

BLOOD BROTHERS
PART THREE

SAVAGE

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Savage Trap (A Reverse Harem Shifter Omegaverse)

Blood Brothers – PART THREE

By Roxy Collins

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Savage Trap is a shifter omegaverse reverse harem romance and is the third book in the Blood Brothers series. If you are unsure what this means, please check the Author's Note. **It is a continuing story and therefore ends on a cliffhanger.** It is recommended for 18+ due to language, violence and sexual situations.

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Author's Note

A quick peek into the world you'll find in this book.

Omegaverse – this book is all about omegas, with the scent glands, heats, adaptive body parts, and knotting associated with this genre. If you are not sure what that means, the Omegaverse is an alternate universe where humans fit into three categories – alphas, betas, or omegas – and have both human and animalistic traits. Relationships are often driven by the sexual, beast-like connection formed between alphas and omegas. This book is a mash-up of this universe and shifters (werewolves), so expect heat, heart, flying fur and messy knots!

Shifters – yes, there are werewolves in this Omegaverse. The three categories – alpha, beta and omega – all come with wolves inside them they can shift into under certain circumstances. That means you get all the growly goodness of alphas and the sweet temptation of omegas, in a furry package.

Reverse Harem – this is a Why Choose story, but in the form of a pack. In this book, our heroine is already with multiple partners who form her pack.

Steam – the fun times continue from the first duet and MM activity is both separate from and part of the pack scenes. Please take note if this isn't for you.

Cliffhanger – This part of the story ends on a cliffy. Sorry about that. But PART TWO isn't far away!

Setting – Apologies to my Chicago readers, setting the Alpha Kings loose in your city wasn't intentional. I know the Loop is actually a great place, so please suspend belief and don't take offense!

Trigger warning

This is a reverse harem romance, so please take care if you are sensitive to some subjects.

- Medium-level violence and discussions of extreme violence
- Consensual sexual acts, including group scenes with multiple partners and MM activity
- Bad language of all stripes, including lots of dirty talk!



Elvi

Are you enjoying your bath, princeshë?

I surge upright as Arben's voice slides through our bondlink like warm honey. A wave of watery bubbles launches over the lip of the tub, but I barely notice as I open my mind to my mate. It's been nearly two days since he last checked in, and the relief makes me tremble. Which is nuts, I know. He's *mjeku i vdekjes* - The Death Doctor. He's not just incredibly skilled at hunting down our enemies, but he's also the guardian of our fated pack, which practically makes him a mythical being.

But every time he insists on going dark, as he calls it, I pine. There's no other word for the hollow feeling in my chest, or the doubts and insecurities that rush in to fill the void. Maybe my dad is right and it's just separation anxiety, but I can feel a growing weakness in our bond, like a bruise that won't heal. Which scares the shit out of me. Because deep down I know Arben will never truly come home – never truly be ours – until he's ended every last threat to our pack.

And that's not an easy thing to guarantee when it comes to the Starling-Ferrier Pack.

But my wolf is purring now, and I know Arben can hear the smile in my voice as I murmur aloud, "I'll enjoy it a lot more if you come join me, Alpha."

I wish I could, princeshë. His frustrated growl echoes through our bond. *But I'm still an hour away. And even then, I'm not in a state to touch you.*

He means he's a bloody mess, which I've told him repeatedly isn't an issue. As far as I'm concerned, every drop of our enemies' blood should be celebrated by the whole pack. In fact, I'm more than ready to get a little grit

under my claws again.

“I want to help more, Arben. You shouldn’t be doing so much on your own.”

It’s not the first time I’ve told him this, and I know the whole pack agrees with me. But until he’s put the last of the Dark River Pack in the ground, Arben won’t rest. And as much as he respects our abilities, he’s used to working alone. It’s beyond frustrating, but the last thing I want to do is add to his burdens.

Will you help me pass the time, princesshë? The road between us is long and dark tonight.

The weariness in his voice pulls at my heart, so I swallow down my disappointment. He’s reached out to me, and I need to give him whatever he needs.

Anything, Arben.

He growls again, this time in satisfaction. *Then kiss our perfect princi for me. I need to feel your pleasure through the bond.*

I raise my eyebrows at Kelly, who’s sitting at the other end of the giant tub. Given the grin on his face, Arben must have opened the bondlink to include him in his request.

Not that he needed to. Kelly and I are always on the same wavelength. Which means he’s just as happy as I am to give our mate the pleasure boost he needs. Not that I’m above a little teasing as I stretch out my leg and dig my toes into Kelly’s ribs.

How about a song instead? I could serenade you with my amazing musical talent.

It’s a lie. My singing voice is atrocious, and would probably make him run off the road and into a tree. But Arben purrs, the link throbbing with dark promise. *Oh, I plan to hear you sing, princesshë. Our princi knows all your*

sweet spots, after all.

As if to prove him right, Kelly takes my foot between his hands and starts pressing his thumbs into my sole. He brushes over the old bite scar, and even though he knows the trauma that put it there, his touch doesn't waver. His focus is completely on my pleasure, and my moans echo around the bathroom as he works deep into my tired muscles. And straight down the bond, because Arben gives a throaty chuckle. *Music to my ears, princesshë.*

I just roll my eyes and give myself over to Kelly's clever fingers. He gives both of my feet the royal treatment, massaging out the strain from a long day of defensive training with our mates. He then works his way up my legs, kissing and sucking every inch of skin until Arben sighs down the bond. Kelly might be new to the female form, but he's quickly become an expert at making me fall apart. Doesn't matter we're both omegas and there's not an alpha knot between us, Kelly can still work me into a panting lather in no time at all. But as his hands slide over my thighs and his body rises over mine in the bath, he pauses. I stare up at him, golden and gleaming, as he cocks his head. "You going to give me my orders, Alpha, or am I improvising here?"

I snigger at his pure brat tone. Kelly was raised as the heir to a billion-dollar fortune, and it shows in moments like this. But he knows Arben is ultimately in charge of our pleasure. Our alpha never demands control – and there are still plenty of orgasms to be had in his absence – but when Arben's part of the picture, we all willingly surrender to his direction.

Can you see yourself in the mirror, princesshë?

I giggle, because Rory sweet-talked Arben into putting a new mirror in the cabin bathroom, replacing the one with the cracked glass and tarnished frame. It's understandable, since Rory is as pretty as they come, and loves nothing more than to fuck to his own reflection. But Arben is giant sized, and the mirror hangs so high on the wall, I can barely see it from where I'm sitting.

It's a bit of a stretch, to be honest.

Then up on your knees, my love.

I pout and bury myself deeper under the bubbles. *But it's cold out there.*

Oh, I plan to warm you up. The promise in his voice makes me shiver and squirm to the edge of the tub, slowly rising to my knees. My nipples instantly tighten in the cool air, my fingers curling as I grip the porcelain.

Join her, Princi, and tell me how you look together.

There's a swish of water behind me, and then Kelly's perfect face appears over my shoulder in the mirror. He looks like a dark fae prince with his gleaming eyes and pale skin, his jaw and cheekbones as sharp as blades. I watch, my heart in my throat, as his lips slide across my shoulder and then pin my earlobe between his teeth. His brazen grin sends a bolt of lust through me. "Hello, Angel."

"Hi, Sunshine," I whisper, my head falling back to rest against his neck. I can still see us through slitted eyes, and like this we could be a half-formed sculpture. Our skin looks like damp clay, and our hair – his tawny gold, while mine is more silver – lies in dark rivers down our shoulders. Together, in the flickering candlelight, it's hard to say where he ends and I begin. *She is me and I am her.*

The words resonate through our bond. Because Kelly and I don't just look alike. We are two halves of the same soul.

Which makes our alpha growl low in his throat. *Then why are you not joined in every way?*

I hum as Kelly's hands slide up my hips, feathering across my ribs before they settle over my breasts. He kneads them like I really am made from clay, his long fingers rolling and stretching my nipples. And then I feel the graze of something cold and sharp, two perfect claws glinting in the mirror.

I whine, my wolf instantly on the rise. If Kelly shares my soul, our wolves

share one mind, and that's almost exclusively fixated on how soon they can be together again. I feel it now, their connection humming in my blood like warm honey.

“Do you know how much my wolf loves you, Angel?” Kelly whispers, his teeth sharp on the sensitive flesh of my ear. “Every single moment of every single day, he's thinking about you.” His hands flex, his palms cupping my breasts while those claws circle my nipples. “He's obsessed with you. Can't stop putting pictures in my head about everything he wants to do to you.”

I moan, my hands slipping from the bath edge to cup his hips and pull him tight. His cock is a ridge of soapy muscle, grinding against my ass cheeks in a perfect tease. “Same here.” I'm almost panting as I press back against him. “Your wolf is the star of all the furry porn in my head.”

We both giggle, while our wolves pace impatiently under our skin. They were running under the moon only a couple of hours ago, but talk about separation anxiety. They're like a couple of horny teenagers, constantly whining to be let out so they can go meet up in the bushes.

But for now, this moment is ours, and I admire my man-wolf in the mirror. What Kelly's doing with his claws is even more controlled than a half-shift and isn't just sexy as hell, but also a sign of how far he's come. This is man and wolf in perfect harmony, and I feel a burst of pride, even as I moan at the way his claws play me. Winding me up so tight, Arben has to remind us to move things along.

Never one to disappoint our alpha, Kelly retracts his claws so he can drop his hands between my thighs, opening me up from both sides. He doesn't tease me now, his fingers sliding through my folds to my clit, while the swollen head of his cock is notched between my lips. Kelly might be an omega, but his dick is as masculine as they come, the stretch as he works inside enough to tear a moan from my throat.

“That’s it, Angel,” he purrs as he slides in another throbbing inch. “Look at how well you’re taking me.”

My hips dance, caught between his fingers on my slippery nub and that thick invasion from behind. Kelly is so in tune with my omega body, sometimes I forget he was raised a rugby-playing alpha. But when he handles me like this, working his way inside me while he pins me to the side of the bath, I’m reminded that he owns my body in every way.

“More, Sunshine,” I whimper, reaching behind us to dig my nails into his muscled ass. “Give me everything.”

He groans at my needy demand, wrapping an arm across my chest to pull me tight. With his lips pressed to my brow, and his eyes burning into mine, we slip into our perfect rhythm, bodies so close I can almost feel his wolf’s fur brushing my skin.

Candlelight flickers on the bathroom walls as he rocks me against the tub. We’re barely an outline now, the mirror dissolving in the heat of our panting breaths. Kelly peppers kisses across my shoulders, before biting down on my bond marks. He covers each with his half-formed fangs, nibbling just hard enough to bring the blood to the surface. And after each bite, he grunts filthy promises into my ear as he soothes them with a lick. I’m so far gone, it takes me a moment to hear the sounds Arben is making through the bond. “Are you touching yourself, Alpha?”

Instead of answering, he flashes a picture into my mind. My mouth drops open, because it’s even hotter than the furry porn on constant replay. Arben is standing in a dark glade, completely naked from his last shift, head thrown back and hand furiously working his shaft as he rides our pleasure. Kelly groans, clearly getting the same visual, his hips pounding harder as he pinches my clit. I’m so close, all it takes is the sight of our alpha’s release pulsing from his body for me to tip over the edge. Kelly’s cry joins Arben’s

roar as we both collapse against the side of the tub.

Bliss. There's no other word for the feeling of my mates inside me, buried deep in both my body and my mind. I cling to our bondlink as Kelly eases me around, our chests mashed together so I can breathe him in. Now that we're bonded, his scent is both sharper and more complex because I can taste all of his mates on his skin. Lightning for Rory, sunlight for Cam, and gun oil for Link. But the one I'm missing most is that wisp of smoky leather... "Arben? Are you nearby?"

Not nearly close enough, he tells us through the bond and I feel Kelly sag against me, our disappointment palpable in the air. *Look after each other, and know that I long to be with you more than my next breath.*

I know it's true. Arben's joy when he's with us is the best feeling in the world. But right now, that's bittersweet. Because as satisfying as it is to share our pleasure with him, my needy soul craves more. What I really want is *him*. To see him and touch him, and know, in my bones, that he's here to stay.

And when his presence fades from our bond, stretched thin both by distance and our demons, I bury my face against Kelly's neck.

"You're sad, Angel. Am I losing my touch?"

We're still clasped together like a pair of barnacles, so I ease back with a sigh. Kelly's angelic appearance has taken a bit of a battering. He's still rosy-cheeked, but his pupils are blown wide, his lips swollen, every moment of our pleasure written on his face. But I can't hide my aching heart as I gaze at him. "I live for your next touch, Sunshine. It's just that I wish Arben was here with us for real."

"Me too, babe." He hugs me tight, then feathers kisses over my pouting lips. "I keep hoping I'll find him sitting in the corner like a dark god on his sexy throne. Back straight, thighs open, and that bossy smirk on his face as he tells me to make you scream."

“Mmmm.” It’s a delicious idea, but I have an even better image engraved on my brain. “Or what about when he puts us *both* on his lap? Last time, I’m pretty sure you out-screamed me.”

A blush climbs his neck that has nothing to do with the bath water, and I lean forward to chase it with my tongue. His skin is as soft as silk, except for the ring of mating bites on his throat. He groans as I suck Arben’s mark into my mouth, but I pull away when I don’t feel an answering throb from the bond.

“Shit,” he sighs, reaching out to tuck a damp curl behind my ear. “The fantasy is good, but we need a dose of the real thing, don’t we?”

I nod as I rub at the ache in my chest. “Especially since we’re leaving first thing tomorrow. I know he’s going to join us, but if it’s hard for him to be with us here, on our pack lands, what’s it going to be like in Chicago?”

“Frustrating as hell.” He kisses me again, although this time it’s more soothing than sensual. “But we have to think of the long game. If we get this council set up the way Lucas wants, we might finally have more allies than enemies. And that’ll get us one step closer to having Arben come home for good.”

I nod my head, taking comfort from his words. We’re both the children of powerful, political alphas, but Kelly was raised more in that life than I was. Until he presented as omega and was shipped to the States for some bullshit reprogramming, he was the son of the Alpha of London, and heir to the massive Prior empire. His dad is dead now, his uncle in the wind, and his mom back with her birth pack in France, but even freshly fucked with fingertips like prunes, Kelly still looks every inch the prince Arben claims him to be.

“Come on, Angel.” He gives my butt a soft pinch. “Let’s grab some of those sweets you like and have a feast in the nest.”

I hum as we clamber out of the tub, exchanging quick, teasing kisses as we dry each other with fluffy towels. We don't bother with a lot of clothes since the cabin is warm, and we'll just take them off again when we get distracted. But I manage to pull on a silky black robe before I chase his snug boxer briefs into the kitchen. Only to stop dead when I see Lincoln sitting at the counter, watching us.

Which reminds me of another enemies-to-allies thing I need to sort out.

"Hey, Link," Kelly says, rounding the island to the pantry where we keep the good snacks. His tone is light, his wave breezy, but I can feel the throb of emotion in our bond before he muffles it. Like always, it makes guilt burn in my belly. Because even after six months of technically being in the same pack, I've still got a whole lot of mixed feelings about Lincoln Hila.

Starling, I remind myself as I lean against the counter next to him. He might not be a fully-fledged Ferrier yet, but he's been a Starling longer than I have. "What brings you by?"

This is our normal now. Polite conversation that ignores all the giant elephants we're riding around on.

Link stares at me with his unblinking dark eyes. "The guys wanted to know if Arben's coming home tonight."

"And you drew the short straw?" He cocks a brow at me and I wave a hand around the kitchen. "They sent you to find out?"

"No. I volunteered." It's on the tip of my tongue to ask if he enjoyed eavesdropping on us in the bathroom, but my wolf bites my tongue. Which is just as well. We don't have any secrets in our pack. No locked doors, or little gossip circles. It was something I insisted upon after the bullshit my supposed stepbrothers put me through. Not that a fated pack with all its interconnected bonds can get away with hiding much.

"Everything ready for tomorrow?" I ask. We've discussed the travel

arrangements until I could rehearse them in my sleep, but this is an olive branch of sorts, since Link is a walking security log.

He relaxes a fraction, and I sense a trickle of gratitude through my bond with Kelly. “Yeah, we’re good. Plane is your dad’s, the pilot is pack, and everything checked out at the Chicago end. Lucas’ top guys will stay here to look after Mrs. Lewis and the rescued omegas.”

I should feel reassured, but if the last few months have taught me anything, it’s that the best laid plans can get blown to hell. “You checked in with Bonnie and Zack?”

The siblings are the unofficial leaders of the omegas who have been staying with us for the past couple of months. They’re the first group to seek refuge at the Ferrier Estate since I’ve been here, channeled to us through Lucas’ contacts in the Omega Underground. The more I learn about what they’ve suffered, the more I admire my father. And the more determined I am to help him form a council of pack alphas who’ll help protect all omegas.

That’s what the trip to Chicago is for. To build a better future out of the ashes of the Dark River Pack, and Roan Risha, the last High Alpha of the east coast.

“They’ll be alright, Elvi,” Link says, and I realize I’ve been gnawing on my nails. I’ve bitten them down to a ragged mess; something my wolf is not happy about at all. “You and Kelly have done a great job of patching them back up.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to snap at him. To rage at the fact they’re hurt in the first place. That they were abused and exploited simply because they’re omegas in an alpha’s world. But that’s a dark road to go down with a guy who sold me to an omega auction a few months ago. Yes, it was to save Kelly, and he’s apologized multiple times, but being this close to so many damaged omegas is making it hard to let go of my own demons.

“Maybe we should go over it one more time.” I catch the slight slumping of Kelly’s shoulders out of the corner of my eye, but cling to my resolve. “If Arben has to spend his night running down our enemies, then we can give up another hour or two, can’t we?”

“Of course, Sunshine,” Kelly says, opening a container of Arben’s home baked *sheqerpare*, the little syrup-soaked butter cookies we’ve all grown addicted to. “I’ll put a pot of coffee on, too.”

Links’ black eyes cling to mine for a moment, but then he nods and opens his laptop. “Better to be safe than sorry.



Elvi

We finish rehashing our plans at midnight, and I end up sleeping in the omega wing of the mansion, sending Kelly off with Link. He gives me a sad look as we go our separate ways, but I know they'll both appreciate their time alone together. They don't get nearly enough of it to keep their mate bond happy, but I'm a greedy bitch when it comes to sharing my Sunshine.

Besides, my plan to spend our last night in the cabin together kind of fell apart when Arben didn't show. The cabin was his, first – well, after it was my mom's, when her uncle was the groundskeeper for the Ferrier estate – and every inch reminds me of him. It's where we stayed when we were first mated, when it was just us against the world. We've made love in every room, and our combined scent - sweet musk and smoky leather – is soaked into every surface. It's my refuge; my soul den. But with Arben out there fighting our battles alone, those safe cottage walls feel like a cage around me.

The omega wing, on the other hand, smells nothing like my mate. Pain leaves a distinct odor on omegas, which most closely resembles scorched sugar. But after a couple of months of making this part of the mansion their own, it's softened to the scent of bruised rose petals. I'm glad it's also lost its hospital smell; some of the omegas were injured when they arrived and we set up a clinic at the end of the floor. But the antiseptic in the air dragged me right back to the townhouse in New York, and the last days I shared with my mom.

“No bad memories today,” I whisper to myself as I open my eyes and peel back the thick white covers. Everything in the omega suites has a soothing, neutral tone, which perfectly suits my mood right now. But nothing beats the sight of electric green eyes smiling into mine. I reach out and run my fingers

through Rory's golden-brown hair, playing with the swoopy quiff at the front. "When did you sneak in here?"

"Not long ago." My mate tilts his head back, practically purring as I run my fingers down his cheek. But then his eyes pop open wide and he shakes off my touch. "But I'm not here for any funny business. We've only got an hour to get to the airport, so I'm your wake-up call."

I quirk a brow at him, because funny business is Rory's middle name. "No good morning kiss?" He bites his lip, then ducks in for the fastest cheek peck in history. "That's it? If you want me to get out of this cozy bed, Rory, you're going to have to tempt me with something good."

"But I *am* being good!" He groans like he's being tortured. "You still have to have breakfast, and if I distract you, Mrs. Lewis said she won't give me any of her chocolate fudge cookies for the flight."

I smirk at the thought of my dad's tiny omega housekeeper withholding anything from Rory. He basically has every female in a one-hundred-mile radius eating out of the palm of his hand. "Okay, but just so you know, I've packed extra *sheqerpare* for the plane..."

"Nope," he says, even though I can feel his gaze on my fresh bite marks, arousal humming down our bond. "I *promised*. So you can't have your way with me, Angel, even if you beg."

"Really?" I have to swallow a laugh, because Rory is down for it, anywhere, anytime. Even if I wanted to beg, he's usually got me bent over some surface before I can get my panties off. And so I grab his hand and press it low on my belly, rocking my hips for good measure. "Even if I need you to rub this ache away with your big alpha knot?"

His pupils blow, and he gives a helpless whine. "Fuck. Me. Cam, this is a freaking emergency! Can you distract Mrs. Lewis while I give our girl what she needs?"

I turn and grin at Cam, who's lying on my other side. I smelled his fresh air and sunshine scent before I even opened my eyes, but it still makes my pulse quicken to find him in my bed. Where Rory leaves me in no doubt of his affection, Cam is quieter, his approach more subtle. But ever since I took his mating bite, I have a new understanding of exactly how deep his feelings run. "I take it you're the back-up plan?"

"That depends on you," he says, his pale blue eyes hooded as he studies my face. The first time I saw Cam, I thought he had a surfer vibe with his tanned skin, ripped torso, and messy, sun-streaked hair. It still surprises me to see him with a buzz cut, but since he did it as part of a rescue mission into the Tower, I don't let on how much I miss running my fingers through those golden waves. "It's your choice, Elvi. We can go down to breakfast like Rory wants, or I can eat you out here, and we can refuel with *sheqerpare* on the plane."

Rory splutters behind me, but I just grin at Cam. There's a reason they call guys with his training head-twisters, because he knows exactly which buttons to push to screw with people.

"You're mean," I whisper, leaning forward to brush my lips against his. He tastes like toothpaste, alpha musk, and the smoky-sweetness of French Roast coffee. It's one of my favorite flavors in the world - and I'd give just about anything to spend a leisurely hour with Cam buried between my legs. But a glance at the sunlight filtering through the drapes tells me we really do have to get moving. "Hold that thought, though. I might need the distraction if flying freaks me out as much as it used to."

"Hell, yes," Rory crows, leaping out of bed. "Let's eat now and fuck on the plane."

I shoot Cam an amused look right as Link sticks his head through the door to hurry us up. Link's gaze rakes over me, lingering on the bite marks Kelly

gave me in the bath, so I turn my back as I throw on my jeans and a sweater. No point rubbing his face in it when he's the only alpha in our pack whose bite I haven't taken.

Although we've barely made it into the hall before Rory slips his arms around my waist and gives Link a smug grin. "We've called dibs on Angel's first mile-high hump."

Link ignores him, but I shove an elbow into Rory's ribs. "I seem to remember Cam offering to eat me out. How does that translate to fucking you both in first class?"

Rory just smacks a kiss on my cheek. "When your dad owns the plane, it's all first class, baby. And you know that as soon as my boy Cam gets you going, my chances at a happy ending are pretty much guaranteed."

It's my turn to splutter, but I can't really argue. Pack life is all about sweet moments that end up escalating into sweaty, steamy puppy piles.

But I pull away from Rory when we get to the end of the hallway and find Bonnie and Zack waiting for me. They look like teenage twins with their flyaway hair and delicate features, but they're actually a couple of years older than me. They're standing just inside the door to their suite, their arms folded tight to their chests and their eyes on the floor. I wave the guys off, and as soon as the alphas have headed downstairs, they both relax a bit. "Sorry to disturb you, Elvi," Bonnie tells me in her near-whisper, "but we just wanted to show you something."

"You're not disturbing me," I reply, and follow them into their room. The drapes are closed and only one lamp glows in the corner. But I also note the candy wrappers on the bed and the magazines and clothes scattered about. It's a good sign, since most of the omegas were too afraid to leave a wrinkle in their sheets when they first arrived.

"Zack, show her." Bonnie gives the male omega a gentle nudge. "You can

trust Elvi.”

That gets my attention, and I give Zack a reassuring smile. He’s a little taller than me but painfully thin, and every time I look at him, my wolf wants me to give him a hug. But just because he looks vulnerable doesn’t mean he wants the world to see him that way, so I always hold back.

“I was practicing the meditation exercises you taught me, and then this happened.” He holds out his arm, and I stare at the light dusting of black fur on his wrist. It’s nothing like his own white-blond hair and is a stark contrast to his milky skin. “I don’t know why it’s so dark... our wolves are s’posed to have our coloring, right?”

It’s true, but his face is so anxious, I refuse to give him something else to worry about. “The more I learn about my wolf, the less I know, but I can tell you it’s amazing, Zack. Partial shifts like this are high-level power.”

A pleased blush climbs his pale cheeks, and he gives a relieved sigh. “I thought... I was worried it meant something’s wrong with me.”

It’s not the first time he’s expressed this fear. In fact, most of the omegas have said something similar while we’ve been teaching them to shift at will. It’s one of the more fucked up aspects of our biology; that omegas can’t draw out their wolves without an alpha to command them. But Kelly and I have mastered the skill, and while not all the omegas have shown an interest yet, Bonnie and Zack have been two of our most eager students.

And it hurts my heart to see the self-doubt in his eyes now. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you, Zack. My wolf thinks you’ve got a real beast lurking under your skin. This is probably just another sign of the power you’re going to have.”

His chest puffs up and I see a hint of masculine pride in his eyes. “Really? Your wolf told you that?”

“She’s very curious to meet him.” I lean forward and whisper in his ear. “I

think he's going to be a complete *badass*."

Zack laughs, while Bonnie clutches his arm and stares up at him like he just slipped into tights and a cape. As they both study the fur on his wrist with wide eyes, I wonder if they're actually siblings. They sleep in the same bed – which isn't that strange for shifters who've been through a trauma – but they're never more than a room apart, and my wolf thinks they might be a bonded pair. I'm not sure if that means they have an alpha out there somewhere who they never talk about, or if their bond just works differently. Like I said, the more I learn, the less I really know about the wonders of omega biology.

"Just keep practicing, and we'll do a session with my wolf when we get back."

They nod eagerly, their attention solely on each other as they pet Zack's fur, but I feel a pang of disquiet as I head downstairs. Logically, I know there's no safer place for them than the Ferrier Estate, but it still makes me uneasy to leave them. All the omegas deserve protection, but there's a special place in my heart for Bonnie and Zack.

And then there's Mrs. Lewis. She's a tiny, wrinkled omega who's been the Ferrier's housekeeper since my dead granddad was in diapers. But she's taught me a lot about inner strength, not only in the competent way she runs an overflowing house, but in the care and compassion she shows to everyone, no matter their designation. And the way she turns my growly alphas into obedient little pups is a skill I hope to one day master for myself.

"I'm not one for lectures," she says a half hour later as we watch my pack load our luggage into an SUV, "but remember to lean on them a little, Elvana. You don't have to do everything for yourself."

"I'm trying."

"I know you are. But until you accept them fully, your pack bonds will be

out of balance.”

I nod, but when my gaze brushes Link’s, I look away. If anything is lopsided in our pack, it’s my relationship with him. But there’s not much I can do about it until we’re back home and things have settled down.

Because procrastinating is so much easier than having an adult conversation about my feelings.

Ugh.

Mrs. Lewis gives me an amused look. “You’re strong, Elvana. That means you can do most things for yourself. But remember, it’s a gift to offer others the chance to do something for you.”

I get what she’s saying, but I can’t help but think of the Tower and the bloodbath that saw me hunt down Roan Bisha. I never would’ve got out of their alive without my pack, but I was the one who tore him to pieces in my wolf form. I could argue it was in self-defense, but it was pure vengeance that drove me. That made it so personal. Not just for me, and what he threatened to do to my pack, but for my mom, and all those years when Bisha treated her like trash.

“I just wish Arben was with us,” I murmur, my gaze drifting to the woods leading to our cabin. “I mean, I know he’ll be there with us in Chicago, but I don’t want him in the shadows. I need him by my side.”

She pats my hand in sympathy. “He thinks if he stays too close, he’ll get distracted, and something will slip past him. And keeping you safe means more than his own happiness.” She leans closer, her gaze intense. “He’s a guardian, Elvana. It would destroy him if anything happened to you.”

Only my dad and Mrs. Lewis know about us being a fated pack, which basically means we’re a fairytale come to life. Once upon a time, it wasn’t uncommon for a pack to have two omegas at its core, with a guardian to oversee the bondmates. We might not be all the way there yet, but we’re

stronger through our shared abilities, and more in tune through our shared bonds. Link and Cam have been researching the phenomena, and according to the history books, fated packs were typically bigger and more powerful than any other. In essence, a formidable team. Which is exactly why Arben should come home, or let us join him and work this mission together.

But my argument isn't with Mrs. Lewis, who loves Arben nearly as much as I do. So I give her a quick hug and wait until she's gone inside and locked the mansion up tight before I join the guys.

We're leaving the estate with a squad of my dad's best guards and all of Link's security upgrades, but I'm still feeling out of sorts when we get to the airstrip. I've barely said a word the entire way there, and I've bitten one of my nails down so far it's bleeding.

"Is this because of the flight or the destination?" Cam asks as he studies my messed-up manicure. We're crossing the tarmac to dad's jet, which looks disturbingly small from this angle. I guess most people would get excited about a trip on a private plane, but I feel an uncomfortable swoop in my belly as I think about spending the next couple of hours locked up inside it.

"Neither. I mean, I went to boarding school in Europe, so I've been on planes before, but never one this small."

"Well, private jets are often safer than commercial planes, since they're better maintained, and can hop around any bad weather. Plus, your dad's pilot is an ace." He kisses my palm, filling my clenching belly with the good kind of butterflies. "You're in safe hands, I promise."

"I just hoped we'd all be together." Missing Arben is a given, but I hold up my phone, displaying the message I just received. "Dad's delayed and going to miss the flight. Something to do with the Omega Underground, so I'm glad he's taking care of it, but the timing sucks."

Cam nudges Link in the back. He's wearing jeans and a black bomber

jacket, and I can see the outline of a handgun under the fabric. “You across the Lucas situation?”

“It’s a hiccup, not a problem.” We’re almost at the airstairs that lead up to the plane and I watch Link’s hand slide under his jacket. I’m not at all surprised when he pulls out a pistol – one of a matching set my dad gave him as a welcome-to-the-family present. “He’s already booked on a commercial flight in a couple of hours. Two of his guys are with him, and I’ve checked out the pilots and cabin crew. No red flags.”

I’m tempted to suggest we just wait for him, but we’ve got commitments at the other end we can’t push back. Dad has put a lot of effort into his alliance with our host, the Alpha of Chicago, who’ll be acting as a kind of peacekeeper during the negotiations. Since we’re guests in his city, we need to be on our best behavior, which includes making a good first impression.

Politics. *Ugh*. If it wasn’t so important to my dad and the future safety of omegas on the east coast, I’d shift into my wolf and spend the next week chasing birds around Lake Michigan.

We wait as Link heads up the stairs first, his gun drawn and pointed into the plane. Only once he’s been inside and ruled out an ambush does he motion for the rest of us to follow. The pilot and flight attendant are waiting for us at the top, and as soon as they realize I’m a nervous flier, the pilot invites me to check out the cockpit. Kelly sticks close to my side, our fingers entwined, while the pilot patiently answers my questions about parachutes and snow geese flying into propellers. He makes it pretty clear that he can handle any emergency, and I’m feeling a lot less jittery as we buckle into the luxurious cabin and the attendant brings me a champagne cocktail.

The seats are in pairs, facing each other, and Rory is sprawled in the one opposite, sipping from his own glass. Kelly is sitting next to me, Link and Cam buckling into the seats across the aisle. I take a sip from the chilled flute

and then set it aside, too keyed up to appreciate the bubbly cocktail. When I look out the window, the stairs are being lifted, and the attendant is locking the door. No one looks worried, but I'm hyper aware of every rattle and hum as the engine fires up and the plane starts to taxi down the runway.

"It's all normal," Kelly tells me, squeezing my hand. "We'll be there in a couple of hours. You want to watch a movie or play some chess?"

Kelly is crazy good at the game and has been trying to teach me, but I'm distracted by a thumping sound and suck in a breath as the world dips away under us. I catch a glimpse of green trees and rooftops, and then the bright blue sky is suddenly all around us. "Crap. We're up already?"

"Yep, we're on our way, Angel." He gives me one of his heart-melting smiles and kisses the back of my hand. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

I bite hard on my trembling lip, my ragged nails digging into the buttery leather armrests. "Even when I'm a shaking, sweaty wreck?"

He pins me with his perfect whiskey gaze. "*Especially* then. You're the girl who walks into lions' dens, Angel. They don't make people braver than that."

That's high praise coming from Kelly. On paper he might be a golden boy born into eye-watering wealth, but like me, he was used and abused, exiled from his home, and punished for being born an omega. He was then sold to an asshole alpha who held him captive for nearly a year while his pack did literally everything to find him. That piece of trash is dead now – torn apart by Link in the Tower – but Kelly still has nightmares that he's trapped and alone.

Which is just another reason we need to get this alpha council in place.

Because it's either that, or Arben will spend the rest of his life trying to save us from the shadows.

But I'm too tense to think about that now. Instead, I lean into the aisle and cock a brow at Cam. "Ready to make good on your wake-up call, Alpha?"



Cam

Growing up, I thought I knew everything there was to know about mind games. The pack leaders saw it in me early, and I was eventually trained to be a medic with a specialty in mental manipulation. Shifters are notoriously hard to break through physical violence alone, and when we needed to get under someone's skin, I used a mix of drugs and psychology to find a way. But all those dark days of twisting heads never prepared me for how I react when Elvana crooks her little finger at me.

I'm unbuckled and on my feet in a second, raking a hand through hair that I shaved off months ago. But at least I'm not as goddamn obvious as Rory, who stares up at us like a whipped puppy.

"You can come too, Rory," she says with a smirk. "Just remember that the first orgasm is mine."

Rory looks affronted. "Babe, when have I ever left you hanging?"

"Never," she admits, "but I'm feeling pretty tense. You might have to hold out for longer than usual."

Rory's grin is suddenly dripping with sex. "Challenge accepted, little wolf."

The three of us head to the back of the plane, but only after Elvi has dropped a kiss on Kelly's head. When he sees what's going down, he's up and crossing the aisle to sit with Link, who has his laptop out and is obsessively checking his feeds. When Link looks up and catches my eye, there's a moment where I'd almost say he's tempted to come join us. But so far Elvi hasn't extended the invitation, and Link hasn't pushed the issue.

Which I know for a fact is messing with his head.

But I push the thought out of my mind as we step through the rear door

into a small bedroom. It's about what you'd expect on a plane, with most of the space given over to the bed. But we're not here for the accommodations and I smile as Elvi wraps her arms around my neck and presses her body to mine.

Yep, definitely here for her.

I don't try to muffle the purr in my chest as I back her up to the bed. I've been wanting to kiss her since she woke up, and I take my time dipping in and out of her mouth. Along with her sweet honey flavor, I can taste champagne of her tongue. But underneath it all is something that makes me pause. I try to catalog it against all the flavors I've ever tasted in her mouth and decide that the faint tang is loneliness.

Which, damn, is like a bolt straight to my chest.

The insecure asshole in me wants to pull away, maybe make up some excuse to bring the other guys in here, too. But I know the loneliness isn't about anyone on this plane. We can all feel the giant Arben-shaped hole in our bonds. And without our guardian around, it's easy for a pack like ours to start wondering how strong we really are. Our history isn't the best, and a lot of that comes down to the fucked-up mind games I unleashed on Elvana. I know Rory feels bad about the lies we told, and Link is kicking himself for putting her in harm's way, but when it comes down to it, I'm the one who set the betrayal in motion.

And I must be projecting all sorts of guilt, because Elvi pulls away from me right as Rory slaps me on the back. "Bro, I know you're into mindfucks, but your brain is kinda noisy right now. Any way you can turn it off?"

I roll my eyes at him, but I have to admit, the guy has a way of lightening any situation. "How about you take care of her pretty pussy while I whisper sweet nothing in her ears?"

Rory looks like I just handed him my last functioning organ. "For real?"

Fuck, I thought I was gonna have to make do with sucking her off your cock when you were done.”

He smirks at me, feeling a throb of arousal down our bond. We’re both pretty versatile when it comes to sex, but there’s nothing better than having one of our omega mates in the mix, feeding their pleasure between us like a live circuit.

And I can already feel the erotic tension in the air as Rory gets to work stripping Elvi out of her clothes. She’s wearing jeans and a sweater, and Rory makes a performance out of peeling the tight denim down her creamy thighs. She’s clutching his shoulders and shivering by the time he gets her naked, and it’s not because the cabin’s climate control has failed.

“So fucking beautiful,” I purr as Rory puts his hands on her hips and eases her down to the bed. For a moment, we both just stand over her, fully clothed, admiring every inch of her body. There’s new lean muscle on her frame since we started our daily conditioning and defensive sessions, but she’s still got plenty of soft curves for us to fall into, and I reach down and grab Rory’s zipper. “No way this can just be a quick fuck, Angel,” I tell her as I cup his impressive bulge. “We’re gonna have to take our time worshipping this body.”

She blushes pink at the comment, but the trickle of slick down her bare thigh makes us both grin like wolves.

I strip off Rory’s shirt, then deal with mine, but leave him to quickly work his way out of his own jeans. I keep mine on while I sit beside her on the bed and watch Rory drop to his knees. I’m so close I can hear her little panting breaths and see the gold flecks in his green eyes. Looking at either of them is one of my favorite things to do, but I brush Elvi’s hair back and whisper in her ear, “If you want him to clean up your slick, you’re gonna have to wrap those sweet thighs around his head, Angel.”

She gives a soft whine, but she's putty in my hands as I lift one leg and prop it over Rory's shoulder. He shoots me a grateful look before zeroing in on the slippery skin between her thighs. "Prettiest pussy in the world," he croons, brushing her folds with an admiring finger. The arousal coming off him sends a bolt of pure heat to my balls and I grab his finger, sucking it into my mouth. Her slick explodes on my tongue – all sweet honey and sizzling musk – wrapped in the flavor of my blood brother and best friend.

"Time to feast," I tell him, and he gives me another wolfish grin before he dips his head to chase her slick.

She melts onto the comforter and I settle back on an elbow, watching little spasms of pleasure flit across her face. But while Rory eats her pussy like he's a starving man, there's a crease between her brows that won't go away. She bites her lip as her gaze dances to the door, and I'm not surprised when she says, "Do you think they can hear us?"

Rory lifts his head and starts to grin, but I rest a hand on his shoulder to keep him quiet. "That's not for you to worry about right now," I tell her, a hint of command edging my voice. I'd never try to use my alpha power against her for real – mainly because she'd laugh in my face right before she kicked me in the balls – but I know it can be soothing when she's stressed.

"You're gonna have to keep quiet, omega," I tell her, my voice dropping an octave. She goes still for a moment, then relaxes into the mattress with a little sigh. "Can you swallow back all those sexy little whimpers for us? We wouldn't want to distract the pilot, after all..."

Her body tenses again, but there's a darker edge to her scent and more slick trickles down her thighs. Rory laps it up greedily, then looks at me like I'm conducting a pussy whispering class.

So I lick at the edge of her ear and give her more. "And when we're rocking into you, nice and slow, you're gonna be happy you're getting our

cocks at all. Because if we fucked you the way we plan to later, this plane would skid all over the sky.”

Elvi hisses in a breath, her fingers tightening in Rory’s hair and her toes curling along my calves. I smirk down at Rory, who’s still staring up at me with awe in his eyes. It would be good to have a direct bond to him so I could spell out my technique, but the best thing about Rory is he’s always happy to go with the flow. Or maybe he’s just realized our angel likes a little danger with her pleasure, because I can see the edge of a fang as he goes back to sucking on her clit.

We can both hear her heart rate speeding up, more of her sweet slick trickling out into his eager mouth. But even with his teeth brushing her bud, she’s still all tangled up in her head. He works her diligently while I tease her nipples, rolling and pinching them until they’re hard, pink pebbles. But her eyes keep flicking around the room, and I’m not sure she’s going to come this way at all.

Time to shift gears, I decide, and grabbing a clump of Rory’s hair, ease him back. They both stare at me, waiting for the next move, and I feel my frustration with Arben grow. It’s bad enough his absence is impacting our pack bonds, but it’s clearly eating away at our angel, and not in a fun, multiple orgasms kind of way.

Where the hell is our cock conductor when we need him?

“We’re gonna pin you to the mattress now, Angel,” I tell her, and slap Rory’s ass hard enough to make him hiss in appreciation. “Get up there and feed her your cock, brother.” Instead of moving, they both stare at me with limpid eyes and I arch a brow. “If he’s plugging your mouth, you won’t have a chance to distract the pilot, will you, omega?”

Elvi groans, pressing her head back into the pillow, and Rory finally gets the picture, crawling up her body with slinky, animal grace. He’s all

temptation with his cut muscles and tanned skin, and Elvi's eyes fall to half-mast as she watches him stalk her.

"There's nowhere for you to go, little wolf," he croons as he straddles her chest, his knees digging into the mattress as he strokes his cock. She opens her mouth eagerly, sticking out her pink tongue, and Rory groans loud enough to be heard in Chicago.

But I distract them both by shucking my jeans and sweeping my dick along her thighs, coating it in her slick. "Ready to stretch at both ends, sweetheart?"

She mumbles her assent and I look over Rory's shoulder to see that she's already stuffed with his cock. I smirk at the greedy asshole, then slide between her folds, my thumb curving over her clit, and I encourage her thighs to clamp on my hips. There are definitely easier ways to get her off, but that's not the point. Elvi needs to feel hemmed in right now, held down and out of control.

I rock into her, hissing at the tight, silky glide. There's nothing like the feel of her slick channel on my alpha cock, and my knot immediately starts to inflate. I grab it in my free hand while I keep working her nub, increasing the pressure every time Rory slides into her mouth. He's taken over the dirty talk, telling her how good she looks under us and how hard she's making our knots.

I don't need to see her face. I can feel how blissed out she is through the bond, her stress melting away under the sensations rippling through her body.

Since I know she likes it so much, I grab Rory's chin and twist it, kissing him hard. He tastes like Elvi's slick and his own champagne-laced flavor, and I suck his tongue until I've stolen every drop. When I feel his body start to tense, I pull back, his eyes snapping with heat as I drag my thumb over his bruised bottom lip. "We're gonna fill her up at the same time," I tell him in

my most guttural tone. “I want her choking on your cum so she can’t make a sound.”

Elvi groans, her cheeks red and her mouth stretched wide. But even stuffed to the brim, she’s still in control, humming around Rory’s girth and making his eyes roll. Female omegas have a gland in their throat that vibrates with their pleasure, and right now she’s dragging Rory to the edge.

“Don’t spill a drop, Elvi,” I warn her as I start to pump into her hard, and she moans her compliance. Her feet are hooked behind me, her thighs running with slick and I shudder as I watch her hands cup Rory’s butt, trying to stuff him in deeper. “You’re such a filthy, sweet omega,” I tell her as I tunnel in deep enough to lick across Rory’s back. “Come for us, princess. Shatter on our cocks and then suck down my knot.”

She explodes with a muffled cry, her pussy milking me while Rory unleashes down her throat. As soon as he’s done, he slides out of the way, peppering her neck and shoulders with kisses. But he’s making room for me to fall forward on my hands, Elvi slamming her hips up as I work my knot inside her.

Omegas are made to take this, but not without effort, and I soak up every tiny flinch on her face. Makes me an asshole, but I love the fact she wants me bad enough to work through the pain. And I’m animal enough to admit I like the sense of invasion, of pushing into her body and planting something there that won’t fade in a hurry.

“Look at you, little wolf,” Rory says in awe, stroking back her tangled hair. “Taking his fat knot like it’s nothing.”

I quirk a brow at that, but he just leans forward and licks a stripe up my chest, making me shiver. Elvi is still coming inside me, rolling shockwaves that work to suck me into her tight body. I drop my face to her throat, licking and nibbling my mating mark until it’s throbbing on my tongue. Her pussy

softens at the pleasure flooding our bond, and I grip her hips, working my way deeper. And then when I'm all the way in, stretching her to the limit, Rory drops his head and licks around our rim. It's enough to finish me off, Elvi crying out again as I unload behind my knot.

I manage to roll to my side, keeping my weight off her since we're still locked together. It'll take a good ten minutes for my knot to deflate, and Rory cuddles against her back, one hand cupping her breast while the other one pats my shoulder.

"Holy shit, bro," he says as we both stare down at our blissed-out girl. "I like this dobbie side of you. Looks like our cock conductor might have some competition."

I glance at Elvi to see how she takes that, but her eyes are already closed, her breathing evening out. So I give Rory a quelling look. "Our job is to take care of her until he can take care of all of us."

He just gives a jaw-cracking yawn, then grins up at me. "You're not telling me anything I don't want to hear."

They're both out like a light before my knot slips free, and I drop kisses on their lips as I climb off the bed. Scooping my pants off the floor, I step into the tiny ensuite. Other than the toilet, it has a shower for one and a miniature vanity. I quickly wash myself down at the sink, then grab my phone from my pocket. Sitting on the toilet lid, I pull up the chat screen to a game I've never played and scroll to the message window. We've only used this chat function a few times, and I'm always careful to delete the thread after we're done. Not that our conversations are worth keeping, since Arben's a man of limited words unless he's bossing us around.

Which makes my jaw clench again as I text: **You really need to be around more.**

This isn't a new message, and he usually just shoots me a query to feed to

Link and his hacking skills. Another piece of the murder puzzle he's figuring by himself while the rest of us twiddle our thumbs.

But this time he texts back: **Keep them close. Something is hunting us.**

Something? I compose a couple of questions, then delete them and settle on: **Who?**

Unknown.

Fuck. **I need more than that to tell them.**

Don't. Not yet.

Is that an order, guardian?

There's a long pause and then he returns with: **Focus on the council and I'll focus on our hunter.**

I grind my teeth, but can't deny the prickle down my spine. If Arben, the doctor of death and most dedicated assassin I've ever met, says we're being hunted, there's no point me whining at him. **Okay, but when will we see you?**

Soon. Keep them close.

I sigh. Arben never repeats himself unless it's life or death. So I settle on: **I'll protect them or die trying.**

Not good enough, he snaps right back. **They die, we die.**

Annoyance ticks through me. **I get that.**

No, it's a fact. Fated packs don't survive without their heart.

I stare at the statement for a long time. For shifters, losing your mate often feels like a death sentence. I've used the threat more than once when I've been deep in someone's psyche, looking for their breaking point. But most of the time, it's not true; even after losing the love of their life, people heal, and some even move on. But there's no denying how serious Arben is about this.

I start and delete three different responses, but there's really only one thing I can say. So I type it out and quickly shut down the chat:

**If you don't want the heart to break, you need to come home,
guardian.**



Elvi

The Alpha of Chicago is Warren Leon, although most people call him the White Lion, given his wolf is a huge beast with an ice-white coat. He's held the top spot in this city for twenty years, and his son Parker is a high-flying lawyer set to follow in his footsteps. Unlike their bootlegging, mobbed-up ancestors, the Leon's run a mostly clean city, which is one of the reasons my dad has sought his help with the council.

But the only guy waiting for us on the tarmac in Chicago is wearing a black suit, thick-framed glasses, and has neatly parted dark hair. He's in his mid-twenties, which means he's way too young to be the Alpha, and while he's leanly built under his suit, there's nothing in his appearance to suggest he's a dominant shifter. In fact, as we pile off the plane, he clutches a leather binder to his chest and keeps his gaze locked on the ground.

He's also a beta, I realize as we get close enough to detect his faint scent. Curious, I watch as he steels himself and steps forward, his hand outstretched in greeting, although it's pretty clear he'd prefer to keep it to himself. His grip is quick and cool, but he doesn't lift his eyes higher than my chin. "Welcome to Chicago, Ms. Ferrier. I'm Nate Leon. The alpha's second son. He apologizes for not being here, and asked me to show you to the hotel."

The welcome speech is delivered in a classic midwestern accent with a hint of a southern drawl buried underneath. Each word is careful and precise, like he's reading it from the back of his binder, and I can see Rory grinning at him out of the corner of my eye. But I feel a surge of protectiveness towards the guy. He's clearly uncomfortable, and who can blame him? He might be on his home turf, but we're a pack of five, with three intimidating alphas in the mix. And if he's heard anything from his dad about what went down in

New York, he probably thinks the horsemen of the apocalypse just rode into town.

“Thanks for meeting us, Nate. I’m Elvana, and I go by Starling-Ferrier now.” I try to be gentle about correcting him, but it’s important. We might be a new pack, but we have a complicated history, and that needs to be remembered. “These are my mates.” I move around the circle, giving him each of the guy’s names, and even though he keeps his gaze averted, I notice the intelligence in his soft gray eyes as he takes it in. I get the feeling he’s just confirming what he already knows, since he strikes me as a bit of a planner. He probably has a bio on each of us in that binder he’s gripping.

“Welcome,” he says, his neck tilting in a way I’m not sure he’s aware of. I can feel my wolf watching him with interest, and the gesture certainly doesn’t go unnoticed by the alphas around me. “The formalities are all taken care of regarding your arrival. And if you’d like to follow me. I have a couple of cars waiting for us...”

But before he’s taken a step, Cam stops him with a raised hand. He’s close to, but not quite touching, the side of Nate’s neck. “What happened here?” There’s no mistaking the concern in Cam’s voice. “How did you get these bruises?”

Nate’s gaze finally lifts, and I watch him blink at Cam in confusion. Not about the bruises, I’m certain, but probably at the way my mate has slipped into his nosy medic persona. When you look at Cam, medical professional isn’t the first thing that comes to mind.

“I have a blood condition. I bruise easily.”

I can see Cam getting ready with a barrage of follow-up questions, so I grab his arm, sliding my hand down until I’m squeezing his fingers. “Thanks, Nate. We should probably head straight to the hotel and check in with your dad.”

Nate nods, although he still looks a bit bewildered as we walk towards the hangar and the waiting cars. There's quite a lot of security standing around the two stretch limos, and Link immediately herds Kelly and me together, with Rory and Cam on the other side. I want to roll my eyes at his overprotectiveness, but with my dad delayed, grabbing us now would make for the perfect hostage situation.

"You're turning me into a paranoid nutjob," I whisper under my breath to Link. "Why am I counting handguns and trying to decide who I could take in a fight?"

To my surprise, he flashes me a rare grin. It lights up his face, but somehow makes him look even more dangerous. "Don't ever say I'm not a good influence, Elvana. And if you ask me, you could probably take any of them in your half-shift form." His dark, brooding gaze roams over the security detail. "Except for maybe the guy by the back door. But I'm more than happy to shoot out his kneecaps to even things up."

I check out which guy he means. He's tall, mid-forties, with the slightly swollen build of a bodybuilder after his prime. But there's that same watchful stillness I used to see in the older togs, or *togerët*, who were Roan Bisha's lieutenants when he was High Alpha. Bad news, even before they tried to take out my whole pack.

But that's exactly where Nate is leading us, and I feel the guy's piercing eyes settle on me. He looks me over, clearly unimpressed, but then his attention slips sideways to Kelly, and his gaze heats as it runs over my sunshine like he's a tasty piece of meat. *Hell, no.*

Link, I say through the bond, *go make that motherfucker squirm, would you please?*

I'm not sure he's heard me at first. Since we're not officially mated, I'm bouncing off Cam's bond to talk to him. But then Link suddenly strides

forward, each step long and loose, his matching CZ Shadows magically appearing in his hands. Everyone jolts at the sight of the guns, but the older guy just drums his fingers on the roof of the car and watches him approach. His lip is curled in disdain, and I can feel my claws pressing against my fingertips, itching to spring free.

Link stops just close enough to still be able to lift his guns and feed him both barrels. “Watch where you put your eyes, wolf.”

The guy holds his gaze for a moment, then gives a slight shrug. “Sure, but can you blame me?” His teeth flash in a condescending smile. “It’s not every day you see two such pretty omegas in one pack. Especially when their alphas are as young as you boys.”

Damn, can’t wait until Arben’s around to hear that, Rory purrs through our bond, but Link talks over him, his voice as tense as his stance. It’s Randall Trench. He’s the White Lion’s half-brother and Head of Security. Unmated, ex-Special Forces. I can smoke him, but it might put a bit of a dent in the diplomatic relations between Boston and Chicago.

I sigh, because politics sucks. *No, back off. We’ll deal with him later.*

“Beauty over age,” Link tells Randall with a deadpan expression, then motions to the door. “Are we getting in?”

“Depends where Nate wants to seat us.”

There’s something in Trench’s tone that makes my hackles rise. But right as I’m telling myself to stop being a paranoid nutjob, I catch the slightest flinch from the gray-eyed beta standing next to me. It’s still hard to read him, but I’m pretty sure Nate doesn’t want to go anywhere near Randall Trench. “Link, can you and Rory take the back car? I need to talk to Nate about some changes to tonight’s agenda.”

Link nods, but doesn’t probe through the bond, and I steer Kelly over to the front car. There’s no way in hell he’s going near Trench, either. And I

don't miss the way the beta's shoulders slump in relief as Cam is the only alpha to slide into the car with us.

"Sorry about that," I say to Nate once the limo is headed away from the airstrip. "But your uncle needs to watch himself. We're not here to cause trouble, but we won't be disrespected, either."

Nate is sitting opposite the three of us, his back to the privacy screen that cuts him off from the driver. He should be wary about being alone with us, especially after Link's aggressive display, but he sinks into the seat with a tired little sigh. "He's not my uncle. I'm adopted. And that was tame for how he usually is." He taps the leather binder balanced on his lap. "Did you really want to talk about the agenda?"

"Nope." That's my dad's show, thankfully. "But it would be nice if you could tell us a bit about yourself."

Surprise lights up his eyes again, turning them that soft silver-gray. Like a lot of betas, Nate's appearance isn't anything out of the ordinary until you take a closer look. Alphas are impossible to ignore, and omegas are generally attractive, with a scent that's catnip to other shifters. But I'm betting there's a lot about Nate Leon that's worth a second glance. "Me? Okay. I'm twenty-six. I'm the pack's accountant. I'm a beta. I live in Lincoln Park. And I'm socially awkward, if you can't tell by the way I just listed off a bunch of facts."

I smile at the self-deprecating humor, but Link's voice buzzes through my bond with the other guys.

He's the pack's Chief Financial Officer, so either humble or evasive. Birth parents not listed. Based on the accent, he's originally from somewhere in the South. No mates, not being courted, and there's a bunch of stuff on his medical records...

I'm all for threat control, but I seriously doubt Nate's privacy needs to be

invaded to keep us safe. *That's enough, Link.*

I feel Link retreat and turn my focus back to the beta. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Nate. So, where is Lincoln Park from here? This is my first time in Chicago, so take into account I have no idea where we are or where anything else is.”

He gives me a small smile, then starts pointing to things out the window. I nod and make all the right noises, but every time he turns his head, I notice the faint bruises on his neck. And I know Cam and Kelly are looking too, because I can feel their anger simmering through our bond.

I don't like those bruises. That's Kelly, his hand moving to Cam's thigh. He was skittish around Trench. We need to find out if there's a connection.

I'm on it, babe. Cam’s hand comes down to cover Kelly’s and I smile at their easy affection. They’ve known each other since they were teenagers, but they only mated a few months back. Every day since has been making up for lost time, and I’ve been the lucky girl to share their honeymoon period.

Cam’s lips quirk, Kelly’s glance turning sly, and I’m certain they can sense the flush of heat in my belly. You’d think what the guys did to me back on the plane flushed it out of my system, but I’m definitely feeling steamy again. But right as Cam’s smile starts to look a little wolfish, Nate tells us we’ve arrived, and I turn my overheated cheeks away from my mates to peer out the window.

The hotel is a sleek art deco building with a lion emblem carved on the portico and a velvet carpet leading up the marble stairs. It’s totally over-the-top, but I’m getting used to this kind of thing after a few months on the Ferrier Estate. A flock of guys in smart navy uniforms steps forward to open the doors. A second later, Link elbows them out of the way, taking my hand to draw me out of the car. I can sense his anger simmering under the surface and I cock a brow. “Not a relaxing drive?”

“Remind me why I can’t shoot him?”

Now I’m really curious, but Nate is leading us inside, and I try to focus on the massive marble lobby and half a dozen bright-eyed staff smiling at me.

“Welcome to the Leonidas,” the manager says, then gestures behind him to a raised lounge area. “Mr. Leon and the early arrivals are having brunch on the mezzanine if you’d like to join them.”

What I really want to do is decompress with my pack in our suite, but it’s time to put my political face on. Dad was pretty clear he might need me to cover for him at some stage during the week, so we might as well see if I’m up to the job.

I must look nervous, though, because my pack falls into step all around me, their positive energy licking through our bonds. My wolf has been a sated kitten since the plane, but now she brushes against my skin, eager to show my mates a little more gratitude.

Rory clearly picks up on her mood because he murmurs, “Joining the mile high club has made our girl frisky.”

There’s a choking sound at the end of the line and I realize Nate is within hearing distance. But there’s no time to smooth things over as we mount the stairs into the raised area. There are leather club chairs scattered around and a huge window looking out over a leafy green park and soaring high-rises. I count five pack alphas, plus a bunch of security guys, and realize the two alphas at the center of the group are Nate’s family: the White Lion of Boston and his heir.

They’re impossible to miss with their white-gold hair, although Warren’s is liberally sprinkled with gray. Parker, his eldest son, is taller and broader than Nate, but with sharper features and no sign of his cute dimples. I get a friendly but slightly aloof vibe from him as he gives us a polished smile. But all eyes are on the Alpha of Chicago as he welcomes us to his city.

Like most powerful alphas, the air around him seems to be charged with extra static, but when he bows over my hand, his brown eyes are twinkling. “You have made your father the happiest wolf on the east coast, Ms. Ferrier.”

“Ms. Starling-Ferrier,” Nate corrects his father. He puts a tick in his binder, like that’s one job crossed off, and looks around at the circle of men. “It’s how she and her mates should be addressed from here on.”

A stilted silence greets his directive and I bite my tongue, but only because I’m tempted to lean over and tell Nate how adorable he is. Instead, I focus on his father. “Thank you for having us, Alpha Leon. And for lending us Nate for the ride here. He’s already made us feel very welcome.”

There’s a glimmer of surprise in his eyes as he looks at his younger son, but he just gives him a nod and waves at the buffet laid out behind him. “Help yourselves to whatever you like. We’ll leave you to settle in over lunch and then kick things off this afternoon.”

Once my dad arrives, he’ll be driving the agenda, so I murmur something polite and steer the guys towards the food. But before I’ve gone very far, one of the alphas gets to his feet and approaches me. Dad and Link made us study up on each of the attendees, so I immediately recognize the Alpha of Maine. He’s the oldest guy here, and according to the bio I read, one of the oldest wolves still holding the position of a territorial alpha. Maine is home to three large packs, and William McDonald has been their leader for close to fifty years.

I can feel the power of his wolf as he approaches. There’s nothing flashy or threatening about it; it’s more like a heavy blanket falling over my shoulders. A presence I can’t ignore, but it doesn’t feel intimidating. Although, as Link likes to point out, the ones who look and act like teddy bears often have a grizzly lurking inside. But I can feel my wolf relax as the alpha stops a respectful distance away and holds out his hand. My wolf gives

me a nudge and I don't hesitate to take it.

"I'm Bill," he says to me kindly, his grip firm despite the slight tremor in his hand. "I've heard a lot about you, Ms. Starling-Ferrier, and I've been very much looking forward to meeting you in person."

"It's Elvana," I tell him. "If we keep throwing double-barrel names around, we'll never get very far into the agenda."

He laughs, his gaze sweeping over Link and Rory, who have ignored the food and are standing at my shoulder like silent sentinels. A quick glance reassures me that Cam is at the buffet table with both Kelly and Nate. When I glance back, the Alpha of Maine doesn't seem concerned by my lapse in attention. If anything, his smile deepens. "Well, I was relieved to hear you made it safely out of New York. I met your mom a few times when she was still living in Boston and I enjoyed our conversations very much."

I blink, eager to hear more, but before I can ask, another alpha steps up. This one is a completely different beast to Bill, and I don't need the bio to place him. All of Bisha's closest allies were either killed in the Tower or have gone into hiding, but then there are wolves like Henry Snider. He wasn't powerful enough to run his own territory without Bisha's blessing, but he's rich. Disgustingly so. Which means he was kept out of the really dirty business, and for a hefty annual donation, allowed to still retain the title of alpha to the packs of southern Connecticut.

He's in his late thirties; good-looking, entitled, and not particularly bright. He inherited both his wealth and his position from his dad, and according to Link, has been slowly losing his grip on both since we dismantled Bisha and his empire. Not that you'd know it from the way he looks me over. "Elvana. I remember first meeting you when I took over the Connecticut territories. You were a tiny little thing, all big eyes and blond curls, sitting on your dad's knee..."

“*Bisha’s* knee,” I interrupt him. “And if that ever happened, I don’t remember it. He wasn’t an affectionate man.”

He gives me a condescending smile. “Oh, I think you’ve just forgotten. You were thick as thieves at one stage...”

“Again, that’s not how I remember things.” When he arches a sleek brow at me, I give him a close-lipped smile. It’s not *quite* a snarl, since I’m trying to be diplomatic, but I imagine I’m not fooling anyone but the idiot in front of me. “Just to be clear, Henry, Roan Bisha was never a father to me. I’m here in the capacity of Lucas Ferrier’s daughter and heir.”

He gives a shrug, his gaze moving slowly over my pack. “Well, if I knew we were going to bring our packs, I would have invited my own. My omega, David, is nearly as pretty as your prince.” He leaves me grinding my teeth as he slinks over to Kelly, who looks up from his plate, his eyes cautious. “I also had the pleasure of meeting your father when I was last in London. I’m very sorry for your loss, Kellman. Barkley was an impressive man.”

Kelly gives a smile even chillier than my own, but the third alpha, who’s sitting closest to the window and swirling something that looks like whiskey in a glass, makes a disgusted sound. “Shut up, Henry, or at least try to read the room before you open your mouth.”

Henry goes bright red. “*Excuse me, Damian?*”

“You’re not excused. If you can’t read the room, then do your homework, because not everyone grew up sailing boats in Greenwich with their dads.” He looks up at the red-faced man, his dark eyes narrowed. “Do you even know the rest of their pack?” He twists to look at my alphas. “Lincoln Hila. Rory Erikson. Cameron West. If you’d met their fathers, you’d know there’s a reason they’ve adopted a new pack name.”

He’s not wrong. None of our so-called fathers deserves the title. But just because he’s right doesn’t mean I know who this guy is...

Damian Loup. Link's voice sounds grim as it slides through the bond. *The Wolf of Washington. Runs the DC packs and has more political clout than any other territorial alpha, including your dad. And the reason you don't have a bio on him is because he turned down the invitation.*

I walk slowly over to the seated man, feeling the press of his wolf's attention on my skin. Loup is an old and protected name in our world. Only bloodlines considered 'pure' are allowed to use it, which means the man in front of me can trace his ancestors back further than anyone I've ever met. It also suits him. Early forties, lean, and dark-skinned with shrewd black eyes, I doubt he has any issues slipping between his human and wolf forms.

"Why are you here, Alpha Loup? We thought you weren't interested in joining the council."

If he's surprised I know his name, he doesn't show it. "I said I wasn't interested in scrapping the High Alpha position, Ms. Starling-Ferrier."

I don't bother to hide my cynical smile. "Because you think you're the man for the job?"

He sets his glass down, every inch of his imposing presence turned my way. "Because a council won't solve your problems."

I know I should step back, let him have it out with my dad, or put his case forward in a formal forum later today, but there's something about the way he's looking at me that makes me want to push back. "But are we talking about the same problems? Because the previous High Alpha did nothing to address omega rights, blood feuds, or pack mismanagement. Mainly because, like many alphas with too much power and too little conscience, it wasn't in his interests to do so."

But instead of being insulted by the insinuation, he waves a dismissive hand. "They're all things we can resolve, with or without a council. But the real issue, and the reason I'm here instead of tending to business in

Washington, is because of one man.” I cock a brow at him, and he leans forward, his wolf in his eyes. “Arben Marku. Do you happen to know where he is, Ms. Starling-Ferrier?”



Elvi

“Isn’t that the question of the day,” I mutter as we walk into our suite half an hour later. I managed to swallow a few bites of French toast and half a cup of coffee, but mostly I spent the time avoiding the Wolf of Washington and his probing dark gaze. “How much do you think he knows?”

I’m asking everyone, but it’s Link we all look to, since he seems to have the lowdown on every shifter here. But instead of answering, he slips past us, gun out as he sweeps the suite for potential threats. I’ve learned to give him time to check things for himself, even though my dad’s security detail has already been through this morning. So, while he’s sweeping for bugs and checking under beds, I kick off my high-heeled boots and pad into the kitchen. Rory and Kelly head for the bathroom, but Cam follows me, his arms slipping around my waist as I lean against the counter.

Cam has always been a steady, cautious influence on our pack, but after what just happened on the plane, I realize his dominance runs deeper than I expected. And while I’m not a typical submissive omega, I get a thrill as he presses his lips over his bite mark. “You feel restless,” he murmurs against my skin. “Everything okay?”

“Hmm, well, we’ve only been here an hour, and I already want to go home.”

He turns me in his arms, backing me against the counter and planting a hand on either side of me. It means he can lean down a little, his eyes closer to mine. “We can leave. No one expects a newly mated pack to want to be around company. We can hand over to Lucas and catch the next flight out.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, liking the way I hang off him a little. He’s the biggest of my mates next to Arben, who’s a beast in his own

category. But Cam is the kind of guy who the word stoic was made for, and I love coaxing out the playful side under his brick wall façade. “What I really want,” I tell him as I swing forward and place a kiss on the side of his neck, “is a massage.” I run my lips across his throat, his head dipping so I can suck on his pulse. “Getting railed on a plane is all well and good, but now I need a little aftercare. You think they have one of those fancy spas in this hotel?”

Cam makes a low growling sound as his hands slide to my hips, his fingers digging in. “You want a massage, I’ll give you a massage.” He rubs his thickening cock against me, sending another thrill down my spine. “Deep tissue? Hot stones? Trigger points?”

I’ve had all three from Cam, and each one was a blissful experience. “Whichever one turns me into a senseless pile of goo.”

I shiver as his fingers circle the dents above the waistband of my jeans. “Full-body massage with warm oils, then.” I grin at him, feeling better already, but he straightens as Link enters the room and sets his laptop up on the dining table. “There’s a pool deck on the roof, right?”

I perk up at that, and turn to Link, my cheeks pink. He flicks a look our way and nods. “Let me just check the area first.”

He does something with a few rapid clicks of his keyboard, and I suspect he’s hacking into the hotel surveillance network. Meanwhile, I run my nose along Cam’s bicep and purr. “A swim and a massage? This is starting to feel like a holiday.”

“You deserve it,” he tells me, a dent between his serious blue eyes. “We don’t spoil you nearly enough.”

My fluttering pussy begs to differ, but I shrug, because phenomenal sex aside, none of us has exactly had the easy life. “Things have been looking up recently,” I murmur, then tilt my head so his gaze jumps to his mating bite on my throat. I haven’t checked it out yet, but I’m pretty sure it’s red and raised

from his earlier attention. “Especially if you’re about to ravage me again on the roof.”

Heat flares in his eyes, his big hands cupping my ass and pulling me tight between his thighs. “You like that, sweetheart? Me fucking you deep and slow while we look down at the whole city?”

I flick a glance at Link, who’s still buried in his laptop. When the guys were working me over on the plane, I was distracted by the thought of him listening in. But as the edge of his ears turn pink, I wonder if it would have annoyed him or made him jealous. And the latter idea sends a strange flutter through my belly.

But I’ve never been a tease – and don’t plan to start now – so I turn my focus back to Cam. “Just as long as we don’t get thrown out of the hotel before I’ve had time to unpack,” I joke, right as Link gives us the green light to head up to the deck. We grab our swimsuits, but I pause by Link on our way out. “Is the Wolf of Washington going to be a problem, do you think?”

He cocks his head, considering the question. “Arben hasn’t mentioned him to me, but my guess it’s political. The Dark River Pack was well connected and the way they went out has raised a lot of questions in high places. Not to mention the vacuum without a High Alpha replacement. The Wolf could be here to smooth things over, to put himself forward to run the show, or...”

“Or?”

“It could be a witch hunt. And Arben’s a big target.”

I feel Cam stiffen beside me, even as my stomach fills with unease. Of course Arben is a target, and not just with the pack he pretended to be a part of for a decade. You don’t earn a reputation as an invincible assassin without picking up a lot of enemies along the way.

“Will you try to warn him?” I ask Link as I press into Cam’s warmth. “And get a message to my dad? I don’t want either of them walking in here

unprepared.”

Instead of answering, Link’s head snaps to the door and Cam and I both tense up even more. But a moment later it pops open and my dad steps through, his eyes lighting up as he takes me in. My gaze flicks down to Link, who’s staring at his screen and the multiple images he has from the hotel’s surveillance feeds. Pressing a hand to his shoulder, I lean down and murmur sarcastically in his ear, “Thanks for the heads up.”

I expect one of his sneers in return, but he slides his gaze my way, and I’m surprised by the heat I see simmering there. “Guess you’ll have to wait a little longer for that massage, Angel.”

Cam mutters something explicit under his breath, but I just toss my swimsuit on a chair and head towards my dad. He gives me a quick hug and we both spend a minute checking each other over. “I’m sorry I missed your flight,” he tells me. “Were there any problems?”

I narrow my eyes and cross my arms over my chest. “It was fine. But unless you have an extra jet tucked up your sleeve, there’s no way you caught a commercial flight that doesn’t arrive for another hour. How long exactly have you been in Chicago, Dad?”

He gives me an amused look. “I arrived just before dawn. There were a few things I wanted to check out while I was still under the radar.”

I shake my head at him. Lucas Ferrier isn’t just a great politician, he’s also wily as hell. “Not to mention tossing us to the wolves, right? I take it you wanted me to meet the other alphas without you around to keep them in line?”

“I was curious to see how they’d react,” he admits, not at all bothered by my accusing gaze. “And to hear your unfiltered impressions, of course. You have an eye for intrigue, darling daughter of mine.”

I huff at his sweet talk and walk over to the couch, tossing myself down.

“Okay, then let’s debrief. But emphasis on the *brief*, because I still want my swim and massage.”

My dad chuckles while I send Link an arched eyebrow. But he’s turned in his seat, and our gazes cling. For a moment, he lets those dark eyes roam over my throat, like he’s memorizing each of the mate bites there, and I have to cross my legs to avoid perfuming in front of my father.

Damn, maybe I shouldn’t have joined the mile high club, because now I seem to have sex on the brain.

“Daddy Ferrier!” Rory’s timing is perfect as usual, his greeting a gleeful cry as he and Kelly come out of the bathroom, looking suspiciously ruffled. Rory heads straight over to my dad and flops beside him, hero worship gleaming in his green eyes. “Thanks for the loan of your plane. It was wicked, and the bedroom provided the perfect in-flight entertainment.”

My dad shakes his head. “You’re welcome. And I’m just going to pretend you went in there alone for a brief nap.”

Cam snorts as he comes over to sit beside me, but Link drops a black folder on the table between us. I’m pretty sure it’s the agenda we’ve been working on for the last couple of weeks. “We need to talk about the Wolf of Washington.”

My dad sits back with a thoughtful gleam in his eyes. “You met him then?”

“He was at brunch,” I say dryly. “Drinking whiskey and asking questions about Arben.”

My dad drums his fingers on his knee. “It’s to be expected. He’s getting pressure from the European Liaisons to explain what happened in New York.”

I flinch before I can stop myself and Cam puts an arm around my shoulders. But I lean towards my dad, too anxious to be comforted right now.

“The story about the Tower still holds, though, right? As far as they know, you got out with your allies before the fighting started, and Darius Raptus and his pack took out Bisha and his thugs.”

Part of Arben’s mission to bury the Dark River Pack includes steering the blame for the Tower massacre away from our door. Everyone who was there that night saw what Bisha did to Glo, Darius’ omega. In a disgusting display of power – not to mention contempt for my designation - he auctioned her off to the highest bidder, who happened to be Kelly’s uncle, Phillip Prior. It was Darius and his guys who started the fight that kicked off the mayhem in the Tower, although the rest of the bloodshed was orchestrated by my pack. And I was the one who hunted down the High Alpha and finished him off, but that detail is only known by the people in this room, Mrs. Lewis, and Arben, of course.

I swallow thickly as my dad tries to read my face. “There are rumors...” he says slowly. “Not from the alphas I got out; they’re so indebted to me, they’ll never question our version of events. But Arben hasn’t been able to track down everyone who was there that night. He’s got to most of them, but it looks like someone with a lot of influence may be sheltering some of the key players.”

My stomach cramps at this disturbing news, and I feel my wolf pushing at my skin. She’s as vengeful as Arben in her own way, and I know she’s eager to get out and hunt down this new threat. “Who?”

“Well, Phillip Prior, for one. Unless Darius dropped him in a ditch for what he did to his mate, he’s unaccounted for.”

I look at Kelly, who’s staring back at me with wide, angry eyes. There’s no love lost between him and his uncle, especially since he’s been using his mom to keep control of the London pack. “Who else?”

“Only a few others. Your Uncle Miko’s body was never found, for

instance.”

“We’re not related.” It’s a sore point, though, because Miko is part of my past when my mom was still alive and I believed there was some good in the Dark River Pack. “But I don’t think he’d say anything. He gave me the key to the cuffs they put on me in the Tower.”

A low rumbling sound comes from my mates at the memory of me up on the stage, cuffed and on my knees while Bisha tried to auction me off to his revolting friends.

“There are two others,” my dad goes on, his hands clenched into fists where they rest on his thighs. “Paige Peters, who was one of Bisha’s mistresses. And a security guard who was working that night.”

I stroke the small scar of my cheek at the thought of Paige. When I was first dragged into the Tower, she hit me so hard her big-ass diamond ring made me bleed. A little while later, she punched me in the face with a pair of knuckledusters, and then kicked me in the head with one of the Louboutins she stole out of my mom’s closet. To say there’s no love lost between us is an understatement. “Gotta say, I’d like to see Paige run into my wolf on a dark night.”

“Not if I get to her first,” Link mutters, his gaze on the tiny scar I’m stroking with my thumb. “I’m covering her credit cards, social media, the works. If the bitch breathes wrong, she’s done.”

I nod, warmed by the fire in his eyes. “As long as I get a punch in, I’m happy.”

“The guard might be a problem though,” my dad says, interrupting our bloodthirsty moment. “He was low level; not a *togerët* by any stretch of the imagination. But he may have had access to the security cameras in the basement.”

“Fuck.” It’s Link who curses, but we all share a worried look.

When Bisha discovered that Arben was working against him, he had him locked up in the torture chamber in the Tower's basement. Arben managed to break out, but he wasn't exactly subtle about it, taking on a rare third form that, for want of a better description, is a monster version of our wolf. Think of an eight-foot half-shift with thick black fur all over his body and a set of steak knife teeth that can snap a man in two.

I watch Link absently rub the monster bite on his throat as he mutters, "There's no way they got it on film. I wiped everything. If they know something, it has to be from this security guy."

I huff and rub my throbbing temples. "Who has possibly taken his story to the Wolf of Washington in exchange for protection. Is that what we're saying?"

"Hopefully not," my dad sighs. "But we have to consider it."

I think of the intense man I met downstairs and feel my panic rise. "If Loup has real evidence against us, what's the worst he can do? I mean, there's no High Alpha anymore. You guys are peers. Can he still come after us?"

My dad's eyes gleam with a level of cunning I can't imagine I'll ever match. "This is just the first play, sweetheart. He might have the European Liaisons, but we have the council. Or the promise of it. He won't make a move until he's certain of the outcome."

The European Liaisons. I don't know much about them, except that they operate as ambassadors to the strongest and oldest packs in the world. Technically, they don't have the authority to challenge a territorial alpha on another continent, but in reality, they wield a lot of power. If one of the European packs has taken an interest in the Tower massacre, Loup probably won't stop digging until their curiosity is satisfied.

"And don't forget, we have the eight-foot monster-man," Rory says with a

vicious grin. “I bet that guard is pissing himself to sleep every night, wondering if he shouldn’t just make a run for it.”

We all stare at each other for a while, our bonds humming with a mixture of best-case and worst-case scenarios, until my dad picks up the folder on the table. “There’s been a change to tonight’s dinner plans. With Loup in town, the Alpha of Chicago has to do something formal. That means pack alphas only, I’m afraid.”

I grin, because it’s the first bit of good news I’ve heard for a while. “Great! Then we’ll do room service and have a movie night.”

Kelly’s smile is instantly a mile wide, since we’re halfway through a Peaky Blinders marathon, and an evening with Cillian Murphy and his dreamy blue eyes beats a stuffy political dinner, hands down.

“Not so fast, sweetheart,” my dad chuckles. “Parker Leon has kindly offered to take the younger ones out to a club the pack owns. You’re not the only heir in town, and Warren wants to make sure you’re taken care of as well.”

I chew my lip, my excitement at the movie marathon deflating. But then I perk up again. “Will Nate be going?”

My dad slants me a curious look. “I’m not sure. Why the interest?”

I decide to deflect his question with one of my own, since I’m not exactly sure how to answer it right now. “What do you know about him? Nate gave us the basics, and Link filled in a few gaps. But could he be a threat in any way?”

My dad never dismisses a question, but he doesn’t look troubled by this one. “I seriously doubt it. He’s quiet, keeps a low profile. He’s extremely valuable to the pack from a financial perspective, but I don’t get the sense he mixes with them much. Warren actually asked me to overlook any ‘odd behaviors’ – his term, not mine.”

I prickle all over at that. “Nate’s not odd. He’s actually pretty cool.”

My dad raises a brow at that, but I’ve had enough of debriefing. “Time for a swim,” I announce, my gaze sliding past Cam to Link. I arch a brow at him. “Is the coast clear up on the roof? I’d hate to go all the way up there and have to postpone... again.”

Cam rumbles a low-level laugh while Link’s jaw ticks in a way that has me smiling on the inside.

But before I can enjoy my victory too much, my dad slaps his thighs and gets to his feet. “Sounds like a great idea. I’ll just nip next door and grab my suit.”

Rory barely waits until he’s left the room before he starts to chortle, but it’s Link who reaches over and punches Cam lightly in the shoulder. “You should see if he wants a massage too, brother.”



Elvi

“Do you think Daddy Ferrier would be pushing us out the door if he knew about the last time we went to a club?”

I look over at Rory, who’s biting the tip of his tongue and giving me devil eyes. Since the night sky is clear, and we’re all feeling rested from our post-swim nap, we’re walking the two short blocks to the Leon’s club. Which means Rory looks unbelievably hot as he struts along in his fitted black jeans, green-toned Oxford shirt, and Chelsea boots. The guy could wear a trash bag and make me pant, but that shirt is doing amazing things for his electric green eyes, and he cackles at the expression on my face.

“What happened the last time you went to a club?” Nate asks quietly at my side. Link elected to stay in the hotel and go over some feeds – code, I think, for listening in on the alpha-only dinner - but Nate was a last-minute addition to our party. And while his brother is striding out ahead, deep in conversation with a couple of the other pack heirs, the younger Leon has hung back with us.

Which means he’s once again in earshot of things he probably doesn’t want to know. “Oh, um...”

“Elvi went into heat and Rory and me were lucky enough to help her through it,” Cam says in a voice that is about two octaves lower than normal. “It kind of kicked things off for us, as a pack.”

Kelly is tucked on my other side, and I feel a trickle of laughter through our bond as I almost choke on my tongue. Yes, Cam’s technically correct, although he left out a bunch of details, including the fact it happened in the Red Poppy, a notorious Dark River Pack club, and that Arben was also in attendance.

But I'm distracted by the way Nate's pupils blow wide as he looks from Cam to me and back again. "Wow," he says quietly. "I'm not sure tonight can live up to that."

Rory sidles up to the beta and gives him a friendly nudge. "Wanna bet on it, little lion?"

I expect Nate to get flustered and blow him off, but instead, he arches a brow at my grinning mate. "When it comes to money, I rarely lose." His gaze drifts over Rory's face, then flicks back to Cam and me. He starts at our hands, which are clasped together, then runs up our bodies, lingering on our mouths. There's nothing subtle about his inspection, and I feel Cam's fingers flex around mine, a hint of alpha arousal leaking into the air. But I still can't gauge what Nate is thinking until he says, "Although, in this instance, I might pay to see a repeat of that."

Now I'm tripping over my feet as well as my tongue, my alphas looking at the beta like it was the last thing they expected to come out of his mouth. It takes a beat for Nate to wonder if he misspoke, his face flushing as he quickly lowers his eyes. But I'm not having any of that bullshit, elbowing Cam out of the way so I can link my arm through Nate's. "Well, I can't promise that, but maybe you'd save me a dance?"

"I like to dance," he admits with a small smile, then glances back at my alphas again. It gives me a close-up view of those bruises on his neck. They definitely fit the grip of a large hand, and I feel a flicker of rage pulse through me. Whoever's been hurting him doesn't want to try that shit while I'm around. When he turns back to face me, I'm relieved his eyes linger on my lips instead of reading the anger in my eyes. "But I don't think you're going to be short of partners, Elvana."

Probably not, but I'm getting the sense Nate hasn't really seen how a close-knit pack works. We like our space, our one-to-one time, but mostly we

want to be together. And that applies to dancing, just like everything else. “Let’s just see how things go,” I tell him, but keep a firm grip on his arm as we sweep into his family’s club.

It’s called Roar, which isn’t surprising given the leonine theme they’ve got going on in this city. Located on a side street in River North, the entrance is through a door with a bronze engraving of a giant lion’s mouth. Parker has already taken care of the arrangements, so we’re swept inside and straight up to a VIP area.

Everything is decorated in shades of the savannah, including gold wallpaper, dark marble, and sleek brown leather chairs. A mahogany bar runs the full length of the room, but servers are already standing by with bottles of Cristal and Diva. Glasses are filled and when the servers have retreated, Parker holds one aloft in a toast. “Welcome to Chicago, heirs. Anything you need, just ask.”

I murmur my thanks along with a couple of the other pack heirs, but I’m looking around for Nate. Despite my best efforts, we got separated on the stairs, and he’s retreated into the shadows. The rest of us are sitting on those long leather couches, Parker on one side with his pack brothers and the heirs, and my mates seated with me. When I catch Nate’s eye and wave him over, his brother shakes his head at me.

“Nate’s not really social,” Parker says, watching him over the rim of his glass. “And this definitely isn’t his scene.”

The alpha beside him chortles, and I feel my hackles rise. Without a word, I put my glass down and rise to my feet. Kelly immediately joins me, and every alpha in the section rises, but I wave them down.

“We’re just going to chat to Nate,” I tell Parker, and gripping Kelly’s hand, head in the beta’s direction. He watches us with wide gray eyes behind his glasses and I hesitate, wondering if all this attention is the last thing he

wants. But then his lips curve into a small smile and Kelly tugs me the rest of the way.

“We’re thinking we might go dance,” I tell him as soon as we reach his side. “Will you come with us?”

His lashes flutter like he’s not sure I’m serious, and Kelly holds out his hand. “As soon as the alphas get a couple of drinks into them, they’ll be all over the dance floor. We should probably get in a few moves while we can.”

Kelly is unusually tall for an omega, but he’s the perfect height to meet Nate eye-to-eye, and I watch as the beta looks him over. Kelly is, quite simply, the most beautiful guy I’ve ever seen. Rory is sexy, Link is striking, and Cam is all man, but Kelly has one of those faces it’s hard to look away from. He’s almost androgynous with his translucent skin, full lips, and almond eyes, but he was a rugby player before he presented, so his chest is broad, his body sculpted. And then there’s the fact he’s a natural dancer who can hypnotize you with a single shimmy of his lean hips...

“Sure,” Nate says, clearing his throat as he takes Kelly’s hand. “Let’s dance.”

I shoot our alphas a glance as we head to the stairs. *The first song is ours.*

Cam nods, but Rory just waggles his brows at me. *Go show the little lion what you’ve got, tiger.*

The main part of the club is a lot more crowded than the VIP area, but the night is still young, so there are only a few hardcore dancers on the floor. We find a spot where we can move without any unwanted attention boxing us in, but then the music changes and a remix of *Promiscuous* rolls across the club. I arch a brow at the DJ, who’s grinning at us from his perch above the dance floor, and blow out an annoyed breath. I’m trying to include Nate, not send him bolting for safety. But to my surprise, he just starts to roll his hips, completely comfortable with the vibe. I raise my brows at Kelly, but he just

twirls me around and walks me directly into Nate's path.

Dancing with Kelly is one of the most sensual things I've ever done. And as he fits himself along my spine, his hands drawing circles on the legs of my black pantsuit, I feel our perfume rising off us in a tantalizing wave. Nate clearly senses it; not the way an alpha might, but enough for his pupils to blow wide again, magnified by his dark-framed glasses. "Is this okay?" I ask him.

"Better than okay," he replies, and Kelly nudges me another step closer. Nate widens his stance, inviting me into the V of his body, and I lay a hand on the front of his black button-down. I can feel his heart hammering in his chest, and then I watch the most delicious blush I've ever seen bloom in his cheeks. It turns his eyes a stunning silver, and when a low whine leaks out of him, I actually catch my breath.

Is it too much? I'm watching his face for cues, but all I can see is his bobbing throat and wet lips, his eyes pinned to mine as we move against each other.

He's in heaven, Angel, Kelly purrs through our bond. *Trust him to tell you if he needs a break.*

But he looks...

Wrecked. The male satisfaction is humming through our bond, and when Kelly tucks his chin over my shoulder, I can feel the hard line of his erection against my ass. His fingers tangle in my hair, pulling just enough so he can stare down into my face. *Kind of how you look right now, babe.*

I moan at the heat in his eyes, his smile turning wicked as he eases me that last step forward. When I'm finally wedged between them, Kelly's hands come up to rest on Nate's shoulders. The beta gives a low groan, but he's still not touching us, except for where his chest and hips are brushing mine.

We dance like that to the end of the song, a sweet torture of fluttering

hearts grounded by Kelly's hands. But it's the riotous applause from the VIP balcony that has us finally stepping apart, and when I lift my flushed face, I watch as Parker holds his glass up to his brother.

I roll my eyes, but grab Nate's hand before he can escape, and lead him over to the bar. We've attracted a lot of attention, but I ignore the curious looks as the bartender pushes bottled water our way. It's clearly an alpha club based on the guys hovering about, but Nate seems perfectly at home as he inserts himself into a gap and leans back against the bar. Kelly crowds me in again, but I'm careful to keep a little distance between us as we sip our water and try to cool off.

Nate's flush has faded a little, but there's a slight hitch in his breathing as he looks between us. "I thought it was going to be a pity dance..." he murmurs, his voice trailing off.

"I'm pretty sure every guy in the club wishes he was you right now," Cam tells him as he steps up next to me, edging another alpha aside with a bump of his rock-hard shoulders. I turn and smile up at my mate, offering him my water. He's not much of a drinker, and he's usually the one nagging me to hydrate when he's torturing me in the gym. But oh, how I love watching his thick golden throat work as he drains the rest of my bottle. Not to mention the sexy way he drags the back of his hand over his lips when he's done. There's no way to disguise the heat in my eyes, and he gives me a slow smile. "Come dance with me, Elvi?"

I nod, because getting my hands back on Cam is now my number one priority, but then I look at the other guys. "We'll amuse ourselves here," Kelly assures me, and I get to watch that blush roar back to life in Nate's cheeks as Cam leads me to the dance floor.

We move together without hesitation, because even though Cam doesn't have Kelly's natural grace, he's not afraid to use his hips. It probably helps

that I'm plastered to his chest as I grind on his thigh. "Fuck, you smell like wildflowers right now," he says, then tips my chin up to his face. "You like our beta, babe?"

I shrug, but my gaze has already drifted back to the bar. Kelly and Nate are watching us, but their shoulders are definitely touching. "I like being around him. I don't think he gets nearly the attention he deserves."

Cam gives a low rumble as his hands slide down my hips. "I think you've taken care of that. Parker's eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw you and Kelly make your move."

I arch a look up at him. "Not too much?"

"Well, that'd be up to Nate, wouldn't it?"

I hum my agreement, letting the beat carry us away for a couple of songs until Rory joins us. We dance in a kind of blur, and I fall into the grinding rhythm, enjoying the heat rippling under my skin and the smiles on my mate's faces. When Kelly and Nate join us, I dance with them for a song, then leave Kelly to entertain them while I head back to the bar to hydrate. I've barely cracked the seal on my bottle of water when the lights dim down and the music dials up. People flood the dance floor from all directions and I look around for a quieter spot as I'm jostled a little in the crowd.

"Honey!" the bartender calls, waving to get my attention. "Your alpha said he'd meet you in the chillout room if you want a break."

I raise my brows at her. "Which alpha?"

"Didn't catch his name, but he said he was here with you." She gives me a wink. "Quite the hottie, too."

I just nod, because when it comes to my mates, that doesn't narrow it down much. I strain my neck, but I can't see through the crowd to work out who might have slipped away. Knowing Rory, he's planning a slow dance in a dark corner, but I'm still cautious as I make my way in the direction of the

chillout room.

Best-case scenario right now is Arben is finally making an appearance...

But the smile slides off my face as I step into the room and find the Wolf of Washington waiting for me. He's sitting in another club chair, nursing another glass of whiskey, and other than the gold wallpaper backdrop, it feels like déjà vu. But I instantly back up, hissing through my teeth as I discover a guy already behind me, blocking the way. He's not threatening, exactly, but it's pretty clear I'm not getting out of here without screaming my head off.

My wolf bares her teeth at the idea, and I narrow my eyes at Loup. "This is a stupid move. The guys who own this club are in the next room."

"I know," he says, his attention on his drink. "I watched you dance with one of them."

I cross my arms and coat my voice with disdain. "Aren't you a little old to be lurking around in clubs spying on people?"

That gets him on his feet, and I bite the side of my tongue. Yep, poking the bear also seems to apply to the wolf, because as he stalks towards me, I can see my disdain leveled right back at me. "I'm not here for the floorshow, Ms. Starling-Ferrier."

I'm tempted to retreat, but with the brute behind me, I know it's pointless. Besides, my wolf isn't about to back down to this guy, no matter his bloodline. "Then why are you here? I thought you'd be dining in style with the other alphas."

He stops a couple of feet away, his gaze aloof. "I told you I have no interest in the council."

"Just for *mjeku i vdekjes*?" He looks surprised that I'll admit to knowing anything about Arben, but I shrug. "I'm sure you know my history and how I grew up. I saw Marku around, and I'm well aware of his reputation. But as to where he is now, my best guess is back in New York somewhere."

He tilts his head, and once again I'm reminded of the thin line between him and his beast. "Is that so?"

I shrug. "You can think what you want, but it doesn't make it true, Mr. Loup. So you should do yourself a favor and stop chasing shadows."

"And sweep them under the rug instead?" He drains his glass and I'm hoping the mini-interrogation is over. But when he pins me with his dark eyes, the sinking feeling in my belly says he's just getting started. "Do you know what's missing from your father's agenda? Any reference to the massacre in the Dark River Tower, or who might be responsible. Why do you think that is?"

"Because the Boston pack is only interested in looking to the future?" He gives me a sour look and I have to bite back a smirk. Maybe I'm not so bad at this political stuff, after all. "I suggest you talk to my dad if you want a better answer."

"I think I'll share something with you instead. Firstly, I don't care who tore Roan Bisha to pieces. As far as I'm concerned, they did me and the City of New York a favor. Secondly, I have no interest in going after you or your father. Ferrier's proven to be a good alpha for Boston, and he's not trying to overextend himself by grasping for the High Alpha position." He steps closer, his alpha dominance radiating off him in waves. "But harboring a dangerous assassin, who according to some reports may even be feral, is not something I can turn a blind eye to."

I'm tempted to ask him who died and made him God, but I know the answer.

The European Liaisons.

And it's clear this guy isn't going to let it go. Maybe he needs a scapegoat for what happened in New York, or maybe this is something personal. But there's one question I need answered, and I tilt my head, curious. "What do

you think you're going to do to Marku if you ever catch up to him?"

His gaze drops to my neck and before I can react, he reaches out and brushes a thumb over the biggest bonding bite. It's Arben's, of course, and for a moment I wonder if the Wolf can still scent my mate on my skin. A growl builds in my chest and I grab his wrist, my claws pressing against my fingertips, ready to sever his grip. "What are you doing?" I hiss.

But my anger just makes his lips tip up. "You have an unusual pack, Ms. Starling-Ferrier. Two omega heirs and three discarded sons... That kind of arrangement shouldn't work without a powerful anchor to hold you all together."

I know what he's insinuating. That Arben is our anchor. Which is circling too close to the truth about us being a fated pack, and Arben our guardian. So, I let my wolf out just enough for my claws to dig into his wrist. "What makes you think I'm not the anchor, Loup? Or any one of my mates? Like you said, we're an unusual pack."

His eyes flare, although it's impossible to discern the black of his iris from his pupil. But I can smell his excitement as he stares at the tiny moons I'm pressing into his skin. "You half shift?"

I retract my claws and fold my arms, as if his lingering touch on my neck is a minor annoyance. "Maybe my anchor is hiding somewhere, pulling on my strings." He glances about, and my lip curls. "I would think twice before poking in the shadows around here, Mr. Loup."

Instead of taking my words as a threat, he tilts his head, dark satisfaction blooming in his eyes. "Let's do a deal. You get Arben Marku to meet me for a private conversation, and I'll grant him immunity from any prosecution by Washington."

I pretend to mull it over, but it's not like Arben's ever worried too much about staying on the right side of the law. But when I open my mouth to tell

him I can't pass on his message – even if I wanted to – his hand snaps out, his finger pressing against my lips.

“Think about it,” Loup tells me. “Because I’m a much better ally than enemy, Ms. Starling-Ferrier.”



Kelly

“I’m going to look for Angel,” I tell Rory, peeling myself away enough to catch my breath. The truth is, breathing becomes quite an endeavor when I’m around my green-eyed devil, and doubly so when we’ve been grinding on each other for the length of three songs. He pouts at me, his fingers trailing down my arm, and I hum, my skin crackling with electricity. “Won’t be long,” I promise. “And maybe then we can make tracks. I really want to show our girl that thing you did to me in the hotel bathroom earlier...”

Rory’s eyes darken with predatory lust, and I get a flashback to him bending me over the vanity, his perfect cock buried deep in my ass. Like always, it was sublime, but it was his face in the mirror that made me come so hard my claws left divots in the marble. Rory is a glutton for anything sexual, but I’ve never met anyone who enjoys giving pleasure more than he does. Especially when he has our little angel looking on and complimenting his efforts.

I shiver in anticipation and his trailing fingers lift to my sweat-streaked face. “Want me to come, sweetheart?”

Innuendo is second nature to Rory, and he grins when I poke my tongue through my cheek at him. He circles the bulge with his fingers, his eyes burning even hotter, and I back off with a laugh. But then I swipe an arm across my sweaty brow and reconsider. I feel like I’m one more dance away from melting into a puddle. “Could you grab me some water while I hunt her down?”

He nods, ducking in for a kiss before he heads to the bar. I turn to look at our other dance partners, not all that surprised to find Cam and Nate in a little bubble of their own. I’ve felt Cam’s protective instincts throbbing through

our bond every time he looks at those bruises on the beta's neck. We all feel it; the need to protect Nate. Not out of pity, but because he seems so completely certain that no one will ever make the effort.

I bite back a growl and step towards Cam, my hand sliding across his muscled back. He's wearing a gray Henley and black jeans, and damn, I'm on sensory overload here, because he looks like a dream. With his sun-streaked locks clipped back to his scalp, Cam exudes the kind of masculine beauty that makes my mouth dry and my dick hard. I can't resist wrapping my hand around his stacked bicep as he ducks his head towards me. "Don't move your cute butt off this dance floor," I tell him as I blatantly feel him up. "I'll be back in a jiff."

He crooks a brow at me, his gaze tracking Rory to the bar. I use the distraction to sidle over to Nate, and pressing my cheek close to his, murmur in his ear, "Just going to grab our girl."

His skin flushes hot against mine and I smirk, knowing he's blushing again. I saw how Angel reacted to that first bloom of color spreading across his skin like a sunrise. In fact, the throb of her arousal through the bond was so potent, it made me instantly hard. And then I'd been driven to nudge them closer, to tease out more of their delicious reactions to each other. I thought she might fight me a bit, or he might freak at our blatant interest, but instead he'd welcomed us in with one of his shy smiles and a swivel of those sinful hips.

Who knew that sexy accountant was really a thing...?

I've never really been into the good boys – being swept up by the Hila gang when I was in my teens kind of nudged me towards the dark – but there's something mesmerizing about the beta's innocence. He's the definition of clean cut, from his shiny loafers to the black-rimmed glasses and sensible side part. I think it's cute as hell, but adding his social awkwardness

into the mix, it explains why he finds it so easy to disappear into the background. Most shifters exude some kind of animal presence, but Nate seems almost untouched by his inner beast. Or he does until that blush creeps across his pale cheeks and he starts gnawing on his plump bottom lip.

He turns his face now, and I feel his breath catch as he realizes how close I am to that slip of red, bitten flesh. I'm tempted to lean over and steal a taste, but I hold back, knowing this is something we need to talk about as a pack. Yes, we all feel some kind of pull towards the beta, but we don't fool around outside our bonds. And inviting anyone into our circle – even if it's just for a fling – isn't something we'd ever do lightly.

Still, when his quicksilver eyes latch onto mine, I feel my resolve wobble and I drop a peck on his flushed cheek. "Stay close to Cam," I tell him. "I'm grabbing Elvi and then we're heading back together."

He nods, but he tilts his neck and his pupils do that expanding thing that makes my wolf sit up and notice. I'm pretty sure Nate is a natural submissive, which to a male omega is a tantalizing thing, especially when you were raised to be an alpha. Protecting him is still my primary instinct, but a part of me also wants to hold him down and fuck him until he's a purring mess.

Jesus, Kelly. Rein it in a little, will you?

I smirk to myself as I cut through the crowd, my eyes peeled for our angel. I'm careful to exude my 'stay away' aura to the circling alphas, but I can't keep my thoughts from drifting as well. With all the testosterone in the air, I have to wonder what our absent packmate would think of Nate Leon. Arben is the epitome of a dominant alpha, to the point Rory calls him a cock conductor because of the way he orchestrates our group scenes. As far as I'm concerned, there are alphas and then there is Arben, sitting all alone on his domineering throne.

The back of my neck tingles and I look around, wondering if I've actually

manifested our guardian through wishful thinking alone. But when I try to tune into my bond with him, I get the same smothering static that makes my stomach clench.

A small mewl of distress leaves my lips and the big alpha next to me cocks his head, his gaze swinging in my direction. I fight the urge to duck my head, because the fastest way to blow off random interest is to let them get a look at the bite marks on my neck. Arben's is huge – although still nothing on the mauling he gave Link in his monster form – and even the horniest alpha tends to back off when they catch sight of it. But this alpha is drunk, and the club is both dark and crowded. I can almost see the moment he decides I'm worth the risk, and my hand shoots to his balls, a single claw poking into his nasty sack. "I have a knife, and I'm not afraid to use it."

Defensive training has been part of our daily routine since the omegas moved onto the estate. Most times it's me and Elvi using one of our mates to demonstrate basic moves, which revolve around a) punching alpha dick, and b) running for our lives. The rest of the time we focus on getting their wolves to come out at will, because there's no better self-protection than a pissed-off beast exploding out of your skin. And the fact I can now half shift - thanks to the dedicated tutelage of my avenging angel – means that I have every alpha literally by the balls.

No more bending over for some sweaty, abusive asshole who thinks every omega is fair game...

"Step back!" I hiss, giving him another poke, and he actually raises his arms as he stumbles away.

I'm tempted to follow just to make sure I've driven my point home – literally – but I swing towards the restrooms instead. I wouldn't put it past him to find reinforcements and come back to teach my omega ass a painful lesson.

My mood lifts a little when I find the club has an Omega Only bathroom, and I push my way inside with a sigh of relief. There are only two cubicles – one of which is occupied – but I pause at the vanity and take in my pale face and wild eyes. My mesh tank is plastered to my skin, and I grab a hand towel and run it under the faucet before wiping it over my face and arms. I’m reaching for a dry one when the stall door opens behind me and a guy steps out.

I instantly reach for my bonds. And not just Arben’s, although I get the same static from all of them. It’s like I’ve suddenly been cut off from my pack, and I know it’s because of *him*. The huge, gold-skinned man behind me, deep scars in his cheeks and piercings through the eyebrows, nose, and lip. When he meets my gaze in the mirror, the air shimmers around him and I swear I can see his beast stalking towards me, although it’s twice the size of any wolf I’ve seen in real life.

I grab the vanity. I *know* there’s damp marble under my hand, but it feels like I’m clutching air. And before I can whirl around to confront him, he’s right behind me, his breath hot on the back of my neck.

But my training kicks in, all those hours of kicking alpha dicks and running for my life paying off. I rear back, using my grip on the counter to add momentum, my head snapping towards his face.

But before I can connect, his hand shoots out, gripping my throat and pulling me back against his chest. I thrash, ready to tear into him with my claws. But when a purr comes out of his chest, my hands freeze and I blink. Because if that face wasn’t staring into my eyes, I’d swear it was Arben. Only this guy is bigger, harder, and about a thousand times more savage.

A shudder runs through me, tinged with terror. But then that breath on my nape turns sweet, drifting over me in a hazy cloud. “Don’t fight me, little one. I’m not here to hurt you.”

Even the voice is similar to Arben's, and I try that bondlink with him again, desperate to see some recognition in the strange eyes peering into mine.

More static, which seems to bleed into the rest of my brain. I try to blink it away, but the mirror suddenly goes foggy and my vision starts to blacken at the edges. I don't think I'm going to pass out, but I can feel my pulse slowing under his huge palm, my wolf retreating into some dark, hidden part of me.

"Who are you?" I croak, and realize there are tears dripping down my cheeks.

He makes a humming sound, but doesn't try to wipe them away. Instead, he lowers his face to my hair and rubs it back and forth like he's scent-marking me. That sweet perfume takes on a darker undertone, and I shiver. But his fingers have found the edge of my mating bites and he chuffs as he strokes them. When he finds Arben's mark, his purr rattles in his chest like an approaching hurricane. "Tell me about this one."

I swallow, every instinct screaming at me to brace for those sharp teeth I can see glinting in his mouth. Fuck, I'm pretty sure at least a few of them are metal, which makes zero sense with a shifter. What's the point of piercing our bodies when our wolves are the coolest kind of modification out there? But even as I have this scrambled conversation with myself, I can feel my mind growing hazier. "It's Arben's," I murmur. "He's one of my alphas."

He says something in a language I don't know, although it could just be a guttural growl. "Does he look after you, little one?"

I shiver and shudder, trying to blink past the mist in my mind. "Yes," I whisper.

"Even when you fight the rage?"

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Does he mean my omega heat? Female omegas might become needy little sex beasts when they give in to

their mating cycle, but I'm more likely to tear a cock off at the root during my heat. That rage was the only thing that kept me safe when I was locked in the basement, but it owned me, turning me almost rabid. And when I came into heat under Arben's roof, I begged him to chain me up, to knock me out, just so I didn't hurt anyone. But instead, he dominated me, forcing me to shift over and over until I got what I wanted: Rory's mating bite.

"Always," I croak. "He looks after all of us."

"Ah." He almost sighs against my hair. "That is good."

I blink, trying to make sense of the expression on his face. But his eyes are hooded, his massive palm slack against my throat. I try to coax my claws out, to seize this moment when he's distracted, but my wolf is still frustratingly out of reach.

And then his eyes snap open and I feel icy sweat pop all over my body. "I've enjoyed meeting you, little one. But you must forget it now. Forget you saw me, what we spoke about..." His hand slides over my throat, tracing Arben's bite as if he wants to memorize it. "And then, when you see me next, wolfing, I will tell you to come with me. And what will you do?"

I blink into those savage eyes. "Come with you," I whisper.

And then he's pushing me towards the door, hard enough to make me slam into the wood. I cry out, but use the force to propel my way back out into the club. The noise and lights and press of a hundred sweaty bodies hit me like a punch and I stagger. But as soon as an alpha swoops my way, trying to steady me, I snarl and dash through the crowd.

My heart gives a needy thump as I spot my pack at the bar, all their necks craning like they're looking at me. No, not all... I still can't see Angel, and for some reason that makes my skin crawl.

"Kelly!" It's Rory, swooping towards me with a wild light in his green eyes. "We were looking for you... Hey, hey!" Big thumbs sweep my cheeks,

coming away wet. “What’s wrong, sweetness?”

“I-I-I...” My body shudders, broken words coating my tongue. What the fuck *is* wrong with me?

“Let me see him,” Cam barks, almost prying me from Rory’s arms. “What happened, babe? Did you take something? Did someone touch you?”

“N-No.” I manage to spit out. “But we need to go. Where’s Angel?”

“Fuck!” Rory is throwing himself at the bar, clambering up without a glance in the direction of the startled staff. He stands with hands on his hips, peering around the dimly-lit club. “We thought she was with you, Sunshine.”

Cam is still checking me over, a frown on his face as he presses his fingers against my hammering pulse. “Sweetheart,” he says quietly in my ear. “We’ll leave, but if something bad happened, you need to tell me so I can treat it.”

I gnash my teeth, staring at him in a mix of frustration and fear. “I don’t...” I bite my lip hard enough to bleed. “I- I can’t talk about it, Cam.”

His big hand comes out to wrap around the back of my head, cradling me against his chest. And then his lips are on my brow. “We’ll fix it, sweetheart, Don’t worry. You’re safe now.”

I want to melt into him, to soak up the certainty that is Cam. If he says he’s taking care of something, he’ll bend the world to his will to make it happen. For fuck’s sake, this guy changed his whole identity to walk into the Tower and have me beat the shit out of him in a fight ring while I was under an omega heat...

A shudder runs through my body, cramping every muscle as I think: *omega heat*. Is that what’s wrong with me?

“We need to go,” I whisper against his chest. “I think... I might be going into heat.”

He stiffens all over, a growl rattling under my ear. “Fuck. Then we go.” I feel him twist at the waist to whistle at Rory. “Get down here!”

There's a thump as Rory jumps off the bar, and then his musky scent is filling my nose as he wraps himself around both of us. "Who do I need to go fuck up, Sunshine?" he croons, peppering me with kisses. "Nate's already agreed to help me hide the body."

Nate! I cringe, peeking past my mates at the poor beta who's staring at me with wide eyes.

"It's okay," I tell him. "But do you know if there's a back way out of here?"

I can't even imagine walking all the way across the club, my heat bubbling under the surface.

"Of course," Nate says, worry pinching his brow. "This way."

He points in the direction of the restrooms and I shudder. I do *not* want to go that way. But Cam is already half carrying me and I cling to him. It's only when Rory doesn't fall into step behind us that I try to plant my feet. "Wait. Where's Rory?"

"He's getting Angel," Cam says, rubbing my back. "They'll come straight after, but the priority is getting you out of here."

I want to protest, but Nate has pushed open an emergency door and we're stepping into a side alley. There's a black car at the curb and Nate opens the back door, biting his lip. "It's one of ours," he reassures me, then nods at Cam, who follows me inside. When we're seated, Nate presses a business card into my hand. "I'll stay until the others are together. Here's my private number if you need anything."

I stammer out my thanks, but we're already pulling away from the curb, the Leon driver checking with Cam that he wants to go straight back to the hotel. While they talk about the best drop-off point, I feel something come barreling down my mate bond and wince.

Where are you, Kelly?

“Heading back to the hotel,” I say aloud, then shoot Cam a shrug. “It’s Link.”

Cam grunts. “Tell him to get the club feed. I need to know what the hell is going on, sweetheart.”

I frown, but Link is talking over him. They have a bond through Arben, since they’re not actually mated to each other in that way, but it’s weak, especially when our guardian is out of the picture. I bite my lip hard and focus on the black energy pulsing through my bond. *Something happened at the club, Link. I’m not sure what, but I thought it was bringing on my heat...*

The admission sounds so feeble when I put it like that, but Link becomes eerily calm. *If you are, we’ll take care of you.* There’s a pause and then he says, *Are the others with you?*

That uneasy feeling is back in my stomach. *Just Cam. We got separated.*

I don’t want to go into any more detail until we’re face-to-face, which takes less than ten minutes, since Cam has the driver drop us at the elevator door in the private parking lot. As soon as we enter the suite, Link steps away from the laptop and pulls me into his arms. I love Cam and trust him with my life, but Link is my home and always has been. My first love, my grumpy devil, the guy who would burn the world down if I asked him to.

“Shh,” he murmurs into my hair, rocking me, and I realize I’m whimpering. Fuck me. What the hell is going on with me right now? “I’ve got you, Kelly. Just breathe and let it go.”

He’s talking about my heat rage, but it feels like there’s something else burning inside me right now, and I slowly pull away. My skin feels... dirty, and I rub at my arms. “I need to.. I need to shower,” I tell him, already headed towards the bathroom. Link is right on my heels, but I pause at the door and look back at Cam. “Will you go back and help Rory?”

Because – *fuck!* - we *left* Angel at the club. Guilt and shame are twisting

me up inside, but now I've got a little distance, I'm pretty sure I'm not going into heat. "I'm okay." I clutch the doorjamb, my face burning. "I think it might have been a panic attack. You should make sure Angel is safe."

Link shoots Cam a dark look, but he's already heading towards the door. "Ten minutes and I can get back here. Stay cool and calm, get rehydrated, and hop into bed."

I nod, walking numbly into the bathroom. I want a shower more than anything, but as I drift over to the vanity, my eyes widen at my reflection. My pupils are blown and perspiration is dripping from my hair. And it's not just fun, club dance floor sweat. It smells sickly sweet, like scorched sugar. Like an omega soaked in terror.

I grip the edge of the vanity, my heart accelerating as Link steps up behind me. "Tell me, Kelly," he says in that same eerily calm tone.

I stare into his eyes, but there's only one image I can see in my mind and it doesn't make sense. "I think it was a wolf."



Elvi

I'm leaving the club with Rory and Nate when Cam meets us on the pavement, about to come back inside and find us. He breathes out a sigh of relief, but I take two strides and grip his arms. "Is Kelly okay?"

"Just shaken up," he tells me, but I can feel the tension thrumming through his body. "Link's got him, and we don't think it's a heat."

I feel an echo of Kelly's fear down our bond, although it's strangely muted. "But someone really upset him. What the hell, Cam? He didn't say who?"

His lips thin like he's holding something back, and he tries to steer me towards a black car that's idling at the curb. As much as I want to get back to my sunshine, I shake my head. I'm too keyed up for a nice sedate drive right now. Swinging away, I start in the direction of the hotel, my hands clenched into fists at my side.

We walk for a while, breathing in city fumes, while I try to get a grip on my anger. I do my best to blank out the honking horns and random chatter from other pedestrians, focusing instead on the fact that Rory is on my left and Nate is on my right. But Cam is like a black cloud at my back and I want to poke at him until he spills whatever shit Kelly told him, but I take a deep breath and turn to Nate. "You said something about getting the club security feeds?"

"Of course," he says promptly, holding up the phone in his hand. "I've asked Trench to meet me as soon as we get back."

"Trenchfoot?" Rory growls. "Forget involving that prick. This stays inside the pack."

But Cam puts a comforting hand on Nate's shoulder. "I'll go with you," he

says. “We appreciate your help.”

I frown, not liking the idea of Nate asking a favor of the Leon Head of Security. But with Cam at his side, at least I know he’ll be safe.

“What about you?” Cam asks as we cross the street in front of the hotel. “Why couldn’t we find you?”

I shoot a glance Rory’s way, since I’ve already been through this with him. His green eyes gleam dangerously, but I decide to keep it low-key until we’re back in our suite. “I was in the chillout room. I ran into the Wolf of Washington. He wanted to hassle me about Arben some more.”

Cam’s growl makes the pit of my stomach heat up, and I turn and let him step right into my arms. His fresh air and sunshine scent is potent, even in a Chicago street, and I know it’s because of all the stress crashing through his body. “Thanks for getting Kelly out of there, and I’m sorry I separated us. I’ll do better next time.”

Cam tips up my chin. “Sweetheart, you don’t need to apologize. I’m not your keeper, and I know you can look after yourself. But we need to work on our bonds.” He clears his throat as he realizes Nate is watching us with unabashed interest. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll hit the gym and go through our drills. And you give me one hundred percent, okay? I want to feel you sweating down our bond.”

I roll my eyes at him, but rise up on my toes to give him a quick kiss. “As long as I get that massage you keep promising me.”

He smirks, dragging me back for a deeper kiss. Rory kisses with his whole body, throwing everything into it and leaving absolutely nothing untouched. Whereas Cam is like a focused assault, using his tongue and lips like they’re heat-seeking missiles. I groan and push him away. “Let’s go and check our sunshine. But hold that thought. I’m feeling... “

I don’t want to say *hot*, *horny*, and *jumping out of my skin*, but that’s the

great thing about a mating bond. I don't have to put any of that into words and my mates still get the picture.

The awareness flares in their eyes, Cam and Rory exchanging a look before they usher us across the street. But as soon as we're inside the hotel, Cam brushes a kiss on my cheek. "I'll go with Nate," he murmurs. "But I'll be up as soon as I can."

I nod and give his arm a squeeze. "Kelly's safety comes first."

Another thing I don't need to put into words, but saying goodbye to Nate is harder. He's so quiet, I imagine a lot of people forget he's around, but his calmness reminds me of the sensation of my wolf's fur under my skin. Like it's there, if I need to reach for it, but not something I have to acknowledge.

"Thank you, Nate," I say quietly, aware of the night manager and security guards watching us out of the corners of their eyes. "Will you meet us for breakfast in the morning?"

He gives me a surprised look. "I'll be going home tonight. I don't stay here very often." There's something in his voice that catches my attention, but he quickly thrusts out his hand for me to shake. "But I'll be around tomorrow."

We shake, my hand lingering in his before Rory tosses an arm over my shoulders, breaking our connection. "Thanks for the dance, man," he says with a wink at the beta, teasing a blush to the surface of his pale skin. "You move like you were made for wicked things."

I dig an elbow into Rory's ribs, but instead of blushing harder, Nate tilts his head, considering. "I've never thought of it like that. But I like the way it sounds."

Rory gives a strangled chuckle and I quickly tow him away towards the elevators. As soon as we're inside, he bumps my hip, pushing me up against the mirrored wall. "Is it just me, or is Mr. Spreadsheets a sexy little beast?"

I hum as he presses his hips against my ass, one hand stroking my belly as the other grabs my hair, tilting my neck. His tongue slides over his mating bite without warning, and I groan as arousal licks between my legs. Even with all the stress, the last few hours have been the best kind of foreplay, and I press back against his groin, grinding on the hard shaft of his erection.

“Remind you of the first elevator ride we took?” he asks, gently biting his mark and making me shudder. I watch the crackle of heat in his green eyes as he licks away the sting. “My little spitfire, who didn’t want to hug me.”

I roll my eyes, partially at his exaggerated pout, but mostly at the way his fingers are working my nipple through my jumpsuit. “I said I didn’t hug strangers, and you said you fucked them. Then you told me sorrow is beautiful...”

“Sure is, but I wanted to scoop yours out and fill you up with something better.”

I groan, half-laughing. “I can’t believe that line actually worked on me.”

“Nearly as good as calling the sweet mess in your pussy *Rory’s slick*.” I groan again, this time grinding on him harder, and he whines. “Love the jumpsuit, babe, but it’s not exactly easy access.”

I laugh for real this time, but I’m pretty sure we’d be full-on fucking if I had gone with one of my flirty little skirts. And that’s probably something the Leon security team doesn’t need to see on our first night in town.

But my laughter dries up as we enter the suite and I drop my purse and kick off my shoes. There’s a strange stillness in the air and I shoot Rory a worried glance as we hurry towards the main bedroom. There’s actually three bedrooms in the suite, but only one with a nest big enough to take us all. And that’s where I find Kelly, curled in a tight ball and fully shifted into his wolf form.

My throat catches as I stare at his silky red-gold fur. Kelly is as beautiful

in his wolf form as he is in his human skin, but my steps are hesitant as I approach the bed. He's clearly sound asleep, but every few breaths he gives a soft whimper that shoots straight to my heart like an arrow. It takes me a long moment to tear my eyes away and look at Link. He's lying next to Kelly, close but not quite touching, and I raise a brow at him. They love each other to death, and it's rare for them to ever keep their distance, except for the times when I'm in the mix. But Link's body is tight with tension. "Everything okay?"

Link is lying on top of the covers and is wearing just a pair of black sweats, low on his hips. Tattoos curl down his neck – a mix of swirls and jagged edges framing a bullet, a claw, and Kelly's name – and there's a white scar on his chin. He has sharp cheekbones, a broad forehead, and a slightly hooked nose over a puffy bottom lip. I remember the first time I saw him, I thought he was the poster child for a pack enforcer, but there's a sharp intelligence in his eyes that I rarely saw in Bisha's lieutenants. And then there's the fact the only pack he recognizes are his blood brothers, and to a certain extent, me.

As much as I know he's a devil, I cannot deny that Link is a stunning man.

"He's better," he murmurs, not looking away from me. "I wanted to check the feeds, but he starts whimpering every time I move."

That explains Link's tension, and I smile as Rory steps past me and hands him his laptop. We all know Link is better when he's wired in, and the furrow leaves his brow as he starts to work the keyboard. "Nate is helping Cam get access to the club feeds," I tell him.

He grunts. "I can probably do it faster from here." But then he tips his dark eyes up to mine. "What did you see?"

"Not anything useful," I admit, my gaze dropping back to Kelly. "He didn't say anything to you?"

“Just something weird.” His fingers pause in their rapid typing, and he bites his lip. “We were in the bathroom, and he looked spooked, like he was staring straight through me. I was talking to him, trying to get him into the shower, but he kept saying one word over and over.” I arch a brow, impatient, and he slants a glance down at our mate. “Wolf.”

“Wolf?” I feel my heart rate jump back up. “Did he say Wolf, or Loup?”

Link’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Why would he be talking about the Wolf of Washington?”

“Because he was in the club.” I sink onto the edge of the bed, rubbing at my face. “Hopefully you can find him on the feeds. He was in the chillout room, back behind the main bar. Just him and one other guy, probably his personal security. He asked me that same bullshit about Arben, only more threatening, and I... sort of popped a claw...”

Rory sucks in a sharp breath, since I didn’t share this with him while we were still in the club. I’d been too freaked out hearing Cam had to take Kelly home. Plus, I wasn’t sure where Loup was. He’d made his offer and then left, but I could still feel eyes on me. And not just the usually drunk alphas checking out an omega on her own. This had felt ... predatory.

“So, he knows you’re special,” Link says, and I can’t deny the tiny lick of warmth in my chest at the word. But he’s scowling now. “What else?”

“He offered us a deal. We get Arben to meet him for a private conversation, and he’ll make sure he gets immunity from any prosecution by Washington.”

Rory makes a low growling sound as he wraps his arms around me. “The fucker shouldn’t be talking to you, let alone offering bullshit deals.”

I twist to look up at him. “That’s what we’re here for, though, right? Politics.”

I almost spit the word, and Rory chuckles, since I’ve made my feelings

clear on the subject. But then he's reaching down and scooping me into his arms, bridal style. "Come on, babe. I'll wash that dirty word out of your mouth."

Link watches us for a moment, then gets back to work on his laptop. "Just keep it down in there."

Rory shoots him a finger, which isn't easy since he's carrying me, but I get his full attention when we reach the bathroom. It's luxurious, like the rest of the suite, with a long marble vanity, a huge tub, and a walk-in shower. He props me on the vanity and, sweeping my hair aside, tugs the zipper on my jumpsuit. "We get clean, then we go sleep with our Sunshine, yeah?"

I nod, resting my head on his chest as he helps me step out of my clothes. I'm exhausted, my adrenaline crashing now I know Kelly is safe, but I'm still squirming inside my skin. And my brain is whirling a mile a minute, the noise and lights from the club still ringing in my ears. So when Rory nudges me towards the shower, I pull on his arm. "You, too," I tell him. "I need you to peel me out of my skin, Rory."

The flare in his eyes tells me he knows exactly what I mean. And then he's backing me under the spray, boots, jeans, and all. I gasp, but he swallows it down, his mouth plundering mine as we circle each other. As soon as I'm lined up with the timber ledge, he drops to his knees, lifting my leg over his shoulders. His silk shirt is plastered to his skin and I tug at it, but it's stuck to his hard muscles like glue. Which is a damn fine sight, but I need to feel his skin on mine, and I finally resort to a claw through the top couple of buttons. He chuckles as he tears the ruined fabric over his head, and I sigh.

Damn, I love this man with every fiber of my being.

Especially when he eats me out like I'm his favorite dessert, spending so much time on my clit that my legs start to wobble. He grounds me by thrusting a couple of fingers inside and hooking into my walls, but as soon as

I come, he surges to his feet and claws at his belt. I'm still trembling and clinging to his shoulders when he lifts me off my feet and drops me on his cock.

There's a lot to be said for an alpha's strength, given he can back me up against a wall and fuck me deep, while still torturing my clit. I writhe on his thick shaft, loving the way it pushes every thought out of my mind. I wasn't kidding when I told Cam I wanted him to massage me into a puddle of senseless goo. And as if I've summoned him with my neediness, Cam steps into the bathroom, gently closing the door behind him.

"Is there room in there for me?" he asks, and I moan, because Rory's fingers pause on my aching clit. He sends a sex-soaked smile over his shoulder as he thrusts his hips up, making stars dance behind my eyes. "Get in here, bro. Our angel is fucking needy tonight."

I grunt, but it's the truth. I need Cam, too, and I hold out a hand to him.

"I don't think I can get in there with you holding her like that," he murmurs as he strips off his clothes. "And if we're talking about needy, couldn't you take a second to pull off your boots and shirt? Or did you miss laundry day?"

I smirk as Rory rolls his eyes, but then he grins at me. "Angel needs extra attention tonight. Got all sorts of dirty thoughts bumping around in her head."

Cam grunts and steps under the spray, his lips immediately covering mine. He swipes at my helpless moans with his tongue, licking his way around my mouth. But when he pulls back, there's a serious glint in his eyes. "You tell us if you need more, sweetheart. It can get lonely, even in a pack."

I bit my lip, wondering how much of my stress is leaking into my bonds. "You give me everything already, Cam. I'm just... on edge."

Cam is still frowning down at me, but Rory nuzzles into my neck as he rocks into me. "Best thing to do when you find yourself looking down from a

high place is to jump, babe. We'll catch you."

I sigh, not doubting it in the least. No one could ever say Rory isn't one hundred percent committed, and probably also slightly nuts.

But it's Cam who sits down on the wooden ledge against the wall and pats his thighs. "Here's a good place, babe." He looks over my shoulder at Rory. "Ready to give those quads a workout?"

Rory makes a low, growling sound, his cock throbbing inside me, and I peer down at Cam. His thick shaft is in his hand and pointed in my direction. "Want to try taking us both? We can just keep it to the tip if it's too much."

Too much? Neither of my guys is small, and Cam's 'tip' is big enough to make me gasp on its own. But it's exactly the kind of distraction I want, and I point my toes, rocking my hips back as I clutch at Rory. "Can you drop me in his lap? But don't drop me, drop me. I want to feel him get all up in your business, too."

Rory groans and spreads his feet. "Okay, but no knots. I'm not having your monster balloon squashing the life out of my cock."

Cam just grunts, and taking me by the hips, steers me down to his lap. Rory has to bend a bit to make it work, but the first brush of Cam's tip has him panting in my ear. But instead of pushing in, Cam's fingers press at our seal. He explores for a bit, spreading my slick on his cock, before a finger slides in alongside Rory's shaft. The pressure is a perfect pinch, Rory's heart hammering under my ear as Cam gently pumps in and out. When a second finger slips in, Rory whines, but Cam runs a soothing hand over his hip. They share a messy kiss over my shoulder before Cam pulls out his fingers and rubs his hand over Rory's balls. "Open her up for me, brother," he says, and Rory tilts my hips, biting down on my neck.

I shiver as Cam inches in, just the tip as promised. Rory makes a gurgling sound, but he doesn't hesitate to lower me over Cam's shaft, circling my hips

to get a better fit. The stretch is enough to make me mewl, white light flickering at the edges of my vision. It's the furthest thing from comfortable, but that's exactly what I want right now, and I can feel slick dripping around their cocks. God knows how when I'm stuffed so full, but it just feels that good.

Cam is gently thrusting his hips, his voice like wet gravel as he grinds another inch into me. "You might want out of your skin, Angel, but there's no better place for us than inside you."

I moan, my orgasm scraping up my spine. "I'm going to come. You need to fill me up fast."

"Baby, we are gonna flood this pussy!" Rory hisses, groaning as Cam stuffs in another inch. "Ah, fuck! You're a chubby asshole, brother! What have you been feeding this dick?"

"You can take it," Cam snaps back, but I can feel Rory shaking and my pussy fluttering.

I shove myself down hard, forcing Cam into the hilt, then lean back to grab him around the neck. "Bite me, Alpha."

It drags a surprised roar out of him, his cock exploding inside me as his teeth sink into my neck. It's right over his mating mark, and Rory almost drops me in his lap as we both convulse. Pleasure explodes through me, all tangled up in our bonds, and I vaguely feel Rory slamming into me as he soars through his own release. But as soon as he's finished, he lets me go and drops to the floor, cupping his throbbing knot. "You're a bad man," he says to Cam through sulky lashes as his dick keeps spurting on his abs. "You nearly broke it."

I hug Cam, almost purring as he eases out of me and laps at the fresh bite mark. "At least he caught *me*," I tell Rory with a grin.

Rory just lets the shower pound him into the tile until we've all caught our

breath and then we pat each other down, Cam doing most of the work. He's still running his fingers possessively over my throat when we head back out into the bedroom.

"You call that quiet?" Link scowls as he looks up from his laptop.

"Next time you should come in and stuff my mouth with something," Rory sighs. "It was either shout my head off or let my dick explode."

I giggle as Rory drops his towel and shows Link his mauled knot. To my surprise, he gives it an absent pat, and Cam smirks at their antics. They might all be alphas, but our pack isn't really stuck on designations, and Rory is always finding ways to spread the love around. *Lubricating the bonds* as he likes to put it. Not that he probably expected it to spread *that* far when Cam joined us in the shower.

"You want a t-shirt, babe?" Cam asks, rooting through the top drawer, but I drop the towel and step up to the bed.

"Don't need it," I tell him, and three sets of eyes fix on me as I shake my shoulders back and let my wolf out. I know on a primal level it still surprises them that I can do this so effortlessly. If they were weaker alphas, they'd probably take offense at the fact I don't need their command to set her free. But this is second nature to me now, as easy as slipping off the towel. And then my awareness changes too, easing into the background as my wolf takes center stage.

"Fuck, have you ever seen anything more beautiful?" Rory breathes, forgetting about his dick long enough to run his hand through my silver fur. My wolf rewards him with a lick across his wrist and a flick of her tail as she leaps up on the bed. I expect her to ignore Link, but she stops right in front of him, head held high as she stares at him. I can feel her interest, and something that feels a lot like possessiveness. They keep up their silent staring contest until Rory crawls up onto the bed and nudges Link's shoulder.

“Looks like she’s seen something she likes, too.”

I’m pretty sure a blush stains Link’s high cheekbones, but then he’s moving aside a little, exposing the warm strip of bed between him and Kelly. My wolf makes a pleased chuffing sound, striding forward and lowering herself onto her belly. Link pauses, then eases back onto the pillow, my wolf giving a low yip as his hand slides across her flank. Kelly wriggles closer, maybe sensing her wolfy heat, and a feeling of smug contentment rises off my wolf as Link’s fingers twist in her fur.

I’m about to tell her not to read too much into it when she drops her head on her paws and it’s lights out.



Elvi

I blink awake to warm skin and Kelly's chocolate scent, his amber eyes fixed on me. "Good morning," I whisper, pressing my naked length along his and giving a happy sigh. Kelly is just the perfect balance of hard muscle and soft curves. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Better," he murmurs back, and I lift my head enough to realize we're alone. "The guys are getting breakfast and checking the security feeds from last night."

I push myself up on an elbow, brushing his hair back from his face. It always comes out tangled after a shift, but also brighter and softer, the highlights like spun gold. Come to think of it, the tangles might be because my fingers are always buried in it, greedy for its silky texture.

"I'm sorry we got separated." I bite on my lip, all the guilt from last night returning in a gush. "It was stupid. I should've come back to find you earlier, or at least checked in with our bond."

"I could say the same," he tells me, rubbing a hand over his face and letting his head fall back on the pillow. He peers up at the ceiling like he's looking for answers. "There's a bunch of stuff all jumbled up in my head, and none of it makes sense."

"You said something about a wolf. Do you think it was Loup?" I ask carefully, but he's already shaking his head. I wait for him to say something more, but when the silence stretches, I lean down and give him a soft kiss. "Well, maybe the guys have something for us. You want to get up, or cuddle some more?"

He rolls quickly, covering me with his hard length, his eyes sparkling down into mine. I gasp, because there's no way I can get this close to Kelly

without forgetting how to breathe. “I always want to cuddle with you, Angel. But your dad’s going to be here soon, and I’d prefer to take our time. Raincheck until tonight?”

“Definitely,” I whisper, leaning up to taste his lips again. “But I wouldn’t say no to a midday quickie either, just so you know.”

His mouth quirks into a masculine smirk. “I think that could be arranged.”

We eventually head out into the main sitting area, the guys split between two loaded room service carts and a bank of laptops on the dining table. My appetite wakes up with a roar, which is typical after a shift, and I head straight for the platter of bacon. There’s Turkish coffee in a traditional wide-bottomed copper pot, and I make grabby hands as Cam pours me a cup. “Make sure you have some of the spinach omelet with that,” he tells me, frowning at the mountain of bacon stacked on my plate.

I roll my eyes at him. “I thought you were going to wake me for a grueling training session this morning.”

“Exactly. I let you sleep in, but now you need to fill up on something nutritious.” He points back at the healthy cart with its egg whites and whole grains. “Because I plan on going double hard on you tomorrow.”

I grab a piece of bacon between my fingers and bite into it with a snap of my teeth. “Or you and Rory could just DP me in the shower again.” I flutter my lashes at him. “Is that what you mean by double hard?”

I’m pretty sure Lincoln just spat his coffee across his keyboard, but I’m too busy grinning at Cam’s shocked face. Rory, meanwhile, has a hand clutched to his heart. “My angel just fell. This is the proudest day of my life.”

I’m feeling pretty proud, too, until Kelly steps up beside me, his hands on his lean hips. “You sure we can’t just blow off this council and fuck all day?”

I choke, putting my coffee down before I scald myself. “What happened to the raincheck we just talked about?”

Kelly gives me a sly smile as he steals a piece of bacon from my fingers. “You know my wolf is a horny beast around you, Angel. I’m pretty much primed to go whenever you are.”

That gets all the guys on their feet, but Link gives a groan that sounds like it’s torn from somewhere deep inside him. “Incoming,” he says, rubbing his face as he checks his monitor. “Your dad’s at the door.”

I shake my head at Kelly, who’s grinning like a devil, and go to let my dad in. If he can sense the tension swirling in the air, he doesn’t comment, dropping a distracted kiss on my cheek. It’s not a new thing, these little displays of affection, but they still make me tingle all over. After thinking Roan Bisha was my dad for the first twenty years of my life, I’m lapping up every bit of normal parenting I can get.

“Quick debrief,” my dad says as we all sit around the dining table. “I heard what happened last night at the club. But can I have your take on it?”

We look around at each other and Cam nods. “Two separate events, as far as we can tell.” He quickly describes my run-in with the Wolf of Washington, and my dad’s eyes turn flinty. But he doesn’t interrupt, and Cam turns to Kelly. “From what we can gather, Kelly was in the omega restroom when he was approached by someone. A stranger, and not Loup. He wasn’t hurt physically, but he was badly shaken up. There aren’t any cameras inside, but we think the guy may have drugged him somehow; possibly through blowing an airborne powder into his face, or applying something to his skin.”

My eyes go wide, my hands coming down on the table with a thump. “Drugged?”

Kelly squirms in his seat, his earlier playfulness gone. “I... panicked. But I remember something weird about his teeth,” he says quietly, fidgeting with his fork. “Maybe I was just off my head, but I think that’s why I kept talking about a wolf.”

Teeth? I can feel my back molars grinding so hard, the bacon in my mouth is dust. But my dad comes around the table, leaning down to wrap Kelly in his arms. My anger instantly melts into gooey love for both of them, especially when my dad pulls back and cups his cheek. “Next time something like this happens, I want to hear about it right away. I know I’m not technically part of your pack, but you’re like a son to me, Kelly. I probably can’t do more than what you’re all doing, but I can give you a hug, and promise we’ll work it out together.”

Kelly stares up at him with wide eyes, and I can feel a heap of admiration for my dad through my bonds. We all have messed up experiences with our parents, but damn, I won the genetic lottery with him.

“Thanks, Daddy Ferrier,” Rory murmurs, sliding in to share Kelly’s seat and shoot heart eyes at my dad. “Believe me, we all want to be your sons. Except in the way it’d be weird with Angel.”

I grin, but force myself to focus on Cam. “What about cameras outside the restroom?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, but then we don’t really know what we’re looking for. There was a bit of traffic because the non-omega restrooms were so busy, but no one went in before Kelly and came out after.”

“I want to see it. Do you have the feed here?” I wave at Link’s laptop and he nods, clicking a few buttons until a grainy image comes up. It’s black and white, the lights from the dance floor like ghostly streaks on the film. It tracks as they said, with a few people coming and going until Kelly rushes into the restroom. I only get the back of his head, but his shoulders are hunched and the hand I can see is curled in a tight fist. I watch the clock tick over, but Link doesn’t jump the film forward, letting it play out in real time. At one second shy of five minutes, Kelly comes stumbling out, head down. He’s just a blur, and I grit my teeth as we watch the film tick over for eight

minutes until the next person enters. It's a petite girl in a tiny dress and she's in there for less than two minutes, then gone again in a streak of white light. "That's it?"

"It's like that for the next hour until the club closes," Link tells me, clicking through a series of images. He's captured every entrance and exit, and I know if he saw anything suspicious, he'd be all over it.

I rub my forehead. "And we're sure it wasn't Loup making a nuisance of himself?"

"No." Link clicks on a new bunch of images, showing the Alpha of Washington in each shot. "He walked to the bar, then the chillout room, then back out the front door. He was only there to see you."

That makes my dad scowl. "Don't worry, I've got a call set up with him in an hour. I'll be making it pretty clear that harassing my daughter is bad for his health."

I kind of love it when my dad gets all badass on my behalf, but then I cock a brow. "Why a call?"

"He checked out before he went to the club," Link tells me. "He's back in Washington."

I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. Keeping your enemies close is a proven strategy – and I definitely don't want him out there continuing his witch hunt for Arben – but I also feel relieved I won't be facing off against Loup for the next week. The guy is way too slippery.

"What about Arben?" I look around the table. "I've been trying to check in with him every hour, but I'm getting nothing."

The guys all shake their heads, looking troubled, and my dad takes my hand. "He'll be here, Elvi. We just need to let him do it his way."

I grit my teeth again, because that only works up to a point. We're in Chicago for a week, and if Arben doesn't make an appearance before we

leave, I'll have a few choice words for our deadly assassin.

But right now, I just want to crawl back under the covers with my sunshine. "Okay, but are we really needed this morning? Kelly and I were talking about catching up on some beauty sleep."

I'm tempted to slide a cheeky wink his way, but my dad shuts that down fast. "The other alphas have checked in, so we're on track to start in twenty minutes." He takes a last sip of his coffee and stands. "Unfortunately, they voted at dinner last night and it's a closed session. Just alphas and their heirs."

"What?" I splutter. "You mean the guys get out of going?" Grins are breaking out around the table and I stomp my foot. "How is that fair?"

"Politics is rarely fair," my dad tells me.

"No shit," I mutter, pulling a face. But my eyes narrow to slits as I notice the guys edging towards the bedroom. "Hold on. What do you think you're doing?"

Cam looks a little shame-faced, but Rory just flutters his lashes at me. "Making sure Kelly gets that beauty sleep you were talking about."

I'm pretty sure the sound that leaves my mouth is a whine.



The council meeting is being held in the hotel's business center, in a boardroom big enough to seat thirty. *Plenty of room for my whole pack*, I note sourly as I enter at my dad's side. The guys didn't start their puppy pile until we left, but the alpha pheromones were already thick in the air, so I have no doubt in my mind I've drawn the *extremely* short straw.

But it doesn't take long for my attention to be diverted elsewhere. The rest of the council is seated when we arrive, and all eyes turn my way. I count nine alphas, excluding the Leons, all dressed in suits. The only woman in the

room is sitting at the far end, although her alpha presence is strong enough to keep my gaze from straying to the Chicago skyline behind her.

There are name cards on the table and my dad is positioned on Alpha Leon's left, since the Chicago pack is acting as both hosts and mediators. I'm next, with the Alpha of Maine on my other side. He gives me a warm smile, but my dad is already introducing everyone and I listen carefully, checking off faces and names against the bios I was given.

Continuing around the table, the Alpha of Maine's heir is James, a guy in his early thirties who I discover is actually his grandson. Next to him is the Alpha of Delaware and his son, Caleb, who gives me a nod since we met last night. The female alpha is next, and I find out she's from Virginia, and the guy at her side is her mate, not her heir. On the other side of the table is a big, beefy guy called Hollinger, who runs the Pennsylvanian packs, and his equally large son, Becker. I also met him briefly last night, and I have to wonder if the patronizing sneer on his face is because he saw me dancing with Nate, or because he's just as ignorant as he looks.

Ignoring him, I focus on Snider, the obnoxious Alpha of Connecticut, and a beautiful dark-haired guy he introduces as his omega, David. He mentioned him yesterday, comparing him to Kelly, and he clearly decided he needed to get him to town fast. David gives me a smile that's borderline nasty, and I'm reminded that just because we share a designation, doesn't mean we're the same kind of animal.

"Thank you all for coming," my dad begins, "and thanks to the Alpha of Chicago for welcoming us to his city this week. His sons are in attendance to help us with logistics." Parker is seated at his dad's right, and Nate is at a small table against the wall, a laptop in front of him since he's the official record keeper for the week. He's wearing a navy suit with his hair perfectly combed, and when he catches my eye, I have to bite my lip to stop my smile

taking over my face.

My dad and Alpha Leon run through a bunch of housekeeping items, then we turn to the heavy leather binders in front of us. We've all been given plenty of pre-reading, with the intention that this week is just about formalizing the council, electing the officers, and agreeing on the key standing committees. The basics have already been hashed out behind the scenes – that the High Alpha of the East Coast position will be abolished, and that the council will focus upon improving the quality of life for all shifters in our community.

Straight-forward, right?

“I don't like to interrupt,” Snider says with an oily smile, not ten minutes into the first item on the agenda, “but I think we should get an update on the situation in New York before we start.”

My dad doesn't react, but I know him well enough to guess that he's annoyed. “In what way, Henry?”

“Well, I'm just curious about what we'll do if the Dark River Pack makes a reappearance.” He sips at his water glass, clearly reveling in the murmurs around the table. “Roan Bisha might be gone, but that doesn't mean one of his lieutenants hasn't taken over the pack. Shouldn't we hold off any major changes until we know for sure?”

My dad gives him a bland smile. “It's important to know how all the packs on the east coast are faring. But do you have any firm evidence to suggest the New York pack is going to make a resurgence?”

“Well, no evidence, but there are a lot of rumors flying around. We've all seen the report on the Tower massacre.” His eyes gleam as he looks around at us. “Who's to say someone didn't slip through the cracks?”

“It's possible,” the Alpha of Maine says at my side. “But it's been six months. And there's an investigation being run out of Washington to

determine such things. I didn't come all this way to second-guess them."

I bite back a smirk, conscious that a lot of eyes are on me right now. And Snider proves it by nodding in my direction. "Perhaps Ms. Starling-Ferrier could clarify a few things for us, since she has in-depth knowledge of the Dark River Pack."

I feel my dad stiffen at my side, but I force a smile. "In what way, Alpha Snider? I can tell you a few things, but since Bisha never really brought me into the fold, I doubt they'd help much."

I might have been Bisha's baby for the first twenty years of my life, but that was as deceiving as most titles. Roan Bisha provided my mom and me with a townhouse, but not much else, and it was only when I discovered we were traded away to pay a debt that I really understood our value to him. Which was next to zero.

"And I don't think Elvana's past knowledge of the pack has any bearing on what we're trying to do today," my dad says, irritation edging his voice. "We are here for the sole purpose of creating a council that will provide stability and prosperity to our communities. But if we get lost in red tape – or rumor," he adds, with a look in Snider's direction, "- we may find ourselves facing a different threat from New York."

The alpha from Virginia sits forward with arched brows. She has a strong jawline and great cheekbones, but when her light blue eyes narrow on my dad, I can feel myself sizing her up. "What does *that* mean?"

"Power does not like a vacuum, Luella. And New York is a very attractive territory for a power-hungry shifter." He leans forward, holding every gaze at the table. "If we don't put a council in place that shows unity on the east coast, how long before someone else steps forward to claim it?"

"And if they do," the Alpha of Maine says at my side, "how long before they reinstate the High Alpha title, and once again place themselves over our

packs' interests?"

"Precisely," my dad says. "We have one chance at this. While New York is out of the picture, we need to act."

There are a lot of nods around the table, and I know that in this, they are united. Whatever Roan Bisha gave them when he was High Alpha, he took far more.

With that behind us, we focus on the formalities of setting up a council. The plan is simple; all packs will retain responsibility for their existing territories, but elected representatives will form a council that oversees the interests of the east coast. Or, to be more precise, the territory from Virginia in the south, Pennsylvania in the west, and all the way to the northern border.

The day passes with a lot of talk about bylaws, executive functions, and officer elections. I tune out of the details, happy just to listen and nurse my aching head. We didn't get back to the hotel until two, and while I didn't drink much, the shift at the end of the night took a lot out of me. *Not to mention the hot as hell threesome in the shower...*

"You gonna share that?"

I look up in surprise at the person standing at my shoulder. It takes my tired brain a moment to place him – David, Snider's omega – and then I realize he's pointing at the Turkish coffee pot in my hand. We've taken a break before we head into the last of the afternoon's agenda, and for the moment we're alone at the coffee station. "It's Turkish," I tell him. "It might be a bit stronger than you're used to."

He's built – at least six-two, with a swimmer's muscles – and dark hair that flops attractively over a long, thin nose. His eyes are the color of violets, and Snider is right, he's very pretty to look at. But right now, he gives me an insulted look from beneath his long lashes. "I'm sure I can handle anything you can, sweetie."

I shrug and hand the pot over, burying myself in my own cup. But before I've taken a step, he says, "I met you once before, you know." I stiffen, because that's never a good thing when you have a past like mine. He catches my wariness, a small smile playing over his lips. "Well, *saw you* is more accurate. You were hard to miss, in a sublime strapless dress that looked like a moonbeam. I'm pretty sure it was your coming out. As Ferrier's daughter, I mean."

I realize he's talking about the Fall Ball at the Crouch Estate.

Which happens to be the night I rescued Kelly from the asshole's basement, and Arben and the guys got into a gunfight.

I give him a quick, dismissive smile. "I don't remember seeing you there, I'm sorry."

But David clearly wants to get a rise out of me. "You were a hot item on the dance floor. Right up until some big hunk of a guy claimed you. At least six-six, brutal face, hands like hams. Ring any bells?"

He's talking about Arben. I'd practically goaded him out onto the dance floor with me, and we'd lasted less than a minute before he dragged me off in search of a quiet corner.

I give David a flat stare, because if this is another attempt to pump me for information on Arben, he's squeezing the wrong omega. "I only really remember dancing with Crouch. He was a grade-A creep, so it's not a pleasant memory." As well as being one of Bisha's allies, Quentin Crouch was Kelly's kidnapper and an abuser of omegas in general. Right up until Link tore him apart during Bisha's disgusting omega auction.

But David just cocks a brow at me, like he has a direct line to the memories running through my head. "Guess you don't have to worry about him anymore though, right? I heard he got taken out in the Tower." He reaches out and gives my shoulder a pat, his violet eyes lingering on the bite

marks on my throat. “Must have quite the guardian angel looking out for you, sweetie.”



Elvi

I finally hear from Arben a few hours later when I'm standing in the suite's closet, trying to decide what to wear to a cocktail party on the roof of a Chicago hotel in four-degree weather.

You'll look mesmerizing in whatever you wear, princesshë.

I almost drop the two dresses I'm holding, spinning around even though I know he's in my head. Still, the disappointment that he's not behind me makes my stomach ache. *Arben! Where are you?*

Close, he purrs down our bond. I'm at the hotel across the street.

I want to rush to the window to search for him, but there are a bunch of hotels around here, and it's not like he'll be hanging over a balcony waving at me. Instead, I sink onto the padded stool in the corner of the closet and bite the edge of my nail. *I've got so much to tell you. When can we meet?*

Soon. Loup left eyes on you. I'm sorry he approached you, princesshë.

You know about that? Of course, he knows. I doubt there's anyone who's entered my orbit in the last six months he doesn't have a mental file on. *You know he's hunting you, right? He says he'll give you immunity if you meet with him, but I don't trust him. I think he's looking for a scapegoat for the Tower.*

Arben grunts, sounding unimpressed. *He's dancing on someone else's strings. When I find the master, the puppet will cease to matter.*

I shiver, staring blindly at the dresses pooled in my lap, thinking of what my dad said about the European Liaisons. *And if that's not the end of it? What if the master has a master? How far will you take this, Arben?*

There's a pause and then his voice growls down the bond. *Until every last threat is gone, and you are safe, princesshë.*

I clench my hands into fists, even though I'm crushing the delicate fabric. *You can't promise me that, Arben. No one can.*

There's an even longer silence, and I know he's wrestling with some pretty dark thoughts. But he finally says in a more subdued voice, *When the council is in place, you will have more security. I will be able to stay closer.*

But near enough isn't good enough for me anymore. *Just stay, Arben. Stay with me and our pack. That's what will make me feel secure. Right now, I just feel like you've left me.*

I didn't expect to say those last words, but they're honestly how I feel. Like maybe being part of our pack isn't what he wants. He spent his whole life either under my granddad's rule, or posing as Roan Bisha's assassin. And like he told me, he can't whitewash his reputation. He has lived a life of bloody retribution, even though he joined the Dark River Pack to help the Omega Underground. And maybe he *needs* that kind of danger and conflict. Maybe he's got so used to the underbelly of our world, he doesn't want to come back into the light.

He must feel my turmoil through our bond, because he sends a bolt of possessive heat straight back at me. *I will never leave you, Elvana. Even if it was the best thing for you, I could never give you up.*

I sag onto the stool, both relieved to hear it, and disappointed in myself for giving in again. *Okay, but just tell me that in person. Not right now, if it isn't safe, but tomorrow. I'm in meetings all day, but I can step out any time. Promise me, Arben.*

You have my word, princeshë.

I have to be satisfied with that, but I'm still fighting a mood as I enter the rooftop party. The area where it's set up is covered in a glass dome, keeping out the elements, while the pool is at the other end, with a breathtaking view of the Chicago skyline laid out all around us.

It's a private function, just for the alphas and the members of their pack they've brought with them, so even Link was roped into coming. He looks undeniably hot in his black blazer and dark jeans, but from the moody look on his face, I know he's as keen as I am to get back to the suite. Although, my plans change a little when I see our host arrive, his sons at his side.

I stand on my tiptoes to whisper in Kelly's ear, "You want to put a smile on Link's face while I go say hi to Nate?"

His eyes warm as they settle on the beta, who's hanging back and half hidden by a potted palm. "Didn't you spend all day with him?"

"Same room, but we didn't get to talk." I shrug, not bothering to hide my frustration at the arrangement. Getting to chat to Nate would have made all the blather about bylaws a lot more bearable. "I want to thank him for his help last night."

That makes Kelly's smile dim, and I'm worried I've stirred up some bad memories, but he's clearly got something else on his mind. "Cam confirmed those bruises on his neck were from Randall Trench. Seems the Head of Security has a thing for Nate, but it's not reciprocated."

Rage burns through me, so hot I actually gasp. I glare at Cam, who's standing with my other mates and my dad. *Why the hell didn't you tell me about Trench abusing Nate?*

Cam turns his head slowly, his mouth pulled into a thin line. *He asked me not to. Said he has it under control.*

I gape at him, and I can see the wince from ten feet away. *But you told Kelly. You know I care about Nate, too.*

Oh, I've got a fair idea how you feel about him, babe. A touch of heat fills Cam's eyes, his mouth curling up an inch. And when you're ready to act on that, we can talk about making it work. But right now, he's not ours.

Ours? I ignore the tingle in my belly at the word. Maybe some of Arben's

possessiveness has rubbed off on me, because I like the way that sounds. Not that I'm ready to admit anything to Cam. *I never said he was. But he still deserves our protection.*

But Cam gives a subtle shake of his head. *We can't step into the middle of another pack's problems. Especially when Nate asked us to keep out of it.*

Don't give me that diplomatic crap, Cam! I've put up with enough of it today to make my head throb. *And I don't believe for a second you won't react the next time Trench puts his hands on him.* I raise my brows in victory, since Cam is now visibly grinding his teeth. *You're just as invested as me, so don't act like you aren't.*

He gives the subtlest of nods, letting me know I've hit the mark. *Yeah, I care. But I'm not gonna torpedo this council week by picking a fight with the Head of Security.*

I will. A dark, deadly voice enters the conversation, and I realize Link is piggybacking off our bond. I look his way and he shrugs, making the holster on his back pull tight against his jacket. *Just saying. Happy to go sort him out now, if that's what you want.*

Before I even realize it, I'm giving Link a grateful smile. Okay, he'd be playing to his strengths by shooting an asshole like Trench, but I still appreciate the offer. Cam mutters something under his breath, but I turn my back on him.

"I'm going to talk to Nate now," I tell Kelly. "If I were you, I'd go give Link a kiss, because I'm pretty sure he's the only alpha around here with his head on straight."

There's a squawk from Rory - who either has the hearing of a bat, or just eavesdropped through the bond - but I just brush my lips over Kelly's cheek and head towards Nate. It's not just my mates who are watching, the Snider pack's attention like sticky fingers on the back of my neck. But I shrug that

off as I focus on Nate, who's still in the navy suit he was wearing today. His cheeks flush as he watches me approach, but there's a pleased sparkle in his eyes that soothes my jangling nerves.

"Hey, Elvi," he says almost shyly as I reach his side. "That's okay, isn't it? You told me to call you that last night."

I can feel the anxiety coming off him and I give his arm a gentle squeeze. I want to ask about Trench, obviously, but I also know this isn't the place, so I give him my best smile instead. "That's fine, Nate. And I'm glad you're here, because I wanted to thank you. For the security feeds, but also with getting Kelly safely back to the hotel."

He's already shaking off the gratitude. "I was happy to help. I'm just bummed we didn't find anything useful."

"It's not over yet. Link is going over everything frame by frame. We're kind of an intense pack, if you didn't already pick that up."

"You're perfect," Nate says quietly, then flushes. "I just mean, you seem to work really well together."

His gaze moves around the party, and I try to see it through his eyes. There are small groups standing at the scattered cocktail tables, with each formed around a pack alpha. While there are a handful of omegas, the vast majority of the guests are alphas, and I'm pretty sure Nate is the only beta on the rooftop. His designation means less than nothing to me, but I'm not sure that's how he feels.

"What about you?" I ask gently. "No one you're interested in as mates?"

His eyes go wide behind his glasses. "Oh, not really. I don't think I'm exactly pack material."

I frown at his dismissive tone. "Doesn't that depend on the pack?"

He stares at me for a moment, like there's something on the tip of his tongue, but his hand drifts to his neck and I realize he's touching the fading

bruises. I can't pick up his emotions – his faint scent is lost in the soup of alpha testosterone on the roof – but I feel a rekindling of the fury in my belly as I think of Trench wrapping his meaty hand around Nate's delicate neck.

“We're going for a pack run tomorrow night,” I say on a whim. “Do you want to join us?”

We've got a free slot in the official agenda, and we agreed to find some time to give our wolves a run, but we never talked about inviting outsiders.

Too bad, I think, with a mental shrug in Cam's direction. He might not want to step into another pack's problems, but any pack who doesn't treat Nate right doesn't deserve him.

“Oh, um...”

But Nate doesn't get to answer, because a stranger is suddenly walking into the party, bringing a fresh gust of alpha pheromones with him. He also has two younger guys at his back. Twins, who not only are identical, but are also dressed alike in navy blazers, white Oxford shirts, and gray trousers. They drip wealth, from their expensive haircuts to their alligator belts, but it comes with an obvious dose of entitlement that leaves me cold.

Still, their entrance gets everyone turning their way, the alpha at the front beaming around like he's the guest of honor. I nudge Nate. “Who are the late arrivals?”

“It's the Alpha of Atlanta.” There's a strained note in his voice, and he seems to press even further back into the shadows. “He shouldn't be here.”

I frown, not liking the sour edge to his scent. I'm still gulping down alpha fumes, so I can't tell if it's just anxiety or something more worrying. “You know him?”

He pauses, then gives a stiff nod. “He won't be here for anything good.”

I'm tempted to suggest we leave – my dad can handle whatever is going on with this other alpha – but one of the twins catches sight of us. And the

grin that spreads across his face makes my hackles rise. “Who’s that idiot?”

Nate makes a choking sound. “Brock Rawson. The other one’s Bryce.”

“Catchy.”

But my sarcastic comment is swallowed by loud laughter from the Alpha of Atlanta. He looks around the group, those big white teeth flashing as he focuses on my dad. “From what I hear, Ferrier, you’re putting together a pack council to control the east coast. Surely that warrants sending me an invitation.”

“You’re mistaken about its purpose, Rawson,” my dad says smoothly, and I feel a zing of pride at how composed he looks. The Atlanta Alpha is obviously here to make waves, but my dad is completely unruffled. “We’ll be overseeing the wellbeing of our packs, not controlling them. And there’s no change to territory. We’re not interested in extending beyond our current borders.”

“Well, that’s interesting news,” Rawson says, although the look he shoots the twins is smug. “I know our friends in Kentucky and the Carolinas were curious about your plans.”

“They got the memo, same as you, Rawson.” The Alpha of Maine says, clearly unimpressed by the other alpha’s bluster. “And you’ve had a couple of months to ask any questions and get whatever assurances you need.”

But the Atlanta Alpha waves a big hand at him. “Oh, don’t mistake my presence here as concern, McDonald. I just happen to see this as a golden opportunity.”

My dad raises a brow, like he’s humoring the other alpha. “In what way?”

“Well, why carve off a portion of the coast when you could have it all? You bring Georgia into the fold, I could give you everything from Florida north, and this side of the Mississippi. Double your territory overnight.”

A ripple of shock passes over the party, and I hold my breath as my dad

studies the other alpha. I don't have a bondlink with him, but I'm getting good at reading his face, and he looks pissed. But his response is calm and measured, like always. "Because we're not in the business of empire building. We're not the Europeans, Rawson. Trying to hold that many packs together with our differing needs and interests would make tyrants out of us." His eyes narrow slightly. "And eventually, all tyrants are toppled."

"You're talking about the High Alpha." Rawson makes a rude sound. "Bisha was a prick of the first order and got exactly what he deserved. But I'm not talking about tyranny. I'm talking about a merger." Before my dad can respond, he steps back, waving a hand at the twins behind him. "These are my sons, Brock and Bryce. Both graduated from UGA, have impressive resumes, and are no slouches in a fight, either. Any pack would be happy to have them."

I have to wonder how the twins feel about being described like high-end goods, but Rawson just puts his arms around their shoulders and faces my dad. "The best way to align our interests is to make sure we're all after the same thing. Which is why I'm here to offer you one of my sons."

My dad's composure finally breaks. "What the hell are you talking about, Rawson?"

"The Starling-Ferriers." He nods in the direction of my mates. "Make one of my boys part of your heir's pack, and I'll give you the east coast."

My dad is right; *what the hell?* I'm not naïve enough to think this sort of shit doesn't still happen – arranged matings for political gain were once the norm in shifter society. But out in the open like this, with all the other alphas on the east coast looking on? Not to mention the fact this is the first time my pack has heard about this offer – or laid eyes on the Atlanta twins.

"How could we turn down such a romantic offer?" I mutter, but when I turn to roll my eyes at Nate, he's already halfway to the elevator, his scent a

sour mist in the air. I stare after him, waiting for some sign that he's okay, but he doesn't look back. I'm thinking about going after him when the scent of entitled alpha fills my nose, and I'm suddenly surrounded by the Rawson twins. I cock a brow at them. "Can I help you?"

I'm not seriously offering, of course, but the twin on the left gives a smug nod. "Sure can. We're thinking about going somewhere quieter to talk about this merger."

I blink at them. Do things really fall into their laps this easily? "Well, you enjoy that. I'm going to have a drink with my pack."

But as I go to step past them, they shadow me, closing my escape route. "We're being nice here, Elvana," the other twin says. "How hard can it be to give us an hour of your time?"

I can sense my pack watching us closely, Link's shoulders twitching in a way that could be very bad for the twins, so I fold my arms and give them my most unimpressed look. "I think you're under the mistaken impression we're for sale. We're not looking for new packmates, but if we were, they'd have better manners than to crash a private party."

That gets them exchanging an amused look. "Because you guys are so civilized?" That's the douche on the right, ducking close enough to whisper, "We're not here for your pedigree, princess. We have that covered already. But if there's going to be a pack who inherits the east coast, we're going to be a part of it."

I try to ignore the bitter twinge at them using Arben's pet name for me and pull back enough to laugh in his face. "Wow. How can I turn down such an attractive offer?" It's pretty much what I asked Nate, but unfortunately, it doesn't send them running. Instead, they glare at me, because true to form, guys like this don't enjoy being mocked. Which just tells me I've given them more attention than they deserve. "My dad will never go for this merger," I

tell them bluntly. “And beyond that, we have nothing in common, so stop wasting all our time.”

But instead of stomping away, they exchange another look, this one a lot darker and more calculating. “Oh, I think we have a few things in common,” the guy on the right says. “You were getting cozy in the corner here with Nate Leon a minute ago, right? You looking for info on him?” I’m too slow to hide the spark of anger in my eyes, and they both chuckle. “Oh, yeah, you should definitely come see him in his natural element.”

I want to bite my tongue, but I can’t help myself. “What does that mean?”

Their grins just grow, until the twin on the right says, “The thing about Nate, he gets himself into bad situations with bad people.”

“Makes poor choices,” the other twin adds. “Not that there are many good ones in the place he’s headed right now.”

I grind my teeth, but I’m on the hook and they know it. “Where is he?”

“Based on how he usually acts in situations like this, he’s headed downtown to a members-only alpha club. If you want to come along, we could get you in the door.”

No way, Cam shoots down the link, clearly reading my mind. *This has a set-up written all over it.*

He’s probably right, but Nate is worth at least an hour of my time, even if these assholes aren’t.

“Fine, but if this is just a bullshit excuse to have a merger chat, you’ll be the ones in a bad situation.” They raise their brows at me, but then my pack is at their backs, and the air is thick with the promise of violence. I give the twins a shrug. “Like you said, civilized isn’t really our thing.”



Nate

If life has taught me anything, it's that right when a plan is proceeding smoothly in a calculated direction, an obstacle appears in your path. Usually, this isn't an issue, since I've trained myself to expect setbacks and to work around them. But there are obstacles, and then there is the Alpha of Atlanta offering one of his sons up on a silver platter.

To *my* pack.

I grind my teeth, as annoyed with my own jealousy as I am with Rawson's brazen move.

But when it comes to the Starling-Ferrier pack, I'm finding it increasingly difficult to hide how I feel. Which could be a problem if I don't rein myself in. Obstacles and setbacks are one thing, but I'm arrogant enough to admit the only force that can truly derail my plans is myself.

And yet the further I get from the party – from *them* – the more my anxiety grows. There's no point trying to distract myself with breathing or counting; all I can see is the Alpha of Atlanta's smug face, and hear his confident voice ringing in my ears.

It's such a typical Bart Rawson move, I'm not sure why I didn't see it coming. I'm the perfect example of what that man is willing to do to advance himself, so why did I scurry away like a bug under the floorboards?

Get home.

Regroup.

Review.

Adjust.

My fingers twitch with longing for the smoothness of my keyboard, while my galloping mind needs the hum of my hard drive, and the glowing

backlight of my spreadsheets.

Because for the first time in months, I feel lost.

How did the Alpha of Boston respond to the Rawson offer? Did he look at the Atlanta twins with their big dicks and perfect pedigrees and feel flattered? Did he see them as a gift, from one powerful alpha to another, or did he see the trap beneath their gleaming hair and smirking grins? Did he know he would be inviting a snake into his nest?

The urge to run back there and expose them is so strong, I can taste it like acid on my tongue. But impulsive – or suicidal – I’m not. So, instead, I take the service elevator to the street level, using my master key to swipe myself out.

And like all predictable things, Randall Trench is waiting there, right in the alcove at the back door. No doubt he tracked my ride down through the hotel, counting each floor until I reached the last. I can see in one glance he’s pent up, frustrated. His shoulders are bulging under his tight suit jacket, his fists clenched like a guillotine ready to fall.

“Not so fast,” he growls, his hand coming down to grip the nape of my neck. Like most alphas, his touch is both repulsive and alluring to me at the same time. But I focus on the hot breath on my cheek as he crowds me against the wall. It’s alpha musk, cigarettes, and the bourbon he’s always sneaking from his desk drawer. “You have some explaining to do, runt.”

Normally that voice, those words, might be enough to stop me in my tracks. But not tonight. “I don’t have time for this, Randall.”

He grunts, wedging his fat cock along my spine. He’s so big, it’s like being stuffed into the back of an old closet when he grinds me into the wall. But instead of mothballs, I’m suffocating under alpha musk and too much cheap body spray. Not to mention the grime of a Chicago alleyway that hosts the majority of the hotel’s dumpsters.

“You don’t get to choose when or where,” he grunts into my hair, his fingers sliding around to grip my throat. “That’s what it means to be *owned*, runt.”

I’d roll my eyes if I indulged in such things, but instead, I blow out an annoyed breath. “I mean it, Randall. I don’t want this right now.”

“You *always* want it.” *Untrue*. “You can’t get enough of alpha cock.” *True, but not from him*.

He thinks he’s got me where he wants me, but he’s just another coping mechanism to be manipulated and used.

Not that he understands me well enough to know that.

“I’ve watched you, runt,” he hisses, his breath ripe on my face. “Flaunting yourself all over the damn city. And then you bring that fucking pup into *my* domain and give him access to *my* information.”

He’s talking about last night, when I took Cam into the hotel’s security hub and gave him access to the feeds of both the hotel and the club. Cam returned every one of Randall’s glares twice over, hovering at my side like he planned to repay my bruises with interest. I’d told him not to bother, but the way he’d frowned down at me – part frustration, part concern – had filled my belly with a delicious flutter.

“You’re getting too close to them,” Randall mutters into my scalp, grinding me harder into the wall. “I should tell them who you are. How little you’re really worth; their shiny new toy.” He grabs my chin, forcing my face to the side until he can look into my eyes. “But the Alpha of Atlanta will take care of that, won’t he?”

It’s pretty clear Randall – the Leon’s Head of Security – gave Rawson the keys to the castle. Or, at least, granted them access to the rooftop, so he could march his precious sons up there and hijack the party.

Bitterness coats my tongue for a moment, but it’s not at Randall’s

betrayal. You don't spend as much time in a spider's hole as I have and not work out he's a fucking insect.

"Don't overstep, Randall," I tell him while we're eye-to-eye, my breath a sour puff between us. I don't have much of a scent, but there's more to intimidation than just whipping out an alpha dick and a measuring stick. "For every bit of dirt you have on me, I have a dumpster load on you."

I look pointedly at one of the trash receptacles next to us and raise my brows. Once upon a time, he'd threatened to strangle the life out of me and dump me in one unless I swallowed his cock. All it took was one of my spreadsheets – listing every underhand thing he's done, along with a forensic audit of his financial records - and he'd decided indulging in my kinks was healthier than feeding his own.

I push off the wall and his hand falls away, although he only moves back an inch. Stupid alpha instincts. Even when his brain is firing off red flags, his dick is still telling him to fuck me into submission.

But he doesn't try to stop me as I leave the alleyway and climb into the back of a hotel car. I have no interest in learning to drive – my anxiety is particularly tuned into traffic – so sometimes I make use of the perk of being Warren Leon's son.

I close my eyes as the hotel driver heads towards my apartment. He's a regular, and one of my dad's older beta wolves, so I can let my guard down for a moment. But that doesn't stop my overactive brain from trying to ambush me.

I'd been doing so well. Right on track with the plan. Unlike Rawson, I know how to be subtle, and I doubt the Starling-Ferriers even realize they've been my targets all along. We've talked, danced, and they've opened up around me, like they're starting to trust me. But then two things happened. Elvana asked me along to their pack run tomorrow night, and Rawson tried to

muscle in on my territory.

The irony makes me want to howl.

“Not the apartment,” I say suddenly, even though my body aches with the need to go through my nightly routine. But discomfort is a small price to pay for moving another hurdle out of my path. “Can you drop me at Finch Street?”

The driver glances over his shoulder. It’s not the first time I’ve taken this detour, so he doesn’t question me. But I can feel his tension rising the closer we get to the drop-off point.

In Chicago, there’s downtown, known as the Loop, and then there’s the Court. It’s a rabbit warren of twisted streets and underground tunnels, all controlled by the Alpha Kings. They’re a gang of violent alphas who, according to rumor, bite not to bond, but to create a feral shifter army. No doubt exaggerated, but it’s a corner of the city where even my dad’s lieutenants are wary to venture.

Finch Street is on the edge of their territory, but you don’t have to look far to find a dark wall painted with a flaming red crown in violent slashes.

“Do you want me to wait?” the driver asks as he pulls over to the curb.

I ignore his concerned frown. “I’ll be fine, but can you drop this back at reception?” I gesture to my leather briefcase beside me. It doesn’t have a lot in it, since anything important is on my private cloud, but I don’t want to be carting it around where I’m going.

He nods, but when I’m on the pavement, takes his time leaving and I know he’s probably calling Trench. Too bad. The Head of Security only got the position because of me, and his little empire only extends as far as I want it to. Which definitely doesn’t include my business with the Alpha Kings.

Not that they come out to greet me personally, or anything.

I go to the black metal door behind the bakery and flash my face at the

overhead camera. Their system automatically recognizes me, although I wouldn't get two steps past the behemoth waiting on the other side if I didn't have the password for the evening. After that's out of the way, I follow his lumbering stride through a bunch of narrow corridors that smell of charcoal and sewer water. The pathway to hell, according to some of the people I've met here. Although for someone like me, it's the exact opposite. It's salvation.

We eventually come out into the basement of the club. Its street name is The Feral Den, since subtlety isn't in the Alpha Kings' handbook, either. It has a flashy bar that caters to the city's elite, but I've only ever entered this way, straight into the bowels with its cages and dungeons.

There's a man waiting for me, sitting on a stool next to a set of cages. Each one is equipped like a cell, with a stone floor, a waste bucket, and a couple of jute bags to lie on, but none of them are big enough to stand up in. He looks me over, taking in my Tom Ford navy suit and designer frames. "You're back?"

I recognize him, of course. Even if I didn't have a photographic memory, every face I meet down here is burned into my brain. He's an alpha, with pock-marked cheeks and flat brown eyes. His hoodie is ratty, his jeans dirty at the knees, but his watch is a Ulysse Nardin. It's probably stolen, but since I've also rifled through his bank accounts, I know that working for the Alpha Kings is a lucrative business.

"The dance card is full tonight," he tells me, picking at his teeth with a claw. It's a common thing down here; alphas flaunting their shift control in our faces. Like waving a sirloin steak in front of a starving dog – petty, but good at putting us in our place. "You want to hang around, or pay extra to get someone else bumped?"

I'm already pulling out my phone. "Bump them. I'll transfer the funds

now.”

Amusement dances in his dead brown eyes, but he pulls out his phone and starts tapping away. It’s already approaching midnight, so after I’ve deposited the extra money in The Feral Den account, I shoot a text to my assistant, asking her to move a few morning meetings. When I’m done, I turn off my phone and drop it in the trash bag the alpha’s holding out for me. My glasses follow, along with my tie pin, house keys, and wallet. My clothes go on top, starting with my shoes, and I don’t stop until I’m standing naked in front of him.

His eyes rake over me, taking in my scars, and he clicks his tongue. “You’re an addict, man. How many times have you done this?” When I ignore him, he runs his claw down my sternum, a dark light in his eyes. “You suck me off, and I’ll pull your bitch out in under a minute. A little give and take will save you a bunch of pain.”

I pay his masters a large sum of money to help me with a problem, not to get propositioned by a lowlife guard, and I don’t try to hide my disdain. “If you’re such a big wolf, why are you down here sitting on a stool instead of up there ruling the court with the kings?”

Probably a question he’s asked himself many times, which is why he lunges at me, grabbing my throat.

“Fuck you, runt,” he spits, pulling the door to the nearest cage open. He pushes me in, using enough of his strength to make me stumble.

But I keep on my feet, and even though my back is bent from the low roof, I give him a cold look. “I paid extra, so you better make sure I’m on within the hour, or I’ll be issuing a complaint to your employers.”

No doubt he feels like reaching through the bars and strangling me right now, but dead clients don’t pay. Still, he can’t resist loosening a glob of phlegm in his throat and spitting it in my face. “You’ll get your fucking turn,

runt. But a little extra time on your knees will be good practice.”



Elvi

“I thought you’d bring more reinforcements,” Bryce Rawson says with a smirk in Rory’s direction. “You always travel this light?”

We’re in the back of the twin’s rented SUV, on our way to an alpha club downtown. I don’t know if Nate’s really there, or if he even needs our help, but the plan is at least to find out. As for reinforcements, Link is back in the hotel suite tracking us, while also digging the dirt on the Rawsons from Atlanta, Georgia. Kelly, thankfully, was happy to stay with him and help, while Cam is following us in another car. Depending on what happens, he’ll either stay in the background, or if things go sideways, provide a secondary avenue to get Nate out. This isn’t our first rodeo, after all.

“Nah, but I’m alpha enough to take on you lightweights,” Rory says with a typical shit-eating wink. “So don’t be getting any ideas, okay?”

The twins exchange a look that I’m fast growing tired of – as if they know something we don’t, and it amuses the hell out of them. They’re also looking at Rory like *he’s* the lightweight, but the joke is definitely on them. Out of all of my alphas, the only wolf stronger than Rory is Arben. Link can shoot anything that moves, and Cam is dangerous when he’s provoked, but Rory is on a whole other level. Of course, most people just look at his pretty face and flirty attitude and write him off, which is what makes him such a formidable threat.

Yep, I’m just that good. Rory clearly can sense enough of my thoughts through the bond to inflate his already high opinion of himself. But when he takes my hand and kisses my knuckles, there isn’t a hint of mockery in his green eyes. *You bring out the monster in me, sweet thing.*

I smile back at him, because monster is actually a term of endearment in

our pack, then return my focus to the twins. “So, what’s this place called again?”

“Not sure,” Bryce says with a shrug, since they’ve been dancing around that question since we left the hotel. “It’s not really our kind of scene. But we know for a fact Nate’s a regular.”

At a members-only club? It’s not unheard of for betas to hang out at places that exclusively service alphas, but the way the twins are acting, I don’t think it’s going to be the usual pickup joint.

And my suspicions are confirmed as we descend below the Loop into a sketchy part of downtown. We’ve left the commercial district and a lot of the buildings are tagged with graffiti. The most common sign is a red flaming crown, which Link told us means we’re in the Alpha Kings’ territory. They basically run downtown after sunset, and according to the law enforcement reports Link accessed, they’re untouchable.

But the twins don’t bat an eyelash at taking their expensive asses into such a rough neighborhood. They don’t strike me as clueless - or reckless – but I use Rory’s bond to check in with Link. *Do you have anything on these guys yet? I’d really like to know how they’re connected to Nate.*

It’s stating the obvious, but Link doesn’t call me out on my impatience. *There’s not much outside their public image, but there’s a rumor there was a third brother who passed away. The twins aren’t implicated anywhere, but the medical reports have been sealed. I can get in, but it’ll take time.*

And the club? Link is tracking our phones, so he knows exactly where we are. *Any ideas where we’re going?*

In the Alpha Kings territory? Nowhere good.

Stating the obvious must be contagious, but I let Link get back to work as the car pulls into a lot filled with luxury cars and we climb out. The street is no different from the dozen others we’ve driven down, except it’s a dead end,

and I can see a building rising up ahead of us. It's painted entirely black, from the steps leading up to a portico to the wide, flat roof. Over the doorway is another of the graffiti crowns, although this one is lit up in red neon.

No name, but a red crown, I tell Link and Cam, who is a couple of minutes behind us.

Could be a place called The Feral Den. No details other than a few comments on a dark chat. But keep your claws sharp. I've got a bad feeling about this place.

It's not like Link to overreact. We've all survived the Tower, after all, and that was no picnic. But I find myself stepping closer to Rory as we mount the stairs, one twin in front and one behind. There's a black metal door under the portico that reminds me of a bank vault, but it swings open easily enough, and we're met by a female alpha in a black pantsuit. She's tall, with a long blonde ponytail that comes down to her butt and sweeping cat's-eye liner. She's beautiful, but not someone I'd choose to mess with, which I guess explains how she got the job of door bitch.

"Your private room is ready, Mr. Rawson," she says in a way that encapsulates both twins, but then her eyes linger on me. "You didn't mention an omega in your party."

"We're courting," Bryce says with a sleazy grin in my direction. "Thought we'd show her the sights while she's in town."

"And him?" Her cats-eyes linger on Rory a little more than I like. "All alphas have to register. You know the rules."

Rory raises his brows at me, but I open my purse and show her my nice shiny new ID with my pack name on it. "I'm Elvana Starling-Ferrier, heir to the Boston Pack. Rory is my mate. And I'm definitely not here on a date." I grab my phone as well, bringing up a picture of Nate that Link sent me. It's from surveillance footage instead of his personnel file, since he's possibly

here under an assumed name. “Have you seen this man? He’s a friend, and we want to make sure he’s okay.”

The blonde’s eyes flick towards the twins, but then she shakes her head. “He doesn’t look like an alpha.”

I grit my teeth. “He’s not. But can you honestly say everyone on the premises is?”

Her cats-eyes narrow dangerously. “It’s my business to know. But if he’s here, I’ll send him on his way. Best I can do. Now, do you want to go through to your room, or is this goodnight and goodbye?”

I glance at Rory, while asking through the bond, *What do you think? Cam’s not going to be able to get in here easily. Should we come back with reinforcements?*

Rory’s eyes crinkle at the edges, and he hugs me tighter to his side. “Send us a bottle of something good and put it on their tab.”

She glances at the twins again, then turns on her heel and hands us off to a guy further down the hall. It’s dimly lit, with a cement floor painted black and blood-red wallpaper. Definitely soundproofed, with some kind of scent diffuser being pumped through the air conditioning. We reach another door and music starts to seep through the cracks, something low and heavy on the bass. The sounds sharpen when we step into a larger room, and I catch muted conversation and the clink of glasses. Instead of heading towards it, we go to an elevator against the wall and our escort waves a card over the scanner. When we’re inside, he hits the basement button and leaves us to it.

“You’ve got a membership,” I say to the twins as we descend. “Didn’t think to share that with us earlier?”

Brock shrugs. “It’s new. We didn’t even think we’d use it this trip.”

“So you come to Chicago a lot?”

They give me matching innocent smiles. “Not as often as we hope to visit

Boston,” Bryce replies, and I decide elevator music would be preferable to this conversation. So I ignore the twins and listen while Rory updates the guys through the bond. No one is impressed to find we’re going into the basement of a club without scouting it out first, but Cam decides to try his luck on the door, while we step out into a large circular room. It’s brighter down here, mainly due to the spotlights being used, and it feels a bit like a three-ring circus because there are multiple things going on.

In the center of the room is a large circular dais, currently empty. To the left is a mesh-covered cage where two alphas are stripped down to shorts and battling it out. Musk and blood are thick in the air and I shoot Rory a pointed look. We have recent history of the sort of shit alphas like to watch when it comes to cage fighting. But this match-up looks pretty even, so I follow Bryce towards a set of stairs.

There are three levels looking down on the action, some with booth-style spaces and others with private rooms, either with glass doors or red velvet curtains. It’s enough like the Looking Glass to make me pause, but the vibe is different, darker, and I don’t think anyone’s here to watch a sexy ballet.

“Dominance fights,” Rory says under his breath as we stop at a room with velvet curtains. “I wonder if Leon knows this shit is going on in his city.”

Rory’s not trying to keep this between us – he’d use the bond for that – and the twins chuckle as they step inside and make themselves comfortable on black leather couches. “You think he’s not getting a kickback?” Brock asks. “For all you know, he’s a member. Maybe even the owner.”

I couldn’t care less if the Alpha of Chicago is into this stuff; that’s my dad’s problem to work out with his ally. But if Nate is in a bad place and his pack isn’t doing anything to help him, that’s a different matter.

“Check that out,” Bryce says, a hint of glee in his voice, and I turn to the dais on the right to find three wolves circling a fourth. All alphas again, but

the one in the middle is almost twice the size of the others. For a moment, my breath catches and I sway on my feet. Rory, of course, picks up on the issue immediately and drops a soothing arm over my shoulders. *Not Arben*, he tells me through the bond. *Just a big fucker looking to prove he can take on a bunch of wolves at once.*

And people really pay to watch this?

Dominance fights are big. They have a professional circuit, but amateurs go from city to city for underground fights, or get hired by places like this. His gaze turns inward, a hint of pain in his green eyes. *My granddad made a name for himself by taking on all comers. Still got his throat ripped out in some shithole in Vegas, though.*

I'm sorry, Rory.

It's okay, sweet thing. His eyebrows lift a couple of times, all suggestion. *Although, you can put a smile on my face later, if you like.*

Which of course makes *me* smile, but my head snaps towards the floor as a cry goes up and one of the alphas in the cage goes down. The distraction has the big wolf looking over, and the three stalking him make their move. They converge on him all at once, fangs bared and claws ready to rip. But the lone wolf takes the first out with a swipe of a paw as big as his head, knocking him clear off the dais. The remaining pair gets closer, one hooking a claw across his shoulder while the other lunges with his teeth, sinking deep into the back of his neck. The lone wolf makes a growling sound that sets my teeth on edge, but he jerks his head down, flinging the one behind him into the air. He lands awkwardly and while he's trying to scramble off his back, the lone wolf snaps his massive jaws around his front paw and rips. Blood spurts everywhere, soaking the dais, and while the injured wolf howls, his partner slinks away, clearly giving up the fight.

"This is barbaric," I mutter, feeling my wolf's agitation beneath my skin.

Neither of us are fans of blood sports, and I tap my fingers impatiently on my thigh as I watch the pawless wolf try to drag itself off the dais. “Is it over?”

Bryce shrugs, sipping on a whiskey from the small bar built into the back of the booth. “The fight ends if he dies or shifts and taps out. Of course, with their blood up, not all wolves stop right away. Can get pretty messy either way.”

I shoot him a disgusted look, but Brock is nudging him, that devilish gleam back in his eyes. “Here he comes. The main event.”

It takes me a moment to realize what they’re talking about. While I’ve been distracted by the wolf fight, a group of guys have formed a circle inside the central dais. I count six alphas, right as one of them steps forward and kicks a polished shoe into someone crouched on the ground.

“Fuck me,” Rory hisses, and the circle parts just enough for me to see a naked Nate on his knees. His pale skin is almost translucent under the spotlight, his head bowed and his hands resting palms-up on his thighs. The guy who kicked him crouches down and grabs his hair, muttering something in his ear. I realize he’s not wearing his glasses, his eyes bigger and softer in the harsh spotlight. When Nate doesn’t respond to whatever the first guy said, another alpha taps his shoulder, taking his place. The same nightmare happens again and when Nate shakes his head, two alphas step up. My heart is hammering so loud I can barely hear the thuds as fists and kicks rain down. But I can see Nate’s muscles jumping and snapping with every blow. It makes me sick to the stomach, but worse still is the look on his face at whatever commands the alphas are whispering in his ears. It’s torture watching the emotions churn in his soft gray eyes, and my wolf lashes under my skin, her protective instincts on fire.

“What the fuck!” I’m on my feet, already halfway out the door when Bryce grabs my arm.

“Wait up! He paid for this.” He points down at Nate, who’s barely moving under the steady assault. “They’re not doing anything he doesn’t want them to do.”

I look at Rory, who’s a step away from putting Bryce on his ass. “Explain!” he barks.

“It’s a service they offer here,” Brock says, a smile playing around his mouth. “Submissive wolves get paired up with dominants and work out their issues. And Nate is about as submissive as it gets.”

I force myself to keep watching, looking for some hint that this is what’s going on. He’s clearly not putting up any kind of defense, but every punch and kick makes the bile rise in my throat.

“And you know this how?” Rory demands. “Because so far, you fuckers have been full of shit.”

“That’s a little harsh,” Bryce murmurs, but when Rory looms over him, he holds up a hand, the malice in his smile on full display. “He’s our brother. Well, half-brother to be technical. Our dad fucked his trash whore mom, so he came to live with us when he was eight. Dad kicked him out when he turned sixteen, and he ended up in Chicago.” He stares down at Nate like he’s enjoying every blow his brother takes. “He’s learned to take a punch, but he’s always been a needy little runt.”

How the hell did he survive growing up with brothers like these?

I’m not sure if it’s my own thought or Rory’s, but he’s the first to tear his eyes away from Nate. It’s dimly lit in the booth, but I can see the deadly glint in my mate’s eyes as he studies the twins. “Call him that again,” he says quietly. “I fucking dare you.”

Bryce gulps, finally realizing what’s standing between him and the door. When Brock looks set to intervene, I pop out my claws, letting my very pissed-off wolf show through my eyes. The twins exchange a glance and then

they both raise their hands, their faces pale. “Fuck. Just... calm down, okay?” Bryce licks his lips, trying to force them into a placating smile. “Nate’s trying to get his wolf to come out. He’s never shifted. Can’t. That’s what he’s paying those guys down there to do.”

I have to bite back the moan that rises in my chest. “Why don’t they just command him?”

“Doesn’t work,” Brock says in a shaky voice. “He’s fucking broken, okay? We knew it when he was a kid.”

“You’re fucking scum, you know that?” Rory’s voice has roughened and dropped an octave, his lengthening fangs getting in the way of his speech. He’s deep in a half-shift, the bones of his face bulging around his glowing beast eyes. For all their world-weary bullshit, I doubt either twin has ever seen a monster quite like this one. “Get the fuck out of here before I rip your spine out of your ass.”

The twins scramble for the door, but I put up a hand, stopping them. Rory reins in his wolf enough to ask, “What do you want to do, sweet thing?”

I glare at the twins through my own burning eyes. “I want these assholes to watch while I help their brother. They don’t get to talk trash about him and walk away.”

Rory’s mouth tips up in a vicious, toothy grin. “Anything you want, Angel.” He grabs the back of their shirts and shoves them down onto their knees, his claws digging into their chins. “Keep your eyes peeled, shitstains, or I’ll do it for you.”

I leave them in Rory’s capable hands, hurrying down the stairs to the performance floor. There are about a dozen alphas there now, some watching, some getting in on the act. I grind my teeth as a big guy in black leather steps forward and drives a boot into Nate’s side.

“Step back!” I yell, pushing my way between them when they don’t move

on their own. Up close, Nate is a mess of bruises and blood. His head is bowed and there's a gash on his temple that's dripping into his eyes, but he doesn't raise his clenched fists to wipe it away. It hits me that he really has invited this punishment, that he thinks the only way to shift is to beat the beast out of him. "Nate. It's Elvi. Can you look at me, please?"

He lifts his head as far as my hands, settling on my claws. He looks dazed, almost drugged. But before he can speak, the alpha in black leather grabs my hair, dragging it to his nose for a sniff. "Who brought the omega?"

I lift my claws on reflex, slicing my hair out of his hold and nicking the side of his hand. He's big and brutal looking, with a shaved head and deep-set black eyes that narrow dangerously as he hisses and inspects the wound. "You'll pay for that, bitch."

"I'll do a lot damn worse if you don't step back." Especially because his knuckles were extra bloody before I cut him, meaning he's responsible for a lot of the damage to Nate's body. "I paid, same as you," I lie. "It's my turn to bring out his wolf."

That gets a laugh from the alphas, but I ignore them, dropping to my knees beside Nate. I keep one set of claws out, but retract the other and set it gently on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"What are you doing here?" he asks, his voice so low and scratchy I barely recognize it. But it's the mixture of shame and frustration in his eyes that makes my heart ache. "You shouldn't see me like this, Elvana."

"We can talk about that later," I tell him, conscious of the alphas growing restless around us. "If you want to shift, I'll help you. Same with any of my guys. I promise, there are other ways to do this."

He finally lifts a hand to wipe the blood from his face, but it's a defeated gesture. "You can't. I've tried this enough to know I'm broken."

The word rings in my head, coated in the scent of his blood and the

hopelessness in his eyes. “You’re not broken, Nate. Your wolf just hasn’t found his way home.”

He blinks up at me, his lashes coated in unshed tears. “What does that mean?”

I take my hand off his shoulder and turn it over, offering it up. “Will you let me show you?”

He hesitates for only a second, then wraps his trembling fingers around mine. I lean in until my mouth is next to his ear. “Your wolf is my business, not theirs. Come with me, and you won’t regret it.”

I have to make the offer, because it’s still Nate’s choice, even if it hurts my heart that he thinks violence is the only way.

But he tilts his head, his lips brushing my cheek. “Even if I can’t shift?”

I smile at him, letting my confidence show. “You can shift, Nate. Trust me. You just need some coaxing.”

He still looks doubtful, so I focus my power on our clasped hands. Nate isn’t a big guy, but his arms are corded, his palms broad and strong. I know even before I dig too deep that his wolf is going to be a sight to see. But I settle on drawing a layer of fur to the surface where it shimmers across his forearm, the blue-black of a raven’s wing and as soft as silk. Nate’s breath catches in his throat, his eyes huge. “What’s that?”

“Meet your wolf,” I smirk, then hold our hands up so the alphas can see his beautiful fur. “The rest of you can back off now. He’s done with your services.”

The only reason I hold back from saying more is because I don’t want Nate to feel ashamed about tonight. If anything, he’s proven how strong he is. How many people could put themselves through this, especially when they had so little hope of success? I draw him to his feet, glancing up at the balcony to find Rory watching us. *Can we get out of here now?*

He gives me a nod, the pride in his eyes clear across the room. But before we can leave the dais, the alpha in black leather steps in our way. “That’s not fucking normal,” he growls, sneering at Nate’s arm. “Who’s helping her?” He looks around at the other hovering alphas, his jaw hard. “One of you is playing fucking games with us.”

I give him a sneering look of my own. “You think I’d let a man who gets off on hurting others control me?”

He looms over us, his face twisted into an ugly mask. “I think you’d be a lot less mouthy with a fist in your face.”

“Wait!” someone hisses behind him. “That’s Bisha’s baby. I saw her at the Leonide. She’s with the Boston Alpha now.”

“I don’t give a fuck who she is,” the alpha shoots back. “This bitch needs to be taught to kneel.”

His shift shudders through his body, but he holds it back with a pained grunt. Clearly his plan is to fuck me instead of fight me, and I curl my lip in disgust as he struggles to contain his wolf. Like a lot of big alphas, he *thinks* he’s powerful, but his control is severely lacking. When his hand falls to his belt, his claws are still peeking out, making him fumble with his zipper. I can feel Rory’s rage rising, our bond electric with his anger, but I shake my head. *Give him enough time and he’ll probably slice off his own dick.*

Which makes Rory growl down our bond. *Sweet thing, if you want his hands to stay attached to his body, then don’t be talking about his micro penis.*

I smirk, right as the alpha’s control snaps. His shift roars over him, his clothes exploding in a mist of black leather. A wave of pungent alpha musk coats the air, and then his beast is rising up; big, black, and borderline feral.

Oh, shit.

An alpha losing control is one thing, but a feral wolf is a whole other

problem. And when those small dark eyes fix on me, I can tell that any lust he felt for me has been twisted into a savage hunger. *Yep, he definitely wants to fight me now.*

But right as he leaps at us, fangs open and dripping, Rory hits the dais in his half-form and skewers him on his claws.



Rory

When you've got a beast like mine under your skin, you learn to keep it on a tight leash. No one wants you raging out at the breakfast table, assuming I came from the kind of family who sat down and ate meals together.

Which I didn't. My mom checked out in my teens, my dad was an asshole, and my brothers – Cam and Link, and later Kelly - were the only ones who kept me sane.

But I have that kind of family now. Breakfast in bed is my new normal, and a lot of that's due to our angel. She doesn't care that we're monsters. Hell, she's got a beast inside her that could take down any of these guys in a fair fight. But she's also got the biggest heart of anyone I've ever met, making her the sweetest of savages.

Link is shouting in my ear, demanding updates, but I ignore him as I vault over the balcony. The shitstain twins scramble away, heading for the exit, but I focus on the fight below. I have a millisecond to lift my claws and catch the beast that's going for my angel's throat. He stinks like wolf gone bad, and I spit in his face as I skewer him. I twist and dig until his insides are scrambled, then shake him loose, kicking his corpse off the dais.

Elvi immediately jumps behind me, her much smaller back pressed to mine as she covers my rear. I feel her slash at something, but the next alpha is leaping forward to try his luck with a foot-long hunting knife. Stupid fucker. I don't know if they're pack or they just smell blood in the water, but he dies just as fast.

“Rory, we need to get out of here.”

The fear in Elvi's voice has me swinging around to find half the alphas closing in on us, while the others are shaking through a shift. I strike out at

the nearest one, catching him between forms and loping off a furry ear. He howls and claws the one next to him, and they roll off the dais in an explosion of blood and fur. But the others are circling us, ready to hit us as a pack.

Angel, when I tell you, run for it. I'll make a hole and do not fucking look back.

The cursing in my ear tells me the other guys are listening in through our bond, but I don't have time to deal with them. Because Elvi is shaking her head at me, her tiger eyes full of sass, even though her lips are quivering with fear. *I fight with you, Rory. I'm never leaving you.*

Fuck, my heart.

I want to touch her. Hell, I want to pull her to me and wrap her in my skin. But we're both claws out, and the fuckers are circling closer. *Babe, this is an end of the road fight.*

She forces a smile, her chin lifting like a goddamn salute. *Then we're going out together, Rory. Now stop talking and kill these motherfuckers, Alpha.*

Fuck, Fuck, Fuck. I'm pretty sure that's Cam, trying to burrow his way through a steel door to get to us. I can vaguely sense Kelly screaming at me, but it's Link whose voice comes through, cold and deadly. *Don't you fucking let her die, Rory.*

Not happening, bro.

I don't know how I'm going to stop it, but they'll have to tear me to shreds before I stop fighting. Which I do for a minute or an hour, falling into the red mist of my beast's fury. He's so far off the leash, I barely feel the claw to my hip or the teeth on my ankle. I'm too busy kicking them back, cracking skulls and clawing out their guts to notice a little thing like pain. Soon, the floor is slippery with gore, and the wolves are hesitating. I risk a glance behind me to

find Elvi in a crouch, Nate at her side with the big hunting knife in his hand.
Ballsy little beta.

I'd reach out and pat his head if I wasn't drenched in blood. But my heart almost stops when I catch the gaze of the huge wolf from the next dais over. He's finished chewing on the paw he ripped off and is headed our way, his black eyes fixed on me.

I've got incoming, I tell the guys, more from habit than anything. Not sure I can take him.

Cam is cursing again, but Link makes a disgusted sound. *Then just picture what he'll do to your angel when he's put you down. You really want her to suffer like that, brother?*

The roar that rips out of me shakes the ground, but the big wolf just shows me his fangs. For a second, I consider letting my beast all the way out and meeting him head on, but he's not the only threat in the room.

And then the decision is taken from me, because smoke fills the air, and I only need to take one whiff to know it's laced with wolfbane. It burns the fuck out of my nostrils, but more importantly, it drops every wolf to the floor. All except for the big black fucker, of course, but he just gives me a creepy-ass look and turns and trots away.

They've got wolfbane bombs, I tell the guys through the bond. Cam, where are you?

At the elevator. Fucked up a couple of security, but I'll hold it until you're ready.

Which gives our escape plan a boost, but there's still the issue of getting past the assholes in human form. Some of them are choking on the smoke, but a couple are eyeing my angel like they think she's up for grabs.

Which just means I'll claw out their eyes first when I fuck them up.

But then the chick from the front door strides through the smoke, wearing

a gas mask and toting a leather whip. It's one of those lion tamer ones, but with steel barbs on the ends, and she gives it a warning flick as she surveys the scene. The wolves are still down, but the humans shuffle back, giving her room. When her eyes settle on me, she says through the mask, "I don't remember adding you to the entertainment program."

I'm still in my half-form, and since my fangs fuck up my speech, I settle for a growl. But Elvi can't help herself, that cute little chin in the air as she glares at the other woman. "We just came to get our friend. Your trash members brought this on themselves."

The alpha bitch cocks a brow. "Yeah, well, it looks like I'll be revoking some memberships. You might not believe it, but my boss has a hard rule about disrespecting omegas in this club." She snaps her whip, hitting the flank of one of the wolves on the ground. It howls, but she ignores it, her gaze traveling slowly around the dais, taking in the dead and dying. When she finally returns to me, she tilts her head and looks me over like I'm a show dog. "You looking for a job, pretty boy? Cos this isn't a bad audition."

That gets a growl from my angel, her claws springing back to their full length. "Eyes off, bitch," she snarls in a voice dripping with venom. "He's *my* pretty boy."

My beast purrs at that, but the alpha just laughs. "Fuck, what my boss would do for a piece of you two." She flicks her whip lazily, then jerks her head towards the door. "Come on. Lucky for you, he's got business elsewhere."

Elvi looks at me, uncertain, but it's not like we have a lot of choice. Nodding, I keep my eyes on the crowd while she and Nate climb off the dais, picking their way through blood pools and body parts. I slosh after them, and as soon as we reach the door, the woman takes off her gas mask and tucks her whip under her arm. "I'm Billie, and right now, I'm your only way out of

here. So put the fucking claws away and get in the elevator.”

I snarl but shift back, pulling Elvi tight to my chest as I step inside. Nate follows, but my angel refuses to give up so much as a claw, and Billie shakes her head as she hits the button for the first floor. When we’re moving, she leans back against the wall and rests one high-heeled black boot on top of the other. “I’ve heard how you clean up your messes in New York, so see this as a peace offering. You get out of here without paying a dime, but make sure you don’t come the fuck back. Ever.” She turns and looks at Nate, who’s standing quietly in the corner. “You hear me, Prince of the City?”

Nate gives a stiff nod, and she sighs, looking him over. He’s still naked and covered in blood and bruises, but there’s a hungry glint in her eye. “Shame. You were always a crowd favorite.”

Elvi is on her in a flash. The alpha has nearly a foot on her, but my angel presses a claw to her throat as she glares up at her. “You can keep your peace offering, bitch. Talk about him like that again, and you lose your larynx.”

The alpha blinks at her, but holds up her hands in surrender. “Apologies for overstepping.” Then she makes a big deal of looking around. “Is there any guy in this club you don’t have a claim on?”

Elvi blinks, but doesn’t back up. “Where’s Cam?”

She’s asking me, but Billie chances a guess. “Big, tanned guy with a shaved head and bruiser knuckles? He’s waiting for you at the back door.”

Elvi steps back, but keeps her claws out until the elevator comes to a stop. Billie makes a point of sweeping a hand in front of her and we head down a corridor to another steel door. Thank fuck we don’t have to fight our way out of here, because the security in this place is Link’s wet dream. Which reminds me...

We’re heading out now. You got a lock on Cam?

There’s a long pause, then Link’s voice comes through, almost

mechanical. *He's at the rear entrance. Car ready to collect.*

Fuck, he sounds pissed. Not something I can get distracted by now, but I know I'll be in his bad books for a while.

But he's right about Cam, thank fuck. He's waiting for us outside the steel door, his bruiser knuckles clenched into fists as he leans on the side of a black limo. He's got a black eye forming, and he gives Billie a foul look as she follows us out. She just smirks in his direction, but then her face settles into a blank mask as she pulls open the back door of the limo. Dropping into a crouch, she bows her head and says something in a language I don't know. But there's a familiar rumble from inside the car, and she touches a hand to her heart and retreats. Without a backward glance in our direction, she slams the steel door shut and I finally let down my guard.

Although, when I duck my head to look inside, I decide that might have been a little hasty.

"Get inside, wolflings," Arben growls. "We have a lot of catching up to do."



Elvi

“Arben!” I can’t stop the cry that leaves my lips as I scramble into the car and throw myself at my mate. My wolf has been so close to the surface for so long, it comes out like a whine, tears pricking the back of my eyes as I breathe in his familiar scent. But instead of wrapping me in his arms, he holds me off, staring down at my blood-splattered body. Crap. I look like I fell into a vat of red paint, then swam through a pool of strawberry jelly.

“Sorry,” I mutter, snatching up some wet wipes from Cam’s medical kit. “I nearly got this shit all over your suit.”

“Fuck. My. Suit.”

I’m kneeling on the floor of the limo as I dab at the bloodstains, which means he towers over me, even sitting down. And the look on his face in the dark interior is enough to make me gulp. But instead of sharing whatever murderous thoughts are flitting through his head, he growls at the others to get in, then barks at Cam to sort them out. No one argues, and the car pulls away. It’s silent, except for the pop of the antiseptic bottle, Rory’s hiss as the ointment hits his wounds, and the rustle of the plastic trash bag on Nate’s lap.

I sit back on my heels and tentatively try my bond with Arben, but he slams it shut and gives me a terrifying look.

Right. So, welcome back cuddles are off the agenda.

No so for Rory, it seems, who snuggles into Arben’s side and bitches about everything Cam does. We all know from the time he broke his leg that Rory is a crap patient, but I’m not sure why I’m getting the cold shoulder.

Ignoring the three of them, I sit back on the seat next to Nate and poke at the trash bag on his lap. “What’s in there?”

“Clothes. Phone. Wallet.” He shrugs. “They don’t exactly give you a

locker when you sign up for The Feral Den.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “And you really did sign up? You thought that was your only option?”

He bites his lip, pulling his glasses from the trash bag and slipping them on. “You must think I’m pretty pathetic.”

I wait until he meets my eyes, then take his hand. “Like I said, your wolf just needs a little coaxing. I’ve been there, so I can help you.”

He stares down at our hands, and I don’t think he’s looking at the spots of blood I missed with the wet wipes. “That was real? My wolf...?”

“All you,” I promise, squeezing his fingers. “And tomorrow we work on a full shift, if that’s what you want.”

He nods, but Cam has finished with Rory and wants to get started on Nate’s bruises and scratches. I scoot down the seat, which puts me right back in the firing line of Arben’s scowl. When I realize he’s put an arm around Rory, who’s now full-on snuggling, I raise my brows. “How come he’s not in trouble?”

“Oh, he is,” Arben says in a disturbing purr. “You all are. But your punishments will fit the crime.”

That has everyone freezing in place, wide-eyed as we soak in his words. But I scoff, putting on a brave face. “Don’t scare Nate. He’s been through enough for one night.”

Arben tilts his head, studying the beta. I expect Nate to be white-faced with fear, but instead, he looks fascinated as he stares back at my deadliest mate. “Then he can have an extra day to recover,” Arben proclaims, his black gaze swinging back my way. “But that’s the only favor you’re getting, princeshë.”

I bite the edge of my nail to stop the protests bubbling up and stare out the window. We travel in silence for a while, then Rory asks Arben, “Hey, what

did that door bitch say to you back there?”

“Princeshë?” Arben prompts me, but I just fold my arms, and Nate’s soft voice fills the void. “She said it was an honor to serve him.”

I ignore the jealous twinge I’ve been fighting since she purred at him in our mother tongue, and turn to Nate in surprise. “You speak Albanian?”

“I like languages. Math best, but I’ve been learning since you guys arrived.”

My lips part, wanting to know more, but Arben growls, “We’re here. Can you get us in unseen, *luani i vogël*.”

He’s clearly talking to Nate – the little lion – and he nods. “Of course. We’ll use the service elevator.”

While he takes his phone from the trash bag and texts someone, the driver takes us around to the delivery entrance. We pile out, and as Nate swipes us into the building, Cam pulls me in for a hug. I’m certain I can feel Arben’s disapproving gaze burning into the back of my head, but I ignore it, soaking up Cam’s comforting scent. We only break apart when the service elevator arrives, and he holds my hand until Nate steps out a floor below ours. “Are you going to be alright?” Cam asks, still in medic mode.

“I’ve booked a room for the night, or what’s left of it.” His soft gray eyes linger on me for a moment before clinging to Arben. “*Më vjen keq për telashet që kam shkaktuar.*”

“You don’t need to apologize, Nate,” I reply, ignoring Arben’s grunt. “We’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes.” He clears his throat awkwardly. “I’m sure we’ll have meetings.”

“And don’t forget the pack run,” I remind him. “Sleep well, Nate.”

He blushes, but I’m impressed at his ability to meet everyone’s gaze, even Arben’s, and then he gives a small wave and walks off. The smile slides off my face as the doors close, and I’m the first one out of the elevator as I stalk

to our suite.

Kelly pulls it open as if he's been waiting for us, and I suddenly get all the cuddles I could want. He hugs me so tight, I feel a sob bubble up. I manage to swallow it down, but it comes out as a soft moan when he sweeps me off my feet. I bury my face in his hair, breathing in deep, but he hasn't taken more than a couple of steps when Arben growls, "Put her down, princi."

Kelly's hands clutch tighter, but then he slowly releases me. I slide down his body, peering up into his face. There are tear tracks on his cheeks and black circles under his eyes. The guilt hits me in a wave and I reach up, running my fingers over his downturned lips. It's only when I see the blood crusted under my nails that I snatch them back.

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

His eyes go wide, his face even paler, but he bites back whatever he was going to say and gives a shake of his head. Somehow, his silence makes me feel even worse, but I just kick off my shoes and head to the bathroom. Link is sitting motionless in front of his laptop, but I bite my lip. If I can't find the words to apologize to Kelly, I have no hope with Link. Better we just all get some sleep and sort it out in the morning.

Or, at least, that's the plan while I lean against the vanity and scrub my hands with some of the hotel's fancy soap. I really need a shower, but I don't even get to turn the water on before I feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

Arben fills the doorway, even barefoot and stripped of his jacket. I raise a brow at his stern face, wondering if he's finally going to talk to me, but he just crooks a finger and stalks away. Blowing out a sigh, I contemplate ignoring him and taking a long, hot shower. But getting dragged out naked and soapy would probably not be the fun time I'd like it to be.

Instead, I follow him back into the main room, stopping short when I see

him sitting in one of the armchairs. Every other member of our pack is sitting on the couches facing him, like he's about to deliver some kind of speech.

No doubt the long, angry lecturing kind, but I push my annoyance down and walk towards him. Being upset about the close call we had makes sense – I'm already kicking myself over half a dozen things that went wrong at the club – but I'm not going to let him scold me like a child. If Arben wants to have more control over our missions, then he needs to be here to help us plan them.

Feeling vindicated, I fold my arms and decide to get in the first word. "I know you're angry, but you don't get to boss me around if you're not here, Arben."

He raises a thick black brow, but otherwise remains motionless. "But you get to put yourself in danger when I'm not here to stop you?"

I narrow my eyes, my anger feeding off the adrenaline in my system. "Stop me? That's not how this works. We're a pack of *equals*, in case you've forgotten."

"It's exactly how it works, princeshë. And if we're equals, as you claim, did you give Lincoln time to survey the building before you rushed in there?"

"No, but -."

"Did you inform your father? Arrange back-up? Ask Leon to liaise with the Alpha Kings on his son's behalf? Did you do one of a hundred things that would have improved the safety of your mission?"

"No," I admit, feeling slightly chastised by his rapid-fire questions.

"Then come here and take your punishment, Elvana. Ten smacks on your reckless behind."

I blink at him, but he's pointing to the ground in front of him. "You must be joking."

"I never joke about your ass, princeshë." I'm tempted to roll my eyes at

him, but Arben leans forward on the chair. It groans under his weight, not a hint of softness in his dark eyes as his thick forearms settle on his knees. “If you’re going to act like a reckless wolfling, I’m going to discipline you like one. Now come here and pull up your dress.”

Oh my god. He really is planning to spank my ass like I’m a disobedient child! “Forget it. You’re not my dad, Arben.”

“No, but I can go and get him.” He half-rises from his seat. “You think Lucas will stop me when he finds out the danger you put yourself in?”

I swallow hard. Dragging my dad in here is like one of those naked-at-school nightmares. And to see him disappointed in me would almost be worse. “Alright,” I mutter, stomping over to the chair and stopping just out of reach. I lower my voice and give a subtle gesture towards the couch. “But can you send them away? You don’t need to make this a public flogging.”

I’m trying to break the soup-thick tension a little, but his glower just deepens. “That’s *exactly* what this needs to be. Everyone in this room needs to know that reckless behavior won’t be tolerated.”

I look over my shoulder at the guys, expecting at least a glimmer of sympathy, but every single one of them is staring at us in fascination. Rory gives me a filthy smile and I whirl back on Arben. “Are you kidding me? You said you were going to punish everyone. How is this going to hurt *them?*”

But Arben has snared my wrist, pulling me close. He looks pointedly at his massive thighs. “Lie down, princeshë. There’s no escaping your punishment.”

I feel my nostrils flare at his dark tone, but that’s as close to rebellious as I get. If he’s so set on spanking my butt, I’ll just grit my teeth and bear it. I’ve suffered worse in our defensive and conditioning sessions, after all. I can live through a few swats.

“Alright. Let’s get this over with.”

I hike up my dress, blushing at the fact I’m wearing a lacy thong. But I keep my eyes averted from the guys on the couch as I lower myself over Arben’s lap. His thighs are twice the size of mine and heavily muscled, and I have to bite back a groan at the scent lifting off his clothes. Arben is a smoky leather dream, and I cock a brow at him. “You sure this is meant to teach me a lesson?”

Before I’m completely settled, a big hand presses into my back while another comes down hard on my left cheek. The sting takes a moment to hit me, and then it’s a red-hot sizzle. “Ow!” I shriek, trying to scramble away. “That fucking hurts!”

Arben doesn’t bother responding to the obvious, bringing his hand down in exactly the same way again, only this time on my right cheek. Somehow, it stings even more, and I curse and buck, but he’s got me pinned. “Stop! That’s enough.”

“It’s not ten.”

“It’s two,” Rory says helpfully from the couch, but before I can send him a death glare, Arben’s hand is coming down again. He’s moved just enough to catch the edge of his first smack but also reach the tender skin at the top of my thigh, and tears spring to my eyes. “Fuck! Why do your hands have to be so fucking big?”

Rory chortles at that, no doubt ready with some filthy quip, but Arben steals the air out of the room when he spanks me three times in quick succession. The pain is like a wildfire, burning hottest on my cheeks but radiating down my thighs. A sob tears out of me, and I dig my nails into Arben’s calf. Of course, it’s like gripping rock, and doesn’t stop him in any way from hitting me again. One! Two! *Goddamn owwww!*

“How the fuck does anyone like this?”

“I like it,” Kelly says quietly, and I’m so surprised, I blink at him through my tears. And the evidence is right there, his erection tenting his sweatpants, his cheeks flushed and his eyes wide. I watch as his gaze roams from my stinging ass, up my spine, to my flushed and tear-streaked face. “You look beautiful, Angel.”

I gulp, a hint of his arousal reaching me and making me squirm in a different way. It takes me a moment to realize Arben is rubbing soothing circles over my flaming skin, but right when I feel a trickle of pleasure, his hand comes down again and I screech. “It’s their turn!” I wail, kicking my feet. “I’m not the only one who screwed up!”

“Yeah, but we’d follow you into hell, Angel,” Rory says, and I peer at him through tear-soaked lashes. “With great sexiness comes great responsibility.”

I gape at this bit of wisdom, but Arben spans me again, this time between my cheeks, and I almost vibrate off his lap. But my next sob becomes a screech when I focus on Rory again. “Are you seriously eating snacks and jerking off to my pain?”

Because he’s got one hand buried in a bag of Doritos and the other wrapped around his dick.

“Baby, if you could see the view I have, you’d understand.” He shoves a few more corn chips in his mouth and grins at me. “Besides, those are love taps. He’s going to destroy my ass a lot worse when he gets through with you.”

“Yeah, but you’re going to enjoy it!” My gaze skips down the row of my mates, all in some state of arousal except for Link. He won’t even glance at me, but Cam gets to his feet and comes over to look at Arben’s handiwork.

I peer up at him, hoping he’ll pull the medic card and call for an ice pack, but he just shakes his head. “She can take more. She’s barely pink on that cheek.”

My mouth drops open, the betrayal making me squeak. “Cam! You *cannot* be serious!”

But he just looks down at me with a small smirk. “You’ve got a few more in you. Tough it out, babe.”

Tough it out? Fuck my pack. The whole lot of them can go screw themselves.

“You’re animals!” I howl while I brace for the next blow. How many are we up to? God, I don’t even know. I press my sobs into my arm and hold on, but Arben speeds up now, finishing with a few quick smacks. And then he’s blowing cold air over my sizzling skin. I give a feeble kick, swiping at my eyes as he lifts me off my lap. When he sets me on my feet without so much as a cuddle, I glare at him. “You’re an asshole,” I mutter.

But he glares back just as hard. “You do this again, and I’ll spank you twice as long and twice as hard.”

My mouth drops open. “You wouldn’t!”

“It’s what’s called a deterrent, princesshë.” He smirks at my outrage. “Now I know you don’t enjoy it, I’ll keep my hand warm and ready.”

I’m tempted to stick my tongue out at him, but I tug my dress down instead, wincing as it brushes my tender ass. But when I try to flounce away, Arban grabs my wrist with a warning look. I glare back, but he stands to his full height, which even I have to admit is intimidating. “We’re not done yet.”

I want to yell at him, but he’s leading me over to the couch, and I have to admit I’m curious about what he’s planning next. When he jerks his head at Rory, I bite back a smirk. “Drop the snacks and go sit in the chair.”

Rory jumps up, his dick still in his hand, and gives me a kiss on my cheek as he bounces past. When he’s settled, Arben unzips my dress and presses gently on my back. “Lie down, princesshë.”

I look at my mates, but they’re already reaching to settle me across their

knees, my head closest to Link and Cam near my feet. Their combined scent makes my mouth water, but I twist to look up at Arben. “What now? Are they going to spank me some more?”

“No, princeshë.” Arben says and reaches out to stroke my tear-stained cheek. “They are going to kiss you better.”

I settle a little. Kissing sounds a hell of a lot better than spanking.

“What about me?” Rory calls, still working his erection. “What am I doing?”

Arben gives a dark chuckle. “You? Nothing, wolfling. You sit there, and you don’t touch yourself. Your punishment is no pleasure until I say so.”

It's Rory's turn to squawk, but I just smirk as he huffs and tries to wrestle himself back into his pants. And then my focus is back on my mates. Because Cam is massaging my calves, while Kelly carefully peels off my dress. The material catches on my tender cheeks and I wince, but he's murmuring soothing words, his breath soft on my tortured skin.

I can still feel his erection, though, and I rub it a little with the heel of my hand, looking up at him curiously. “Do you just like watching me get spanked, or do you like being spanked?”

“Both.” He gives me a smile that's borderline criminal. “If I could have it my way, you'd be bent over one knee and I'd be over the other. Every smack you'd rub your hot little ass on mine. Or maybe we do it face-to-face, so I can kiss away your tears.”

I gulp a breath, almost half-inclined to give it a try. But then I remember how much it hurt and I shake my head. “Maybe I'll just be the one spanking you,” I declare, shooting Arben a filthy look.

What I'm not expecting is to hear them all groan at the idea, their musk lifting into the air in a heady haze. I bite my lip, peeking up at Link as I fold my arms across his thigh. He's still not looking at me, but there's a pulse

flickering in his jaw. I flick my gaze down to his groin and even though he's wearing his military-style cargoes, I can see the hard line of his erection pushing at the fabric. What I can't tell is if he's uncomfortable watching me get punished, or if he's excited about the idea of seeing Kelly spanked but doesn't want to let on. For all the times Link and I have ended up in the same bed, I don't know much about what he likes sexually, except that it always revolves around our sunshine.

And all of a sudden, I'm insanely curious.

"What do you think, Link?" I ask, still nibbling on my lip. "Should I spank Kelly?"

He jerks, his eyes unreadable when they flick down to me. "What?"

"Well, he's your mate. And you're very protective of him." I force a smile I don't really feel. "You might shoot me if I make him cry." But he just stares at me like I've lost my mind and I realize how stupid I sound. "Oh, right. You probably spank him all the time if it's something he likes. So maybe I should watch next time and learn how."

He makes a strangled sound and presses a hand to my mouth. "Just stop."

His skin tastes like gun oil and alpha musk, but I don't let it distract me. "Am I embarrassing you? But why? I've watched you do all sorts of stuff to Kelly. You have to tell me if that's out of bounds."

Link just shakes his head and looks at Kelly, who gives a soft laugh and bends down to kiss the heated skin of my ass. His soft lips feel like heaven and I groan, pushing my butt up at him. "More, please. It hurts all over."

That has them all moving under me, Kelly feathering kisses across both cheeks while Cam's fingers dig in deeper, massaging the tension out of my thighs. When Kelly starts to lick across what I'm sure are the giant welts left by Arben's hands, I groan and my perfume fills the air. But I freeze as slick trickles between my thighs.

“It’s okay, Angel,” Kelly whispers, feathering more kisses over me. “You’re allowed to feel good now.”

I bury my face in my folded arms. “But I thought this was punishment.”

Link mutters something under his breath, but Kelly just kisses me some more. “That’s over. Now we get to take care of you.”

I roll my head just enough to peek up at Arben, whose arms are folded, his legs braced wide. He looks like a scowly statue as he watches us and I feel a flicker of renewed anger. “Then if I’m allowed to feel good, I want more.” I push my butt up again, even though my thong is probably soaked in slick by now. “More, please.”

What I’m not expecting is for my lace thong to be nudged aside and a finger dragged between my cheeks. I freeze and Cam chuckles. “You said *more*. Isn’t this what you meant?” He doesn’t wait for my answer, sliding down to press lightly against my hole. It makes me jerk hard, my thighs clenching, and he makes a dark humming sound. “Sometimes I forget how innocent you are. Have you ever had someone in here, sweetheart?”

I pillow my head on my arms, hiding my flaming cheeks. “No. But if it’s anything like spanking, I know I’ll hate it.”

“Should we find out?” Cam murmurs something to Kelly, and then I feel fingers sliding under my thighs, and my angel is gently rubbing my nub. It feels so good, I didn’t realize I was already right on the edge, and more slick trickles out as he hooks his fingers inside me. He’s still licking and kissing the raw spots on my ass and I rock over his lap, torn between his mouth and his hand. But then his fingers are tangling with Cam’s and I feel a thumb press into my hole. I’m pretty sure it’s just the tip, but like every other part of Cam, it feels huge. I groan, not sure if I want to push back on him or pull away. “Let me in, sweetheart,” Cam whispers against my thigh. “Give me your pretty pink hole.”

“Fucking fuck *fuck!*” Rory spits from across the room, but I barely hear him, torn between the pleasure under me and the intense pressure at the back. I’ve read about this stuff, of course, but in my monster romances, whoever is getting their butt probed always gushes about how good it feels to be so full. But then again, there’s usually a slippery tentacle or barbed tail involved...

“How does she look, Link?” Cam asks softly as he sinks in another inch. “Let him check in, sweetheart, so I know you’re okay.”

I’m not sure I want to show Link my face right now, but I don’t want them to stop, either. So I quickly meet his eyes before burrowing back into his thigh again.

“That’s not consent, Angel,” Kelly says, gently pinching my clit. “Tell Link how it feels.”

I swear to god they’re all trying to kill me. Either by making me drown in my own embarrassment, or in the puddle of slick that’s brewing in my body. Either way, I still don’t see how this is punishing anyone but me.

“Okay,” I grumble, although it comes out breathless and shaky. “The front stuff is good, obviously,” I tell Link, rolling my head just enough so I can stare hard at his chest.

“And the butt stuff?”

I jerk at the gravel in his voice, which just pushes Cam in another inch. He must have reached some kind of barrier, because he slowly pulls back, making my entire body clench. “It’s weird. Like I need to push it out.” Cam is clearly waiting for more, so I circle my hips a little. It’s hard to think with Kelly stroking my nub, but I’m pretty sure it’s starting to feel less intense without Cam inside me. “It feels a little dry,” I hedge.

“We can fix that,” Kelly says, shuffling under me. “If you want me to.”

But it’s Cam who grits out, “Link, open her up for Sunshine.”

I freeze, waiting to see what that means, but then I feel Kelly’s silky hair

trailing over my lower back. I jolt as cool fingers touch the welts on my ass, but I barely have time to work out they're Link's before he's pulling my ass cheeks open. I squirm at the rush of cool air, then freeze as Kelly's hot, wet tongue swipes across my hole.

"Oh my god."

"Still too dry?" I'm pretty sure Cam is laughing at me, but I ignore the amount of slick trickling down my thighs and focus every atom on Kelly and his tongue.

It's slippery and pointed, soft but firm, and it feels so damn good I can't stop the moan that rips out of me. "Yes, Kelly! Oh, my god. Right there!"

My hands are now clinging to Link's thigh, my knees digging between Cam's legs as I strain up towards Kelly's mouth. Someone else has taken over rubbing my clit and I rock over all three of them, completely lost to the sensations swarming my body.

I didn't think I had an exhibitionist kink, but knowing they're all staring at me while Link holds me open and Kelly licks and sucks me, makes my head spin. "Oh, god. That's so good. I want more."

I'm vaguely aware of someone groaning – other than me - but Kelly is now pushing a finger in next to his tongue. That full feeling hits me and I thrash my head, my orgasm roaring towards me.

"Fuck, you'd take our dicks so well, baby girl," Cam growls, and I realize it's his fingers rubbing my pussy walls. "But right now, you need to come all over my hand. Come for us, sweetheart."

I'm in no state to disobey, and I orgasm harder than I think I ever have, my bones melting in waves of pleasure as Kelly gently laps at my ass.

And then Cam is pulling me up into his arms, careful to cup my aching cheeks. But he seems almost ravenous as he licks his way into my mouth, Kelly tugging on my hair while he runs his tongue over my mating bites.

When Cam comes up for air, I stare at Link through hooded eyes, his hands now clenched on his lap. He looks like he's just waiting to bolt from the room. "No kisses, Link?" I ask quietly.

I don't expect an answer, but to my surprise, he responds. "I don't want our first kiss to be part of your punishment." He looks up at Arben, a cold light in his eyes. "But you know that, right?"

Does he mean this is *his* punishment? Taking his laptop off him for an hour would hurt a lot more, but I'm stuck on the fact he knows we've never kissed. I mean, we've been in puppy piles before – everything from sleepy to scorching hot sessions – but I've always been careful to keep our touching to a minimum. I know why he's there – for Kelly – and given our history, it's just been easier to ignore whatever feelings I have for him.

Maybe it's the post-orgasm bliss, but for once, I don't want to turn away from him. So I screw up my courage and reach out to touch his frowning lips. "It doesn't have to be. If you want to kiss me, kiss me."



Link

I'm off the couch and bolting for the door before Arben can jerk me back by the scruff. I don't miss Elvana's small cry of surprise at my abrupt exit, but I have to get away, and I know our sadistic guardian won't let me if he has any say in it. But I only make it as far as the kitchen before I stop abruptly and stare down at my hands.

Fuck. They're covered in the syrupy scent of her perfume. Feeling like a fool, I lift my fingers to my nose and sniff. The combination of slick and cum makes my eyes roll back in my head. Fuck Cam, too, for making me touch her. Bad enough she used my lap for a pillow while my brothers worked her over. Now everything I touch is going to get soaked in her perfume, because there's no way I'm washing it off.

My keyboard already smells like her. Cam even commented on it the other day, the asshole, telling me it's even sweeter at the source. As if I don't fucking know. Every time we end up in bed together, I'm half out of my head at the way her scent calls to me. I don't know if it's her, or the pack bonds messing with me, but she's like an oasis in the desert surrounded by a twenty-foot fucking fence.

I scrub my hands over my face before I realize what I'm doing, and as soon as her scent hits my nose, I bite my tongue so hard I taste blood. Not to mention the way my cock throbs in my pants, my wolf all but throwing himself against the cage of my skin.

Because his need for Elvana is becoming a fucking menace. I can rationalize all the reasons she's keeping her distance, but he doesn't get it. He can feel her beast through the bonds, and he doesn't understand why he's the only one on the outside looking in.

Because I screwed her so bad, she doesn't trust me to do my job, let alone share an unbreakable mating bond.

"Link?" I freeze, my spine vibrating with tension as she pads into the room behind me. She doesn't touch me, but she circles around until she can see my face. She's pulled her dress back up, but her hair is a silver riot and her eyes are still hazy with sex.

I heard her scrubbing her hands in the bathroom earlier, but there's still spots of blood on her arms and scratches on her legs. She looks like she took on a dungeon of alpha cunts, then came home and had a victory orgasm. And it takes everything in me not to react, because she's like a GPT-5 tech chatbot went and mated with a DALL-E 2 image generator and spat out my AI dream girl. Which makes me a fucking geek with a hard-on for someone who barely knows I exist.

She gives me a bewildered look and sets her feet, like she's bracing herself. And while everything in me screams to walk my ass out the door, I throw my arms around her and squeeze until it hurts. "Fuck me, Angel. Don't ever do that again."

"What the hell?" It's a squeak, like she's afraid I'm going to break her ribs, but then she gives me an awkward pat on my back. "It's okay, Link..."

"No it's fucking not!" I snarl the words, but I'm still trying to burrow my face in her hair. Forcing myself to take a step back almost kills me. "What the fuck were you thinking, Elvi?"

She blows out a breath and grimaces, probably from her dress catching on her red-hot ass cheeks. Or maybe it's just the migraine I'm giving her. She doesn't wear her glasses very often any more, which means I get the full force of her tiger eyes as she peers up at me. "Are you just ticked off because we screwed up the logistics? Or is it something I did personally?"

I swallow a groan, balling my fists so I don't reach out and shake her.

“How do you not get it? Are you still punishing me, or are you really this fucking clueless?”

“Hey, ease up.” I don’t know where the fuck Cam came from, but he slides a hand between us, giving me a warning look. He’s lucky I don’t break his wrist, especially when he turns his sappy smile Elvana’s way. “Come on, let’s go wash up and get some rest. We can talk about it tomorrow.”

But Elvana’s waiting like she expects me to spill my guts all over the floor. And when she presses a cautious hand to my chest, it rips something inside me. “Why did you do it? Are you into him? Is that why you risked Rory and Cam? Or are you just focused on him so you don’t have to deal with me?”

None of that’s what I wanted to say, of course, but jealous bile has been sitting on the back of my tongue since I saw her light up at the airstrip.

She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. I grip her shoulders, sending Cam a death glare when he moves to get between us again. “Back off!” I hiss. “Give me five seconds where one of you isn’t pushing me aside!”

That makes him blink, but he keeps his meddling ass out of the way and I give Elvana a shake. “You nearly fucking died. Rory gave me a play-by-play as it was going down, but all I was getting from you was static. No Arben, no Kelly, means *I can’t fucking hear you!* Do you get it now?”

She nods numbly, but I can tell from the bewildered look on her face that she doesn’t. So I let her go and grab my jacket off the chair back. “I’m going downstairs for a drink,” I mutter, taking my sulky ass to the door.

Because I need to get the fuck out before I say something I can’t take back.

Like begging her to fucking pick *me*, even if it’s just to settle the bonds.

No one tries to stop me, which I tell myself is how I want it. But I haven’t even made it to the elevator before Kelly is checking in. *Babe? You want*

company?

He knows I don't, but Kelly has zero problems with rejection. Not sure where he got his titanium balls from, but it's something I've always envied about him. Even though his dad tossed him away like defective goods, he has no problem trusting the world to see how awesome he is.

Just clearing my head. Won't be long. I hesitate as he shoots a bolt of pure love down the bond. He's way too good for me, which is why I feed him back a dose of sulky asshole. *Can you sleep in the other room? I don't think I can do a fucking puppy pile tonight.*

There's a flicker of sadness, but he clamps it down as fast as he can. *Of course. I'll keep the bed warm.*

Because our sunshine loves my moody ass.

Shaking my head, I bypass the hotel bar and head to the street. It's cold out, with a hint of rain in the air, and I pull on my jacket. It has to be close to three am, but there are still airport shuttles zipping about, and people staggering around between the late-night bars. I chose one called Daggers, because it suits my mood, and push my way through the pretty people at the window to the bar. It's disturbingly bright inside, but as I snag a free stool, I realize why. The back of the room has a line of booths, like batting cages, only people are throwing knives at wooden targets. When the bartender puts a glass of Jack in front of me, I ask, "Is this like the hipster axe throwing thing?"

He smirks. "Yeah, but then we'd need to be called Axes."

Smart ass. "Well, those are knives, not daggers. So, maybe you should just call yourself pretentious and leave it at that."

The guy just snorts and wanders off to serve a less surly customer. Which sucks, because I've already knocked back my drink. But before I can wave him down, a guy appears at my elbow with a clipboard and a blinding white

smile. He's got a black polo on with a picture of a dancing knife and the bar name on the pocket. "Aren't your fingers just twitching to join the fun?"

I cock a brow at him. If my fingers are twitching for anything, it's my laptop, or the trigger on the gun under my jacket. "Not interested."

"There's a thousand dollars in the kitty," he sing-songs, shoving the clipboard at me again. When I shoot him the equivalent of a dagger stare, he just grins. "If not for money, what about for pride?"

The question stops me and I stare at my reflection in the bar mirror. I look like shit. Black circles, eye bags, frown lines. Yeah, I could do with a bit of fucking pride.

But when I hand over twenty bucks and scrawl my name on the form, I stare at my signature. *Lincoln Hila*.

Fuck. It's been a long time since I called myself that.

Scowling at my reflection, I follow Mr. Clipboard to one of the throwing booths and stand silently while he flips my form over and reads out a bunch of safety instructions. I amuse myself watching the drunk guy in the next booth fumble his knife and nearly chop off his thumb, then Mr. Clipboard is handing me my first blade. I flip it in my hand, studying the weight and balance. It's a piece of shit that would get you laughed out of the WKTL, but there's no denying the buzz in my blood as I let loose and bury it dead center in the target.

"I'm guessing this isn't your first time handling a dagger, Mr. Hila. You have impressive technique." It takes me a moment to work out he's flirting with me, but I'm even less interested in him than I am in the low-rent knife. But that doesn't stop him from leaning over his clipboard and giving me a coy smile. "You know, if you scoop the pot, I could always arrange a private celebration."

"Thanks, but my alpha has me on a tight leash."

I pull down my collar enough so he can see the massive chunk Arben took out of my throat in his monster form. The guy's eyes go comically wide and he backs up so quickly he nearly trips over the guy in the next lane. "Fuck, yes. Sorry. Enjoy your tossing. Throwing. Whatever."

I grin, picturing his reaction if the Death Doctor waltzed in here in person and scrawled his name on his clipboard. But the smile quickly slips off my face when the guy in the next lane belches and leans my way. "You can't blame him for trying," he tells me with a bleary-eyed leer. "You smell like vanilla pussy."

I roll a lethal eye his way. "What the fuck did you say to me?"

The guy must have a death wish, because he just gives another belch and scratches his balls. "You gotta hot little omega at home? I'm in the market myself, but so far nothing's caught my eye."

I take a menacing step towards him, then sniff my hand. Elvana's scent rushes back through me, setting my blood on fire. Which means there's no way in hell I'm going to touch this guy, even if I want to kick his drunk ass into the street. "Keep your fucking nose to yourself, asshole."

"Sure." Another belch and a leer. "But I'll give you fifty bucks for the dagger."

It takes me a moment to realize he doesn't want it as a souvenir, but because it's covered in Elvana's slick. And in the next breath, I have the knife he's clutching out of his hand and tucked tight to his carotid artery. "Maybe I should do all the omegas in the world a favor and slit your stupid throat."

The guy makes a gurgling sound, and I realize the music has stopped and most of the bar is gaping my way. And then the only alpha in the room with an inch of actual power steps up behind me.

"Hey, buddy." It's the bartender, a baseball bat on his shoulder as he

studies me. “Maybe you should give the gun range across town a go.”

I sneer at his attempt to get me out of here without a fight. “Maybe you shouldn’t let your patrons drink and knife.”

He bobs his head like it’s a reasonable suggestion. “I saw your name on the form, so I’m trying to keep this civil. This place isn’t up to your standards, Mr. Hila.”

I want to sneer at him some more, but he’s put his ego in check to try to diffuse the situation. And hearing my asshole father’s name spoken aloud drains the rest of the fight out of me.

“No fucking kidding.” But I let the drunk guy go and toss a hundred bucks on the bar. “For the knife,” I tell the bartender, tucking it in my jacket as I head back to the street.

Shaking my head at my stupidity, I stare up and down the street. But all I can think of is the name I scrawled on a clipboard, and the way Lucas put his arms around Kelly the other day. He called him his son and told him to come to him the next time he was in trouble. Which none of us ever heard from our own worthless fathers. So why the fuck am I starting bar flights when I could be home with my pack?

Because you’re a dumbass, Link Starling-Ferrier.

I rub my hands over my face - until all I can smell is pack - then turn back towards the hotel. But I haven’t even reached the end of the block when a heavy hand comes down on my shoulder. “You forgot your wallet.”

I spin around, but I’m too slow. A massive, gold-skinned guy has a hand around my throat as he walks me back into an alley. I stumble over some trash, but use the loss of balance to go for the knife. Pulling it free, I lunge at him, an inch from his kidney. But he blocks me with one hand and shoves me against the wall with the other. I bounce off, angling the knife at his ribs, but he bats it away hard enough to chip bone. My arm goes numb, and I look him

over as I reach for my gun – even bigger than I thought, with scarred cheeks and a lot of piercings - and then my gun is spinning through the air and clattering in the dark. I drop the knife and pop my claws, but he hits me again with his sledgehammer of a forearm. I kick out, striking his thigh, but he doesn't so much as grunt.

For the second time tonight, I think I'm about to get my heart ripped out.

But instead of finishing me off, he grabs my numb wrists and shoves me face first against the wall.

I struggle, even though I know it's useless. He has at least forty pounds of muscle and six inches of height on me, but it's more than just his build. His fucking dominance is off the charts, and I brace for his wolf to tear my head from my shoulders. But instead, he presses all his weight on me and murmurs in my ear, "You take a bite so well. Where's your alpha, pup?"

I have a stark memory of flashing Arben's mating mark in the bar and want to kick myself. Is this revenge for being a cocky dick? I didn't see him in the crowd, but I have a habit of making enemies without even trying. "I *am* a fucking alpha, dipshit."

He makes a purring sound and rubs his chest against my back. I imagine this is how a rabbit feels right before it's pancaked by an eighteen-wheeler. "You're a wild thing," he croons, squeezing the air out of me. Then something hard and wet runs along the back of my neck. "You taste like alpha, but you smell like slick."

It never occurred to me he's looking for a fuck, but the sweet scent coming off him throws me for a loop. Not that it matters whether he wants to kill me or fuck me; either way, I'm fighting him to the bitter end.

Except when his weight comes off, I keep hugging the wall. A second later he's back, and something brushes my spine. "You're doing very well, pup. But tell me why you're out here alone, instead of cuddling your

omegas?”

Omeegas. Plural. I blink, trying to clear my head. “I’m going back to them now.”

It’s probably wishful thinking, since he’s got me cornered in a dirty alleyway...

“That’s good,” he croons, sending a shudder through me. “You need to keep them close. Keep them safe.”

I nod, like I give a fuck what he thinks, but then his mouth is back against my ear, that sweet scent pushing into my nose. “And when I tell you to drop your weapons and get on your knees, what are you going to do?”

I search my brain, but the answer is already tripping off my tongue. “I drop my weapons and get on my knees...”

“Very good, pup.”

The pressure comes off my back a second time, and then my head suddenly bounces off the brick. I feel a searing pain in my skull, and then I’m blinking through a fog.

I stagger forward a step, fumbling for my gun. It’s snug in its holster, but my mouth tastes like whiskey and blood. I try to wipe it away, but my arms are numb, and my chest feels like I took a dive off a roof onto a cement floor.

I whirl around, looking for whoever hit me. Only somehow, I’m standing on my own in a stinking alley.

What the fuck?



Elvi

I wake to the bed dipping beside me and Arben lifting me into his lap. He's sitting on the edge, still dressed in his suit minus his jacket, and I blink up at him through the soupy dawn light. "Did you get any sleep at all?"

The last thing I remember is Link storming out, Sunshine steering me into a shower, then falling face-first into bed.

But instead of giving me an update on his night, he says, "Rory and Cam are in the gym, and Lincoln just came back. He's sleeping with Kelly in the other room."

I nod, wincing at the pang in my chest when I think of our fractured pack. "I really messed up," I sigh, watching his face as he cards his fingers through my hair. "I'm sorry I was so reckless."

Arben makes a low humming sound in his throat. "You're all here. Safe, and in one piece."

"Are we?" I grab his hand and squeeze. "Our bonds are weak. Everyone's pissed. We're not even sleeping in the same bed."

He tips my chin up, placing a soft kiss on my lips. I can't help but cling; it's been too long since I could take these moments with him for granted. But he eases back and looks into my eyes. "You never answered Lincoln's question. Are you really interested in *luani i vogël*?"

I bite my lip, thinking of the way I feel when Nate is around. "I think so. I mean, I like him. And I want to get to know him better."

Something flickers in Arben's eyes as he brushes his thumbs over my cheeks. "Is it because he's the first one you get to choose? The rest of us you... *të trashëguara*."

Inherited? I scoff. "My *stepbrothers*, maybe." I wrinkled my nose,

remembering how they tricked their way into my life. Assholes. “But I chose Kelly for sure. And you were always my first choice, Arben.” He gives me an amused look and I jab him in the ribs. “What? You were!”

His head dips again, and this kiss is the burning, claiming sort that makes my toes curl. And when he draws back, his smoky leather scent is clinging to my tongue, and the rumble in his chest is pure possessive beast. “My love, ‘choice’ suggests you weren’t already burned into my soul.”

I roll my eyes, but of course it’s exactly what I want to hear. “Well, I’m choosing you now. Over sleep.” I kiss his chin. “Over coffee.” A peck on the corner of his mouth. “Over *bacon*.” I lick my lips for that last part and he groans and starts to ravage my mouth like a starving man. I grin as he pulls my sleep top over my head, one massive hand mauling my breasts while his teeth press against the edges of his mating bite. I shiver at the pulse of pure need that floods our bond, his tongue sinfully hot as it lathes the scar.

I scoot backward enough to unbuckle his belt, his fingers digging into my hips as I peel down his waistband and pull out his cock. It’s a two-hand job, his body shuddering as I stroke and squeeze.

“Get rid of my shorts,” I pant as I dig my knees into the bed, rising up to give him room to work. He pops a claw and slices them off, a black light glowing in his eyes as I stretch over him, naked and dripping. But as his hands come around to grip my ass, I hiss, and I can taste the satisfaction in his scent. “Did you *like* spanking me?”

“I live for every sound I can summon from your body, my love.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Even if it makes me cry?”

There’s a hard note in his voice as his fingers stroke their handiwork. “Tears dry faster than blood.”

“So that’s your excuse?”

He tilts his head, all softness gone from his face. “Will you think twice

before hurling yourself into the next den of sadists and degenerates? Because if a few swats give you pause, then every tear was worth it.” I’m working up a frown when he kisses the tip of each breast and murmurs, “But I carry the scar of every one on my soul.”

His hot mouth opens, sucking gently on my nipple, and I rock over him, pulling on his hair as pleasure shoots down my spine. “Just as well you have a pretty tongue,” I moan, closing my eyes and sinking into the sensation. “When you’re not lecturing me, I mean.”

“It’s also very agile,” he purrs, licking his way up my collarbones and then across his mating mark. “Shall I give you a demonstration?”

“Later,” I tell him as I scoot forward and rub myself on his cock. “Right now, I want to take your knot and ride you hard, so I feel you deep in my body all day.”

“Who has the pretty mouth?” he mutters, shoving down his pants and notching himself at my opening. Arben is the biggest of all my mates, and the time apart makes me a little wary of taking him so quickly. But my body also wants what it’s missed, slick dripping down my thighs as he slowly pushes his way inside.

“Know that I punished myself as much as you,” he growls into my hair while I fist his shirt and rock over his lap. “Watching them kiss you, opening you up and giving you pleasure, and forcing myself to stand apart. Only Rory suffered more.”

I smirk, my eyelashes fluttering as he slides home. My body clenches, holding him tight despite the sting of the stretch. “I didn’t see,” I murmur, pulling at his shirt until I can feel his hard, warm flesh. “Did he obey you and not touch himself?”

“He came three times, but all hands-free,” he mutters. “I’m not sure it was a very good lesson.”

I laugh into his shoulder, but he's starting to move, and my mind is stripped of everything but him. This dark, dangerous man who punishes himself with my pain and rewards me with pleasure.

As if reading my thoughts, he goes still and cups my face. "I love you, princeshë, with everything that's in me. That means you get the dark and desperate beast more than the gentle lover."

"I don't care," I tell him, pressing my mouth to his neck. Soaking him in. But also wishing I could push my way under his skin and hold him tight forever. "I want it all. I love every part of you, Arben."

His pleasure licks through our bond, magnifying my own. But Arben suddenly stands, taking me with him. I moan as he throbs inside me, his hands under my ass as he strides across the room to the couch. He lies me down exactly where our mates reduced me to a puddle only hours before, then flips me to my hands and knees. Before I can draw a breath, his lips are on my ass, tracing the faint outline of his handprints. I groan and rock back against the hint of his tongue. But he gently pries me open and I freeze. "What are you doing?"

"Your virgin ass is mine, princeshë. Fingers and tongues I accept, but you save this for me. Understand?"

I want to tell him I'm not a piece of land he needs to claim, but this is Arben. And that's exactly what I want him to do. But before I can get the words out, he's flipped me again and is suddenly pushing his cock back inside me, his fingers slipping down my belly to pluck at my clit. He fills me to the brim, and I shiver at how perfect it feels.

"You already own every part of me," I tell him as I sink into the stretch. "If there's anything left, just take it."

He clutches my sore ass, a groan ripping from his chest. "Then take my knot now, so I don't lose myself in your sweet hole."

I look down to see it pushing against me, a hard, swollen muscle that demands entry. And I soften to grant it, moaning and panting as he works his way inside. So tight. So hot. My body sealing around his fat knot until I'm coming with a desperate, mindless sob.

"I have you trapped," I whisper when my heart rate slows enough to speak. He's still rocking inside me, but there really is nowhere for him to go, and I wind my fingers through his hair. It's just long enough to show a hint of curl, and for some reason, that makes my heart melt. "Will you stay? Can you just give the hunt a rest until we go home?"

"No, but I'm prepared to compromise." I cock a brow and he chases it with his thumb. "I'll hunt while you're in meetings, then come find you after dark. But only if it's safe to do so."

I shiver, imagining him sneaking into my bed in the dead of night. But the reality of how this usually plays out – the hours I spend staring at the ceiling, waiting for a shadow that never comes – brings me back with a thud.

"What about the pack run? You need to come on that." He frowns and I can imagine all the terrible possibilities flicking through his head. I grind myself down on him, his nostrils flaring as I bring him back to the present. And when our eyes lock, I don't hide a thing from him. "My wolf needs to run with you under the moon, Arben."

He nods, but his gaze is already distant, his body softening inside mine. I bite my lip, trying to think of a way to stop him from slipping away. "Shower with me?"

That brings a small smile to his lips. "I'll scrub your back."

I look pointedly at the mess dripping between our thighs and he smirks. "If you're carrying the imprint of my knot all day, then I get to keep your sweet scent on my skin."



When I'm freshly scrubbed, Arben leaves me with a kiss, and I come out of the bathroom to find a note on the table from Kelly. He's taken Link out for breakfast, and I try not to feel hurt that I wasn't invited along.

Not that there's much opportunity to sulk with the agenda ahead of me. The rest of my pack has been excused again, and I'm feeling particularly sour as I meet my dad outside the boardroom where we'll be working all day. Maybe he senses my mood, because he pulls me in for a tight hug. "Arben said you had a rocky night. Does it have anything to do with the bruises on that boy in there?"

I peek through the door to find Nate in a huddle with his dad and brother. "He's not exactly a boy, dad." I roll my eyes at the smirk on his face. "You know what I mean. And yes, we had a strange night, but I think everything's okay now."

I'll need to talk to Nate to know for sure, but my dad just pats my shoulder. "Well, just remember we're only here a few more days, sweetheart. My advice is to take things slowly, and if it's meant to be more, time will tell."

Now I'm curious exactly what Arben told him about last night. But my focus is still on Nate, who's separated from his family and is taking his seat at the table in the corner. I slide past a couple of chatting alphas and crouch down beside him, frowning at the bruises on his face. He's in another navy suit, his hair perfectly parted, but there's a lick of fire in his gray eyes as they meet mine. "Hi, Elvi."

"Hey. Are you okay? That bruise on your temple looks nasty."

He adjusts his glasses and smiles at me in a way that makes my stomach swoop. "I'm fine. I don't heal as fast as alphas, but it'll be gone in a couple of days."

I don't like the fact he's so familiar with his recovery time. But I'm distracted as his hand brushes mine where it grips the side of his desk. "What about you, though? Did you get into a lot of trouble?"

That's one way to describe it, but I manage to keep the blush off my face. "There were words, but we made up."

Nate clearly suspects there's more to it, but I have no intention of talking about my ass in present company. When he leans back, he's biting his lip. "But Arben Marku?" He's speaking quietly, but I can see the glitter of excitement in his eyes. "Even my dad doesn't know about him."

I wince a bit at that. "Sorry, but we need to keep it that way. I know it's a lot to ask since we're in your territory, but it's not safe for him to be out in the open right now."

I expect him to probe for more details, but he just says, "No problem. I'm loyal to my dad, and if I thought this was going to be an issue for him, I'd ask you to bring him into the loop. But as for protecting your pack, I'll help in any way I can."

I blink at him, surprised by the fervor in his voice. "Thank you. Finding people to trust isn't easy, so this means a lot to me."

He gives my fingers a discreet squeeze. "Like I said before, your pack is perfect." He pauses, then huffs out a breath, looking sheepish. "Although I have a ton of questions."

"Arben has that effect on people," I murmur with a smile. "But you can ask him yourself if you come on the pack run with us tonight."

He gives a tiny shiver, and I wonder if he's finally reacting to Arben and his reputation. But I realize he's thinking about something completely different as he chews on the inside of his cheek. "But what if – what if I still can't shift?"

And with that question, last night comes rushing back. I see him under the

harsh spotlight, bruised and humiliated as he desperately tries to free his wolf. Having to rely upon someone else to unlock a part of yourself is one of the cruelest tricks nature can play. Which makes me surge forward and kiss Nate's pale cheek, right over where he's gnawing away at it so hard. Do I pity him? No. But I understand him in a way Arben and my other alphas probably never will.

"Leave that to me," I tell him. "But even if it doesn't work, it's worth coming along and trying, isn't it?"

He touches his cheek, a blush spreading under his fingers. "More than I can put into words."

I smile and head over to my seat next to my dad, ignoring the curious eyes as he gets the session underway. But he's barely finished outlining the day's agenda when Snider, the Alpha of Connecticut, pipes up. "Shouldn't we be talking about the Alpha of Atlanta's offer? It could change the whole focus of this council."

My dad is already shaking his head. "My answer hasn't changed. This council isn't about empire building, or changing the power dynamic on the east coast. All of which I told Rawson last night."

"But he's still in town," the Alpha from Virginia says with a calculating look. She opens her hands wide, gesturing around the table at the other alphas. "Shouldn't we explore it more, at least to keep things civil with him?"

"I agree," Snider says with an oily smile in the female alpha's direction. "We should at least give him a chance to outline his proposal." He reaches out and lays a possessive hand on David's arm, and the omega shoots me a haughty little smirk. "We should be thinking about what's best for our packs, not turning away allies because of pride."

I grind my teeth, but my dad looks unconcerned. "If Rawson wants to explore a closer alliance with us, then I suggest he reaches out at a later date

to have that discussion. But right now, our agenda needs to remain on the topics we prioritized as a group.”

But he’s barely finished before the Pennsylvania Alpha speaks up. “Shouldn’t we put it to a vote?” He licks his lips and looks at his son, who folds his beefy arms and glares at my dad like he doesn’t plan to take no for an answer. “I don’t think I’m the only one who wants to hear what this council could do with Rawson’s connections.”

“A vote sounds reasonable,” the Virginia alpha says and looks at Snider, who gives her another oily smile.

“What can it hurt, Ferrier?” he asks my dad. “Or are you going to pull the High Alpha card and tell us who we can and can’t speak to?”

I open my mouth to tell the slimy asshole to go to hell. It’s obvious that while I was dealing with the toxic twins last night, they were all setting up this ambush. Which makes my blood boil, especially because my dad risked his life to go into the Tower and confront Bisha. If he wanted the High Alpha position, he could have taken it at any time, but instead, he’s poured his time and energy into trying to form this council.

But before I can unload on them, my dad leans forward, his dominance leaking into the room. “If you want to vote, we can vote. And if you want to offer up your omega to Atlanta, that’s your business.” My dad cocks a brow at David, who has the common sense to slink down a little in his seat. “But let me be very clear. My daughter is not a political pawn in anyone’s game.” Every eye in the room turns my way, and my dad rests a hand over mine on the table. “I won’t let anyone use her – or her pack – to advance their own ambitions.”

My heart flips – does a complete somersault in my chest – at the way he stares at me with the perfect mix of protectiveness and pride.

“I’d prefer we vote on the agenda items,” the Alpha of Maine says in a

weary voice, although he squares his shoulders. “But if you want to talk about getting into bed with Rawson, here’s my view. You’re wasting your breath and probably making a colossal mistake.” He looks at his grandson. “James spoke with a contact from the South, and he had a thing or two to say about the Rawson pack. I’m not one to besmirch a man’s reputation, but if you’re talking about trading away our omegas – which is one of the damn reasons we need this council at all - then you need to hear this.”

James looks at my dad, and when he gives a nod of permission, leans forward to take in everyone with an unwavering stare. He’s not quite as dominant as his granddad, but he’s not far off, and I watch the other alphas sit up, ready to listen. “According to my source, the Atlanta pack is involved in a blood feud with the Iron Aces. If you haven’t heard of them, they’re the mercenary outfit led by Cooper Stone, who currently controls the Texan packs. I’m getting more details, but early intel says Brock and Bryce were involved in trafficking omegas into Mexico, and Cooper Stone’s niece got caught up in it. She was traded to a feral pack and died before he could get her out.” The blond alpha looks down the table at me. “I think Rawson is looking for a way to get his sons out of the firing line, and mating a pack of your standing would give them some protection.”

Fury spirals through me at the suggestion, and I’m pretty sure my eyes are glowing. “If they’re trafficking omegas, my pack is the last place they want to hide. In fact, I’ll save the Iron Aces the gas money and ship the twins down to Texas myself. Minus a few body parts.”

James grins at me, but my dad squeezes my hand, which is close to popping claws at this point. “Let’s park that plan for now, and wait to see what else we can discover about this blood feud. James, could you liaise with someone from each of our packs, so we’re all kept in the loop?”

He nods and we go around the table, giving him the names of our liaison

points. Dad offers up Link, and informs the table in a cool voice that he'll be dealing with Rawson directly. No one argues, and when we get back to the agenda, it's a subdued group who works through the items. There's minimal debate now, and we're close to breaking for the day when Alpha Leon holds up a hand, his face grim.

"A call has just come through to my private number and they're requesting a moment of our time." He looks at my dad. "It's coming from one of the European Liaisons, and he already has Alpha Loup dialed in. Do you want to take it?"

My dad looks pissed, but he nods and Parker jumps up to sort the AV system. A few moments later, the Wolf of Washington and another man appear on the screen at the end of the room. "Leon. Ferrier," Loup says, then nods at the other alphas around the table. "Apologies for the interruption, but Alpha Rossi has an update I think you need to be across."

Rossi is an older man in a light gray suit, but he clearly has the kind of commanding presence that holds its own next to Loup. This is the first European Liaison I've seen in the flesh, and when his cold black eyes move over me, I'm glad he's not physically in the room. "We've had a development in Rome," he says in a thick Italian accent. "Please observe your screen while you are connected to Alpha Vadini."

My dad stiffens at my side, but the screen is already splitting in two, and another man appears. He could be a carbon copy of the European Liaison – older, powerful, with dead dark eyes. I'm fully aware that Arben ticks those boxes to some degree, but for all his fearsome reputation, he doesn't make my skin crawl like these men do.

"Alonzo Malito, the Head Alpha of the Italian territories, passed last night," he says in a cold, toneless voice. "As his *sottocapo*, I have assumed control of the pack. His daughter, Gloriana, has agreed to be my mate and

will hold the position of Compagna di Luna in the Italian territories.”

I can't help stealing a glance at my dad. He knows as much as I do about Glo, and there's no way she'd willingly give up Darius and their mates. Does that mean this new High Alpha has taken over her pack, or has he got rid of the other alphas so he can control his old boss's daughter? I'm guessing the latter, and he quickly confirms it. “I have a written confession from Darius Raptis regarding the massacre in New York. He was personally responsible for the death of Roan Bisha, your High Alpha. However, since it was in defense of my future mate, I will oversee his punishment. We will also be sending Alpha Rossi as our liaison to New York.” He gestures to the guy sitting next to Loup. “He will hold the territory in our name until a new High Alpha has been installed.”

My dad must be reeling from this speech just as much as I am, but he shows no sign of it. “We appreciate you informing us of the changes in the Italian territories, Alpha Vadini, but Alpha Rossi's assistance is unnecessary. We're in the process of establishing a council that will replace the High Alpha position, and all its responsibilities on the east coast.”

The man blinks, and then glances off to the side. He nods his head at whoever is talking to him off screen, then gives my dad a dismissive look. “We will be in touch.”

That's all he says before the whole screen goes blank, his words hanging heavily in the air until Snider says with a smug smile, “Looks like we might need to rethink our agenda. Anyone disagree?”



Kelly

I'm worried about Link. He dragged me to breakfast after falling into the spare bed with me, twitchy and restless, and smelling of blood and steel. It wasn't the metallic scent of a fired gun, but his heart was racing, and there were bruises and scrapes all over his body. He definitely got into a fight, but when I asked him about it, his brow crinkled and his eyes glazed over and he mumbled something about falling over a trash bag in an alleyway.

And then he dreamed. Link is a quiet sleeper. Doesn't matter how bad things were with his dad, or the nightmares we lived through in the Tower, he always sleeps like the dead. But he tossed and turned all night, meaning we woke up clinging to each other with deep shadows under our eyes.

Breakfast out makes sense. We both need fresh air and space. But it still hurts my heart to leave the hotel without the rest of our pack.

We walk randomly for a while, Link massaging his knuckles as I try to clear my head with the crisp morning air. But the tension twisting through him makes me stumble, and he curses under his breath, steering me into the nearest coffee shop.

I stare at him with wide eyes as he ignores the smiling server and nudges me into a booth. Climbing in behind me, he pulls me into his lap, even though there's enough room for six, and buries his face against my neck. The server wisely drops the menus on the table and retreats, although she fans her face as she heads to get our coffee.

I twist on his lap until I'm sitting sideways, even though the table edge is digging into my ribs. My beautiful man blinks down at me, a kaleidoscope of emotions swimming in his dark eyes. "Tell me what's going on, babe. Did you get into a fight last night?"

He jerks and frowns, now dark as a thunderstorm. “Is that what Elvana called it?”

I blink, trying to piece the clues together. Link is a complex man, and even with a mating bond, I don’t always know what he’s thinking. “I meant after you left the hotel. You were gone a while,” I say gently and reach up to trace a bruise on his cheek. “And someone hurt you. Can you tell me what happened?”

Link’s frown deepens, but there’s a touch of confusion there, too. Like he can’t quite put the pieces together himself. “It was nothing,” he says finally, kissing my palm then dropping my hand. “What do you want to eat?”

He knows, of course, and when the server returns, I bite my lip as he gives our order. It’s cute watching him describe the color of my toast and the firmness of my eggs like they’re going to be building a bomb in the kitchen instead of breakfast. But the server is a good sort, even giving me a sly wink as she departs. While we sip our coffee, Link is back to scowling at the tabletop, his breath a huff against my neck.

“I really need to go shopping today,” I announce in my cheeriest voice. “I know it’s probably the last thing you want to do...”

“I’m coming.” He twists his fingers in my hair, arching my neck so he has easy access to his bite. I know other patrons are looking my way, but I can’t help melting into his lap when he runs his tongue over the scar. “They better feed me before I take another bite out of you, though,” he mutters.

I laugh, startled. Link isn’t known for his jokes, but I can feel some of that restlessness settle under his skin as he focuses on my bite. I purr and press closer, shamelessly encouraging him as he licks and nuzzles our bond. He only stops when my toes are numb and the server has cleared her throat three times to bring me back to earth.

After leaving her a huge tip and a wink of my own, we head back out to

the street, Link wrapped around me like a bulletproof jacket. When he's in this mood, he's the perfect blend of affectionate and possessive, glaring at any alpha who looks at me a moment too long. Not that I get the kind of attention our angel attracts when she's out and about. Which gives me an idea, and after checking my phone, I lead him a couple of blocks over. As he takes in the display in the window, heat flares in his eyes and I grin.

I'm pleased to see a friendly-looking beta waiting inside, his brows twitching with appreciation as he takes us in. "Hello, gentlemen. My name's Curtis. Feel free to browse, or I can offer you a full fitting." He gestures to the curtained booths at the back of the store. "You can take your pick."

I laugh at the way Link's hand twitches towards his gun holster. "We'll be fine," I tell Curtis. "But we might need some help with sizing."

"For yourself?" His eyes drag over me, then flick to Link. "We have couples' sets."

I laugh again, trying to imagine Link in any of the lacy, silky things hanging on the racks. But Curtis gives me a knowing look and steps back to open a door I assumed was for storage. Inside is a rack of black leather that has my dick hard in a heartbeat. "Like I said, every couple is accommodated here." He pulls out a hanger with an arrangement of black straps and buckles, all connected to a pair of studded leather shorts. "We call this our apocalyptic range. It's the perfect accessory for the gentleman who's partial to firearms."

Link grunts, and I expect him to tell Curtis to take a hike. But when I glance his way, he's giving the hanger a curious look.

I snatch it off Curtis with a smile. "And something a little frillier for me?"

A possessive snarl leaves Link's lips, but Curtis just gives me a professional once over. "Oh, yes. I'm thinking our whiskey and lace range for you, given your size and coloring." He leads us across the room to a towering display of gold and rust-toned undergarments. They're silky but edgy, not

feminine as much as sensuous, with everything from crystals to barbells woven into the fabric. “It’s about the feel as well as the look with this designer,” he tells us, trailing a finger over the studded crotch in a pair of high-cut lace panties. “Every time you move, you’re reminded of exactly what you’re wearing.”

I catch a smoldering glance from Link and bite back a grin. “Let’s start here, then.”

Curtis gives a satisfied nod, grabbing a bunch of other items from the display before leading us back to a fitting room. It’s spacious, with a leather sofa against the wall and a little dais with mirrors on every side. “You’ll have complete privacy,” he tells us, showing me how to secure the drapes to the walls. “But if you need any assistance…”

He leaves the offer hanging, but when Link curls his lip, Curtis shrugs good-naturedly. “Can’t blame me for trying. Enjoy, and press the button there if you want a few more selections.”

I look at the mountain of garments in my arms, then take my phone from my pocket. “Can you also grab me a few things to suit her?” I flash a picture of Elvi in her pajamas, stealing a piece of bacon off my plate. She’s laughing, and the sunlight streaming through the cabin window turns her silver hair into a flaming halo.

“What an angel,” Curtis says, patting his heart. “It’ll be my pleasure. Maybe silver to your bronze?”

I nod and while he buzzes around the store, I secure the curtain and turn back to Link. He’s sprawled on the couch, the bulge in his jeans enough to make my mouth go dry. But I pluck the first garment from the pile and hold it up, admiring it from every angle. “This is pretty.”

Link groans, palming his crotch. “Give me the full fitting, baby. I want to see it all.”

I shiver as I step forward and grab his hand, hooking the hanger off his finger. Heat flares in his eyes as I retreat to the dais and flick the button of my jeans. I'm a dancer by nature more than training, but I know how to move my body. I've stripped for him before, but usually as a prelude to sex, and anticipation sizzles through my blood. When I'm down to my underwear – a pair of plain black boxer briefs – I pause and nibble on the edge of my lip. The silky scrap hanging off his finger is a completely different look. “This isn't going to be weird?”

As much as I love my body and I'm comfortable in my skin, my designation can still mess with my head. I was born to be an alpha, and until I presented, omegas were the pretty little jewels I might one day get to wear in my crown. I'm embarrassed to admit it now, but I really was that much of a dick. But then my body betrayed me – both in my eyes and my father's – and I had to come to terms with the fact I was now the prize instead of the prince.

But some part of me is still that muscular, rugby-playing boy who thought he was going to rule the world.

And what does Link see when he looks at me? A peer, or a pretty prize?

“You know what I see,” he growls, and I realize he can hear me through our bond. “I see the brat I wanted to fight, then the guy I wanted to fuck, and now the mate I'm gonna love until the day I die.” He hooks an arm around me, pulling me into the V of his thighs. “I see everything you are, Kelly, and I want it all.”

I huff out a breath, because I don't think there's a more perfect answer in the world. “Okay,” I murmur, dragging the hanger off his finger. “But if you don't like anything, *pretend*. My fragile ego really needs you to lie your ass off, Lincoln.”

He smirks and settles back, his eyes raking over me. “Anything you wear is just icing on the cake. I already want to lick every inch of you.”

“Hold that thought,” I mutter as I step back onto the dais and peel off my boxers, replacing them with the panties. I bite my lip at how silky they feel, although there are tiny studs all over the crotch, both inside and out. They’re slightly ribbed, rubbing gently against my junk. My dick is already half hard from the way Link is staring at me, but there’s enough fabric to provide a comfortable pouch. I take a cautious step and my eyes blow wide. “Wow. That feels different.”

“Different good?”

I study my reflection and take another couple of steps. The panties are eye-catching, but the real selling point is zinging against my skin. “Oh, yeah,” I murmur and quickly peel them off before I make a mess of myself. Grabbing the next item off the pile, I smother a groan. They’re a full brief, but the crotch is delicate lace covered in tiny crystals.

“Fuck, Sunshine,” Link growls, his eyes eating me up as I ease them on. “How am I meant to sit through this and not fuck you?”

“You’re not,” I tell him with a smug smile. “It really is a full-service store. That means they expect us to fuck.”

His brows shoot up, and he jerks his head at the curtain. “And that guy?”

“Here to help us get the perfect fit.”

“Baby, there’s no such thing as a bad fit when it comes to you.” I’ve strayed closer to him and he grabs my waist, licking a burning stripe up my belly. I fist his black Henley and melt into him, but he groans and gives me a little nudge backward. “He can keep his full service, but I want the full show.” He settles back on the couch, but pops the button on his jeans, pulling out his long, thick cock. “Show me everything, Sunshine.”

It’s my turn to groan, and I stagger back to the dais on trembling legs. All my dancer’s grace leaves my body when I watch Link drag his fist up and down his shaft, his eyes hooded with heat. He was my first fantasy, the bad

boy with the snarl that was as hot as his body, and the black eyes that followed me everywhere. He's not joking when he said he wanted to fight me. I was a big-mouthed brat with the muscles to back me up, and the first time I got my hands on him, I punched him so hard he lost a tooth. But it wasn't long before all that fury turned to fucking... My thighs clench as I remember the first time he bent me over and drilled that cock into my virgin hole.

I'm not sure what I put on next, my hungry eyes fixed on his shuttling hand. But he hisses, pre-cum drenching his fingers, and I stuff my aching junk into the next selection. There's no way I'm getting through the entire pile, and Link seems to agree. "Turn around for me, baby. I want to see how slick you are."

"I think this is a case of you soak it, you buy it," I joke in a shaky voice, but when he twirls his finger, I turn and bend at the waist, my hands dropping to the floor. Not only am I flexible as hell, I know it gives him an unrestricted view of the wet silk over my ass.

He's off the couch in a flash, his knees hitting the dais as his mouth latches on to my dripping hole. I cry out, gripping my knees, but I'm never in danger of falling. Even when he peels the wet panties off and buries his tongue in my ass, his other arm is holding me up. Even in the worst of my heats, Link has never let me fall.

"What about the rest?" I croak as he reaches through my legs and massages my throbbing balls. "Don't you want to see the ones with the zipper in the crotch?"

"Nothing could look as good as this view," he mutters, pressing a slick-covered finger into my hole and massaging my nub. Just as female omegas have a vibrating gland in their throat, ours is right next to our prostate. Every time he strokes me, it hums, and we both groan. "Where are the zipper ones?"

I give a choking laugh and dig through the pile, holding them up. Link rips off his jeans, although he keeps his Henley on, since his holster is over the top. Not even adventurous underwear will get Link to disarm in public, and I'm fine with that.

"Come on, pretty boy," he coaxes, settling back on the couch and slapping his naked thigh. "Come let me fuck your frilly edges off."

I whimper, pulling up the panties and then stepping between his legs. I go for the zipper, but he bats my hand away, running his fingers over the silky front. He pinches the edge of my dick, growling at the way it tries to burrow through the fabric. "So fucking needy."

He could be talking about either of us, since his own dick is dark red and dripping, and his hips jerk as I climb into his lap. I'm barely settled before he's angling it at me, his other hand dropping to cup his swelling knot. I wiggle, wondering if the zipper is open enough to take him, but he just latches his mouth onto my nipple. "I want to feel those little teeth bite me every time I sink into your hungry hole."

Link doesn't say much, but heaven help me when his dirty mouth starts to run. Slick is already dripping down my thighs and I shudder as he pushes into me. It's a sharp, sweet thrust, even when I'm soaking wet. Rory likes to play before we fuck to see how much slick he can wring out of me, but Link is too impatient. And I live for the way he invades my body, so desperate the zipper scrapes against his hungry dick.

"Silk and grit," he mutters, grabbing my shoulder so he can buck up into me. "You're the perfect blend, baby."

I drop my head back, squirming and hissing as I ride him into the couch. I want his knot so bad, but there's no way it can fit in this position. So I focus instead on the way my gland vibrates with every roll of his hips, his teeth grinding as his dick is both zapped and scrapped. His knot is a hard lump in

his hand, but the zipper isn't really wide enough even for his uninflated girth. Which just makes it hotter. Knowing he's fisting his knot and rubbing himself raw, just to tunnel into my ass.

But we only last a handful of minutes, both too worked up to drag it out. I come with a strangled shout, shooting my release all over the front of his Henley. I'm just as sloppy down below, but Link still manages to pound my channel, my entire body lighting up as his hot cum explodes inside me.

"Best. Shopping. Trip. Ever." I pant into his hair while his hands gently massage the globes of my ass. I'm sticky as hell, but he just squeezes me tighter. And then he's dipping his head, his lips brushing one long, endless kiss over my mating bite.

"I hope to fuck these guys deliver to Boston," he mutters as I finally peel myself off, the panties pulverized by his cock. He inspects his deflating knot, which is a pretty shade of purple, then eyes my ass. "And we better order in bulk, because the next time I'm punching through that zipper."

I laugh as we use the wipes and towels to clean off and then get dressed. He's slower than I am, so I grab our purchases and take them out to the counter. Curtis is fanning himself, which reminds me of the girl in the coffee shop, although his smile is all male envy. Girls look at Link and get fluttery for the bad boy, but guys look at him and know how thin the line is between fucking and fighting.

"Jesus, you're one lucky bitch," he murmurs under his breath. "Even if he shoots me for saying it, I can't hold back. I want what he's toting around in his holster."

There's a teasing light in his eye, so I keep my green-eyed monster under wraps. "We destroyed the zipper pair, but we definitely want a replacement." I look past him at the cupboard full of leather options. "Do you have anything in extra-large?"

His eyes narrow suspiciously. “How large are we talking?”

“*Extra extra*. The guy I’m thinking of is six seven and two fifty pounds, but his hips aren’t much bigger than mine.”

Curtis makes a helpless squeaky sound. “Rub my nose in it, why don’t you?” Then he flutters his lashes. “Pretty please. Rub away.”

I just laugh and he takes a catalog from under the counter and pops it on top of the pile of purchases. “There’s a full range in here and online. But if your giant wants to come in to try a few things on, I’ll make sure the *extra extra* fitting room is free.”

I just smirk, trying to imagine his reaction if Arben Marku walked in here to check out his leather display.

Curtis promises to deliver our purchases to our hotel, so we wander for a while, before ducking into a nearly empty cinema. There’s something with lots of guns playing, so I tick off a bucket list item by blowing Link in the back row while he death-grips the popcorn. We leave before the final shootout, and walk some more until our stomachs start to rumble. We split a deep pan pizza that’s served straight from a hole in the wall, eye fucking each other until we’re both hard as stone.

I’ve barely wiped the grease from my fingers before Link’s tongue is in my mouth and he’s nudging me back into one of the many shadowy alcoves around the square. When soft grunts come from somewhere off to our left, he bumps my forehead with his. “Did you google best places to fuck in public, or is Chicago just this damn horny?”

I laugh into the soft skin of his neck. “I might have gone down a rabbit hole when I was planning this date,” I admit. “But this city is really into full service.”

He groans and bumps his hard cock against mine. “We don’t date enough. You need to drag me down a rabbit hole more often.”

I smile, leaning into his heat and wrapping my arms around his middle. Seriously, this man makes me a melty mess. “So, we’re going steady?” I tease. “That’s the technical term, right?”

He nudges my chin up, his gaze all black arrogance. “Babe, I owned your ass the first time you looked at me.” I want to scoff, but he snakes his hand over mine and drags it to the hard thump of his heart. “But you owned this. Same moment. I was fucking yours.”

Melt. Melt. Melt.

Just step aside and let me drip down the nearest drain.

But as much as I don’t want to burst the perfect bubble we’ve been in all day, there’s also a niggling pain in my chest. “Same, but it’s probably time to check back in with the others. The pack run’s tonight, and they’ll be waiting.”

He sighs and leans against the wall, but gives a reluctant nod. I don’t want to totally ruin the mood, so I pull out my phone and shoot a text off the Cam, asking him if the run is still on. He calls me instantly, the relief obvious in his voice. “Yeah, we’re just waiting on you. Everything okay? You’ve been really quiet today.”

I wonder if he’s tried to check in with me via our bond, only to get radio silence. Ever since my panic attack in the club, I’ve kept myself tuned right down, but I make a mental note to do better. “Everything’s fine. We just got caught up shopping.” Link smirks and I bump him with my hip. “Where are we going? We’re a few blocks away, but we can grab a cab and meet you wherever.”

“No need. Drop a pin and we’ll come by and collect you.”

I murmur goodbye, then turn and press my hips against Link’s. I can feel the tension in his body, but I know he needs this, same as me. Because if we can’t talk things out as civilized people, we might as well strip down to our

wolves and give them a shot.



Elvi

I'm a ball of twitching nerves by the time we arrive at Busse Woods, a nature preserve in Arlington Heights, west of the city. Nate tells us it's what they call a flatwood forest, with black ash, red maple, and white oak fed by the adjacent wetlands. There are plenty of paved paths for joggers and cyclists, but by the time we pull up in the hotel's SUV, it's after eight p.m. and the place is deserted.

As I scan the edge of the woods, I feel my stomach dip, although I didn't really expect to find Arben waiting for us. With the stuff going down in Europe – and a liaison potentially on the way – my dad is in an emergency session of the council; and no doubt Arben's back on the hunt.

I shiver as we pile out of the car. The driver has been told to take a nap; code for keeping his eyes shut and his lips sealed. But he's left the headlights on, creating a pool of golden light in front of us. And when I draw Nate around into the glow, he watches me with so much trust, it makes my throat ache.

"We try this, but if it doesn't work, we can just hang out," I tell him, and when he gives me a hopeful nod, I look at Kelly. "Sunshine? Can you lend a hand?"

He gives Link the briefest glance before he joins us, and I wonder if they're talking through their bond. They've been quiet all day, and while I know it's important to give them space, it still hurts to see them so closed off. But Kelly's hand is warm in mine as he grasps it. "Okay," I tell Nate. "We start small and if it works, we can go bigger."

He nods, but then glances over at the guys, who are leaning on the hood of the car and watching us. "I thought... Don't you need one of your alphas

nearby to make it work?”

I tilt my head, puzzled, but Rory gives a rumbling laugh, stepping behind me to kiss the back of my neck. “We’re lucky she loves our dicks, or she wouldn’t need to keep us around at all.”

I swipe at him, blushing hard, and Nate’s eyes go wide as he looks between us. “You mean... I thought you were drawing on your mating bond at the club.”

Link clears his throat and folds his arms. I expect him to say something scathing about how reckless I was, but instead, his voice slides down Cam’s bond. *Are you sure you should do this? You’re getting very close to admitting we’re a fated pack.*

I pause, thinking it over. Link might still be pissed at me, but when it comes to protecting our pack, his advice is always solid. Comes from being a paranoid obsessive who’s usually three steps ahead of everyone else. *Can you think of another explanation we could give him?*

He tilts his head, his eyes boring into mine for a second. *Bloodline. Your dad is powerful and your mom is an unknown.*

An Old Blood European. The words make my heart thump and I can’t keep the slight wince from my face. *She used to tell me she could trace her line back to the Arbanon in the Middle Ages. It was a lie, but...*

We’re not our parents. We’re not even the people who raised us. If good people choose us, that’s all that matters.

I blink at him, stunned by what almost feels like a kindness. Until I remember he’s just spent a day exclusively in our sunshine’s company. Anyone would be feeling pretty generous after that. “It’s rare, but some omegas have the ability,” I tell Nate. “It also helps that Kelly and I both come from powerful bloodlines.”

I nod for him to take Kelly’s hand, closing the loop. As soon as we’re

connected, I feel my wolf rising to the surface. We've done this a lot lately with the omegas from the Underground, and a faint hum starts in my blood as I feel Kelly's wolf reach for mine. They know what to expect, and they're eager to be let out. "If you meditate, try to get yourself into a mindful space," I tell Nate.

"Or yoga," Kelly adds, who's a level three practitioner and the most Zen person I've ever met. "You want heightened awareness, but also inner stillness."

Nate nods, closing his eyes, and descends into the silence between the three of us. I've thought about this a lot, since my mind is way more chaotic than Kelly's, and I don't really think it's about us reaching any particular meditative state. It's more about opening ourselves up enough to let our wolves breathe, but not handing over to them completely.

For shifters, there's often only two ways of being: human or animal. But I believe there's a third space that exists between our forms. For most powerful wolves, it's probably so small they don't ever feel it, but when you've been trapped the way Kelly and I were for most of our lives, every inch matters. And once you let a little sunshine in, it has the ability to fill you completely.

I like that, Kelly whispers down our bond. And filling you is definitely my happy place, Angel.

I smile and focus on my arms. My wolf is ready, already pressing eagerly to the surface, and I let her power ripple through my skin. Silver fur covers me from elbow to wrist, while Kelly's is a deep red-gold. There's a moment where I wonder if I'm too wound up to bring Nate's to the surface, but in the next breath his arms are coated in blue-black silk.

His eyes pop open and he sucks in a shaky breath as he studies his fur in shock. "I can't believe this is inside me. He's really there? My wolf?"

The way his voice cracks sends a ripple through our bonds. It's our alphas,

both at their pride in what we're doing, but also with a touch of shame, since they've never had to struggle to connect with their wolves.

"It only gets better," I assure him. "We'll help you this time, but if you practice, soon you'll be doing it on your own." I pause and glance around at my mates. "And the stronger your pack, the easier it gets. Kelly and I are proof of that."

He blinks at me, and I can't read his expression. It might be the light bouncing off his glasses, but for a moment I wonder if there's guilt swimming in his eyes. But in the next breath, he's nodding. "Please. Yes. I want that. Whatever it takes, I'll do it."

Kelly glances at me, no doubt feeling the tension humming through our connection. For once, it's not me; all that frantic energy is coming from Nate. *But can anyone blame him for literally jumping out of his skin to finally meet his wolf?*

"If you want, once you've shifted, I'll take a picture on my phone," I suggest, hoping it will help settle him a little. "So you can see your wolf through our eyes."

Nate bites his lip. "Can one of the alphas do it? I'd like to see our wolves together, if that's okay."

"Of course. If that's what you want."

Cam gives me a nod, but when I pull my focus back to our connected hands, Rory starts singing down the bond in an off-key voice. "*Angel and Nate, shifting in the trees. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.*"

I snort and shoot him a mental roll of the eyes. *That's not how the song goes, genius.*

"Oh, I know that," he says aloud, his smirk a mile wide. "But spelling out fucking felt a little juvenile."

Nate blinks, his palm growing warm in mine, and I clear my throat,

determined to get back on track. “This may feel kind of weird, but just keep hold of our hands. We’ll work our way down your body, and if you want to stop at any point, just squeeze.”

“You can’t just do it fast?” he asks, looking pale. “Like ripping off a Band-Aid?”

I exchange another glance with Kelly. Maybe he wants to do it before he loses his nerve. “We can try, but it might make you feel a little sick...”

“I trust you,” Nate says firmly, giving me a look that makes me feel warm all over. “Just rip it out of me, Elvi.”

I get ready to do just that when Cam clears his throat, making me jump. “Are you going to get him naked first, or are you ripping his clothes, too?”

I flush to my roots, and breaking the connection, wave a hand at Nate. “Oh, right. Um, no, destroying your clothes would be bad.”

“Cos that’s Angel’s job,” Rory quips, but I’m already swinging around to back him up against the hood. His grin is huge, his eyes dancing with glee as I crowd into him. “Happy to volunteer if you want to practice on me first, little wolf.”

“Seriously, Rory. This is his first time, and you’re screwing it up.”

I roll my eyes when he sniggers at the innuendo, stalking back over to Nate, who’s conveniently stripped in the meantime. I get rid of my own clothes, blushing like a maniac, then grab his hand. He’s as red as I am, and Kelly clearly takes pity on us both. “Quick as a Band-Aid,” he promises.

I hold Nate’s gaze as I release my power, both drawing him up and sinking back at the same time. I’m not sure which movements are me and which are my wolf, because as her awareness swims to the surface, I feel my own fade. But I’ve practiced this enough to take Nate with us, first by the hand, but then through the call of my wolf.

And she leaps at him the moment he’s free, throwing her body against his

so they tumble to the ground. I'm pretty sure Rory is breaking a rib he's laughing so hard, but my wolf has no interest in his teasing. She rolls Nate to his haunches, flattening him with her smaller size, and bites her way around his muzzle. He lies still, his throat exposed to her sharp nips, and I'd cringe at her dominance if he didn't seem to like it.

And it's not like I can do anything about it, anyway. My wolf is firmly in control of us now. She poses only long enough for Cam to snap a few pictures on his phone, then she's dragging Nate up by his scruff. They're not that different in size, but I cringe again when she pokes him in the rump with her nose, pushing him into a trot. I'm pretty sure all the guys are laughing now, but she just waves her tail at them and then we're leaping through the trees.

Nate might be a little submissive, but he's fast and agile. We whip through the woods, dodging and jumping, and he's a blue-black blur at my side. I feel Kelly hanging back while the guys shift behind us, but my wolf isn't interested in them right now. She lunges uphill, pushing Nate to meet her step for step. And he's glued to her side, yipping and grinning, right up until a huge black wolf crests the ridge.

Her first thought is *mine*.

But even though he looks like Arben, and his power feels like Arben, his scent is all wrong. And the way he stalks towards us is the opposite of a lover's greeting.

My wolf whirls around, knowing better than to take on a beast of his size. But Nate drops to his belly, a frightened whine escaping his throat.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Even a mouth around his ruff doesn't get him back on his feet, and my wolf gives a desperate yelp. I try to push her to a half-shift, every instinct screaming to take control, but she thrusts me back, harder than she's ever

handled me. Images flick through my mind; of my torn body, of Nate dead in a heap, of this beast picking off my mates, one by one. And as the massive wolf stalks towards us, she plants her feet, every hair on her body raised in warning. The growl that rips out of her chest hits me on a visceral level. If the wolf dares to touch us, she will fight him to the death.

While she faces off with the giant beast, I try to push past my fear to study him. His size, his coloring, the strange sweet scent that hangs in the air. Instead of an SOS, I hurl impressions down the bond. Not to anyone in particular, but to everyone in the pack. If we're going to die on this hill, they'll know exactly who to hunt down to avenge us.

And then there's a blur of gunmetal gray and Link's wolf is at my side, his chest heaving and his fangs dripping. He snarls at the monster, daring him to take another step. But then his head lifts, tracking the rest of my pack as they sweep up the hill; Cam and Rory, with Kelly wedged between them, all snarling and ready to fight.

And then a howl rips through the woods, more monster than wolf.

Arben!

I can feel him hurtling towards us, smashing through the trees like a force of nature. My pack presses closer, their snarls now peppered with taunting yips. The beast is off-the-charts powerful, but not against a pack of seven. And not against *mjeku i vdekjes* when he's on a rampage.

Those dark, dangerous eyes lock on my wolf one last time, and then he's gone. Melting back down the hill like he's more shadow than beast. I can feel my alphas straining to give chase, but they circle us instead, Cam nudging Nate back to his feet while Kelly hurls himself at me. Our wolves crash together, far more violently than we do in our human form, but our joyous howls lift into the sky.

Until I feel Arben's wolf circle the hill, bypassing us altogether as he

chases after the beast who dared threaten his pack.

Arben! It's part scream, part howl.

But he doesn't stop, flooding our bonds with his alpha command: *Back to safety!*

My wolf sways, torn between charging after him and obeying her mate.

Arben! Leave him! Come back to us!

But he slams the bond shut between us, even as I feel him reach for the others. Link snarls, planting his feet and staring down the hill, but the other guys turn as one, herding Kelly and Nate back to safety as commanded.

My skin itches, the need to obey my alpha crawling through my blood. In a wolf pack, dominance is everything, and Arben has it in spades. But he's never used it like this – a whip to drive me away, pitting my instincts against my heart.

We limp down the hill. My pack is waiting – minus Arben – and we trot back to the car, our wolves on autopilot. I can feel the turmoil in our bonds, same as the battle waging inside my wolf. But we shift back in silence, finding our clothes in the glare of the car headlights. We don't speak until we drag ourselves into the back of the car, and Nate is the first one to whisper, "I should have run. I don't know what happened..."

"It was your first shift," I tell him, my voice a raspy creak after howling after Arben. "And that wolf isn't normal. I don't know why, or what it is, but it spooked us all."

"But you stayed. You defended me. Why?"

I meet his gaze, a little of my numbness fading at the swirl of emotion in his eyes. Reaching out, I thread my fingers through his. "Because we don't leave pack behind."

He jolts, a shock I feel through our joined hands. I'm not sure if he's really pack yet, but my wolf chose to stay and defend him, just as I chose to help

him at the club. Something in Nate calls to us, and it's enough to want to keep him close.

“Do we wait?” Cam asks quietly, clearly speaking for the others. They're pale and tense, just as shaken as I am by what happened on that hill.

I stare out the window at the dark woods. It's on my tongue to say yes – *because we don't leave pack behind* – when my phone rings. I dig it out of my pocket, right as Nate's phone beeps with a notification. We both fumble to answer, his eyes going wide as I hear his dad say, “Elvana. I'm sorry to tell you this, but Lucas has collapsed. You need to get to the hospital right now.”



Elvi

I don't remember the drive to the hospital, just the quiet whispers of my pack and the press of their bodies, as they try to force some heat into my frozen limbs. Arben has gone dark – every link locked down while he hunts his prey – and if I wasn't so numb, I'm sure I'd be furious. But all I can think of is every scenario in which my dad – one of the most powerful shifters on the east coast – can collapse.

What does that even mean? Is he hurt? Sick? Exhausted? All Alpha Leon could tell me was that during the emergency session to deal with the news out of Europe, my dad went to the bathroom and didn't come back. Alpha Leon went personally to check on him, and found him slumped on the floor, unconscious.

My body shudders at the image, and Kelly burrows tighter to my side. I'm sitting on Cam and Rory, their arms wrapped tight around me, while Kelly perches on Link. Their hands are on me, too, but I barely feel them as I bite my nails down to ragged stumps. There's a small pocket of warmth coming from Nate, who's sitting on the floor at my feet, his back pressed to my legs. There's not a lot of room down there, but he doesn't seem to mind, his cheek resting gently against my knee.

And in a great big whirlpool of nightmares, that feels... right.

But even having my pack close can't stop my racing thoughts. And by the time we pull up in the hospital parking lot, I'm a nervous wreck. I leap out of the car as soon as it stops. I'm halfway to the emergency doors when Nate puts a gentle hand on my arm. "This way, Elvi. It's the private entrance. I have access."

I blink at him, but I suppose it makes sense. What did that woman at The

Feral Den call him? The Prince of the City? Nate probably has access to every building in Chicago, although he's too humble to brag about it.

"The ward he's on is high security," Nate tells me. "No one will get in without authorization, I promise."

I nod, although the implication sinks through my body like a block of ice. If my father is incapacitated, someone might try to get in here and finish him off.

"It's okay, Angel," Kelly whispers, pulling me tighter to my side. I must have whimpered, because he's stroking my hair like I'm a wounded wolf. "Lucas is so strong. He'll be fine. Back on his feet in no time."

I swallow another whimper, but we're all breathing heavily by the time we reach the ward. I press my bleeding nails into my palms as I look around for my dad. But Nate's led us into some kind of waiting room, with elegant couches and a view of the park.

"Elvana, come in and sit down," Alpha Leon says as he comes out of a side door. He steps forward like he wants to take my hands, but Link blocks his path, keeping him back.

"Please just tell me what happened." The tension is so thick, I feel like I'm going to pass out. "Is he okay?"

"He collapsed in the bathroom. He couldn't have been unconscious for more than ten minutes, and once my security team arrived, he was immediately transferred here. His vital signs are strong, but he's unresponsive."

I bite my nail so hard, I taste blood in my mouth. "What does that mean?"

"He's in a coma." The alpha looks like he's aged ten years since I saw him in the boardroom, his scent sour with distress. "I'm so sorry, Elvana, but early tests suggest this wasn't an accident. The medical team thinks Lucas might have been poisoned."

The cry that comes out of me is almost a howl. My wolf is right up inside me, so close I can feel her claws under my skin. “What? Who would do that?”

But it’s a stupid question. My dad has enemies, and he’s become an even bigger target since he abolished the role of High Alpha and started working towards an east coast council.

“We’re looking into it,” Alpha Leon says, but as he starts to describe the investigation he’s launched, my head spins and I lean forward, trying to drag air into my lungs. I vaguely sense Kelly rubbing my back while Cam demands medical details and Link is snarling about a security fuck-up. Nate is on his phone barking at someone, and Rory is pacing, his wolf so close to the surface the air is snapping with static.

“I understand your distress!” Alpha Leon’s dominance crashes down on us, making my guys growl. But I know he’s trying to help, so I wave their anger away.

“Please,” he says in a softer tone. “Just give me a moment to reassure you. Lucas is in a stable condition and the doctors tell me the coma is a good thing, because it’s stopping the spread of the poison. It’s giving us time to get the antidote, while ensuring none of his organs is damaged. Of course you will have access to his medical records and the security feeds – whatever you need – but right now, I think the best course of action is for you to come and see him for yourself.”

My pack looks at me, but I’m already moving towards the door. I have no idea where his room is, but there are enough hands guiding me that I can follow blindly. We don’t go far before the bright hallway gives way to glass doors and a pretty receptionist, who buzzes us through to another room. The smell of antiseptic hits me and I can barely swallow the bile in my throat.

Nightmarish images batter me as I’m shown into a room that’s all white

walls and a squeaky floor. There's the gentle hiss of machines and the low murmur of voices, but I barely take in the doctors standing around the bed as I look at my dad. He looks... untouched. He needs a shave, but other than the white sheet tucked up to his chin, he looks no different than when I last saw him. But there's no ignoring the tension in the air, or the careful looks the doctors give me when I turn their way.

There are a million questions crashing around in my head, but I force myself to focus on the one that terrifies me the most. "What poison did they use?"

The tension deepens as they glance at Alpha Leon. He nods and one of the doctors steps forward, eyeing my mates uneasily. "We're not certain. We know it's not a nerve agent, which makes us believe this is a recoverable illness. At this stage, our best guess is a variant of Compound X. This is used..."

"On feral wolves," Cam says shortly, his anger palpable in the air.

"Yes. But its purpose is to induce a coma in a matter of seconds. It's a type of tranquilizer, for want of a better description."

"But Compound X has a reversal agent." Cam looks at me. "It counters the sedative and brings the patient out of the coma state."

"Yes, but this is a variant. It's not something we've encountered in this country before."

"You mean it's out of Europe," Cam says, but the doctor doesn't reply, and Alpha Leon steps forward. "This team is the best in the city. Lucas is in good hands."

I manage a weak nod and someone leads me over to a chair by the bed. I sink into it, and my dad's hand is wrapped in mine. I don't know how long I sit there listening to the beep of the machines and the shuffle of footsteps. I feel hands on my shoulders – all belonging to my pack – but I'm not aware

enough to tell who they belong to. The only thing I can focus on is my dad's face and the taste of antiseptic on the back of my tongue.

The next conscious thought is of Rory lifting me in his arms. I rouse myself enough to struggle, but he only carries me as far as the other side of a blue curtain. The lights are dimmed low, but there's a hospital bed, minus all the equipment, and Kelly curled up waiting for me.

Rory passes me into Kelly's arms, then climbs in behind me, sandwiching me between them. He tucks a jacket over my shoulders, and when I lift it to my nose, all I can smell is my dad. I breathe it in, Kelly's arms coming around me as Rory nuzzles the back of my neck. "Sleep, little wolf," he croons. "We've got you."

I mutter something about my dad, but I'm too worn out and heartsore to resist the lure of sleep. And as I slide away, my last thought is of Arben, running through a dark forest on the hunt for a ghost he can never catch.



"You don't need to go, babe," Rory tells me as he watches me dress in the clothes Nate had sent over from our suite. "One of us can sit in, or we can ask them to postpone the session until tomorrow. It's the least they can do with Daddy Ferrier getting poisoned under their fucking noses."

He growls the last part and I shoot him a soft smile. "It's okay. I want to go."

Rory buries his face in my neck, making a mess of the fishtail I'm trying to braid. But I cling to him as Kelly scoots forward and rubs my back. We're still in the little room next to dad's and I'm not sure where Link or Nate are, since all Rory can tell me is they're working on the security feeds. Cam's scent is heavy in the air, since he's been either sitting with my dad, or grilling everyone in a medical coat about why he's still in a coma. I understand

enough to know they're dealing with a new kind of poison, and there's a lot of scrambling behind the scenes to get their hands on the antidote.

And while all my mates are busy trying to help my dad, I need to do my part as well. Which, according to Alpha Leon, is acting as my dad's proxy on the council. I've already slept away half the day, and they're about to go into the afternoon session. Which is why I'm getting last cuddles from my pack before I head back to the hotel. The last thing I want to do is play politics, but if this is what my dad needs, I'll be damned if I let him down.

"Updates every half hour," I remind Kelly as they walk me to the hotel car waiting outside. "I'll keep my phone out the whole time."

"Of course, Angel," he tells me, giving me my hundredth kiss since I woke up, shaking in his arms with a tear-streaked face. "But I'll be checking in through the bond. We all will be."

I feel myself blush. "Yeah, sorry. I'm not thinking straight right now."

"I'll be listening for Arben, too," he says, giving me a last, soothing hug. "As soon as we hear anything, we'll all know."

My agreement is a little sour this time, and I'm glad I get to ride back to the hotel alone, because I really want to stew without them watching. Because the truth is, I'm pissed at Arben in a way I've never felt before. I'm even angry that he doesn't know about dad, because he hasn't reopened his bond with any of us. What's the point of being our guardian if he's never around when we need him?

But my angry inner monologue cuts off when I walk into the hotel business center and find the Alpha of Atlanta at the head of the table. Alpha Leon is standing against the wall, arms folded and a muscle pulsing in his jaw, but he straightens when he sees me. I spare the rest of the room a quick glance, noting that not only are the other heirs present, but Bryce and Brock Rawson are also sitting at the table.

They give me matching smug grins while their father clicks his tongue in false sympathy. “Ah, Elvana. You poor thing. We’re all very sorry to hear about your father, but there’s no need for you to be here today.”

I don’t even try to sound civil. “If you’re here, then I’m certain I should be as well.” He opens his mouth to argue, but I cut him off and take a seat at the table. “In my dad’s absence, I’m the Boston proxy. Alpha Leon has the paperwork if you need to see it.”

Rawson’s smile slips a little, but he rallies quickly. “No, of course I don’t. But since we’re no longer following your father’s agenda, I’m not sure you can speak on behalf of his pack.”

I raise my brows at him. “Then what are you talking about?”

“With the Europeans taking an interest, it’s more important than ever to have strong allies by our side,” Snider tells me with another of his oily smiles. “And closer ties with the Atlanta pack will prove we’re a united east coast. That’s why we’re voting on Alpha Rawson’s offer.”

“His offer?” I almost choke on the bite burning in my throat as I look around the table. “You’re actually voting on whether I should take one of his sons as my mate?”

“I’ve already made my feelings clear,” the Alpha of Maine tells me, disapproval hanging over him like a black cloud. “This is not the time or place to be discussing such matters.”

“This is precisely the place,” the Alpha of Virginia counters, pinning me with what she probably thinks is a maternal look. “It might feel like we’re forcing your hand, Elvana dear, but your father was very clear that he puts your safety above all else. As his allies, he would expect us to look out for you and guide you in his absence. And with the Europeans showing an interest in our business, we need to prepare for some changes. They’re a lot more traditional than we are and have different expectations of pack

leadership. No omega, for instance, would have a place at a table like this.” She leans forward, her alpha dominance trying to press me into my chair. “Woman to woman, some sacrifices are necessary to ensure the balance of power is maintained.” She finally shifts her intense gaze away, shooting a flirtatious smile at the Atlanta twins. “Not that accepting one of these young men into your pack will exactly be a hardship.”

I shoot to my feet, my eyes narrowed as I circle the room. “Thanks for looking out for me, Alpha, but I’ve already made up my mind.” I stop right behind the twins, although I shift my attention to their dad. “If I pick one of your sons, we’ll have your full support, and this council can return to its original agenda. Correct?”

Rawson grins at me. “That’s what we agreed upon, darling.”

“Fine. Then I pick Nate Leon.” I look at the Chicago alpha, ignoring the shocked whispers around the room. “I’m sorry to do this without checking with you first, Alpha Leon. But my interest in Nate is genuine, and since he qualifies as one of the Atlanta heirs by birth, he’s my choice.”

“Now hold on a minute!” Rawson blusters. “That’s not in the spirit of my offer!”

I keep my gaze firmly on Alpha Leon as he walks over to open the door. “Nate? Can you come in please?”

“You can’t be serious!” Rawson snarls, striding over to glare down at me as Nate enters the room. He’s pale and looks as uncomfortable as hell, but he doesn’t hesitate to come over and take my hand in front of his father. Rawson watches us with a mixture of shock and disgust. “Why in hell would you choose *him*?”

I feel the slight flinch from Nate, and pull him closer as I return Rawson’s glare. “I didn’t realize my thoughts on the matter were of interest to you, but if you have to ask, then you don’t know Nate very well.”

Rawson narrows his eyes, his lip curling as he looks around the room. I notice some subtle nods from the other alphas and brace myself. “That’s very sweet, darling. But this is an arrangement between alphas, not little girls with hearts in their eyes.”

“Then make your agreement with *me*.” A voice I’ve come to only expect in my dreams cuts through the chatter, and the room goes deathly silent. I feel him move through the air behind me, and watch the faces around the table go suddenly pale. But I don’t move as large hands settle on my shoulders, and Arben bends down to brush his lips against my cheek. His smoky leather scent floods my lungs, and I let myself lean into his warmth.

A purr of pleasure rattles in his chest, and he doesn’t hesitate to nuzzle his mating bite as he introduces himself to the room. “I’m Arben Marku, born to the Tirana pack of Eastern Europe, and blood brother to Lucas Ferrier, Alpha of Boston. But most importantly, I have the honor of being Elvana Starling-Ferrier’s mate.” He lifts his head long enough to catch the horrified eyes of the twins. “And anyone she accepts into her pack will be my mate, too.”

Rawson has scuttled away from us like we’re radioactive, but Alpha Leon steps forward to touch his son’s arm. “Is this what you want, Nate? I only know Alpha Marku by reputation, but I’ll support your decision either way.”

But Nate is smiling up at Arben with a touch of awe. “I want this more than anything. It’s an honor to even be considered for their pack.”

I can feel the approval humming through Arben, but I know he didn’t just come here for a public claiming. As his gaze sweeps the room, every alpha drops their eyes. I feel a stab of petty satisfaction when I notice David trying to disappear under the table. But Arben just unbuttons his jacket and slings it over a chair back. “Extend your visit. Get your affairs in order. Because no one leaves this city until I know who dared raise a hand against the Alpha of Boston.”

“We will help in every way we can,” the Alpha of Maine says. He’s the only one at the table who doesn’t look horrified by Arben’s appearance. “I’d also like to point out that most of the remaining business of this council comes down to agreeing the time and place of our first official meeting. I’d like to offer my estate in Portland. If we can vote on that, Elvana and her pack can focus on her father’s health, which is the priority right now.”

There are a few murmurs around the table and the vote is quickly taken. With that out of the way, I look at Arben. He’s at his intimidating best as he glowers at the other alphas, but his eyes soften as they rest on my face. “What do you need, princeshë?”

A part of me wants to sink into his strength and let him take care of everything, but I focus on Rawson. He’s standing with his sons, his face tight with displeasure, but they’re all looking anywhere but at Arben. I wait until I catch his eye, then tell him, “Now we’re allies, you’ll need to send a written apology to the Texas pack, accepting all responsibility for the death of their omega. You’ll also need to pay them whatever they ask for in damages. It won’t erase your sons’ actions, but it will serve as a sign of remorse for letting them operate on your watch.”

“We don’t have the funds for that!” Rawson blusters, his face almost purple with outrage. “Our money is tied up in our business ventures...”

“You mean you’re broke,” Nate says coldly. “I’ve been monitoring your accounts for years, watching you squander your pack’s money. Luckily for you, I’ve put a trust together on their behalf. It’s enough to support the pack, as well as pay for this blood debt.”

Arben gives a low chuckle, his hand sweeping up to cup the back of Nate’s neck. A part of me is still really angry at Arben, but I have to admit, I like watching him openly accept Nate. “You can remain as pack alpha, Rawson, but we’ll be managing all of your financial affairs going forward.”

Rawson shoots him a filthy glare, but he's sensible enough to keep his mouth shut.

"I can speak to the Texas alpha personally, if you'd like," the Alpha of Maine suggests. "James has strong contacts in the South and might be able to smooth things over a little."

I nod my thanks, then try to clear my head enough to get my thoughts in order. This is normally when my dad would say something inspirational, but I can't even pretend to think like him right now.

"You're all strong alphas with your own territories and your different agendas. I get that. But I lived under the rule of a Head Alpha. My mom died under it, and a lot of other vulnerable omegas were destroyed because no one stood up for them. If you want to go down that path again, I won't support you. And when my dad is back on his feet, you know he will do everything in his power to live by the principles of this council. As for why he was poisoned, and who is responsible..." I look up at Arben, who's watching me with pride burning in his dark gaze. "Well, they'll be answering to my pack for that."



Arben

There's a burning sensation that lives between my shoulder blades. As if a giant pair of hands is trying to rip me in two. One hand holds my heart in its palm, and the other holds my rage. If my heart is a bloodless, wizened thing, my rage is a creature of insatiable appetite; boundless, and ever growing.

But that rupturing sensation eases in my chest as I reach the threshold of our suite. It's close to midnight, and I carry the stink of the Chicago streets on my skin. But there's also the scent of the forest where I shifted into my wolf in a vain attempt to catch our ghost. The line between man and beast has never been so thin, and both of us are frustrated. In fact, my claws are so close to the surface, it takes me a shameful amount of time to open the door.

I kick off my shoes and drop my jacket as soon as I'm inside. If I could shed my skin, I'd do that, too. But I need to have my wits about me if I'm to heal the rift I can feel growing in our pack.

Made so much deeper by the attack on Lucas. I've been trying to keep the images at bay all day. Not just of him lying in the hospital bed like an empty shell, but the memories growing up together. Of the times we stood up for each other in front of his father. We paid the price, but it forged something between us that has proven unbreakable. And to be mated to his daughter, to live beside him on his lands, is all I've ever wanted in my life.

But I can sense her now, tucked up in bed with our sunshine. They smell of their lovemaking, but even more of her shock and fear. She's clinging to him like he's the only thing holding her together.

Which should be me.

I've been the pack's guardian for six months, and if there was a probation review, I'm certain fate would rethink her plan for us. But that other part of

me – the predator who cannot rest while we’re under attack – turns me away from her door and into the second bedroom.

Lincoln has set it up as a surveillance base, removing the bed and filling it with a huge desk and mountains of computer equipment. I can feel his anger and frustration through the bond, same as for everyone in the pack. But with Lincoln, everything is amplified. Not in the way it is with my omegas, but because he took my bite in monster form. If I ever snap and go feral, Lincoln will no doubt burn the world down in my wake.

But I push those thoughts aside as I enter the office to find Cam and Rory in Link’s place behind the bank of screens. Cam spins around in his chair, and our medic looks as grim as I’ve ever seen him, but he stands and grips my arm. “Glad to have you home, Alpha.”

I nod, while Rory gets to his feet and comes straight to me for a hug. “Fucking sucks about Daddy Ferrier,” he says into my chest. “Whoever did this deserves a lot worse than a coma.”

“When the time comes, we will explain that to them in painstaking detail.”

They both growl as they pull away, but it’s heavy with exhaustion. They need sleep, but like me, they need answers more. I wrapped things up with the council as quickly as I could, but it’s still time wasted, and it just adds to my rage. “Let me catch you up on what I know.”

They sit back in their chairs and I look around. “Lincoln?”

“He’s somewhere with Nate,” Cam replied. “Probably in the security office checking feeds.”

I nod. “That makes sense. I’ve cleared the council of the attack on Lucas, but Trench, the Head of Security, is on the run. Alpha Leon has taken charge of hunting him down. At this stage, the worst-case scenario is we’re looking at a European connection.”

Rory grimaces. “What? Why?”

“New York,” Cam says quietly. “They want the territory, don’t they?”

I shrug, since I have a few theories on that. “It’s possible they’re going after the whole east coast. Or feeling it out, at least, to see what opposition they might get if they set themselves up as High Alpha.”

They exchange a long angry look before Cam asks, “So, how do we get them to lose interest?”

“I have a few ideas. But first, Lucas’ doctors have confirmed the poison. It’s a variant of Compound X like they suspected. Manufactured almost exclusively in Italy, and the company keeps a controlled supply of the antidote. It’s possible they’re planning to blackmail us with it.”

“Fuck that!” Rory snaps. “Give me the address and I’ll go fucking get a batch.”

I smile at him, and I can tell by the way he touches his neck that I’m showing a hint of fang. “Leon’s already put in a request to Vadini,” I inform them. “If that doesn’t work, we’ll take a more direct approach.”

They both slump a little – in relief, rather than disappointment. They are strong men and powerful wolves, but they’re not built for this kind of burden. I thought to keep it from them, but how can they defend themselves – defend our omegas – if they don’t know what is hunting us?

“I have a theory on our ghost.” Cam perks up at that, and I nod. “I call him that for a reason. *Fantazëm*. He’s a contract killer, and I’ve discovered it’s the name he uses with his clients. But we grew up together, so I know him as Luca.”

Cam nods, his eyes distant. “Kelly told me about him. That’s how you learned to control omega heats.”

“Yes. We were outcasts together, in our youth. He came from amongst the Gabrdýn; a gypsy tribe in the mountains. The men who ran the orphanage were scum, and they lived to torture him through his heats. He’d go feral, so

we'd run away into the woods. I had no choice but to learn how to calm his beast."

"And you think he's after us now?" Rory frowns. "Why?"

"I left him." Something shifts in that chasm in my chest, as if a hand is pressing deep into the wound. "Not in the orphanage. He was older than me, and had already left by the time I was adopted by Jarvis Ferrier. But I made a promise to him in those woods. That if he ever reached out to me, I'd offer him a safe place to live. But when he contacted me, I was living on the estate, tangled up in Ferrier affairs, and already trying to help the Omega Underground. I didn't have anything to offer him."

"So, what?" Rory asks in a belligerent tone, his eyes hard. "We all had a shit start in life. Asshole fathers and bullshit promises. Why is he coming after you for that?"

I could tell them that as an omega, he felt he had some connection to me beyond the bonds of our childhood. Some claim to my wolf, or place earned in my pack. But it could also be as simple as a job he is carrying out for one of his European masters. So I leave it at a shrug. "I don't have the answer to that. But Luca is broken, and very, very dangerous. They don't just call him the phantom because he completes his missions without leaving a trace. They call him that, because he once terrorized a shifter so badly, he turned his black wolf completely white."

"Well fuck, that's just what we need," Rory mutters, rubbing his hands over his arms. "And you think this spook put Daddy Ferrier into a coma?"

I open my mouth to tell them it's unlikely. The timing doesn't match. Luca was harassing my pack in the woods at the time Lucas was poisoned. Not that he couldn't be working with an accomplice...

"We think we might have something," Link says as he enters the room with Nate on his heels. He shoots me a half smile, even though I've had the

bond open to him since I entered the suite, but I turn my gaze on his beta shadow. Nate's perfume, I note, is sweeter, his eyes lit up with excitement behind his glasses. I can't tell if it's the glow of finally freeing his wolf, or if he's decided to let us see behind the mask he usually wears. Either way, it lights him up from the inside, and I can suddenly see why he's caught our angel's eye.

"This is Nate's work, so he should show you," Link says, interrupting my lingering scrutiny. He clicks a few buttons, projecting his laptop onto the bank of screens. "This is just a summary tab. Nate, you want to talk us through it?"

A faint pink blush touches the beta's cheeks, but he nods. "I have certain tools that monitor financial accounts, and when Link mentioned there might be a European connection, I fed their information into a database."

Cam blinks at him. "You have access to the accounts of the European packs?"

"I've been tracking them since the Wolf of Washington got involved in council business." He looks around at us, his blush deepening. "I started with Alpha Loup's accounts and found a couple of transactions with the European Liaisons. I followed the trail from there, and now I'm seeing some crossover." Nate looks at us with an excited gleam in his eyes. "Over the last six months, they've been purchasing a lot of property on the east coast.

Cam looks understandably concerned. "You mean the Italian pack?"

Nate shakes his head and pushes his glasses up his nose. "I mean all of them. Or the five main ones, anyway. The Head Alphas of Italy, Norway, Spain, the UK, and Albania." He nods in my direction. "You call them *pesë fangët*?"

"The Five Fangs."

Nate smiles and ducks his head back to the spreadsheet. "Well, we ran a

cross-check between the bank accounts they used to purchase these properties and any deposits that have recently been made into the account of the Leon Head of Security.”

“Trenchfoot?” Rory snarls.

“He’s on the run for a reason,” Nate tells us. “And I already have proof that he let the Alpha of Atlanta into the private party for a fee. He’s as dirty as they come, and would be a logical choice for whoever wanted to get into the hotel to poison Alpha Ferrier. He controls all the access points and cameras, which were conveniently scrubbed right before he disappeared.”

“Well, maybe it’s Rawson,” Rory argues. “He was pissed Angel didn’t pick one of his shitstain offspring.” He gives Nate an apologetic grimace. “Not including you, I mean.”

But Nate just smiles. “They *are* shitstains,” he agrees, “but I’ve had them under surveillance, and they left the hotel immediately after the council meeting and caught a flight straight to the west coast. Besides, the accounts lead us somewhere else.” A picture appears on the screen and we all groan. It’s Phillip Prior, Kelly’s uncle, and a man I should have ended a long time ago. “He’s the proxy head of the London Pack at the moment, and is also the new owner of this property in Hartford, Connecticut.”

The sting just burns deeper as Nate brings up a picture of a familiar manor house. It’s garish in the extreme; a fortress built on top of what was once a beautiful building. “The Crouch Estate.”

“One theory is they’re planning to kick off the omega trade again,” Link says through a gritted jaw. “It would give them a remote but accessible base of operations, including a private airfield.” He taps the map to display a small but professional-looking airport only a few miles away. “This could potentially give them direct access to and from Europe.” Link sends me a furious glance. “And we know the estate is already set up to hold omegas.”

He's talking about the basement where Kelly was imprisoned for nearly a year, along with an unknown number of omegas who were sold off to a network of abusers and defilers.

"We need to check it out," Cam says, getting to his feet. "And we need to double our security on the omegas back home."

My stomach roils as they start making plans, and I close my eyes so they can't see how furious I am with myself. This is negligent in the extreme. I made a promise when I cleaned this up last time: that piece by piece, body by body, I would make the world a haven for my omegas.

Instead, I've allowed the rot to fester and grow.

"I don't care how this goes down," Link says quietly at my side, "but Kelly isn't stepping foot back on that estate."

"You won't get any arguments from me." I turn to see Kelly in the doorway, and it hits me, like it always does, how beautiful he is. Even when he's pale and sleep-mussed, and his fear is leaking into the room. "Arben, can I speak to you for a minute?"

Getting summoned by one of your omegas is like being pulled by your heart string. I growl at the rest of them to keep working on a plan, then I'm in the hallway, wrapping myself around him in a too-tight hug. But he clings to me, his feet even leaving the floor, and I feel arousal throb through our bond. "I want you to fuck me pretty bad right now," he whispers into my neck, "only there's a good chance I'll start crying like a baby."

"Let's start with a kiss."

He hums and leans against the wall as I cover his lips with mine. It's a soft kiss, but a claiming one. He licks inside my mouth and strokes my tongue, winding his around it possessively. I can feel his need in his trembling hands, the thick line of his cock rubbing on my thigh, and the faint scent of omega slick in the air. Kelly is as tall as Link, with the sculptured muscles of an

athlete, and I feel the strength in his hands as he grips my neck, angling my face down to his. Instead of kissing me again, he gives me a little shake. “We need you, Arben. Don’t leave us like that again.”

“Come with me,” I tell him, and taking his hand, lead him back into the bedroom.

Our angel is sitting on the edge of the bed, her tired gaze staring at the wall while she bites at her butchered nails. When she sees us, she gets to her feet, her movements slow and heavy. “This is so wrong,” she whispers. “They have to pay, Arben.”

Angel leans heavily against me as Kelly moves to her back, and we both wrap her in our arms. She gives a shuddering sigh, her scent like burned sugar, and I cup her face. Her eyes are red and swollen, but her wolf is glittering in her golden irises. And maybe she sees the monster in mine, because she stiffens. “You’re leaving again,” she says, her voice cracking. “You know who did this? You’re going after them?”

“We have an idea.” I briefly outline what Nate and Link discovered about Phillip Prior and the European packs, omitting any mention of Luca. They both look incensed to hear Kelly’s uncle is up to his dirty tricks, and that other omegas might be in danger. “But I promise it will only be a short trip. We’ll deal with Prior, and then stop home to check on our omegas.”

“Then I’m going with you.”

I’ve been expecting this, so I keep my expression guarded as I pull up a chair and pat my lap. “Sit. There’s something I haven’t told you.”

They take a thigh each, wrapping an arm around my waist and tangling their legs between mine. When their cheeks press to my chest, their faces only inches apart, a tremor of pure pleasure ripples through me. If I could sit like this for the rest of my days, I’d consider my life complete.

“To keep you safe, I need to understand why others might covet you.

Beyond the obvious, of course.” I run a hand down their spines, soaking up their shivers. “I also need to understand our strengths and weaknesses. We’re stronger and more connected, but the omegas at the center of a fated pack are the heart in every way. We can’t live without you.”

They go still, studying each other. “You mean if we die, *you* die?” Kelly asks, sounding horrified.

“I’m sure all your mates will tell you the same thing. If we were to lose you, we wouldn’t want to go on anyway.”

Elvi sits up straight, her hand fisting my shirt and her eyes snapping. “But you mean that? *Literally?*” Her mouth drops open before she hisses at me, “Arben, why the hell didn’t you mention this *before* we became a fated pack?”

I smirk at her outrage. “Because it wasn’t a choice, my love. We were always destined to be together. That’s the fate part of the equation.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “I. Chose. You.” She narrows her eyes at me. “I didn’t sign up to take you with me if fate kicks me off a cliff.”

“And I’m not telling you this to add to your burdens.”

She huffs and rubs her head. “No, you’re telling me this so I stay home when you go kick Prior’s ass.”

I nod. “It’s the only way to keep you both safe.”

Kelly wraps a hand around her flushed cheek. “You won’t get any arguments from me. I can’t – I won’t - go back there.”

Elvana lifts her head. “Back there? Where are you going?”

“Connecticut. The Crouch Estate.”

The words settle between them like poison and she clutches Kelly’s hands. “You’re not going back. Ever.” But she looks equally fierce when she regards me. “You’re taking backup this time, Arben. No arguments.”

I nod, relieved we’ve come to the same conclusion. “Rory and Cam will

come with me and Lincoln will stay and work logistics from here. You'll be safe, but you can keep tabs on us as well."

Kelly sighs and tucks his face into my neck, but our angel grabs my chin, her tiger eyes aflame. "Good. And after you've punished that asshole for attacking my dad, we can watch you burn that fucking place to ash."



Elvi

I sit shoulder-to-shoulder with Link as we watch our pack head to the Crouch Estate on his bank of computer screens. It's four a.m., the perfect time for an ambush, according to Arben. They took my dad's jet as soon as they'd made their plans, landing at a small airfield not far from the estate. They're all wearing full tactical gear, including headsets that transmit video and audio right back to Link's computer. It's as close as I can get to them without physically being there, but I'm still shaking inside. What Arben told me about fated mates has left me with a hollow feeling in my gut. Not because I feel any less loved by my pack, but because I know that their feelings for me could one day get them killed.

It also explains why Arben made such a meal out of punishing me for The Feral Den.

Something I try to put out of my head with Link's shoulder pressed to mine. We still haven't talked about that messy conversation we had before he stormed out of the suite. But if he's tangled up in this fated mates business – and he has to be, at least through his bond with Kelly – then it's no wonder he doesn't know whether to kiss me or spank my reckless ass raw.

There you go thinking those thoughts again...

“Is the plan to kill him or capture him?”

Link blinks, like he'd forgotten I was there. “Capture, if possible. We all want to put him in the ground, but he's the London Alpha right now. We can possibly ransom him for a dose of your dad's antidote.”

I nod weakly and wrap my hands around the second cup of coffee that's gone cold in an hour. My tongue tastes like cardboard, and I'm just about to go and hunt down some *sheqerpare* when their car pulls to a halt in the

woods at the back of the estate. Link has already been over the whole property with a thermal drone, and it appears as quiet and deserted as a grave. But low fog is making things harder, and since the infrared camera can't see through concrete floors, we don't know if Prior's even on site.

The only way to know for certain is to search the manor, room by room.

"It's okay, Elvi," Link says quietly at my side. "You don't have to watch if you don't want to."

Kelly has already retreated to the bedroom and Nate is in the security room, going through the feeds to see if he's missed anything.

"No, I need to know they're okay. I'd lose my mind if I couldn't see them." When he glances at my fingers drumming on the desk, I give a weak laugh. "My nails are already toast."

To my surprise, he takes my hand and turns it over, rubbing his thumb across my palm. An unexpected shiver skips down my spine, and I try to force a teasing note into my voice. "Are you finally making good on my promised massage?"

"That's Cam's thing," he says dismissively, his eyes on my hand. "If I had you alone, I wouldn't be fucking around with hot rocks or whatever the hell he does."

I catch my breath at the burst of heat his words conjure, but then he's laying my hand back on the desk and checking his screen. I feel the moment slipping away, which has to be the reason I blurt out, "We should go on a date." He cocks a brow at me, those dark eyes sliding my way. "Like you and Kelly did in Chicago, I mean. We should do something like that."

To my surprise, the tips of Link's ears go red. "Uh, yeah. Something like that would be good." He clears his throat and fiddles with his keyboard. "Although, I'm just as happy hanging out here, in case you thought I was gonna be a high-maintenance date."

I gape at him. A date *and* a joke! With Link of all people!

I'm trying to think of a reply when the screen shimmers and I realize they're on the move. I hold my breath as they step through the fringe of trees and into the forecourt of the manor house. The fog is so thick it's like watching them swim through soup, but I remember the place only too well. It has elegant bones, like it was once a grand, historical house. But that was before Crouch turned it into a fortress with gun turrets on the roof and bars on the windows. But the real ugliness is under the manor, in the basement where he kept Kelly and an unknown number of other omegas as prisoners.

I shiver as Cam's face looms out of the fog, his eyes hard. He and Arben are obviously having a conversation through the bondlink, because they peel away with Rory in step next to them.

"They're heading to the basement," Link tells me, and we watch them walk quickly around the corner of the building.

"That's the same door I used to get Kelly out," I murmur, trying not to bite my nails as Rory drops to a knee and starts fiddling with the lock. I cringe at every sound coming through the comms and blow out an anxious breath. "I don't know how you do this. Sitting here, but not jumping in if something goes wrong." I catch him staring at the side of my face and force myself to meet his eyes. "I wanted to say I'm sorry about The Feral Den. It was stupid of me to go rushing in there. I should have let you do your job."

Apologizing doesn't come easily to either of us, but I think I see something soften in his eyes. "Just check in next time. If not with me, then with someone who can tell me you're okay."

I bite my lip, because we both know what I really need to do. If I was mated to Link and we shared a bond, we could connect any time we needed to. But that's not something we can talk about now with half our pack on a dangerous mission, so I just nod and turn back to the screen.

The next few minutes are both tedious and nerve-wracking, and I have a new respect for Link's ability to remain calm. I jump at every shadow, and the temptation to ask questions has me biting the edge of my tongue. We agreed to keep bond chatter to a minimum to avoid distractions, but I need updates. Is there any sign of Phillip Prior? Are they checking all their blind spots before entering each room? Do they still promise to torch the hellhole when they're finished?

But I go completely still when they enter the basement. They take the stairs single file and I relive every moment of creeping down there during the Fall Ball. I was drawn by Kelly's scent, but the rest of the place smelled like scorched sugar, the unmistakable sign of terrified omegas. It seems like it takes our mates an hour to reach the bottom and as their cameras pan around the stark room, I'm suddenly glad I'm not there to experience it all over again.

"The cells look the same?" Link asks in a low voice as we watch the guys start to search them. I nod, because there's not much to see except for bare cots and a hole in the ground. The doors, though, are reinforced titanium, and I fight a shiver. Link must feel it, because he murmurs, "Kelly said one of the worst things was hearing a cell open somewhere. Because he didn't know if someone was being sold, or if someone new was being brought in."

Anger curls through me as I remember how I found him; bleeding, beaten, and about to be raped by a guard. No doubt he heard - and felt - a lot worse stuff than opening doors, but my eyes narrow, and I straighten my spine. "Then we make sure he never has to hear that shit again."

Link gives me a hard nod, and we sit in silence as the guys complete their search of the basement. When they're certain no omegas have been through recently, they head back upstairs. There's nothing much to see until they come to the doors of the ballroom and push inside. Link's fingers start to fly

over the keyboard while I stare at the strange sight on the screen.

A man in a tux and a woman in an evening dress are sitting at a small table in the middle of the cavernous ballroom. There's a long-stemmed candle set between them, with crystal glassware, and even a decorative flower arrangement. But there's so much blood dripping off the white tablecloth, I can't tell if there was ever anything on their plates.

"It's Prior and Peters," Link tells the team, bringing up two familiar faces on his screen. I stare in disbelief at Phillip Prior, Kelly's uncle, and Paige Peters, my mom's one-time assistant and Roan Bisha's sidepiece. Last time I saw her, she beat the shit out of me in the Tower when I was cuffed and couldn't fight back. But payback must be a bitch, because along with their elegant evening wear, they're both now sporting slit throats.

"This whole thing's staged," Cam says, turning over Paige's wrist, which flops like a dead fish. "Ligature marks, and it looks like they were gagged at one point."

"There are name tags." Rory picks up a white card from next to Paige's blood-splattered wine glass, but drops it like it burned his fingers. "Shit."

"What does it say, Rory?" I demand.

He huffs a breath, but Cam's face appears on the screen. "It says: *For Elvana.*" He grimaces and points to a similar card in front of Phillip. "That one says: *For Kellman.*"

"Fucking hell," Rory hisses, turning in a circle so we can see the whole empty ballroom. "Is some psycho really wooing our mates with murder gifts?"

I glance back at the bedroom door, relieved that Kelly isn't here to see this, but Arben already has them on the move. "There's nothing else for us to find here. We might as well head back."

"Hold on." Cam nods at something on the table next to Prior's plate. "That

cell phone looks kind of staged, too.”

“I have Prior’s number,” Link tells him. “Let me trace it.”

But Cam is already plucking another card from the sticky tablecloth, his frown deepening. “I think it’s in Albanian.”

Arben takes it from him, a sigh leaking through the comms. “It’s from Luca.” Link is still trying to trace Prior’s cell phone, but his fingers go still and we exchange a puzzled glance. “I’ll explain later,” Arben says, “but I think a ghost from my past is haunting me.”

I shake my head, confused. The only Luca I know is the one Arben befriended in the orphanage when they were kids. But I hold my tongue as he plucks the blood-soaked phone from the table and scrolls through the contacts. He musters *fantazëm* under his breath – another ghost reference – and puts it on speaker. Cam and Rory keep their eyes on the door as we listen to it ring.

“*Arbi.*”

It’s a voice I’ve never heard before. I know, because it’s deep and guttural, and so full of dominance it would live in my head for days. But Link jerks beside me like he’s been hit with an electric current. “What?” I whisper.

“Nothing.” He scowls, staring at the screen so hard he looks like he’s trying to crack it. “I just... Can you translate?”

I jerk back to the conversation and realize they’re talking in Albanian. “Um, yeah. He’s telling Arben that he’s done this for his own good. That Arben has put himself in danger. And something about a job, from a European Pack Alpha.” I swallow hard as the words shift painfully around in my head. “It’s a catch and cage order. On Arben. Because they want what he has.”

Link makes a low growling sound. His fingers are flying, and I don’t know if it’s because he’s pissed at the threats Luca is making, or because he

can't trace the call fast enough for his liking.

But Arben sounds almost gentle as he says, "Luca, this isn't a job you want to take. I will defend my pack, even from you."

"*Our* pack," the voice purrs from the other end of the call. "Don't you remember, brother?"

My voice falters as the phone suddenly clicks off, and Lick nudges me. It takes a moment to gather enough moisture in my mouth to respond. "He said, '*fate has a pack for us all.*'"

There's a noise behind us, and I drag my eyes from the screen as Kelly comes stumbling into the room like he's sleepwalking. His face is flushed, and his scent is sour with stress. He looks around in a panic. "Who was that? Who's here?"

"No one," I say quickly, jumping up to hug him. "Are you okay? Were you dreaming?"

"I don't know." He drags me against him with a moan, burying his face in my hair, and I get a concentrated dose of his scent. *Oh, shit.* But he huffs out an awkward chuckle. "I think it was just a nightmare, but my heart's racing like it's going to burst."

"It's okay, but I think it's more than that," I tell him, gesturing for Link to follow as I steer Kelly out into the sitting area. I lower him onto the couch and hurry to grab some water from the kitchen. "Here, drink this, Sunshine."

He drains the bottle without argument, but his eyes are still glazed. And when Link comes into the room, he stops dead. "You're in heat."

Kelly looks like he's just been kicked in the stomach. "*What?*"

"It's okay," I tell them both, grabbing my phone off the table. "I'll call Nate. We can get some heat blockers from the hospital."

I get his voicemail, so I leave a message and shoot off a text, while Link goes back into the comms room to inform the guys. I don't open the bond in

case there's still a chance of distracting them, but I can guess their reaction. When Kelly goes into heat, it's not as bad as it used to be, but it's still pretty chaotic. He no longer has to go into isolation, or get tied up so he doesn't hurt himself, but it's still really hard for him to control his emotions. He needs knots and bites and a dominant hand. Which means we need all our alphas here desperately.

"Arben doesn't want us going anywhere," Link says grimly as he returns to the room. "He says it's too dangerous. Even the hospital."

I grit my teeth, but I can't really argue with him. It's the middle of the night, and we need to lie low until he sorts out this phantom person. "I'll ask Nate if we can get some blockers delivered."

"The jet can get them back here in a couple of hours," Link adds. "Three Billie."

I nod, rubbing Kelly's back reassuringly. "That's plenty of time. We can make it work."

Kelly doesn't look so sure, but Link crosses the room and grabs him in his arms. My throat grows tight as I watch them rock together, soaking each other in. "You know we can do this, babe," Link murmurs against his cheek. "And if shit goes sideways, we'll keep you so busy with orgasms, you won't have the energy to fight anyone." He gives Kelly a melting kiss, then hooks a dark brow my way. "What do you say, Angel? Think you can help me fuck the rage out of our sunshine?"

Kelly makes a gurgling sound, but then he gives Link a sly smile. "We should give her the lingerie. That will definitely make me feel like fucking."

I'm pretty sure I'm bright red now – even though I have no idea what lingerie they're talking about – but I'm saved by a knock on the door. I launch myself across the room and pull it open. "You're a lifesaver, Nate..."

But the shadow that falls over the threshold steals the rest of the words out

of my mouth. Because he's in his human form, but he looks like a beast. And when he stalks towards me, all I can think of is a predator come to stake a claim.

He's huge. Bigger than Arben, so he has to duck his head to enter. There are deep scars on his cheeks, and metal piercings everywhere. But there's nothing submissive about the way he looks around with a possessive glint in his eyes.

I stumble backwards right as Link roars, "Get down, Angel!"

The command rips through me, knocking me off my feet, but the giant grabs my arm before I hit the floor. A strange sensation worms through my blood, thick and warm as syrup. And then he glances at Link, like he isn't hurtling across the room with his gun out and pointed at his face. "Let her go, asshole!"

But the giant just says in a guttural voice, "Drop the weapon and get on your knees, pup."

The pure dominance in his voice makes me shudder, but Link's entire body jolts. And instead of pulling the trigger, he drops his gun and hits his knees, a high, painful whine tears from his lips.

"Link?" I flinch at the whimper in my voice. "Do you know this asshole?"

"No." His jaw is clenched so hard, I can hear his teeth grinding. "Yes. I mean... I know his voice. I can't get it out of my fucking head."

I'm going to kill him. I can see it in my mind's eye. My half-shift, the slash of my claws, the way I'll tear through his neck like it's butter. I'll break whatever spell he's put Link under, and then we'll grab Kelly and run.

But as soon as I try to free my claws, the giant's fingers dig into my shoulder. More of that sticky warmth swims through me, and I moan as his sweet scent fills my head. "You're the wolf from The Feral Den. And the woods. You've been stalking us..."

“*Watching* you,” he corrects me. “Protecting you.”

I want to laugh in his face, because I just saw his lethal handiwork on Link’s computer screen. “You think that’s protecting us, Luca? We don’t fucking need your help to take out trash like Prior.”

“No, you don’t. But that was a gift. As well as a distraction for your alphas.”

“Why? If you want to talk to Arben, just call him on the goddamn phone!”

He looks completely unmoved by my anger as he turns me towards the door. “You’ll understand once I get you to safety.”

I’m thinking about sinking my teeth into his thick wrist when his other hand extends past me. To *Kelly*. Bile floods my mouth as I turn and see my sunshine staring up at Luca in horror.

“No. Don’t touch him.” More of that thick, warm heat rolls through me and I bite my tongue until I taste blood. “Leave him the fuck alone.”

But he ignores me, wrapping a hand around Kelly’s shaking fingers. “Come with me, omega.”

I want to scream, but I’m so full of that sticky heat all I can manage is a whimper. And when I reach desperately for my wolf, all I feel is more of that thick, cloying warmth. Is she hiding? Is she hurt? All I know is that my claws are useless, and my bonds so weak, I can barely feel Link across the room.

Which means I have to delay us. Buy enough time for Link to break free of this guy, or for our alphas to come back.

And maybe Kelly sees the plan form in my mind, because he turns and plants himself in front of me, his entire body shaking as he stares up at Luca. “I’m going into heat. If you take us, I’ll fight you every inch of the way, and I’ll die before I let you touch her.” He swallows so hard I can see his throat bob. “But you can knock me out, chain me up. I won’t stop you. And if you let her stay, you can do whatever you want to me.”

Link roars, his fists slamming against the floor, but the giant just strokes a finger over the mating bites on Kelly's throat. "You think I can't handle an omega in heat?" His gaze is almost kind as it slides my way. "I *am* an omega. And you're both safer with me than any alpha, including your mates."

All I can manage is another helpless whimper, but Link makes a grinding, feral sound. Every muscle in his body is shaking as he glares at Luca with death in his eyes. "I don't give a fuck what you are. If you touch either of them, I'll burn down everything you care about."

I look at Kelly, shaking with heat, and Link, suffering on his knees. I *have* to try. Even if he breaks my neck, I can't let him drag us out of here. I know Arben said that if we die, our pack dies, but maybe they can survive with one omega. And if this asshole takes us to use against them, I wouldn't want to live with the aftermath, anyway.

"*Fuck you, you spineless runt of a dog,*" I spit at him in our mother tongue, using the worst words I can think of. I dredge up every slur and taunt I ever heard a dog hurl at someone else. And I watch them hit home, see the way his demons gather in his eyes like storm clouds. I tell him he's nothing. Worthless. A filthy, ugly runt no one ever wanted. So pathetic and clingy, Arben had to cross the world to get away from him.

And as his metal teeth glint and his fingers twitch towards my throat, I strike.

Kick them in the dick and run!

It's like smashing my toes against a brick wall, but he flinches, just enough for me to break his hold and dive at the door. It's still open, and my heart almost bursts as I throw myself at Nate. He's rushing forward, his eyes huge as they take me in, and I try to push him back down the corridor. "We have to go! Get help! *Run, Nate!*"

But instead of turning, Nate brushes my hair back from my neck and I feel

a pinch over Arben's bite. Fear rushes down my spine, but my muscles turn liquid, the room spinning wildly. I wobble, my stomach churning as I clutch his arms.

What the fuck?

Nate's eyes gleam behind his glasses, drinking me in. But when they slide past me – to Luca – the adoration in them makes me want to weep. "It's clear, omega. I've turned off the feeds all the way to the parking lot," he says in a breathless voice.

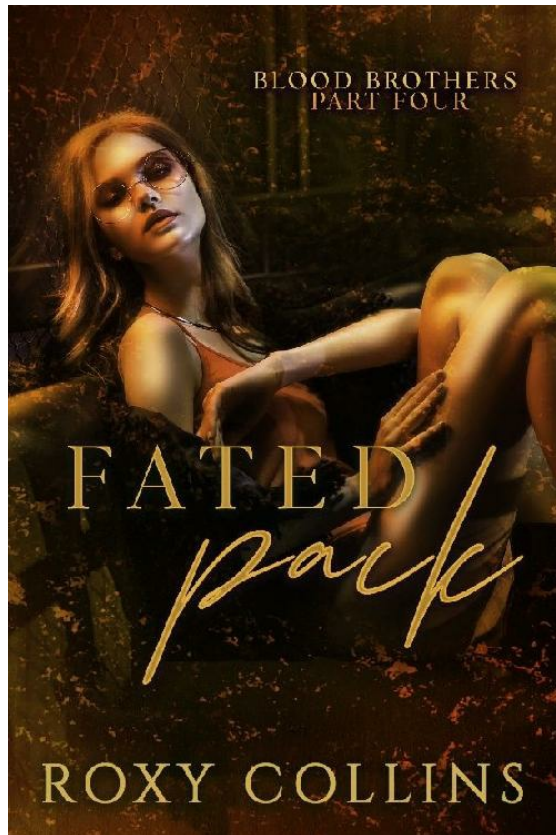
There's a savage roar behind me, a helpless moan from Kelly, but darkness is crashing in on all sides.

My knees buckle, my face pressed to Nate's chest and the excited thump of his heart. "Don't. Do. This."

But he just sweeps me into his arms and starts back down the hall. And right before everything goes black, I think I hear Arben howl deep inside me, too far away to do me any good.



To be concluded in the final Blood Brothers book...



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Roxy Collins

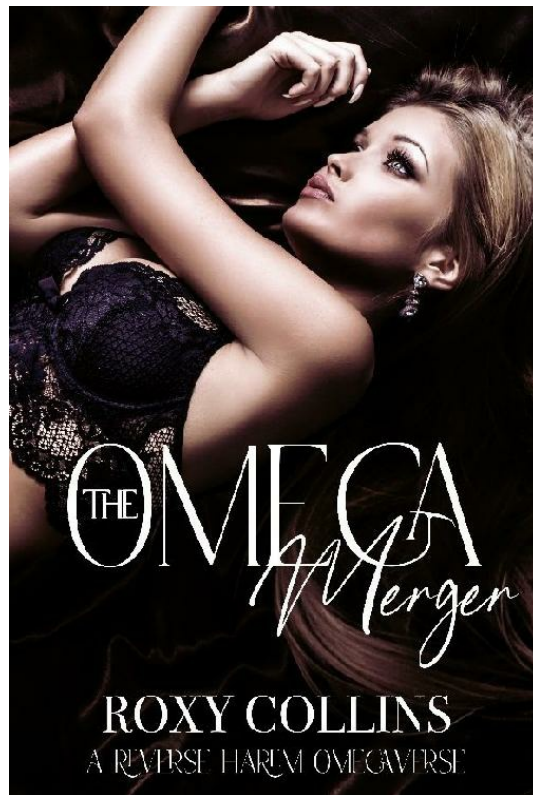


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