



THE REJECTED BOOK ONE

REJECTED
BY
WOLVES

ROMY LOCKHART

Rejected by Wolves

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Contents

- [1. Foreword](#)
- [2. Chapter One](#)
- [3. Chapter Two](#)
- [4. Chapter Three](#)
- [5. Chapter Four](#)
- [6. Chapter Five](#)
- [7. Chapter Six](#)
- [8. Chapter Seven](#)
- [9. Chapter Eight](#)
- [10. Chapter Nine](#)
- [11. Chapter Ten](#)
- [12. Chapter Eleven](#)
- [13. Chapter Twelve](#)
- [14. Chapter Thirteen](#)
- [15. Chapter Fourteen](#)

- [16. Chapter Fifteen](#)
- [17. Chapter Sixteen](#)
- [18. Chapter Seventeen](#)
- [19. Chapter Eighteen](#)
- [20. Chapter Nineteen](#)
- [21. Chapter Twenty.](#)
- [22. Chapter Twenty-One](#)
- [23. Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
- [24. Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
- [25. Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
- [26. Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
- [27. Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
- [28. Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
- [29. Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
- [30. Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
- [31. Chapter Thirty.](#)
- [32. Chapter Thirty-One](#)
- [33. Chapter Thirty-Two](#)
- [34. Author's Note](#)
- [35. Sweet Omegaverse Series](#)
- [36. Hybrid Shifters World Books](#)
- [37. Author Links](#)

Foreword

This is the first book in The Rejected Duology, which is a slow burn paranormal romance told over two books.

It's set in the same paranormal world with the same rules as my Hybrid Shifters novels but doesn't feature any character crossovers or interwoven storylines.

Content Warnings: The main character is deaf and has been made an outcast in her pack. The storyline contains some bullying, rejection, violence, suggestion of sexual assault.

Chapter One

LITA

No matter how dark the night, the sun always rises in the morning.

It's the inscription written inside every book my guardian has ever given me, and I'm so familiar with those words that they've lost all sense of meaning to me.

Of course, the sun always rises.

It's the constant that dictates our actions.

Every day, we rise with the sun to serve our pack.

The kitchen of the communal dining hall in the centre of town is our workspace.

It's where we cook, clean, and repeat. With around three hundred residents to feed at every meal, day in, day out, our small team works to a rigid schedule that doesn't allow for much slack.

Alina nods at me when I walk back to the kitchen after cleaning up the last of the breakfast tables.

The dishes have been done, and we've got enough time to take our regular half hour break to eat our own lunches before everyone else begins to arrive to be served theirs.

I swoop in and start taking the plates out to the picnic table in the back yard, not allowing my guardian to do all the work. Alina moves too slowly to stop me, and if any protest leaves her lips, she knows I won't hear it. I find our co-workers out back already.

Emily is stretched out on the sun lounger next to the table, already passed out cold.

I put the plates down on the table, and Astor re-arranges them based on the contents.

These older women are creatures of habit, and it's been easy to fall in line with them.

There's safety in the familiar. It feels nice to have that sense of security.

I go back for the rest of the plates, and Alina follows me out this time with a jug of water and five glasses stacked inside each other.

Our last team member rounds the corner into the yard as Alina sets the jug down on the table.

Cora gives me a smile as she crouches down next to the little boy who's clinging to her skirts.

"Look who I found," she says, ruffling his dark hair.

Little Adam looks up at me with his big, dark eyes.

His lips stay flat. He's a very serious five-year-old.

I crouch down, and sign to him, "Good morning. Are you staying for lunch?"

He frowns, not signing back as he normally would.

If there's one thing he always seems to enjoy, it's interacting without the need to speak. It's odd that he's not showing his usual enthusiasm for demonstrating how well he can sign.

I look at Cora. She shrugs at me before she puts her arm around him and asks him what's wrong.

He blows out a breath, seeming frustrated. After a second, his eyes sparkle and he starts to sign.

"Not a good morning."

A chill comes over me as I look back at him.

He always looks solemn, but he doesn't usually have anything bad to say.

"What's wrong?" I sign, after a second of hesitation.

He shakes his head. Something's definitely wrong, but I'm not sure he can tell me.

Adam doesn't seem to enjoy talking, which is why he likes to be around the only other person in this town who doesn't talk. Alina and I have taught him some ASL, and he's always happy to use it, but it seems like he doesn't have the words for whatever's bothering him today.

"Come eat," I sign, before I rise to my feet and take his hand.

He comes with me to the table and Cora mumbles something I can't quite read before she darts into the kitchen. Adam sits between me and Alina at the table, while Astor takes her usual seat at the other side, digging into her soup and sandwich combo before Cora comes back out with a plate made up for our little visitor.

He signs his thanks as she sets it down.

She beams back at him. She knows what he means.

The kitchen staff know a little ASL. They expect me to read their lips for anything important that isn't basic or simple, and I can understand why.

I'm an aberration.

Nightshade's pack has a long history of rejecting wolves born with imperfections.

That's because our ancestors knew we needed to be better and stronger than any other pack.

Anything that could weaken our standing was deemed unacceptable.

We're here to protect the rest of the world from a supernatural threat.

We can't afford not to be the best of the best.

In theory, that's understandable.

In practice, it's evil.

Alina knew that. It's why she refused to let the Alpha banish me to The Abyss as a child.

Once it became obvious that I couldn't hear, I was deemed defective. A weak link in a chain that needed to remain unbreakable. I would be rejected, like others had been in the past.

Alina refused to let me be sent away.

She argued that those rules were antiquated, and that my disability made me strong, not weak.

My guardian went up against the pack's Alpha to ensure I wasn't sent to my death for being different.

She forced him to accept me, and he ostracised her for that.

I know she would be in a better position in the pack if she hadn't fought for me.

We have one of the most arduous jobs in the pack for a reason.

Astor's here because she's easily distracted, Emily because she's always tired, and Cora because she's kind of nitpicky about how things should be done. And of course, they're all past their child-bearing years. The Alpha wouldn't have any of his most valuable women working their fingers to the bone like we do.

Those women, his potential mates and Lunas, were given the most important positions in the pack, and their whims are catered to as if they're princesses in waiting.

While the bravest person I know is treated as closely to a slave as anyone is in this town.

It's unfair, but I know there's nothing I can do about it.

I can think of worse fates.

I wouldn't want to be one of the princesses.

Those perfect specimens who gave The Alpha his sons have been waiting around patiently for that awful man to name one of them as pack Luna, his equal to help rule over Nightshade's pack.

The disrespect he's shown those women is astonishing.

I could never imagine having a child with a man who's shown no desire to mark me as his mate, but three of them did just that, perhaps expecting something to change. In the quarter of a decade that I've been alive, nothing has changed in this town.

The Alpha uses those women, and others, to fulfil his own selfish needs.

He isn't interested in having a partner.

He'll never name a Luna.

I thank my lucky stars every night that I'll never have to worry about attracting his attentions.

He barely puts up with my presence in Nightshade.

I know if he had his way, I would be gone.

Banished to The Abyss.

I guess at least now I'd have a fighting chance against the monsters.

But it would kill me to leave Alina behind to struggle along on her own.

I would worry about Adam and his preferences being ignored by almost everyone.

As much as I'm an outcast, I have a place here, and I don't want to lose what I've got.

Chapter Two

LITA

Adam still seems bothered by something by the time lunch is over, but he isn't able to articulate his thoughts. Alina tries to coax it out of him, attempting questions that have simple yes or no answers, but she doesn't find the right one. So, we don't know what's wrong, and we've run out of time to figure it out.

"Let's get you back to the nursery," Cora tells him, as I get to my feet and start cleaning up the table.

He shakes his head, shrinking away from her when she holds her hand out to him.

She looks a little hurt. He usually lets her take him back.

He tugs on the sleeve of my sweater. I look at him, watching him chew on his lip. After a second, he signs, asking me to take him back.

Well, this is a first.

I put down the plates I was starting to stack, and I ask Alina if I can walk Adam back to the nursery.

She nods at me and says something to Cora. With her head turned, I can't read her lips, but I can guess that she's telling the older woman I'll be the one to walk our guest back home today.

Cora gives me a wry smile as she leans over and picks up the plates I just put down.

"Have fun!" she says, as she continues cleaning up.

I take little Adam's hand, and he moves quickly, jumping over the bench and dragging me out of the yard before I get the chance to even wave to the others.

He's never seemed this keen to go back to the nursery before.

Usually, he trudges out of the garden with Cora, his head down.

I'm forced to pick up my pace to keep up as he starts to run, taking us past the entrance to the nursery, down the side of the building and out to the edge of the woods.

He slows to a stop only once we're at the treeline.

I take a second to catch my breath, keeping hold of his hand in case he decides to dart off again suddenly. I don't want to risk losing sight of him.

Especially not here. This is the part of the forest that's closest to The Abyss.

Even if that dark portal doesn't open during daylight hours, it worries me to be so close to it with a child who doesn't fully

understand the dangers. Any experience he has of the woods will have been taught to him by the women who run the nursery. He's too young to have been told much beyond the basics so far.

I only let go of his hand when he crouches, showing he isn't about to run off.

I start to sign to ask why he brought me here, when he points at the ground.

His gaze moves up to mine, and I look down at where he's pointing.

Oh, dear Goddess of Wolves.

There's a footprint in the mud. A large, distinctive mark with sharp indents.

It's much too big and misshapen to belong to a regular shifter.

This shouldn't be possible.

Rituals are carried out daily to ensure the creatures that belong to The Abyss never venture beyond the treeline of our shared forest. Every shifter in our pack knows better than to go into the woods after dark, where the monsters are free to hunt until daylight.

Yet, we're standing here, yards away from the treeline, under the bright, warm sunshine.

The footprint stands out starkly in the damp patch of dirt, and I finally understand why Adam is so worried.

Something came out of the forest last night.

This is the evidence of a trespass, and it turns my blood cold
as I look back at the little boy.

The barrier that protects our town no longer exists.

The rituals have stopped working, or the creatures who call
The Abyss home have grown stronger.

Either way, our pack is in trouble.

A monster has set foot in Nightshade.

Chapter Three

LITA

The mystery of Adam's strange behavior has been solved, but the boy doesn't seem assured when I sign for him that he doesn't need to worry about it.

“Our Alpha will take care of this threat.”

He shakes his head, and I can tell he's getting frustrated. He worked hard to pick up the words and phrases he asked Alina to teach him, but he doesn't know enough ASL to have a full conversation.

It feels like there's more that he wants to tell me, but he can't find the right gestures.

I take his hand and lead him away from the footprint, not sure it's safe to be close to the spot where a monster was standing Goddess only knows how long ago. My thoughts are already starting to spin.

They can't leave The Abyss in daylight.

That portal closes off before the sun rises.

I know that to be true. I've spent countless hours in the forest during the day in my shifted form, and the portal that leads into The Abyss is never present during those runs. There's an energy there that my enhanced shifter senses pick up on, but that's all. Most of the pack spend some time in the forest during the day when it's safe, and there's never been an incident.

That doesn't mean anything now.

Even if that monster took this one, single step before he turned back into the forest, he proved that he could do something that shouldn't be possible.

That's all it takes to remove the sense of safety our Alpha has spent his life building up in all of us.

Nightshade is our home, and our people work tirelessly to keep the creatures inside The Abyss appeased, to prevent them from coming out of the forest and stepping into our world.

The Luna who led our pack several generations ago made a deal with those monsters.

We've done everything within in our power to uphold that deal.

Something must have happened to break it.

The thought turns my stomach.

The hard truth is, if one of those creatures were able to break the barrier that supposedly exists for them between the forest and our town, all bets are off.

I hold my hand out to Adam, and he takes it reluctantly.

If he doesn't have the words to tell me what's on his mind, then he needs to go back to the nursery where he belongs. His afternoon schedule will already have started. The teacher will wonder where he is, and the headmistress will be angry that he wasn't brought back in time.

I stop outside the nursery gates and let go of Adam's hand.

I sign to tell him he needs to go inside and stay there.

I'm not sure he understands the full implications of what he showed me.

It's not safe for a little kid to be running around while there's evidence that a monster was in town.

He should be afraid, not excited.

He starts shaking his head.

He doesn't want to go back inside.

I crouch down and tell him it's safe in there.

I'm not sure he knows what I'm telling him.

I spell out the letters for "safe," and point to the nursery.

He frowns at me.

He understands now, I think, but something is still wrong.

Looking down, he slowly runs through the first few letters of the alphabet with his hands. I realize that he's trying to work out how to spell out what he wants to tell me, but whatever he wants to say, he doesn't get the chance to attempt it.

I catch the faint scent of another shifter on the air when I take in a breath. Looking up, my gaze fixes on the path that leads into the building where the children of Nightshade are taken care of.

The sight of Maria storming down the path makes my stomach churn.

The woman who's in charge of the nursery may be mother to the Alpha's first child, with stunningly beautiful bone structure, but she was my worst nightmare as a child. Alina didn't allow this woman to raise me with the other kids, and for that I'm eternally grateful. Of course, it didn't stop Maria from showing up on our doorstep time and time again, insisting that I needed to be taught the ways of our pack along with the other children.

Given her relationship with him, I was always terrified that one day she would come with explicit orders from the Alpha, and there would be nothing Alina could do to stop her from dragging me away.

Goddess, it's been more than a decade since she put that fear into me, and her presence drags me right back to a place where I feel helpless. I have no right to demand Adam stay with me, but I don't want to force him to go back into that building with her.

She stops at the gate and her icy stare cuts right through me.

I get to my feet, keeping a hand on Adam's shoulder to reassure him as he turns and looks up at his headmistress. He doesn't look afraid, just sad. Defeated, maybe.

She scowls at him, and her lips move.

I can't catch anything she's saying with her head tilted down, but it's obvious she's telling him off for leaving the nursery. He winces and glances up at me, and the tiny spark of hope in his eyes makes my vision blur.

I wish I could help him, like Alina helped me.

Things are precarious enough for me in this pack.

I can't do anything that breaks the rules for fear of dragging Alina down with me, because she's the one who vouched for me. She sacrificed her standing in the pack, and now neither of us have any choice but to follow the rules and avoid making waves.

Maria's stare moves back to me, and I blink back the urge to let my emotions overflow.

My vision takes a second to clear, but when it does, I nod, signalling that she can speak.

She smirks, and it takes everything inside me not to react.

She knows I have no power here, and she's enjoying it.

"Give the boy to me," she orders, opening the gate and then her arms.

It's the last thing I want to do, especially while he seems so upset.

I feel a little stuck, and I'm sorely tempted to pick him up and walk straight back to the cafeteria.

When I don't immediately pick Adam up and pass him over to his headmistress, she reaches down and grabs his hand, yanking sharply.

He's dragged a step forward, his little mouth dropping open in shock.

Anger burns inside me at her unnecessary roughness.

My wolf growls, I feel the vibration in my chest.

Suddenly, my claws are out, and I'm feeling ready to use them.

Her superior expression drops, but only for a second.

"Touch me, and I'll have you exiled to The Abyss," she tells me, smirking again because she knows our Alpha will take any excuse to be rid of me.

I force my claws to retract as I stare at that self-satisfied smirk.

She narrows her eyes as she stares back at me. "This child is my responsibility. Not yours."

Her words have more weight than I expect. It hits hard when I realize it doesn't matter that I feel protective of Adam. Under our pack's laws, she is his guardian. I could appeal to our Alpha about her behaviour, but considering she is one of his consorts, and the mother to his eldest son, I doubt he would listen, even if I asked someone else to bring the matter up to him.

There is nothing I can do here to protect this little boy.

It hollows me out inside to watch her drag him away.

She doesn't slow down and his little feet rush to keep up with hers.

I watch until they disappear inside and the door closes.

My claws come back in another burst of frustrated anger. I think about following them inside and slashing her throat. It might help the children to have that awful woman gone from their lives, but it would make me deserving of the punishment it would earn me, too.

I was an innocent when the Alpha planned to have me thrown into The Abyss, as a sacrifice to the monsters dwelling inside. Killing another member of my pack would make me a monster.

The Abyss would be exactly where I belonged.

I do the right thing and walk away.

It feels wrong, and there's not a damn thing I can do about that.

Chapter Four

LITA

The lunch rush has started when I get back to the kitchen, and I'm still agitated over leaving Adam with that awful woman at the nursery. I have a few near misses with some poorly balanced plates before I manage to pull myself together.

Alina asks if I'm okay when I get a second alone with her.

She can tell I'm rattled even if I've gotten it under control.

I tell her I'm fine. I add that I don't like that bitch who runs the nursery.

She smiles. "Maria can be very unpleasant, but she is not as bad as she seems."

I shrug, still wishing I could have done something to avoid letting Adam go back with her.

"He'll be okay," Alina tells me. "He's a good kid."

He is. That's what makes it feel so bad.

I nod and start drying the plates she's already washed. The first load of tables have been served and now we have to get prepped for the second round. That means making sure we have enough plates and cutlery ready, and that we haven't run out of any of the food that we need.

Emily yawns as she stirs the fresh pot of soup she helped Alina to make.

She tastes it after a few seconds and gives us a thumbs up to let us know it's ready for the second rush. I stack the dried dishes on the serving table, knowing there's a little time but wanting to be sure I get everything done before it's needed.

Cora steps into the kitchen and we turn. She pulls a face, and I can tell what she's about to say before she signs it. If there's one reason my coworkers love ASL, it's to help them be discrete about the people we're talking about when there's a chance they might overhear.

"Royalty has arrived," she signs, rolling her eyes and then signing, "Roll out the red carpets."

We all know what those two favorite phrases of hers mean.

The Alpha never eats with everyone else, but his sons do, and they aren't that well liked outside of the groups of girls who want to be mated to them and the boys who want to be them, mainly because they act like they're above everyone else.

Emily signs, "Fuck off."

Cora gets the giggles, and I can't help laughing either.

Emily can never be bothered to sign, but she always manages it for this one profane purpose.

Alina shakes her head at us, but she has a smile on her lips.

“Well, you’d better go ask them what they’d like to eat,” Alina tells Cora.

She pulls a face, and I can tell she’s about to say she needs to go to the bathroom, her usual excuse to avoid the jobs she doesn’t want to do.

Goddess only knows Astor will be too busy daydreaming in the cafeteria to notice them. She probably doesn’t even realize Cora’s abandoned her yet.

I make sure my hands are full, grabbing another dish to ... keep wet with the now sodden dish towel. The last thing I want is to capture the attention of Apollo Masters or one of his brothers.

I needn’t have worried. Alina knows my peer group are the ones who make fun of me the most. She would never make me serve those guys. She doesn’t make Emily do it, either, because our constantly tired friend would do her best to accidentally-on-purpose spill hot soup in their laps.

My guardian straightens up and dries off her own hands before she leaves the room to ask our least favorite guests what they’d like from the options we have on offer.

Everyone is supposed to get the same, but we always ask when we’re able to offer more than one option. Lately, we’ve

been blessed with good crops, so it's rare when there aren't a couple of choices.

I put the wet dish towel in the basket by the door for the women who do the laundry to pick up at the end of our shift. I pick a fresh one out of the drawer as Cora disappears into the ladies room.

I guess maybe she really did need to go.

Emily nods her head at me, and I put the towel down to grab the bowls.

She might not have learnt much ASL, but we've picked up a shorthand that lets us get the job done.

I set the bowls down on the countertop beside her and she picks them up one by one to fill them with the steaming hot soup.

I get back to work drying off the rest of the plates and cutlery.

Alina returns and asks me to make four sandwiches with extra filling.

I catch Emily rolling her eyes at that request, but she doesn't say a word.

She'd never question Alina.

She adds a little extra to the bowls when my guardian goes to her side.

I make the sandwiches quickly, only slowing down a little to make sure they're filled appropriately without appearing like a

different meal before I nod at Alina to let her know they're ready.

She arranges the meals onto a tray that she lets sit on the counter when she turns to me.

“Water,” she signs. “Two.”

I press my lips together as I grab the jugs and get them filled.

I place them carefully on a second tray while Alina waits for me.

Once I have four glasses beside them, I look up to check I have everything correct.

She nods and picks up her own tray. I pick up mine and follow her.

All I have to do is hold the tray while Alina serves them.

I can avoid looking at them while we're out there.

It'll take a couple minutes and then everything can get back to normal.

Unfortunately, the Alpha's sons aren't the only early arrivals for the second lunch rush.

The table full of girls who would do anything to be their mates stare over at us, and the tray shakes a little in my grasp. I haven't spent much time around any of these people because any time we happened to cross paths, every single one of them made it clear they would never have shown me the mercy that our Alpha did.

I'm mindful of where I step, remembering the time one of the girls tripped me and pushed me face first into the ground when we were kids. It was mean, but it was a long time ago now. Still, I can't help the nerves that come over me as I stand at the nearest empty table, feeling the heat of their stares on my back.

They've always stared like I'm a freak when there's literally no way to see what makes me different from them. The hate in their eyes used to make me cry. I couldn't understand why they hated me when they didn't know me. Eventually, I realized it's because they think I'm a bad omen.

They don't see anything of themselves in me because they don't see me as a person, or a shifter.

I'm one of the rejected, yet here I am walking around in their town, acting like I'm a member of their pack. That's what stirs the hate inside them. It's what makes the venom come out.

They were taught to hate the rejected.

They were taught that we were made to be sacrificed so that they could keep living the dream lives they're used to living in Nightshade.

My existence threatens their idyllic lives.

I watch Alina serve the Alpha's sons, my gaze on her, not them.

She does her job with grace and courtesy, despite the fact that she should be their advisor, not their waitress. Her smile tightens at something Apollo says, something I don't see

because I'm not looking at his lips. I can only tell it was him because of the smirk he wears when I look back at them.

Alina doesn't respond. She simply takes the water from me and puts it down in the middle of the table. She sets their glasses down next, her face stony. She doesn't pour the water for them.

She doesn't put the glasses in front of each of them.

She just picks up the empty food tray and leads me back to the kitchen, past the table full of grown-up mean girls, and she doesn't mention what he said, not even in ASL.

Whatever it was, it made her mad.

I'm not bold enough to ask. I know it was probably something about me.

I make up the orders with Emily while the others waitress.

Usually, we take turns with everything, but it feels like Alina wants me to avoid the dining room until the Alpha's sons and their groupies have gone.

I don't complain about that.

My guardian shouldn't still need to protect me, but after watching that awful woman from the nursery walk Adam back into that building, I'm feeling a little raw.

Alina's always taught me to see the good in things, but sometimes there's just too much bad to push past to get to the good stuff.

Dark thoughts from my younger years start to flood my thoughts.

Those girls don't think I should be here.

Maybe that's because I shouldn't be.

I try to shrug those thoughts off.

Alina saved me for a reason.

She knew it was wrong to leave a defenceless toddler to a terrible fate.

These people are following old traditions that don't make sense.

They never question why. They never oppose their Alpha's wishes.

I've been taught to believe they were wrong, but what if they're right?

What if I'm the reason a monster has set foot in Nightshade?

I picture that footprint in my mind, and I know I should have told Alina about it. I should have asked her to go to the Alpha because there's no way that man would ever listen to me.

I'm afraid of what it means, but I can't keep it to myself any longer.

That monster came out here once, he could come again.

I don't want to be the reason someone gets hurt.

Goddess, I can't believe I'm going to do this.

When our shift is over, and the last of the tables have been cleaned, I tell Alina to wait.

The others leave, switching off the dining room lights, but leaving the kitchen ones for us.

Alina watches me expectantly. Her patient expression makes me want to cry.

She's always been there for me, always fought in my corner.

I know no matter what, I have to tell the Alpha about the footprint.

And it needs to be now. Tonight.

I calm my breathing as I start to sign, telling my guardian what's going on.

The worry in her eyes grows as I explain everything.

She frowns as I finish the story, and minutes pass as I wait for her to respond.

When she does, it's the answer I expect. "Are you sure?"

I nod. It looked real, and it felt real.

Besides, no one in Nightshade would ever fake something like that.

I'm not sure what the punishment would be, exactly, but I doubt anyone who takes the Alpha seriously would dare fake a threat to our town and our pack.

Alina closes her eyes, her hand covering her mouth as she thinks.

When she takes her hand away from her mouth, she speaks rather than signs.

“We shouldn’t tell anyone.”

Goddess, she knows what they’ll think if we do.

She’s still trying to protect me.

This time, she shouldn’t be.

The monster might have come here because of me.

If he hurts someone, it’s my fault for not telling.

“We have to,” I sign. “It’s a threat to the pack.”

She shakes her head, and steps closer, holding my arms in hers as she looks in my eyes.

I drop my gaze to read her lips.

“I can’t lose you, Lita.”

She hugs me close, and I feel like a little girl again, crying on her shoulder as she comforts me after a confrontation with one of the mean kids in town.

I wish this was that simple.

It would make me happy if a hug could solve this problem.

Unfortunately, I’m no longer a little girl.

I’m old enough to face my own battles, and that’s exactly what I need to do.

She lets go, and I wipe the tears from my eyes.

“I have to do this,” I sign, making sure she knows I’m not going to let this go.

She nods slowly. “Tomorrow. When Adam shows up at lunch.”

I let out a sigh. She’s trying to stop me. I know she is.

“The Alpha will ask why you didn’t tell him sooner,” she reminds me.

She’s right, but I don’t think it’ll make much of a difference to his response.

“If you go tomorrow, after Adam comes over, then you can tell him he just showed you it.”

As far as concessions go, I guess it’s a small one.

“I don’t want to ask Adam to lie,” I sign back.

“You won’t need to,” she says. “The Alpha won’t speak to him, and if he does, well, Adam doesn’t like to talk. He won’t get more than nods and head shakes out of the boy. Please, Alina. Wait until tomorrow.”

Waiting isn’t going to make things any better for me, but Alina needs more time to process what’s about to happen. Considering all that she’s done for me, I can’t refuse this request.

What difference is a day going to really make?

Chapter Five

LITA

I wake up when the sun rises, and I know it's time to go to the Alpha. I spent a couple of hours with Alina last night, baking cookies and praying to Artemis, before my guardian hugged me tight and told me to get my rest. I went to bed, but it took a lot longer than usual to fall asleep.

I know what I'm about to do will protect the pack.

That's all I need to remember.

Whatever this means for me, I've had a good life.

I've been happy here with my guardian. I've made the most of everything I was given.

When I'm ready and dressed in my nicest clothes, I make my way to check on Alina.

It's not like my guardian not to be ready before me.

I go to her door and knock a few times.

Folding my arms, I step back.

When she doesn't open the door, I get an uneasy feeling in my stomach.

I grasp the handle and push it inwards, finding the room bright and the bed empty.

My guardian isn't in the house, and there's only one reason she'd leave without telling me.

She's gone to see the Alpha on her own. She must think she can reason with him, persuade him not to throw me under the bus.

I stuff a notebook and pen into my back pocket before I rush out of the house.

The Alpha's house is in the centre of town, close to the cafeteria.

I walk straight there, and go right up to his door, getting my notepad out on the porch and writing clearly that I need to see the Alpha on the first clean page, before I knock on the door.

Waiting on that doorstep is a strange kind of torture.

My nerves feel frayed by the time the door opens.

One of the Alpha's middle sons looks back at me with a questioning expression, one eyebrow slightly raised. I hold the note out, and he rolls his eyes, pushing it away.

I frown at his puffy lips, annoyed that I have to put in the effort to read them when he can't be bothered to read my six-word note.

“Like I don’t know why you’re here,” he scoffs, giving me a sneer.

This must be Fenrir. His twin looks exactly the same, but Thor has a much harder edge that his brother never quite manages to match no matter how hard he tries. The sneer is one of his favorite expressions, because his dark eyes don’t ever get as cold and empty as Thor’s do.

I take a step forward, ready to push past him to get inside.

He puts his hands on my shoulders and gives me his version of his brother’s cold stare.

“You’re not welcome here, and you never will be.”

I pull away from his grasp, glowering back at him.

He smiles. “Your guardian is talking to my father. You can see her when she’s done.”

I push the note back in front of him, and he slaps the pad out of my hand.

“You don’t deserve to breathe the same air as we do,” he tells me. “You will never have an audience with my father. Never.”

Goddess, I thought Apollo was the worst of the Masters’ boys. Clearly, despite having different mothers, they’re all cut from their father’s cloth. I suppose they do all live with him.

He’s about to close the door on me, and I’m seriously contemplating shifting to fight my way inside, when his younger brother tugs the door open wider from behind him.

Orion has always seemed a bit quieter than his brothers, less openly abrasive and cocky.

He's a little smaller in frame, but no less Alpha than they are.

Fenrir scowls at him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Thor is pretending he's you again," Orion says, which only makes Fenrir roll his eyes again.

"So what?" Fenrir asks.

"He's got that girl you like in your bedroom ..."

Fenrir's face goes white before he storms away.

Orion gives me a sympathetic smile, crouching to pick up my notepad and passing it back to me without losing eye-contact. "I'm sorry. My brothers lack manners. I assume you need to speak with my father?"

I nod, wary but thankful as I hold the notepad against my chest.

He gestures to me to come into the house.

I step inside, taking in how much grander the house is compared to the cabin I share with Alina close to the forest. The Alpha's house has stone walls and it's much, much bigger. I glance at the wooden staircase as I follow Orion past it, and down a long hallway.

The youngest Masters brother is a year older than I am, and he's not too much taller.

He's the least physically imposing, but he has a definite take-charge attitude and now it also seems like he's much more mature than his Alpha-hole bully brothers.

His attitude is a lot sexier to me than a built body.

Goddess, no, Lita. Don't start crushing on one of these guys.

They're all out of bounds for you, and you know you're about to be sent to your inevitable death, besides.

It's not the time to start wishing you'd had the chance to pop your cherry.

You never much cared about it before. Don't start now.

I can't help the flush that burns my cheeks when he turns and smiles at me.

Alphas have a natural charm that I've seen have this effect on other girls.

It's the first time I'm feeling it for myself.

I've never understood those girls who are obsessed with the Alphas, but admittedly their charm, properly applied, can be potent.

I'm still a little flustered when he brings me into the room where his father is standing, talking to my guardian.

Our pack Alpha, William Masters is the tallest, and most muscular guy in Nightshade. He has classically handsome features, and a fearsome reputation that keeps any of his subordinates from thinking they might have enough Alpha energy in them to challenge him.

He doesn't look pleased when his gaze lifts from my guardian and moves from his son to me.

His expression hardens, and I start to wonder if it might have been better to walk away when Fenrir told me I wasn't welcome here.

Clearly, he was right.

Orion gives me a reassuring smile when I glance at him.

I'm not sure why he's being so nice to me.

It's possible that he's a good guy, I guess.

I just didn't think that was likely since he's one of William Masters' sons.

Alina turns and I can tell she's not pleased that I'm here, either.

My hands shake as I take my notepad and grab the pen from my pocket.

I find a clean page and write down a question for Alina.

Did you tell him?

She nods in response, before she asks me in sign language to wait.

I nod back and turn the page, waiting.

I don't know what she's saying to the Alpha. I can only see the back of her head.

He moves a little, making it harder for me to read his lips.

Orion shrugs at me when I glance at him again.

Alina turns away from the Alpha and signs at me that it's time to leave.

I blink at her, my thoughts going blank.

Time to leave?

With no repercussions?

This ... Doesn't make sense.

I glance at the Alpha in time to read him saying, "Orion, see them out."

Orion nods and leads the way. Alina puts an arm around me.

It takes a bit of nudging from her to get my legs to move.

I know she'll tell me what happened once we're outside, but I'm still too shocked right now to not drag my feet a little against leaving.

Orion opens the door for us, and Alina lets go to step out first.

I look back. The door to the room we were in is closed.

I'm not going to get the chance to speak to the Alpha.

All I can do now is hope that Alina didn't sacrifice anything for me.

She's already lost enough because of me. I don't want her to have to give up anything else.

I step out onto the porch, and Orion touches my shoulder to make me turn.

He signs, "Goodbye."

I blink at him, not believing it.

One of the Alpha's sons knows a little ASL?

There's literally no reason for him to learn.

I'm the only girl in Nightshade who's deaf.

He wouldn't learn something like that just for me.

Would he?

He smiles before he closes the door.

I walk away with Alina, trying to catch up as she heads to the cafeteria.

I can't get her to slow down, so I rush a little to catch up in the hope that we'll get the chance to talk before the other girls get to work.

Chapter Six

LITA

Unfortunately, Alina doesn't seem keen to talk about what happened at the Alpha's house, and her reluctance only makes my anxiety worse. I need to know what's going on, but all I can do is help my guardian get everything ready in the kitchen, like every other day.

We're here early, which should give us time to talk, but she keeps shaking her head when I try to ask what happened. It's driving me insane. I stop in front of her when she puts down the cutlery box, blocking her path.

I take out my notepad and write on it, "I need to know."

I underline the "need" and hold it up until she looks at it.

She sighs, her eyelids closing.

Whatever she doesn't want to tell me must be bad.

When she opens them, she shakes her head, but then, she signs, "He says there are no monsters."

I blink, sure she must have signed something the wrong way.

“What?” I ask, frowning.

“The rituals,” she says. “He stopped doing them a while ago. Weeks, maybe a couple months.”

Oh, sweet Goddess, no.

Those rituals keep the things that live inside The Abyss at bay.

It makes sense, but it’s definitely bad news. The only way a monster from those depths could set foot beyond the forest would be because the rituals weren’t upheld.

“What is he thinking?” I sigh, not believing it.

“I do not know,” she admits. “But he does not believe there is a threat.”

This is not what I expected. It’s practically the opposite.

But that doesn’t mean it’s a good thing.

“Did he see the footprint?”

She shakes her head. “He believes you saw something that was created by a child’s overactive imagination. He says he has been re-reading the prophecies and he no longer believes there were ever monsters inside The Abyss. It was simply a story created to scare children, to keep them from wandering too far into the forest.”

Alina doesn’t look too impressed as she finishes telling me what he told her. It’s clear that our Alpha exasperated her. Now, I know why, and I can hardly believe it.

Why now, after decades of sticking rigidly to our rituals, would he suddenly decide to stop believing in the reason behind them?

Re-reading the prophecies is a weak excuse.

No Alpha is supposed to change the ritual without consulting with the pack's elders first and checking that the pack witch can do something to negate any risk a change of ritual could incur.

He is being reckless at best.

“Do you think Adam made that footprint?” I ask.

I can tell by Alina's expression that she doesn't, but I know she would have already argued with the Alpha about how much sense his reasoning didn't make.

He's made up his mind.

That's the trouble with Alphas.

Once they make a decision, there's nothing anyone can do to change their minds.

It makes me so mad. We're the ones who are going to suffer because he didn't follow the rules.

“We should start cooking,” Alina signs, reminding me that we have a job to do.

I nod as she opens the cupboard and begins taking out pots and pans.

She taps me on the shoulder once I've got my apron on.

“Do not worry about this,” she signs. “Nothing has happened. And it is up to the Alpha to protect us all if anything does happen.”

She’s right, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

The choice William Masters made without telling anyone might have put his pack in danger, and he’s not willing to face that he might have been wrong.

Everything to do with the Nightshade pack might be his decision, but if he’s not protecting his pack, he’s not doing the job of an Alpha.

I feel tense all morning, my wolf close to the surface and begging to be set free.

The faces of the people I serve breakfast to stay burned in my brain as innocent lives.

None of them know what I know, and all of them should.

I don’t have a way to tell them, and they wouldn’t listen to the girl who can’t listen back, besides.

I’m the reject they despise or pity. The girl who should have been sent to the monsters a long time ago. I’m not their Alpha, or his child who might succeed him. I’m nobody.

If I disappeared tomorrow, the only ones who’d notice would be Alina, the kitchen staff, and little Adam.

No one else would ask where I’d gone. No one would care.

Alina notices I’m more agitated than usual by the time we’re clearing the plates away and getting ready to have our own

lunches before the lunchtime rush starts. She holds her hand out to me, and I frown at her, not sure what she's asking.

“Your apron,” she says. “Go for a run. You could use it.”

She's right, and I'm in no condition to refuse the offer.

I nod, taking the apron off and handing it to her.

I step outside before the other women start setting up for lunch at the picnic table in the yard. My legs carry me deep into the forest. I can't sense any other wolves nearby. I'm as alone as I always am out here. I almost never run into anyone else. Probably because they usually run in groups earlier in the day, when it's safest.

I strip out of my clothes and leave them on a tree's branch.

When I shift forms, my wolf lets out a long, rumbling growl of frustration before she takes charge and starts to race through the forest, turning our surroundings into a blur of greens and browns.

She chases a squirrel up a tree, and a rabbit back into its burrow before she stops suddenly and stares straight ahead. Growling continuously, making my chest vibrate madly, she fixes her gaze on the area directly in front of us.

I know where we are. We're right at the spot where the portal opens after dark.

When the sun goes down, it appears right here.

I've always been able to feel it.

The air here is just different. It's almost as if it's doused in active magic.

Wolves can't usually sense magic, but that's how it feels to me.

It's sparky and makes my fur feel weird, like static electricity.

There's no scent involved, and nothing is visible.

All there is, is this feeling of something other. Something that shouldn't be.

I know the sun will go down while I'm at work, clearing tables and getting everything ready to start all over again in the morning. I won't get the chance to come back out here and stand watch, ready to chase back the monsters who think they can do whatever they want now that the town's protections are down.

I'll have to come out here later, and hope that I'm not too late.

Someone needs to keep our pack safe.

If the Alpha's not going to do it, and no one knows, it's going to have to be me.

I let my wolf growl some more, feeling the vibrations of her angry rumbling in my chest.

Then, I let her know we can't stay out here much longer.

She's not happy about that, but she lets me take back control once we're back at the branch where I left my clothes. I shift

back into my human form and stretch a little before I shake out my clothes and start putting them back on. I've probably got barely enough time to choke down a couple of bites of a sandwich before I need to get back to work, but I feel much better than I did before I went for my run.

I know what I need to do now.

All that's left is to get through the rest of the afternoon.

Chapter Seven

LITA

There's a plate and a glass left at the table for me when I get back to the yard, but everyone else has gone inside already. I feel too guilty to eat before I go back with them, so I pick up the plate and glass, use my shoulder to nudge the door open fully, and step inside.

I get inside just in time to see Emily swear at Cora in ASL, and I figure the Alpha's sons have made an appearance. Alina looks over from the sink and shakes her head at me.

She dries off her hands just to come over and sign at me to go back out and eat.

I glance at Emily who looks ready to quit for the day already.

She does a shooing motion at me, showing it's no big deal.

"Eat," Cora signs at me, before giving me a knowing look and saying, "You'll need your strength."

I still feel awkward about stepping back outside, but once I sit down, Alina signs for me to take my time before I come back inside. When she goes back in, she closes the door.

I try to eat at a normal pace, but I can't help feeling bad about leaving everyone short just because I seriously needed to let my wolf out. I guess it happens to all shifters, sometimes, but I can't stand feeling like I'm letting anyone down and that's how I feel anytime I need help.

Sipping at my water, I gaze out across the yard, into the forest.

It's smart to have a break right now, Lita.

You might need some strength to put up with the Alpha's sons, but you'll need even more when you're acting as Nightshade's only defence against the monsters that live inside The Abyss.

I make sure I eat every last ham-filled bite of my sandwich before I take my plate back inside.

Putting my apron back on, I look to Alina to be told which duty I'm covering.

She gives me the dining room, I guess because Astor's already making the salads.

It's the worst of the duties for me, if only because I can't ask what everyone wants.

I take the notepad out of my pocket and head into the dining room.

The tables are full, and Cora is at the far end of the room, setting plates down in front of the people at the furthest away table. I can tell from a simple scan that the four tables closest

to the kitchen door are the ones that haven't been asked for their orders yet.

My heart sinks at that realization, because the Masters brothers are at the top table, as always, and the surrounding tables are filled with their groupies and the guys who idolize them.

It's literally the worst scenario I could have walked into.

I force a smile to my lips as I move over to the table where the Alphas sons are lounging, pen poised over my pad as I stop at the end of their table.

They all turn to look at me, and it takes everything in me not to turn on my heel and stalk back into the kitchen. Apollo is staring at me as if I just rudely interrupted a private conversation and he wishes his stare was enough to burn me into a pile of ashes. He's the worst of these guys, and I know he expects me to keep my gaze on him, because he's the eldest, and he's the one who's going to take over when their father gets too old.

I keep my stare on him, raising an eyebrow.

His lips start to move quickly. I barely manage to switch my attention to read them.

"What?" he asks. "Speak up, bitch, or walk the fuck away."

I take in a breath and write the two options on the notepad, before turning it to him, punctuated with a question mark. I glance at his brothers, seeing their bodies moving.

The twins are laughing. *Great.*

Apollo smirks at me, not saying a word.

Goddess, give me strength.

I tried to talk when I was younger, but it was difficult, and it only seemed to make the other kids make fun of me even more. If he's trying to get sound out of me with this behavior, he's going to be sorely disappointed.

I feel a tap on my arm, and I glance at Orion.

My heart skips a beat.

He has kind eyes, and a sympathetic smile.

“Can I?” he asks, miming writing something down.

I pass him the notepad and pen, my skin starting to burn as I wait, too afraid to look back over at Apollo, and even more petrified to read whatever Orion is writing.

It's probably just their dinner order.

Goddess, don't let it be something else.

I'm starting to think he might be different to his brothers. I would hate to be proved wrong by words.

Reading is my only real escape from this reality.

Words can cut deep.

He passes back the pad, managing to save it from Thor's snatching grasp as he does so.

His hand closes over mine and I feel the tiniest flutter of butterflies in my belly.

“Thank you,” he says, before he lets go.

I smile at him, and move away, heading straight back to the kitchen before I read their order.

Four orders of stew, please. No salads.

And I'm sorry for my idiot brothers.

They were born assholes.

Ignore them.

It makes me laugh a little. Orion is definitely different from his brothers.

I still shouldn't let that make me like him, but I don't seem to have any control over that.

I signal to Emily for four stews and then I go grab the usual jugs and glasses for their water.

Picking up a tray, I bring it over and Emily puts the bowls down, adding extra while pulling a face when I signal that it's for the royalty.

Apparently, there was some dough left over from yesterday's lunch that was baked into small rolls to go with the stew. She places four of them on a plate and I put it on the tray with the rest of their food.

It definitely makes it look like we put in extra effort for them.

Astor comes with me to bring the water.

I put the tray down on the empty stool by the side of the table, and I make sure I give the fullest bowl to Orion. Apollo gets the one that looks like it might be more veg than meat. I

leave the rolls at Orion's side, and I catch the nasty glare Apollo gives me for not treating him like the king of the table.

I ignore it. I smile at Orion and wait for Astor, giving her my empty tray to take back to the kitchen with her own.

I move over to the table of groupies, notepad at the ready.

They frown at me uniformly. One puts a hand in front of her mouth as she leans to one of her friends. Astor slaps her hand down in passing, making her face pale and her mouth gape.

"There's no room for rude in the dining room," Astor says, winking at me as she disappears into the kitchen.

The whole table seems stunned.

I press my lips together, trying not to smile.

The blonde at the end closest to me snaps out of it first. "Just bring out salads."

One of the others looks crestfallen. "But ..."

"Salads," the blonde says, before looking her friend up and down. "You know you could stand to skip this meal, Hera."

One of the girls' starts giggling before Hera gets to her feet and storms out of the dining room.

I walk straight through to the kitchen and take a ready plate of stew and a fork from Emily's side.

Going out the back door and around the side of the building, I take quick steps and manage to catch up to the upset girl before she's too far away to reach. She looks ready to cry, and

the look on her face is confounded when she sees I brought her food.

“You brought me food? But we’re so mean to you,” she says, frowning.

I shrug, handing over the bowl.

She takes it after a second, but she seems conflicted.

“I can’t be see eating this,” she explains, trying to give it back.

I shake my hands in front of it and motion to her to follow me.

After a second, she does, probably worried someone inside might walk out and see us.

Fortunately, her friends haven’t been served yet so that’s unlikely.

I walk her around to the backyard and offer her a seat at the picnic table.

She looks around as she comes toward it, awe in her eyes. “It’s so nice out here.”

I nod, as she sits down with the food she really wanted before her nasty excuse for a friend told her she shouldn’t have any.

I grab her a glass of water from the kitchen, and she smiles at me.

“Thank you,” she says. “I ... I might have to stay back here until they’re gone. Is that okay?”

I nod, as Cora steps outside and puts her hand to her heart.

My co-worker is a definitely a people-person.

She must have seen or been told what happened in the dining room.

She smiles at me and moves over to the girl's side to check on her.

There's nothing more that I can do, so I go back inside, and I take my time getting the mean girls their salads. They're not happy that it took so long, but I don't pay them any attention.

I move on to the other tables, and thankfully, the rest of the shift is uneventful.

I'm alone in the dining room for a while, I guess while Cora talks Hera through her upset, and nothing too crazy happens. I mean, besides the fact that I keep feeling like I'm being watched and every time I turn around, I see Orion's the one watching me.

Those butterflies I felt before are starting to multiply.

Liking him wouldn't be so bad if he liked me back.

I doubt anything will happen between us.

It's just kind of nice to feel seen for once.

I smile at him as I step back into the kitchen for another order.

The way he smiles back at me is enough to make me hope for more.

Chapter Eight

LITA

It's dark out when we're done for the night, and Alina raises a few eyebrows when she changes our locking up procedures to avoid the back yard that leads into the forest. She doesn't explain herself, and no one asks. That's the level of respect everyone has for my guardian.

She doesn't do anything without a reason, and if there's something we should know, she'll tell us.

I can't help feeling we should tell them the whole truth, but I know Alina would do that if she thought we should, and she doesn't say a word as we step out of the building, via the front door, for the first time ever.

She locks up, while Cora and Astor wave their goodbyes and walk off in the direction of the cabin they share. I wave back while Alina puts the keys into her bag.

Emily yawns before she starts trudging down the stairs ahead of us.

She lives close to the centre of town, and Alina and I always walk her to her cabin before we move on to our own. The need to look out for one another is strong in a pack. That's why the Alpha's decision to stop performing the rituals seems so unbelievable. Even if he thinks it's a silly myth, the urge to look after his people should have been too strong to let him just stop. He should have had to go to the elders. He should have had to alert the pack.

The way he's done things ... It feels like he doesn't care.

That's a hard pill to swallow.

I could understand if he felt that way about me, considering I'm not supposed to be here.

I can't comprehend an Alpha who doesn't care about his pack.

Why should the people here accept him as their leader if he's not thinking about their needs?

They deserve to feel safe. They deserve to be protected.

I feel my wolf's presence as we walk Emily to her home.

I promised her we'd go back into the forest tonight.

She hasn't forgotten. She won't let me forget.

Someone needs to look out for our pack.

If our Alpha won't do it, I will.

I'm so busy planning tonight inside my head that I don't notice Emily's cabin until she gives us a half-hearted wave and trudges up the path to her door.

Alina's touch on my arm makes me turn.

She shakes her head at me, and signs, "No."

I frown at her, feeling like I missed the start of a conversation somewhere.

"What?" I sign back.

"You will not be shifting form tonight." She raises an eyebrow at me.

My wolf is too eager. Clearly, Alina sensed her presence.

I push her influence down quickly, before she can growl at my guardian.

I don't feel that familiar vibration in my chest, but I can tell when I meet Alina's gaze that she is waiting for me to agree with her statement.

I sign back, "Okay."

She frowns at me, and I get a sharp stab of guilt in my gut.

Okay isn't good enough. It was my standard response whenever she was trying to make me feel better as a teenager, and I didn't believe her that things would get better.

I might as well be saying I'm going to shift whether she likes it or not.

"I won't shift tonight," I sign, wondering if it's the first promise I'll have to break.

She stares at me for a long moment, as if she's trying to decide whether or not to believe me.

The thought of disappointing her is crushing, but I feel in my heart this is something I need to do.

“You will pray with me tonight,” she says. “Before you go to bed to sleep.”

She says that as if it’s not something we often do.

I suppose she’s putting the emphasis on me going right to bed afterwards.

She nods slowly. “We will ask Artemis to keep our pack safe while I think about what I can do to help restore our protections. This is not your responsibility, Lita. You are not the pack’s Alpha, nor are you one of its elders.”

In other words, I’m not the one who’s supposed to keep us safe.

I already know that. It doesn’t matter. If no one else can, I will.

I nod, and Alina leads the way home.

She’s still my guardian.

She’s the reason I’m alive.

I would do anything for Alina, but I can’t ignore the instinct to protect Nightshade’s people.

I never would have guessed the line I would cross that will disappoint my guardian would be this one.

Chapter Nine

SCAR

The ruined forest shimmers when darkness falls in Nightshade. It's the first sign that the portal is ready to open, to allow us access to the lush woods full of small creatures that the pack seem to take for granted. Their Alpha has not made the promised weekly sacrifice of livestock for almost two months now, abandoning the ritual that was put in place by his father's captive.

The pack's witch was a very smart woman.

The Alpha's son, however, is as lazy and entitled as I always suspected he was.

A wiser man would have known to consult his elders, and the pack's only spell-casting member, before abandoning a ritual that's been in place for close to a century.

The dark magic that was summoned to make the forest into a prison was kept strong by the ritual.

It built upon its own foundations with each offering.

Fresh blood spilled on the ground sealed the trap.

But the walls of our prison were broken when that blood stopped flowing.

The spell's strength weakened. The dark magic faded.

The rituals were powerful. They worked.

Now, every last spark of the magic that created them is gone.

There's nothing keeping us confined to the woods any longer.

They've lost their grip on our reigns, and that's something they are going to bitterly regret.

They can do nothing to stop us.

It would make no difference if they tried to start the ritual all over again. Even if they sacrificed entire herds of cattle. Even if they sacrificed some of their people. The magic is gone. There's nothing they can do to make blood sacrifices mean anything.

Our prison walls have crashed down, and I intend to take full advantage of the chance to slip past the boundary of the forest and begin to exact my revenge on our captors.

My thoughts fill up with savage acts, all of them soaked in blood.

The crimson liquid has held us in chains for long enough.

Now it will quench our thirst and signal our freedom.

"You are going back there tonight?" Scratch asks, his low, rumbling voice making me turn.

The arid, rocky landscape of the inner circle of our prison is enough to make me sneer.

This place is a hell hole incapable of sustaining life.

We have next to nothing here. Everything we do have, we had to find ways to make or build on our own. Stealing from their forest was the only way to get anything useful.

I refuse to let us live like this any longer.

“I have to,” I admit.

“Then, I should come with you,” he tells me.

Scratch is a loyal friend, and I feel some guilt at leaving him here, but I do not wish for him to come with me. Reclaiming Nightshade is something I need to do on my own.

My whole life has been building to the moment I am able to confront my childhood foe, and it is something I must accomplish alone.

That is not something Scratch will understand.

He has never been alone.

I have been with him since the day he was born, and he has had brothers ever since he was old enough to make memories.

I understand why he wants to come with me, but I cannot allow it.

“You need to stay here and take care of our brothers,” I remind him.

He shows his sharp fangs as he growls at me for giving him his most hated job.

It is hard to keep from huffing at how irate he becomes when he is tasked as babysitter.

“They are big enough and ugly enough to take care of themselves,” he grumbles.

“That may be so, but they are also unpredictable,” I remind him. “They need to be taken care of to make sure they don’t get into any trouble.”

“Well, Fox is busy taking care of himself right now,” Scratch utters, voicing his disgust for our cat-like brother’s current pre-occupation with physical pleasures. “I doubt he’ll notice whether I’m here or not.”

That may be true, but our brothers feel it as keenly as we do when the portal is open.

If they’re in the mood to chase wildlife around, they will step into the forest when it calls to them, and I do not know what might happen if they discover our barrier is gone.

I kept the discovery to myself at first, before speaking with Scratch in private once I knew what I had to do. Scratch knows as well as I do that our brothers have feral sides that may cause problems out in the more civilised world.

When we bring them into the forest to hunt, they are not left to their own devices.

When a hunt must be done quickly, I go alone, and Scratch keeps our brothers from following.

“Fox may decide he’s hungry later, and Snake can never be left on his own,” I remind him.

Our lizard-like brother is a strange one. He lacks the vocal range to talk, but he can hiss in dozens of very distinct tones, and his whip-like tongue does the talking for him when a hiss isn't expressive enough. Communication difficulties aside, he is much too quick to rush toward danger without assessing the risks.

He does not possess the same features and abilities that we do.

Our claws and teeth are vicious weapons, and our bodies heal quickly from most injuries.

Snake is strong and agile, but his teeth are small, and his claws are barely worth mentioning.

He may have scaly skin and an ability to stay underwater for extended periods with no need to breathe, but when he is injured, the healing process is excruciatingly slow.

Thankfully our enemies no longer exist inside The Abyss, but now that we have access to Nightside, my true enemy must be dealt with.

Scratch is staring at the portal, and I can tell he's trying to think of a way to convince me that our brothers will be fine if we leave them on their own.

There is nothing he could say to change my mind.

It is already made.

"Snake almost died the last time he got hurt," I remind him, hoping the guilt it brings is enough to keep him from complaining anymore.

It was not his fault, but Snake was coming to his defence against one of the shadow creatures who'd taken Scratch by surprise when the creature solidified and cut our reptilian brother deep. It may have happened several years ago now, but I know Scratch still thinks about it.

“There are no more shadow creatures in The Abyss,” he protests.

“We do not know that for sure.”

“It has been six years since the last attack. If they still existed, they would be trying to feed.”

I let out a sigh. If it were possible to include him, I would have to think about this, but it is not.

“They are probably gone,” I admit. “Still. It is best to be cautious.”

At least for now. I do not intend to make them stay here forever.

There is much to be done if I am going to create a new home for my pack amongst the people who hurt us the most. I am certain it will not be easy, and I do not wish for them to feel badly at how their new community react to them. It may be an impossible task.

I do not want my brothers to kill everyone simply because they won't accept us, and I know that is what they will want to do. The hate in my heart became theirs when they were sent to me. The bitter pain of being rejected and exiled was healed

little by little by the arrival of my new brothers, but not before some of it was passed along to them.

Those stories were meant to make them understand the people who hurt us were wrong for doing so, but the brutal ways we had to adapt to in this place only amplified our pain.

Nightshade would be so easily torn apart by my brothers.

Everyone there would be made to regret rejecting us, before they were sent on to their afterlives.

Scratch sighs. “There is another reason you want me to stay here.”

He is intuitive, and he knows something has been going on with me.

As much as I share with him, I can’t share this.

Not until it’s done. Not until the Alpha is dead, and I am in charge of Nightshade’s pack.

“There is something I must do alone,” I admit to him. “Once it is done, I will return. All I need you to do is keep our brothers safe until I am back.”

“Until you’re back,” he murmurs. “When will that be, exactly?”

I was hoping he would not ask, but now that he has, I know I cannot lie about this.

“My task may take some time, but I will bring back food tomorrow night.”

He huffs out a breath. “You are going to be gone a full day? That is not smart, Scar. Those people may not know that their barrier is not working, but they will know the moment they see you.”

“They will not see me,” I assure him.

“You are pretty hard to miss,” he says.

“I will be careful.”

“You had better be, and we would prefer our food fresh. Do not bring slain animals that we cannot first hunt to kill.”

Now that he is bargaining, I know he is close to accepting what needs to be done.

“I will bring whatever is safe to bring,” I tell him, not committing to something I can’t do.

My brothers are used to running on instinct. They accepted their darker appetites when they were young, so they are much more vicious than I was raised to be. It helped them survive, while stripping away a layer of humanity that I was more used to.

I don’t enjoy hunting small animals.

It is a means to an end for me.

The pleasure it gives them is one of the few joys they seem to get out of life, and I would never try to take that away from them. There is not much that we can be grateful for.

“Hmm,” Scratch murmurs, pulling my attention back to his bright eyes. “What about bringing us one of them?”

“One of them?” I ask, too distracted to catch his meaning.

“One of the people who rejected us,” he clarifies. “The shifters who sleep in warm beds in a busy town, while we sleep in caves in this nowhere place.”

He sounds casual about it, but there’s a gleam in his eyes that tells me he would enjoy torturing the people who sent us here. It’s yet another hurdle in my plan to take over Nightshade.

I don’t want needless bloodshed to be part of this, but it feels inevitable.

“We could use a real hunt,” Scratch goes on. “A victim we can taunt and chase until we get bored and end his suffering. That would make this babysitting thing worthwhile. I’m sure Fox would love to try out that knife he spent months carving before he became obsessed with taking himself in hand.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

It would only give them a taste for it.

They’re bloodthirsty enough now.

“There is nothing to stop us from going into town ourselves,” he reminds me.

It is an empty threat. All four of us may be Alphas, but I am the pack leader.

I’m the oldest and I’ve been here the longest. They all took my mark to bind us together as a pack, accepting me as their Alpha. I taught Scratch and Fox how to talk, and I helped Snake find ways to communicate that we could all understand.

They are my family, and there is only one thing I care about more than my brothers.

Nightshade's Alpha made the biggest mistake of his life by allowing his pack's rituals to slip.

It's going to afford me the chance I've been waiting for to destroy his world.

That is something I've been dreaming about for a very long time.

Maybe it is selfish to expect Scratch to understand without telling him my reasons, but I do not wish for him to get his hopes up if there is a chance they may be dashed.

"I am your Alpha," I remind Scratch. "You will do as I say."

I look at him, seeing an almost exact mirror image of myself.

Tall and well-built with defined muscles, Scratch has dark grey skin like mine, with a fine layer of fur a shade darker covering much of his body. His form is human, but exaggerated and detailed with features that make it patently clear that he is much more than simply human.

Strong, sharp claws make his feet and hands deadly weapons.

Fangs make his teeth perfect for dealing killing blows.

He has the face of a wolf, his bright blue eyes the only sign that there may be something less feral hiding beneath his monstrous surface.

My coloring is a little darker, and I'm not sure my eyes are as bright as his, but the main difference between us is the scar that runs across the front of my body, a permanent reminder of the day I was rejected.

It was caused by a silver-bladed weapon, and if it had cut any deeper, I would not be standing here now, full grown and ready to exact revenge on the people who tried to offer me up as sacrifice to the 'monsters' who lived in The Abyss long before I arrived.

Those so-called monsters were created by Nightshade.

They were moon-cursed shifters who turned feral and became tied to The Abyss as shadow creatures when they died of starvation in this barren nightmare of a place. Their memories slipped into me when I became a teenager and apparently old enough for them to feed from. My brothers saved me from that fate, but it was only the start of our time fighting off the life-energy draining spirits.

Those unfortunate souls lived and died in The Abyss while Nightshade's pack prospered in their perfect little town.

I don't know when Nightshade decided to start rejecting shifters born with a rare, mutated gene that combines their two forms into one unchanging whole, but I was the first to survive The Abyss.

The bones of those who came before us are scattered over the landscape.

While we've been here, fighting to survive in this barren reality, the Nightshade pack are carrying on their lives believing they are doing their part to keep the world safe from monsters their ancestors created. Terrible creatures who no longer even exist.

Only the Alpha knows the truth, and he does not share it with anyone.

His people will never know about it if someone does not open their eyes.

"I will do what you ask," Scratch agrees, though he sounds irritated. "But if you don't bring us back one of those shifters to play with, I'll tell Fox and Snake that the barrier is gone. That way we can all go hunting together."

He walks away, leaving me alone in front of the open portal.

It's not an empty threat, this time.

I do not know that I will get back soon enough to stop Scratch from bringing our brothers into Nightshade. I'm more conflicted about that than I would like to be.

I don't want to blame the pack for the Alpha's actions.

But the truth is the people that Scratch talked about playing with are the same people who did nothing when we were exiled as defenceless children.

They knew what they were allowing to happen.

They didn't expect us to survive.

They expected us to die.

Well, they should have made sure I was dead the day they left me in the woods as the sun was setting, blood spilling from the wound across my chest.

The Alpha will regret that oversight once I'm standing in front of him.

He'll wish I'd never been born.

Chapter Ten

SCAR

My walk through the forest is typical. Birds and small ground dwelling creatures are quick to scatter from my path, knowing they're in the presence of a predator. They don't always run in the presence of ordinary shifters. They sense the difference. They know we are faster and stronger than the shifters they share this space with during the daylight hours.

The only thing they don't know is that tonight they don't need to be afraid of being hunted down.

So, they run for their tiny lives while I take a familiar path through the forest.

Walking a trail I've often followed ever since I was first abandoned to The Abyss, I only stop once I realize what I'm doing.

There is one person who does not deserve to be hurt for her part in my exile.

My mother did her best to keep me hidden away from everyone else.

She was alone when she gave birth, and she told my father I was stillborn.

Since he was the only one who knew she was pregnant, and they were not living together as mates, she was able to raise me for the first few years of my life.

My only happy memories are of my mother.

She saw me as a kid, not a monster.

I spent a long time wishing I could go back to see her.

But I always stopped short of coming within sight of her back yard.

Some part of me was always afraid to see a monster reflected in her bright eyes.

The way she viewed me as a child may not be the same way she views me as an adult.

Eventually, I decided it was better if she thought I was dead.

I never could have gone back to living with her.

The barrier stopped me from exiting the woods, and even if it didn't, I knew she could get into real trouble over me. I didn't want that. She didn't deserve it.

Now, the need to see her propels me forward in spite of myself.

If there's one person I want to see spared from the path of destruction that's about to be blazed, it's my mother. I would

protect her with my dying breath. She's the only person other than my pack brothers who ever meant anything to me.

Picking my way through the trees, I stop when I see her cabin up ahead.

There's no light from inside, and no candles lit in the yard.

It's possible she's sleeping.

I am not sure how late it is. It has been a long time since we were sitting at the kitchen table, and she was teaching me how to tell the time from the clock on the wall. I'm not sure I remember what the hands meant. A couple of decades have passed, and I mostly only know that because of my brothers.

I made a point to know their ages, so we could celebrate their birthdays.

I no longer remember the date of my own.

Counting days and having a rough idea of the season thanks to the forest isn't the same as having a calendar full of months to look at.

I step into the dark yard, creeping toward the house as quietly as possible.

There are candles under covers on the steps that lead down from the slightly overgrown grass to the paved stone that leads to the kitchen door.

I'm careful to step past those candles without letting my clawed toes nudge the covers.

Peering in the dark windows, it doesn't look like anyone's home.

I can tell this is still her house. Her scent is weak on the air, but it's here.

Now that I've decided I must speak to her, I do not like the thought of leaving, but I cannot creep around out here and simply hope her closest neighbours will not notice me.

As Scratch told me before, I'm hard to miss.

I look around, trying to decide if I should return to the forest, or pick a route through town and come back after I've dealt with Nightshade's Alpha.

My ears prick up when I hear talking. The sound of my mother's voice is nearby, but not close enough to tell me she's coming around to the back yard.

I can't pick out her words, and I can't hear any responses.

A light goes on inside the cabin. I move away from the window, slinking down to a crouch by the side of the back door. I listen carefully, and I hear two sets of footsteps. There's still a creaky floorboard in the kitchen, by the stove.

No voices, not yet, but I'm sure I'll find out who she's with soon.

Chapter Eleven

LITA

Alina isn't kidding about making me pray with her the moment we get home. She never jokes about our Goddess. I know there's no escaping it, so I simply do what she does, minus saying the words out loud. We take matches and candles from the kitchen into the living room and sit down next to each other on the couch.

She turns to me and says, "Say every word of Artemis' prayer inside your head, Lita."

I nod, knowing what she wants me to do, and fully intending to do it.

She doesn't need to worry about that.

I know she really believes in the power of prayer.

I don't feel the same way about them, but I respect her faith.

She takes my hands in hers once our candles are lit.

When she bows her head, I do the same, closing my eyes.

I play the prayer over in my head, thanking our Goddess for everything we have in my thoughts, while I know Alina is saying those words out loud.

I run through most of it without feeling much of anything other than mild agitation that might not get the chance to go into the forest tonight.

When it comes to the parts about seeking Artemis for her guidance and feeling her wolf when we need her most, I start to feel something switching inside me.

It's like a light going on.

My wolf rises to the surface, carried on a wave of instinct, and my eyes blink open.

The room is bathed in the golden glow of my eyes.

I don't think my enhanced sight has ever felt this strong.

It's so bright I have to squint a little to see properly.

Alina opens her eyes and squints back at me.

I let go of her hands and get to my feet, not feeling conscious of making the choice to stand up.

The urge to shift washes over me like a tidal wave. I start stripping out of my clothes, and I can feel the rumbling growl of my wolf in my chest, vibrating like crazy.

“Lita ...” Alina warns, trailing off with a hint of awe in her expression.

I'm not sure what she sees in my gaze, but something makes her rush into the hallway as I shift into my wolf's form, feeling

as if I'm being compelled by the Goddess herself.

Bounding over the end of the couch, I race through the hall, following Alina into the kitchen, where she's unlocking the back door.

She's murmuring something to herself, but I think she understands that this, whatever it is, is much more than my own frustration at our idiot Alpha's actions.

"Goddess be with you," Alina signs to me, before she pulls the door wide open.

I race out into the night, darting through the yard and into the woods.

I might not know exactly what's happening to me right now, but I know where I'm headed and I'm beyond ready to protect my town and my pack.

Chapter Twelve

SCAR

When the door opens, I press myself tighter to the wall, moving up from my crouching position slowly and keeping my gaze focused on the entrance. I take in a breath just as a wolf charges out of the house, leaping into the air and knocking over one of the candles on the steps to the yard in her rush to get through the yard and into the forest.

The sweet scent trail she leaves behind is unlike anything I've ever inhaled before.

I'm sorely tempted to chase her down so I can breathe it in deeper.

The only thing stopping me is the shock of her sudden arrival and departure all at once. It's so unexpected that it takes me out of myself. I shake my head, forcing myself to turn and look back at the doorway.

When I do, I find out my mother is looking right at me, her bright, kind eyes full of worry.

I go still, almost afraid to draw breath, for fear that she might slam the door closed.

She looks much older than she did when I was a child, and much smaller.

It hurts my heart to see her look so frail and lost.

I should not have come.

She puts a hand on her chest, and sighs softly. “Goddess, above. Sol. I prayed for you every night. I dreamed of this day, but I didn’t think this was how it would happen.”

“I should not be here,” I tell her, trying and failing to keep my gravelly voice soft.

I sound much different than I did when I was young, and though she doesn’t seem afraid of me, I’m worried about doing anything that might alter her opinion.

“You remember how to talk,” she says, giving me a smile. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

“I remember everything you taught me.”

She holds out her hand to me, opening the door wider. “You shouldn’t be out here. It’s not safe.”

I accept her invitation into the house I once called home, ducking my head a little and pushing the kitchen table back to make space to sit on the floor with my back against the wall. It is more comfortable than craning my neck to fit inside the room, and it will be less threatening than looming over her.

“It is not safe outside for your pack,” I tell her, wondering why she would let a wolf out after sunset into the woods. It is a strange thing to do. My lungs are still filled with the creature’s sweet scent, and I realize that is because there are traces of it in the room, making the air fragrant.

Flowers in springtime don’t smell half as good as she does.

“Who was the wolf?” I ask.

My mother closes the door and leans against it, looking back at me with a tight smile on her face.

“Lita has been like a daughter to me. Her mother died giving birth to her, and I was still grieving from losing you at the time. She saved me from becoming lost to grief. I thanked Artemis every day for her, and I prayed for you to be kept safe from harm.”

“I am glad you were able to raise another child as your own,” I tell her, surprised to realize there is no bitterness inside me over this surprise.

My mother did not willingly let the Alpha take me away. She fought, and when that failed, she prayed. She never gave up home, and she didn’t lose her heart.

“I knew I’d see you again, someday. I didn’t think it would be under these circumstances.”

“What circumstances?” I ask.

“The Alpha stopped carrying out the ritual. He said it’s because it does nothing. That the monsters aren’t real.”

“The monsters were real,” I tell her. “They are gone now. Only the rejected remain in The Abyss.”

She blinks at me. “The monsters ... You ...”

She steadies herself against the door. “What were the monsters?”

That is a good question, because it is something the Alpha was vague about for a reason.

“They were spirits of shifters imprisoned in The Abyss. They were half-mad when they were sent there. They didn’t use the forest to hunt at night, as far as I can tell, and they didn’t start to show themselves to us until we got older. We were able to fight them off. The last time we saw one was several years ago now.”

“Oh, my Goddess.” She moves over to the table and turns a chair around to face me before she sits down on it. “So, the monsters ...” She shakes her head, unable to finish.

“The Alpha created them,” I confirm. “Or his line did, at least. His father, maybe his father’s father. It may have been unintentional at the time but if it was then lies were fabricated to cover up the fact that they were the ones who created the monsters.”

“Maybe he knows they no longer exist,” she mutters, frowning.

“It is also possible he did not believe the monsters ever existed,” I admit. “His line used The Abyss to exile shifters. If

that is all he knows, then he would not be afraid of a story that he was likely told was meant to keep the pack in line.”

“Goddess, that is horrifying,” she murmurs.

“More horrifying than actual monsters coming out of The Abyss?” I ask.

“Infinitely,” she says. “Why are we here, if not to safeguard the rest of the world from The Abyss? If there is nothing to protect others from, then we have no reason not to allow the pack to connect to the rest of the world like everyone else on the planet gets to.”

She sounds mad by the time she is done, and I do not blame her.

We both have reason to despise the Alpha.

The whole pack, if they knew, would not be happy with him, either.

“This pack only works because it is shut off from the rest of the world,” I remind her. “If the shifters here were allowed their freedom from this place, do you think they would stay?”

“Considering the rules here are so rigid, I believe most of the pack would want to leave.”

“Would you?” I ask.

“A long time ago, yes,” she tells me. “If I could have gotten away with you, I would have left.”

“I know,” I tell her. It was a dream I had for a long time when I was exiled.

We escaped and lived happily together somewhere else.

For years, that was the beacon of hope I'd held onto.

"My dear, sweet Sol," she murmurs. "You were always so bright. I knew you would outshine us all one day. You're here to challenge the Alpha, aren't you?"

"I cannot let him continue as he has been."

She nods, though her eyes are filling with tears.

"I didn't think you still felt anything for him."

"I don't," she tells me, wiping under her eyes. "I never did. I'm just so proud of you, my son."

I always suspected he hurt her. Now, I know.

My mother never would have had me if she hadn't lain with the Alpha, and I couldn't imagine her taking him as a lover. The anger inside of me burns brightly, but I keep it where it is, ready to be unleashed on the right person. William Masters is that person.

"Will Lita be safe in the woods on her own?" she asks suddenly.

I took her by surprise coming out here, and now she's remembering she has a young woman she raised like a daughter in the woods after dark. Even without the presence of monsters in The Abyss, that is a situation that would concern most parents.

I get to my feet slowly, careful not to bump my head against the ceiling.

“I will bring her back to you. There are no monsters in The Abyss any longer, but I have a few brothers who do not fully understand how this world works. Stay inside. I will track her down and make sure she comes to no harm.”

Chapter Thirteen

SCRATCH

Scar is being more secretive than usual. As our pack leader it is his right to decide who needs to know what in any given situation. I accepted that when I accepted his mark.

That does not mean I have to like it.

I know what he is going out there to do tonight, and he knows he does not have to do it alone.

If he does not think I am ready for battle, he is a fool.

The shadow creatures we have fought in this place have prepared all of us well.

We are strong, and fast, and we do not give up.

We could have helped him take on one lowly Alpha shifter.

I know that man is the one who hurt us all the most.

He gave the order that sent us all here.

Scar was never good at hiding his feelings.

I know the Alpha hurt him more than he hurt the rest of us with his actions.

My eldest brother lived among the people in Nightshade for several years before he was found and exiled to this barren realm. Talking about that place and those people always made him angry.

Talking about the Alpha, that made him angriest.

That is the man he left to kill tonight. I would bet my life on it.

It irritates me that I am not with him. It would be good for all of us to watch that man die.

To know that we survived in spite of his sick, twisted actions, and that he lived just long enough for us to cut him into a million tiny little pieces to throw into the Ocean, where something called a shark can devour his remains for breakfast.

I walk back to the caves, ignoring the urge to move toward the portal's opening.

I may as well check on the brothers I was left behind to babysit.

Though, I already know Fox is alive and well.

His moans are echoing out of his cave loudly.

The damn guy can't leave himself alone for five minutes.

Passing Snake's narrow coffin of a cave, I peek inside, only to find it empty.

I do not know how he can enjoy sleeping in that tightly confined space. I only know I'd rather sleep out here in the open, even when it's cold and bitter with fierce winds in the winter, than stuff myself into a hole that barely has a finger-width of wiggle room.

Shuddering at that thought, I move along.

The cave I share with Scar is empty. Blankets we found in the forest and wash in the stream are piled up on either side of our tidy shared space, showing where we sleep across from each other.

My gaze automatically looks for the pouch where I store my things.

It is not next to the bed, but my fingers graze it at my hip, hanging from the same cord as my loin cloth. It is safe. I have never lost it yet. I let out a relieved sigh, before I force myself to move on to the opening of Fox's cave.

I am sure to keep a four-foot distance to avoid what Scar calls the splash zone.

There are some disturbingly wet sounds coming from inside.

Apollo be damned, I do not wish to look.

"Stop tugging on your ugly cock!" I call out, covering my eyes.

"Get lost, buzzkill!" he calls back, clearly still deep in the grasp of his hormonal urges.

The wet slapping noises don't even slow down for a second.

“I need to talk to you!”

“Then, make it dirty talk!”

Gods above, he's impossible.

I move back a little more before I take my hand away from my eyes, wondering if what I'm about to do is a good idea. Then, I see Fox isn't alone, and I let out a groan. I turn away, but there's no use in pretending I didn't see it.

I avoid making eye-contact as I wonder if leaving them alone like this would really make Scar mad.

They look busy enough not to bother us, that's for sure.

My feline brother is laying on his bed of blankets, loin cloth on the ground at his side while he tugs furiously on his black, hook-ended cock. Trails of cum paint his flat, red-brown furred stomach, but it looks like he's mostly aiming for the floor.

Snake is watching him curiously as he unties his own loin cloth and frees his scaly, double-barrelled cock for his quick expanding tongue to flick over, basically whipping it until both lengths are rigid.

“Please don't teach Snake how to be horny,” I complain. “It's bad enough hearing you do that all day and night. I don't need to hear this, too.”

As if he's trying to make me hear more, Snake's tongue rolls around his right cock, squeezing tight with a wet sucking sound that goes on as he tugs that cock with his long, stretchy

tongue. He wraps his hand around the other length and I look away.

“Too late for that,” Fox breathes out, just before he closes his eyes and grunts loudly.

His hand stills. Cum seeps onto the growing puddle in the middle of the floor.

“Snake has been sitting there doing weird things with his tongue for a while now. He just lost the loin cloth so you could get a closer look.”

Fox sits up, rubbing his hooks and sighing softly.

“Apollo, you need a mate,” I tell him.

“I’ve been praying for one,” he says, leaning against the cave wall as he gazes past me, staring into space.

“You? You’ve been praying?”

He gestures to the puddle of spunk of the cave floor. “This is how I worship, and it’s how I’ll continue to worship, until the Gods see fit to bless me with a mate who wants to feel what my hooks can do.”

The thought of a mate who wants what I have to offer makes my dick twitch slightly, but I have enough control to ignore that spark of desire. We’ve been stuck here long enough that a mate is the single most tempting thing any of us could be offered.

I went through my hormonal phase a few years ago, but I didn’t allow my common sense to be lost to it like Fox has. I

simply emptied my loins in the forest once in while, whenever it was safe and appropriate, palming my engorged shaft and leaning against the trunk of a tree with my eyes closed, imagining what it might be like to walk into town and find a willing, eager mate.

It's still a sexy thought. The difference is now it might be possible.

I don't know if what I'm about to do is dumb, or smart.

My objectivity is seriously skewed.

All I know is, Scar never should have gone into town alone.

Fox starts to stroke his cock again.

I'm going to have to get talking if I want him to cut that out.

Whatever happens after this, it's on my shoulders.

I accept the consequences without thinking twice.

"Scar has gone into Nightshade," I tell them.

Fox looks at me as if I'm an idiot. His green eyes are glittering, and his fur is a little wet in patches from sweating like crazy in his heat-induced frenzy. "Of course he has. It's that time of night."

He doesn't stop playing with himself. Of course not. It's practically impossible to get him to stop.

I should leave them here. They'll think we're in the forest. They won't move.

My gaze falls on Snake. His double headed cock is impressive, and the way he manipulates both shafts with his

tongue and hand is weirdly hypnotic. There are times when he gives off pheromones that can be distracting. This seems to be one of those moments. I can't stop watching.

“See?” Fox breathes. “He’s doing weird stuff with his tongue.”

I manage to break my gaze with concentrated effort, only to find Fox staring at Snake, his gaze unfocused. His hand slows on his cock. He’s breathing heavier and sweating a little too much.

“Apollo, give me strength,” I mutter, as I move closer and haul Fox out of the cave, lifting his shoulders and pulling him up on to his feet. He’s a dead weight for a few seconds before he snaps out of it and turns away from the cave on his own.

“Wow,” he murmurs, finally letting go of his shaft. “That was crazy.”

“You two are going to drive me insane,” I tell him.

“Promises, promises,” he mutters, leaning against the cave wall.

I give him a minute to compose himself before I finish what I started.

There is no way I’m spending all night in here with these two doing nothing but making Fox’s cave smell worse. It already stinks from weeks of relieving the heat he’s been going through.

“When I said Scar was going into Nightshade, I didn’t mean the forest.”

I wait for my words to sink into Fox's brain. It takes a few minutes.

His eyes look more focused when it clicks in his head.

Finally.

“Wait. What?” he asks, straightening, and folding his arms across his chest. “Did you mean he's going into the town? How is that even possible?”

“The Alpha stopped doing the ritual.”

He blinks at me. “When?”

I shrug. “I don't know.”

That's not an outright lie.

Scar has been keeping it to himself for the Gods only know how long. I've only known for a few days, and Scar told me he isn't sure when it stopped, exactly. He didn't try to go into town as soon as he realized the sacrifices had stopped showing up. He took his time, thinking and plotting. He brought in his own hunts from the forest so none of us noticed anything was different.

He's been inside his head more lately. He's been like that for weeks.

“So, you're telling me we could be out there right now, in town, looking around for mates?”

“Well, yeah, but we should probably find Scar first.”

He makes a noise. “What for? He left without us. Clearly, he isn't interested in having us with him, wherever he is or

whatever he's doing.”

I really hate it when Fox has a point.

“We find him first,” I repeat, in a warning tone.

He shrugs, turning around and grabbing his loincloth off the ground.

“Wouldn't want to go showing my goods off to the ladies,” he starts as he ties it back on, pausing for a second to look at me. “Or would I?”

“Humans wear clothes. It will be less jarring if we wear something.”

“Huh,” he murmurs, clearly not convinced, but after a second of thought he ties the loin cloth and keeps it on. “It's easy to take this thing off, which I'm sure I'll be doing soon enough.”

“You are delusional.”

He laughs and then looks at me. “What does that word mean, again?”

“Never mind,” I mutter. “What do we do about Snake?”

“If I have to wear a loin cloth, he definitely should be wearing one,” Fox tells me.

“That's not what I was asking.”

“Oh,” Fox murmurs, realizing Snake is still playing with himself. “Snake! Hurry up and finish. We've got mates to go prowling for.”

“Are you serious?” I ask him, right before the loud, sudden splatting sound turns my head.

The puddle on the floor looks more like a pond now, but Snake’s tongue is back in his mouth, and his loin cloth is already in process.

“Good,” Fox says, making me frown. “Unfair advantage.”

If he seriously thinks the women in Nightshade are only interested in comparing their cocks, I’m pretty sure he’s in for nasty surprise. Shifters take choosing mates very seriously, and we’re unlikely to be what they’re looking for.

Maybe I should let them look for a mate before we go find Scar, after all.

They’ll be dissuaded quickly. It will be disheartening, but I can live with that.

We were exiled for a reason, and we know what the reason is.

It’s not going to come as a surprise when the female shifters are not interested in what we have to offer. At least, it won’t be for me. Fox is a little too hopeful for his own good, and Snake ... well he tends to copy everything his brother does. I’m not sure if he’ll be hurt by rejection, but I know Fox will be.

“Just remember, we don’t look anything like them so initial reactions might be ... severe.”

Fox shrugs. “I do not care if four dozen women turn me down, all I need is for one to say yes to me.”

Snake hisses in agreement as he gets to his feline brother's side.

“We are ready to go,” Fox tells me.

This is starting to feel like a bad idea, but I don't think there's anything I could say or do to dissuade my brothers against it now. They look more than ready to get out there and cause some chaos.

I could use a little of that myself.

I smile at Fox. “Let's go.”

Chapter Fourteen

FOX

The forest is much nicer than The Abyss. I always wonder why I don't spend more time there when I step through the portal, yet when I'm in The Abyss I have no real reason to want to be anywhere else. Despite our sparse living arrangements, I am almost content with what we have.

My older brothers can be a little boring, but they are loyal and fierce.

Snake is lucky he has me, otherwise he would be just as boring as Scar and Scratch.

I am much more fun to be around, because I do not take everything so seriously.

Besides my need for a mate, which has been consuming me lately.

This is a phase all shifters must navigate.

I would prefer to navigate it with a partner.

It is fortunate that we are now able to access Nightshade.

I am eager to see what human women look like.

Scar did not explain that very well.

I have never been able to picture it.

“We should head to the creek, first,” I tell Scratch. “I do not wish to be unclean when I meet my first human.”

He sighs. “We don’t have time for that.”

Snake hisses his annoyance before he scales the closest tree and starts to swing from tree to tree like a big, scaly monkey. It is a strange word for an animal who can do what Snake does, and I cannot picture what it looks like other than to try and imagine Snake with hair. It is a disgusting thought.

“Where is he going?” Scratch asks, as if I’m supposed to know.

I shrug as we watch him go. “He did not like that you think we don’t have time to make ourselves presentable, so I would have guessed he was headed to the creek, except he is going the wrong way.”

“I knew this was a mistake,” Scratch gripes as we follow Snake on foot.

“It was not a mistake,” I tell him. “At least, you’re not the one who made the mistake. Scar should have told us in the first place. No doubt he would have ordered us to stay put, but it would have stopped this from happening, at least.”

I wave up at the trees.

“I thought cats were supposed to be good in trees?” Scratch asks.

“No, according to Scar, cats are good at getting *stuck* in trees. So, it would not be a smart idea for me to try and impersonate Snake. Perhaps wolves are more monkey-like.”

He scowls at me. “Forget that idea. Call him back.”

“Call him back?” I ask, pointing to where our friend is. “Do you seriously think he will hear me from all the way up there? And even if he did, what makes you think he will listen?”

“He always listens to you! You’re on his level, or something.”

I snort. “You just doubt his ability to communicate so he ignores you on purpose.”

Oh, that makes him mad.

I’m surprised he didn’t know.

He stops and stares up at our youngest brother, who looks like he’s about to disappear into the forest, never to be heard from again, when in reality he is winding up our leader’s right-hand man and the only brother who thinks he’s about as communicative as a bag of rocks.

“Snake!” he roars. “Get back here! Now!”

I try to keep a straight face, waiting to see what Snake does in response.

Then, my attention drops back to ground level as the scent of something incredibly sweet and tongue-tinglingly delicious

hits my nostrils. I don't recognize this decadent mix of light and heavy sweetness, and it is absolutely making my mouth water.

“What is that?” Scratch whispers, obviously smelling it, too.

The rustling sounds of a mid-sized animal thundering toward our location are far too tempting to ignore. I run toward the sound, ready to tackle whatever creature is making the air so damn sweet.

I don't expect to end up rolling around the grass, with my arms wrapped around a cute, dark-furred wolf. She growls and wriggles around in my arms until her snout is under my arm and her fangs are snapping close to my chest.

“Woah, there,” I murmur, making her still in my arms.

I loosen my grasp to let her trapped snout get free, but not enough to let her run.

She looks up at me, and I realize she isn't fighting me.

“Hey,” I go on, before losing my train of thought when I start to purr.

She relaxes a little more, and I remember something Scar told me when I started purring as a child.

It's a happy sound, that's caused by positive things, and that can be felt by whoever's near when it starts. It's not something I ever need to be afraid of.

He was right, and I'm glad about that.

“Fox!” Scratch calls out, ruining the moment with his annoyance.

Too bad he’s not closer so my purr could affect him.

“It’s okay,” I tell the wolf, stroking my hands down her sides and enjoying the feel of her soft fur against mine. “You’re safe. We’re not here to hurt anyone. My brother sounds mean because he’s too serious. That’s all.”

“What are you doing?” Scratch asks, before his gaze falls on my catch and his expression slackens.

“I’m just introducing myself to this beautiful creature,” I murmur.

She moves out of my arms and shifts into her human form, right in front of Scratch.

I get to see her pale legs and shapely behind take form, and suddenly Scar’s description of humans makes a lot more sense than it did when he first explained it. She does have hair all over her body, some of it is just too fine to notice. She has light colored skin, and a mass of dark brown hair on her head that hangs down her back in a pleasing way. Her body is smaller and more delicate looking than any of ours, and I am very much enjoying the view.

It takes a second to get to my feet because her behind looks so good from this angle.

Her body is making my loin cloth stretch out, and my hooks flicker.

I ignore that response, because she has not yet agreed to be mine.

“Who are you?” Scratch asks.

She reaches up and touches his shoulder, moving her hand over his fur, her bright blue eyes sparkling with interest. I move a little closer, not wishing to lose my chance with this pale skinned beauty only to have to watch my serious brother claim her as his own.

I touch her shoulder from behind, and she turns around.

If I have one advantage over Scratch, it is that I am closer to her height. It means she strokes the side of my face when she reaches out to touch me. Her gaze goes to my mouth, and I begin purring again.

If she wishes for me to lick her, I will use my tongue wherever she chooses.

She smiles, her hand moving to my chest. She is feeling the vibration of my purr.

A moment later, she starts to growl lightly before she moves my hand to the place between her breasts. Her rumbling is very similar to my purr. I think that is what she wants me to know.

I nod. “You can purr, too.”

She nods, clearly excited by this similarity.

Scratch clears his throat. “Sorry, miss, but could you tell us who you are?”

I shake my head at him. He is so impatient.

She doesn't seem to notice or care that he just spoke.

I frown at her, reaching out to touch her hair.

“What is it?” Scratch asks.

Again, she just keeps looking at me.

“Do you have ears?” I ask her.

“What?” Scratch asks, shaking his head at me.

She seems amused by the question, pulling her hair back to show a cute shell-like feature with a hole. She has ears. They are just not like ours.

“Do they work?” I ask, noticing that she is looking at my mouth the whole time.

She shakes her head, and I have my answer.

I look at Scratch. “She is not answering your questions because she cannot hear you. She can tell what I am saying by looking at my mouth.”

Scratch makes a dismissive sound. “That cannot be true.”

“It is true,” I tell him.

He stands back and claps his hands together loudly.

I wince at the sound, but she only reacts to my expression, not the loud noise.

“I cannot believe you did that. You will not be invited to our wedding.”

She puts her arms around my neck, and I lift her up by her shapely behind, keeping her close and making sure she does not have to stretch her legs too far to rest her pretty head on my shoulder.

“You are getting ahead of yourself,” Scratch mutters.

“That is jealousy talking. I will be mated to this woman soon, and you will hear her moans along with mine coming from my cave.”

I see Snake passing by overhead before he swings to a couple lower branches and lands in the grass next to Scratch. He hisses excitedly, and I turn my future mate’s chin so she will look at my lips.

“I am Fox. This is my brother Snake. He is pleased to meet you.”

She turns to look at Snake, her eyes shining with curiosity.

She makes a gesture with her hand that I do not understand.

Snake moves in close, head moving to look at her more closely.

He is quiet as he studies her, before his tongue flicks out and runs up the side of her naked body.

The hisses he issues after he tongues her are more complex than anything I’ve heard from him before, but judging by the soft moan she gives out as she rests back against me, I think I know what he is saying.

This woman in my arms isn’t just mine.

She belongs to all of us.

Chapter Fifteen

LITA

The feeling of soaring through the forest almost like I'm flying instead of running at the most insane pace I've ever run is enough to make me weightless and lightheaded. I know where I'm going, but I have no real knowledge of what I'll encounter once I get there. I don't have a plan, but do I really need one when the Goddess of Wolves herself is driving me onward?

I let her take me, hoping she has a plan.

She must have something.

She's beyond powerful.

I'm not sure what I expect, but crashing into someone who's running toward me isn't it.

The collision doesn't hurt, it only disorientates. The weightless sensation is gone. My fuzzy head is confused as I move, quickly finding my snout trapped under something. A hint of panic has me ready to attack my captor, but I'm not in a position that enables me to do him any damage.

Why has Artemis abandoned me?

I don't understand what's going on.

Then, he moves, and I'm no longer stuck.

The calm that comes over me with that realization is enough to make me go still as I look at the man I crashed into. His body feels hard beneath me, his proportions human, but he has warm, auburn-colored fur all over him. His face is vaguely human-sized, and his vibrant green eyes aren't much bigger, but his nose is that of a big cat. It sticks out a little more, I think, but it's nowhere close to a snout. He has fine whiskers around his nose, and his lips look soft, and black, like his nose.

Goddess, if this is what a monster looks like then they are much more attractive than I ever realized.

I thought they were supposed to be terrifying. It seems I was misled.

I move so that I can shift forms, and he lets me go without hesitation.

I'm a little disappointed that he let me go so easily.

Then, the second monster catches my attention, and I find myself drawn to him just as much as I felt drawn to the cat-like one. This one has dark grey fur, and he's taller than any man I've ever been around. He must be at least eight foot tall, and every inch of him looks like it's composed of solid muscle, even if his lines are partially hidden under his fur. I reach up to touch his shoulder, unable to resist the urge to see what his body really feels like.

He stays still as I touch him, his gaze fixed on me.

He feels like a living, breathing God.

Apollo made flesh, with brilliant blue eyes and a body meant to be worshipped.

My wolf agrees with my assessment, and she wants to see more of the man who caught me.

It feels like I'm in a haze as I turn and see the cat-like man is standing there.

He's even more beautiful now that I can see him a little more clearly with my human eyes.

Built just as densely muscular as his friend, he is a bit shorter and smaller in general, but he would still be seen as tall by human standards. Maybe six foot, maybe a few inches taller.

When he lifts me into his arms and I wrap my arms and legs around his hard body, it's hard to imagine being more comfortable anywhere else. I rest my head on his shoulder, and I keep a hand over his chest, where I can feel his purr. It's perfect.

I'm almost relaxed enough to fall asleep in his arms.

My wolf approves of that idea.

But before I can close my eyes, a third creature appears, seeming to drop down from the sky.

He's not as tall as his wolf-like friend, but he's definitely taller than the cat man.

I don't see wings to explain his landing, but his skin has a greenish-gold shimmer and a textured look to it that makes me realize he has scales, not fur. His body is leaner than the others, more svelte and toned than muscular, but equally as appealing.

His eyes are big and black with yellow-green slits.

He doesn't have a visible nose or ears like his friends, but when his mouth parts, I watch in surprise as a long, red, forked tongue emerges. It flicks over the naked skin from my upper thigh to just under my chest, the soft sensation making me shiver with need.

My body has been ready for such intimate touches for a while now.

The only thing missing has been a willing partner.

I probably shouldn't be thinking that the monsters from The Abyss would make the perfect lovers, but each one of them is uniquely stunning and it's almost too much to handle being this close to them while I'm naked.

Maybe this is what makes them dangerous.

These monsters are beautiful creatures.

I would welcome them in my bed.

It's crazy, but they are so incredibly alluring that I can't help the way my body reacts to them.

I lean in and press my lips against the cat's mouth, and he purrs a little harder.

I stroke my hand through his fur, feeling the strength of his muscles beneath.

Something brushes against my ass as I kiss him, closing my eyes and enjoying the velvety feel of his tongue against mine. He reacts to every move I make as if he is learning from me, enjoying the way I touch him, and realizing he can do the same things.

When I pull back to catch my breath, I find the others staring at us, and I remove one arm from my cat to beckon them closer. That velvety tongue rolls over the skin of my throat, making me shiver in anticipation of where he might use it next. As if he can read my thoughts, the lizard-like man sends that stretchy forked tongue of his over my exposed breasts, flicking it over my hardened nipples.

I let out a moan, and I don't care what it sounds like.

I want more from these men. I need everything they've got.

I reach out to pull the wolf-man's head down and kiss my way along his jaw-line until he opens his mouth for me, to let me feel his tongue against my lips.

My legs are still tightly woven around the cat-man, and I rock a little against his soft furred torso, my wetness coating my clit. I feel the lizard's tongue spanking my breasts as he moves in closer behind me, one cool, smooth arm wrapping around my belly.

The cat kisses my throat, before his fangs scrape against my skin, turning me into a shaking wreck.

Goddess, I want him to mark me. I want all of them to mark me.

Something else bumps against my ass, and the dampness makes me realize I have the heads of two cocks rubbing against my cheeks. It wouldn't take much movement to impale myself on one of them. I'm so aroused by that thought that I come, losing myself in sensation and barely able to contain the searing desire that my climax causes.

I'm in heat. Letting this happen, wanting it so badly, I caused this.

And I don't care. Not one little bit.

I want more. I need more.

"Please," I beg, my hand grasping the fur of the wolf-man's neck. "Please ..."

Chapter Sixteen

SCRATCH

Who is this woman? The question is still pre-occupying my thoughts as she allows Snake to kiss her breasts with his tongue. I know where his tongue has just been, yet the sight makes my cock stiffen under my loin cloth. Her nipples are pink, and her chest flushes at Snake's flickering touches.

When she kisses my jaw, I feel helpless.

I want her touches. I've never wanted anything more.

This woman shouldn't be out here, alone and naked, but she is and every time she tugs on my fur, I want to pull her closer and warn her that she doesn't know what she just got herself into.

There is no way we can let her leave after this.

She has cast a spell over all three of us.

She belongs with us now.

I will not be content to go back to The Abyss unless she is wrapped around me the way she is wrapped around Fox. I

remember every single time that I took myself in hand, leaning against one of the trees out here in this forest, dreaming of meeting the shifter woman who would become mine.

None of those fantasies come close to the real feeling.

This woman is running on instinct.

She is free and open with her kisses and touches.

It is impossible not to get caught up in her energy.

She is such a small, delicate thing, yet she knows exactly what she wants, and she is not afraid to ask.

When she cries out, throwing her head back, Snake and Fox support her as she recovers, relaxing against them, and breathing hard. I watch her flushed face, and I know this is only the beginning.

She lifts her head slowly, chewing on her bottom lip as she readjusts her position.

Fox is gazing at her as if he is in love.

Snake has the same expression.

They are both ready to claim her.

I cannot deny that I feel the same way.

We have been alone for so long that perhaps we would feel this way about any woman who happened to cross our paths. I do not believe I would have the same gut reaction to anyone else, but it would be foolish not to find out more about this woman before this goes any further.

I should not let my brother's unbridled enthusiasm sweep us away in a fantasy that may not be exactly what it looks like.

I must think about what Scar would do. He is not here, and I am in charge when he is not around. What happens next is my responsibility.

Fox is leaning into her touch as she strokes his cheek.

Snake is rubbing his head against hers, his eyes closed.

Why does she have to be so perfect?

I know without having to be told that this is not the way that most women would react to us.

We are not like the shifters she lives with. We do not look like them, and we do not behave as they do.

The longer I stand here watching my brothers with her, the harder I know it will be to do what needs to be done. It is best to do something now, before anything more can happen.

“We should not be doing this.”

Fox narrows his eyes at me. “Do not try to be Scar. You are not our leader.”

Snake hisses in support of our feline brother.

Neither of them shows any sign of stopping what they are doing.

The woman gazes at me, a hint of hurt feelings in her bright eyes as I back up a little more to clear my head. She cannot reach me to touch me again, and for that I am glad. I only have

so much self control. It is pathetic how quickly she could strip it away.

Snake cups her breast with his hand, and her eyes flutter closed.

I look at Fox. “We do not know who she is, or why she is out here. You are under the influence of your hormones, Fox. Taking this any further is not a good idea.”

He growls lightly at me. “Can you not tell she is our mate? She is the one woman in this world who is meant for us, Scratch. I will not give her up for anyone, or anything. She is ours to protect now.”

He sounds so sure, and it makes me feel like a villain.

She does feel like she’s ours, like we were fated to meet her and claim her as ours.

It’s not that it doesn’t ring true for me. It does.

That’s what worries me.

What are the chances that our fated mate would meet us here tonight, when our leader is out in town fighting the man who exiled us?

These woods have always been ours at night.

In all the years we’ve lived in The Abyss, we’ve never come close to running into another shifter out here.

Why now? Why tonight? Why her?

“I am not debating that she is our mate,” I tell him. “But we do not know if this is her normal behavior. She may be under

the influence of a heat. If that is what is making her crave our touch, then she will not be happy when she is in her right mind and discovers the men who were supposed to protect her took advantage of her.”

He closes his eyes, and I know I have gotten to him.

I am not wrong. Something about this is at best dubious.

It would be unethical to let things progress.

He glowers back at me as Snake makes an irritable sound and takes his hands off the woman, stepping back from them both. He turns away and adjusts his loin cloth while Fox tilts the woman’s head until she is looking at his mouth.

“We should slow down,” he says softly. “So none of us gets hurt.”

She gazes back at him, disappointment in those expressive eyes.

After a few seconds, she nods, and she unwraps her legs, letting him place her feet back on the ground. She lets her arms drop from around his neck, and she suddenly seems much less brazen than she did when we met. She folds her arms, covering her breasts, and her skin flushes when her lowered gaze falls on Fox’s engorged cock.

His loin cloth has slipped around to the side and the hooks around the end of his length are flicking in and out. Her eyes go wide, and she nods slowly, as if she is just now realizing what he meant when he told her he didn’t want anyone to get hurt.

Fox covers himself when he glances down.

He holds out his hand to the woman.

She looks up at him.

“Do you have a home?” he asks, sounding deflated.

She nods, but she doesn't elaborate.

“Is it safe?”

Another nod.

“Do you want us to take you back there?”

She shrugs, seeming as deflated as Fox does now.

Everyone stands in silence, and if feels like I've made a mistake.

She wanted this, and we turned her down.

If we get a second chance, I won't make the same mistake twice.

I'm wondering if there's time to salvage our night, when the sound of someone coming toward us through the forest pulls my attention. I look up to see Scar marching our way, from the same direction the woman came.

He stops when he gets to us, his gaze taking everyone in quietly.

“Scar. There you are. Have you already met our mate?” Fox asks, sounding as casual as ever.

The woman is staring at our leader, her gaze as curious and brazen as it was when she first laid eyes on me. To say I'm

jealous would be an understatement. I am already starting to bitterly regret trying to do the right thing.

Scar does not look at our feline brother. He simply gets down on one knee and lifts the woman up.

She doesn't fight, or protest. She clings to his neck, her gaze on his face.

He looks at me. "Take our brothers back to The Abyss."

His tone is cold, and he does not say anything more as he turns and stalks back the way he came with the woman curled up in his arms.

"I hate wolves," Fox mutters, turning and heading back toward The Abyss without being told.

Snake chases him, catching up quickly and hissing out his displeasure loudly enough for the entire forest to hear it.

I feel hollowed out as I trail after my brothers through the trees.

Something amazing came close to happening tonight.

It's gone now because I couldn't trust it for what it was.

She's gone.

Scar has her.

He had better bring her back.

Chapter Seventeen

SCAR

Tonight has been full of surprises. I was unprepared to find myself drawn to a potential mate, and I was even less prepared to find her with my brothers, all of them acting as if I was interrupting something of great importance when I happened upon them.

Of course, Fox cuts straight to the point, making it obvious that something did happen.

He sees her as his mate. They all do.

That is not the situation I hoped for when I dreamt of one day meeting a shifter who might be willing to look past my condition and take me as her mate, but I do not find the idea of sharing this beautiful creature with my brothers as terrible as I expect.

I would not be happy if she were mated to someone else, but my brothers are loyal fighters who will do anything to protect her, just as I will.

She could not find four more dedicated men if she tried, and it does not seem like she is interested in looking elsewhere. Whatever happened back there with my brothers, her scent is stronger than it was, and her upper legs are wet and shiny with signs of her arousal. She is open to this mating bond.

If she was not, she would have run from me when I tried to lift her up.

She would not have allowed me to carry her away.

Even now, she is gazing up at me in curious longing, her fingers stroking the fur at the base of my neck and along my shoulder. It is distractingly pleasant to be touched by a gentle hand.

My craving for a mate seemed to rise and fall with my hormonal phase, but that desire never really went away. It just lay dormant, waiting for the right time and the right woman.

I didn't expect it to happen like this, but it feels right.

It feels like destiny.

We were fated to meet, fated to become mates.

She sighs softly as she closes her eyes, snuggling her head against my shoulder.

I came back to Nightshade for a reason, and now I have two good reasons to kill the Alpha and take over the town.

Revenge for what he did to me, and my brothers is the first.

Making this town a safe place for our mate and the children we will have is the second, and it is much more important than

simple revenge.

I know as I look down at the woman who is sleeping in my arms, trusting me to protect her, that I would do anything to keep her safe.

If killing the Alpha would get in the way of that goal, I would find a way to let it go.

My brothers would understand. They already know our lives are going to change.

They've met our mate, and they are possessive of her.

If I was not established as pack leader, they would not have allowed me to take her away from them.

This separation is only temporary.

The urge to take her home to claim her and mark her is strong, but easy to ignore.

I never want to make my mate suffer the empty landscape of The Abyss, for any reason.

It will not be my home for much longer, nor will it be for my brothers.

Once I have knocked the Alpha off his throne, Nightshade will belong to the five of us.

There will be no reason for anyone to see the inside of that barren prison ever again.

Our mate especially is much too precious for that terrible place.

I bring her back to my mother's house, where I know she will be safe until I am able to return for her.

My mother opens the back door and steps out when she sees me coming into the yard.

Her eyes are wide as she approaches, her gaze moving around as if she is looking for injuries.

“Where was she? What was she doing? Is she okay?”

“She was in the forest, near the portal,” I answer. “And she is ... fine. She fell asleep.”

It is all truthful, if a little scant on details.

I am not certain if it is wise to mention that she feels like my mate, especially since she is in my arms naked, and I am definitely not going to breathe a word about my brothers. The fictional romance books my mother liked to read when I was young were sometimes progressive, but I do not think those scenarios will be what she expects for her surrogate daughter.

“She's sleeping?” My mother sounds astonished.

“She must be very tired,” I mumble, knowing it is more than that.

My brothers definitely did something to relax her, and she seemed very comfortable in my arms afterwards. True mates have instincts about each other that help them to bond much more quickly than mates who are not fated but chosen.

“We work long hours,” she says with a sigh. “It can be a little gruelling.”

My mother moves back, going into the house and holding the door open so I can bring Lita inside.

I crouch and step inside, seeing the table has been pushed back against the cabinets.

She must have done that while I was gone. I move forward a few steps and she closes the back door.

“What work is it that you do?” I ask, knowing she was on the Alpha’s board of advisors before I was discovered and exiled. I suspected she would be demoted after that happened. There is no way the Alpha could have any trust in her after that deception.

“I’m in charge of the cafeteria, and Lita works with me there,” she admits as she moves past me to open the door that leads into the hallway.

I blink at her. “The cafeteria. But isn’t that ...”

“The worst gig in town?” she laughs. “That’s what happens when someone keeps pissing the Alpha off.”

I grind my teeth together. The Alpha is going to regret many things when I am done with him. He has hurt all the people I care about. I could torture him until the end of time, and it would never be enough.

My mother sighs as she leads me out into the hallway and into the bedroom that looks out over the back yard. The room that was going to be mine one day, when it was safe. That day never came for me, but I am glad Lita was able to have this room.

She pulls the sheets back. “Close the drapes, would you? They’re too far for me to reach.”

I put Lita in bed and cover her sleeping form with the sheets carefully, not wishing for her to be cold.

Then, I lean over her and close the drapes.

I ignore the urge to nuzzle against her cheek. It rises and falls sharply, an instinct that’s imbedded deep. I don’t want to do anything that my mother might think is inappropriate. She doesn’t know yet that Lita is my fated mate, and it feels like something Lita should know about before her guardian is told.

I spot the stack of books by the side of the bed as I am moving back.

My gaze moves over them as fond memories return of my mother reading to me as a child.

I bet that’s why Lita has these now. She will have read to her, too.

She looks wistful when I turn back to her. “She loves stories as much as you always did.”

It takes a moment to realize what that means, and it makes me wonder if some things changed when I was gone.

“The Alpha allowed you to raise her?”

She hid me because I would have been exiled. This girl’s mother died, but children are not supposed to be raised by their parents in Nightshade. There is a nursery that is also a

sort of school, where the children are raised until they are old enough to live in groups without supervision.

She moves out of the doorway, gesturing for me to come out of the room.

I follow her, even if it does not feel right to leave my mate alone so soon after finding her.

I knew what I was doing bringing her back here, and I know the separation is temporary.

Even so, closing the door on her causes a strange sense of loss within me.

I do not believe I would cope well if I were never to see her again.

It is a relief that I will be coming back.

My mother doesn't talk again until we are back in the kitchen, and she has closed the door.

"Lita's mother left town a year before she gave birth to her daughter."

"Left town?" I ask, certain that was something that was forbidden when I was last here.

She nods, moving to let me walk past and get comfortable on the floor again.

"She told me and the other nurse when she was starting to go into labour. She wanted there to be no doubt over who the father of her child was."

"Someone would have doubted?"

“The Alpha is known for forcing himself on women. She was one of them, but she was able to leave town and get help from a witch to make sure she did not conceive from that encounter. A month or so later, she met another shifter and started to fall in love. She didn’t come back until she was five months pregnant.”

“If she found her mate ...”

“She’d been told about a medical condition she had. If she went ahead with the pregnancy she would most likely die. She knew her mate would plead with her to terminate to save her own life and she knew she couldn’t do that. So, she came back, and she begged me to promise I would take care of her baby personally. She asked that I give her child her father’s name and address once it was time.”

“So, you told the Alpha you would raise the child so that you could keep the promise you made to her?”

She takes a seat and shakes her head slowly. “It was a little more complicated than that. I raised the child to make sure she survived. Her father was born deaf, so there was a good chance she would be, too. Considering what happens to children born different here, I knew I had to intervene. I was working at the nursery at the time, and I knew I might only have one chance to save her. I took her home and when the Alpha came to ask what I thought I was doing, I told him I was going to raise her as my own since he took you away from me. I told him if he didn’t let me, I would tell everyone how her mother managed to get out of town. He knew Lita wasn’t his,

so he could suffer her to live, as long as he didn't have to see her, which he wouldn't if she was being raised separately from everyone else."

It is a lot to take in. I think it over, wondering why the Alpha didn't care as much because Lita wasn't his child. It seems strange that he is more willing to sacrifice his own children.

Terrible people are difficult to understand. So much of their behaviour makes no sense.

I am glad my mother fought for Lita's life, and I am glad she found a reason to force the Alpha to walk away and let them be. It still angers me that he makes them work the hardest job with the longest hours, but at least they have always had each other.

"So, Lita is deaf?" I ask, curious about how she communicates if this is true.

My mother nods. "She is."

"Then, how did you tell her stories?"

She smiles. "I learned to talk to her with my hands."

She demonstrates this by straightening up in her seat and making a few hand gestures.

"It's called American Sign Language. ASL for short. Once I learned this, I taught it to her. Then, I taught her to read, always telling her stories using my hands while she held the book and put her finger under the words."

“Can you teach me this ASL?” I ask, keen to know how to talk to my mate.

“You can talk,” she says, seeming bemused.

“I would like to know how to talk to Lita.”

Her eyes light with understanding. “Now, Sol, she’s the first female shifter you’ve met here so I know you must have some ... instinctive feelings ... but Lita is not used to attention from men and ...”

I hold up my hand, knowing now is the time to inform her of my intentions. It makes me slightly nervous, but I know if anyone can understand, it is my mother. She is the best person I have ever known.

“You misunderstand. I am not going through my teenage phase. That was over a long time ago. I am ready for my true mate, and I am certain Lita is the one.”

My mother raises her eyebrows at me. She does not seem sure about how to handle this revelation.

“Did I teach you about true mates?” she murmurs the question, almost as if she is only speaking to herself, which I recall she sometimes used to do.

“You had many books about shifters meeting their true mates. They did not skimp on the details. They describe exactly what I felt when I met her.”

Her mouth drops open. She closes it again, her face flushing.

“Those books were not for a child’s eyes, Sol!”

“Yes. They were very ... informative.”

“I’m sure they were,” she utters, shaking her head.

She gets up and opens a cupboard.

I sit up straighter, wondering if she has any cinnamon cookies like the ones she used to make when I was young.

She brings out a book, which I am equally eager to see, especially when she tells me what it is for.

“This will teach you ASL.”

The book is quite big and thick.

There are illustrations on almost every page.

It has been a long time since I read words, but I am certain I will pick it back up quickly.

“Thank you,” I murmur, as I leaf through it.

She shakes her head at me. “There are *a lot* of other female shifters in this town, Sol.”

“I am sure there are,” I say as I close the book. “But none of them are my true mate.”

Lita is, and I will make sure I have learned some ASL before I meet her again.

“You always were determined,” she tells me, smiling wryly. “If Lita feels the same way, then I’m happy for you both.”

“She feels it, too.”

Of that, I am certain.

“Are you going to challenge the Alpha tonight?” she asks.

“I was,” I admit, though now I am torn.

If it were possible to get to know my mate more before challenging him, I would choose to spend my time doing just that. Everything else feels much less important.

“Now you’re not sure?” my mother asks, stifling a yawn.

She is tired, I realize. She works long hours, and she must need her sleep even more than my mate needs hers. I should seek out the Alpha. It would be best to deal with him, so they no longer need to work so hard for the rest of the pack. It is unfair that my mother is still being punished for hiding me, and Lita should not be punished for what the Alpha sees as her mother’s misdeeds.

I am beginning to fill with anger all over again at the thought of letting this continue.

“I was not expecting to meet my mate tonight,” I admit. “I do not wish to challenge the Alpha while I am not focused. It would not be wise.”

I do not wish to let the Alpha’s reign continue but letting another day pass when I have already let a few of them get away while I ruminated over my plan does not seem like such a big deal. It would be best to challenge him with a clear head. Tomorrow night.

I will talk with my brothers tonight and we will decide what the plan is before we come back.

I know now I cannot do this alone. We are stronger together. That is why we are all meant to be mated to Lita.

We will defeat the Alpha and take over this town.

Then, we can begin to court our mate the way she deserves to be courted.

“How about some cookies?” my mother asks, getting up and going to the cupboard again.

She brings out a tin and hands it to me. I can smell them before I even open it.

One bite, and I’m transported back to that impatient five-year-old version of myself who could barely wait for the sugar-filled treats to cool down to taste one.

I eat three more in quick succession before I close the filled tin.

They still taste the same, and they remind me of my time as a child.

“You did always have a sweet tooth.”

“It has been a while since I had something this sweet,” I admit, trying to remember the last time I found edible fruits in the forest. It is fortunate that my mother taught me many things while I was young. Otherwise, I could have died long ago from the poisonous berries that grow on the nightshade plants that seem to grow faster than weeds, all over this town.

“Well, you can keep those. I can make more.”

I smile at her, glad that I didn’t gorge myself on them.

Tonight’s plan is looking even better by the minute.

I am looking forward to learning some hand signs for my mate and giving cookies to my brothers.

Facing and challenging my father can wait for one more night.

He isn't going anywhere, and this reprieve is only temporary.

His punishment will be final.

There is no escaping that.

Chapter Eighteen

SNAKE

Fox does not stay excited about our mate when we get back to The Abyss. He tells Scratch he is not hungry when our older brother tells us he will find something for dinner in the forest. He is lying and it is not because he is being deceitful. He is not happy about being ordered to come back here, and he is distracted by his thoughts. His stomach complains with rumbling noises as he lays down on the ground outside of his cave, but he does not pay it any mind.

He groans and rubs at his face. “We were so close!”

I hiss my agreement.

Our mate seemed ready to become ours, but Scratch cast doubt where there was none and Fox worried that he may be right. That is simply because it seemed too good to be true.

Scar has taught us many things over the years, but that is one concept that I did not understand until tonight, probably because nothing has ever felt that way before.

Finding a mate is like discovering the gold at the end of a rainbow.

It is so incredible that it does not feel real.

It is like a dream that I never want to wake up from.

So, I understand why Fox is upset. We found that dream, and our leader came along and snatched her away without an explanation, all because Scratch didn't do what he was supposed to do.

Now, it feels like we're wide awake.

She is not here, and we are without a mate once more.

I sit down near Fox and keep my gaze on the portal, hopeful that Scar will return soon with our mate.

My feline brother's problem is that he cannot see past the present.

He lives in the moment, so he is going to suffer every moment that he goes through without her.

I can think about what is coming, and that means I know we will be reunited.

True mates are arranged by The Fates. There is nothing that can stop us from becoming her mates.

That knowledge is enough for me.

I try to impart it on Fox, but he waves off my hisses and then props himself up on his elbows.

"I know all the fated mate stuff. Scar used to bleat on about it as if he was an expert."

He sighs, looking up at the permanently dark grey sky above us.

“What if he’s wrong, Snake? What if that was our one chance to claim her?”

I am lost for words. *Scar is never wrong. He is our leader. He lived in the shifter world before he was exiled. He taught us everything we know. How could he be wrong?*

Fox turns his green eyes on me, and I shrug soundlessly.

He groans. “I feel like I’ve been stabbed through the heart.”

I look up to see Scratch stepping through the portal.

“Stop being so dramatic,” Scratch says, dropping a bundle of cooked meats wrapped in a sack in front of us. “You are not dying.”

“How would you know?” Fox grumbles, his whiskers twitching.

He can smell the meat as well as I can.

It is not my favorite thing to eat, but I am hungry.

Scratch sits down opposite us, opening the bag.

Fox sits up but pretends not to care about the food.

“Eat,” Scratch says, handing me one of the cooked bundles.

I take it, hissing my thanks.

He holds one out to Fox. “Eat.”

“I’ll eat when I know our mate still wants to claim us,” Fox tells him, folding his arms.

Scratch looks at me, as if I might be able to snap our brother out of his funk.

He knows as well as I do that Fox is best left to get out of it on his own.

It may mean he acts like this for hours, or days, but not much can affect him when he decides he is upset. Though, perhaps this time, there is something ...

I make him aware that it would be best to keep our strength up for the inevitable bedroom activities that will occur once our mate returns to us.

Scratch frowns and winces as I communicate this to my more receptive brother.

I am guessing that the reason Fox understands me so well is that he is a feline and is able to hear on different frequencies than my wolf brothers. They have learned what some of my more obvious hisses mean, but even Scar can barely tolerate a longer conversation, and he tries much harder than Scratch does. That is because Scratch does not think I understand much of anything.

I do not care what he thinks, but I would like Fox to eat because he will become unbearably dramatic later if he does not have some sustenance now.

Fox looks at me. "Are you done?"

Perhaps I was not convincing enough. He does not seem motivated by the thought of claiming our mate. I shrug and

hiss a much shorter threat at him before I begin to eat my own dinner.

I will be happy to claim our mate for him should she return while he's too weak to get hard.

I flash my cocks at him to hammer my point home.

He scowls at me, but he picks up his food.

Scratch grins at me, hiding his mouth quickly when Fox scowls at him.

We take our time with our food, and Fox's mood improves slightly before Scar comes home.

I am disappointed to see he is alone.

Fox rushes over to him. "Where is she?"

"Calm down," Scar tells him a hint of command in his tone.

Fox steps back, no longer crowding him at the entrance to The Abyss.

He waits impatiently, his fluffy tail tapping the side of his leg.

It is as restrained as Fox gets.

Scratch comes to the front of his cave, and I step out of Fox's cave to move closer to him.

"Everyone sit down," Scar says. "The sun will be rising soon, and we've got nowhere else to be. There is much to discuss."

Chapter Nineteen

FOX

Scar is trying to kill me. My tail is flapping around like crazy, I'm already being super patient waiting to hear what he did with our mate, and he's making us sit down in a circle near our cave entrances before he'll even start to explain anything.

The same question repeats on my head in a loop while I wait.

Where is she? Where is she? Where is she?

My gaze moves to the portal opening, some part of me hoping she'll step through it at any moment, filling me with relief that she's not been left somewhere out there alone while her mates are all stuck in this place without her company.

"I want to start by saying I'm sorry," Scar tells us. "I should have told all of you that the barrier was gone. I told myself I was just being thorough, but I had other motives. I planned to kill the Alpha on my own, to take over the town before I came back to get you all."

Apollo, alive! Get to the point, Scar!

“What about our mate?” I blurt, no longer able to be patient.

He shakes his head at me. “I am getting to that.”

“Well, you’d best be quick about it,” I grumble.

“I would appreciate knowing, too,” Scratch speaks up, followed by my usual supporter in the form of hisses.

“She is safe at home in bed,” he tells us. “This place is a prison. I will not bring her here.”

Ugh. He is right. The Abyss is no place for a beautiful woman who is gentle and kind.

“Then, why did you not stay with her in her bed?” I ask, wondering how big her bed is and how he possibly could have marked her and come back here alone. He would have to be a stone-cold psychopath to manage that without feeling like he was having his skin ripped off with every step.

“I was not with her in bed, for a start,” Scar says. “She may be our fated mate, but we have just met her, and you would all do well to remember that. We will not rush her to be ready for things she may not be ready for.”

“There was no rushing involved,” I mutter.

Snake agrees with me immediately.

“Is she in heat?” Scratch asks.

“God of Wolves! You two have the same brain,” I tell him, exasperated that they are both worried that our mate, the woman who is perfect for us in every conceivable way, is not

sure about what she wants, as if she is not capable of making decisions for herself.

“I do not think so,” Scar admits.

“See?” I protest. “She knew what she was doing.”

“I am not sure she did,” Scar adds. “She was possessed by the spirit of Artemis when she ran into the forest. It may have been The Fates guiding her toward us for our first meeting, but she was under the influence of the Goddess of Wolves.”

“She did seem a bit shy after ...” Scratch starts, trailing off when Scar turns his head to look him in the eyes.

“After?” he asked, a hint of threat in his rumbling voice.

“It was nothing,” I interject. “Just a little kissing and touching, and she was the one who started it.”

“It wasn’t nothing!” Scratch argues.

Sometimes, I think he exists entirely to frustrate me.

“She kissed me, and she kissed Fox,” he goes on. “Snake licked her breasts, and she rubbed herself against Fox until she had an orgasm.”

“Kiss and tell is against the rules,” I snap at him, irritable that he broke what happened down into bland details that tell nothing of the feelings behind our actions.

“She is supposed to be fated to all of us,” Scratch protests. “Scar should know all of this.”

“That is all that happened?” Scar asks.

“It is not all that happened,” I tell him, knowing Scar will want only the bland details as given by Scratch, but also that our brother missed something that is important, because it affects the way our mate communicates. “I also discovered that she cannot hear. She was watching my mouth to tell what I was asking her. She had no response to Scratch, but his mouth is not so easy to see.”

Scratch frowns at me, but his hand goes to his mouth, and I can tell he is thinking about what I have said.

“It is true that Lita is deaf,” Scar says, picking up one of the items he brought back with him. “This book will teach us the way she communicates with her hands.”

I think back to the gesture she made, the one that wasn’t obvious.

I would like to know what it meant, but there is no point in snatching the book away from him.

He is the only one of us who can read. He tried to teach us, on several occasions, but it was a waste of our time. There are no books in the forest. No writing instruments. And words scraped into the dirt with a stick look like indecipherable squiggles.

He gave up after a dozen failed attempts and did not try again.

It was a futile exercise, though, now I am wishing I’d tried harder to understand.

Scar is going to learn how to communicate with our mate much faster than the rest of us.

I only enjoy unfair advantages when I am the one who holds them.

“Well, then, what is in the tin?” I ask him, poking at the lid.

He puts the book down and opens it.

The smell instantly attracts me to the strange looking rocks inside.

They are an odd golden-brown color, and they crumble when squeezed between my fingers.

“What are these?” I pick one up more carefully than the first.

The sweetness of the scent is vastly different than the scent of our mate, but it is nice, and I like it.

“They are cookies,” Scar explains. “My mother made them.”

Scratch gasps. “Your mother?”

I narrow my eyes at our leader as I drop the cookie back into the tin. “You went to see your mother? When exactly did you have time ...”

“If you’d let me explain things the way I was going to before you interrupted, you would know I went to my mother’s house when I left and that it is the only place I have been tonight,” Scar explains, pausing to give me a chance to continue to question him.

This is a tactic he employs to make me shut up. If I do not, the story will take forever, and he will only talk about the parts

we really want to know at the end.

I learned a long time ago that it is better to be quiet and let him talk, but it is not the easiest thing to do when I am impatient to hear about our mate and why it is okay that she is not with us.

I can feel all my brothers staring at me, as if they are waiting to see if I decide to make this take a longer, more arduous route before I allow Scar to simply go on. I scowl back at them and pick up one of the cookies again, this time putting it in my mouth to show I am done being disruptive.

One bite, and the explosion of flavor is like nothing I've experienced before.

It is gone much too quickly, and I must have more.

Scar did not lie about his mother's talent for creating tasty snacks.

I grab a handful from the tin, and Snake copies me, realizing he is missing out on something interesting judging by my immediate reaction.

Scratch shakes his head at us. He shows no interest in the cookies. I am glad. It means there is more left for the rest of us. I chew the next one slowly, eager to make the sweet taste last.

Scar goes on with his story. "Lita was raised by my mother. Her own mother died after she was born. Her father is from another place. I will explain that part later. For now, our mate

is safe with my mother. That is where she should stay until we have challenged my father.”

I blink at him, my mouth full of cookie. *His father?*

Snake stops chewing at the same time, and Scratch is staring at Scar, his eyes wide.

“William Masters is the Alpha of Nightshade,” Scar goes on. “He has been exiling the rejected children of the pack since before I was born. We are the only ones to survive this barbaric practice, and my mother is the only reason for that. If she had not protected me and taught me everything I know before I was found and exiled, none of us would have made it this long on our own.”

“The Alpha was your father?” Scratch asks, shock apparent in his tone.

Scar nods. “It has caused me much shame, but I understand now that it does not matter if this is a matter that is personal to me. We are family, and we are strongest when we are united. I should not have planned to challenge him alone. You are my brothers. We will rid Nightshade of William Masters together.”

It is hard to describe the emotions that wash over me as our leader looks at each of us, making it plain that he is inviting us to stand with him as equals. Snake and I are often treated like children, probably because we are a few years younger than Scratch and because we have never been as serious as our wolf brothers. They are the ones who give the orders. They do most of the hunting. They rely on each other to make plans to eliminate threats.

I do not know if Scar has ever shown this level of trust in either of us.

I look at Snake, and he appears just as shocked as I am.

Of course, Scratch is quick to nod. “We will not let you down.”

For once, I do not have the urge to tell him to speak for himself.

I simply finish eating my cookie so I can nod. “You can count on us.”

Snake crunches noisily before he hisses his agreement.

“What is the plan?” Scratch asks.

“I thought we would work on the details together,” Scar tells us. “But the plan is to kill the Alpha and take over the town. We will not claim our mate until this has happened, and we are certain that no threats remain that could jeopardize her safety.”

It is a bold plan. I do not like that we will not immediately be claiming our mate, but I understand why. Scar has thought of everything. He is our leader, and his plan means we will have a better life with a good future once we have dealt with the Alpha and his supporters.

It is not going to be easy, but it will be worthwhile.

I will just need to keep reminding myself of that.

Chapter Twenty

LITA

I wake up tangled in my bedsheets, the remnants of a strange, wonderful dream flooding through my thoughts in disjointed pieces as I start to stretch my weary body, enjoying the feelings those dream memories bring out in me. All of it seems so vivid, and so real ...

Running through the forest at night, spurred on by the spirit of the Goddess Artemis herself. Tumbling to the ground and feeling stuck, trapped. Wrapping my legs around the middle of a big, feline man with thick muscles and auburn fur. Kissing an incredibly tall wolf man. Being licked and held close by a lizard man with a very talented forked tongue.

I sit up, starting to untangle the sheets while wishing I could be experiencing everything I dreamt again, instead of getting up for another day of work in the town cafeteria's kitchen. As far as dreams go, that was extraordinarily sexy and unusual.

I have no idea where it came from.

Standing up, I feel a draft and look down at myself.

Wait. Why am I naked?

I don't care how tired I am when I get home from work, I never just pass out without putting a nightdress on. It's not warm enough in the cabin to do that.

I sit back down, curling the sheets around my middle as I try to remember what happened after work last night. Those vivid images from my dream slip back through my thoughts, way more interesting and fascinating than the ordinary, mundane reality that I'm trying to recall.

All three of my imagined mates made me feel so good.

So good, in fact, that I feel a little wet between the legs.

I move a hand down there, brushing my fingers over my clit and making myself even wetter.

My breasts feel full, and my nipples are kind of tender when I let the sheet fall and stroke where I remember being licked. I stroke my swollen clit slowly, biting down on my lip.

All I need to do is think about how much I wanted those men to claim me, and I start to climax, getting my fingers wet when I push them forward into my clenching slit.

The dreamy bliss of giving myself an orgasm makes my head feel even cloudier.

I could get back into bed and lay there all day.

Too bad I need to get up and go to work instead.

Goddess, I hope I dream about them again.

All ... four of them.

There were three to begin with, but a fourth showed up later.

He was another wolf man, I'm sure, and he was strong and protective.

He lifted me into his arms, and it felt like I was home.

I passed out, snuggled up close against his warm, musky body.

I take my hands off myself, knowing if I don't, I'll have a hard time stopping.

The slickness that coats my thighs is new. I don't think I've ever gotten that wet before.

Goddess, I'm probably going into heat.

I knew it was a possibility once I got out of my teens, but honestly, given the lack of male interest in me from the guys in town, I doubted it would ever happen.

If my heat has come on because I'm having sexy dreams about men who don't exist ... I can't think of anything more mortifying. I'll have to hide it. Pretend it isn't happening.

Hopefully it'll pass on its own.

I don't know how that works.

Usually, a mate is involved when it comes to heats.

Considering I don't have one of those, it's probably a good thing I learned how to satisfy myself.

It looks like I might have to start doing that a lot.

I throw on a nightdress and open the drapes.

The sun's rising. It's definitely time to get ready for work.

It's a good thing I have a solid internal timer. I usually leave the drapes open, so I get to see the sun rise when I wake up, but considering I went to bed naked and I can't remember doing that, I guess I was having some kind of heat-induced blackout last night. I'm just lucky it's not actually the sunrise that wakes me up.

I step out into the hall and see the kitchen door is open.

Alina's already up and making tea.

She smiles back at me, and signs, "Good morning."

I sign back the same, and then I remember sitting with her last night, praying, when something happened that made us stop. Something good, I think, maybe, but I really don't remember.

She raises an eyebrow at me when I frown at her.

I hesitate for a second before I sign to ask, "What happened last night? After we prayed?"

She shakes her head. "We don't have time to talk about that. We'll be late for work."

Picking up her cup, she moves to the table, signalling an end to the conversation.

So, something did happen, then.

I just don't know what.

I think back to my dreams, wondering if some part of what I saw in them could have been real.

Maybe not the part where I met a bunch of men I thought might be the monsters from *The Abyss*, except they were way too attractive and gentle to be monsters.

But I guess I could have been in the forest last night.

I do remember thinking it was something I needed to do.

To go out there and protect the pack.

Waking up naked would make sense if I'd shifted last night

...

Think about it later! You have to get ready for work. You don't want to make Alina late.

Darting into the bathroom, I rush through my morning routine, feeling more than a little out of it the whole time. Something definitely happened that I don't remember last night.

That's all I can really be sure of right now.

I'm still tired. It'll probably come back to me once I'm more awake.

Either way, there's no time to talk about it.

Alina's already waiting by the door for me when I'm dressed, and we're leaving the cabin a few seconds later, ready to head into the cafeteria.

The out of it feeling doesn't go away on the way there.

I can tell it's not going to be a good day for me.

I just need to get through it.

Fingers crossed I'm not going into heat.

Chapter Twenty-One

LITA

I'm more inside my head all day than Astor is when she's on dish washing duty. It's driving me insane that Alina doesn't think we should talk about what happened until we're done with work. The couple of times that I try to ask again, she shakes her head and signs that we'll talk later, at home.

I'm about eighty percent sure that I was possessed by the spirit of Artemis when we were praying last night, going by what little I have managed to remember that probably wasn't a dream.

If that's true, then it's only the craziest thing that's ever happened to me.

Despite the mountains of books I've read about our Goddess, I've never heard of her possessing someone before, and I'm sure that would have been well documented if it had ever happened.

Everyone would be putting it into their prayers, begging for the Goddess to come personally help them out ...

Maybe that's why it wouldn't be documented.

Right. It's also probably equally possible that I had some kind of blackout.

Whatever it was, I seriously need to know.

I'm so distracted, I barely notice when the door to the dining room opens about five minutes after our staff lunch break, while all the staff are in the room, or the bathroom.

It's only when I realize it can't be Astor that I look around and tap the closest person on the shoulder, Cora, who's just finished washing our lunch dishes in the sink. She turns as she's drying her hands and I motion to the doorway just as Orion takes a step into the room, a vaguely nervous smile on his lips.

He looks at me and smiles a little brighter, giving me a wave.

Cora takes a step away from the sink, and I know she must be telling him no one's supposed to come back here. I really hope he didn't come back here to speak to me. My skin heats up quickly as I watch his expression fall into disappointment. They both glance at me, and I feel my stomach starting to churn.

I step away from the counter, where I'm supposed to be making salad, coming over and tapping Cora on the arm. I do ASL for, "It's okay."

She raises her eyebrows at me. "Him?" she signs, pulling a face.

I nod, not bothering to explain. She doesn't know ASL for, "It's not what it looks like", anyway.

I'll be made fun of for this, but he's been kind of nice to me, so I don't want to brush him off too hard, or in front of people. He doesn't deserve that.

I motion to him to come with me, and I open the door to the backyard.

He smiles tightly at Cora, shrugging at her as he comes toward me.

I step outside and he follows.

Goddess, I'm glad Alina's in the bathroom right now.

I hope she takes her time in there.

I have no idea what Orion wants, but I don't need anyone giving me a hard time for talking to him, just because he's one of the Alpha's sons and everyone thinks they're all awful.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Cora leans out the door to tell me.

"Please," I sign back at her, rolling my eyes.

Emily appears when she steps back into the kitchen, pulling a face and calling Orion something unsavory in ASL. She's opening her mouth when Cora yanks her back into the kitchen, and I tug the door closed with relieved sigh.

I can't imagine what Orion was thinking when he walked into the kitchen, but I doubt he expected this less than

welcoming reception. I hate to think what Emily was about to blurt out before Cora saved us all from that outburst.

Turning back around to face the Alpha's youngest son, I see he's wearing a bemused smile.

He's not sure what to think of my co-workers. Neither am I right now.

I feel a little better knowing we're not about to be rudely interrupted, now that the door is closed, but I'm alone in a secluded spot with one of the Alpha's sons so I'm not exactly relaxed.

Those butterflies he had me feeling before aren't around, and I can't help wondering if I've lost my mind. I felt more than just butterflies when I dreamt of those beautiful monsters last night, and my heart pounds a harder just thinking about them.

I seriously need to forget that dream.

There's no way a mortal shifter can compare to those god-like men.

They make Orion look pathetic in comparison, and he's one of the four guys my age in town that every woman in her late teens and early twenties wants to win as their mate.

I'd be considered lucky if he wanted to date me.

I don't even know what he came here for.

All we're doing so far is staring at each other.

I guess we can't really talk.

He doesn't know ASL.

I check my apron's pockets and find out I left my notepad in the kitchen.

I look up at him, folding my arms. I might not be able to communicate too well without ASL or my notepad, but he can tell me why he decided to break the rules to come see me.

All he needs to do is start talking.

He runs a hand through his hair and looks around as if he's really interested in what it looks like back here. It's so adorably awkward. It's almost as if he doesn't know how to talk to girls.

I know that can't be true. All four of the Masters' brothers have been inundated with female attention for years.

Almost every teenager, and most of the twenty-somethings, are completely obsessed with them.

They're the guys every boy wants to be, and every girl wants to be on the arm of.

I was always on the outside of that whole thing. The home-schooled girl who can't communicate the same way everyone else does watches what's going on but is never a part of it.

"You can read my lips, right?" he asks, finally.

I nod, and he sighs before he smiles again.

"Good. I learned a little ASL, but all of it flew out of my head the second I got out here with you."

I give a knowing nod. Everyone always says it's hard to learn.

I'm happy when someone tries. It's sweet when they care enough to want to try.

"I feel like ..." he starts, frowning a little. "Didn't you used to talk, too?"

I nod again, kind of wishing for my notepad.

Then again, if I had it, I might feel compelled to explain myself, and I shouldn't have to.

It was obvious back when I used to talk that something was wrong with my voice.

Everyone always laughed when I spoke.

I couldn't hear myself, so I couldn't fix what was wrong or different, and it was too hard to keep trying when everyone always made fun.

No one wants to feel like a walking punchline to a joke.

"I'm sorry you stopped," he says, running his hand through his hair again.

I shrug. I'm not sorry I stopped talking. It let me fade into the background a whole lot easier around other people. It stopped them from making fun of me as easily, and it stopped me from caring about trying to communicate in the way it made the most sense to other people.

I'm not interested in being friends with anyone who would be mean to me, and since that covers a lot of the people around here, I'm happy with the amount of effort I put in to make them more comfortable.

“Anyway,” he goes on, “I just ... I was hoping we could maybe spend some time together, one night.”

I raise an eyebrow at him and gesture to my apron.

“Oh,” he says. “I meant after work. When do you finish up?”

I see the watch on his arm, and I step closer, touching the gold strap.

He takes it off and hands it to me. I look at the dial and point to nine p.m. on it.

He looks shocked when I look back at his face.

I’m sure most of the pack know kitchen duty’s the hardest shift in town, but he seems aghast.

“But ... you’re here first thing in the morning,” he says, frowning at me. “Every day. That’s the time you guys finish up here at night? Every night?”

I nod, then sign, “Yes.”

“Holy ... That’s a long shift.”

It’s a long shift that his father put in place years ago.

He blinks at me. “I can understand why you don’t date.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. He thinks anyone around here would want to date me? I mean, besides him, if he’s actually serious about that.

He can’t be that oblivious.

“I mean ... I’ll speak to my father. There must be a way to split the shifts between more people.”

I shrug, not sure he's serious, and doubting his father will listen even if he is.

"If I can get you a day off," he starts, his cheeks flushing a little. "Will you agree to go on a date with me?"

I can't help the smile the thought of a day off brings out.

He smiles back and I start to feel the faintest twinge of butterflies in my stomach.

It's a sweet gesture, if he can pull it off.

It's probably not going to happen, but I won't be mad if it does.

I nod, signing, "Yes," again.

He copies me this time. "This means yes, right?"

I nod, and he smiles.

Chapter Twenty-Two

LITA

The downside of talking to Orion is going back to work after and being teased about it mercilessly. I tell everyone it was nothing, but it feels like I'm walking on air just a little, and I'm sure Cora has noticed.

She teases the most, but she also asks me to be careful.

She doesn't want me to get hurt.

I tell her it's not like that, but I don't think she believes me.

I'm not sure if I do, either. I can't seem to make my mind up about Orion.

He seems nice, but there's something about the way he's been with me that feels a little off.

I don't know what it is. Maybe it's because he doesn't behave like I expect, or maybe he's only pretending to be sweet.

All I know is, I'm glad Alina's in the dining room for most of the rest of the afternoon.

She seems to have missed the whole thing with Orion, or if she heard about it, she isn't commenting, which is about the only reason I'm happy she's in this odd mood.

It feels like she's avoiding me. That there's something she doesn't want me to know.

As much as I want to know what actually happened last night, I know better than to push.

Alina will tell me what's wrong once she's resolved her feelings about it.

In the meantime, I should probably assume nothing, and try to forget about those weird, sexy dreams.

Dreams usually drift away. I just need to let go of that fantasy and that's what will happen.

I guess if they didn't fade like that, they would feel too much like memories.

I'm still thinking about it while I dry the dishes Cora is washing.

The last of the dinners were served a little while ago, but I don't realize we're done for the night until Cora puts the last plate on the drying rack and drains the sink.

I blink at her, and she signs, "Finally!"

I finish up drying and putting the dishes away for tomorrow.

Astor and Alina come into the kitchen and toss the cloths they used to clean the tables into the laundry basket. Emily's already by the back door, jacket on.

Cora's just taking her apron off.

I close the cupboard and untie my apron, glad that it's finally time to go home.

Alina tells Emily to lock the back door. Everyone's already forgotten the new routine we established last night, to make sure we were being as safe as possible under the circumstances, while Alina and I are the only ones who know our Alpha has stopped bothering to keep up the rituals that protect our town from monsters.

I hang up my apron, grab my jacket and follow Alina and the others out of the kitchen.

I switch off the lights as we leave, plunging the room into darkness.

The dining room lights are at this end, too, so I wait by the switch for the others to get to the exit into the hall before I flip that switch. The hall light guides me as they filter out of the room, Astor holding the door for me. The hallway is a pretty small area that doesn't really have much of a purpose.

Cora has her hand on the light switch by the door as the rest of us filter out of the building.

She steps out last, and when I look back, the building is completely dark.

The minimal street lighting makes the town look haunted at night.

No one's ever around when we leave.

Everyone's in their homes by now.

Well, everyone except us.

We walk down the steps and Cora and Astor wave as they head off in the direction of their cabin.

They disappear into the night, and I follow Alina and Emily, my gaze studying all the dark paths and corners we pass. Nightshade has always felt safe. Well protected.

The Alpha has always promised his people his protection.

Ever since I encountered that footprint in the mud, I knew we were no longer safe.

Alina confirmed that fear when she visited the Alpha and found out he wasn't doing what he'd promised.

I get agitated thinking about it, but I don't feel my wolf rising.

When I connect with her, she exudes so much calm that I actually relax a little.

It's kind of strange. I don't think I've ever felt her like this.

Usually, her presence means something is wrong.

Well, she isn't present right now.

I guess maybe if I checked in on her more often, I'd find her like this at times.

She feels sleepy. It makes me yawn.

I disconnect, needing to be alert.

Alina will insist I go to bed when we get home if I seem tired. She'll use it as an excuse to avoid talking to me. I don't want that. If I sit with her for a while, she'll talk, I'm sure of it.

We wave to Emily as she heads into her cabin.

Alina seems to stiffen up a little once our friend is gone.

I can't imagine what could be making her so tense.

It's not like her to avoid talking about anything.

She's always so open, and so quick to help anyone who might be having a hard time.

She's the one who lifts everyone else's mood just by being around.

I don't know what would make her clam up like this.

She goes straight to the kitchen once we get home.

I lock the front door, taking my time to give her a moment alone before I follow her.

She's making tea, which is one of her main rituals, besides praying.

I take off my jacket and put it over the back of my usual chair.

She doesn't look up while she's making the tea, so I sit down and prepare to be patient, stifling the first yawn that threatens to escape from my lips.

Last night, I was determined to hunt down monsters.

I don't know what I thought a lone female wolf could do against Goddess only knows how many monsters there are in The Abyss, but I wasn't thinking straight. I was running on instinct. My own, fuelled by anger, and my wolf's, fuelled by white-hot-rage.

Artemis' possession of my body seems to support that crazy instinct, but I have no idea if that was real, or if I dreamt it along with everything else.

Nothing makes sense and I know Alina is keeping something from me.

When she pours a cup of tea and puts it in front of me, I sign my thanks.

She puts her own down after a moment of hesitation, and then brings a tin of cookies out of the cupboard. When she sets them down and opens the tin, I know she's ready to talk. She only breaks out the sugary treats when there's something difficult we need to discuss.

She sits down and picks up her tea, taking a slow sip before she looks at me.

I know it's easier for her to talk when we're sitting like this, rather than to sign.

My eyes are a little tired, but this is important, so I concentrate on her lips as they begin to move.

“I had a son, before I took you in.”

I blink at her, and sign asking her to repeat, sure I picked her words up wrong.

She gives me a sad smile, and signs, “A son.”

Questions fill up my head as I stare back at her, but only one stands out.

“Did I ever meet him?” I sign.

“He was exiled to The Abyss about a year before you were born. He was five years old.”

I stare at her in shock. That’s the same fate she saved me from.

I know if she was able, there is no way she would have let her own flesh and blood be sent away like that.

She fought so hard for me. She would have fought even harder for him.

My dislike for our Alpha is turning into hatred.

I knew about the exiles, the rejected, because Alina told me it was what would always happen when a child was thought to be less than perfect. The pack had to be the sharpest, and the fastest to survive and keep the rest of the world safe from the creatures living inside The Abyss. They made up those reasons to justify what they did, but really it was a heartless act.

It isn’t something that’s happened since I’ve been old enough to know about it, so I guess I pushed it to the back of my thoughts like it was some barbaric practice from the distant past, an act that was stopped when someone realized how inhumane and viciously evil it actually was.

Knowing it was something that directly affected someone I know and love is like taking a knife to the heart. My guardian is the kindest person I know. She would never dream of hurting someone, even if they hurt her.

Knowing she lost a child is heartbreaking.

“He’s the reason the Alpha let me keep you.”

I frown, signing, “I don’t understand.”

“I told him the child died when he was born. I raised him in secret for five years, until the Alpha found out and discovered why.” She picks up a cookie and starts breaking it up on the table next to her cup, before she looks back up at me. Her eyes are so sad. I can’t even imagine what it must have been like for her. She starts to talk again and I’m quick to move my gaze back to her lips. “... Excited at first, he was angry when he saw our little boy was afflicted with a rare genetic condition that can only be passed along on his father’s side.”

“The Alpha was his father?” I sign, barely believing it.

She nods. “He blamed me for our son’s condition, and he told me the boy should have been smothered the moment he was born.”

Goddess, our Alpha deserves to be thrown into The Abyss and eaten alive by the monsters he doesn’t believe in.

My wolf growls lightly, apparently awakening inside me thanks to the emotional storm I’ve been swept into. She’s angry that the woman who protected and raised us had to go through all of that.

“He does not deserve to be our Alpha,” I sign.

My wolf’s growling gets louder.

I should challenge William Masters myself. It would humiliate his family if he was ripped apart by a pack reject. They deserve to be pushed down a few pegs. He deserves a gruesome, bloody death.

Alina stares at me.

“You will not even think about it,” she signs, reminding me of how she used to re-act to my tween efforts to sneak out after dark.

It’s funny that she’s using those same words to tell me not to challenge our evil asshole Alpha.

“You can’t stop me from thinking about it,” I sign back.

That brings out a ghost of a smile, but her eyes are still so damn sad I can’t stand it.

“You’re not ready to challenge an Alpha,” she says.

I raise an eyebrow. “You think I will be ready, some day?”

She smiles properly this time. “You’re determined enough to become a Luna. You’re hard-headed and you care about people. But you’ve never trained like the Alpha has. He knows how to fight, in both forms. And he’s stronger than you are, Lita. Much stronger.”

I don’t like that she has a point about his strength and fighting skills, but it’s kind of nice that she thinks I would make a good Luna. It wasn’t really where I was going with the

whole challenging and murdering our Alpha plan I just started to make inside my head.

All I want is to make him hurt the way he's made Alina hurt.

Rushing in without thinking it through would only make things worse, though.

I need to be smarter than that. It might be the only advantage I have.

“Promise you won't attack our Alpha,” Alina asks.

I lean back in my seat, and sign, “Fine. I'll wait until I have learned to fight.”

She shakes her head at me, and I pick a cookie out of the tin.

It has been a while since I had one of these, but it tastes much sweeter than I remember, and I enjoy every crumbly, sugar-loaded bite.

Chapter Twenty-Three

SCRATCH

I cannot fight the feeling that something is wrong. I was not able to get any sleep when I lay down to rest, and I am not able to be still now that it is getting close to the time when the sun will set in Nightshade. I do not understand Scar's change of heart, and I do not trust in my feelings for the woman my brothers believe is our mate.

Everything is changing and it is all happening very quickly.

"We do not know if he will attempt to cheat with magic," I protest, coming up with a point I already made several hours ago while we were putting together tonight's plan.

Scar does not look concerned. "If he attempts to cheat in our fight, then it is no longer a fair fight. The rules of a one on one will no longer apply, and this means you will be able to help me. This is why Snake and Fox will be kept hidden from him. They are our secret weapon. The Alpha will not know they are with us so they will not be affected by anything he does to us."

“You think we have thought of everything, don’t you?” I ask him, worried that we have not.

“I think we are as prepared as we are ever going to be,” he tells me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “We will not fail. He expected us to die, and we thrived. He will expect us to be easily beaten, and we will show him we are stronger than he is. You know this in your heart. We are warriors. We beat the shadow creatures. We can beat one lowly Alpha.”

He feels the truth of every word that he speaks. There’s passion in his voice and he is ready to fight the man who exiled us. He’s ready to cut a clear path to our future.

I hang my head, because I do not know why I am finding it so difficult to trust in this plan.

“What is wrong, my brother? You do not seem like you are feeling well.”

“I do not know,” I admit, looking up at him. “I have never been afraid to die, and I am not afraid to fight. I am not used to thinking of a future. I am used to surviving day to day. I am not sure I am cut out for a life where everything is more ... comfortable.”

And I do not know if that explains the entirety of my bad feeling, but it is all I have in me that I can find the words for. I do not expect Scar to understand. He has always known what it was like outside of The Abyss. I have only known this life.

“You are used to a life you never should have had to live, Scratch. Change can feel hard, but it is always possible, and it

is needed to grow. We cannot grow any longer inside this place. It was never meant to sustain us.”

“You are right,” I murmur, knowing it is true but unable to connect that truth to the way I am feeling.

“Do not worry if you are uncertain now. It will take time, but you will get there. Even if you don’t see that, I do.” He locks gazes with me, and I feel a little better knowing he has faith in me.

It has always been this way. He is more than a brother to me.

He raised me virtually from the moment I was born.

He has always cared for me as if he was my father.

I would do anything for him.

That is why I do not allow my concerns to crush me into inaction.

He wants me to push past this feeling to help him start a new life outside of this prison.

I will do this for him. Whatever happens later is a problem for another time.

For now, I fight by his side.

“You will win this battle,” I tell him. “And Nightshade will be yours.”

He shakes his head as the portal swirls to life in front of us. “We will win it together, and Nightshade will be *ours*.”

“Are you two done making eyes at each other yet?” Fox asks. “The portal is open.”

I frown at our feline brother. “Do not be disgusting. We are not behaving like lovers.”

Fox shrugs. “You are having an emotional discussion about feelings. It is close enough.”

“Fox, I do not want a word out of you once we leave the forest,” Scar says, staring him down with those icy blue wolf-eyes. “I am reminding you this one last time. I will not do so again. If you speak, I will send you back here. Tell me you understand this and promise me you will follow this instruction.”

Fox blows out a breath, his shoulders slumping. “I understand and I promise. Now, while we’re still in The Abyss, are we going to see our mate once the fight is over?”

I can’t say I’m not curious about that, but I’ll be surprised if Scar gives him a definitive answer.

Snake starts to hiss next to him, clearly trying to hurry Scar’s response along.

“We will need to establish ourselves as the Alphas when he is dead,” Scar says. “And we will have to weed out any pack members who are against us before we can be sure it is safe enough to be around our mate. It is not going to be a quick transition.”

He glances at me as Fox screws up his face, ready to complain.

“But if it is possible, we will visit her briefly before we announce ourselves as Nightshade’s new Alphas.”

I feel a little lighter knowing there's a chance that we'll get to see her.

“Until we are in charge of Nightshade, I am still your leader,” he tells us, his gaze on Fox. “Once we are all Alphas together, things will be different, but I will make the rules until we have adapted to all of the changes. Clear?”

“Clear,” I murmur.

“Clear,” Fox drawls in a bored tone.

Snake hisses, echoing Fox's tone.

“I believe we're all ready to go,” I tell Scar.

He nods and leads us through the portal.

I don't understand why Scar wants to share the Alpha's position with us when he is the one who is going to defeat the Alpha. He has always been the leader, the parent, the one with the knowledge.

It is another thing that is going to change.

Perhaps that is why it is troubling me.

I should not think about it now.

I need to be ready for the different scenarios we prepared for last night. We all require to be at our best, prepared for anything and ready to adapt as needed.

“I wish we had more of those cookies,” Fox admits as he steps into the forest.

Snake is quick to agree, in his loudest, most enthusiastic hiss.

The sound is short and sharp and hurts my ears.

I frown at Snake, and he sticks his tongue out soundlessly in apology.

“I will ask my mother to bake more another time,” Scar promises.

“I think you’ll need to share them with Snake,” I tell Fox.

“Well, sure,” Fox says, as if I’m being insulting. “Snake and I are used to sharing.”

His black lips twitch. “You are the one who will need to become more open to that concept.”

Why do I just know he isn’t talking about cookies?

When I think about how comfortable he got with Snake and our mate, and how awkward it felt when she brought me closer, I know he’s talking about how things are going to work if we all claim Lita.

Snake makes a weird noise that is like laughter to him.

Fox chuckles a little at his own joke while I narrow my eyes at him.

“That is not true,” I protest.

Scar snorts, and I stare at him as he glances back at us.

“You are very possessive of your things,” he reminds me.

My hand goes to the pouch attached to my loin cloth automatically.

“That’s because they belong to me. There is nothing wrong with that.”

“Hmm,” Fox utters.

Snake gives out one of his less identifiable hisses.

It’s a subtle sound that I’m guessing is meant to echo Fox’s sentiment, because he almost always echoes Fox’s sentiments.

“We are getting close to town,” Scar reminds us, for Fox’s benefit more than anything.

Our mouthy feline brother doesn’t seem pleased, but he manages to keep quiet.

It is a minor miracle. Apparently, I am not the only one who is willing to do what it takes to help our brother accomplish this victory over the man who exiled all of us.

Scar’s father. I am still trying to let that piece of information sink in.

It is bad enough that the Alpha banished us, leaving us to die.

The fact that Scar is his blood, and he still threw him away like that makes me furious.

It is long past time for that Alpha to pay for what he has done.

Leaving The Abyss was easy, but the closer we get to the edge of the forest, the more on edge I feel.

We are walking away from the place we’ve called home for two decades.

We only have Scar's word to go on that this will be better.

The Abyss, and the forest are the only world we've ever known.

I cannot picture what our new home might look like.

When the treeline ends, I move forward anyway.

I trust my brother, and this is what he needs.

I do this for him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

FOX

The forest is an assault on the senses in the best possible way. Everything here is full of life. The scents and colors are distractingly wonderful. It's difficult to avoid the temptation to give chase to the small prey animals as we make our way through the trees toward the place that has long been forbidden, but I manage it for the same reason that I manage to keep quiet when Scar warns me that we are getting close to Nightshade.

I know when he is joking, and he was not kidding about wanting me to be quiet while we are heading to the Alpha's house. It is a serious thing, murder, even when it is covered by pack law.

It would not do to make inane chatter on the way to that task, even if it would make the walk less tedious. Fortunately, we are already in town by the time I am starting to get bored with being quiet.

The town is an even bigger assault on the senses than the forest.

It contains so many interesting sights and scents that I can barely focus as I follow my brothers along the dark, empty path that our leader already seems to know well enough to traverse at a quickened pace.

According to Scar, there are only a few hundred ordinary wolf shifters living and breathing in the houses that we start to pass by. These people don't exist in tiny little caves with few luxuries. They live in wooden houses with windows to look out of to see the rest of the world that exists around them. Even in the dark, it is an impressive sight to see so many of these well-crafted dwellings in a relatively small area.

The Abyss is not a fully realized place.

It is not a world. It does not vibrate with signs of life.

It is a pocket in space that has a singular use as a prison.

Being thrown in there was our punishment for being different.

I am glad that Scar is ready to face the people who did that to us.

I have been ready for a long time. I believe Scratch has been ready, too, even if he is now afraid of the changes we are about to go through, and what they will mean for our lives.

Snake ... I think Snake finds it easier to make the most out of things.

That would probably be my attitude, if I was able to do the crazy things with my tongue that he can. I don't think I would

mind The Abyss quite so much if I could milk my own cock the way he does.

As if he knows I'm thinking about him, he turns and flicks his tongue out at me.

I close my eyes to avoid any droplets. Thankfully, my whiskers deflect them.

"Keep moving," I whisper, when I open my eyes and bump into him.

He hisses softly before he does what I tell him.

None of us particularly enjoy it when the others tell us what to do because we are all Alphas, and we all believe we know what is best.

Scar is the exception to this, because he's the reason we are alive, and the reason we are together.

We follow him because of this. He is our leader because of this.

If he hadn't rescued Scratch and raised him, then Scratch never would have found me in time to keep me from certain death. Babies have no hunting skills of their own. They can't take care of themselves. I know I would have died if they hadn't helped me, and I know that's because of Scar.

I still find it hard to believe that he took me in, even knowing I wasn't exactly like them.

I am not a wolf. I do not have the instincts they do. I didn't instantly feel as if they were my family.

That took time. I'm not sure I view the pack the same way Scratch does, but I would kill for them, and I would die for them, and I'm pretty sure that makes us close, even if my wolf brothers' serious natures get on my nerves a bit from time to time.

Snake is much easier to put up with.

He is not so serious.

I resist the urge to call out and ask if we are there yet.

It would not be appropriate, and I would be sent back to The Abyss like an unruly child being punished because he could not be quiet.

Scar will stop and tell us when to split off and go in the other direction to be ready for any nasty surprises this likely devious Alpha may decide to spring on him. Until then, we are to follow quietly.

I decide to practice the hand movements Scar figured out and taught us before we left.

Yes. No. Good Evening. You are Beautiful.

I requested the last phrase, and I would not shut up about it until he found the hand movements to express those words. Scratch thought we should learn the words for *Please* and *Thank You* instead.

Our table manners are not going to be an immediate issue, so I pushed for the compliment.

Scratch eventually gave up and caved in, which he should have done in the first place.

Please? Why would that be one of the first things we'd need to know?

I would much rather be told I am pretty, than be thanked for anything.

I am certain I have mastered the gestures, but I will not know for sure until I can show her.

Sighing softly, I plod along behind my brothers, hopeful that I will get the chance to see Lita once we have dealt with the Alpha. My cock goes hard just thinking about the pale-skinned beauty with the gentle touches. I know our mating might not happen straight away, but I have been beyond ready to meet my mate for months, and now that I have, I am eager to spend time with her.

I do not care what we do together.

All I want is to be near her.

Well, okay, maybe I am keen to claim her, too, but that will be on her terms.

Everything can be how she likes.

I may enjoy bouts of laziness and being catered to, but I will also enjoy catering to her in the same ways.

It will make me happy to give her many kinds of pleasure.

There is a light in our path that illuminates a small patch of the ground.

It seems like an odd feature, but Scar explained that there are several of them scattered around so that anyone who is out walking at night can feel safe. Wolf shifters have enhanced sight, as do we, so this feels unnecessary, but when we get to it, Snake rushes forward to stand under the lamp.

He stares up at it curiously, before closing his eyes and opening his mouth.

The long slow hiss he makes is one of his most relaxed noises.

I think I've only ever heard it before when he was sleeping.

Huh. That's a little weird.

I'm about to open my mouth, when I remember I'm not supposed to be talking.

Lucky for me, Scratch turns around, and taps Scar's shoulder, making him look back.

I shrug my shoulders at them, gesturing at Snake and his odd behavior.

They come closer and Scar sighs softly.

"He's attracted to the heat, probably."

"Attracted?" I ask, wondering if he's making a joke.

It doesn't really seem like the time for that, but from someone who's usually way too serious, I'll take a joke wherever I can get one.

"Not in a sexual way," Scar says, shaking his head.

"So, you just mean he likes it."

Snake lets out a happy hiss.

Oh, he definitely likes it.

“Can you get him to move?” Scar asks.

“I don’t know. Am I allowed to talk to him?” I ask. “Or are you about to send me home for this talking I’m doing right now?”

Scar stares at me like he does when I’m testing his last nerve, whatever that’s supposed to mean.

“We are almost there,” he says, lowering his voice out of irritation. “You will do what it takes to get Snake to move along, and you will both go down the path to the left until you reach a fork that leads right. You will get behind the stone built house and wait for the signal. You will navigate Snake past any other lamps you come across. Quietly. Understood?”

I nod, keeping my mouth shut because he didn’t tell me explicitly that I was allowed to talk, and I’ve already pissed him off enough.

I make a hissing noise at Snake, and Scratch’s jaw drops open when Snake hisses back.

I do it again, and Snake makes a sad little hiss before he lets me push him past the streetlamp, away from its barely noticeable source of heat.

“What was *that*?” Scratch asks as we pass them.

I shrug, mouthing, “Not allowed to talk!”

We move past them, and I pretend for a second like I don't know what left is.

Scar shakes his head at me when I look back. He knows I was faking him out when I swerved to the right before I direct Snake down the left path. Snake stops dragging his feet and runs ahead, stopping under another streetlamp close to the fork in the path.

I groan softly as I make my way toward him.

I get the feeling this is going to be a long night.

Chapter Twenty-Five

SCAR

My father lives in the biggest house in Nightshade, and the only one that is built out of stone. It stands in the centre of the town, with a short picket fence keeping the tidy front lawn separate from the town square where the people gather whenever there is an announcement to be made, like the death of an Alpha and the news of his replacement.

It seems fitting that he set things up so conveniently for my takeover.

This house is much more appropriate for the needs of my brothers and our future mate than our pitiful setup in our makeshift prison. I will enjoy taking it off his hands tonight.

Scratch looks at me. “Are you ready?”

“I am,” I tell him. “Stand back and watch for my signal.”

I pick up a brick from the prettily placed rocks in the garden of the town square, and I measure its weight in my hand before I throw it, aiming at the only lit window of the ground floor of the house.

The brick hits my target and shatters the glass.

The time for quiet is over.

Fox and Snake will be in place, ready to join us if there is any attempt at deception.

I wait outside of the garden, not willing to set foot on my father's property until it is time to rip it out of the hands of his less capable children.

My father is not the first to step out of the house when the door opens and light spills out onto the porch.

His eldest claimed child is the first, the boy he named after the God of Wolves, Apollo.

The boy storms onto the porch, his face twisted in anger, and his hands curling into fists at his sides.

When he looks across his pretty little yard and sees me, his expression changes.

His anger vanishes when he sees it is not a member of his pack standing out here in the dark waiting for a fight. He does not know who, or what, I am, and the shock in his stare quickly turns to fear.

I growl at him from where I stand, several feet away.

He jerks back, stumbling, and only managing to keep from falling when he grabs hold of the doorframe.

There is a dark stain on the front of his pants as he backs away.

This is one of the children my father actually approved of as his son?

He is a coward, and I am willing to bet he is a bully, too.

“Don’t you dare crawl away like a worm,” I growl at him. “You will bring me your father, or I will bring him your head on a spike!”

I yank one of the slats from the fence and snap it in half, examining it under the moonlight.

“This will do nicely.”

The sound of the guy’s feet on the floor is comically loud as he rushes away to do what he is told.

Scratch shakes his head at me. “On a spike? Really?”

I shrug. “It’s a classic for a reason.”

“Poor kid,” he mutters.

“That poor kid is almost the same age that I am,” I remind him.

My mother filled me in on my father’s family last night, and I relayed most of that information to my brothers. It seems likely that my father is also Scratch’s father, considering the condition my father gave me is something that is rare, but I do not wish for my brother to know his father is a terrible person who abandoned him to his death.

“He looked younger, but maybe that was just the pee stains, or the fact that he’s a regular shifter.”

“It is because he was quick to retreat. A real man does not run in the face of danger.”

I turn back to the doorway when Scratch’s gaze drifts from me.

The man who stands there is tall and muscular, like I remember.

His son is standing in the doorway, holding onto the frame behind him, staring out.

I can practically see him shaking in fear.

It is an odd sight to witness from someone who is supposed to be an Alpha.

“Go back inside, Apollo,” William Masters orders his son. “Close the door.”

The kid does what he’s told, and his father walks away from his house, coming down the path with no hesitation in his step. He only stops when he gets within two feet of the gate.

“Sol, is it?” he asks, his cold blue eyes regarding me with no hint of emotion.

He begins to roll up the sleeves of his collared shirt as he watches me, waiting for my response.

He stands tall and acts as if I’m not two foot taller than he is, with claws that could tear him to shreds.

He has not changed one little bit.

“I go by Scar now,” I tell him. “Thanks to the permanent gift you left me.”

I motion to my scarred chest, to the wound that will never fully fade because he made it with a silver coated blade.

My mother called me Sol. I will not allow him to do the same.

“It is somewhat impressive that it didn’t kill you,” he tells me. “Scar. I do not like that as a name, but it does not matter. You will be drowning in your own blood soon enough. I will be happy to put you out of your misery.”

I let out a huff of laughter. There is no way he will best me in a battle.

“What?” he asks. “You think because you spent decades in that spirit trap, laying those old ghosts to rest that makes you ready for a real battle? You may as well have died the night I slashed your chest open. You are nothing more than a ghost.”

My anger bubbles over at his taunting, but I do not allow him to goad me into attacking.

He must first accept my challenge and choose his form.

“We will see who becomes a ghost when this is over,” I snap. “Accept my challenge or die a coward’s death.”

He smirks at me. “Oh, I accept your little challenge, my son. I am ready to make you bleed. Do not worry about that. I will make sure I take care of your brother, too, while I’m at it.”

“Choose your form,” I growl at him, motioning to Scratch to move back.

“I am getting to that,” my father says, making a shooing motion. “Step away from the gate.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but I move back, and I keep moving back, as does Scratch, until we are almost three times as far away from him as we were when he was standing in front of us in his yard.

“That should be far enough,” he says, as he loosens his tie. “Let’s see now ... human is out. Much too vulnerable to those teeth and claws. Wolf ... well, that’s a little predictable, now, isn’t it?”

His smile twists and grows too wide for his mouth as his skin ripples beneath.

This looks like a deception, likely of the magical variety.

I signal behind my back to Scratch, and he moves away to alert our brothers.

My father does not seem to notice. He is too busy enjoying the sound of his own voice.

“Your mother thought I was a carrier for a genetic mutation. She was wrong about that, but I didn’t bother to correct her.” His muscles get bigger, ripping his clothes while his skin darkens. His face is still his, but his skin is changing, shining with scales. “Do you know there are many different kinds of chimera?”

Chimera? Vague memories of a monstrous creature from a scary story I probably shouldn’t have been reading come filtering back to me. It was a strange, mutated being, made up

of different parts of animals. A snake's tail. A feline's head. A ... wolf's body?

I don't remember that last part, but he did just say there are many different kinds.

They don't live as they are. They disguise themselves as something else in order to live undetected amongst others, while they find different ways to feed off of the people around them.

Blood, sex, life energy. There are many ways for a chimera to feed, and each of those ways only make them stronger.

Panic starts to set in as I watch his transformation.

Of all the things I remember about chimeras, there is one important blank spot.

Why can't I remember how to kill them?

Oh, right. In that story, the villain won in the end.

It was a horror story, of course the villain won.

When I see the end result of my father's transformation, I understand why the normal kid couldn't defeat the supernatural monster. The creature standing in front of me now is at least three foot taller and twice as broad as I am, with a similar looking wolf-like upper body, but with a massive snake tail for his lower half and the head of a what appears to be a tiger.

Well, I guess this explains Snake and Fox.

My pack brothers are also my brothers in blood.

This vicious creature fathered all of us, and by the look in his glowing eyes, he's ready to end us, now, too. None of our plans included facing down a chimera, and I do not see how we can beat this guy without some kind of divine intervention.

The roar he gives out as he cranes his head skyward is deafening.

Oh, shit. There is one more thing I forgot about these monsters.

They usually have some sort of elemental based power.

The hail of rain that follows from the clouded sky above seems to be in answer to his shout, the crack of thunder from above making me feel extremely ill-prepared for this battle.

I thought I knew what I was coming out here to do. I thought I'd kill this terrible man with little effort.

I'd assumed the only real difficulty would come from knowing he was the man who'd given me life.

I was wrong, horribly, terribly, hideously wrong, and that's going to be the death of us all.

Chapter Twenty-Six

SNAKE

Crazy weather makes the ground wet and the sky crackle and howl. The monster our brother came here to slay is much bigger than we are, and it is not a fair fight. We see this clearly from the back yard of the Alpha's home, when he turns his head to the sky and roars loudly.

He made the crazy weather. That does not make sense, but it is so.

I look at Fox, but he is staring at the monster with shock in his eyes.

He is upset about something, and it is confusing. He is breathing as if he might be about to start crying. It is not the right time to be emotional, but when I hiss at him, he is too distracted to notice, or the weather is too loud for him to hear me.

It is frustrating. We need to help our brother. I am not used to being the one who thinks of ideas. That is what the others do.

I know that I must do something, but I do not know what.

I cannot allow my family to become food for this terrible creature.

I slip away from Fox's side, as he crashes to his knees, sobbing at the ground.

All I can think of is that I must help, and it must be now.

The flash of light from the sky comes cracking down close to where Scar was just standing a second after I use my tongue to tug hard on the monster's left arm from behind, hard enough to make him topple to the side. His angry gaze fixes on me as he straightens and turns. I whip my tongue back before he can do something nasty to it.

It is my only weapon. I cannot afford to have it ripped apart.

I dart out of the monster's way as he makes a grab for me, my speed and agility finally counting for something. I make him chase me for a while, taking his concentration and making him increasingly angry. When he straightens suddenly, howling at the sky for a second time, it appears to be a pain-fuelled sound caused by something Scar stabbed into his scaly lower body.

My leader stabs another stick into his tail, and he howls again, before he whips around, away from me to roar at Scar and lunge toward him.

I use my tongue again, allowing Scar a chance to stab him another couple of times.

This time when he turns to me, he roars at the sky and the crazy weather gets worse.

The bolt of lightning comes close enough to singe some of the skin on my leg, but I get away in time to avoid certain death. I do not think we will manage to avoid many more of those fatal strikes.

I would do anything to save my brothers, but I cannot think of something that will be enough to end this fight. All I can do is hope to distract the monster until someone else thinks of something.

The ground is getting slippery from the rain, and my tongue is getting tired from being used to yank around the monster's arms. One of my brothers must think of something soon.

I do not know what will happen if someone does not.

The monster grows tired of chasing me and turns back to lunging at Scar.

I notice where Scar is getting his pieces of wood, and I start doing the same.

If nothing else, we can make the monster bleed.

It does not feel like we are going to win this battle, but I will not give up until I am dead.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

FOX

My father is the one who exiled me, believing I would die. It is a painful thing to learn, and it was made even more shocking by the way in which it was revealed, without words but without a shred of doubt. I am still in deep emotional pain when everything starts to go crazy all around me, but I know what needs to be done.

I let instinct take me over as I rush toward the treeline behind the house.

The plants all around this town are the same, and everyone knows to leave them alone.

I take my knife out of my pouch and carefully clip a few branches worth of the berries into the small pouch I carry before I tie it closed and secure it back onto the strap of my loin cloth.

“Fox!” Scratch calls out to me, rushing toward me. “We need ...”

“I know,” I yell back, through the howling wind and rain. “I noticed!”

Snake dove straight in to giving the chimera the run around while I was falling apart.

He’s doing a good job of distracting the beast, alongside Scar, who seems to be re-planting our father’s fence into his snake tail.

“I need to get up high,” I yell at Scratch.

He frowns, looking around.

The roof of the house is the tallest point I’m going to get that’s close to where the chimera is.

I point and Scratch runs with me, giving me a boost up to the backyard porch ledge and then clambering up behind me as I start shimmying up a pipe to reach the roof.

The tiles are slippery as hell in the pouring rain, and I feel like the cold wet blobs of water are trying to pin me down on the roof. It’s not going to be easy to stand up and jump onto my moving target.

Scratch climbs up and somehow, he can stand.

“Throw me!” I tell him.

“What?” He looks at me as if I’m insane.

I shrug at him. “I’m a cat, right? If I hit the pavement, I’ll land on my feet.”

At least, that’s how Scar tells it. According to him cats also have nine lives.

That's not something I want to have tested right now.

He laughs at how ridiculous I'm being.

I shudder at how cold the damn rain is getting. "Do it. I need to get the nightshade into his mouth."

He stares at me. I motion to my pouch, hoping nothing's leaking out.

I'd hate to die because some berries got squished or something.

He picks me up and I pray he isn't going to just drop me to my death.

The chimera hasn't seen us up here. He's too busy chasing his tail and our brothers.

"Do it!" I yell, knowing Scratch will be worried he'll drop me wrong.

We've only got one shot at this.

I'm about to yell again when he tosses me into the air.

Everything seems to slow down around me.

I claw at the air, and then, suddenly, I'm on the chimera's back, and I'm hanging on for dear life.

I don't even get a second to feel relieved that I made it.

Miracle one, achieved. Ha ha ha.

So, what, dummy? Scratch's perfect throw isn't going to matter if you don't get the poison into this thing's mouth.

The second part of this plan is going to be a real pain in the neck if this monster doesn't stop moving around as if he's trying to shake me off.

God of Wolves, help me figure this out, please?

I pull myself up, latching my claws into the monster's head and making him way angrier than he already was.

He shakes even harder and I slip a little before I get my grip back.

The sky above us is getting louder, thunder rumbling, ready for lightning to strike again in a minute or two.

I kind of hope he's dumb enough to strike himself.

Maybe my nine lives will save me while he dies a gruesome death.

I see Scratch on the roof, throwing tiles at the chimera the way he skims stones across the water at the creek. They're slowing the monster down a little, and he's doing it well enough that he hasn't hit me. I guess maybe I don't annoy him that badly.

I manage to haul myself up on the monster's big head and grab my pouch.

There's no way I have any dexterity left to open it, so I just loosen the ties and toss it into his open mouth. He coughs and it jumps back up, almost falling out! I push it back in hard, shoving it down his throat, and just avoiding his snapping fangs.

I'm going to have to hold his giant mouth shut.

It takes the last of my strength, but I force his mouth to close while he bucks and spins under me, trying to shove me off.

Somehow, Scratch manages to land on his back a second later, and my brother moves up to the other side of his face and takes over holding the beast's mouth shut for me.

I slap my father's face as I move back a little. "You didn't succeed in killing us, father, but we've succeeded in killing you."

He struggles so much that I almost think I didn't pick enough nightshade to end him.

He's big, sure, but he's not so much bigger than we are.

Scar spent a lot of time making sure we knew to avoid the nightshade plants when we were kids.

It was one of the important things he made sure we knew, so nothing bad could happen to us.

"That's what parents do," I murmur, mostly speaking to myself. "They protect their kids. They don't try to kill them."

He convulses under us, and then starts to slowly crash to the ground as the weather eases up above us, the rain trailing off and the thunder fading away. No lightning strike this time.

Just one big, dead monster and four extremely tired brothers who could use a warm bed with a sweet mate and a whole tin full of cookies to fill their stomachs.

We jump off our father's back as he crashes to the ground, returning in death to a pink-skinned human with a small, breakable body that's kind of full of gaping, bloody wounds.

Snake rushes to my side and hisses at me in excitement.

He pokes at the body, moving around it as if he's inspecting our work.

"What was that exactly?" Scar asks as he approaches, dropping the piece of fence that's in his hand.

I smile at him. "I remembered something you taught us when we were kids, and then Scratch stopped him from spitting out the poison."

"That was nightshade?" Scar asks, sounding vaguely amused.

"Well, it didn't seem like we were going to get very far with a physical attack."

"It's a good thing that worked," Scratch says. "I have no damn idea what kills chimeras."

"Do we take over the town, now?" I ask Scar, not really caring either way.

I'm wet and tired enough to just want to get warm.

I wouldn't say no to visiting Lita, but also, sleep.

Scar is frowning when I look back at him.

"We need to talk to my mother," he tells us.

I smile. That sounds perfect. Lita lives with his mother.

“I hope there’s a fire, and cookies,” I murmur.

Scar walks on without responding. Scratch chases after him.

I wait around for Snake to be done with the body, because he seems to be enjoying himself.

He hisses nastily at the dead guy before he moves over to me, giving me a big hug from behind.

“Okay, okay,” I tell him. “I’m glad we’re alive, too, but it you don’t watch it you’ll squeeze the life right out of me.”

He lets go and darts after Scratch. I doubt he’ll try to hug our moody wolf brothers, but I catch up to find out anyway.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

SCAR

I don't know what it means exactly that my father was a chimera, but I know it means something.

My father had two distinct forms and he could shift between them. My mother has two forms.

Yet, I cannot change forms. When I was a child, I spent many hours trying and failing.

All I'd wanted was to be like the other shifters.

I didn't know why that wasn't possible.

I still do not know.

Something about that troubles me.

I do not know if my mother will have answers, but there is nowhere else we can go to try and figure this out. She was always well read, and knowledgeable about many things. I enjoyed asking her questions and listening intently to her answers.

She is the only person who might be able to shed some light on this unexpected surprise.

I do not know what she will make of my brothers, but we are together in this now.

Fox's smart thinking saved our lives tonight. Snake helped me keep the chimera distracted while he worked with Scratch to poison him.

I can see clearly now that it would have been foolish to challenge the Alpha on my own.

He controlled the weather, made a storm overhead and tried to strike me with a lightning bolt. Twice. Or maybe it was three times. It's hard to remember now that the fight is over.

All I know is that without the help of my brothers, I would have died tonight.

We work better as a team. I have always known that, yet I've spent so long trying to keep them safe, that it is hard to see them as the equals I know they are.

"Something is bothering you," Scratch murmurs next to me. "What is it?"

He is keeping his voice low, so our brothers do not hear.

Snake and Fox are a few feet behind us.

Our reptilian brother keeps stopping under lights, and Fox has been hurrying him along with the promise of more cookies at the end of our walk.

Scratch was with me for longer, and because we both think like wolves, and he is older than the others I have shared more with him at times. I can see now that excluding our younger brothers has been unfair. They may have unpredictable natures and issues that make them a handful at times, but their differences make us better as a whole.

I stop walking and turn, making sure we're all included in my answer to Scratch's quiet question.

Snake and Fox stop in front of us. Snake hisses and moves back a step to be under the nearest streetlamp. Fox shakes his head at him, before he turns his bright green eyes on us.

“What is wrong?”

“We are almost there. I am going to ask my mother what she knows about chimeras. I do not think it would be smart to take over this town without figuring out what is going on here.”

“Our father was hiding here, pretending to be a shifter,” Fox says. “What else is there to know?”

Snake hisses in agreement, showing he is listening, even if it looks like he is just basking under the warmth of the lamp.

“For one thing, why aren't we like him?” Scratch answers before I can.

“Yes,” I agree. “How can we be stuck in these forms when we came from two different species who can transform? Perhaps we have some of his abilities that we do not know about.”

“Or perhaps something cancels out in that mix,” Fox suggests. “Meaning that each of our father’s matings with shifter partners resulted in children unable to shift forms.”

“I do not know who my mother was,” Scratch murmurs.

“But my mother might,” I tell him.

He blinks at me. “Really?”

I nod. “She knows everyone here. She should know who your mothers are.”

Scratch seems stunned by this information. I should have realized it was something I could do for them. We’ve spent so long on our own that I didn’t even think about it, despite enjoying the chance to spend time again with my own mother.

“Who cares?” Fox blurts. “Those women abandoned us. We don’t need them.”

Snake gives out a few hisses, none of which are easy to decipher.

Fox frowns at him. “You seriously think it wasn’t their fault?”

He hisses again, and turns his head up to the light, closing his eyes.

“It wasn’t their fault,” Scratch says. “Didn’t you listen when Scar told us about this place? His own mother fought for him, but she wasn’t able to stop his father and his men from taking him away. I have always believed our mothers would have been just as devastated as she was.”

“Then you are a fool,” Fox tells him. “Look at us, Scratch. Then look at them. Humans look very different than we do. If they’d had time to feel anything when we were born, before we were thrown away, it would have been revulsion. Scar was lucky. He got the sweet mother who kept him hidden, not because she thought he was an abomination, but because she was trying to keep him safe. Our mothers did nothing. They let us be taken.”

“We do not know that,” I warn him.

“I know it,” Fox grumbles.

Snake hisses in disagreement.

“Well, I don’t,” Scratch says.

“There will be no talking about this in my mother’s house,” I tell them. “If you are not well behaved, I will make you stay outside.”

“We will not talk about this,” Scratch says.

“What are we allowed to talk about, then?” Fox asks.

“I will introduce you and I will ask about chimera,” I explain. “You are allowed to listen, and you will remain polite if my mother asks you questions.”

I did my best to teach them everything my mother taught me, but certain things never made much sense while we were living outside of society and its rules. Scratch could understand why he would need to know these things, and he was quick to adapt his behavior, but Snake and Fox think

differently than we do. They can be unpredictable, and they are more likely to take risks.

That worked in our favor with the chimera.

I let out a sigh. I cannot fault them for their natures.

“We’re almost there. Just remember we are here to learn what we can about the chimera.”

Fox frowns at me. “It is dead. What more do we really need to know?”

It is a fair question, but I don’t have the answer.

Instinct is hard to quantify.

“We need to know what he was doing here. This is supposed to be a pack town. He was supposed to be a wolf shifter.”

“Arming ourselves with knowledge will prevent another unexpected situation,” Scratch adds. “You were wise to remember that nightshade is a poison that is plentiful here. Had you not known about it we might not have fared quite so well.”

Fox nods. “That makes sense. We should aim to be prepared.”

Snake hisses in agreement, after a beat, and only once he seems to realize everyone is looking at him. Those streetlamps are a real distraction to him.

“We should go while it is still dark.”

I do not wish for any of the Nightshade pack to see us while we are not certain of our next move.

I am only going to know what to do once I speak to my mother and get another chance to lay eyes on my mate.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

LITA

The tension drains out of me after our prayers are finished. Artemis didn't possess me tonight, and I feel a little more tired than usual, slumping back in my seat afterwards, and yawning until my ears pop.

Goddess, it's been a long day.

I glance at Alina, and she signs at me, telling me to, "Go to bed."

Covering my mouth as I yawn a second time, I decide to do what I'm told.

My movements are sluggish as I haul myself up from the couch.

I step out into the hallway and head to my bedroom first.

Changing out of my clothes and putting on a nightdress takes so much effort that I feel the need to perch on the edge of the bed for a second.

I tell myself I'll get up in a minute, but my legs feel like they're made of lead and my head is getting a little fuzzy. I lay down on my side, letting my eyes rest.

Then I pull my legs up, and before I know it, I'm snuggling backwards into the sheets, pulling them around me to keep my sleepy body warm.

I blink at the entrance to the room.

Alina steps inside and smiles at me. "Sweet dreams, Lita."

I'm too tired to answer. She turns out the lights and closes the door.

I pass out into darkness, letting everything go.

Chapter Thirty

SCAR

I do not let my brothers crowd the doorway as I knock gently on my mother's cabin door.

They are standing a few steps behind me, watchful of the area around us. From the limited number of lights we've seen in the cabins we've passed, I'm guessing most of the pack are safely tucked away in their beds for the night. That is for the best. I do not believe my brothers would be keen to let a chance to study one of the pack's members pass them by.

I find myself wondering how many of the pack are actually wolf shifters, and out of those who are not, how many are aware they are something far more rare and dangerous?

I feel uneasy about the answer, and I know there may not be a way to tell until it is too late to back out of another fight. We must tread carefully. I do not want to walk us into another ugly situation.

Fox acted quickly to save us from the last one, but I do not want to take a chance like that again.

My mother takes a few moments to open the door.

She raises an eyebrow when she sees it's me. "Don't you have a pack to take over?"

"I do not know if we can still call it a pack," I admit. "The Alpha was not a wolf shifter."

"He wasn't ... That's not possible," she murmurs. "What do you mean?"

"We should talk inside," I tell her. "Would you mind if my brothers came in?"

I motion to them behind me on the path that leads to her front door.

She blinks at them, surprise in her gaze.

"Your brothers ... Oh, Goddess. Yes. Come in. All of you."

She steps back, holding the door open wide.

I move inside, ducking my head and going to the kitchen door.

My mate's bedroom is right next to it, and I catch a hint of her scent when I get close.

She is sleeping. I do not wish to wake her.

"Living room," my mother tells me, nodding to the open door. "Was it raining? You all look like drenched. I'll get some blankets."

I leave my mate's door alone, wishing I could see her again, but knowing there will be time for that later. I must concentrate on the task at hand.

Scratch follows me into the living room and sits with me on the floor opposite the couch.

Snake's tongue comes into the room ahead of him, whipping out as if to inspect the air before springing back into his mouth. He hisses in approval as he sits down cross-legged in front of a lamp table with a bright lamp under a pale-colored shade.

Fox takes his time and makes himself comfortable on the couch. He lays down on it and stretches out, looking ready to take a nap.

I draw him a warning look and he shrugs.

He doesn't think he's being rude, but that is the only seat in the room, and it belongs to my mother.

He is also soaking wet and he has probably already made the couch damp.

"Get down," I hiss across the room at him.

Snake echoes my hiss with a more dramatic one instantly.

Fox sits up straight. "Better?"

"Marginally," I mutter, as my mother steps into the room.

She has blankets in her hands that she passes out.

Fox snuggles under his while she hands out the others, making himself look innocent and sweet, he looks at her when he asks, "Ah, would it be the right time to ask about those delicious cookies?"

I should have made him wait outside. He does not know how to behave around people at all.

My mother laughs. “I made more this morning. Just wait right there and I’ll get them.”

She leaves the room and Fox leans back in the seat, seeming pleased with himself.

He sighs as he puts his head back and closes his eyes, breathing in deep.

“I think they will be even better than last time,” he says. “It feels good to be close to our mate even if we can’t see her. Her scent is all over this house.”

I frown at him, hoping he is not going to talk about Lita in front of my mother.

She knows I see her surrogate daughter as my mate, but I do not know how she would feel if she knew my brothers all see her that same way.

“He is not wrong,” Scratch murmurs. “And it does feel better to know she is close.”

Snake makes a murmuring sound. He usually hisses in agreement, but occasionally he makes this sound instead. Apparently, we are all in agreement that it is a good thing to be close to our mate even if she is sleeping in another room. If that was the only reason we were here we would have nothing more to worry about than running low on cookies.

Unfortunately, our situation is a bit more worrying than that.

My mother returns to the room with a tray of drinks, and a tin of cookies on the side.

She sets the tray on the table and closes the door.

Fox is quick to open the tin and snatch up one of the cookies.

He inhales it and picks up another before my mother walks past to sit at his other side.

“Thank you,” he mumbles with a full mouth.

I suppose I should be grateful that he is making an effort, not annoyed that he is ruining the attempt at good manners by speaking with his mouth full.

“Thank you,” Scratch says, as he takes a cookie.

He must be hungry. He doesn't have much of a sweet tooth.

“So, our Alpha was not a wolf shifter,” my mother says, picking up a glass of water from the tray. She looks from Fox to Snake and back at me. “Is he feline, or reptilian?”

I give her a rueful smile. “He has elements of both, along with wolf. He is a chimera.”

She puts the glass down carefully and looks at me. “A chimera? Are you sure?”

“He became a giant monster with the face of a tiger, the body of a wolf and the lower part of a snake,” Fox informs her.

“Oh, Goddess,” My mother mutters.

“Do you know anything about chimeras?” I ask.

“I know there isn’t much they can’t do,” she says. “Besides show empathy. They are notoriously self-serving and will not hesitate to kill others to get what they want.”

“He seemed to be expecting us,” I admit. “Well, me, at least.”

“So, he stopped the ritual on purpose,” she muses. “Then the ritual was never meant to keep monsters out of Nightshade. It was made to keep his rejected children out of his plans.”

“What could his plan have been?”

She shakes her head. “Chimeras were hunted to the brink of extinction a long time ago. It’s possible his father set Nightshade up as a feeding ground for the few that were left.”

“If that was the plan, wouldn’t that mean there are others in town?”

“It would.”

That’s what I was afraid of.

I look at Scratch. He nods, knowing this is why we came here.

“Do you know any ways to kill them?” I ask.

“I can check,” she says, getting up and going over to the bookcase in the corner of the room.

“We can poison them,” Fox reminds me, through another mouthful of cookie.

“That depends on how many there are and how smart they are,” I tell him. “The same trick doesn’t always work twice.”

He pulls a face and continues to stuff his face.

Snake's tongue whips toward the tin and curls around a cookie. He opens his mouth wide and brings the cookie into his mouth. A moment of stillness is followed by a lot of crunching, and a little bit of the throaty murmuring sound he usually makes in agreement with our comments.

Our reptile brother has a happy snacking sound.

He seems to be just as fond of the sugary treats as Fox.

My tastebuds have changed, I think. They are still good, but I don't feel the need to eat any just because they are right there in front of us.

I take a drink of water while it is on offer, feeling strange getting used to taking it from a container once more like I used to when I was a child. It is more satisfying, I decide, once I feel more used to the glass. The water is cool and refreshing and this is the easy way to drink it.

Lapping from the stream in the forest is time consuming and messy in comparison.

Scratch watches me before he attempts to drink some out of the glass himself.

He seems to find it trickier.

"Open your mouth and hold it a little above," I tell him. "Tilt it slowly."

He tries and pours too much into his mouth at once.

Spluttering, he swallows a little and spills a lot.

He frowns at me. “Humans have such annoying habits.”

He puts the glass down and I know he will never pick one up again.

Fox has less of a struggle with his much shorter snout. He seems happy with himself when he tries it.

Of course, Snake has to outdo all of us with his tongue winding around the glass and bringing it over to his mouth where it pours slowly into his open mouth until it’s empty. He makes a happy sound as he sets the empty glass back down on the tray.

“Show off,” Scratch mutters, pulling his blanket closer.

Fox snorts. “Trust the Snake to show the Wolf how it’s done.”

“Here it is,” my mother says, as she moves back to the couch with a book.

She sits down and starts flipping through the pages.

When she gets to the right page, she uses her finger to read a few sentences before she says, “The chimera can be difficult to kill due to its size and abilities, but demon hunters agree that a well-timed fire can be one of the best methods to ensure a nest is destroyed. The chimera is easiest to kill when it is hiding its true form. Other methods that have been known to work are poison and beheadings.”

“I’m not sure a fire would be a smart move considering where we are,” I admit.

“I’m sure that’s why the Alpha’s father picked this place when he did.”

“What happened to the Alpha’s father?” I ask, wondering why his son might kill him if the point was to create more chimeras. It doesn’t make a lot of sense.

“At the time we were told William Masters killed his father. He buried the man himself, apparently, and then he took over as Alpha. It’s possible he just left town. We’d have no way of knowing. No one was told where he was supposedly buried.”

“So, our father was trying to make more chimeras when he had us?” Fox asks.

My mother shakes her head. “He would have known he had to mate with another chimera for that. It seems as if he had you created for another purpose.”

She purses her lips, her eyes going back through the book, finger moving with her gaze.

“Another purpose,” Fox murmurs.

“If we are not shifters, and we are not chimera, what are we?” I ask my mother.

“Abominations, probably,” Scratch mutters, shrugging when I stare at him.

“The rejected,” she says, tapping the page. “A chimera will create children with shifters when he wishes to strengthen his powers. These ... children ... will be sent away until they reach maturity. When they come back, their life essences will

be absorbed by the chimera, bringing him a step closer to immortality.”

“So, we were *made* to be killed,” Fox utters.

My feline brother sounds disturbed by this revelation, but I am not surprised. After everything we’ve already gone through, I didn’t expect to be told I was conceived out of love and nothing more.

“Our mothers did not know of this,” Scratch blurts, surprising me with his insistent tone. “If they did not know what he was, then they could not have known. That is correct, is it not?”

She nods. “None of us ... I mean, I’m no longer sure which of our people are shifters now ... But your mothers were shifters, so they would not have known.”

He seems satisfied by this answer. He is going to want to meet his mother. I cannot help but be worried over how such a meeting could go. I am not certain it is a smart idea, but I know it will be asked by Fox or Scratch if I do not ask first.

“Do you remember who their mothers were?” I ask, capturing my mother’s attention with the question.

She blinks at me and nods slowly. “Yes, I do. I remember because I was a nurse when they were born.” She turns to Scratch. “I’m sorry to tell you this, but your mother died a few years ago. She worked with our livestock, and she had a beautiful singing voice. I can find a picture for you, if you’d like to know what she looked like?”

Scratch slumps back, his anxious energy gone. “That would be nice. Thank you.”

She smiles sadly at him. “She was a lovely girl. So sweet and pretty. I know she wanted to keep you. There was nothing either of us could do to make that happen.”

“It is okay,” he says. “I would like to hear more about her when we do not have other concerns.”

“I’ll find a picture by the next time you’re here.” She looks to Snake, and back at me. “Can he talk?”

“Snake communicates in hisses and other gestures. We understand him, but he cannot talk.”

She nods, before she looks at him again.

He stares back at her, dark eyes wide and unblinking.

“I’m sorry, but your mother had a hard time giving birth. She didn’t survive for long after you were born. She held you that first night and didn’t let go. I can find a picture of her for you, too.”

He hisses excitedly, nodding his head.

She smiles and turns to Fox.

He already looks sad. “When did my mother die?”

“She didn’t,” my mother tells him. “Zara works teaching children at the nursery. I knew her the least of all the girls, but she knew before she had you that you would be taken away from her. She barely left her house for two years after. Then, she was asked to work at the nursery. That’s all I know.”

“So, my mother is alive?” he sounds stunned.

“I thought you didn’t care,” Scratch mutters.

“I thought I didn’t, but maybe I do.”

“We can talk about meeting her once we’ve dealt with the chimera problem,” I tell him.

“Right, that,” he says. “What’s the plan?”

“Is there a way to identify who the others are in the pack?” I ask, looking at my mother because she still has the book in her hands.

She lets out a soft sigh. “If you cut them in their false form, they don’t bleed. If we had a witch there might be a spell we could use to find out how many of them are in Nightshade, but without that I would guess there are at least seven. Maybe more.”

“At least seven,” I repeat, thinking about the child who seemed afraid of us. “He has four children. Considering he had no Luna, I am guessing they had different mothers?”

My mother nods. “Three different women carried his children. He was the only one present at the births. I thought after I lied to him, that meant he was trying something different, but now I can see the real reason. If they were his sons, and they were born chimera, the mothers must be like him.”

“So, no one else was permitted to be there because they weren’t shifters, and anyone who helped would know the minute they arrived.”

“That makes seven likely chimera in Nightshade,” she repeats. “At least seven.”

“His eldest son seemed afraid of us,” I tell her.

“His children may not know what they are. Children and teenagers can be unpredictable. He may have been waiting for the right time to tell them.”

“Then they should be no threat to us,” Scratch says.

“The mothers will be, though,” Fox says. “Especially once they know we killed their leader, or whatever he was, whatever he meant to them. If those three are anything like him, we don’t want them all coming after us at once. There’s no way we’d survive that.”

“I think you should go back to The Abyss,” my mother says. “For tonight. The Alpha’s children are mean-spirited and power-hungry. The eldest will claim he was the one who killed his father. By pack law, that will make him the Alpha. We should see what the mothers do when this happens, find out who is their new leader. That should help us prepare for what comes next.”

I do not like the thought of going back to The Abyss.

Even if my mother’s suggestion makes sense, I don’t like the thought of leaving her here.

I don’t like the thought of leaving my future mate behind, either.

“It is likely that the mothers will take some time to plot their next move before they do anything,” she goes on. “If there’s

any way they can tell you came here, or that you're still here, you'll be at risk of an attack you might not win. William might have known what he was doing with you four, but we can't assume they knew. He was secretive. He didn't allow any of them to get close. He seems to have kept their kids out of the loop. He was being very careful."

"We can't leave," Fox moans, picking up the last cookie from the tin.

Snake hisses his agreement. He sticks out his tongue.

I look at Scratch, and I can tell he's conflicted.

"It makes sense to be careful, but we cannot leave without making a plan for tomorrow night."

I nod slowly. He is right. We may have to go back before the portal closes tonight, but we should not leave until we know what we are doing when we get back.

My mother gets up and takes a large sketchpad from the side of the couch.

She flips it open onto a clean page, and places it on the coffee table.

Snake moves the tray back a little with a flick of his tongue.

She thanks him for his help before she starts to draw out a map.

"This is where we are," she says, as she marks the spot with an X and draws a rectangle around it.

She starts to draw paths and buildings, quickly sketching out a map of the entire town, including the part of the woods where the portal opens.

“You’ve come out of the woods at this spot before,” she says, pointing to the path between the nursery and a house. “Maria, the mother of his eldest son, lives and works there as the head of the school. She is thoroughly unpleasant. I used to think that was because he never made her pack Luna.”

“Does my mother also live and work there?” Fox asks.

“She lives in a house over in this area.” She points it out. “So, she will already be home by the time you come back to town tomorrow night.”

“That’s good news,” I tell him when he looks vaguely deflated. “She won’t be there when we have to fight her boss.”

“There’s one problem with that,” my mother says. “The nursery is where all the kids in town are. There aren’t any babies right now, thankfully. But you would have to lure her away from the building to deal with her. It wouldn’t be safe to fight a volatile creature like a chimera around dozens of small children.”

“Where do the other two live?” I ask, looking over the map and realizing Nightshade is even smaller than I thought.

She draws an M over the nursery and moves her hand over to the building nearest the livestock.

“Candace is the mother of his twins. She lives here, and she oversees everything to do with our livestock.”

She draws a C and moves her hand again.

“This is where the crops are grown, inside greenhouses and barns. Valerie oversees this, and she stays right next door, here.”

She draws a V and moves her hand.

I can see where she’s headed next.

The biggest house in town.

“And this will look familiar to you all because it’s where you just were. There are four immature chimera in this building who may or may not get the chance to evolve depending on what their mothers decide when they find out what happened last night.”

“What is the usual procedure for the town?” I ask.

“Someone will be sent to ring the bell in the tower early in the morning. This will encourage everyone to get out and meet at the centre of town for an important announcement.”

She points out the bell tower and circles the town square which is where we killed the chimera last night. “This is where we’ll all group together. I’m guessing Apollo will make the announcement from his porch. He’ll probably have his father’s body taken to our makeshift undertaker before he rings the bell. He won’t bury the body himself. He’ll want to make sure it’s done in the right spot in our town’s graveyard.”

It would be the absolute worst time to attack.

Everyone will be in the same place at the same time.

Having at least three full-grown chimeras with God knows what powers all rising at once in that spot with everyone else from town standing around wondering what the hell is going on sounds like a chaotic nightmare that could only end in bloodshed.

“What are the chances that the chimera might try to take the whole town out while they’re trapped in that square?” I ask, hoping to rule it out.

“I don’t see why they would do that,” My mother says. “They came out here for a reason and the people around them are doing what they expect them to do. Losing one of their team shouldn’t matter. They have four sons who can take his place, even if he’s only a figurehead.”

“If you have to go to the announcement, stay back from the main crowd. Same goes for Lita. It might be unlikely, but we don’t want to risk either of you.”

My mother nods. “We wouldn’t go too close anyway. We’re basically outcasts. So, don’t worry about that.”

I would prefer it if they weren’t there at all, but I know that could be taken as a show of disrespect, if it were to be noticed. The Alpha controlled this pack so tightly that it’s a surprise they’re all still breathing. I nod at my mother, getting to my feet.

“Sunrise is getting closer. We should leave before the portal closes.”

“We still do not have a plan,” Scratch says, frowning.

“We do,” I tell him. “We are coming here when the portal reopens for an update, and then we are going to find each chimera’s weak spot so we can take them out one by one and save this pack.”

He nods at me, accepting the plan.

It is not as solid as I would like, but it will have to do.

We leave my mother’s house and I ache inside that I wasn’t able to see my mate, but I know I will see her again soon. Nothing can stop true mates from bonding with each other. Their paths are chosen by The Fates. They will always intersect.

Chapter Thirty-One

LITA

My dreams are so vivid again that waking up in my bed is the part that feels fake. I pull the covers back to find my boobs falling out of my nightdress, the top buttons undone. My skin is flushed, and I feel a little hot and ... needy.

Goddess, I really must be starting to go into heat.

I didn't think that was possible until a wolf meets her mate.

Maybe it's only the dreams. They feel so real my body is getting confused.

Hopefully a cool shower will help douse the lustful memories that push through my thoughts.

I fix the buttons on my nightdress and get out of bed, going into bathroom and taking a normal shower after I chicken out of trying a cold one. I wouldn't want Alina to hear me scream and to have to explain what's going on with me when I barely understand it myself.

I find my guardian in the kitchen once I'm dressed and ready for work.

She seems a little jumpy this morning, almost dropping her cup when I appear at the doorway.

“Are you okay?” I sign.

She nods, and signs back, “Just tired. Didn’t sleep well.”

That’s not like her. “Are you feeling sick?”

“No,” she signs. “It was raining last night. The sound kept me awake.”

Right. The weather can be a little up and down around here. It always bothers Alina when it rains.

“Ready to go?” I sign.

She nods, putting her cup in the sink.

We leave the house, and she definitely seems a little tired.

Yawning more than usual, bumping into the door when she’s opening it.

When we get to work, I sign to her that she needs to stay in the kitchen and take it easy today.

She can make Emily do the dishes, while she watches over the food.

She agrees with me without argument, and it only makes me worry about her even more.

The morning passes quickly, with both of us in the kitchen so I can keep an eye on how she’s doing.

On our break, she takes a nap in Emily’s usual spot and our resident tired woman doesn’t complain. She also doesn’t miss

out on her usual nap. She gets her coat and lays on the grass, snoring within seconds of lying down.

I worry a little when Adam doesn't visit. It's been a couple days. He usually doesn't stay away for that long. I hope Maria isn't being stricter with him. He's such a sweet kid.

The lunch rush comes and goes, and we're cleaning up before the dinner rush starts, when Alina taps me on the shoulder. She's turned off the oven, and the others are grabbing their jackets.

"What's going on?" I sign.

"Town bells," she says. "Announcement in the town square."

I blink at her. It's like she's speaking a foreign language.

Town bells? What does that mean?

"Announcement by who?" I sign.

She shrugs. "Alpha, maybe?"

Huh. Weird. Since when do we have town square announcements?

I'm so used to Alina preparing me for things that I feel totally confused that there's something going on that she's literally never mentioned before. It must be something that hardly ever happens.

I take off my apron when she does, and I grab our jackets.

The dining room is already cleared out so it's just us workers who make our way over to the town square. It's only down the

path a little, and it looks like the rest of the town beat us out to the party.

It's kind of weird to see our whole town out here like this.

Everyone's standing around looking as confused as I feel.

It makes me feel a little better that it's not just me.

“What's going on?” I sign to Alina.

She shakes her head. I push onto my toes.

The sun is close to setting. It's going to be too dark to see anything soon enough.

It's not like the streetlamps are frequently spaced enough to make a real difference.

Alina touches my arm and points. Over by the Alpha's house, Apollo is standing on a stage of some sort, a microphone in his hand. His brothers are behind him, his mother at his side.

I glance at Alina, and she starts signing when Apollo starts talking.

The Alpha is dead!

I look around. Everyone is in shock.

Alina nudges me. I look back at her and she signs, “Apollo and his brothers have decided to become joint Alphas, and they will be choosing a Luna.”

I stare at her wide-eyed. She shrugs at me, but her own eyes widen as she stares at the stage.

Apollo's mother has taken the microphone, and she is looking extremely pleased with herself.

Alina looks like she's going to throw up.

I rub her back, and then sign to ask, "Are you okay?"

She shakes her head, and signs at me, "Run!"

I blink at her. "What?"

"The Abyss. Go. Now."

I frown, looking around and finding every pair of eyes in town on me.

Whatever is being said, everyone knows something I don't.

"What's happening?" I sign, pleading with her to tell me.

Tears spring to her eyes. "They are going to kill you, Lita. You have to run. Now!"

The crowd starts to part as the sky darkens above.

Apollo and his brothers jump down from the stage, tearing off their clothes.

Alina shakes me, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Run!"

I don't understand, until I see the lips of everyone in the crowd cheering the same thing, over and over. "Kill the Reject!"

People I serve food to, people I see every day.

All of them are chanting for the new Alphas to kill me.

Goddess, this is really happening. These people want me dead because I'm not like them.

If there was ever a time for Artemis to possess someone, this is it.

Unfortunately, the goddess doesn't seem to be answering my prayers today.

I let go of Alina's hand and I throw my jacket to the ground.

It goes against everything inside of me to run from this fight.

But I know if I defeat these Alphas, I won't be named Luna.

These people hate me because I'm different.

They will never accept me.

This crowd will tear me apart if the Alphas don't.

The only choice I have now, is to run.

"Go to your mates," Alina says.

Those four words unlock the truth inside me.

My mates. The monsters. They're real.

None of it was a dream.

Goddess, all of that, in the forest, all of it happened.

A smile hits my lips as I bolt out of the town square.

If I'm going to run, it's going to be into the woods.

It's going to be right where the portal is about to open.

I'll let my monsters tear these boys to shreds.

Chapter Thirty-Two

LITA

I run into the forest, stripping out of my clothes and shifting into my animal form. I can sense and smell the Alpha's sons as they chase after me, getting closer and closer to where I am with every second that passes.

I bolt through the forest at breakneck speed, my wolf angry that we're running, and angrier still that the people I cared enough to want to save from the monsters, turned out to be the very same people who decided it was okay to chant for me to be murdered to please their new Alphas.

Those four are the most popular guys in this town.

All the boys want to be them, and all the girls want to date them.

Of course the whole town want me dead because they do.

I get to the spot where the portal opens, and I skid to a stop.

The sun has set, and it's not open.

My lungs are burning, and my plan is ruined.

I turn, ready to fight for myself like I would have been if I thought the town would let me kill their golden boys. The four of them slink toward me, looking like they're growling viciously, as they corner me where I stand.

You can't expect popular kids to fight fair, Lita.

I growl at them, snapping when Apollo gets close.

He jerks back slightly before he lunges at me.

I roll over and pounce, slamming my snout into his side and clamping my jaw into his right thigh.

I shake my head before I let go, determined to do as much damage as possible.

The taste of blood hits my tongue and I let go, as one of the twins bites my tail and yanks on it.

What a dick move. My tail. Really?

That's got to be Fenrir.

Thor wouldn't waste his time.

I kick my leg back, smacking Fenrir in the throat.

He lets go, growling irritably.

Apollo lunges at me again and I'm stuck between him and his dumb brother so I can't do much, besides sliding out from under them to let Apollo bite his brother on the neck instead of me.

Goddess, these Alphas are idiots. They certainly don't know how to fight.

Thor comes at me, and I duck out of his way at the last second, sending him running into the stump of a tree.

Ouch. I doubt that helps with his ability to think straight.

Orion leans back and shifts forms.

He looks right at me, smirking. “I told them you would be impossible to beat. They didn’t listen.”

I stare at him, wondering what his angle is right now.

He’s smarter than his brothers, it seems, but the whole nice guy thing was an act.

“Looks like you won’t be getting a day off to go on a date with me,” he says. “How disappointed are you, exactly, on a scale of one to ten?”

Ugh. I can tell by the way he’s looking at me that he thinks I’m upset that he isn’t who he pretended to be.

I growl at him, ready to attack, regardless of what form he’s in.

“Aw, don’t get upset, baby,” he says. “We can still have a little fun together.”

His brothers stop trying to fight me and the shift into their human forms, too, like they’re following his lead. Like he’s the leader, not Apollo.

Orion looks at Apollo, clearly unimpressed. “I told you ...”

“It’s hardly impossible to beat the bitch,” Apollo says, narrowing his eyes at Orion. “She’s just a little slippery.”

Orion smiles at me. “Come and be our girl, Lita. We’ll let you live if you open your legs for us. You won’t be our Luna, but we can make you feel things, at least until you start to bore us.”

Goddess, that’s so fucking gross. He’s even creepier than his brothers. I can’t believe he ever made me think he was sweet.

He laughs as he gets to his feet. “Get the rope and tie her legs to that post we left out here. I want her carried back to town like she’s a pig we’re about to spit-roast.”

Apollo leans in and touches my face. “Oh, that is *exactly* what she is.”

He slaps me before I back away from them. I’m not going to just let them tie me up and carry me away, and I’m definitely not going to let them do anything sexual to me, or near me.

They’re dumb as shit in their wolf forms. Why couldn’t they have stayed like that?

“I don’t know why you’re into this bitch,” Thor says, spitting at me.

He misses, but he looks like he wants to do worse.

His lip is split. I hope hitting his face off that tree stump really hurt.

He deserves worse. They all do.

I don’t stick around to find out anything more about their sick plans for me.

I take off, bolting deeper into the woods. They'll have to shift to chase me, and that means I get another shot at messing them up while they're in dumb wolf mode. I don't count on being hit in the side with something while I'm running, or crashing to the ground hard as my body goes limp.

I shift to my human form without trying, and I push hard to shift back, but I can't move a damn muscle much less force a change in form.

Panic swells inside me. They shot me with something!

I can't move anything more than the muscles in my face.

I'm paralysed, and it feels like I'm about to pass out.

Orion's the one who leans over me a moment later, waving a tranquilizer gun in his hand and giving me a suggestive smile. "You think we didn't know where you'd run to when we announced our plans? We knew. You can't hide anything from us."

He gets closer, his eyes darkening. "Sweet dreams, Lita. I really hope you don't wake up to a nightmare."

He kisses me on the temple, as if he still wants me to think he's the nice one.

I can't keep my eyes open, and I'm starting to think that's probably for the best.

Goddess of Wolves, help me now and I'll never ask for anything again as long as I live.

A tear rolls down my cheek, and I feel someone's rough,
disgusting tongue lick it away.

I fall into darkness as the sedative Orion shot me with kicks
in.

I don't know if I'll ever see the sun again.

The Rejected continues in Claimed by Monsters.

Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed *Rejected by Wolves!* Don't worry, this is only the first part of Lita's story, which is completed in *Claimed by Monsters*, coming soon.

This story is set in the same universe as my Hybrid Shifters world, though it doesn't have any of the character crossovers as any of the other books in that series, so I've chosen to list it as its own thing.

If you loved this book, please consider leaving a review.

Thank you!

Sign up to my author newsletter to make sure you never miss a release, and you'll be sent *Charming Their Djinn*, a completed trilogy of steamy, suspenseful novellas:

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Sweet Omegaverse Series

You may enjoy this series if you enjoy my *Hybrid Shifters* books, however, please be aware that unlike all my other books, some of the main male characters have intimate relationships with each other as well as with the female main character in this series.

[Secret Omega](#) is the first standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Secret who moves to the big city for college and quickly discovers that pretending to be a Beta is harder than she realized. Note: The Alphas have intimate relationships with their male Omega in this book.

[Lost Omega](#) is the second standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Ember who is grieving the loss of a mate when her life at the academy is suddenly turned upside down.

Note: There are no intimate relationships between the men in this book.

[Broken Omega](#) is the third standalone in this new series, about an Omega called Brooke who escapes the academy and drives her mates crazy as she builds a new life for herself.

Note: Most of the male characters have intimate relationships with each other in this book.

[Stolen Omega](#) is the fourth standalone in this new series, about popstar Omega Zelena who gets kidnapped on the way to her next tour stop.

Note: Most of the male characters have intimate relationships with each other in this book.

More books in this series are coming soon.

So far, I have books planned for Leanne, Beth, and Lana!

Hybrid Shifters World Books

If you like my *Sweet Omegaverse* series, you may also enjoy my *Hybrid Shifters* world. These are suspenseful and steamy new adult reverse harem paranormal romances. The novels can be read as standalones, but the following reading order is recommended if you'd prefer to avoid spoilers!

[Vicious Love](#) follows Cheryl, a witch being sent to a wolf academy against her wishes.

[Shifting Hearts](#) follows Rachel who needs to escape a boyfriend who's trying to kill her.

[Hybrid Rejected](#) follows Amanda, a hybrid who's rejected by her true mate.

[Runaway Mate](#) follows Jillian as she rejects a chosen mate and runs away to find a better life.

[Hybrid Hearts](#) brings Amanda, Rachel, Jillian and Cheryl back with their mates for a novella that hints at how their

stories will continue in future standalones!

[Necromancer Bitten](#) follows necromancer Kelly as she travels to a facility and meets vampires.

[Moon Cursed](#) follows Cheryl's pack as when Oscar is accused of murder by another pack.

[Shifting Spirits](#) follows Rachel and her mates into a mansion full of ghosts on New Year's Eve.

[Vampire Bait](#) follows Roxy as she adapts to life on her own now that Kelly no longer needs her help.

[Hybrid Forgotten](#) follows Amanda and her mates as they're tested by a memory-wiping spell.

More books in this series are coming soon!

Author Links

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