sip of her juice, ignoring Cody's too-loud voice grating in her ear. For some reason, he had felt the need to sit next to her this morning, and she hoped it wouldn't become a habit. It was torture to have him this close to her and not be able to slide under one of his broad shoulders and bury herself into his side. Fighting the mate pull had irritation dancing along her skin, and the hair on her cat stood up.

She held in a sigh and took another sip of her juice. Maybe the pull wouldn't be so strong if she hadn't seen Cody at all this summer, but he'd popped up constantly. Her mom had kept her

busy by throwing her into more of the pride's leadership activities and running strategy sessions over and over again. But every so often, she would get to sneak out to their spot, and without fail, Cody would be there. Sometimes they didn't talk at all, just lay out in the middle of the clearing and stared up at the stars. Sometimes they talked about the Academy and their friends.

Bethany found that she missed Holly and Zack a lot. The two of them had become so ingrained in their lives at the Academy that being separated was hard. Sure, she and Holly exchanged letters frequently, but it wasn't the same. Her lioness missed Zack the most, but Bethany hoped the distance would help with her lioness's crush. Her cheeks still heated when she thought about that awkward kiss in the library. But Zack never brought it up again, and slowly, Bethany had relaxed around him. Although the crush hadn't gone away. If she didn't know any better, she would say her lioness claimed the quiet wizard as her mate as well.

Speak of the devil...

"Bethany, Cody," Zack greeted as he slid into the seat across from Cody. "You're back."

"Zack! We missed you!" Cody said. Was that a little bit of red on the Alpha's Heir's cheeks?

"Missed you both too," Zack said. There was definitely a dusting of red on Zack's cheeks. "Holly and I missed you at dinner last night."

"Yeah, we got in super late. Pack and pride things," Cody answered easily.

Bethany had been delayed by a pride elder meeting that ran long, but when she'd gotten to the portal location, she'd found Cody sitting there waiting for her. He'd said he had just gotten there himself, but she had a feeling that he had waited for her. She refused to let the warm feeling in her chest spread. Instead, she kept her gaze on Zack.

"Well, I'm glad you made it," he said with a warm smile.

His eyes darted to Cody's and an odd look crossed his face, but before she could study it further, Holly approached, and she wasn't alone.

The girl Holly was leading had to be a new student. She was very pretty with long brown hair and bright blue eyes. Her slender frame seemed to fold into herself as the noise of the cafeteria echoed against the stone walls.

"Everyone, this is Claire," Holly announced as she got to the table. "She's a brand-new student and my friend, so help me make her feel welcome. Claire, this is Bethany, Cody, and Zack. And so Cody doesn't stick his foot in his mouth like he's prone to do," Holly teased, "yes, Claire is blind."

Claire gave a small smile and a nod to the table. "Pleased to meet all of you. I hope you don't mind if I join you for breakfast?"

"Cute as a button and she has manners? She can stay forever, and we can kick Cody out," Bethany said lightly to set Claire at ease.

"Hey!" Cody protested. "I forget to say good morning to you one time and all of a sudden I'm an animal?"

One time last year, Cody had been so tired he had just plopped down at the table one morning and hadn't said a word. Except her lioness wanted to poke at him constantly to make sure he noticed her, so she had teased him about his lack of good morning. She picked on him about a lot of things, waiting for the day when he snapped back in anger, but he never did. He just took it or teased her back. Truthfully, she enjoyed their banter more than she probably had a right to. It helped ease the pull between them.

"You're a wolf, so yes," Bethany shot back.

"Shifter," Cody growled.

"Children," Zack chided. "We want Claire to like sitting here, not be scared off by your bickering."

Zack rose to his feet as Holly and Claire sat down. "Claire, it's a pleasure to meet you. Holly is the best person to know here and has saved all of our butts a time or two."

Holly brushed it off. “We all have to take care of each other. Now, let’s sit and get some food before Claire’s first day of classes.”

As Holly helped Claire sit down, Bethany studied the quiet woman. She definitely wasn’t a shifter or a dragon, so she had to be a witch. Her lioness’s nose twitched, and the cat sat up in her head, focused on the quiet witch. There was something... interesting about her. Something that intrigued her lioness. She was very quiet and sweet, and to an untrained eye, she also seemed innocent and naive. But her lioness told her there was something more to the sweet blind witch, and Bethany couldn’t wait to find out.

* * *

Zack’s POV

A week later

Zack’s steps slowed as he approached the dining hall. Cody and Bethany had gone home for the weekend, so he was just meeting Holly and Claire for dinner. Bethany had a pride event to go to, and Cody was tagging along under the guise that he was going home to visit, but Cody had confessed that he was really going home to keep an eye on Bethany. The summer hadn’t gone as well as Bethany let on. There was a lot of bullshit, especially from some of the male lions, and Cody didn’t want Bethany to go home alone anymore without backup.

He didn’t blame Cody at all. If things were different, he would be right at Bethany’s and Cody’s side when they went home. The more he learned about their families, the more he worried. There was so much pressure put on both of their shoulders, and the expectations were unrealistic for anyone to be able to shoulder alone. Add in the pressure from their families to be looking for a ‘good match’ and knowing that Bethany was Cody’s mate...

Yeah, he worried about them. A lot.

He hadn’t expected either one of them, but after spending all last year with them, Zack couldn’t help falling for the feisty

lioness and the playfully protective wolf. Bethany was fiercely loyal and protective over their group and made Zack's stomach flutter when she turned her green eyes his way. Cody acted like a goof but was hiding a quiet intelligence in his playful brown eyes. He and Cody had continued their quiet flirtation, but outside a few makeout sessions, it hadn't gone very far. He was okay with that, though. Most of their attention was on Bethany as she pushed herself to be everything her mother wanted her to be.

Zack huffed out a laugh and rolled his eyes. He was in so deep with the two of them. Pushing open the doors to the dining hall, he searched the half empty room for their usual table. His steps faltered. Desmond was sitting next to Claire. *Interesting.*

The Stonemont Triad has been particularly attentive to their new sweet friend, and he had an inkling as to why. But it wasn't his secret to share.

"Holly, Claire, Assistant Desmond," Zack greeted as he slid into the seat across from Claire. His usual seat was occupied by Desmond, but from the subconscious way Claire leaned into him, he didn't think she minded.

"We're outside of class," Desmond said. "You can just call me Desmond."

Zack nodded as Claire questioned Desmond's title.

"Assis—Desmond is an assistant teacher in my advanced spell work class," Zack explained. He placed his hand on the orb to order his food.

"Oh, that's right. Holly mentioned that you did that while you were getting your mastery."

"I do. That's why I'm curious to hear the story about your Spells and Potions class."

"Wait," Zack said, pausing his order. "It was your class that had the explosion. I heard about that. Are you okay?"

Claire felt like the little sister he never had. He had heard about the explosion earlier but hadn't thought anything of it. He hadn't realized that was Claire's class.

Claire blushed. "I'm fine. I screwed up the potion somehow."

"I was an assistant teacher for that class last year," Desmond said. "If Professor Benton used the same first potion, a cough syrup, that he did last year, that should have been impossible."

"I guess I'm an anomaly. Or the first to make that mistake." Claire shrugged. "I think I was distracted by Runes. Besides, it's got to be difficult for Professor Benton to teach a blind student."

"How did you mix it?" Desmond was persistent, and Zack didn't blame him. That was a simple potion that should have been easy to do. Unless it was messed with...

Zack glanced around the dining hall and caught sight of Vivienne glaring at their table. The witch had been walking around all last year spreading rumors about how she was the Stonemont Triad's Fourth. She wouldn't be happy that the Stonemont Triad's attention was on Claire.

"Well, I crushed the berries with the provided mortar and pestle and then scraped it into the bowl. Then we crumbled up the dry leaves and mashed that waxy material into the mixture. Finally, I poured the contents of the vial into the mixture. That's when it began to sizzle and then exploded everywhere."

"So it didn't begin to sizzle until you poured the mixture in?" Desmond asked.

"Yes."

"The cough syrup potion?" Zack asked.

"Yes, it was our first one."

Zack and Desmond exchanged a look. "I think I agree with Desmond on this one," Zack said slowly. "That's nearly impossible."

"I guess I'm just that talented." Claire tried to joke, but from the way her shoulders curled in on themselves, she didn't believe her words.

An angry fire danced in Desmond's eyes as he caught the movement, but he seemed to swallow the anger as he explained the contents of the vial had probably been switched.

To cheer up the sweet, blind witch, Desmond launched into a dramatic story of how he'd screwed up a potion in his lab one time, and it had resulted with his eyebrows getting burned off. The story had its desired effect on Claire, and her sightless eyes seemed to get brighter as he spoke.

Zack smiled and ate quietly, sharing a conspiratorial look with Holly, who smiled and rolled her eyes at him. Desmond—in fact, his whole Triad—seemed to be head over heels for Claire. Witches didn't have the same hangups as shifters did about intermixed matings because they were more focused on power. Powerful witches and wizards tended to stick together, and therefore, during the Great War, fewer witches found themselves on opposite sides unlike the shifters.

Desmond's father, Coven Leader Frederick, likely wouldn't bat an eye if Desmond turned out to be soul flames with Claire. His own coven leader, Aiden Ashcraft, would probably throw a stink, but that was just because the man was an asshole like his son. Brent had tattled to his father about the company Zack had been keeping, and he had gotten a lecture from the coven leader about making better connections at the Academy right before he returned for his second year. But it would take more than a stern lecture to keep Zack away from his friends.

“Oh, Claire!” Holly said when Desmond finished his story. “Share your good news from earlier today with Zack!”

“I love some good news,” Zack said.

“Professor Andy stopped by after Herbology and had me try the rune for the earth element again, and I did it!”

“What! That's great!” Zack exclaimed. “Great job, Claire!”

He was happy for his friend and the news slotted another piece of the puzzle together that had been bothering Zack's brain. Their new friend had all the signs of being powerful with four proficiencies, but she couldn't do very much with her magic yet. It was a conundrum because with four proficiencies, she should have the ability to level mountains, yet she could barely move the elements around. It was almost like her power had been bound, but Zack didn't sense any bindings on her.

Claire smiled, “Thanks! Professor Helene said that sometimes when we put too much pressure on our magic to perform, it can actually cause it to get defensive.”

“That makes sense,” Holly said before breaking into a story about her first Runes class, which set off another story from Desmond.

For the rest of dinner, they all chatted and swapped stories about their first year at the Academy. Bit by bit, Claire relaxed as she soaked it all in. After dinner, Desmond offered to walk Holly and Claire back to their dormitory. Zack went with them for some fresh air but was going to head to the library to work on a project with a classmate.

He watched as Holly got distracted by a classmate needing something and Desmond walked Claire back to the dorm, their heads bent together. He smiled. Something deep in his gut told him that Claire was going to shake things up at the Academy and possibly the Realm, but he didn't think that was a bad thing. He thought of Cody's pack and Bethany's pride and their outdated views on a lot of things but especially mates. The Realm needed to be shaken up.

CHAPTER TEN

BETHANY

Age 21

Early fall in the shifter/Elven forest.

A hard lump against her back woke her up. She opened her eyes to the early morning light streaming through the trees. She must have rolled over onto a root while she slept. She groaned softly as she rolled off it. She could already feel the bruise forming in the middle of her back. That was going to make for a fun trek today.

They had left late last night from the neutral grounds. Cody had heard from one of the wolf patrols that there was evidence of a large group moving along the far edge of pack territory. Since they weren't inside the territory lines, the patrol hadn't engaged, but it was the first solid lead they had about the escaped prisoners. They had hiked until they had caught the scent of the group. Bethany's lioness had locked onto the trail

with a tug in her gut that had guided them, but by then, it was a very early hour of the morning, so they camped at the base of a large oak tree.

“Hey,” Zack said softly from next to her. He must be on watch. “You still have a bit longer to sleep if you want.”

Bethany rolled over to look at him and winced when her back hit the ground. “I think I’m up for the morning. I slept on a root.”

Zack frowned. “Let me see?”

Bethany pushed herself to a sitting position and swung her legs around until her back was to Zack. She couldn’t hold in the shiver as his hands lifted her shirt.

“Sorry,” he whispered, misunderstanding her reaction.

In contrast to the cool air, his hands were warm as they probed the bruise softly. Bethany felt his magic rise before it brushed against her skin, seeping deep into the muscle. The pain slowly receded until it was gone.

“Thanks.” She smiled over her shoulder.

Her breath caught. Zack’s face was closer than she expected. They just looked at each other for a few seconds. Just as he was leaning in to kiss her, Cody shifted on his other side. Bethany drew back, getting to her feet.

“Come on, wolf-boy.” She nudged Cody’s leg softly as a distraction. “We’ve got to make up some ground today.”

The scent they’d caught yesterday had been at least a day old. Who knew where the prisoners could be by now?

“I’m up, I’m up,” Cody said blearily, his brown curls falling into his face as he yawned.

“You look it,” Bethany said dryly. Her hands itched to push the curls away from his eyes, so she turned and packed up her bag instead.

Despite his sleepiness, Cody also packed up quickly, and soon they were on their way. Cody and Bethany took turns shifting to make sure they stayed on the correct path. Their noses were

better than most in human form, but there was no room for error here. If it was just Bethany and Cody, they could have shifted and covered the distance in half of the time, but when Zack proposed that idea, they both shot him down. Neither of them wanted to leave the wizard by himself. Bethany was padding alongside Zack in her lioness form when the trail split in two directions.

She shifted back. “They split up,” she announced, pointing in two separate directions.

Zack hummed and pulled out his map. “It looks like one trail leads to the Dragon Mountains and the other leads towards the Elven Forest.”

“Which way do we go?” Cody asked. “I don’t want us to split up.”

Bethany nibbled on her lower lip. Her lioness was telling her to go towards the Elven Forest, but what if that was the wrong idea.

“Bethany, what is it?” Zack read her face too well.

Bethany hesitated. “I’ve been feeling this pull since we found the trail. I thought it was just that my lioness was excited to track them down, but now that they’ve split up, my lioness is pulling me towards the Elven Forest.”

“Then let’s head that way,” Cody suggested.

“What if I’m wrong and the bulk of the prisoners went the other way?”

“Then we can circle back and find them.” Zack shrugged. “But I don’t think we should discount your lioness. We knew we wouldn’t be able to find the prisoners all at once, but if your lioness is feeling strongly about a particular direction, let’s listen to her.”

Cody nodded in agreement.

Bethany was stunned by their easy acceptance, but she guessed that made sense. Her mom would have asked her a thousand questions before eventually choosing the opposite of what Bethany suggested.

“Okay, let’s go that way then.”

She shifted back into her lioness and followed the trail towards the Elven Forest. As they traveled, the pull began to feel familiar. It felt almost like the mate pull she felt towards Zack and Cody, but that couldn’t be right. Multiple mates were rarer than intermixed matings, and Claire and Holly already had that covered in their friend group.

An hour later, they stopped for a late lunch. After they finished eating, Cody shifted into his wolf, and Bethany had to fight the urge to run her fingers through his fur. They walked for another twenty minutes before they entered a large clearing. Cody froze and let out a threatening growl. Zack and Bethany immediately dropped into fighting positions as Bethany’s lioness yowled inside of her. Something was in the trees watching them. Was it one of the escaped prisoners who had doubled back to set a trap?

Across the clearing, the branches in a tree rustled, then a dark shape dropped from the tree. A lithe black panther landed at the base of the tree. Its intelligent golden eyes locked onto their group. She didn’t remember a panther shifter being in Zack’s prisoner records. Cody let out a warning growl when the panther took a step closer. Bethany placed a hand on Cody’s back, and his wolf settled. She wasn’t sensing any animosity from the panther. In fact, her cat was yowling in her head to get closer to him.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Bethany asked.

The panther studied her for a few moments before shifting back. Zack inhaled quickly. Sharp ears stuck out from his black hair. He was an Elf and also a shifter? A hybrid? A linen shirt and pants, in an Elven style, lay loose on his lean frame. He watched their expressions curiously.

“Who are you?” Zack repeated Bethany’s question.

The panther finally answered, his voice gravelly like he didn’t use it often. “I’m Mylo.”

“Are you half Elf?” Zack asked, like he was unable to contain his curiosity.

If it were a different situation, Bethany would have been amused by Zack's inquisitive mind. But she still wasn't sure if the panther was dangerous or not. Her cat didn't seem to think so.

Mylo nodded, his eyes dancing like the question amused him. He'd probably expected a different question, as had Cody, if the look his wolf gave Zack was anything to go by. Toan hadn't mentioned anything to Claire about sending any assistance in tracking down any escaped shifters. Why was he so far from the Capitol?

Bethany asked. "Did Toan send you?"

Mylo shook his head, and Cody growled before shifting back. "Why were you watching us?" he growled low in his chest.

Mylo gestured at Bethany. "Mate."

"What?" Cody and Zack said at the same time, spinning to look at Bethany.

Bethany's eyes widened, and she covered her mouth with her hand. Mate? No, that was impossible. She already had a fated mate and another her lioness had chosen. She couldn't have another mate. She couldn't even have the first two.

"You are mates, too." Mylo looked confused as he gestured from Cody to Bethany and Zack. "Why do you let them walk around unclaimed?"

"What?" It was Bethany's turn now to stare at Cody with wide eyes. She was his mate. Zack was Cody's mate? That couldn't be possible, his wolf would have claimed them already.

Mylo looked at Bethany. "You don't claim them either? Why?"

Bethany's legs went weak when he gestured to Cody and Zack. What was happening?

Mylo looked confused by their reactions. "You are all mates. Do you not know this?"

When they stared at him blankly, he sighed and looked up at the trees. "Humans are confusing." he whispered to the leaves.

Cody's lips quirked, and Mylo caught it.

"I do not understand. She is your mate, correct?" He gestured between Bethany and Cody.

Cody's hand went to his throat like something hurt him, but he nodded.

Bethany stared at him in shock. "Wait. What? But you never said anything... I thought wolves..." she stammered. He knew she was his mate?

"Oh, like how you said something?" Cody shot back at her, dragging his hands through his hair. That was fair, but how could he not say anything? His wolf...

Cody must have read the confusion on her face. "I knew the moment I scented you on my eighteenth birthday in our clearing, but my father gave me an Alpha Command to not say anything to you or anyone else. I don't know how I can even talk about it now. It's always been too painful to attempt."

"Old magic here." Mylo waved his hand at the forest around them. "Mutes outside magic."

"That and you're stronger than your father," Zack said quietly, his face unreadable. "I noticed it yesterday at the party. His command is wearing off."

"What's your excuse?" Cody asked her, equal parts hurt and anger warring on his face.

"What did you mean, Zack's his mate, too?"

"Actually, you're both my mates," Zack interjected, and Bethany spun to face him. He shrugged, "You're both my soul flames."

"But what... how..." She looked from Mylo to Zack. Did that mean Mylo was Zack's soul flame, too?

Zack tracked her gaze. "I don't feel the same pull to him. More like he's family," he said quietly. "But you're changing the subject. How long have you known Cody was your mate?"

Bethany hesitated. She could feel Cody's stare burning into the side of her head, but she kept her eyes on Zack. "Since I was

eighteen,” she confessed softly.

Cody cursed colorfully next to her.

“I told my mom, and she said it wasn’t possible. And when Cody didn’t respond like I was his mate, and with intermixed matings still being illegal after the Great War...” She stopped.

They were hers. She could barely wrap her mind around it. It felt like she was simultaneously soaring through the sky and had also been taken out at the knees.

Mylo interrupted her. “Is that still happening?” He frowned darkly.

Zack let out a bitter laugh. “Unfortunately, yes. Why?” Zack’s eyes widened. “Your parents?”

Mylo nodded. “My mother was a panther shifter, and my father was an Elf. They were thrown out of the Thorncrest pride during the Great War. My mother came from a family of Delta warriors. When the war started, the pride demanded that he leave as they were worried he knew too much about their battle strategies. My mother went with him, and they found peace with the Elves.”

The Thorncrest pride was her pride. Shit, Bethany looked away from him. Her grandparents were likely the ones who threw his parents out. Mylo looked older than them but seemed younger in his mannerisms. She wondered how long he had been in the Forest alone. She remembered Claire mentioning something about Elves who communed deeply with the Forest and didn’t live at the Capitol. Mylo must have been one of those. Zack looked at her, and Bethany realized he must have put together the name as well. Mylo looked between them curiously.

“My grandparents led the Thorncrest pride during that time,” she confessed.

Instead of getting angry, Mylo’s gaze softened at her. “Do you share the same beliefs as them?”

Bethany shook her head. “I don’t, but the Realm does. My mom...” She bit her lip. “The pride would have...” She trailed off. She didn’t want to imagine what the pride or her mother

would have done if she mated them. Hell, that could still happen. “When Cody didn’t seem to recognize me as his mate, and with my mom and the pride... It just seemed safer to not say anything, especially with the Realm the way it is.”

“Hellcat.” Cody’s broken whisper had her looking his way. “We didn’t need your protection. We just needed you.”

Bethany wanted to answer him but found she didn’t have the words. These last few minutes had been a mindfuck.

Mylo seemed to sense she was struggling. “You came into the forest for a reason, yes?”

She must not have been the only one who’s head was spinning as Zack jumped into answer. He quickly explained the last few months’ events leading up to them tracking the prisoners through the forest.

Mylo nodded. “I will help. Come, this way.”

They traveled in silence, and Bethany was sure Cody’s and Zack’s minds were spinning as much as hers was. They were mates. Cody knew she was his mate, but Alpha Bryson had forbidden him from telling her or anyone. Why? Was it for the same reasons her mom had given her? And she was Zack’s soul flame? Both Cody and she were? Why hadn’t Zack said something? Was he protecting them too? Was this whole mess just from them trying to protect each other? And where was Mylo going to fit in? He was half cat, so her mom might accept him. But she wouldn’t accept the others? But how could they stay away? Fated mates were supposed to be sacred, and intermixed matings were supposed to be rare. But were they really rare, or were they just illegal because they threatened the corrupt Council’s view of the Realm?

Bethany felt like her entire world had been turned upside down, and her head hurt from trying to process it all. The group was silent as they wove through the forest following Mylo’s lead. Mylo moved through the forest like he was a part of it. His footsteps were so quiet that Bethany had to keep checking he was actually there and not a figment of her imagination. His muscles rippled as he climbed over roots and wove around trunks. His dark hair was cropped short around

his ears like the coat of his panther. Bethany wondered if it was as soft as it looked.

When the light faded from above them, Mylo stopped next to the base of a large tree. The closer they got to the Elven Forest, the larger the trees had become. The trunk of the one Mylo stopped next was twice as wide as Cody was tall. Cody and Bethany set up camp silently while Mylo showed Zack which plants were safe to eat.

She took a seat on her bedroll a few paces from the fire and watched Mylo teach Zack how to prepare the plants they'd found. He seemed to fit into the group effortlessly, and Bethany's lioness was more settled than she'd ever felt. Cody settled in next to her, and her lioness woke up and stretched toward him.

"You're really mine?" Cody's whisper cut through the air, hope woven in his soft words.

Bethany hesitated. She was, but would the Realm let them be together? Would their parents? Was Claire right and the Realm could change? Holly's words cut through the fog. Enjoy the present. She didn't have any more answers than she had this morning, but she could enjoy the present.

She nodded without looking at him. She let out a soft yelp when his arms wrapped around her waist and yanked her into his lap. He buried his face in her neck, and her lioness rose in her center with a soft purr. She hesitated for only a second before snuggling into him.

"I know we have to figure some things out," Cody whispered in her ear, clearly sharing some of her same concerns. "But can I just hold you tonight?"

Bethany relaxed further into him and nodded. He was right. But it was a problem for tomorrow. Her eyelids were heavy, and she closed them, snuggling into his arms and breathing in his familiar pine scent. How could something the Realm deemed wrong feel so right? Would they be able to make this work with everything stacked against them? Was it worth it to try when Bethany knew other intermixed mates lived in exile?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CODY

Age 20

Beginning of second year at the Academy.

The familiar flash of gold hair in the distance had Cody's wolf raising his head. Cody narrowed his eyes. Bethany was marching across the courtyard like she was on a mission to save the Realm. Her tall lean frame was rigid, and even from a distance, he could see her green eyes flashing brighter. Someone had pissed off his little lioness.

Without thinking about it, Cody started in her direction as his mind raced with what it could be. It had to be something on campus because he would have known if it was something at the pride. Cody had taken to going home with Bethany any time she had a pride event. He made excuses about the pack every time, but the truth was his father had it well in hand and didn't need him. No, he went home because he hadn't liked

what he'd heard over the summer coming across the border from the pride lands.

Bethany's mother was pushing her daughter harder and harder whenever she was home. Not just to lead the pride but to also take a consort. Sadara had a very specific list that she wanted Bethany to choose from, and Cody didn't like a single male lion on that list.

Not just because Bethany was his mate and his wolf threatened to burst from under his skin at the thought of her with another male besides Zack but because he knew what male lions were like. He'd grown up next to the pride. Where male wolves were hot-headed and brash, they settled their differences quickly and moved on. Male lions held a grudge and would smile at your face while stabbing you in the back. None of them wanted to be with Bethany because she was an incredible woman; they only wanted to be with her for the power and prestige being her consort would afford them. They would fully try to control her the second they became consorts.

Power. The damned currency of the Realm.

Bethany's quick steps took her to the dining hall, and Cody broke into a light jog to catch her at the stairs, touching her elbow lightly.

"Hey, where's the fire?" he asked.

She shot him a heated glare over her shoulder. "What are you doing here?" Her voice was venomous, but he didn't let that deter him. Her anger wasn't directed at him. At least, he was pretty sure it wasn't.

"Well, I saw you marching across the courtyard like the Realm was on fire, so I came to investigate. Did you murder someone?" he asked lightly with a laugh, but if she had, he would help her hide the body. Or maybe they could just get Zack to incinerate it and blow the ashes into the wind.

He was shaken out of that mental imagery by her scoff as she turned on her heel and headed up the steps. He expected her to go to their table, but she bypassed it, weaving through the mostly empty tables until she got to the back of the room. The

large dining hall barely had any people in it as classes had just ended and dinner wouldn't start for another half hour at least, but Bethany slipped through the back door into the kitchen, and Cody hurried after her.

“Bethany, darling, how are you?” Nita, the friendly witch who worked as the head chef at the Academy greeted her. “And Cody too.”

Bethany scowled over her shoulder at him when he followed her into the kitchen but put a smile back on her face as she turned back to face Nita.

“Hey, Nita, I was wondering if I could get some food to go tonight?”

“Everything okay?” Calen, a cougar shifter who helped with the grounds, came up behind her and placed his hands on Nita's shoulders. The witch leaned back into him, tipping her smiling face up to his. Cody fought to keep his eyebrows from raising at the familiar gesture.

Cody had met Calen on a run around the grounds one morning and had helped him plant a few trees on the weekend. He liked the man, but always wondered why he was working here when he moved with the grace of a warrior.

“Everything's fine,” Bethany said. “Just having a girl's night.”

“Of course,” Nita said. “Would you grab me some containers out of the back, mate?” she asked Calen, who nodded and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

Mate? This time Cody's eyebrows did shoot up. It was rare to find an intermixed mating couple. Especially a cat with a witch. Cats were snobs. Did Calen and Nita have a leader's blessing? He knew the Academy offered sanctuary to those who needed it. Was that why they were here? He risked a glance at Bethany.

Bethany stared at them with something like wistful longing on her face before she masked it. She dug around in her bag for something while Nita started preparing the food.

Calen returned with the containers, and the pair worked seamlessly together to fill them. Before Bethany could reach

out and take them, Cody took them from Calen, balancing over three-quarters of them in his arms.

Bethany shot him a glare, but it lacked heat. Her eyes turned sad when she swiveled back to Calen and Nita. She held out a folded piece of paper to Calen.

“She gave me this for you,” she said softly.

Calen’s eyes darkened as he took the paper from Bethany, treating it reverently, like it was a precious artifact. Nita rubbed his back, her own eyes sad. “Thank you, Alpha Heir.” He addressed Bethany with her formal title.

“Please don’t thank me,” Bethany muttered. “I wish I could do more.”

“This is more than enough,” Calen said.

Bethany jerked her head in a nod before scooping up the rest of the boxes and practically running from the kitchen.

Cody waited till they were outside away from prying ears before asking “What was that?”

“What was what?” Bethany kept her gaze straight ahead, a clear tell she was avoiding the question.

“What was that you gave him?”

“A letter.”

“A letter from who? His mate?” Cody knew Nita called him mate, but he was poking at Bethany to try to get her to answer. Were cats not as opposed to intermixed matings as they seemed?

“No. Nita is his mate,” Bethany answered sharply.

“I didn’t know they were mates. Intermixed species matings are rare, especially after the Council forbade them. I didn’t think cats approved of them.”

“They don’t.” Bethany’s voice was so quiet that he almost didn’t hear it.

She glanced at him and sighed at the look on his face. Cody arched an eyebrow at her. He wasn’t going to let this go.

“They don’t approve. Why do you think they’re working here instead of in a pride or even a coven, for that matter?”

Cody opened his mouth to ask about the letter again, but she cut him a sharp look. “The letter is from his sister, okay? He had to leave her behind when the pride forced him out. She just had another baby. Another nephew he won’t get to meet.”

Cody didn’t know what to say, and they walked in silence for a few minutes. This whole ‘let’s forbid intermixed matings’ thing was starting to sound like bullshit. So, because Calen found his mate outside the pride, he was exiled from it? Why? He was clearly a warrior and probably a good one. The pride would rather lose a warrior than accept a witch as his mate? Was it Bethany’s mother who’d made that decision? If he broke the Alpha Command his father had given him and claimed Bethany, would the pride and pack accept them, or would they also have to seek sanctuary at the Academy?

He looked at the stubborn set of Bethany’s jaw. He wasn’t going to get any more answers about this, so he changed the subject. “So what’s with all the food? Is it related to why you were stomping around like someone dumped water on your fur earlier?”

Bethany sighed loudly and rolled her eyes at him, but she held the door to her dormitory open with her hip so he could pass through.

“I don’t know, okay? Holly just came to me and said something happened and Claire needed a girl’s night, then asked me to get food. Honestly, the girl’s been through enough with fucking Vivienne lately that it pissed my lion off.”

Cody’s own wolf sat up and took notice. The sweet blind witch had grown on them all, and Cody’s wolf considered her pack already. “Was it Vivienne?”

“I just said I don’t know,” Bethany shot back at him.

They stopped outside the door, and Bethany almost dropped one of the boxes as she knocked on the door. Cody stepped closer to her and caught it with his own stack of boxes.

“Careful there. See aren’t you glad I came now?”

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

“Oh, shut it, Bethany, there was no way those measly feline arms were going to carry all of this. You needed the big bad wolf, admit it,” he teased, trying to lighten her mood.

Holly cleared her throat, and whatever sharp retort Bethany was about to give him died on her tongue. He hadn’t even heard Holly open the door.

“Evening, ladies,” Cody greeted Holly and Claire. “Having a girl’s night?” His tone was light, but his eyes traced over Claire’s puffy cheeks and red-rimmed eyes. The sweet witch looked like she had been crying, and Cody’s wolf was feeling a little murderous about it. “Need anything else from the big bad wolf?”

“Claire, what’s wrong?” Bethany asked bluntly.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I did this to myself.”

Holly sighed exasperatedly, and Claire smiled.

If Holly could growl, Cody was sure she would. “You did not,” Holly said.

“Do I need to kick someone’s ass?” he asked.

Bethany smacked him. “Not everything is solved by beating it up.”

“Some things are,” Cody shot back. “And besides, it’s Claire. She’s the sweetest person we know. In this case, someone probably does need to be beaten up.”

“Thanks, Cody,” Claire broke in. “But no one needs to be beaten up.”

“Well, maybe not tonight,” Holly disagreed. “Tonight we need to stuff our faces with this delicious food and have a girl’s only night.”

“So, it’s a boy I need to beat up?” Cody was persistent.

“Tomorrow.” Holly was firm. “Thank you, Cody.” Her eyes begged him to drop it, and his wolf huffed but he backed down.

“Okay, I’m going to go bother Zack at the dining hall. Let us know if you need anything.”

Holly nodded and took the boxes from him before shutting the door behind her. Cody stood outside the door for a few moments longer. Every instinct was screaming at him to stay, but he forced himself to turn and walk away. Bethany and Holly, and even Claire, were capable of handling themselves. Whatever it was, they would figure it out. But he would be here if they couldn’t, and he could enlist more help.

Zack looked up as Cody approached their table in the dining hall. He frowned when he saw Cody was alone. “Where are the girls?”

“What? Am I not enough for you?” Cody teased him and took pleasure when the wizard’s cheeks reddened.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” Zack rolled his eyes at Cody, but there was a smile on his face.

Cody knew he had a goofy grin on his face as he stared back at the handsome wizard. Zack had really come out of his shell since their first year here, and their playful flirtation when they were alone was always the highlight of Cody’s day.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I’ll recover,” Cody teased.

“Maybe I can help with that later,” Zack murmured as he took a sip from his cup. “But only after you tell me what’s going on. I can sense that your wolf is riled up.”

Cody’s eyebrows shot up briefly before he controlled his face. Usually only other shifters could sense anything about another shifter’s animal. Cody’s thoughts flashed back to Nita and Calen. Could Nita sense Calen’s animal?

Cody looked around the dining hall. They sat in the back corner, but he still didn’t want to add any fuel to the gossip mill. “I don’t know what happened, but Holly asked Bethany to grab them food from the dining hall, and when I helped her carry it back, Holly answered the door with Claire who looked like she had been crying.”

Zack’s silver eyes brightened as his magic rose, and a frown played at his perfect lips. “Vivienne?”

Cody shrugged, eyes scanning the dining hall. “It’s possible. Claire wouldn’t answer when I—” His eyes caught on the Stonemont Triad’s table. The three usually larger-than-life men were sitting around the table like someone had just kicked their puppy. Their shoulders were slumped, and it looked like Malcolm was just picking at his food. Cody knew the dragon could eat enough for three full-grown shifter men.

Zack’s eyes followed his gaze, and he hummed softly. Cody looked at him, but instead of shock, an amused look danced in his eyes as his lips quirked up slightly.

Cody nudged his leg under the table. “What? What do you know?”

“Remember the other week when Bethany had that pride event, and you went home with her?”

Cody nodded and nudged Zack’s leg again to keep him talking. This time, though, he didn’t pull his leg away, and Zack swallowed softly before explaining how Desmond had joined them for dinner and how he’d walked Claire home.

“You think she’s his soul flame?” Cody stumbled over the term that the witches used for their mates.

“I think she might be all of theirs,” Zack whispered, his words barely loud enough for Cody to hear.

Cody snapped his head around to look at the Stonemont Triad again. “All of them?” he whispered.

If it were just Desmond, he could understand, as he was also a witch, but Malcolm and Everett weren’t the same species. He thought about earlier with Calen and Nita. He couldn’t see the Stonemont Triad allowing anyone to disrespect Claire, but would they be able to change the Realm’s minds about intermixed matings? They might be the only ones who could.

Zack shrugged. “I could be wrong.”

But Cody doubted that he was. Zack was not only brilliant when it came to academics, but he also had one of the best tactical minds Cody had ever met.

“Then why is she upset?” Cody wondered out loud. His wolf growled in his head. “If they hurt her, I’ll kill them.”

Zack nudged his leg against Cody’s, and Cody quickly trapped it between his. Zack rolled his eyes but relaxed into the touch. “Easy there, tough guy. I don’t know if we’re ready to take on the Stonemont Triad just yet.”

Cody loved that it was a ‘we’ and not a ‘you’ that came out of Zack’s mouth. “Eh, I don’t know if they’ll put up much of a fight right now.”

“True,” Zack hummed. “Anyway, how was the rest of your day? How is Bethany?”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Cody said, then filled Zack in on meeting Nita and Calen and the revelations that they were mates and what Bethany had said about them being forced out of the pride.

If Bethany’s pride was really that against intermixed matings, Cody and Zack had a long fight ahead of them. And it would be a fight. Their time at the Academy had shown him that he couldn’t just go back to the pack after their four years were up and watch her mate with someone else. He was going to fight for her and Zack.

Zack hummed again, the sound so much like a purr that his own wolf purred in response. Zack jerked slightly when he heard it, and it was Cody’s turn for his cheeks to redden.

“Can’t help it,” he grumbled. And he couldn’t. The wizard was just as important to him as Bethany was.

Zack flashed him a quick grin. But his face quickly turned serious as he thought about what Cody just shared.

“That makes a lot of sense,” he murmured. “Why she’s so shy about getting close to anyone who isn’t a male lion, and from what you’ve told me of male lions, she wouldn’t want to get close to them anyway.”

“But Sadara will force her to anyway,” Cody growled. “She wants a consort for Bethany who will secure her place as Alpha, but I don’t think she understands that the lions on that list don’t care about Bethany’s power, only their own.”

Even though his father had forbidden him from telling Bethany, Cody wasn't going to sit idly by and let someone else get close to his mate. Well, anyone besides Zack. Especially not someone who wouldn't treat Bethany like the jewel she was. All male lions cared about was the power she could bring them.

"It's a good thing Bethany has us, then," Zack said simply, and Cody wished it was only that simple.

They had a long fight ahead of them. They had to get Bethany on board with accepting that not just Cody, a wolf Alpha Heir, but also Zack, an Ashcraft wizard, loved her and wanted to stay at her side forever. And that her mother's skewed views on love and emotions didn't matter. Once they overcame that, they just had to tackle the Realm's forbidding of intermixed species matings and the pride's very hostile views and tendencies to kick intermixed mates out of the pride. It would be a piece of cake.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BETHANY

Age 21

Summer after second year.

Bethany's jaw ached as she held back another yawn. She looked around the room at the fifth meeting of the day her mother had forced her to attend and by far the most boring one as the Elders in her pride droned on about trade routes and proposed trade goods. She was home for the summer and sitting in boring meetings seemed to be how she was going to spend most of it. The meetings were especially boring given how exciting the last few weeks of the semester and the first week of summer had been.

She'd finished her second year at the Academy, which was exciting enough. But what made it more exciting was Claire had touched a mysterious dagger at the market and had regained her sight. Then she and Everett were attacked by a

Felua, a massive creature only seen in the Elven Forest, which had been controlled by dark magic. Claire and her Triad had headed to Brandlevine with Holly and Zack. Holly also lived at Brandlevine, and Zack was able to secure an apprenticeship with Andrea Brandlevine, or Professor Andy, as she was known at the Academy. It was an amazing opportunity for Zack, but Bethany's lioness missed him terribly. She did, too, if she dared to admit it to herself.

She missed all her friends. Her lioness had claimed them as an honorary pride, and now with Claire in danger and the others so far away, her lioness was antsy. But her mother wouldn't hear a word about Bethany staying at a coven this summer. Even when Bethany tried to tell her mother what was happening and the importance of building allies, her mother was firm that she spent the summer at the pride.

So here she sat, in an uncomfortable wooden chair in the pride's main meeting hall, listening to the Elders debate how much wood they should sell at the Capitol this year.

"Bethany, what do you think?" her mother asked, her keen eyes narrowing in Bethany's direction like she could tell that Bethany wasn't paying attention. Good. All these meetings could have been paper requests instead of taking an hour of her time.

"I'm sorry, can you repeat the question," Bethany said, her green eyes holding her mother's similar ones a fraction of a second longer than was typically appropriate before looking at Elder Nicolai.

Sadara frowned at her, but Bethany avoided looking at her. She used to admire her mother. Her strength and discipline had carried the Pride through the death of Bethany's father and cemented their place as one of the most influential shifter groups in the Realm. But lately, she was starting to question some of her mother's choices. Starting with this ridiculous notion that Bethany had to take a consort to cement her place in the Pride before she turned twenty-two. Her mother had never taken another consort after her father died. Even though their marriage was arranged, her mother and father had shared a deep respect and love for each other. It was like opening her

heart to her father was the one risk her mother had ever let herself have, then when he died, she'd locked all of her emotions into a steel vault and made the pride her first, second, and third priority. And she was determined to make Bethany do the same.

"We were talking about how much firewood to bring to the market to sell," Elder Nicolai told Bethany, his brown eyes assessing her.

Elder Nicolai was the grandfather of the pride's biggest pain in her ass, Alonzo. Alonzo was on the short list of her mother's list of consort candidates despite Bethany's protests. From the look Elder Nicolai gave her, he found Bethany lacking.

"How much did we use last year?" Bethany asked. She locked eyes with Elder Nicolai, pushing a little dominance into her gaze until the man shifted in his chair. Good. He and his grandson needed to be taken down several pegs.

"300 cords."

"Are we anticipating the winter to be worse this year?"

"The witches are saying no, but we have no way of verifying that," Elder Nicolai said.

Bethany nodded. The Fae used to be a reliable source of information, but since the Great War when they disappeared, the witches had been the only forecasters of the weather. And the witches were too power hungry to be a reliable source of information.

"Then let's keep an extra fifteen percent in our stores for the winter and take the rest to the market. We can always sell the additional later or keep it for next year and not have to cut as much down."

"Fifteen percent is too much," Sadara contradicted her. "Store ten percent and sell the rest."

Bethany bit her lip against her retort. What was the point of asking her opinion and then not taking it? They could always sell the extra wood later, but if they had to buy it back, they would spend more money than they would make. For a half

second, she considered speaking up but decided against it. It wasn't worth the fight. Or sitting in this meeting any longer.

"Meeting dismissed," Sadara said.

She stood, and the rest of the room scrambled to their feet. Bethany headed towards the door, intent on slipping out before her mother could find something for her to do.

"Bethany."

Bethany fought off a groan. She was so close.

"Yes?" She turned, hoping whatever it was it would be quick.

"Join me in my office." Sadara stepped past her, and Bethany bit her lip as she followed her mother down the hall to her office.

Her mother took her time settling into her seat and shuffling the papers around on her desk. It was one of her mother's many techniques to teach Bethany patience. If she fidgeted, her mother would make her wait longer, so Bethany kept herself still and pasted a bored look on her face.

Finally, her mother looked up. "I've planned a dinner tonight. Make sure you are there and not late. And dress appropriately."

Bethany's eyebrows shot up. "And who will be at this dinner?" She had a bad feeling about the guest list.

"Some important people in the shifter world," Sadara said, her eyes on a piece of paper in front of her. "You will be representing the Pride."

"Some important people or some important people's sons?" Bethany pushed.

Her mother had spent the last few weeks hinting at a list of potential consorts for her but hadn't pushed for anything beyond that. Bethany had shut it down every time, but it seemed her mother was out of patience.

She let out a sharp sigh. "Bethany, we've talked about this."

"No, we haven't talked about anything," Bethany said. "You've talked about it, despite my express wishes that I have

no desire to take a consort any time soon.”

“A consort will only cement your position as Alpha when you take over. Provide the pride strength and stability.”

“How? You’ve done fine without one.”

Sadara’s eyes flashed dangerously, and Bethany knew she was treading on fragile ground. The only surefire way to get under her mother’s skin was to hint at or mention her father.

“There has been a lot I have shielded you from. There will always be unrest in the Realm, people seeking more power. A powerful match not only secures your place as Alpha but also keeps the Pride safe.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to cultivate multiple allies instead?” Bethany pushed.

Her mother ignored her, a clear sign she was done with the conversation. “Dinner will be at six. Dress appropriately.”

Biting her lip so hard she tasted blood, Bethany stood and stormed out of the office. The second she said something her mother didn’t like or didn’t agree with, she shut Bethany down. She was so Realms-damned worried about maintaining power that she failed to see the Realm was changing. Something big was on the horizon, but all her mother cared about was Bethany taking a consort.

She was so angry that she didn’t even notice someone standing outside the door of the meeting hall until she almost slammed into him.

“Easy there, Princess,” an insufferable voice drawled. “Don’t need to act that excited to see me.”

“I’m not,” Bethany shot back at Alonzo.

He ran his hand through his sandy blond hair. “Come on, Beth, don’t be like that.”

“Don’t call me that!” Bethany shot back.

In addition to being Elder Nicolai’s grandson, his father, Nik, was one of Sadara’s Delta’s. Which meant he was an easy choice on her mother’s list of potential consorts. He was a

powerful tiger shifter, distantly related to Councilman Roland. He came from a line of powerful shifters, but that made him a cocky bastard who was constantly putting everyone around him down and boasting about his miniscule accomplishments. Cody never acted like that even though he was Alpha Heir to literally the largest wolf pack in the Realm. She had seen him with his pack and at the Academy. He never demanded special treatment like Alonzo did for simply existing even if Cody was a powerful wolf.

Alonzo was insufferable, and since Bethany had returned home a few weeks ago, he had upped his game. He thought he was being suave and charming, but he made her lioness's hackles rise. Not that he would ever see that. Zack would have noticed something was wrong. He noticed everything about her, it seemed, even the things she tried to hide.

She didn't bother to talk to Alonzo. She whipped around and marched away. Away from him, away from her mother, away from all of it. She walked along the path, lost in her swirling thoughts. Was there any point in trying to change her mother's mind, or was she stuck in this hell till she took over as alpha?

If Sadara had her way, that wouldn't be for another few decades, it seemed. Which would be fine if Sadara left Bethany alone and didn't insist on meddling in her life.

"Rough day?"

The question had her jumping. Her cat hadn't alerted her that she wasn't alone. She looked up and found her feet had taken her to her and Cody's spot. The shifter in question was sitting on the ground, his back to a tree as he whittled a piece of wood in his hands.

She huffed as she threw herself down next to him. "I don't want to talk about it." Not till she had it sorted out in her own head.

Cody looked like he wanted to pry, but she shot him a glare. He chuckled, turning back to the piece of wood in his hands.

Her body began to relax as she stared up at the sky. The leaves above her danced in the slight breeze, and Cody's pine scent

filled her nose. The silence was nice. She enjoyed their banter, although she would never admit that to him. Poking at him and his poking back soothed something in her lioness and kept her from going insane with the desire for her mate.

She snorted. Her mother's plan was working. Well, kind of. This close to him, the mate pull rose inside her with a vengeance. Fucked if she stayed away and fucked if she stayed close.

Cody glanced her direction at her snort but looked away when she kept her eyes on the trees. She closed her eyelids halfway so she could peek at him without making it obvious she was staring. He focused on the piece of wood in his hands with a quiet determination as he coaxed a shape from the branch. Her breath caught as she watched his hands.

Her lioness purred at the thought of them on her body, and Bethany snapped her eyes closed. She couldn't let her thoughts go down that path. It would make the pull harder to fight, and the next few years would be agony unless Sadara changed her mind. And she wouldn't. Her mother would never agree to Cody as her mate, and without her mother's blessing, she would have to directly challenge her mother to take over the pride. She didn't want to do that. Those challenges always ended in bloodshed and sometimes even in death, and she didn't see Sadara yielding.

A soft crunching of leaves had her eyes flying open. She sat up quickly as Cody set his knife and wood to the side. Seconds later, Alonzo stomped into view. Bethany let out a quiet groan that had Cody's lips quirking.

"I thought I smelled dog." Alonzo sneered at Cody.

Bethany leaped to her feet. "Watch your mouth," she growled, her eyes flashing brighter as her lioness shifted closer to the surface. The mate pull caused her lioness to be even more protective.

"I know the Academy is intermixed," Alonzo said, the corner of his mouth curled in a sneer. "But that doesn't mean you have to sully yourself with other species, Beth."

“Her name is Bethany,” Cody growled, his eyes bright with his wolf.

Fuck, she needed to end this. The alliance was already tentative enough without these two getting into it.

Bethany held up a hand to Cody, and he growled again but didn't speak. “You should be very careful about what you say next, Alonzo. Cody is one of our best allies. You wouldn't want it getting back to your father and my mother that you were insulting one of our oldest allies, would you?”

Instead of taking the warning and leaving as she expected him to, Alonzo's sneer stayed on his face. “Best allies? The dogs are just convenient. We won't have to sully our pride with them much longer.”

“What in the Realm are you talking about? Why don't you leave the running of the pride to the adults who actually know something about the Realm.” Bethany rolled her eyes like Alonzo was stupid.

The male tiger did not like that, and a growl slipped through his lips.

Cody let out a louder growl behind her, and Bethany fought not to sigh in exasperation. Freaking males.

She squared up with Alonzo and let out her own growl, her cat rising inside her to push dominance into the growl. She was satisfied when Alonzo's growl stopped; although by the anger that flared in his eyes, he was not happy that she forced his tiger to back off.

“What, are you his protector now?” He sneered at Cody behind her.

“Cody doesn't need protection,” Bethany said. “I'm just preventing you from starting a fight you won't win.”

Alonzo opened his mouth, but Bethany cut him off, slashing her hand in front of her. “A fight against me, not him. He would wipe the floor with you, but you forget yourself and the terms of our alliance. I would be well within my rights to step in, so shut up and get out of here.”

Alonzo looked like he wanted to say more but snapped his mouth shut. He took a few steps backward before his eyes lit up with an evil glint.

“I’ll see you at dinner tonight. I’ll tell your mother that I’m still interested. Even if you’ve sullied yourself with a wolf.”

Bethany’s growl followed him out of the clearing. Cody wrapped a hand around her arm and tugged her to face him. His brown eyes were bright gold with his wolf.

“What did he mean, see you at dinner tonight?” He growled out the question as if the idea was a personal attack on him.

Bethany rubbed a hand over her face. “My mother has arranged a dinner tonight.”

Bethany didn’t know why she hesitated to tell him. That was a lie. Her lioness didn’t want to hurt him, which was absurd, because even if Cody was her mate it didn’t mean he felt anything for her other than a friendship built on annoying each other. If he did, his wolf would have already claimed her.

“Hellcat, why is he going to be there?”

Her head snapped up at the nickname. His eyes were... wild with an almost feral gleam.

Her cat whined, and the words spilled from her lips. “My mother has decided I need to take a consort before I take over the pride. And not in a decade. In a few years. Tonight’s dinner is the first of many I’m sure she’s arranged for me to meet her list of suitable options.”

“A consort?” Cody dropped his hand from her arm, and she cursed herself for missing the warmth.

Bethany nodded, her eyes on his chest instead of meeting his gaze.

“I see.” Cody’s voice was devoid of any emotion, and when her head snapped up, his face was shuttered. “I’ve got to go. I forgot my father needed me for something.”

The words were tinged with the sour smell of a lie, but Bethany didn’t have a chance to call him on it before he was walking away, leaving her alone in the clearing. Why was he

so bothered by that news? Could he feel something for her? No, he couldn't. He knew as well as she did that intermixed relationships were rejected and condemned. No, this had to be something different. Lingering protectiveness because they were friends.

Bethany sighed and dropped her head towards the ground. A glint caught her eye. Cody had left his knife and the block of wood he'd been whittling. The faint form of a cat was beginning to take shape in the wood. She picked it up and held it in her hands. She found herself slipping it in her pocket, telling herself she would return it to Cody later. But right now, she had a dinner to get to.

She slipped through the trees until she arrived at her house. Luckily, her mother seemed to already be at the meeting hall for dinner, so she didn't run into her as she headed up the stairs. She entered the room and stopped short. A green dress was laid out on the bed with matching shoes. Her mother clearly didn't trust her to know what *dressed appropriately* meant.

Bethany grinned. Her mother was right. Bypassing the dress, she chose a pair of black pants and a black blouse from her closet. The blouse was dressy enough and would send a clear message to her mother. Her mother might think she needed a consort to take over the pride, but she didn't. She would show her mother and the pride that she could handle it all herself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BETHANY

Age 21

Summer after second year

Bethany was practically vibrating with excitement. The second they crossed through the portal, a warm body slammed into her. She wrapped her arms around Holly, hugging her tightly.

“I can’t believe you’re finally here!” Holly cried. “It’s been too long.”

“I know,” Bethany whispered, holding Holly tighter. Her lion was purring with happiness now that she was back with her lioness’s claimed pride.

She watched over Holly’s shoulder as Cody and Zack hugged. They drew apart, staring at each other, their faces only a few inches from each other and a soft look in both of their eyes. Were they...?

Holly released her and turned to Cody, who scooped her up and swung her around. Bethany stifled her instinctive growl. Zack pulled her into his arms, and she burrowed her face into his shoulder.

“It’s good to see you,” Zack whispered into her hair. “Holly’s right, it’s been too long.”

Warmth spread through her body, and she burrowed deeper, allowing herself to be held for the first time in too long. Her mother was not a warm person, and the pride wasn’t really a touchy group, even if shifters thrived on touch. It had been too long since she’d been hugged. That was the reason she gave herself when her purr became audible, and she felt Zack’s smile in her hair. The mating pull eased at Zack’s touch, and there was also a new warmth spreading through her body as tendrils of desire unfurled in her stomach. That had her releasing Zack and stepping backwards. She ignored how her cheeks felt heated and blamed that on the extra magic from the portal travel.

Cody had released Holly, and Holly slipped an arm through Bethany’s and started guiding her towards the Brandlevine manor house. She leaned over and murmured in Bethany’s ear, “You could cut that sexual tension with a knife.”

“Stop it,” Bethany hissed at her.

Holly looked at her and giggled. Bethany rolled her eyes but couldn’t help the giggle that slipped through her lips. By the Realm, it was good to be back with her friends and not feeling like she constantly had to be on her guard.

“Where’s Claire?” Cody asked.

“She’s at the training arena with her Triad,” Zack answered. “They’ve been there for a while now.”

“So we’re going to go rescue her,” Holly explained.

They got to the arena just enough to hear Malcolm tell Claire that she had to step to the side when sparring against a straight blow. Claire frowned, and Bethany could see the exhaustion and frustration on her face.

“You looked good to me!” she called to Claire.

Claire turned and her face lit up. She let out a squeal, sheathed the daggers, and ran towards them. Bethany met her halfway and wrapped her in a tight hug. Her lioness was purring strongly in her chest as she held her last packmate to her.

“You’re here!” Claire pulled back, her smile mirroring Bethany’s own.

Cody wrapped his arms around them both and swung them around. “We’re here!” he echoed.

Bethany’s eyes traced over her friend as the others explained they were here for the Summer Solstice celebration. Holly had gotten Desmond’s father, the Brandlevine coven leader and a Councilmember, to formally invite Bethany and Cody, which was the only way that they convinced their parents they should go. But it had been worth it to see Claire grin. It was like the exhaustion melted away from her.

Claire kissed all her men goodbye, and Bethany couldn’t resist teasing her. “Come on, Claire! You can kiss your men later!”

Claire laughed as she caught up with them, and they all walked to the village for lunch. It was almost like they were back at the Academy again as they filled each other in on everything that had happened in the few weeks since they had been gone. The sun’s rays stretched low across the ground by the time they headed back towards the houses. Cody was staying with Zack, and Claire had talked her Triad into a sleepover at Holly’s.

“Ok,” Bethany said, settling onto her stomach.

They had dumped all the bedding off Holly’s bed while she called for more blankets, and together, they had made a nest of blankets on the floor of Holly’s room. Her lioness curled up in her chest, content to take a nap surrounded by the scents of her makeshift pride.

“Tell me everything you couldn’t say in front of the boys.” She wasn’t dumb, she had seen how Claire blushed as she covered some of the last few week’s events earlier at lunch. Luckily, Holly had her covered.

“Claire got kisssssseed!” Holly said dramatically, throwing herself back onto a pillow, her hand on her forehead like a swooning lady.

Bethany feigned shock. She had seen how much closer Claire was with her Triad. She would be surprised if kissing was all Claire had been up to.

“What? Why in the Realm didn’t you lead with that?”

“And say what?” Claire laughed as she stood outside the nest of blankets. Bethany’s lion woke up to insist that Claire join them in the nest. “Hey, Bethany, great to see you. Malcolm kissed the soul out of me the second day we were here.”

Bethany gave into her lioness’s urging and tugged Claire down next to her. “Yes! Exactly that! Tell me every detail!”

Holly rolled over on her stomach. “Ooo, don’t forget when they eye-fucked you when you came down in that dress.”

Bethany’s eyebrows flew upwards as she stared at Holly, who was not normally that crude. She hit Claire’s shoulder playfully. “And they eye-fucked you!!! Tell me everything! Now!”

Claire groaned and Holly joined Bethany in teasing their sweet friend about how obsessed her mates were with her. Would she ever know that kind of devotion from a mate? That unexpected thought had the mating pull became so unbearable it hurt to breathe. She struggled to shove it back down and not alert her friends. This one-sided bond was killing her. Even if Cody had turned out to be her mate and felt the bond like she did, she would never be able to share that kind of devotion with him. At least, not publicly. The pride and pack, their parents—hell, even the Realm—would never allow it.

There was no use wallowing over what she couldn’t change. The few memories she had of her father, she remembered him telling her that. “You have to accept what you cannot change.” So when Claire finished her adorably cute story, Bethany cut in.

“That is the most adorably cute thing I have ever heard,” she said, groaning as if the cuteness was killing her. “All the

sweetness is going to give me a toothache. Do you have any bloodthirsty stories?"

Claire laughed. "I mean, not really? Training stories but nothing bloodthirsty yet." Her face darkened briefly, and Bethany wondered if she was thinking about the Felua that attacked Claire and Everett at the Academy.

"Boring," Bethany complained, slumping over. A small smile lit Claire's face. She hid her own grin as the tension in her best friend eased.

"I'm sure we can get up to some trouble now that you're here," Holly teased.

Bethany sprang up on her elbows, her eyes gleaming. "Now that's an idea."

"Oh no, look what you've done," Claire complained to Holly, but laughter coated her words.

"Hey, I make your lives interesting. Admit it," Bethany protested, although there was no heat behind her words.

"You definitely do," Claire reassured her, placing a hand on Bethany's arm.

"Make them interesting tomorrow, though," Holly said, her mouth splitting open in a big yawn. "So we can keep up."

"Fine, ruin all my fun," Bethany teased even as she snagged a pillow, her own yawn betraying her.

The girls snuggled down for bed, Claire pressed at Bethany's back and Holly's hand in her hair, and her lioness let out a sleepy purr. This is what it felt like to be around a true pride. These two women's unwavering belief and love for Bethany was a tangible thing, and she hadn't realized how much tension she carried around at her pride until she had stepped foot on coven land. Here, surrounded by her chosen pride, the tension melted away, soothing her lion in a way that she had previously only felt around Cody and Zack.

Her lioness let out a whine that Bethany smothered so it didn't stir the women sleeping next to her. Her lioness ached for this, and Bethany didn't know how to give it to her. She was the

Alpha Heir. Her mother's only Heir. She was the only option for her pride. But with each day and each meeting, the position felt more and more like a death sentence. Like a noose that was tightening around her neck. There were good people in the pride who were counting on her to lead, to continue the legacy her mother had created as the first female shifter leader and maybe even make her own changes, but she didn't want to.

Bethany froze. It was the first time she had admitted to herself, even if only in her thoughts, that she didn't want to lead the pride.

She shoved that thought away, putting it firmly in the dreams and fantasies box. It didn't matter what she wanted. It didn't matter that she found her chosen pride at the Academy or that her lioness had chosen Cody and Zack as mates. That was a fantasy. She didn't get to have the fantasy. They lived in the real world, and in the real world, that would never be accepted and certainly not from an Alpha Heir. Intermixed matings that fell on opposite sides of the Great War had caused chaos and cost lives. As Alpha Heir, the effects would be multiplied. What if the pack and pride alliance fell apart? How could they pick up the pieces from that? She had people counting on her. Counting on her to bring the change to the pride that was sorely needed. She couldn't let them down. She had to let go of that fantasy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BETHANY

Fingers brushed her wrist, and Bethany jumped. Zack's face was carefully blank as he took the pile of red silk from her, but there was a sparkle in his eyes that had Bethany guessing it wasn't an accident.

A hand on her back had her jolting again. Cody leaned past her to dig a pile of gold silk out from the crate of decorations. Bethany usually wasn't jumpy, but Cody and Zack seemed to be taking every excuse to touch her as they helped hang decorations up for the Summer Solstice party later that evening. It was like the men had heard her thoughts last night and were determined to tempt her into acting on her fantasy.

Ducking her head, she pretended to rifle through the garlands in the box to give her cheeks time to cool off. Her lioness was loving all these stray touches. The big cat was not on board with Bethany ignoring her chosen mates. The cat

didn't understand the politics of the Realm they lived in, and it was up to Bethany to stay strong.

As Zack's fingers brushed hers again, though, she felt her resolve weaken. Claire's laughter drew her attention away. She was decorating the doors of the shops in the village, and she and Holly were laughing about something. Desmond, in all his overprotectiveness, had assigned Cody and Zack to be on the ladders and the girls to be on the ground. Bethany had wanted to tease him that they were capable of getting into trouble anywhere, but the shadows in his eyes had her pausing. Desmond looked like he hadn't gotten any sleep last night. She didn't know if it was because he was worried about Claire or because he'd been separated from her for a night. She snuck a peek at Cody and Zack hanging one of the garlands across the road and bit her lip. What was it like to have someone who worried about you like that?

She was so lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice two witches cutting through the street until they were walking past.

The witch with curly red hair mock-whispered to her friend as they passed under the garland the men were hanging. "Never thought I would see the day when shifters attended a witch festival. It's just unnatural. I don't know why Frederick would allow it."

Bethany swallowed the growl that bubbled up from her lioness. She wanted to snarl at the women. To make them jump and scurry away like the rats they were, but she was on coven land. She couldn't make a scene, especially not as an Alpha Heir.

Claire's face darkened, and she stepped towards the women like she was going to give them a piece of her mind.

"Leave it." Holly caught Claire's arm gently. "That's Matilda. She's still stuck in the past."

"The far past," Bethany growled. "She forgets that the shifters fought alongside the witches in the Great War."

Cody descended the ladder and squeezed Bethany's shoulder softly. Whether it was to keep her from going after

the witch or in comfort, Bethany didn't know, but she recoiled from the touch. Matilda's comment was just another reminder that the species didn't mix. That the Realm would never accept an intermixed relationship, even if they were blessed by the leaders. If someone from the pride had seen Bethany just a few minutes ago acting like a lovesick fool over a few simple touches... She held in a shudder at the thought. No, she needed to let go of the fantasy, if only to protect all three of them. Even if she had to fight the pull for the rest of her life.

"If they did, then why is she so..." Claire struggled to find the word. "Hateful?"

Bethany hid a small grin. Claire was so sweet. She doubted the witch had ever cursed anyone out before.

"Allies is a loose term," Zack said from up on the ladder. He frowned. "It was definitely born out of necessity rather than a true willingness to work together."

Claire still looked like she was going to go after Matilda, but she huffed and marched over to the crate and took out a tangled mess of garland. Bethany stepped up next to her to help her untangle it.

"What do you mean?" Claire asked Zack.

"Well, when the Elves started demanding higher prices for their medicinal treatments, the other species knew that they had to band together and refuse to pay those prices until they were lowered. That forced the shifters and witches into a trade alliance," Zack explained.

"So how did the Fae and Elves become allies, then?" Claire asked, her face screwing up in confusion.

Bethany agreed. This was always the part that felt a little hinky to her.

"That was a surprising development," Desmond said, "at least according to Father. The two species lived on opposite sides of the Realm, yet when the first attack happened, the Fae came to the Elves' aid."

"The Elves attacked first?" Claire asked.

Desmond nodded, but Zack broke in. “Actually, I don’t think that’s true. At least, not according to the Dryad’s journal I was just reading. It was the witches who attacked first in a surprise attack on an Elven village close to the border.”

Desmond frowned. “That’s not what the records say.”

“I think...” Claire stopped untangling the garland, looking around the street to make sure their group was alone. “I think we should maybe consider that everything you’ve been taught about the Great War is wrong.”

Bethany’s eyebrows shot up as she stared at her friend. She agreed that some parts of the Great War and the reasoning the leaders of the Realm provided were a bit hinky, but what was Claire thinking? That everything they had been told was a lie?

“Why do you say that?” Holly asked the question Bethany was sure on everyone’s minds.

“All the official records are written by the witches, shifters, and dragons, correct?” Claire asked, her voice low.

“Yes,” Desmond answered.

“Wouldn’t they want their stories to be told? Or, at least, the stories from their perspective? And isn’t it convenient that there are no records from the Fae and Elves?”

“I thought you thought the Fae and Elves recalled the records?” Bethany asked, her brain spinning.

She remembered asking her mom about the Great War when she was little. Her mom told stories of battle strategy and strong warriors, but she’d never shared any details of how the war started. Or really anything about the Fae and Elves. If their records were recalled, that could explain why.

Claire shrugged. “I did, and I do think that. I’m just also wondering if there’s more to it that we don’t know. Would the Council keep records from the other side’s perspective? Especially if those records didn’t fit the story they were sharing, like the book Zack read.”

The group was silent as they processed that information. Claire brought a unique perspective, having grown up in

Windshire. If she was right...

“I think you’re onto something, Claire,” Cody said, his words careful. “I think it’s time to consider that everything we’ve been told might be wrong.”

“But that would mean the Council...” Bethany trailed off, but the rest of her statement hung heavy in the silence.

That would mean that the Council had been lying to everyone. But not just the Council. Were their leaders lying to them? Was her mother lying to her? How much of their lives now after the Great War were built on a lie? Selfishly, Bethany thought of the ban on intermixed matings. Was that a lie, too? She let herself have a moment of hope before she dashed it. Even if it wasn’t a lie, it was what the Realm had decided, and she didn’t disagree that there had been serious fallout from Triads with species on both sides of the war.

Desmond swore softly and scanned the area. “We can’t talk about this here and now, out in the open like this.”

“Later,” Claire agreed.

“After the festival tomorrow, before Bethany and Cody have to go back,” Holly said, her face pale.

Bethany agreed with her. They needed to talk about this, but not now. If it was true, though... if her mother knew... Bethany didn’t know how she’d be able to go back to the pride and look at her mother, knowing she might have lied to her.

They finished the last of the decorations in somber silence. Thankfully, Clarissa only had a few more tasks for them when they made it back to the village center, but they managed to paste smiles on their faces. Desmond must have filled in Malcolm and Everett, because Malcolm’s face got even stonier, and a low growl emanated from his dragon. If Claire was right, if the Council was responsible for the Great War, they were all well and truly fucked.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BETHANY

It was a miracle that Claire convinced her Triad to let the girls get ready by themselves. Malcolm had only acquiesced after Claire promised they would get ready in their suite at the manor house.

“We look amazing,” Holly said proudly as the girls stood in front of the long mirror.

Claire was wearing white linen pants and a dark red blouse that billowed at the sleeves and cinched around her wrists. She paired it with Holly’s gold belt. Holly was wearing a similar outfit, except her shirt was copper colored and set off the warm tones of her dark brown hair. Holly had lent Bethany a dark red wine-colored blouse that wrapped around her body to tie at the sides. The deep V and fitted sleeves made Bethany feel sexy. She opted for a short white skirt instead of the pants the other girls wore. Even with the lightweight material,

shifters ran hotter than witches did. With all the dancing Holly said took place, she wanted to be able to enjoy the evening.

“We really do,” Claire said, twirling slightly in the mirror.

“Come on.” Holly tugged Claire away playfully. “Let’s go show your obsessed men how hot you look.”

“I believe they already know.” Bethany laughed as Claire blushed.

“You don’t have room to talk,” Holly threw over her shoulder, her brown eyes dancing. “You’re going to knock Cody and Zack dead in that outfit.”

Claire stopped by the door and whirled around. “That’s right! I keep forgetting to ask, but what’s going on there?”

Bethany rolled her eyes. “There’s nothing going on.” There couldn’t be anything going on. Not with everything stacked against them, and Bethany was tired of thinking about it.

“Bullshit,” Holly said calmly, folding her arms. “You could cut that sexual tension with a knife when you got here yesterday.”

Claire looked from Holly to Bethany with wide eyes. “You didn’t mention that last night,” she accused.

“Because there’s nothing to mention.” Bethany groaned and rubbed her forehead. “Even if there was, my mom... the pride... they would never approve.”

Holly shrugged. “Then don’t tell them. And no one’s saying you have to marry them, but there’s no reason you can’t enjoy the present together or even your time at the Academy.”

Bethany knew Holly enjoyed her own share of flings and one-night stands. She also had never told Holly that Cody was her mate. Or how much her lioness liked Zack. But she didn’t have to. Holly had confided in Bethany about her Empath magic early in their friendship, so Bethany didn’t need to say a word for Holly to figure it out.

Claire looked back and forth between Holly and Bethany, biting her lip. She clearly wanted to say something, but

Bethany didn't want to talk about it. There were too many obstacles in their way, there was no way it would ever work. She had to put the fantasy to rest.

Holly softened her stance and walked over. She squeezed Bethany's shoulder. "Just think about it," she murmured. "There's no reason you can't enjoy the present."

Bethany could think of several reasons, but she just smiled tightly at Holly and nodded. She could think about it, but that was all she could promise.

"All right." Holly clapped. "Let's go knock the socks off your men."

Bethany didn't miss how Holly included her in that statement, but when she sent Holly a glare, she just smiled at her. Bethany rolled her eyes. They opened the door to find Claire's Triad waiting in the hallway. They really were obsessed with their Fourth. The girls looked at each other and burst into laughter as the Triad stood there with confused looks on their faces.

"*Obsessed*," Holly mouthed at Claire as they descended the stairs.

Cody and Zack were chatting with Frederick and Ilena as they descended to the foyer. Cody and Zack's eyes snapped to Bethany, and it felt like a wave of heat caressed her skin as they drank in her outfit. Their gazes were like a physical caress, and she was suddenly glad she had packed this skirt.

Holly nudged Bethany with her elbow, drawing her attention. "Obsessed," she whispered to her as she descended the stairs to greet her aunt and uncle. Claire was busy with her Triad whispering in the corner, leaving Bethany with Cody and Zack.

Her steps faltered as she approached them, and the mating pull roared to life. They both looked incredible standing there together. Zack wore a dark red shirt in almost an identical shade to Bethany's own and light brown pants. His shirt's tie was open, exposing his lean chest, which was dusted gold from the sun. Cody's shirt was a deep gold that brought out the

gold flecks in his eyes and showed off the highlights from the sun in his mess of dark curls. Both men looked good enough to eat, and Bethany had to fight to keep herself from drooling as she approached them. Damn it, she had just spent the last twenty-four hours telling herself this was a bad idea and then they showed up looking like this.

The silver and gold in their eyes seemed to glow brighter as she approached. A kaleidoscope of precious metals she was never going to have.

“You look amazing,” Zack said softly.

Bethany aimed for nonchalance as she pretended to look them over. “You both clean up nicely.”

“Only for you, hellcat,” Cody said with a flirty smile.

Was he flirting with her? She thought he only saw her as his best friend, but the way his eyes traced over her now made her unsure. Come to think of it, she didn’t recall him flirting with anyone at the Academy. Well, that was a lie. He flirted with Zack. Her lioness didn’t seem to mind that, though. Maybe he was just flirty with his friends. If he was flirty with her intentionally, Bethany didn’t think she would survive it.

“Are we ready?” Ilena’s interruption prevented Bethany from reading too much into Cody’s intentions.

Frederick and Ilena were pulled away as soon as they arrived in the village, but the rest of the group stayed together as they threaded their way through the crowd. The village was alive with all sorts of sounds and smells that had Bethany’s nose twitching. Lively music danced in the air as children shouted and squealed as they weaved through the crowds with colorful streamers clenched in their sticky fists. Savory meat roasted on several grills along the street, and Bethany’s mouth watered as they passed by.

Zack stopped at one of the grills and came back with three skewers of meat. He pressed one into Bethany’s hand and handed the other to Cody.

“Thank you,” Bethany murmured, feeling off-kilter when his molten silver eyes rested on her. She had to get herself

together.

Holly appeared at her elbow, tugging her away, and they quickly lost Cody and Zack in the crowd. “You looked like you could use an assist,” Holly murmured in her ear. “Unless you’re ready to get out of the land of denial.”

Bethany rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I’m not living in denial. I’m living in reality. You know how the pride would react.”

“Well, the pride’s not here,” Holly shot back. “Where did my seize-the-moment friend go?”

“She spent the summer with her mother,” Bethany grumbled half-heartedly, thinking of the endless strategy meetings and increased pressure to take a consort she didn’t want. And her mother’s passive-aggressive comments about Bethany’s ability to lead. It was enough to drive anyone crazy.

“Well, that’s enough to drain the fun out of anyone,” Holly said sympathetically.

Bethany shrugged. She didn’t know what to tell Holly that would make her feel better, so she just kept silent. Holly squeezed her arm and then dropped it as they approached a colorfully decorated table with women serving something sweet-smelling.

“Three glasses please, Carla,” Holly told the woman.

“Here ya go, Holly,” Carla said. Her blond curls were tight around her face. “You and your friend enjoy.”

Carla’s face was warm and her eyes kind as she nodded at Bethany. Apparently, not all witches held Matilda’s views on shifters. Bethany nodded back at the witch with a small smile and took the glass from Holly. She lifted it to her nose and took a sniff of the sweet-smelling wine. She took a small sip, and the flavors of blackberries and peaches exploded on her tongue.

“Oh, that’s amazing,” Bethany said, her eyes widening as she looked at Holly.

“I know, right? Carla makes the best wine.” Holly smiled as she took her own sip.

“We’re going to need another two glasses please,” Bethany said to Carla, who laughed and poured them for her. Holly and Bethany clinked their glasses together and then drained them. They took the new glasses from Carla and went to find Claire.

Bethany held the wine while Holly stole Claire away from Malcolm. Claire was confused at first but came along willingly. A grin spread across her face when Bethany pressed the glass of wine into her hand. The girls toasted each other, then drank quickly. The warmth of the alcohol flooded Bethany’s insides, making the world seem lighter and happier.

Claire looked like she wanted to ask questions, and, feeling playful, Bethany pressed a finger to her mouth and shushed her. That was hysterical for some reason, and the girls collapsed in laughter. That was how Claire’s Triad, Cody, and Zack found them. The men stared at them in amused bewilderment before Malcolm stole Claire back into his arms.

Zack’s intelligent gaze caught the empty cups on the windowsill behind them, and he grinned at Bethany. He held out a hand to her, and Bethany let him tuck her into his side. She blamed the wine for the heat radiating through her, as it surely couldn’t be the feel of his body pressed against hers, but she was a little too tipsy to care. He snagged a glass off a table as they passed by and pressed it into her hand. It wasn’t as sweet as Carla’s wine, but the blueberry wine was the perfect mixture of sweet and tart. She grinned up at him. He always paid attention to her. The thought caught her off guard.

Cody glanced back over his shoulder, and his eyes softened even as they glowed with his wolf. She knew she probably needed to create distance between them, but with the wine flowing and Holly’s words in her head, she couldn’t find it in herself to move away. Maybe she did need to embrace the moment, like Holly had been saying. She wasn’t committing to forever.

Holly’s mother Clarissa called out to them, and Holly and Bethany stopped to talk with her. Cody and Zack got pulled

into a game of kickball with some children.

The kids shouted excitedly at the addition of the two into the game. Bethany lost track of the conversation with the other women as she watched. Zack moved like a dancer, his feet twisting quickly as he rolled the ball away from Cody gracefully and sent it softly to a little boy in a red shirt. Cody was not quite as graceful. He barely managed to avoid bowling Zack over at the quick movement. Zack grinned at him and said something, then Cody threw his head back and laughed.

Holly glanced over at her with a smirk, and Bethany elbowed her softly without looking. She was staring, but she couldn't help it. She *could* blame it on her lioness for not wanting to look away, even as sweat shone from every inch of available skin, but the heat that rose in her body wasn't just the lioness's fault. Cody and Zack were both sexy in their own ways. Zack's lean body was lithe, like a dancer, while Cody's broad shoulders and muscular frame spoke of the power that resided in his wolf. Together, they made a striking pair. Bethany was dying to know if there was something between them, but she knew it was likely just her imagination. Alpha Bryson would eventually force Cody to find a wolf shifter to settle down with. He would never accept a magic wielder into the pack, much less a wizard. She wished, not for the first time, that the Realm wasn't so divided. But there was no use wasting wishes on something that wasn't going to change.

She let out a soft chuckle when Cody let himself get tackled by a few of the smaller boys. He fell to the ground dramatically with exaggerated shouts of defeat. The little ones piled onto him playfully with shouts of victory at defeating the 'big bad wolf.'

"Come on." Holly tugged on her arm softly. "The bonfire's about to start."

Around them, the witches and wizards of Brandlevine Coven were moving out of the village and towards the field behind it. Holly and Bethany scooped up more sweet wine before gathering their friends. Holly went to get Claire and her Triad. Bethany stopped by Cody and Zack. A wave of shyness swept over her before she steeled her spine and offered them

each a cup. She really needed to get these pesky feelings under control. She wasn't shy. She was a badass Alpha Heir, who ate men for breakfast. She had to pull herself together.

But when Zack murmured a quiet thanks and his fingers touched hers as he took the cup, her defenses crumbled. Ignoring the sparks from their fingers, Bethany decided to tread back into familiar ground: teasing Cody.

"How does it feel being the mighty Alpha Heir who got taken down by a few munchkins?" Bethany teased him.

Cody laughed. "A few? That was practically a whole army."

"If you call an army, four children, then yes." Zack smirked from behind his cup.

"No, no." Cody waved his finger between the two of them. "Bethany's the only one allowed to rag on me. I can't have both of you ganging up on me. It's not fair." He folded his arm and pouted. Bethany would never admit how cute he was out loud, so she turned to Zack.

"Are you interested in forming an alliance with me?" She smirked and held out a hand, delighted when he threw his head back and laughed.

"Absolutely," Zack said, reaching for her hand.

Cody lunged upwards and grabbed their hands with both of his. Bethany stumbled into Cody as he hauled himself up. "Thanks for the assist there," Cody said, ignoring Bethany's growl. "And just so you know, since you didn't shake on the alliance, it's not valid."

"What are you going to do, hold our hands all night so we don't shake on it?" Bethany arched an eyebrow at him.

"That's a great idea. I'll do that." Cody grinned at her.

She rolled her eyes and tried to tug her hand out of his grip. He squeezed it softly, but let her go just as Holly came back with the others. They passed around the sweet wine, Claire giggling softly when Bethany smirked at her. The girls were probably each on their third or fourth glasses already, but

only Desmond and Zack looked suspicious. Everett had a small smirk on his face. Not much got past the gryphon shifter.

By the time they got to the bonfire, the flames were reaching to the sky. The pile of wood had to be at least seven feet tall, with stacks of additional wood placed at a safe distance around it. Clearly, the coven planned to party all night.

When the music changed, Holly tugged Bethany and Claire onto the dance floor and into a fast-paced dance. They drained their sweet wine, and the kick of alcohol loosened their movements. When Desmond tugged Claire away, Holly and Bethany grinned at each other. Holly was tugged away by a couple of witches a few moments later, and Bethany lifted her hands to the sky, content to move to the beat by herself. She closed her eyes and let the music move through her as she twisted her hips.

A soft touch on her hip had her eyes opening. Zack stood in front of her, firelight dancing in his silver eyes. He held out a hand, and Bethany took it. She gasped as he tugged her into his arms, bringing her close like they were a couple instead of just two friends. He smiled at her gasp but didn't say anything, placing his hands on her hips and moving with the beat. They moved farther towards the field, on the other side of the bonfire to give themselves more space. The shadows flickered between the couples here, and the mood was quieter and more intimate. Bethany jolted as strong hands covered Zack's grasp on her hips. Cody's familiar pine scent wrapped around her, and she tilted her head back when Zack didn't move.

"May I join you?" He leaned down and whispered in her ear.

She shuddered softly as the puff of his breath danced along her skin. She should say no, but she found herself nodding. Heat surrounded her on all sides as Cody moved closer to her back. She closed her eyes and swayed with them to the music as their scents overwhelmed her. She felt drunk and not just on the wine. No one spoke a word as one song turned into two.

Her eyes opened at the soft brush of fingers against her cheek. Zack's fingers hovered in the air, his eyes soft and curious, as if he was waiting to see what she would do. When she didn't move, he ran his fingertips from her cheek to her ear, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear as he did so. His fingers paused, and Bethany could feel her heart pounding at the innocent touch. Her eyes traced over his face, from his expressive silver eyes framed by thick glasses to his full, pink lips.

She could have blamed it on the sweet wine that warmed her veins, but the desire to kiss Zack's lips had her knees weakening. Cody caught her from behind, his strong hands holding her up as his thumbs traced her hips, sending a new stream of heat into her center. She fought the urge to push back against him, but he did it for her, stepping closer and guiding them farther from the bonfire and into the shadows.

With Cody's broad back blocking them from the others, Zack ran his fingers down her cheek to cup her jaw. "I want to kiss you," he confessed hoarsely. "May I?"

Bethany closed her eyes, her thoughts swirling. She should say no. The practical thing would be to say no, but she was tired of fighting this. And maybe Holly was right. Maybe she should just enjoy the present. She couldn't promise them anything else other than that, but she also didn't want to go another moment without knowing what it felt like. To be kissed and held by her fated mate and the wizard her lioness had chosen.

She nodded, opening her eyes. Soft hands cupped both her cheeks, and Zack's thumbs stroked along her cheekbones. The flames of the bonfire danced across his face, catching the silver flakes in his eyes and causing them to sparkle. By the Realm, she wanted him to kiss her. He leaned forward, and she let her eyes flutter closed again as he brushed his lips over hers. The first brush of his lips had her lioness purring loudly. She felt Zack smile against her lips before he deepened the kiss. He ran his tongue over her bottom lip, coaxing her to open for him.

When she didn't, he took a step forward, pushing her back into Cody's broad frame. Her head fell back onto Cody's shoulder with a gasp, and Zack slipped his tongue into her mouth. She growled and kissed him back just as hard, greedy hands clasping at his shoulders. By the Realm, why did she wait so long? Zack was a masterful kisser as he dominated her mouth. Each stroke of his tongue coaxed the heat in her center higher. Cody's chest rumbled in a purr behind her as his hands tightened around her hips. Zack broke the kiss, trailing his lips down her throat.

A low rumble had her eyes flying open. Her head still rested against Cody's shoulder, and his eyes were bright gold with his wolf.

"Kiss me," the words slipped from her lips before she could think too much about them, and Cody's eyes brightened.

He cupped her throat, his thumb resting under her jaw as he tilted her head towards him. When his lips touched hers, her lioness wanted to roar in victory. She was kissing her mate!

She arched her back, pressing herself into Zack as one of her hands left his shoulder to bury itself in Cody's curls. Cody growled approvingly as he deepened the kiss, and Bethany's head swam. Zack kissed her collarbone, nipping softly. The slight bite of pain had Bethany groaning into Cody's mouth. Everything ached, and she couldn't get enough of them. The mate bond was finally quiet in her chest. Her nipples felt like sharp points against the silk shirt. She caught one of Zack's hands and pressed it to her breast. Zack cupped it, his thumb brushing over her nipple in a delicious soft touch that was still not enough.

She tore her mouth away from Cody. "More," she growled out.

Cody and Zack glanced at each other, and something passed between them. Bethany was about to growl again when Cody lowered his lips to hers again. He brought his other hand up to cup her breast as Zack's hands traveled down her body. He skimmed her hips, his fingers tracing along the sliver of skin at her stomach before traveling lower.

He ran his hands down her legs before bringing them back up, dipping under her skirt before repeating his path. She growled and tried to break the kiss with Cody to demand Zack touch her, but Cody's hand tightened on her throat, and he pinched her nipple. Sharp pleasure shot through her, and she sank into his chest. He rumbled underneath her approvingly as Zack's fingers finally brushed against her center.

Zack hummed approvingly. "You're so wet for us," he whispered in her ear.

He nipped her earlobe, and she groaned. She would have thought Cody would be the biter, since he was a shifter, but apparently her nerdy wizard had layers she didn't know about.

His fingers brushed against her folds, spreading the wetness that was seeping out of her up to her clit. When his thumb circled her clit, her hips bucked between them, and Zack held her hip with his free hand. The two of them worked together to drive her wild. Zack's fingers danced against her expertly, every brush and touch driving her higher and higher, while Cody's sharp pinch of her nipples sent bolts of pleasure straight to her core. Cody's mouth covered hers, capturing the sounds she was making and keeping their moment safe in the shadows.

She was so close, and her body strained to fall over the edge. She picked up her leg and wrapped it around Zack's hip, pulling him to her. He groaned and nipped at her neck before giving her what she wanted. He slipped two fingers into her, and she gasped at the stretch. He swirled her clit with his thumb as he drove his fingers in and out. Cody pinched her nipple and twisted it between his fingers, and Bethany let out a shuddering cry into his mouth as she broke into a million pieces. Zack softly withdrew his fingers as Bethany practically lay on Cody's chest, breathless between them. Zack lifted his hand, his fingers still glistening with her wetness. His silver eyes were molten as he licked his fingers. Bethany blushed when he moaned.

"I want a taste," Cody rasped out, his voice a soft growl in her ears.

Zack held out his fingers to Cody, and Bethany groaned. She didn't know if she had seen anything hotter than Cody licking her wetness of Zack's fingers.

"Delicious," Cody rasped in her ear.

As her brain put itself back together after her orgasm, sounds began filtering through her ears, and she stiffened as she remembered where they were.

"Hey," Zack said, his voice soft as he stepped closer to her like he sensed she was about to flee. "It's okay, no one saw. I put up a barrier."

Bethany looked around. The air was shimmering around them. She hadn't even noticed Zack do that.

"That was only for us," Zack said, bringing her attention back to him.

Bethany relaxed slightly, then stiffened again. Had she enjoyed it? Yes. But she had been so lost in it that she hadn't thought about someone seeing. If someone had seen them, it could have gotten back to the pride and her mother, and there would be consequences for all of them. Even if they hadn't mated, intermixed species relationships were still subject to the same prejudices.

"Hey, hey." Zack and Cody pushed closer, and Bethany realized she was whining softly. Zack cupped her face. "I meant what I said. That was only for us. No one else has to know." His eyes were soft with understanding, but she could see the hurt in them, and Bethany's lioness whined louder. She didn't want to hurt them, but there was no way this could end well.

"He's right," Cody said even as his chest rumbled in a soft growl, as if he hated the situation they were in. "This can be for just us."

"My pride..." Bethany tried to explain.

"We know," Zack said softly. He looked over Cody's shoulder and cursed softly. "It looks like the light orb ceremony is about to start. We can talk about it later."

Bethany nodded stiffly and pushed away from Cody. She attempted to straighten her clothes but had a feeling she was wearing a 'just fucked' look. She looked at Cody and Zack and nodded. Zack was right. They needed to show up to the light orb ceremony before someone got suspicious. Cody looked like he wanted to say something else, but Zack nudged him and dropped the barrier.

Bethany practically ran towards the bonfire, but she could feel Cody and Zack following behind her. It was like whatever they did tonight had deepened their connection and she could sense them in a new way. Fuck, fuck, fuck. If her mother found out, she would assume Bethany lost control of her cat and couldn't handle the mate pull. She would subject her to extra 'training,' and Bethany could say goodbye to returning to the Academy in the fall.

Holly frowned when Bethany found the group, but Bethany ignored her. Desmond and Zack created light orbs, weaving their fire and air magic into a softly glowing orb and dispersing them to the crowd.

As Frederick started the ceremony, Cody and Zack stepped up on either side of Bethany, and she straightened her spine. While she could enjoy the present, she couldn't lose sight of reality. She couldn't have more than a few stolen moments with these men, and she would be wise to remember it.

When she released her orb into the night sky, Bethany whispered her wish. She might not be able to claim her mates, but maybe when she was alpha, she could change things.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CODY

Age 21

Early fall in the shifter/Elven forest

Raspberries and cream.

Cody struggled awake, the sweet scent filling his nostrils. Something was tickling at his nose with every breath he took. He opened his eyes. The dim morning light trickled through the leaves, leaving a pebbled pattern on the forest floor. Warmth pressed against his front and back. As the fuzziness from sleep faded away, he couldn't help his lips pulling up into a wide grin. Bethany was asleep in his arms, her golden hair tickling his nose. He didn't have to move his head to know Zack was the heat pressed against his back.

It was so quiet.

Not just the forest in the early morning, but his wolf slept soundly in his chest. His wolf had never been this quiet, even when sleeping. His brow furrowed, and he checked in with the sleepy animal. Contentment radiated off his wolf, deep in his magical center. He had never felt him this quiet and content before. If he wasn't feeling his wolf snoozing in his chest, it would feel like he was missing from under his skin. It was an odd sensation but a welcome one, and it was all due to the two people sleeping on either side of him.

Movement beyond his feet caught his attention. Mylo was stoking the fire in the early morning. He gave Cody a nod when he saw he was awake. He wasn't sure what to make of the quiet hybrid. For more than a few moments yesterday, Cody had thoughts that because Mylo was half-panther, Bethany would immediately recognize they were mates and her mom would accept him because even if he was a hybrid, he was a cat, and he smelled powerful.

But then Mylo had outed them all as mates, and Bethany's reaction and explanation had given Cody hope. She was overwhelmed and in shock, but she hadn't said she didn't want them. Just that her mom and the pride made her think she couldn't have them. He was under no delusion that everything would be automatically fine this morning, but maybe she wanted them as much as they did. He knew she wanted them physically, but the question of whether she believed they could come out to the Realm as mates was a different story.

Bethany shifted in his arms, and his chest rumbled with a purr. Her green eyes slowly blinked awake. The second she registered where she was, her body stiffened. He could let her push them away, or he could show her how good it could be if they were mates. Decision made, he brushed a kiss on her forehead. Her eyes fluttered closed for a second, and he used that opportunity to push up to a crouched position and roll her gently into Zack's arms.

Zack sleepily opened his eyes and then pulled Bethany closer. He closed them again and buried his face in her hair. Bethany furrowed her brow, and Cody brushed his fingers across the crease, marveling at the feel of her skin under his fingertips.

“Stay here,” he whispered, not giving her time to protest. “We’ll take care of breakfast.”

He stood up and turned around. Mylo was skinning a rabbit, with another one at his feet. He hadn’t even heard the hybrid leave and come back. He rummaged around in one of the packs and pulled a second knife from it. Mylo nodded at him as he sat down. They worked in silence for a few minutes. Once the meat was prepared, Mylo produced some quail eggs from his pocket. Cody let out a quiet laugh. The hybrid seemed to be prepared for anything. Mylo’s eyes twinkled as he started chopping some herbs.

He placed a flat stone in the fire and arranged the meat in strips on it. When the meat had browned a bit, he cracked the eggs over the strips and sprinkled the chopped herbs on it. Cody fetched their meal kits out of their packs, and the two of them worked to finish breakfast. Mylo glanced over at Bethany and Zack, and Cody’s eyes followed his. Zack’s hands were running through Bethany’s hair as her head lay on his chest. Bethany’s eyes were closed, but Cody could hear the soft purr from her chest from here.

“How long have you known you were mates?” Mylo’s question surprised Cody. He had been so quiet up until now.

“With Bethany, three years,” Cody admitted. “With Zack, it was different for my wolf. It wasn’t a singular moment, just a steady knowing.”

Mylo nodded. “From my Elven side, I feel that steady knowing. But my cat knew instantly.” Mylo stared at Bethany, longing clear in his golden eyes. “I don’t know how you stayed away that long.”

Cody let out a humorless laugh. “Well, the Alpha Command helped, but...” He trailed off. “I don’t know. It was hell in some ways, but I was very lucky that we had been friends for so long and were at the Academy together. Her proximity was the only thing that kept my wolf sane.”

“She seems... skittish to the idea of mates?” Mylo’s voice was no more than a whisper.

Cody rubbed a hand over his face. "It's a long story."

Mylo nodded. "We'll have to win her belief."

Cody's eyes widened. He had used the same word in his head earlier. Belief.

"I plan to treat her like a mate. The way I wished I could but couldn't the last few years. Maybe convince her that way." Maybe he could show her it would be worth the risk.

"Of course," Mylo said it like that was a given.

He seemed so confident that this would work. Cody wished he had the same confidence, but he knew how the Realm was. With the changes Claire was bringing, however, maybe it wasn't so out of reach anymore. Although Sadara was probably still going to be a problem. Cody laughed to himself at the thought of the look on Sadara's face if Bethany showed up with three mates, none of them a true cat. Well, not if, when. Cause he was determined to make her believe. That this would work. That being mates would be worth all the obstacles in front of them.

The eggs finished cooking, and Mylo scraped the food onto the plates. He handed two to Cody. Cody walked over to Zack and Bethany. Bethany's eyes popped open as he approached, and a hint of a blush dusted her cheeks as she sat up. Zack looked reluctant to let go of her, and Cody understood the feeling. He handed them each a plate. Mylo stepped up next to him and handed Cody a plate before he sank to the ground in front of Bethany and Zack.

"The group you're tracking is about ten people," Mylo said once they started eating. "They are probably a half day ahead."

Zack nodded and swallowed his bite. "That's great news. Do you know where they are heading?"

Mylo shrugged. "I was tracking a disturbance in the forest until I caught Bethany's scent. I'm not sure where they're heading, but I have some ideas."

Bethany's cheeks flamed red, and she dropped her eyes to her plate. Cody held in his chuckle. It was going to be fun watching Bethany get flustered under the attention.

Zack's lips quirked, and he studiously didn't look at Bethany. "Sounds good. We can talk on the way, then."

They finished breakfast quickly and packed up. By the time Mylo was done with their campsite, it looked as if they had never been there. It was smart. They didn't know who was ahead of them, but they didn't know who was behind them either. That second group of escaped prisoners was still out there. And they had to convince Bethany to trust them enough to handle anything their parents or the Realm could throw their way.

He didn't necessarily blame Bethany. It wasn't going to be easy, and she had spent her life trying to please her mom. His dad wasn't going to be happy but would eventually get on board. Sadara was going to be the biggest obstacle here. But he had hope. Even if Bethany didn't believe in them yet, he had seen some changes in her over the last few months that gave him hope.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CODY

Age 21

A few days after the Summer Solstice

Clank!

The metal weights hit the packed sand of the pack's training arena. Cody blew out a harsh breath. He took a few moments, letting his aching muscles relax as he sat back in the chair, surveilling the others. A few pack members were running laps around the arena, their harsh breaths echoing in the air as they ran by him. Cody had run at the start of his workout before attacking the weights for the last hour. His muscles screamed at him, but he welcomed the ache. It was the only way to tire out his wolf and keep him docile enough that he didn't go charging into pride land to claim Bethany.

The mate pull was growing stronger and harder to ignore. The proximity to his father reinforced His Alpha Command, which helped dull the ache but still wasn't enough. So Cody had resorted to pushing himself to the limits with every workout. It served two purposes, though. Not only was it tiring out his wolf; it was making him stronger. And in a Realm that valued strength and power, Cody needed to be stronger if he could ever dream of claiming his mates. Both of them.

Cody heaved himself to his feet and ignored the ache in his muscles. He restacked his weights for the next person and headed towards the door. The arena was large, large enough to hold the circular track around the inside and outside. A variety of weights and workout machines littered the inner circle, surrounding a large roped-off area for hand-to-hand combat.

A group of wolves were in the combat area. Cody avoided looking at them as he passed. It was a group of the pack's Deltas, and Cody had no desire to be roped into conversation.

"Cody!" one of the Deltas called as he approached the door.

It was Peter, one of his father's newest Deltas and one of Cody's tormentors growing up. That was one of the things Cody hated about the pack. Everything was a constant dominance fight. He didn't have friends growing up outside of Bethany because every other kid in the pack had something to prove to him. Peter was a frequent instigator of those 'play fights' growing up until Cody had turned twelve and started putting him on the ground in only a few moves.

Cody slowly turned towards Peter. From the gleam in Peter's eyes, he wanted to try his luck again against the Alpha Heir.

"Come spar with us." The challenge was clear in Peter's voice.

Cody wanted to decline, especially after he'd pushed his body to the limits these last few hours, but if he did, it would be viewed as a sign of weakness to Peter and his friends. And if his father heard that he'd declined a fight... Well, he wouldn't only get a lecture, but his father might put him in additional training. And Cody wanted to save every spare minute he had this summer for Bethany.

They'd hung out more this summer than they had in a while. It wasn't easy for either of their animals knowing that their friends were in danger, especially Claire, who was about to head to the Elven Forest searching for answers. Both their animals and the people missed their friends terribly. Zack wrote to him almost daily but hadn't brought up in any of his letters anything about their time together at Summer Solstice a few days ago. Cody was dying to bring it up with Bethany, but it didn't feel right to do it without Zack.

Cody's wolf missed Zack fiercely; their stolen moments at Brandlevine hadn't been enough. But he wasn't going to be able to do anything about that until he got stronger and could break his father's Alpha Command. Then he could claim both of his mates. His father wasn't the only person he had to convince. And first, he had a challenge to win.

Sure, it wasn't an official challenge, Cody thought as he ducked under the ropes that separated the combat area from the rest of the arena. But that didn't stop other wolves from stopping their workouts and gathering around the edge of the arena.

Peter's eyes gleamed as Cody straightened and faced him. The Delta must have been watching Cody's workout and decided to challenge him to a sparring match after he thought Cody had exhausted himself. But when Cody straightened, his wolf woke up and flooded his body with new strength. He would be damned if he let this cocky little shit beat him.

"Wolf or man?" Cody asked Peter shortly.

"Wolf," Peter answered, confirming Cody's suspicions. It took a bit of Energy to shift, and it was Energy Peter was banking on Cody not having.

Cody just nodded. "First blood?" It was common for most fights in the training arena to end at first blood.

"Till the other submits." Oh, Peter was really going for some added humiliation, too.

Cody tilted his head from side to side, stretching out his muscles before he shifted into his wolf. Gasps and whispers

sounded around the arena. A side effect of his training meant his shift had gotten faster and took less Energy to complete. His wolf shook out his coat and growled at Peter. Cody let a sliver of dominance slip into the growl, just enough so Peter could feel the pressure. Peter narrowed his eyes and slipped into his own wolf form. A sleek dark gray wolf with amber eyes stared back at Cody. Cody's wolf was quite a bit larger than Peter's. His training showed through in the added muscles of his wolf form.

Peter growled and lunged towards Cody. Cody danced out of the way and let the wolf go flying past him. Peter landed and spun around, growling. He lunged again and Cody danced away again. He caught his dad's scent and chanced a quick glance towards the audience. His father stood in the crowd, his arms folded. Well, fuck. He couldn't let Peter tire himself out too much then. The last thing he wanted was his father to analyze the fight and come up with more drills for Cody to run.

The next time Peter lunged, Cody danced away and then raked his claws down Peter's hip as he passed by. Peter landed with a snarl; his eyes bright as his wolf rose because of the pain. He lunged again, and this time Cody met him in a clash of teeth and claws.

Back and forth, they traded blows. Cody took a slice to his hip but raked his claws down Peter's belly in retaliation. He was panting, but thankfully, Peter wasn't much better. Cody saw his opening as Peter leaped at him again. He moved out of the way and swung around, throwing Peter to the ground. Before the other wolf could move, Cody was at his throat, jaws clasped around the skin as he growled menacingly.

The arena froze as they waited for Peter's next move. There was still a fire in Peter's eyes, but he whined in submission and let his tail thump the floor three times. He submitted.

Cody drew back, holding in a whine as the cut on his hip burned. He couldn't show any weakness in front of this crowd. He shifted back and stood tall. He strode over to where Peter lay, having shifted back but still lying on the ground. He held out a hand to help Peter up. Even though they had just fought,

Peter's eyes held nothing but respect as Cody helped him to his feet.

In a way, Cody appreciated that about the wolves. They were quick to anger and always on their dominance bullshit, but when the fight was over, at least for a little bit, they let it go. If it had been Alonzo, the tiger shifter in Bethany's pride, he would still be holding a grudge and plotting how to stab Cody in the back.

The crowd around the ring slowly dispersed, and Cody reluctantly headed towards his father.

"Good fight," his dad said, looking him over for any weakness.

Cody stood tall even as his hip ached. "Thank you, sir," he said.

His dad wasn't a bad Alpha, but he also subscribed to the Realm's view that power was everything. He was always pushing Cody to be stronger so he could be more powerful. Sometimes Cody wished that he would take a breath and see Cody as his son more than a powerful tool to wield for the Pack.

His mother was the same way. She kept having lunches at the pack house with what she called "eligible females." She didn't seem to care if Cody liked any of the female wolves. She was just focused on finding the most powerful females so she could have powerful grandkids. Cody was sick of it. He wanted Bethany and Zack, and that was it.

"I'm glad to see you taking your responsibilities and training seriously," Bryson said. "Although maybe we can add some more pack duties to your plate."

Cody shook his head. "I'm focusing on preparing for the next Academy year. It's a strict program." That was part of it, but more than that, he didn't want to lose any more time this summer to the Pack.

His dad hummed. "*If* there is another year at the Academy. There are reports of unrest in the Realm."

Cody hid a wince. “We heard that from Coven Leader Brandlevine at the Summer Solstice. Reports of beasts not seen since the Great War.”

Bryson’s eyes sharpened on Cody. “Do you think it has anything to do with the Stonemont Triad’s Fourth?”

Cody weighed his words carefully. Change was definitely coming to the Realm, and Claire seemed to be at the center of it. She was going to need allies before all of this was over, and while Cody would stand with her, getting the pack behind her would be even better.

“I think some of the Council members feel threatened by her,” Cody said honestly. “She hasn’t had any formal training, but all signs point to her being powerful.”

“Is she a threat to the Pack?”

“No,” Cody said firmly. “Not only because she’s my friend, but she’s also one of the kindest people I know. She would only be a threat if we turned her into one by threatening her friends, but she’s definitely a powerful ally.”

“The Stonemont Triad is formidable on their own,” his dad mused. “If she’s as powerful as you say, then we definitely want them as allies.”

Cody nodded and was relieved when his dad seemed convinced.

“I wonder why the Council is spooked by her?” Bryson thought out loud.

Cody hesitated. While Bethany wasn’t sure if her mother would really lie to protect the pride, Cody couldn’t see his dad lying like that. He was inclined to think his dad believed the lie, but if he was wrong, Claire and her Triad could be at risk.

“I think,” Cody said carefully, “There might be a few on the Council who aren’t on it for the good of the people.”

Bryson’s eyes sharpened. “What do you know?”

“Nothing concrete,” Cody said, which was true. “Just what I’ve picked up at the Academy. Some people have questions

about the Great War and the disappearance of the Fae and Elves.”

Cody blinked slowly when his dad snorted. “So do I,” his dad said.

Bryson chuckled when Cody’s eyebrows shot up. “Clearly I haven’t been teaching you enough strategy if you’re shocked that I have questions.”

“You just seemed...” Cody didn’t know how to say ‘a rule follower’ without sounding disrespectful.

“Only a fool believes what people in power say without question.” Bryson clasped a hand on his shoulder. “It wouldn’t surprise me at all if we didn’t have the full story. And if your friend is at the center of it, she’ll need all the help she can get.”

Cody nodded, shocked at his dad’s easy agreement. If only he could get him to agree that Bethany and Zack were his mates that easily. He opened his mouth to say something, but Bryson cut him off.

“Anyway, we have dinner at the house tonight. Your mom has invited some guests.”

Cody held in his groan as he nodded. Great. Maybe he could get his mom to agree to no more dinners. He had already found his mates and had no intention of letting them go. Memories of the Summer Solstice weekend flashed through his mind, and his cheeks heated. He turned away from his dad and headed out of the training arena. His wolf growled softly as he remembered how Bethany had felt in between them. His hellcat had sheathed her claws for a short time. But then she’d thrown the walls back up between them. Cody didn’t blame her reaction to their shared moment with how intermixed pairings were treated in her pride, but he was determined to show her it was worth the risk, anyway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BETHANY

Age 21

A few weeks after the summer solstice

Bethany stifled a yawn, ignoring the look her mother shot her from across the table. She was still struggling to catch up with sleep from their adventure a few weeks ago. She and Cody had gotten back to the shifter territory late the night after the Solstice. They were supposed to have been back in the afternoon, but Claire had a knack for getting into trouble and had ended up getting herself kidnapped by her new Notus familiar. Malcolm had ended up finding her wandering with the Notus near the Fae lands. By the time she got back to the manor, and they talked about everything they learned, it had been late afternoon.

She didn't really care that her mom was pissed, though. If what they had talked about a few weeks ago was true, the

leaders of the Realm had been lying to the people for the last twenty years, and Bethany didn't know if her mom was among them. Did she know the truth? Or had she been told the lie? Did she believe the lie? How many deaths in the Great War could have been prevented? Bethany's grandparents had died in the Great War long before Bethany had ever met them. Could their deaths have been prevented? What other rulings had the Council enacted that were based on lies?

Rustling around her drew her attention back to the room. People were getting up and leaving. *Perfect*. She slipped out between two of her mom's betas, pretending she didn't hear her mom call out her name. She wouldn't ignore her forever, but she needed to get her head on straight before she confronted her. And she didn't need to sit in another meeting. It wasn't like her mom took her opinions seriously, anyway.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't even see the group in front of her until it was too late to avoid them. She looked up, barely hiding her groan at Alonzo's smug grin.

"Beth." Alonzo's smooth tone sounded like nails raking down her sides.

He was the epitome of a male tiger. Tall and lithe with smooth golden muscles. His blond hair was short with reddish streaks in it, and his blue eyes shone with an elitist malevolence that made Bethany want to hurl. Cats had reputations of being snobs, and Alonzo definitely leaned into the reputation.

"Alonzo," she said, her teeth clenched in a too-tight smile. She looked over her shoulder at the meeting hall. She was too close to it to risk causing a scene. Her mother was probably watching her from her office window.

"I heard you went on a little field trip a few weekends ago." Alonzo said, his lips curled into a sneer. "To visit a witches' coven."

"It's important to cultivate allies," Bethany said tightly.

"You think the witches would ever ally themselves with shifters? With you?" Alonzo laughed with his friends, as if the idea was preposterous. And maybe it was to them. The witches

and shifters had never gotten along well, but why did that mean that could never change?

But Alonzo was stuck in his beliefs. Well, more like his father's beliefs and his father before him. That was the problem with this Realm. Too damned focused on bloodlines and power.

He would never listen to logic, so she went a different route. She smiled sweetly up at him, too much teeth in her smile to be genuine, but she didn't care.

"What do you mean?" she asked, pretending she didn't understand.

There was no way Alonzo was going to explain and risk insulting her. His father would have his head. Not because he insulted Bethany, but because he risked his chance at being her consort.

"I..." It was extremely satisfying to watch Alonzo falter and stammer as he tried to figure out how to respond. "You're just too good for them, Bethie," he told her with what she was sure he considered a charming grin.

"Mmmm" she hummed non-committedly, but he grinned like he'd won gold. "Well, I have to get going. Enjoy your day."

She politely brushed by them and kept her pace steady but quick as she walked away. She didn't dare risk a look back. Alonzo would take it as encouragement to follow her. Even as it was, she hoped he was too flustered to try to follow her.

Once she was out of sight of the meeting house, she slipped between two houses and darted into the woods. She and Cody hadn't really had a chance to talk when they got home last night through the portal onto the neutral ground. When they arrived, Deltas from the pride and pack were waiting to escort them home. Hopefully, he had been able to slip away, and even if he hadn't, she could enjoy the serenity of their spot.

Bethany frowned when she arrived at their spot and it was empty. Her lioness stretched restlessly beneath her skin, and Bethany decided to let her out. She touched her neck, the shifting charm laid against her chest. Right next to it was the

golden paw print charm that Cody had gotten her for her eighteenth birthday. With the mate pull between them intensifying, Bethany had taken to wearing it more regularly to reassure her lioness that she had a piece of Cody with them. Her cat was insistent that a bite would be more effective, but so far, she had managed to keep her in check.

She slipped into her lioness form, the shift feeling as natural as breathing. It hadn't always been like that. But her mom's strict training growing up was finally good for something. Although she had hated every moment of it, the bond between her and her lioness had grown stronger. It was the only way she had been able to control her cat when it came to the mate bond. Her cat wanted to hunt Cody down and claim him as hers, and not just Cody. Her cat wanted Zack, too. She was a greedy bitch like that, driven by feelings and instinct. It was up to Bethany to make sure she kept her in check.

She stretched her paws out in front of her, kneading the ground with her claws as she shook out her coat. It had been too long since she'd last shifted. Sunlight shone through the trees, and she lazily batted at a leaf as it floated by in the wind. Her lioness perked up, her ears twitching as she heard something approach. She hoped it wasn't Alonzo. Her lioness was more dominant than his tiger, but Alonzo didn't recognize that. He was always trying to dominate her, and every time she embarrassed him by shutting him down, he just doubled down on his efforts.

She crouched as she caught a flash of grey fur. When the wolf padded into view, though, she relaxed, and her lioness padded to greet him. Cody's wolf was large, even for a wolf shifter, standing almost a foot taller than her lioness. His soft grey coat was streaked with brown, giving him an almost brindle appearance. Large yellow eyes looked down on her as she approached. Before she could control herself, her lioness rubbed against Cody's wolf, scent-marking him in a way that would have Bethany blushing if she was in human form. Cody's wolf just rumbled with approval and licked her ear. Her cat sneezed at him, and his tongue lolled out at her. If he was in human form, she was sure Cody would be laughing.

He nudged her shoulder with his snout and took off trotting towards the trees. They ran around the neutral grounds for almost an hour until they collapsed back in the clearing next to each other. Bethany stretched out in front of him, her front paws almost touching his chest. Cody's wolf lowered his head to hers, nuzzling her softly. Bethany froze, not moving a muscle. Her lioness let out a loud purr when Cody licked her ear, completely ignoring human Bethany's objections.

Grooming another shifter was an intimate act, usually reserved for partners. But as Cody continued, she didn't want to move. She was half afraid if she went to move, her lioness would jump the wolf's bones. Her cat fought in her mind to move closer, but Bethany used every ounce of her mental willpower to keep her still. So she remained frozen but purring as Cody's wolf groomed her face.

When he was satisfied she was clean, he nuzzled his head next to hers and closed his eyes to take a nap. Bethany couldn't sleep, though. She was terrified if she did and relaxed her control, her lioness would do something she would regret later. Especially because Bethany wasn't sure where she stood with Cody or Zack after their... shenanigans during the Summer Solstice. They hadn't had a chance to talk about it with everything that happened with Claire afterwards. She needed to make sure they understood it was just fun between friends and couldn't turn into something more. There was too much at stake.

They lay there for a few minutes before Cody's wolf lifted its head and Cody shifted back. He kneeled next to her and ran a hand over her fur. "All right, hellcat, shift back and talk to me. I can practically hear your brain thinking even in shifted form."

Bethany lifted her head from her paws and twitched her nose at him. He laughed. "You can't hide from me." Cody laughed at her put out expression.

Sighing, Bethany rose to her feet and shifted back. She settled next to him, her back to a tree and her legs folded in front of her. There was no way in hell she was going to talk to Cody about what had happened with Zack during the Summer

Solstice. She preferred to bury that deep until she absolutely had to talk about it. Besides, it felt wrong to talk about it without Zack.

“Just thinking about everything we learned a few weeks ago,” Bethany said, referencing their conversation with their friends.

Cody blew out a sigh. “That was a doozy.”

“Do you think our parents knew?” Bethany asked quietly, her voice barely a whisper.

Cody tilted his head, his brown eyes unfocused as he stared out into the trees. “I don’t know,” he said softly. “I would like to think they didn’t. That they believed the lie, but I don’t know. The way my dad talked a few weeks ago... I don’t think he knew, but I don’t know. What about your mom? Have you talked to her about it?”

Bethany nodded, staring at her hands in her lap. “I don’t know how to,” she admitted. “Or if I even can bring it up. It’s not like she makes a habit of listening to me.”

Cody nodded. “I know how you feel. I want to ask my dad more about what he meant, but... maybe it’s wanting to believe the best in them, but I don’t think they know that it might all be a lie.”

Bethany wanted to agree with him, but she wasn’t sure. If her mom thought the pride would benefit from the lie, she would have told them the lie. Anything to keep the pride safe and powerful. She didn’t want to rule like that. To do anything, even lie and compromise her moral integrity for the sake of the pride.

She took a deep breath. If there was anyone who was going to understand what she said next, it would be Cody. Even if they weren’t as close as they once had been, they had so much shared history together and even now shared the same weight from their parental pressures.

“I don’t want to run the pride like my mom doe,” she confessed, not looking at Cody.

Cody was still as he took in her words. “What would you want to change?”

Bethany huffed out a laugh. “So much. Starting with the mentality that power is everything.”

Cody barked out a laugh with no humor. “The damned currency of the Realm.”

Bethany laughed. “That’s an excellent way to put it. Maybe it’s too lofty of a goal with it being what the Realm values, but it feels like we take it a step further. At least inside the pride, I want us to work together instead of it always feeling like a transactional relationship, with everyone only considering what they get out of something.”

Cody nodded, looking thoughtful. “I want that for the pack too,” he admitted. “I just don’t know how to get them to see past the dominance. Shifters have hot tempers, that’s just a fact. Getting them to take a breath before acting might take a Champion of the Realm.”

“Maybe Claire will do it.” Bethany smiled at the thought. The witch was sweet for sure, but she was powerful. She could do anything she put her mind to.

“I would pay so much gold to watch her smack our parents’ heads together,” Cody said.

They laughed, and Bethany relaxed further back into the tree, her thigh brushing Cody’s leg softly. Cody stiffened, but he didn’t move away.

“What else would you change?” he asked.

Bethany tapped her finger against her chin. So many things, including lifting the ridiculous ban on intermixed matings, but she didn’t want to bring that up. If she brought that up, Cody might want to talk about what had happened at the Summer Solstice, and Bethany didn’t want to talk about that yet.

She finally settled on, “Too many things.”

And it was true. Regardless of whether the Realm ever changed its view on power, when she took over the pride, she was going to change a lot of things about how it was run. That is, if her mother ever let her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ZACK

Age 21

Late summer

Zack let out a sigh of relief when Cody and Bethany came through the portal into the Administrative building. He hadn't been sure that their parents would let them come back to the Academy. He drank in the sight of them and cursed. Dark bruises littered their skin. Their parents might not have let them come willingly.

"What in the Realm happened?" Holly asked as Zack hurried towards them. Gwen was in with the headmaster, so her desk and the surrounding entry hall were empty.

"Well, the pack and pride didn't take too kindly to our violation of the travel ban," Cody joked with an easy grin, but Zack could see the strain around his eyes and the way he

avored his left side. Bethany was moving better, but she had some gashes on her forearms.

“Your parents?” Holly asked sharply.

“The patrol guard,” Bethany said, wincing as Holly touched a bruise on her temple. “But I’m guessing our parents know now.”

“I never should have sent that message,” Holly said as she guided Bethany to a chair.

Zack worried his bottom lip between his teeth as he helped Cody do the same.

“Your message said we needed to come, so we came,” Bethany said simply. “We would never leave you or Claire to face this alone.” Still, she winced as she sat down.

“May I?” he asked Cody softly, tugging on his shirt lightly. Holly was already digging in her bag in the seat next to Bethany.

Cody leaned back in his chair and nodded, eyes closed. Zack wasn’t used to seeing the strong Alpha Heir so defeated. He gently tugged Cody’s shirt up, wincing at the bruises dotted over his ribs. He laid his hands on them gently, wincing at Cody’s hiss. Gentle blue healing magic glowed around his hands as he sent it into Cody. Cody’s hand gripped his wrist.

“Do Bethany first,” he ordered.

“Absolutely not,” Bethany snapped, sitting up tall. “Heal him first. Stupid idiot jumped in front of me and took the brunt of it.”

Holly tugged her back down. “Sit and let me clean those gashes while Zack heals Cody.” Holly produced some bandages and cleaning solution out of her spelled satchel.

Zack laid his hands back on Cody’s side, looking up at him when Cody hissed again. Pain had his face drawn tight, but Cody’s eyes were soft when he looked at Zack.

“I missed you,” Cody whispered softly.

Zack's heart warmed. "I missed you, too. But I would prefer if you would be in one piece when you came back to me," he teased.

Cody's chuckle turned into a groan. Zack frowned and pushed more healing magic into him. Healing magic wasn't his specialty, but Andy had spent some time teaching him the delicate magic this summer. She had a feeling he would need it, and she had been right.

Beneath Zack's hands, the bruises slowly faded, and Cody's breathing eased. When the bruises were a sickly yellow and green, he lifted his hands and cupped Cody's face. He brushed a thumb under the shiner that was forming around Cody's eyes. Cody's breath hitched, and Zack's breath quickened in response. By the Realm, Zack had missed them both. He looked over at Bethany. Her eyes were squeezed shut as Holly dabbed her already healing cuts with a damp cloth. His magic flared to life inside him as anger rose within him. They should have never been hurt.

Cody brought his hands up and squeezed Zack's wrists. "I'm fine for now," he whispered. "My wolf is already helping. Help her now."

Zack nodded, his anger melting away at Cody's touch. He leaned down and brushed a kiss against Cody's forehead, and the wolf rumbled approvingly. He was tired of hiding their relationship, but he knew the risks. Here at the Academy, though, with no one around, he didn't care to hide it.

He knelt in front of Bethany, and Holly shuffled over so he could have some room. He touched Bethany's knee, and her eyes opened.

"May I?" He gestured towards her arms, and Bethany nodded.

He gently lifted one of her hands, cradling it in his as he extended her arm. He hovered his other hand over the gash on her forearm and called on his magic, letting it seep out of him in a gentle blue glow. Bethany winced as the magic hit the cut and it started closing at the edges. She squeezed his hand when he faltered.

“I’m okay, it just stings,” she assured him softly.

He nodded and let his magic finish with that cut before moving on to the other one.

“What is going on?” the headmaster barked. With his focus on healing them, he hadn’t heard Headmaster Dorian and Gwen entering the room.

“Just a disagreement with our pack and pride,” Cody answered casually, although his body was stiff.

Headmaster Dorian eyed Cody’s bruises and the blood-stained cloth in Holly’s hand before looking at Zack and Bethany.

“Do you need sanctuary?” he asked grimly.

Bethany and Cody eyed each other. Zack bit his lip. He wanted them to take the sanctuary the headmaster was offering, but he knew they wouldn’t. Taking sanctuary at the Academy meant they were never going to be able to go back to their pride and pack, respectively. And they weren’t going to give that up, no matter how much it hurt them to stay. Although, from his last letter from Cody, Bethany wasn’t planning on running the pride the same way Sadara was running it.

A cautious hope had bloomed inside him at Cody’s description of the conversation they’d had. He was careful not to let that small flame of hope grow too big, but it was possibly a sign Bethany was open to an intermixed mating. Or two of them. He wasn’t sure how much longer Cody was going to be able to hold out. Nor himself, for that matter. In his letters to him, Cody had talked about how despite his best efforts to tire his wolf out, the mating pull was almost unbearable.

Now that the urgency of healing them had faded, Zack’s stomach flipped as the magnetic pull that drew all three of them together rose inside him. Bethany shifted in her chair, and Zack wondered if she felt the pull the same way they did. Cats were notoriously private about their affairs.

“No, thank you, Headmaster,” Bethany said diplomatically, answering his question.

Headmaster Dorian eyed them a moment longer and then nodded. “If that changes, the offer will always be there. Come

into my office. Let's talk. Desmond sent word that they are on their way here now."

They went into his office, where Andy and Helene were waiting. It wasn't long before Claire and her Triad showed up and filled them in on the events in the Elven Forest and at the Dragon Mountains. Claire was searching for something that her mother, Winona, had left for her but didn't have many details on what it could be. But she knew she needed to find it alone.

When she left, Zack escaped to the library to, hopefully, lessen the pull. It was hell just sitting there talking about the danger they were about to face and being so close to his soul flames but so far as well. And yes, they were his soul flames. He didn't care what the Realm thought about it. But they weren't ready to claim him. Well, Cody might be, but he was still under his father's Alpha Order, and Bethany was still trapped in the narrative her mom and the pride had instilled in her.

"Zack. Are you okay?"

Zack closed his eyes and kept in his groan. Speak of the devil.

He pasted a smile on his face and turned around. "I'm fine."

Bethany stood before him, her golden hair framing her face where it had come loose from her braid. Her brilliant green eyes narrowed at his words. "Don't lie. I thought we were friends."

"Is that all we are?" The words slipped through his lips before he could stop them.

Her eyes widened, and she hesitated. "My pride..."

Zack groaned. He was so sick of that excuse. He knew her pride was a problem, but he wanted her to stop hiding behind it.

"I'm not talking about your pride," he warned her as he advanced. "I'm not looking to be in a relationship with your pride. I want to know how you feel. Did what happened at the Solstice mean anything to you?"

Her eyes widened, and her raspberry scent hung heavy in the air as he closed in on her, coming to a stop just a few inches from her. Her green eyes flared, and Zack wondered if their proximity affected her like it affected him.

The pull intensified, and her eyes flashed over his shoulder as Cody entered the library.

“Whatcha all talking about?” Cody stopped behind Zack, leaning in and resting his chin on Zack’s shoulder. Zack leaned back against him, enjoying the feeling of Cody’s chest against his back. Cody’s hand came up to rest on Zack’s hips, and Bethany tracked the movement.

“What’s going on between the two of you?” Bethany asked. She stepped back as she changed the subject, but her eyes were curious.

Zack smiled at her attempt to avoid his questions, but he humored her for now. He tilted his head and brushed a kiss across Cody’s cheek. Cody rumbled in approval and pressed closer to Zack. Bethany’s eyes were alight with curiosity and heat. Did his lioness enjoy watching the two of them together? His cock hardened as he thought of all the possibilities. From the low rumble at his back, Cody was on the same page.

“Zack!” Andy’s voice came from the entrance to the library. “Are Cody and Bethany with you?”

“Yes!” Zack called back.

“Okay, bring them with you. Claire’s back, and she found it.”

Reluctantly, Zack stepped away from Cody, his heart panging at the loss of heat.

“This conversation isn’t over,” Zack whispered in Bethany’s ear as he passed her. He enjoyed the shiver that went down her spine at his promise. They were going to finish this conversation at the Dragon Mountains.

Bethany escaped to Holly’s and Claire’s side as soon as they got back to the office, but Zack was content to sit back and let her. He shared a conspiratorial glance with Cody and smiled at the gold flecks in his brown eyes. Their hellcat could run, but she wasn’t going to be able to hide for long. Not now that

she'd shown her hand. She was more interested in them than she'd let on. For a while there, he thought she didn't see them at all like that, but she had been slipping this year. He wasn't the only one eager for the three of them to be together, it seemed.

After Claire shared what she found, they traveled through the portals to the Dragon Mountains and were headed down the stone tunnels towards their rooms. Holly was up ahead with Bethany, their heads close together as they had a whispered conversation. Zack didn't have any shifter hearing, but he overheard Holly saying something about "enjoying the present."

Zack frowned. Was Bethany just trying to take what she could from them before she thought she would lose them? Not that she actually would, but in her mind, did she think all she had were a few moments before she had to go back to the pride and what her mother expected of her? He wanted to be upset at her for that, but for how fierce Bethany was, she was also very skittish when it came to feelings and relationships. He could be patient with her. If she wanted to treat this like it had an expiration date, she could. But he and Cody would do everything they could to convince her otherwise. She couldn't get rid of them that easily, and Zack would take on both the pride and the pack before he allowed either of the Heirs to be taken from him.

Holly opened the door and held it for Bethany. She gestured Zack and Cody through when they hesitated.

"Take care of her," Holly whispered as they passed.

She stepped towards the door next to theirs, and Zack realized that she was giving them a room alone together. He smiled at Holly and nodded before following Cody through the door. Time to convince their skittish hellcat that she belonged with them.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ZACK

Bethany turned around when the door closed behind Zack. Her brow furrowed when she saw them standing there without Holly.

“I told you we would finish that conversation,” Zack said with a smile.

Bethany looked thoughtful for a moment before a slow smirk spread across her face.

“And if I don’t want to talk?” she asked, prowling towards him. She looked between Cody and him.

Zack hesitated. On one hand, they really did need to talk, to have an honest conversation about what they were doing and what they wanted. But on the other hand, Zack didn’t know if Bethany was ready for that conversation. Or maybe she was ready, and Zack was just scared of what her answer

would be. Regardless, he wanted a little more time to convince her how good it could be. Or maybe show her how good it could be.

Bethany stopped a few feet from him, her green eyes blazing with a challenge. With her this close, the pull roared to life between them. He gritted his teeth as every muscle in his body seemed to stretch towards her. Zack looked over his shoulder at Cody. Cody's eyes were blazing gold with his wolf, and Zack could read the desire and the conflict in them. Cody nodded ever so slightly. He was on board.

Zack reached out and pulled Bethany to him. She let out a soft gasp, as if the move shocked her.

“What do you want, then?” he asked her softly, but every word felt like it echoed in the silent room.

Bethany hesitated, her green eyes searching his for something. “I want you. I want both of you. Just for tonight.”

Zack leaned closer, brushing his lips against the fading bruise on her temple. “You have us.”

His breath tickled her hair, and she shivered. He left out the forever part, choosing to ignore her implication that this would only be for one night. They would have time to figure it out. He would make sure of it. But right now, before they entered the Fae lands, was probably not the time to get into it. He had been patient for years now, he could be patient a little while longer. The mating pull eased at the contact, and he let out a sigh of relief.

Cody moved behind Bethany, sliding his hands on her hips. She jumped.

“Are you sure about this, hellcat?” Cody asked softly.

She tilted her head back towards him, exposing her throat, and Zack nearly groaned. “I'm sure,” she whispered softly.

As the words left her mouth, Zack gave into the urge to bury his face in her throat, taking a deep breath of her raspberry and cream scent. Bethany's surprised gasp cut off, and Zack lifted his eyes to see Cody had claimed her mouth. He dragged his lips up her neck, alternating between soft nips

and licks. When he got to her jaw, he pulled her lips away from Cody's and claimed them himself.

He groaned as he tasted Cody on her lips and deepened the kiss, chasing her taste into his mouth with his tongue. One of her hands came up and cupped the back of his neck, pulling him closer until there was not an inch of space between them. His cock was rock hard at this point, and Bethany arched her back, rubbing against it with a soft moan.

Finally, they pulled away to breathe.

"Cody, I think she's wearing too many clothes," Zack said breathlessly.

Cody growled his agreement, and his hands went to the hem of Bethany's shirt.

"Wait!" Bethany said quickly.

Cody and Zack instantly stopped and looked at her. She blushed, "No, I meant. I want to continue," she said quickly, "But if you want... you know you can..."

"Hellcat, spit it out," Cody said teasingly.

She glared at him, but there was no heat in it. She bit her lip. "You two can kiss. If you want to, I mean. I mean, I wouldn't mind..." She stumbled over her words, cheeks bright red, and Zack barely held in his laugh. That had been heat in her eyes earlier in the library.

"Well, we can't disappoint you," Zack said with a small smile.

Cody couldn't contain his laughter, and Bethany smacked him on the arm. "I'm sorry, hellcat, it's just that was a lot of words to say you want to see Zack and me kiss."

"Well, if you're going to be—"

Zack cut Bethany off and grabbed the back of Cody's head. "Why don't you stop running your mouth before you get us both in trouble," he murmured, covering Cody's lips with his.

Cody groaned as their mouths touched. It had been too long since he had tasted Cody. And Cody seemed to agree as he cupped Zack's neck and dragged him closer. When they broke apart, Bethany stared at them wide-eyed, but her breath was coming out in quick gasps.

Cody dragged her shirt up and over her head as Zack unclasped her bra. Cody groaned and cupped her breasts with both hands. It was Bethany's turn to groan when he brushed her nipples with his thumbs. He cupped them like an offering for Zack, and he couldn't resist leaning down and taking one in his mouth.

He rolled his tongue around her nipple before lightly tugging it between his teeth. Bethany groaned and bucked her hips against him. She buried one hand in his hair and placed the other on his shoulder for balance. Zack alternated breasts, driving her higher between them. Her skin was soft and tasted like raspberries. He couldn't get enough of her and the noises that spilled out of her mouth. He needed more.

He dropped to his knees and tugged her pants and underwear off at the same time. She stepped out of them at his urging, head still thrown back on Cody's shoulder, cheeks red and breathless. She was a vision.

He ran his hands up the outside of her legs, letting his fingers trace along her lean muscles. She shuddered as his fingers trailed across her hip, and she widened her stance unconsciously, offering herself to him. He dipped his fingers across her center. Moisture covered the tip of them, and he brought them to his mouth.

Cody let out a groan at the same time Bethany did as they watched Zack lick the taste of her off his fingers. He grinned and ran his fingers through her wetness again. This time, he rose to his feet and offered his fingers to Cody. Cody grabbed his wrist with one hand and brought his fingers to his mouth. Zack felt his cock throb when Cody sucked Bethany's taste clean. He palmed his cock through his pants, and Bethany's eyes tracked the movement.

“I need to taste you,” Cody growled, spinning Bethany around and pressing her back into Zack.

Cody dropped to his knees and hooked his hand behind one of Bethany’s knees, throwing it over his shoulder and opening her up to him. Bethany groaned and fell back against Zack as Cody lowered his mouth to her center.

Zack slid one hand around her waist to help support her and brought the other one up to her breast. He idly alternated between her breasts, toying with her nipples as Cody drank her in. She moaned and twisted between them, simultaneously seeming to want more and trying to get away from the sensation. She turned and buried her face into Zack’s neck as she gasped and shuddered. Her body went rigid and then relaxed into his arms as Cody pushed her into a shaking orgasm.

Cody rose from his knees, mouth wet with her juices.

“Come here,” Zack all but growled out.

Cody took a step towards him with a cocky smirk. Zack yanked him by his shirt, and Cody’s eyes widened before their lips collided together. Bethany’s body still shook with the aftershocks of her orgasm while she was pinned between them. She arched her back, and Zack groaned as her ass pressed against his cock even as he devoured the taste of her from Cody’s lips.

“On the bed.” Zack broke away from the kiss, chest heaving. “My turn.”

Cody smiled and picked up Bethany, who squealed at the movement. She squealed again as he tossed her on the bed, then shot him a dirty look. Cody just whipped his shirt over his head with one hand and prowled towards her, taking her lips in a fierce kiss that looked more like a battle for dominance than a romantic declaration.

Zack worked his own shirt off and yanked Bethany’s hips to the end of the bed, breaking up the dominance fight in his own way. He ignored Bethany’s growl as he lowered his head to her center. The growl tapered off into a throaty moan as he

licked up her center, which was still overly sensitive from her last orgasm. Zack pressed a finger into her core, holding in a curse when her walls gripped him tightly. He was going to have to prep her to take either of them.

Cody's groan had Zack looking up, and he nearly came in his pants at the sight. Bethany had pushed Cody's pants down his body and had Cody's cock in one hand. She worked it slowly, her other hand tangled in Cody's hair as they kissed.

Eyes still on them, Zack dove back down to her clit. He circled it with his tongue as he worked another finger into her center, slowly stretching her out. He could feel her walls starting to clamp down on him, and he eased off. Another time he would make her orgasm over and over again until she knew who she belonged to, but since they were heading into the Fae lands tomorrow, he didn't want to exhaust her.

She growled when he lifted his head, and he just smiled at her. He looked up at Cody. He wanted to give him a chance to be with his mate first, if he wanted. Cody's eyes were bright with his wolf, and he shook his head softly. He must be worried his wolf was too close to the surface and he might not be able to stop him from claiming Bethany. And while they had made progress tonight, if Cody tried to claim her, that would not go over well.

"What are you doing?" Bethany asked breathlessly, her green eyes glowing bright with heated desire.

"Are you ready for me?" Zack asked her, pumping his fingers into her softly and curling them.

Bethany gasped and arched her hips like she was begging him for more. Zack squeezed his cock through his pants; he couldn't come until he was inside of her.

She nodded, and Zack rewarded her by swirling his thumb over her clit. "Good girl," he said softly, and she clenched around his fingers. "Turn around and take Cody in your mouth."

Bethany turned over, and Zack groaned as she presented herself to him. Cody scooted back so he was leaning against

the headboard, and Bethany crawled forward so she could take him in her mouth.

Zack shed his pants, almost tripping over them in his haste. He climbed up on the bed. Bethany turned her head when she felt the weight shift, and Zack groaned at the desire in her eyes. He wasn't going to last long if she kept looking at him like that. Cody threaded his fingers through her blond locks and guided her down to his cock. When he groaned, Zack slid two fingers back inside Bethany. She moaned around Cody's cock, and Cody groaned again, opening his eyes halfway to give a half-hearted glare at Zack.

Zack smirked at him. Sometimes it was good for the Alpha Heir to know he wasn't in charge all the time. It was good for Bethany, too. To the world, they could be in charge, but in their bedroom, Zack got a thrill out of directing their pleasure.

Bethany started to bob her head up and down Cody's cock, and Zack shuffled closer till the backs of her thighs pressed against his. He reached underneath her and found her clit. Making small circles around it, he notched his cock at her entrance and started pushing into her. Her warm heat enveloped him, and he gritted his teeth. He was not going to lose control until she came again.

With slow, rocking thrusts, he let her get used to him. When she started pushing against him, moving her hips back to meet his, he picked up his pace.

"Fuck, hellcat," Cody groaned as Bethany swallowed him deep. Both of his hands flew to her hair as he tried to keep himself from thrusting up into her.

Zack had a wicked idea. He leaned down and pressed a kiss on the back of Bethany's neck.

"Make him come and then I'll let you come," he whispered, eyes locked on Cody's. Bethany huffed out a laugh around Cody's cock but redoubled her efforts.

"Fuck!" Cody growled, as one of her hands cupped his balls. "I'll make you pay for that later," he gasped out at Zack, but the threat lost its sting when he bucked his hips.

Zack changed the angles of his thrusts, slowing them down but drawing them out as he slowly moved over that spot inside her that drove her wild. Bethany groaned around Cody and bucked her hips, but Zack didn't change his pace. He was enjoying watching both of his soul flames get closer to the edge.

“Fuck, hellcat, I'm going to come,” Cody loosened his grip, but Bethany swallowed him deep.

A groan ripped from Cody's chest, and Zack nearly came at the sound. By the Realm, that was as sexy as he remembered.

When Bethany lifted her mouth off Cody, her lips curled into a satisfied smirk. Before she could say a snappy retort, Zack snapped his hips into hers, and a soft cry escaped her lips. He slid his hand up her chest, bringing her back until she rested against his chest as he drove into her. He dropped his other hand to her clit and pressed small circles around it.

“Come for us,” he whispered into her ear. “Come for both of us, now.”

At his soft command, Bethany clenched hard around him and then cried out as her orgasm surged through her. Zack groaned and thrust up into her three times before letting her pull him over the edge. She shook in his arms, barely noticing Cody get up and duck into the bathroom.

Zack slowly lowered them to the bed, sliding out of Bethany with a quiet moan. Cody returned with a warm washcloth and wiped them all off before tucking them into bed. His wolf still glowed brightly in his eyes, and Zack bet the alpha wolf was nesting hard right now. Cody slid next to Bethany, his hand coming across and gripping Zack's hip like he was scared he would disappear. Tears pricked the corner of Zack's eyes as an overwhelming feeling of rightness flooded through him. This wasn't just a purely physical relationship for them, and they would prove that to her. Bethany's head lay on his chest, her eyes closed as she fell into a light sleep. Cody leaned over and brushed his thumb under Zack's eyes before pressing a gentle kiss to his temple.

Regardless of what the Realm was about to throw at them, Zack was determined that it wouldn't tear the three of them apart. Once the dust settled, they would figure out where to go from here, but wherever it was, they would be together, even if Zack had to burn the Realm down and rebuild it from the ashes.

CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

BETHANY

Age 21

Early fall in the shifter/Elven forest

Cody's hand cradled her elbow as she scrambled over a root, and Bethany bit back a growl. All morning long, all three men had found every reason to touch her. Bethany's lioness was in heaven and hell, and human Bethany's brain was spinning.

They had been hiking through the forest for a few hours now. Although hiking was a light term. They were practically jogging through the forest to close the distance between them and the prisoner group. Up ahead, Zack moved easily next to Mylo, who led their group. Zack had been explaining the events of the last few months in detail, and Mylo listened intently, asking a few questions but mainly taking the information in.

Cody had been traveling next to Bethany but didn't attempt conversation. On one hand, it was odd because usually they would be picking at each other and riling each other up, but on the other hand, Bethany was grateful for the quiet to try to process the last twenty-four hours.

When she'd woken up in Cody's arms this morning, she had never felt so content or peaceful. But then reality had kicked in. Even though they'd had these big revelations yesterday, the reality was still the same. Bethany wasn't sure that just accepting they were all mates was enough. Not when their parents had gone to such great lengths to make sure they never let each other know. Cody's dad had actually given him an Alpha Command, a command that was usually reserved for important things that protected the pack. Well, he was protecting the pack. From her. She couldn't put all the blame on Alpha Bryson, though, because her mom had reacted the same way. It didn't bode well for them ever getting their parents' blessing.

And, sure, they could leave the pack and pride, but they were both heirs of their groups. If they left, what would that do to the pack and pride? Both groups needed stability now, especially with all the changes in the Realm. And Bethany might be ready to wash her hands of the pride, but the pack would thrive under Cody's leadership. And what would happen if Cody's dad gave his blessing and her mom didn't? It wasn't like she could go be the pack's Luna. The alliance between the groups was already tentative, but there was no way the pack would accept that. Or hell, even the pride, for that matter.

But they couldn't put the genie back in the bottle. Now that it was all out in the open, the guys would want to discuss where it went from here, and Bethany didn't have an answer. But she let herself daydream for a few moments, remembering Claire's words before they left. The Realm was changing. Maybe it would all work out and they could merge the groups together or build a house in the neutral grounds. She shook her head. It was a nice fantasy, but it was a fantasy.

“Are you okay?” Cody’s question nearly had her stumbling, but she caught herself.

“I’m fine.”

Cody frowned. “You’re not fine. And we need to talk about it eventually.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Bethany strode ahead of him, ignoring his frustrated growl.

He was right, they would need to talk eventually, but she was going to avoid the conversation as long as possible. Her stomach rumbled. Although breakfast had been delicious, she hadn’t been able to eat a lot.

“Let’s stop for lunch,” Cody called up to Zack and Mylo.

Bethany rolled her eyes. She could walk and eat at the same time. Cody probably just wanted an excuse for the four of them to talk. Or he was coddling her now that it was out in the open that they were mates. She wasn’t sure what was worse.

“That’s a good idea,” Zack said. “It’s probably better to stop and rest up a little bit before we confront them. We can’t be more than a few hours behind them now.” That was fair, and her agitation at being treated differently eased.

They swung their packs down and fished around in them. Mylo added some dried meat to their pile, and they snacked on the meat, nuts, and berries.

“You mentioned you had a theory about what they’re going after?” Zack asked Mylo.

Zack’s leg pressed into Bethany’s. She should shuffle away, but Mylo was right on her other side, and any movement would have her pressed against his side. Her cat was purring, but Bethany’s skin felt too tight. It itched, and irritation built under her skin.

Mylo nodded as he munched on some berries, the juice staining his lips red. Bethany tore her gaze from them before she did something stupid. Like kiss him.

“I think they might be going after a Fortis plant patch.”

Bethany, Cody, and Zack exchanged glances. Crap. They had seen what Fortis could do to a person when they watched Claire face off against their old professor, Henry Storm. If the prisoners got ahold of it, they could do some serious damage. If they combined it with any other magical spells, they make their skin or fur impenetrable.

“Is there one nearby?” Zack asked.

Mylo nodded. “Fortis plants that grow in the Forest are hard to find. They would have to know where they are going, but I don’t think their direction is accidental. Someone told them where it would be.”

“Then we should get going,” Bethany said, her lips in a tight line. They couldn’t let the prisoners get to the Fortis.

Cody and Zack exchanged glances as they packed up. Cody’s eyes were direct, and Zack’s eyes looked amused. As they started out again, Zack touched Bethany’s arm, letting the others get a few paces ahead of them.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “How are you feeling after this morning?”

“I’m fine,” Bethany said shortly. She really didn’t want to get into this now. “We should be focusing on the prisoners.”

“This is equally important.” Zack gestured between them.

Bethany pinched her lips together, holding in a sigh of frustration. It wasn’t. Not really. Even if her lioness yowled at her thoughts. They couldn’t do anything about being mates right now. All their obstacles lay outside the forest. But inside the forest, they had to focus on the prisoners.

That’s a nice excuse. You’re running away, a little voice whispered in her head. Bethany shoved it away. Maybe she was, but they had bigger things to focus on.

“Let’s just focus on the prisoners.” Bethany took a deep breath. She understood why they wanted to talk about it, but she just needed some space.

Zack looked like he wanted to say more, but she willed him to drop it. Thankfully, he did, and the next twenty minutes were

peaceful. Then Cody dropped back to walk next to her. His shoulders brushed against Zack's.

"Did you talk?" he asked, looking between Zack and Bethany.

"There's nothing to talk about," Bethany gritted out.

Why wouldn't they drop this? Didn't they realize they had bigger problems at hand? They could talk after they caught the prisoners. And caught the other group. And delivered them back to the Capital. Or never.

Bethany sped up to walk next to Mylo.

Cody caught her elbow and swung her around to face him. "You can't keep avoiding this!"

Bethany exploded. "I am not avoiding anything! You all are the ones with your priorities out of order. We need to focus on reaching the prisoners before they get to the Fortis!"

"Fuck the prisoners!" Cody yelled back. Bethany's eyebrows shot up. He couldn't mean that. "When are you going to realize that you're important to me? To us? You are the only thing that matters. We are mates, and you don't even want to talk about how you feel about it."

"Why should we? It doesn't matter what I'm feeling about it. Nothing's changed! After this is all over, you're still Heir to the pack and I'm still Heir to the pride. We both have responsibilities, and we can't just abandon them because we're mates. You know our parents will never allow it or give their blessing. Look at everything they did to keep us apart!" Bethany bared her teeth, breathing heavily as her lioness rose inside her. She wasn't sure if the cat was angry at her or Cody, but her hackles were raised.

"So that's it?" Cody threw his arms out in the air. "You're just going to roll over. You're my mate! You're Zack's mate, Mylo's mate! You're just going to give up?"

Bethany pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to shove her lioness down and answer Cody at the same time. "I'm not giving up! I'm being realistic. And besides, do I need to remind you where we are and what we are doing? We're in the fucking woods tracking prisoners who are on their way to

ingest Fortis and become unstoppable. We need to be focusing on that! We can have our conversation later.”

“But will we?” Cody got in her face. “Because I think even after all this is over, you’ll still keep running away.”

“I am not running!” Bethany shot back, waving her arms wildly. “I am being logical. We have a job to do. Claire needs us to focus on this.”

“Claire wouldn’t want you to use this as an excuse, and you know it.” Zack flattened his lips, his grey eyes steely. “Claire would change the law in a heartbeat.”

“Of course I know that!” Bethany shouted, the tips of her fingers slicing into claws as her anger rose. “But that doesn’t mean we should ask it of her! Or did you forget that she nearly died saving us all only a few weeks ago? The Realm is too unstable right now for another fight like this.”

“You are the only one who thinks it’s a fight!” Cody yelled.

“Are you delusional? Did you get dropped on your head as a child?” Bethany stared at him in confusion. “Of course it’s a fight. It’s the *law*.”

“Not if the pair are fated mates,” Zack’s quiet voice broke in.

“Yeah, if they’re fated mates, then they need to get leader approval.” Bethany put her hands on her hips and pretended to look around the forest. “Oh wait, I forgot. Our parents didn’t give approval because they knew it wouldn’t be received well. Even if Claire changes the law, the entire Realm has believed it for decades. Hell, our pride and pack can’t even get along on a good day! If they find out we’re mates, the fighting will never end!”

“So?” Cody said. “I don’t care about any of that. I care about you! We care about you!”

“What if that’s not enough?!”

At this point, her lioness decided she’d had enough of being shoved down and surged forward. Bethany lost control of her shift as she landed on all four paws. Her lioness hesitated for a moment, not sure if she wanted to go to her mates or protect

herself. Bethany used that moment of hesitation to wrest control back from her animal. She had to get out of here before she did something she regretted. She hadn't lost control of a shift in years. She turned and ran into the forest, leaving it all behind.

The urge to run faded as the shame, anger, and guilt grew. She stopped before a large tree, pacing in front of it, tail swishing angrily. If she was in human form, her cheeks would be red and not from the exertion of the run but from shame. As it was, her lioness trembled as she paced.

For the Realm's sake, she had really lost it. She shouldn't have lost control like that. She knew better. But Cody had just kept pushing, like he always did. He didn't seem to understand all the obstacles they faced. It was like, once they knew they were all mates, nothing seemed to matter to them. They didn't get that nothing had changed. It didn't matter that she wanted them as much as they wanted her. That yesterday it had felt like the clouds parted and birds sang when she'd realized they were all mates. Today, reality had set back in.

Rustling from above her had her lioness freezing in place. In the next breath, apples filled her nostrils and her cat relaxed before Bethany registered the scent. Mylo.

She lifted her head and spotted the inky black panther lounging on a tree branch above her. In a graceful move, he leaped down from the tree branch to land soundlessly next to her. A ripple of Energy covered his body as he shifted back. He took a seat next to her with his back against the tree but didn't speak. As the silence dragged on, her lioness soaked up the comfort of his presence. Mylo seemed content to wait her out, so Bethany shifted back.

She took a seat next to him, their knees almost brushing as she leaned back against the tree. Although he was a comforting presence to her cat, Mylo was still very much a stranger. And in some ways, that made it easier to talk to him. She found herself opening her mouth and letting it all spill out.

"I don't want to hurt them, hurt you. But I don't see how this is going to work," she admitted. She fingered her necklace as

she waited for Mylo's response.

"My parents met when they were eighteen. They knew instantly that they were fated mates." Mylo ignored what she said as he continued. "It was frowned upon back then but not illegal. They actually met in these very woods. My mother had a bit of an adventurous streak, and my father indulged her." Mylo's voice was soft yet wistful as he talked about his parents.

"They snuck around a little bit but eventually decided to tell their leaders. Her pride did not take the news well. She was the daughter of a Delta and had been matched with a tiger from another pride without her knowing. But my mom put her foot down and showed up with my father bearing her mark. The pride reluctantly accepted them and, in time, grew fond of my father and even integrated him into some Delta responsibilities." He smiled, his eyes lost in memories.

"Then the war started, and the shifters and Elves were on opposite sides. There was a lot of confusion and ignorance, which led to hate and bigotry. The Alphas panicked and kicked my father out, terrified he was going to give their secrets to the Elves. They tried to keep my mother in the pride, but she left with my father, and they went to live with the Elves. My father always felt guilty about it, tearing my mother away from her family. But my mother always told him that they were mates, and whatever they faced, they faced together. There were always going to be challenges or obstacles in their path, but the beauty of mates was they didn't have to face it alone."

Bethany's eyes dropped to the ground in front of her as she understood where Mylo was going with this. His mother had been exactly where Bethany was now. Well, not exactly; she had been a Delta's daughter and Bethany was an Alpha's daughter. And she had a pre-approved match that her parents pressured her towards while Bethany was just being pressured to take a consort. But they both shared the same obstacle, and that was their pride. But Mylo's mom had walked away from the pride. Bethany was the Alpha's daughter. She couldn't walk away from the pride. Could she?

“Were they happy?” she asked. *Was it worth it?* was the question she really wanted to ask.

“They were the happiest people I knew. That doesn’t mean they didn’t struggle, but they did it together.”

Bethany chewed her lip as she thought it over. Her entire life, her mom had raised her to be the most powerful Alpha Heir so she could take over the pride. Emotions were weaknesses that could be used against you. Every decision was a carefully thought-out strategy and had to be backed up by facts and figures. Happiness was never a consideration. She had found stolen moments of it with Cody growing up and then again when they’d met Zack at the Academy. Even in Mylo, who she hadn’t known very long, she could see glimpses of a life in the future where they were happy. Where all of them were happy. But was it enough when the obstacles against them seemed insurmountable?

“I will not diminish the points you made back there,” Mylo said softly. “You are right, there are several obstacles against us, and it sounds like for a long time you’ve been facing them alone. You all have. But what would happen if you faced them together?”

Bethany thought about this. What if the next time her mother questioned her decisions, she had them at her side to back her up? Or after a long day managing tensions between the pack and pride, she had them to come home to? Or their help with managing them. Bethany knew it was only going to get harder. Being Claire’s Ambassadors brought on a whole new level of responsibilities and risk, but what if she didn’t have to do it alone?

“You’ve known them a long time,” Mylo said. “Do they seem like the type to abandon you when things get tough?”

“No,” Bethany admitted. “But it can’t be that simple.”

Mylo huffed out a laugh. “It’s that simple and that difficult all at the same time. But the question is, are you willing to choose us as we are willing to choose you, even if it’s hard? Even if your parents don’t approve and the entire Realm is against us? Because if you do, I can promise that you’ll never be alone.”

Unexpected tears pricked at the corner of her eyes, and she pulled her knees up to her chest.

“You’ve been alone for too long now,” Mylo said softly, and she could feel his golden eyes fixed on the side of her face as she looked out into the forest. “You can rely on us.”

She swallowed roughly against the lump in her throat. Despite not knowing her for very long, he had hit the nail on the head. She had been alone her entire life. She didn’t know what it was like to go through life with someone at her side. Her dad had died when she had been young, and her mom had never been there for her in that way. And neither had anyone in the pride. It wasn’t until Cody and Zack, and now Mylo, that she understood what that felt like. And the thought of not choosing them, of continuing to go at it alone, had her heart aching. She couldn’t imagine life without them.

Mylo was right. It would be hard, and they wouldn’t have all the answers, but who did? She didn’t want to lose them, and she was tired of doing it alone. Could she believe that they could face whatever was in front of them together, even if it was hard?

Yes. She could.

A tear spilled over the corner of her eye, and Mylo wiped it away with his thumb. She shifted to look at him. His golden eyes were bright but gentle as he smiled at her.

“I’m tired of being alone,” Bethany said, her voice barely a whisper. “I want to choose you all. But I’m scared. Scared I’m going to mess it up. I’ve... I’ve never had anyone before to rely on like that.”

“The only way you could mess it up is if you stop choosing us. Are you choosing us?”

Bethany swallowed and nodded. “I am.” No matter what came their way.

“And we’re choosing you.” Zack’s soft voice next to her had her jumping as she turned to face them.

Cody and Zack stood next to her. How had they snuck up on her? Zack’s hands glowed with magic, and he shook out his

fingers to release it. A cloaking spell. He must have used a cloaking spell to hide their approach. She should have been mad, but she was glad they had. She didn't know if she would have the courage to say it all a second time. Some things were going to take time, and she was feeling a bit raw.

"You can't get rid of us, hellcat," Cody said, his voice rough with emotion. "No matter what."

Bethany looked at Mylo. She didn't know him that well, and he didn't know her either. Did he really want to hitch his wagon to her crazy? Mylo's lips quirked, as if he could read her mind. "I'll always choose you."

Strong arms picked her up, and Zack settled her back down in his lap. "Say it again?" he said, burying his head in her neck. His soft puffs of air had sparks of heat shooting down her spine.

The sensation was distracting, and she struggled to remember what she had said for a moment. She pulled back.

"I choose you," she said softly, looking into his shining silver eyes. She lowered her lips to his, claiming him with a soft kiss. He kissed her back, his lips pressing hard against hers.

A hand tangled in her hair, pulling her back. She growled softly, but then Cody was there, taking her lips with his. He dominated her mouth, and she surrendered to him. She wouldn't always let him have the upper hand, but she didn't mind letting him take the lead once in a while.

He pulled back. "Say it again," he murmured against her lips.

"I choose you," she whispered.

He kissed her again, hard and breathless, before he let her go.

She turned to look at Mylo, at those berry-stained lips she was suddenly dying to kiss. Zack let her climb out of his lap and into Mylo's.

"Thank you," she said as she looked into his golden eyes.

"Always," Mylo said, heat and uncertainty dancing in his eyes.

Bethany wondered briefly if he had ever been kissed before. She hoped not. Her lioness was purring at the thought of being his first.

Slowly, and giving him time to pull away if he liked, she lowered her lips to his. He stayed still. The only move he made was to place his hands on her hips, keeping her flush against him. His lips were tentative, but he copied her movements. Confidence growing, he pulled her closer to him, and Bethany purred when her center met his stomach. She ground down against him, and he growled.

She broke this kiss, looking down into his glowing eyes. She looked at Cody and Zack, a purr breaking from her chest at the sight of Zack leaning back against Cody.

“Claim me,” she said breathlessly. “I’m done waiting. I want you all to claim me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

BETHANY

The clearing seemed to freeze in place, and Bethany fought not to laugh at the stunned expressions on their faces. That was fair. She had been fighting them for a long time. But she was done fighting. She wanted them all to claim her.

“Are you sure?” Zack asked. “We can wait—”

“I’m sure.” Bethany shook her head, cutting him off.

She didn’t want to give herself any more time to get in her head about it. If they were willing to claim her, she wanted them now. She didn’t need a bed or frilly things, she just needed them, here in the woods, where she had met her first mate and her final mate. It felt fitting.

“I won’t feel bad if you want to wait,” Mylo said softly. “I know you have a history with them, and you don’t know me very—”

“No,” Bethany said. “I want you, too. Besides, we have a lifetime to get to know each other, don’t we?” She ground her hips against him, and he growled, yanking her down for another kiss.

Just as quickly, he broke this kiss and pushed her gently in their direction. “Them first. They’ve waited a long time for you.”

Bethany almost felt shy as she crawled towards Cody and Zack. Their eyes shone as she approached, and Zack extended his arm to pull her in close. She let out a soft oompf as she hit his chest, but he stole the breath from her lungs with a hard kiss. She scrambled into his lap, looping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer. Cody moved behind them and tugged her shirt off, breaking their kiss. His hand snaked up between her breasts, unhooking her bra as he pulled her back into his chest. He kissed her deeply, his tongue plunging into her mouth as he chased hers. She chased him back, and they fought for dominance as Zack divested her of the rest of her clothes.

She moaned into Cody’s mouth when Zack pinched her nipples. She arched her back against Cody’s hold, trying to push her breasts further into Zack. He cupped them both and alternated between pinching her nipples and laving them with his tongue. The sharp and soft sensations collided in her center, sending mixed signals to her body that ignited her core.

One of Cody’s hands trailed down her side, sinking his fingers into the wetness pooling at her center. He growled as his fingers slid across her. Bethany cried out when they found her clit, rubbing a sharp circle around it before sliding back through her wetness.

She broke their kiss, gasping for air as she laid her head back on Cody’s shoulder. She looked over at Mylo and gasped as she found him watching her, his gold eyes burning. One of his hands covered the bulge in his pants, squeezing softly as he watched them take her apart.

Cody forced her attention back to him as he plunged two fingers into her. She let out a throaty groan as he set a

punishing pace, thrusting his fingers in and out of her. One of Zack's hands left her breast as he pulled back to watch her face. His hand trailed down her stomach, leaving a trail of sparks in its wake. She cried out; the sound trailing through the trees as his fingers found her clit. He rubbed his fingers across it in a back-and-forth motion as Cody added a third finger.

“Come for us,” Zack ordered hoarsely, “Come for us now.”

Cody curled his fingers, brushing over that special spot inside her, and Zack pinched her clit hard. She detonated between them, heat slamming into her, filling her entire body, and leaving her shaking in its wake. Thank the Realm for birth control spells.

Clothes hit the dirt behind her, and Cody yanked her hips back until she was straddling Zack's outstretched legs. He ran his fingers through her wetness again, and she shuddered.

“Last chance, hellcat,” he rasped. “Say the word and we stop.”

Bethany looked behind her. His brown eyes were bright with his wolf, but she knew he meant what he said. “Claim me, wolf boy,” she challenged, using his childhood nickname.

Cody rolled his eyes at her, and she laughed. Her laugh was cut off when he thrust inside her in one smooth motion.

“Fuck.”

She fell forward into Zack's chest. By the Realm, he felt so good. Long and thick, his cock raked over that spot inside her with every thrust. She buried her head into Zack's neck, but he threaded his hand in her hair and tugged her head back.

“Let us hear you,” he whispered in her ear, placing a kiss on the skin underneath it.

His grip in her hair kept her head from falling forward as Cody set a punishing pace. Each thrust right after the other, giving her no time to adjust to the sensations before the next one stole her breath away. She was already on the edge, ready to be pushed over, when Zack's fingers dropped to her clit. A cry ripped through her throat as she fell over the edge.

Zack pulled her head to the side, and sharp teeth sank into her neck, sending a new wave of heat crashing through her as she spiraled into another orgasm. Cody licked the bite wound, his tongue soothing the needle-like sensation. She turned and buried her teeth in his neck. He groaned, and his movements stuttered inside her as she cleaned the wound. She released him and fell forward on Zack's chest.

Shocks of pleasure radiated from the bite as Cody cleaned it. The sensations had her clenching on his cock, and he groaned.

"No more running, hellcat," he ordered, his soft tone taking the sting out of the command.

"You'll just find me, anyway," Bethany said as she reached out to the bond that had snapped into place when his teeth pierced her skin. She thought it might feel heavy or confining, but it felt steady and warm, like a comforting presence. She could almost feel Cody's wolf when she tugged on it, and he let out a soft grumble behind her as he pulled out. A whimper escaped her at the empty feeling, and he hushed her softly.

He lifted her hips and sucked on his mark again as he lowered her onto Zack's cock. She moaned, not expecting it, and Zack groaned as her muscles clenched.

"This okay?" he asked, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

"Don't you dare stop," Bethany gasped out as she started to ride him, Cody helping guide her pace.

Cody didn't lift his head from his mark on her neck as the sensations started to build in her body. Cody ran his tongue across her skin, and she clenched around Zack's cock. He groaned and bucked harder into her. Bethany let her head fall backwards as she felt herself approaching the edge again. It was a slow build, but the storm swirled inside her, waiting for something to push her over the edge.

Zack sat up and pulled her hips down, so he sank deep inside her. She cried out at the change of angle. He caught her

chin. Her eyes blinked open. His silver eyes were bright as he spoke.

“I, Zack Ashcraft, do freely give up a piece of my magic and my heart to you. To have and to hold and to love for eternity and beyond.”

His eyes were bright, shining with so much love that the words caught in Bethany’s throat as she felt the force of his emotions like a physical weight on her body.

“I, Bethany Thorncrest, do freely give up a piece of my magic and my heart to you. To have and to hold and to love for eternity and beyond.”

She felt a tug on her lioness, and the cat rose to her feet in her magical center. A string of silver magic appeared in her magical center, and her lioness batted at it playfully before pulling it towards her, curling up around it. Bethany leaned forward, groaning as her orgasm rose to the surface, just out of reach. Her hips moved up and down, chasing it.

“Bite me,” Zack begged softly. He didn’t have to beg for long, though. Bethany opened her mouth and bit down on the muscle in his chest. The bond snapping into place sent the orgasm crashing into her.

Zack buried his head in her hair, breathing her in as she sucked on her bite mark, cleaning it even as her body shook. His hips jerked twice, and warmth flooded her center as he came inside her.

For a few minutes, they just sat there, the three of them intertwined as they tried to catch their breath. Zack gently pulled out of her and muttered some words for a spell that instantly had her feeling refreshed.

“That’s a handy spell,” she teased, her fingertips trailing across the healing bite mark on his chest. She liked seeing her mark on him. She craned her head back to see the matching mark on Cody’s neck. It still looked a little inflamed, as she hadn’t given it much attention. She leaned up and ran her tongue across it. Cody groaned.

“That’s enough of that, or we’ll be going again.” Cody grabbed her arms softly, pushing her back. “Besides, you have one more mate to claim.” He tilted his head towards Mylo, who was sitting back against the tree. The panther hybrid was deadly still, but his eyes were bright as he restrained himself.

Bethany left Cody and Zack as she crawled towards Mylo. She settled herself on his lap, fully naked. There was almost something naughty about her bare skin rubbing against his clothes. His arms snaked around her waist and drew her closer to him. She rested her forehead against his and closed her eyes when he purred.

“We don’t have to,” he whispered. “I’m fine to wait.”

“I want to,” Bethany said. She repeated her earlier words. “We have a lifetime to get to know each other.”

“I don’t know if I can last very long,” he admitted, his cheeks as red as his berry-stained lips. “I’ve never done this before.”

Bethany purred. Her lioness liked that. “That’s okay,” she whispered. “Just let me feel you.”

He nodded, and she pulled back. He didn’t move a muscle as her hands fell to his pants, pushing them down until his cock sprung free. It wasn’t as thick as Cody’s, but it was longer, with a slight curve to it. She ran her hands up and down, twisting them slightly. His head fell back against the tree, and he groaned. She bit her lip, enjoying the powerful feeling that spread inside her as she watched him come apart.

A moan from next to her had her looking over. Cody and Zack were lying on their sides, facing them. Cody was behind Zack, and from the slow thrusts of his hips, he must have been buried deep inside him. Zack’s face was slack with pleasure, but his eyes were on Bethany.

A sharp pang of heat shot through her, her center clenching on nothing. Her marks were still bright on their skin, still healing, and it made her possessive instincts sing.

“Enough,” Mylo growled out. “I want to be inside you.”

Bethany moaned softly at his words and rose to her knees. Mylo traced his fingers through her wetness, dipping two inside her. His fingers running over her over-sensitized nerve endings forced a throaty groan from her.

She placed the tip of his cock at her entrance and sank down on him. He groaned loudly, his face contorted in pleasure. Bethany raised herself up and sank down again, determined to keep that expression on his face.

“Place your fingers on her clit,” Zack rasped from next to them. “Rub small circles around it.”

Bethany moaned as Mylo followed his instructions. She looked over at Cody and Zack and clenched down on Mylo. He groaned and bucked his hips up harder. While she was looking at Cody and Zack, Cody buried his face in Zack’s neck, just above where her mark was and sank his teeth into Zack’s neck. Zack let out a stuttered breath as he came.

The sight of his orgasm triggered Bethany’s own, surprising her as it swept over her. Mylo groaned as her clenching muscles took him over the edge, too. She fell forward into Mylo’s chest, placing her teeth at his neck as he buried his face in her neck. They bit down at the same time, the bond snapping into place instantly.

Bethany groaned as a mini orgasm swept through her. She felt wrung out with pleasure, her muscles liquid and barely able to move. But an overwhelming feeling of contentment filled her. All three bonds danced inside her, humming with a quiet pleasure. Each felt a bit different like each of her men, but together, Bethany felt like she could take on anything. Was this what Mylo was talking about? This feeling of invincibility and strength the bonds filled her with? She felt silly for fighting against it so hard now that she felt the bonds. She couldn’t change the past, but she could focus on the future.

Mylo tilted her head up, catching her lips in a soft, sweet kiss. She could still taste the berries he had for lunch as she swiped her tongue across his lips. He chuckled softly and kissed her deeper. A soft blanket settled over her shoulders. She looked up as Zack settled next to her. Cody settled on her

other side, placing a hand on her back as if he couldn't not touch her.

Bethany's lioness purred as her mates settled in around her. Warmth filled her as she slumped against them, a low, contented sigh escaping her lips.

"I hate to ruin the moment," Cody said, "but the prisoners have probably reached the Fortis patch by now."

Bethany felt Mylo nod above her. "Probably," he admitted.

A pang of guilt shot through her, but just as quickly, Bethany shoved it down. She wouldn't feel bad about claiming her mates. She wouldn't change anything about it, including the time and place.

"Why would they want Fortis specifically?" Zack asked, resting his head against Bethany's shoulder. "There's no more ultimate weapon, right? Claire destroyed that."

"She did," Bethany confirmed quietly. That was a good question. What would they want the Fortis for? To be stronger, right? But for what?

"That's been bothering me, too," Cody admitted. "We know it makes you stronger and can make your skin or fur impenetrable with a dark magic spell, but for what? If this truly was a prisoner escape, wouldn't it have been best if they split up and disappeared into the Realm?"

Zack hummed as he thought out loud. "Instead, they stayed as a group. Almost like they had orders. But from whom? The inside person who helped them escape? And orders to do what? Without the dark magic, the Fortis would give them a short burst of strength but would also be highly addicting. With the dark magic, though, it still takes a toll. So, if they were smart, they would save it for one shot at something, but what would be worth doing that for? The Fae lands are on lockdown."

"But Claire doesn't have her magic," Bethany breathed, sitting up straight. "What if they wanted to free Roland and Vanya and take out Claire at the same time? They're on lockdown, but the Elves returned to the Forest and our pack

and pride returned to their territory as well. Without Claire's magic, what if they're going to try for the Fae Lands?"

Cody growled, "I think you're right."

Zack frowned but agreed. "That would make sense. I wish we knew who the inside person was."

"Holly and her mates are taking care of that," Bethany said. "But if we're right, we have to get to the Fae lands if the prisoners are heading there next."

Mylo looked among all three of them with a grim look on his face. "Let's go then. We don't have any time to waste."

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

BETHANY

Luckily for them, Mylo knew of a hidden portal near the border to the Elven Forest that would take them to the other side of the witches' territory by the Fae lands. The trees were dull and lifeless, indicating the portal had been dormant for a long time. Zack frowned as he looked at it.

"I'm not sure I'm going to be able to activate this." He bit his bottom lip, and Bethany forced herself to stay focused. Ever since she'd marked them, a low level of arousal seemed to simmer in the bonds. "It's going to take more magic than usual if it's been dormant for so long."

"Just try," Cody urged. "Or we'll have to travel around the Elven Forest and backtrack through the shifter territory, and I would rather not do that."

The route would be longer but also Bethany would be willing to bet that Cody wanted to put off their confrontation

with their parents until after they made sure Claire was safe.

Zack nodded and widened his stance as he called up his magic. She could feel it down their bond as he gathered his magic. It was a weird sensation but not unlike how Bethany felt when she started her shift. Zack's hands glowed brightly as his magic built. It was more magic than she had ever seen him gather before, but he didn't show any signs of physical strain. When the ball of magic was the size of a large watermelon, he pushed it into the portal. The portal drank up the magic greedily, glowing brightly before settling to a shimmer. It was active.

"You did it." Bethany smiled at him, squeezing his arm.

Zack frowned at his hands. "I did. It wasn't hard, either."

"Our bonds," Mylo said. "They strengthen our abilities."

Did that mean her lioness would be stronger?

"We can play with it later," Cody said impatiently. "Let's get going."

Zack grabbed Bethany's hand as they walked through the portal. The warmth of his hand in hers was a comforting weight as they pushed through the magic of the portal. Cody and Mylo exited close on their heels, and they stared out at the grassy plains that separated them from the Fae lands.

"We're going to have to run," Cody said, his eyes darting sideways to Zack.

"You can use your magic," Mylo told Zack. "Your wind magic can help you run faster. The rest of us can shift."

"How do I do that?" Zack asked.

Mylo quickly showed him how to use the wind to propel his stride, and Zack caught on quickly. Bethany dropped her pack on the ground and called up her lioness to shift. The transition happened seamlessly, and Bethany dropped to the ground on all four paws. She shook out her fur. Now that she had shifted, she felt what Mylo had been talking about. Her lioness did feel stronger, like she could go forever without getting tired.

Cody's wolf nudged her shoulder, and she turned and ran her head along his neck. He nuzzled where his mark was, and she pulled back and flashed a bit of fang at him.

"None of that or they would get distracted."

"Fine, but after we're done saving the Realm again." She heard Cody's voice in her head, and she jumped with surprise. She must have sent her thoughts to him accidentally. She had forgotten that when they cemented the bond, they formed a mental connection as well.

"Told you we were stronger together." Mylo rubbed up against her in his panther form.

"Yeah, yeah, you all can gloat later," Bethany said. *"Now, we need to get to Claire."*

Zack helped secure their packs to their animal forms, and they took off running towards the Fae lands. An hour into their run, Bethany lifted her head as her ears perked up. Faint sounds of a battle filtered through the air. They were close!

They crested the next hill and skidded to a stop. Zack barely caught himself from plowing into the back of a witch fighting a Fae warrior. The witch turned, ready to throw a spell at Zack. Cody leaped and ripped the witch's throat out.

Zack held out his hands to the Fae warrior when he dropped into a fighting stance. "Easy, we're friends of Claire's. What's going on?"

The Fae warrior relaxed slightly as recognition dawned in his eyes. "They came out of nowhere. Most are the escaped prisoners, but some of them are different. We've sent out the signal for help, but..."

A familiar rumble of the earth had Bethany's head jerking around. It looked like Holly and her mates had arrived.

"Holly's here," she sent to Zack.

"Looks like reinforcements have arrived." Zack pointed to Holly and her mates, who were at the center of the fighting. "And we're here to help. We'll push in from this direction and

pin them in. You grab a few others and flank them on that side.”

The Fae warrior nodded and ran off.

Cody’s wolf howled a battle cry that drew the attention of the enemy soldiers. Bethany let out her own roar as they leaped into battle. Three wolves charged at them, and Bethany collided with the first one. They rolled to the ground, both fighting to get the upper hand. Bethany kicked him off with her hind legs, her claws slashing across the wolf’s underbelly. He yelped and charged her. Mylo slammed into him, rolling him to the ground. Cody pounced and tore out the wolf’s throat. Her lioness should have been upset that her kill was stolen from her, but she just purred in approval. If she had been in human form, she would have rolled her eyes at the fickle cat.

The other two wolves had been knocked out, and Zack lit a circle of fire around them to keep them in place as they moved onto the next group. With the Fae warriors keeping the left flank pinned, Bethany and the guys were able to drive the prisoners towards Holly and her mates, trapping them between the two groups. With his boost in magic, Zack was able to throw rings of fire around small groups of the prisoners, trapping them without a fight. The Fae warriors caught on to his plan quickly and helped keep the barriers strong.

Bethany shook her head, spitting out a mouthful of blood from a dead shifter who wouldn’t yield. She didn’t enjoy taking lives, but her animal instincts helped override the human guilt she would feel when she shifted back. These people threatened her family, her chosen pride. They couldn’t be allowed to live in her cat’s eyes. She looked around for her next target, but there was no one left.

Cody and Mylo padded up next to them as Zack rested a hand on her back. “I think that’s it,” Zack said, scanning the battlefield.

Bethany sought out Holly and Desmond and let out a breath of relief when she found them unharmed. Synora, one

of Holly's mates, stood next to Holly while the twins were guarding... Holly's dad?

"I'm going to talk to Holly," she sent down the bondlink. Why was Holly's dad here and in restraints?

Cody shifted back. "Mylo, go with Bethany," he ordered. "I'll stay with Zack."

Mylo dipped his head but didn't shift back from his panther form. Bethany padded towards Holly and shifted about halfway to her. Holly had moved closer to her twin mates and looked pointedly at the panther at Bethany's side when she walked up.

Bethany laughed and rolled her eyes. "Don't ask," she fake-grumbled. Holly laughed but didn't ask.

"I'm glad you're okay," she squeezed Bethany's hand.

Mylo growled softly, and Bethany smacked his head lightly. It seemed Mylo's panther was a bit more possessive than Mylo let on. "Stop that. No growling at my best friend."

Mylo grumbled but stayed silent. Bethany caught sight of a familiar figure over Holly's shoulder. "Looks like Claire couldn't stand not being in the action a second longer."

Even though her friend wanted to be in the action, Everett followed behind her like he was her shadow.

"Holly, Bethany, you're okay?" Claire asked breathlessly, her blue eyes still blinked unseeingly, but she seemed to focus in on where they stood.

"We're fine. Are you okay?" Holly asked.

"I'm fine." Claire stepped closer and lowered her voice. "My vision is slowly coming back. I can see shadow shapes now!"

"That's great," Holly said, and Bethany agreed. Mylo bumped against her legs, and she let herself run her fingers through the silky fur behind his ears.

"Um, Holly, why are your parents here?" Claire asked.

Bethany turned. Holly's mother was standing next to Kallan, sobbing into her hands. Her papa was still on the ground and looked to be restrained with vines? "And why is your papa in weird vine ropes?"

Holly sighed and explained how they'd discovered that her papa was actually Roland and Vanya's right hand inside man and had been responsible for a lot of the lies behind the Great War. Bethany and Claire comforted Holly. It wasn't her fault for not catching it, but Bethany knew Holly would carry the guilt about not seeing it for a long time.

The girls split off. Holly went to check in with her mates, and Claire went to comfort Holly's mother, who was hysterical. Bethany decided to go check in with Cody and Zack and see if they needed help with the prisoners.

Cody had shifted back into his wolf, but he shifted as she approached, drawing her into his arms. Bethany snuggled into his chest, relaxing as she soaked up his comfort. She turned her head and saw that the rings of fire were still burning.

"How are you feeling?" she asked Zack. This was the longest he had kept up his magic before.

"I'm feeling fine," he said, his eyes dancing with amusement at her concern. "It's like I have an unlimited supply of magic now."

"We're stronger together," Bethany murmured.

Cody smirked down at her. "Glad you're finally on board."

She rolled her eyes and smacked him in the chest but didn't step out of his arms.

"Shouldn't that go away now that we're mates?" Cody complained, but she could hear the laughter in his voice.

"Never," Bethany assured him.

Shouts rang out behind them, and Bethany spun around. They ran towards the commotion. Holly's mother apparently had known about her husband's plans all along and had just tried to kill Claire with a death blade, but Holly had saved her.

When the shock finally wore off, Malcolm forbade Claire from helping with the cleanup anymore, and Bethany's and Holly's own mates were far too happy to make them sit on a rock with Claire while everyone else finished cleaning up.

"Well, that was fun," Bethany said, looking out at the clean-up that was happening on the battlefield and trying not to feel frustrated that she wasn't out there helping. "Let's not do that again."

Claire and Holly echoed their agreements as their dragon mates huffed behind them in their dragon forms. Bethany was sure if any of the girls attempted to leave the rock, they would be dealing with a grumpy dragon.

"So, what happens now?" Claire asked, swinging her legs in front of her and looking just too darn cute. Bethany knew what she wanted to happen, but she wasn't sure if Claire wanted to commit to being Queen of the Realm just yet.

"Everyone's calling you queen," Bethany said. "Are you going to take the crown?"

"I'm already a queen," Claire said evasively, referencing her reign of the Elves and Fae.

"They're calling you Queen of the Realm," Holly said gently.

"Why would people want a blind queen?" Claire asked, sounding uncharacteristically insecure. "What if I'm not very good at it? I've barely been Queen of the Elves and Fae for a few weeks, and I've already led them into two battles."

"But you won the war," Bethany said plainly. "And I think the Realm could use a queen like you."

A queen who was fair and willing to change the laws of the Realm and had powerful allies to back her up. A queen Bethany would gladly serve under if she wanted the role.

She listened as Holly reassured Claire. Their friendship worked like that. Bethany didn't have the soft words, but Holly did. Claire had a big, kind heart, and Bethany could call them all out on their shit. And her mates could call Bethany out on hers, she thought wryly.

“But we can do it.” Claire sounded surer of herself. “We’ll make sure every voice is heard. No more ‘us against them.’ Just the Unitam Realm.”

“Sounds perfect.” Bethany said. “Let’s do it!”

They would build a Realm where everyone’s voice was heard, and people didn’t have to jump through hoops to be with their fated mates.

“Let’s do it,” Claire echoed Bethany’s words. “I guess I’ll be queen.”

“Long live the Queen,” Holly said softly.

“Long live the Realm,” Claire corrected.

It was almost a perfect ending to a long day. There was just one more hurdle Bethany had to clear before they could live happily ever after, and it was waiting for her at home. Hopefully, her mom would take the news of Bethany’s mating as well as she would take the news of Claire’s impending coronation. But Bethany wasn’t holding her breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

BETHANY

“Let me get this straight.” Sadara laid down her pen and steepled her fingers in front of her. “You disobeyed a direct order from your Alpha to not mate with Cody Clawmoon, and not only did you mate with him, you also mated with a hybrid and a wizard without my blessing.”

Bethany held in her wince. Yeah, her mom was not happy. Sadara’s voice was steely, and disapproval radiated from every line of her body.

They had spent the night on the Fae lands. Partly in case there was another attack, and partly because Bethany wanted a good night’s sleep before she faced her mom. They had piled onto a large bed in a guest room at Kallan and Kieran’s manor house and had fallen into an exhausted sleep in a tangle of limbs. It was the soundest Bethany had slept in a long time.

When they had hit the shifter territory, though, pack and pride Deltas were waiting to escort them to their alphas. Cody had pressed a quick kiss on her lips, much to the displeasure of the pride's Deltas. He had tried to insist Mylo and Zack go with Bethany, but Bethany had cut him off. Using the bondlink, she'd told him that she was worried about what the cats would do to them. But when they went to follow Cody, the pack's Deltas told them they were to wait in the guest house on neutral land. Neither she nor Cody wanted to leave them, but Zack and Mylo insisted in the bondlink they would be fine.

Bethany had been escorted through the pride's village and past the pride members, straight to her mom's office, where a less-than-thrilled Sadara waited for her. She had just finished filling her mom in on the events of the last week and watched as cold rage filled Sadara with every word from Bethany's mouth.

She forced herself to not fidget in her chair as she replied. "Look," she said evenly. "I didn't intentionally mean to go against your order." Well, that was a lie, but she could say it to appease her mom. "But Cody, Zack, and Mylo are my fated mates. I understand that you are not thrilled by that, but that doesn't change the reality. They are my fated mates, and I am theirs."

"Not thrilled..." Sadara parroted back to her, her golden eyes gleaming with anger. "Is that what you think I am?"

Bethany was getting tired of her mom's bullshit. She leaned forward. "Fine. You're pissed about it. But frankly, I don't care. They're my mates, and nothing is going to change that."

"Did you forget that you need my blessing for intermixed matings?" Sadara said icily. Her nostrils flared. "That's the law."

"I have the Queen's blessing," Bethany shot back, her lioness's hackles raised at her mom's threatening tone. No one threatened her mates.

"Well, the Queen isn't crowned yet," Sadara growled.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Bethany’s eyebrows shot up.

Sadara continued, as if Bethany hadn’t spoken. “As long as I am Alpha, I won’t allow this.”

“Allow this?” Bethany sputtered. “You don’t need to allow anything. I claimed them. It’s done.”

Sadara waved her hand. “Claimings can be undone. I’ll speak with Alpha Bryson. I’m sure he’ll agree with me.”

A threatening growl ripped from Bethany’s throat. “Over my dead body. I will exile myself before I let you do that if you’re so determined to follow the law and not give your blessing *that we don’t need.*”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sadara said. “You’re the Alpha Heir and my daughter. You can’t leave. The pride needs you.”

Don’t be ridiculous? Did her mom hear herself right now?

Bethany took a deep breath, trying to relax her muscles. “If you can’t see that I am happy, that I have mates who love me, if you can’t be happy for me, then I don’t want anything to do with the pride.”

As Bethany said the words, a weight lifted off her shoulders. Deep down, she realized that she had always wanted to say those words but never had. In the past, she never wanted to abandon her mom, to hurt her like that, and there were so many changes she wanted to make to the pride. But Bethany didn’t want to subject herself to a life of misery if her mom refused to be happy for her. And if that meant she was exiled from the pride, then so be it. She could help Claire rebuild the Realm full-time instead.

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do,” Bethany said firmly. “I recognize this is a lot to take in at once. I’ll give you some time to think about this, but, Mom?” She waited till Sadara’s eyes met hers, and she held her gaze in a challenge. “This is happening whether you’re on board or not.”

“The pride will never accept it,” Sadara hissed. “They’ve been in an uproar ever since word came yesterday of you sporting *their* marks. The pride wants their throats.”

A cold chill ran through Bethany. “And what did you say to them?”

“Nothing,” Sadara spat. “I assured them it couldn’t possibly be true, and if it was, I would handle it. But then you walked in here with those marks on your neck, and I don’t know what they are feeling.”

But Bethany knew. She had seen Alonzo in the crowd as she had been escorted to her mom’s office. Had seen the dark look on his face. *Fuck*. The damned tiger was crazy enough and stupid enough to do something drastic. Like go after Zack and Mylo on neutral grounds.

Her shift ripped through her as her lioness roared at the threat to her mates. Ignoring her mom’s shouts, she raced out of the office and through the village. Her legs ate up the ground as she closed the distance between her and her mates.

“*Cody!*” She yanked on the bond, unsure if it would carry over the distance. “*Mylo and Zack are in trouble.*”

He didn’t answer her, and she didn’t waste any more time trying to contact him as she entered the neutral grounds. The pride Delta who had stayed with Zack and Mylo was leaning against a tree as he watched Alonzo’s tiger and three other lions pace in front of Mylo and Zack. Zack stood with his back against the house’s wall, magic sparking at his fingertips. Mylo was in his panther form and crouched in front of Zack. He was silent except for the swishing of his tail as he watched the male cats in front of him posture.

Bethany leaped over the closest male lion and landed in front of Mylo. She spun and roared at Alonzo and his friends, warning them to back off. A wolf howled close by, and Cody burst into the clearing, teeth snapping, as he stopped at Bethany’s side.

Alonzo, being the dumbass that he was, didn’t back down and instead snarled at Cody. He charged at the wolf, and Cody

met him in a clash of teeth. One of Alonzo's friends sprung for Cody's back, and Bethany pounced on him, batting him out of the air. She latched onto his throat and shook him until the lion whined in submission. She let go of him and whirled on the others, letting out a loud snarl and forcing all her dominance into it. The lions cowered and tucked their tails, her dominance too much for them. Huh, that was new. She could usually get them to back off but not submit like that. She turned back to check on Cody.

Alonzo was bleeding from several places, but Cody didn't look like he had a cut on him aside from a small one above his eye. The wolf looked like he was playing with Alonzo, and Bethany would have rolled her eyes if she wasn't still so pissed that Alonzo went after her mates. Alonzo and Cody squared up again, and Bethany leaped at Alonzo, rolling him. He got to his feet, and she placed herself in front of Cody, snarling a challenge at the tiger.

Before he could respond, her mom ran into the clearing in human form, the rest of the pride following behind her. Bethany huffed. Cats were unendingly curious. She shifted back.

“Stop this, Mom, before anyone else gets hurt.”

The only way Alonzo and the others would truly back off was if their Alpha ordered them to, and even then, they wouldn't stop until Sadara publicly gave her blessing.

Sadara's eyes flashed. “I cannot give a blessing to what I don't approve of. I do not recognize your choices.”

Gasps rang out around the clearing as Sadara confirmed that Bethany had mated the men behind her. Bethany fumed, her hands in fists at her side. She hadn't wanted it to come to this.

“Fine. Then I, Bethany Thorncrest, revoke my position as Alpha Heir and member of the Thorncrest pride.”

More gasps rang out, and Sadara's eyes glowed angrily. “I forbid you from doing that.”

Bethany just stared at her mother, the two women at a stalemate. Technically, Sadara couldn't forbid Bethany from revoking her position, but she also didn't see Sadara letting them walk away without a fight. She didn't know what to do.

"Challenge her," Mylo said through the bondlink.

"What? I can't," Bethany protested. *"She's stronger than I am."* And Bethany wasn't sure she wanted leadership of the pride, anyway.

"No, she's not," Mylo said. *"I can smell it. And you'll be a great leader,"* he added softly.

"I'm not ready." Bethany shot back. It was too early. She wasn't ready. And Claire needed their help in rebuilding the Realm.

"You are," Cody said. *"You told me this summer all the things you want to change. You've got their best interests in mind."*

She did, but she always thought she would have more time. More time to prepare, to soften the pride to the changes she wanted to make.

"We can do everything together," Zack reminded her gently. He touched her back softly and poured some healing magic into her, chasing away the lingering aches from the fight.

"What is going on here?" Alpha Bryson appeared from the direction of the pack lands, the missing pack Delta behind him.

Bethany relaxed slightly.

"Alpha Bryson," Bethany said before Sadara could speak up. "I'm glad you're here as a witness."

"A witness?" Alpha Bryson asked, his eyebrows shooting up as he took in the tense scene.

"Yes," Bethany said, drawing herself up tall. "I, Bethany Thorncrest, challenge Sadara Thorncrest for leadership of the Thorncrest Pride."

CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

BETHANY

“What are the grounds for the challenge?” Alpha Bryson asked.

More members of the pride were filtering into the clearing, and the wolves with Bryson shifted uncomfortably. Technically, shifters didn’t need grounds for a challenge, but when they still had a Council, records were kept of each challenge and the reason why.

“For refusal to give a blessing to an intermixed mating,” Bethany said evenly, keeping her eyes on her mom.

The wolves behind Alpha Bryson started murmuring among themselves. She wasn’t sure how far Cody had gotten with his father, but Bryson didn’t show any surprise at her words.

She hadn't wanted it to come to this, but she was tired of everyone trying to keep her away from her mates. The last two days had given her a glimpse into the life they could have had for the last few years, and her lioness was *pissed* that it had been taken from her. A small part of her still didn't believe she would win, but the confidence streaming down her bondlink was slowly drowning that out.

"Alpha Sadara, do you accept this challenge?" Bryson turned to her mom, who was still standing at the edge of the clearing.

Sadara stared at Bethany, her gold eyes not giving anything away. "I accept this challenge," she said finally. "But if the challenger is to lose, she will remain the Alpha Heir of the Thorncrest Pride, and the bonds between her and her supposed mates will be broken, and they'll never be allowed to step on pride lands again."

Bryson's eyes widened as a growl rumbled in Bethany's chest. Chatter erupted in the clearing from the gathered shifters. Cody let out a threatening growl and stepped towards her mom, but Bethany placed a hand on his fur and stopped him. This was her fight. Her mom was never going to accept her bonds. Not if she was willing to make those the stakes of the challenge.

Shifters could go feral if they were separated from their mates, especially after bonding with them. Sadara seemed to either have a lot of faith in Bethany's control over her lioness, dismissing the possibility of any harm, or she simply didn't care if it happened to her own daughter. Her desire for Bethany to remain as Alpha Heir suggested she was banking on the former.

"Bethany, do you accept these stakes?" Bryson asked her, his words careful.

His eyes darted to Cody. If Bethany didn't win, Cody would also be at risk of going feral if Sadara were to keep her word and separated them. A calm sureness that had nothing to do with the bonds filled her. She was sad it had come to this,

but she was not going to let her mom win this challenge. She wouldn't be separated from her mates.

"I accept," Bethany said. She shifted to her lioness form and roared a challenge at Sadara.

Cody brushed against her shoulder as he backed up. He sat next to Zack and dipped his head at her. "*Give her hell,*" he growled.

Mylo and Zack echoed their own reassurances before falling silent. She couldn't afford any distractions during the fight. While her beliefs were outdated, her mom was a brilliant fighter and tactical strategist. The only edge Bethany was going to have was that her mom had trained Bethany since she was little to think like her. She called upon all those lessons now as Sadara shifted into her own lioness form across from her.

The shifters in the clearing backed up until there was a fifty-foot circle cleared in the middle.

Alpha Bryson stepped up. "The challenge has been issued and accepted with the proposed terms. Challenges are fought until one party submits... or dies."

Growls broke out behind her, but Bethany didn't let her focus break as she slowly began circling her mom. Confidence and strength poured down the bondlink, and Bethany soaked it all in.

She kept her steps light and even, not giving anything away in her body language as she sized the familiar lioness across from her up. Her mom's coat was darker than Bethany's, more rust-colored than the golden hue of Bethany's coat. Before the bonding, Bethany's lioness had been a little bit smaller than Sadara's, but now the lionesses seemed evenly matched.

Between one step and the next, Sadara lunged towards Bethany, teeth going for her neck. Bethany ducked, dodging left, and struck out with her front paw, aiming for Sadara's side. She caught her front leg with her claws, leaving a ribbon of blood spilling down Sadara's coat.

Sadara growled and came at Bethany again in a flurry of moves Bethany recognized. She defended against each of the moves, letting Sadara catch her shoulder with her teeth instead of her neck but protecting her vital areas. When they broke apart, each lioness was sporting a few more bite marks. Blood oozed from the marks, splattering the dirt like a morbid painting.

They circled each other again, sizing up each other's strengths and weaknesses as they attacked and defended. Bethany's heart ached at the familiarity of it all. Growing up, the only time Sadara really spent a lot of time with her was in training. It was the only time she got her mom's attention, especially after her dad died. It was bittersweet that she was using these moves against her now.

Recognize your opponent's patterns, her mom used to tell her. Everyone has them. Recognize them and use them against them.

Maybe she could use her mom's pattern recognition against her. The next few attacks, Bethany followed the same pattern, letting her mom clip her flank on the last one. Bethany let out a yowl and pretended to limp on that leg. Sadara's eyes narrowed on the apparent weakness.

But the next time Bethany attacked, instead of dodging left, like she had been doing, she barreled straight into Sadara, forcing the other lioness off her feet and leaping onto her back. Sadara bucked her hips, trying to dislodge Bethany. In the past, that might have worked. But Mylo had been right, her cat was stronger and faster than her mom now. She ignored her mom's teeth snapping at her ear. She pretended to get up just enough that Sadara shifted onto her side underneath her. Then Bethany's teeth closed around Sadara's throat.

The clearing froze around them, no one expecting the move. Sadara struggled once more underneath Bethany, and Bethany's heart clenched. Would her mom submit? If she didn't, could Bethany really go through and kill her? She mentally pleaded with her mom to submit. She growled and increased the pressure of her bite.

After what felt like an eternity, her mom let out a soft whine underneath her and relaxed her body, slumping to the ground. Bethany waited a second longer to make sure it was real before releasing her. She licked over the bite marks softly, but Sadara just closed her eyes and ignored her. She backed up, trying to hold in her own whine at her mother's rejection.

"The winner of the challenge is Bethany Thorncrest," Alpha Bryson announced.

Soft fur brushed her on either side as Mylo, Cody, and Zack joined her in the challenge ring.

Zack placed a hand on her back. "You did so well," he murmured to her, aware of the ears around them. His eyes were sad and understanding as he felt her conflicted emotions through the bondlink.

Her mom rose to her feet and padded through the crowd back towards the pride lands. She didn't stop to talk to anyone or shift back. Bethany watched her go with an ache in her chest. She had won the challenge and had lost her mom on the same day. But as her mates surrounded her, their love filling the bondlink, Bethany knew she wouldn't have done anything differently.

They shifted back, and Zack placed a hand on her back as Cody turned to his father.

"Are you looking to challenge me as well, son?" Bryson asked Cody, eyeing him carefully.

"Are you going to try to keep me from my mates?" Cody asked, folding his arms over his chest.

Bryson let out a humorless chuckle and shook his head. "No. I was wrong. I can admit that." He looked at Bethany. "As parents, you want what's best for your kids, but sometimes you're wrong about what's best for them."

Bethany dipped her head slightly in acknowledgment of his words. She stepped away from Zack and faced the pride. They were looking at her with a mixture of expressions on their faces. She saw some glares, a lot of indifference, and

some hopeful faces. She didn't feel ready to lead them. Or at least not in the way they were used to being led.

“There have been a lot of changes in the last few months,” she started. “Not only in the Realm but also in the pride. There is still a lot of uncertainty about what will happen in the future. I ask that in the next few months, you extend grace. Not just to me but to all your fellow shifters and citizens of the Realm. We are better together. But let me be crystal clear about one thing.” She stopped and waved a hand at the men at her side, calling up on her lioness until her green eyes glowed. “These men here? They are my mates. Threats against them or our bonds will be dealt with swiftly and severely. You will not get a second chance if you come after them. Am I clear?”

The pride members dipped their heads. “Yes, Alpha,” most murmured, and Bethany took note of which ones didn't. She looked at her mates, who nodded they had caught it as well.

She wasn't naïve enough to think that they would be widely accepted right away, but she also wouldn't put up with any more threats against them. If she had her way, they would live happily ever after. But first, they had work to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

BETHANY

Despite the pride's initial hesitance, the changes Bethany had talked about with Cody over the summer had actually gone over really well. Even Sadara had come around to most of them.

After the challenge, Bethany had returned to her house and had found Sadara packing. They'd had a long overdue heart-to-heart conversation. Bethany had opened up to Sadara about how she had felt growing up about Sadara's lack of attention and warmth. Sadara confessed to not handling Bethany's father's death well and how that snowballed into her unhealthy focus on keeping the pride safe, since she wasn't able to keep her consort safe.

They were nowhere near a healthy relationship, but they were working on it. Especially after Bethany had convinced Sadara to stay in the pride and be one of her advisors. Sadara

had lightened the load of some of the administrative tasks while Bethany and her mates focused on the changes she was making.

To help her with the changes, she was putting together a new set of advisors who weren't just Elders of the pride. The first two people she had sent an invitation to after her mother? Calen and Nita, the cougar shifter and witch who worked at the Academy. They had been exiled for mating without her grandparents' blessing. They had been rightfully cautious about accepting her invitation, but Bethany had convinced them to at least come back for a visit.

Calen met his nieces and nephews for the first time in the pride village. The strong cougar warrior was in tears when he embraced his sister for the first time in years. It was an emotional moment that had more than a few watery eyes from the pride members gathered to watch it. Calen and Nita decided to accept Bethany's invitation. Bethany tasked them with finding others the pride had exiled over the years. When the pride heard what they were doing, a few members came forward requesting that their family members be allowed to return.

Claire had issued a royal decree, officially lifting the ban on intermixed matings. Working alongside Cody and his father, Bethany had issued a corresponding ruling, negating the necessity for blessings by the leaders. They also extended a warm welcome to any pack or pride member who had previously been exiled due to intermixed mating, should they choose to return. Although a few diehard purists remained within the pack and pride, recent events, such as Calen reuniting with his family and Bryson's second-in-command openly acknowledging his witch mate and their previously concealed relationship, were swaying the tides of public opinion.

There was a new generation dawning in the Realm. Roland and Vanya had been executed, and the entire Realm was turning over a new leaf. Claire, Holly, and Bethany had been dubbed the "Unitam Triad" as they started several realm-wide initiatives with their mates. Bethany wasn't entirely sure it

wasn't just Cody behind the new nickname, but it amused all their mates, so the women just rolled with it.

After the challenge, Cody had told his dad his focus was going to be on Bethany and helping her with the pride. He didn't want to take over the pack any time soon, he had confided in Bethany, Mylo, and Zack. But he was working on several initiatives to proactively mix the pack and pride members, so when the time came, the transition would be easier.

Mylo and Zack helped him with some of those but also helped Bethany with other things as well. Zack was pouring over the pride's records for exiled members, and Mylo was helping to track them down once they were identified. Everything was making amazing progress, but it had been a busy few weeks and Bethany hadn't had as much time with her mates as she would have liked. It seemed like she'd fought so hard to have them, and now she didn't have time to enjoy it.

As she stepped through the portal from the Fae lands to the neutral ground, she was determined to change that tonight. She had just been visiting Claire, whose magic was returning in leaps and bounds. It had been a good visit as they finalized the Realm's market opening in a few weeks, but Bethany was looking forward to stealing her mates away for some alone time.

She was not the only one with that idea, though. Cody, Zack, and Mylo were standing in front of the portal as she exited.

"We're kidnapping you," Cody announced. "And there's no getting out of it."

Bethany laughed. "I was about to tell you all the same thing."

"It's been too long," Zack murmured, drawing her into his arms.

"Mmhmm," Bethany mumbled as she buried her face in his shoulder, her body relaxing.

Zack released her, and Mylo stepped up behind her, wrapping his arms around her. Bethany leaned back into him.

“So, where are you taking me?”

“It’s a surprise.” Cody was practically bouncing on his feet. Whatever it was, they were excited about it. Bethany could feel it down the bond.

Mylo grabbed her hand with his as they walked deeper into the neutral grounds. They seemed to be headed towards her and Cody’s spot. Maybe it was a picnic lunch. Bethany would enjoy that. Maybe they could go for a run in the woods afterward.

When they hit the clearing, though, she stopped dead. Taking up almost all of the clearing was a beautiful two-story log house. The smell of freshly cut wood saturated the air and spoke to the recent construction.

“What?” Bethany stammered out. There was a house in their clearing? A new house.

“It’s our house,” Cody said, a wide grin on his face as he bounced on his toes.

“But how?” Bethany couldn’t seem to form complete sentences. The large windows glowed gold in the setting sun, and the light-colored wood door seemed to beckon her.

Zack laughed at her shock. “We’ve been busy. But we had help. Claire sent over some Elves, and they got it built quickly.”

“Do you like it?” Mylo asked softly.

She turned to him. “You built me a house.”

He grinned, his gold eyes dancing in amusement. “We did. Would you like to see the inside?”

Bethany nodded, still in shock, but she let Mylo guide her inside. The first room they entered was large and cozy, like a warm nest. Filled with neutral colors and a few splashes of green, there was a large couch against one wall with a low table in front of it. Against the opposite walls, hammocks hung from the exposed beams in the ceiling in front of the large

windows. With the forest all around them, it felt like the house was actually in the trees. Past the large room, it opened up into another room with a long table and a kitchen. A set of stairs was to her left, and Mylo led her up the stairs.

“There’s an office up here,” he told her. “For when you don’t want to go to the meeting hall. And three extra bedrooms and bathrooms for when you want space from us.”

“And this”—Cody pushed open the door at the end of the hall—“is our room.”

Bethany gasped as she stepped inside. The walls were painted pale green. To her right, floor-to-ceiling windows let in the afternoon sun and provided a beautiful view of the forest and the rest of the clearing. Against the left wall, the largest bed Bethany had ever seen was piled high with pillows and soft-looking blankets. She felt her lioness stir with the desire to build a cozy nest. Beyond the bed, two doors were open, revealing a closet and a bathroom. Bethany could see the edge of a large bathtub through the bathroom door.

She turned in a circle, taking it in.

“What do you think?” Zack asked, leaning against Cody’s chest as the three of them watched her take it all in.

“I love it,” Bethany breathed as she stepped up to the bed and ran her fingers along one of the blankets. It was as soft as it looked. “It’s beautiful.”

She looked over at them. “Thank you,” she said, choking up. She searched for more eloquent words to show her appreciation, but nothing came to mind. They’d built her a house!

Mylo wrapped his arms around her when he heard the hitch in her words. “Of course.” He tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. “Anything for you,” he said softly, his gold eyes glowing.

“I love you,” Bethany said, not able to keep it in any longer. “I love all of you.” She looked over at Cody and Zack.

“I love you, too,” Zack said, his silver eyes molten with emotion.

“Me too.” Mylo nuzzled her ear. “I love you,” he whispered against her hair, and she melted into him.

Strong arms plucked her out of Mylo’s hold and threw her on the bed.

“Hey!” she yelped as she landed on the soft blankets.

Cody prowled onto the bed, covering her body with his. “I love you,” he said softly, leaning down and brushing their noses together. “I fell in love with you in this clearing, so it only seemed fitting we build our house here.”

“I love it,” Bethany said softly. “And I love you.”

Cody kissed her, but he pulled back too quickly. When she opened her eyes, he looked down at her with a wicked grin on his face. “What do you say we christen the bedroom, then? Make it official?”

Bethany laughed. “Yes. Please.”

She barely finished speaking before Cody rose to his knees and yanked her pants off. Bethany couldn’t hold in her giggles when he got them stuck on the shoes she still hadn’t taken off. Zack rolled his eyes and pushed Cody out of the way.

“By the Realm, we’re meant to be seducing her.”

Bethany laughed and rose up on her elbows. “I think that’s Cody’s version of seduction.”

Cody crawled up next to her and leaned down to kiss his mark on her neck. Bethany gasped as heat shot straight to her center.

“I don’t know. I think it’s working,” he said against her skin.

She buried one hand in Cody’s hair as Zack carefully took her shoes off and removed her pants the rest of the way. Mylo settled into the bed on her other side, and she tilted her head towards him in a silent plea. He answered it and leaned down to kiss her, his lips and tongue teasing hers.

She gasped in shock when Zack ripped off her underwear. She broke the kiss to look down at him.

Cody laughed. "I'm rubbing off on you."

Zack grinned up at her before looking at Cody primly. "There is a logic to your methods, I guess."

Bethany rolled her eyes as she laughed. Her men were ridiculous. Her laughter died quickly when Zack buried his face in her center. "*Fuck*," she gasped, her head falling back.

Mylo tangled his fingers in her hair and brought her lips to his again. Cody redoubled his efforts on his mark as Zack used his fingers and tongue to drive her crazy. He licked up her center, his tongue diving into her as his fingers traced intoxicating patterns on the sensitive skin on her upper thighs. He moved higher, circling his tongue around her clit. He sucked on it hard as Cody sank his teeth gently into his mark. Bethany cried out into Mylo's mouth as she fell over the edge.

Zack slapped her outer thigh lightly. "Roll over and get Cody ready for you."

"Wait," Bethany said, and the men froze. She smiled. "I want Mylo in my mouth and you inside me."

"And where will I be?" Cody nipped her neck.

She turned her face towards him, their noses brushing. "Inside Zack, of course."

Zack's eyes flared with heat, and Cody groaned into her neck. "That good with you, mate?" Zack teased Cody.

"So good," Cody growled, pressing a hard kiss to Bethany's lips before rolling away and grabbing a small jar from the end table.

Zack helped Bethany roll over onto her knees in front of Mylo. Mylo moved so he was sitting against the headboard.

"Is this okay with you?" Bethany asked Mylo softly.

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It is," he promised. "You know I like to watch."

Bethany's muscles clenched, and she held in a groan. Her panther did like to watch, and something about it was so hot. She shuffled backwards and dropped her hands to the

waistband of his pants. Mylo helped Bethany get them off, and her mouth watered when his cock sprang free. There was something so powerful about making one of her men fall apart with her mouth. Over the last few weeks, they only had found time for quickies, but she was going to savor this experience this time.

She wrapped her hands around his cock, jumping slightly when she felt hands on her hips. She looked over her shoulder as Zack pulled her hips back and settled behind her. He ran his fingers through her center and groaned at the wetness.

Cody settled behind Zack and pushed on his upper back till she could feel Zack's breath on her spine. "Prep her while I prep you," he growled, and she felt a surge of wetness leak out of her at the commanding note in his voice.

Zack didn't argue and leaned forward to bury his face in her center again. Bethany moaned as he slid a finger into her. Mylo gathered her hair up and wrapped it around his hand, guiding her mouth to his cock.

Bethany took the tip of his cock in her mouth and swirled her tongue around the sensitive head. Mylo groaned and bucked his hips, and Bethany opened her mouth wider to let him slide into her mouth. Behind her, Zack added a second finger, and she whined around Mylo's cock at the stretch. He curled his fingers inside her, and she groaned as pleasure rocked through her.

Zack grunted against her, and Bethany got wetter, knowing that Cody was starting to prep him. Zack started to pump his fingers harder, and Bethany rocked her hips back to meet him. The rocking motion had Mylo's cock sliding farther down her throat, and his hand tightened in her hair. She was hovering right on the edge of another orgasm when Zack pressed three fingers into her, keeping her there but not sending her over. She started begging around Mylo's cock, making wordless noises as she bobbed her head up and down.

"Take her," Cody growled.

Bethany whined as Zack withdrew his fingers. Mylo brushed his fingers across her cheek comfortingly.

Zack shifted forward, then reached around and slid two fingers on either side of her clit as his cock nudged her entrance. Bethany released Mylo's cock and buried her face in his hip as Zack slid home inside her. Every nerve ending felt like it was on fire as she greedily drank up the sensations. She tilted her head and groaned as Cody drew Zack back into his chest, fisting his hand in his hair and kissing him desperately as he moved behind him. Zack got harder inside her, and his hips punched forward into hers as Cody entered him. Bethany clenched down around him, and Zack groaned.

"I'm not going to last," he gritted out.

Cody released him, letting him fall forward till his chest blanketed Bethany. Bethany and Zack moaned together as Cody started moving, punching his hips into Zack, which sent Zack deeper into Bethany. Mylo guided Bethany's mouth back to his cock, and Bethany sucked on it desperately as she spun out towards an orgasm. She cried out as Zack's fingers pressed down on her clit, moving back and forth across it like mini vibrations.

Zack cried out and buried his face into Bethany's neck as Cody picked up his pace.

"Come now," Cody growled out. "All of you."

Her orgasm slammed into her, and Bethany sobbed out her pleasure. Zack's fingers pressed down on her clit one final time before he released it, grabbing onto her hips as he bucked into her, groaning as he came. He whimpered as Cody buried himself deep inside him, forcing him deeper into Bethany. Bethany cried out around Mylo's cock, and he groaned, his hips bucking as he came. Bethany swallowed down his release before releasing his cock with a pop. His hand in her hair gentled, and he petted the back of her head as they all caught their breath.

Bethany's shoulders shook as a thought came to her.

Zack groaned as she clenched down on him with silent laughter. "What is it?"

“I think we can consider the bedroom christened,” she said, giggles spilling out of her uncontrollably.

Her laughter was contagious, and the bed shook slightly as the men joined her. Zack’s laughter broke into a groan as Cody’s weight disappeared from on top of them. Zack pulled out of Bethany, and she whimpered. Cody returned and tossed a cloth at Mylo, who bundled Bethany up into his arms and cleaned her up. Cody did the same with Zack, then they all fell into bed next to each other, Mylo at Bethany’s back, Zack next to Bethany and Cody at Zack’s back. A purr rumbled out of Bethany’s chest, and Mylo answered it with one of his own as her eyes began to close.

Had someone asked the twelve-year-old Bethany about her vision for the future, she could never have dreamed up this scene: in the very clearing where she once played with her best friend, lying in a home he had built with her other two mates. It was a happily ever after she would have never thought possible, but cuddled up against them, she would do everything in her power to make sure she didn’t lose it.

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And that's a wrap on Bethany's story and the Unitam Realm series! Although stay tuned for a potential prequel series about the formation of the Unitam Realm series!

As always, thank you so much to you, my darling readers, for reading and loving these characters as much as I do!

If you loved this book, please consider leaving a review. They are so important to us indie authors. Word of mouth is also another way to help an author out. Telling all your friends, whether they are book friends or not, is a great way to help out authors. If you love my books, recommend them to friends so they can enjoy the worlds I create as well.

To stay up to date on updates and follow more of my work, visit my website at www.authorsunnyhart.com or my Facebook group at [Sunny's Rays of Sunshine](#).

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UNITAM REALM SERIES

[By Her Sight](#)

[With Her Sight](#)

[Beyond Her Sight](#)

[All Her Feelings](#)

[Make Me](#)

STANDALONE

[Avoiding the Sack](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sunny Hart lives in the rolling hills of the Kentucky Bluegrass. She has spent her entire life expressing herself through writing and short stories until one NaNoWriMo, she challenged herself to write a book to share with the world. *By Her Sight* (under pen name Sunny Hart) is the first book she has published but is one of many floating around in her head. When not writing, Sunny is spending time with her dogs and horse and working her ‘day job’ as a business strategy consultant.

FOR THE LATEST NEWS, updates, and giveaways, check out Sunny’s Facebook group, [Sunny’s Rays of Sunshine](https://www.facebook.com/groups/2871054323110368). (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2871054323110368>)

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