

THE  
THREE SISTERS  
WAR  
BOOK ONE



THE  
ALPHA'S  
MATES

CATHLEEN COLE  
FRANK JENSEN

THE ALPHA'S MATES



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C&J NOVELS LLC

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Publisher: C&J Novels LLC

Cover designed by: Bewitching Book Covers

*For all the girls who dream of having multiple hunky wolf shifters who love you, this ones for you.*

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# TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book is meant for readers 18+. Some content may be unsuitable for some readers. For a full list of warnings, please visit <https://www.cathleencolenovels.com/tropes-warnings>

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# CHAPTER 1



**Reese**

**M**y heart tried to pound its way out of my chest as I followed my pack of terrified females. We raced through the woods, running desperately toward our only hope for escape. The howls and barks were gaining on us. If we couldn't make it to the tunnel we'd all be captured. Looking over my shoulder, I tried to catch a glimpse of our pursuers, but they were just out of sight. That was only a vague relief.

I'd worked too hard for a year and a half to keep them safe only to lose them now. All the omegas living with me and my beta best friend were here because they had either been abused or didn't want to be a part of a pack of alphas. Life for omegas was perilous, to say the least. At least it had proven to be so with the seaside wolves we'd been born to. And no other males of our species had managed to gain my trust enough to make me think I'd judged them wrong. I couldn't fail my pack now.

These woods had been our home for months and we'd managed to avoid the pack of mountain wolves who'd marked it as their own. We'd stayed too long. But game had been plentiful and I'd started to relax in the little space we'd carved out for ourselves. No one telling me what to do. That females couldn't have a pack. I wanted to rest and hide away from the world. We were paying for that complacency now. I snarled in frustration at the reminder that I'd screwed up.



The Venat Pack had a brutal reputation and I'd known, in the back of my mind, that if we were found I'd be killed and all the omegas would be split up and enslaved amongst the alphas living in the pack. Emma was a beta, so she'd end up as a servant and might be able to one day choose beta mates to marry. She'd been my best friend from the moment we were old enough to walk and I was comforted—though only the tiniest bit—that she'd be spared. The rest of us would have no choice as to our fates. Me especially. I should have moved us on after we'd had the chance to catch our breaths. My arrogance and the overwhelming desire to slow down had been our downfall.

A yip spilled from my muzzle as I directed Emma. She was leading my pack of females and made an immediate left at my order. All nine omega wolves followed her, with me at the rear so I could confront the threats that were bearing down on us. My eyes were on Clover, making sure she didn't fall behind. She was the youngest of us and as a teen omega her wolf was tiny. Her small legs nearly blurred as she fought to keep up with the pack. She had the heart of a lion and didn't complain once about the speed. She just ducked her shaggy head down and ran as hard as she could.

Love nearly overwhelmed the worry and fear. I'd grown to care for each of these women. They deserved everything kind and decent. All I could offer was freedom. It had to be enough even if it came with a life on the run.

I'd never meant to start collecting females who needed help. It just sort of happened and now I had my own little pack of omegas who looked to me to guide them. I'd never asked for this responsibility. Life as a female alpha wasn't easy. Short would be the only real descriptor. There had only been a few of us throughout history, and none had lived long.

The fact that Emma stayed with me was dangerous enough for her, but then one day an omega appeared, needing help, and we hadn't been able to turn her away. She'd been out in the pouring rain, being beaten by the pack of seaside alphas that were supposed to love and adore her. Her pleading eyes had met mine through the storm and I'd answered the call.

From that point on, we took in any who sought us out. I feared my ability to protect them might be coming to an end.

A brown blur slammed into me from the side. I hadn't even seen the alpha coming. His speed was damn impressive. Picking myself up, I spun, baring my teeth as I blocked the path between him and my pack. Letting out a bark, I ordered Emma and the others to continue on.

The wolf in front of me snarled as he paced back and forth. He didn't seem thrilled to be facing a female, but what could he do when one was confronting him? It was so far out of the realm for most of our women to act this way he wasn't sure what to do. He was used to submissive omegas and obedient betas.

I didn't give him a chance to ponder it too long. I attacked. Seeing an opening, I hit the enemy in the side, knocking him to the ground. He tumbled, a mess of scratching claws and biting wildly at the air. I lunged straight through, ignoring his attempts to defend himself, and covered his throat with my teeth.

The wolf below me froze, stunned that he'd been beaten and awaiting his death. A howl sounded, causing the scruff at the back of my neck to rise. They were too close. Though short, the fight had given them time to make up distance and they were closing in.

I shifted to human form, grabbing the wolf by the scruff of his neck and his tail, and tossed him bodily through the air into the brush. He landed with a thump and whimper, but I was already back in wolf form, racing away. I knew exactly where my girls were going and it didn't take me long to catch up. No more brown shadows showed up to impede our path.

Relief poured over me as I saw the tunnel ahead. I could run like this all day, but my omegas were going to tire out far sooner than the wolves pursuing us. It was imperative that I gave them time to get to safety.

Emma skidded to the side, dirt showering over the tunnel entrance, as the others scrambled into the tight space and ran

through. It was a natural dug out in the earth that would protect them as they continued their escape.

Emma and I watched as the last bushy wolf tail disappeared inside. Her golden brown eyes turned to me. We weren't male wolves. I didn't have the ability to bond any of these females to me, or to each other, so we couldn't speak directly into each other's minds, but I'd known her most of my life. We didn't need telepathy to know each other's thoughts. Our wolves were currently handling the communication. Posture, scent and a direct stare told us volumes in an instant. There was worry and fear in her gaze. I acknowledged it with a quick bob of my head. She was able to read the command in my own eyes. She had to leave with them.

We'd gone over this escape plan time and time again. Since we'd moved into the mountains and decided to stay and rest in the comfort of the forest, she'd known that if we were discovered she was to take my pack and run while I stayed behind to defend them.

Sadness filtered into her eyes and her muzzle dipped once in agreement. I watched as she bolted into the tunnel, her chocolate coat flashing in the last ray of light before disappearing.

Giving the opening my back, I turned and waited. Nerves fluttered in my belly. Seaside wolves were inherently smaller than the huge shifters who lived up here in the mountains, so I knew what I was going to be facing. The pack's area we were in now had the worst reputation, by far. But when we'd stopped and seen the beautiful glades and forest paths, I hadn't been able to resist. My heart had insisted we stop.

Our packs from back home weren't filled with kind, understanding males. They'd been fucking terrible. I was about to find out whether the mountain wolves were worse.

It didn't take long before the woods were filled with wolves. Males. *Alphas*. Flashes of brown, gray, and black began to slink into view. So many, a dozen? Maybe two dozen? Too many scents to sort out. I couldn't count them all

right now. They'd slowed now that they could smell that I was here.

They appeared from behind trees as they moved to surround me. The ground sloped upward from the little valley I was standing in, so most of them had the high ground. The dugout was at the lowest point in the earth and I was defending it.

I took a step back, making sure none could slip between me and the hollowed out ground that formed this tunnel. I had to give my friends as much of a head start as possible. If that meant laying down my life, so be it. I was dead anyway once these wolves figured out what I was. There was no way I could fight an entire pack's alpha population. Alphas didn't tolerate an alpha from outside their pack. They certainly weren't friendly towards anomalies like myself.

Slowly they crept in, one directly in front of me, the rest fanning out until they were at ninety degree angles to my left and right. It was impossible to keep all of them in sight at the same time. I kept my head swaying back and forth quickly, trying not to give any of them a chance to creep in. My fangs were bared and I was ready as I could be. My legs shook with anticipation. The fight was about to start. Then things got really interesting.

My lip lifted in a snarl as three massive gray wolves appeared out of the forest like specters. They were twice the size of the alpha wolves surrounding me. Their authority forced my hackles to rise. Their power crackled through the air, electrifying everything around me. Thrown off balance by the trio, I looked around to see if there was any hope of escape once enough time had expired.

*This isn't good.* I was completely surrounded. Every other wolf was watching them, waiting for commands. Most of the other shifters surrounding me were closer to my size, but that didn't mean they couldn't shred me to pieces. They had me outnumbered. One on one, I had some hope, but not with so many here.

This wasn't some weak—or newly formed—pack. There'd be no tricking them into making a mistake. Which meant no escape for me. Swallowing hard, I watched—head and tail held high—as the three gray wolves approached.

The wolf in the middle was clearly the leader and moved with a fluid grace that belied his size. The beast to his right was the biggest of the three, while the other on the leader's left was only slightly smaller than the leader in the middle. Their size was only relative to each other. Compared to any other wolf, they were massive. Their coats shone in the light that filtered through the trees as though they were basking in the moon's iridescent glow. If my death wasn't imminent I would be fascinated by them. Their size and the differing color of their eyes told me they weren't triplets, yet they were clearly bonded. It was rare for wolves to so closely resemble one another, even siblings.

They were alphas, and clearly formed their own cadre. It was apparent in the way they moved. Male shifters mated females in cadres of threes and fours, claiming their intended and worshiping her to the end of time. Or so it used to be. We hadn't had that kind of love and devotion in thousands of years, as far as I knew. My pack of females had known nothing but abuse at the hands of our kind. None of us trusted them. Somewhere along the line omegas became slaves to alphas. We were fighting to break that cycle.

The three wolves in front of me stopped and waited, watching me with calculating eyes. The groups of three and four males surrounding us sat, awaiting orders. There wasn't time to take stock, but I was easily outnumbered by thirty or so wolves. Far too many. It was a much larger pack than I'd anticipated. Our packs from back home rarely reached twenty. How was I to know the mountain wolves were so plentiful? With the pack headed up by the males in front of me, I knew that I didn't stand a chance. The larger the pack, the stronger the leading cadre and this was the biggest pack I'd ever seen.

Females were much more rare than males, with betas—of both genders—greatly outnumbering the male alphas and female omegas. Alphas and omegas were made for each other.

They fit together like puzzle pieces, the legendary omega heat drawing their alphas in and causing the alphas to tip into their rut. It wasn't the only way that alpha males could reproduce, they could still claim a beta and impregnate her, but most males craved omegas. Mating with a beta only produced more betas. While it kept numbers up, it did nothing to strengthen the pack. Only an omega could birth an alpha. And without alphas, a pack would deteriorate and be vanquished. Our female population was dwindling every year. Most alphas were just happy at this point to find themselves a mate to claim.

I'd always been an outsider because I was even more rare than an omega. In fact, I was considered a mistake—an abomination—if my father's words had been correct. A mutation that shouldn't have even been allowed to happen. My mother had been the only reason I'd lived and survived until my eighteenth year. When she died, I left before my father could murder me in my sleep. I wasn't supposed to exist.

My muscles tensed as power shimmered in the air. The leader shifted. The air sparked as he made his transformation and I couldn't take my eyes off him. Fur and flesh morphed into skin and human muscle. He stood in front of me in all his glory. And Goddess what a sight his body was.

The instant attraction that assaulted me was more than a little worrying. I didn't lust after men. They were dangerous. Mean. More often than not, they wanted me dead. My belly fluttered as my eyes roamed over him of their own volition.

Muscle stacked on muscle, a head of shaggy black hair that was shorn short on the sides and just long enough on top to flop into his eyes. That gray, intense gaze was latched onto me and made me swallow hard.

He was studying me, trying to figure out what was so different about me. Why my scent was off to his sensitive nose. Why his instincts were howling at him. Why he was having a hard time figuring out my designation. "Who are you?" His voice demanded obedience. If he had ordered it, my ass would have hit the ground.

It was obvious that I was standing before the head alpha of the Venat Pack. There was no way this man took orders from anyone, save maybe the Moon Goddess herself. If I was right, this would likely be my last day of life. This pack was known for ripping intruders apart, limb from limb. The rumors said it didn't matter if you were male or female. It was a rare occurrence for male shifters to kill females—even the betas were coveted, thanks to our declining birth rates. But I was no beta, nor an omega. *I wasn't safe.*

I didn't shift. I didn't move, just stared him down, anger ripping through me. He had no right to demand anything from me.

He sniffed the air again, folding muscular arms over his chest. "I asked you a question." He was calm, but I felt him push an order into his words. It was a nifty trick male alphas could do to manipulate those they commanded.

I wasn't immune to it, though it didn't impact me as much as a beta or omega because...

"Holy shit," he muttered, his eyes narrowing. "You're an alpha."

That caused a stirring amongst his pack. The smaller gray wolf on his left shifted and now I had two naked men standing before me.

*Moon Goddess help me.* This male wasn't any less impressive than his cadre mate. I was in so much trouble.

## CHAPTER 2



### Reese

“*T*hat can’t be right,” the newcomer growled, eyes narrowed on me.

Refusing to look away, I met his gaze. His pale blue eyes studied me, my snarl, my stance, my refusal to bow to his lead alpha’s command. It was still floating through the air, but I ignored it. “You may be right, Soren,” he finally admitted. There was awe in his tone.

Sounds of wolves, agitated animals, filled the air around me. I was used to this kind of reception. It was actually filled with less teeth and aggression than normal. The brown wolf who I’d fought before moved closer to my spot, pulling my attention to him.

The leader—the other had said his name was Soren—barked out names. “Go around. See where that tunnel lets out.”

The brown wolf and his cadre instantly complied, running up over the hill behind me. He was clearly the quickest in this pack and Soren knew it. I couldn’t follow, but wasn’t worried. We’d investigated that tunnel. The best way to find where it let out was to go inside and to do that, they’d have to get through me. Going over the hill was a complete waste of time. They’d never find the exit.

I may be woefully outnumbered, but I would put up enough of a fight that my girls would have the time they needed. Even as we sat here in a standoff they got further



away from us and closer to the perfect hidey hole I'd found when we first got here.

Why these alphas weren't attacking me yet was a mystery. My father wouldn't have hesitated. Still, I didn't shift to ask. That would take away my advantage. I was much bigger and stronger in wolf form and could handle their attacks much easier. Especially by backing into the tunnel, where their numbers would work against them. Only one or two could fit at a time.

The dirt shifted under my paws as the walls of the tunnel arched over me, creating a natural choke point. I'd left just enough room for one wolf at a time. If they attacked as a group, I was finished, but this way there was hope.

I shook out my rust colored coat, itching to get this over with. But that was stupid. I needed to stall. Knowing that didn't help the nerves that were like a live wire within me. I was far too *aware* of the two men and the third wolf standing in front of me.

The huge mountain of a wolf standing nearby stalked forward, eyes on me.

"Atlas," Soren warned. The hulking gray wolf showed his teeth, but stepped aside.

I perked up, ready for the upcoming fight. At least it was something to do instead of waiting while emotions I couldn't name swirled inside my chest.

Most of the wolves stayed sitting, watching, as the three larger wolves spread out in front of me. They had the opportunity to overpower me with sheer numbers, but were choosing not to.

Doubt flickered in my chest and I wondered if maybe the reputation these wolves had as vicious killers was wrong. Maybe they weren't like my father and the other numerous males we'd run from. They were making this almost a fair fight—even as a pack of coveted females fled from them. Well, it wasn't technically fair. I'd never seen wolves as big as they were—not even alphas.

My eyes flicked back and forth watching the three wolves as they spread out further, blocking me inside the mouth of the tunnel. That was fine. I wasn't leaving it.

Soren darted in at me, shifting mid attack, shocking me with his speed. Something that big shouldn't be able to move so quickly.

I yipped in surprise, barely dodging a bite to my left hind leg as he lunged past my defenses. I spun and snapped at him, not surprised when he danced agilely away. There was a doggy grin on his face and it made me want to bite him. This was life and death and this asshole was treating it like a game.

My chest was heaving with a mixture of adrenaline, worry, and—even though I'd never admit it out loud—fear. None of the other cadres moved a muscle. It was me against their leader, for now. Even his cadre mates were waiting, letting him face me alone. They were just blocking any escape route.

Feigning a few more attacks—that I warded off—he continued to dance just out of reach of my teeth. I narrowed my eyes, focusing solely on him since the others had made it clear they weren't going to interfere. The head alpha wanted to kill me himself.

*So be it.*

I was tired of being on the defensive. Making my own move, I growled in pleasure when my jaws clamped down over his front right leg. The move had taken me outside the tunnel and past his cadre mates as he'd tried to avoid my snapping jaws. Before he could use my distraction to take a bite out of my own hide, I bolted back to my spot inside of the opening. The two wolves waiting there for their alpha's command hadn't gone inside. Their cadre was clearly the rulers over this pack, but even within cadres there was a pecking order. The gray wolf in front of me, staring down at the bite on his leg in irritation, ruled them all. So long as I held his full attention, the others wouldn't move for the tunnel. Of course, that meant that I had his *full attention*.

Gone was Soren's amusement. I'd drawn first blood. With the coppery flavor coating my tongue I realized that he wasn't

trying to hurt me. He could have easily if that'd been the case. They had an advantage in size and numbers. I apparently had one in the fact that they didn't want to kill me yet. So while I would go for blood, they were trying to keep me intact.

*Probably want to study me. Figure out how I came into being. Get in line, Pal. If wolves didn't want to kill me on sight, they wanted to inspect me.*

I'd love to know why I'd been cursed into being a female alpha. Why had the Moon Goddess forsaken me? Mom had looked into it, but had only been able to find mention of three other times in history when this had happened. None of the females had lived long enough to know how their designation would affect them. One had been killed when she'd come of age and presented as an alpha. Her pack had shredded her down to bone. The others had disappeared and been presumed dead.

The dance went on between us. I hadn't managed to get in another bite and he wasn't even limping from the one I had given, much to my dismay. I'd battled wolves on behalf of my pack before, usually betas and lesser alphas, looking to drag us back to their leaders. This was my first time fighting a powerful alpha. It wasn't going so well for me.

I wasn't stupid enough to think that because I was an alpha I could overpower a beast like the one in front of me. He easily outweighed me and his huge gray bodyguard—Atlas—standing nearby was at least twice my own weight.

We'd survived not by fighting, but by hiding. Unfortunately, my pack had doubled in the last six months alone and that made flying under the radar much more difficult. A growl floated through the air and it took my breath away.

My eyes flashed to his—they were so dark I couldn't see gray in them anymore—and I tried not to cower. He was using his alpha sway to try to force me to comply. Luckily, being an alpha myself, it wasn't as strong as it would be if I were another designation. Still, the power behind it and my need to bend to his will shocked me.

He was strong, physically and mentally, in his role as leader. My desire to protect my girls was the only thing keeping me on my feet. I crouched down low, avoiding the pull his second growl caused. I'd never reacted to a wolf this way before. Not even my own father—head of a pack himself—held this kind of sway over me. No one had ever made my muzzle dip down toward the dirt like it was starting to do.

*Fight it! You can't let him win.*

My breath came out in pants as I tried to break the hold he had on me. Three sets of eyes were watching me, all intense, and all pissed off. They didn't like that I was resisting.

As one unit all three let out menacing growls. Some of the alphas standing nearby flopped to the ground at the strength of the demand coming from their leaders.

I couldn't hold out against all three of them. It'd been a miracle I'd manage to resist one. My legs gave out and I sank down to my belly, nose down to the ground, eyes downcast. I couldn't fight the pull. They'd won and they hadn't even had to fight.

Soren had been testing my skill and strength before, something I was just now realizing. I'd come up lacking and it made tears well in my eyes. This was the first time I'd ever failed my pack. I didn't know what they had in store for me, but death might be preferable. My bruised and battered ego had me seething, burning away my tears.

The cadre he'd sent out to scout the tunnel returned. There was a quick conversation held—the lack of fighting or snarling indicated they were speaking telepathically—and envy washed over me. That was a useful skill I wish I had. A female could only speak in other's minds once a mating bond was formed with her pack.

Their concentration was broken enough for me to raise my head and watch them. I wasn't being forced to stare at the ground.

Dark eyes swept over to me again. He just realized his wolves would have to get into the tunnel to get my females. I

gave him my own doggy grin. I'd managed to stall for twenty minutes or so. My girls should be exiting the tunnel about now and heading out for our meet up spot.

Soren's eyes flashed with excitement as he watched me. That hadn't been what I'd been expecting from my challenge. I figured he'd be pissed. Instead there was heat there in his gaze.

That couldn't be right. Males weren't interested in me that way once they realized what I was. Sure they were attracted to me at first, but after they learned I was an alpha? The heat always turned to icy hatred. It never turned into a rut. They wanted omegas, or maybe a beta, if they didn't find their fated mate within an omega's embrace. None of the members of my father's pack had wanted anything to do with me growing up, sexually, or otherwise. I'd been an outcast.

The sound of snapping jaws to my right had me scrambling to my feet and out of the way of sharp teeth. The huge gray wolf had joined the fight. Now that they needed to get past me they weren't pulling punches.

A set of teeth grazed my hind quarters and I spun with bared teeth, growling low as the smaller gray wolf slunk around behind me. I was surrounded as the three of them began circling. The rest stayed back and watched. They didn't need to get involved because the three wolves around me were giving me a run for my money.

I easily bested other females, and the few male wolves I'd fought in the past hadn't been ready for me. That was how I'd managed to take Soren's own warrior, by the element of surprise. They weren't used to a female shifter being as strong or quick as me. Because none of them ever assumed I was an alpha. These three seemed like they'd been born to make me toe the line. It pissed me off.

Going back on the offensive, I rushed after Atlas and snapped at his vulnerable throat. It meant leaving my position in front of the tunnel, but the girls should have had enough time to get to safety by now.

He scrambled backward, proving that they weren't trying to hurt me. He could have easily out maneuvered me and snapped my neck. It angered me even further that they were toying with me like this. My pride was the only thing I had. I was strong, and a leader in my own right, and for these assholes to challenge me this way was them trying to take that from me. I couldn't allow it.

I realized my mistake as soon as the heavy weight came down over my back. Sharp teeth sliding around the scruff of my neck as a wolf bore me down to the ground weren't even needed for me to understand that I'd just left myself vulnerable to attack. I may be an alpha female, but I still wasn't used to fighting well trained wolf shifters.

Grunting under the weight, I sank to my belly and froze. Not that I had much choice. The heavy weight was pinning me to the ground. Teeth had sliced through my fur and into the muscle at the back of my neck. Pain radiated through my mind, forcing me not to squirm. I didn't need to look—not that I could turn my head with his maw around me, controlling me—to know it was Soren.

His jaws tightened—causing me to whimper—as he pinned me to the ground. A growl sounded, the vibrations rolling around in my head. There was no ignoring it while he was this close to me. My muscles relaxed below him. He'd won. I was finished. All I could do was wait to see what they'd do with me.

Flashes zipped past as his wolves barrelled into the tunnel around us. I'd done all I could. It was up to Emma to keep them safe now.

## CHAPTER 3



**Reese**

I waited, pinned beneath Soren's bulky weight, to know what lay in store for me. Would he snap my neck and be done with it?

Another growl sounded and I gritted my teeth. He didn't need to use words. His growls resonated inside of me, vibrating throughout my entire body, telling me what he wanted from me. He wanted me to shift.

*Fuck that.*

Shifting with a wolf's teeth locked around my nape was a death sentence. I tried to hold out, barely managing. Then two more growls once again joined his and I knew I'd lost. They were working together against me, and my body—for some unknown reason—was complying.

My gasp was loud as I felt the power wash over me, tingling, as my wolf form melted away. He must have felt it too because in the seconds it took me to shift to human form, he did the same.

My breasts were squashed flat, sticks and other debris digging into my skin. A huge hand wrapped around my throat from behind and I sucked in a shuddering breath. His hand tightened more, forcing me to hold it in for a beat before he released it, allowing me to exhale. He was showing me that I was only breathing because he allowed it.

*Message received, dickhead.*

“Do you have a death wish, Little One?”

I snorted at that. I wasn't little. My body was made as an alpha's was. Or what I'd always imagined a female alpha's was supposed to be. While omegas were small and petite, and even beta females were dwarfed by me, I had been an Amazon amongst my father's pack. My wolf was even bigger. That didn't seem to matter with these three however, as they were easily double my size.

“Speak,” the third man barked at me, irritated that I wasn't answering his leader. I hadn't realized that all three of them had shifted. The other two were circled around me, barring me from the eyes of their fellow pack mates as much as they could. I started to avert my gaze because there was junk as far as the eye could see. They didn't seem to care that they were naked.

I wasn't going to give them the respect of being bashful if they didn't care. If they were going to let it hang out, I'd take a nice long look. My eyes widened as I realized that Atlas was as proportionate as a man his size should be. My jaw dropped as I stared at the massive length between his legs. Goddess, that was intimidating.

A growl came from the only one whose name I didn't know, forcing my gaze back to him. I studied him. He was just as gorgeous as his cadre mates. Muscular, though he had more of a runner's build than the other two, and damn he was pretty with his light brown hair and pale blue eyes, but I wasn't about to let any of them know how they were affecting me. “Caught up in little man syndrome, I see.”

His eyes narrowed and a snarl ripped through the air. This one had a temper. It didn't matter that my observation was wrong. He may be smaller than the other two, but he was anything but little. Reality didn't matter when I was just trying to piss him off.

“Testing Calder isn't a good idea, Pet,” the hulking mountain told me with a chuckle.

“You *will* answer my questions,” Soren ordered, his hand tightening on my throat again.



I didn't know what it was. Why these males spoke to some dark part of me I hadn't known existed. I felt the urge to test them. As one would of potential mates. But that couldn't be right. My father had taken great pleasure in explaining how no males would ever want me as a mate. How could they when I was a freak of nature? An alpha female—defective.

Another growl sounded and heat pooled low in my belly. The feeling was so foreign, at least in connection with a male, that I panicked.

Struggling beneath him, I ignored the hand on my throat, and tried to buck him off. He was too heavy and soon I was panting into the leaves littering the ground, exhausted.

“You finished?” he crooned in my ear. His moves were exaggerated as he sniffed the air. “Though I enjoyed the feel of your ass rubbing against my cock, I hope you figured out that it's pointless to fight me.”

Embarrassment flooded me as I realized he could smell my arousal. I didn't like being forced to submit. Didn't want to be reacting to him this way. On top of it all, his light, teasing tone made me angry. This may not be serious to him, but it was to me.

I had no intention of obeying Soren, but I was too tired to keep fighting for now. Sharp teeth once again settled over the back of my neck and mortification swept over me as I felt myself growing wetter. No alpha had ever managed to wring a drop of arousal from my body. Soren didn't seem to be even trying and I was gushing for him. My nipples were hard and poking into the ground where I lay. Heat was roiling in my belly. All from his dominating position and the feel of his sharp canines on my skin.

To bite me in human form would irrevocably tie me to him and his cadre. I knew he wouldn't do that, but there was a tiny piece of me that wished he would. I mentally bitch slapped that little voice. I didn't need mates. All I wanted was freedom. I hadn't even wanted a pack, but had felt an obligation to protect those weaker than myself. *Look where it*

*landed me.* Naked and pinned by a shifter twice my size while he rubbed his body all over mine.

The feel of something thick rising against my ass made my eyes widen. Despite my own kind not wanting me, I wasn't a virgin. I'd found myself a drunken alpha to rid me of my pesky virginity—and to see what the hype was all about. That's all it was, hype. It hadn't been worth the hassle. But because of that encounter, I knew exactly what was poking my ass.

His hold on my neck prevented me from looking back at him, but my eyes flashed up to his cadre mates. A smirk spread over the mountain's face while Calder glowered at me. They watched with interest as their leader ground his hips against my ass.

“Let me go, or kill me,” I demanded, tired of their mind games. Tired of my body's betrayal.

That caused the two standing in front of me to growl with fury at my order, but Soren just chuckled. “No, to both of those options.”

There was no chance for me to argue, or do much else, because his hand tightened until he blocked off my air. My eyes widened and I grabbed his hand, trying to pry it from my throat. His position from behind me allowed him to easily wrench my neck up, making it more effective. He'd just said he wasn't going to kill me, but was choking me.

Black dots danced in front of my vision and one of the men said something, but the lack of oxygen had my ears buzzing too loudly to hear what.

Soren used his free hand to brush a lock of my hair away from my ear. The gentle touch was so opposite of what his other hand was doing it threw me off. His lips brushed my ear. “Go to sleep.” The command in his tone plus lack of air pushed me into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

MY EYES SNAPPED open and my hand went to my throat. The skin felt bruised and ached beneath my light touch. I was a

shifter, so it'd heal as soon as I took my wolf form.

Closing my eyes, I urged my wolf to come out so we could get out of here. I needed to meet up with my pack. She stayed stubbornly at the back of my consciousness, refusing to come forward.

*What the hell?*

“You're not allowed to shift.”

My head snapped over toward the voice. It was Atlas. In human form his hair was dark brown and his eyes were a honeyed brown. He had on leather pants and a tight dark shirt. Probably the only thing good to come from humans was the clothes. We didn't need or use most of their technology—and shifters had been the first to discover electricity—but the clothes they preferred most of my kind did as well.

I didn't speak, just glared at Atlas. Until I figured out what their end goal was, the less I spoke the better.

He shook his head and walked over to the bed. That was when I realized my right leg was shackled to a sturdy wooden post at the foot of the bed. Inside I smiled. That might hold an omega, but no way would it hold me. I didn't want him to realize their mistake, however, or it would mess up the escape plan that was forming inside my mind.

He set down a plate on the nightstand next to where I was laying. His eyes dipped down, skating over my body.

Cool air danced over my skin, making me aware of the fact that I was still naked. I grabbed a blanket from the foot of the bed and pulled it up to my chin, narrowing my eyes on him.

“You're not to shift,” he told me again. “Eat the food and drink every drop of the water in that glass. One of us will be back shortly.” With the orders given, he left the room. I heard the distinct click of a lock engaging.

“Don't shift. Eat and drink. Who do these guys think they are?” I muttered as soon as he left. “I don't answer to them.” If they thought they were dealing with a meek little omega, they were about to realize their mistake.

Closing my eyes, I focused on my wolf, but she was refusing to cooperate. With a sigh, I left her alone. I'd have to do this as a human then and figure out what her problem was later.

The food next to me was making my mouth water, and as much as I wanted to ignore the man's instructions, I needed to eat. Alphas burned through a lot of energy in a short amount of time and we needed to continuously eat to keep our strength up. I wasn't any different in that regard.

Picking up the heaping plate, I ignored my dirty hands and started shoving food into my mouth. As soon as the meat hit my tongue my taste buds sang. Salty, gamey flavor exploded inside my mouth. The fight—and refusing to submit to their alpha commands—had depleted my reserves. This was the only way I was going to get out of here. Wherever *here* was.

Finishing the food, I licked my fingers clean as I studied the shackle on my leg. I wiped my hands on the bedspread to get the remaining grease off and tugged at both halves of the metal cuff. It refused to give. Huffing out an irritated breath, I grabbed the chain, ignoring the way the silver dusted metal burned my palms, and gave it a firm yank. Neither the chain nor the post it was anchored to gave way. Giving a frustrated breath, I tried again. The shackle itself didn't burn my skin the way the chain was, but iron alone wouldn't be able to hold me. Maybe it was alloy? It didn't matter, I was getting out.

The scent of pine and citrus was battering at my senses, so I knew I was in someone's room, not just a guest bedroom. The smell made me want to roll around on the covers until I'd mixed my own scent into the fabric. Instead, I focused on escaping.

## CHAPTER 4



### Soren

“*Y*ou realize that’s not going to hold her for long, right?” Atlas asked as he walked into my office.

Calder snarled as he continued pacing back and forth. Finding our mate and realizing she wasn’t some docile creature had put him in a foul mood. “She’s going to stay because we told her to stay,” he said with another low growl.

I chuckled, causing his eyes to snap over to me. “She’s an alpha,” I told him, then paused to let that sink in. It shouldn’t have surprised me, not given the prophecy my grandmother liked to pull out at every given chance and show me. “She’s not likely to listen to anyone.”

“How is that even possible?” Atlas asked, his brow furrowing.

“Later,” I told him, my sensitive hearing picking up the sound of a rattling chain. She wouldn’t break the chain, but the wood post would be toothpicks in another hour. Sooner probably. Then she’d be free, and with a silver dusted iron chain as a weapon. “I just need her to stay put long enough for Grams to speak to her.”

“Why Vera?” Atlas asked. “Why aren’t *we* going in to speak to our mate?”

When we’d first come upon the female alpha, I’d sensed right away that she belonged to us. The Moon Goddess’s magic was fading more and more every year, but apparently we still had the ability to sense our mates. If this kept on much

longer that too would soon be lost. Grams had always said I'd know my mate because I'd feel it. She was right. The pull was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. When I first picked up her scent, I knew instantly she was ours. I'd put out a call, telepathically, to my pack that she belonged to us, and to find her.

It hadn't escaped my notice that she had some cuts and that Drew had managed to catch up with her first. It was also impossible not to notice the limp that Drew had. He was the fastest wolf in our pack, even quicker than Calder, which was nearly unheard of. That she'd managed to best him told me she was smart and strong. She'd used the element of surprise to attack him. Drew wasn't small, or stupid. He was one of my best warriors. He just hadn't been expecting a female wolf to go on the attack. It also told me that our mate knew how to grant mercy. Drew had walked away from the skirmish with only a few deep cuts.

"She's not going to speak to us yet," I explained. "We're the wolves who separated her from her pack and aren't releasing her. I'm hoping Grams will be able to get her to talk."

Calder's scowl deepened. "You're going to owe me a new bed when she breaks it, Soren."

"We'll be using the mating bed soon enough," I assured him. "Atlas, did you set the guards?"

"I did. They're standing by. Just in case."

The cadres we'd sent out to track down this female's pack hadn't returned yet. They were giving them the runaround, according to Belan when he'd reported in through our mind link. It made me chuckle to think of a bunch of women outsmarting some of my best alphas. Something told me life was about to get a lot more interesting.

As amusing as it was to have a group of females presenting this much of a challenge, it was dangerous. Sooner or later another pack would catch their scent and track them down. We could be looking at a fight with one, or several packs. We needed to find them.

We'd been hearing rumors for well over a year now about a pack of females who chose to live away from packs and on their own. I could understand their reasoning, since I'd had Calder look into the situation and it sounded like the majority of them had come from pretty terrible conditions. The seaside wolves were well known to be nothing but a bunch of cowards and bullies. They liked to control their women through fear and pain. Disgust was heavy on my tongue just thinking about it.

I was well aware of the reputation my own pack had, but it was nothing but fabrications to keep intruders out. Though we ruled with an iron fist, we treated our women with respect and love. We were one of the few packs remaining that hadn't fallen to degeneracy. We still followed the old ways. I wouldn't tolerate my males mistreating their mates.

As much as I wanted to track down each of the shifters who'd caused these women to fear the males of their own species, there wasn't going to be an opportunity. We'd been looking for them for quite some time. The fact that we'd found them holed up in my own territory? It just made it that much easier to lay claim to them. They'd give my males hope and even more importantly, mates, and pups.

Our birth rates had been steadily declining over the decades and because of it too many males were being left without mates. That's why we'd begun forming cadres thousands of years ago. The situation today was dire. Every female needed to be found and mated, not only to keep our lines going, but to keep them safe.

Too many alphas were getting desperate at the thought of never finding a mate, let alone the elusive fated mate the history books mentioned, and it made them fucking dangerous. It was as though the Moon Goddess had forsaken us. I hadn't heard of a fated mate pairing in thousands of years. No one alive today had ever seen one.

Happiness could be found amongst a cadre who were mates, my grandparents were proof of that. My grandfathers doted on my grandmother, even now, in their retirement, they chased each other around like pups. It was the same for my

parents, when they were alive. But there was a time when fated mates reigned supreme. The bond between a male and female was so strong that if one died, the other would soon follow, through no choice of their own.

It'd been speculated upon that once we began forming cadres, we angered the Moon Goddess and she refused to bestow the bond on us any longer. This caused some males to try to force females into their cadres, as if you could force a fated mate or even just a regular mate bond. As I said, degeneracy. My grandmother didn't believe that the Moon Goddess had turned her back on us. She'd found some long forgotten prophecy that spoke of fated mates being reintroduced into this world.

I was a realist. Fated mates were a myth. If they weren't, they were so far out of our reach it was pointless to worry about it anymore. What wasn't a figment of my imagination however, was the instant attraction I felt for the woman who'd bared her teeth at us. I didn't know about fated mates, but I did know that she was mine. Ours. She belonged to the three of us. The way I figured it, if The Moon Goddess was so displeased about cadres mating their women, then she wouldn't allow the mate bond to form between a group. No. There was some other reason all this was happening.

Glancing down, I touched where the puncture wounds on my forearm had been before I shifted and grinned. The little alpha didn't know who she was fucking with. "You wouldn't want a tame little mate," I told Calder, as I waited for the plan I'd set into motion to unfold. The little alpha next door wasn't going to break out. If she tried, I'd bring her straight back. She'd soon learn to obey me. She'd soon realize that she and her females would be safe here with us.

Something needed to be done about our dire situation or the humans would get their wish. We'd become extinct. Grams was the only one with any clues as to what was going on. Some long ago text that only she and a handful of other village elders could read. I'd sent her and my most trusted warriors—of course my grandfathers had insisted on going along to protect their mate as well—to the plains wolves to confer with



some of those elders again, months ago. The seaside wolves hadn't been of any help. Very few of them were making it to old age. I wasn't losing sleep over that. If it wouldn't anger the Moon Goddess, or go against the peace treaty, I'd have wiped them off the face of Elaria long ago. They had no place in my world.

Calder snorted in response and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back against the wall. "It would have been nice to have one a little less—" The sound of splintering wood cut him off and he arched a brow at me. "She's going to break down the door next."

I was fucking impressed. Baron was the finest woodcrafter in our village. The posts he'd made for our bedroom sets had been made from the thickest cedar. Most homes were not built as sturdy as our beds. Our mate was strong. A grin slid over my face. I couldn't wait to test my strength against hers once again.

"You'd get bored," Atlas said in agreement, after a pause to listen to what our mate was getting into. "You need a female with fire."

"Maybe with a little spark," Calder agreed. "This woman is—" He shook his head. "Forget it."

The thought of having our mate's curves beneath my hands made my cock harden beneath my leather pants. Her body was enough to make a full grown shifter fall to his knees and thank the Goddess. Calder might have doubts—and really he was just being stubborn—but every fiber of my being recognized her as soon as I laid eyes on her. She *was* ours. He'd pull his head out of his ass and come to recognize it soon enough. Everything about her was built for us. A woman who was tall enough we wouldn't strain our backs leaning in to kiss her. Curvy enough to fill our large hands.

Her red hair had shone in the dappled sunlight, blonde streaking through it all the way until the ends were more blonde than red, softening the color. Her pale gray eyes had been wary, but mesmerized me. But it wasn't until she was back in her human body that I'd nearly lost my mind. There

wasn't a place on her that was small and I fucking loved it. Her thighs were thick, hips and belly rounded, and her tits were full and heavy. She was made solidly enough to handle three rough shifters.

Moving in my chair, I reached down and adjusted my cock. It was going to be impossible to deal with this raging hard-on while we tried to gain her trust. She had yet to obey a single command. I was used to the mountain packs' obedience. Even some of the other remote packs knew better than to disobey me. They had their own head alphas, but our pack was the biggest and strongest. They knew better than to fuck with us. Our female hadn't learned that yet.

She refused to shift until we used our alpha sway to force her, and at that time she'd been on the ground. After I knocked her out, we'd gotten a good look at the female I planned to claim. She was at least six-two in height—a good compliment to us as we ranged from six-six to six-eight. No one wanted to have to bend way down just to kiss a mate. Omegas usually topped out around five-five, at the most, and we'd have ended up with continuous backaches into our elder years if we'd gotten one of them.

“She’s destroying your shit,” Atlas told Calder, a smirk lifting one side of his mouth. He was by far the easiest going of the three of us. Something about his size forced him to control his anger. If he went on a rampage he’d end up destroying everything before we could stop him. So he kept a stranglehold on his control.

“What the fuck-” Calder started toward the door.

“Wait,” I ordered him.

His pale gaze locked on me as he shot me a glare. “If she touches-”

We all paused as our sensitive hearing picked up the sound of a lock being turned. I smiled and leaned back in my chair. “It won’t be long before she’s ours. Let Grams see if she can persuade our defiant little mate to give in.”

Calder snorted again, but he finally sat back down. Atlas took a seat as well. “You think she’ll give in just like that?”

“Probably not,” I admitted, “but there’s no harm in trying.”

She impressed me. She had learned a lot in her time alone. “Did you ever check into her?” I asked. I had tasked Calder with seeing what he could find out about the pack of females. Little did I know its leader was our mate. If I had, I’d have destroyed all of Elaria in order to find her. It wouldn’t have taken us months if I’d realized.

Calder nodded. “Tried. Took me a few weeks of investigating before I figured out the pack likely came from the seaside wolves. The plains wolf packs hadn’t heard anything about them. As soon as I made it down to the coast I began hearing the rumors. Took another week before I tracked the rumors back to the Silvest pack.”

I muttered under my breath. Haron Silvest was more than just a simple prick. He was an enemy. His father had started the pack war fifteen years ago. The same war that had claimed my fathers’ lives. My mother had followed them not long after. She’d made the choice not to live without her mates and ended what would have been a naturally long life. The death toll from the war had forced all of us back into our corners, divided more than ever, but with a tenuous peace agreement. Fights still broke out between packs, or between individual shifters, but we’d all agreed not to repeat the mistake of a war between shifters. The price was still too fresh in many of our minds.

I’d been nineteen at the time and pissed off that my fathers had forced me to stay home with the women and children. Atlas and Calder hadn’t been pleased that they’d been sidelined alongside me, but we obeyed. If they had lost all of us, my grandparents wouldn’t have had anyone to take over our pack. Someone would have challenged my grandfathers and killed them in the process. They were closing in on two hundred years old, past their prime for shifters, and they wouldn’t have been able to defeat a cadre of younger wolves. It would have been the end of our line. Of our legacy. So I

stayed. The last words I said to my fathers had been in anger. I regretted that every day.

“Haron wasn’t willing to give much information. Claimed his daughter was dead, along with his wife. At the time, I didn’t have much reason not to take him at his word.”

Calder’s words pulled me from the past and I focused back on him. He’d been on his way back from the seaside wolves’ territory when he’d picked up the female pack’s scent. He’d called to me and Atlas and we’d rounded up the troops to go after them.

“And now?”

“Now I know he was full of shit. There were rumors I overheard while staying with them overnight, about his daughter being an unnatural freak. It didn’t make sense at the time.”

He was glaring at the wall that separated us from our mate. An angry growl ripped from his chest. He might not like our mate’s attitude right now—we were possessive males who required submission from our females—but he certainly didn’t like the things that had been said about her either. He was already feeling protective. That was a good sign. The longer the four of us were around each other, the more our pheromones would wreak havoc until we were all forced to give in to the mating bond.

Like most males, we’d wondered if we’d ever find a mate. So *we* weren’t going to be hard to convince. We were all ready to take her and claim her now, even Calder. But she was resistant and we needed her on board. It was the easiest way to assimilate her pack into ours with the least amount of injuries. We had no idea what these other females were like, but if they resembled their leader at all, they weren’t weak willed.

My alphas would locate her pack and bring them back to our village. With their alpha bonded to us, it would pave the way for other cadres to mate their own females.

My nostrils flared as her scent wafted around my office. She hadn’t even been in here, but the smell of lemons and

sugar, like lemon meringue pie, was permanently lodged inside my nose. She smelled sweet enough to eat in a single bite. Her underlying scent was destroying my willpower. They'd been living out in the forest so I could smell the dirt, pine needles, and other woodsy scents all over her, but that sweetness underneath it all was uniquely her.

My dick was aching as I thought about fucking and claiming her. Gritting my teeth, I tried to shove the images of her curvy body from my mind. Jumping her the minute we saw her again wasn't going to endear us to her. She needed to learn to trust us. Needed to understand that we belonged together and that she'd benefit from an alliance with us.

A chuckle had me glancing over and I caught Atlas's eye. There was a grin on his face. "She's already driving you mad."

"How are you remaining so unaffected?" Calder asked. His face was a dark cloud of anger. He didn't like anything fucking with his routine, and though we knew he was just as ecstatic to have found our mate, it would take him some time to adjust.

"I'm not unaffected," he admitted. It was just his legendary control that was keeping him calm.

Atlas and I had grown up together, but we hadn't met Calder until we hit thirteen. A few years later our cadre had formed on the night we'd all presented in our designations. That was the night we'd shifted and realized that all three of us had matching wolves. We weren't related, it should have been impossible, but it was a sign from the Moon Goddess. That was when my grandmother had begun searching through the lore.

Calder had walked into our camp with a swagger that irritated me at the time. We still got on each other's nerves—often—but I loved him like the brother he now was.

My father had taken one look at the young pup and declared he'd stay, much to my annoyance. It was a good thing he had, since he was meant to be ours. If we'd sent him away I would have had to hunt him down later and bring him back.

*Sly little minx.*

I doubted Calder realized he was muttering those words inside his own mind and tapping into our link. He shoved out of his chair and paced back and forth. He knew the most about her since I sent him to learn everything he could from her pack. He wasn't wrong, our mate had proven to be smart and efficient. She'd gotten enough females to trust her that they'd joined her pack and now followed her. If we wanted to set our alphas up with any of the new females, we needed her cooperation.

We could hear the muffled sounds of her speaking with my grandmother. Both Atlas and I sat back in our chairs to wait, while Calder wore holes in my floor with his usual pacing.

## CHAPTER 5



**Reese**

**M**y head snapped up as the door opened and I shoved my hands behind my back, trying to hide the loose chain. A look around at the destroyed bed made me realize that I wouldn't be fooling anyone. I'd managed to find some pants and a shirt to change into. Even with as tall as I was, I had to roll up the bottom of the pants to keep from tripping on them.

The beautiful woman who walked in had dark hair with gray at the temples. Her smokey gray eyes crinkled at the corners with her smile as she surveyed the damage to the bedpost. It was split in half, with shards lying around the room like it had imploded.

My smile was sharp as I studied her. "It's not smart to keep an alpha where she doesn't want to stay."

She cocked her head, studying me. "I'd begun to lose hope that I would meet you, child."

My brows drew low as I frowned at her. "What do you mean?" All thoughts of escape dropped, at least for now. Her eyes were so genuine, I wanted to trust her. I scolded myself for being so easily distracted.

"May I sit?"

"It's your pack," I told her with a shrug.

Her beautiful dress flowed around her legs as she moved. She looked like she belonged at some fancy party, not like she

was a shifter living in the middle of the woods. Granted, from what I'd seen of their house, they had the same amenities we'd had at the coast. Only their house was well furnished and was much nicer than any I'd lived in. If they had a home like this, I doubted their people were living in hovels built into the ground.

*Only your pack lives without luxuries.*

She gave me a winning smile as she sat down at the desk. She motioned for me to take a seat on the bed. "Please. We have much to discuss."

"The only thing we need to *discuss*," I replied, "is your alpha letting me go, so I can go find my pack. He has no right to keep me here."

Her lips twitched, but she waited silently until I sighed and sat on the bed. The chain rattled as I moved.

"What's your name?"

Considering my choices, I looked around the room again, avoiding her gaze. I shouldn't be here talking to her. I *should* leave before those alphas came back, but her gentle grandmother-like nature was comforting. She reminded me of my mother. Missing my mother was a constant for me. She'd been the only bright spot in my life—besides Emma—and the night she died a piece of me had left with her. The guilt of her death was a living, breathing entity inside me.

"Reese."

"I'm Vera. Soren sent me in here to speak to you about The Moon Goddess."

That got my attention. Sitting up straighter, I nodded for her to keep speaking. Me and my pack had been trying to figure out a way for females to get out of being forced into cadres against their wills. That wasn't the teachings we'd grown up on. The stories we'd been taught were full of love and acceptance between cadres and their females. The Moon Goddess chose mated pairs, and later, mated cadres. While some thought she had abandoned us for good, my mother hadn't believed it. She thought that the Goddess's magic was



fading, though she hadn't known why, and that was why there were fewer and fewer mated cadres every year. Why there were fewer females being born.

Emma and I had been searching for answers. Maybe Vera and the Venat Pack could help us find some of those answers. All we knew for sure right now was that no one seemed to care whether she was blessing cadres with their mates or not. They just took the females they wanted. The women we'd rescued from abusive packs hadn't been mated to them. Not officially in the way of our kind. They'd just been too weak to defeat a pack of alphas to gain their freedom. Anything Vera could tell me about The Moon Goddess and the shifter's plight might help with our own mission. It was our last remaining hope at a free life.

"I'm sure you've noticed," her tone was droll, "that the packs are turning away from our Goddess's teachings."

"They think she's abandoned us," I said by way of agreement. Telling her too much could put our own agenda at risk, so I was careful in my answer.

"It's hard to blame them," she admitted. "But turning from her is only hurting us more. It's bad enough that we lost the ability to sense our fated mates. With the population decreasing the way it is, we can't afford to lose each other to pointless wars."

"I agree," I said with a sigh. My grandfather had begun a war years ago. I'd only been a pup, but the fallout of the major battle had sent a shockwave through our species. Packs didn't trust each other anymore. They stopped working together to solve problems, isolating themselves and hoarding their goods. The smaller packs died out, unable to fend for themselves against the humans or from simple starvation. What was left were the few packs who'd managed to survive. Survive being the key word. We weren't progressing, we weren't thriving. We weren't going to make it very long as a species if we didn't change what we were doing.

"My pack has traveled from ocean to ocean," I told her.

Her eyes widened. "So far. You must be a skilled warrior."

My smile was humorless. “Not really. I’m adept at hiding.”

Vera cocked her head as she studied me. “Why do I get the feeling you don’t give yourself nearly enough credit?”

Shrugging my shoulders, I continued on, “We haven’t seen any packs on our journey that are following the old ways.”

Vera nodded. “It’s what we’ve observed as well. We’re the last.”

My mouth turned downward in a frown. “You’re telling me the Venat Pack still follows the Moon Goddess’s teachings?” I couldn’t keep the disbelief out of my tone.

She smiled at me. It was a soft, reassuring gesture. “I know it must be hard to believe, but we do.”

“Your reputation-”

“Is only for our protection. Nothing more.”

“So you don’t tear intruders apart, limb from limb?” I asked, my tone cynical.

“That was only one time. They deserved it.”

The deep voice and answering chuckles had my muscles tensing as my head snapped toward the door. I hadn’t even heard them approach, that’s how engrossed I’d been in Vera’s tale. My stomach dipped when I saw the three Alphas crowding the doorway. Their good looks had an effect on me that I wasn’t comfortable with.

My heart raced in my chest, my palms turned clammy, and a tiny piece of me—that I refused to acknowledge—hoped they’d stick around. All of these reactions were inconvenient and unnerving. I didn’t have time to crush on these three and it certainly wasn’t in my best interest. If I’d learned anything over the last year and a half it was that males were dangerous. They took what they wanted without any input from the women they were keeping.

“My grandson-”

Now I was staring at her. “You’re *his* grandmother?” She didn’t look a day over forty. That didn’t mean much with our

kind, not when we could live to be three hundred years old.

“I am,” she replied, head held high. Pride shone on her face. It was sweet. She obviously loved her grandson, and I couldn’t fault her for that. That didn’t mean I had to like him. Ignoring the little voice in my head that insisted I *did* like him, I focused on the woman in front of me. “He’s a firm but fair ruler, just like his fathers and grandfathers before him. You and your pack will be safe here,” Vera told me. Her eyes pleaded with me to do what she asked. “Please stay.”

Trusting others wasn’t a natural inclination. I’d spent my life being punished for doing just that. Even before my designation had been revealed our pack had been shunned. When your leader started a war, you kind of became everyone’s enemy. When that leader’s son took over after his death and further alienated your pack from the others, it just reinstated the fact that all of you were untrustworthy. When the majority of my pack had shunned me, after I’d presented as a female alpha, it hadn’t taken me long to figure out that it was best to only trust in myself. You could only kick a wolf so many times before she stopped trusting all together. My mother and Emma had been the only exceptions. Now I had nine omegas who had become trusted friends as well.

“We’re not staying.” I gave Vera an apologetic look.

“The fuck you’re not,” Soren growled from the doorway.

Scowling at him, I stood up from the bed. “You can’t keep me here.”

“We can,” he declared.

My mouth gaped open at his arrogance. Firmly locking away whatever fledgling feelings I was having for him, I shot him a glare. If he was going to act like an overbearing jackass, I wasn’t going to allow myself to feel any emotions for him besides disdain. “What gives you the right?”

“The Moon Goddess. She’s given you to us,” Atlas interrupted. It was clear from his tone he was trying to calm the tension sparking between us.

“I don’t know what that means,” I said with a shake of my head. “The Moon Goddess hasn’t bestowed a fated mate pairing in-”

“That’s not what he means,” Calder snapped.

My glare landed on him, but I didn’t respond. These men were testing my patience and it was about to run out.

“Fated mates are gone, but we can still feel when a female is our mate,” Soren explained. “It doesn’t happen much anymore since there aren’t many females.” He was breathing deep, his huge chest rising and falling in a rhythm that told me he was trying to keep his temper from bursting free.

“Bullshit,” I spat. “That’s just what males tell us to force us into a cadre.”

They were all staring at me in shocked silence. Concern and incredulousness filled their expressions. What I said had truly never occurred to them.

“I’ve seen it too many times,” I continued, in a softer tone. “Shifters forcing women into their cadres and abusing them. None of my omegas were claimed in the way of our Goddess. Not one woman in my pack wants to be forced into a mating.”

“They never felt the bond?” Soren asked, his eyes narrowed.

I shook my head. “It’s nothing but lies.”

“*We* aren’t lying,” Calder insisted.

Giving him an understanding smile, I held up my wrists. The chains rattled across the floor. “Excuse me if I don’t believe you.”

“That was for your own safety,” Soren snarled. He was pissed that I wasn’t just going along with him.

As the lead alpha of this pack, I could understand why he wasn’t pleased. “You’re not *my* alpha. This isn’t *my* pack. I’m not obligated to obey you.”

“You’re our *mate*. You. Belong. To. Me.” He took a step forward with each word.

“Us,” Calder clarified.

“Soren,” Atlas warned, his eyes on my face.

Stubbornness often made me reckless. The strange sensations they were evoking within me didn't matter at the moment. I wasn't going to stick around and give them the opportunity to trick me into something I didn't want. It would be smarter to wait until they'd dropped their guard. Especially after they'd beaten me once before. But I'd kept my pack safe and hidden by trusting my instincts.

Turning on my foot, I lunged for the window. My arms crossed in front of my face, I prepared for the breaking of glass. It never came. My wrists were jerked backward, my body following and I landed in a heap on the floor. Pain splintered through my body at the harsh contact with the hardwood.

Vera's gasp and the men's angry panting was loud in the otherwise quiet room. Looking backward, I saw Soren's boot on top of one of my chains. “You son of a-”

“You're *not* leaving.” He reached down with one massive hand and picked the chain up, wrapping it around his fist. His skin sizzled from contact with the chain. He ignored it, furious eyes locked on me. My body began to slide over the floor. He was reeling me in like a fish.

## CHAPTER 6



### Atlas

“Calder. Get Vera out of here.” The room was too small for me to deal with three other pissed off alpha wolves and keep Soren’s grandmother safe. Her mates would skin our hides if we allowed her to be injured, even by accident.

Calder hurried Vera from the room, and I heard her muttering, “Good luck.”

Sighing, I watched Reese spin and dig her heels into the floor as she pulled back on the chain, trying to gain her freedom. These two were matched in their stubbornness, it seemed. That meant I would forever be the peacekeeper between them. For some reason, that idea didn’t seem to bother me. As long as we got to keep our mate in our lives, I’d do whatever was necessary to make her happy. I went to sleep too many nights thinking I’d never have a mate. Now that she was here, I was beginning to realize that we’d been waiting for *this* particular female. No other would have suited us the way she did. We wouldn’t have wanted just *any* mate; we’d been waiting for *her*. The Moon Goddess gave her to us and for that I’d always be thankful. Already deep seated emotions were forming, thanks to the magic, and her pheromones.

Sighing, I watched the battle in front of me play out. Unfortunately for Reese, she was barefoot and she kept sliding closer to Soren. It didn’t matter how much she fought, she wasn’t going to win this one. Not to mention my cadre mate was pissed beyond imagining at the thought of her wanting to

leave us. His patience for her arrogance and denial were at an end. Mine was holding on by a thread, but in a way, I understood her. In her mind she was doing exactly what we always did. Time and time again we'd sacrifice our time, our safety, our happiness to do what was best for our pack. We may be their leaders, but that came with responsibility for them and Soren took that seriously.

Reese was the same. She was fighting to get back to her females. The desire to allow her to return to them was butting up against the overwhelming need to keep her nearby and safe. Watching her fight my cadre mate, I began to realize something. We were doing exactly what she claimed the others had done, forcing her. We planned to claim her under our Goddess's teachings, and only after she was begging us, but that wouldn't change anything for her. She'd still see it as being forced against her will.

*Damn it.* We needed to do this a different way. Our female was unlike any other I'd met. Which meant we couldn't use the typical methods to win her over.

Soren usually had a steady head on his shoulders, but we'd waited a long time for our mate. There was a time when shifters found their intended mates as soon as their designation presented. Then they'd have five years of getting to know one another. At eighteen they'd claim each other as a cadre and be united as one.

Soren had just turned thirty-five last week. His patience was gone. Hearing his mate say she wanted to leave had a level of rage descending on him that I hadn't seen since his fathers and grandfathers had forced us to stay home from the war. Soren and I had just turned eighteen that year, Calder was sixteen. It took days to calm Soren down. I wasn't so sure it would be as easy this time.

"How about we sit down like rational shifters and discuss this?" I asked in a hopeful tone.

Twin gray glares pierced me before they focused on each other again. "There's nothing to discuss," Reese grunted. They both could agree on that point, albeit for different reasons. She

was trying to avoid being pulled into Soren's grasp. She wasn't having much luck.

I knew, without a doubt, that Soren wouldn't hurt her. There just had to be a better way of getting her cooperation than the thoughts that were flashing over our mind link.

*That's not a good idea, Brother,* I warned him. We weren't actually brothers, but had known each other all our lives. We'd been born only months apart. The Goddess had meant for us to be together in a cadre and we'd known it since the beginning. We were inseparable.

*Fuck off. She's going to learn to obey.* His face was set in a fierce scowl as he jerked Reese the rest of the way, into his waiting arms.

*You're just going to push her away...* I bit back a grin as Reese flailed and kicked as he hauled her up.

Soren shot me a dark look as he turned with our mate secured over his shoulder. "Are you going to stop me?" he asked out loud this time.

"No, Alpha."

"Knock that shit off, Atlas. She's your mate, too." He was breathing hard, whether from the anger or the brief tussle, I wasn't sure. He didn't want me deferring to him because he was lead alpha. In his current state he wanted me to work with him to convince her. Only our ideas on convincing her differed.

All I did know was that Reese hadn't given that fight her all. She was waiting on something. *Probably for us to drop our guard.* She wasn't stupid, she knew she had no chance of beating us. We were made for her, just as she was made for us. She had a weakness when it came to us. That and we were the strongest leading alpha pack in the mountains, likely all of Elaria. The Moon Goddess had bestowed us with many blessings, size, strength, and cunning. We didn't take our gifts for granted, most of the time. Vera was convinced our Goddess needed our help, and that was what we were trying to do.



“Go ahead,” I motioned for Soren to continue with his plan.

Giving me a sharp look, he strode down the hall, his large arm pinning Reese against his shoulder. I grimaced when I saw her lean forward and take a bite out of the muscles in his back. His snarl of pain echoed through the halls.

The home of the Venat Pack leaders was massive. It'd been built big enough for the generations of ruling cadres to live together, while still having enough space that they weren't stepping on each other's tails.

Soren's grandparents lived on the lower half of the house, leaving us the top floor. At one point it'd been split into two, when his parents were still alive. Since then, we'd spread out across the floor and made it our own.

I followed Soren into the room we'd use once we claimed Reese as our mate, officially. It was almost overtaken by the huge bed that stood in the middle. Another, smaller, room connected to it and that was where Soren was headed. Sectioning off the smaller space from the main room were pure silver bars. We'd had it put in, just in case. You never knew when you'd need to hold a shifter prisoner. Maybe if Soren's fathers had locked Sarina—Soren's mother—inside their own cell before they'd left she might still be alive.

We'd chosen to put it in our mating room because if any of us ever succumbed to the rage, it was a private place to cool our heels. We'd commissioned Baron to create multiple areas where we could keep prisoners within our village. All outfitted with jail cells made of silver.

Soren reached out, hissing as he ripped open the gate. Reese seemed to realize too late what was about to happen. Just as she started struggling in earnest he tossed her inside.

I glared at him as he slammed the door shut and locked it. The skin on his hands sizzled from where he'd touched the silver. The light marks on his arms from the chains were already fading. This was different, those bars were pure silver versus the dust that had been on the chain. “Did you have to fucking throw her?”

“She landed on the bed,” he muttered. He turned away, reaching behind his head and pulling his shirt off.

Turning back to Reese, I saw her eyes widen and knew before I heard the thud of Soren’s pants hitting the ground that he’d stripped completely down. Magic filled the air as he shifted. I ignored him while he swapped back to human and began to dress again. He’d needed to shift in order to keep the silver from scarring his palms where he’d grabbed it.

Reese sat on the bed, watching us with a sullen look on her face. Folding my arms over my chest, I waited for Soren to step beside me.

“You can’t keep her in there forever,” I told him.

“That’s my line,” she said, tossing me a confused look.

My willingness to help her was throwing her off center. I grinned at her, then glanced over at my friend. His eyes were narrowed on her.

“What’s your plan, Soren?”

“Keep her in there until she learns to listen,” he replied, giving her a dark look.

“I have no reason to listen to you,” she insisted, standing and moving toward us. She stopped within inches of the bars, staring us down.

“We’re your mates. All we need is time around each other and you’ll come to your senses.” Soren gave her a smug look.

I knew what he meant. Our pheromones would work on her the same way her scent was driving us mad. She’d eventually give in and realize our claim to her. Seeing as she hadn’t known any cadres with real mating bonds, I doubted she understood what he meant. It was crazy to me that none of the wolves in her pack had been mated under the Moon Goddess.

*Have things really been this bad for so long?*

We hadn’t seen the devastating effects as quickly because we still followed her commandments. Now more than ever I was convinced of that. As a larger pack we still had mate

bonds. There were no fated mates, but we knew the bonds still existed. Had the seaside wolves lost that completely? “Is that really what you want? How you want to do this?”

That got his attention. “What other way is there?” His dark eyes locked onto me as I switched over to our mental link.

*Let her go.*

*You’ve lost your mind.* The look on his face would’ve made me laugh if this matter wasn’t as serious as it was. *The farther she gets from us the more we’ll lose our minds. And it’ll be downright painful for her.*

*I know that.* I rolled my eyes. He wasn’t the only one who’d learned about this shit from Vera. We’d also had plenty of examples of how bonded mates interacted. Mates that hadn’t completed the bond yet were vulnerable. Until the males claimed their females, they had to stick close. It was detrimental to everyone in the cadre if they didn’t. *But this needs to feel like it’s her decision.*

Soren crossed his arms over his chest, mimicking my pose. Reese was watching us with a suspicious expression. She knew, from our silence, that we were speaking to each other. The look on her face told me she didn’t like being excluded from the conversation.

*What do you have in mind?* Soren’s sigh blasted through our link. He wasn’t happy about any of this. He didn’t want to have to force our mate into anything. Especially not after her saying that was exactly what the seaside wolves were doing to our women. *It wasn’t exactly the same thing, but to her it was.* We wouldn’t have to force anything. She would succumb to the Moon Goddess’s wishes, the same as us. But he didn’t want to keep her trapped in here.

*Let her go. She’ll go back to her pack. And she’ll bring them back here on her own. We won’t have to fight with her because it’ll be her decision.*

*And if she doesn’t come back?* His tone was resigned. He knew I was right. This was the only way to move forward for us. This had to be her choice.

*You think she'll be able to resist the Moon Goddess's sway?*

*No... Fine. We'll release her after dinner.*

*Soren-*

"I'm not sending her out there hungry and in the daylight. She'll be fucking vulnerable." His words cracked around the room. He wasn't pissed at me, so much as at the idea that he'd have to let Reese go after we'd just found her.

I couldn't blame him; it wasn't my favorite idea either. But what other choice did we have? If she felt like we took the decision from her she might not take to the claiming properly. I'd deal with the consequences of letting her leave now to avoid a lifetime of a mate who hated us.

"Why don't you give us a few minutes," I suggested. *Besides, we can follow from a distance. Now that we've found her, we can track her anywhere. We can make sure she stays safe until deciding to come home.*

A muscle flexed in Soren's jaw, but he turned without another word and left. It was as much of an agreement as I was going to get from him. The door slammed behind him, making Reese jump.

Her wide eyes met mine. They reminded me of the foggy mornings that were so common here in the mountains. She was so beautiful she made my heart ache. "I'm Atlas," I told her. There was no point in reaching through the bars to touch her. She wouldn't welcome it even if my fingers were itching to brush over her soft looking skin.

"Reese."

"Yeah." When her brows pinched in confusion, I confessed, "We could hear you speaking with Vera." Shifters had incredible hearing, so it hadn't been hard to listen in.

"You're going to let me go?" she asked.

"Yes. Tonight."

Her eyes strayed to the door where Soren had disappeared. "And you'll let us all go? You won't come for us again?"

This time it was me gritting my teeth in frustration at her question. I didn't *want* to let her go. It was our only option. "You're free to go back to your pack. We won't follow you." *Too closely.*

Her eyes dropped down to the ground at my feet, hiding whatever emotions she was feeling. It took all of my control not to insist that she look at me. I wanted to know everything about her. Already the Goddess's sway was working on me and my cadre mates. I wondered if it—if we—were affecting her at all?

Her eyes met mine again and they were carefully blank. She folded her arms underneath her breasts, shoving them up and out. Calder's thin shirt didn't do much to hide the outline of those shapely mounds. My mouth watered at the sight. "Thank you," she said. Her voice was softer now that she wasn't having to fight us. "I can't leave them out there unprotected."

"You would all be safe here," I reminded her. A stubborn look crossed her face. "You're welcome to come back, anytime." I just hoped that they stuck around the area. If she left before the Goddess's sway began working she could end up hundreds of miles from us and in too much pain to return. It was a risk, but one we had to take. That was also the reason one of us would stick as close as we could without being detected. Leaving our mate unprotected was as detestable to us as leaving her pack alone was to her.

"I'll be back soon. We'll give you some dinner, then you can leave."

Her eyes narrowed on my face, judging whether she could trust me or not. "Why not let me go now?"

"You heard Soren. He's only going to let you go when it's safest to do so."

She nibbled on her full lower lip, drawing my attention there. Internally, I groaned as I hardened in my pants. Her pink tongue darted out to wet her lips. I wanted to touch her, taste her, fuck her. She tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear.

The red in her hair shone under the light as she nodded her head. “Okay.”

“Until then, you’ll stay in here. Can’t have you wandering off on your own.”

She gave me an unamused frown. “Yeah, that would be a shame.”

My grin spread over my face. I was ready to get this over with so we could have her back. So I could begin earning her trust and see more of her attitude. The urge to rake my eyes over her body was too much to resist. Her eyebrows shot up at my blatant perusal of her. Offering her another grin in answer to her shocked look, I winked at her. “Try to miss me while I’m gone.” Her laughter followed me through the door.

## CHAPTER 7



### Reese

Sighing, I sat down on the bed and let my head fall into my hands. This was a complete mess. I was grateful that they hadn't killed me, but Soren's declaration that I belonged to them pissed me off. And a part of me was worried that he might be right.

Too many times over the years I'd seen my old pack mates claim their 'mates'. Only to find out, once I got older, that it wasn't a real claiming sanctioned by the Moon Goddess. My mother told me the truth once I'd turned fourteen. That the seaside wolves were claiming women as their own, sometimes not even as packs, and without consent. They would steal and imprison any female they could find.

That explained why my father didn't have cadre mates. Who would put up with a man like him? Then when I presented as an alpha my father and brothers were horrified. Dad's words still rang in my mind.

*Who's going to want a freak like you? Thanks for making my life even more difficult.*

Tugging at my hair, I tried to force his voice out. I wanted nothing to do with him. With my brothers. They were dead to me. I'd kill them if I could, but I couldn't risk it. Leaving my new pack meant they would eventually be captured. Who was I kidding? I knew it was only a matter of time before something like this happened. They deserved the best and

what they had was me. I'd do everything I could for them, but at some point, it wouldn't be enough.

Raising my head, I stared at the floor at my feet. I'd give anything to be able to talk with my mom. She'd know how to handle the situation I found myself in. Tears pricked at my eyes as my emotions fought each other.

Female alphas were nearly unheard of; they were practically a legend in themselves. A curse really, since all the stories only talked about the horror that followed a female alpha. My designation was the bane of my existence. Daddy dearest made no qualms about letting me know he despised me for it.

That was why I'd had to leave my home. I'd been lucky no one had tried to kill me throughout the years. Mom was the only reason they hadn't. Somehow she'd kept Dad from doing it and no one else dared to get on his bad side. I couldn't bring myself to think of what she'd given to him in order to keep me safe. Sadness seeped through my veins as I thought about her. She'd tried so hard to protect me, and in the end all I'd done was get her killed. The tears spilled out over my cheeks. I hadn't cried since the night I'd left my mother's body lying in the mud and rain. I'd been too busy trying to keep us all alive to give in to emotion. A wave of exhaustion swept over me as I thought about the past, threatening to drag me under.

The seaside wolves hated anything that wasn't what they considered normal. So much so that their numbers were declining faster than any other pack. They were so superstitious and killed so freely that they were dooming themselves to extinction. Half of them followed their alpha's lead and refused to live in cadres. They still followed my grandfather's way of thinking and it was opposite of what our Moon Goddess wanted. My mother was the one who'd taught Emma and I about our Goddess.

She was the one who'd traveled to the mountain and plains packs to seek out any information she could find on female alphas. It made me wonder if she'd met with Vera. Ultimately, her efforts had been in vain, but the fact that she'd tried



showed me the depth of her love for me. Her sacrifice had proven what I'd always known.

I made my own way in the world since the night of my eighteenth birthday. The night my mother gave her life to save me. I avoided packs at all costs. The last thing I needed was another man like my father taking control of me the way he had my mother. I couldn't blame her, my father always got what he wanted. Now I had three men trying to take control of me.

Once I'd asked her why she stayed. Her smile was sad as she shut the book she'd been reading. "I could never leave my children." I'd often wondered over the last year and a half if she would have left once I'd matured. My brothers were as rotten inside as my father was. But they were still her children. I didn't understand a mother's love. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

My heart thundered in my chest as though it was reminding me that this was the first time any of my species had shown an interest in me. Not just an interest, but they wanted to claim me. Could I trust them? Did they really want me for who I was? Or were they trying to fool me for some unknown reason. Having three captors was hardly better than having just one. For all I knew this pack was hardly an improvement over those I grew up around.

Studying the room, I tried to relax. They promised they'd let me go. Honestly, if I didn't have my own pack to protect, I might consider staying with these men. That was how conflicted I was. Something about them kept drawing me in and I wanted to find out what. Why was I feeling this way? Emma's face flashed inside my mind, reminding me of why I couldn't stay. Shaking my head, I shoved aside all thoughts of finding mates. I couldn't afford to think about myself at a time like this. The others needed me. I couldn't abandon them.

Emma had run away with me, catching up to me a week after I'd left our pack. No matter how I'd begged her to go back, she'd refused. She'd told me she'd rather live on the run with me than back home with our pack.

It hadn't taken long to start picking up stray females as we traveled the coast. Some were alone, like us. Others had been in danger. One was only thirteen years old and had presented early. She'd run from her pack when her step-father had been ready to auction her off to the highest bidder. Revulsion spread through me at the thought of a full grown alpha taking advantage of a child like that.

The more we traveled the more it became clear that the seaside packs weren't the only abusers. In fact, it seemed that all shifters were losing their minds. So desperate for mates that they would do anything, including auction a thirteen-year-old. We couldn't turn the women away. So our pack grew.

When I first ran away, I'd only been thinking of myself. I had no idea that I wasn't the only female in danger. With every omega that joined us, I realized just how bad things were getting. It wasn't just my pack that was dying. It was all packs, all over Elaria. And not just dying, but falling towards degeneracy and decay. Our entire species was destroying itself. As if that wasn't bad enough, the thousand-years long war with the humans was further depleting our numbers. We'd been fighting since the dawn of man itself. The difference was they had the ability to repopulate at an astonishing rate. It didn't matter that they had a much shorter life span, they were winning this war by sheer numbers alone.

As time passed my pack had grown, gotten smarter, stronger. I was almost twenty now and after a year and a half of surviving and leading my own pack I'd become stubborn, and perhaps a little arrogant. Or maybe I was just born that way. My alpha designation also made it so I didn't back down. In wolf form I was bigger than any female, and most males, faster, stronger, and other than rumors, not much was known about my kind. While human, I towered over the tiny omegas and my full hips, thighs, and breasts caught males' attention wherever I went. It was the last thing I wanted.

There was no hiding my height or the womanly body that shifters and humans alike lusted over. Just as there was no hiding my omegas' pheromones. They affected human men differently, but still encouraged human and shifter both to

pursue them. Only weeks after narrowly avoiding capture during a brawl in a pub, I'd decided to stick to living in the wilderness. Emma would head into towns for supplies, while the rest of us remained hidden.

I refused to be a lab rat for my own species or the humans, and I refused to die by the hand of my sire, so I stuck to myself, other than my friends. My new pack was full of the only people I trusted. We'd known each other long enough now that we were friends and had managed to squeak out a life—one on the run—but it was better than being forced into mating a cadre who'd abuse them and cast them aside. No pack would ever mate me. Who would want a headstrong alpha female to contend with? They all wanted omegas—soft, pliant, sweet omegas. At least until now. Now I had a cadre saying they wanted me.

We'd seen the abuse happen too often and I was convinced the whole *worship their female mates* thing was a scam. A myth, the same way fated mates were nothing but a fairytale. These days the Moon Goddess didn't designate mates who were destined to be together like all the stories of old relayed. Gifts from the Sky Goddess hadn't been received. The Sun Goddess seemed to be the only one left and she heaped blessings upon *her* people, the humans.

Cadres bound females to them with mating marks, but they never glowed with the Goddess's blessing. They were a ball and chain to force a woman to serve her cadre and provide them with children. The Goddess had abandoned us, and rather than fight for her love, we spited her by abusing our own. No wonder she left us. No wonder she and the Sky Goddess were nowhere to be found.

The door opened and Calder stepped into the room. I sat up straighter on the bunk and watched him as he crossed the space. He leaned back against the footboard on the bed and stared at me. His muscular arms crossed over his chest.

“Our scouts haven't been able to find your pack.”

My grin was sharp and quick. Emma had followed the plan and it worked. Too bad we were too far from the bog for me to

make it there with them. Then I wouldn't have to decide whether I wanted to be mated or not. I'd have slipped into the dark acres whose stench covered our tracks.

Even now it was like there was a piece of me waking up. Something inside I never knew existed, but I'd heard plenty about. Mom had taught me and Emma everything she knew about fated mates, mating claims, alphas, betas, and omegas, once we'd gotten old enough, of course.

The longing in her voice and sadness that overtook her gaze was all I needed to hear and see to know she wished for a different life. One where she hadn't been forced to mate with a bastard like my father.

"They may as well stop trying," I told him when he continued to watch me in silence. "Your alpha promised to let me go as soon as darkness fell." His eyes followed me as I stood up and walked toward the bars. Careful to avoid the silver, I bent my head and looked toward the right. "That should only be another few hours," I commented, jerking my chin toward the window where the weak sunlight shone in through the glass.

"I'm aware."

Straightening my head, I focused on him. His pale blue eyes were narrowed on me. He didn't sound thrilled about the plan. Soren wasn't either, but for some reason Atlas had talked him into it. I didn't need to hear their conversation to know that was the way of it. I wasn't sure why the huge shifter had convinced his cadre mates to let me go, but I wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. It would be selfish of me to choose to stay here instead of going back to my small pack. I wasn't even sure staying was what I wanted. Everything was all jumbled. I didn't know what I needed.

"Why are you here?" I asked. Speaking with him was better than thinking about my childhood. It was definitely preferable to trying to sort out the emotions knotting up inside of me.

Calder shoved away from the bed and began pacing between it and my cell. His hands were shoved in the pockets

of his pants as he moved, but I could still tell they were balled up.

“Wound a bit tight, aren’t you?” My mouth had gotten me into more trouble growing up than anything else. Mom’s sharp looks and lectures hadn’t been able to keep me from spouting off after the age of ten. It was the only kind of control I had, so I used it.

Calder gave me a sidelong glare, but didn’t stop moving. “Why do you want to leave?”

My brows shot up. I wasn’t sure what his objective was, but I didn’t see any harm in answering him. “Because I don’t belong here. I should be out there, with them.”

“You should be here, with your mates.” He stopped in front of me, his chest heaving. “Your pack of females belongs here, too. We can keep all of you safe.”

Oh, how badly I wanted to believe him. A place where we could settle down? Be able to stop running and be somewhere safe? Where we didn’t have to worry about abuse at the hands of the men who were supposed to protect us? It sounded like heaven. It was too good to be true. I cocked my head and studied the downward pull of his mouth. “Why should we trust you?”

That seemed to shock him. “*Because* we’re the alphas of this pack. No one would touch you without our decree. *Because* we’re your mates. *Because* you’re ours.” He held up a new finger with each comment.

In a rare moment of self-control, I decided not to argue. I was too close to being released. Nodding in agreement, I smoothed my hands over the pants I’d confiscated. The scent of pine and citrus filled the air telling me that it was his bedroom I was in before and his clothes I wore now.

My wolf stirred in the back of my mind, urging me to snuggle into the clothes. *If you’re not going to help me, then you don’t get a say in what I do*, I reminded her. She’d been all too happy to obey Soren’s order and refuse to allow me to shift. I wasn’t thrilled about that.

“When I was twelve, my oldest brother Batu took a mate. He snuck into a neighboring pack’s village and stole her away in the middle of the night.”

Calder’s jaw flexed as he ground his teeth together. His eyes darkened with anger. I watched his reactions closely. He and his cadre might be good shifters, but how could I trust that? I didn’t know them and those I knew had been the worst of the worst. As far as I was concerned, good shifters were nothing but fairy tales. Even some of the women were showing signs of decay. I’d beaten a middle aged female to a pulp when I’d caught her dragging a sobbing omega back to her abusers. Maybe our kind deserved to die out if this was what they were capable of.

“When the head alpha came to bring her home, he’d been faced with my father’s most loyal warriors. Neither my father nor my brothers hold any honor. They don’t care that stealing away mates isn’t the way things are supposed to be done. The alpha had been forced to leave and Batu had his little plaything. At least, until she’d grown tired of the abuse and managed to escape a few months later.”

“Good for her.”

A genuine smile spread over my face. I may have only been a little girl at the time and certainly hadn’t known what I’d become, but even then, I couldn’t stand to see another harmed. The trip back to her village had taken us a few hours, but we’d made it. I’d warned her leaders to take her somewhere my brother couldn’t find her because if he did, he’d kill her.

My brothers had searched everywhere for her, but her pack had hidden her away well. I’d been young enough none of the suspicion had fallen on me and they’d finally let it go, agreeing that she must have made it back on her own.

“I met your father. And your brothers,” Calder told me. The hesitation in his tone was easy enough to hear. Most shifters had that kind of reaction when speaking about my family.

“I’m sorry you had the misfortune.”

He barked out a laugh, relaxing at my words. He crossed his arms over his chest again, coming close to hitting the bars in front of us. My heart gave a little leap at the thought of him being injured. It'd done the same when Soren had scalded his hands. It'd taken every ounce of will power I possessed to keep from insisting he let me see the injuries. Then he stripped and I about swallowed my tongue.

*What's wrong with me?* Was Soren right? Was being near them somehow working against my will? As a shifter I'd grown up seeing naked bodies on the regular. Never had the sight of a man sent sensations cascading through me, until now.

It was a good thing I was leaving soon. I made a promise to keep my females safe. I couldn't go back on that now. It didn't matter how handsome these men were or how good they smelled. It didn't matter that somehow they had me considering the idea of staying. No one had ever made me give serious thought to being mated before. If it was just me, I might have considered giving them a chance. I just didn't have that luxury. Not when so many were counting on me.

Calder's scent was driving me crazy. My wolf was awake, pacing inside of me, and I was having to fight the desire to brush against him. The silver bars were probably the only reason I wasn't, because my self-control was fading.

These were the types of sensations Mom had spoken of when she'd given our lessons. But the Moon Goddess didn't sanction claimings anymore. Not that I knew of. I hadn't seen a true mated pair or cadre in a year and a half on the run. They were all forced claims that didn't hold the Moon Goddess's blessing. Then again, I hadn't strolled into any pack's villages and searched either. Maybe it was just my fucked up pack—and a select other few—that were forcing women to live with them against their will.

Calder was watching me, almost as if he could hear my internal debate. It wasn't possible, though. Alphas could only bring a female into their mental connection once they were mated. Then through their cadre the head alphas of a pack could speak to all mated pairs. That was something that'd

pissed my grandfather and my dad off. They hadn't ever had the ability to form a mental link with their pack.

Mom always said it was because they shunned the Goddess, so she refused them the gift. I could see it. They were massive assholes. Killers. Unworthy. Grandfather was dead, but my dad had passed all his evilness on to his three sons. I considered myself lucky to have escaped his warped genes.

"I get it." His deep voice caught my attention. "If I had a family like yours, I wouldn't trust anyone either."

My lips twisted into a wry grin. "That's putting it mildly."

He nodded, his arms falling to his side. "What would you like for dinner?"

My brows drew together at the question. "Whatever you're having-"

"No. I want to know what *you* want. What's your favorite meal?"

The longing rose up within me again. I couldn't afford to trust these men, but the part of me that wanted to was growing. I had to get out of here.



## CHAPTER 8



### Calder

*I* was such a dick. She was staring at me, stunned into silence. We forced this woman to comply with our demands out there in the forest, locked her up, hoping she'd give in to the mating fever that was taking over us. But not one of us had realized the depth of hurt and mistrust that ran through her. She had every right to feel that way, considering who her family was.

Atlas was right. We had to let her go. It was fucking killing me. I hadn't admitted it to Soren and Atlas, but I wasn't immune to her. I had no real doubts that she was our mate. And the more I learned about her the more I understood her.

Meeting her father and brothers was one of the most unpleasant things I'd ever had to do. They'd been suspicious and downright nasty. That I could understand. I was an unmated shifter coming into their territory. If I had been a lesser alpha they might have killed me on the spot. The sight of their women and children slinking around in the shadows so as not to be noticed had nearly broken my heart. Women and pups should be given all the best a pack had to offer. These people had been skin and bones, covered in dirty sacks that were called clothes.

The Silvest Pack hadn't been highly respected before Lenat had begun the war between packs. His son taking over after his death didn't help matters. Haron was just as bad as his father was. Looked like once the pack passed on to the eldest

of Haron's sons, it would be more of the same. An endless cycle of abuse and greed.

“Spaghetti and meatballs. Garlic bread. And sweet corn.”

One side of my lips tipped up in amusement. “You eat corn with spaghetti?”

“If you mix it in with the noodles it gives the bite a nice crunch.”

There was no holding back the grin. “That sounds disgusting.”

She gave a haughty sniff. “Don't put it down until you try it.”

I chuckled. “Alright. I'll give it a try.”

She nibbled her full bottom lip as though she was trying to gather the courage to ask a question. This was the softest I'd seen her. She'd fought like a ferocious beast to protect her pack of females. At the time it irritated me. Now I was impressed by her. It couldn't have been easy for her to keep everyone safe. All the responsibility fell to her and she looked so young. I knew from talking with her family that she was nineteen. They refused to tell me what happened, but claimed she was dead. They scoffed at the rumors of a pack of female shifters living on their own. Men like that would never believe women could be resilient enough to survive by themselves.

“Could I see your village before I go?”

“Yes.” I didn't need to check with Soren. We'd do anything to keep her from leaving. After seeing where she grew up, I knew our home was going to leave her shell-shocked.

“I know first-hand what it's like to walk into this village after being on your own for so long.”

She gave me a curious look, but didn't comment. Only my cadre mates knew my story—and likely they'd told their parents—but this was my mate. If it would help her connect to me I didn't mind sharing. “When I was a kid, my parents took me and left our pack before they destroyed themselves. They

tried to talk sense into our head alphas, but no one would listen.”

“The war?” she asked, face a mask of shame and guilt.

I shook my head. “I’m older than you, Reese. I was seventeen when the war happened.”

I had to fight the urge to run my gaze over her body. She was standing near me voluntarily and I didn’t want to scare her off. Building trust was going to be paramount in getting her to take her place as our mate. It was the only reason we were letting her go.

“We’re seeing the effects of everyone turning away from the Goddess’s teachings, but it started back then. I was ten, and even I knew something was different.”

Her gray eyes were focused on me as she listened. Her scent curled around me, causing my stomach to knot up in lust. I didn’t have the self-control that Atlas did, but I did my best to keep my wolf under control. He was fighting to be let out so he could convince our mate that she belonged to us. None of our wolves were pleased with our decision regarding her. That was why it wasn’t smart to let our animal halves have much control. We let them out long enough to blow off steam while in wolf form, but most of the time, our human halves kept a close hold of the reins.

“We were doing fine, carving out a new life for ourselves, when a roving band of alphas came across our home. Mom told me to hide. At ten, I was a stubborn pup, but the fear in her eyes convinced me to listen.” I swallowed hard, pain flickering through me at the memories. The sounds of their death cries still woke me most nights.

“You were a kid,” Reese said, tone soft. “I know what it’s like to lose family. Only...I wasn’t a child.”

The shame had deepened in her expression. The grief in her eyes told me her pain was still fresh.

“What happened?”

Something flickered there in the gray depths and she averted her gaze. She turned away from me and whatever was

building between us broke down. “I need to get some sleep if I’m going to travel tonight.”

I wanted to push. To force her to open up to me. That would do more harm than good, so I left it alone. “I’ll be back to get you in an hour.” Turning, I left the room. Leaving her presence allowed my muscles to loosen, but still I wanted to go right back into that room. To hell with the uncomfortable emotions that were overwhelming me. I just wanted to be near her.

“Letting her go is going to be fucking painful,” I said as I walked back into Soren’s office.

My best friends—the men I considered brothers—both looked up at me with grins. They’d both been sitting, deep in thought. Now their gazes were focused on me.

“That didn’t take long,” Atlas replied with a chuckle.

Frowning, I sat next to him. “I was gone for at least thirty minutes,” I responded, unsure of what he was talking about.

“He means it didn’t take long for you to realize she’s our mate,” Soren said. He raked a hand through his black hair, making it stand up in sharp spikes. It wasn’t the first time he’d run his fingers through it today.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not an idiot. I knew she was ours at the same time you did.”

Atlas’s brows pulled low over his eyes. “Then why were you denying it before?”

“Just wanted to watch you freak out and try to convince me.” I gave him a wicked grin.

It was Atlas’s turn to roll his eyes. “You always have to cause trouble-”

“It’s my job. Soren is the responsible leader. You’re the peacekeeper-” I said, cutting him off.

“And you’re the trouble maker,” Atlas finished. We grinned at each other.

“You’re both pains in my ass,” Soren announced, looking over whatever document he was holding.

“We’re not actually letting her go out there alone...right?” I asked, ignoring Soren’s dig.

“Fuck no.” He set the paper down. “The Durset Pack leaders are arriving tomorrow morning.” Irritation flickered over his features. “My grandfathers could probably-”

“Soren,” Atlas warned. “This meeting is important. You’ve been working for over a month just to get them to agree to it.”

Sighing, Soren nodded. “Damn woman is already throwing a wrench into things.”

I laughed at the aggravation in his tone. “Something tells me that’s going to be a common theme with our mate. I’ll go,” I offered.

Neither looked thrilled. They both wanted to come with me. Keeping an eye on our mate had taken precedence over everything else for all of us. Unfortunately for them, Soren was the leader of this pack and Atlas was his second. They had duties that came before their own personal needs. No one would be offended if their third wasn’t at some meeting.

Even as important as it was, nothing would keep us from sending at least one of us to trail Reese. If anyone laid a claw or fang on her, their life would be forfeit.

“Thank you, Brother.”

I snorted. “No need to thank me. You’ll just be lucky if I don’t end up dragging her back here against her will. Again.”

“Something we all want to do,” Atlas said in agreement.

“You were right,” I admitted. Both of them looked surprised, but I kept going before they could comment. “She needs to come back to us of her own free will. I didn’t get a chance to give you a full report on what I found in her village.” I paused and gave Soren a dark look. “It wasn’t good. I wouldn’t want our worst enemy living there.” I recounted to them what I’d seen and heard.

“No wonder she doesn’t trust anyone,” he said, rubbing his hand over his short beard.

“This is why it’s so important to have her come back on her own. We quite literally can’t force her. She’s been through too much,” I said. “Her father and brothers are as fucking terrible as the rumors say.”

“I’d be more than happy to pay them a visit,” Atlas offered, cracking his knuckles.

“As much as I’d like to go take care of them myself, it isn’t time,” Soren told us in a grim tone. “We need to get enough of the packs on our side before we start that fight. Otherwise, everyone will think we’re trying to finish what Lenat started. Hopefully there’ll be enough packs left over afterward to stand against the humans. Because that fight will be next.”

“As if we’re anything like that fucking bastard,” I growled.

“To those who don’t know us? We could be. We need to repair some of the broken relationships between packs before we move forward with our plan.” Soren tapped a finger against the desk as he thought about everything that needed to be done.

That was why tomorrow’s meeting was so important. The Durset Pack was our closest neighbor. We’d been reaching out for months, trying to mend the broken bonds between the various mountain wolf packs. If we couldn’t convince our own brethren to trust us we were never going to succeed in convincing the plains and seaside wolves that the only way to move forward was in unity.

“I’ll take good care of her,” I promised.

Soren and Atlas both nodded. They knew they could count on me. Nothing would harm her while I was around.

## CHAPTER 9



**Reese**

I took a cautious step out of the cell and gave Calder a suspicious look.

“You didn’t think we were going to make you eat in there, did you?”

Shrugging my shoulders, I stayed quiet. That was exactly what I thought. It was what my father and brothers would have done. When Batu had taken Hannah, he’d kept her under lock and key for over a month. He’d driven a silver spike into the ground and left her chained in his hut.

Mom tried to convince him to release her. Eventually he’d gotten sick of her pleas. The first day I’d seen my eldest brother strike my mom was the day I learned that no male could be trusted. If he would do that to his own mother, then there were no limits. I knew I’d end up killing him one day. When my mom was murdered for protecting me, the entirety of my remaining family was put on my list to kill. One day, I’d find somewhere safe enough for my females. Then I’d take my revenge.

Even though I knew Mom wouldn’t fault me for having to wait, the guilt still weighed heavy on me. I forced the thoughts away and focused on the man in front of me. The urge to trust him was overwhelming, but I was angry at myself for wanting to.

He motioned for me to leave the room. My heart tripped in my chest. Was I fast enough to bolt and keep out of his grasp

long enough to escape into the woods? I was still wary of the fact that at any time they could go back on their word to release me. As soon as the door opened, my heart dropped. Soren and Atlas were waiting there for me.

I froze in my tracks, waiting to see what they'd do. Were they going to force a claiming on me? My breaths were coming in sharp little pants. I refused to acknowledge that it was partially from excitement.

I needed to have a sparring match with Emma as soon as possible. Work off some of this pent up energy. My body was rioting on me anytime these men were around. Whenever we fought, I always gave myself enough of a handicap that she had a fair chance. I'd let her beat the hell out of me once I got back to my pack. It was what I deserved. What I needed to get my mind back into the game and my emotions untwisted.

"We wanted to show you the village before it got dark," Atlas said, breaking the silence. He gave me a big smile, showing off pearly white teeth.

I'd have to watch him. He was sneaky. It would be easy to end up liking him thanks to his laid back nature. *You're not in the market for mates.* I was going to have to keep reminding myself of that fact for the next few hours while in close proximity to these males.

"Thank you," I replied.

Soren offered his arm, and though I could see him stiffen when I stared at it in distrust, he didn't say anything. He waited until I'd made up my mind.

The zip of sensation when my skin touched his was like a shock and I couldn't help but gasp in surprise. A muscle in his jaw flexed as he stared down at me, his dark cloudy eyes deepening in color. None of them said a word. It was as though they realized I was moments away from bolting like a scared rabbit. It didn't matter that I was an alpha. I was still a woman and right now desire was pounding at my defenses. Never had I thought I'd experience sensations like these. Maybe this was the Goddess's way of telling me my



assumptions about mates were wrong. Maybe she was still here with us.

Soren started walking. I kept up with him, admiring their home as we went. It certainly wasn't the huts I'd grown up in.

"My great-great grandparents had it built."

Jerking in surprise, I looked up at Soren's stoic face. His deep voice wrapped around me like silk. Longing welled up inside of me and my wolf begged me to rub against him. I refrained, though it took a lot more control than I would have expected.

"It's beautiful," I commented.

"My grandparents live on the first floor," he continued as we started down the stairs.

I glanced up, noticing the huge skylights that allowed sunshine to stream into the house. "I wish I could sit right here during a storm."

Atlas's chuckle made me realize I'd said that out loud. "It's an impressive sight."

Flushing at the warm smile he sent me, I looked away quickly. "If your grandparents live down here and you live upstairs, where do your parents stay?"

Soren's arm flexed beneath my hand, all but turning to stone as he stiffened. A grim look flashed over his face before he let the blank mask fall over his expression once more. "They're dead."

"I'm so sorry." Pain like the kind when you lose a parent was long lasting. I knew all about it.

"My parents live in their own home a few houses down," Atlas offered, breaking the uncomfortable, sullen silence that descended.

We stepped out onto the porch and I sucked in a deep breath of fresh air. Their scents were filling my head with all sorts of fantasies. My body was on fire and the only one touching me was Soren. My nipples were tight and aching

beneath my stolen shirt. I took another pull of cold, crisp air. A storm was rolling in.

The sun was descending in the sky. Soon I'd be on my way back to my pack. My friends. My wolf curled up inside my mind, pouting at the thought. She'd always been on board about protecting the others. All it had taken was these three to step into my life and suddenly she and I were at odds. I didn't care for it.

"Wow." The word came out in wonder. There were neat rows of wooden homes lining the huge meadow where their village sat. A small lake was nearby and the entire meadow was surrounded by thick vegetation and trees. It was the perfect spot.

Birds chirped and squirrels chased each other from tree to tree nearby. I smiled at their antics. Little boys played in the paths between houses, kicking around a leather ball. I froze when a woman opened her front door and a little girl went running out, pigtails bouncing.

"You have-" Everything. They had everything I'd ever wanted. The women strolling by were calling out to each other and smiling. The children were giggling as they played. This place seemed safe. And most importantly, as men and women passed by, they called out to their lead alphas. They seemed happy, safe, and content. It was so different from the village I grew up in.

Soren's arm dropped and he wrapped his fingers around the back of my neck. "Breathe, Reese."

I sucked in air, unaware that I'd been holding my breath until he mentioned it. His fingers singed my skin, but I ignored the sensations. My eyes darted around, wanting to see everything all at once.

A man limped past, pausing and giving me a knowing smile. My eyes widened as I recognized him as the wolf who'd caught up to me and my pack. The wolf I'd fought. My gaze dropped down to the wound on his leg. My bite had been deep enough that it hadn't healed immediately. A day or two, and a few more shifts, and it would be gone.

“You remember Drew,” Soren said, amusement coloring his tone.

I gave Drew a guilty smile. At the time I thought I was fighting for our lives, so I refused to apologize. That didn't mean I didn't feel bad for injuring the man. He dipped his head and chest in a bow toward us before he continued on his way.

“It's different from your home,” Calder said, his tone soft.

I turned my head and stared at him. “It is.”

“In more ways than one,” he said, his eye brows lifting in emphasis. “You can trust us, Reese.”

Looking away from his blue eyes, mine swept the village. Vera was walking toward us, speaking with another woman. They were deep in conversation and hadn't noticed us yet. Everyone looked so...relaxed. *You can trust them. They have children here, happy children.* I hadn't seen giggling, smiling faces since I was a child. And even then, it was almost always when we visited another pack. There weren't too many happy shifters living within The Silvest Pack.

My day to day focus was always protecting and providing for my pack of females. But the longing was there, every day. The longing for mates, for children of my own. My father had done his best to squash that dream as early as possible, but it was still there somewhere deep inside me. They lived that dream here. It was possible.

“How do you feed so many?” I asked, trying to get their attention off me. Their stares were boring into the sides of my face and it was making me squirm. I wasn't used to this much attention from males. At least not once they figured out what I was.

“The forest provides plenty of game to hunt,” Soren said as he dropped his hand from my neck.

We started walking again. As soon as they focused on something other than me I was relieved. Vera waved and I lifted my hand and repeated the gesture.

“We store the food we’ll need during the winter time, though there is still usually some game around. We keep the population under control, we hold competitions to see who gets to hunt, but we share the spoils of the hunt with everyone.” Atlas continued. He pointed to a building surrounded on all sides by homes. “Would you like to see the cold storage area?”

“Sure.” This was fascinating. Maybe I could learn a few things from these wolves. I’d been planning on heading back to the plains for the winter. The weather there was much more mild and we’d be able to find more food.

I looked down in surprise when the door to the cold storage opened. There were stairs, descending down into the dark. “How deep does it go?”

“About fifteen feet,” Atlas said from directly behind me. His hand landed on my back, gently nudging me forward.

Grabbing the rail, I felt around with my foot until I found the next step. There were no windows in here and it was pitch black. All the cracks and crevices must have been sealed off with mud and moss. A cracking sound came from behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder as Soren lit a torch. He handed it forward to Atlas.

“Keep going.”

I gave Atlas a dubious look, but moved down the stairs now that the torch lit up the area. Once I made it to the bottom, I made room for the others.

There were wooden shelves lined up against the wall and almost all were full. Even with as big of a pack as they had, they weren’t going to starve this winter.

“We hold our competitions in the spring to select the hunters, then we send them out each day, starting near the end of summer.” Soren said from directly behind me. “The competition keeps our alphas content and allows us to assess everyone’s skills from year to year.”

Crossing my arms over my chest to help keep my body heat in, I studied their stores and pointed at the vegetables.

“You have gardens?”

“Down by the lake.”

My heart skipped a beat as Soren’s warm breath hit the back of my neck. He was standing even closer now. My body tingled and I had to fight the urge to step backward and press myself against him. It was cool down here, but I was sure that wasn’t the reason my nipples were once again hard. Every nerve ending pricked and I pressed my thighs together to help relieve the sudden ache between them.

“What’s wrong, Little One?”

I swallowed hard at the husky tone of his voice. “Nothing.”

“You sure?”

“Yes,” I squeaked. I had no idea why my body was going haywire. *Liar, you’re in a confined space with the hottest guys you’ve ever met.* It hadn’t been smart for me to come down here with them. Their scents combined and with every shaky breath, I was dragging more of their pheromones into my lungs.

When large hands gripped my hips, I didn’t need to turn to know it was Soren. I was at the back of the storage room and he had me pinned there. Turning, I looked past him and found his cadre mates watching with half lidded eyes. All three of them were staring at me like they wanted to eat me. And I wanted to let them.

Soren moved a step closer, making his chest brush against the aching tips of my breasts. My hands shot up and landed on him. He dropped his own arms down to his sides, though his fingers curled into fists as though it was painful to let me go. The heat from his body nearly burned me through his shirt. I wasn’t pushing him away, but it did keep him from feeling how rigid my nipples had become.

I didn’t want him knowing the effect he was having on me. What if he changed his mind about letting me go?

Calder sniffed the air, looking so much like his wolf counterpart I wondered if he was about to shift. My wolf was

paying close attention and she'd steal any opportunity to wrest control away from me. I was sure their wolves were doing the same.

“Fuck you smell so good, Reese,” Calder groaned.

Atlas licked his lips, his eyes glued to me.

Frowning, I gave a subtle sniff, but I smelled like I always did. It wasn't like I could smell much over their scents anyway. Pine, leather, smoke, and other woody scents kept battering at me, wearing down the walls I tried to erect around myself.

“So fucking wet,” Soren growled. It was a low, vibrating sound, again making me wonder how close they were to losing control.

“Wet?” I asked, confused. Then my eyes widened. I didn't have much experience. That one, drunken affair had been it and the male hadn't exactly been thorough. I hadn't even gotten wet for him, which he fixed by spitting on his dick.

That wasn't the case now. Rubbing my thighs together experimentally, I realized my pussy was dripping wet. How had that happened? Seriously, only Soren had touched me and only on my hips.

“What's happening to me?” I whispered. It didn't matter if I was giving away the fact that I was hopelessly aroused by them. They could clearly smell it.

Soren stepped in closer and I allowed it, my hands dropping down to his abs. I just rested them there. His head lowered to mine and his sharp teeth nipped my ear before he spoke. It sent a jolt of pleasure through my system. “Your body is responding to your mates. Ready you so we can claim you.”

I was panting, yearning for the feel of his hands on my skin. Desire thumped a rhythm inside my clit and I dropped my head back to rest on the shelf behind me.

Soren's lips brushed over my jaw and down my neck. A line of fire seared through my veins as he licked the pulse point that fluttered against my skin. His hands slid up my

sides, taking my shirt with them. Cool air brushed my belly. When his thumbs brushed the undersides of my breasts, I jerked. There was nowhere to go. His body was pinning mine to the shelves.

His hand cupped my breast, the thumb strumming over my nipple and I couldn't hold back the groan that worked its way up from my chest. His other hand zipped back down over my hip, grasping my thigh. He tugged, pulling my leg up to wrap around his hip so he could settle between them. He pressed closer and I gasped, staring into eyes that were so dark they were almost black.

His hard-on pressed against my pussy. Our clothes were barely a barrier between us. He must have seen the panic in my eyes because his lips were on mine before I had the chance to say anything.

His tongue invaded my mouth, taking with it any semblance of organized thoughts. His lips were softer than I'd imagined they'd be, his body hard as stone against mine.

I grasped his biceps, using his body to keep my balance as he slowly started grinding against me. His tongue and hips worked in unison, ratcheting my pleasure higher. I was gasping into his mouth with each movement, lost to sensations.

Soren let go of my breast, my shirt falling back into place and suddenly I was airborne. He'd grabbed my other thigh and lifted me. Automatically, my legs wrapped around his trim hips to keep myself from falling.

"You taste as good as you smell," he said, taking my mouth in another searing kiss.

In the new position, my pussy was open and vulnerable to every movement. I knew the others could smell how much wetter I'd become. The leather pants I was wearing were soaked between the legs with my arousal.

The shelving dug into my back, adding a layer of pain to the pleasure that was bombarding me. It didn't detract from the sensations, just pushed me higher.

One of Soren's hands was now on my ass, helping to hold me up and the other yanked my shirt up. He broke off the kiss and dipped his head. His lips closed over my nipple and I cried out as his tongue licked over it.

My breathing was harsh in the quiet of the room. The flickering torch was throwing shadows everywhere, but I could see Atlas and Calder, watching, hands on their cocks over their pants.

Soren sucked hard, causing my hips to buck against his. A low moan ripped from my throat and I threw my head back in ecstasy. Pain sent bright lights skittering over my vision as my head hit the top shelf of the storage racks.

I sucked in a breath and grabbed the back of my head. Soren had frozen for a brief moment, then suddenly I was back on my feet. He spun me around, making everything wobble as he did.

"Are you hurt?" His hands were brushing over my scalp, gentle, yet probing.

Putting out a hand, I pushed him away. Embarrassment made my cheeks flame. "I'm fine." I sidestepped when he tried to grab me again. They were all watching me with narrowed eyes, but they didn't try to touch me again. My head wound was enough to snap me out of whatever hold he had on me.

My hands were shaking as I smoothed the shirt down. He'd managed to overwhelm any objections I had without any effort at all. It wasn't safe for me to stay here with them. Not if I wanted to get back to my pack.

"Can we go back?" I was proud that my voice didn't tremble. My wolf grumbled at me, angry that playtime was over. My body was on board; I just couldn't allow it to happen. If they fucked me, they'd end up claiming me. After my reaction to them, I was beginning to doubt my assumptions that no shifters were claiming their mates with the Moon Goddess's blessing. I'd never reacted to anyone like I was to them. If any of them touched me right now my resistance would crumble.



“Of course,” Soren said with a nod of his head.

I skirted around him, heading for the stairs. When Atlas held out his hand to help me up, I ignored it and hurried up into the late afternoon sunlight.

## CHAPTER 10



### Soren

Tapping my finger on the dining room table, I watched as Hatti and Gail put the delicious meal they'd cooked onto the table. The older women insisted on cooking for our family—as well as their own—every day. They always said it was their way of contributing to our pack. We were certainly grateful as none of us could cook much. Grams always took care of it when the other women were unable to, but as the pack's historian she had an important task that kept her too busy to tend to the task often.

I put her in charge, years ago, of seeing whether she could figure out what was going on with our declining birth rates, the Moon Goddess, or anything that could help us reunite the shifter packs.

Grams smiled and thanked the women as they quickly hurried out of the room. My grandfathers were sitting on either side of her and kept passing each other looks. It was taking everything for my Grandpa Seren—who I'd been named after—to keep his mouth shut. He had a wide, shit-eating grin on his face.

Reese met his gaze and straightened in her seat. It was my turn to grin and exchange a look with Atlas. Our mate was no withering flower. As uncomfortable as this dinner was, she was holding her own as far as energy was concerned.

“What's your name?” Grandpa Ezra asked.

“Reese.”

“Reese what?” Grandpa Grant demanded. “Who are your people?”

Her eyes slid over to me, pleading, before she finally answered. The secret would come out sooner or later.

“Reese Silvest.”

My grandfathers froze, their eyes landing on me. My hand fisted around the knife I was holding.

“Did you know this?” Grant barked. I’d gotten my personality from him. Brusque and straight to the point.

“Yes.” Arching a brow at him, I dared him to continue. He might be my grandfather, but I was the leader of this fucking pack.

“Grant,” Grams said, laying a hand on his forearm. Her soothing didn’t work.

“Lenat Silvest-”

“Was one of the worst men I ever had the displeasure of meeting,” Reese said, cutting him off. “I say that because his son Haron is even worse. And *his* sons-”

“Are your brothers,” Seren pointed out, though much more gently than Grant would have.

“They’re *murderers*. Evil. I plan to kill them all one day.” Her chin tipped up, fury blazing in her eyes. “I’m only sorry I didn’t get the chance to kill my grandfather as well.”

“You couldn’t have been more than a pup when he started that war,” Ezra said, giving Grant a dark look. “None of that was your fault and no one here will hold your family’s misdeeds against you.”

Silence fell. Grandpa Ezra was waiting. Grant sighed and grumbled. “He’s right. No one will.”

“Thank you.”

My heart clenched in my chest at the pain in her voice. She tried to hide it, but this wasn’t the first time she’d had to face those who hated her family and lumped her in with them.

“You really planning on killing them?” Seren asked, cursing when Grams kicked him beneath the table.

“Yes.”

We all looked over at her. The determination in her tone was firm and sharp. I didn't envy Haron or his sons. If it was only Reese coming for them, it would be bad enough. Now she had the three of us watching her back. Haron would deal with us as a mated cadre. And he would lose.

“Good for you,” Grant replied. It wasn't hard to miss the admiration that had replaced the hostility.

Pride that my mate had stood up to my grandfather and won his respect made me smirk at Grant. He shot me his middle finger and I barked out a laugh.

Reese looked over at me, startled. She was so surprised, I couldn't help but chuckle again.

Atlas leaned over and whispered to her. “I know he looks like a grumpy asshole, but he does laugh every now and again.” He made sure to say it loud enough for all of us to hear.

Shaking my head at him, I swirled spaghetti onto my fork. It had been our mate's request. I doubt they had luxuries like pasta, living on the run as they were. She'd looked at the vegetables we had in the storage cellar and nearly drooled. Shifters could live on an all meat diet, thanks to our wolves, but it didn't mean you didn't long for more.

It was taking all my self-control to keep from tossing Reese over my shoulder and going upstairs so we could finish what I started earlier today. My wolf was gnashing his teeth, pleading to be released, convinced he could persuade her to stay.

I promised her I'd release her. It was hard not to regret that promise now. She was so responsive to us, I knew that within a few days she'd bow to the Goddess's will and allow us to claim her. Then we could go together to get her pack and bring them here.

*No. We can't. She'll hate us if we allow things to play out in that way.*

Glaring over at Atlas I snarled at him through our link. *Stay out of my head.*

*Then stop projecting your thoughts at us.* That came from Calder. He looked like he was enjoying my loss of control. The fucker probably was. He was usually the one raining down chaos and now it seemed like I might be the problem.

Grams cleared her throat and gave us all a warning look. My mother had always admonished us that it wasn't polite to speak privately in front of others. We'd found each other so young that we were able to mind link from the time we were kids. It was a giant pain in the ass for my parents as they tried to teach us any semblance of manners.

"I'd love to hear more about what you've found out about the Moon Goddess, Vera," Reese said, taking a bite of one of the meatballs on her plate. She paused then let out a decadent moan. "Wow. This is amazing."

Atlas's jaw was hanging down as he stared at her. Calder was clenching his teeth, and I was sure I was doing the same as we all watched her. The noise she'd just made reminded me of those from earlier when I'd been grinding my cock against her and sucking on her nipple.

My grandfathers all cleared their throats at the same time. Reese looked at them in confusion, but my cadre mates and I took the hint and dropped our gazes. I shifted in my chair, trying to ease the pressure of my throbbing dick. Letting her go after getting a taste of her was going to be pure fucking torment.

"Thank you, Dear," Vera said, breaking the awkward silence. She gave me a sharp look, reminding me to behave. I was seconds away from acting like the beast she knew lurked within me. "I'll be sure to pass it on to the other women. They'll be thrilled you enjoyed it."

I watched as she and my grams discussed the Moon Goddess. My appetite was gone. At least for the dinner sitting

in front of me. My fingers drummed against the table as I studied my mate.

Grams had given her some clothes from one of the bigger beta females that lived in the village. The shirt was a bit small for her, and it left her belly bare, molding against her breasts. The pants were just as tight over her delectable ass. The black leather brought out the golden hue of her skin and I wanted to do nothing more than strip her out of those clothes.

As sexy as she was, our mate was intelligent as well. Smart, strong, protective, she embodied everything an alpha should, only she was wrapped up in this tempting, mouth-watering package. How was I supposed to resist her?

“Soren,” Atlas muttered from my left side. Calder was next to him and the fucker was grinning from ear to ear.

“What?” I realized everyone had fallen quiet and was staring at me.

“Any reason you’re growling?” Atlas asked.

Ignoring them, I motioned for Grams to continue talking while I pulled myself together.

“As I was saying,” Grams said with a look of amusement in my direction, “I read something quite interesting. In one of the old texts the Cirdan Pack loaned me, I found mention of a woman who lives nearby. No one knows her name and the few who tried to visit were quickly driven from her home. It’s unusual for one of our kind to live alone, especially a female. To go unclaimed for decades... It might be worth checking out.”

“I’m amazed any of the plains wolves gave you their tomes,” Reese said, leaning forward. She had pushed her plate aside, finished with her meal, and now her breasts were resting on the table.

I rubbed my jaw, my beard scratching over my palm. This female was going to kill us all. Atlas was staring at the ceiling, clearly praying for patience. Calder was staring at her tits in a resigned manner.

Grams leaned around Seren and smacked Calder's knuckles with her fork.

"Ow! What the-" He swallowed the rest of that statement under Gram's glare. "Sorry," he muttered.

Reese lifted her hand to her mouth and let out the most adorable laugh I'd ever heard. My head turned slowly to the right and I stared at her. This was the first time I'd heard her giggle. She sounded so happy and...free. If only I could make her understand that I could give that to her each day. Maybe then I could convince her to stay with us.

## CHAPTER 11



**Reese**

**M**y heart squeezed inside my chest. The three men who claimed to be my mates stood on their porch as the sun sank down below the trees. They were holding to their promise and letting me go.

Soren's face was dark and grim. He looked like he wanted to throttle me. They made it very clear that they didn't really want me to leave, and if I was being honest a part of me still wanted to stay. In fact, that part of me had grown as I spent the day with them.

That didn't change the fact that I had responsibilities. People counting on me. I couldn't let them down. I gave the guys a quick nod, turned, and walked away.

Even though I was used to nudity, I didn't want to undress in front of them. Something told me that would be too much for any of us to take. I hurried past the rows of houses. Their villagers were nestled inside their homes, likely eating their own suppers before they wound down for bed.

As soon as I stepped into the shadow of the trees, I shed my borrowed clothing and tied the ends of the pants together so it could be carried. Shifting to fight Soren and his pack destroyed my other clothes. These would make due until I could find someone to make me some that fit better.

My wolf came forward, finally ready to obey me now that Soren had taken his command not to shift off her. My body bent and twisted, bones cracking, fur sprouting, as I changed.



It all happened so fast there were only brief flashes of pain. They were forgotten as soon as the animal was loose. Turning my shaggy head back toward the village, I let out a long howl.

Those men had not only spared my life, but returned my freedom to me. That in itself gave me warm feelings toward them. Men who kept their promises were new for me. I had to admit, I liked it. It went a long way toward proving that there were still honorable shifters amongst us.

Still my heart cracked a little as I picked my bundle of clothing and shoes up into my maw and began to run. It shouldn't have been possible for them to have woven themselves into the fabric of my being so quickly, but as I ate up the miles with my long strides, I knew it was true.

That was also proof of their words. Our Goddess still bestowed some form of mating bond upon us. It was weakening with every year that passed, according to Vera, but I knew without a doubt that it was the truth.

I ignored the pain splintering through my head as I ran from the males who I now acknowledged—if only internally—as my mates. My eyes darted from left to right, keeping an eye out for shifters and humans alike. Now that I was free from the safety of the village I had to be vigilant to attack again. Though it had been refreshing to let down my guard for a short while, it was time to get back to my pack.

It took a few hours before I made it to the bog. My lip lifted in disgust, catching on my tooth as the stench filled my nostrils. My bones creaked—aching and throbbing—as I made my way through the tiny dry path that meandered through the bog.

Emma and I had searched this area for weeks after we'd gotten to the mountains. We'd made our friends trek through the foul smelling area as well, so they could learn the route we wanted them to take to safety should we be discovered.

A growl split the night air and my hackles rose at the challenge. My snarl answered, and the silence that followed was thick. Then it was broken by an excited yip. I side stepped as the huge furry body rushed at me. Emma stumbled, but

managed to catch herself before toppling into the putrid water surrounding us.

She turned and we butted heads together in greeting. This wasn't the place to shift to our human forms. There was time enough for that, and catching up, once we reunited with the rest of the women. We loped together along the path until the rock cliff that had been off to our left was directly overhead.

Emma waited until I ducked under some brush and entered the cave, then followed behind me. The walls were tight around my body as I bellied my way through the tunnel shaft. Soon enough it opened up and I was able to stand.

“Reese!”

The cries rang out, bouncing off the walls. I shifted just in time to catch Clover in my arms. Her girlish giggles were happy and light as we embraced. The others crowded around, asking question after question.

“Give her some room to breathe,” Emma commanded and they scooted back.

I took the opportunity to slip into the clothing that Vera had given to me. The men's combined scents from where the clothes had brushed against them wafted up to my nose and my belly spasmed. I'd been fighting the pain of leaving them the entire way here. Mom had taught us about the effects on wolves when they were separated from their mates. After the claiming it wasn't nearly as bad, according to the old legends, but if the males hadn't completed the ceremony it was excruciating for all involved.

Already it was as though someone was piercing my flesh with a hot poker, over and over again. It wasn't pleasant. Vera's words were true. There were still females—omegas and betas—who were happy to be claimed by their cadres. The only reason I thought it was all lies was because I hadn't witnessed any true claimings. The Goddess had seen fit to give me the proof I required. I just wished it wasn't so damn painful.

“What happened?” Clover asked as I sat down by the fire.

Emma handed me the cooked leg of a rabbit, almost as if she'd known I was returning tonight and had saved it for me. She took her seat beside me. There was a sea of curious faces watching me. I told them about the fight and waking up in the alphas' home. I relayed what Vera told me about our Goddess. Their eyes kept getting wider and wider as I continued with my story.

"They put you in a cage?" Harper asked, outrage plain on her face.

"It was more of a cell than a cage," I replied, "but yes."

"They sound awful," Clover declared.

I looked over at Emma and sighed. "They're my mates."

Jaws dropped and a bunch of questions were lobbed my way. Holding up my hand, I quieted them, but I couldn't help but laugh at their reactions.

"I didn't believe it at first, but it's true." The look I gave Emma was rueful. "Remember how Mom used to give us daily lessons on the Moon Goddess as kids?"

She gave me a soft, wistful smile. She'd loved my mother almost as much as I had. Emma's mother was killed when she was just a little girl. Her father didn't have much use for a daughter, so he pretended she didn't exist. Mom took over and cared for Emma. We'd been inseparable ever since.

"My bones feel like they're breaking," I admitted. "My heart is on fire." I set the meat she'd given me aside, unable to eat.

She shook her head, her dark hair flashing in the firelight. "I thought it was all a myth. We haven't seen any signs of a true claiming in...ever."

"I know," I told her. "Trust me. I didn't want to believe it either. But the things I was feeling for—" Looking over, I caught Clover hanging onto every word, wide-eyed. I cleared my throat. "I'll tell you about that later," I muttered. It wasn't anything Clover needed to hear. She was still young enough to be innocent. I wanted to keep it that way as long as possible.

“So you think the Goddess is back?” Daisy asked, excitement in her voice.

“According to these alphas and Vera, she’s not, but alpha’s abilities to sense their mates are still there. Though they diminish every year.”

“And...you don’t think they’re lying?” Emma asked. Her suspicion made me love her even more. We were so much alike in that regard. Most of the omegas in front of us looked hopeful. They were made to love and breed with alphas. It’s what they wanted, but they’d been taught not to trust men. Having a violent reality clash with your instincts is not something anyone should have to endure.

Here I was telling them everything they wanted to hear. And if I were being honest it was what Emma and I wanted as well. We’d just given up hope on ever finding loving mates. The fact this pack was true to their word, and was so big, was a huge positive. So many unmated alphas. It was like a bright shining beacon of hope for all of us.

“I really don’t,” I told her. “They let me go, Em. Knowing that I’d come back to you and take not only their mate away from them, but ten other women who could be potential mates to their lesser alphas.” One side of my mouth tipped up in a smile. “What do you think?” I asked, seeking her opinion.

“No wolf I’ve ever known would do such a thing.”

“Me either,” I agreed. Sighing, I met her eyes. “I need you to tell me the truth. For all I know I’m so caught up in their spell I could be doing the worst thing imaginable, but... I think we should go back.”

“All of us?” Clover asked, looking between us.

“Yes,” I said, eyes still on Emma. “You’re my voice of reason, Em. Is it crazy?”

“Do you think they were telling you what you wanted to hear?” she asked with a frown.

“Why play games? They could have kept me locked up. They would have eventually found this place and could have easily dragged you all back to their village. They released me,

knowing there was a chance we'd disappear and they'd never find us."

Emma scratched her cheek, her eyes falling to the fire as she thought it through. "I think you're probably right. We should go. It'll be safer for all of us. If they prove to be monsters, we'll leave again. But maybe we wait a day or two. Make sure you're thinking straight?"

"Probably not a bad idea," I admitted. "They managed to completely change my mind about *some* alphas and claimings in only a handful of hours. It's wise to wait and make sure that it's not some kind of trick, or...something."

The relief on the women's faces told both of us that we were doing the right thing. We were all sick of running. Of merely surviving. This was our one chance to possibly have a home again. That was another reason to take the time Emma suggested. We all wanted this enough that we might overlook some glaring red flags.

"And I'm really interested in seeing if we can help Vera find out what's going on with the Moon Goddess," Emma added.

"You and me both. Our kind is in serious trouble." I pulled my hair back into a low ponytail, tying it with a spare piece of leather that Emma passed over to me. "Between the declining birth rates, our war with the humans, and constantly being at each other's throats, if we don't do something we won't last long."

"When will we go to the village?" Harper asked. She'd been elected as a spokesperson of sorts by the other women. That was fine by me, it meant I only had to answer questions once and the omega had a good head on her shoulders.

"We'll go in three days' time, at first light," I told them.

"That's going to make for a few miserable days for you," Emma commented.

"I know. And it's safer to travel in the darkness, but I don't want to show back up at their village in the middle of the night. The last thing we need is some lesser alpha getting

jumpy and forcing me to fight him.” Emma snorted out a laugh and I arched a brow at her in question.

“Sorry. Just picturing us showing up and asking to be taken in, then having you toss an unconscious alpha at their feet.”

We both laughed at the mental image. “I think that’s giving me a bit too much credit.”

She shook her head and gave me a look of disbelief. “I don’t think you realize how strong you are, Reese. You never fight if we can run, which I totally understand. But I think if you fought more, you’d see that you’re not so easy to defeat.”

I patted her shoulder and gave her a smile. She was always building me up. It was possible she was right, but for the sake of my little pack, I tried to avoid conflict. If I fought the wrong wolf and was killed, they’d all suffer. I couldn’t allow that.

“Get some sleep,” I told everyone. “We’ll start making preparations to move in three days’ time.”

## CHAPTER 12



### Reese

“Are you going to let those alphas claim you, Reese?”

I looked down at Clover’s eager face. “What do you know of claiming?”

Emma snickered at my predicament. The last thing I needed was to explain to this young girl the sexual acts that happened during claimings.

“My mama told me all about them.”

“Really?”

Clover heard the doubt in the word. “I’m an omega.” She gave me a soft smile. “Mama wanted to make sure I knew what to expect. She told me about heats, ruts, *and* knotting.”

Emma and I both stopped abruptly in our tracks, staring at her in shock. The rest of our pack was following behind us. We were all carrying our supplies, so we walked slowly along through the forest. It would take days to get back to The Venat Pack’s village at this pace.

I gave the air a gentle sniff. My nose wasn’t as sensitive in human form, but it was still sharp. The wind was swirling from behind us, mostly all I could smell was my pack.

“How old were you when she told you of those things?” Emma asked.

“Eight.”

My jaw dropped. “Usually mothers don’t tell their pups about such things until they present.”

“She knew I would be an omega since she was and I was so little as a child.” She had a typical omega build. She was graceful and willowy. Her blonde hair was so light it was almost as white as the snow.

*I should have Em shift so that we have a strong nose. We’re heading to safety, but I shouldn’t relax too much.*

It was impossible to turn off the constant vigilance after so much time on the run. Even when speaking with the others, I was always scanning, always worrying.

“That’s still very young to tell you about such things,” I told her, turning my attention back to the conversation. I wasn’t judging her mother. Our kind did whatever they needed to in order to survive and keep their children safe. That being said, I couldn’t imagine telling an eight-year-old that when she came of age her body would go into heat in order to attract alphas. That it would cause her immense pain unless those alphas helped her through it. And the only way for them to help would be for them to fuck their omega over and over again until the heat passed. That they would tip into their rut and be nearly as mindless as she was. That they would fuck each other to death unless they had others who cared about them enough to bring them food and water.

That was one of the reasons cadres had been formed. With three or four males there was someone who might have a brief moment of lucidity where they could make sure to look after their omega and cadre mates before they were overtaken once more. Well, that and the fact that there weren’t enough females for our kind to pair off anymore.

“Do alphas really have a knot at the base of their-” she broke off when a wolf jumped into the path in front of us.

His teeth were bared, his barrel chest heaving as though he’d been running for miles. Saliva dripped from his mouth down toward the ground.



*Fuck. I knew better, but now it's too late. So love struck that I got lazy.*

I reached out an arm and gently shoved Clover behind me. “Emma.”

She shot me a glare. “I can help.”

“You can help by getting them out of here.” It was an old argument between us.

Four more wolves slunk onto the path behind their leader. Something told me that wouldn't be the last of them.

“You have to get them out of here-” I broke off when the man in front of us shifted.

His eyes flicked between Emma and I. He inhaled, head moving around as he caught our scents. “You're an alpha.”

Shit. He figured that out too quickly. “We're under the protection of Soren Venat.” It was a desperate ploy. They were already trespassing, they wouldn't care.

His smile was more of a snarl, a gnashing of teeth. “Fuck Soren Venat. He doesn't get to claim a group of omegas without a fight.”

My muscles tensed as I prepared. Soren wasn't here to fight him. If I wanted to protect my females, I was going to have to fight in his place. I had kept my women safe by mostly avoiding fights, but these males were sorely mistaken if they thought that I couldn't. More wolves materialized out of the woods, surrounding us. They cut off Emma and the others' retreat.

I couldn't worry about that now. There were at least fifteen wolves. I was so outnumbered it was going to be a bloodbath if I fought them. But going with them meant my pack of females would be the ones who suffered.

Without giving the shifter in front of me a chance to prepare, I shifted and lunged at his throat. My body hit him with all the power I could gain with my single leap. It, plus my body weight in wolf form, was enough to knock him back a step. My jaws closed around his neck and I clamped down. He

was still in human form. His neck crumpled beneath my strong jaws with a satisfying crunch.

Blood spilled against my tongue and my wolf gave a happy growl. I shook my head, allowing my fangs to sink deeper. Once they made it past the muscle they slid through his windpipe like butter and I jerked backward.

His limp body fell to the ground. I stood, head low, eyes darting from wolf to wolf. My wolf and I were both on high alert. I was hoping that by killing their leader the rest would put a stop to the fighting.

Deep inside, I knew better. My pack was too valuable to let that stop these males. The deranged look in their eyes confirmed they were beyond reason. Angry snarls sounded around us. A quick glance backward and I saw four alphas herding my pack off into the forest, while the remaining nine stayed to deal with me. They wouldn't have left so many if they didn't consider me a threat, but since I'd just killed the shifter in front of me within seconds they weren't taking any chances.

Teeth tore at my haunches forcing me to whirl around to face the attack coming from behind. They were matching my energy. There wouldn't be any fighting with honor. I didn't have the luxury being outnumbered nine-to-one and they didn't have the morals. These wolves weren't like Soren, Atlas, and Calder.

Snapping at the wolves behind me, I turned slowly in a circle trying to come up with a plan. I didn't like that my girls were out of my sight, but now that they were it made it easier on me. There was no reason to stick around where the wolves ambushed us.

I darted between two brown wolves and took off in the direction they'd taken my pack. If I could use my speed to separate some of these males, I'd have more of a chance. I'd only managed to get about a quarter mile away before a wolf appeared beside me. He glared over at me and I saw the intent in his gaze.

Putting the brakes on hard, I skidded to a stop and he tumbled out in front of me. His tail flew through the air. He'd gone to snap at my front leg, but since it wasn't there anymore, he'd stumbled. I snickered as I watched him bounce across the ground.

My wolf was screaming at me. I was defaulting to my usual run and hide technique. We were beyond that. This was Armageddon. They had my pack. They were going to enslave them and kill me. My wolf was right, it was time.

I lunged at the tumbling wolf, shifting to human as I did so. I grabbed his hind legs with either hand and pulled in opposite directions, breaking his legs. His howl was as loud as it was pitiful. I dropped his legs and lifted him by the scruff of his neck and the fur above his ass.

Turing to face the next wolves closing on me, I raised their limp friend in the air and brought him slamming down onto my knee. My knee vibrated with the shattering of his spine. I dropped the lifeless rug and shouted, "You want my pack! You'll have to kill me first!"

The two didn't get a chance to respond before I launched myself at them, turning back into a wolf mid-air, and landing on them in a heap of teeth and claws. I felt a bite on my back leg but managed to kick it off. When we stopped rolling I emerged with a head in my jaws. A wolf skull was stronger than a human's, but it still crumbled under my bite.

I turned to the other wolf. He had backed up and waited for reinforcements. There were three now, and I could hear the others closing in.

He lunged at me, knocking me to the ground. I shifted back to human and placed my foot under his stomach, launching him away from me with a solid push. My arm was bleeding; his teeth had sunk deep into my flesh. I didn't let it phase me. I was on my feet in time to catch the wolf jumping at me.

The thing the men didn't understand was that as alphas, we kept our strength in both forms. They always preferred to fight

as wolves, never learning the utility of hands. I knew how to use hands *and* paws.

I caught him with both hands around his neck and spun with his momentum. Instead of being knocked on my ass I carried him through the air by the neck. When I stopped the spin abruptly his mass had nowhere to go, his neck popped. I dropped the carcass to the ground, ready for the next one.

If this had continued one and two at a time I might have been able to take them all. That opportunity was gone. The rest of the pack had arrived.

The two lead wolves leapt at me. I caught each of them by the neck in either hand, but their combined weight and momentum brought me to the ground. While I was trying to hold them back I felt teeth sink into both my calves. They were going to rip me limb from limb. Fear sank in. Not for myself, but for my pack. They'd be helpless. At the mercy of these shifters. My mates might never know what happened to them. They'd think I somehow left with them, never realizing I was coming back to them. Sadness for what I was going to lose renewed my determination to fight.

I kicked, trying to shake loose the biting wolves while simultaneously trying to choke those in my hands. It was a desperate attempt. No alpha could withstand this kind of attack on their own. I struggled desperately trying to find an opening, anything to get out of this. A cry of frustration escaped my lips, something between a howl and pure rage.

Their teeth were on my legs again, two more were stalking up to my shoulders, they would make for my neck. It would be over soon.

*Not yet, Little Minx.*

Despite the rows of teeth bearing down on me I was flooded with a sense of hope. Had I imagined that? It had to be a desperate attempt by my mind to convince myself this wasn't over. Alphas couldn't speak telepathically with their mates until the claiming was finished.

A boulder covered in fur slammed into us, sending the wolves on top of me hurtling into the woods in different directions. I was lifted off the ground with the rest of them. Ignoring the pain from the hit and teeth ripping out of my flesh, I wasted no time. I shifted in midair and landed on my feet, face to face with...

*Calder?*

The gray wolf in front of me winked, then spun to catch an attacker by the throat and ripped it clean out. A wolf tackled him and I watched as his back claws scratched down the wolf's belly. His innards splashed onto the forest floor as Calder flung him away and jumped to his feet once more.

*Some girls get flowers, you get a disemboweled enemy,* I thought. I wouldn't have it any other way. The mix of warmth and relief practically had me seeing little hearts around his bloody maw. My emotions would have to be put on hold though, we were still outnumbered and more enemy wolves were arriving by the minute. The original nine I'd been fighting had grown in numbers. We both spun in opposite directions, our sides touching as we faced the enemies encircling us.

Outnumbered, yes. But already I could feel my strength growing. With Calder by my side their numbers meant nothing. Now our wolves would really get to play.

## CHAPTER 13



### Calder

I was glad to see that our mate had chosen to come back to us so quickly. Had she known I was following her she might have hesitated a bit. I tracked her using our mental link. It was faint since we hadn't claimed her, but it was there. It was the same sense of knowing that told us she was our mate in the first place. That allowed me to stay far enough away to keep her from picking up my scent, but close enough to keep an eye on her.

I'd gone to hunt up some breakfast, thinking I'd have enough time to get back before they left. Little had I known they'd be getting on the road so early. By the time I'd gotten back to the cave where they made camp she'd already gathered up all the women and had struck out. Worry tingled down my spine. I picked up their trail easily enough and began to run. I needed to catch up to them. It was my job to keep an eye on them, to keep my mate safe.

As I got closer I began picking up new scents. Another pack was moving in. It was the Fenhall pack. Rivals who shared our southern border. We had an uneasy truce, mainly because there had been no women to fight over. Until now. They must have had a scout moving through our territory that found the women. Now they were here with reinforcements.

There was no time to warn Reese. At least two dozen were on their way. I ran toward the incoming pack hoping to cut them off and slow them down. There was no point in calling

out to Soren and Atlas. They were too far away to help. By the time they got here the fighting would be over.

I found the males coming down the mountainside like an evil wave of fur and teeth. I fixated on one and ran straight for him, catching him in his side and ripping a hole in his stomach. They were so intent on the women that he hadn't seen me until my teeth were in him. That element of surprise was gone now.

Two wolves broke off and came for me, the rest of the pack continued on, unbothered by my presence. I charged the one on the left, my weight overpowering his, and brought him down with my teeth on his neck. The second wolf latched onto my back leg. I ignored the pain and crushed the neck in my mouth.

With him dead I could focus on the asshole trying to eat my leg. I turned and snapped at his head, he let go and backed off, growling with my blood dripping from his mouth. I squared off, trying to fight the limp in my back leg. Pain wasn't going to slow me down. It couldn't.

The wolf lunged at me, hitting me and sending the two of us rolling down the hill. We stopped with a thud against a tree. Something popped in my shoulder, causing waves of agony to roll over me.

I had to shift to human form, the bite and the roll down the hill had been too much, I needed to heal. I stood on my feet and found that he had shifted as well, he must have broken something in the fall. I ran to him before he could stand and grabbed his head by the top and chin, and with a heavy twist snapped his neck.

One long howl echoed through the forest and caused goosebumps to rise on my skin. The rest of the group had found her. Found them. I shifted before I even knew I was going to do it. My wolf rejoiced in the freedom. He was looking forward to the fight ahead. The chance to protect his mate and kill something making him downright giddy. Barreling down the mountain with all my speed, I let my wolf take over. He knew how important this was and was itching to

go. Nothing would keep us from getting to her. We bounded over boulders and plowed straight through the brush. Anything that got in our way would end up as shrapnel.

I could see her now, only a few hundred yards beneath me as I ran along a ridge. She was surrounded, and they were pinning her to the ground. A blind rage filled me, a red lens covering all that I could see. They would all die. Right. Now.

I focused on the wolf pinning her torso down and increased my speed. Running straight through him caused a ripple effect on the others holding down my mate. It was like an explosion of bodies. They flew through the air, landing a few feet away in every direction. Reese shifted in mid-air and landed on her feet with the grace of an angel. I winked at her before catching an attacker by the throat. Another one hit me, I dug my claws into his belly as he passed over me. His guts spilled out when he landed. Every drop of their blood would soak the ground before I was finished.

Reese placed her side against mine, facing the opposite direction. Reinforcements were coming down the mountain, surrounding us. The Fenhall pack was the second largest in Elaria. It just showed how important a small pack of females were to us. How dire things really were that they were willing to lose so many numbers to acquire them.

Despite being outnumbered, I was elated. Standing side by side with Reese, I was energized beyond anything I'd ever felt. Euphoria had my heart racing, my muscles tightening. My entire body was vibrating from some kind of power. I didn't know what was happening, but she was the center of it.

The wolves circled us, weighing their options. They'd hesitated now that I'd joined the fight. A representative of The Venat Pack and an alpha belonging to the leading cadre wasn't something to take lightly. They were debating on whether this fight was worth it.

Someone decided it was. That they had the numbers to win, because a large brown wolf lunged at Reese, starting the fight again. It didn't take him much time to realize he was wrong. Reese shifted to human and caught his jaws in her



hands, pulling opposite directions she tore his head open and flung the lifeless corpse back at them. “Who’s next?” she dared them.

Lust pulsed through me at her words. She was fucking beautiful, standing there with blood running down over her bare body. I was also impressed. I’d never seen that before, fighting wolves in human form. Shifters rarely fought as humans and the few times we did we tended to wait for our enemies to shift back as well. It was stupid, but we always went to our wolves when we should be fighting in whichever form was most useful in the moment. It was just a natural instinct for us to shift. Watching her fight this way inspired me to give it a try.

The next wolf charged. I shifted to human and bore down on him, grabbing him by neck and tail. I pulled. His flesh ripped apart as easily as tearing a rag. Never in my life had I felt this sort of power, and certainly never in human form. I dared to glance at Reese, the wild empowerment in her eyes told me everything. She was feeling it too. Somehow we were making each other stronger.

She caught me looking at her and her return smile was quick and sharp. “Play time.” She wanted to make these wolves regret coming after her pack. That would help us keep them safe in the future, so I had no problem unleashing my feral mate on the males who’d made the stupid decision to test us.

We shifted back to our wolves and charged in opposite directions. It was an absolute blood bath. We tore through them like hot knives through butter. Their bones held no resistance to my teeth. I crushed skulls and tore flesh with ease, all the while becoming more ravenous. No amount of flesh could satisfy this blood lust that rode me.

The red mist of rage was replaced by an energetic, almost pup-like desire to hunt and kill. For as angry as I was that they had dared to attack my mate, I was so overjoyed at the power I was feeling from her presence it was hard to resist. I wanted to disembowel the whole world and present the innards to her as a gift.

I killed the last of the attackers and turned to Reese. She was playfully pulling the intestines out of a wolf, tugging on them like a rope. I nudged her and started up the hill toward the rest of the females. She let go of her toy and took her place next to me. We ran uphill, following the scent of the women. It didn't take long to find them.

There were only a few of the Fenhall pack left, when they saw us closing in they took off. If twenty of their clan couldn't stop us what chance did they have? I would gather Soren and Atlas later, and we would go to the heart of their territory to exact vengeance on their alphas. Right now we had more important things to do. We had to get the women home.

Soren and Atlas had picked up on the change in me. Though the blood lust and euphoric high were diminishing, they still knew something was going on. It took some convincing to keep them from leaving their duties back home to come for us. The danger was past, and we were heading their way.

\* \* \*

IN ORDER TO SAVE TIME, we left behind all of the women's belongings. Our alphas would come back for them later. We ran as wolves through the forest, wild and free, and a hell of a lot faster than walking on two legs.

It still took hours of running, especially having to slow our pace for the youngest omega, but we didn't run into any more trouble. I let out a mournful howl as we approached the village. My ears pricked as I caught Soren's reply.

I slowed, Reese by my side, and her females behind us. Soren and Atlas's wolves reached us, materializing in the low light like smoke.

*What the hell happened?* Soren asked, his eyes raking over the group, lingering on Reese.

*The Fenhall Pack found them.* I ignored my cadre mates unhappy growls. Most of the women nearby pinned their ears back to their heads at the sound and lowered toward the ground. *Knock it off. You're scaring them.*

Shame crossed both furry faces as they realized the same thing and reined in their tempers. They were pissed that one of the mountain packs had gone for the females, but really, who could blame them? Most of the packs left on Elaria would have done the same. They were so far past using logic it was almost as if they were sinking into the baser nature of their beasts.

*We need to talk about what happened while Reese and I fought.* I quickly explained what we'd both felt and how it had affected our fighting because I knew Soren was itching to get the women inside the village and settled in. He didn't want to be standing around in the forest when we didn't know who could be lurking nearby.

*Maybe Vera will know something about that,* Atlas offered. *I've never heard anything like it.*

*Me either, but that's enough. Let's get the females inside and safe.* Soren let out a series of yips and barks that our wolves understood and I waited while the women followed my mates. I fell in at the end of the line, watching their backs as we brought them into our home. Our house would hold them all until we were able to find cadres for each of them and release them into the care of their alphas.

An hour later, the females were tucked up into five separate rooms, fed, warm, and mostly happy. Reese kept going from door to door, checking on them all, making sure they didn't need anything.

Atlas and I were stationed in the hall while she did so, waiting for her to finally settle enough that we could bring her to Soren's office. We were meeting Vera there. All of us were curious about what had happened out there. How we seemed to amplify each other's strength somehow.

All my wounds had healed with the exception of my leg. There was still a small scratch there that shifting hadn't fully healed. It'd be gone in a day or two. That first pair of wolves had managed to do the most damage to me during the fight. After Reese and I had come together it was like no one could touch us.

“You alright?”

I glanced over at Atlas and nodded. “Just thinking. She handled herself well. Better than I expected. We could still teach her a few things, then she’ll be even more deadly than she is now.”

“Not a bad idea. Just in case she’s ever separated from us,” Atlas mused.

I laughed and he grinned in answer. The odds of Soren ever letting her out of his sight again were slim to none. You never knew though. It was a good idea to help our mate fight to the best of her ability. All three of us could teach her new things, just as she’d taught me the fighting in human form trick.

“You finished, Little Minx?” I asked as Reese stopped in front of us.

She nodded. We could see she was exhausted. She’d been fighting the pain of being away from us for days. Add in the physical exhaustion from the fight and she was drained. But we needed to do this.

“Yeah. Soren mentioned a meeting?”

“Come on,” Atlas said, dropping his arm over her shoulders. The fact that she didn’t pull away, in fact snuggled into his embrace, made me grin. She’d truly come to the conclusion that we were mates. It didn’t mean she wouldn’t fight us tooth and nail on certain things. We’d have to take our time with her. We needed to continue to win her over, but we were through the first hurdle.

## CHAPTER 14



### Soren

Grams and I watched as my mates came into the room. My brows shot up as I saw Atlas with his arm around Reese. That was progress. I'd take whatever we could get. I hated that it took her and Calder having to fight off a wolf pack for her to trust us, but then again he'd mentioned she was already on her way back to us when that happened. A satisfied smile crossed my face as I leaned back in my chair.

*How much are we telling her?* Atlas spoke directly through our mental link.

"We'll tell her all of it."

Reese looked up at me in surprise as I spoke. Everyone was sitting quietly, so the sound of my voice cracked through the room.

"Tell us what happened," I urged. When she sat without speaking, I arched a brow at her.

"Oh. Sorry, I thought you were speaking to... him." She motioned to Calder, who was sitting to her right. They had her sandwiched between them. Grams was sitting off to the side, a wide smile plastered on her face.

"He already told us everything from his point of view." I narrowed my eyes, watching her every move. "Did you feel the same...thing...as he did?"

"It was like a wash of power," she admitted. "I've never felt anything like it. And then it was as though...I had an

unlimited amount of energy. My injuries didn't pain me anymore, and nothing seemed to tire me."

"We knew what move the other was going to make before they did it," Calder added.

Reese nodded. "And..."

When she didn't continue, I prompted her, "And what, Little One?"

She made a face at the nickname, but didn't comment. The quick glance she gave Grams let me know that she was trying to behave because there was an audience. She probably thought if she caused too much trouble we might turn her pack away. That would never happen, but since it was gaining me her cooperation, I didn't say anything.

"I heard Calder."

Everyone frowned.

"Heard him?" Atlas asked.

"Speaking. In my head. Before he even got to the fight." She looked around at our shocked expressions and quickly added, "Just one sentence."

"That-"

"Should be impossible," I said, cutting Calder off. "But then again, it doesn't seem like anything regarding you is typical."

Her head jerked back as if I'd slapped her and hurt filtered into her gorgeous gray eyes.

"I didn't mean it like that," I told her, mentally kicking myself.

*That was smooth.*

I shot Atlas a glare as he and Calder tried to hold back laughter. Nothing like shoving my boot into my damn mouth. "I just meant, we've never seen an alpha female-"

Anger made twin spots of red appear on her cheeks. Sighing, I gave up. "Grams. Can you tell us about the

prophecy?”

“Happily.” The disapproving look she gave me told me I was in hot water with her for that remark as well.

Women. I wasn't a damn virgin, but I didn't spend a lot of time around them. I was too fucking busy keeping my pack alive. How was I supposed to know that I'd hurt my mate's feelings with a few words? I'd have to watch myself in the future. The last thing I wanted was to alienate her, or make her dislike me. Just because she'd come to the conclusion that we were her mates, didn't mean she trusted us. Sure she trusted us enough to bring her pack here, but she didn't have a whole lot of choice in that matter. Giving us her heart would be a whole other endeavor. We'd still have to win her over. It was a battle I was looking forward to.

Reese sat forward on her chair, eagerly looking at Vera. “What prophecy?”

“There's a prophecy I found many years ago inside the Verulian Text.”

My mate's eyes were wide and she was squirming in her seat with excitement. She looked like she wanted to jump out of her chair and shake Grams until every bit of information was spilled.

“It spoke of a female alpha and her pack of fated mates.”

Reese's face fell. This had pretty much been the part that had dashed all our hopes as well. Fated mates were gone. Only now, I was beginning to wonder if maybe something could change. Maybe somehow we could fulfill this prophecy.

“Oh. Well...”

“Don't dismiss it just yet,” Grams said with a cluck of her tongue. “You youngsters. Always so impatient.” She stood and put a book on the desk in front of Reese, then pointed to a paragraph. “It's in the old language. I only know a little. Tellura, the alpha of the Verulian Pack also knows some. From what we could piece together, this pack of alphas plays a huge part in some war.”

“War?” Reese asked, her eyes flicking from the text to Grams.

“We don’t know what that means,” she said, shaking her head sadly. “And we don’t know much more, other than this pack is supposed to be stronger than any other. They, plus some companions, are supposed to go on a journey.”

“A journey,” Reese said, doubt creeping into her tone.

“Nine of you.”

We all looked over at Vera now. I growled low in my throat. “No. It’s not happening.”

She looked at me as if to say I was the asshole for arguing with a prophecy. “I’m just telling you what the text says, Grandson.” She threw her hands up in the air.

“I don’t give a shit what some ancient text says,” I snapped.

“What’s going on?” Reese asked.

“Soren is pissed because he doesn’t want to bring you along,” Atlas told her.

Anger all but crackled off her. “What? Why not? Why wouldn’t I go?”

“Because we nearly fucking lost you today,” I snarled. “And I’m not doing it again. I won’t take that kind of risk with you.”

“Agreed,” Calder said, folding his arms over his chest.

She rounded on him. “What! You saw me out there today! I know how to take care of myself.”

He snorted in response, but didn’t reply otherwise.

“That doesn’t mean we’re willing to put you in danger,” I told her.

“You don’t have a choice,” she growled right back at me.

Breathing heavily, I stood, my palms flat on the desk as I scowled at her. “I could lock you up here. Then you wouldn’t have any choice at all.”



“Do that,” she taunted, standing as well. We were nose to nose over the desk, eyes piercing. “And you won’t like what happens.”

“Mates,” Atlas said, holding his palms up in a soothing manner when both our heads snapped over to him. “How about we discuss this rationally?”

“Fuck rational,” I muttered, but I watched as Reese’s chin tipped up with pride and she took a step back and sat down. After her delectable ass was back in the chair, I sat as well.

“At least one of you has a good head on her shoulders,” Atlas muttered.

“I would just like to point out...” Grams said, her shrewd gaze sweeping our group. “That unless you plan to claim your new mate before leaving, you *won’t* be able to leave her behind.”

“Grams,” I growled, pissed that she’d just given Reese the weapon she needed to twist my arm.

“I wasn’t planning on having a claiming right away anyway,” Reese told me in a haughty voice.

My teeth ground together in agitation. It was probably the truth, but now it was guaranteed that I was not only going to have to bring my mate on some dangerous expedition, but that I’d be doing it with fucking blue balls, too. That was sure to make my mood better.

“Fine,” I conceded, though I wasn’t happy about it. “How are we supposed to know who the other five are who are going on the quest, Grams?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a sigh. “It says something about the Sky Goddess’s vessel?”

“That’s entirely unhelpful,” Calder pointed out. “Why don’t these prophecies ever give us names? Locations? At the very least they could be less vague.”

Grams glowered at him. “Would you like to try to read this stuff?”

“It was written thousands of years ago,” Calder said with a shake of his head. “I barely care to read what was written yesterday.”

“Exactly,” Grams told him. “So keep your trap shut.”

We all chuckled at her now playful tone. It eased the tension in the room. Reese’s musical laughter floated on the air and I found myself staring at her.

She met my gaze, held for a beat, then looked away with a faint blush staining her skin. She wasn’t comfortable around us yet, but we’d change that.

“Does it say when we should leave?” Atlas inquired.

“No, but there’s some kind of timeline here,” Grams said, waving at the book. “We just don’t know what it is.”

“So we need to find someone who can read the book,” Reese commented. She looked around at us. “Maybe we can find someone in the plains packs who can?”

“You should check back in with Tellura and see if he’s found anything out,” Grams replied. “But first stop in and see Jessu. He’s the other shifter who’s been helping us. He leads the Cirdan Pack. He’ll be able to take you to meet with Celinda.”

“Celinda?” Reese asked.

“The shifter who lives away from society. Jessu has made contact with her. We don’t know if she’ll be able to tell us anything, but it’s worth a shot. Jessu seems to think there’s something off about her.”

“I can’t believe you have two packs who are willing to speak with you. To help you with this,” Reese said, looking over at me with awe.

The corners of my lips tipped up. She had no idea how much work it’d taken to get these packs on good terms. It was what I was currently doing with the mountain packs. The Dursets had left only this morning and had agreed to work with us. The promise of future mates might have played a role in the negotiations. “Eight of the plains packs, and two of the

mountain packs. I haven't been successful in gaining the trust of any of the seaside wolves."

"I'm not surprised," she said with a wry grin. "I wouldn't count on it."

"Who knows," I told her, "maybe with one of their own as our mate, they'll change their minds."

She looked surprised. "It's a nice thought, but I'm not only a Silvest, who most hate, but an alpha female at that. I'm guaranteed to make things worse."

"They'll soon see that you're *our* alpha female. They can choose to accept our terms or be considered enemies when the time comes."

"Time for what?" she asked me.

"Later," Atlas said, rubbing his forehead. "We can speak about unifying all shifters later, but for now...how are we supposed to figure out who else is supposed to go on this damn adventure?"

No one had an answer. I raked a hand through my hair, causing it to stand up in spikes. "Well, we have three days to figure it out."

"Why three days?" Calder asked.

"Because I need time to deal with the Fenhalls, and Reese needs time to make sure her women are settled in enough to set her mind at ease so she can leave them again. Won't do us any good to have her looking over her shoulder the whole time."

Startled gray eyes met mine, then softened. "Thank you." She even gifted me with a smile.

I nodded my head in reluctant acceptance. "Grams. Thank you for your help. We'll meet again tomorrow."

"Goodnight," she told us as she left the room.

Silence fell around us as we sat together. This would be our first night with our mate. She looked nervous. That wasn't

what any of us wanted. We wanted her to feel comfortable around us, but that was going to take time and patience.

## CHAPTER 15



### Reese

“*I*’d like my own room,” I demanded. It was easy to see that Soren was agitated. Whether it was with the entire conversation, or my request, I wasn’t sure. But the muscle in his jaw had been jumping for nearly the whole meeting. He was going to grind down his fangs if he kept clenching his teeth like that. The leader of our cadre was wound a bit tight.

It was understandable. He was responsible for not only our cadre but this whole pack. Now, I was realizing he was preparing for all-out war. With or without the Moon Goddess present he was fighting to bring shifters rallying under her. It was impressive and...respectable. That didn’t mean I was ready to give myself over to these males. Not yet.

If I had to tell the truth, it was because I was terrified. I’d never thought to have mates, and now these three hulking shifters had been dropped into my lap. Most would be thanking their lucky stars. Me? I was deflecting. Good thing I wasn’t being forced to tell the truth.

“That’s fine,” Atlas said, shooting Soren a dark look for taking too long to agree. “We’ll set you up in the guest bedroom. It’s directly between Soren’s and my room. If you need anything, just call out and we’ll get it for you.”

“Thank you,” I said, hesitantly. “I’m... I’ll get there. I just-”

“You don’t know us yet,” Soren snapped. He cleared his throat and softened his tone. “We’ll all get there in time.”

Calder nodded, but didn’t say anything else.

“Come on,” Atlas said, standing. “I’ll go get you settled. You must be exhausted.”

Pausing at the door, I turned and looked at the other two males who were going to be my mates. *Were* my mates. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Telling me all that. Letting me come along. Giving us a safe place to stay.” I gave Soren a weak smile. “Pick one.” With that I turned and followed Atlas. He was so massive his shoulders almost spanned the width of the hallway.

He pushed open a door and gave me a charming smile. “Breakfast is at eight.”

I placed a hand on a bicep the circumference of a redwood’s trunk and smiled up at him. “I have you to thank the most.”

One brow arched up in answer. These men were humble. My father would have been gloating about all he’d done before I ever had a chance to thank him, if he were here. Of course, things would be very different if he were here.

“You allowed me to choose this on my own. I’ll never forget that, Atlas.”

A dull red flush edged up his neck toward his face. I had to bite back the grin because he’d think I was laughing at him. In reality, I just found it cute. He was embarrassed about the praise I’d just given him.

“Anyone would’ve done the same,” he muttered. He stalked off down the hallway, muttering to himself.

“Not anyone,” I whispered. “Just you.” Shaking my head, I shut the door, closing the world out. I surveyed the room, my eyes going from the bathroom to the bed. Shower or sleep? It was an impossible decision.

My wolf let out a small whine inside my mind. Sleep it was. I flopped backward onto the bed and closed my eyes.

\* \* \*

“WHAT KIND OF PROPHECY?” Emma asked, hands on her hips while she stared suspiciously at me.

I relayed everything that we spoke about last night in Soren’s office. We were walking the perimeter of the village as we talked. My hair was still wet from the scorching shower I’d taken this morning. I could have stayed in there forever, but I wanted to catch Emma up to speed on things before breakfast.

We stopped in the middle of the village by the time I was finished. Her eyes were wide and her brows were nearly in her hairline. “Do you think this quest will help us find the Moon Goddess?”

“It’s our best hope,” I admitted. “Even if Soren can pull together as many of the remaining shifter packs as he can, what are we supposed to do? We’re dying.”

She huffed out a sigh. “I know. We have to do something.”

“Ladies!” Vera called out, waving to us as she hurried over. She was loaded down with a huge stack of clothing.

We met her in the middle, taking her burden from her. “What is all this, Vera?” I asked.

“Oh! Beatrice has been working through the night,” she told me, beaming. “She had enough clothes for all the omegas and even Emma here, but you and Clover needed some custom made things. Yours is on top there. I have to go meet with Eralius about something, but I wanted to give these to you. Bye!”

She was gone before I could speak. I just goggled at the amount of clothes that filled our hands. “They made us clothes?”

“These people,” Emma said, her voice husky with unshed tears. “Hasn’t anyone told them that unknown shifters are supposed to be enemies?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Apparently they never got that memo.”

“Could you imagine being raised that way?” Her voice was wistful as she stared off after Vera.

“If only.”

We shared a look. My heart nearly broke in my chest, wondering how happy Mom would have been here. She’d never gotten the chance to know a place like this. People like these. I caught Vera alone for a few moments this morning and she said my mother had never come to the Venat Pack’s territory. I wasn’t sure who Mom got her information from about alpha females, but she’d never made it here.

Movement caught my eye and I grinned as four alphas approached.

“We’ll take those over to the pack leader’s home for you,” the leader said, voice gruff.

“That’s okay,” Emma snapped, making my brows shoot up. “We’ve got it.”

“Nope,” A blonde who had a mirror version of himself standing next to him said with a smile. He took the clothes out of my hands before Emma could object again.

I frowned at the twins, trying to figure them out. It took me far longer than I cared before I realized. “You’re betas.”

Emma’s gasp and pointed look made me blush in embarrassment.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “There’s nothing wrong with betas...”

“You’re just not used to seeing us in a cadre with two alphas,” the second twin said with a huge grin. “Don’t worry. We’re used to the scrutiny.”

“Still,” I insisted, “It was rude of me.”

“I’m sure if anyone is used to scrutiny, it’s you, my lady,” the first twin said.

“Oh jeez. Don’t call me that. I’m Reese,” I said, sticking my hand out to shake theirs.



“I’m Reign.”

“And Bane.”

I blinked at the blonde hunks with honey golden eyes as I took in their names. “Nice to meet you.”

“This is Holden,” they said in unison, pointing at the quiet alpha watching everything unfold.

“And Griff,” Reign told me, pointing at the black-haired grump who’d first approached us.

Griff nodded politely to me, but his piercing blue eyes were watching Emma closely.

“Okay! Thanks. The girls will be thrilled to get those clothes,” Emma said, waving them off. As soon as the men left, though it was clearly reluctant on their part, she whirled to face me. “They won’t leave me alone.”

I couldn’t bite back the laughter that bubbled up. “What?”

“That asshole Griff came right up to me and said he was claiming me as his cadre’s mate. Now they won’t leave me alone.”

Pursing my lips, I considered the situation. “Any reason you don’t want them as mates?”

She gave me a pained look.

Nodding my head, I told her, “I get it. Neither of us really thought that we’d have mates.”

“At the most I figured I’d eventually marry a beta man. Maybe have a couple pups, but alphas? What am I supposed to do with two alphas and two betas?” she asked, worry and hope mixing in her eyes. She wanted this, she was just scared. I knew exactly how she felt. “Unnatural, that’s what it is,” she muttered.

I laughed and smacked her in the shoulder. “You’ve been best friends with an alpha female almost all your life. You should know better than anyone that the Goddess does what she wants. She makes creatures like me and she matches souls as she sees fit. Obviously those four men are meant to be

together. Our Goddess doesn't make mistakes." At least not if we were to believe what my mother always said, rather than my father.

Emma let out a heavy sigh. "Okay, well, we'll put that aside for now."

I gave her a snarky grin because I knew those males weren't going to let her get away with that for long. Not if they were like mine. The smile slipped off my face as I thought about what was coming up. "I don't know how long we're going to be gone, Em. Will you take care of them?"

Shock filled her expression. "Take care of who?"

My brows dipped in confusion. "The omegas-"

"That's going to be hard to do when I go with you," she pointed out.

"Em..." I shook my head. "You're not coming."

"The hell I'm not!"

Looking around, I saw heads turning our way. "You have to stay with the others. They're going to need you."

"They have Vera. She'll take great care of them. And Harper will help. You're going to need me." She folded her arms over her chest. "I'm going."

"You're not!"

"I am!"

We were shouting in each other's faces now. "I'm not taking you! It's too damn dangerous!"

A throat clearing knocked us out of the intense staring contest we were in and I realized that my mates were standing there, watching us. Soren and Calder were stone faced while Atlas was grinning. Emma's newly found mates were back as well and standing on our other side.

"Problem, ladies?" Soren asked.

"Sorry," I muttered, shooting Emma a dark look. "Just a small disagreement."

“Reese didn’t realize that I’d be coming along on the trip. She does now,” Emma said, planting her hands on her hips and glowering at me.

“Not happening,” Griff rumbled.

I bit the insides of my lips and groaned. If he wanted to endear himself to Emma, that was the wrong move. I could fight with her, we were basically sisters. The opinions of others were not welcomed in our fights.

Emma’s golden brown eyes darkened in color as fury took over my friend. “Listen here you...giant...oaf.”

Griff blinked in surprise and Reign and Bane collapsed on each other in hysterical laughter. The twins were barely managing to hold each other up.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do. Neither do you,” she snapped at me, her finger drilling into my chest.

I rubbed my right upper boob, where she’d jammed her digit into my skin. My friend had a hell of a temper and we were all getting a peek of it now.

“We can’t drag along another female,” Soren said, trying to be the voice of reason. I could tell he chose his words carefully. Saying he wouldn’t take a beta would have been even worse.

Emma rounded on him too, uncaring that he was the lead alpha of this pack. “Well, you can’t expect me to send my sister off into the wilderness on some dangerous quest, alone.”

“She won’t be *alone*,” Calder said. It was clear from his tone he was offended.

“Oh, so I should send her off with *you*? I don’t know *you*!”

My mates looked at me with baffled looks. They weren’t used to anyone yelling at them, at least not from their pack, but especially not the women. I gave them a smug smile, then looked over at Griff. “This is what you can look forward to if you don’t find yourself an omega.”

Griff’s blue eyes flashed with anger. “She’s mine,” he growled.

My grin widened. “Good. I expect you to take care of her.”

“With our lives,” Holden spoke up for the first time. “We’re going with you, Pack Leader,” he told Soren.

Soren muttered out curses. “Who the hell is in charge here?” It was clear he didn’t really expect an answer to that question. He was just sick of everyone telling him what was going to happen.

“Excuse me.”

All eyes turned to Vera. She smiled at us all and her eyes landed on Soren, softening with love as she stared at her grandson. “It seems to me that you’ve found your additional five.”

My head snapped over and I looked at Emma, who was still glaring at me for daring to think I could leave her behind, and the four men standing at her back. “You think—”

“Why not?” Vera asked with a shrug. “Emma is with you for a reason. Griff and his cadre are linked to her. They’ve been members of this pack since birth and Griff is Atlas’s cousin. Why not them? You need five more for this journey.”

I studied Atlas and Griff. They couldn’t be more different. If Vera had said that Griff and Calder, or even Soren himself, were related it would make more sense. Maybe Griff had gotten all the surliness in the family while Atlas had made off with the good nature. Either way, I was thankful for my cheery mountain of a mate. He smoothed out the short fuses of the other two.

“Quest,” Emma interjected with a grin. “It’s a damn quest.” Excitement bubbled up in her words.

Soren gave me a resigned look, before addressing Griff. “Fine. Be ready the day after tomorrow. We leave at dawn.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Emma’s cadre spoke in unison.

My best friend gave me a smug smile, then wrapped her arm around my waist. “We have plans to make,” she told me. With that, our fight was forgotten.

I looked over my shoulder at the two sets of males who were standing there watching us walk away. Life was sure turning out much differently for us both than I thought.

## CHAPTER 16



**Reese**

Huffing out a long breath, I stirred in my comfortable bed, inside the safe mountain mansion I was currently living in. How had I gotten to this point? Not that I was complaining. I'd never complain about regular meals and hot showers. Add in the comfy bed? I was glad to be here. Even if the sexy shifters who were my mates were low key driving me mad.

There'd been a short blip of time in the middle of the night where I'd nearly gone and crawled into bed with one of my mates. *My mates*. It seemed like we'd gotten here so fast. They'd been potential enemies and now were future lovers. Not knowing which mate to choose and not wanting to hurt the others' feelings had been the only reason I'd managed to resist and remain in my own bed.

This was becoming harder, but for the first time in my life something was simmering inside my chest. Was that happiness? I wasn't sure, but it was as foreign as being able to fully drop my guard while sleeping, something I hadn't done since early childhood.

The mattress shifted and something brushed my arm, causing my eyes to snap open. Sucking in a gasp of surprise, I studied the gray wolf in my bed. "Hello. I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to be in here."

His ears flicked then pinned themselves back to his head. That move alone, along with the heady scent of a campfire,

told me this was Soren's wolf. All three of them looked so similar it might have been hard for most to pinpoint which male this magnificent creature belonged to without the others to compare.

I had no such trouble. My hand reached out of its own accord and buried itself into the soft fur of his neck. "I wasn't kicking you out, you know. No need to be so grumpy."

He let out a canine grumble and shifted closer to my body. His huge form was taking up a good portion of the bed.

"I just overheard Soren saying that none of them should introduce their wolves to me just yet. He thinks you won't behave yourself." It didn't matter that I'd seen their wolves before. Meeting them while not in a life or death situation was completely different. They didn't have anything to keep their attention, so it would naturally stray to me.

The wolf let out a snort of displeasure. He dipped his head, resting his chin on his paws. His dark eyes closed as I scratched behind his ears.

"Oh!"

His head jerked up, eyes alert, a low growl rumbling around the room as he searched for danger.

"Sorry," I patted his head, "but you're hurt." Touching his front leg gently, I examined the large gash there. "How did that happen? And why haven't you shifted..." I looked up into amused eyes. "Because if you shift, Soren won't let you out again and you wanted to meet me," I told him, answering my own question.

His muzzle dipped in a form of acknowledgement. He yawned, showing off large incisor teeth. Fangs like those could rip me apart in seconds. But our wolves were mates, the same as our human halves were. He'd never hurt me.

"Then I better clean this up if you're planning on sticking around for a bit," I said. Shoving off the bed, I went into the bathroom and rummaged under the sink until I found what would be suitable for cleaning his injury.

Grabbing a clean towel, I settled back on the bed, legs crossed under me, as I focused on his wound. I kept up a steady stream of small talk. “You’re much easier to speak to like this,” I told him. Soren would be hearing all of this and would retain it for later. “The fact that you managed to wrest control from him is impressive,” I told the wolf, looking up and nearly bumping noses with him as he inspected what I was doing.

“What do you think,” I pulled the towel back and showed him the wet fur that was now devoid of blood.

A wet tongue slid across my skin from clavicle to forehead. Laughing, I scratched his ears again. “Thank you.”

“How am I supposed to know?” an agitated voice asked from the hallway.

“Well, where else would he be?” That was Atlas’s slightly less amused than normal voice joining Calder’s.

A knock sounded at my door. I looked into the deep gray eyes of the wolf. “Jig is up. Want me to open the window so you can go run through the forest?”

He huffed out a breath, but just stretched so that he was splayed over my lap. He didn’t seem too worried about being caught now that his objective was met.

Stretching my legs out straight to accommodate his weight, I called out, “Come in.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Calder grumbled when the door swung open. “Told you he’d be here.” He glared at the wolf. “This wasn’t what we agreed on.”

My whole body vibrated with the unhappy growl the wolf let out.

“We sort of need Soren back,” Atlas said. “There’s a lot to do before we leave tomorrow.”

The wolf lifted his head and looked up at me. It was a strange relationship we had with our wolves. They were a part of us. Many considered them our primal sides, wild and free, but one couldn’t live without the other. They weren’t given



names because they were us. Our name was theirs technically, but we rarely addressed a wolf by a human name. Their spirits called to us and ours to them, we didn't need names.

"It's okay," I promised him in a whisper. "We'll meet again. But next time you can play with my wolf."

He hopped off the bed, shooting me a piercing stare over his shoulder before he walked out the door. That look was full of heat. It wasn't the way a wolf would look at a human. Soren was back in full control; he was just choosing not to shift until he was out of sight.

As much as I wanted to see him naked again, I was grateful for the fact that he waited. They were getting harder to resist. Each hour that ticked down seemed to wear at my defenses. I convinced myself I wanted to get to know them before I just gave in to the claiming. Now I wasn't so sure. My dreams were haunting me, leaving me panting and wet when I woke.

"Breakfast will be served in thirty minutes," Atlas reminded me.

Both men gave me scorching looks before they left. It was nice to know that it wasn't just me that our proximity was affecting. Not that having them be just as jumbled up was going to help my mission of getting to know my mates before I jumped into bed with them. Sighing, I got up to prepare for the day. Today was going to be a busy one since we were leaving early the next morning.

\* \* \*

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you're going," Clover said, tone soft, eyes on the plate of food in front of her. All nine of the omegas were seated around the large wooden table.

Emma and I exchanged a worried glance as the mood dipped in the room. Omegas had different personalities, just like the rest of us, but most of them were a little more sensitive than betas, and certainly more than alphas. The males usually had a hard time adjusting their brash attitudes so as not to hurt

their omega's feelings. The girls were sad, thinking we were abandoning them.

"We'll be back," I told them in an upbeat voice, eyes scanning their faces. In some cases, like Clover's, I was looking at the tops of their heads as they refused to look up. Getting them to maintain eye contact was a challenge on the best of days.

"Yeah," Emma added, chirping the word. "It won't be long and then we'll be back here with all of you."

Harper gave us an encouraging smile. We'd already spoken to her yesterday about taking over the leadership position of the pack until we got back. It was in theory only because whoever Soren left in charge would lead my pack as well. They would be in charge of safety, and the girls knew that, but they needed one of our own to go to for comfort while they adjusted to being in a new place.

It wasn't hard to see that packs of alphas had already started taking notice of the women, but Soren had set out a decree yesterday. No one was to claim their mate until we got back from this quest. He'd spoken to my group first and told the women that his decree would allow everyone to get to know one another without pressure. It also meant that all four of us would be here to supervise how things were going with newly formed cadres.

We weren't anticipating any trouble, but you never knew and a lot of these women had come from abusive situations. They needed time, like I did, more really. I'd advised Soren and the others that this would be the best step and they'd agreed. Warmth radiated over my skin at the thought that I was being helpful, not only to my pack and doing right by them, but to my mates as well. For a shifter who'd never fit in anywhere, I had hope that maybe this would be my place.

"We'll miss you," Clover said, finally meeting my eyes.

"I'll miss you too, Little Dove." Clover had fully entrenched herself into my heart. "But we have to do this."

“You really think you can find out what happened to the Moon Goddess?” Cassie asked. She rarely spoke, so hearing her voice was a surprise and a treat.

“We do,” I told her. “And if we can figure out what’s going on, maybe we can help everyone. Maybe shifters will stop dying out.”

“Do you think she’s alive?” Delilah spoke up this time.

I frowned over at Emma before I answered. “I don’t know.” Pursing my lips, I thought about it. “I’m not even sure if a Goddess can be killed?”

“There are ways.”

We all jumped and I glared over my shoulder at Soren as he and my other two mates entered the room. The warm feelings his wolf had evoked this morning vanished thanks to him startling the crap out of my omegas. All except Harper were now staring at their plates.

“Good morning,” Soren said, reading the shift in the room.

There were murmurs in response to his greeting, but everyone was too busy eating or avoiding looking at the three powerful shifters to say anything else.

The men sat down, sandwiching me between Soren and Atlas, Calder sitting across from me next to Emma. Reaching over, I brushed my fingertips over Soren’s forearm. Our eyes clashed, his darkening to black. I sucked in a breath as desire swept over me. Just touching him had this effect on me now. I was in so much trouble.

“It healed nicely.”

“It was just a scratch.” His voice was low, but the gravelly quality made my lower belly cramp with awareness. “Thank you for taking care of it for me.”

“How did you get it?” I breathed the question out, still stuck in his trance as he watched me like a spider watched the fly. It was as though he wanted to gobble me up instead of the food that was set in front of him. Somehow, I knew it would be worth the loss of control on both our parts when he did.

“Convincing the leader of the Fenhall Pack to cooperate,” Calder said, answering for him.

My brows shot up as I looked between the three of them. It'd been difficult to tear my gaze from Soren's, but I was afraid that if I didn't he'd end up spreading me over the table top. None of the omegas would likely appreciate the show along with their morning meal. Or...maybe they would. Omegas were inherently sexual creatures. But I certainly wasn't ready to share that experience with these men, let alone my pack.

“And did he?” I asked.

“Did he what?” Soren replied.

“Agree to cooperate?”

“It took some convincing.” He picked up his fork and scooped up some food, shoving it in his mouth.

I didn't know him well enough, but I was pretty sure that meant he didn't want to talk about it. That irritated me. If I was going to be their mate, to complete their cadre, they'd have to share these things with me. Maybe not if I was an omega, because such things wouldn't interest me. But as an alpha? I couldn't live without being included.

Atlas's huge hand covered mine where it was fisted on my lap. “We'll tell you more about it after breakfast.”

Looking around, I saw the worried glances my omegas were giving us. My muscles loosened and I un-balled my fist so that I could squeeze Atlas's hand in gratitude. He really was the most level-headed out of the four of us.

My males knew we didn't need to be having this conversation in front of the others. I wouldn't lie to, or keep things from them, but I could buffer the information I gave so as not to worry them.

Emma, thank the Goddess for her, kept up a steady stream of small talk during breakfast, pulling the omegas into the conversation and relaxing them.

We parted ways afterward and I watched as my males stalked off to complete whatever list of tasks they needed to finish before leaving. I was sure it was nearly limitless. My own to-do list was daunting enough and I was only responsible for the nine we were leaving here. It helped keep things in perspective.

Soren could be brusque and uptight, but it was because so much was riding on him. It made me wonder if there was anything I could do to help make things easier on him. Shaking my head, I realized that the yearning to take stress off him was another sign of our bond getting stronger. It wasn't a bad thing. And I wasn't trying to avoid it anymore, I just wished this had all come when I was ready for it.

*When would that have been?*

I ignored my wolf's completely valid point. No matter where I was, I wouldn't have been prepared for these three. All I could do was work with what I had and do my best to stay open to them. As long as Soren, Calder, and I didn't wring each other's necks first, we might make it through all of this. Hope that we could come out stronger on the other side was a deep wish buried inside my heart.

## CHAPTER 17



### Atlas

We were up before the sun the next morning, finishing up last minute tasks that would allow us to leave our pack for an indefinite amount of time. None of us were happy about it, but this was important.

My eyes followed my mate as she flitted amongst the women who formed her pack. By the time we returned they would likely be integrated into life here in the village. It was an important time and Reese was going to miss it. I knew she felt badly about that. She was as stuck as us.

She needed to come along, despite Soren and Calder's reservations, we all knew it was true. Hauling the pack that held some of our supplies over my shoulder, I walked toward her.

"Ready to go, Little Warrior?"

Her eyes flashed up to mine and she put her hands on ample hips as she scowled at me. "Why do you all do that?"

"Do what?" I asked, amusement with her.

"Call me little this and little that?"

"Are we not allowed to have nicknames for you?" I arched a brow.

"I'm not little," she huffed.

"You are to us."

Her beautiful gray eyes narrowed and it was clear she was thinking of a rebuttal.

Dropping the pack, I grabbed her with one arm, around the waist and yanked her against my body. Her head came to my shoulder, and despite her curves she still felt delicate in my grasp. Both hands dropped to her hips and I squeezed the flesh there.

Her pupils were blown, lips parted as her breathing sped up. Everything disappeared around us. She was staring up at me like she needed me to continue. As though she were going to perish if I didn't kiss her.

My head dipped, lips brushing lightly over hers as I spoke, "See? Much smaller than me." My hands slid down over her full ass and I cupped it in my palms. "Softer." I sacrificed one hand and brought it up to grip the back of her neck so I could kiss her properly. Our lips rubbed together, something I wished our bodies could be doing, and she opened for me when I licked the seam of her lips. Dipping my tongue into her mouth, I played with hers, drinking in her little pants and moans. "You taste so good." The words were muffled since I couldn't bear to break the connection.

The sound of a door slamming had her jerking in my grasp and she broke the spell that was weaving its way around us. She grabbed my wrists, her fingers barely able to circle them. "Please."

The desire was dampened and now she just looked embarrassed, like she wanted to bolt. Sighing, I released her and watched as she did just that.

"Good job," Calder muttered from nearby. He shoved off the wall he'd been leaning on.

The sun was starting to rise, sending rays of light streaming over the village. "Why are you skulking around in the shadows?" I asked, irritation taking over. I wasn't angry at her, just that I'd scared her off. Getting close to our mate was difficult enough. I'd lost my head and taken it further than I planned to.

“Because she would have run even faster if I joined the two of you.” He shot me a smirk.

“Not my fault someone slammed a fucking door.” Rolling my shoulders to release some of the tension, I grabbed the pack I dropped. “Let’s go. Soren’s going to want to get on the road soon.”

“Why do you think I’m here? He sent me to find you.”

We walked to the edge of the forest where our little band of participants were waiting. The omegas, Vera and her mates, and Ruck—the head of our security team—were there to see us off. Soren’s grandfathers would be in charge until we returned, but Ruck and his cadre, along with the other teams who helped watch over the village’s safety would play a huge part in things while we were gone.

“Safe travels,” Ruck told us, bowing his head in respect as we passed.

I placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. We’d known the males here since our birth. Some were older and had seen both Soren’s fathers, and his grandfather’s rule. No one had said a word when the position had been given to Soren. Pack leaders could be challenged at any time. One cadre would fight another for the right to rule the pack. No one had bothered. This was not only Soren’s birthright; he was perfect for the position. Our pack was thriving, as much as was possible, in difficult times.

“We’ll be traveling as quickly as we can,” Soren said as soon as he spotted us. “If you need a break, say something,” his eyes landed on the two females who were traveling with us, “otherwise we won’t be stopping until dusk.”

It was safest to travel at night. Less chance of running into humans that way, but that wasn’t possible when the journey was going to take as long as it was. Our human halves needed to rest at night. If this trip was only going to take a few days, we could sacrifice some sleep. But it would take a little more than a week and none of us were willing to weaken our mates. We just had to be careful.



We were larger, and more powerful, than humans, but they had numbers on us, sometimes ten or twenty to one. And they had weapons that could defeat us. Weapons given to them by their Goddess. The Sun Goddess was the sister to our very own Moon Goddess and to the Sky Goddess, who belonged to neutrality and never took sides. But for reasons that I couldn't fathom, the Sun Goddess hated our kind. She'd done everything in her power to ensure that her people survived while we were forced into hiding. Without our Goddess we were losing and we hadn't even known there'd been a battle to fight until it was too late.

Reese and Emma hugged their friends goodbye, promising them they'd be back soon. My heart warmed watching them interact with the omegas. They were the rocks the rest of the women depended on. It spoke of the integrity and character of my mate that these women trusted her to lead them.

Shucking my clothes, I stuffed them into the bag in front of me, placing Reese's clothes in as she took them off. My eyes raked over her naked body. As though she could feel my gaze, she glanced over at me. Her cheeks turned a dull red as she caught me staring and she shifted into her wolf form. As soon as I had no more need for opposable thumbs, I shifted. The magic washed over me and I shook out my coat when my four paws hit the dirt.

Grabbing the pack up in my mouth, I waited while the other males did the same. We all had bags containing our supplies, but we left our mates with nothing to carry. All they needed to do was keep up. I had no doubt that Reese would do so easily. It was the beta I wasn't so sure about.

Griff and Holden would keep close eyes on her and let us know if she needed us to slow our pace. Soren wanted to cover as much ground as possible, but he wasn't going to run the females into the dirt to spare a day of travel.

Waiting for everyone to pass by, I fell in behind them. The forest was a blur as we ran in formation. Our mates were in the middle with Soren and Calder at the head, and Griff and Holden directly behind them. I was at the rear and it left me staring at the twins' shaggy tails as we bounded along

pathways. I wasn't about to complain. I was too busy scanning the vegetation around us for threats.

It was rare to see humans this deep into the forest—though we would start seeing their settlements as we approached the plains—but that didn't mean there weren't other mountain wolf packs out here. After what happened with the Fenhall Pack, we didn't want to waste time fending off another attack.

That was the deviousness of the Sun Goddess, her true evil. It wasn't enough to arm the humans and send them after us. She managed to turn shifters against each other in a mad civil war. Every pack was on defense from every other pack, and all humans. It was a wonder we had survived this long.

My chest was heaving by the time we stopped for our first break of the day. Soren had halted near a crystal stream that brought water down from a glacier high up in the hills. We dumped our packs next to a tree and everyone drank their fill and rested.

In our wolf forms our animals had more control, even though we were keeping a tight rein on ourselves. We couldn't afford to let the wolves take over. They would be all too happy to frolic, play, and hunt the days away, stealing precious time from our mission. One of these days we'd allow them full control so they could interact with their mate unencumbered. Now wasn't that time.

My wolf let out a growl of irritation, but behaved for me. He was me and I was him, so it was no surprise that his control over situations was a vast improvement over our cadre mates'.

I watched as Calder's wolf shook his head, fighting for dominance as he tried to overtake my friend. Walking over, I bumped his shoulder and was greeted with sharp teeth to my haunches. Chuckling to myself, I left him to his internal battle and went over to check on Reese.

She was lying by the stream in a patch of sunlight. Her gray eyes met mine and her tongue lolled out as she gave me a doggy grin. She was relaxed and looked happy.

Settling my bulk next to her, I kept watch while Soren and Calder ascertained the best route to take. They navigated much better than I did. Not that I couldn't, but my skills were best used as security. Brute strength was my biggest contributing factor to our group. And my ability to play peacekeeper.

A low agitated voice caught my attention, and I watched with interest as Emma berated Griff. Both were standing across the stream, naked as the day they were born, in their human forms.

“Stop pushing me around.” She glowered up at my cousin, her hands motioning at him.

“I was just trying to keep you close by. We don't want you wandering-”

“It's my choice if I want to wander. You have no say in what I do.”

Griff let his head tip back as he stared up at the sky, searching for patience. If his muscles got any tighter he was going to pop.

I grinned as I watched. My cousin had met his match. It thrilled me that he'd found his mate. He and his cadre were considered odd because of the addition of two beta males, but Griff had welcomed the twins with open arms. He defended them when friends and family alike had questioned why he would include betas in his cadre. As if he had any choice in the matter. The Goddess's will acted upon us all. But it made complete sense now. There were betas in his cadre because his mate was also a beta.

Griff had always had my support. It wasn't my place to question his motives, or the Goddess's will. Because of that, we'd remained close. My parents loved him like a second son and he'd chosen to move in with us at fourteen, tired of explaining to his parents why he'd chosen the cadre he had.

Somewhere along the way, they built a tentative peace in their family and now my aunt and uncles had their eldest son back in their lives. I wasn't sure how they'd feel about having

a beta daughter-in-law, but knowing Griff, he would never allow them to disrespect his mate.

A delicious lemon scent caught my attention seconds before Reese's soft fur was brushing mine. Looked like her wolf had taken over for a bit. Since I was the current recipient of head butts and her wolf rubbing against mine with affection, I wasn't going to complain. She was safe here with me.

I allowed my wolf to come a little closer to the edge without giving him full control. Our animals playfully brushed against each other, and I laughed internally when Reese flipped onto her back under my snout and rubbed against the dirt.

Snuffling along her belly, my wolf laid his head down, pinning her to the ground. She struggled under the weight and managed to flip onto her stomach once more. My wolf's head was now resting on her back and we were both content to stay that way.

I sighed when Soren let out a yip a few minutes later. It was time to go. I wanted to stay with her, next to the stream, lying in the sunshine for as long as we had it. Instead, I heaved my body up, waiting until she gained her feet, then went to grab the pack. This was why we couldn't give the wolves full control yet. We didn't have time to play.

We ran for hours, but my wolf was thrilled to be out in nature and free. Being the cadre that led the Venat Pack was an honor, but it meant there was never alone time. Our wolves only got to run if we were up before the rest of the village. By the time Soren and Calder found our resting place for the night my muscles were burning faintly.

We all shifted and dressed before setting up camp. I wandered out into the forest with the ax I'd strapped to the outside of my pack—it was what had made me late that morning, I'd damn near forgotten it—in search of lumber. It took about an hour to haul back enough that we'd have a cheerful fire all night. The others built our covers, rigging the cloth between trees and from outcroppings of rock. We needed to hide the glow of the fire. We could sleep as wolves and be

comfortable, but in order to keep full control of our animals we needed to remain human while our bodies shut down.

I dragged four large logs over and placed them around the fire pit I dug out and circled with stones.

“Can I help?”

Glancing up, I smiled at my mate. “Sure. Do you know how to make a fire?”

She gave me a droll look. “I’ve been living out in the wilderness for a year and a half,” she reminded me.

I kept an eye on her as I stacked the wood I split out in the forest. Her hands were steady and true as she used a piece of flint to cast an ember onto her waiting bed of tinder. Before long she had a happy flame in the pit, waiting to be fed. I passed over ever increasing sizes of fuel for her to build her fire.

“Thank you,” I told her.

“We want to help,” she said. “You guys can feel free to put us to work. We’re used to it.”

“That’s probably part of the reason I want you to just sit back and relax. You’ve survived long enough.”

She laughed and the sound had my wolf raising his head within my mind. There was a light, airy quality to it and I loved hearing it. “This is living in luxury compared to how we were. Trust me, this won’t be so bad.”

I nodded and went over to sit with her on the log. My task was completed. Calder and Soren were out hunting our dinner. Griff and Holden were finishing up building our sleeping areas, and the twins were keeping Emma company while she arranged the bedrolls inside each spot. They would end up being the cooks once Soren and Calder got back.

Theirs was the most important role, as we all wanted decent food on this trip and none of the rest of us could cook for shit. Focusing back on my mate, I decided this was the perfect time to get a little closer.

“Did I scare you this morning?”

## CHAPTER 18



### Reese

I frowned over at the man who was poking at the fire with a long stick. Is that what he thought? That he scared me? I had to bite back a scoffing sound. I'd been ready to climb his huge body like a tree, right there in the middle of the village, to hell with whoever had been watching.

"No," I admitted, but didn't further explain. I wasn't sure how to tell him that he reduced me down to liquid heat. Revealing that now might lead to a repeat.

Soren's wolf came trotting out of the woods, three rabbits hanging from his maw, saving me from needing to provide more of an explanation to Atlas.

"Looks like it was a good night hunting," I commented, smiling at the gray beast.

He detoured over to me and rubbed against my side, sort of like a feline might, before he went over and dropped the rabbits at the twins' feet. Dark eyes found mine and I saw that it was still Soren in charge just by the look in them. Then he disappeared back into the brush.

"Where's he going?" I wondered aloud.

He cocked his head, as though listening. "They also killed a small deer. He's going back to help Calder finish gutting it so they can bring it to camp."

I looked over at Atlas, wistfulness radiating off me. "I wish I could do that."

He looked over at me and smiled. “You’ll be able to, soon.”

The breath caught in my throat because I knew exactly what it took in order to be able to hear their thoughts. Was I ready? Examining my emotions, I realized there wasn’t any real fear. It amazed me how quickly I started to trust these shifters. If it wasn’t enough that I was verbalizing that they were my mates, I left my pack with theirs, came on this trip, and couldn’t seem to go a night without dreaming of them taking me, dominating me, fucking me into oblivion.

The fight against it was definitely over and I really didn’t mind so much. This was everything I ever hoped for. Mates who wanted me. Not just some female, but actually wanted *me*. Sure, they probably would have taken any female, just as I’d have taken males who would respect me, but this wasn’t just settling for a mate. I knew they weren’t faking the looks and the words. They were happy that I was their female and it was so damn freeing knowing that.

These males were kind and respected, and truly seemed to care. Sure two of them were as surly as wolves with splinters in their paws half the time, but I didn’t care about that so much. I’d learn how to deal with them. Just as they’d have to learn to deal with a stubborn, headstrong female rather than one who submitted easily.

A glance over at Atlas’s profile made me grin. He was the one with the biggest job since all his mates tended to be a little more on the grumpy, unreasonable side.

“What?” His gorgeous brown eyes were resting on me.

“I was just thinking that you have a big task before you.”

His brows shot up. “What’s that?”

“Keeping us all in line.”

His lips twisted into an amused smile. “Tell me about it.”

I snorted out a laugh, then settled in to watch the dance between my stubborn beta sister and her mates. My fight might be over, but her battle was just beginning.

“I can do it,” she huffed at one of the twins, taking the knife back from him so she could skin the rabbit in her hand. “Just because we lived out in the woods doesn’t mean we lived like barbarians.” She glared over at the males who were laughing at her. She was going to end up knocking their heads together soon enough.

They were lighthearted and always cackling about one thing or another. Emma’s scowl deepened as they set about teasing her. Once she pulled the stick out of her ass, I knew she’d cave and end up joining them. She had a great sense of humor that even our upbringing hadn’t been able to quash.

She was scared. I understood it perfectly. She thought that if she gave in and started to care for these males that they’d be taken from her. A tiny ember of the same fear lived deep inside of me, so I recognized it. Only, I couldn’t seem to fight the draw to my three mates enough to keep my distance anymore. Did these feelings creep up on everyone with the Goddess’s blessing this quickly?

Tilting my head, I used my own stick to poke at the fire. “Do betas respond differently to mating pheromones?”

Atlas’s eyes drifted over to the others and he made a non-committal sound. “They can. They don’t have heats, like omegas, so it can take a bit longer to win them over. Her beta mates would never be able to, they don’t have the same pheromones. But her alphas will get her there.”

I frowned, suddenly worried for my friend. “But it’s her choice, right?” That was one thing Emma had always kind of expected. The right to pick whoever she wanted as a mate. I wasn’t sure if she would be happy having that taken out of her hands.

Atlas’s chuckle was deep and sent a fissure of lust zipping down my spine. “It’s her choice as much as it’s any of ours.” He cocked his head, much like I had a moment before, while he studied them. “Do you think she’ll be unhappy? I’m not sure there’s anything we can do to break a mating claim, but Soren can make sure Griff and the others give her plenty of time.”



“No... It’s not that. I’m sure she’ll be fine, once she comes around to the idea.”

“Have you?”

Our eyes locked onto one another. “Come around to the idea of you being my mates?”

His deep nod made a longer lock of hair fall onto his forehead. His hair was growing fast. He was going to need a haircut soon.

“Yes.” I bit my bottom lip. “I’m not sure what I’m ready to do about it, but I know that you’re my mates.”

One side of his lips kicked up in a satisfied half smile. “We’ll give you the time you need. We have eternity.”

I blinked at him in surprise. Not every shifter believed that mates reunited in the afterlife, living together under the Goddess’s glory. I was glad to hear that he did.

Calder and Soren came back into camp, wearing only their leather pants as they carried meat upon their shoulders. The sight of tanned skin, tattoos, and muscle had all the moisture fleeing my mouth. Calder’s pale blue gaze met mine and he winked as he walked by.

My belly fluttered, reminding me that soon enough my body wasn’t going to give me a choice. I’d be accepting these males into my bed far sooner than my mind would be ready for, but my heart and libido were getting impatient.

\* \* \*

I STARED down at one of the two shelters while dismay rose up within me. It hadn’t occurred to me earlier that Griff and Holden had only set up two areas.

We had a delicious meal and my belly was full and happy. I was grateful there was enough left over for breakfast in the morning. It hadn’t taken long before weariness crept in and my eyelids had started drooping.

Soren’s keen eyes missed nothing. “We’re getting an early start, let’s get to bed. This way mate.”

Now we stood there, staring at the bedrolls and blankets that had been opened up to create a comfortable, padded nest. It was one that an omega would be proud to have.

“Um...” I glanced over my shoulder and saw Emma arguing with her males. There was pointing and flailing as she tried to convince them that they could sleep with the other males while we took the second sleeping area.

“Not happening,” Griff muttered, crossing his arms over his chest.

Without a word, Holden—he didn’t seem to speak much—plucked Emma off her feet and slung her over his shoulder. They disappeared behind the flap of canvas that blocked our views of each other’s shelter.

That left me bunking with my mates. I swallowed as nerves rose up in my chest, pinging around like they were fireflies trying to escape.

“What are you waiting for, Little One?” The amusement in Soren’s voice told me he knew exactly what was going on.

Lifting my chin, I gave him a haughty look and marched into our shelter. I refused to think of it as a nest. That was far too dangerous and intimate since omegas usually only nested when their heat was coming on. They’d drag blankets, pillows, and their alphas’ clothing into a huge pile until she and all her mates could fit inside comfortably. Then they’d fuck each other senseless until her heat passed.

I kicked off my leather boots at the entrance and sat down on one of the bedrolls. I was so tired that it wouldn’t matter if I was sleeping on rocks, but the others had managed to find plenty of moss and pine needles to soften the ground beneath us. As my mates crowded in, the space around me shrunk. My breathing picked up pace as I watched them begin to strip. “What are you doing?” My voice was a bit higher pitched than I was used to.

“Getting ready for bed,” Calder stated, matter of fact as ever.

“You could leave some clothes on,” I pointed out.

“No.” Soren gave me a look and shoved the leather pants off his hips.

Thanks to shifting, I’d seen them all naked already, but that hadn’t been nearly as intimate as this. My cheeks heated and I flopped backward, rolling onto my side and pulling a blanket over top myself. I wasn’t about to sleep naked with these three. That was a recipe for disaster.

Shifter’s hearing was impeccable and I didn’t want the other five listening to things they had no business hearing. My clothes were my last defense against the urges that were building inside of me.

“Don’t you want to get more comfortable?” Atlas asked me as he laid his huge body down in front of me.

“I’m comfortable.” I rolled so I wasn’t staring at a hairy, brawny chest. My sigh was audible when I realized that Soren had already settled in behind me and there were more lickable muscles just inches away. A large tattoo covered his chest from shoulder to shoulder. My fingers itched to trace the ink across heated skin.

Calder settled in at our heads and I was surrounded by taut, firm bodies. Their breathing filled the space and I found myself matching their rhythm. Their eyes were on me in the dark. It was so overwhelming I did the only thing I could. I shut my eyes and tried to force my body to sleep.

It must have worked because sometime later I woke up, groggy and disoriented. My mates were sleeping, their deep breaths quiet in the darkness. My ears strained, trying to figure out what had woken me.

A branch snapped nearby. My head jerked toward the sound, instincts alert and screaming at me. I’d been living on the run for so long they were finely tuned. I shifted a little, starting to sit up.

Muscular arms tightened around me and pulled me back into Soren’s chest. He grumbled in his sleep.

Another snap.

My elbow rammed into his gut, forcing him awake with a pained grunt.

“What the fu-”

“Shhhh,” I hissed. “There’s something out there.”

“You sure?” Calder asked, sitting up. Atlas was awake now as well.

I’d give my mates props, they were light sleepers. I probably could have woken Soren a bit easier, but he prevented me from slipping from the shelter to check out the noise myself. He deserved what he got.

Rustling came from the forest and I gave Calder a pointed look. Our eyes were sensitive enough that we didn’t need light to see one another. The moon shining above gave off enough ambient light for us to see quite well.

“Stay here,” Soren told me in a low voice.

“What?” I whispered, irritated. “No way, I’m going-”

“To do what you’re told,” Soren snapped in my face, “and stay here.”

Folding my arms over my chest, I glared at him. Each of my mates wore similar scowls as they all dressed and left the shelter. Low whispers sounded outside and when I stuck my head out the canvas flap I saw that Griff and the twins were dressed and heading out with my mates.

I got up and stepped outside. Emma and Holden were already there. We sat down at the dying fire pit and I rested my elbow on my knee and my chin in my hand. “We could have helped,” I groused.

“Your mates aren’t going to allow you to put yourself in danger. Whenever possible they’ll be the ones to check out noises in the middle of the night now,” Holden said.

My brows shot up and I exchanged a glance with Emma. This was the most we’d heard him speak.

“We’re not useless you know,” Emma replied. “We protected our pack for a long time without any help from

males.”

Holden nodded, his eyes on the embers in the pit. “And you did a good job.” A slow smile spread over Emma’s face. “But now you have mates. You don’t need to do everything alone anymore.” The smile faded.

“What if I want to help?”

“We won’t stop you from helping in some ways. But you are far too important to risk getting hurt.”

She glowered at him. “Who said you guys get to order me around?”

“The Moon Goddess.” He looked over at her, his eyes boring into hers. “She gave you to us. We’ll die to protect you.”

A goofy smile lit up my own face. My friend had found love. Sure, she wasn’t happy about it right now, but she’d get used to it soon. Of course, this was one area I agreed wholeheartedly with her. The guys didn’t just get to boss us around and leave us behind. We weren’t frightened, helpless omegas. We were warriors in our own rights.

“Why did you get stuck here babysitting?” I asked, irritation with my mates making me a bit snarky.

“I’m honored to watch over my leaders’ mate, as well as my own,” was all he said. There was no pulling this guy into an argument. He used silence as a weapon.

Sighing, I sat back, waiting for the others to come back so I knew what had been scouting out our campsite. I wasn’t sure what would be worse right now, shifters or humans. Soren had seen to it that all I could do was wait to find out.

## CHAPTER 19



**Reese**

**W**e sat around the campfire for over an hour. My eyes were growing heavy once more as the night lengthened.

“Go to sleep.”

Jerking at Holden’s low voice, I sighed. Once I was standing, I looked at him in surprise. Emma was in his lap, cuddled close as she slept. She must have fallen asleep and he pulled her into his arms.

“Thank you, Holden,” I whispered. He gave me a respectful nod as I went back to my sleeping area. Stripping down, I laid amongst the blankets and breathed in my mates’ scents.

The warmth and comfort of the bed pulled me into dreams and, like usual, they were of the guys. They had me stretched out between them as they touched my body. My pussy tingled and throbbed as someone stroked my clit. Moonlight lit up the makeshift shelter and golden skin surrounded me.

Letting out a moan, I arched into the firm touch between my thighs. A man had never made me orgasm before. Sure, I’d done it myself, but this was so much better.

Lips covered mine, stifling another moan as someone slid a finger inside my core. The sensations were unbelievable. I frowned. Now that I thought about it, they were even better than the previous dreams. How was that possible? I was on the verge of consciousness, unwilling to wake up because this

delicious dream would disappear. But something kept nagging at me.

Something wet and warm licked my pussy and my eyes shot open. Atlas's tongue was in my mouth, swallowing the sounds I was making while Soren ate me out. My gasp disappeared the same as the moans. I considered breaking the kiss and shoving them away, then Soren's tongue circled my clit and my eyes rolled to the back of my head. *Maybe in a minute.*

Pressure on my nipple had my back bowing as pleasure zipped straight down to my core. Calder scraped his teeth over the tender bud and I made a strangled sound in my throat. I wanted to ask what happened earlier, but every thought scattered before it could fully form.

Soren's finger delved deep inside me, stroking areas that lit me up from the inside out. My thighs shook as he buried his face between them. My body was coiled tight. I'd been waiting for this for so long... Okay fine, it had only been a week, but with the Moon Goddess's magic and their pheromones playing with my emotions it seemed much longer. Every minute I was around them these feelings were overtaking me and I didn't know what to do with them.

When Soren's tongue swept over my clit again my soul cracked apart right along with my body. The orgasm swept over me with a power that had to be fueled by magic.

Atlas kept his mouth over mine, smothering my cries of release as I broke apart in their arms. Hands gripped mine as I reached out for something tangible to hang onto.

Soren settled into slow licks as I floated down from the heavens. My eyes nearly crossed as he delved his tongue into my pussy as though he couldn't get enough of the wetness seeping from my body.

"Wha-" I whispered as Atlas released me from the kiss. My lips were swollen and sensitive, much like another part of my body.

“Just a small taste, Little One,” Soren said, voice low, as he crawled up my body. His kiss was soft, relaxed, and I tasted myself on his tongue.

Soren dropped next to me, taking up position on one side as Atlas did the same for the other. Hands cupped my cheeks and I looked at Calder. He dipped his head and kissed me.

I groaned against his lips, my body flaring to life despite the mind numbing release I was just given. My head strained as I tried to follow Calder’s mouth as he pulled away.

“Go to sleep, Minx,” he whispered, dropping a kiss on my forehead. He climbed back into his spot above my head.

My eyes were already drooping closed when I asked, “What happened out there?”

“Sleep, Reese,” Soren ordered and my body obeyed.

\* \* \*

A HAND BRUSHED over my hair and my eyes opened once more. A pale light was filling the tent. It was early. Groaning, I rolled and buried my face in someone’s chest. A deep earthy scent filled my nostrils and I knew I’d just cuddled up against Atlas. That was fine. He made a good pillow.

“Get up.”

Arms closed around me, tightening.

“Time to wake up,” a new, deeper voice joined the other.

I ignored them both and burrowed in more. He was so warm, and it felt so good to have him wrapped around me. I let out a little growl when someone touched my back.

“Someone’s cranky in the morning,” Calder replied, a grin in his tone.

“It’s not morning,” I muttered. “It’s still the middle of the night.”

“It’s morning,” Soren answered. “Get up, Little One.”

A sound cracked through the shelter and a moment later my ass heated up. I gasped and turned my head, pinning him



with a sullen look. He'd just slapped my ass.

He was standing, head cocked, eyes transfixed on my cheeks. "I like the way your ass bounces. I'm going to be doing that a lot more."

My jaw dropped, but before I could say anything he was ducking out of the shelter and striding away. I turned forward again and blinked up at Atlas. He was smiling down at me.

"Good morning."

"Hi," I replied, hesitantly. Had last night really happened? Or was it a dream?

"You just looked too delicious lying there," Atlas said as he rolled away from me. "You can't blame us for sampling you."

*Well, that answers that question.*

My cheeks heated as I realized everything that went down had really gone down. I was alone in the shelter now, and I quickly dressed because I heard the others moving around.

I fell into step with Holden as he and Griff broke down the shelters. Bundling up a blanket, I shoved it into one of the packs, unwilling to look my mates in the eyes yet. I shot a quick glance over at Emma.

She yawned and stretched before jumping in and helping to break down camp as well. She looked well rested. I could only hope that Atlas kept me quiet enough that the others didn't overhear all that last night.

"How long until we get to the Cirdan Pack's village?" Emma asked, breaking the early morning quiet.

"We should get there late tomorrow evening," Soren responded. "We'll speak with Jessu and look into the woman who lives alone. Then we'll continue on to the Verulian Pack's home."

"That will take another four or five days of travel," Griff added.

We nodded. The guys had pushed us hard the day before, but we were up for the challenge. We were used to traveling fast and keeping a low profile.

“Who was in the forest last night?” I asked.

“Just a bear,” Calder replied, keeping his eyes down and on his work. No one said anything else, but the fact that none of the males were looking my way made me suspicious.

I met Emma’s gaze and she raised an eyebrow. She didn’t believe it had just been a bear either. As much as I wanted to argue, I knew now wasn’t the time or place. Soren wanted to get a move on and I didn’t want to hold us up. None of us knew what the timeline for this quest was. It would be a bitch if we were a few days short when we came to the end and missed whatever goal we were working toward.

Once camp was packed away and the area looked like no one had been there, we stripped and shifted. My wolf rejoiced in the opportunity to run and test my speed against my mates. We took breaks during the day as needed, but Soren pushed us hard and soon we came to the edge of the forest.

He slowed and stopped at the tree line. We spread out and stared down into the plains below. The mountain we were standing on led down into a valley where the plains packs held authority.

My ruff bristled as I thought about leaving the safety of the trees behind. From this point on our chances of running into humans tripled. They liked to live in the open spaces and lower elevations. We had enough of them over on the coast, but the plains held even more. They were like locusts on the land and you never knew when you’d run into them. Not to mention, they hated us.

Soren led the way out of the trees and we followed. We ran as a group now instead of single file, though Atlas was still at the rear of the group. The males circled us, putting Emma and me at the center of a mass of wolves.

As we ran, the unease of being out in the open faded. We ran far past the time when we’d stopped yesterday just trying

to get to the village. Soren pushed us even harder. He was trying to get to Cirdan Pack lands before darkness fell.

My legs were tiring, which meant Emma was probably close to being done. She was strong, but she and the twins weren't alphas. They didn't have the same level of stamina as the rest of us. Though the twins didn't seem to be having any trouble keeping up.

Our group was beginning to lengthen out as Emma tired. Soren, Griff, and Calder were about ten feet in front of us, while the rest of the males stuck close to our sides. I wasn't about to leave Emma to run at the head of the pack.

Someone must have warned Soren, because he shot a look over his shoulder and slowed his pace. He didn't shift, but I saw reassurance on his wolf's face. We were almost there.

We raced into a village as the last fingers of light disappeared behind the mountain at our backs. Men stepped out of grass huts, watching us with suspicion and mistrust. Waiting up ahead was a tall man with graying hair.

"Soren! Welcome!" He spread his arms out and a booming laugh filled the air.

I stuck close to Emma's side while my mates shifted and approached the man. As much as I wanted to hear what was being said, I wanted to make sure she was okay first. She was heaving deep breaths and her legs wobbled beneath her. I flopped down to the ground, panting myself, leading the way and showing her it was fine to relax. We'd run hard all day long and I was exhausted. I never pushed my females this hard except when our immediate lives were in danger, so it'd taken its toll on Emma.

The twins laid down next to her, watching everything with solemn eyes. It was the first time I'd seen them somber. Griff and Holden were standing near us, creating a barrier between the curious plains wolves and ourselves.

Women and children began creeping out of their homes, silently studying us. When one child dashed down the steps of

a hut, his father turned and barked something at him, sending him scrambling back to his mother.

This was more like what I was used to. Everyone was on edge and weren't quite ready to accept us. This was what I'd expected of Soren's pack. They didn't react this way though. They took us in, gave us food and clothes. Greeted us with warm, open smiles.

Emma laid her shaggy head on my back as we listened to the low tone of the men speaking. Fine tremors wracked her body while we waited and I hoped Soren sped the greetings along for her sake. I was tired, too, but Emma wasn't built for the day we just had. She kept up, but if the village was much further away, I would have insisted we stay one more night in the woods.

Finally, Calder turned and motioned to us as the others began to walk. As we began moving forward, Emma let out a small yelp and started to crash to the ground as her legs gave out beneath her. The only reason she didn't go down in a heap was because Holden caught her in his strong, capable arms.

"Shift." She did and Holden scooped her up fully in his arms. Biting back a smile as Emma sighed, I shifted and walked beside them. My mates were still ahead of us, but I knew they were keeping an eye on us as they went. They were skilled diplomats and it showed. That wasn't something my father had ever worried about, and thanks to my designation, I stuck to myself. I had a lot to learn if I really was going to be these males' mate.

"Reese."

My brows shot up as Soren motioned for me to join them. I was hesitant as I approached, but I smiled at Jessu. His eyes were shrewd as he watched me approach. I wasn't self-conscious of my nakedness. You got over that quickly as a shifter.

"Thank you for your hospitality," I told him as I approached.

“My pleasure,” he replied as he inclined his head. “I knew your mother.”

My steps faltered and the smile faded from my face. “You were fortunate.”

“I agree. Tenala was an amazing woman. She came to me in order to research alpha females.” His lips twitched into a smile. “It’s an honor to meet you, Reese.” He held out his hand.

Meeting Soren’s eyes, I reached out after he nodded at me, and clasped Jessu’s hand. “The honor is mine. Thank you for helping my mother.”

The smile on his face turned sad. “If only I could have. I tried to convince her to remain here, with my pack. Now I understand why she had to return home.” He shook his head, as though brushing away the memories. For a brief moment there was an emotion there in his eyes that made me wonder if Jessu had felt more for my mother than he was letting on.

Looking around at the curious faces of his people, I wondered what might have been if Mom, Emma, and I had come here and sought protection? His pack was suspicious, but not malicious. It was clear their leader was a happy and outgoing man. Two other men stood nearby and I knew, just by the way they were watching us, they were Jessu’s cadre mates. All three were handsome, though they didn’t hold a candle to my three. I wasn’t sure anyone could.

Jessu turned and announced, “These shifters are our guests! There will be a feast tomorrow evening to honor them!”

Cheers ripped through the air and suddenly people were smiling and talking together in excitement. His endorsement of us changed the mood of the village in such a manner that my mouth dropped open.

Jessu caught my shocked look and winked at me. “I’ve had to teach them to be wary. Most of my people are far too optimistic and giving.”

“This coming from the man opening his home to us,” I said with a wry smile.

His features sombered. “You’re doing something important. Something that will benefit us all. And that something can only be performed by you.” His eyes held mine and his words sent a chill down my spine.

“You know about-”

“Not tonight,” he said, cutting me off. “We’ll speak tomorrow before you speak to Celinda.”

“Who’s Celinda?” Atlas asked.

“Someone who can point you in the right direction,” Jessu replied in a cryptic manner. “This will be your hut for the duration of your stay. I hope you find it comfortable. Your companions’ is over there.” He pointed a few huts down.

“It’s much appreciated,” Soren told him. “Beats sleeping on the ground.”

The men shared smiles. “I have to admit, I miss those days,” Jessu replied. “As you know, it’s impossible to find enough time to leave the village these days.” He shook his head again. “Have a good night. We’ll speak in the morning.”

I followed my mates inside the hut. There was one massive bed, a table and chairs, and a fireplace. It wasn’t spacious and with four large shifters inside, I resigned myself to constantly bumping up against my mates.

## CHAPTER 20



### Reese

Silence fell over the space and I swallowed hard when I found my mates staring at me. Hunger flared to life in their eyes and it made me nervous. I wasn't sure what I was doing. This was all new. Males who wanted me. Not just to fuck me, but to claim me as theirs for eternity. I was coming to grips with it. My body craved theirs. Every molecule of my being seemed to be tuned into them. Was this what it felt like when the Moon Goddess bestowed her blessing? It seemed to be.

"What are you thinking about?" Atlas asked, his eyes on mine, his voice soft.

I licked my lips, trying to find the words. "Just how different this is."

"Different from what?"

"My whole life, I've been told that there's something wrong with me," I explained. The way Calder bristled at my words made my heart drum a little harder in my chest. "You-"

"We want you exactly as you are," Soren told me, a hard edge to his tone. He wasn't angry with me, but at my family for telling me such things. "I won't take what isn't freely given, but that doesn't mean we won't try to convince you to be ours, Reese."

I shook my head. "I don't know if I can deny it any longer," I admitted in a small voice. They'd worn me down, though not in a bad way. Already my nipples were tightening

under my shirt just from their eyes raking over my body. Was this how it felt for an omega when she went into heat? A complete inability to control her own body? I squeezed my thighs together, trying to relieve the ache between them.

“You’re wet for us,” Atlas said, his voice low and husky. I squeaked out a sound of embarrassment, then shot him a glare. He reached out and took my hand in his, tugging me closer. He chuckled at my reaction to his words. “There’s no reason for you to be embarrassed with us, Baby Girl. I’d do damn near anything to feel you wrapped around me. To have you dripping all over my cock.”

My mouth dropped open at the filthy words, unsure how I was supposed to respond to that. Thank you seemed a bit inadequate.

“We want you more than we’ve ever wanted anything,” Calder told me, his eyes on mine as he stepped closer. “But we can wait until you’re ready.”

I shook my head, practically vibrating with need. Ready or not, this was what I needed. The hunger within me was clawing at my chest. I’d already pushed all of us to the limits by holding off for this long and the orgasm they’d given me seemed like a far too distant memory. The fact that I’d been able to deny us all for so long was a testament to my alpha nature. “I can’t,” I choked out.

Soren’s eyes narrowed. “Then we wait.”

“No,” I cried, chest heaving as I tried to get the words out. They were watching me struggle, unable to help. It was like I’d waited so long and now that the time was here the dam had broken and I was drowning. “I can’t...wait. It hurts.”

“What hurts?” Atlas asked, concern in his voice.

“My body,” I whimpered. “It’s on fire.”

“Fuck,” Soren growled, his hand going to my throat. “Calder.”

“What?”



“You’re going to suck on our mate’s needy little pussy until she comes all over your face.”

Silence filled the room for a few heartbeats as we all stared at him in surprise. Then Calder grinned. “Yes, Alpha.” It was said with a chuckle. He reached behind him and ripped his shirt off over his head as Soren began walking me backward toward the bed using only the hand on my throat.

My eyes widened as I searched his face. I was an alpha female. Stronger than most men, and I was afraid. “Soren,” I whispered.

“Do you want this?”

My head bobbed in a quick nod. “Yes.” As worried as I was about how this would go down, there was no more denying myself.

He smiled at me, but it wasn’t kind. It was predatory. “Then stop fighting us and let us take care of you, Little One. You’ve been fighting for far too long.”

“Maybe we could...hold off...on the claiming?” I suggested.

He cocked his head and stopped as the back of my knees hit the mattress. “Is that what you’re worried about?”

Another nod was all I could give. I didn’t know how to explain to him the worry I felt about them overtaking every part of my being. What if they didn’t like what they found once they knew my heart and soul?

The corner of his lips quirked upward. “That’s the easy part, little girl.”

I swallowed at the promise in his tone. “Then...what’s the hard part?”

“Taking all this cock when you’re not used to it. We’re going to fuck you until you’re screaming our names, mindless with pleasure.”

*Well, then.*

I didn't know how to respond to that. Turns out, I didn't need to. He wasn't finished.

“You need to be fucked. Your body is crying out for it. The connection between us requires it. And if you think we can fuck you and not claim you, then you have a lot to learn.”

He removed his hand from my throat and slowly pushed against my shoulder until I was sitting on the edge of the bed. “Get in the middle and lay down.”

My eyes darted from him to the others and back. This was it. I could say no and they would respect that. But if I did as Soren demanded, I'd be giving them leave to do anything to me that they wanted. By the time they were done we'd be bound together for life. It was all so overwhelming. Yet still, I was past the point where I could go back. Being in close proximity to them had cemented something deep inside me. I belonged to them. It was time to release my fears and trust that my mates would do everything in their power to keep me safe. They wouldn't harm me. They wouldn't turn from me.

Sucking in a shaky breath, I scooted toward the middle of the mattress and laid back. Growls sounded around me, causing goosebumps to rise on my skin. I'd just given them permission to continue. To officially make me theirs. Goddess help me.

Calder stepped forward, his eyes raking over my body as he crawled up on the bed and straddled my hips. “You're fucking beautiful.”

My heart fluttered in my chest at the awe in his tone. He leaned down, his lips brushing mine as he kissed me. I moaned into his mouth as his tongue swept inside and tangled with mine. His kiss was demanding, yet gentle, and I found myself melting underneath him as he explored my mouth with his own.

I whined in need as he broke off the kiss and began peppering them down my body as he moved between my legs. Breathing heavily, I watched him as he grasped my pants and began to pull them down.

“You won’t need all these clothes, Minx.”

Gasping as new hands pulled my shirt upward, I craned my neck and looked up at Atlas. He gave me a patient smile as he and his cadre mate stripped me bare. They’d seen me naked before, and had even tasted my skin the other night, but it had started when I was sleeping, so there’d been no embarrassment. I went to move my arm over my chest when Soren caught my wrist in his powerful grasp.

“Don’t.” His eyes were glued to my breasts. He licked his lips, but otherwise didn’t touch me.

They were torturing me. It was almost like I could feel their touch, but other than holding me still no one was actually doing any touching. They were just staring. It was unnerving. Sure, some women would be preening at the lust written all over their faces, and there was a small piece of me that did, but it was drowned out by my jangling nerves. Mother had explained what would happen when alphas claimed their beta or omega mates, but was it the same when the mate was an alpha as well?

*Guess we’ll find out.*

Jumping when Calder’s hands went to my inner thighs, I obliged when he shoved them apart and allowed them to fall open so he could fit his massive shoulders between. My eyes widened when he rubbed his face against my pussy, as though he was trying to transfer his own scent to me. As though he wanted to bathe in mine. I whimpered as his tongue flicked over my clit. “Already so wet for us,” he growled low in approval before diving back into his feast.

My hips bucked up off the bed as he sucked my clit into his mouth and began to tease it with his tongue. I cried out in surprise when a pair of hands cupped my breasts and rolled my nipples between their fingers.

“So responsive,” Atlas whispered in my ear.

I turned toward Soren, needing a kiss, but he just watched, shaking his head. “You’ll take orders from us, Mate. Not the other way around.”

I narrowed my eyes, scowling at him. They were going to tease and torture me, but there was no way I could do anything about it while Calder had me pinned to the bed with a heavy arm thrown over my hips. His mouth was driving me crazy.

“Please,” I begged, not even knowing what I was asking for. My one sexual encounter before them had been nothing like this. I hadn’t come. I hadn’t enjoyed it. And this building pleasure inside of me had been absent. It was a tsunami, threatening to wash me away once it broke. I wasn’t sure if I wanted it to or not. My hips bucked upward as Calder’s mouth latched onto my clit and he sucked with long pulls.

I cried out at the intense sensations crashing over me. They were edging me higher, closer toward my climax. Touching myself had never felt this way. When I came on my own fingers it was like a soft echo of the bliss Calder was pulling from my body.

Calder’s growl vibrated through me as he continued to feast on my pussy. Lips closed over my nipple and my back arched as I chased the wonderful sensation of a tongue laving the sensitive bud.

“Oh!” I cried out as teeth nipped at the tip before Soren soothed it with his tongue.

Atlas chuckled again as he maneuvered my body until my head was in his lap. He wrapped a massive hand around my throat, forcing me to stare up at him. Calder and Soren shifted as Atlas moved me, following along and never stopping what they were doing. “Have you ever come before us, Little Warrior?”

I started to nod, then realized I couldn’t with his massive paw in the way. “Y-yes.”

All movement stopped and I looked around nervously as they stared at me. Calder had lifted his head from between my thighs, his lips shiny and wet from my own juices. Soren was glaring at me.

“You’d better explain before you make them angry,” Atlas suggested.

Oh. They thought another male had made me come. “I...” Ugh, could this be any more embarrassing? “I made myself come.”

The tension in the room dissipated as soon as I bit the words out. I gasped as Calder ran his tongue from my asshole to my clit in one long stroke. Sparks detonated deep inside my pussy and I swore I was going to lose my mind if I didn’t orgasm soon.

Soren’s fingers pinched my nipples and I cried out, not sure if it was from pleasure or pain. My body was on fire and they were the only ones who could put it out.

“We’re the only ones who will make you come from now on, Little Warrior.” Atlas’s voice was a dark warning that had me whimpering with need.

Calder’s tongue attacked my pussy again, driving me closer and closer toward the edge. It was hard to take a full breath as the pleasure battered me. It seemed like every time I was about to tip over that edge, Calder would switch things up, the pressure, the rhythm, and I’d have to start over. I didn’t know if he was doing it on purpose, but my whole body was shaking with the need for the release he was keeping just out of reach.

“Come for us, Little One,” Soren demanded.

I was trying, dammit. Reaching down, I grasped Calder’s head to force him to keep his tongue on my clit. His deep chuckle told me he knew exactly what he’d been doing. He sucked my clit into his mouth and flicked it with his tongue. The orgasm slammed into me so hard, I saw stars as my vision went black for a moment. My entire body shook with the force of it.

Calder lapped at my pussy, drinking in every drop of my release as I came down from my high. He didn’t stop until I was squirming away from him because it was too much. Only then did he lift his head and give me a wicked grin. His face was covered in my juices and it should have been embarrassing, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel anything other than satisfaction.

“Now it’s our turn.”

I glanced over at Soren, eager to see what he wanted me to do. I was so far beyond the fear that nothing was going to stop me. If Calder could make my whole world shift with just his mouth, I couldn’t wait to see what was next.

Soren stood up and took his place between my thighs, Calder shifted over to my side to give him space. He wasted no time sliding two fingers inside of my pussy. I moaned as he began pumping them in and out of me slowly. My body tightened again as he thrust his fingers into me, curling them slightly to hit a spot inside of me that set off fireworks behind my closed eyes.

I felt Calder move away from me and opened my eyes to see what he was doing. He’d moved around to Soren’s side and was watching as our leader finger fucked me, his hand wrapped around his thick cock. Something brushed my cheek and my eyes widened as Atlas’s dick bobbed in front of my face. I wasn’t even sure how or when they’d gotten naked. It must have been before all this started, but I’d been so nervous I hadn’t realized.

“Open your mouth, Little Warrior,” he demanded, his voice rough with need. “I want to feel your lips wrapped around me while Soren sends you over the edge once more.”

As if on cue, Soren added a third finger and began pumping into me harder. I moaned, but did as Atlas ordered and opened my lips. His dick was hard, but wrapped up in soft, silky skin and it slid easily over my tongue. He didn’t thrust forward, just held himself there as I sucked the head into my mouth.

“That’s it,” he groaned. “Just like that.”

I gasped as Calder rejoined us and began rubbing my clit. There was no way this was possible. I’d never come more than once. But that feeling inside me was rising again. My legs shook as Soren continued to fuck me with his fingers, Calder played with my clit, and Atlas fed his cock into my mouth. It was all too much and yet not enough at the same time.

As distracted as I was, Atlas took over and began to slowly thrust into my mouth. He was so big my jaw ached as I took his dick in further. I swallowed around him and he growled in pleasure, his hand coming down to grip the side of my head.

“That’s it, Little Warrior,” he groaned. “You’re doing so well.”

I moaned around him as I felt myself getting closer to that peak again. My body was shaking, my muscles tensing as Calder worked my clit. I couldn’t believe this was happening again.

“Be a good girl and come for us, Mate,” Atlas ordered, his voice tight with need.

Calder pinched my clit and Soren curled his fingers inside me and I came undone, screaming around Atlas’s cock. The orgasm ripped through me, making me shake and moan as they continued their assault on my body.

When I finally stopped shaking, Soren pulled his fingers out of me and leaned down to lick up my pussy, groaning in pleasure. “You taste so fucking good, Little One. Look at me.” He waited until I opened my eyes and met his. “Are you ready to get fucked?”

Ready? My body was a mass of loose limbs. I wasn’t sure I could move even if I wanted to. I was sated and sleepy and he still wanted to fuck me?

He must have read my thoughts on my face, because he gave me a wicked grin. “We’re going to make you come so many times you’re going to wonder if you’re feeling pleasure or pain, Mate.”

I blinked, unable to voice my questions because Atlas was still sliding in and out of my mouth. All I could do was keep my lips wrapped tightly around him and hold on. Something told me that was going to be the theme of the night as these males brought me to the edge of my limits.

Before I knew what was happening, I was dragged off Atlas’s cock and Soren had me flipped onto my stomach on

the bedspread. He hitched my hips into the air, forcing me to my knees, chest still on the bed.

“Hand me that pillow.”

I didn't know who Soren was talking to but soon enough the pillow was being stuffed under my chest, lifting me off the bed a bit.

“Don't want you to hurt that pretty neck,” Soren said as though that explained anything.

I understood as soon as Atlas kneeled in front of me again. My lips parted on their own and his heavy length was back in my mouth before I really knew what was happening. My body knew what it needed. It wanted more of this. More of them.

Soren ran his hand over my ass cheeks and squeezed. “You have such a nice ass, Little One.” He gave me a hard smack and I jumped at the unexpected contact. “So fucking sweet. I can't wait to fuck you here.”

I jerked on Atlas's cock in surprise, but his huge hand tangled in my hair, keeping me from releasing him so I could tell Soren that wasn't going to happen.

“We're definitely fucking you there, Reese,” Atlas said, answering my thoughts and I wondered how they knew what I was thinking. We hadn't completed the claiming, so the mind link wasn't in place, but they seemed to know everything that was running through my mind. “But this time you'll only take us in your pussy, one at a time. Next time though, you'll take all three of us at once, in each of your holes.” My eyes widened as I looked up at him, but he just smiled down at me and patted my cheek. “Keep sucking, Mate.”

I did as he asked because it was easier than trying to fight them on what they wanted to do with me. My pussy had clenched down hard while Atlas was talking. I wanted them so badly, the way they were going to take me was mattering less and less.

Soren's fingers slipped between my ass cheeks and I froze for a moment. He didn't pause or give me a chance to get used to his touch. He just kept going until he was rubbing my



asshole. I jerked a little, but he just chuckled as he removed his fingers. Turning my head to see what he was doing wasn't possible, so I jerked when the tip of his cock brushed over my pussy. Eyeing the cock in front of me, shuttling in and out of my mouth, I wondered if Soren's was as big as Atlas's while hard. If he was, I wasn't sure he'd fit. Atlas wouldn't, that was for sure. There was no way. Especially not with the knot there at the base, swelling before my eyes.

Soren rubbed his dick over my pussy lips again and then pushed forward, forcing me to open up for him. I tensed, waiting for the pain that would come from him splitting me apart, but it never came. They'd relaxed my body with multiple orgasms, and I was so wet, he slid in with one thrust. It was tight and there was so much pressure I gasped, but it didn't hurt.

"Fuck," Soren growled, his hands going to my hips. "You're so fucking tight."

I moaned around Atlas's cock and he groaned above me as I sucked harder. Soren pulled back and slammed into me again. My eyes rolled up into my head as pleasure exploded through me. He did it again and again, until I was moaning continuously around Atlas's cock.

Soren reached down and wrapped his hand around my throat, pulling me off Atlas's dick and up to my knees. "You're mine, Little One. Do you understand?"

My chest was heaving and it was hard to talk through the tight grip he had on me, but I managed to choke out, "Yes."

"Next time I'm going to fuck you for hours," he promised, "but you can't handle that yet. We have to build you up to it."

I screamed as something sliced into the right side of my neck. The pain slammed into me, but right on its heels was a pleasure so intense I came without even having Soren move within me. It took a minute for my dazed brain to realize he'd bitten me. He'd claimed me. Oh shit.

Soren started moving within me, thrusting in and out of my pussy as I felt his teeth sink in deeper. I could feel the bond

between us forming. I could feel Soren's need for me, his desire to protect me. His love for me. My eyes widened as that last thought slammed into me, but then Atlas was there, standing above me on the bed, shoving his cock into my mouth again, distracting me from the emotions flowing through me from Soren.

I sucked hard on Atlas's dick as Soren fucked my pussy and bit down on my neck. The pleasure was too much, and I came again, screaming around Atlas's cock.

Atlas pulled back, his hand fisting in my hair as he groaned out, "Fuck."

"Let her go," Soren ordered as he released his hold on my neck. They both pulled out of me and even though I'd come so many times, I whimpered at their loss.

I was down on my back on the bed with Soren's body covering me within moments. He thrust back into my pussy, making me purr with pleasure.

"Bite me, Reese," he gritted out from between clenched teeth. "Claim me as your alpha. As your mate."

My canines lengthened inside my mouth as my eyes latched onto his neck. I was acting on pure instinct by this point. I bit down on Soren's neck, sinking my teeth into his skin and muscle as he'd done to me. His blood filled my mouth and I moaned in pleasure, sucking hard on the bite mark I'd left behind.

"Fuck!" Soren groaned out as his hips slammed into mine over and over again.

I could feel our bond growing stronger with every second that passed. He was filling every fiber of my being. It was so intense it rocked me to my core.

He slammed into me one last time, as deep as he could go without filling me with his knot, and I could feel his cum inside me. I whimpered in disappointment that I wasn't getting all of him. "Not today, Little One. I don't want to hurt you," he murmured in my ear. He was breathing heavily from the pleasure. He held most of his weight off me as he recovered,

but I wanted him to just let go and lay on top of me like the best weighted blanket in the world.

Soren pulled out of me, rolling us both onto our sides, facing each other. He pulled me tight against him, wrapping his arms around me. I sighed in pleasure and contentment at being wrapped up in my mate's arms. He brushed a kiss over my forehead. "It's not over, Little One." With that, he moved away from me.

## CHAPTER 21



### Atlas

Finally. She was going to be ours. It hadn't been long since we'd found our mate, running from us in the forest, but when the Moon Goddess's power got a hold of you it felt like each day we didn't complete the claim was an eternity. She was staring up at me with soft gray eyes. I could see the exhaustion in them. Between traveling here and the multiple orgasms we'd already given her she was depleted. But we couldn't stop. Soren had claimed her and she'd returned it. We had to cement our claim on her as well.

We already agreed that this wasn't the time or place to knot her. We wanted to be home, in a safe environment, before we bred our little alpha. We were also going to lock down our bond with her as much as possible once we claimed her. Our emotions rushing through the mind link would easily overwhelm her, and she had already been fighting this before. We didn't want to make her more nervous as she tried to figure out her new place in our cadre.

Her body was still flushed pink from pleasure, her nipples hard points begging for attention. I leaned down and sucked one into my mouth, making her gasp. Her fingers threaded through my hair, holding me to her breast as I teased and licked and sucked.

She was so responsive to us. I loved that about her. She'd been hesitant at first, but now that she knew she belonged to us she was giving in to our demands for her body. It was a heady feeling.

I moved to the other breast, giving it the same attention as the first while Calder kissed her. His hands were roaming over her body and a growl rumbled deep in my chest. It wasn't that I minded him touching her. She was his mate too, after all, but it was my turn. I'd waited patiently to claim her body, her soul, for myself.

Calder backed off, more than willing to wait his turn with our girl. We'd all been waiting for this day since we'd met her.

I didn't want to crush her under my immense weight, so I sat down on my ass and lifted her like a rag doll until her legs were spread over my thighs. Her gasp was loud in the quiet room. My mates were watching with interest, but didn't interrupt.

"Atlas," Reese scolded.

I was sure she was about to say something feminine and dumb, like I shouldn't be lifting her because she was 'too big', which was ridiculous. I liked that she was thick. It meant I was less likely to hurt her. Later, I'd prove to her again that compared to me she was still dainty and graceful. I tugged her by the hips until she was perched above my straining cock. "Fuck yourself down onto me, Mate," I ordered in a gruff voice.

Her eyes widened, and she bit her full lower lip, but she complied. As she began to sink down on me, she shook her head. "I don't think you're going to fit."

My chuckle joined my cadre mates' at her words. She had no idea how well we fit together. Once we were mated, our bodies would be made for each other. Our ruts would activate, and we'd be able to make love for hours without tiring. I could feel the urge to give into my rut even now, but I couldn't. None of us could. There wasn't time. Once the four of us succumbed we'd be here for days. We couldn't allow that to happen. It was taking all my effort to contain the need. Gritting out between my teeth as her tight cunt enveloped me slowly, I told her, "Oh, it'll fit, Baby. Keep going."

To help her, I put my hands on her full hips, shoving her downward. I didn't want to hurt her, so when she sucked in a

pained breath, I eased off until she became used to my size. As soon as her muscles relaxed, I pushed her body down further. I needed to be seated fully inside her wet heat.

“Oh my Goddess” she whimpered as I bottomed out inside her. I was careful to keep my knot outside her body, no matter how badly I wanted to shove completely into her.

I stopped moving and waited for her to adjust. She was so fucking tight. Her walls were squeezing me like a vice and it was hard to keep from thrusting up into her body.

“You’re so big,” she moaned, as she began to rock over me. She was crossing the pain-pleasure point. She was less afraid of my size and was starting to embrace it.

I allowed her to set the pace as we both got lost in the pleasure of our bodies joining together for the first time. My hands roamed over her skin, touching every inch of her that I could reach.

“Fuck, Reese,” I groaned when she squeezed me tighter. “You’re perfect.”

She whimpered again, but didn’t stop moving. Her hips rocked faster and faster as she rode me hard. Her breasts bounced in my face, so I latched onto one with my mouth. Her nipple pebbled against my tongue as I sucked on it.

Her fingers threaded through my hair, holding me close as she continued to move over me. The sounds of our bodies slapping together filled the room and it was music to my ears. She was mine. The pristine skin on the left side of her neck was calling me. My fangs lengthened as she moaned in my ear. I wanted to bite her. To mark her as mine forever. My teeth slid into her flesh like a knife into butter, and a force I hadn’t been expecting slammed into me. It was her. Everything that made up who she was roared into my mind like a storm.

My heart pounded as she sank her teeth into my neck at the same time. The slight bite of pain was overwhelmed by the pleasure that jolted through my system from her bite. Our bond snapped into place, tying us together for all time. Her

body shook above me as she cried out my name, her pussy clenching around my cock as she came hard.

I thrust up into her a few more times before I found my own release, pumping my cum deep inside her womb. As much as I wanted to shove my aching knot inside of her, Soren was right. She wasn't ready for us. I was big enough as it was and she wasn't an omega. We'd have to train her tight little pussy to take that part of us in order for us to fuck her with them without hurting her. She collapsed on top of me, panting heavily in my ear as we both came down from our high. She was limp in my arms, but she had one more mate to satisfy.

I let her go as Calder lifted her off my lap. As much as we wanted to let her rest, this had to be done all at once. The cadre was being formed now. If all her mates didn't complete it now, they wouldn't be included in the new cadre being formed. None of us were willing to let that happen.

Despite her exhaustion, Reese lifted her head and returned Calder's kiss with passion and eagerness.

"I'm going to make you feel good," he promised against her lips. "You're doing so good, Reese."

I moved out of the way so he could lay her out on the bed and spread her legs wide. I watched him lick his lips as he stared down at our mate with lust in his eyes. He wasn't going to prolong this. He would take her first next time so that he could draw out their pleasure together as long as he wanted, but this time was going to be fast so that our mate could rest.

He notched his cock at her entrance, and my own dick twitched with interest as he slid into her welcoming body. She moaned, her hands reaching for him, pulling him closer. He didn't hesitate to lean over her and press their chests together, giving her everything she wanted. Her arms wrapped around him, holding him close as they moved together in perfect sync.

I scooted closer, watching them with rapt attention. I loved seeing them like this, lost in each other and the pleasure they were bringing one another. It wouldn't take long before Calder's knot started to form. Like us, he wouldn't shove it into her until she was prepared to take us in that way. It was a

bittersweet agony for us, but one we happily shouldered so that our mate was safe and protected.

Calder grunted, his hips moving faster as he neared his release. He pressed his lips to Reese's ear and whispered to her how much he loved her and how good she felt wrapped around him. Then he moved his head lower, fangs extended and sank them into her shoulder at the base of her neck, right below Soren's bite mark.

I watched my mate's body tense, her mouth opening on a silent scream as Calder's bite sent her over the edge. When her jaws clamped down on his shoulder, a mirror image of her own bite that he'd given her, I knew exactly what he was feeling. The high was fucking incredible. Feeling that bond forming and connecting was like nothing I'd ever known before. He groaned, thrusting deep inside her and froze as he came.

Reese's eyes were closed, but I could tell that she was still with us. She was tiring quickly, and Calder seemed to realize it.

"You pleased us all so well, Minx. Rest now." He kissed her forehead before pulling out of her and moving off the bed. I started to roll off the bed as well, but he shook his head.

"Let me."

I nodded in agreement and laid back down. Soren was already pressed against Reese's side, giving her comfort as she drifted off to sleep. She turned toward him, burying her face against his chest as her breathing evened out.

Calder came over with a bowl of water and a rag. It wouldn't erase our scent on her, but that pleased me in a primal kind of way. He went to work cleaning her skin, and between her legs, making her shiver in the cool night air. He placed the bowl back on the small dresser nearby, then crawled into bed, wrapping his arms around her.

Normally, it was Soren and I who slept with her sandwiched between us, but this time he got to hold our mate as she slept. Closing my eyes, I put my arms behind my head



as a pillow and let my mind drift. We'd waited for so long. I'd begun to despair at ever finding our mate. She wasn't an omega, like so many dreamed of, but honestly? She was even better. So strong. So brave. She stood next to us, an equal in her own right and we fucking loved her for it.

My brows shot up as the word love popped into my mind. I knew that the protectiveness and possessiveness of her would come with the claiming bond. Shit, those were there the minute I set eyes on her and knew that the Goddess had earmarked her for us. But love? Was that only because of the bond? I didn't think so. It didn't matter that we'd only known one another for a short time. I started falling in love with her almost immediately. She was so selfless and kind to those around her, except her enemies of course. They got to see the feral side that would kill to protect those she loved. No. I wouldn't have chosen anyone other than Reese as my mate. If the Goddess had given us any other, it would have been a mistake.

## CHAPTER 22



### Soren

The loud squeal had me looking over my shoulder and grinning when I saw Emma jumping up and down and hugging Reese all at the same time. Seeing them together, the friendship they'd forged, so close it was more of a sister relationship, eased something within me. I knew Reese hadn't grown up in a good environment. Between her haunted eyes as she spoke of her family and the information Calder had relayed to us about the way Haron was leading his pack, it didn't take a genius to figure things out. Whatever the case, I was glad the two females had each other to lean on.

Emma was plucking at Reese's shirt so she could see all three of her claiming marks. The bites had healed up overnight, but they were permanent fixtures to Reese's skin now, just as hers were to us. No other bites we gave our mate from this point on would scar the way those three had. They were a physical manifestation of our bond. They told all of Elaria that she belonged to us, and we to her.

Reese's eyes met mine and my heart stuttered in my chest. She was so fucking beautiful. I couldn't believe she was mine. She'd been terrified of me when I'd first approached her, but now, despite the blush staining her cheeks, she was confident in what she had with us. She knew where she belonged.

*Do you want to be a part of the meeting?*

She jumped as my words formed in her mind. Thanks to the link created by the claiming, she could now hear and speak

to us using only her mind. I grinned when her jaw dropped. She cocked her head as though she was trying to figure out how to use her new power.

*Just think it.*

She didn't have the control yet to conceal thoughts from us. It would take her time to figure it out, but we'd help her. Every male alpha had to master that skill lest he project his thoughts out to anyone listening.

*No. I'll stay out here. You guys can fill me in when you're finished.* She paused for a minute then shot me a smile. *This is so cool.*

All three of us chuckled under our breaths as her thoughts reached our minds. Jessu was busy pretending he hadn't heard anything at all. Any alpha male in the vicinity had. We needed to teach her quickly because, being an alpha herself, her ability was strong. Only the women, children, and beta males in the village hadn't heard her. None of the women could mind link until they were claimed. The beta men would only be able to do so if they were in a situation like the twins were. Once the four men claimed Emma, she would connect them all together and Reign and Bane would have the ability, same as Emma. The ability would come to them from Griff and Holden.

*That's fine. Stay inside the village,* I told her.

I didn't really need to. They were likely going to talk about her claiming from last night. My cock hardened just thinking back on it. I couldn't wait to get her alone again, but with this damn quest looming in front of us, I wasn't sure when that would be. Griff came with us as we stepped into the hut that Jessu used for meetings. Holden and the others would wait outside and watch over our women while we had this meeting. There was a large table and chairs and not much else inside the space. We sat when Jessu motioned for us to do so.

"It'll be a quick easy day trip up to Celinda's cave," Jessu started as soon as we were comfortable.

"Have you tried talking to her before?" I asked.

“Of course. She always shut me down. Just keeps saying it isn’t time. As if I know what that means,” he replied with a shrug. “I’m hoping that now is the time.”

“The Moon Goddess has never been clear on anything,” Griff said. “I don’t see why this would be any different.”

“You’re right, but it’s worth a try,” Jessu said with a smile.

We turned as the doors opened and Jessu’s Cadre Mates, Relay and Nero came inside. “Sorry,” Nero told us with a friendly smile.

“Is everything clear?” Jessu asked them.

“Yeah,” Relay replied. “We only had to dig out one landslide. The path is open for you.”

“You two aren’t coming?” Atlas asked.

“No,” Jessu told him. “Celinda is squirrely in the best of times and lately she’s been losing her grip on reality more and more. We don’t want to bring any more people than we have to.”

“Besides,” Nero told us, “we want to stay behind to protect our pack.”

“Been having a lot of trouble?” Calder asked with a tilt of his head.

“There’s a new pack forming nearby,” Nero explained. “Outcasts from other packs.”

I frowned over at Jessu. “Want us to help you take care of that?” We all knew what this meant. The worst of the worst from each of the packs, the males who’d been kicked out of everywhere else, were banding together and would wreak as much havoc as they could.

“Thank you, but no. You need to focus on this mission and nothing else. We can handle things here.”

I had no doubt about that. Jessu and his cadre mates were our parents’ ages, but they were strong. It was a shame they’d never found their mate. Maybe once The Moon Goddess was restored, they would find her living among some distant pack.

“What do we do if she can’t help us?” I hated even having to fucking ask the question. I hated not having a plan. Planning was my fucking forte, but in this, I was flying blind. My grandmother, Jessu, and Tellura had the only answers. Deferring to them and their knowledge wasn’t a problem for me. I just wish there were some damn reassurances that we weren’t wasting our time.

Jessu shook his head. “Go visit Tellura and see if he’s found anything in his texts over the last few months since I’ve seen him.” His solemn eyes met mine. “Let’s just hope Celinda can help.”

“I still don’t get how some crazy female is going to help us with this,” Calder said with a laugh. He grunted in pain a moment later and glared over at Atlas, who had kicked him under the table.

Relay chuckled and nodded as though Calder had a valid point. Even if he did, it hadn’t been very diplomatic of him to point it out.

“She’s...” Jessu broke off and shook his head. “I don’t know how to explain what she is. She’s more than a loon. At least, I hope she is. Because she’s kind of our last hope here.”

“Great,” Calder muttered, shifting away from Atlas in case he tried to kick him again.

“We’ll head to her first, then,” I told them. “If we can’t find any answers there, we’ll head to Tellura’s. We’ll find something,” I said, with a reassurance I didn’t quite feel.

“You’d think the Moon Goddess would leave easier clues for us to find her,” Calder grouched.

“Unless she didn’t leave of her own free will,” Atlas pointed out.

“True,” he sighed. “Which means it’s not only going to be hard to find her, but hard to free her as well. She’s probably going to be guarded.”

“One problem at a time,” I replied. “First let’s find her. Then we’ll worry about who the hell we have to fight in order to free her.”

“That’s even if she was taken,” Nero pointed out. “For all we know she just got sick of dealing with shifters and all our shit. These kids are probably going to find her sitting on a beach somewhere, drinking fruity drinks, and end up ruining her vacation.”

We all fell silent, staring at him while he shrugged. Relay glowered at him after a few seconds. “That’s fucking depressing. Thanks a lot, Bro.”

“Just pointing out a possibility.”

“I think it’s best if we go into this assuming she hasn’t willingly left us,” Jessu suggested, with a wry smile for his cadre mates, “so that we’re prepared for anything that might happen.”

“Good plan,” I agreed.

“We should get going,” Jessu said, standing up. “It’s going to take a few hours to climb to the top of the mountain.”

“What mountain?” Atlas asked.

We all followed him out the door and glanced over as he pointed to a peak that was out in the distance.

“It’s going to take a fucking while to get there first,” Calder muttered.

Thankfully, Jessu was already bidding his cadre mates a farewell. I shot Calder a look, telling him to behave, as Reese, Emma, and the others walked up. They were ready to go, so we waited for Jessu to lead the way.

Calder was right, it took a few hours to get to the mountain path that would lead us up to Celinda’s cave. We stood there, staring at the rocky path that led upwards. Most of us had shifted and changed into the clothes we’d brought in our packs, though Reign and Bane remained in their wolf forms so that some of us would have better senses.

Something about the trail ahead had the hair raising on the back of my neck. I wasn’t sure what it was that was bothering me, but my wolf growled inside my head, not liking it either. I couldn’t sense any danger, but every nerve was on full alert.

Motioning to Reese, I wrapped a hand around the back of her neck, just needing to touch her. “Stick close.”

“No problem,” she uttered, looking around as though she sensed something was off, too. “I don’t really want to go exploring around here.”

“Why do I feel like this?” Emma asked the group. She lifted her arm and showed the goosebumps that had the fine hairs there standing on end.

“It’s to ward off unwanted visitors,” Jessu told us. He grinned over at me. “Told you she wasn’t just a loon.”

With that, he stepped onto the trail and we followed him up the mountain.

## CHAPTER 23



### Reese

“Well this is creepy,” Emma muttered as we made our way toward the mouth of the cave.

We left Jessu’s village after our talk and the sun was still low in the sky. It was directly overhead now, having taken up precedence in the sky while we worked our way through the mountains. I glared up at the orb as the heat of the day caused sweat to trail down my back.

If the Sun Goddess could, she’d take her gift from the world and leave us in darkness. That would kill off her precious humans, though, so it wasn’t something she was willing to try. None of us knew why she hated shifters so much.

“Yeah, it is,” I agreed, as I stared at the opening of the cave. Moss and climbing vines crawled over the stone face. It should’ve been just a regular cave. It didn’t look like much else. But it was surrounded by sheer walls of rock on either side, making the path Jessu led us down the only way of getting back. Something made me uneasy about the area. Something other than the fact that we were in the perfect spot for an ambush, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I realized that the soft chirping of birds that accompanied us up here had stopped. The light breeze making its way through the area was the only sound as it ruffled leaves on the dirt. There were stubborn trees that had managed to take root in cracks



and crevices and grow upward along the cliffs, despite being surrounded in stone.

“I’ll go in and speak with her first,” Jessu told us. “Wait here...she’s a bit...particular.”

“What does that mean?” Griff asked, but Jessu had already walked into the cave. Reign sat his shaggy butt on dirt and yawned. He and his brother opted to take this trip in wolf form.

“Why is it so quiet?” I asked, looking over at Soren. His gray eyes landed on me and a flush heated my skin. Memories of the early morning hours, and what we’d done during them, flooded my mind. Placing my hands on my neck, I brushed my fingers over the three bites that had already scabbed over. They’d claimed me, and now I belonged to them. A pulse pounded in my pussy as I touched the spots my mates had marked. I pushed all thoughts of them aside, and dropped my hands, so I could focus.

Atlas’s steady gaze met mine and the corners of his lips lifted. The mind link. *Oh God*. Had they heard my thoughts?

*Loud and clear, Little One.*

My eyes flashed over to Atlas and I found him and Calder watching me with hungry gazes. My cheeks burned as I broke eye contact. I wasn’t used to having the ability to speak within others’ minds. It was going to take some getting used to, and I needed to learn to block the thoughts I wanted to, while projecting others.

“There’s magic here,” Holden snarled. I jerked as he pulled me out of my own head. He was pacing back and forth, clearly agitated.

My brows shot up. Only Gods and Goddesses held magic. Our shifting was a gift from our Moon Goddess. None of us held the ability to create actual magic. “How do you know?”

“It has a certain feel to it,” Holden replied, his eyes sweeping the cliffs above us as he walked back and forth.

I looked up, too, wondering what he was searching for. Nothing could climb those walls. They were too tall. Too

smooth. If danger were to come from anywhere, it would be behind us.

“Holden has the gift of sensing magic,” Griff told me.

“So you’ve met a God?” I breathed. I’d had a fascination with them since I was a young girl. My mother used to chide me when she caught me setting traps for lesser Gods when I was younger. Elaria held all manner of deities. They were all ruled over by the twelve. Our Moon Goddess and her sisters were three of those twelve.

“When I was a boy,” Holden admitted, his green eyes meeting mine. “I thought he was a fox shifter.”

My eyes widened and I had to keep myself from bouncing up and down like an excited child. “You met Katashi?” I breathed. “Was it him?” I demanded when Holden hesitated. Katashi was only a minor God, but a well known one. He was a devious bastard by all accounts.

“It was. He gave me my gift. Well, he is a trickster, what he actually did was bite me. Then he winked and told me that I would be glad one day that he did. Ever since then I’ve been able to sense the presence of magic.” Holden’s brows furrowed together. “Most people don’t believe me when I tell them this story.”

“When you grow up the way we did,” Emma responded, “you tend to hope and pray to any of the Gods or Goddesses who’ll listen. You don’t have the luxury of thinking they’re myths.”

Holden’s jaw flexed as he ground his teeth together at Emma’s sad tone. “No pup should be raised in a place like that. They should be exalting the Gods in happiness and love.”

“All we had was despair,” she replied, then turned and watched as a crow landed on a rock near Reign. She completely missed the determined look that Holden and Griff exchanged.

Bane lifted his head and watched as the bird hopped from side to side, examining his brother. It cawed, the sound

echoing off the rock. Reign lifted bored eyes and acknowledged the bird, then looked away.

The crow hopped down to a lower rock and I had to stifle my laughter when it cracked its beak on the top of Reign's head. The wolf growled low in his throat, causing the bird to flap its way back up to the taller rock, out of the way of the angry animal. As soon as Reign settled and looked away again, the crow was back at it. He was about to peck Reign's head again when the wolf snapped at the bird, trying to catch it in his powerful jaws.

The bird was too fast. He took flight, peppering Reign's head as he winged around him. We were all laughing as Reign jumped to his feet and snarled at the bird. Having had his fun, the crow settled back on the rock again and cawed three times in succession.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say he's laughing," Calder commented.

We studied the crow, but he just settled in to wait with us. A crashing sound caught our attention and I stepped back as shards of an exploding rock hit the dirt around my feet. Looking into the cave, I saw Jessu walking back while plateware detonated against the cave walls above his head. He had a resigned look on his face as he walked, shoulders back and head high, even while being pelted with shards of ceramic, glass, and rock.

"What the hell?" Atlas muttered, giving him a questioning look.

"She's in a good mood today, she wouldn't throw her nice plates if she was angry," he told us with a bemused look on his face. He nodded at the crow in greeting, as though they knew one another. "She wants to see you." His eyes scanned our group.

I looked into the cave dubiously. "She doesn't exactly seem friendly."

"She won't throw anything at you," he replied with a chuckle. "Go on, she gets cranky if kept waiting."

“That was her *not* being cranky?” Bane asked. He and his brother had shifted and dressed while the commotion was going on.

Jerking as something landed on my shoulder, I smiled over at the crow. He ruffled his feathers, his beady black eyes looking at me. I swore the look in his eyes was telling me to get moving.

I took my place next to my mates and followed Soren into the cave. He and Atlas were at the front, with Calder by my side. Emma and the others entered right behind us. Jessu waited outside while we ventured forth.

“This goes a lot further back than I thought it would,” I said, voice low. It still echoed off the walls. The ceiling was high enough that Atlas and Griff didn’t have to stoop while walking. It was plenty tall for the rest of us.

“Keep alert,” Soren muttered, eyes scanning in front of him for any dangers.

“It’s just some old woman, right?” Reign asked.

“Yeah, what’s she going to do to us?” Bane added.

“The magic is getting thicker,” Holden replied.

I took a quick look over my unoccupied shoulder and saw that he was tense and a grim look covered his face. The man always seemed to be a little somber, but this was new. He didn’t like being in here. A chill raced over my skin and I shivered. The crow cawed, making me jump. “That was right in my ear, my friend,” I scolded him.

He shook his body, ruffling his feathers again. His talons bit into the leather of my shirt and I felt the pinpricks on my skin. He didn’t seem nervous, just impatient.

“Maybe we should-” Atlas broke off when we rounded a corner and sitting there next to a cheerfully glowing fire was a woman.

She was old. Like, *really* old. I would even say ancient, except it wasn’t possible for shifters to live more than three hundred and twenty years. Her hair was stark white and her

skin looked so delicate that it might blow away with a slight breeze.

“Come forward,” she croaked.

“She has a good arm for an old woman,” Calder muttered.

“And good hearing, too,” she snapped, making Calder flush a dull red. “Don’t be rude. Come. Sit by my fire.”

I studied the ceiling. There were no holes in which to vent the smoke, but even my delicate senses couldn’t pick up on any in here. There was a massive wall at the woman’s back. This was the end of her cave. Off to the right, water trickled down from the ceiling and pooled. Where was it coming from? I wanted badly to take the time to examine the place, but she was watching us with piercing golden-filmed eyes.

We shuffled into her space and took a seat on the logs surrounding her fire. She studied me, and the crow, for a few moments before shifting her focus as Emma approached. Her eyes softened and I would have sworn I saw relief in them. That didn’t make any sense though.

“My name is-”

“I know who you are,” Celinda snapped, causing Soren to stare at her open mouthed, but fall silent. She shook her head. “They think I don’t know them. As though I haven’t waited for thousands of years.”

Reign leaned forward and looked around at us, then made a circle next to his temple. A rock hit him squarely in the chest, causing him to yelp and look back at Celinda in shock. “What the fu-”

“Who knew shifters had become so rude?” Celinda muttered as she and Reign exchanged glares. “Your Goddess has been missing for too long. You’ve forgotten her ways.”

Clearing my throat, mostly to mask my laughter at the look on Reign’s face, I asked, “Our Goddess?” Golden eyes settled on me. It was uncanny because some kind of power was washing over me. Only, I didn’t have the ability to sense magic. Not normally anyway.

“She’s been waiting for you.” Celinda was still staring at me as her words echoed ominously through the cave.

“Uh.” I shot my guys a nervous look, but Soren motioned for me to keep speaking. She clearly wasn’t in the mood to talk to the men. I yearned to scoot closer to them, to take comfort in their protective ways, but I wasn’t that kind of shifter. I protected my own. In order to be worthy of these males, I needed to be strong. “Who’s been waiting for me?”

Celinda smiled, showing cracked, yellow teeth. “Lyas, of course.”

We all glanced at each other again and this time Emma asked, “Who’s that?”

“Your Goddess,” Celinda said with a sigh. “Amazing how much you forget after a few centuries.

“The Moon Goddess’s name is Lyas?” I asked, wonder filling me. Mom and I had always tried to guess what her name would be. It was a game we played while stargazing when I was younger. So many had researched the Moon Goddess, but we hadn’t gotten anywhere. Not even Vera had dug up much. It was as though the Goddess had been erased.

“It is.” A sad expression filled Celinda’s face. “There was a time your people knew it. She walked among you as a friend.”

“And she’s been waiting for me? How long has she waited?”

“Oh it’s hard to say, maybe twelve hundred and forty-two years, give or take a month.”

“But that’s impossible...I’m twenty.”

“There were those who came before you. But it’s always been you. She’s patient enough to wait for the right one.”

“And I’m the right one?” Celinda didn’t bother answering, just stared at me, so I tried again. “What happened to her?” I asked. “Why did she leave us?”

“She didn’t leave of her own will, Child.”

I shook my head. “We’re dying without her.”

“I know.”

“We need to know where to find her. What we can do to bring her back.” I searched her eerie eyes. It was as though they were covered in a golden film. “Can you help us?”

Her smile grew at my question. “Of course I can.”

“How do we know you’re not just some crazy old lady?” Calder asked, suspicion coloring his tone.

I shot him a death glare when Celinda clucked her tongue and shook her head. Driving a wedge between her and us wasn’t going to help. Even if she *was* crazy, she was our only lead.

“Sometimes you need to have faith, Calder Reisten.”

Calder’s jaw dropped. None of us had told her our names. His eyes narrowed. “Neat trick, lady. Jessu probably told you our names.”

“Did he tell me the names of your mother? Of your fathers? Did he tell me of the moonlit night when those raiders found the temporary home they’d created in the woods for your family? Of the last words your mother spoke to you before her death?” Her golden eyes shone in the firelight. “Run. Hide. They mustn’t find you. You’re meant for so much more than this. You’re meant to-”

“Stop!” Calder was pale, panting, and grasping the log on either side of him in a grip so hard the wood groaned.

“Believe me now?” she asked, softening her tone.

I reached over and brushed my fingers over his knuckles. They were white with strain. As soon as I touched him, he looked down at me and relaxed. I kept my hand on his, smiling when he linked our fingers together. The small touch gave me courage and him relief. I was still getting used to having mates, but I had to admit it was nice to have someone to count on.

“Yes. I do. But, who *are* you?”

“More importantly,” Celinda said with a cackling laugh, “is who are *you*?” Her gnarled finger pointed at me.

My brows shot up. “Uh. I’m Reese Silvest.” I broke off as she shook her head.

“Your mother was a saint, putting up with that insufferable man for as long as she did.”

Swallowing back tears that sprang forth at her words, I nodded. “I’m aware of that,” I whispered. We were beyond asking how this woman knew our lives. The reality was, she did and that meant she could help us.

“But that’s not what I meant, Child. I know your name. Of your beautiful mother. Your scoundrel father.” She tilted her head. “Do you know *who* you are?”

“No,” I whispered.

“*What* you are?” she rasped.

“I’m an alpha female.”

She grinned and I knew that was what she was looking for. “You are. Do you know how precious you are?”

That was a first. “No. I’ve been told I was a mistake my whole life.”

“By that useless father of yours, yes. But you’re not a mistake. Do you know what alpha females are born for?”

“No,” I replied.

“You’re Lyas’s priestess. As were those who came before you, Goddess rest their souls.”

I blinked, unable to believe what I was hearing. “What?”

“Her priestess. Her protector.”

“How am I supposed to protect a Goddess?” I asked with a wry laugh.

“Goddesses aren’t immune from trickery, or betrayal,” Celinda answered with a bitter laugh. She fell silent, eyes open wide, as though watching something we couldn’t see.



I met Soren's eyes, uneasiness filling me at her sudden silence. He clenched his jaw.

*Easy, Mate.*

Jerking at the voice in my mind, I drew in a steady breath. How long would it take for me to get used to the fact that they could now speak directly inside my head?

Holden growled low in his throat, causing the crow on my shoulder to shift from side to side with unease. "Where is this magic coming from?"

That jerked Celinda from her trance. "Nevermind that. You," she said, focusing back on me again, "are Lyas's only hope."

Cringing, I let out a shaky breath. All I'd ever wanted was to find a quiet place to settle down and live my life out in solitude. Away from the jeers and disdain of my pack. Yet, here I was. Mated. The leader of my own new pack of women, and now Soren's pack. And apparently the last hope of the Moon Goddess and all of shifter kind. Fantastic.

## CHAPTER 24



**Reese**

“*W*hat exactly do you mean by that?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you that.” Celinda said with a roll of her eyes. “If it was that easy, it wouldn’t be fate.”

Shaking my head with a dry laugh, I ran my free hand through my hair trying to relieve the stress that this talk was causing. Calder squeezed the hand he was holding, lending me his strength. “What *can* you tell me?”

“You’re Lyas’s priestess. Her life is in your hands. You must save her during the upcoming lunar eclipse. And...”

We all leaned forward, the crow making a grating clicking noise in his throat.

“It’s time for you to go home.”

Everyone let out the breaths we were holding. “Home?” I asked, looking over at Soren.

“Not that home,” she said, sending Soren a beaming smile. “I knew her plan to include the three of you would make a difference.”

“What?” he asked.

She waved her hand and left that sentence to hang cryptically in the air. “It’s time for you to go to the place you were born.”

The blood drained from my face. I wasn’t ready for that. There was still so much to do before I went home and faced

my father and brothers. The finality of her words settled on my shoulders, heavy and oppressive. I somehow knew she was right. I had to face them. Face whatever lay in wait there for me.

We all tensed as Celinda rose from her log. Her bones creaked in the silence as she walked around the campfire. She was zeroed in on Emma.

My friend cast me a worried look as the old woman approached her. I shrugged, unsure of what we should do.

“And you...” Celinda smiled. “Oh, how long I’ve waited for you.” Celinda reached out gnarled fingers and brushed them over Emma’s cheek. As soon as they made contact, a shock wave blasted through the cave, throwing us all backward off our seats.

I gasped as I stared up at the ceiling of the cave, trying to catch my breath even though my chest felt like a tree laid upon it. The crow was flying in circles, cawing in anger. Scrambling to my hands and knees, my eyes found Emma where she lay, still as a statue. My eyes widened with horror. Celinda was nothing but a pile of bones.

“Em!” I croaked, and hurried over to her side.

Her eyes were open, unseeing, a slow film of gold covering them. She didn’t respond when I shook her by the shoulder. Her future mates were standing nearby, unsure of how to help her.

Jessu rushed in, looking from the bones to Emma, shock covering his features. “What happened?”

“You tell us!” Griff roared. “You sent us in here and that fucking woman poisoned our mate!”

“We need to get her back to the village,” Atlas said, ever the voice of reason.

Holden picked Emma’s prone body up and cuddled her close as we all raced back to the safety of Jessu’s village. I fought back tears the entire way. If I’d known that going into that cave would harm Emma, I wouldn’t have let her come

along. I watched as Holden placed her gently on a bed in the hut they'd been given.

"Celinda just...disintegrated," I told Jessu, voice hoarse.

He sighed, meeting my eyes. "We had a theory."

"Who's we?" Griff demanded. Reign and Bane curled up next to Emma's sides in wolf form, keeping her warm.

"Tellura, Vera, and I," Jessu answered, his voice calm. "The oldest recorded shifter was three hundred and twenty years old." We nodded. That was very well known information. "And humans have even shorter lifespans. Celinda was clearly older than three hundred." He paused, waiting for us to pick up on his implications.

"You think she's a Goddess," Soren said, putting the pieces together.

"I don't know," he answered, aggravated. "She never answered our questions pertaining to who she was. Always just said that wasn't for us to know. She was certainly more than a shifter. But what else could she be?"

"Why would a Goddess do something to Emma?" I asked.

"It was just a theory. We don't actually know who, or what, she was."

"And now we never will," Calder muttered.

A coughing sound made us all fall silent. I rushed over to Emma's side as she groaned and sat up.

"Ow." She looked around, confusion written on her face. "When did we get back..." She frowned, cocking her head, staring at the wall as she trailed off. "Oh boy."

"What?" I asked, putting my hand on her forehead. "What's going on?"

"Her vessel," she whispered, eyes glazed over in gold. She passed out again before I could ask her what she meant.

I shook my head and looked helplessly at Soren over my shoulder. "I don't understand," I told him. "What's happening?"

He moved forward and crouched behind me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “We need to let her rest, Little One. Let her mates care for her for the night and we’ll check in on her in the morning.”

I was hesitant to leave her side, but my alphas were insistent, so I followed them from the hut.

Soren led me to our hut and ushered me inside. “Atlas, keep her safe. We’ll go hunt for dinner.”

“I’m sure Jessu has food,” Calder argued. “We could just-”

“We’re not taking any more of his stores. He has a village to feed,” Soren told him, putting an end to his argument.

“Come here, Little Warrior.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I found Atlas reclining on the bed, his huge shoulders resting on the headboard. He’d already removed his shoes, but thankfully left the rest of his clothes on. I was too emotional about what was happening to Emma to even think about sex. Toeing off my boots, I climbed onto the bed and let him drag me into his arms. I reclined against his huge body, enjoying the way his scent wrapped around me. I didn’t speak as Soren and Calder left the hut. What was there to say?

“Stop it.”

I looked up at Atlas in confusion. “Stop what?”

“Blaming yourself.”

How had he known that was what I was doing? Then I remembered the bond. That was going to take some getting used to. Of course I was blaming myself. “She wouldn’t have been in that damn cave if it wasn’t for me.”

Atlas’s chuckle was deep and vibrated through my entire body. A flash of anger overtook me, but before I could lash out at him, he spoke. “Remember what Celinda said?”

Narrowing my eyes on the wall next to us, I searched back over my memories. “No.”

“It’s fate, Reese.”

I shifted away from him so I could look him in the eyes. “Well, fate doesn’t get to just mess with our lives.”

He scratched his beard. “I sort of think that’s all fate does, actually.”

Sighing, I shook my head, my shoulders slumping. “If she dies...” I swallowed, blinking back the tears that welled up inside. “I can’t lose her, too.”

Atlas’s arms tightened around me as he pulled me close. “You’re not going to lose her.”

“You don’t know that,” I argued, my voice cracking.

“She was meant for this, Reese. She’s here for a reason. Whatever is coming her way, she can handle it.”

“How are you so calm?” I snapped at him.

His chuckle rumbled through me again. “It’s in my nature.”

That was true enough. I had yet to see him lose his temper.

“We’ll find Lyas, and then figure out a way to help Emma.”

Biting my lip, I considered my options. “What if we help Emma first?”

“Then nothing will matter,” he told me. “Celinda said you have to save Lyas during the lunar eclipse. That’s less than two weeks away and it’s going to take us nearly that long to get back to your old home.”

Grief, anger, and worry were a maelstrom inside of me. How was I supposed to do this? We had little to no information.

“It’s time you let her mates protect her.” The look I shot him had daggers at the end of it, but he continued softly, knowing this was hard for me to process. “You got her this far. You did your job and protected your pack, delivered them to us. Now it’s our turn. We protect you, and her mates will protect her. They’ll see her through whatever’s next,” he promised.

I stared for a full minute before I relented. “I know. I know. I just...Emma is my pack, my sister, I can’t just stop protecting her.”

“You protect her by finding Lyas. We have the time and location now,” Atlas replied.

“Can you teach me to control the mind link?” I asked, needing to change the topic for the sake of my aching heart. “It’s annoying having you all knowing everything I’m thinking.”

“Sure, Little Warrior, but not tonight. Get some sleep.”

The sun had already begun to sink down below the horizon. It was still early, but exhaustion kept pulling my eyelids closed. It’d been a long few days. Hell, it’d been a long few years. I’d gone from being ostracized from my home, to protecting my own pack, to now having mates who were willing to give their lives to protect me.

“There’s too many thoughts flowing through that pretty head of yours,” Atlas said as he adjusted the both of us so we were lying on the bed. “Shut it down and sleep. There’s nothing we can do to help Emma or Lyas tonight.”

He was right. There was nothing we could do until we got back to the seaside packs. We were going to have to travel cross-country, which was going to take too damn long, but the roads had all been blocked off by the human government in this region. The only way was to avoid them at all costs. I remembered clearly the journey that got us from my home to the mountains where the Venat Pack had found us. I couldn’t believe I was going back already.

A rumbling sound started up from behind me and it took me a minute to realize it came from Atlas. “What are you doing?” I asked. The sound was tugging at me, urging me to relax against him. He was behind me, chest to my back. His arms had me wrapped up in a cocoon of warmth.

“Purring.”

My eyes widened. Mom had told me about an alpha’s purr, but I’d never heard one before. The alphas where I grew up

didn't make the noise. They probably thought it was a weakness, because it was all about comfort. Alphas were known to use it for the betterment of their mates and young. Atlas was easing my fears with the deep gruff noise. It was a beautiful sound that spoke to me on a molecular level. Without my permission, my body lost all tension and my eyes slid shut.



## CHAPTER 25



### Calder

Leaning against the porch railing, I glared at the door of the hut where Reese was inside sitting next to her friend. “There has to be a way,” I muttered.

“A way to what?” Atlas asked. He was standing there, quietly waiting for Reese to finish saying goodbye to her childhood friend.

None of us knew whether Emma was going to be alive by the time we got back. For that matter, we didn’t know whether we were actually going to return. We could all easily die on this quest. Which was why I was growling with a frustration I couldn’t seem to contain. “To keep her here.”

Atlas’s head turned as he studied me. “That’s not the way it works.”

“Soren agrees with me,” I told him.

“Of course he does. Look, Calder, I don’t want to put her in danger either, but something tells me that if we leave her behind, we’re all fucked.”

I knew that. So did Soren. It was why we were both fucking pissed this morning. Instead of leaving our mate somewhere safe we had to bring her into the fucking lion’s den. “I know.”

“Then stop with the growling and get your shit together. We’re leaving in an hour.”

He was right. We'd already wasted enough time trying to figure out what to do. If we didn't get moving now, we wouldn't make it back to the ocean in time for the lunar eclipse. Since that was what the crazy old bag of bones had told us to do, it was the plan we'd follow.

"Fine," I snapped, shoving off the railing.

"You know you can't go in there, right?" Atlas asked, his voice low so Reese wouldn't hear him inside the hut. "She needs to say goodbye on her own terms."

"Fuck off with your goddamned logic, Atlas." His laughter followed me across the village as I stalked away. I needed some time alone before we started on this fucking quest. The last thing Reese needed was me snapping at her. She'd think I was somehow blaming her for all this and I wasn't. We'd waited so fucking long to find a female, never even knowing if we'd be able to mate her in the way of our Goddess, that this idea of taking her on a potential life ending adventure was making me prickly as shit. If fated mates were still a thing, I knew she'd be ours. It was probably better that they weren't because there would be no way we could let her go with us if she was our fated mate. It would tear us up from the inside. Not that it wasn't already doing that.

I just hoped that our bond would grow enough while we traveled for her to understand that we were only doing this because we trusted her. She could handle herself, she'd already proved it. If she were a beta or an omega? We wouldn't even be entertaining the idea of her saving the shifter world. No. She would be tied to a post somewhere until we were out so far in front of her that she couldn't catch up. But Reese wasn't a beta, or an omega. She was an alpha. Like us. She deserved the chance to prove herself to those who doubted her. To avenge herself. And to play out what fate had in store for her, even though I fucking hated it.

Soren was speaking with Jessu and his cadre mates, so I went over to our packs and began checking to make sure we had what we needed for the journey. I knelt down, rummaging through, when something landed next to me, making me jerk.

The crow cocked its head, cawing at me as though I was in its way. “The fuck are you doing here?” I asked. The last I’d seen of him was at Celinda’s cave.

He cawed again and hopped closer to me, his eyes on the packs. “You want to come with us?” As though in answer, he took flight and landed on top of the hut that our pack mates were in with their ill mate. He seemed to be settling in. “Okay. You’re staying here.”

“Who are you talking to?” Soren asked as he walked up.

I pointed up to where the crow was walking back and forth along the roof, as though he was a guard on duty.

“Where’d he come from?” Soren echoed my earlier question.

Shrugging, I buckled up the packs. “Not sure, but it looks like he’s staying.”

“We ready to go?” Atlas asked as he and Reese walked up.

All our eyes landed on her. Though she looked well rested, there was pain on her features. Leaving Emma when she was injured wasn’t easy on our mate. “Yes,” she told us, a determined look chasing away the grief. “Let’s do this.”

Soren nodded and turned back to Jessu as he approached “Make sure they’re safe here.”

Jessu nodded. “Nothing will harm them while we live.”

Just the fact that he was willing to give his life for the members of another pack was an indication of how important this quest was. It was a last chance for us all. The urgency within us felt almost supernatural. It was why we weren’t questioning things. Why we knew this was the right path. What we had to do.

Griff was the only one who came out to see us off. He and Atlas exchanged words while I undressed and shifted, eager to get on the road. The others quickly followed and soon our wolves were running free over the plains.

We ran, avoiding villages, shifter and human alike. It was going to be a long journey where we’d push ourselves to the

limits, but at the end there was a shining beacon of hope. It was as though the Moon Goddess had left it there, shining inside us all, to guide our way. To fortify our spirits. Shaking my shaggy head, I shoved the fanciful thoughts out of my mind. We had a long way yet to go and I needed to focus on the path in front of me.

The miles flew by beneath our paws, the wind ruffling through our fur. The sun rose higher in the sky and began to set again.

*We need to find somewhere to rest.*

We acknowledged Atlas's thought and I looked around for a place that would be suitable. *There.* An outcropping of rocks broke up the endless rolling hills of grass. It was as good a place as any, and better than the open plains. We'd be exposed here. At least there we could find some shelter from prying eyes.

We slowed our pace and made our way over to it, one by one slipping into the shadows. As soon as we were out of sight we shifted and dressed. The rocks rose up on either side of us, a tiny pathway in between them providing some shelter. We all sat down with our backs against the stone, legs stretched out in front of us, and ate some of the dried meat we'd packed for the journey. We wouldn't risk building a campfire out in the open like this.

"How much longer?" Reese asked.

Atlas chuckled at her question. "You sound like a pup, asking when we'll get there."

She stuck her tongue out at him, but there was a playful smile on her face once it was back inside her mouth.

"You've made this trip before," Soren told her with a grin.

"We didn't exactly go in a direct path," she argued. "It took us four months to make it from Laccifer to your woods."

Laccifer was a larger human settlement at the very northern tip of the Cobalt Sea. "That's only about a month's trip," I told her.

“Not when you’re going from village to village, and hiding out in between,” she replied.

“Fair enough. It should take us eleven days, if nothing goes wrong.”

They all glared at me. “Why would you say that?” Reese asked. “Now something will go wrong.”

It was my turn to chuckle at her superstitions. “If things are going to go wrong it won’t be because I said so. It’ll be because whoever, or whatever, abducted the Moon Goddess realizes what we’re up to.”

“Oh my Goddess,” Reese groaned. “Can someone shut him up before he has us mired in bad juju?”

“Bad juju?” Atlas teased. “Where did you learn that term?”

She gave him a toothy grin. “I met a shaman lady at the edges of the Cobalt Sea. It’s why I took the chance of even going near Laccifer. She was the one who told me I should consider a change in scenery. It was because of her I took the chance on heading to the mountains, though I would have eventually because all the seaside packs were beginning to hunt us.”

“Then we’re grateful to her,” Soren said, giving Reese a heated look.

We wanted nothing more than to drag her back to our home and seclude ourselves inside our bedroom with our mate. End of world schemes were getting in the damn way. There wasn’t much we could do about it.

“Can you teach me to start shielding my thoughts now?” Reese asked.

“Sure,” Atlas replied.

“And as soon as we get to the Dreiken Wood, we’ll start showing you more fighting techniques, too,” I promised her.

She shivered and looked away. “I didn’t like going through there.”

“It’s home to many humans,” Soren said, “I’m not surprised.”

“It wasn’t even that,” Reese argued. “There was just something about it.” We stared at her as she tried to explain. Eventually she gave up and shrugged. “It was probably just my paranoia about being so close to home.”

The Dreiken Wood was only two days from her village. Having made the trip recently, I knew exactly how long it would take us to get to where we needed to be. We had exactly thirteen days before the moon would hide in Elaria’s shadow.

Reese was right, though. The Dreiken Wood was a strange place. There were humans who lived there and they seemed to be able to sense our kind. They’d been known to hunt shifters and keep them in cages. The rumors got pretty wild from there. Everything from forced breeding for the female shifters who were captured, to the males being cannibalized. And of course where there were gruesome deaths, there was talk of vengeful ghosts. Truth or not, we wouldn’t linger there longer than needed.

The woods had made me uneasy when I’d traveled to the coast to look into the rumors of an all-female pack. In fact, I’d been so on edge, I’d pushed myself to my limits to make it through them without stopping. We weren’t going to be able to do that this time. Not with our mate traveling with us. I’d ended up having to rest for two days after emerging from the woods the last time. A shiver rode down my spine and I shoved thoughts of the darkened trees out of my mind.

Atlas began teaching Reese how to control her thoughts, now that she had the ability to communicate directly to us using only her mind. She needed to learn quickly. Last thing we needed was her projecting to our enemies. I listened with half an ear as I watched Soren pace around us. He was obviously thinking about something and it was making him agitated. I had a feeling he wanted to keep pushing on, getting to the Cobalt Coast long before the deadline so he could form a battle plan.

Reese proved to be a quick study. Before long she was able to focus and keep some of her thoughts from us. It would be a useful tool in the upcoming fight. We didn't know when that war that Vera had mentioned was going to start. Saving Lyas could be the catalyst to it all. We all needed to be in top form if that was the case.

By the time Soren settled down, Reese was yawning. I remembered back when I was first learning to control my projections. It was mentally exhausting.

“Get some sleep,” Soren told her. “We'll be leaving at first light.” He looked over at me. “I'll take first watch. You relieve me in two hours. Then Atlas.”

“I can take a watch,” Reese announced.

Soren shook his head, not bothering to argue with her, instead walking away.

“What?” Reese asked, looking between us. “I can help.”

“Go to sleep, Minx,” I told her, grabbing her around the waist and settling her in front of me so she was reclining against my body. She grumbled, but shifted until she was in a comfortable position.

Atlas moved closer and I watched as she fell asleep within seconds. It wasn't long before her breathing evened out and she began snoring lightly. It was adorable.

“She's going to be trouble,” Atlas said quietly, amusement clear in his voice.

“But she's our trouble,” I replied, in full agreement.

He laughed. “That she is.”

Despite the weight of the world on our shoulders, we followed her quickly into sleep.

## CHAPTER 26



### Reese

I wasn't sure what woke me, but my eyes popped open. Gone was the comforting heat of my mates sleeping beside me. I stood up slowly, looking around with a frown. Where were they? It was the middle of the night and the moon was shining overhead, lighting up the plains. It amazed me that I could see the grass swaying back and forth in the gentle breeze, that was how bright it was outside.

My mates were gone though, and I couldn't see them anywhere. "Soren?" I called out softly. The crickets nearby silenced at the sound. "Atlas? Calder?" I stepped out of the shadows of the rocks we were using as cover.

Nothing.

There was no one around.

Where would they have gone? Why would they have left me behind? My eyes narrowed. They wouldn't have. No way. Something had to be wrong.

I sniffed the air, trying to pick up their scent. It was faint, but there, leading away from our camp and toward the open plains. I followed it, my heart racing with worry. I kept my senses peeled for any sign of danger. A shudder raced down my spine and I froze. It was too quiet. The insects never started back up. Even the wind was silent though it still blew through the grass.

I took a few faltering steps and looked around again, searching for any signs of life. Nothing but grass as far as I



could see in all directions.

“Soren?” I called out again, louder this time.

“He’s gone.”

Whirling, I turned and gasped as I found a woman standing there, watching me. Her golden hair shone in the moonlight, whipping back and forth in the wind. Her dress billowed and waved, like it was entreating for peace. We studied each other silently for a few heartbeats. “Who are you?” I asked.

Her shrewd sky-blue eyes assessed me as her lips twitched upward into a small smile. “A friend.”

I doubted that very much. Something about her had my inner beast pacing in agitation. I decided not to fall into whatever little game she was playing. “Where are they?”

“They’re safe,” she assured me with a wave of her hand.

“I don’t believe you.”

Her smile grew bigger, more feral, and she shrugged. “That’s your prerogative. They *are* safe, but you on the other hand... I want to help you.”

*Like hell you do.* I took a step back as she moved forward, my eyes narrowing on her. “Stay away from me.”

She stopped advancing, but didn’t move back. “You need to be prepared.”

“For what?”

“The war that’s coming.” She tilted her head in my direction. “Do you love your mates?”

My mouth opened, then shut. I did, even though we hadn’t had much time together, I loved them more than I could comprehend. My mother had explained it to me as a child. When shifters’ unions were blessed by the Moon Goddess, their souls were meeting once again. They were all one, united, before they were created, and once they found each other again they completed one another. Mom’s eyes had been sad when she’d told me and I knew now, as an adult, it was because she never got to find the other half, or halves, of her

soul. She'd been stuck with my father, who'd taken her from her village without permission. Without caring that she didn't want to be with him.

"If you do," the woman continued as though my answer didn't really matter, "you'll want to be on the winning side. Won't you?"

My eyes narrowed. "And what side is that?"

She smiled at me again. "Mine."

*Winning side, as opposed to the right side.* That distinction wasn't lost on me. "Of course," I replied. She clearly missed the heavy sarcasm in my tone because a smug look drifted over her face. "You're Arune, the Sun Goddess."

"I am. And you're Lyas's priestess." She began walking, circling around me like the little reef sharks from back home did whenever we went swimming in the sea. I didn't circle with her, just let her go until she stopped in front of me again. A look of disappointment settled on her features. "I expected...more."

As if that was going to hurt my feelings. "I grew up with Haron Silvest," I informed her. "Nothing you say to me is going to sting, but good try."

I saw a moment's anger flash behind her eyes. Being compared to a shifter, and found inferior, in any way, was a grave insult. It was her turn for her eyes to narrow on me. "You could join me," she suggested. "I will-"

"Not interested."

Anger clouded her eyes again as I cut her off and I felt her power rise in the air around us. I'd heard about the Sun Goddess and her power, but had never encountered it before. I'd never even seen her before. According to legend, the Gods and Goddesses used to walk among us here on Elaria. Something changed and we haven't seen them in centuries. I had a feeling the Goddess standing in front of me had something to do with that.

"I could squash you like a bug."

I shrugged despite the fear that rose inside me. The last thing I wanted was to show her my emotions. “You could try.” It was probably the truth. She *was* one of the twelve. I was a lowly shifter, an alpha, but just a shifter nonetheless. But something about her display just seemed off. She wouldn’t, or couldn’t kill me directly. Why?

She started laughing again and I didn’t know what was so funny, but it was starting to piss me off. Her moods were giving me whiplash. “Perhaps I underestimated you.” She smiled at me, a real smile this time. “I like you, Reese.”

“Thanks?” I wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“I have a proposition for you.” Her eyes were sparkling with excitement as she stopped in front of me again and folded her hands together in front of her. “Join me and I’ll make you immortal.”

“You can do that?” I asked, surprised.

She nodded eagerly. “Yes! I can.”

“And what exactly would I be doing if I joined you?”

“Killing Haron,” she answered without hesitation. “You’re an alpha female. You should be leading a pack, not hiding in the woods with a bunch of omegas and betas.”

I could sense her excitement. She thought she was swaying me. I had no desire to be immortal. And though I did want to kill my father, I knew that wasn’t everything she wanted. I would also happily chew off my own leg in wolf form rather than lead The Silvest Pack. Those miscreants couldn’t be trusted any further than I could throw them. “What do you have against my father?”

“He’s a shifter,” she said with a delicate shrug.

There it was. “You hate shifters.”

Her eyes settled on mine, bright and piercing. “I do.”

“Why?”

She gave me an indulgent smile. “My sister has been so proud of you all. Bestowing her gifts and watching what you

do with them. Crowing about your abilities to shift, to work with one another to better each other's lives," she spat out in disgust.

"Wait... You hate us because we can shift?"

She didn't reply, but her lips tightened.

"No," I said, thoughtfully. "It's more than that." I searched her face. "You hate us because we were living in harmony. Harmony that you never brought to your humans."

"I don't care about you or what you do," she replied.

Realization struck and I gave a humorless laugh. "You hate us because we belong to your sister." Or maybe a little of all three. And if I worked for her, subjugated to the Sun Goddess, well that was even better than wiping us out. She could steal her sister's creation, and enslave us. Those of us who would willingly enter into a contract with her, anyway. Those who wouldn't, like my mates, would be killed so as not to be in her way.

Her eyes flashed with anger again and I realized she couldn't hold it back. She kept trying to show me any emotion but it, and yet ended right back on fury each time. She was filled to the brim with it.

"You belong to me!" She screamed the words at me, causing me to flinch backward. "Everything on this planet is mine! And you will all bow down to me! Whoever is left, anyway, once I'm done with you."

"So you're going to potentially destroy us because you're jealous of your sister." I was poking the bear. I knew it, but I needed to figure out what was going on here. She might inadvertently give me a clue about Lyas.

"I'm not jealous," she seethed. "I'm the oldest. I deserved the best."

Racking my brain, I tried to remember back to Mom's lessons. "Your father gave his three daughters a choice," I muttered out loud. "As the oldest...you *got* first choice." She'd chosen humans. Looked like she wasn't so happy with her decision anymore.

“They’re impossible,” she said, seeming to calm down a little. “Always fighting one another.” A wicked smile grew on her lips. “So, I put their talents to use.”

The feud between shifters and humans was beginning to make more sense. I was beginning to understand. Watching Arune’s mood swings, the feuds between human clans, the dissent that had been rising on Elaria, it all started to come together. For a brief moment I had pity for the humans. Their deity was a gigantic cunt.

“Once I got my meddlesome sisters out of the way, I had no problem convincing your kind to treat each other like enemies. Turns out you’re not so superior to humans after all.”

I glanced around again as she was gloating. It was hard not to ask how she’d managed to get her sisters ‘out of the way’, but I knew she wouldn’t answer. It was pointless to ask. *Where are the guys?* This wasn’t right, but I couldn’t put my finger on why. “If I decide to work with you, how are you planning on convincing my mates?”

“They conform, or they die.”

She really didn’t understand how mates worked. Probably because humans didn’t have that kind of a bond. She thought I would let her kill my males just to be spared by her? To gain immortality? She was delusional.

“You’ll never win,” I told her.

She laughed. “Oh, I’ve already won, Reese. You just don’t know it yet.”

“What about Lyas?”

“She’s gone,” Arune said with a flip of her hand. Her eyes were shrewd as she studied me. “Join me and I can give you everything you desire.”

I could see the wheels turning in her head, trying to figure out what would entice me. Even as an alpha, I wasn’t immune to the pull of a Goddess. She wanted me to listen to her, to obey her. But I knew better. She couldn’t be trusted.

“I only want my mates,” I told her honestly. “And for you to leave us alone.”

Her eyes went cold and a chill zipped through my soul. She stepped in closer to me and I fought against the panic racing through me when I realized I couldn't move. She was a Goddess. A powerful one. And I'd just refused to be her ally.

“I'm going to make you regret that decision,” she hissed at me. She reached out to me, slowly.

My eyes widened as I watched her finger turn into a talon. There wasn't anything I could do. As much as I was trying to struggle against the hold she had on me, I couldn't budge. Pain seared me as she drew her finger down my neck, slicing open my skin. It was a shallow cut. A warning, but a trickle of warm blood dripped down, soaking into my leather shirt.

I didn't say anything. Refused to let myself cry out with the pain. That was what she wanted.

*Reese!*

My name was whispered softly in my mind. I couldn't look around, but it had been Soren. Where was he? I could feel them. The strength that always seemed to amplify when they were around was flowing through my body. It was a comfort in this stressful time.

“You're a great deal more difficult than your family has been.”

I focused back on Arune, shock making me forget about what I'd heard. “What?”

Her smile was wicked. “You thought your grandfather managed to start a war between shifters all by himself?” She clucked her tongue, giving me a pitying look. “You don't exactly come from the brightest of shifters. Made it easy for me.”

That was the truth. My grandfather was a fool if he aligned himself with this devious bitch. The look on her face told me what she said was true. She was hoping it would hurt me to hear the reasoning behind that despicable war. If she thought it would endear me to her, she didn't really understand my

hatred for the males in my family. They'd killed my mother. The night I'd tried to escape, Mom had insisted I run. That she would talk with my father, give me time to go. I hadn't told anyone what I'd seen that night, but neither my father, nor my brothers would live to see their elder years.

"I don't care," I told her honestly.

She frowned at me. "You should. You think your mates aren't going to feel differently about you once they realize that your grandfather played a part in all this?"

*They already know he started the war. And they accept me anyway,* I told myself. She wasn't going to make me insecure about them.

*Why isn't she waking up?*

My breath caught in my throat. Atlas's question made me realize why everything seemed so off. I was dreaming.

*Why the fuck is she bleeding?*

Swallowing hard, my mind raced as I tried to figure out how to break out of the hold Arune had on me. If Calder could see where she cut me, that meant she could actually kill me in this dream state. Was this the only place she could? Why hadn't she attacked directly? It didn't matter right now. If this was a dream, I could win. Only I controlled my dreams. She could only infiltrate them.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked her, trying to understand. Trying to buy time. "Is a broken, uninhabited world really worth ruling over? Because that's what's going to be left if you pit shifters and humans together in a war."

Her smile grew. "You think I don't want them to destroy each other?" She laughed, the sound like nails on a chalkboard. "I'm counting on it, little wolf."

Gritting my teeth together, I tried to focus on my mates' voices. More of their conversation was bleeding through. I kept them centered in my mind. *Wake up. Wake up.*

She spun suddenly on her heels, fire blazing in her eyes. "What do you think you are doing, little wolf? You think you

can escape my grasp?”

*It's just a dream, it's not real.* Around us the wind picked up, the moon rose higher and shone down much brighter than should have been possible, but this was *my* dream. She stalked closer, hand raised ready to strike me. I grabbed onto Soren's voice, steady, and calm. I could feel Atlas holding my hands, the warmth in them. I was resting in Calder's lap, his hands stroking my forehead comforting me. They were grounding me. I clung to them, their love coursing through me. Giving me strength.

Arune stepped forward and brought her hand down on me. It didn't connect. Her face went from rage to frightened confusion. We both turned our heads slightly. I was holding her arm at the wrist. I had caught her blow.

The winds intensified, washing clouds over the moon and blocking the light. Darkness swept over us, and for the briefest second, I felt her fear as though it was my own. She was scared of me. It had brought her out of hiding and forced her to take action. Arune tugged hard and snatched her arm out of my grip.

With a gasp, I reared up, struggling against the hands trying to hold me down.

“Easy. Easy, Mate,” Soren said in a soothing voice.

I looked around, but I was back, concealed behind our rock with them surrounding me. My eyes locked with Soren's. There was worry and questions swimming in them. “We have to go. Now.”



## CHAPTER 27



### Soren

She was terrified. I frowned, but looked around and met the gazes of my cadre mates. Atlas gave an almost imperceptible nod. We didn't need to speak. Didn't need to wonder whether she had just had a bad dream. We were way past doubting her. Reese had kept herself, and her pack, alive for longer than most could have. Her instincts were well honed and, though I didn't know what had happened to put the panic on her face, I knew we needed to listen.

"Come on," I grabbed her by the hand to help her up. It took everything inside of me to keep from holding her close. It would be a waste of precious seconds and her urgency was riding me hard through our mind link.

Atlas and Calder had already shifted, bags in their mouths. We quickly undressed and followed suit. She was right behind us as we made our way out onto the plains. Sound traveled at night and my ears twitched when the unmistakable bay of a hound rolled through the air. Humans. Looking over my shoulder, I met her worried gaze. She was right. We needed to go. More barks and bays filled the plains.

Humans were relentless in their pursuit of shifters. It didn't matter to them that we were people, too. That we had families and lives just like they did. They hated us. Wanted us dead. They used dogs to help hunt us, and though their hounds were no match for our speed or strength, the weapons their Goddess had given them, along with their bloodthirsty nature, made

them a dangerous foe. What they lacked in raw strength they made up for with sheer numbers.

They weren't as troublesome before, when shifters outnumbered them. But now they were like locusts on the land, everywhere all at once, and our numbers had dwindled down until it would be easy for them to extinguish us if done right.

We took off across the plains, using our speed to keep out of range of their weapons. Their horses were fast, and their hounds had our scent, but we had determination fueling us. If Reese hadn't warned us, we would have been sitting ducks. One or two of us might have made it out alive after we killed the humans, but we would have sustained losses. And losing our mate would have broken us.

The fact that she knew danger was coming for us before we did was something I was dying to ask her about, but we needed to focus. We zig-zagged, trying to throw them off our trail. Moving in and out of streams and rivers, making false trails to distract their scent hounds. We ran for hours. The sun was peeking over the horizon before I called for my cadre to stop.

Panting, I listened. Silence. Testing the air, I tried to scent the humans and their animals. Nothing. We'd managed to outrun them. There was a time when I'd been doubtful when Calder and Reese had told me that they had somehow amplified each other's strength and endurance when they'd fought together. We were all feeling it now and I couldn't deny it anymore. Even with as tired as we were, I could feel all of our powers combining and giving us all that extra edge. It was certainly welcomed while we were being chased by enemies.

Atlas shifted first and looked around, his nose in the air as he too scented the area. "They aren't nearby."

Calder shifted next and grabbed the bag from the ground next to Atlas. He began passing out clothing as Reese and I shifted. "What happened?" he asked, his eyes on her.

Before she could answer, I had her in my arms, my face buried in her neck as I held her close. She smelled so damn

good and it had been too long since I'd been able to hold her like this. My wolf howled inside of me, wanting to be close to her.

“Soren,” she murmured, her hands coming up to rest on my shoulders. She'd been squeezing me back, but we didn't have a lot of time.

I let her go, reluctantly. “What happened back there?” I asked, echoing Calder's question, shoving away the fear that told me I'd almost lost her.

Atlas was already using a clean cloth to dab at Reese's wound, cleaning the blood from her neck. The scratch was minor and should have healed the minute she shifted. The fact that it didn't meant one of two things. Magic or silver. The humans never got close enough to us to use their weapons, which meant magic.

She winced away from Atlas, but he just growled at her. The sound had my hackles rising and I stepped closer to him, ready to defend our mate if he tried anything. He sighed and shook his head, calling upon his legendary patience to rein in his temper. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I'm just on edge.” He sat down, pulling her onto his lap, and gentling his touch as he tended to her wound.

My hackles rose as she recounted her conversation with the Sun Goddess. She wanted to destroy us all. I'd long suspected it. My wolf was pacing inside of me, wanting to get out and protect our mate. I would never allow anyone to harm her, not even a Goddess.

Calder sat down next to Atlas, his hand resting on her knee as he listened. “Did you know your family was involved with her?”

She shook her head. “No, but really, it isn't very surprising.”

“What do you suppose she offered Lenat to get him to start that war?” Calder asked.

I tensed, trying to work through the anger that was a living entity inside of me. My fathers had been killed in the war

started by her grandfather, and ultimately my mother's life was lost as well. It had nearly destroyed me. My grandparents and my cadre mates were the only reason I was able to find my way. They were the only reason I'd become the leader I had. I didn't lay any blame on Reese. None of this had been her fault, but her family? They were deeply enmeshed in what was happening to shifter kind. And they would answer for it.

"I don't know," she replied. The glance she shot my way was full of guilt.

I sat down in front of her and cupped her cheek. "You have no reason to take on the burden of this," I told her. "Your father and brothers will have to answer for their crimes."

"You think they're involved?" she asked, searching my gaze.

"If your grandfather was a part of it? I have no doubt his son is. And *his* sons as well."

She nodded, leaning into my touch. "I agree, unfortunately. My father and brothers were possessed with blind hatred, much like my grandfather. It probably wouldn't take much of an offer to get them to start or fight in a shifter war."

Calder's hand tightened on her knee as he spoke, "We'll find them and make them pay." His eyes met mine.

"Thank you," she whispered, giving us all heartfelt looks. "You pulled me back. I couldn't break out of her grasp until you started talking. Then I could...feel you, and not just through the mind link."

"I was fucking terrified," Calder admitted.

The surprise on her face made me chuckle. It was easy to read her thoughts on her face. If 'scary' alpha males like us were afraid, what did that say about the situation?

"You have no idea, Little One," I told her. "No idea that you're now our greatest weakness."

She looked offended, so Atlas offered, "And our greatest treasure."

“You’re both in one for us,” I replied in agreement. “If anything were to happen to you, we would be lost.”

“I think that’s one of the nicest things you’ve said to me,” she admitted with a shy smile.

Calder snorted and I rolled my eyes. “I’m not always an ass,” I insisted.

She gave me a look that had Calder and Atlas both biting back laughter. “That’s debatable,” she replied.

Giving her a wicked smile, I shrugged. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Also debatable,” she echoed.

“Why do you think Arune showed up now?” Calder mused, drawing our attention back to the problem at hand.

“There was a minute...” Reese broke off, shaking her head.

“Go on,” Atlas urged her.

“It was like we...connected. I think she’s scared we’ll accomplish what we’ve set out to do.”

“Free Lias,” I stated.

She nodded. “And that will mess with her plans.”

“Good,” Calder spat. “Stupid bitch shouldn’t have fucked with shifters.”

“She’s dangerous,” I cautioned. “She’s a Goddess.”

“I got the feeling she couldn’t touch us,” I told them. “But then she cut me, so I don’t know. I could be wrong about everything.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Atlas told her in a soothing tone, brushing his hand up and down her back.

“We need to go,” I told them. It was the last thing I wanted. I wanted to find a secluded cave and spend the next few hours showing my mate exactly how we felt about her. Explaining to her how she changed things for us. Just basking

in the sight of her. Instead, we needed to run because we had a deranged Goddess and her humans on our heels.

Even as they nodded in agreement, the baying of a hound started up once again.

\* \* \*

CALDER SHIFTED BACK to his human form, dropping onto his back on the ground. Reese collapsed to her belly near him, exhaustion pouring off her in waves. The only sound was our harsh breathing. We'd run all day and well into the next night without stopping for longer than it took to get some water and dried jerky. The humans had pursued us with a relentless focus that told me that Arune was behind it all.

The chase had forced us to keep going and had gotten us to the Dreiken Wood ahead of schedule. Atlas joked, "Man, next time we're in a hurry to get somewhere let's just find some humans to chase us."

I took a few steps toward the line of trees. They were dark monsters, standing sentry as they guarded their home. The monster trees were gnarled and reached far into the sky. Once we entered the wood, those canopies would block out the sun and moon, leaving us to depend on our night vision.

Before the Sun Goddess had shown up, I'd known this was going to be the most dangerous part of our mission. Well, at least until we got to the end and whatever was waiting for us there. Now, the Dreiken Wood would keep our enemies at bay. All while revealing a whole new world of dangers.

I turned back to my mates. Reese was still in wolf form, her fur matted with sweat, and her sides heaving with each breath she took. Calder looked no better. He was sprawled out on his back, his eyes closed, and his face pale. Atlas was still on his feet, but even he looked tired. We all were. "We'll stay here for the rest of the night. Get a start into the woods in the morning."

The Dreiken Wood was a funny place. Though it was called a wood, it was magical. If you tried to walk around it, you'd find yourself spanning Elaria and ending right back

where you first started. Yet, to cross it only took a little over twenty-four harrowing hours. That is, if the wood allowed you to leave at all. It wasn't the length of time that made it dangerous, though. It was the things that lived there.

I'd never been inside the wood myself, but I'd heard plenty about it from my fathers when I was growing up. Calder had gone through on his way to the Cobalt Sea and back. The wariness in his eyes had been apparent from the moment he heard our destination and knew he'd have to return to those dark depths once more. "Do you know a path through?" I asked him.

"No."

Atlas and I frowned at him. "What do you mean, no?" Atlas asked. "You were here just a few weeks ago."

He opened his mouth, then shook his head. "It's going to sound insane," he insisted, "but no two paths are the same. At least I wasn't able to find the path I used before, though I went back to the same area upon my return. It's like...the woods play with you. Put you on whatever path they deem."

Reese picked her shaggy head up at that and whined. *That makes it sound like the woods are alive.*

"I...think...they are," Calder replied to her mental statement with a shrug. "Or something within them controls the trees? I don't know."

"What are we getting ourselves into here, Calder?" I asked. We'd all heard the rumors of the Dreiken Woods. None of us were looking forward to going inside, but I needed to know if it was as bad as was said.

"I kept moving," he admitted, "even at night and just pushed through. I kept my head down and refused to look up." He gave our mate a sheepish smile. "I'm not afraid of much, but the things I heard in there--"

Reese squirmed closer to him, licking his hand, giving him reassurance that she didn't think any less of him for what he did.

"You can shift, you know," Atlas told her with a chuckle.

*Too tired.*

“Get some sleep,” I told them. “I’ll take watch. At first light we’ll enter Dreiken Wood.”

A cacophony of sound accompanied my statement, making us all tense. The eerie howls sounded as though the woods were rejoicing, for they were about to have new victims. Swallowing hard, I shoved all thoughts of what we needed to do from my mind and focused on the task of protecting my cadre during the night. I didn’t plan to wake them. As leader it was my burden to bear the weariness settling into my bones. I needed the other three as fresh as possible for what was to come.



## CHAPTER 28



### Reese

The sun was shining. The birds were singing as they pillaged the grass on the plains for seeds. I was with my mates and completely in love. It should be a glorious morning. And yet my stomach was roiling so hard, I thought I might puke up my breakfast of jerky and water. There was a metallic tang on my tongue that wouldn't dissipate no matter how much I swallowed.

"The sooner we go in, the sooner we get out," Calder said, trying to sound chipper. He didn't do upbeat very well.

Steeling my spine, I stepped into line behind Soren. Calder and Atlas brought up the rear as the Dreiken Wood's shadows consumed us. Just crossing past the first row of trees sent shivers over my skin. I'd been in these woods before. We'd crossed them on the way to the Selkin Forest, where Soren's pack lived, and I could still hear the whispers in my dreams. I didn't want to go back inside. But it was too late. Here we were. To turn back now would be the end of our kind. We had no choice but to move forward.

My eyes darted around. There were no birds here. No squirrels scrounging for nuts. They knew better than to cross the threshold into the woods. This wasn't like the Selkin Forest, or any other on Elaria, for that matter. This was something else entirely. Magical, like Calder had said. Only it was dark magic.

I turned to look at Calder and saw him staring straight ahead, his jaw set. He wasn't happy to be here either. The other two hadn't ever entered the Dreiken Wood. They didn't know what to expect. I wasn't sure whether it was better to know, or not.

The trees were so thick that barely any light shone through, making it hard to see what lay ahead of us. We tread upon a dirt path I knew from experience could disappear at any moment. It was as though the woods played tricks. Tested you. Anything that did live here was warped. Dangerous.

"You've been through them."

I jumped as Soren's voice broke the silence within the trees. It was as though a hush lay over the land when you were inside. "Yes," I replied, even though it wasn't really a question.

"Was it bad?"

"Clover had nightmares for two months straight," I told him, giving him a weak smile when he turned and looked at me over his shoulder.

"It's better not to talk," Calder warned.

We fell silent, but kept moving. The woods had a time limit. That's why anyone who was asked about how long they were inside always answered in hours. It wasn't about distance. You couldn't just bolt through and know you only had two more miles to go. The price you paid to traverse the woods was a full day of your life. Though some had reported to be lost for multiple days. Most came to a general consensus that it took twenty-seven hours exactly to make it through the Dreiken Wood. Everything about your experience inside was...terrible. As though the woods fed on your fear.

Even when you left it wasn't over. You took a piece of the woods with you. Twenty-seven hours to make it though, physically. Mentally, some never left.

A branch snapped, the sound ricocheting through the silence and causing us all to stop as one and stare hard into the dimly lit trees to our left. I wasn't breathing. Forcing my lungs

to expand, I sucked in a breath as I searched for threats. My wolf was snarling inside of me. A warning in and of itself, but I couldn't see anything. Couldn't smell anything. My usual impeccable night vision was grainy and wavering. And it was as though I was completely nose blind. It had happened before. I wondered if the others were experiencing the same.

After a few heartbeats, Soren's voice cut through the tension in the air. "Keep moving." He wasn't bothering to speak quietly anymore. He sounded pissed. Antagonistic in a way. He wasn't going to back down to some fucking trees.

That was the exact feeling I was getting from him, thanks to our new connection. I stifled a laugh. This wasn't the time to show joy. I didn't want to know what the woods would slap me down with if I dared to do that.

"What are you laughing at?" Atlas teased, coming to my side, a smile playing over his face. He was trying to lighten the mood, as he always was.

"Nothing," I muttered, ducking my head and staring at my boots as we continued walking. He was sticking close to me now, but a grim expression once again covered his face. Was there ever a mood other than somber and uncomfortable in this place? Terrified. Alone. *Hungry*. I froze in my tracks. That last one hadn't been my thought. Oh Goddess. Terror flooded me as I watched mist begin to roll over the toes of my boots.

My head snapped up and once again, I was alone. In the middle of the Dreiken Wood. "No." My voice echoed as mist poured in from the rows of trees crowding the path I stood on. "Guys?" I called out, spinning in a circle, searching for my mates. This was bad. Really fucking bad.

"Reese!" Calder's voice sounded like it was coming from a distance.

"It's okay, Little One."

"We're here." Atlas's voice joining in made me sigh in relief. They were all here with me.

"What *is* this?" I asked. When me and my pack of females had gone through the woods before, we'd heard all manner of

things in the shadows, but we hadn't seen anything. Even though it had scared us, there'd been nothing bad that had happened.

Another branch cracked from behind me. I whirled around, sharp breaths tearing from my throat, eyes darting around. The mist was so thick it was as though I was in a tiny bubble of clear air, surrounded by the thick, almost foamy, substance.

"Snap out of it, Reese," Soren ordered.

I didn't know what he meant. I couldn't see them, so I held onto their voices like a lifeline. "It's everywhere."

"What is Minx?"

They couldn't see it?

Crack!

I screamed as something bashed against my bubble, making the mist part as whatever it was slid away into it again. An imprint was left where the mist had been forced away, but I couldn't puzzle out what I was looking at. It wasn't shifter, or human.

"Reese!" Soren barked, as though I could fix whatever was happening and come back to them.

The mist swirled as the thing slithered around my little spot. I didn't dare move. I was a badass alpha female...who was about to piss her pants in fear. And really, I didn't feel too badly about it. Anyone who wanted to give me shit was going to get a dare that they come and stay a night inside the Dreiken Wood. If the daytime was shaping up to be this bad, I was really dreading what would happen once the sun fell below the horizon.

"Reese," Calder whispered, his voice soothing me even as the creature bashed into my bubble again and again. "You need to come back to us."

"How?" I asked, my eyes darting around, trying to see through the mist. The creature didn't seem to be able to penetrate whatever was shielding me.

“Close your eyes,” Soren ordered, his voice deep and demanding. It made me want to obey him without question. “That’s it, Little One. Do as I say.”

I closed my eyes and took a breath in through my nose, holding it for a second before slowly exhaling.

“Now open them.”

The mist was gone. My mates circled around me, concern on their faces. I looked around, confused as to what had just happened. “What the fuck?” I launched myself into Atlas’s arms. He held me, his deep purr vibrating his chest as he tried to calm me down. I was shaking so hard, I was sure my knees would give out if he wasn’t holding onto me.

“It’s okay, Little Warrior” Atlas said softly, running his hands over my hair. “You’re safe with us now.”

“What was that?” I demanded, as I pulled back from his embrace. I explained what had happened, then locked eyes with Calder. “Did you ever see anything?”

His lips thinned out. “Only one thing, but it wasn’t necessarily scary.”

“What was it?” Soren demanded.

Calder shook his head, not wanting to respond, but an irritated look from his alpha had him replying. “It was my mother.”

My eyes widened. “You saw her?” His family had been killed by raiders when he was young. How had he seen her here?

“I...don’t know if it was really her,” he admitted. “Or something that wanted me to think it was.”

Reaching for him, I took his hand and let him pull me into his side. I wrapped an arm around his waist and rested my head on his shoulder, giving him comfort in the only way I could at the moment. If our departed loved ones were trapped inside this place... It didn’t bear thinking about. “The Moon Goddess wouldn’t allow that,” I said out loud. When they all looked at me, my belief strengthened. “She wouldn’t let our

spirits reside in a place like this,” I insisted. “We’re supposed to go to be with Drennen.”

“Only if you’re good,” Atlas pointed out.

Drennen was the father of the three sister Goddesses. He was the one who’d given them their dominion over the sun, moon, and sky, while he chose to reside over shifters as they passed on in life. He was there as we took our eternal sleep, watching over us. Protecting us.

I shook my head. “If they’re evil they go to Shroul.” I straightened, glaring at the twisted trees around us. “Even *he* wouldn’t live in a place like this.”

“And my mother wasn’t evil,” Calder pointed out. He was right. By all accounts she’d been a wonderful woman and had loved her son with all her heart. She’d died trying to protect him from those who would harm him. Someone couldn’t sacrifice like that and then end up here. I refused to believe it.

“Let’s keep moving,” Soren suggested, his eyes landing on me. “If you’re ready?”

“I am,” I told him, feeling steadier now. “Just...stick close.”

Their chuckles were a comfort. I didn’t have to walk through places like this alone anymore. Not that I’d been alone the last time either, but I’d had to be the strong one. Now we all shouldered that burden. We were going to need each other’s strength for this trip. The hours passed without incident and soon my shoulders had relaxed once more. There were screams and groans. Howls and whines. The woods made noises that would make your hair stand on end, all around us, but nothing else jumped out. At least not until the path ahead widened into a large clearing.

“That’s suspicious,” I said waspishly. I wasn’t about to trust anything this place gave to us. My hand darted out and I smacked the Trat Nut out of Calder’s hand before he could lift it to his mouth. I hadn’t even seen him bend to pick it up off the forest floor. “Don’t eat that!”

He looked at me like I'd grown another head. Who knew? With this place he might have if he'd eaten that nut.

"Don't touch *anything*," I demanded. I shouldn't have to explain this to them. "This place is evil and we don't know what will happen."

"I think we should take a break," Soren suggested.

"It's a trap," I insisted, vehemently shaking my head.

He stopped in front of me, giving me a piercing look. "We need to rest or we're going to run ourselves into the ground trying to get out of here."

"I vote running into the ground," I replied, putting my hands on my hips. "Especially if it means getting out of this hell hole."

His lips twitched at my words. "You've been through worse than this, Reese," he pointed out.

I scowled at him, not appreciating being reminded of that.

"Besides, that's not the way it works," Calder said. "We're only getting out of here when the woods let us out. May as well rest." He sat down on a log. It was gnarled and twisted, but it didn't move or try to eat him, so I supposed I could allow him to sit there.

The protective feelings I was having for these men were so new to me. That didn't seem to matter, though. They were already ingrained deep within me, twisted up into everything that made me who I was.

Soren sat beside him and Atlas joined them. They were right. My legs were fatigued. We'd been running since we left Jessu's village and had only gotten a few hours of sleep last night. I still opted to sit in the dirt rather than chance that log turning into some sort of monster at my touch.

"Tell us about your childhood," Soren suggested. "How did you learn so much about the Gods? Most shifters don't know much about them anymore."

I rolled my eyes at his obvious ploy to distract me, but gave him what he wanted because it would help keep my mind

off the screams and groans around me. They started up again the minute we sat down. “My mom taught me. I don’t know where she learned, but she had so much knowledge. She taught me to love our Goddess. To respect the rest of the Gods. And to fear them as appropriate.”

“Vera did the same for us,” Atlas said with a grin. “She was a bit heavier on the fear thy Gods bit than your mom, though, I’m betting.”

I laughed at that. “Yeah, I could see that. But that was probably to keep you unruly boys in line.”

Calder snorted. “That’s putting it mildly.”

Soren nodded his agreement. “So you were raised by just your mom? How active was Haron with you?”

I winced and looked down at the ground. “I did everything I could to stay out of his way,” I admitted. “Even before I presented as an alpha.”

“Sorry,” Soren said, voice softer than usual.

I knew they could feel my turmoil through our link. It wasn’t something I liked to dwell on. My father had never been kind or loving toward me. He’d been cold and distant, but when I’d presented as an alpha... he’d become downright cruel. He’d tried to kill me in my sleep more than once. His hatred of females had been ingrained in him from birth. He didn’t want a daughter to begin with, let alone one who was a female alpha. He’d made sure to let me know that every day of my life.

My mother had been my only shining light. Had saved my life so many times. Until the night she couldn’t win against him anymore.

“He killed her.”

All three of their heads snapped up at my admission. Soren’s eyes were like granite. Hard and cold. But he didn’t say anything. Just waited for me to explain.

I hadn’t planned to tell them that. No one knew. Not even Emma. I’d never told anyone my shame. My guilt. “I left her



there. And he killed her.” Tears welled in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I was stronger than this. I had been for a long time now.

A huge hand cupped my cheek, turning me to face him. Soren squatted there in front of me. I hadn’t even heard him move off the log. “*He* killed her. Not you.”

“I left her,” I cried out. “Ran away.”

“Like she told you to,” he guessed. “So she could protect you. So you could live.” He sat down, gathering me close.

I sniffed as I pressed my cheek to his chest. These males melted me. I was a strong alpha. And they melted me. I couldn’t hold out against their kindness toward me. Was it because I’d yearned for this kind of treatment? For someone to love me? My mother had, but growing up thinking I’d never have mates had broken something inside of me. Now that I did have them, I couldn’t seem to keep from showing my vulnerable side to them. As much as I wanted to feel badly about that, I couldn’t. They weren’t judging me. They didn’t think I was weak, or pitiful. They just wanted to comfort me. To love me. And I wanted to let them.

“It was my name day,” I told them. Soren’s hand was cupped around my head, holding me close to his heart. I wasn’t going anywhere. It was time to get this off my chest. To let the burden go.

## CHAPTER 29



### Reese

“Father decided he’d had enough of me,” I explained. “He was kicking me out of the pack. As much as it hurt knowing I’d have to leave Mom behind, I didn’t want to make trouble for her, so I packed my meager possessions to go.”

Thinking back on that night, I frowned. “I don’t know what changed.”

“What do you mean?” Atlas asked.

“He was willing to let me go. The whole village had gathered to watch my banishing. He was going on and on about how outsiders and freaks weren’t welcome. Then...” I bit my lip at the looks on Atlas’s and Calder’s faces, then continued. “Then he sort of went quiet for long enough that people started getting antsy. Then out of nowhere, he just attacked me.”

“He attacked you?” Soren’s voice was filled with rage. “Why would he do that?”

I shrugged. “No clue. I was shocked. He’d been so calm up until that point. I mean, I knew he hated me, but everything changed in a second. Maybe that had been his plan the entire time?”

“Or maybe he had a little push,” Atlas suggested.

Focusing on him, I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“If Arune really is connected to your family, maybe she made a deal with him to kill you.”

That hadn't occurred to me. Mostly because the knowledge that my grandfather had been in league with the goddess was so fresh. And we'd been doing nothing more than surviving since I found out. “That...almost makes sense. Arune knew what I was, what I am. And my father wouldn't need much encouragement for violence.”

“What happened next?” Soren asked, tone gentle for my sake, even though I could feel the fury building inside of him.

“I ran,” I told them. “Not to try to get away, because even though he's a devious bastard, my father is a strong alpha. I just didn't want to have to fight where the rest of the pack could pile on and kill me easily if I got the upper hand.”

“Smart,” Calder told me. His eyes were filled with pride.

“Only my mom and brothers followed us.” A lump formed in my throat as I tried to hold back my tears. Soren was purring now and though it was helping, I was still distraught. “Mom begged for him to keep his word. I don't even want to know what she'd had to do to wrangle that promise from him,” I admitted. “I can't imagine what she gave up for me over the years, just to keep me alive.” A tear slid down my cheek. “She must have lived through horrors every day and night being force mated to him, but she never complained. I never knew because she always had a smile and a hug for me.”

“You were her world.” The absolute certainty in Calder's voice eased some of the guilt. “That's what parents do for their children.”

“She saw that her pleas weren't having an effect on Father. She looked me dead in the eyes and told me to run,” I said with a small sob. “Then she just...attacked him. She was a beta female. She knew she had no hope of winning against him. In the past she'd always used cunning to keep me alive. This time she shifted and threw her wolf at him with the savagery of an alpha.”

“Maybe, in a way, that was her way of freeing herself,” Soren explained. “She knew you would get away and be safe, and she wouldn’t be stuck, chained to that asshole anymore.”

That gave me a little sliver of peace. She’d taken her life into her own hands in the end and made the decision that was best for her. “I begged my brothers to help. Batu just told me to shut the fuck up. That they would get to me once they killed the bitch. Neither Drez or Cain did anything. They were never as bad as father or Batu growing up, but they weren’t good either.” They didn’t stop what happened that night. They watched my father tearing my mother apart with rapt attention. The glee that had been written all over Batu’s face had been absent on my other brothers’ expressions, but they did nothing. “And for that, they’ll die right alongside the others.”

“We’ll help with anything you need,” Soren told me.

“How did you escape?” Atlas asked.

I scoffed. “My brothers thought I was so whipped that I’d just stand there and wait for my death. I spent years biting back my retorts to their needling. Never fighting back. Never stepping a toe out of line where anyone, other than my mother, could see, so that when the time came, I could use it against them.” My laugh was humorless. “I shifted and ran. They were as bad as my father so they never assumed a female could be so fast, so cunning, not even an alpha. They always thought they’d be able to catch up to me easily so they didn’t try as hard at first. By the time they realized they needed to put effort in, I was gone.”

“And you’ve been running ever since?” Atlas asked.

I nodded, throat too tight to speak.

Soren’s hand tightened around the back of my neck and I gasped. Not because I was worried, but because I liked it. I could feel through our connection the love and deep desire they held to keep me safe. I felt the same for them. Soren brushed his lips over mine. It would have been easy to deepen the kiss, but this wasn’t the time or place for it. “Thank you for telling us, Little One.”

Ducking my head, I tried to sort through my emotions. What I needed was a minute alone to get them figured out. The guys must have felt my need because they stood up, Soren placing me on my feet.

“I have to take a piss,” Calder announced.

There was a stream nearby. I went over to it, keeping the corner of my eye on the clearing as I stared at the water. All three of my mates went the opposite way to relieve their bladders. I could still see them, backs facing me. I knelt down, dipping a finger into the stream, waiting to see if something would happen. When nothing did, I splashed some of the cool liquid over my face. I wouldn't trust it enough to drink it; our canteens were full, so there was no need. But this felt great. I cupped the clear water in my hand and slapped it on the back of my neck. It helped clear away my tears.

“You know, I was wondering something.”

I glanced up as Soren walked over to me. “What's that?” My eyes strayed over to the other two, who were talking together and pointing toward the route they wanted to take. There were multiple paths out of the clearing.

“Do you think your mother ever regretted having you?”

My eyes flashed to Soren's face, shock holding me still.

“I mean,” he shrugged casually, “she lived a pretty shitty life mainly because of you. Her sons sound like giant assholes, so she only stayed to protect you, Little Wolf.”

A buzzing started up in my ears. His words were like a slice to the heart, but the minute I heard the nickname, I knew I was in trouble. “Arune.”

I stood, staring at the man who wasn't my mate. I knew the minute he said that first hateful thing that it wasn't him. Soren wouldn't do that to me. Now that I'd caught on, I felt the blankness inside her. I couldn't feel Soren's emotions, or hear his thoughts. It was nothing but emptiness as I looked at him. The same for Atlas and Calder. They were gone. I was alone in the clearing with the Sun Goddess.

“You’re a smart one,” Arune sneered. She’d given up the ploy and looked like herself again. “Too bad it’s not enough to save you.” She lunged forward, grabbing me by the throat and squeezing until my eyes watered from lack of oxygen.

I wasn’t asleep this time. What was going on? I wheezed, grabbing onto her forearm and half shifting so that my claws dug as deep into her muscle as they could. She howled in rage and released me. I didn’t waste time. If it was like before my mates could see me. They would follow me. I bolted down a path, trying to outrun the murderous bitch behind me.

“You can run,” she called out, laughing, her voice echoing all around me, “but you cannot hide.”

I ran faster, knowing that she was right. I couldn’t hide from her. But I could try to wake up, or snap out of it. All I knew was I wasn’t going to stand there while she killed me. Worst case scenario, I would fight her. I’d managed to draw blood. It didn’t matter that she was an immortal being. I hurt her. Whatever was happening, it worked both ways.

Tree branches slapped me in the face as the woods closed in around the path I was on. My lungs were burning, even though I was in damn good shape. Time moved differently here. To me, it seemed like I’d been running for minutes. It could be hours for all I knew. It never felt like you’d only been inside the Dreiken Wood for twenty-seven hours. It felt like a lifetime according to all who were willing to speak about their time in the wicked place.

I shoved against the brush now blocking my path and stepped out into another clearing. Arune was nowhere to be found. Neither were my mates. “Guys?”

Nothing.

A slithering sounded from the woods behind me, so I jumped further out of the way of the trees. I looked around the clearing, something on the other side catching my eye. There was a small pond in the center, but that wasn’t what had drawn my attention. A stone altar sat at the far end of it, just past a copse of trees.

I needed the break. Since Arune didn't seem to be chasing me right now, I could take the time to rest. To hopefully wake up. I walked around the pond and bent a little to read the inscription on the altar. **To those who are lost. Take heart. Believe in thyself. And when in need, ask for help.**

Frowning, I stared at the stone. That was a weirdly upbeat message for a place like this. I kept my hands locked together over my stomach. I wasn't about to accidentally touch the damned thing. It could summon something else and that was the last thing I needed. This whole damn place was filled with magic, and I already had one huge problem I didn't know how to deal with.

Should I wait here for the guys? Or keep moving and hope I meet them on the other side of the woods?

A rustling in the trees behind me had me spinning around, hand raised and claws out, ready to fight whatever came through those trees next.

"What are you doing? Why the hell did you leave the clearing?" I blinked as Soren stepped out of the trees, looking around in confusion. Atlas and Calder were right on his heels.

"Jesus Minx, you scared the shit out of us."

"I could barely follow your scent trail," Atlas added, giving me a disapproving look.

Stepping backward as they got closer, I growled. All three stopped, shock written all over their faces. "Prove to me who you are," I demanded. I was trying to read them through our connection, but I still wasn't completely in control of that ability and my racing mind wasn't allowing me to concentrate.

"What?" Calder asked. He stepped forward, but stopped again when I stumbled back.

My wolf was begging to come to the surface, to help me protect ourselves. "Do it," I snapped, unable to explain further. My adrenaline was pounding through my system. My hand shook in front of me. I didn't want to hurt my mates, but if this was more of the Sun Goddess's trickery, I was going to rip her to fucking shreds.

Before they could say anything, a roar split the air. The ground trembled beneath my feet.

“What the fuck is that?” Atlas asked, spinning around.

There was no time to worry about who was friend or foe, because we all had to dive out of the way to avoid being crushed by the ten foot tall creature that burst out of the trees and into the clearing. The creature was made up of clay and mud, the thick substance dripping down its face as it bared its teeth at us.

“Holy shit! Golem!” Calder yelled as he rolled across the ground and came up in wolf form.

Soren shifted as well and Atlas followed suit.

A golem? They were things of legend, but if we were going to run into one anywhere, it would be here. The three wolves were already attacking the monster, pretty much proving to me that they were my mates. Unless the Sun Goddess was also afraid of Earth Golems. Even if that was the case, the enemy of my enemy was my friend. Temporarily.

I didn't have the chance to shift, because Calder's wolf was snatched up by the golem and tossed away just as quickly. He collided with me, knocking me to the ground. I groaned in pain and his quick whine of apology lingered longer than he did. He bolted back into the fray. My mates were keeping the golem distracted, so I looked around. Maybe there was something that could help us. There had been a random uplifting altar here. Who knew what this forest was capable of producing.

“Help,” I called out. “If anyone is there, we could really use it.” I didn't know who I was asking. Who had etched the words into the stone nearby, but I was willing to take help from anywhere I could. When no one responded, I sighed and looked around.

I'd landed next to the pond and a random flash of light caught my eye. There. In the mire, there was something. Reaching into the water, my hand closed around something metal. I tugged. Nothing happened. Getting onto my knees, I



leaned backward, using all my weight. Whatever it was was buried so deep in the mud I couldn't pull it out. "Damn it," I muttered.

"Release it!"

My head snapped up and my eyes met worried brown eyes. The man had his hand held out as he crept closer, as though he didn't want to startle me. "Please. Let it go. You can't free her."

"Free who-" One minute I was speaking to him, then next my world was spinning as I tumbled ass over heels through the air.

"Reese!"

I heard my mates shouting for me through the ringing in my ears. I'd landed in a heap on the ground, dazed. The golem had been swinging his hands around, getting ever closer to me as he and my mates fought. His fist had caught me and it had sent me halfway across the clearing.

"No!"

My eyes snapped to where the newcomer was standing, a stricken look on his face. Everything had stopped. The golem was just standing there, a muddy smile on his face. Lifting my hand, I held up a talisman on the end of a long chain. It looked like an old rune of some kind. Etchings were barely visible through the mud as it spun around on its chain.

## CHAPTER 30



### Atlas

I shifted and rushed over to Reese, hands roaming over her to make sure nothing was broken. A quick glance over my shoulder was all it took to see that the golem was about to start fighting again.

“George! What in Drennen’s name are you doing?” the man who’d come from the woods snapped, catching the golem’s attention.

“Helping,” George mumbled, looking contrite.

“Are you okay?” I asked Reese.

She nodded, looking dazed, but let me help her to her feet. “What’s going on?” She sounded tired, confused. We all were.

“Helping Arune, you worthless lump of clay!”

The golem blinked at the man’s angry words. “No. Lyas.”

“No, George,” the man snapped. “Arune tricked you.”

The golem dropped his fists, looking horrified. “Not her.”

“Yes, her.” We all turned to a voice as beautiful as chimes singing in the wind. There, at the edge of the clearing was a gorgeous blonde in a dress that barely hid her form. It was so lightweight it was mostly see through.

The wink she threw my way made me shiver. Revulsion filled me. Despite her beauty, I could see the ugliness beneath.

“Arune,” our mate growled.

I stepped forward, placing myself between the Goddess and Reese when Arune began to walk forward. “If you want to get to her, you’ll have to go through me.”

“No problem, big boy,” she purred at me, then proceeded to do exactly that.

I reached out to stop her, but she passed through me as though she was a ghost. “What the...”

“You can’t touch her,” the newcomer called out. “And she can’t touch you. At least not until she gets that talisman. Throw it here!”

I snarled in anger as Arune backhanded Reese and sent her sprawling backward. “I thought you said she couldn’t touch her?”

Soren and Calder went on the attack, but nothing was working. We couldn’t land a hit on the bitch who was fighting our mate. The damn golem was standing off to the side, crying. A disturbing sight on a normal day, though right now it was just background noise.

“Who the fuck is *she*?”

I glared over at the man who was now standing next to me. I didn’t know where he’d come from, but he seemed to be on our side. For the moment. “Reese Silvest.”

His eyes widened. “No. Damn it, that explains how she pulled the Treaty from the pond. She belongs to Lyas, so she’s connected to Arune. You’ve called to me for help,” he said, looking at Reese, “and I’ll do everything I can.”

“I have no idea what you’re-” I closed my mouth with a snap. He wasn’t paying attention to any of us anymore.

He joined the fight between the women. He hit Arune so hard, she went flying. “Run,” he told Reese. “Quickly.”

Reese was on her feet, heading for the trees when the ground shuddered again. Roots, the size of my bicep, broke free of the ground, wrapping around us, holding us still even as we struggled. They didn’t touch the man or the golem, though. He turned and rushed Arune again, but she held up a

hand and murmured something, then with a flick of her wrist she sent him tumbling away. He didn't get up from where he fell, lying still as stone, eyes open and unblinking. Fuck. Was he...dead?

"You've always been a trouble maker, Katashi," Arune said with a shake of her head. "Don't think I won't punish you for the part you played in trapping me. But first," she purred, walking toward us, "I need you to give me that." Her eyes sparkled as she looked at the rune Reese held.

Reese's hand tightened on the pendant and she shook her head.

"Give it to me," Arune demanded. She held out her hand and commanded, "Now!"

Reese's hand shot out against her will. She was trying to hold onto the rune, but it was no use. It flew from Reese's hand and landed in Arune's waiting palm. She smiled triumphantly as she held it up and admired it. "Finally," she breathed. "After so many years."

"What do you want with it?" Reese asked.

Arune's eyes narrowed on our mate. "It's mine," she snarled, her beauty fading for a moment as she gnashed razor sharp teeth. Seeming to realize she let the facade fall, she composed herself, the mask back in place. "Meddlesome little gods thought they could keep me contained. They wanted to *help shifters*," she mimicked in a snarky voice. She rolled her eyes, her lip lifted in disgust. Lifting her hand, she studied the rune again, then she slipped down the strap of her dress, letting it fall below her breast. She slapped the rune to her skin and my jaw dropped as it was absorbed into her flesh. She let out a loud sigh and smiled as she opened her eyes. "Now, it's time to kill you all."

A roar split the air for the second time and suddenly George was in motion. The tears were gone and in their place was a pissed off look. Who knew clay could be so expressive? Arune looked shocked as the golem flung himself at her. She didn't have time to defend herself before he was on top of her, his hands around her throat.

She screamed, a horrible sound that had us all covering our ears, but George didn't stop. The roots loosened around us and Soren grabbed a hold of Reese, holding her close.

“Go,” Katashi said as he slowly got up, shaking his head as though to clear it. I was glad to see he wasn't actually dead. “She's still weak. It'll take time for the Treaty to give her back her powers. If you're here when that happens, she'll kill you.” His eyes slid over to Reese. “If you die, all is lost.”

“You're a God,” Reese said, eyes wide. “Can't you fight her?”

“Fight, sure. Win? Never. I'm just a minor God, Priestess. There's only so much I can do. But George and I will keep her busy for you while you escape. Your time here has long past elapsed, but you'll still need help getting out of the woods.” He held up a hand, his deep red hair glinting in the little rays of sunlight that were fighting their way past the canopy. He snapped his fingers.

I looked around, not seeing anything. “That was anticlimactic,” I muttered.

He glared at me, opening his mouth to say something, but a caw interrupted. A crow dropped down from the canopy above, flapping his wings uselessly. He was in a free fall. Katashi caught him with a grin. “Hello, old friend.”

Stepping over to my cadre, I watched the exchange with a shake of my head. George went stumbling back, shaking the ground, as Arune managed to get the upper hand.

“Is that the crow from the mountains?” Reese asked.

Calder nodded, but didn't speak.

“Calix,” Katashi said, nodding over to where Arune was smoothing down her dress. “We have a problem.” The bird ruffled his feathers in response. “I'll help where I can,” Katashi said, as though he was replying to something the bird said, “but you have to get them out of here.”

Calix's beady eyes settled on us, and in response he let out a string of guttural clicks. Katashi released him into the air.

“Follow him. He’ll lead you out of the woods.” He gave Reese a faint smile. “Good luck, Priestess.”

“Go,” I said, shoving at them all. I didn’t want to wait around to see who won between one of the twelve and a minor god and a golem. It wasn’t going to be pretty. We needed to be as far away from here as possible before Arune broke free and had her powers back.

We shifted and ran, keeping our eyes peeled for the crow overhead, all while plowing through thick brush and vegetation. I growled low as a branch snapped back and hit me in the face. I couldn’t say how long we ran, but my sides were heaving by the time we reached the end of the Dreiken Wood.

Soren was in the lead, and there was no light to indicate that the woods were coming to an end. We broke through the line of trees and I snarled, shutting my eyes and skidding to a stop as the sunlight assaulted my senses. We were out. Peeking one eye open, I glanced around. There was nothing but rolling green hills for miles. The land sloped downward in front of us until it reached a river. It wasn’t far from here, but it might as well have been on the other side of the world for all the energy I had left.

As much as I wanted to take a break, I knew we couldn’t. The crow landed on a rock nearby, letting out ever increasingly loud caws, until I snapped my jaws his way. He wanted us to hurry, but we were busy trying to breathe. Even for alphas, the events since we left Jessu’s village had been a lot.

*We have to keep following him.*

Reese was right. I fell into step behind my cadre mates as they began running after the crow, who’d once again taken to the skies.

\* \* \*

“SHIT,” Calder muttered, dragging a hand through his hair.

We left the last village on the plains with dismay in our hearts. The leading cadre of alphas had treated us with

suspicion and mistrust, but they'd answered our questions before sending us on our way.

"How is it possible?" I asked. It'd taken us a week to get out of those damn woods.

"Arune," Reese said with a shrug.

"She was trying to make you miss the lunar eclipse."

We all jumped and stared at the man sitting on top of the rock nearby with mistrust. The crow had vanished and he'd taken the bird's place.

"It was all she could do while the Treaty had her bound."

Soren stepped forward. "You're Calix. The crow."

"I am. I'm also a Demi-God," he said with a blindingly bright smile. His black hair ruffled in the wind, much like it had when it'd been feathers.

"Good," Soren snapped. "Then you can answer a few questions."

"I can, though we don't have much time if we're going to get you to the sea--"

"You can answer our fucking questions," Soren growled. "Fucking gods keep us in such a rush we can never get a straight answer as to what the fuck is going on. Pretty fucking convenient."

Calix cocked his head, looking so much like his crow self, that I had to bite back a laugh. "Okay... Ask away."

"Who trapped Arune?" Reese asked.

"It took many of us working together."

"That's vague and unhelpful," I pointed out, crossing my arms over my chest. He merely shrugged and waited.

"Why did you do it?" Soren asked.

"She trapped her sisters. Tried to kill them. She was upsetting the balance of Elaria," Calix told us. "If allowed to continue, she would have killed everything. Shifters. Humans. Animals. Plants. Elaria would have been a wasteland. Most of

our kind love you,” Calix explained. “All of you. We don’t take sides so much as ensure balance. We’re protectors, nurturers of Elaria. We couldn’t allow her to kill off everyone. So we bound her until the time that the prophecy could be fulfilled.”

“What prophecy?” Calder asked.

“You know it already.”

*Vera’s prophecy.* I met Soren’s eyes and arched a brow. It had to be. “Can you tell us where Lyas is?”

“No. But I can show you the way.”

“It’s like speaking to a stone wall,” Calder muttered. “George would have been more helpful.”

“If you would rather find your own way-”

“No!” Reese said, elbowing Calder in the side. “We’re grateful for your help.”

“Good. We don’t have much time.” He jumped down off the rock and rubbed his palms together.

“What are you doing?” I asked, eyeing him as he lifted his hands to my chest.

“I can’t teleport. Not one of my skills,” he told me with another megawatt smile. “But you’re too damned slow.”

I bristled at that. My mates and I were the fastest shifters I knew. We weren’t fucking slow. We were exhausted.

“This will help.” He placed his hands on my chest, and then nodded in satisfaction as the glowing light left his hands and sank into me.

A warmth spilled through me, invigorating my tired muscles. I suddenly felt like I could run the length of Elaria for all eternity. He repeated the process with each of my cadre mates, then cocked his head again, studying his handiwork.

“Keep up.” With that, he shifted, this time a jet black wolf stood in front of us, waiting for us to be ready. Once we were, he darted off in the direction of the sea.



## CHAPTER 31



### Reese

“*I* can’t leave you,” I insisted, looking between my three mates, then over their broad shoulders to where my father, brothers, and all the warriors in The Silvest Pack stood. The hatred spanned the space between us as my eyes clashed with my father’s.

Calix, and his magic, had gotten us here just in time. We’d run without rest and now we stood on the hill above my village, with the moon rising in the dark night sky. It was the night of the lunar eclipse. The night that we either rescued Lyas, or lost to Arune.

They were waiting for my males to make a move, because with larger numbers they had the upper hand. At least that was what my father assumed. It was incorrect. Even with eleven wolves waiting for us, my mates would still beat them. Arune was nowhere to be found, but just the fact that they were waiting for us was damning. They were working with the Sun Goddess.

I knew it deep in my heart. That didn’t mean it wasn’t heartbreaking. Not because I really cared for them, but my family had already harmed the shifter community more than could be said, and here they were doing it again.

“You have to go,” Soren said, his stormy gray eyes settling on me. “You heard Celinda and Calix. Our only chance to save Lyas is during the lunar eclipse. The only time when Arune is prevented from interfering.”

“If you don’t go now,” Calder told me, “it’ll be over.”

Biting back a sob, I nodded. “Promise me,” I whispered, stepping closer to them, “that you’ll come back to me.”

“We promise,” Atlas said, pulling me into his arms.

“You make sure to do the same,” Calder demanded, taking me into his arms next. His inhale was huge and deep, telling me how much he didn’t want to let me go. But he handed me off to Soren.

I rested my cheek on Soren’s shoulder as he wrapped his arms around me. “Don’t you do anything stupid,” he warned. “If I have to battle Shroul to bring you back from death, I will. I just don’t want to.”

The laugh made its way out of my chest. Only these males could make me laugh at a time like this. “Same, my loves.”

They stilled, staring down at me. It wasn’t the first time I’d told them I loved them, but we hadn’t said it since my claiming. That felt like a lifetime ago.

I lifted my head and placed my hand on Soren’s cheek. “Be safe.” With that I turned and ran down toward the dock. Calix had disappeared into the shadows as we climbed the hill overlooking my childhood village. He couldn’t help us anymore. There were rules, he’d explained along the way. Many that a minor God couldn’t break. Many that one of the twelve themselves couldn’t break. We didn’t know all of these rules, but one of them was that Arune couldn’t interfere during the lunar eclipse. Something about it being the one time where her two sisters ruled completely without input from Arune. It was the same for a solar eclipse. Lias was temporarily powerless then, as Arune was now.

It was the reason that Arune had my father and his warriors ready to defend the sea. I still didn’t know where I was going, but I knew somehow the Cobalt Sea was a part of it. All I could do was hope to receive further help, or some kind of clue at the very least.

Glancing up, I gasped as I saw Elaria’s shadow creeping over the moon. I had to hurry. A loud cacophony of sound had

me skidding to a halt. Looking back, I watched as my mates hit the line of warriors with loud snarls and snaps. My heart climbed into my throat, worried that I'd lose them.

*Go.*

Soren's command filled my mind. His love warmed me, giving me strength and I jumped into the little wooden boat tied to the pier. If I didn't find our Goddess, we'd all suffer.

Dropping the rope anchoring me to shore into the water, I picked up the oars and began rowing. The boats with sails were further up the beach, but it wouldn't be worth running to them. There wasn't a breath of wind in the air. I had to do this manually. It seemed appropriate that I had to put the effort in for this quest.

My arms burned and ached. I wasn't sure how far I needed to go, but I didn't want to be a few hundred feet short. Turning my face to the sky, my strokes stopped. My boat glided to a halt in the sea as I watched Elaria's shadow cover the moon. It shone blood red in the sky. The water lapped lightly at the hull of my boat, but with the eclipse happening everything was dark. I could barely see my hand in front of my face.

Squinting into the darkness, I searched for anything that would guide me to Lyas. "I'm here!" I called out. My voice echoed over the water. Tense and still, everything seemed so eerie with the moon bleeding overhead.

"You brought me here!" I shouted, anger overtaking me. "*Why* am I here? Where are you!" Standing in the boat, I ignored the way it rocked. There had to be something here. Someone to tell me what to do. Why had Celinda brought us here? Was it possible she'd worked with Arune and sent us to our deaths?

Fear zipped down my spine. I'd left Emma suffering some unknown ailment to come here. If Celinda was really an enemy I could lose my best friend. I'd put my mates in danger. We could all die.

No. Katashi, Calix, even George, once he realized he was fighting the wrong people, had helped us. Why would they

help us if they were working with Arune? I put aside my doubts, this was the place. It had to be.

“Must you yell?”

Yelping, I turned and then quickly shut my eyes. The blinding light before me was so out of place in the darkness it hurt my retinas. “Who are you?” Slowly squinting my eyes open, I waited until they were used to the white light to open them fully.

There was a man standing there. Wind whipped around him, even while the rest of the water stayed calm. He was in leather pants, a loose flowing shirt, and... I leaned forward, tilting my chin so I could see over the side of the boat. He was standing in the water. I was far enough away from the beach that the surf wasn't rocking my boat. There was a mountain of rocks nearby, rising out of the sea and reaching for the sky. It was why I stopped. I could use it as a guide. But still the water could be anywhere from twenty feet deep to hundreds.

I met laughing green eyes. “Hello, Reese.”

“Uh. Hi.” I swallowed as a chill made the flesh on my arms raise in bumps.

“You may call me Squall.”

“Okay, Squall.” My eyes flicked down again to where his feet were covered by water. It was as though he were standing on a rock, just below the surface of the water. Only, I knew there was no rock there.

“You're a God,” I said, after a few brief moments of silence.

“I am. The God of the Sea, to be more accurate. I've been watching you since you were young and liked to swim in my waters.”

“That's...a bit creepy.”

His laughter rolled over the sea like thunder. “Nothing creepy about it. I watch everything that happens in my domain.”

Tilting my head, I studied him. “Celinda sent me here.”

He nodded. "I know. I'm here to help you find Lyas. I knew you'd need a little help," he explained with a smile. "It's up to you to find her, after all."

I shook my head in disbelief. "You knew about all of this?" He nodded. "And you've been watching me since I was a kid?" Another nod of confirmation. "Why wouldn't you tell me everything sooner?! Why would you wait until our kind was on the brink of extinction?!" I glared at him, breathing hard as I yelled at the God in front of me. Not the smartest thing if I wanted to *continue* breathing, but my temper snapped.

"I couldn't, child. Everything is happening now as it needs to."

That took the wind out of my sails. I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to force down the anger. "Okay. I guess I can understand that. Well no, I don't, not really. But I don't have time to argue with a God. Where have you all gone? Why have you all abandoned us?"

"Most of us have been in hiding. You know by now that Arune tricked Celinda into the body of a shifter." Nope. That was new to me. It meant our theory of Celinda being a Goddess was true though. "She's been trapped and alone in that cave for years. That was when Arune attacked Lyas."

"So Celinda is-"

"The Sky Goddess. Tasked with keeping balance and order," he told me. His tone said I was an idiot for not figuring it out sooner.

"I thought the Goddess's powers were equal. How did The Sun Goddess...Arune manage all this?"

"She had help," Squall said. A grim look flashed over his handsome face. "The kind of help that is hard to combat. The kind that forced lesser Gods and Demi-Gods into hiding in order to preserve their lives."

"That's cryptic." A chill washed over me. I rubbed my arms to warm my skin. "Of course, that's what I've come to expect from all of you."

“It is, but I can’t tell you any more. I made a promise that when one of Lyas’s priestesses finally made it here during the eclipse, I would do everything in my power to assist. Even if it costs my life.”

“Can a God die?” I asked in confusion.

“Demi-Gods can. Others of us... Worse, we diminish, fade away. Like Lyas did. To us, it’s dying. I hid her before she faded too far, preserved her if you will. You’ll see what I mean.” He motioned beside me toward the water. “In you go.”

“What?” I looked up at the sky where the moon still glowed red, then back down into the inky black water.

“You want to find Lyas, do you not?” His long blond hair caught on the breeze that seemed to surround only him and whipped his tresses away from his body.

“Yes.”

He motioned to the water again. “You’ll need to dive down to her.”

My eyes narrowed on him. “Wait a minute. You’re telling me, I just so happened to row out to the exact spot in the ocean where The Moon Goddess is apparently being held?” It was hard to contain the sarcasm.

His laughter rolled out again, cracking against the water causing it to shift and sway. “Of course not, Little Priestess.”

I glared at him. It was bad enough Soren and the others always called me little this or that. Now these Gods kept calling me little too, plus he wasn’t making much sense. It was irritating me.

“If you were a hundred miles south of here and still on the ocean, then that is where this would take place. The spot isn’t what matters,” he said as though he was the epitome of wisdom. “But the actions which are about to take place. Your devotion. That is the only thing that can restore Lyas.” His hand gestured again.

I inched toward the side and looked down. The water was calm and though it was dark, it was inviting. I grew up on this

sea. Like Squall had mentioned, I swam in its waters all throughout my childhood. Emma and I would dive down and collect shellfish and crabs for lunch. That was a far cry from diving down this far out. In the dark. With a homicidal goddess on the loose, trying to kill her sisters. One of which I was about to set free.

“How deep is it?” I asked, suspicious of the likelihood that I’d live through this.

“Too deep.”

Sighing, I gave him an agitated look. “I’m a strong swimmer-”

“Not strong enough.”

“But how do I know I can make it down to where she is? How do I even know where to go? And then free her and return?”

He tilted his head with an exhausted smile. “You came here prepared for a one-way trip, did you not?”

I was about to ask how he’d known that, then remembered who I was talking to. It had been hard to think I was going to make it through both saving a Goddess and fighting my family. I’d been having these secret thoughts about what might happen once we reached the end of this trip, since we left Jessu’s village.

“If I can’t make it, how can I rescue her?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“If it were possible for me to rescue Lyas, I would have when she was attacked. It must be you. And you must do it as an act of faith.”

“An act of faith... So I have to do it on my own, knowing the bare minimum? But also knowing I’ll die?”

He nodded, his green eyes twinkling at me. His glow was illuminating enough of the area that I could see, but it wouldn’t penetrate very far below the surface.

“Am I allowed any help at all?”

“I like you.”

“Thanks,” I replied, tone dry.

“I’m going to give you a gift.”

“A...gift.”

He took a few steps forward until he was standing directly before me. I watched, frozen with fascination as he leaned forward and kissed my forehead. Glancing down at myself, I looked to see if I’d grown a tail, gills, anything that would be useful. There was nothing.

“Some gift.”

His smile spread over his face. With him standing so close, I realized why he kept calling me little. He would tower over even my mates. He had to be eight, eight and a half feet tall. “Take a deep breath.”

“Huh?”

He gave me a sharp look. “Deep breath. Now.”

The power in his voice had me sucking in the requested lungful of air. Then he grabbed me under the arms and chucked me off my boat.



## CHAPTER 32



### Reese

I had to fight against gasping in outrage as salty water closed over my head. As soon as I bobbed to the surface, I sputtered in indignation. “What was that for?”

“You were taking too long.” He swept a hand up to the moon. It was still red, but the glow seemed to be fading. “If you don’t release Lyas before the end of the eclipse, Arune will find you and end this.”

That didn’t sound good. I nodded and reached down to pull off my soaked leather boots. Tossing them onto the boat, I treaded water. “Any last words of wisdom?”

“Good luck.” His voice whispered around me, but he’d already disappeared into the wind as quickly as he’d come. I couldn’t help but detect the pleading in his voice. It wasn’t hard to deduce that if both Lyas and Celinda faded away nothing would keep Arune in check. Our world would change as we knew it and who knew what that would do to the Gods.

“Thanks for the help,” I muttered. It was back to being almost pitch black. “I’m going to die.” My words were resigned. At least my species would live if I could pull this off. That was the price, and me swimming down to free her was a one-way trip. If I’d told my mates what I suspected, they would never have allowed me to go. Our species be damned. But I didn’t want to think about my group of females, my best friend, the women in their village, living and dying without

having the children they craved. Of all those we love, moving through our long lives with the knowledge that our lines ended with us. I would spare them that.

Squall's answer to my question was 'too deep'. He hadn't answered how I was supposed to make it down to where he had Lyas hidden. Faith and devotion. It was what he'd said I'd need and it was all I had. "It's now or never." Taking a deep breath, I dove down.

My eyes stung as salt water filled them. I couldn't see where I was going. The wavering moonlight from above was swept away as I dove deeper. Fighting against fear and claustrophobia, I forced my legs to kick, propelling me further down.

My lungs were used to staying under the water for long amounts of time, so I knew I could go further than most, but the hysteria in my mind clamored at me to kick for the surface. I knew, from all my dives as a kid, when exactly I needed to turn back. When I had just enough air left to get to the surface. I was at that point now. My mind begged me to do just that. To turn back. I pushed on. This was it, either I found her, or I became a permanent feature of the ocean floor. Or maybe both. I didn't know how this worked. A dim light appeared beneath me.

Pausing in my swim, I watched as the light glided through the water toward me.

*What is that?*

My eyes widened as the light shot straight at me, then zipped around me in a graceful circle. A little otter hovered in front of my face, cocking its head at me as if to ask if I was ready to go. It glowed with the same light Squall had and I wondered if this was my gift. A companion to light the way along my journey.

*Some damn journey.*

I followed the glowing otter down into the dark sea below. My lungs began to ache and I knew my ability to hold my breath was coming to an end. I needed to find Lyas, and

release her. It was already too late to get back to the surface, but I was running out of time for her. A shelf of rock came into view. The otter dipped down below it, blocking his light.

Delirium threatened to take over again, but my friend's little head popped back up over the shelf, easing the feeling. I kicked my way over to him, the water flowing past as my body moved through it. Pushing off the rock, I propelled myself downward and nearly let out a cry of relief when I saw the sandy bottom.

I had no idea how deep I was and—if I understood Squall correctly—it didn't matter. Everything that was happening to me was supernatural. I was in The Goddess' world now, operating by their rules.

A circle of light lit up the bottom of the sea and I swam toward it. There I found the otter circling a broken skeleton. My heart slammed against my chest then sank. I knew who the skeleton belonged to. She was dead. Panic was beginning to rise up in me. I was too late, my mates would die, my people would die. And I would die, here, a failure.

I wanted to scream, to cry. To curse the bones in front of me. Everything we had gone through, everything they were fighting for on the surface, and we were too late. I swam to the bones and knelt in front of them. All my anger and fear gave way to sadness.

I studied them, with what little breath I had left. She had sat down at the bottom of the ocean, legs crossed and hands placed gently on her knees. She had sat and waited patiently for her priestess, for me, to come save her. I'd failed her.

Despite the saltwater I could feel my own tears flowing. Kneeling before her, I reached out a hand to brush her cheek, or rather the bone under the cheek. *I'm sorry.*

A shock wave knocked me back through the water, tumbling ass over heels until I didn't know which way was up and which was down. My head kept spinning long after my body stopped. Shaking it to clear my mind, I made my way back over to the bones. The otter came out of hiding, zipping behind me and stared between me and the bones. He didn't

want me to do that again. I didn't really care to either, but I had to be sure.

I touched her again. Nothing. A single moment of hope washed away. Despair was a lead weight on my shoulders. I truly had failed. All I could do now was try to make it back to the surface. I knew it was a long shot, but I had to try.

This had all been in vain. My lungs screamed for oxygen. My legs and arms were heavy and my mind became foggy. I was drowning. Soren, Atlas, and Calder's faces entered my mind. I could kick for the surface and try to reunite with them. We'd live out our lives, knowing that fewer and fewer shifters would be born and eventually our kind would die out. Except, I couldn't.

I looked over at the skeleton. I couldn't abandon her. She looked almost peaceful. She'd been waiting here for centuries. Waiting for me to rescue her. I might not have succeeded, but I couldn't just leave her. Situating myself in the sand next to her, I let the emotion flow over me. My tears mixed with the salt water surrounding us. I just knew this was where it ended, yet I belonged here. Reaching out, I grabbed Lyas's hands in mine, and leaned forward, placing my forehead against hers. Her bones wrapped around my fingers as I waited there.

*I'm sorry, Lyas. I'm too late. My loves...oh my loves. I'm so sorry. I failed you. Failed us all.*

*Reese?* Atlas's panicked voice entered my mind.

*Where are you, Little One?*

*Do something, Soren.* Calder's fear was all I could feel.

My little otter friend looked from me to Lyas, then curled up on my lap. His light was a comfort. I wouldn't drown down here in the pitch black.

My eyes widened as my lungs spasmed hard. Without my permission my mouth opened wide and I sucked water in as I desperately tried to get oxygen. Fear threatened to overtake me, but I focused on my mates. They were such a blessing to me. I wasn't going to my end never having known safety and love. Thanks to them, to my mother, to Emma, I knew exactly

what it meant to be loved as a mate, a daughter, and a friend. I knew what it meant to be willing to make this sacrifice. I was leaving everything behind for Lya, but it only meant something because of *who* I was leaving. Without them, this wouldn't be much of a hardship.

Water rushed through my body and despite my glowing friend's presence everything began to dim. I glanced over at the skeleton, hoping I wasn't actually going to have to die here, but she remained still and cold next to me. My heartbeat began to slow in my chest, and my body began to convulse from the lack of air.

I kept all those I loved in my mind in those last few seconds, gripping Lya's hand tightly in my own. A strange sort of peace overtook me at the last moment and I knew I was dying. The blackness crept over me as my head slumped forward onto my chest.

## CHAPTER 33



### Soren

I skidded to a halt, ignoring the wolves swarming around me. “No.” The word was more of a harsh breath than anything. My eyes found my cadre mates’ and I saw the shock and horror reflected there. We all felt the moment that Reese died.

“No!” I roared, spinning toward the sea. My eyes searched the inky waves, looking desperately for her. I knew I wouldn’t find her, but I couldn’t seem to help myself.

Atlas and Calder were at my side instantly, their hands on me, trying to calm me down. It wasn’t working.

She was gone.

The female who had challenged me and refused to back down. Who’d brought joy into my life once more. Who’d given us her love despite her fear. Was gone. I knew it as surely as I knew my heart was still thumping away in my chest. I didn’t know where, or how, or why. She was just dead. Pain splintered through my soul as the piece that was hers broke away.

“Soren,” Atlas said, his eyes shifting to the wolves circling around us. “What do you want to do?”

Calder looked crushed. His eyes met mine. “Whatever you want, Alpha, we’ll follow your command.”

I knew what they were asking me. Did I want to end our agony? Our mate was gone. We’d never hold her in our arms

again. Never see her swell with our pups. We'd live a cold, miserable existence for the rest of our lives without her. As fucking terrible as that sounded, I refused to let Haron win. To let Arune win. To give up on shifter-kind and allow them to suffer because of us. Godsdammit all, we were going to finish this. Finish it by killing Reese's traitorous family in her stead. Finish it by doing everything we could to defeat Arune. It was a tall order, but we'd do it for our lost mate. Then, we could discuss going to be with her under Drennen's watch. Only then.

"Kill them all," I snarled. I shifted before the men I considered my brothers could say a word.

The fighting had started the minute Reese had run for the docks. Compared to now, it had almost been civilized before. We attacked our enemies with a force fueled by grief and rage. There were no more rules of engagement, no more holding back.

We were out for blood and we wouldn't stop until they were all dead. The only thing that would make this better was if Haron was here so I could rip his throat out myself. But no, the fucking coward had sent his wolves in to die while he watched from afar, waiting to see what happened. Even his sons were here fighting.

A neck snapped beneath my powerful jaws. My eyes were locked on Batu. I only needed to kill the wolves between he and I to get to him. He was going to be mine.

The three of us worked together against the greater numbers. We utilized Reese's strategy of shifting back and forth between our human halves and our wolves to kill more efficiently. Blood sprayed across my muzzle, but I didn't care. It was nothing compared to the blood I wanted to spill.

My teeth sank into another wolf's throat, ripping it out in a spray of crimson that coated my fur. The enemy's blood didn't bother me. They were the ones who'd killed my mate. They stood with the Goddess who started this whole fucking thing in motion. They would all pay. The females and pups left

behind would be the better for it, if Reese's description of their lives was any indication.

A howl sounded from the back of the pack. My head whipped around, searching for the source of the sound as my ears twitched, trying to pinpoint where it came from.

"It's Haron," Calder snarled, shifting back to human form to heal his minor wounds.

We watched as the few remaining wolves limped their way back to their leader. Three of them surrounded their alpha, while Haron's sons remained on the battlefield. A growl rattled in my throat. Three of them, three of us. They were outmatched, but didn't seem to realize it. We were bigger. Stronger. Faster. And right now it was as though we couldn't be killed.

*Batu is mine, I snarled. You take care of the other two.*

Calder and Atlas nodded, Calder shifting back to his wolf form. I didn't need to worry about them. The Silvest sons weren't tiny. Their alpha fed them well. Unlike the females and pups who were hiding nearby, watching the battle with skeletal faces and concaved bellies. It was clear who Haron favored when it came time to feed his village. Every warrior was hearty and strong. It was a fucking travesty that he was their alpha and these innocents had to live like this. No female or pup should be treated this way. They should be loved and revered. And Godsdammit fucking well fed. I snarled as Batu shifted.

"I'm surprised you're here, Soren," Batu sneered. "I figured you'd send your lackeys out to do your dirty work for you."

We were doing this? Fine. I shifted. "You've mistaken me for your coward of a father, Batu."

We hadn't officially met, but as alphas, and heirs to our father's packs, we'd been taught of all the pack leaders throughout Elaria. It was custom. So though we didn't know each other, we knew *of* each other.



Batu's eyes narrowed on me. He didn't like what I had to say about his father. I heard the snarls and growls explode behind me, but I didn't bother to look. Atlas and Calder could take Drez and Cain. I knew it as much as I knew Batu would die by my hand tonight. "Where's my sister?" he spat, cocking his head. "And why did she bring you treasonous mountain wolves here to our home?"

"Treasonous? Us?" I asked with a laugh. "Do you know your father is working with the Sun Goddess?"

The truth was there in his eyes. In the way they flicked from mine, avoiding contact. He knew. He was a part of it. I growled low as fury fueled me.

"Anyone who works with Arune and the humans to kill shifters is the traitor," I told him. "You're going to pay for your loyalties." My words were a dark promise. "You're going to die because you tried to kill our mate. Watched as your piece of shit father killed *his* own mate, your mother."

Batu stiffened. "You shouldn't have mated an alpha female. She's a monstrosity. A freak."

"She's the best thing that happened to this miserable world," I snapped, cutting him off. "She's stronger than you'll ever be. I should wait and let her kill you herself." I didn't want to let on that she was gone. He didn't need to know that. It would just give him power over me.

"I'd like to see her try. I'm not the weakling you are, Soren. I'm going to kill you tonight."

"You can certainly try."

He shifted and I did the same, meeting him head on. We crashed together, and the teeth rattled in my head at the power behind our lunges. Though he wasn't as big as me, he certainly wasn't small, and the shifter had a lot of pent up rage inside of him. Who wouldn't, being raised by Haron Silvest?

His snapping jaws caught on my shoulder and I let out a snarl of anger and pain. I needed to get out of my own head or this asshole really was going to kill me. I shoved away everything except the singular focus to kill the wolf before me.

We shoved away from one another, circling, searching for weakness. Bloody fur matted down on my shoulder, but I didn't feel the bite. I knew it would heal once I shifted. His eyes were cold, calculating, waiting for me to make a mistake. I didn't intend to give him that opportunity.

He was faster than he looked and I was barely able to dodge his teeth as they snapped at my throat. He was trying to end this quickly, but I had other ideas. It didn't matter if I took a few hits here and there, I was going to make him pay. Make him suffer. Only after he was a broken shell of himself would I then end it. Then I'd take on Haron and repeat the process.

My teeth caught his ear and ripped it off with a tug of my head. Blood sprayed into my mouth and I licked my lips, enjoying the taste. He let out a howl of pain and did exactly what I was hoping he'd do. He rushed me.

I stomped down hard on his tail as he went past and he yipped in surprise before spinning around to face me once more. His eyes were wild with anger and I knew that he wasn't thinking straight now. I was toying with him. Shoving him further into madness. It was building in his eyes. This time when he rushed me, I stood my ground, bracing for the impact.

When his body hit mine, I let my knees buckle, sending us both sprawling to the ground. I was ready for it, he wasn't. My front claws hooked on his shoulders as he struggled to roll away. He wasn't going anywhere. I met his eyes and satisfaction brimmed inside of me when I read the fear there. He knew these were his last moments. I bunched my back legs, letting the claws on my feet scrape over his belly. Slicing him open from chest to balls, I grinned as his innards spilled out, hot and wet, over my fur. It had been my plan to bathe in the blood of my enemies. I wasn't going to fucking shy away from it. I held on, watching as the light faded from his eyes.

Once he was dead, I tossed his carcass aside. It hit the ground with a squelch as I stood and faced where Haron and his three remaining wolves were waiting. *It's time to kill him. For Reese.* It wasn't going to take us long to dispatch these fuckers. There were only four left, including Haron, and three were already exhausted and injured from fighting us.

I took a step forward, ready to finish this fight, when a shock wave hit me. The force sent all three of us down to our bellies with whimpers. There, between us and Haron, was Arune. And at least fifty more shifters. *Fuck me.*

## CHAPTER 34



### Calder

*M*y ears rang with the finality of our own death. Lifting my muzzle, I gazed out over the wolves who now blocked our path. Beyond them, Arune stood, like the Goddess she was, lording over our damnation. She looked so fucking thrilled, it pissed me off. Where had she found so many of our kind willing to screw everyone? Didn't they realize what they were doing? What could she have offered them to sway them to her side?

I recognized some of their scents. They were all our enemies to begin with. It was comforting to see none of our allies had sided with the deranged goddess. Still, we were outnumbered and there was no way we'd be able to fight our way out of this.

Atlas and Soren were at my side, both in wolf form, ready to fight to the death. We had nothing left to live for. So, despite the odds, we'd fight. And we'd die. At least it wouldn't be said that we didn't try.

*I want you both to leave.*

Looking over at Soren, I snarled in disbelief. *And leave you here to die alone?*

*I don't want to sign your death warrants.*

*That's not your choice, Soren.* Atlas shook out his fur, licking his chops as he surveyed the insurmountable army before us. *You don't get to have all the fun.*

Snorting in amusement, I turned my face forward. *I'll take the twenty on the left.*

*I get the twenty on the right.*

*What the hell? You can't leave me only ten,* Soren snapped.

*You get the bitch, too. She's got to be worth at least ten.* I gave him a feral grin full of teeth before I bombed my way down the hill like a loose cannonball.

The first two wolves went down under me and didn't get back up. My claws were sharp and my teeth were sharper. Blood coated my muzzle by the time I was done with them. I didn't have the chance to turn before something rammed into me, sending me sprawling. I was surrounded by at least six wolves. I wasn't about to let that stop me. Snapping my teeth, I spun, keeping my eye on them as much as I could. They attacked as one, and claws and teeth raked my hide, sending pain splintering through my mind as I fought. I gave pain back to them, not as often, but I was doing my best. My blood was flowing, my mind numb now as I caught a claw to the cheek.

My eyes searched past the wolves surrounding me, I'd managed to kill another, but more just took his place. *There.* I found Atlas fighting. Just beyond him, Soren was standing, his ribs expanding and collapsing as he stared down at the ground. Arune stood in front of him, waving her hand around. I didn't need to be close to know she was doing one of those damn monologues that she loved to torture us with.

*Fuck.* I didn't want to die. I didn't want my cadre mates to die. Didn't want Reese to be gone. I didn't want my pack to have to suffer these traitors. My heart throbbed at the thought of my mate. We'd all felt the moment she had slipped away from us. It was a feeling I'd never forget. My legs were knocked out from under me, then, and now. A huff exploded from me as I hit the ground. Calix's magic had worn off long ago. I closed my eyes, knowing this was it. This was the end. At least we'd all be together in the afterlife.

“Calder!”

My eyes snapped open. I swore it had been Reese, but as I looked around nothing had changed. I struggled to my feet. The wolves let me, ready to gang up on me again. They were enjoying this. My eyes widened as a huge...mud ball...rolled down the hill toward the battle. I couldn't even say anything, just looked for an opening in the wolves circling me. There! I dove just as George rampaged through the shifters who'd been about to kill me.

I rolled, shifting to human, healing my wounds, and running toward Soren. He was still standing there with that rage filled look on his face. Arune was laughing as she taunted him. She was so focused on him she didn't see me coming. I partially shifted as I got near, letting my lethal claws out. They raked over the backs of her knees, deep enough to cause lacerations down to the bone. Her scream was like music to my ears. It wouldn't kill her, in fact, the wounds were already closing before my eyes, but damn had it felt good to cause her a bit of pain.

She turned and snarled at me. My eyes widened and I tried to shift, but it was too late. Her claws were already ripping through my chest as she shoved me away from her. I landed hard on my back, the wind rushing out of me in a painful whoosh. I lifted my head and stared down at my chest. "Fuck," I croaked. White bone was shining in the moonlight.

"Calder!" This time it was my friends yelling my name.

"Shit, guys," I choked out as they knelt next to me. A quick glance over assured me that Arune was busy. George, a wolf in each hand, was raining haymakers down on her. The Goddess could take a punch, I'd give her that. Half she was blocking, the others were hitting her with a force that would have felled any mortal. Two new wolves had joined the fray. Their red and black coats, and the air of magic around them, told me it was Katashi and Calix. Some part of me, the part that was still thinking rationally even as the blood welled up out of my chest, was glad George and Katashi were still alive. I thought for sure they were goners when we left them in the Dreiken Wood.

I looked back at my friends who were trying to stop the bleeding. "I'm okay," I lied. "Go help George."

"We're not leaving you," Atlas snapped.

"Guys, you have to help them defeat Arune," I wheezed. It was taking more effort to breathe. Every word was draining me. "For Reese."

They exchanged glances, and then Soren glared down at me. "Fine, but you're not fucking dying here, Calder."

"You don't get to tell me what to do anymore, Soren," I told him with a grin. A cough racked my body, sending blood spraying over my face. Shit. That wasn't a good sign. "Go." I tried to shift, but there was too much damage.

Atlas was breathing hard, shaking his head, and I swore there were tears in the dumb brute's eyes. He hugged my head to his chest, then loped away to rejoin the fight. I looked up at Soren. The look on his face would be heartbreaking if I wasn't already halfway gone.

"Fuck," he muttered, raking a hand through his hair. I realized now he had my head in his lap, cradling me close. "Don't fucking leave, Cal," he pleaded. "We'll go. We'll win, but I need to know you'll be here when I get back."

He didn't bother to ask me to shift. I'd already tried and couldn't. There was too much pain. Too much damage. I didn't have the energy.

"I'll take care of him."

Who was that? Calix? No, it didn't sound like him. I didn't have the strength to look over. It didn't matter who it was at this point. If it was Arune, it would all end faster. Not that I would expect one of my best friends to leave me with that cunt in my last minutes of life. He wasn't that much of a dick.

Soren's scent washed over me as he tightened his grip in a hug around my head. Then he was gone. I stared up at the night sky. The eclipse was over. Arune was here. Reese was dead. Presumably so was Lyas. What did any of it matter anymore?

“Hold on a little longer.”

“Can’t,” I croaked.

A hand rested on my chest and light and peace filled me. I sucked in a shuddering breath at the sensation. My exposed heart double timed, as though it was happy enough to keep pumping my blood all over the sand.

“You can. Just a few...more...minutes.”

I rolled my head and blinked as I saw a woman sitting with me. It wasn’t Calix. Unless he’d grown breasts when I wasn’t looking. “Who’re you?” I blinked at the translucent wings that fluttered in the moonlight. Now that the eclipse was over, it was bright out. With our night vision, it may as well have been mid-day instead of midnight.

The woman smiled down at me, using her free hand to tuck her hair behind a pointed ear. “A friend.”

“You healing me?”

“You’re beyond my abilities, but if you can wait—” Something slapped me in the face as my eyes drifted shut. I snapped them open only to find her glaring down at me. “I said wait!”

“Demanding Pixie,” I muttered.

“I’m a sprite,” she said with a huff.

I opened my mouth to tell her it was the same thing, when everything went still. It took me a moment to realize I wasn’t dead, but that all the fighting had stopped. Turning my head, my mouth dropped open as I watched a man rise up out of the ocean, carrying two limp forms over his shoulders. One was a skeleton.

“Squall,” my companion called out.

He took one look and detoured over to us. He laid the bodies he carried next to me and my heart wrenched when I realized one was Reese. “Take a breath.”

There wasn’t time to comply. He put a hand over my chest, water sluicing into my body through my wound. My mouth



opened on a silent scream as water poured out through my lips. I was drowning from the inside. Within seconds my lungs were aching, my body was thrashing, and a small part of me wished I'd died before this asshole drowned me.

It felt like hours, though it could only have been a few seconds, before he pulled back, leaving me gasping for air. It took me several breaths to realize I was no longer dying. I patted at my chest, finding the bone and muscle back underneath my skin where it belonged. The pain was gone. Along with the numbness. "What was that?" I gasped.

"I healed you."

I sat up, staring at him. "Do me a favor?" One blond brow arched as he waited for my request. "Don't ever fucking do that again. I'd rather die than be healed by you."

His chuckle was low and deep. "Okay. Whatever you say."

"Calder!"

Atlas and Soren were back at my side, but Atlas was cradling Reese's lifeless body to his chest. His head was bent over her, grief pouring off him in waves.

"Can you heal her?" I asked, looking over at the man the sprite had called Squall. No. Not a man. A God.

"I can't heal the dead," Squall replied. "But I can help you with another problem." He stood, anger blazing in his eyes. "Arunel!"

She whipped around, shock written all over her face. Her eyes narrowed as she watched Squall walk her way. "What are you doing here?" she hissed.

He didn't answer, just grabbed her by the throat and lifted her into the air. She kicked out at him, but he ignored her flailing limbs as though they didn't exist. "You will pay for what you've done," he snarled.

Her eyes widened as he squeezed tighter, cutting off her air supply. She clawed at his hand, but there was no give in his grip. "You can't kill me!"

“No. But I can make you hurt.” Squall reached over and plucked George up as though he weighed no more than a feather. Squall released Arune, then brought the earth golem down on her head like a fucking weapon.

“Ow.”

I looked over at the soft feminine voice. The skeleton next to me sat up. Now, normally I’m a pretty hard to faze kind of male, but the yelp I let out could have been heard across Elaria. I practically climbed over Soren to get away from the hot fucking mess next to me. “The skeleton spoke. The skeleton spoke!”

Soren froze, eyes on the bones that were moving. “What in the fuck is going *on* right now?”

As we watched, flesh began to grow and knit itself together on her frame. I fought back a gag. Looking away from the gruesome sight, I watched as the Gods battled. Katashi and Calix were helping Squall, though I wasn’t sure he needed it. Haron and his new army were standing on the sidelines, also watching. Haron was too fucking cowardly to join the fight himself, and none of those wolves owed allegiances to him. I wasn’t sure they’d follow him into battle anyway.

“Give her to me.”

My head snapped to the side. Where the skeleton once sat, there was now a beautiful woman. Her dark hair flowed down her back. Her blue eyes watched us with a mixture of kindness and understanding. Just staring at her eased the burden of my mate’s death. That shouldn’t be possible. Yet, it was.

“Atlas. Let me have her.”

Atlas glared at the woman, but an inch at a time, he softened under her gaze. He finally handed over the lifeless body of our mate.

“Can you bring her back?” Soren asked.

The woman smiled and the breath slammed out of my lungs. I suddenly knew who this was. Knew it down to my bones. “Lyas.”

Her eyes fell on me and her smile softened. “Hi, Calder. Soren. Atlas. You’ve all suffered a loss tonight. And despite that, you’ve fought bravely. I thank you for your loyalty. For your love. For your sacrifice.” She closed her eyes. “Shroul.”

I looked around. Surely she hadn’t just called down the God of Death? She was one of the twelve, but seriously? Drennen and Shroul weren’t of the twelve. They were older. They just...were. They answered to no one. I didn’t know enough about the Gods, none of us really did, to know where any of them came from, but there was some kind of hierarchy to them, and Drennen and Shroul were at the top of the food chain.

“Shroul! I know you hear me, Uncle!”

A heavy sigh sounded behind us. We all turned to look and I marveled at the man standing there, arms crossed, pissed off look on his face. His hair was so blond it was nearly white, and it was cropped close to his head. He had the same blue eyes as both Lyas and Arune. “What do you want, Lyas? I’m busy.” He paused as Arune went flying past, through the air, sending sand spraying over our group. “No thanks to your pets.”

“No!” Arune shrieked when she saw us all there. Fury sparked in her eyes. A bolt of lightning hit the sand a few feet from where I was sitting. The buzz of the charge singed its way up my spine. “You can’t do this!” she wailed, but she was already being dragged backward, by an ankle.

George held her upside down in front of his face and studied her. “Bad Goddess.”

I choked on a laugh. This was insane. Was I dead? I had to be, right?

Lyas looked to Shroul. “You have someone that belongs to me, and I want her back.”

## CHAPTER 35



### Atlas

I could tell, thanks to our mind link, that my cadre mates were as wrung out as I was. My heart was fucking destroyed. The loss of Reese had been a devastating blow. And I honestly thought we were going to lose Calder. To see him sitting there, watching Lyas argue with Shroul... It was so fucking good to see him alive and well, but fuck was all this weird. The Gods had disappeared from Elaria so long ago, no one alive today had seen them. Well, except maybe the traitors who were working with Arune. Though I didn't know how she'd struck her deal with them.

To see the most powerful Gods and Goddesses arguing and fighting on this fucking beach...it was mind blowing. My aching lungs forced me to take a breath. I hadn't even realized I'd been holding it until I was sucking in air on a reflex that kept me alive when I would have just stopped going all together. Hearing Lyas ask for Reese's soul back... Was it even possible?

"In fact," Lyas told him, standing and brushing her dress off. She'd gone from skeleton, to fully dressed in a midnight blue gown and sandals. "You have two souls I want back, Uncle."

As soon as she stood, I gathered Reese's body back into my arms, situating her so she was lying over my lap. I couldn't bear to leave her lying on the sand like a discarded toy.

“Two?” Shroul asked, his eyes narrowing as he glared at the Goddess.

“I’m going to need both Reese and Tenala.”

My eyes flashed to the Goddess who ruled over our kind. She couldn’t possibly be speaking about the same Tenala. Could she?

“She doesn’t belong to you,” Shroul snarled, looking extremely pissed. “I’m not going to just hand you over souls to do with as you please. It doesn’t work that way.”

Lyas shrugged. “Take it up with Fate. She put the prophecy in motion and when I spoke with her, she told me how to get my priestesses. Reese is one of those priestesses, the only one who made it.”

“I’m aware,” Shroul growled, folding his arms over his chest.

“Well, then you should also be aware that Tenala suffered for years thanks to Haron Silvest and those worthless sons of hers. I made her a promise, all those years ago when Haron kidnapped her. I came to her in a dream and made my pact. If she grew my priestess for me, protected her, loved her, and set her on her path to find me, then I would reward her.”

“So reward her.”

“I am. Now give her back,” Lyas snapped.

A howl split the air and I looked over my shoulder, watching as the Fenhall Pack, or what was left of them after Calder, Reese, and later Soren, had finished with them, stormed toward the fighting Gods.

Lyas let out a heavy sigh and held her hand up in the air. Every wolf, who wasn’t a God, halted, as though frozen to their spots in the sand. “I’ll deal with you later.” She didn’t raise her voice, but it carried on the wind. I knew each of those traitor wolves were shaking in their fur.

“You can’t just kill them,” Shroul argued with a sigh. “I have enough to do tonight thanks to Arune and her damn schemes.”

“I’ll do what I like with them,” Lyas told him, moving closer toward him. “They fall under my domain, the same way souls fall to you.” She tilted her head. “Though...we could make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“I won’t kill them, if you give me both Reese and Tenala.”

“I don’t care about puny mortals, shifter or human.” Shroul looked disgusted at the very idea that her bargaining chip was to save a handful of shifters.

“That’s very clear, Uncle. But you *do* care about your timeline... Do you not?”

Shroul huffed. “I’m already behind.”

“Fifty more shifters is going to set you back for days,” Lyas prompted. “And I promise you, it won’t end there. If you don’t give these three back their mate I will set them loose, with my full blessing. It will be a slaughter unlike any you’ve witnessed in centuries.”

“Devious wench.” But Shroul’s lips twisted upward. “I don’t know if you got it from your father, or your mother.”

Lyas’s laughter was like the peal of a bell. “Both, I’m sure.”

Shroul shook his head, his eyes straying to where Arune was still battling. “Not sure where that one came from. Nothing like any of you.”

“We all have our uniqueness,” Lyas replied, face a blank mask.

“Her uniqueness tried to kill you,” Shroul pointed out.

Lyas sighed. “True. Though I have it on good authority that this was all part of some grand design.”

“That explains why Drennen wasn’t able to stop what was happening. Not even *he* can fuck with Fate.”

“Getting Reese and Tenala back is part of that,” she added.

“Impatient child.”

“I have my own timeline to follow, Uncle.”

“Very well.” Shroul walked over and kissed Lyas’s forehead. “You always were my favorite.”

Lyas’s smile was so bright it hurt my eyes. “And you mine, Uncle.” She looked down as Shroul cupped her hands around something.

“Watch over her. She belongs to us both now,” he requested. “I’ll be back.”

I blinked, looking around as he disappeared. My jaw was hanging open, and I was pretty sure it had been the whole time. Soren nudged me and I managed to shut it with an audible click.

“If you do this, I’m going to make you regret it!”

We all looked over, and there was Arune, chest heaving, gown torn, clay dripping all over her, courtesy of George.

Lyas rolled her eyes. “I regret everything about you, Sister. You always were a devious little bitch. I don’t know why I thought anything had changed.”

Arune’s eyes widened and then narrowed. “You’re not going to get away with this!”

Lyas laughed again, the sound like tinkling bells. “I think I already have.” With that, she lifted her hand and spoke into her fist, then opened it.

We all had to shield our eyes from the blinding light that lit up the beach next to the Silvest Pack’s village. A gasp came from below me and my heart froze mid beat in my chest. Glancing down, I nearly broke Reese in two when I saw her eyes open, staring up at me. Her chest was rising and falling with her breaths. Her mind was once again within ours and I felt her confusion. Her soul was back, melded into the tapestry of ours and we were whole once more.

Soren’s arm tightened around me in a side hug as he watched her expression change from fear to wonder. She was remembering everything. Her battle. The loss. The pain of drowning. And she was remembering us. Our bond had been

broken, but it was back now, stronger than ever before. We went through it all with her.

She didn't speak, but our bond told us everything we needed to know. She loved us and she wasn't going anywhere. Not without us.

“Welcome home.”

Reese looked over and her eyes widened. “Lyas, my Goddess.” She bowed her head, though she didn't try to pry herself from my arms. It was a good thing because I wasn't letting her go.

“You're too weak to take me on,” Arune screeched, reminding us of her presence once again. She didn't like being ignored.

“Let me up,” Reese told me, and as one unit the four of us rose. She faced Arune. “We're not too weak.”

Arune scoffed. “Gods can't kill other Gods, Little Wolf. What makes you think you can do anything to me?”

The smile that spread over Reese's face was... disconcerting. “I just spent what felt like a lifetime with Shroul. Did you know he loves to play Kroust?”

Arune's face paled.

“It's always been his favorite game,” Lyas answered since Arune stayed silent. “Though I've long suspected he cheats.”

“Oh, he absolutely does,” Reese said with a dark laugh, “but not as well as I do. I was able to wrest all sorts of information out of him while we waited together.”

“Waited?” Soren asked.

“A section of Shroul's domain acts as limbo,” Lyas replied. “Anyone who hasn't been placed with him, or Drennen, waits there until their end is revealed to them.”

“Huh,” Calder said. “I would have thought that would be one of Drennen's duties.”

“Father could never give up a soul,” Lyas said with a soft smile. “He would keep them all, despite the consequences.”



Uncle is much easier to convince to release a soul to where they're meant to go.”

“It turns out,” Reese continued, “that all manner of Gods and Goddesses visit Shroul there. I know more than you think.” She lifted a hollowed out reed to her lips and blew into the end of it.

The shock on Arune's face was so fucking satisfying. We'd been running from her for days. She'd been the start of all of this, though it sounded like Fate had something to do with it all as well. My head was spinning thanks to the lack of details though, so I might have gotten some of that wrong.

A black stain began to spread over Arune's skin where the dart had punctured. A scream shook the very air around us. “This isn't over!” But she didn't hang around to back up her threat. Much like Shroul before her, she was there, then she'd just disappeared without a trace.

“No!” Soren roared. “We have to go after her.” He halted as Reese put a hand on his shoulder.

“That gives us some time. Enough that Lyas can regain her strength, and us too, but she's right... This isn't over.”

“Whatever that was, won't kill her?” I asked.

“Just incapacitate her for a while,” Reese confirmed.

“She won't stop,” Lyas told us. “She'll keep coming until one of us is dead.”

“But...Gods can't kill Gods,” I said with a sigh, rubbing my forehead.

“Not directly. But, technically there are ways,” Lyas explained. “Like what she tried with me here. If Reese had failed, I would have faded away into nothing. Not a death, but I wouldn't have been able to be reborn as I was. There are other ways for Arune to accomplish her goals.”

“Then that means there are ways for us to stop her, permanently,” Calder growled.

“Yes, fierce protector,” Lyas told him. “There are.”

“What are you going to do with them?” Soren asked, looking out over the beach where the shifters were still frozen in time, waiting on their Goddess to release them.

Lyas sighed. “Squall? A little help?”

Squall gave her an aggrieved look, but he snapped his fingers, and every warrior, except Haron, was gone. “I’m going home before I’m forced to keep doing you favors, Lyas.” There was a grin on his face even as he said the words. They embraced before Squall walked back into the ocean.

“I have so many damn questions,” I muttered.

“There will be plenty of time for those later-”

“But where did the shifters go?” Calder asked, interrupting Lyas.

She gave him an indulgent smile. “Home. With no knowledge of what happened here tonight.”

“Would you have killed them all?” Reese asked.

“Most, yes,” Lyas replied. “They deceived me and deserve no mercy, but I promised my uncle and I will keep that promise. Those warriors will have the opportunity to show me they’ll make better choices in the future.”

“They won’t,” Soren predicted.

Lyas’s smile turned predatory. “I know.” She looked over at Reese. “There is one who Shroul is expecting tonight, however.” She motioned with her hand, to where Haron was still frozen in place. “He’s yours to do with as you wish.”

## CHAPTER 36



### Reese

Everything was spinning. So much had happened, and yet it felt as though I'd spent an eternity with Shroul.

I'd gone through so much grief losing my mates, and now I was back with them. I spent all that time thinking I'd failed in my duty to Lyas, knowing that I'd doomed the shifter community to a slow extinction. But here I was. And here she was.

And she was offering me almost everything I ever wanted. I was back with my mates, our bond was knitted together again, and I had the opportunity to kill my sire. As soon as I did, I was going to spend the rest of my life growing as close as I could to my mates. All of this had been a whirlwind for us, thus why everything was spinning for me, but now it could stop. Sure, Arune would come back. The poison dart that Mother Nature, her name was Dreala, Drea for short, had given me would only stop Arune for a short time.

Drea had spent some time with me, explaining a bit about what was happening, and the biggest thing that stuck with me was that the Goddesses were all depleted. Lyas had been sitting at the bottom of the ocean for far too long, cut off from her followers, and it was going to take time for her powers to build again. In the meantime, she was vulnerable to attack. That's where I came in. I was her protector. Me and my mates.

Arune was trapped by various Gods and Goddesses who worked together to see that her devious plan failed. According to Drea, it would have been disastrous if she'd succeeded. And

so her powers were likewise drained. Not as much as Lyas, but enough that she'd sulk off to lick her wounds and power up.

Celinda, well, Drea had been very mysterious about the third goddess. I got the feeling she was the most powerful of them all. She was also missing, and Drea wouldn't say anything else about it. Only I knew she wasn't missing. She'd been stuck in the body of a shifter for hundreds of years. And now I was afraid I knew where she was. I hadn't asked Drea to confirm my suspicions. Honestly, I didn't think it mattered much because I was stuck in limbo, with Shroul, playing games while I waited to see where I was destined to be placed in my afterlife. In fact, I doubt she would have told me as much as she did if I hadn't been stuck in limbo. It had only been a short time, but she'd gotten bored.

My eyes found Soren's and warmth filled me as he gave me a nod of encouragement. It didn't matter that they'd lost me once. He knew I could handle my father. The fact that he, and the others, believed in me filled me with so much love I thought I might burst.

Now that we were back together, I felt the familiar tingle of magic filling me. It had been this way since the beginning whenever my mates and I were together in any kind of dangerous situation. We amplified one another's strength. They were all lending me theirs now.

Whatever magic was holding Haron captive released him as soon as I walked up to him. It seemed so fitting that we were on the same beach where he brutally killed my mother for daring to protect me. Hatred for the man in front of me was like acid burning my insides. He didn't deserve to live. My mates were about to find out that I wasn't the kind of woman who would forgive and show mercy to my enemies.

*That just makes us want you more.*

Calder's reassurance made a feral grin spread over my face. Haron blinked, looking around. Probably looking for the Goddess he'd betrayed us all for. The bodies of my brothers were nearby, and not a drop of pity welled within me for them. I was glad they were dead. "Your sons are dead. Your goddess

has abandoned you. You've betrayed your own kind," I told him, circling him like a shark.

The hatred spreading over his features only cemented the fact that I was right in killing him. He'd never change. He'd never be anything other than the monster he was right now, bent on destruction and death.

"You're an abomination," he spat at me, his lip curling up in a sneer.

I looked over my shoulder and found Lyas watching me, eyes soft, a small smile on her lips. "Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not. At least I'm not trash, like you."

He snarled and attacked. I easily dodged him, taking him down to his knees with a kick to the back of his legs. "You don't deserve the mercy of a quick death," I growled as I wrapped my arm around his neck, cutting off his air supply.

His hands clawed at mine as his body fought for breath. It took longer than it should have for him to lose consciousness. His body was streamlined for fighting and killing. It wouldn't help him here today.

I released him, letting his body fall into the sand. His eyes snapped open a moment later. He'd get no reprieve from me. I was going to toy with him before he died.

"What are you doing?" he gasped out, trying to get up and scramble away from me.

I circled him again, not answering him until I was standing in front of him once more. "You're going to die today, Haron. You've lost everything."

His eyes flicked behind me to where my mates stood watching us. "You can't kill me."

"Oh? Why's that?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow at him.

He swallowed hard and I could see the fear in his eyes. He knew that his Goddess had abandoned him and he was about to face the wrath of the rest of the gods he came across in death. He'd never be welcomed into their halls now.

“Because I’m your father,” he said, a helpless look on his face as he tried to use that fact against me.

I shook my head slowly. “You spent my entire life claiming I wasn’t yours. That you wanted nothing to do with me. The night you murdered my mother, your own mate, it was because you tried to kill me. And you think claiming we’re blood is going to work now?”

“She may be your blood, Haron,” Lyas said, her voice easily carrying on the wind. “But she doesn’t belong to you. She’s mine. Mine and Tenala’s. She was born to fill a purpose for me, and to provide comfort for the woman you stole and forced pups on. You hold no claim over her.”

Haron’s chest was rising and falling rapidly as he tried to figure out how to prolong his life. I saw him for what he truly was in that moment, a fucking coward. He always had been. He forced my mother to stay with him. Forced his pack to stand by his side, not through love and loyalty the way Soren’s pack did. He did it through fear and manipulation.

It was my turn to shift and launch a full frontal attack on him. I wasn’t going to be a coward, like him, and attack from behind. I would defeat him fair and square. We collided with a crunch of bones, claws and fangs flashing.

I was stronger than him now, thanks to the years of surviving on my own. Because my mates gave me something to fight for. And because of the knowledge of why I was here. Why I was created. Only a powerful being could help protect a God. I’d grown so much from the time I’d run away from this man until now. He had no idea what he was up against.

He tried to fight back as best he could, but he was no match for me. Not anymore. My teeth found purchase in his hide as we battled. His claws raked down my side, but the pain and the wash of blood only fueled my anger. My anger. My purpose. It was all that mattered.

He staggered backward, looking down at my side, then back into my eyes. He read his death there. He was going to die the way my mother had. He turned to try to run. Where he thought he’d go, I wasn’t sure. I jumped on his back, bearing

him down into the sand. Those watching were silent. Every one of them was on my side. All his allies were dead or gone. There was no one left here to help him. No one who would dare defy the Moon Goddess's will.

My teeth clamped down around his throat as we rolled in the sand. His claws raked down my belly and I nearly let go, but I held on tight, refusing to give in to the pain. My own claws dug into his hide as I struggled to hold on while he thrashed wildly.

I couldn't let go until he was dead. Until he was gone from this world for good so that he could never threaten me or mine again.

Grinding my teeth down as hard as I could, I felt something snap. He fell limp beneath me, his body going still. I held on for another minute, just to be sure. When I finally let go, I staggered backward, covered in blood and sand, and collapsed onto the ground. There was no remorse. No grief. Only satisfaction.

Shifting, I cleaned off as best I could before changing back into my clothes. I had just finished when Shroul appeared on the beach again, between Lyas and I. My eyes widened when I saw the woman with him. Tears clogged my throat, making my words hoarse as I had to push them out. "Mom?" Her eyes met mine, and I was afraid to move. To breathe, because she might disappear.

I looked towards Shroul. "How?" I asked. He'd spent so much time explaining what his job was, and giving back the souls of people who died wasn't in the description. I knew for a fact he detested doing so.

"You have your Goddess to thank," he said with a shrug. With that, he was gone.

I wasn't sure who moved first. Who spoke first. Whose eye the first tear fell from, but suddenly, my mom and I were in each other's arms. We clung to one another, crying and laughing and talking all at once. She was here with me again and I couldn't believe it.

My mates gathered at my back, but didn't try to interrupt the moment. Once we were calmer, I smiled over at them, then introduced my mother to the men I loved. She was just as quick to hug them as she welcomed them into her family.

She pulled back and looked me over. "You're not pregnant yet?" she asked, with a mock frown.

I shook my head, smiling at the thought of carrying pups. "No, Mom," I said with a laugh. "There hasn't been a lot of time for...things."

"I'm sure your young men would like to rectify that," Lyas said, walking up with a knowing smile.

My cheeks heated as everyone chuckled. There were far too many people, and Gods, overhearing this conversation, for my liking. "That can wait."

*That's what you think.*

I ignored Soren's growled statement. "I have so many questions."

"All of which I will answer," Lyas promised, "But first, I need to give you a gift."

I tightened my arm around my mother's shoulders. "You've honestly given me the only gift I care to receive."

Lyas smiled at my mother. "Tenala's return isn't your gift. That was me honoring my vow to her. It was given in a dream as I wasn't able to come to you in person," she told my mother, "but it was valid all the same. I have a gift for each of you," she told us. "First you," she told me, "as this gift will impact all shifters as much as yourself." She motioned me forward.

It was difficult to leave my mother's embrace, but I forced myself to step forward and bow my chin to my chest. My goddess laid her hand on the crown on my head and I gasped when my mating marks flared to life. They burned like the fire of the sun that powered Elaria. I cried out, distantly hearing my mates echoing my pain. It was over in a flash. Jerking myself backward, I narrowed my eyes on Lyas. "What was that?"



“I’ve given you what so many have missed all these centuries. You and your mates have always been fated to one another. I saw to that, however my ability to finish the bond was taken when Arune trapped me on the ocean floor.”

My eyes widened. “Wait. So, this means...” I turned my head and the feelings I thought I had before were amplified to the point where my knees buckled. My mates were around me in a heartbeat, holding me. Touching me. Giving me strength. Lyas had just given us our fated mate status. And it was going to be possible for all shifters to find theirs once again. This was the reason we’d started the journey to begin with, but now I knew, we’d been just as desperate to have Lyas back. We didn’t know it, because we didn’t know her, but the love she had for us now resided there inside my chest. I would burn all of Elaria for her. I would face Arune a hundred times, just to protect the Goddess standing beside me.

I turned to look at the Goddess and she smiled at me. “You will always be able to find your mates,” she said softly, “and they will always find you. You’ll never be alone again.”

“This is all sweet and tender,” Katashi said, breaking up the moment, “but maybe we should do this somewhere less... open. We have no idea how much ‘time’ that little trick with the dart bought us.” He looked over at me and winked.

“I don’t think we’re exactly welcome there,” Calix said, motioning to where the Silvest village was.

“I’ll never step foot there again,” Tenala announced.

It didn’t matter that the Silvest men were dead. That village held nothing but bad memories, and enemies. Father would have had someone there, left behind, in case something happened to them all. Whoever it was would take over the Silvest Pack and build its numbers back up. I doubted they would change course and become one of the good guys. As much as I wanted to help the women and children who lived in my old village, they would have to want to help themselves first. I made a mental note to speak to Soren and the others about it later. Maybe we could come back, offer assistance, but for now, we had to get Lyas somewhere safe. She wasn’t going

to be back to full power for some time, which meant she was vulnerable.

“I have somewhere,” George offered to the group, wringing his clay hands together. “Very safe.”

Katashi turned and raised a brow. “The Moon Goddess isn’t going to want to stay in your swamp, George.”

The snort that George gave was equal parts offended and amused. “Don’t call it swamp, Fox Man. Missus won’t like.”

That was the most I’d heard George speak. Intelligence shone in his eyes, so he wasn’t dumb. He just seemed to like to get his intentions across in the least amount of syllables possible.

“We would be honored to stay in your home, George,” Lyas told him. “And I’ve been looking forward to meeting your lovely mate for centuries.”

Katashi looked around our group, then shrugged. “Lead the way.”

## CHAPTER 37



### Reese

George was right. This place wasn't a swamp. My mouth dropped open as I looked around. We were back inside the Dreiken Wood, and even though we were here with Lyas, Calix, Katashi, and George, I was still uneasy. A branch snapped nearby, causing me to jump and glare over my shoulder. It didn't matter that I was Lyas's High Priestess—she'd given me a promotion—or that I was a powerful alpha in my own right. This place freaked me out.

“Don't worry,” Lyas reassured me, “most of what happened here before was thanks to Arune.”

“She kept distorting reality,” I told her. “Somehow taking me away from my mates so she could get me alone.”

Lyas nodded. “Because you belong to me, and she and I are connected, she was able to reach you in a way she couldn't touch the others.” She gave me an apologetic look, as if she had any control over what her insane sister did.

“After that first time, though, she wasn't able to fully take me from them,” I replied, looking over to where my mates were talking with my mother, George, and the minor Gods.

Lyas's smile was blinding when I glanced toward her once more. “Back when I first heard Fate's prophecies about the wars that would be coming, I knew I needed to do something to protect myself.”

“Wait,” I interrupted, “so you knew someone was going to try to...kill...you?”

She nodded, the morning sunlight glinting off her hair. Thanks to Katashi's ability to distort time, we'd made it back to the Dreiken Wood right as the sun began to creep upward into the sky. He'd cut days off our trip, and I was grateful because now that it was all over, I was exhausted. It wouldn't surprise me if I slept for a week.

"Yes. I knew, but...there's only so much even *we* can do to mess with Fate's designs. So, I did what I could. I ensured my Priestesses would be born, hoping that one of you would be the one to find me." She reached out and touched my cheek. "Somehow I knew, as soon as I met Tenala in that dream, that it would be you. Fate doesn't like imbalances. She tries to give us opportunities to correct the way things could go when possible."

"But I thought you came to Mom in a dream because you'd already been captured?"

"I did. Arune found out I'd gone to see Fate and she moved up her timeline. She struck Celinda first, making sure that our sister couldn't assist me. She tricked her into the body of a shifter." Lyas frowned down at the ground.

"How did she manage that?"

Lyas sighed. "Since the first creation Celinda has been in love with another God. Arune swayed him to her side and he betrayed Celinda. It's not really my story to tell," she said, when I opened my mouth to ask another question. "But once our sister was out of the way, Arune came after me. She had help," Lyas said with a twist of the lips. "Other Gods who enjoy the chaos her schemes would cause on Elaria."

I glanced over at Katashi, wondering if he had anything to do with it all. He was known as a trickster, after all.

Lyas must have read my thoughts on my face. She shook her head. "Katashi has always been loyal to Celinda. Calix, as well. As soon as she went missing, they went to Fate to find out what had happened. They rallied others to help us both, knowing that a world with Arune in control would be left in absolute shambles. Because of them, Celinda and I had the allies to help us fight. Gentle creatures, like George, chose

their sides and helped hold Arune at bay while you grew into the powerful shifter you are today.”

My heart wrenched inside my chest as I thought about what I needed to tell Lyas. “Celinda is...gone,” I said, voice soft. “We went to visit her, and she set us on the path to find you.”

Lyas’s brows drew together at my words. “Gone?”

I nodded. “I’m so sorry. We didn’t know how to help her. Or that she even really needed it.”

Lyas tilted her face upward until a stream of light hit her cheek. She looked like she was just basking in the warmth. With the Gods here, a lot more light penetrated the Dreiken Wood. There hadn’t been this much sunshine either of the times I’d gone through before. “She’s not gone.”

I opened my mouth to correct her, but the door to the giant stone mansion in the middle of the clearing was thrown open, interrupting me. My eyes widened as a female golem stepped out onto the grass. Her glare swept over us, but eased the moment she saw her mate. The squeal that split the air had me clapping my hands over my ears.

She rushed forward, tossing herself into George’s arms. The move sent George stumbling backward about three paces before he caught his footing. My insides melted as I watched him hold his mate close while they reunited.

“Guess females are all the same, no matter the species.”

I glared over at Calder. “You be quiet. This is so sweet.”

Atlas chuckled as he and the others walked forward. “You can throw yourself at me anytime, Mate.” His eyes roamed over me as he spoke.

I gave him a chastising look, then glanced around at all the people who were listening in. I should have realized that wouldn’t stop my mates from flirting with me.

Calder stepped closer until his body was pressed against mine. He bent down, his lips brushing my ear as he whispered, “You know you want to.”

A shiver worked its way through me and I had to fight back a groan. The pull I'd always felt for these men had deepened when we'd become mates. Now that we were fated mates? There was no resisting. I was going to end up a panting puddle of need despite the fact that my mother and Goddess were watching with knowing smiles.

George saved the day. Again. He came forward, holding hands with the female golem, a proud smile on his face. "My Goddess," he said with a bow of his head, "my mate, Maria."

Maria's eyes widened, then she gave her mate a sharp look. "You need to warn me when you bring a Goddess home," she snapped, slapping his shoulder. A chunk of hardened clay broke off, rebounding off a nearby tree, causing Calix to have to jump out of the way or risk being clobbered with it.

I watched in fascination as new clay welled up to fill the hole that'd been left. George murmured apologies to his mate, appeasing her. Maria stepped forward. "I'm so happy to meet you, Goddess," she said in a sweet tone. "Our home belongs to you. As does our loyalty." She bowed her head as Lyas stepped closer.

Lyas was tall, at least six and a half feet, but she was short compared to the golems standing before her. They were massive. And so in love it radiated from every fiber of their beings. It made my heart ache with happiness for them and for the future I knew we had in store. Every being on Elaria was better for having the Moon Goddess back. I just knew it. That didn't mean that our work was done.

"It's so nice to meet you," Lyas said, taking Maria's hand. The golem looked shell shocked that a Goddess was touching her. "I can't tell you how appreciative I am of everything that you and George have done for me."

Maria looked between Lyas and Katashi. "You know?"

"Of course," Lyas replied with a kind smile. "I couldn't affect anything here on Elaria while I was bound under the sea, but I could watch. I saw you step forward and offer your, and your mate's, services to Katashi when he was gathering allies."

If a golem could blush, Maria would have been. “I’m sorry to say, I never liked your sister,” she admitted.

“Few do,” Lyas replied, her laugh rippling through the air. “Arune is...an acquired taste.”

“Come,” George offered, motioning toward the huge stone home. “It’s safe here.” He cocked his head. “You can stay as long as you want.”

“Thank you, George,” Lyas said, reaching out and squeezing his palm as well. Now she was holding both their hands. “We’ll rest here for a few days and then we’ll be traveling back to the Selkin Forest.”

We followed the golems inside their home and even though I still had so many questions, I let my mates lead me to the room that was going to be ours for the remainder of the stay. My eyes were drifting closed without my consent. Pausing at the doorway, my eyes found my mother’s. “Wait-”

“It’s okay, Reese,” she told me, moving forward to wrap me up in another long hug. “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Nodding, I let Soren lead me into our room. I couldn’t stop the yawns that kept coming.

“You need to sleep,” Soren told me, going over to where the huge bed rested in the middle of the room. He flipped back the covers, motioning for me to get in.

Shaking my head, I leaned against Atlas as he wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “I don’t want to sleep.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want, Mate,” Soren growled. “We’re going to ensure you get what you need.”

Now that we were alone, I felt comfortable enough to tease them. “Then maybe you should give me everything I need, Alpha.”

His eyes narrowed. “You have no idea how badly I want to take you up on that invitation, but you need to rest.”

Licking my lips, I swished my full hips as I walked toward him. “Maybe I need something else more than rest.”

The corner of his mouth kicked upward. “You were the one embarrassed about our comments earlier.” His eyes trailed down over my body. “And now you want me to fuck you here, in this house, where your mother is sleeping?”

That took the wind from my sails. Huffing out a breath, I glared at him. “Well not now. Not when you say it like that.” I folded my arms under my breasts and gave into the urge to pout a little.

His grin was mischievous. “Don’t worry, Mate. As soon as you’ve rested, we’re going to fuck you until you’re screaming.”

My eyes widened, mouth falling open, but my head was shaking without my permission. “You just pointed out-”

“It’s okay, Reese,” Atlas said, catching my attention, “no one is going to hear a thing.”

“What?”

He reached out and smacked his hand against the wall. A dull thump sounded, but not much else. “This is pure stone. George made his house sturdy, and nearly sound proof. Which means-”

“We can rut you all we want and none will be the wiser,” Calder interrupted, finishing for Atlas.

“But first,” Soren said, grabbing a hold of me and pulling me toward the bed, “you sleep.”

My cheeks were already flaming, thanks to their promises, so it didn’t bother me as much when Soren stripped me naked. I slid into the bed, the sheets were clean and crisp. “How do you think Maria keeps everything so clean with all the dripping clay?” I wondered out loud.

My males were in the process of stripping, but none of them answered my question. They climbed onto the bed with me, and my eyes were shutting before they even finished getting comfortable.



## CHAPTER 38



### Calder

A hand slid over my chest and I smiled. Even though my eyes were still closed, I knew it was Reese. She was curled up against me, her head on my shoulder, as she ran her hand over my skin. She stopped over my heart.

“You almost died,” she said, her voice soft.

I made a sound of affirmation.

“You can’t do that,” she said, pushing up onto her elbow and staring down at me. “You need to be more careful.”

Opening my eyes, I drank in the sight of her. Her red-blond hair was tousled and framing her face. There was still exhaustion in her eyes, but worry covered her face. “This from the girl who *did* die, and left us behind completely.” My words were a bit harsh, but my tone was teasing.

She blanched at them, biting her full lower lip. “I’m so sorry. I... I couldn’t leave her down there alone. Even though I had you to come back to, I just knew I needed to stay.”

Reaching up, I curled my hand around the nape of her neck. I squeezed, stopping her explanation. “We understand, Reese. You did what you had to do. In fact, Soren suspects that if you hadn’t done what you did, this would have all turned out much differently.”

Her brows pulled together as she frowned. “Different how?”

“He thinks that your death was the catalyst for the return of Lyas.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes searching mine. Her head tilted a little in my grasp. “That would actually explain something that Squall said to me. We should go ask Lyas.” She froze when my hand tightened, keeping her from jumping out of the bed.

“I don’t know... I think Lyas can wait.”

Her eyes widened, then heat flared to life in the gray depths as my meaning sunk in. “Oh.”

“Yeah, Mate. Oh.” I pulled her down so I could take her lips with mine.

She moaned into my mouth as I rolled her onto her back, covering her body with my own. My cock hardened against her belly and she arched up into me.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” she asked, her hands spanning over my chest again, searching for the wounds that had been healed in the worst way possible.

I nodded. “I’m fine. And I’m about to be even better.” My hand slipped between us, finding her wet and ready for me. “Fuck, Reese,” I groaned, sliding two fingers deep inside of her.

She gasped, then moaned, her hips lifting to meet each thrust of my fingers. Her eyes were closed as pleasure washed over her face.

My cock ached to be inside of her, but I couldn’t resist teasing her a bit. We’d been running from the time we left Jessu’s village. It was pure pleasure just to be able to stop and take a breath. Losing Reese had been worse than Arune almost ripping my heart out of my chest. “Look at me,” I demanded.

Her eyes snapped open and I felt her clench around my fingers as she stared up at me with lust filled eyes. “You did what you had to do once, Mate. Never again,” I warned.

She whimpered because I wasn’t moving inside of her. “What?” she whined, arching her hips against my hand, trying

so hard to get the friction her body was craving.

My free hand went to her hip, holding her still. “I’ll make you come when I want you to,” I told her. “Not before. Look at me,” I told her again when her eyes drifted shut. Her thick dark lashes parted and she gifted me with her stare. She was desperate for this. For me. I needed this, too. Losing her, then having her returned to us had broken something inside of me. I never wanted to feel that pain again. Never wanted to know what it was to lose my mate.

“Calder,” she moaned, writhing under me as much as I’d allow. “Please.”

My cock throbbed, aching with need as I watched her begin to grow frenzied beneath me. Studying her, I began to wonder if a female alpha would tip into a rut the same way us males did. She hadn’t before, but we also hadn’t denied her the thing she craved from us. I wasn’t going to test my theory now. That was best discovered when we were all together. That didn’t mean we couldn’t lose ourselves in each other for a little while.

Reese’s hands slid up my chest to my shoulders and her nails dug into my skin. “Calder,” she growled, her eyes flashing as she lost her temper with me

I grinned down at her, then lowered my mouth to hers, swallowing her moan of pleasure as I began to move my fingers inside her once again. She was so wet. So tight. Her body was sin and I wanted to spend the rest of my life showing her how badly I wanted her.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whispered against her lips as I continued to drive her wild with my fingers. “So strong.” My lips trailed down over her chin to the column of her throat. “So many would have failed at the task you’d been given.” I honestly wasn’t sure if I could have completed it. Knowing I’d have to die? To leave her and my friends behind? It wasn’t that I couldn’t, I just didn’t know if I would have chosen to. And yet, by her choosing to do exactly that, she’d saved all of us. Shifters would thrive and flourish thanks to her unselfish actions.

Her hands slid up my chest and into my hair, tugging at it as she tried to force me back up to her mouth. “Please.”

“You beg so pretty,” It told her, nipping at her lips. “But not yet.” Her eyes flashed with frustration as I denied her what she wanted.

“When I want you to,” I reminded her again. “Not before.”

Reese’s hand slipped between our bodies, reaching for the part of me that ached for her the most. I growled in warning, but didn’t stop her as she wrapped a hand around me. My hips thrust into her touch, unable to help myself. She’d been taken from us and I needed this. Needed to feel her touch on me, reminding me that this was real. My knot swelled at the base of my cock as she began to stroke me. I was going to come all over her hand if she kept this up.

“You are *mine*,” Reese snarled at me, her eyes flashing with power. “I’m done waiting.” Her legs came up and wrapped around my waist, pulling me down to her.

My chuckle filled the room as my mate realized the power she wielded. I didn’t have it in me to make her wait any longer. Notching myself at her entrance, my eyes shut as I began to press into her. She felt like heaven around me, so wet and hot.

“Fuck,” I groaned as I pushed inside of her until I was seated fully. “Reese.”

She made a sound of agreement as she wiggled beneath me, trying to get closer. My hands went to her hips, holding her still as I began to move inside of her.

I needed this. Needed to be close to her. To feel her skin against mine. Her body wrapped around mine. Her pussy clenching around my cock as I thrust into her.

“More,” Reese demanded, her nails digging into my back. “Harder!”

“You’ll have it all,” I promised her as I began to pound into her.

“Good,” she purred. “Then I want your knot.”

My head jerked back and I stared down at her. “No.”

Her lips formed the cutest little pout. “But I want it.”

“Not yet,” I told her through gritted teeth. It was costing me all my patience to explain this to her right now. “I won’t knot you until we’re all together.”

Reese’s eyes narrowed on me and I could feel the power building in her. She was going to force me to do what she wanted. “Now, Alpha,” she ordered me, using the same tone I’d used on her so many times before.

Luckily for me, her alpha sway didn’t work on me. Probably because Soren was the lead alpha in our cadre. “You’re going to pay for that, Minx,” I warned her. I accented the threat with a thrust of my hips.

She moaned as I filled her again, but it wasn’t enough for her. “I want your knot,” she begged.

“Not happening, Minx,” I growled at her. My hand came down on the side of her ass with a sharp smack. Then I wrapped it around her throat. “Don’t ask again until Soren and Atlas are here with us,” I commanded, using my own sway to reinforce the demand.

I saw the moment she gave in. When she did, I rewarded her by beginning to thrust once more. Her back arched up off the bed as her body began to shake beneath me. She was close already, so close that I knew it wouldn’t take much to send her over the edge.

“Come for me, Minx,” I told her.

She bit her bottom lip as she stared up at me, gray eyes wide as she watched me. There was desperation in her gaze, as though if she let it fall from me, she’d be lost. I squeezed her throat, reassuring her that I was here with her. Her pussy clenched around me as her body obeyed my order. Her scream was music to my ears.

“That’s right,” I praised her as I continued to pound into her, drawing out her pleasure. “Come all over my cock.”

Her body shook and shuddered beneath me as I continued to fuck her through the orgasm. She was so tight that my own release wasn't far off. My balls were already tightening against my body and I knew that I wasn't going to last much longer. My knot was aching with every beat of my heart, but I didn't push it inside of her willing body. Instead, I took what pleasure I could. Burying myself with it just outside her pussy, I let my head fall back as I came inside of her.

I'd never get tired of this. Of being buried inside my mate. Lyas gifting us each other as fated mates made all of this so much more intense. Special. Reese was rubbing her face against my chest, enjoying the way my body crushed hers into the mattress. Her hands were running over my back and sides, petting me. It was a wolf thing and we all enjoyed it when she did this after sex. She couldn't help herself. She needed to scent us and touch us.

"You okay, Minx?" I asked her, my voice husky from the orgasm that had rocked through me.

"I'm perfect," she told me with a smile. "That was exactly what I needed."

I rolled to the side so I wouldn't keep crushing her, and pulled her into my arms. My eyes were drifting closed, when she made a small noise. "What?" I asked, teetering on the edge of sleep.

"Can we go downstairs?"

I sucked in a heavy sigh, but forced my eyes back open. She looked so hopeful, I couldn't resist. "Alright. Let's-"

She was already jumping out of bed, throwing her clothes on. She was eager to be a part of the conversation I knew was happening downstairs. I kept catching bits and pieces of Soren and Atlas speaking with the others through our mind link. She must have as well. I followed her downstairs at a slower pace.

## CHAPTER 39



### Reese

Everyone looked up as I came into the room. Mom got up from the table and hugged me tight before we both sat down. Soren was seated across the table from me, and his gaze was penetrating. I knew, thanks to our link, that he knew what Calder and I were doing upstairs. Neither he, nor Atlas seemed upset about it, so I slowly relaxed. Atlas was seated on the other side of me and he reached under the table and linked our hands together.

“I know you have so many questions,” Lyas began. She looked exhausted. I wasn’t sure whether she had slept or not. Did Goddesses even sleep? Despite my time with Shroul, he hadn’t answered very many of my questions about the inner workings of Gods and Goddesses. “I’m going to do my best to answer them now.”

“I have one,” Soren said, his gray eyes landing on her. “What happened out there?”

“In the ocean?” Lyas asked.

He nodded, his face pinched with anger and worry. “Why did Reese drown?”

“I’m so sorry for that,” Lyas said, her gaze drifting to me. “When we’re as close to death—because that’s where I was heading—as I was, Fate doesn’t allow for one of us to be regenerated easily.”

“But you’re immortal,” Calder said with a shake of his head, as he joined us at the table.

“We’re actually not,” Lyas stated. When all our brows drew together in confusion, she sighed. “This will be easier if I explain life spans. We consider shifters and humans as mortal. Humans live, maybe one hundred years, if they’re lucky. Shifters, a little over three hundred.” There were nods all around the table. “Other magical beings, like golems, sprites, griffins, they’ll live up to one thousand years. Minor and Demi-Gods live even longer. Tens of thousands,” she explained. “Then you have the twelve. My sisters and I are the strongest of the twelve, but we aren’t the most powerful out there.”

“Drennen and Shroul are,” I guessed.

She smiled and nodded. “And more. There’s so much you don’t know because, once Arune attacked Celinda and I, so many of the Gods went off the radar. Everything about us was lost to you over the years. There are more than just Father and Uncle. There’s Drea, Mother Nature, and Fate, as well as Destiny-”

“Wouldn’t Destiny and Fate be the same?” Mom asked, confused like the rest of us.

Lyas’s laugh was low. “No. There are subtle differences between the twins. One being, Fate’s a fickle bitch. Destiny is a lot sweeter. Trust me, if you ever meet them, stick close to Des.”

My head was already spinning. “How many of...them are there?”

“A lot,” she replied. “Call them higher gods. They,” she said, giving us a hard look, “are the true immortals. You can’t kill Fate. Or Death. Or Nature. Or Heaven. But the rest of us? We can be eliminated. In his wisdom, our father gave us the choice to govern over the moon, sun, and sky. Three constants on Elaria. Because there were three of us, he knew he needed to find a way to balance the power between us. Arune and I are equally as powerful as one another. Because of that, she could never outright kill me, any more than I could her. Celinda, on the other hand, is more powerful than us both.”



“That’s why she’s the balance between you,” Atlas murmured. If anyone understood balancing personalities, it was him. It didn’t surprise me in the least that he picked up on that before my mind even caught up to Lyas’s words.

“Exactly. If she wanted to kill one of us, Arune and I could join forces to battle her. If Arune or I got out of control, she would be able to take us down. She’s been playing peacekeeper between us since the beginning of time.”

“Wait,” Calder shook his head, “that’s where it gets confusing. You’ve been around since the beginning of time. So, how are you not immortal?”

“We don’t age. We’ll never die that way. It’s an arrangement father made with Time.”

“Time is a God?” Soren asked, eyes narrowing.

“He is,” she replied. “Not very pleasant in the morning,” she confided. Her head tilted as she thought about my question. “I guess God isn’t the right way to describe him. He’s a constant, he keeps time from getting messy. He has no worshipers and grants no favors, not like the rest of us. The reason we aren’t immortal is because we can be killed using other methods. Not because his timeline ages us the way it does you and humans.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I tried to imprint every piece of information she was giving to us into my mind. Who knew what could be important later?

“Arune first had to ensure that Celinda couldn’t interfere when she came after me.”

“So she imprisoned her,” I said.

“That’s right. It was ingenious really. But, because she and I are opposite sides of the same coin, she couldn’t outright kill me. So she trapped me, binding my essence, making it impossible for me to escape. My physical body died. My powers were bound. If Squall hadn’t found me and counter balanced some of Arune’s magic I would have died long ago.”

“How did Squall get involved in all of this?” I asked.

“I sought him out.”

Turning, I saw both Katashi and Calix leaning against the wall behind me, near the door. They must have just come inside, though I hadn't heard them. I studied the handsome Gods. They seemed like an unlikely duo, but appeared to be friendly with one another.

*Handsome?*

My head snapped back and I blinked at my mates, who were all glaring at me. *Well they are*, I pointed out.

Fangs were bared and growls rumbled through the room.

A quick look over at my mother showed that she was biting down on her bottom lip, trying not to laugh. The others weren't privy to our discussion, at least I didn't think the Gods could hear us, but they clearly knew something was going on.

“He was hesitant to get involved,” Katashi continued, “until I pointed out that without a moon Goddess his tides were going to be all fucked up.”

“He's the God of the Ocean, though,” I said. “Wouldn't he have power over all that?”

Lyas's grin was huge and smug. “That's the thing. So many of us are so interconnected, we can't do our jobs properly without the others. Without Arune, the sun wouldn't shine, and Nature would die. The moon would decay right along with Elaria. Shifters, humans, all magical beings would die.”

“Which is why so many decided to join us in helping Lyas,” Calix said, shifting from foot to foot. It was as though he couldn't stand still. Even in human form, he reminded me of the crow. “Without her, without the others, we were all doomed.”

“Which brings me back to Fate and Reese.”

All eyes landed on me, causing me to squirm in my seat.

“Fate always gives us a choice. Reese could have decided not to dive down to find me. And Arune would have won. Reese was my last priestess, my last hope. Once she was down

there, she could have chosen to abandon me, seeing me in my skeletal state. Who would have blamed her for believing me long dead?” She reached across the table, palm up, and I placed my free hand in hers. She gave it a little squeeze then sat back once more. “Her choice to stay, to die, gave Shroul the ability to return me. A life for a life.”

“Then how were you able to bring her back?” Calder asked.

“Because I’d made a promise that if any of my priestesses took that leap of faith, and gave their life for mine, that I would bring them back.”

We all sat in the silence after, pondering her words.

“It’s all so...convoluted,” I said, finally breaking the quiet hush of the room.

“If it wasn’t, it would be too easy to destroy one another,” Lyas admitted. “We were made interconnected so that couldn’t happen. So that the inhabitants of Elaria who we’re responsible for can live their lives in the best way possible.”

“How did Arune know what to do?” I asked. “To imprison Celinda, and nearly kill you?”

Lyas shook her head. “That I don’t know. Once I’m back to my full powers, I plan on asking.” Her grin implied it wouldn’t be a very gentle conversation.

“What do you need from us?” Soren asked.

Lyas looked over at him. “Your protection.”

“Done.”

“Her protection, most of all,” she nodded toward me.

“I’d give my life for you all over again, Goddess.”

My mates growled inside our minds, but didn’t protest outright. They knew how important this was. That each of us was a tiny speck of sand in the greater design and the loss of one of us, while devastating to our cadre, didn’t matter in the overall scheme of things.

“Thank you, Reese. It’s going to take some time before my powers return. Thankfully, we should have that time thanks to the poison Drea gave to you in that dart. Arune has gone to ground. She’ll be healing, same as me.”

“I have one more question,” I told her. “You said to me before that Celinda wasn’t gone. What did you mean?”

She sighed. “That, I’ll explain later. But it’s not your journey, not your problem.”

As much as I wanted to argue and tell her it was better to tell everything now, I knew she wasn’t going to budge. When I’d been dead, and stuck in limbo, Shroul and Drea had both only ever told me exactly what they wanted me to know. No amount of badgering could get them to impart any additional information. And I tried. To the point where Shroul had turned me into a badger. He soon realized his mistake, as I’d been a mean little creature, and turned me back after only a few days.

“So, what now?” Calder asked.

“Day after tomorrow, we’ll head back to your home,” Lyas answered.

“Shouldn’t take too long with Katashi’s handy skill,” Atlas replied with a shrug.

“We’re not coming.” That had us all looking over at the God pair once more.

“Why not?” I asked.

“We need to continue recruiting from those who’ve tried to remain neutral,” Calix explained. His gaze slid over to Lyas’s and she nodded for him to continue. “A war is coming.”

“One that we can’t hope to win alone,” Katashi said. “Arune’s plans may have been derailed this time, but she’s not going to stop.”

“Why is she doing this?” I asked.

Lyas gave me a sad look. “There is good and evil, even amongst gods. She’s always been...difficult. I’m just surprised it took this long for her to make a move.” She shook her head, as though to dispel the dark thoughts from her mind. “Take

today and tomorrow. Rest. Replenish your strength. Then we'll start the journey home."

The others got up and scattered around. Soren went to speak with Katashi and Calix. Mom and Maria—who had remained quiet, along with George—were speaking quietly together. Atlas and Calder were both talking to the golem who had first attacked us and was now our ally.

"You have another question."

I nodded. "Why do we amplify each other's strength when we're near each other?"

Lyas smiled. "There were reasons you needed to grow up under the thumb of Haron Silvest." Sadness entered her eyes. "I'm sorry for that. The same way I'm sorry I had to ask Tenala to stay with that horrible male. He raised you, telling you that no one would ever want you. You know now, of course, that he was wrong. I had your fated mates all picked out long before you were ever born. Once I was bound and couldn't do anything further to help you, Destiny took it upon herself to give you the gifts I'd been planning to. Only she can't grant a fated mate status. But she was able to give you just enough that the four of you found one another, recognized each other as mates, and were able to boost one another's abilities. It'll be stronger now that you're official."

"Sounds like we owe Destiny big time."

"By the time this is all over, there are going to be too many favors that have been exchanged to count. We'll have to chalk it up to we're all on the same side, fighting for the same goal."

With those words ringing in my ears, I went to go stand with the others. As much as I wanted to keep talking with Lyas, my brain needed a break. I was trying to learn centuries of knowledge in a short time and I was afraid it would implode.

## CHAPTER 40



### Atlas

**M**y head snapped up as I caught my mate's scent on the wind. It was the next afternoon and I was out in the forest, letting my wolf run. Even though being near each other meant we strengthened each other, we'd all been exhausted yesterday and had just spent a lazy day hanging out with our new friends and allies. By the time we'd gone to bed, Reese had been out as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Later today, we were going to be prepping and making a plan to leave early the next morning. So I was using the free time to let my wolf release some tension. It was going to be a long road home, because we were likely going to be traveling in human form rather than as our wolves.

Creeping forward, I followed Reese's scent until I found her walking along a nearby river. The water flowed lazily on the surface, but I knew with how deep and wide it was, the undercurrent would be strong. My eyes narrowed as I watched her crouch by the water. Katashi had promised us that with him and Calix there, none of the monsters in the forest would bother us. It was a confirmation of everything we suspected. Monsters did live here. They did harass travelers. The woods themselves fed off those using its paths. It was fucking unsettling. But with the two Gods with us, none of that was happening. We were free to roam and explore without fear. If Lyas was at full power, we probably wouldn't have even needed to pass through the woods at all.

Reese swirled her hand through the river's surface, creating eddies and disrupting the flow. She was so damn beautiful. Her dual colored hair framed her face as she looked down at what she was doing. I wanted to feel her gaze upon me. Her gray eyes were soft and sweet now, so different than when we first met her and there was nothing but suspicion and anger in them. Her body was all lush curves that I knew from experience fit my hands perfectly. I planned to spend a lot of time memorizing every inch of her skin. I was going to spend the rest of our lives learning everything about her.

I crept up on her, keeping my steps silent as I moved closer to the water's edge. My belly nearly dragged on the ground as I stalked closer. She didn't hear me coming. Too busy playing with the water, she didn't realize how close I was until it was too late.

Rearing up, I leaped and landed in the water right next to her. I'd already taken a bath in the freezing water earlier, more to invigorate myself than anything, because George and Maria had indoor running water out here in the woods, so I knew the river was shallow at the edge.

Reese's squeal had my tongue lolling out in a doggy grin. She glared over at me, her hair dripping in her face. "Atlas!"

I stepped out of the water, and one by one, shook my paws, spraying her with more water. A chuff of laughter escaped my chest when she cupped water in her hands and tossed it at my face. She was smiling and laughing. Considering I'd felt the soul crushing loss when she'd died only a few days ago, I was going to do everything within my power to keep her heart light. Her love strong. Nothing would separate us again.

Right as the promise formed in my mind, something in the middle of the river caused the water to swirl. My hackles rose and I growled at whatever threat was moving toward us.

*Get behind me.*

"I'm an alpha, too," Reese reminded me. "And Lyas's High Priestess."

She had a point. It didn't mean I didn't want to protect her from...the world. I wanted to keep her locked up in some fucking tower where nothing could touch her again. Only, that would mean she would slowly die. Reese was as much a protector as I was. She needed to connect with others and she needed to help, or she'd wither away to nothing. It was hell having a strong, capable mate, because it meant you had to let her be strong and capable.

We faced the threat together, my muscles coiled tight, ready to pounce on whatever came out of the water. An alligator? Piranha? Something worse? If golems and sprites and griffins were real, it meant that the sky was the limit. Maybe it was some kind of water dragon, so big it would swallow us in a bite. Another growl split the air as I waited, vibrating with impatience.

When the small, furry head broke the water and the otter gave a happy squeak, all I could do was rear my head back in shock. Out of everything I'd been preparing for, that wasn't what I expected. Reese's gasp had me searching around for something else. For something...bigger, more dangerous. But it was just the otter.

"You're alive!" she barked out, words sounding husky, as though she was biting back tears. She began to rush into the water, until I reached out and snagged her leather shirt with my teeth, holding her back. She glared at me over her shoulder. "Let me go, Atlas."

I shook my head and then pulled on her shirt again, gently tugging her back to shore. She didn't need to take the chance that something else was waiting there in the deep. The otter swam toward us, his eyes locked on Reese as he made his way to shore. I let her go as he approached.

They ran to each other and much to my surprise she collapsed down onto her knees in the shallow portion of the water and held the otter close. The animal's happy squeaks matched the intensity of Reese's words as they reunited. I wasn't sure how she knew this animal, but it was obvious that they had bonded.



“I thought you were dead,” she whispered into his fur. “I thought I’d lost you.”

He nuzzled into her neck and then began making a series of noises that sounded like a purr mixed with a little bark. She laughed, a watery sound, and pulled back to stare at him again.

“You’re okay?” she asked, before looking him over from muzzle to tail. He wiggled in her grasp as if trying to show her that he was fine. When he bumped her chin with his head, she laughed again. “I’m okay too, promise.”

She looked over at me and I realized that I was staring at the pair of them, mouth hanging open. I couldn’t help it. The way she was with the otter was...beautiful. She was so gentle, so soft, and it made something inside my chest ache. It was obvious that she cared for the little otter, and he cared for her. “Squall sent him to help me,” she explained, “when I had to go into the ocean to find Lyas.”

I nodded my shaggy head, finally understanding. She’d told us yesterday, everything that had happened to her after she dove into the sea. I just hadn’t put together that this was the otter who’d helped her. She didn’t know what had happened to him after she’d drowned. My chest tightened as I watched her pick him up and walk toward George and Maria’s home. She had herself a new pet. I knew for a fact she wasn’t going to let him go.

*What will you name him?*

She smiled down at me as I kept pace with her, grateful that I understood without her having to explain that this otter belonged to her now. “Gleam.”

I frowned at the creature’s dark brown coat, and dark eyes. He was content to be carried and settled into Reese’s arms. Gleam seemed like an odd name until I remembered her story. He was glowing in the water, guiding her. It made me want to grab him by the scruff of the neck and toss him back underwater to see if he’d glow again. I had a feeling my mate wouldn’t appreciate that very much, so I kept my maw to myself.

Considering he'd done his part, even risked his own life, to help our mate during her quest to find Lias, it wouldn't be very hard to make him a part of our life.

She must have picked up on my feelings on the matter through our link. "Thank you," she whispered as we walked up the steps to George's porch. The others were all sitting around, talking and eating lunch.

Katashi's eyebrows shot up when he saw Gleam in Reese's arms. "That's Squall's right hand. What's he doing here?" Katashi stood and went to the door. "Is Squall here, too?"

"Right hand?" Soren asked. His eyes narrowed on Gleam. "Is he a God? Some kind of shifter?"

Katashi chuckled. "No, he's just an otter. Squall has a bunch of animals, both land and sea, that he associates with. That little beast happens to be a master at coordinating battles."

Soren gave the otter a dubious look as Katashi walked over and touched the otter's forehead.

The little animal blinked, then stared up at Reese. "My God gave me to you," the beast said, making all of our jaws drop. "I'm your faithful servant for as long as you want me."

Reese's eyes filled with tears. "I don't want you to stay with me because you feel obligated. If you want to be here, with us, then you'll be a part of our family for as long as you want to be."

The little creature nodded. "That's what I want." He wiggled until Reese put him down and he scampered over to George.

It was humorous to watch the Gods and golems talking with the little otter. They all knew each other and it just reminded me that these beings had been fighting this war for far longer than any of us had. We'd only just started while they'd been in the trenches for years.

"Please tell me you're going to give him some ridiculous name now that you've domesticated him," Katashi said with a chuckle.

Reese looked up at him and grinned. “I already named him Gleam.” She turned her attention back to the otter and smiled, ignoring Katashi’s booming laugh. “Will he always be able to speak?”

“Sure, consider it my thanks for what you’ve done for us.”

Reese put her hand on Katashi’s bicep, ignoring the way Calder’s eyes snapped over to watch her as she touched the male. “You protected us here. Gave us Calix to help us get to the sea on time. Came to the coast to continue to fight.” She shook her head. “It should be me thanking you, I think.”

Katashi’s smile was wry. “You died for this cause. If we’re keeping tabs, you’ve done far more than I have.”

“How about we don’t then?” Reese suggested.

“Agreed. Then we can move forward as friends, as well as allies.”

My mate looked stunned at the god’s proposal. I understood perfectly. We’d gone from only vaguely knowing about these powerful beings to suddenly being surrounded by them. It was a little hard to wrap my mind around.

“I’m going to head back to Squall and let him know what’s going on,” Gleam said, looking up at Reese. “I’ll be back before you leave tomorrow.”

“How did you know we were leaving tomorrow?” she asked.

The little otter laughed, “There won’t be much he won’t know thanks to these three.” He motioned with his head toward Lyas, Katashi, and Calix.

Reese nodded. “We’ll walk with you back to the river.”

She and I fell into step with Gleam as he went outside. The walk back to the river was peaceful, only broken up when Gleam began to chase after a butterfly. It didn’t take long before he was back in the water and heading toward the sea once more.

“He’s adorable,” I said, watching him swim away. I’d shifted once we got to the river.

“I’m not going to be able to relax until he comes back,” Reese admitted, her eyes on the water. “It’s amazing what a close bond almost dying together can forge.”

“You *did* die,” I reminded her.

She turned and wrapped her arms around me. “I’m going to have to apologize to all of you for that, won’t I?”

I squeezed her close. “Definitely. You could start now.”

She glanced up at my suggestive tone. “What did you have in mind?”

A slow grin spread over my face and I wrapped a hand around the back of her neck, slowly forcing her down onto her knees. She stared up at me, lust written all over her face. “Open your mouth,” I ordered.

She complied immediately, closing her eyes as she waited for my cock to slide between her lips. I wasn’t going to make her wait long, but I wanted to savor this moment. My mate on her knees for me, waiting for me to fill her with my cum. It was a heady feeling.

“Look at me,” I said, voice low and husky as my desire grew. Her eyes opened and locked with mine. I slid my length into her mouth, watching as her cheeks hollowed as she sucked me deeper. Groaning, my eyes half closed as I let the pleasure roll through me. She bobbed up and down on me, tongue swirling around my cock as she took me deep into her throat.

I gripped her hair and held her in place as I fucked her mouth. “You’re such a good girl,” I told her, watching as my words affected her. She moaned around my cock and I felt the vibrations all the way to my balls. “I’m going to fill your mouth with my cum.”

She whimpered and I knew that’s what she wanted. I thrust harder, faster, enjoying the feel of her lips wrapped around me. Of her tongue caressing my length. When she buried my dick in her throat once more and licked at my knot, I squeezed her hair in my fists. She was going to make me embarrass myself. My chest was heaving as she raked her nails down over my

thighs. I couldn't hold on any longer. With a roar, I came, shooting my cum down the back of her throat just as I promised. She swallowed it down greedily before licking me clean.

I pulled her off her knees, lifting her until her legs were wrapped around my waist. "Are you wet for me, Little Warrior?" The nickname I'd once given her had never been more applicable than it was now. Somehow, even back then, I knew what she was going to become. What she had inside her. She was a warrior queen and she'd proved it over and over again. She'd saved us all.

"Yes," she whispered against my lips. "Please."

I let her slide to the ground long enough to rip her pants down. They got stuck on her boots, making me swear as I fumbled, trying to get them all off. Finally, she was naked from the waist down. My cock was still hard and ready. Picking her back up I drove myself into her with one thrust, groaning at the tightness of her pussy around me. She was so fucking wet and warm and perfect. I braced her back against a tree, grateful I left her shirt on so the rough bark didn't mar her perfect skin.

She gripped my shoulders as I pounded into her, taking what was mine. Her head fell back, exposing her throat to me. With a growl I bit down over my mating mark. She screamed in pleasure, enjoying the way the sensitive mark amplified all the sensations. I shoved the front of her shirt up, baring her soft belly and huge tits. My mouth watered and I switched from biting her neck to gently sucking on her nipples. She cried out again as I rolled one between my teeth.

"You're going to come for me," I demanded, releasing it with a pop. "Come for me now."

I slammed into her hard and deep and she came undone. Her pussy clenched around me so tightly that I couldn't hold off any longer either. My knot swelled, trying to lock us together, but I refused to push deeper into her. It wasn't time. None of us would knot her until we were back home with her, alone in our bed, and all together. None of us would allow

ourselves to fully lose control with her and tip into our ruts, and if we knotted her that's exactly what would happen.

Rocking back and forth into her, I enjoyed the way her body clamped down onto mine. I let her finish her orgasm, keeping my pace the same so I could drag it out as long as possible.

As soon as she started to come back to herself, I focused on my own release. Growling, I began a new, furious rhythm. Before long she was clenching around me again, on the verge of another orgasm. Reaching between us, I rubbed my thumb over her clit in time to my thrusts. I wasn't going to last much longer, not with how amazing she felt around me. I gritted my teeth, trying to hold out so I could make her come again. Her head jerked backward as she shattered once more, and I buried myself as deep as I could and followed her over.

She was panting as I finally pulled out of her, leaving my cum dripping from between her legs. "You're mine," I growled at her. "And I'm going to fuck you again as soon as we get home." I rubbed my nose against the side of her face. "You're going to get stuffed full by all your mates. Are you ready for that?"

A shudder ran through her body, making me grin. I could feel everything through the link, it was why I knew she was so close the second time. It was why I knew she'd needed me to focus on her clit the second time. It was a handy thing to be so connected to your female. "You're going to fucking love it," I told her.

She was limp in my arms, and I took her over to where an errant ray of sunlight was illuminating the lush grass and laid down with her. We may not be locked together by my knot, but it didn't mean I wanted to let her go. Never again. It didn't matter what we had coming, we'd fight it all together. We'd do everything in our power to make sure she was safe, and stayed here, with us.

## CHAPTER 41



### Reese

Gleam made it back just in time. I was beginning to worry that I'd have to ask the others to wait until he returned. Soren was getting impatient to leave. He wanted to get home. I did too. We were going to stop by Jessu's village on the way, and I was anxious to check on Emma. Just the thought of what might have happened to her since we left had my stomach in knots. I had a pang of regret, we'd been so busy I hadn't had the chance to think about her.

We set out, waving goodbye to the golems as we made our way from their clearing. Katashi and Calix were coming with us to the edge of the woods. This morning was a far cry from when we first set foot inside Dreiken Wood. It was warm, and even more of the sunlight was filtering through the trees. We had three Gods with us, what could go wrong? I smiled over at my mother.

I still couldn't believe she was here with me. Every night, in my dreams, I saw Haron rip her apart. Fur and flesh separating as he tore into her. Now, he was dead, my mission was completed, and she was here with me. Frowning, I realized that even though I'd completed what I now knew was my destiny, it didn't mean this was over. Arune was still out there. She wasn't going to let this go. She wouldn't give up on her quest to take down Lyas and Celinda.

"You look worried," Gleam said, coming to walk beside me.

I glanced down at him. The fact that he could speak now was going to take some getting used to. But there was a bond between us that had been forged in adversity and I trusted him. Something about finding my mates had taught me to give people a chance. And while some of the beings we've met so far may not qualify as 'people' I found myself being more open and vulnerable than ever before. "I'm worried about what's going to happen when Arune comes for us again," I admitted.

The otter nodded his head. "She's powerful," he said, "but so is Lyas. So are our allies. So..." he paused, giving me a steady look, "are you."

"She has allies too, though, doesn't she?"

"She does, Little Wolf."

The nickname made ice form in my blood. Whirling around, I found a man leaning against one of the gnarled trees. We were within eyesight of the edge of the Dreiken Wood. He was behind us, where the wood now stood steeped in shadow, all sunlight fading as though it was retreating from him.

He had blonde hair and red eyes. Even if he hadn't used Arune's nickname for me, I wouldn't have liked him. Something about him made me uneasy. He was gorgeous, but in that way villains tended to be. His smile was wicked, and his eyes held a cruelty that I knew ran soul deep.

"I knew it was you," Lyas said, her face full of anger. "You conspired against me."

The man shrugged broad shoulders and pushed off the tree, walking with a loose gait toward us. It was as though he didn't have a care in the world. All the males, Gleam included, were herding my mother and I into the center of a loose circle they formed around us. One look at Katashi's face and I knew he also knew who this was.

"You're pathetic, Pyre," Calix spat, scowling at the newcomer.

"Who is he?" I asked, shuffling to try to get a better look at him through the crowd of males in front of me.



“I just came to get a look at Lyas’s savior,” Pyre said, his voice dripping with scorn and disdain.

“Pissed off that she ruined your plans?” Katashi sneered.

Pyre shrugged again. “You know me, I get bored. I was about to start some violence myself if something didn’t happen soon.” His smile widened. “Imagine what could be done with the three sister Goddesses trapped in nets of their own making.” He made a tsking sound.

“Yet you did nothing,” Calix spat. “You did what you always do, create a shit storm, then sit back and watch.”

“Who is he?” I barked, getting angrier with every word the others said. Not at them, but at the God standing before us who helped Arune take down Lyas.

“He’s the God of Luck,” Gleam answered.

That made me pause. I was trying to wrap my head around the God of Luck being evil.

“His twin brother is Chaos,” Katashi added.

Oh. Well, that sort of made sense then. Too much or too little luck caused nothing but chaos and destruction in people’s lives. I eyed the man who was still staring at me, ignoring the jabs the others were throwing his way. “You’ve seen me,” I told him. “Now what?”

His laughter echoed through the now gloomy woods around us. A heavy mist was creeping over the ground. “Nothing, Little Wolf.” He held his hands out in a gesture of peace. “It isn’t time yet.” He arched a blond brow at me. “But when it is, do you really want to be on the opposite side of Luck?” He walked away from us, calling over his shoulder, “Think about that when you decide who you want as allies.”

My mates growled at the threat, but didn’t leave their protective circle around me. They also didn’t try to speak for me. The fact that these males respected me enough to know I could stand up for myself, made me love them even more.

“I don’t need to think about it!” I said, not bothering to raise my voice. I knew he’d hear me. The way his gait paused

and his back muscles tightened under his shirt confirmed it. “Anyone who aligned themselves with Arune is my enemy. And we’re going to take you all down.”

He didn’t bother to respond. Didn’t turn around, but I knew I pissed him off. As soon as he disappeared into the trees, the mist cleared out.

“What the hell was that?” I asked no one in particular.

Katashi sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair. “That’s what happens when Gods get involved in your world.”

“He’s always been a dickhead,” Calix told me. I stifled my laughter with my hand. “Believe it or not, his twin is a lot nicer. Doesn’t matter that Kern causes mischief every minute of every day, at least he’s somewhat likable.”

“We should go,” Lyas suggested.

I didn’t miss the sadness there in her eyes. Her own kind were ganging up on her. I knew exactly how that felt. How it was to have your own family want to kill you. She and I were more alike than I ever knew. No wonder I’d been the one Fate and Destiny had chosen to be successful in rescuing her. Or had that been all me? I wasn’t really sure exactly how much those two played a hand in what happened. We still had free choice. I could have failed by leaving Lyas on the bottom of the ocean. So maybe they’d only had a hand in me living long enough to find out what my quest was. Shaking my head to clear the confusing thoughts, I focused on the others.

“We should leave you here,” Calix said.

“There’s a lot to do,” Katashi agreed. “We’ll do our best to rally others to our cause.” His eyes flicked between all of us. “You should do the same.” His gaze settled on me. “But most importantly is that you keep Lyas safe while she recovers.”

I nodded in agreement. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

In a flash of light, Katashi shifted into a red wolf and bounded away.

“Show off,” Calix muttered as he watched his friend leave. He turned his head back toward me. “Lyas isn’t the only one

who needs your protection,” he said in a cryptic tone. “Watch over both of them for us.”

I opened my mouth to ask him who else needed my protection. Who else I was supposed to watch over, but he too had shifted. The black wolf shook out his coat, then casually walked into the forest. “Lyas? Who is he talking about?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” she answered. “We should go before Pyre decides he’s bored enough to do something after all.”

It only took another minute before we were out of Dreiken Wood. I heaved a sigh of relief. It didn’t matter that it was different with the gods in our company, that place creeped me out. If I never had to enter it again, I’d be a happy female. None of us spoke as we traveled. We were all lost in thought, reliving different moments in time as we walked. There would be plenty of opportunity later to plan and coordinate. For now, we basked in the sunlight and silence.

## CHAPTER 42



### Soren

It would have taken a lot less time to travel back to Jessu's village if we'd run as wolves, but we couldn't afford to weaken Lyas's powers any more than they were. She mentioned there were specific rituals that needed to take place in order for her to gain her strength back. And time, of course. She claimed it would take at least a month, a chance for the moon to go through all its cycles before she'd return to her former glory. So we walked the entire way in our human forms.

There was something peaceful about it. As though we were in our own little bubble. Each of us knew, in the backs of our minds, that one of Arune's allies could attack at any time, Pyre had proved that. But no one spoke of it and we all focused on putting one foot in front of the other. It gave me a chance to strategize about the best way to gain the support of the shifter packs. We needed to band together against whatever Arune was going to throw our way. If we didn't, they'd force us into extinction. Considering Reese had given her life to ensure that didn't happen, I wasn't about to let it go down that way just because shifters couldn't be bothered to trust one another.

There were certain groups I wouldn't approach. They weren't worth having in the army I was going to build for Lyas. They'd as soon attack you when your back was turned than work with you in battle. We didn't need those types. It meant they'd end up on the opposite side, but they were

enemies anyway. However, most of the packs left on Elaria were filled with decent shifters.

They'd form together to fight for our continuation. For their Goddess. I knew it. Especially now that the hope of finding their fated mates was back. Most of the males I knew would move mountains to find the female who would complete their cadre and give them pups. A mate and children were the essence of life for us. The reason for living through our long existences. Without them, helplessness and anger had set in. It was time to reverse all the harm that had been done.

Katashi and Calix were in charge of rallying the magical beings and beasts. I glanced over at Gleam as he ran alongside Reese. His little head was constantly surveying the land, looking for threats. He was a part of our family now. I knew it the minute she'd walked through the door carrying him. I didn't have an issue with it. If she'd tried to bring home another mate, then the shit would hit the fan, but their relationship wasn't that way. I could sense the love they had for each other, but it was a familial love.

I heaved a breath of relief when huts came into view. Being back at this village meant we were one step closer to being home. Now that our quest was completed, I was anxious to get back and check on my pack. Not to mention I couldn't wait to see my grandparents. It'd been almost impossible to resist asking Shroul if he could bring my parents back with him when he returned Tenala. I knew for a fact it'd taken all of Calder's willpower to keep his mouth shut, as well. We both missed our parents terribly, but it had been their time to die. They'd sacrificed themselves for their families. They deserved their eternal rest with Drennen.

Tenala was different. She'd sacrificed herself and stayed all those years because Lyas had asked it of her. In return, she was going to be able to live out the rest of her life here, with her daughter. My mate's mother was an incredible woman and I'd always be grateful to her for protecting Reese. Not that she'd needed a deal with a Goddess to do that. The love between them was palpable. Even now, they were walking

with an arm looped around the other, comfortable in their silence as they traveled together.

No, the sacrifice was that Tenala had to stay and endure the abuse from Haron for eighteen years, then gave her life in exchange for her daughter's. Something about being raised in that adversity had been needed for Reese to become who she was. So Tenala stayed. And now she was free. They both were.

We walked into the village and I grinned when I saw Jessu, Relay, and Nero coming forward to greet us. The smile slipped off my face when the three stopped dead in their tracks. Relay's mouth was hanging open, but the other two looked so wary I almost expected to turn and find Arune standing behind us. The others must have felt the same way because Calder cast a suspicious look around.

"Tenala?" Jessu choked out.

My brows shot up as I looked between the three alphas and Reese's beta mother.

"Jessu!" Tenala ran forward, tossing herself into the stunned shifter's arms. He caught her up in an embrace that looked like it would crack a rib or two. "Relay, Nero," Tenala whispered, turning to them and hugging them close as soon as Jessu let her go.

"She knows them?" Atlas asked, confusion stamped across his face.

"They're her fated mates," Lyas answered, a smile playing over her face.

We all gawked at her. There was no other possible reaction.

"Excuse me?" Reese squeaked.

Lyas sighed, her eyes full of remorse. "I needed Tenala to produce offspring with Haron," she explained. "In order to bring you into this world. It was the only way. So, I set it up so that he'd see her in a neighboring village."

"You made him kidnap her?" Reese asked, eyes narrowing.

“Of course not,” Lyas replied, sounding indignant. “But...I knew he would. He could have been a good mate to her. Could have given you both a wonderful life. Even though she had others who were her fated mates, her life with Haron didn’t have to be all bad. He just made that decision because, at the core, it’s who he was.”

“I don’t think Haron had the capacity to love anyone but himself,” Reese stated.

Lyas shook her head. “No, you’re right.”

The group of reuniting shifters seemed to finally remember we were there. They stepped closer. Jessu’s eyes were on Lyas, but then he looked at me. “How?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Atlas beat me to it.

“It’s kind of a long story. So, condensed version. Reese rescued Lyas.” He motioned to the Goddess. Relay’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head at being in the presence of our one true Goddess. “Lyas propositioned Shroul and got Tenala back.” Atlas cocked his head, thinking about what needed to be *in* the condensed version of this story. “Fighting, fighting, golems. Gods. And here we are.” He bared his teeth at them in a wolfish smile.

To their credit Jessu and his cadre mates only blinked at Atlas as they digested his version of things. Not that it made any sense when given that way.

“You were dead,” Jessu stated, looking at Tenala like she might disappear at any moment.

“I’m not anymore,” Tenala said with a smile. “I’m here now.”

“How do you even know each other?” Calder asked.

It was Reese who answered. “Mom came here looking for anything she could find out about alpha females.”

“Actually,” Tenala corrected. “That’s what I told you, because I had to say something. I came looking for information about Lyas and how to help her. Not that I didn’t

gather every scrap of information about alpha females also, but it wasn't the only reason."

"Tenala was the one who convinced me to help Vera and the others with the ancient text," Jessu offered.

My brows had been up nearly this whole time as one thing after another was revealed. "Wait." I looked over at my mate's mother. "So you know my grandmother?"

Tenala smiled. "I do. I'm looking forward to seeing Vera again."

"You've met Vera?" Reese asked.

"Once," Tenala said. "She traveled here to study the Verulian Text with us. She offered to take me back home with her, to shield me from Haron, but I couldn't go. I had to go back to you." She smiled over at Reese.

"I wonder why she didn't tell me she'd met you," Reese mused. "She mentioned you'd never been to the Venat Pack territory, but never that she had actually met you."

"I was only able to tell her bits and pieces. She probably thought it was easier to avoid the topic of meeting me since she couldn't tell you everything."

This whole thing was so convoluted. My grandmother had sent us off on this damn quest with only half the story. Granted, it was probably the smartest move, because it was all so much to take in and we would have had so many questions that she wouldn't have been able to explain to us at the time. I didn't know that I would have been willing to go if it sounded too fanciful. I had a pack of shifters depending on me and my cadre to keep them safe, fed, and continuing on life as well as they could under the circumstances. The fact that I left in the first place was a testament to how desperate I was to find answers.

"Please," Jessu said, bowing his head to Lyas. "Our home is your home. We have a place for you to rest."

Lyas looped her arm through Relay's, the man's eyes widening like he was going to have a heart attack. "Rest sounds wonderful. You should all take the evening to catch



up.” With that, she gracefully walked off with Relay toward one of the huts they used for guests.

Reese caught Jessu’s attention. “How’s Emma?”

Jessu winced. “She’s...okay.”

My eyes narrowed at his hesitation. It wasn’t going to be easy to console our mate if something more had happened to her best friend after we left her here.

“What does that mean?” Reese asked, her own eyes narrowed on Jessu.

“She and the others went back home.”

“Home?” Reese tilted her head.

“Well, her mates’ home. Back to your pack,” Jessu said, looking over at me.

“Why would they let her travel?” Reese demanded. “She was comatose when we left.”

“She woke up a few days later. She was...mostly normal. And she wanted to go back to your pack of omegas,” he explained. His words calmed Reese down, she huffed out a breath.

“I’m sorry. I’m just anxious to see her.”

“That’s alright,” Nero told her. “We understand. It’s hard to leave those we love. Even when they have a higher calling that has to be fulfilled.” He was watching Tenala as he spoke.

Tenala’s cheeks went bright pink, but there was sadness written all over her face. She and her fated mates had stumbled upon one another, but she had to leave them. Had to return to an abusive asshole and continue to live with him for years. Died at his hand, knowing there were three shifters right here who would have loved and cherished her. It was almost fucking cruel of Lias to have asked that of her. It seemed that with this war between Gods, acts of cruelty preceded acts of love. Maybe Elaria had been built that way on purpose.

I understood why she did it. That didn’t mean it was any easier on those affected. I’d felt it when Reese was torn away

from us. Had considered just ending everything there on the beach, but I knew, deep down, we had to keep going. At least until the fight was over. So I understood these males' heartbreak. Just as I understood why Tenala did what she had to do, despite it ripping her heart from her chest.

The fight wasn't over, but for all our sakes, I vowed to keep all those I cared for safe. Arune wouldn't fucking take any of them from me again.

\* \* \*

I COULDN'T SLEEP. Jessu and his village had thrown an amazing feast for Lyas. Seeing the happiness on everyone's faces at her return was inspiring. It helped ease all the grief over everything that had happened while she'd been missing. Now the village was quiet. Almost everyone was sleeping, and I was out wandering the plains alone.

We'd spoken with Lyas for hours about what she would need from us to help her regain her powers. I left the others planning, too restless to sit still any longer. We'd be leaving in the morning, but there was still at least a week of traveling left for us. This feeling would only ease once I had all of the people I was responsible for in one place where I could keep an eye on them. The knowledge that there were gods, good and evil, in this world was much different than seeing in person the shit they could do. Not only what they could do, but that they were fucking thrilled to be causing so much grief. They took pleasure in it. Fuckers.

A rustling sound had my head snapping back. Every muscle tensed as I went on full alert.

"Sorry."

Reese's soft voice forced me to relax as I turned and waited for her to catch up with me. "Where are the others?"

She laughed. "Calder fell asleep about twenty minutes ago. Atlas left him sleeping at the meeting table and went to bed himself."

I grinned. This wasn't unusual. Calder hated politics. Meetings put him to sleep faster than a pup being rocked in a

crib. It was why I kept him out of them as much as possible. He hadn't been needed tonight, none of us were except Reese, but he wasn't willing to let her out of his sight. We all felt the same way.

Walking over to a huge boulder embedded in the ground, I sat down on the soft grass, back to the stone. "And what are you doing out here, Little One?"

She was watching me with a steady gaze. "You seem...out of sorts."

My emotions were volatile enough they were leaking through our mind link. "I'm ready to be home."

She came and sat next to me, back to the rock, staring out over the darkened plains. "Have you always taken responsibility for everything?"

I gave a rueful laugh. "Yes."

"I figured." She looked over at me and cocked her head. "Being the alpha of such a big pack must be tiring."

Considering her statement, I shrugged my shoulders. "It's worth it. I like taking care of those around me."

"And who takes care of you?" A smile stretched over her face. It was wicked and inviting all at once.

My brow arched. "As my mate, that would be your job."

"Oh, well then... How can I help you, Alpha?"

Stretching my legs out in front of me, I patted my thigh. "Come here, High Priestess."

She wasted no time, throwing a leg over my thighs as she hovered over my lap. Her arms wrapped around my neck and she leaned in to kiss me.

I let her have control for a few minutes before taking it back. She moaned into my mouth as our tongues tangled together.

Her hips rocked against me as she sank down, grinding our bodies together, trying to get friction where she needed it most. I gripped her hips and held her still. "Not yet," I growled

against her lips. I knew she and the others had been fucking, and had no problem with it, but that meant I could make her hold off on her orgasm. Tease her a little.

She whimpered, but nodded.

“Take your shirt off.”

Her eyes flashed with excitement as she pulled the soft material over her head and tossed it aside. Her breasts bounced free as she watched me, waiting to see what I would do. They were large and full, just like the rest of her, but they fit her body perfectly.

I cupped one in each hand and kneaded them gently. Her nipples pebbled into tight peaks under my touch. She moaned as I rolled them between my fingers. “You like that, Little One?”

She nodded, biting down on her lip as she tried to hold herself still.

“Good girl. Hold still until I tell you to move.” I continued playing with her tits as I leaned in and kissed along her neck. Her pulse beat wildly against my lips and I nipped at it.

A shudder ran through her body and she moaned again. “Soren-”

“No,” I cut her off. “I liked when you called me Alpha.”

Her eyes darkened as she stared at me, hunger burning in their depths. “Alpha.”

“Do you want more?”

She nodded, but didn’t speak further.

“Say it.”

She swallowed hard before whispering, “I want more, Alpha.”

“More what, Mate?”

“More of your touch. More of you.”

I grinned at her. “Such a good little mate. So fucking perfect.”

Her hips rocked against mine again, seeking friction. She wanted me to touch her where it mattered most, but I wasn't ready for that yet.

"You're so impatient," I teased her.

She nodded. "I need-"

"I know what you need," I assured her. "And you'll have it soon enough. Get on your back."

She scrambled off my lap and laid down in the grass. Her legs spread wide as she looked up at me, waiting for me to tell her what to do next.

I stood and pulled my shirt off before dropping my leather pants and stepping out of them. Her eyes dropped down to my cock. She licked her full lips and I had to bite back a groan. Later. I'd have her suck my cock until I came, but not until later. Right now, I needed inside of her more than I needed to breathe.

Crawling over her, I yanked her shorts down her thick thighs, and settled between her legs, my cock pressing against her wet folds. She was already soaking for me. "You want this?"

"Yes," she gasped. "I want you inside me, Alpha."

"That's what I want to hear." I lined myself up with her entrance and thrust into her in one hard stroke. We both cried out as our bodies joined together. It felt like coming home. Like I was finally complete.

She wrapped her legs around my waist as I began to move inside of her. Her pussy gripped me tightly as I pumped in and out of her. Her moans were music to my ears as she arched beneath me. "Fuck, Reese. You feel so good."

Her nails dug into my shoulders and I knew she was getting closer to the edge. Her pussy fluttered around my cock as her orgasm neared. She was close, but so was I. My balls ached and my cock throbbed inside of her.

"That's it, Mate," I encouraged her as I continued to pound into her. I didn't give a shit anymore about drawing this out. I

needed to come. I wanted to fill her up, breed her until her belly was round with my pups. It wasn't going to happen tonight. That would require knotting her. It was within my right to do so as one of her mates. It was even more my right as head alpha in our cadre, but I wouldn't do that to my brothers. The first time we knotted her it was only right that we all be together. So no matter how much I wanted it, I kept my thrusts shallow enough that my aching knot stayed outside her wet cunt.

I could feel the moment she came undone. Her pussy clamped down on my cock and she cried out as her orgasm washed over her. The pleasure breaking her into pieces spilled over into my mind. There was no holding back when I could feel her orgasm almost as strongly as she did. With a growl, I let myself go and followed her over the edge.

We laid there, staring up at the moon, as I held her close. This was what I had to look forward to for the rest of my life, and fuck if I wasn't going to do everything in my power to protect it. My family would come first, after we defeated Arune and set Elaria straight. There was a lot to do, but we'd do it together.

## CHAPTER 43



**Reese**

**M**y heart was so full, at times I worried it would burst in my chest and send me straight back to Shroul. If I was being honest, other than having to leave those I loved behind, that wouldn't be such a bad fate. Shroul had been, mostly, kind to me. I wondered if there was a way to request I stay with him when I died. I hadn't met Drennen, and though he's painted as this wonderful God, I knew Shroul and we'd gotten along well.

His dark scowl frightened most souls who crossed into his domain, but it'd just made me feel right at home. He sort of reminded me of Soren, in a way. They were both leaders, grumpy, but willing to do whatever it took to protect those under their guardianship. I stopped in my tracks as I realized that was exactly why I'd felt such an attachment to Shroul. He'd made me feel a bit more connected to my mates in a time where everything was upside down and I was out of sorts. I smiled.

"What's so funny?" Atlas asked, coming up beside me.

"Nothing," I told him with a shake of my head. Even as easy going as he was, he wasn't going to like hearing that I'd enjoyed my time with another male, even if he was a God. I didn't feel anything for Shroul other than a friendly kind of affection, but I didn't want to have to explain that to my jealous mates. It was a revelation best kept to myself.

“I can’t believe she found them and still managed to leave them behind,” I said, eyes landing on my mom. “I wouldn’t have blamed her if she never came back.”

Atlas snorted, a scornful sound. “As if she would ever leave you behind. I’m just shocked she didn’t take you and go back to them.”

“She couldn’t,” Soren said as he prowled past. He was pissed we were stopping, but there was no rushing the Moon Goddess when she wanted to do something. She was currently speaking with a squirrel.

I had no idea even the animals were so connected with the Gods until I met Gleam. My whole view had been uprooted. According to Lyas not every animal had the ability to align themselves with a God, the way Gleam had. Only the most special could. But every being on this planet deserved respect. I agreed with her. Even when we ate the deer in the forest, I was always grateful to their sacrifice—involuntary as it was—so that I could go on living. If something were to eat me, as much as it would suck, I would just be continuing that creature’s life in the same way. Thankfully, there were few beasts who were stronger than me. Three of them stood next to me, scowling at the Moon Goddess as though she’d gone crazy.

My eyes slid back over to my mother in time to see Jessu cup her cheek in a sweet gesture. My heart throbbed. It was so good to see my mother happy after so many years of misery. “I’m surprised they came with us.”

Soren looked over at the cadre and shrugged. “They’re courting her. They weren’t about to let her go anywhere without them.”

“She’ll never go anywhere without them again,” Calder added.

“And she wasn’t going to stay behind while you continued on in this fight. She may be a beta, but she has the heart and determination of an alpha,” Atlas told me.



That made me smile. I loved that my mates held such respect for my mother. How could you not? Given what she'd sacrificed for us all. Still, she loved them just as much and it was everything I could ask for.

"We need to go," Soren said, his voice holding a hint of command that had me turning to face him.

He looked at me with heat in his eyes. "I'm about to lose my shit if I don't get home."

"What crawled up your ass and died?" Calder asked.

Atlas rubbed a hand over his face, as though he wasn't looking forward to defusing this situation.

Surprisingly, Soren chuckled. "I have no fucking idea, but something is pushing me hard to get home." He raked a hand through his hair, causing the longer black strands to stand up straight.

"Then let us go," Lyas said from behind us.

I jumped, looking over my shoulder. I hadn't even heard her leave the squirrel and approach us.

"Thanks," Soren told her, relief heavy in his tone. "I'm ready for this to be over."

Lyas nodded once and then turned to walk away. We all followed her. We were only about an hour from the village.

\* \* \*

THE REST of the journey was easy and quick. As soon as we walked into The Venat Pack's village a cry went up. People were spilling out of their homes, eager to welcome us home. I laughed as a small figure darted between the crowd and tossed herself into my arms. "Clover!"

The other omegas rushed forward and we all hugged in one big group. They were all chattering and throwing questions my way. "I'll tell you all about it later," I told them. My eyes were searching and they finally fell on five figures waiting on the outskirts of the wall of people.

"Em?"

The crowd parted and suddenly we were standing in front of each other. She was fighting back tears, and if I was being honest they were clogging my throat as well. She looked okay. There was still that golden film over her normally golden brown eyes, but otherwise she was alive and here. I moved forward with every intention of pulling her in for a hug.

“Wait!” Panic laced the word. “Please. Don’t touch me.”

My jaw dropped and hurt crashed over me. She didn’t want to hug me?

“I’m so sorry, Reese,” she said with a shake of her head. “I want so badly to hug you, but-” She broke off, her eyes widening at something behind me. “Tenala?” she gasped.

Before I could explain to her what happened, chaos erupted. Emma went up in flames. My gasp of horror could barely be heard over the crackling of the fire consuming the woman who was basically my sister. “Emma!” I looked around, desperate. “Someone get water!” I saw that Nero had his arms locked around Mom, keeping her from rushing forward to help Emma. They didn’t want her to get hurt.

Atlas tossed a bucket of water on the flames and they hissed as they died down. Once they were gone I saw Emma standing there, completely unharmed. The fire hadn’t touched her.

“What the hell was that?” I managed to squeak out.

Emma was dripping wet, looking miserable, and all she could do was shrug. “I don’t know,” she cried. “I can’t seem to control it. I set fire to Griff’s home yesterday, all because Reign startled me.”

Before I could find words of comfort, Lyas was there, hugging Emma close. My friend seemed shocked at first, but gave in and took what was probably the first hug she’d had since Celinda had evaporated in that cave.

“What’s going on?” I asked Lyas, eager to find a way to help my friend.

“Emma is Celinda’s vessel.”

“What does that mean?” Emma asked, eyes full of tears. She refused to let them fall, but she was on the edge of a breakdown. If I was randomly catching fire, I’d feel the same.

Lyas smiled gently at her. “It means you are the only one who can release Celinda from her prison. Until then her soul, her powers, are locked away inside of you.”

Emma looked stunned. “I have a Goddess inside of me?”

Lyas nodded. “And I thank you for finding my sister when you did. Without you, she would have died, the same way I would have without Reese.”

Everyone was stunned. Emma most of all. “I’m just a regular, normal beta,” she whispered.

Lyas cupped Emma’s cheeks and looked deep into her eyes. “There is nothing regular or normal about you. Not from the beginning, and certainly not now. Are you willing to help my sister?”

“Of course,” she whispered.

“It won’t be easy, or comfortable,” Lyas warned. “But I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Me too,” I added. Looking over, I studied the men who claimed to be her mates. Something told me this journey Emma was about to go on was going to test them all. We’d soon find out if their claims were real. I hoped for Emma’s sake that they were. These seemed like good men and I wanted her to find love and happiness the way I had. She deserved to have strong capable mates to help her during the uncertain times. And there were going to be plenty of those moving forward.

## CHAPTER 44



### Reese

*I*t took until late in the evening to calm everyone down and recount the story of what happened on our journey. We answered all the questions thrown our way and Lyas was even more patient as Soren's people, and mine, fawned over her. We'd gone so long without our Goddess, having her back was hard to believe. Despite how insane the story sounded, no one questioned it. Maybe it was the fact that Emma was here, and often flammable, or that you could just sense the magic within Lyas. Either way, they believed us.

Clover rested her head on my shoulder as she fought sleep. Harper had Gleam in her lap as she petted his soft fur. Me and my omega friends were sitting on the floor in the guys' main dining room, in front of the fireplace, while everyone else crowded around. It was the only room big enough to fit the entire village. I didn't miss the way some of the alphas were eyeing the women sitting around me. Soren had left orders that no omegas be claimed while we were gone, but that didn't mean that the males hadn't been trying to get to know the women. Except Clover. Not only were there explicit instructions that no one was to get near her, none of the older alphas were interested in a child.

Emma shot me a worried look when Atlas finally finished telling the longer than condensed version of our story. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

I sighed in relief. She was still my best friend and the same girl I'd known all my life. Even though she was dealing with

her own troubles, and they were big, she was still willing to help out for the greater good of everyone. “I don’t know,” I whispered. “We’ll figure something out.”

“Okay, okay,” Vera called out. “Everyone’s tired. We need to let the travelers get their rest.”

It took about ten minutes for everyone to file out of the house and for Vera and her mates to retreat to their section of the mansion. Gleam disappeared with Emma. She’d been staying in Griff’s home with all the males, but I knew for a fact she had her own room. We’d had a quick conversation and she told me they were treating her very respectfully, and being quite protective of her. I loved that for her and the irritated look on her face made me laugh.

I looked around, suddenly aware of how quiet it was. My mates were watching me with predatory looks. I swallowed hard, unsure of what all this meant.

“It means, Mate,” Soren said, his voice low and deep, “that it’s time for us to claim you properly.”

I frowned, reaching up to touch my mating marks. “I thought you had.”

“Not yet,” Calder said.

“That was only a portion of what we need to do, for you to be fully ours,” Atlas added. He walked over and bent in front of me.

Suddenly the world was spinning as he tossed me over his shoulder. I yelped, but couldn’t help the laughter that poured out. It was so different now than before. When we were in this place prior I’d been scared, wary, and mistrusting. Now, there was nothing but love and friendship between us. So much had changed in such a short amount of time.

The breath was knocked out of me when Atlas suddenly dumped me on a bed. It was the room where they had the silver cage.

“This is our mating bed,” Soren told me.

My brows shot up. There were so many customs I knew nothing about because Haron didn't observe any kind of tradition. My mother hadn't known about the traditions enough to pass them onto me. "What does that mean?"

He put his hands on the bed and leaned in until our faces were close together. "It means, this is where we're going to fuck you. To claim you. You're going to be ours forever."

"I already am," I whispered, searching his gaze for a sign that he was there too.

His eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled at me. It was enough to kickstart my heart into overdrive. He was a handsome bastard when he was scowling. But when he smiled? Whew. Not to mention his cadre mates were flanking him and I had three huge alphas staring down at me. It made me feel a little helpless. I wasn't. I was strong. Powerful. The priestess to a Goddess. And I was theirs. But I liked feeling helpless before them.

"What a good fucking girl you are," he murmured. "Are you going to give in to us?"

I nodded, my hair moving with the motion, rubbing over my already charged skin.

"You'll do anything we want?" Atlas inquired.

Another nod.

"You may regret that," Calder stated with a wicked smile.

No, I wouldn't. I trusted them down to my soul. They wouldn't ever hurt me. Even now I felt the deep seated need within all of them to protect me, to keep me safe, and to show me how much they cherished me. "Maybe you should try it and see," I taunted.

Calder's brows shot up and both Soren and Atlas's laughter filled the room. "Maybe I should," Calder growled, crawling onto the bed. His hands were on me in moments and I arched into his touch. But all he did was strip off my clothes.

I didn't bother to cover myself. These were my mates. They'd already proven to me they loved every swell and dip

on my body. I was theirs to do with as they wished and I trusted them implicitly.

Soren took a seat in one of the chairs nearby and Atlas sat on the end of the bed, watching as Calder started touching me. He ran his hands over my skin, caressing me, teasing me, but not giving me enough pressure to get me off.

I squirmed under him and he chuckled.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he murmured, leaning down to press a kiss to my lips. “But it’ll be worth it.”

“It will,” I agreed, running my hands up his arms and into his hair.

He kissed me again, his tongue sliding against mine. His hands were busy, moving over my body, causing goosebumps to rise in his wake. My nipples pebbled and my pussy ached. I needed them so badly I could barely stand it.

Calder broke the kiss and sat back on his heels. “I think she needs something from us,” he announced to the room.

The other two had been happy to sit back and watch us together, but now they stood and moved forward, stripping off clothing as they got closer. Calder was doing the same. My pussy clenched as I took in their beautiful bodies. They were all muscle and grace. Their heavy cocks were already hard and pointed toward me as though guiding them.

I licked my lips, eager to taste them again.

Soren’s eyes flashed with heat and he moved forward, crawling onto the bed next to me. He knelt there, his cock bobbing in front of him, and waited for Calder to move out of the way. As soon as his brother moved, he sank a hand into my hair and tugged my face toward him. I opened my mouth obediently and his length filled me. I was still sitting, balancing my weight back on my hands. Fingers wrapped around my thighs, and I didn’t need to look to know it was Atlas. He shoved my legs apart and laid between them. It was hard to spread my legs far enough to allow his wide shoulders access. I gasped against Soren’s dick when Atlas finally just

draped my calves over his back. The move jarred me enough that I lost my balance and fell onto my back.

Soren didn't miss a beat. He followed me down, leaning over me so I could continue to suck on his cock. My eyes fluttered closed as I felt the first swipe of Atlas' tongue over my pussy. He licked me from clit to ass and I moaned around the cock in my mouth.

"Fuck," Soren grunted, his hips moving faster now. "You like that, don't you?"

I nodded as well as I could with him fucking my mouth. He pulled out and I sucked in a breath before he slid back in again. Calder was there next to me, his hand stroking his cock as he watched us. When Soren pulled away again, I whimpered in disappointment, but then Calder was there to take his place. His dick wasn't quite as long as Soren's, but it had a slight curve to it that I liked. It hit just the right places when he was inside of me and drove me insane. I sucked hard, my cheeks hollowing out, causing Calder to groan in approval. It was hard to breathe with Atlas eating me out, and became even more difficult when lips closed over one of my nipples.

Soren bent over me, taking the tight bud between his teeth and tugging on it. I cried out around Calder's dick, my body arching up off the bed. Atlas took advantage of my distraction and slid a finger deep inside of me. I moaned again as he pumped it slowly in and out of me. My hips moved in time with his thrusts.

"She's so fucking wet," Atlas growled, adding a second finger to join the first.

"Fuck...I don't want to wait anymore," Calder snarled.

There was this sense of urgency that I knew all of us felt. It was permeating the link between us. "What is that?" I gasped, hips grinding against Atlas.

"Our rut," Soren said, his lips popping off my nipple. "You can feel it from us."

I shook my head. "I think it's in me too."



That caused all of them to pause, staring down at me. My legs moved restlessly on Atlas's back because all the stimulation had stopped at once and it was enough to drive me crazy. I wanted them so badly.

"I always wondered if you'd have a version of it," Soren mused out loud.

"Can we figure it out later?" I snapped, glaring at them all. "I wouldn't have said anything if I knew you'd just stop."

"Feisty little minx," Calder said, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look at him. "You think you can boss your mates around?"

I considered that, then gave him a devious grin. "Yes."

He chuckled. "I'm going to enjoy showing you how wrong you are. You're ours, Love. We're in charge here."

I stuck my tongue out at him. Honestly, if I wasn't so sexually frustrated, I would have laughed at the look on his face. They hadn't touched me since we left Jessu's village and my body was humming with need. I'd been having erotic dreams every night and woke up soaked in my own arousal.

Soren grabbed my hair and pulled my head back until I was staring up at him. "You want to be a brat?" he asked, eyes narrowing on me.

"No," I said, trying to shake my head. It was difficult with him holding me so tightly.

"Then apologize to Calder."

"Sorry," I said quickly, giving him a small smile. I only wanted to push them to keep going, not get into a fight about the politics of our cadre. There was plenty of time for that later. If they thought I was going to turn into a meek little mate now, they were very mistaken. But I'd explain my demands to them at a time where I wasn't panting for their dicks. When my pussy wasn't aching, clenching around Atlas's still fingers in need. "Please," I begged, knowing all three of them liked hearing that word from me. "Please, fuck me."

Atlas groaned, his fingers moving again, thrusting in and out of me. My hips moved in rhythm with him, trying to get as much pleasure as possible. Soren released my hair and I turned my head back to Calder. “Why don’t you keep that pretty mouth of hers busy?”

Calder grinned and his cock bumped my chin. “More than happy to.”

He slid inside my mouth, groaning when I sucked on the tip. His hand went to my head, holding me in place as he began to move.

I closed my eyes and let myself feel everything they were giving me. Atlas’s fingers were thick inside me, stretching me open as he fucked me with them. They were building the sensations up until I was a roaring inferno, ready to combust. I wanted to come so badly, but Atlas pulled away from me right before I did.

Groaning in disappointment, I opened my eyes and glared, but Calder wasn’t letting go of my head.

“Lay down,” Soren demanded.

I wasn’t sure who he was talking about until Calder popped free from my lips and he moved me out of the way so that Atlas could lay on his back. Soren’s hands went to my hips, and I gasped as he lifted me up and set me right back down on top of Atlas. I sprawled against his huge body, enjoying the way we rubbed together when I moved. He was hard and brushing against my ass.

Atlas’s hands went to my thighs, spreading them open wide so I could straddle him. I looked down between us, watching as he lined himself up with my entrance and slowly pushed inside. My pussy clenched around him, trying to take all of him in one thrust.

“Fuck,” he groaned, his fingers digging into my flesh. “She’s squeezing me so tight.”

I moaned at the feeling of being filled by him. He was so big it was almost too much. I felt like I was going to burst.

“Don’t move,” Soren ordered, sliding closer behind me.

Atlas stilled, though his cock twitched inside of me, making me gasp and clench even tighter around him. He wrapped his massive arms around me and dragged me down to his chest, holding me prisoner.

My eyes widened and I struggled a little, panic overwhelming me. It didn't matter that I trusted him, I didn't want to be held down.

"Shhh," Calder soothed, stroking his hand over my hair. "Relax, Minx. We're not going to hurt you."

My chest was heaving, but his words and the comfort he pushed through the mind link had my muscles relaxing at his command. As soon as I was lying limp against Atlas, Soren continued.

He was kneeling behind me, between Atlas's spread legs. I could feel Atlas's dick throb inside me as he watched what his cadre mate was about to do. I looked back as much as I could. Soren looked so sexy, staring down at me in my most vulnerable state. His large hands went to my ass cheeks and I moaned when he spread them. "Are you ready for me, Mate?"

"Yes," I gasped. I was too far gone to care. The need to have them all buried inside my body was riding me. The bed shifted under Calder's weight as he got off it. I watched the sexy play of muscles in his ass as he walked over to the dresser and picked something up. It was a small bottle with a stopper in the top. He handed it over to Soren before climbing back on the bed.

The sound of the stopper being unplugged was my only warning before some kind of oil dripped down over my ass. I gasped and jerked in Atlas's arms. He squeezed me closer, making it difficult to breathe.

"Relax, Minx," Calder ordered, stroking my hair again. "We're going to take care of you."

I nodded, trying to do as he said. I'd never done anything like this before and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. But I trusted them and knew they wouldn't hurt me.

Soren's finger circled my ass, coating me with the oil. It was cold and sent shivers through me. He pushed against the tight ring of muscles and I tensed up again.

"Breathe, Reese," Atlas whispered in my ear. "Let him in."

I did as he said, forcing my muscles to relax as Soren pushed his finger inside me. The feeling was strange. It didn't hurt, but it was a little uncomfortable. He worked his finger in and out, making me squirm in Atlas's arms. My body was heating up again and I could feel the slickness between my legs. Atlas groaned as my pussy tightened around him. His cock jerked inside me and I moaned at the feeling it caused.

Soren added another finger and I gasped at the stretch. He worked them in and out, loosening me up for what was to come next. When he pulled them out I whimpered at the loss.

"You're doing so good, Little One," Soren praised. "Are you ready for my cock?"

"Yes!" I begged. I was a little scared, but willing to place my trust in them. If they thought I was going to enjoy this, then I would.

Soren spread my ass cheeks wide as he positioned himself behind me. The tip of his cock pressed against my ass and I couldn't help that my muscles tightened up again. Calder's hand squeezed my breast, pulling my attention back to him. It was hard not to focus on what Soren was doing, though. His dick was so much bigger than his fingers, and those had been a little uncomfortable. It didn't matter that I was dripping wet and dying to be fucked. I was still a little nervous.

"Relax, Mate," Soren growled through clenched teeth. "I'm going to take this nice and slow."

I nodded, trying to force myself to relax. Calder leaned down to kiss me, drawing me in by nipping at my lips and letting our tongues play together. Atlas's hands were roaming over my body, his cock still buried deep inside my pussy.

Soren pushed forward and the tip of his cock slipped past the tight ring of muscles. I gasped into Calder's mouth as he slowly pushed forward, working himself inside my ass.

I squirmed against the invasion of my body, but Atlas planted his hands on my hips, holding me still so Soren could plow forward with a slow and steady pressure. Groaning, I shook my head, breaking the kiss. “It’s too much!”

All forward progress stopped, but Soren’s hand went to my back, smoothing up and down my spine. “I’ll give you a minute to adjust. You’re taking my cock so well, Reese. You’re so fucking tight.” His voice was strained as he spoke and I knew it was hard for him to hold himself still within me. I could feel the overwhelming need for him to thrust as deeply into me as he could, burying himself inside my ass. I was grateful he didn’t. It was a struggle to accept another cock inside my body when I already had a huge one stuffing my pussy full.

“Fuck!” Atlas groaned. “She’s squeezing my dick like a vice.” He pushed in deeper and I cried out as he hit bottom, shifting Soren’s cock deeper in my ass.

I moaned at the feeling of being so full. My body shook with the effort of holding still, but I didn’t want them to move yet.

Soren leaned forward, pressing his chest against my back. His hand slid up to wrap around my throat again, pulling me up so that we were both on our knees. It shifted both him and Atlas inside of me once more, and I whimpered at the sensations swamping me. “You’re going to take the entire length of my cock into your ass. Do you hear me, Mate?”

I whined, my clit throbbing, but the thought making my stomach flutter with nerves. After a moment, I nodded.

“Tell me out loud.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Good girl,” he breathed into my ear. His arms released me and his hand went to the space between my shoulder blades as he shoved me back down until I was lying on Atlas once more. He’d managed through all this to keep his dick still within me. I wondered how much I had left to take?

*About half,* he answered in my mind.

A breath shuddered out of me. I could do this. My eyes closed as he began to push forward again. They popped open when I realized the level of discomfort had decreased drastically. Giving my body a chance to adjust and relax had worked. Now the feeling of him sliding into me was causing sparks to shoot off inside my body.

I moaned, lifting my hips slightly as he pushed forward again. The inch or so left wasn't nearly as hard to accept as it had been at first. Then Soren was fully seated inside me and I felt the press of his balls against my ass cheeks. I was breathing hard against Atlas's neck, my face buried there as I dealt with all of the sensations cascading through me.

"You're so fucking tight," Atlas muttered in awe, his hands running up and down my arms. He'd shifted them so that he could hold me to him. His fingers were gripping my wrists tightly, keeping me from moving too much.

"She's perfect," Soren agreed. "So perfect for us." His hand slid down my back, over my ass, and down my thigh. "I'm going to move now, Little One."

"Okay," I breathed out, not sure how I was supposed to feel about any of this. They were both inside of me. It felt amazing and overwhelming at the same time.

Atlas groaned when Soren pulled back slightly and then pushed forward again. The movement forced his hips to shift against mine as well, causing his dick to move inside of me too.

Soren set a steady pace, his cock sliding in and out of my ass easily now that I was used to him being there. The heat was building, and as soon as Atlas started moving, as much as he was able beneath me, my clit started to throb in tempo with them.

My body was on fire as they moved within me. My breasts were rubbing against Atlas's chest with every thrust from Soren. Flames licked over my skin, making it tingle. I could feel my orgasm building and I knew it wasn't going to be long before I came.

“My turn, baby girl.” I looked over at Calder and watched as he jerked his cock in his fist while he watched us. He scooted in closer until his dick was lined up with my mouth. Pre-cum filled my mouth as he thrust inside. It coated my tongue and I moaned in pleasure. He tasted divine. They all did. And now all three of my mates were inside me, just like they promised they’d be.

I sucked him deep, taking him to the back of my throat. He groaned and grabbed the back of my head, holding me still as he thrust into my mouth. His dick slid down my throat and I swallowed around him, loving the sounds of his moans. My body was rocking forward and back thanks to Soren’s thrusts, so I didn’t have to strain my neck trying to move on Calder’s cock. I pulled my hand from Atlas’s grip and wrapped it around the base of Calder’s dick, amazed at how much his knot had swelled already. It was huge.

“Fuck,” he groaned as I squeezed my fist around him, moving it in time with his thrusts. “You’re going to make me come, Minx.”

I hummed around him, sucking him harder. A particularly violent thrust from Soren had my nose bumping into Calder’s abdomen and his dick slipped deep into my throat. His hands went to the back of my head and I was stuck there. My lips were partially around Calder’s knot as he groaned in pleasure. “You all need to hurry the fuck up because I’m about to come.”

There weren’t any more words from the other two, just grunts and groans. I would join them, but I had no air left to make a sound. I could only rest there, swallowing around Calder’s cock while the other two fucked me to the point of ecstasy.

Calder came with a shout, filling my mouth with his cum. It was so much that I couldn’t swallow it all down fast enough. Some of it dripped from my lips and onto Atlas’s chest below me. As soon as Calder pulled out of my throat so I could breathe, Atlas grabbed me by the hair. “Clean it off,” he ordered, his voice husky with desire.

“Shit,” Soren grunted behind me, his thrusts becoming erratic as he slammed into me. His fingers dug into my hips, holding me still as he pounded into me one last time and then froze.

I gasped, tongue on Atlas’s skin as something much bigger than expected slipped into my ass. “Oh!” My eyes widened as I realized that Soren had just shoved his knot deep into my ass. I felt his come filling me, trapped there.

Atlas reached between our bodies and began rubbing my clit as he thrust up into me. It was all too much. The feel of Soren’s knot stretching me, the way Atlas filled my pussy, the way Calder watched us with a satisfied look on his face. It was all too stimulating and I screamed as I came around them. Both of my mates who were still inside of me groaned as I clenched down on them. It was Atlas’s turn to shove his knot inside of me. It slipped into my wet pussy and I moaned as he too began to come. Reaching over, I wrapped my fingers around Calder’s cock. He was still hard and his head fell backward in pleasure as I massaged his knot. I wanted us all sharing in the pleasure that was pounding through me. The feel of my mates inside of me, their cum filling me up, was so much better than I could have ever imagined.

I laid against Atlas’s chest as we all came down from the high. The little squeak I made when Soren’s knot deflated enough for him to pull out of my ass made him slap his hand against my cheek. I was too sated to care. Besides, it felt kind of good in a weird way. Atlas was still stuck inside me, but I didn’t mind.

The guys settled in around and under me, and soon we were all asleep.



## EPILOGUE



**Reese**

*M*y eyes opened as moonlight streamed into the room. Sometime through the night, Atlas had finally slipped out of me and I was wrapped up in Soren's arms. I eased out of his hold and scooted off the bed. Looking around, I found my clothes and dressed. Even with as tired as I was my mind was awake now, worrying about everything that we had coming. We were going to be facing angry gods and who knew what else?

I moved quietly through the house until I was outside. Sucking in a lungful of cool night air, I wrapped my arms around myself and began to walk. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, but I ended up standing at the edge of the nearby lake, staring out over the water.

"Can't sleep?"

Jumping, I turned and watched Lyas walk up from behind me. I shrugged. "Just thinking."

"Worrying, you mean."

I smiled. Somehow she knew me so well already. "That's true."

"You shouldn't worry," she suggested. "It'll just wear you out before anything even happens."

"How can I not?" I asked.

She stared out over the water. "Would it help if I showed you something?"

“Depends on what it is.” I turned to face her as she did the same.

She lifted her hand and her index finger lightly touched my forehead. I gasped as my mind was flung into a...memory? No, it couldn't be, because I watched myself walk out into the village. There was a smile on my face, and I was older. I wasn't sure how much, but definitely older. There was silver streaking my hair. Children ran around laughing, the younger in human form, the teenagers in wolf.

“That one takes after you.” Soren wrapped his arms around me from behind in the premonition.

He was talking about a little alpha boy. His spiky hair was red at the roots and blonde. His gray eyes flashed with challenge as his mother called out to him to do something. Instead of listening to her, he ran and wrapped his arms around my legs. He was a carbon copy of myself.

“Just as stubborn, too,” Calder stated as he came to stand next to us.

The little boy smiled up at us, then looked over and held his arms out. “Up, Gampa Atlas,” he requested.

Atlas swung him up into his arms and grinned at him. “You're going to get me in trouble with-”

“Dad!”

Atlas winced and gave his daughter an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Serena. You try saying no to this face.”

Our daughter sighed and shook her head. “I do. Every day.” She put her hands on her hips and tried to keep the scowl on her face. The smile ended up chasing it off, however.

Suddenly, the lake was in front of my eyes again and I shook my head. “What was that?” I asked, dazed.

“Just a little preview of your future,” Lyas told me, patting my shoulder. “I thought maybe you'd be able to sleep if you knew that in your future things would work out.”

“For me,” I said. “And my mates.” I sighed. “We're going to lose people in this war.”

She nodded. “That’s the nature of battle, Reese.”

“I don’t want to lose anyone I love.”

“I know you don’t. That isn’t what I want either, but if we do nothing-”

“Arune will destroy the world.”

We both turned and watched as my mates walked up. They were all bare chested, but had pulled pants on before coming outside. Soren’s words were heavy in the air.

“We’re going to stop her,” Atlas said, pulling me into his muscular arms, comforting me.

“We’re going to kick her ass,” Calder corrected, a grin spreading over his face.

My heart was so full. Standing here, in the moonlight, with them, I knew they were right. Whatever came for us, I was facing it with mates who loved me and a family who supported me completely. My mom, Emma, the people in this village, they were all banding with us. We’d find more allies. But I had everything I needed to take on the world, right here. Arune didn’t stand a fucking chance.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you to my partner in crime and Co-Author, Frank Jensen. I couldn't do this without you.

To my amazing beta readers Heather Ashley and Saam King, thank you so much for all of your time and effort you spent helping me make these books the best they can be!

Also a heartfelt thank you to my editor, Ce-Ce Cox of Outside-Eyes Editing and Proofreading! Thank you for catching everything I always seem to miss, especially those pesky commas.

Thank you to the awesome Rebecca Frank of Bewitching Book Covers for giving me a gorgeous cover.

To my wonderful and perfect fans! Thank you all for giving an unknown author a shot and for reading my books! I hope you love them and I can't show my gratitude for you enough.

Lastly, to my family, you're the best. Thank you for the love and support.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cathleen and Frank live in SE Oregon where they have a family farm. They split their days between working with their animals and writing. Both left a law enforcement background to pursue their passions and for Cathleen that meant picking back up a long-forgotten hobby with writing. They strive to bring readers steamy, action-packed stories that provide hours of entertainment.

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