



PACK
ROYALTY

THE
WOLF
KING'S
DEMAND

MILLY
TAIDEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE WOLF KING'S DEMAND

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BOOK 3

MILLY TAIDEN



CONTENTS

About the Book

The Wolf King's Demand

1. Addison
2. Tyler
3. Addison
4. Tyler
5. Addison
6. Tyler
7. Addison
8. Tyler
9. Addison
10. Tyler
11. Addison
12. Tyler
13. Addison
14. Tyler
15. Addison
16. Tyler
17. Addison
18. Tyler
19. Addison
20. Tyler
21. Addison
22. Tyler
23. Addison
24. Tyler
25. Addison
26. Tyler
27. Addison
28. Tyler
29. Addison
30. Tyler

About the Author

[Also by Milly Taiden](#)

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The Wolf King's Demand

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Who knew that a marriage arranged so long ago would lead to such an all-consuming love?

Addison knows she has to go through with her planned wedding to King Tyler. And while he's certainly good-looking and makes her knees buckle, she doesn't think that would make them compatible in the long run. **Yes, he's broody and growly in all the sexy ways, but is that enough? If he's truly the one for her, shouldn't she feel...more?**

King Tyler of Somberglen is certain that Addison of Autumhart is his fated mate. He loves her more than life itself and is willing to do whatever it takes to make her realize they're meant to be together. **Addison is the woman for him. He just has to take the time to show her they're perfect for each other.**

The biggest problem? Addison, who is half-human, cannot shift into her wolf form. And because of that, she cannot feel the mating bond the way he does. There's also the issue of a bounty on Addison's head. **In a race against the clock he has to figure out the attacks and the bounty before someone tries to kill Tyler's queen.**



THE WOLF KING'S DEMAND

PACK ROYALTY

*NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR*

MILLY TAIDEN

— *For my readers.*

There's a perfect someone out there for everyone.

ONE



ADDISON

“And have you moved in yet?”

Addison rolled her eyes, glad her mother couldn't see her over the phone. Every conversation between the two always came down to this, and she was tired of it. As the Queen of Autumhart, her mother had every right to arrange a marriage for her, but that didn't mean she could force Addison to like it.

“No, I haven't,” she said bluntly while correcting a small error in the security code she was looking over. Technically, it wasn't an error, but it read better this way, and as far as she was concerned, code that worked but didn't read well was just trouble waiting to happen.

“Addison, I know you have your own ideas about arranged marriage, ...” her mother began.

“It's not a question of arranged marriage, Mom. It's a question of my life. I'm fine getting married to Prince Tyler. But I need my own space set up to my technical specifications, and he can get used to it.”

“You know that we didn't just choose Tyler because Somberglen is an important ally,” her mother explained for the four hundredth time. “Every match we selected for you and for your sisters was chosen with care and precision. We want you to be happy.”

“And that's great for Lexi and Taryn,” Addison said. “I'm glad they're happy with their mates. This is what me being happy looks like. And it's not going to change.”

It was true. All of the sisters had a mate arranged for them by their parents to ally their kingdom of Autumhart with the various neighboring kingdoms run by shifter kings. As the girls were only half-blooded shifters, they could not shift themselves, and the arranged marriages helped protect them from any enemies who scorned the girls' inability or thought of them as weak and easy royal targets.

Lexi and Taryn had been fortunate enough to truly fall in love with their betroths. Addison was happy for them, but that didn't mean she was going to completely upend her life for Tyler. She would marry him and do her duty as a princess, but that was enough.

“Just you and your computer?”

“Just me and my multi-million-dollar cybersecurity business.”

Addison had always been fond of technology. Her parents were often afraid that she was retreating into it, making a fantasy life for herself where the fact that she couldn't shift into a wolf didn't matter. Addison didn't see it that way, though. To her, the world of the internet was just as real as the world of her kingdom. She was simply building a different kind of power, not trying to replace anything.

Honestly, she didn't understand the fuss. The house she had constructed for herself was on the grounds of the Somberglen castle. If she looked out the window, she could see the gloomy old thing. What difference did a couple of feet make, anyway, especially compared to all the good she could do for the kingdom through her business?

“Will you at least promise us to be open to exploring a relationship with Prince Tyler?” her mother asked. “That's not so much to ask, is it?”

At that moment, Addison spotted something very wrong with the code she was looking at.

“I'm sorry, Mom,” she said. “I have to go. There's an issue.”

“Will you just please make that promise ...”

Addison ended the call and turned back to the abnormal code.

This isn't just a minor typo, she thought, reading it over. This was planted deliberately. And it was subtle, too. It would be easy for someone less detail-oriented to read over this code and not think anything was unusual. It was spread over a few lines and interrupted with other bits of normal, harmless code. Still, it was unmistakable if someone was to put it all together.

A back door. All someone would have to do would be to insert a keyword on the right screen, and they'd have full admin access to her client's security software.

Someone had planned on sabotage. Had they been paid off by a competitor? Was it some kind of personal vengeance or a plan to embezzle? Either way, she had better figure out who had done this and what they could use it for quickly, or her client's entire business and her reputation would be sunk.

As her mind began to churn with possibilities, a loud screech blared, and the red light over the door started spinning. The security alarms! But those would only go off if someone had broken into her house.

Footsteps stomped up the hallway.

She froze and felt the fear a shifter wouldn't have. If she were like King Tyler or her father, she could turn into a wolf with piercing fangs and deadly claws and attack whoever was behind that door. Instead, she grabbed a glass soda bottle she'd just finished drinking by the neck and tried to look as brave as she could.

The door burst open, and a man in a dark, hooded cloak leapt out at her. She saw a gleam and guessed it was from a knife, so she swung the bottle as wide as she could while also trying to get out of the blade's way.

The bottle hit something hard. At the same time, the man's shoulder rammed into her, sending her stumbling back against the desk. Before she could get her bearings, a fist slammed into her chin.

Adrenaline surged, and she dove to the ground just as the knife whistled over her. She kicked the man's knees as hard as she could, once, twice, and he crashed into her bookcase. She tried to stand, but the ringing and the pain in her head made her wince and tumble. Desperate to survive, she crawled toward the door.

No time. The man was on top of her. Acting with pure instinct, she grabbed the hand holding the knife with both of hers, pushing it away with all her strength. With his free hand, the man hit her in the ribs. She groaned and headbutted his nose.

He gave a cry of anger and pain. Blood dripped from the hood of the cloak that hid his face.

At least I injured him, Addison thought. She had no idea if she could win this fight, but she refused to be killed without at least a fight to the death.

The assassin growled at her, and the sound was animalistic, even though he was in human form. A moment later, his fist crashed into her ribs again. There was no way she could keep the knife away from her. Her strength would give out in seconds, and the blade would plunge into her chest.

This isn't fair, she thought. *I didn't even get to see my arranged husband naked.*

Suddenly, the door burst open, and the sounds of several men entering the house reached her ears.

“Princess Addison!” one of the guards called. “Are you all right?”

The man in the cloak didn't stop. Not until another, far more chilling sound came.

A piercing howl that could only belong to King Tyler filled the air. As soon as the alarms went off in her house, he must have transformed into his wolf form to get here.

At that, the man in the cloak froze. Addison felt his muscles clench in a combination of anger and fear.

A moment later, he was off her and racing away.

“Up here! In the office!” she cried, wincing as she sat up. The would-be killer would be out a window and long gone by the time security or Tyler arrived. That meant he would be out there somewhere. This might be the first attack of many.

She had ventured into uncharted territory, a place she never fathomed she’d find herself in. Leading her parents’ tech and computer business had accustomed her to dealing with unsavory characters. Since her childhood, layers of security in the castle that cocooned her life never mattered to her. The notion that she, of all people, could be the target of a vendetta had been beyond her imagination.

The realization hit her like a bolt of lightning, shaking the very foundations of her reality. The boldness of someone plotting her death stripped away the layers of comfort she had grown accustomed to.

It was a chilling reminder that danger could breach even the most fortified defenses. In the face of this weakness, she struggled with the stark truth that her sheltered existence might not be enough to safeguard her from the ruthless forces now closing in on her.

What did I just step into? she wondered as the door opened. *And how am I going to make my way out of it?*

TWO



TYLER

Tyler sat in his library, his favorite sanctuary, where he spent countless hours studying the pages of his nation's history. The accounts of the past never failed to spark his out-of-the-box thinking.

Within these pages lay the rich tapestry of his nation's story ... a tapestry woven with threads of conquests and failures, bravery and weakness. Each scroll he'd collected held the voices of his ancestors, their experiences etched in ink, their wisdom and foolishness forever preserved.

As he fell deeper into the stories of those who had shaped his kingdom, he couldn't help but feel a connection to the history. These accounts of both the battle-won triumphs and gut-wrenching losses of his forefathers reminded him that his own journey was but a chapter in the grand epic of his kingdom's legacy.

He could only wonder what this library would hold about him and his rule in a hundred years. There was only one place to learn to be a king, and that was being on the throne, but if there was anyone who could help him learn to manage it, he'd find them within these pages.

Unfortunately, nothing in these scrolls made him any less troubled than he had been before. This was a time of crisis in the kingdom, and a crisis could explode into a disaster because of a tiny, overlooked detail. Why had one king led the country to triumph when another, seemingly following in his footsteps, drove it into ruin? There were no simple answers.

Just as he was growing tired of it all, there came a knock at the door. Tyler breathed a sigh of relief. He could use a distraction from his brooding.

“Come in,” he called.

Louis, Tyler’s trusted beta and his right-hand man in every endeavor, stood in the doorway. Their bond surpassed mere friendship; it was a deep understanding of each other developed through years of getting into trouble together as children to making decisions affecting the lives of others in his kingdom.

Jointly, they formed a strong partnership, a combination of their individual strengths. With his ability to chart the course and set grand goals, Tyler found strength in knowing Louis was the dedicated hand at his side.

“Is there any news from the North?” Tyler asked his confidante.

That was the most acute emergency facing the country at the moment. Someone was attacking villages in the north. He thought them to be a small group of well-organized people who always escaped before military support could arrive. It didn’t seem like the work of typical raiders because they often attacked easy targets in favor of more profitable ones. It seemed more like someone was actively trying to hurt Tyler and his people.

“We have one report, sir. But I can’t promise it’s accurate.”

Tyler’s eyes narrowed. “What is it?”

“There is a report that among the raiders, someone saw ... Sir Maximilian.”

Tyler sat back, surprised, and considered the implications. If it were true, it would put the entire kingdom at risk of a civil war. No, he decided. That wasn’t possible. Better to ignore it for the moment because admitting the possibility would put him on dangerous ground.

“He’s dead,” Tyler said at last, looking closely at his beta. “The report must have been a mistake.”

“The witness is fairly certain,” Louis pushed back. “And he is someone who was personally acquainted with Sir Maximilian.”

“It was a mistake,” Tyler repeated, a little louder. “Maximilian’s dead and buried. It must be someone who looked like him.”

Louis bowed and said nothing.

Tyler took a deep breath, shaking it off. “Is there any other ...”

But the alarm began to sound throughout the castle before he could finish the question. Without pause, Tyler was on his feet and checking his cell phone. The security alarm was for the house, not the castle. What was happening? Was someone after his fiancée?

They were about to find they’d made a very serious mistake if they were.

“Gather the security,” he cried. “Find Addison!”

And then, without a second’s pause, his body shifted.

The first time it happened, the shift was painful. Bones stretching, muscles expanding into new shapes, claws bursting out of the skin. In fact, it never actually stopped being painful.

But Tyler had learned to embrace that pain. It was the pain of taking on his stronger form. It meant that something was happening and that he was stepping up to meet it.

What if it’s too late? a voice whispered inside Tyler’s head. *What if she’s already taken?*

That voice was always inside Tyler’s head. It was the same that told him that he couldn’t handle the crisis in the north or the power of the throne. It was a whisper that told him Addison would never love him because he hadn’t earned her love.

But in his wolf form, there was only silence. His actions and decisions while in his wolf body happened entirely because of his animal instincts. When he was human again, he could be afraid about having done the wrong thing or whether

he'd succeed the next time he had to shift. But he didn't worry while he was a wolf. He just acted.

He bounded out the door of the library and down the steps, out the main door, into the outdoors. His body hovered halfway between human and wolf; he could move like either when he chose to. The wolf's run was the fastest way to get anywhere, but standing like a human with his hands free was the deadliest way to fight.

As the house came into view around the corner of the castle, he let out a single, piercing howl. Security had already entered the house, and he would be there in a few seconds. He leapt through the door, past his guards, and into the study, following Addison's scent with his powerful nose. She was down and obviously hurt, with two of his guards tending to her. The attacker was gone.

"He got out the window," one of the guards said. "And he already made it to the forest."

Tyler let go of his wolf strength. Like a spring coming back to rest, his body quickly returned to his normal self. He quickly redressed in a spare change of clothes, one of many stored around Addison's house and his own castle.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he yanked a shirt over his head. "And who attacked you?"

Addison looked at him, still shaking from her ordeal. Tyler sensed her pain almost as if it was his own. Someone had tried to hurt someone close to him, and he hadn't been there in time to protect her.

You failed her, that voice said.

"I'm fine," Addison answered. "And I don't know. I was working on reviewing a security system, and then suddenly, he was just here."

"Did you see his face?"

"No, it was covered with a hood." Then she winced as she tried to move.

Tyler held his anger back. After all, Addison wasn't the one who had done anything wrong. But once he found the one who had ...

"You're sleeping in the palace from now on," he declared.

"What?" Addison said, confused. "No. I've got all my work set up here and ..."

"This isn't a debate," Tyler snapped. "I want you to be as comfortable as possible. But first, you have to be safe. And right now, this house isn't safe. Do you understand that?"

Her eyes widened.

He realized she clearly didn't expect that kind of passion from me. Did she really think I would leave her in a house where someone had nearly killed her?

"You're right," she said finally. "I like being on my own, but ... I'm not used to this kind of thing."

"You shouldn't have to be," Tyler told her. "Let's get you inside. You need a shower."

"A shower?" she repeated, slightly confused.

"It will help relax you," he explained. "Which is important after an experience like this. And also, it will get the smell of that foul attacker off your body."

"Can we change that to a bath?" she asked.

Tyler smiled and scooped her into his arms. She relaxed into his chest. "Even better."

Questions ran through his head as he carried her out of the house and into the castle. Who would do such a thing? Was it an enemy of hers, or was there someone out there who would try to get to him through her?

"Draw a bath," he commanded the maid as he entered Addison's chamber, the bedroom reserved for her that she had refused to use until now. He laid her on the bed to wait for the bath to fill, and she smiled up at him.

"I didn't know you cared about me that much," she said, her voice light and dismissive.

Tyler said nothing. It wasn't the only thing that he had kept secret from Addison. He always liked to play his cards close to his chest with everyone, and it was particularly important with her. If Addison knew that she was his fated mate, that the two of them were destined by magic and biology to be together for life, she would feel forced to love him. And that wasn't the best way for them to come together as they were truly meant to. He had to tread carefully.

THREE



ADDISON

Addison let herself sink into the hot bath as the white and gold marble-tiled bathroom filled with steam. The maid had put a selection of herbs recommended by the healer into the bathwater. They let out a wonderfully sweet aroma, something like lavender, relaxing her even further.

She hadn't noticed she was cut and scraped in several places until they stung upon contact with the water. However, the sting was momentary, and it gave way to a much softer sensation, an ache that was healing.

All of her fear and panic slowly subsided. She could think again. When in the house, she had felt slightly defensive when Tyler had suggested she move into her room, but it had been a good idea.

“Someone just tried to kill me.” Saying the words out loud still didn't feel real.

Here in the bath, with Tyler and all of his guards outside, she could finally accept the truth and start to make sense of it. That attack hadn't been a random event coming out of the blue. Someone planned it. And they had to have a good reason.

There were two main possibilities. One was that it had to do with her job in computer security. Maybe the attacker had predicted she would find the coded backdoor and was trying to take her out before she learned his identity.

“That would mean he had very big plans,” she mused to herself.

Which was possible, of course. The client had been from one of her parents' companies. Anyone gaining access could cause trouble on a national scale as they could pass themselves off as a royal.

The other possibility was that Tyler had an enemy she didn't know about, and they were going after her to get him.

That was certainly possible, too. There was a lot that she didn't know about Tyler. She certainly hadn't known that he would respond so passionately and quickly when she was in danger. She had assumed he felt the same about her as she did about him. That their upcoming marriage was a bump in the road, an inconvenience that she had to deal with as part of being a royal.

But that hadn't been what she'd seen in his eyes. He had been furious, but it was the kind of anger that sprang from fear. The idea of losing her was clearly unthinkable to him. But why? How had he become so attached to her when she had barely let him get close to her?

She would have to investigate the mystery of who was targeting her, but she also wanted to know more about Tyler. The strength in his arms, the gentleness in the way he carried her, and the care in taking her immediately to relax in a bath had surprised her.

The man she was being forced to marry might be a lot more interesting than she had initially thought.

Finally, she drained the tub and stepped carefully onto the floor. She dried off as best she could, wincing once or twice at movements that made her ribs ache, and finally got into a red dressing gown.

It was time to talk to Tyler and learn a little more about the intriguing wolf shifter.

She took a breath and opened the door to his bedroom, stepping in.

Tyler sat in a chair in the corner of the room, tapping his foot impatiently. The moment she entered, he stood and gestured toward the healer perched nervously on the bed.

“Before we talk, I would like her to examine you for injuries and treat you. Are you comfortable with that?”

Addison nodded. “I was going to ask for her even if you weren’t going to.”

He frowned, and she realized he thought she meant that as a rebuke. She hadn’t. She was just tired. But before she could say anything, the healer waved her over.

“Lie down on the bed, on your back,” the healer said. “It looks like this shouldn’t be too difficult.”

Addison put the puzzle that was Tyler aside to do as instructed, the healer hovering over her. She felt the magic sink in and explore her body. Some days, Addison wished she had at least been a healer because that was one power everyone admired. It would have been a lot easier than just being a half-blood with no idea of her abilities.

Maybe her parents were right. Maybe sometimes she did use computers to retreat from the real world. Online, she could meet other people as equals rather than having to deal with the fact that some people were born more powerful.

People like Tyler. People who could turn into a wolf at a moment’s notice and run to her rescue. Sometimes, Addison resented the fact that she could not rescue herself.

She groaned at a sharp pain as the magic pressed her ribs back together, but it only lasted a second.

Finally, the healer stood and nodded. “That should do for now. You’re very lucky. There were no internal injuries.”

Addison remembered the knife that had nearly plunged into her several times. Lucky indeed.

The healer gave a quick bow and left the bedroom. Addison snuggled under the blankets, and Tyler sat next to her.

“I owe you,” Addison said, giving him a smile. “Your howl scared him away. If you hadn’t been as quick and as angry as you were, I don’t know if I would have made it.”

Tyler returned the smile. “You’re my bride-to-be. You deserve no less.”

“Yeah, but ...” She hesitated. “I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“I try to avoid letting people know how I feel.”

That made sense. At first, she had assumed that what she saw with Prince Tyler was the whole story. A boring man who did his duty and not much else. Now, she was seeing another side. Someone who cared enough about duty to stay hidden from most eyes but who was a passionate and interesting man in his own right.

Maybe there was even some fear there. Anxiety? The kind of emotions people experience. Maybe there was a human somewhere underneath all that toughness?

“Well, I like knowing a little more about you,” said Addison hesitantly. “I like this side of you.”

“I’m glad to get to see a different side of you, also,” Tyler replied with a little shrug.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not working on a computer or telling me to leave you alone.”

Addison laughed. She hadn’t really been that distant from him, had she? Then again, maybe she had. Once she was involved in a project, it was easy for her to lose track of pretty much anything else. Even a new soon-to-be husband.

“Do you like this side better than the other one?” she asked.

He grinned. “I haven’t gotten to see much of it yet, but I think I like it a lot.”

There was a silence as the two of them sat on the bed, gazing into each other’s eyes. The silence was oddly comfortable, the fear that Addison had felt struggling with the cloaked man a distant memory. She was warm, comfortable, healed, and, most of all, not alone.

“I’m going to need you to tell me what happened,” Tyler finally said. “In as much detail as you can. Even the littlest thing or impression might be helpful in tracking this man

down. But we don't have to do that yet. Whenever you feel you're ready."

Addison nodded. "I can talk about it now."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." She searched back through her memory, fitting the pieces together into a logical story. "But I'm afraid I can't offer you much. He was only there for a little bit, and I never got a look at his face."

"That's okay," Tyler reassured her. "Whatever you remember. We'll go from there."

She started telling the story. Tyler sat still, listening attentively, and occasionally asking clarifying questions. Addison told him everything from finding the software sabotage to the moment of attack and then to the security guards bursting into the office.

To her surprise, it actually felt good to let someone else share it, someone who seemed to care.

Whoever this killer was, at least she didn't have to deal with him alone.

FOUR



TYLER

Tyler still seethed under his skin the next morning. The wolf within cried for blood. How dare someone attack his chosen mate. It didn't matter that no one but himself knew she was his fated mate. It was public knowledge they were to be married. Whoever had perpetrated the attack did so, knowing it was a direct aggression toward the royal family.

He paced outside her quarters. She had shoed him out so she could shower and change. He thought they'd crossed a boundary the night before when they had shared a bed. Okay, so he slept above the covers, fully clothed, but he had still spent the night in her private room.

I was only trying to protect her, he thought. He couldn't put her in a bubble all the time, but she had to understand that as King of Somberglen, he had to protect her. As her future mate, he had to protect her. Damn it, why couldn't she see what she meant to him?

"What a frustrating woman," he muttered to himself as he kept pacing.

Eventually, she came out looking refreshed. He exhaled with relief when he saw her. He knew he was being overprotective. The entire building had guards posted on every corner. It would destroy him if something happened to her now when he had only just found her.

He noticed her wince as she got into the car. The wolf inside wanted blood for the wounding of his mate.

He quizzed her again about the attack on the way to the office until, eventually, she got fed up.

“We’re going in circles on this,” she said. “I don’t remember anything other than what I’ve already told you. You can stop grilling me now,” she finished firmly.

“Yeah, okay. I’m pushing you too hard,” he admitted. “But it’s my job, okay?”

They sat in silence for the rest of the journey. He needed to get her on his side, but he didn’t know how. She wasn’t like most of the girls he had met, who would do anything to please the king. She was stubborn and argumentative. It vexed him, but at the same time, he loved it. Those other girls were all brainless pushovers.

They took a break, grabbed some food, and decided to have lunch in his office. As he thought about his lack of progress, he realized it was time to try a different approach. A change in strategy was in order, and he felt the need to include her in the inner circle.

It was clear that she deserved to know what had transpired lately. He needed to open up to her and reveal the events he had been purposely protecting her from.

“Yours isn’t the first attack,” he admitted to her. “There have been several attacks in local villages recently.”

“Really?” she said. “I didn’t know that. Do you think it’s the same people?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “These strikes have been going on for weeks. Minor skirmishes, really. There was one yesterday, too.”

“What? While I was being attacked, there was also an attack on a village? Do you think they were connected?”

“I’m almost certain,” he replied. “I’m beginning to think the attacks are a decoy to draw me and my men away from you. It’s possible you were the target all along.”

“And you’ve no idea who it was?” she asked. She wrapped her arms around herself, grateful that Tyler was home to

protect her with his wolf form rather than chasing these troublemakers through the local villages.

“Not yet. There doesn’t seem to be a clear pattern. We have seen some activity from one group in particular, but we haven’t linked these incidents back to them for certain. They were a faction we had a lot of problems with a few years back. We had thought it was all sorted out, though,” Tyler told her.

“It might have been nice to have a heads up that there were problems going on,” Addison said reproachfully.

“We just figured it was a few rogue skirmishes,” Tyler replied, not appreciating the scolding. “And you know you haven’t exactly made yourself approachable,” he added.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll give you that. I’m sorry. I will be more involved from now on.”

A wave of relief washed over him. All he wanted was to keep her close and safe. He smiled at her. “I appreciate that,” he said.

It seemed to Tyler that they had reached some sort of truce. Addison was more friendly and open as they worked on their separate projects for the afternoon. He hoped the new familiarity would last a long time.

“I’m still no closer to tracking this damn security breach,” she told him several hours later. “Whoever hacked into the system is using some advanced software. I keep thinking I’m getting somewhere, then it just sends me around in a loop.”

“That sounds frustrating,” Tyler replied. “Listen, I’m finishing up here. I’ve got to send the last shipment of supplies to the attacked villages, and I’ll be done. Do you want to finish early and go somewhere more restful?”

“Like a date, you mean?” she asked suspiciously.

“No,” he assured her. “Nothing so horrible as a date. I was thinking something more along the lines of a carriage ride down to Turtle Lake and a picnic dinner?” He tried to keep the laughter from his voice as he said it.

“That sounds suspiciously like a date, you know.” She side-eyed him with a sneaky grin.

He cracked a smile. It was the first time she’d laughed spontaneously like that. He liked the way her eyes lit up with merriment. “No, I just happen to like carriage rides and picnics,” he said innocently.

The laughter twinkled around her eyes. “Okay then,” she said. “As long as it’s not a date.”

They finished their work and headed out to the Royal Stables. He loved it there, and in truth, taking the horses out was one of his favorite things to do. Something about the routine of bringing them back to the stable and grooming them set his nerves to rights.

Addison wasn’t so sure about horses, but he calmly showed her how to manage them, and soon they were on their way.

They set out between a long avenue of trees, their spring blossoms scenting the warm afternoon air. “Do you want to have a try at driving the horses?” he asked.

“Really? Do you think I could?” she replied eagerly.

“I don’t see why not,” he said, handing her the reins and showing her how to hold them.

“This is amazing,” she squealed. “I love it!”

The two black horses were perfectly matched and trotted nicely underneath her gentle guidance. “You’re doing really well,” he said.

She drove the horse all the way to the lake’s edge and pulled them to a stop at his favorite picnic spot. The scene was flawless. The lake was clear and blue, reflecting the azure sky.

An ancient willow had half fallen into the lake here. It had continued to live, as willows do, creating the picture-perfect bowled picnic area. He spread out the blanket, and they unpacked the food together. The palace kitchens had done them proud. There were potted meats, a cut glass bowl of

green salad, and freshly baked rolls, along with homemade lemonade and a bottle of sparkling wine.

“This is lovely,” Addison admitted.

He was so pleased she had warmed to him a little. “Made all the lovelier by you being here,” he said.

“Ugh, cheesy,” she replied, throwing a grape at him.

He burst out laughing. She was certainly not like the women who simpered at him in court. “Come with me,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

He led her into the woods to a gentle rise. At the top sat a tower. “Wow, that’s cool,” she said. “Why is it here?”

“It’s just a gimmick,” he replied. “We used to play here all the time when I was a kid. A group of us would have the tower, and the other group would be the invaders.”

They climbed the spiral staircase that wound its way around the inside up to the floor at the top. The view was stunning, with the lake below and the castle on the far hill.

“I love it,” she breathed, her eyes twinkling and setting his heart on fire.

FIVE



ADDISON

The relaxation of the day before had already been nearly forgotten as Addison sat in front of her computer and cussed. She had gotten so close to tracing the computer hack when it had thrown her right back to the beginning again. She didn't understand how they were doing it. She thought she had at least made it so they couldn't breach the system again. But she couldn't be sure with the advanced software they were using.

“Still not nailing it?” Tyler asked.

There was no blame in his words, but she felt them as a slight. She prided herself on her computer skills, and she didn't want to have to ask for help from her family with this one. But it was so damn tricky.

“I'll get there,” she assured him, sitting back in her chair and running her hand through her hair.

Just then, the tracker Tyler had sent out earlier padded in. The big gray wolf trotted to the privacy screen in the corner of the office to shift into human form.

He returned, tucking his shirt into his pants. “I tracked them to their camp about twenty-five miles west of here,” he said. “They took a circuitous route to try to throw me, but there's no tricking this nose.”

Tyler smiled. Declan's tracking skills were legendary. “Well done, Declan. I knew I could count on you.”

Declan smiled, and Addison noticed even in human form, Declan's incisors were long and sharp. He looked like a wild

man with his dark beard and shoulder-length dark hair that could use a hairbrush.

“Did anyone see you?” Tyler asked.

“What do you think?” Declan asked. “You know no one ever sees me unless I want them to.”

“That’s true. We nicknamed him the Ghost when we were younger,” he told Addison. “Do you know who it was?” he asked Declan.

“It was the Fleetfoot Rogues,” said Declan.

“Damn, are you sure?” Tyler appeared livid.

“Absolutely,” confirmed Declan. “I saw their leader at the camp. They were keeping slaves, too. Women and kids who looked underfed and squalid. The conditions were abominable.”

“Fuck,” Tyler growled. “Louis,” he called to his beta, “assemble thirty of the best fighters we have. We’re going to take down that camp.”

“I’m coming,” said Addison quickly.

“No way,” Tyler growled. “It will be too dangerous.”

“I can handle myself,” she retorted. “Besides, if there are children and women that need looking after, I’d like to help them.”

For a moment, their eyes locked. He did have beautiful eyes. Then, she chided herself for thinking such a thing at this time.

Tyler seemed to come to a resolution. “Okay,” he said. “But you’re to hang back until we secure the camp, and then you can come in and help with the kids.”

She felt better having a part in it. There was no way she was prepared to stay at home and be an ornament.

Sooner than she expected, she was hiding outside the camp with a small group of shifter warriors. She smelled the stench of the camp even without having a shifter’s sense of smell. She peered out through the bushes, waiting for the signal.

A flare flew up over the camp. That was it, time for action. They had the camp surrounded, and now the pack leapt in for the kill.

She and the large gray squad of wolves she was deployed with headed for the entrance where the slaves were being held while the enforcer wolves went to fight. She tried to ignore the screams and yelps of pain that erupted from the camp as the shifters were attacked by Tyler and his crew.

The gates on this side were guarded by two shifters. One was a wolf, one a brown bear. The two rogues were outnumbered, and the wolf was quickly dispatched. But the big bear posed a problem. He had a long reach, and the squadron of wolves couldn't get near him. But Addison had an advantage. She could climb.

She was supposed to hold back, but she had this. She had been trained in using daggers when she was growing up. So she took advantage of the situation and shimmied up a nearby tree.

The leader of her squad saw what she was doing, and they herded the bear under the branch where she crouched, ready to spring.

She schooled her breath to calm herself. If she let fear rule her, she would fail. Slowly, the bear had no choice but to enter the space directly beneath her, and she dropped lightly onto its back, burying the two long hunting knives into its neck on either side.

The beast bellowed and thrashed, but it was no use. The lifeblood drained from the gaping wounds in its neck. It fell to the ground in a pool of its own blood, and Addison leapt free.

They quickly released the slaves and gathered all the women and children they could find. Some were free women, followers of the rogue pack who must have been here keeping an eye on the slaves. Addison noticed one of them slap a young girl of about four across the face because she didn't move out of the way fast enough.

Addison was furious. She hated cruelty of any kind. She picked up the child, who was crying from the blow. “Where’s this child’s mother?” she demanded.

“That *was* her mother,” the slave woman next to her said. “She always treats her like that, the poor little mite.”

The woman had disappeared between the tents, but Addison wouldn’t let her get away. One of Tyler’s shifters shot after her, his nose to the ground.

“Hey, it’s okay, little one,” Addison cooed to the child in her arms.

The child turned her face toward her, and Addison noticed a birthmark across her cheek, a strange dark stain in the shape of a crescent moon. She brushed the girl’s hair aside to look at her. The girl squirmed in her arms and tried to hide her face.

“Hey, it’s okay,” she said. “Everyone thought I was a freak when I was growing up because I couldn’t shift. I used to get bullied even though I was a princess. I get what it’s like to be different.”

The child looked up at her shyly, then buried her face into Addison’s neck, crying. Addison’s heart melted for this poor, neglected child, and she was consumed by an overpowering need to protect her. “Hush, child,” she said. “You can come home with me. I’ll look after you. Don’t fret.”

Just at that moment, the enforcer returned, dragging the child’s mother behind him. “You will not take my daughter away,” she screamed at Addison, overhearing what she had told the girl. “Cassia is my child, not yours.”

Cassia flinched away from her mother as the woman reached to grab her out of Addison’s arms. “No,” the little one cried, clinging to Addison tightly.

“You don’t deserve this child,” Addison told her.

“Who are you to come around stealing other people’s children?” the woman snarled. “You’re the shifter princess who can’t shift, aren’t you?” she said, disgust in her voice. “Some queen you’ll make, you half-blood. You’re pathetic.”

That was it. Addison had had quite enough of this woman. “Take the child,” she said to another of Tyler’s enforcers. “I don’t want her to see this.”

The enforcer took the little girl and carried her away to join the other camp children who had been taken to a ramshackle shed nearby while everything was being sorted out.

As soon as the child was out of sight, Addison leapt at the woman, taking her to the ground. She didn’t mess around, landing on the woman’s chest and punching her in the face. The woman struggled to shift and fight Addison off at the same time. But Addison was strong and lithe. She wasn’t about to let the bitch get away with such disrespect and hate.

The woman landed a lucky strike, raking Addison with her claws, but in doing so, left herself exposed. Addison slammed the woman’s head so hard she lost consciousness.

A cheer went up, and she realized that half a dozen of Tyler’s warriors were standing around her watching the fight. She smiled inside as she stood, shaking the pain out of the hand she’d landed the punch with.

SIX



TYLER

Do we have them all? We'd better check. Tyler was trying to focus on the task at hand, which was subduing this rogue group of shifters and fending off any further problems. Still, he knew Addison was nearby. She had come to check out the report of women and children who were being kept prisoners in terrible conditions in the rogue camp.

While fighting, it was hard not to worry about Addison, who was out of his sight. He had left her with a crew of guards, so he just had to assume everything was fine.

Louis nodded his agreement, put his muzzle down, and sniffed around, searching the camp. He knew the way already, but by his demeanor alone, Tyler knew he wasn't taking any chances. Louis was the best beta Tyler had ever had and the pack's best tracker. He knew they could walk into their deaths if they didn't have Louis leading the way.

Tyler followed behind his beta and watched the tracker's every move. Even a twitch of his ears could be significant. There were other signs, too, such as Louis stopping in his tracks or letting off a flow of infrasound that would signal for the pack to attack. The last thing they wanted was to be surrounded on their flanks by the outlaw marauders.

Near the back of the camp, Louis and Tyler hunkered down in front of a dirt berm and observed a group of shifters. The men felt sure they were readying for another attack. The rogues had already shifted and, as a group, were now headed straight for the alpha and beta.

Louis looked at Tyler, and Tyler looked back. The alpha gave the paw signal, and they leapt. The avenging pack moved swiftly and dangerously before the blink of a rogue wolf's eye.

Growling, howling, and gnashing fangs filled the air. Tyler's adrenaline peaked with his rage for their attack on Addison, spurring him on. He heard yelps and yowls. Tyler and his wolves were winning the battle. Blood spurted and flew high in grizzly sprays.

It felt like it took forever as Tyler's energy stores depleted, but they took down what was left of the pack one by one. Although they did keep two alive, those they thought were important members of the pack, to glean whatever intel they could from them.

The encampment was a shambles. Tyler, Louis, and the entire pack slipped and slid over the blood brew covering the ground. The enforcers cinched the prisoners and dragged them into a nearby outbuilding. Louis and a few select enforcers would get the confessions.

Tyler left them to do their hair-raising deed. He had other things on his mind.

The alpha shifted back when one of his enforcers came by, distributing clothes they had all removed before the fight. Nervous exhaustion gnawed at him. Yet, amid the fatigue and muscle pains, he continued toward his mate.

Tyler headed to the side of the camp, searching for Addison, but she was nowhere to be found. For a moment, he lost his breath. Panic set in.

Had that skirmish been another ruse? Had remnants of the rogue pack flanked us and taken her under my nose?

Tyler ran through the camp, trying to catch sight of her. He asked shifter after shifter where they had last seen her. He couldn't find any of the guards he had left with her either. His panic rose higher and higher each time someone shrugged, saying they had no idea where she had gone.

The alpha continued his search, thinking Addison must be close. He hit the middle of the moat bridge when he saw Louis

ambling along. The tracker had shifted into his two-legged form. He looked tired but calm as he made his way down the well-trodden path toward Tyler. Obviously, the interrogation of the prisoners went well. But that supposed success didn't help him now.

Tyler furiously waved and called out. "Louis! Addison, she's gone! I can't find her anywhere."

Louis grinned and made a peace sign with his hand. "Calm yourself. They've taken all the children to a shed in the back of the cave tunnel. At least until they sort out what to do next. Her guards are still with her. It should be the safest place for them right now, though we seem to have everything under control out here."

Tyler flashed a relieved smile, rushed to Louis, and gave him a big hug. "Man, I do not know what I'd do without you, you wonderful wolf." The alpha slapped Louis on his back and raced toward the cave-like entrance on the edge of the forest to seek his queen.

Tyler jogged along the wooded trail until he found the sod-covered cave. He slipped through, and about fifty feet on the other side, he laid eyes on the modest hideout. A thin sliver of smoke eschewed from the fieldstone chimney.

Tyler reached the stoop and lightly knocked on the knotty pine door so he didn't scare them with his arrival. Seconds later, it opened, and there was a small boy, about six years old, smiling up at him. Tyler smiled back. He looked over the top of the boy and saw Addison sitting on a fireside bench, reading a storybook to the children sitting cross-legged or lying about on the floor.

The tiny audience of four children was mesmerized by Addison's soft lilt and the wondrous tale she told. A few of the guards he had left to supervise Addison were scattered around the outskirts of the room, along with three women he guessed had been kept as slaves.

Tyler noticed one girl in particular. She sat alongside Addison, resting her head on Addison's bosom, her tiny arms wrapped around her waist.

Louis came up from behind and whispered over his alpha's shoulder. "That's the little girl who was abused by her mother. The same one Addison swiftly took out, if you know what I mean."

Tyler sniffed. *Blood. Addison's blood.* He looked at her more closely. She had a swollen lip.

By this time, Addison had sensed Tyler. She jerked her head up to see who was at the door, assuming it was a guard checking in.

For a moment, Addison and Tyler locked eyes. He sensed in her the same intensity that was in his heart.

"Children, how about you rest now? I have a visitor. We will finish the story after your nap."

The children moaned and grumbled but did as they were told. One of the guards watching from the corner, Declan, handed out blankets he must have retrieved from somewhere in the camp.

Addison rose and came to her king. "Tyler, where have you been?"

Tyler held her chin lightly and turned her face to examine her wound. "Never mind about me. Look at your lip. Are you all right? Do you need the healer to visit you again? I can order her swiftly to meet us at the castle."

Tyler now knew why he had smelled her blood so easily.

Tyler lightly ran his hands over her arms, feeling for other wounds. Thankfully, there were none.

"Addison, what happened? Who attacked you?"

When Tyler uttered those words, he saw the four resting children suddenly huddling together under their quilts, fear painting their faces where a moment before there had been none.

Addison cupped Tyler's face and serenely smiled. "I am totally fine, Tyler. Now, if you're asking about that woman tied up in the corner. She might give you a different response."

Tyler scanned the small cabin. His eyes homed in on the far right corner on the other side of the fireplace. One of his enforcers stood guard beside the tied-up, but unconscious female splayed out on a wooden cot.

The alpha approached and gazed down at the wench. Addison followed.

“She might need the healer, Tyler,” Addison smirked.

The enforcer broke protocol. He couldn’t help himself. He chuckled and spoke.

“Your queen is one fine woman, My King. She can surely take care of her own. She took down the bear guard at the gate, then kicked some serious ass with this girl despite the wretched hag calling her all sorts of names and threatening the little one over here. I would have done worse if it were me. But your mate knocked her on the noggin to shut her up. Worked like a charm, as you can see.”

Tyler could have glared at the enforcer, ready to scold him for speaking out of turn, but instead flashed him laughing eyes and an approving smile.

The king looked down at his queen. She had left his side to attend to the children, calming them and returning them to their nap.

Hmm ... who knew I had a fated mate who was a fighter in her own right? I'm not sure if I should feel pride or offense at feminine competition for my manly duties.

Tyler voiced no words, of course.

He left the unconscious woman and lightly put his hands on Addison’s shoulders. The alpha was too in love and too enamored by his beautiful gladiatrix.

SEVEN



ADDISON

Tyler smiled at the enforcer's proud words of his queen, which made Addison blush. She never thought it that big of a deal to subdue a rogue female, but maybe it was to the shifter men.

"Addison, could I speak with you privately?" Tyler's expression was somber. Addison picked up on it right away.

"Yes, of course." But as soon as Addison uttered the words, the little waif, Cassia, clutched onto Addison's skirts even tighter and hid her tiny face in the folds.

"Ah, yes. This is my little shadow. Tyler, Louis, meet little Cassia. This is the source of the friction that caused me to have a showdown with the nasty woman in the corner."

Addison bent down and unwrapped her charge, then looked her calmly in the eye. "Now, sweetie, I need to talk to the king. You will be safe and sound here until I return, okay?"

Cassia's face had a mix of trepidation and fear, but she seemed to trust Addison. The little girl nodded and peeked at Declan, who smiled and held out his hand. Cassia followed him to the fireplace, where he patted a blanket for her to rest on.

Addison smiled at the big, burly wolf shifter caring for the little girl. Then she followed Tyler outside to a wood-hewn bench near a wildflower garden overlooking another side of Turtle Lake. The cabin was only one room, so there was no privacy. Addison was still a little apprehensive about being alone with Tyler, but maybe having alone time, however short, was what she needed to get accustomed to her king.

Tyler brushed away fallen leaves and twigs from the bench with his hand, then offered a seat to Addison, who gracefully nodded. The two gazed out at the glassy surface of the water for a time. Addison waited to speak. She knew something was on the king's mind.

After a time, Tyler cleared his throat and turned to Addison. "Addison, I know you've told my guards and enforcers you're okay. But are you? Truly? You can be honest with me. That skirmish and rescuing the children, especially that little tot from her abusive mother. It must have been traumatizing for you. Not to mention your battle with that awful woman."

Addison jerked her head to Tyler. Her expression was anything but sweet. She knew her immediate change in demeanor would shock her king, but no matter.

"What exactly are you inferring here, Tyler? That I'm too mentally and physically weak to hold my own. I'm not some sort of useless wallflower, you know? How dare you assume such a thing."

Tyler leaned away from her, his face blanched with shock.

"Not the answer I expected. I'm not sure you understand why I care so deeply for your welfare." Tyler grabbed both of Addison's arms and looked straight into her eyes.

"In a nutshell, Addison, I simply can't lose you to rogue attacks or by any other means. You are my fated mate. Maybe we have kinks to iron out in our relationship, but you, dear one, are my present and future. No one else but you. And, so, your life will be my primary concern until the day I die."

Addison opened her mouth as if to speak, but no words formed. The shock was too great. She needed time for Tyler's admission to sink in.

Tyler put his finger on her warm, moist lips and continued his heartfelt confession.

"Addison, it's been clear to my heart ever since I first laid eyes on you and we signed the mating contract. Your inability to fully shift matters not one iota to me. It's what is in your

heart that counts. You live a just life and are a warrior for good. There is no evil in your being. What more could a king ask for in a mate?"

Addison heard his words, but she wasn't ready to digest or accept what Tyler had said. She closed her mouth and stared out at the glassy lake.

How could I not see this? How did I not know? And why didn't I feel the attachment so strong coming from Tyler? To be a fated mate, should I have sensed this?

She turned her head to Tyler. The more she thought about what he said, the more his words found a home in her heart, and the more it all fit. Her feelings of trepidation simply melted away, and her fondness for the man deepened in their place. Addison's heart was finally ready to receive all from her king, her fated mate.

Her smile was warm again. Tyler breathed.

"So, now, do you appreciate my worry? My care?"

"I ... I do ... but, Tyler, I need time to digest this. It's something I never thought you would say or feel. This is huge, you know? For me, surely, but especially for you. Do you understand my hesitancy? My need to take this all in?"

Tyler smiled, reached out, and cradled her hand.

"Dear one, we have all the time in the world, don't we? Fated mates have a lifetime to settle in. For my part, I will do or say or promise anything to get your heart where mine is today. And once it is, our lives together will be golden."

Addison's defenses, what was left of them, fell away. She sat closer to her man and let a lighthearted mood overtake her. Finding her fated mate had never occurred to her. Maybe as a little girl, one could dream. She'd always understood she had a royal duty to marry whoever her parents had selected, regardless of what it meant for her. But for that selection to also be her fated mate, to still have a chance at love, the fact simply took her breath away.

Her mind raced. She thought about shifter pageantry and royal events. She imagined being by his side to help the pack

and kingdom rise to bigger heights. Regal images swirled in her brain of ladies-in-waiting, of finery never before seen, and of no end to the happiness because she had found the man she was always meant to find.

“Tyler, I am afraid to accept all this.”

“Why?”

“Because what if it’s just a dream? What if I wake up and you’re not here, holding me, confessing your heart to me?”

Tyler laughed. “Oh, this is not a dream, Addison. It’s what fate has planned for us. There is not one adviser in my court who doesn’t think the same about you. You have won over everyone with the courage of your convictions. They have told me so. You are my queen already. You’re just the last one in the realm to realize it, my dear.”

Addison blushed and laughed. Her eyebrows raised to say *maybe he was right*. She was the last to realize the inevitable, natural evolution of a couple who would bring the realm out of the rogue pack, dark ages, and into the light.

Tyler slapped his knee. “And now, onto other, more urgent business. What is your wish for that little girl who desperately holds onto your skirts?”

“Cassia?” Addison flipped her head back in a full-throated laugh. “Oh, you mean my brand-new shadow? Ah, yes. Isn’t she just the sweetest little child you’ve ever seen? I can’t believe her mother could treat her so horribly.”

“Right. So there is no returning the little tot to a home life like that. Have you had any thoughts about her future? The pack will handle the adults, but we’ll need a plan for the children.”

“Well, yes, I have, in fact. Tyler, I’m not sure how you will view my wish, but here it is. I want desperately to give Cassia a safe and loving home with a mother and father she can trust and learn to love. And I think that mother and father are you and me.”

It was Tyler’s turn to be shocked. The admission by his queen stunned him into silence.

“Tyler, please, let us adopt her.”

EIGHT



TYLER

Tyler knew he was making Addison panic with every second he didn't respond. He saw how attached Cassia was to Addison. But more than that, he saw how attached Addison was to the little girl. The bond between the adoptive daughter and mother already existed. And because he adored Addison so, whomever she loved, he knew he would adore. Tyler smoothed away Addison's worry lines with the tip of his thumb.

"Trouble yourself no more, darling. Of course, we can adopt Cassia. What better place could she be raised than with us in Somberglen Castle?"

"Oh, Tyler." Addison hugged her king with all her might, which made Tyler uproariously laugh. His wolf yipped in delight at making his mate happy.

"What made you agree to adoption? I know you must look at it as a serious move, given we have just bonded ourselves."

Tyler spread his arms with upturned hands. "Oh, that was a fairly easy decision for two reasons. First, I will give you anything you desire. Second, I adore children. Secretly, I've always wanted a house full of them laughing, playing, and running about. After all, aren't children what makes a house a home?"

Addison wiped tears from her eyes, hugged Tyler once more, and ran back to the shed, overflowing with joy, just as two enforcers left the building to await further instructions from their king.

“Ah, yes, Malcolm and Valerian. Now that I have settled things with my queen, I need you to move the children and the women to a larger house in a more convenient location. Might I suggest the large groundskeeper’s cottage on the other side of the lake by the castle? The old codger refuses to live in the cottage, preferring to rough it in that cabin he made for himself a while back. Make sure it’s outfitted with all the necessary supplies. Food, linens, and whatever Addison requires for the group. They may be there for a while, at least until we have thoroughly dealt with this rogue pack.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, right away,” chorused the two. The men bowed and marched off to arrange the transfer.

“Henry, I have a different task for you. You and I need to interrogate the rogues we’ve kept for questioning.”

“Your Majesty, you do not want to get your hands sullied by these two louts.”

“I will accompany you but observe from a distance. I’ll be there in case you require backup, as I don’t trust these pack members. They are out for blood anyway they can get it. We can’t take their behavior for granted, even if they are bound in chains. Has the mage arrived?”

“She is almost here, My King. But until she arrives, I would like to play with the prisoners.” Henry gave him a wink. The king detested torture, especially since they didn’t need it to get what they wanted. But he’d let his enforcer have his “fun.”

Tyler watched as Malcolm and Valerian returned to the shed to round up the small group. When he knew all was well, he and Henry made their way to the shack where the two remaining rogues were held.

Henry opened the door for Tyler. Inside, the single room was cloaked in darkness, save for a couple of lanterns burning on a simple pine table. In wooden chairs sat the chained prisoners. By the looks on their faces, they were ready for what they thought was to come.

Tyler took a seat in the corner nearest the door while Henry began the “interrogation.”

“Well, well, what do we have here? A couple of miscreants, losers, who are lucky to be alive. How has the questioning been going so far, men?”

The one guard spoke up. “We have yet to obtain the pack’s permanent lair location, the strength of the pack, weapons caches, or their current location in the realm.” The guard smacked the one prisoner with his hand for good measure. The rogue cried out in pain.

“Hmm, seems like we picked two tough cookies. What is the main reason for the attack? Any results there?” Henry slowly walked around the two chained men, leaning in close as he growled out his query.

“We were working on that when you arrived, sir.”

Henry pulled out a small dagger and looked at it with interest as he spoke. “Do either of you know what an orchiectomy is?”

Tyler almost laughed out loud. He couldn’t believe Henry was doing this ploy.

When neither prisoner said anything, Henry continued with the small knife. “Well,” he said, “I’ll tell you how the procedure is done.”

Henry lunged forward and swung the blade down to one of the rogues’ groin. “First, a small incision is made just above your pubic area, then your testicles are pushed up and removed through the hole.”

All the color in the two men’s faces drained.

“Of course,” Henry said, “the procedure won’t kill you. We’ll let you live. But will you really want to after that?”

One of the men opened his mouth, and the other kicked him and growled. These shifters truly were not giving up information. No matter. He would still get what he wanted out of them.

With a knock on the door, his guard's playtime came to an end. "Oh, darn," Henry said, sheathing his dagger. "It was fun while it lasted." The enforcer opened the door to a frail-looking female in a dark robe.

"You called, My King?" she asked.

Henry nodded to the chained shifters. She entered without a word and stood behind the first seated rogue. Her hands lay on both sides of his head.

"Please begin," she whispered and bowed her head.

Henry asked his first question. "Where is the rogue pack's home base?"

The prisoner said nothing, but the mage said, "At the outpost on the edge of the kingdom."

Both rogues gasped, and Tyler smiled. With magic, reading minds was as easy as pie. No torture or injury is needed. But there was the problem of the brain exploding if the person mentally fought too hard to keep thoughts hidden. He hoped that didn't happen, but he would do anything to get the intel to keep his queen safe.

In response to the next question Henry asked, the mage replied for the prisoner. "The Fleetfoot pack was hired to assassinate the queen, Your Majesty."

Tyler rocketed out of his chair with a shout. "Who? Who ordered such a thing to be done?"

The prisoner, with his thoughts being scanned, found his tongue. "Sir, we don't know."

Tyler strode up to the man and stared at the mage, waiting for her reply.

"He speaks the truth," she said. "He has no knowledge of the name."

Henry drew his dagger. "Then we have no further use for you." He stepped forward as if to slit the chained man's throat.

"No! Please! We will describe the messengers who came to the lair that night. Clothing, looks, anything you need to

know! I beg you. We did not hear the conversation as our alpha ordered us out of the room, but we could describe them.”

Tyler smiled to himself and motioned for Henry to come to the door. In a whisper, he spoke. “Get what you can from these fools. I suspect they know less than nothing. But get what you can, then take them to the dungeons.”

Henry nodded. Tyler met the mage’s eyes, silently letting her know to keep doing what she was to drag the needed information out of the rogues. With that, he left with too many questions in his mind.

Who could hate me enough to do such evil to my mate? He shall not live a single minute more if ever I meet the bastard. And now he had a daughter to protect as well. His wolf’s determination solidified. He would do anything and everything to keep those he loved safe.

Tyler’s footfalls slammed hard against the well-trodden path. He knew well where his future lay. And how to get there.

NINE



ADDISON

Addison surveyed all the baskets and packages the guards carried to their new cottage hideout. She was thankful for such a large space where the women and the children had room to live and play. The collected group only totaled seven in all, four children and three women, but they still needed room to spread out and get comfortable. Even now, the children were outside enjoying fresh air and games in the grassy field, something they obviously hadn't experienced in a long time, if ever.

“It looks like you have been well-supplied by our alpha. I'm relieved to see that. More beds, more linens, and even new dresses. I believe my king has thought of everything you might need.”

“Oh, My Queen, the food. Just look at all the food. In the Fleetfoot pack, when the larder was near empty, the alpha would come in the dead of night and raid what was left. He would keep it for himself while, in the morning, the rest of us starved. He didn't even give us anything for the babies and toddlers, and they would cry day and night.”

Addison shuddered inwardly at the thought of the toddlers around her now literally crying for food.

“Well, tonight, we shall have a celebratory meal. A huge feast. There's cold roast duck, and we can boil the tubers. Look at the parsnips and the red potatoes. I can whip up some mashed potatoes and applesauce for the children. We will have a glorious meal.”

The women clapped and cheered. All hands came on deck to peel, slice, boil, and bake. Not one of the females complained a whit. Everyone worked in harmony, grateful for a safe place to call home.

Once most of the preparation was done, the three women and Addison sat around the butcher block kitchen table for a steeped tea and chitchat. And although it started out light, about recipes and tips for cooking over an open flame, the conversation soon turned dour.

“Addison, you have no idea the amount of abuse and torture we lived through each day. A hit with a fist or a club, and for the littlest of things,” one woman, Jacinda, said.

Letitia spoke next. “Yes, and God help us if we women did not make a bed properly or burned a flank of beef. It would mean being lashed on the back, twenty, forty, or more strikes.”

Kinley joined in. “We were so grateful when your king and his pack arrived, Addison. We knew to keep straight faces and stay quiet while you were there, but our hearts sang when you took us with you. I’ve never known joy and relief like that in all my born days.”

The women chorused in agreement, murmuring their gratitude.

Jacinda stood from the table and raised her teacup in a toast. “On behalf of all of us here, I pledge our fealty unto death to Tyler and Addison, our new and great king and queen!”

“Hip, hip, hooray!” all of them chorused, clinking their teacups together.

Addison stood next. “You have taken the words right out of my mouth. I was about to ask for your pledge. The Somberglen pack is a devoted one. We demand utter loyalty from cradle to grave. Tyler and I will expect nothing less if you mean to stay with us. If you stray, if you commit a treasonous act, you will be dealt with in the harshest terms. The realm is a fierce place. Your new king must know he can

count on you, trust you, even with his own life. I'm sure you can appreciate my words."

"Wholeheartedly, My Queen," Jacinda said once more.

All echoed the same.

Kinley said, "We will easily do as you wish, for we all want a better life than the torturous one we just fled. We were taken against our will and made to submit to a terrible existence. You and your king are giving us a second chance at life. We owe you more than you ask. We owe you our lives."

"Hear, hear!" the women sang again.

Addison smiled. Tyler would have nothing to fear from his new subjects.

Just then, the front door swung open, and in the doorway stood Tyler. Her wolf.

Immediately, the women huddled close. They kept still and said not a word.

Addison looked around the table, and she recognized the trauma. No more stories would be needed. She could tell abuse had been inflicted on these poor souls by a man's hand. The sight of Tyler, their king no less, still ignited the awful physical and mental response.

Tyler looked quizzically at the women, and Addison let the reaction go for now. It would be for another private chat with her alpha to describe this frightful effect. He would need to learn how not to be so overbearing in his greetings.

Tyler pulled Addison to the threshold and kept his voice low, not wanting to frighten the women any further. With a hand to his face, he leaned down to confide in his mate.

"I came here to let you know we got what we needed from the prisoners. Or as much as they knew, anyhow. They told us the member who attacked you was hired by someone else, but they've told us where we can find that person."

"And what have you done with those rogues now?"

“It’s best you don’t know, Addison. I came here to inform you that Louis and I and a squad of enforcers will be going to the location they gave to see if they’re correct.”

“And if they are?”

“Then we will know we have the upper hand. We will find the person behind this, learn their reasons, and eliminate the problem. Nobody attacks the queen or my people and gets away with it, Addison. Nobody.”

Addison was afraid to ask any more questions, fearing Tyler’s answers would be too grim. He did not become an alpha by shirking responsibilities or distasteful actions. The less she knew about those things, the better.

“While I’m gone, there will be a contingent of guards in a circular perimeter around the cottage, two enforcers outside the door, and one on the ground floor front room you can call out to at any time for anything.”

Addison nodded and smiled.

“Do you have everything you need until I get back home?”

“More than. Your men have given us the world here in supplies.”

“Good. We will have to figure out what to do with the women and children next. They came to us with nothing, so we’ll need resources and a plan.”

“Yes, that has been on my mind. I’m going to talk to the women tonight once the children are asleep. I’m certain we can find them more permanent lodging, but some of them may have family somewhere. One thing I have learned is that none of these women are the children’s mothers. They all seem to be orphans, but Cassia and I won’t return Cassia to that cruel woman.”

“Of course not. I support whatever decision you make, my dear. I’m confident you can find the best solution for everyone. You already have everything in hand.”

“Yes, I do. But I won’t have you.”

“And I won’t have you. But as king and queen, it is our duty to lead our people. Sometimes that will come with great sacrifice, but in the end, so much satisfaction and joy.”

Addison thought to voice the fear she held about Tyler heading back into the lion’s den. But that would not help her king do what he must. So she held her tongue and smiled confidently at him instead. Her mate would be at his best if he knew he could count on her.

Tyler leaned down and stole a light kiss. And before she could kiss him back or form words, he turned on his heel to return to the castle. She wondered if it was because tears filled his eyes like they did hers.

Addison watched her brave shifter stalk off into the deep pines. When he was out of sight, she stepped out the cottage door, clapped her hands, and, with a confident voice, called out to her fold, playing in the yard.

“Okay, my little ones, chop-chop. To eat, then to bed. We women have a lot to do.”

The four children cheered and ran inside for their place at the massive table. Their eyes were wide. Their mouths were watering. They had clearly never seen such a plentiful spread.

The women also sat down, with Addison at the table head. The women talked lively, ate, and drank well throughout the meal, but not their queen. Addison’s stomach was already too full with dread.

TEN



TYLER

Tyler arrived at the camp the rogue had told them about. Luckily, this wasn't another rogue camp. Instead, it was more of an outpost for loners and wanderers. Not made up of the most savory crowd, they kept to themselves for the most part.

Rogues were also known to pass through here. Tyler left them alone as long as they kept to themselves and didn't cause trouble. And those who lived there seemed to understand that arrangement.

Until now ...

The alpha who ran the outpost sometimes shared information with him. Hopefully, he would have more answers about the rogues' mysterious benefactors. And if he didn't, Tyler was going to tear apart the outpost looking for some.

When he arrived, the alpha was already waiting outside for him. Hugh was a gruff-looking older man who had been alpha for a long time now. Tyler had a well-earned respect for the man as well. He never beat around the bush or tried anything underhanded.

"Your Majesty, what brings you to my outpost?" Hugh said by way of greeting, dipping his head.

Tyler didn't bother with pleasantries. "I'll cut right to the chase. A few villages have been attacked by a group of rogues. And then someone tried to kill my betrothed just a few days ago. I managed to wrangle some information from one of the rogues, and he said they were hired by someone from here."

Hugh's features darkened. "I'd heard about the attacks on the villages. We've even had a few refugees pass through here. Can't say I know much about those, but the attack on your betrothed, on the other hand, I might know something about that."

Tyler's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What do you know?"

The other alpha raised a hand defensively, though his voice remained calm. "I don't know who specifically attacked her the other day. But I wouldn't expect it to be the last one."

Was that a threat? No, Hugh was smarter than to threaten him openly. And he'd never portrayed any desire to grab power further than his outpost.

"I've heard rumors circulating about a high bounty for a royal," Hugh continued. "Naturally, I had my people look into it. It turns out that there's quite a high amount on the head of your Addison."

His blood froze in his veins. Someone had put a bounty on his soon-to-be wife ... on his *mate*. Anger boiled inside him at the thought. An almost unconscious growl escaped him.

"Who?" he all but snarled.

Hugh shook his head. "I don't know. All I know is that the word has been well spread. It might not even have originated here. I do know that every rogue and loner is going to be looking for a way to get to Addison and collect that bounty."

Tyler snarled. "They won't collect anything if I get my hands on them first."

The other alpha barked out a laugh. "I don't doubt that for an instant. Nonetheless, these young fools might still try their luck."

He hammered down his anger enough to remember why he'd come here in the first place.

"I still have information saying that someone out of *here* is paying rogues to attack," Tyler reminded the other alpha.

Hugh sighed and shook his head. "Someone at the outpost very well could have paid off some rogues to go wreak havoc.

That doesn't mean they're still here. If they were smart, whoever you're looking for probably came here to hire rogues and then bailed after that."

Tyler let out a growl of frustration. Hugh was probably right. Which meant this had been a dead end.

He nodded in acknowledgment toward the other alpha. "Thank you for your cooperation."

Hugh dipped his head. "Happy to oblige."

Tyler turned swiftly from him. He needed to get back to the capital city *now*.

On the way back, he contemplated calling ahead and making sure Addison was okay. Or better yet, having several of his best shifters take her to a safe room and guard her. However, she'd be furious if he did.

A million possibilities swirled in his mind of how she could be harmed. One of the rogues could have broken free. What if they hadn't really captured all of the pack, as he had thought?

Maybe he *should* make that call. But Addison would protest about whatever plans he enacted to take her away from the women and children. She was home on the castle grounds, which was one of the safest and most secure places she could be. Her guards should be sufficient for the time being, and she was committed to taking care of those they rescued. If he tried to derail her now, he would never hear the end of it.

He would see to her safety himself when he arrived and make her understand the danger she was in.

And he *would* keep her safe.

In record time, he arrived at his castle in the capital city and saw his beta waiting for him. Tyler quickly marched up to him.

"Has Addison been in sight the whole time? Are the guards keeping an eye on things?" he demanded.

His beta nodded. "Of course. All is well here, though the guards have to keep pretty quiet and stay out of her way. She

doesn't like knowing they're following her all the time."

A tension that he hadn't even realized had been building in him was suddenly at ease. Good, no one had tried anything again. At least not yet.

"Where is she now?" Tyler asked.

"She's helping the women and children settle into their rooms. For now, she's given them all a place in the castle in the guest wing. I think she's started a list to make sure everyone has what they need." Louis told him.

Tyler nodded. "Thank you." And then he quickly went off to find his betrothed.

Just as Louis said, she was talking with the women. The little girl, Cassia, clung to her side.

Addison noticed his approach and gave him a questioning look. Tyler came up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "I need to speak with you for a moment. Alone."

She frowned but began to extract herself from the circle of women. Cassia let out a noise of protest, and Addison smoothed her hair and smiled down at her. "This will only take a moment. I'll be right back."

The girl seemed satisfied enough with that answer and released her hold on Addison. Tyler pulled his betrothed off to the side and pulled her close to him. He'd done it so the others wouldn't be able to hear, but it was almost intoxicating now that she was so close. Her scent was so utterly perfect that all he wanted to do was draw her even closer.

He mentally kicked himself. He needed to focus. There were more pressing matters right now.

"Did you find out who was behind all these attacks?" Addison asked.

Tyler shook his head. "No. I did, however, find out something dire. Someone has put a bounty on you."

Addison stiffened.

“We need to figure out a plan to protect you,” Tyler continued. “Something to ensure your safety.”

She nodded, still looking a little shell-shocked. “Yeah, I guess so. What did you have in mind?”

“We need to get you out of the kingdom. We can send you to hide with one of your sisters or parents.”

Addison set her jaw. “No.”

Tyler balked, and the wolf inside him growled. Hadn't she understood what he'd just said?

“I know you're trying to protect me, but I won't run,” she told him. “And I have a responsibility to these women. What kind of future queen would I be if I just ran?”

“I'm trying to keep you *alive*,” he retorted. “You can't be any kind of queen if you're dead.”

She shook her head. “This person put a bounty on my head. If they want to take me so badly, then who's to say they won't follow me wherever I go? I'd rather stand and fight than be hunted down like an animal.”

Her gaze was like liquid fire. A set and unshakeable determination settled in her eyes. “Let me stand with you and fight. Let's face this enemy together.”

A part of him screamed at how incredibly stubborn and rash she was being. Every instinct in his body wanted to haul her away to the farthest corners of the world, away from here. And yet, he couldn't help the small part of him that was exceptionally proud.

ELEVEN



ADDISON

“Addison.” The warning in his tone would’ve made most people shudder. But Addison simply jutted her chin out more. There was no way she would leave all these people behind while she ran and hid.

“Look,” she began before he could lecture her again. “If we stay and work together, then we have more of a chance of defeating whoever is attacking us. And if you take me away from here, you’ll have *two* fights on your hands.”

Tyler held her gaze as if searching for something in her eyes. Finally, he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine. As long as you promise you won’t throw yourself into danger.”

Addison thought about it for a moment. If she was going to make a promise, she wanted to be able to keep it.

After considering it for a moment, she answered. “I’ll stay out of trouble if I can. But I also have a duty to protect those women and children. I won’t abandon them if they’re in danger.”

From the way his mouth twitched downward, he was obviously not thrilled about that addition. Addison held her ground, however. She wouldn’t let these people down.

He nodded, and she noted the respect in his gaze. “Very well. But otherwise, you stay out of danger.”

Addison allowed a smile to quirk up onto her lips. “I will.”

“Good. I’ll put out the word and try to get a hit on whoever could have set the bounty.”

She nodded. “And if they catch word of where I am, there’s bound to be another attack on the palace. We’ll need to upgrade security around here. Luckily, you just so happen to have a tech genius around.”

That got a smile from him. “I most certainly do. For now, I’ll let you get back to moving the refugees in. I’ll send out trackers to see what I can find.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Evening rolled around quickly, and Addison was worn out by the time she was able to sit down after settling everyone. But at least all were comfortable now and felt more at ease.

After putting Cassia to bed in a room down the hall from her own, Addison debated just flopping straight into bed. Then she remembered that she and her sisters had scheduled a call for tonight. She didn’t want to miss out on that, especially since they didn’t get to talk as much as they were used to. Addison checked her phone and saw she was already a little late to their call.

She set up her laptop on her makeup table and jumped into the conference call. The images of her sisters popped up on screen, and their faces lit up with joy.

“Addison!”

“There you are!”

“Well, well, well, look who decided to show up.”

Addison snorted. “Hey. How’s everyone doing?”

Taryn, the second youngest, shrugged. “Can’t complain. Everything’s been pretty peaceful here right now. Thank goodness, I needed a break from all the craziness.”

“I hear you on that one,” Lexi, the youngest of them all, put in. “But I wouldn’t say everything’s been too peaceful. That would just be dull. Like the other day when I ...”

Addison tried to listen to her sister's story, but a sudden pang of longing hit her. She missed those nights when they were young and would sneak into each other's rooms to gossip all night. Or when they'd play pretend together and make up the most outrageous stories. Now, they had to travel to see one another or settle for a call.

"Addison, are you all right?" Madison's voice broke her out of her thoughts. Addison sighed. Leave it to her twin to pick up on her sudden mood change.

She decided to tell them what was going on. They'd probably hear about it anyway eventually. And they'd be furious about hearing it secondhand instead of directly from her.

"Someone is hiring rogue shifters to attack our villages," she told them.

There were varying mutters of shock. Time for the kicker.

"And on top of that, someone's put a bounty on me."

There was stunned silence for a moment, and then they were all talking at once.

"What!"

"Were you attacked?"

"Who put a bounty on you?"

"Are you okay?"

"Since when!"

Addison put her hands up in an attempt to calm them down. "Whoa, hold on there. Let me take those questions one at a time. Thank you. Yes, I was attacked once. We don't know who put the bounty out, only that it's enough to have a bunch of rogues after me. Yes, I'm okay, just a little scraped up. Tyler was there and shifted into wolf form to handle it. Then, he and his shifters hunted down the pack behind it. And I only found out about the bounty today, so I promise I haven't been keeping this from you."

Her sisters only looked a little more relaxed.

Lexi snorted. “Who knew our lives would only become more complicated once we moved out? I always thought the worst thing I’d have to deal with is bullying about being half-human.”

Addison would have hugged her little sister if she’d been there in person. Leave it to Lexi to break the tension.

“No kidding,” Taryn put in. “What can we do to help?”

Addison smiled at them. “Distract me. Tell me everything that’s been going on in all of your lives. I’ve missed you all so much.”

Lexi and Taryn immediately started telling her all about the people they’d met and the things they’d been doing. They told her about how their mates were faring and silly little stories of things that had been happening.

Madison, though, was quiet. Addison knew her twin wasn’t about to just let this conversation go. And really, if their roles had been switched, neither would Addison.

It was just the special bond between twins that couldn’t be explained. Not that she didn’t have a strong bond with her other two sisters. Of course she did. But she and Madison had always been at each other’s side since the very beginning.

A creak of her door had Addison jumping in her seat, whipping around to see who was there. Peeking in shyly was Cassia. “Addison, I’m sorry to bother you, but I got scared. Can I sit with you for a little bit?”

Addison’s heart melted, and she held an arm out to the girl. “Of course, sweetheart. Come here. I’m just talking to my sisters.”

Cassia immediately rushed over to her and snuggled into her lap. There were gasps and coos from her sister.

“Aww, who’s this?” Taryn asked.

Addison beamed. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet Cassia. I’ve decided to take her in.”

“Hi, Cassia.”

“Oh, my gosh, she’s so precious.”

“We are going to have to visit soon.”

“Congratulations.”

Cassia ducked her head at the attention but still waved meekly back to them.

“Addison, maybe the two of you should come to stay with me for a little while,” Madison urged her gently. “Or with our parents, or Taryn or Lexi. Just get away from there until all this blows over.”

She’d been wondering when her twin would finally voice her thoughts aloud.

“I know you’re worried about me, but I can’t leave. I won’t leave,” she amended. “We saved a bunch of women and children from the rogue camp, and I won’t abandon them. I need to see this through and keep them all safe.”

Madison sighed. “You’ve always been too stubborn for your own good.”

Addison barked out a laugh. “Please, that goes for all of us.”

They all laughed at that one. The rest of the call was more lighthearted, and after about an hour, they all said their goodnights to each other.

Addison noticed Cassia was barely awake in her lap.

“Come on. Let’s get you to bed, little one.”

Cassia made half-hearted protests but was clearly too sleepy to put up a real fight. Addison carried her into the room. She gazed lovingly at her new charge and smoothed the girl’s hair.

She crept quietly out of the room when Cassia’s eyes seemed to have drifted shut for the night. Then, she made her way toward the king’s chambers. She needed to find Tyler and talk with him.

TWELVE



TYLER

He heard the door of the bedroom open as he stood in the shower, his shifter senses already on alert.

That would be Addison. Even if he didn't know from the scent, it would have been obvious from the way she opened the door without knocking.

Perfect. Just who he wanted to see.

Addison always surprised him. Now, she had even brought a new child into the pack. Good, he decided. He looked forward to getting to know the nervous young thing. He wanted to see what she would grow into now that she was finally in a pack that would support her rather than tear her down.

She had grown attached to Addison so quickly. Surely, that meant the two of them shared some of their spirit. When she grew, Tyler believed Cassia would be every bit as confident and cunning as her new mother.

She would be an asset to the pack.

He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower.

Whoever had put the bounty on his fiancée wanted to hurt him and his people. Instead, they had made them stronger. That was good. That was the way things were supposed to be.

He dried himself off, then considered the bathrobe hanging on the back of the door.

No, he decided. It was only Addison out there. Wearing the bathrobe would be less fun. Besides, it would be wise to

approach her romantically.

He opened the door and stepped into the room. Addison sat on the bed, and the moment she saw his naked body, her eyes widened. She looked to the side, blushing.

She was aroused. Good. They had that in common.

“I wanted to talk about Cassia,” she said, doing her best to sound calm and unperturbed. The act couldn’t fool his sensitive shifter nose. She was full of the same thoughts he was.

He sat on the bed next to her. “Is she settling in all right?”

“Better than I expected, actually,” Addison replied. “I took her to the park with some of the other children. She was shy for the first hour or so, mostly staying in her own corner. But eventually, she joined one of their games and started having fun. She’s got a beautiful laugh.”

Tyler smiled. Everything was always easier when the members of his pack got along by themselves. “I look forward to hearing it myself.”

Addison smiled. “Anyway, I was wondering if I could take her to the healer.”

“What for? Is she injured?”

She shook her head. “No, but she’s still self-conscious about her defect. One of the other children pointed it out, and she just went silent for a little while. I wanted to see if there was anything the healer could do.”

“You can ask if you want,” Tyler said. “But I’d be surprised. The healing art is the power of repairing the body, not altering it. It can’t make Cassia’s body into a different body.”

“You’re probably right,” Addison said, looking down. “I just want to be sure we’ve tried everything. I know how hard it can be to have a defect.”

The moment the word crossed her lips, Tyler’s eyes flared, and he straightened up to his full height.

“Who told you that you have a defect?” he hissed.

Addison shrunk back. “Well, you know. I can’t shift. I’m a half-blood.”

Tyler laid his hand on the bed and crawled over Addison. “Some people find their power in shifting. You found it in technology and in caring for others. Your body is not a defect. I would like to see anyone who believes so strongly in shifting make themselves as beautiful as you are right now, for even a moment.”

He growled slightly and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled. He appreciated that she didn’t flinch or pull herself away. She was a brave and beautiful girl.

He caressed her face with his fingers. “I want to show you just how beautiful your body is.”

She relaxed, and he kissed her on the neck.

“I want to love your body the way that you should love your body.”

His hands slipped under her shirt and pulled it over her head. Her body lay on top of the covers, smooth, glowing, and luscious. He could just see the tips of her nipples poking against her white bra.

He lay his chest against her stomach, and they felt each other’s warmth and passion flowing through their skin.

He wrapped his hand around the center of her bra and, after checking for a quick nod from her, tore it away, too. Her breasts were every bit as beautiful as the rest of her body. He cupped the right one and gently squeezed. She shivered in pleasure.

“Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted to do this?” he whispered to her.

“I wish you’d done it sooner,” she said.

He took one of her nipples into his mouth while his hand explored between her legs. First, he touched her through her skirt, producing a gentle, warm feeling, but he quickly slipped his hand under the fabric and touched her directly.

She was wet and inviting, and the moment his finger reached her, she moaned and arched her back. The two of them pressed into each other, feeling the other's strength against their bodies.

“I don't regret any of the time I've spent with you.”

He kissed down her stomach, over her belly button, and to the edge of her skirt. Finally, he grabbed her skirt and underwear with both hands and pulled them down. Addison worked them down her legs and off as he stared down at her fully naked body.

“You really think I'm beautiful?” Addison said. Tyler let out another growl, this one softer and more friendly.

“I think that you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.”

His cock stood straight up, hard and erect, as if answering her question itself.

“Please,” she whispered. “I want you inside me.”

Tyler looked down into her beautiful eyes and at her hair splayed over the pillow. He bent his elbows, and the two of them kissed passionately on the lips. They were both full of excitement ... full of the desire to keep exploring each other.

The tip of his cock teased the wet, warm lips of her pussy. The two of them locked eyes, and then, with a single, confident motion, Tyler pushed deep inside of Addison.

“Oh, fuck,” she said breathlessly and pushed back on him.

“You are perfect,” he told her. “You are everything I've ever wanted.”

This was a moment Tyler had been waiting for ever since she had come to his castle. This was the moment their relationship became real. It was his when he would mark her as his queen and a member of his pack forever. Tyler had waited a long time for this moment, and it had only become sweeter for the wait.

She was his. She was his love, and he was hers.

And no rogue assassin or plot in the north would take her from him ever again. Whatever happened to them from now on, they would face it together. And because they were together, they would win.

THIRTEEN



ADDISON

Addison wasn't thinking about what this moment meant for their relationship or where it would lead. From the moment that Tyler had first kissed her, she had decided to simply let go and follow her instincts. Her wolf side was there even if she couldn't shift, and maybe her instincts would guide her to him. After all, that was what was supposed to happen to fated mates.

But for now, none of that mattered. All that mattered was this moment, the tingling heat all through her body and the surges of pleasure every time Tyler pressed into her.

Maybe this is what love and fated mates are really about, she thought, wrapping her arms around Tyler's body and pressing herself against him. *Maybe a fated mate is just someone you can be yourself around and not have to worry about it.*

She kissed his shoulder and his neck before finding his chin. As they kissed, she felt his fingers toy with her nipple.

"You're amazing," she moaned, running her fingers down his back.

"You're mine," he replied, and she felt how true it was. She was his, and she relaxed entirely into that.

He leaned back and paused to reach his hand down to touch her clit directly. Again, he drove in and out, and she realized how close she was.

Her whole body tensed, and then came the release. Waves of pleasure surged through her body as she felt the twitching

of his cock inside her. Everything that had been scaring and overwhelming her lifted at that moment. All that mattered was this moment, this perfect feeling right now.

He pulled out and lay next to her. Immediately, she rolled over and laid her head on his chest. His breath gently raised and lowered her head up and down, up and down.

For a while, they sat there silently, both feeling their body and each other's presence. It was like sitting by the ocean and watching the waves on the shore. Everything was soft and warm, and there was no hurry to any of it. They were perfectly safe and happy together.

Tyler wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and she adjusted to get comfortable.

She could imagine making a home with this man. They could live a happy life together. They really were going to have it all through some miraculous twist of fate.

“So,” Tyler said finally. “Does this change things between us?”

Addison shrugged. “Probably. Heck, maybe we’ll even get married,” she teased.

Tyler smirked. “Sex before marriage. Very modern of us.”

“Give or take the castle,” Addison added.

They looked into each other's eyes and laughed.

“Speaking of the castle, I’d like to do something about the security,” Tyler announced suddenly. “Whatever is happening, it’s clearly a lot larger than that one rogue pack. And we know the bounty will bring in every money-hungry rogue in the kingdom.”

She groaned. “Do we really have to talk about security at a time like this? I’m too happy to think about that.”

“There’s also the possibility that Cassia will become a target once it spreads that she’s part of our pack and connected to you. We’ll have to keep an eye on her, as well as amping up the general security measures for the castle.”

“You really think so?” Addison said, rolling over to lie next to Tyler. “I don’t know. I just worry that being followed around by security guards will scare her. I mean, hasn’t she had enough violence in her life already?”

Tyler thought about the kind of people who worked in his security detail. “You might have a point. But you’re right. We can talk about this in the morning over breakfast.”

“Is there something you’d rather talk about now?”

He looked at her and grinned. “There is. And she’s lying right next to me.”

“You want to talk about me?” She was genuinely surprised.

“I want to get to know you,” he answered. “We haven’t really gotten the chance, and I don’t think we’re going to get a better opportunity for a while.”

She shrugged. “If you like. I can’t say there’s that much to know about me.”

He rolled on top of her, his face almost touching hers. “I thought we already had that conversation.”

“I’m just saying you probably have the basic idea. I’m a princess. I like hanging out with my sisters. I’m good with computers. That’s pretty much the idea.”

“Those are the surface details,” Tyler said, moving back to her side, where he propped his head up with his hand. “I want to know about you. What makes you get up in the morning? What makes you happy?”

“You can ask whatever you want,” Addison replied, blushing slightly. “I just might not be as exciting as you hoped.”

“As exciting as me, you mean?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, you’re already ruling a kingdom. And you’re used to people trying to kill you, or at least you sure make it look that way.”

“I may have seen a thing or two,” Tyler admitted.

“I just don’t have anything like that in my life. I don’t want you to be bored.”

“You think that’s all exciting because you haven’t done it.” He stared into the distance for a moment. “I was born a prince. I was born a shifter. There was no choice but to step up to it. Same with having enemies. They came after me. All I did was survive.”

“You could have been a bad prince.”

He sighed. “And who would have paid the price for it?”

“My point exactly.”

He lay there, silent, thinking that over. “Well, you’re just entering into my world, and you’ve already fought off an attacker, killed a rogue, and attacked a woman to save a child.”

“I guess I did, at that.”

“That, to me, sounds like someone I’d like to know. It’s easy to be brave when you’re already a wolf, but you were brave even without that. Which brings me to my first question.”

“Hit me.”

“What’s your favorite kind of music?”

Addison laughed. “My favorite kind of music? I was expecting some deep, soul-searching question.”

“Well, maybe we’ll get to that,” Tyler said. “But we’ve all got to start from somewhere.”

She thought for a little. “I guess I like jazz. I don’t know why. I think it’s because there’s so much space for the musicians to just play around and show off how good they are. More than most genres, it’s just about being able to let people know what you can do. And I think that’s neat.”

“And you said that wasn’t a deep, soul-searching question.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, maybe my soul just isn’t buried all that deep. Anyway, it’s my turn now. What do you usually do with your evenings? Before I got here, I mean?”

“I spend much of my time reading in my study,” he answered. “Or when I’m tired of that, sometimes I’ll go out and just feel the moonlight on me and the ground beneath my feet.”

“As a human or a wolf?”

“You don’t get two questions.” Tyler’s eyes narrowed. “It’s my turn, and I get a harder one. For someone who’s worried that their life won’t be interesting enough for their own fiancée to want to know, how do you always manage to come off so confident?”

Addison felt a tugging sensation in her heart. She hadn’t expected Tyler to cut that deep or even to pay such close attention.

“I guess I’ve made peace with not being that interesting,” she finally said. “Maybe it’s a middle sister thing. But I figure that whether someone’s looking or not, I might as well do what I want. If I’m going to do something, I should do it as well as I can, right?”

Tyler wrapped his arm around and pulled her onto his chest. She closed her eyes and could almost feel herself sinking into him.

Tyler and Addison continued trading and answering questions, but they both started choosing sillier ones, like what toys she had played with as a kid or what he liked doing on the weekend. Eventually, the spaces between their questions got longer and longer, and the answers got shorter and shorter, and she sank deeper and deeper into sleep.

Finally, they were both asleep, one on top of the other, and they could both feel that they were much closer than they’d ever been.

FOURTEEN



TYLER

Breakfast, it turned out, could be incredibly chaotic. Especially when you throw a bunch of children into the mix.

Children raced about, spilling food, and playfully taunting one another. Cassia, the youngest at four, ate more quietly than the others, but she kept grinning at the antics around her. There was also a six-year-old, Jacob, who was already coming out of his shell to be a sweet yet rowdy boy. Liddy was eight and a little bossy but whip-smart. Finally, there was Timon, the eldest at nine.

Tyler, for his part, loved every minute of it. He'd been thrilled when all of the children had agreed to join them in the formal dining room. Addison had wanted them to learn to be a part of a pack instead of some alpha's slave. And Tyler had agreed wholeheartedly.

Some of the women still felt too awkward to eat with a man just yet. Addison and Tyler respected their wishes, though they were both hopeful the rest would feel comfortable in time.

Jacob snatched a pancake from Timon's plate, who squawked in protest. "Hey! That's mine!"

"I'm the pancake monster! I steal all the pancakes." the thief teased.

In retaliation, Timon wadded up a napkin and threw it at Jacob. The self-proclaimed pancake monster then wadded up his napkin and threw it at Timon. Then, for no obvious reason, Liddy threw her napkin as well.

And to think that this room was usually filled with the most refined people in the kingdom. Nobles and royalty who had been well-trained in manners since they were young and never threw napkins at each other. Though the idea made him grin. He could think of a few he'd have liked to throw napkins at.

The other children began playfully stealing each other's food, turning the whole thing into a game.

This, Tyler decided, was better than any dinner he'd ever had in this room.

One thing that made it particularly enjoyable was his betrothed. Addison was such a natural with the children. She seemed to have made a connection with each one of them.

As the food fight started to get out of hand, Addison went into the center of the chaos. She put a gentle hand on the two children who had started the food fight.

"All right, that's enough roughhousing for now. I promise that we're not going to run out of pancakes anytime soon. So how about we put down the napkins and call a truce?"

"But I'm the pancake monster," the little boy protested.

Addison grinned. "But don't you know that pancake monsters can be defeated with an amazing hug?"

And then she squeezed Jacob in a tight embrace. The kid squirmed, but from the way he was laughing, he clearly didn't mind.

"Addison, I'm a pancake monster, too," Cassia shouted.

"Me too."

"I'm a pancake monster, too."

"You can't catch me."

All of the children had declared themselves pancake monsters and were goading Addison into noticing them. She sighed exaggeratedly. "Well, I guess it's amazing hugs for all of you then."

The kids all let out squeals as Addison began going around, wrapping each kid in a tight hug.

Tyler smiled at her in pure adoration. She was definitely maternal.

For a moment, he pictured the dining room at his castle filled with their own children. The faces he imagined had bits and pieces of each of their features. He wouldn't even mind if some of them were children they had taken in, just like Cassia. Every morning, they could have breakfast just like this. Maybe even with these four children.

His heart warmed at the thought. He wondered if Addison wanted as many children as he did. But as he watched her going around and hugging the children tightly, he was leaning toward assuming she was just as in favor of it as he was.

Just then, he locked eyes with his mate. Her eyes were shining with pure delight. Tyler vowed to always work to bring that much happiness to her.

Finally, Addison had "defeated" all the pancake monsters, and their empty plates were whisked away. Tyler rose from the table and clapped his hands. "I would like to take a run. Is anyone up for joining me? I can introduce you to my wolf, too."

All the kids cheered and raced to join him. Addison laughed and followed them outside. It was beautiful out this morning, and Tyler breathed in the fresh air. To his amusement, a few of the children copied him.

"All right, I'm going to shift now and let you meet my wolf," he told the children.

Some of them looked excited, while others seemed a little hesitant.

"It's okay," Addison soothed. "He's been doing this for a long time. His wolf has had time to mature."

With the kids now more reassured, Tyler went behind a line of trees to undress and shift. And in an instant, he was in his wolf form.

Seeing his wolf, a couple of the kids crept a little closer to him, their eyes wide. The others drew back toward Addison.

Tyler had to remind himself how young they all were. Most of their own wolf forms were probably still immature and unruly. They probably hadn't been taught much about shifting at the rogue camp, and that was not to mention all that they could have seen.

He had to suppress the rage he felt at that thought. Getting angry wouldn't ease the children.

"He's not going to hurt you," Addison reassured the children. "See, let me show you."

She came up to him and knelt, making him taller than her once more. Addison reached out a gentle, upturned hand and smiled at him. There was so much trust in that one smile. Trust that he wouldn't hurt her or even so much as growl at her.

It amazed him to think he had earned that trust from her. Slowly, he nuzzled his head into her hand, and she stroked his ears.

The kids were all coming a little closer now, but they were still keeping their distance. Addison grinned at them. "Don't worry, he won't bite if you don't make any sudden moves. In fact ..."

In one swift motion, she rose to her feet and jumped away from him. Tyler gave her a confused look, but she just grinned playfully.

"In fact, I don't think he could catch me if he tried," Addison taunted, and then she darted off.

Tyler understood now. She wanted to play and show the children he could be gentle. He chased after her.

Addison laughed wildly as she ran around, never straying too far from the kids. Tyler certainly could have caught her if he wanted to. After all, a human couldn't outrun a wolf. But this was a game, and the kids seemed to be thoroughly enjoying it.

They were all cheering on Addison from the sidelines and warning her when he got too close. He'd get just within grabbing distance of her and then slow down enough for her to get ahead of him again. Sometimes he'd even gently butt her in the back with his head, and she'd let out an exaggerated squawk.

Then he chased her toward the trees, and she quickly scrambled up a tall, thin birch.

“Quick! He’s got me trapped in a tree, and you have to come and save me!” she called out to the children, her tone overly dramatic.

The children let out loud, and frankly adorable battle cries, and one by one began to shift. They let out little howls as they came bounding to Addison’s rescue. They tried to tackle him, and Tyler playfully fended them off. Every time, he made sure to be gentle with them.

After several futile attempts to take him down, Addison called out with another order. “Dog pile him! He can’t take on all of you at once!”

The wolf children let out howls of agreement. Then, they tackled him to the ground and pinned him all at once. Tyler had to admit, it was a good strategy. Strength in numbers.

He looked up at Addison and could just barely make out her face in between the little bodies pinning him down. Her shoulders were shaking with laughter, and her eyes shone with fondness. Tyler did his best to smile back at her. The children were letting out little howls of victory above him.

Now that just wouldn’t do. If these kids were going to learn to fight properly, they needed a real challenge. He wiggled his way out from underneath them and then began to run. Behind him, he heard little howls and then the sound of several wolf children chasing after him.

Once again, he found himself pondering how he could ensure that this would be his future. The thought of him and his beautiful Addison working together to raise a whole brood

of little shifters made his heart warmer than maybe it had ever been.

FIFTEEN



ADDISON

Addison was exhausted. It had been a challenging few days. Her body hurt from the fighting and ached from the lovemaking. But she felt better than she had in a long while. Her life had a purpose. She was fighting for a cause, and she loved her fated mate. It lent a meaningful quality to the aches and pains she felt.

It had taken a while to get all of the orphaned kids to sleep. They were all restless and troubled being in a new place, even on their second night, even if it was a place with a soft, comfortable bed and clean, dry clothes.

Tyler had won them over in the end by telling them a story until they had fallen asleep one by one. He was so natural with them, the perfect dad.

She smiled again when she recalled the children playing with Tyler around the great hall. He had been so patient outside earlier as well when the kids practiced their shifting.

He might be a big, tough wolf when it came to running the kingdom, but underneath, he was a big softie. She wished she could have her own children with him, but she would be mortified if they couldn't shift. She wouldn't bring a child into this world that was doomed to the sort of ridicule she had received while growing up.

Maybe adoption was the answer. She was certain she wanted to adopt Cassia. The child was adorable. It had been interesting to note that the crescent-shaped birthmark remained when she shifted. It turned into a beautiful white crescent

moon in the fur on the side of her face. Addison thought it made her look magical rather than a freak.

I wonder if Tyler would consider adopting all four of them. We could start life with a ready-made family, she thought idly as she shut down the computer program she'd been working on. *He certainly seems to enjoy having them around.*

She was in the office doing more work on the digital security system. She'd been at it for a couple of hours, and she believed she had finally blocked the system from being hacked again. She'd also identified several blind spots around the castle and grounds where they needed extra cameras.

She became aware of a shadowy figure in the doorway and felt her heart leap in fright. She turned, ready to defend herself, but it was only one of the women they had rescued from the camp. She stood hovering in the doorway like she didn't know if she would be welcomed.

"Hi. It's Letitia, isn't it?" Addison asked. "You gave me a start."

"Yes, that's right." She looked nervous. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you. I should go," she said and made as if to leave.

"No," said Addison hurriedly. "Don't go. Come on in, what is it you need?"

The shifter woman entered the office sheepishly, looking around with big eyes. *These women have been so badly abused,* Addison thought with sadness.

"Come, sit down," Addison said, trying to make her feel at home. "Would you like coffee?"

"No, no coffee, thank you," Letitia said, smiling wanly. She took the chair opposite Addison, perching upright on the edge. Addison thought she looked like a bird prepared to fly away at the slightest provocation.

"It's a nice office," she said, looking around with her eyes wide.

“Thank you,” said Addison, not sure where this was going but not wanting to scare the poor thing away.

“Tyler isn’t here?” Letitia asked, peering around.

“No, he normally works here, but he’s off meeting with his enforcers. Do you want to speak with him?”

“No, not really,” the strange woman said. She sat with her hands clasped together in her lap, looking at the desk in front of her.

Addison wasn’t sure what to make of this. “How are you finding things here?” she asked when the silence became uncomfortable. “Is everything to your liking?”

“Oh, yes, it’s wonderful. You and Tyler have been very kind. All the women are very happy to have been rescued.”

Silence again.

“Is there something you wanted?” Addison asked, starting to feel a little vexed.

“Well, maybe,” Letitia said vaguely. “I heard you were going to adopt Cassia.”

“That’s correct, yes.” Addison wasn’t sure she liked where the conversation was going. She wished the woman would just get to the point.

“I’m sorry, I’m not making a good impression, am I? It’s been so long since I’ve been treated with respect, I’ve forgotten how to act,” admitted Letitia. “I wondered if you needed a nanny. Someone who knows the children. I’d like to be useful if you’d let me.”

Addison was relieved she had finally come out with it and felt bad that she had seemed so nervous about asking. She and Tyler had talked about keeping Cassia, but if it was up to her, she’d really like to keep all the orphans from the raid. If they did that, however, they were certainly going to need some help. She just wasn’t sure about putting that much trust in a total stranger.

“So you knew all the children at the camp?” asked Addison.

“Yes, of course. We were left to fend for ourselves most of the time, so the women would stick together to look after the children and each other. There was never much food to go around, so what we had, we shared.”

Both the women and the children were all emaciated. Addison had no problem believing they had been half-starved by the rogue bastards who had kept them in such appalling conditions.

“The free women weren’t treated much better than the slaves, to be honest,” Letitia went on. “Whatever we had, we would share with the slave women and children. It only seemed natural. I’m sure it’s what you would do, too.” She fixed Addison with a strange look that made her feel uncomfortable.

“You weren’t a slave then?” asked Addison. She wasn’t sure if it really made a difference if what Letitia was telling her was true.

“No, but we were all treated like shit. Well, the ones that didn’t fight alongside the men, anyway.” Letitia looked sad. “The fighting women were treated better than the rest of us. They looked down their noses at us and never helped or stood up for us when we were beaten.”

Shit thought Addison. I can’t look away from this. *Somehow, I have to offer these women a new beginning.*

“Thank you for rescuing us from there,” Letitia said sincerely. “I don’t know what we’d have done if you hadn’t. So many of us had already died because of illness or beatings.”

“Of course,” said Addison, feeling embarrassed. It made her feel sick, listening to what these women and children had endured. She’d only done what any decent person would have done, liberating them from their violent oppressors. It made her feel uncomfortable being thanked for it. “Look, I’ll talk with Tyler about you becoming our nanny. And I’ll see if we can find jobs for all of you around the castle if that’s what you all want?”

“That would be lovely. I’ll tell the girls. They will be so pleased.” Letitia stood. “I won’t take up any more of your time,” she said. “Thank you again, Princess. You will make a wonderful queen.”

She didn’t know what to do with Letitia’s flattery. She smiled and stood. “Please call me Addison,” she said, holding out her hand. “I’ve never much been one for airs and graces.”

Letitia shook it hurriedly. “Thank you, Addison,” she said shyly, then looking uncomfortable, she dashed from the room.

Addison hoped she wasn’t overstepping the mark with her offer. She just wanted these poor, oppressed women to feel at home here. Tyler had been in his meeting quite a while now. She decided she should find him and run the idea past him.

SIXTEEN



TYLER

Tyler and his enforcers had just finished up their official meeting about the current situation. Now, they all lounged around the game room, drinking, and trying to one-up each other in darts or shooting pool.

And though the atmosphere around them appeared calm, they were still trying to sort out their dilemma.

“We scoured that outpost for any trace of the person who paid off the rogues,” his beta said as he lined up his shot. “Nothing, not even someone who had seen them when the bounty was issued. It seems the word’s traveled mostly by way of mouth.”

Louis took the shot, and two of his balls fell in the pockets, much to the dismay of his opponent.

Tyler growled and took a swig of his drink. It seemed Hugh had been right about the mysterious benefactor bailing after issuing the bounty. And the fact that this person had been smart enough to not leave any traces behind spoke of a professional. Just who exactly were they dealing with?

It wasn’t as though he had a shortage of enemies. But the bounty had been placed on *Addison*, not him, which drove his wolf into a frenzy. Although the attacks on the villages suggested that it was a feud with him. And there was no better way to get to him than through his betrothed.

However, he doubted their attacker knew just how effective a weapon hurting Addison would be against him. And he hoped they never found out.

Or perhaps someone was taking advantage of the chaos to try to get to her.

“So, it’s another dead end then,” one of the enforcers, Valerian, said as he threw a dart, just missing the bull’s eye. “Where does that leave us?”

“With no leads and no new clues until someone else stirs up trouble,” Malcolm said. He picked up his own dart and threw it with ease, hitting the center spot dead on. Malcolm smirked, and Valerian groaned in frustration before shoving him out of the way to take another turn.

“So, where do we go from here?” Henry, who had the misfortune of playing billiards against Louis, asked.

“Continue to send out trackers and keep your ear to the ground. With the price on Addison, no one is going to let up anytime soon,” Tyler said and knocked back the rest of his drink.

His beta nodded. “Yes, Sire. I already have a few men deployed and keeping an eye on some other rogue camps. And we’re still keeping an eye on the outpost in case our mystery instigator decides to come back.”

Tyler nodded. He could always count on his beta to be on the same page as him.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to take your betrothed to another kingdom?” Malcolm asked. “We could have her over the border in a few hours.”

Tyler sighed. “No, we’ve agreed that she’ll remain here. As the future queen, she feels a responsibility to stay. I will honor that.”

Malcolm shrugged. “As you wish. It might be easier to guard her here in the palace anyway.”

“Yeah, the benefactor could have been counting on us moving her and had an ambush planned,” Valerian mused thoughtfully and then threw his dart, missing once again. He cursed colorfully.

Louis grunted. “Well, personally, I think they might ...”

Just then, the door opened, and Addison strode in. The room immediately fell silent. She looked around at them all and then frowned.

“So, you decided to go ahead and discuss plans to ward off the attacks without me. I don’t need all of you talking behind my back like I’m a scared child in need of protection. I may not be able to shift, but I did inherit other abilities from my father. Hearing, sight, strength.”

Her tone grew lower with every word. Tyler could practically feel the embarrassment and awkwardness radiating off his enforcers.

“We apologize. We really didn’t mean any disrespect ...” Valerian began, but Addison put up a hand to stop him.

“Stop, I don’t want to hear it. That’s not why I came here anyway.” She turned her attention to his beta. “Louis, I have a task for you.”

The beta straightened. “What would you ask of me, Highness?”

“There’s a woman, Letitia, who approached me earlier about possibly becoming a nanny for the children. I’m considering the idea, but I want you to look into the woman’s background first.”

Louis nodded. “It will be done.”

Tyler was impressed by the way Addison commanded his men with such ease.

“The little ones starting to get underfoot, Highness?” Malcolm quipped.

Addison offered him a smile. “No, but I can’t spend as much time with them as I like.”

“Should we allow this strange woman to care for these children?” Henry put in. “Perhaps we should consider someone we already know.”

“Are you volunteering?” Addison asked.

Henry sputtered a bit. “I, um, well ... it’s not that I don’t like children, I do. I just have no idea what to do with them.”

Valerian laughed at his fellow enforcer’s blunder. “Can’t say we’re much for babysitting, Highness. Louis will find out if this Letitia of yours is solid.”

Tyler nodded and stood from his chair. “Indeed. And now I believe it’s time we end our gathering. We all have our assignments.”

There was a chorus of “Yes, Sirs,” and the enforcers cleared the room. Tyler turned to Addison. “Walk with me?”

He escorted her back up to his room, where they could have more privacy to talk.

“You’re certain about this whole nanny idea?” Tyler asked.

Addison snorted. “I don’t know about you, but I know I can’t be with the children all the time. They need someone to look after them when we need to go after a lead or have meetings. We can’t have all our meetings after their bedtime, you know. It’s not a long-term solution.”

“It just seems strange having someone else taking care of them. Aren’t we sufficient?”

She smiled at him and put a hand on his arm. “She won’t be replacing us. She’d just be stepping in when we’re busy.”

That put him at ease, and he smiled at her. “All right then. As long as Louis approves it, we’ll let Letitia watch over the children.”

Her smile grew. “Glad you see it my way. So, do you want to talk now about what all you men were discussing?”

Tyler sighed. “I wish I could say there was something to tell. The outpost was a dead end, and we have no new leads so far.”

Addison frowned. “I’ll do a little digging of my own then. See what someone from the underground chat rooms has to say.”

He grinned. "It seems you will be needing that nanny after all."

A strange look came into her eye, and she fixed him with a serious look. "You do know that I wasn't implying that we need a nanny because you're inadequate, right? You make a great father, Tyler."

His heart warmed at her words. But he noticed she'd left herself out. "And what about you? Do you want kids of your own?"

Her reply was immediate. "No, not if they can't shift like me. I don't want to put a child through what I went through. Even if there's only a quarter chance of it."

He hadn't even considered that as something that would factor into her decision. But it made sense now. He knew about the people who had bullied her because of her inability to shift. The thought made his blood boil to see just how much it had truly affected her.

Tyler frowned. "You know you are not less because you can't shift, don't you? You are the strongest person I've ever met, and any child of yours would be proud to be like you."

Her cheeks grew pink as she blushed, and she looked away. His wolf whined, wanting to make her know that she was perfect. "Maybe. But I'm still not sure. This is something I've thought about for a while, and it would take a lot to change my mind."

"They don't have to be our children by blood." He hesitated for a moment before voicing his next thought. This might be a bit fast for her, but perhaps not because of how she'd been acting these past few days. "I've decided I'd like to keep the orphans. All of them."

Addison stared at him in surprise for a moment before laughing. "I've been thinking the exact same thing," she admitted.

SEVENTEEN



ADDISON

Without warning, Tyler grabbed Addison and threw her onto the bed. Startled by the sudden speed, she burst out laughing and spread her arms and legs.

“Well, someone’s feeling playful today.”

“Just one of us?” Tyler said, approaching slowly.

“All right. Maybe two of us.” Her eyes narrowed. “Wait a second. I don’t like that smile. What are you planning?”

Tyler stood at the foot of the bed. “What makes you think I’m planning anything?”

“That smile! Don’t try to hide it. That’s the smile of someone who’s plotting, and I don’t like it.”

“I can’t believe my own fiancée would accuse me of formulating a scheme and then lying about it,” Tyler replied, pacing back and forth, the grin on his face growing ever wider. “Don’t you trust me? Do you really think I would tell a mistruth to my own beloved fiancée?”

Addison realized this humor was new for Tyler. Even when he was open about his feelings, he had always been overwhelmingly serious and careful with his words. Now, he was being silly. Not witty or clever, but just goofy. She was glad that somewhere underneath all that talk about responsibility to the kingdom and the people, there was a guy who just wanted to laugh and play a little.

In fact, he wasn’t the only one who had been hiding his careless, childish side under a lot of adulthood. She had

certainly played herself as a grown-up, too. And it was a relief to let go of that with him. It felt comfortable, which was the last thing she had expected an arranged marriage set up by her parents for diplomatic reasons to be.

She pulled one of her legs close to her chest and extended the other one toward Tyler's abdomen, wiggling it invitingly. "So since you don't have any plans, there won't be any risk if I simply allow my foot to remain here?"

"Of course. You tease me."

"I sure do."

"Absolutely shocking."

"Uh-huh."

And that was the moment Tyler pounced. The movement as he jumped onto the bed and seized her leg was unmistakably wolf-like. He was an alpha, taking down his prey, and he was also a cub, learning to hunt by playing.

The moment he landed, he ran his fingers up and down the side of her leg. Addison burst into giggles.

"I knew it," he cried. "I knew you would be ticklish! From the moment I saw you, I knew you would be ticklish!"

"Noo!" Addison laughed. "Not tickles! My one weakness!"

Addison twisted and contorted her way around the bed as Tyler continued to tickle her. Finally, Tyler made a leap for her other leg, and she was able to pull both of them away from him.

"You're pretty good at that," he admitted.

"You've unlocked a dangerous can of worms here," Addison said, raising her fingers. "He who lives by the tickle dies by the tickle."

"Ha!" Tyler laughed. "What makes you think I can be tickled? Even if I could be, how would you know where?"

"You're covering your sides with your arms."

Tyler tucked his arms still tighter against his ribs. “You wouldn’t.”

And then Addison pounced. As a child, she had sometimes pretended that she could shift when she was sure no one was watching. Now, she could do it in front of someone and feel all of the excitement and none of the shame. Her body was a weapon, and using it to leap onto someone made her feel just how powerful she could be.

The two of them rolled around on the bed, grappling, and trying to tickle each other. Both were laughing, and there was no way to tell when someone was giggling from being tickled and when they were just giggling.

Until, suddenly, she was underneath Tyler, with both of her arms pinned under his legs.

He stroked her cheek lovingly and, with his other hand, started to circle her nipple with his thumb. She remembered all at once how handsome he was and how much she wanted him.

“A second ago, we were talking about the idea of having children of our own,” he said, his voice now soft and sultry.

“You have to let my arms go,” Addison replied.

“Only if you agree to a tickle truce.”

Tickling was already the last thing Addison wanted to do to Tyler. “Agreed.”

He moved his weight back to his feet, and she pulled her arms loose. Immediately, she wrapped them around his neck and pulled his face down to her.

“I want you to fuck me right now,” Addison said. “And I want everything that comes with that.”

With that, she kissed him, and he kissed her back. If their playing had been animal-like, the way they kissed each other was even more so. They needed each other with a passion that spoke from the deepest, most natural part of them.

Tyler pulled her shirt and bra off. He grabbed both breasts and caressed them. Addison writhed.

“First, I want to play,” said Tyler. With that, he kissed her on the collarbone, then slowly kissed down her body toward her wet pussy. With a yank, he pulled down her skirt and underwear and then gently ran his tongue over her already soaking core.

She moaned. For a second, she wasn't sure if she liked the wetness, but the power of the sensation carried her past that. Gradually, Tyler focused on her clit, and the feeling grew stronger and stronger. Everything else faded away, and all she needed, all she wanted, was for him to keep going. Faster, longer, more ...

Tyler pulled away. “You enjoy that?”

“Yes,” she managed. “Yes, I did ...”

Tyler unbuttoned his pants. “Good. Get ready for the main course.”

His cock fell out, long and hard and ready. The moment she saw it, she wanted it inside her.

“You're so beautiful,” he told her as he gently pushed into her body. He leaned closer, and she grabbed him with her arms. The two of them were soon rolling on the bed again. The difference was, this time, their touches were clinging and longing. They pushed and pulled each other into themselves, full of a desperate fire.

“I want you so much,” she muttered. “You're amazing.”

He pushed into the deepest parts of her, never too hard but never too gentle either. Both of them followed their animal instincts. They listened to their bodies and to the sounds and rhythm that told of the other's body. They were on a bed, but it all felt as natural as a forest floor.

She felt the rising tension of the final moment when all their passion would crescendo. Tyler could certainly feel it, too, and he was pushing her further and harder. She ran her fingers through his hair and then down his back. Yes. This was it. Yes.

She came just a second before he did. Pleasure surged through her body, and her muscles tensed and released,

twitching slightly after. The two of them lay wrapped in each other and full of each other's joy.

Tyler pulled out of her and then squeezed her to his chest. His arms were strong and warm, and she relaxed into them gladly. Already, the animal passion they had been full of felt far away, but it had given way to something even better. A peaceful contentment followed by lingering warmth like embers in a fire.

"Gods, that was even better the second time," she said.

Tyler smiled. "Don't worry. There will be many more times after that."

She beamed. "You promise?"

"Trust me."

And they lay there, all wrapped up in each other. Addison felt a sense of warmth and belonging that she supposed she had been searching for her whole life.

As much as she loved her family, the fact that she couldn't shift had always been a thorn in her side. She was teased and ridiculed by outsiders. She and her sisters defended each other loyally, but there was always an ache somewhere deep inside that she would never be enough.

That ache had finally been filled by Tyler. For the first time, she was enough. Not even just enough ... he made her feel like she was perfect. Her big, strong wolf shifter mate thought she was perfect with no power of her own to speak of.

And she really loved him for it.

EIGHTEEN



TYLER

They decided to work together the next morning to find out more about the benefactor behind the bounty. He had a desk brought into his office for Addison. She was as much a part of the search now as he was. The children were sent outside with trusted castle staff in the meantime.

It brought him no small amount of delight to have her so close, even if it distracted his wolf. He loved looking up from his work to see her hyper-fixated on her computer. At one point, when he looked at her, he saw her expression brighten suddenly.

“What is it?” he asked.

She grinned at him. “Louis just texted me, and he told me he couldn’t find anything bad on Letitia. It looks like we have a new nanny. Maybe we can let Coraline get back to her life from babysitting duty now.”

Tyler smiled. “I’m glad. Though I have been thinking, all those children seem like a lot for one woman to handle. And we intend to add even more.”

Addison nodded. “One or two children would be a lot to handle on your own anytime. Maybe I can ask to see if any of the other refugee women would be willing to help out.”

“Or perhaps we could ask one we know a bit better,” Tyler suggested.

She furrowed her brow. “Why not one of the refugees?”

“It’s not that I don’t trust them. It’s simply that I’d like to have someone I know around them. It isn’t easy to find information on these women from the camp. I’d be more comfortable with at least one who we know is loyal to the royal family.”

Addison considered this for a moment before nodding. “That’s fair. I’ll tell Louis to find someone we know to help out Letitia. I’m sure she’ll appreciate someone who she can take shifts with. I can ask Coraline if she minds being a backup as needed, too, but I know she doesn’t want to stop working in the kitchen altogether.”

They continued working for another hour before it was lunchtime. They’d already promised the children that they’d eat with them, and frankly, Tyler was grateful for the break.

Lunch was served in one of the less formal dining rooms this time, as Coraline only had a little time to prepare the meal in between entertaining the kids. The children all tried to talk at once to them, telling them about what they had done that day or showing off a rock one of them had found. One of the little girls had drawn a picture for Addison.

Of course, his mate gushed about how cute the picture was. Now, all the kids were promising to make them both pictures. Tyler would frame each and every one of them.

When lunch was finished, Addison made an announcement. “Kids, we’ve decided to take you on a tour of the school this afternoon.”

Cassia wrinkled her nose. “School? Why are you taking us to see a school?”

Addison chuckled. “Because someday you’ll all need to go. It’s important to know all about the world around you and how it works. Plus, this way, you’ll know what you’re getting into before you go.”

And so the two of them herded all the children together and escorted them to the school. There were several loud gasps as the kids took in the building with awe.

“Do you see?” Addison asked gently. “There’s nothing to be afraid of here. You’ll get to learn a lot.”

“And maybe you’ll even become as smart as Addison,” Tyler added with a grin.

She scoffed, but a faint blush tinted her cheeks.

After that, the kids were all excited to start school. They even talked about playing a game of school when they got back to the palace.

As they stepped out of the car later, Tyler got a call. He checked the ID while Addison led the kids into the palace.

It was Anton. If his tracker was calling him, it meant he had more information. His wolf growled in anticipation.

Tyler answered. “What have you got?”

“I’ve been keeping my ear to the ground with the rogue camps, and today, I finally heard something useful. Someone had just come from Windwood, where they claimed to have met with the benefactor. A male.”

And if whoever this was claimed to have just seen the instigator in Windwood, he might still be there. At least, assuming this person traveled directly from there to the rogue camp.

“Thank you, Anton. I’ll take a team of enforcers with me to check it out.” He hung up and let out a low growl. The wolf inside him was antsy and ready for blood. Hopefully, today would be the day they finally caught the bastard.

He sent out a message to his enforcers to be ready to go in ten minutes. Then he went into the palace to make sure Addison and the kids were settled in safely.

Tyler found them in the sunroom doing arts and crafts. There were art supplies everywhere, and somehow, Cassia already had paint on her nose.

Addison spotted him, and her grin dropped when she saw his face. Gently, she excused herself from the children and came over to him. “What’s wrong?”

“We just got a tip about the man who put out the bounty. I’m going to need you to make good on your promise and stay here with the kids.”

She chewed on her lower lip, and her uncertainty was obvious, but after a minute, she nodded. “All right. I suppose it wouldn’t do us any good if I delivered myself to the person who wants my head.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon.” And he placed a firm kiss on her temple.

A few minutes later, Tyler and his enforcers were headed out. Windwood wasn’t another rogue camp but a small northern village that was a part of Somberglen. It was often frequented by travelers and was where people went to keep a low profile.

In other words, it was a perfect place for their mystery antagonist to hide.

Anton had been messaging him more details as they drove. Apparently, the rogue he’d gotten information out of had been at a bar called the Windlow.

When they arrived, Tyler sent Malcolm and Valerian to cover the back in case anyone tried to run. He had Henry stay in front. And he went in with Louis.

The first thing he noticed about the Windlow was that it was obviously an upscale bar. He’d seen other bars on their way into town that were clearly much cheaper than this one. Apparently, the man they were looking for preferred luxury over practicality.

He gave a subtle signal to his beta, and then he disappeared into the crowd to gather information. Tyler went to the bar top and took a seat in between two rough-looking men. He ordered a drink he had no intention of drinking and then struck up a conversation with the men.

“I heard someone was paying big money around here for a bounty. Is it legit? I mean, who around here has that kind of money?”

The man on his right grunted. “Him? Not too sure. Definitely wasn’t from around here, that’s for sure.”

Tyler furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, the guy just stuck out like a sore thumb. His clothes were too nice, and he had this way of speaking. I’m not even sure how to describe it. It was like ...”

“Like he could get whatever he wanted just with a word. Like it wasn’t even a question,” the man on his left supplied. “Always found him annoying.”

It sounded like a man who was used to privilege. Or it could be someone who’d always wanted to be and was simply emulating that. He needed more information to tell.

“Anything else you can tell me about this man?” Tyler asked. “I’d like to find him and ask about this bounty myself.”

The man on his left grunted. “Good luck with that. Apparently, the guy never stays in one place too long. And he left Windwood about two days ago. He only stayed here about four days anyway.”

Tyler suppressed a growl. He was long gone then, and who knew where?

“You talking about that uptight guy who used to come in here?” the bartender asked; she’d obviously been listening in.

Tyler nodded. The bartender scoffed. “Something tells me you don’t want him for his bounty. Not that I care. He was a lousy tipper, even though he clearly had the money. He was an older guy. Not too tough looking but had a sour face and a laugh that could rival a donkey.”

“And none of you got his name?” he pressed.

The bartender shook her head. “He never gave it to me. I’m guessing that was on purpose.”

Then the information they’d given him would have to do.

NINETEEN



ADDISON

Addison tried not to worry about Tyler while he was away. On the one hand, she wanted this man caught so they could stop living in fear. On the other, this man was evidently willing to go to great lengths to harm them. Who knew what might be waiting for Tyler wherever he was going?

But he was back that evening in one piece. She learned they hadn't been able to find the guy. In fact, they hadn't so much as gotten a name. So now all they had to go on were vague descriptions.

"We will find him," Tyler promised her. "But for now, I believe I owe you a date night."

Addison snorted. It was almost ridiculous to have a date night in the middle of all this chaos, but it was also a welcome distraction.

They decided on a movie night since she was on semi-lockdown because someone was trying to kill her. And since it was Tyler, it wasn't any ordinary movie night. Instead of simply curling up on the couch, he'd set up a projector outside in the garden.

She immediately decided this was the best way to do it. They wrapped themselves in blankets and had popcorn brought out to them as they selected a movie. Addison snorted as Tyler made recommendations.

"I can't help but notice you keep suggesting romance movies," she teased.

Tyler shrugged, but a grin was forming on his face. “I just thought it would be appropriate. That and I thought action might be off the table considering the circumstances.”

She shrugged. “Action movies are so exaggerated, anyway. I don’t think it would bother me.”

“The choice is up to you. Though I do think a little romance would set the mood,” he teased playfully.

Addison rolled her eyes, but privately, she admitted that she thought it was really cute. “Okay, okay, if we’re going in that direction, then I have a suggestion. It’s a compromise between a romance and an action movie, anyway. Ever seen *Knights of Opposed Realms*?”

He shook his head, and Addison grinned. “Then that is totally what we’re going to watch. You’ll love it. It’s a bit of an older movie, but it’s so good.”

They found the movie and settled back on their cushions. She hadn’t seen the movie in a while, and she was excited to watch it again.

It was a film about a knight who was considered the best in the land and who set out to protect a princess from an opposing kingdom. It was a star-crossed romance that grew stronger while tensions between their kingdoms increased.

It was a little cheesy and overdramatic, but she and her sisters had loved watching it as kids. They’d been utterly enchanted between the action and the romance between the two leads. It was sort of a comfort movie for her now.

Throughout the movie, Addison snuck glances at Tyler to see his reaction. He’d snort a few times a cheesy line or over-the-top reading. But as the movie went on, she could tell he was starting to get invested.

Then came the scene where the two realized they were in love with each other. They stared deep into each other’s eyes before furiously kissing in the rain. Because, of course, it was raining.

Addison glanced at Tyler and bit back laughter. She could tell by his expression that he was completely hooked. Never

would she have guessed that a romantic movie would do it for the big, tough wolf shifter. It was actually really sweet.

She scooted closer and snuggled up to him. He immediately wrapped an arm around her and smiled down at her.

There was so much adoration in his gaze, and she soaked it up eagerly. Reluctantly, they turned their gazes back to the screen. Addison was very aware of his strong form beside her, and she struggled to pay attention to the movie. In the back of her mind, sexy thoughts sprung up, but she pushed them away. She wanted to have quality bonding time with Tyler.

Even though they were engaged, they really hadn't spent much time together like this. Time to just absorb each other's presence. It was nice.

Addison sighed contentedly and snuggled closer. This really was the perfect date night.

She was half asleep in Tyler's hold when she sensed something was wrong. Addison sniffed the air and frowned. The guards who had been hiding in the shadows weren't where they were a few minutes ago.

Maybe they had gone to give them some privacy? If Tyler had been going for a certain mood, perhaps they felt that the couple didn't want them sticking around. But she doubted they would be so careless as to leave them there unguarded. And surely she and Tyler would just go inside to get away from the men.

Then Tyler stiffened, and she knew something was wrong. She sat up and watched as he carefully scanned the area.

"What is it?" she whispered.

He shook his head, not sparing a glance at her. Something was definitely wrong.

Then, an alarm blared, and they both shot to their feet. That alarm could only mean that someone had breached the perimeter. Panicked thoughts of the last time she heard that blare flashed through her mind.

She opened her mouth to ask Tyler what they should do when she heard a whooshing sound.

Something sharp hit her neck, and she howled in pain and surprise.

“Addison!” Tyler shouted. He pulled her out of the open and behind a bush.

She reached for the place where she’d been hit. Her fingers found something small and cold still in there. A dart!

Addison yanked it out and threw it away from her. What exactly had she been hit with?

She could hear Tyler yelling out for his men, and then she saw him shift. A moment later, the enforcers came running, and they all shifted. Something moved in the trees, and they howled and chased after it.

There were the sounds of fighting and growling and even a few yelps.

Addison stood from the bush. They were in danger, and she needed to go help them.

She got one step in before she fell to her knees, and her head swam.

The dart. It had to have been poisoned. But with what? Something just to make her fall asleep or something to kill her? And how long did she have before the poison took full effect?

Her muscles felt like jelly, and her mind was foggy. That was really not good. She knew it had to be a fast-acting poison, and she was running out of time.

Whatever it was, it was attacking her nerves. It probably meant that whatever was in her system was lethal.

Vaguely, she could tell some of the enforcers were chasing down the intruder, leaving the gardens and running after him. She couldn’t let everyone leave. If they did, she would die.

“Tyler,” she called out weakly, surprised at how feeble her voice sounded.

Instantly, he shifted back, and his head snapped up to meet her gaze. His expression filled with worry, and he ran over to her. “I’m here, I’m here. What’s happening?”

Shakily, she pointed to where she’d tossed the dart. “Dart. Hit. Poison.”

His eyes went wide, and then he screamed to one of the enforcers still in earshot. “Healer! Get me a healer right now! She’s been hit!”

Addison tried to stand again, but she couldn’t even pull herself up this time. At this rate, she’d be unconscious soon. And then probably dead not too long after.

She needed to convey all her symptoms to him. Tell him the dart was lethal. Tell him she didn’t have much time.

But her tongue felt so heavy in her mouth, and the edge of her vision was narrowing. Her body was trying to pull her into a deep sleep. And it was working.

So, instead, she grabbed onto his shirt with all the might she had left to make him look at her. He did, his gaze filled with so much worry and anguish.

“Call ... Taryn,” she managed to get out.

And then she could fight the pull of sleep no more.

TWENTY



TYLER

Addison lay on the floor of the castle apothecary. Tyler had picked her up and run with her to the clinic, not wanting to waste a second waiting for the healer to arrive with his bag of potions. He draped a robe over himself as he anxiously waited for Taryn to pick up.

When she did, he explained the situation hurriedly. Taryn's voice was almost as panicked as he felt while she gave him instructions from the other end of the phone. "You need to smell the dart and tell me what it smells of," she told him.

He raised the vile object to his nose, his wolf senses picking up on the varying scents with ease.

"It smells almost sickly sweet," he said. "But there is the stench of putrid death about it, too."

There was silence at the end of the phone as Taryn thought. Every moment was agonizing for Tyler as he waited for her response. "There are only a few poisons with that profile," she said. "The first and most feared is Destroying Angel, which is derived from a mushroom. I pray it's not that because there is no antidote."

Her words made his gut clench. "How do we know if it's that?" Tyler demanded, his fear making his words sharp.

"You must scrape some of the poison into a jar of Yellow Archangel," she said. "If the mixture goes black, we're in trouble."

He searched the apothecary's shelves until he came to the required jar. He took his knife with trembling fingers and

scraped some poison into the yellow liquid. “Nothing’s happening,” he said to the receiver. “How long is this meant to take?”

He heard Taryn breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank the Goddess for that,” she said. “It should react instantly.”

Tyler was relieved, but Addison was still slowly dying on the floor. “What next?” he asked.

“It could be Elfespur,” she said. “That would require some sort of magic to be bound to it. Elderflower negates magic curses. Give her a tincture of Elderflower next,” she said.

Tyler scoured the shelves. *Where is the healer? This would be so much easier if he were here.* Every second felt like an eternity.

He located the elderflower tincture and held it to Addison’s lips. Nothing happened. “Taryn. It’s not working!” he cried in desperation.

“Maybe it’s Arum Maculatum. That also has a fetid stench,” she said, equally as desperate. “The antidote for that is milk thistle.”

Milk thistle, milk thistle, where can that be? he thought as he searched. As soon as he located it, he dropped to the floor by Addison’s head. “Come on, my love, you need to drink this,” he said as he tenderly poured it into her mouth.

She choked and sputtered, and then some of the tension went out of her body. Was that a sign? Had it worked?

“Taryn, I’m not sure if it worked,” he wailed. “She choked and then seemed to relax a little. Does that mean it worked or not?” She couldn’t die. He would lose it if she did. He would tear the world apart, hunting down who was responsible.

“It’s a good sign,” said Taryn. “Give her a moment, see what happens.”

“Does she have a moment?” demanded Tyler. “This is taking too long,” he roared into the phone. The wolf inside him was howling with fury and impatience.

“Tyler, you need to remain calm if you want to save her,” Taryn replied. “There is something else ...”

She didn't get to finish her sentence because Addison gasped, and Tyler dropped the phone. “Addison?” he said, cradling her head in his lap. “Addison, can you hear me?”

“Tyler?” she said muzzily. “I feel like shit.”

“Oh, Addison, you're alive,” he said with relief. He picked up the discarded phone. “She's alive!” he told Taryn. “You've done it. You've saved her. Thank you so much!”

Taryn gave a sob of relief. “She needs rest now, Tyler. Warm broth and plenty of fluids, also.”

Just then, the healer appeared at the door. He was out of breath and in his night clothes, hair sticking up, and glasses askew. He looked around at the disarray in the dispensary and then down at his king kneeling on the floor with the now-conscious Addison clutched tightly to his breast.

“Here, let me help you,” he said, reaching out to help Addison stand.

Together, they supported her and walked to Tyler's chambers. “I'll send some herbs for you to put in a bath. They should help draw out any residual poison and help with the pain,” the healer said.

Tyler nodded his thanks.

“Is there some water?” asked Addison. She was propped up on the bed with several pillows. Her throat sounded hoarse.

“Sure,” said Tyler, handing her a glass.

Maids came and brought the herbs from the healer and filled the huge bath with steaming water. The maids hung around, but Tyler shooed them out. He would look after his lady himself.

He tenderly undressed her and helped her into the bath. His wolf whimpered at the sight of her, so weak and so frail. She was still unsteady on her feet, but she was alive.

Then he stripped off and got into the bath with her. With love and care, he laid her back into his arms, gently washing the tangles from her hair and the sweat from her face.

She smiled at him. “Thank you,” she said. “You saved my life.”

“No, that was Taryn. She knew exactly what to do. It was the right thing to call her.”

“She knows everything about herbs. She is incredibly good at what she does,” Addison said with pride in her sister. “I would trust her with my life when it comes to herb lore.”

“That is evidently justified,” said Tyler. “How are you feeling?”

“Weak,” she said. “I feel like I’ve been run over by a herd of elephants, to be honest. Every bone in my body hurts. The bath is helping, however.”

“Good. The healer said the herbs would ease the pain.” He lovingly washed her back as he spoke.

“What now?” asked Addison.

“We should go to your parents,” he said straightaway. “You are not safe here.”

“You know that’s not what I want,” she said. “But in truth, I think I’m going to have to agree with you on this. We just don’t know what these rogues are capable of. We have the children to think about now, too.”

Tyler was so relieved. He did not want to have to insist. He was glad she’d seen reason.

He helped her out of the bath and into bed. She looked so pale against the sheets. She smiled up at him. “Thank you, Tyler. I feel so much better now.”

He bent to kiss her on the forehead, and by the time he stood, she had fallen asleep. He watched her breath coming slow, deep, and even. How differently this night could have ended. *Taryn, you are a savior*, he thought.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. It was his beta. “We caught the bastard,” he said. “He’s down in the dungeon.”

“Stay with Addison,” Tyler growled and brushed past him with seething wrath in his heart. Time to make someone pay.

The guy lay crumpled and naked in the corner of the cell. He had obviously shifted to try to get away, but there was no getting away from Anton.

Tyler was across the cell in two strides and picked the perpetrator up by his hair. “Tell me who hired you!” he shouted in his face.

“I don’t know who it was,” the guy whimpered. “Some guy in a bar paid me. It’s known I’m good with poisons. It was meant to be an easy job. I didn’t know she was a princess. I just got a description and a location.”

“Fuck,” Tyler swore.

“If you let me go peacefully, I won’t bother you again,” the assassin said, “but if you hold me captive, I’ll make sure the princess and all those brats running around in the castle die painfully.”

“Let you go?” Tyler asked incredulously. “You poisoned my woman. You threaten my family ...” The shift was already taking place in his bones. The wolf within surged forward, taking control of the situation, and delighting in the taste of the traitor’s blood in his mouth.

TWENTY-ONE



ADDISON

Addison still felt weak as a kitten after the poison dart. She had spoken to Taryn again on the phone that morning. Her sister told her to expect to feel drained for a couple of days, but Taryn was confident she would make a full recovery thanks to Tyler's quick actions. She had also told her that all her sisters were going to be staying with their parents for a while. She was looking forward to seeing them all and eager to set off.

The kids were playing chase across the palace lawns. They had all shifted and were enjoying their last few minutes of freedom before they were cramped up in a car for several hours.

The eldest boy, Timon, always seemed to take the lead in these games. He was a bit more organized than the others, good with rules and structure, and he loved being chased.

The game looked like it involved all the young pups trying their hardest to intercept him. He was very sporting, however, and even though he was the fastest by far, he would allow the others to catch him. He would then make a show of fighting them off, but it was all noise. Addison was impressed no one ever seemed to get hurt.

There were going to be four vehicles traveling together. A van at either end of the convoy would carry enforcers and their weapons. The two cars in the center were for Addison, Tyler, the four children, and the two nannies. Addison couldn't believe how much stuff they all needed just to go away for a couple of weeks.

“You’d better round those pups up,” Tyler called to her as he loaded the last of the bags into the trunk.

“Sure thing,” she said, although she was reluctant to break up their game. They were having such a lovely time.

“Come on then, kids,” she called to them. They came hurtling across the lawn and ran around her a few times, howling like they’d caught their prey. She laughed at the sight. “Come on, you fearsome beasts, get a shift on,” she told them.

Once they were all shifted back to their human form and clothed, the convoy got on its way. Addison had Liddy, Timon, and Nanny Richelot in her car, while Tyler rode with Nanny Letitia, Cassia, and Jacob. Since the children were still adjusting, Addison and Tyler had deemed it best to split up so that each car and child had one adoptive parent nearby.

In Addison’s car, both Liddy and Timon were excited to be going to visit another castle.

“Is it a big castle?” Timon asked.

“It sure is,” said Addison, smiling.

“As big as Somberglen Castle?” he asked.

“It is about the same size,” she said. “But it looks different. There are more towers and things to explore than here.”

“Oh, cool,” he said.

“Your mom is the queen, isn’t she?” asked Liddy shyly. “Do you think she’ll like me?”

“How could she not like you?” said Addison with a smile. “You are amazing.”

Liddy smiled. “And your dad is the king,” she surmised. “Is he big and mean?”

Addison laughed. “No. Completely the opposite. He only ever gets cross with people who deserve it. He couldn’t get mad at you,” she assured her. “And all my sisters are going to be there. They’ll all love you too.”

“How many sisters have you got?” Liddy wanted to know.

“Three sisters. There is Madison, who is my twin. Then there’s Lexi, the baby, and Taryn, who saved my life yesterday with her knowledge of magic herbs.”

“Wow, did she really save your life?” Timon asked.

“Yes, she did. She’s very clever,” Addison said.

“I want to be a healer when I grow up,” said Liddy.

“Well, you’ll have to talk to Taryn about that,” Addison replied.

The car journey went smoothly enough. They had to make several stops, and Addison noticed Tyler’s apprehension every time both cars came to a halt. While they were traveling, they were exposed and vulnerable. But the kids needed bathroom breaks and to stretch their legs.

It was late afternoon when they eventually arrived. The entire family came pouring out of the castle doors to greet them. Not only were all of Addison’s sisters there, but their mates were too. It made for quite a large party with plenty of arms to welcome the four little orphan children.

It must have taken half an hour for the welcome party to all be introduced to the newcomers and for everyone to be thoroughly hugged and kissed.

“Come in, come in,” the queen insisted. “We have refreshments in the dining room. You must all be starving, not to mention thirsty.”

“Do you have any lemonade?” Timon asked, who had attached himself quite firmly to Addison’s mom.

“We have gallons of lemonade,” she replied, reaching out and taking his hand. “Addison warned me that you preferred it.”

“Can I explore your towers?” Addison heard him asking as he was led away. He was going to be a scamp; she could tell.

Cassia was looking rather shy, so Addison sat her at the table between herself and Madison. Madison had a sweet nature that she knew would make Cassia feel right at home.

Taryn sat on the other side of the table, and Addison told her how Liddy dreamed of being a healer when she was older. Taryn promised to show her the apothecary and take her out foraging sometime. It wasn't long before they were having quite an in-depth conversation about herbology. Addison realized it wasn't some idle dream. Liddy really was interested in the subject.

Tyler sat on the other side of her, talking to her father, and for a moment, Addison sat in a pocket of silence amid the hubbub of her family. She looked around at all the faces, old and new. She felt a warmth spread up from her toes. These were *her* people.

She suddenly didn't know why she had ever delayed coming back here. *Maybe it's because I left here as a child, and I've come back as an adult. A mother, too, by the looks of it.*

"Pass the rolls over, daydreamer," said Lexi opposite her.

Addison smiled and passed them across the table. The noise of her family all chattering at once washed over her again. "How are you doing, Lexi?" she asked. She caught up with all of her sisters as the evening passed happily into the night.

Eventually, the kids were tucked up in bed, way past their bedtime. They were all exhausted after their long day and fell asleep as soon as their heads hit the pillows.

Later, the adults who could shift went for a run. Tyler talked to her before they left. "Are you going to be okay if I go out?" he asked.

"Of course I am. There are enforcers and guards everywhere. Plus, no one knows we're here," she replied. "I have lots of family to visit. You have fun." She gave him a kiss. "Thank you for bringing me here. It was a good idea."

He pulled her into a fierce hug.

"Come on, put her down," called Xander, Lexi's mate, from the doorway. "Time to play for a while."

Reluctantly, she released her man. In reality, she would have liked him to stay by her side, but she wasn't going to stop him from enjoying himself. Just because she couldn't shift was no reason for him to miss out.

She was making her way up to her room when someone grabbed her arm. On instinct, she drew back her fist, but her assailant jumped clear, and she saw, to her relief, it was Madison.

"Damn it, sis! You scared me!" she accused.

"Sorry," said Madison, grimacing. "I guess you've been through a lot recently. I didn't mean to make you jump."

Addison's heart thumped like a drum, and her nerves thrummed on high alert. "Yes," she said. "I'm feeling a little wound up right now."

"I just wanted to talk to you about that nanny you've got. You know, the one from the rogue pack."

"What about her?" asked Addison.

"She seems a bit off to me," said Madison. "She kept out of the way of everyone tonight as if she was trying to hide herself, and when I tried to talk to her, she snubbed me."

"I think she's just been through a lot," Addison replied.

"Hmm, maybe," said Madison. "Keep an eye on her, won't you?"

"I think you're over-worrying, but yes, I'll keep an eye on her," Addison promised. She felt a tension in her gut that she hoped was still just her strained nerves.

TWENTY-TWO



TYLER

Later that evening, when Tyler returned from his run, he took the chance to drag Addison away from her family. She gave him a questioning look, but he just grinned at her mischievously. Addison rolled her eyes, but a smile was already playing on her lips.

He tugged her toward the gardens.

“Where exactly are we going?” she asked.

“Anywhere you want,” he replied simply.

In truth, he just wanted time alone with her, no matter where that might be. Everything had been chaotic since she’d been shot with that poison dart, from frantically trying to save her life to getting out of the kingdom and reuniting her with her family. And the whole time, he’d been solely focused on making sure she was alive and safe.

But now they were here in her home kingdom. They could finally relax and enjoy their time together here.

Now, all he wanted was to hold her and make her feel loved and safe in turn. And *he* needed to feel that she was safe and alive. That she hadn’t died in that garden or on the healer’s floor.

And selfishly, he wanted her to himself for a while. They’d been surrounded by people all day, and not without good reason. There were active threats against them. They didn’t know exactly where they were coming from.

Still, it was beginning to irritate him not having his mate to himself for a bit. Even his wolf felt anxious, pacing inside.

They began with a walk through the gardens, with Addison pointing out different things to him along the way.

“My sisters and I used to climb those trees over there. I was the only one who could climb super high on that twisty one for the longest time. It was a great hiding spot until Lexi had a growth spurt, and suddenly, she could invade my territory.”

Tyler chuckled at the mental image of the two sisters fighting over space in a tree.

“Luckily, I had lots of little hiding spots around here,” Addison continued. “There’s a little waterfall over there that had just enough space for me to squeeze into. Or there’s a bench hidden behind the roses that was overgrown with morning glories until I took it over.”

“Sounds like you were a menace in hide-and-seek,” he teased.

She laughed. “I really was. I was always the best hider, and don’t let the others tell you otherwise. Although Taryn was the best at covering up her scent so that we couldn’t find her.”

Then he spotted something odd just ahead of them. A treehouse was built up into a giant tree with a rope ladder hanging down.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked.

Her grin widened. “Yep. The old treehouse we used to hang out in all the time. Want the grand tour?”

And before he could answer, she was tugging him to the treehouse. When they got to the base of the tree, she let go of his hand and scaled the rope ladder. Not wanting to be outdone, Tyler was quick on her heels.

When he reached the porch of the treehouse, he realized it was much bigger than he thought it was. It was a rather impressive structure, with its weight nicely distributed along

the branches. There was also a bridge connecting the treehouse to a smaller treehouse on another tree.

“This is impressive,” he murmured.

Addison scoffed. “You haven’t even seen the inside of it yet. Come on.”

And with that, she went through the curtain and into the treehouse. Tyler grinned and followed right behind her.

The inside really was magnificent, with fairy lights everywhere and bookshelves with big chairs next to them. There was a bed in one corner that looked small but comfortable. There was even a television surrounded by plush cushions. All things considered, it was a rather fancy treehouse.

“My sisters and I loved playing in here,” Addison said, her eyes shining. “We saw a movie that had a treehouse in it one time and begged our dad to make us one.”

Tyler looked at her in surprise. “Your dad did all this?”

“Well, mostly. He had some help, but a lot of it he made himself.”

Tyler felt his respect rise for Addison’s father. The fact that he took time to make his daughters something so intricate with his own two hands was impressive. It said a lot about the kind of man he was.

Addison sighed wistfully. “I have so many good memories here. Our favorite game to play was pirates. This would always be the main part of the ship, and that smaller treehouse was our crow’s nest.”

Her eyes shone as if reliving the memory. “Usually Madison or I pretended to be the captain since we’re older, then the other one would be the first mate. Taryn was our navigator and drew maps for us to follow so we could find treasure. Lexi always liked being the lookout and screaming at us to pretend enemy pirates were boarding our ship.”

“Sometimes we’d still play even if it was raining,” she continued, meeting his gaze with a smile. “Though most of the

time, our favorite thing to do in the rain was to curl up with a book or a movie. Sometimes Mom and Dad would come up here on those rainy days with hot chocolate, and we'd all hang out."

Tyler was suddenly hit with a pang of remorse. Their childhoods had been wildly different. His parents would have frowned upon him having days like that and playing silly games.

They had wanted to raise a king, not a son. He wasn't even really sure he could say he had a childhood. It was always about training, both in his wolf or human form, to be better ... to be perfect. And he was never perfect.

He'd always blamed himself for not meeting their expectations until they died. Then, he began to see just how messed up their philosophy was.

Addison had grown up with loving parents who went the extra mile to make sure she and her sisters grew up happy. They hadn't been without discipline, but everything had always been done out of love.

A love that his parents had always lacked.

Tyler had sworn to himself a long time ago that he would be a better father to his children. He hoped they would always grow up knowing their father loved them.

Addison seemed to have sensed his change in mood and was giving him a questioning look. He smiled at her reassuringly and squeezed her hand. She studied him a minute more before smiling herself. "You know, if the kids see this place, they're going to want one of their own."

Tyler barked out a laugh. "Then I guess I'll just have to build one for them as well."

"All by yourself?" she teased.

"Well, maybe with a little bit of help."

That made her tip her head back and laugh. And when she did, the evening light coming from the curtain fell on her just

right. Her hair looked radiant, and she was practically glowing in the light.

An overwhelming sense of adoration and pure love filled him. Now more than ever, he wanted nothing more than to live with this woman for all of time. Everything about her was enchanting and wonderful. He loved every piece of her, from her intelligence to her stubborn determination. She was so much more than her absolute beauty, even though she was that too.

There was no one else in this world or any other he would rather spend the rest of his life with. No one else whom he wanted to have a family with and raise their children together. She was his everything, and the concept of waiting seemed silly now.

He knew she felt much the same way. What was stopping them from bonding right here and now?

She was everything to him, and he didn't want to waste a moment with the uncertainty surrounding them.

Tyler took her hands in his and gazed deeply into her eyes. She seemed to understand he was about to say something serious, and her laughter subsided.

He smiled at her lovingly and then kissed her hands.

“I want to bond with you. Here and now.”

TWENTY-THREE



ADDISON

For a moment, all she felt was shock.

The mating bond? Here? Now? In her childhood treehouse?

She had been told about the mating bond when she was just a young girl. It was the piece of being a shifter that she was allowed to take part in. A shifter and their partner would have sex, and at the moment of climax, the shifter would bite their partner. The mark from the bite was permanent, and more than that, it would leave a scent that any other shifter would smell and recognize.

But that wasn't Addison's favorite part. What had thrilled her was that the bite left a piece of the shifter with the partner. Using the mark, someone who was mate bonded with a shifter could communicate thoughts to them across a distance, and the shifter could send their own thoughts back. Some people even said that the partner could call on the strength of the shifter through their mark.

The mating bond was a choice made for life. Once that connection was formed, it could never be broken. And Tyler was proposing to do it with no forethought, totally spontaneously.

It was only after she had run through all the reasons it was a bad idea that she realized just how much she wanted it.

“Are you serious?” she asked. “Like, do you actually mean it?”

“I've never been more serious,” he said.

This was entirely against Tyler's nature. He was used to being cautious and careful. He never made a decision for the kingdom without consulting its history. He surrounded himself with people he trusted totally, and he never took half-measures when it came to security.

Addison knew how startling it was for him to say this. They both knew the elaborate courtly ritual he was supposed to go through to woo her in a way that would satisfy both custom and his people.

But there was a cozy little bed in the corner, suggesting maybe this was the right time after all.

"I want to," she said finally. "But it's not just about us, is it? There's the whole kingdom to be thought of."

"What about them?" Tyler returned. "They like me. They'll learn to like you."

"That doesn't sound like you." Addison was clearly hesitant, but the desire was rising in her. She was trying to come up with a reason to say no, and he refused to give her one.

"You're right, it doesn't," he said, stepping closer and setting his hand on her waist. "That's part of what I love about you. You bring out sides of me I don't even recognize."

"I like this side of you," Addison whispered, leaning against his chest. Tyler stroked her hair with his other hand.

"Then, is that a yes?"

Addison paused, thinking about everything the mating bond implied. And then she thought about all the things she had experienced with Tyler. She thought about him saving her from the killer, about Cassia, and about all the small, quiet moments that they had spent together.

There was only one answer.

"Yes. Yes, it is."

Without a moment's pause, Tyler tossed her onto the bed. Barely a moment after she landed, he was on top of her. He fondled her breasts through her shirt and bit her gently, then

less gently on the neck. None of these were the mating bond, but they were in preparation.

Both of them pulled their clothes off and threw them away carelessly. The mating urge rose in both of them. Addison sensed the power of his wolf form running through his body. He was strong and assertive as he practically ravaged her.

That was the nature of the mating urge. It was the one moment when their bestial, wolf side could join with their thinking, human one. They could give in to an animalistic passion because that hunger was also full of human love and connection.

“I love you,” she said. “I love you forever.”

Tyler ran his nails over Addison’s skin, careful not to scrape or draw blood. Addison shivered at the sensation.

Tyler bent down and took her nipple into his mouth. He wasn’t as gentle with it this time as he had been the last. His teeth pinched and even pricked her, but it felt good. As he did this, his hand teased her pussy.

She ran her hands over his body, feeling his strength and the power inside him. Strangely, she didn’t feel envious. He loved her, and she knew that, and if someone this powerful could love her the way he did, then she didn’t need to be anything more than she was.

Tyler raised his head. “I love you. And I always will.”

He penetrated into her and then rolled over so that she was on top of him. His hands ran gently down her back as he pushed his cock in and out of her.

Tyler growled. His hands squeezed Addison’s breasts hard, and she gasped in pleasure.

His body rocked against hers with all of its strength, and she pushed back with all of her own. The mating urge pulled her forward with every moment. All of her time with Tyler had led to this, and it was so beautiful.

This is what it meant to be with your fated mate.

Tyler's grunting grew louder, and his body's movement sped up. This was it, she realized. This was the moment he would finally do it. He would make her his forever.

He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her down, rolling over once again. He pushed into her and opened his mouth, ready for the final moment. She gasped with her own orgasm at the very same moment as he bit down. The mating instinct had pulled them into perfect sync.

His teeth sank into the flesh of her shoulder, but it wasn't painful, or at least not the way she expected. Somehow, she felt as if her skin was being molded rather than torn. There was purpose in it, and her whole body rejoiced in the sensation.

"It's done," Tyler said, collapsing next to her. "We're mated."

She looked down at the wound. It bled only a little. She could see the shape of his mouth, perfectly marked on her body.

"Forever," she said to him and laced her fingers into his. She was entirely human, but with the gift of his bite, she could feel the wolf beneath the surface.

"Forever," he repeated and kissed her on the lips.

Outside, the full moon lit up the kingdom and its forest in silver. Its soft rays seemed to embrace the two lovers as they lay next to each other and thought about what it meant to be bound together for the rest of their lives.

TWENTY-FOUR



TYLER

Tyler's eyes popped open. The alpha was still on edge even after the incredible bonding the night before. Addison's life was still on the line. He brushed away the negative thoughts, crept quietly out of bed, got dressed, and headed out to bring breakfast in bed for his beloved mate.

Breakfast in bed for my sweet. She deserves this and so much more. I will strive every day to make her choice to be with me the right one. Orange juice and strawberry crepes coming up.

The alpha walked on air. The bonding was all he had dreamed of and more, and his wolf was going wild. To wait for one's fated mate was worth every minute of every day. As he strolled down the hall with his head held high and his senses fulfilled, he couldn't remember his life without Addison. And that preferred amnesia sat well.

An hour later, Tyler tiptoed through the bedroom door, carrying a tray prepared by the kitchen staff. He was greeted with Addison's bright eyes. She had just awoken as he went by and was yawning and stretching.

"Good morning, my beautiful. Did you sleep well?" Tyler laid the tray on her lap and kissed her longingly on the lips.

"The most restful sleep of my life. Last night ..." Addison cupped her hands around her alpha's cheeks.

"Yes, my mate. Last night."

They shared knowing smiles and one long, tender kiss. Then Tyler crawled back into bed to take his rightful place by

her side. Wherever she might go, that was where he belonged, and he knew that to be truer than anything else in the world.

For now, he was content to share breakfast with his mate. To see her there, shoulders bared, all tucked up in their bed, was exactly how he wanted her to stay for as much of their time together as he could steal. Being a mother and a queen had its responsibilities, but time with Addison like this, vulnerable and his, was what he dreamed of most.

Addison selected one of the chocolate-covered strawberries and placed it in Tyler's mouth. Tyler did the same with a chocolate-dipped pineapple piece. And with toast, eggs, and slices of bacon, they fed each other slowly, carefully, and lovingly. The gesture turned out to be a bonding ritual all on its own, and the king and soon-to-be queen savored each morsel.

"So, what is on the agenda for today?" Tyler fingered away a wisp of hair from Addison's cheek.

"I had told my parents and siblings we could go for a long stroll around the grounds with the children. Show them all my childhood sites as I showed you."

"That's a perfect idea. The moment they see your old treehouse, I'll never hear the end of it." Tyler laughed.

"Yes, I'm sure. I never heard the end of my mother's preparations for this supposed carefree walk. I'm told she and Dad have put together a massive picnic basket. A veritable feast they plan to have at the water's edge."

"Yes! That's a great idea. The older ones can swim to wear off all their pent-up energy, and I can teach Cassia how to swim, too." Tyler's heart lit up at the thought.

Addison laughed. "Oh, yes, Dad is also bringing all sorts of yard games. By day's end, we will all be completely exhausted, but happily so."

Once the brood was dressed and prepared by the nannies with Addison's oversight, Tyler led the way with Addison's father beside him. Alpha and father-in-law talked, joked, and laughed. They got on so well it was surprising even to Tyler.

Tyler looked back at Addison, bringing up the rear with her mother and the children. His mate's wide smile pleased him. There was no more familial ice to break. Everyone was bonding as a fated mate's family should. That told Tyler more than anything else that his life with Addison was gifted by the gods.

Addison's father chose a spot under a massive oak. Tyler unfurled the tartan blanket, and before anyone could say or do another thing, the alpha yelled, "The last one in the lake will eat rotten eggs for lunch!"

The kids squealed, quickly disrobed, and raced to the shore in their swimsuits. On the verge of crying, Cassia was scooped up by Tyler.

"You don't think I would forget you, do you? C'mon, let's get our toes wet before they do." Cassia giggled, and Tyler ran to the water's edge with the little girl. Like father and daughter, he slowly taught the little girl how to tread water. Soon, both were giggling up a storm. Cassia would not be eating rotten eggs for lunch.

The afternoon floated by with swimming, water fights, and a huge meal. By late day, the kids played with their unofficial grandparents while Addison and Tyler were sleepy, half-dozing, half-bathing in the sun. Staring up at the fluffy clouds and making daisy chains kept Taryn and Lexi busy. Their mates, Declan and Xander, spent the day racing each other in the water, and Madison and Fletcher took a long, leisurely walk.

As the midday sun melted down to the horizon, the brood returned to the palace, happy and spent. Addison and Tyler came in last, holding hands. When they entered the great hall, Addison's mother did a double-take.

"How did I miss it all day? Was it too much sun?" she wondered out loud. "I can sense it in you, you know. You've bonded. That's fantastic. I guess you finally came around to the idea, then?" she teased gently.

Cheers and salutations echoed in the great hall as Addison's sisters took turns hugging her. Meanwhile, their

mates clapped Tyler on the back, and then everyone made way for the parents to give their hugs and blessings. Tyler saw Addison's blushing cheeks, which made him smile all the more.

Cassia, her tiny body, did its best to bowl through the crowd to tug on Addison's skirts and beg for a lift from Tyler. The couple laughed, and the alpha raised his girl.

"A family, my family, at last," Tyler joyfully cheered.

Another pound of clapping and best wishes went on until Addison cut the merriment with her motherly duties.

"Okay, enough excitement for this little one today. Cassia needs her dinner, a bath, and a bed. She's practically sleeping on your shoulder. The rest of you eat, too, and you'll bathe in a bit," she instructed Timon, Jacob, and Liddy.

Madison laughed and pried Cassia from Tyler's arms. The girl reached out, trying to keep a grip on his neck.

"It's okay, sweetie. You'll see your daddy bright and early tomorrow. Let's get you some dinner. And later, we can have a rubber ducky race in the tub. How does that sound?"

Tyler looked quizzically at Addison, and his mate shrugged her shoulders.

Cassia slowly let go and smiled at her new auntie. Madison delivered the little girl to the nannies, who led her to the table.

Madison leaned over and whispered in Tyler's ear. "Cassia panicked earlier this morning when you and Addison had left the castle early to prepare for the picnic."

"Why? Had something gone on when we were out?"

Madison shook her head. "No, not at all. She's still traumatized, I think. If the little girl can't see either of you, she thinks she's being abandoned again."

"Addison, are you okay without me for a little while?"

"Yes, of course. Don't fret about Cassia. I'll get her ready for bed. Are you still going out riding with the men?"

"If all's well with you and the children, yes."

Addison hugged her mate. “Yes. Go. All’s well. I’ll make sure Cassia knows we are never leaving her again. When you come back from your ride, look in on her and kiss her goodnight. She’ll be asleep, but she’ll sense you’re there and that her world is safe, and she’ll know we love her dearly.”

Tyler leaned down and kissed Addison.

“I won’t be long. Just a bonding session with your father. We got on so well at the picnic that he invited me for this ride with the men. I couldn’t very well turn him down.”

“No, you could not. My father is forceful. And as the newest member of his family, he’ll want to show you off.”

Both laughed. Tyler kissed and hugged his mate and left for the stables. At the door, he turned and blew a last kiss and a lighthearted wave.

As Tyler rode off down the road with the other men, the last image he saw was of his beautiful mate and her sisters waving goodbye. The image of domestic bliss was seared into his brain.

I will remember this day for the rest of my life. I will remember it all.

TWENTY-FIVE



ADDISON

“Oh my, what a mess!” Addison said as she surveyed the dining table, her morning robe swishing around her.

Luckily, the adults had all eaten, and only the children and the two nannies were about, for every inch of the surface seemed to have a thin coating of porridge.

“Yes, My Queen. The children are still having difficulty with their table manners. None of it was done on purpose. Porridge can be tricky with little hands holding spoons.” Nanny Richelot quickly wiped every morsel she could find, not wanting the servants to have quiet fits.

Addison held a hand over her mouth. She couldn’t restrain her smile, but she didn’t want the children to think their clumsy ways were royalty-approved.

“Okay, you lot. Upstairs. Washcloths, warm water, and soap on those sticky faces, pronto. And don’t forget to brush your teeth.”

“Yes, Queen Mommy!” they all heralded, babbling up a storm as they made their way from the dining hall. With a dour and disapproving face, Nanny Letitia followed the brood in tow.

Queen Mommy, how I love the sound of that.

Addison made her way back to her room to shower and dress for the day. As far as she was concerned, family life, with all its messes, was perfect for her. What was a house, all perfectly aligned, if no hearts lived there? She hummed a merry song as she got ready for the day.

An hour later, Addison made her way to the drawing room, where her sister Madison was watching the children play outside and smiling softly.

“Look at them running. Their energy is boundless.” Addison stood and watched in wonder.

“Oh, yes. If we adults could only bottle it,” Madison replied. “I’d get so much done if I still had that much pep.”

Addison drew nearer to the windows. She searched the busy group for Cassia, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“Nanny Richelot, where is Cassia? I don’t see her with the other children.”

The nanny ran outside. She looked left and right and jogged down the slight hill toward the lake. No Cassia anywhere ... the nanny’s frightened eyes put Addison into a panic.

The queen ran to the others. “Children, where is Cassia? Was she with you when you started playing?”

Liddy answered first. “Oh, yes, Mom, but Nanny Letitia took her.”

Addison grabbed the child’s arms to get her full attention. “Where did she take her? Please tell me.”

The group murmured in fits and starts. “We don’t know, Mom. Nanny came and grabbed Cassia and left.”

Timon spoke up next. “Nanny Letitia had a mean look on her face, Mom. I thought Cassia had made a mess upstairs. And she was taking her to clean it up.”

Addison’s eyes popped. She knew no one was upstairs in the children’s quarters. There was no mess in their nursery or playroom. She had just come from there to see if the children were about.

The queen went into rescue mode. She stood in the great hall and called out to every family member.

“Father, Mother, sisters, please come help me. Cassia is missing. Nanny Letitia took her.”

Bedroom, drawing, and study room doors swung open. Addison's mother called down to the servants' quarters. Soon, the entire household was on alert.

Addison, by now, was in a frenzy and flew through the castle as fast as her feet could take her, calling out the little girl's name. The heavy material of her dress swished this way and that as she made her way to every floor and through every room.

"Have you found her? Is she there?" Addison would call as she passed the fellow searchers in the halls.

Yet all she was met with were frightened eyes and nervous voices saying no. In the blink of an eye, little Cassia disappeared with the one person Addison entrusted to take care of the little girl. With every castle space swept, with every square foot of outside ground covered, Addison's panic grew more and more.

Eventually, they all made their way back to the great hall. They were bereft of where to look and hoping Addison's father would know what to do. Addison felt a pit in her stomach, suddenly regretting the fact that the girl's mates had all gone on a shifter's excursion in the woods. She would feel much better if Tyler were here to help her keep her head.

By now, Addison was a mess of tears. Her hands shook. Her sisters helped her to a nearby chair.

"Father, Mother, please, what do we do?"

Suddenly, a voice called from upstairs. Nanny Richelot stood at the top railing and called down. "Queen Addison, a note. I found a note. It lay on Cassia's bed."

Addison jerked her head and stifled her sniffles. She ran for the stairs and met the nanny halfway down. Addison's father ran to meet his daughter, and, on the landing, together they read the missive scrolled in a quick ink quill hand.

Addison,

*If you want to see Cassia alive again,
you will abdicate your throne as Queen of the realm.*

And you will divorce yourself from being King Tyler's mate.

Letitia.

“The hell I will!” Addison shouted defiantly, then fell into her father’s arms, wailing.

Her father shook her to her senses. “Child now is not the time to cry. Regain that spunk. We must fight for Cassia in every way we know how.”

Addison nodded, gulped back the tears, and with what inner strength she had left, left her father’s arms and stood tall. The queen morphed into the woman who had beaten that abusive rogue mother. She had fought for Cassia then. She would fight for her now.

“Father, you are right. Please alert your men. Send someone to find Tyler and the others, too, and send someone to Somberglen to get Tyler’s beta and tell him what’s going on.”

“I will, my daughter.” With one last quick hug, he hurried off to begin assigning orders.

Addison’s mother and sisters gathered around the enraged queen.

“Someone is out to get me. I don’t know for sure why, but it does not matter. They want a battle. Well, I’m not afraid, and I’m not going to run. So let’s have the war,” Addison declared.

Her family nodded and murmured agreement.

“If it takes my own life, I will find Cassia and rescue her again. I will bring her back where she belongs. With Tyler’s help, we will put an end to any of those treasonous traitors left from the rogue pack once and for all.”

Addison ran out the foyer doors, calling out Cassia’s name. Her sisters followed suit.

In the castle’s outside keep, she made this promise: “Cassia! Cassia! I love you! Mommy is coming! Daddy will find you, our little one.”

The queen's cries echoed through the valley, ricocheting off the granite cliffs and reverberating on the lake water. Ravens in the magnificent trees shot off in all directions, caw-cawing their mimicked cry.

What had started out as a sunny day had storm clouds gathering and lightning striking. Booming thunderclaps and torrential rains came down on the wailing mother as her family members dragged her limp body back inside.

As her sisters held the water-drenched Addison at the castle door to await Tyler's arrival, the queen whispered in a raspy and tremor-ridden voice. "Cassia, Cassia, you are my world. We will save you. Hold on, my little one. Daddy and I will have you in our arms again."

TWENTY-SIX



TYLER

It took no time for Tyler to reach the castle after receiving the message from a servant who found him with the other family shifters in the woods. He rushed into the great hall, where he found Addison pacing back and forth. The look on his queen's face was tragic. Tyler had never seen Addison so despondent before, and the sight broke his heart.

"Addison, I'm here." Tyler reached out to her.

"Oh, Tyler. Please help, please! She's gone. Cassia is gone!" Addison rushed into his arms, wailing.

"Addison, please, hang on, darling. Can someone show me the note?"

One of Addison's sisters handed it over, and Tyler quickly read the missive. His face flushed red with rage. "I can't believe I allowed Letitia into our world. What was I thinking? She was a free woman in the rogue pack, not a slave. Once a bad egg, always a bad egg. I will have her head when this is done."

Tyler clapped serious eyes on Addison's father. "Mr. Hart, could you and Mrs. Hart take the children on whatever foray you had planned for the day? We need them away from all this to keep them calm."

"Yes, of course, Tyler." He was aware Tyler knew more about the situation and the woman involved and followed his guidance willingly. "That's easily done. But what about safety measures? Should I take my men with us?"

“Yes, take your castle guards as well and any other male hands you can spare. Don’t have them overreact. I don’t think the children are in any real danger. They took Cassia to get to Addison and me, and they’ve already succeeded at that. But thank you for managing them.”

“Absolutely. We had merely planned another day at the lake as the children loved it.” Addison’s father waved at his men to mount up and form a guard party.

“That’s perfect. Far enough away from the castle so they don’t overhear any news but close enough to get them back to the safety of the palace in case of another attack. Mrs. Hart, if you would, assemble the children now.”

Mrs. Hart nodded. She scooped up her skirts and, with Nanny Richelot, gathered the picnic and supplies and hurried out to the back lawn to get the brood on their short walking tour.

Tyler leaned down and whispered. “Addison, you go with them too.”

Addison jerked up her head. “No, Tyler. I know I am supposed to obey my mate and king. But in this instance, I say no. I am coming with you.”

“Addison, I appreciate what you’re saying, but ...”

“I’m coming too,” Madison piped up.

“Me too,” said a breathless Fletcher as he hurried in, having just returned from the men’s retreat in the woods that Tyler had also just left.

“Tyler, listen to reason,” Addison insisted. “I know that vile wench the best. You may need me if there are any negotiations or merely to sweeten the pot to get Letitia to let go of Cassia.”

“I don’t know. Those rogues have already tried to hurt you once ...”

Addison put her finger to Tyler’s lips. “No negotiation. Not this time. I have to be there for Cassia. She will be so

scared, Tyler. I must be there. Her safety before mine. I am her mother.”

Tyler exhaled. “Very well. But my king’s guards will surround you and Madison the entire way. That is not open for negotiation either.”

Addison nodded.

“Where are we headed?”

Madison pointed to the front of the note. “Letitia drew a simple map. X marks the spot.”

“Right. Okay, all, mount up. There’s no time to lose.”

They prepared themselves while waiting for Tyler’s shifters to arrive from Somberglen. Once word from the servant reached Louis, he rounded up some of the enforcers, and they met the group at the Autumhart castle.

Then, the large party raced off toward the spot the nanny had highlighted. This was the first time Tyler went with less than full confidence to a skirmish. He was not afraid for himself or his men. No, his hesitation was because Cassia’s life was at stake, and he was bringing the love of his life along as a ploy. One wrong move and his entire world could collapse before his eyes.

In less than thirty minutes, they had reached the place Letitia had stated in the note. It lay on the outskirts of the nearest city. When they pulled up to the location, they found it was an abandoned manufacturing plant that used to be a grain mill. With its dilapidated conveyor belts and rusting parts, the steel and iron beast made awful groaning and creaking sounds in the strong breeze.

Tyler leaned over to Louis. “It feels like a trap.”

“I was thinking the same. For that hag to offer the location where she took Cassia. It’s all too inviting a morsel, isn’t it?”

“Tell the men to be on high alert. Assemble a perimeter. Quickly now.”

Louis nodded, hurried off, and gave the instructions. The squadron took their offensive and defensive positions.

Tyler pulled Addison against his chest. “My men and I will go in. You and Madison stay here with my guards.”

“Sorry, Tyler, but not on your life. If Cassia is in there, I’m going in there too.” Addison said flatly.

“And I am with my sister every step of the way.”

“Ladies, we don’t know if this is the real thing or a trap. Let me survey it first.”

Addison crossed her arms and flashed a disdainful glare. “Tyler, we are wasting time debating something that is not debatable. Are you coming or not? Because I’m going in.”

Addison and Madison walked toward the building. Tyler stopped them in their tracks.

“Fine. Okay. But listen carefully now. I need you two to stay close by my side. My enforcers, Fletcher, and I will surround you the entire way in, but you keep your eyes on me at all times. Do you understand?”

The women nodded.

With weapons at the ready and a bag full of spare clothes in case they had to shift, the group entered a side door that sat ajar. Tyler feared it was left that way on purpose. The closer they came to the entrance, the more certain he feared the setup was a trap. But he knew his queen. If there was even the remotest of chances Cassia was inside, there was no stopping the little girl’s mom.

A guard pried open the rusted door. Tyler entered first, along with his front-line guards. Then the women stepped over the threshold with a rear contingent of men.

It took a while for their eyesight to adjust to the dark and dank surroundings of empty and warped shelving, steel girder catwalks, and water dripping from the leaking tiled roof.

Every footfall echoed throughout the structure. There was no way to move stealthily. In the darkness, one guard tripped over an oddly placed pile of wooden pallets. He slammed up against a massive shelving unit, which tipped and came tumbling down.

Everyone in the entourage ducked for cover. Once the dust had cleared, Tyler jumped up and searched for the women. He quickly found Madison, held in her mate's arms. But no Addison. His queen was nowhere to be seen.

“Addison! Addison! Call out! Where are you?”

Tyler's shouts ricocheted off the metal and concrete walls.

Yet no reply came.

The group fanned out, searching high and low, digging through the fallen shelving rubble. No sign of her at all, not even a torn piece of her dress. Nothing. She had simply vanished.

“Addison! Addison!” Tyler kept calling her name until Louis ran up, put a hand over his mouth, and whispered in the king's ear.

“Sire, she's gone. Whether by chance or by plan, she's gone. Let us regroup and rethink. Yelling only gives our location away.”

Tyler ignored his beta's plea. He ran left and right, racing down each aisle, calling her name. When there was still no reply, the king stood in the center of the vast space and hollered Addison's name so loudly that rust fell from the catwalks, and nesting birds shot into the air.

The alpha's wail for his lost mate ended up being the most sonorous, guttural sound to ever fill the realm.

TWENTY-SEVEN



ADDISON

Addison woke up alone, her head pounding. She smelled an odor coming from her face. She rubbed her fingers against her lips. *Chloroform?*

She sat up and looked herself over. Nothing broken. No cuts. She was chilled by the icy cold floor, but she was okay and free to move. With some effort to steady herself, she got to her feet and, in the darkness, searched for a way out of whatever spot she had gotten herself in and back to Tyler and the group.

Within seconds, she bumped into bars. She felt left, then right, then behind her. She was surrounded by cast iron bars. *Oh, my God, the rogues caught me. This was a trap. I'm caged.*

Soon, her eyes acclimated to the surroundings. A shaft of light streamed into the foreign place from a small window opposite her. And there on a woven rug sat Cassia. The little girl looked unharmed, but her hair was disheveled and her dress dirty. She sat in the middle of the floor playing with a ratty old doll, its hair, and dress in the same condition.

Addison thought to call out to the little girl but realized the girl was far away and behind thick glass. Cassia would not hear her cries, and such calls would only bring the rogues down to investigate her. God only knows what that would mean for the pair of them.

Instead, Addison swiveled her head, looking for a way to escape. But the cage was all-encompassing, and its door was

held closed with a gigantic padlock. Addison tried to slink through the bars, but no matter how much she sucked in her body, she could not fit. And there was no bending the solid bars, regardless of their rust-covered facade.

Addison had undoubtedly made enough noise that footsteps sounded from above. A single bare bulb lit up at a flight of rickety stairs, and soon, small feet made their way down to the damp and dour space.

The queen cupped her hands around her mouth, ready to call out for help, only to recognize the sight. Her hands fell to her sides, balled up into fists. Her face flashed fiery red with rage.

“Well, well, look who is finally awake. Our little miss queen for a day. How are you feeling, my pet?” crooned Letitia. The wretched woman had abandoned her modest nanny outfit for an ostentatious robe in a deep indigo hue.

Addison raced to the bars and held onto them tightly, staring the women down.

“You release me this instant, and Cassia too. Then King Tyler may choose to save your pathetic life.”

Letitia belly laughed. “Oh, that’s a good one, that is. To have such confidence behind bars when it’s me who holds the key to both your lives.”

Addison pressed her face against the bars and hissed. “You hold nothing. Maybe you think you do, for a time, but the king and his men are here, Letitia. Your life and those rogues who helped you in this attack are on the line.”

Letitia chuckled. “Oh, dear girl, you’re such a fool. And so is your mate’s entourage. You people bit at my lure even easier than I thought. All for the sake of that pitiful toddler over there.”

“If you put one finger on Cassia ...”

Letitia came closer and glared. “And you’ll do what, exactly?”

“I will kill you with my bare hands.”

Letitia chuckled, shook her head, and sat in a wooden chair near the stairs.

“You know, Addison, you’re more of a fool than I thought. It seems you’re too dense to put even two and two together. Here, I’ll enlighten you about how silly that threat you just made is. I am the mate of the alpha who put the bounty on your head.”

Addison opened her mouth to speak, but shock prevented words from forming.

“Oh, dear, sweet Addison, take a seat on that bench over there, and let me tell you a story.”

Addison turned around and took a seat. Not because of Letitia’s suggestion. But because she felt herself too weak to stand.

“Good. Now that you’re seated, I shall begin. You see, dear, my mate is Tyler’s uncle. He and Tyler’s father fell out over the love of one woman. Tyler’s mother. When Tyler’s dad won her heart, his brother left the realm, never to be heard from again.”

“No. That can’t be. Tyler would have ...”

“Shush now, and let me finish this wonderful tale. Tyler grew up never knowing who was responsible for his parent’s deaths. It was Tyler’s uncle all the while, as payback for being wronged all those many years ago. I mean, with the pride in the Giles clan. How Tyler’s father could think that slight would be water under the bridge, well, it’s beyond me. The fool should have known his brother would eventually seek revenge.”

Addison, bug-eyed, whispered to herself. “He killed Tyler’s parents. Oh my God, and Tyler doesn’t even know.”

“That’s right, dear. I guess what they say is true. Ignorance is bliss until you aren’t ignorant anymore. Then, the hurt sets in. How delicious!” Letitia cackled like a menacing witch.

“But all those years ago, Tyler was still so young. How could he? How could he leave Tyler to be an orphan? That is beyond cruel. Tyler had nothing to do with the love triangle.”

“Oh, yes, but he was the ill-gotten fruit from that love affair. No matter. Whenever my mate saw Tyler, it only reminded him of his lost love. And, of course, one betrayal had to invite another. One damaged heart to slay one more. Killing the parents was fine. But wreaking devastation on Tyler’s heart would be the coup de gras, don’t you think?”

“Letitia, you and this rogue alpha ... you are both pure evil.”

Letitia shrugged. “Maybe so, but whatever brings joy to my mate brings joy to me. Tyler’s loss of you and that little blonde-haired brat over there will be our crowning glory. Revenge at zenith heights. Finally, my mate can rest easy, knowing his hurt has been healed. An eye for several, my dear. The revengeful heart wants what it wants.”

The wretched woman let out another cackle. In the shadows and the bulb lighting, Letitia looked like a monster, a white-faced breathing skeleton infused with blind loyalty and seething hatred for people she didn’t know. Even in her caged world, Addison felt pity for the lost soul, but not enough to quell her anger.

The two sat there for a while in silence. It gave Addison time to think.

Tyler never mentioned his uncle, not even once. Does that mean he never knew about the love affair? Or that he knew, and he had written the man out of his world? Or did Tyler think the man was long since dead?

The question hanging in the air was if there was any hope that Tyler might finally put it all together. Did he know his uncle was the mastermind behind all of this, alive and well? Or did he have no knowledge of an uncle at all? What were the odds Tyler would get to the bottom of this, considering he was a child the last time his uncle was presumably seen?

After a time, Addison spoke. “This isn’t over, Letitia, you know that.”

Letitia looked up from her hands resting comfortably in her lap and smiled serenely.

“Oh, Addison, I think this game is played and won. And neither you nor Tyler are the victors. Once you and that rug rat over there are done away with and my mate delivers your heads on a silver platter, your besotted man will fold like a cheap deck of cards. He will no longer have the will to rule or to defend Somberglen. He’ll abdicate, and in no time, my mate will be the head of the realm. Then I will be his queen, as it should have been all along, all those many years ago.”

Addison said not a word to Letitia. Instead, she bowed her head in silent communication with her mate. The mating bond, with any luck, was supposed to allow them a telepathic link.

Tyler, read my mind if you can. You need to avenge your parents’ deaths and rescue Cassia and me. With all your force and might, free us from this mighty ruin and let our family finally be free.

TWENTY-EIGHT



TYLER

Panic and fury surged through him with a force he didn't even know was possible. His mate was *missing*. And more than likely taken by the same people who put the bounty on her head.

She wasn't dead. Of that much, he was certain. But that didn't mean any number of horrible other things weren't happening to her right now.

Tyler snarled and frantically reached out to feel the bond again, desperately trying to sense where Addison could be.

Letitia. She had done this. Just like she'd taken Cassia.

But she couldn't be working alone. And why?

He barged his way through one door that led to a wide-open room. There were large shelves lining the walls, but the center was bare.

"A perfect place to get caught," he muttered.

Carefully, he crept his way along the walls, trying to stick closer to the shelves. The others had spread out, searching the rest of the large factory building for any trace of Addison. He was all alone for the moment when his eye caught a camera, its blinking red light staring right at him.

"Shit."

Someone definitely knew he was here now. No point in trying to hide.

He stepped out of the shadows and squared his shoulders. “Whoever you are, you took the wrong woman and child. I will find them, and then I will tear you limb from limb!”

Tyler didn’t expect a response, but he did hear the distinct sound of footsteps. They were coming toward the door on the other end of the room.

Apparently, he was going to get a direct answer after all. Fine by him.

The door swung open, and a familiar scent hit his nose. He couldn’t quite place it, however. The figure was partially hidden in the shadows, but his silhouette was distinctly male.

Tyler knew without a doubt that this was the man who had placed the bounty on Addison.

He snarled at the man. “You face me, and yet you still hide yourself in the shadows? Come out from there and stand in the open. Let’s finish this.”

The man chuckled, which Tyler was sure was meant to sound menacing, but it sounded too strained. “I was hoping you’d recognize me. Though I suppose it has been a long time.”

And with that, the man finally did step out of the shadows. Tyler gasped.

The man looked like his father. There were some obvious differences, of course. He wasn’t as big as his father, and his face was longer and more weather-beaten.

But in so many other ways, they looked so much alike. Even their body language.

Now Tyler understood who this was. He’d only remembered him from pictures and faint childhood memories. But there was no doubt that it was him.

“Uncle Maximilian,” Tyler growled. “How is this possible? You died years ago.”

Maximilian grinned widely. “You sound so disappointed, boy. Not even so much as a hello? I am one of your last living relatives, after all.”

Tyler let out a snarl, his wolf fighting to come out. “You kidnapped my child and put a bounty on my mate. I wouldn’t care who you are. You are fortunate I’m not currently ripping out your throat.”

His uncle sneered. “No, boy, you are fortunate I have not acted openly until now. You might be younger, but I’m the more experienced one of the two of us. Both in politics and in a fight.”

“What is all this? What’s the point? You obviously have it out for me in some way, so why attack Addison and not me?” Tyler demanded.

Maximilian’s grin returned. “My brother was never worthy of his crown, and you are even less worthy. And so I arranged to have him and his temptress disposed of. You were so young, and it should have been easy to get rid of you also.”

Tyler felt his blood turn to ice. His uncle had been the one to kill his parents. And by some miracle, he’d barely avoided being murdered, too.

“Unfortunately, my plan to dispose of you failed, and you lived on,” his uncle continued. “I needed to find a new way to bring you down, perhaps even turn your own people against you. And then you got engaged to that half-human waste of a princess.”

The king snarled at the insult to his beloved mate.

Maximilian paid him no mind. “I was certain your people would turn on you for it. That they would reject the idea of having a weak queen who couldn’t even shift. And you would have looked weak in turn for accepting her.”

Maximilian began to pace as he relayed the chain of events. “I planned on challenging you for the throne in front of all your men to see. Defeating you in combat would have been the final straw, and I would be the undisputed king. And yet, despite her shortcomings, your people accepted her as their future queen. They even began to adore her.”

Tyler felt a surge of pride at that. At how much his mate had clearly gotten under his uncle’s skin and proved everyone

wrong. She truly was stronger than them all.

“Is that why you put the bounty on her?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“If I couldn’t bring you down in one fell swoop, I’d settle for picking you apart piece by piece.” His uncle took a step toward him, and Tyler met it with his own step closer. “Starting with the woman you were so clearly besotted with.

“With her dead, you would slowly begin to crumble. And the rogues attacking your villages would further aid my goal of making you look weak. If you couldn’t defend your villages, let alone your own betrothed, then what kind of king would you be?”

“And yet, even now, we are putting an end to your rogue attacks. And after I kill you, I will find my mate and the child you stole.”

Maximilian chuckled. “Did you really think I would have thought to challenge you if I didn’t think I could win? Don’t be such a naïve boy. Your father and I kept the peace in a very different way than you do, and it struck fear into the hearts of thousands.”

Then suddenly, his uncle had shifted, and he leapt at him. Tyler barely had enough time to dodge the attack and then shift himself.

His uncle made a big mistake in riling him up.

The two charged at each other, and they rolled across the floor. Maximilian pinned him for a moment. His uncle’s teeth gnashed at his throat, but Tyler was quicker. He bit down on Maximilian’s throat hard, and the older wolf kicked him off.

Before his uncle could recover, Tyler lunged at him again, biting at his legs. He managed to get in a few hits before Maximilian returned a few of his own.

His uncle tore at his ear and face, and the king growled in anguish. He retaliated by biting at Maximilian’s throat again and leaping away.

He needed a plan of some kind to take out his uncle. Maximilian's wolf was bigger than his and could obviously sustain a lot of blows.

Before his uncle could charge at him again, Tyler sprinted toward the large shelves. Time to make use of his environment. Maximilian tried to keep up with him, but he was slower than Tyler.

He disappeared into the shadows and then moved along quietly. His uncle growled furiously at not being able to catch him, and he heard him sniffing around.

Tyler didn't give him the chance.

Leaping from his place in the shadows, Tyler tackled the other wolf and sunk his teeth into the back of his neck. Maximilian howled and tried to shake him off, but Tyler kept his grip firm.

His uncle tried to roll over in an attempt to dislodge him, but Tyler let go at the last instant. He pinned his uncle to the ground. Maximilian let out a piercing howl before Tyler ripped out his throat.

He stood over his uncle's body, making sure it was truly finished.

Then, when Maximilian didn't move anymore, Tyler shifted back.

He was panting hard, and he could feel where his uncle had torn out parts of his flesh.

But that wasn't important now. What was important was finding Addison and getting her out of there.

TWENTY-NINE



ADDISON

The bar was almost free. Addison had spent the last half an hour working on the rusted piece of iron that held her captive. She had managed to maneuver a rock out of the wall and had scraped away most of the old soft mortar with it.

It was frustrating work. She could sense Cassia nearby and was frantic to get to her before something bad happened to her. She was certain Letitia would have no qualms about hurting the child.

She took the bar in both hands and shook it as hard as she could. She put all her pent-up aggression into the act. She was rewarded with landing on her ass as the bar came free from its socket and rolled into the hall beyond.

“Yes!” she said aloud. Then she cursed herself for making such a racket. She didn’t want to draw attention to her escape.

She inched her way through the widened gap in the cell bars. It was still pretty tight, even with a bar missing. But with a sigh of relief, she found herself on the other side.

Now, where the hell was Cassia?

Her instincts took her left down the dank corridor, which seemed to move in the correct direction based on where she thought the window in her cell had been located. Water dripped from the ceiling, and the tunnel smelled musty and disused. She may not be able to shift, but her senses were still sharp, and the moldy stench was getting up her nose. However, underlying the smell of disuse, there was a scent that gave her hope ... Cassia’s.

The tunnel opened into a wider room with cells lining the walls. Her scent was strong here. “Cassia?” Addison hissed into the semi-darkness.

She heard a movement in one of the cells, and Cassia’s terrified face appeared at the bars. “Addison?” she called with a catch in her voice. “Is that you, Addison?”

Addison ran to the bars and did the best she could to give the brave little girl a hug.

“Oh, what a touching family reunion,” said a voice behind her.

Addison spun. She would recognize that voice anywhere. It was the woman she’d promised to kill.

She faced the evil nanny, a growl rising spontaneously in her throat. She wished with all her heart she could shift. It was at times like this that she could swear there was a wolf within her trying to break free. It was so frustrating that she couldn’t use tooth and claw to defend her pup as she would have liked.

The two women circled each other, both looking for a weak spot, a glitch in the defenses of the other. “You are going to die tonight,” Addison told her calmly, stating it as a fact.

“You think a pathetic human bitch like you could kill me?” Letitia replied. “Well, bring it on,” she said and shifted so quickly that Addison didn’t have time to react. Before she knew it, she had a massive wolf launching itself at her throat.

Somehow, she managed to twist out of the direct line of attack, but the wolf caught her across the shoulder, and her arm went numb with pain. “Fuck,” she swore as she picked herself up and faced the snarling creature.

How was she going to fight her when she didn’t even have a weapon?

Suddenly, she remembered the iron bar discarded down the tunnel. It was her only hope. She turned and ran as fast as she could back the way she came. It was an impractical weapon, but she could think of nothing else.

She could hear Letitia hot on her heels. It lent wings to her legs. There it was, exactly where she had discarded it in the middle of the aisle.

The sound of the wolf's running gait changed behind her, and she knew Letitia was ready to spring. Addison skidded feet first across the floor, flattening her body to the ground and grabbing at the makeshift weapon as she went down.

The wolf managed to rake Addison's head as she leapt, sending her vision reeling and blood coursing down her face.

Despite her injury, Addison wasted no time jumping to her feet, the bar held before her. Letitia scrambled to a halt and then spun to face her, eyeing the iron bar warily.

"Not so sure now, huh?" Addison asked, spitting blood.

The corridor was narrow and not conducive to such a long weapon, so Addison started to back carefully down to the open space where Cassia was being held. She didn't want to fight in front of the child, but it was the only hope she had to defeat Letitia.

Letitia must have understood where she was going and the advantage she would have if she made it out into the open space. She pulled her teeth back into a snarl and sprang.

Addison brought up the bar and used it like a lance, knocking the wolf out of the air with the tip. She smiled in satisfaction as Letitia yelped and dropped her left shoulder. "Yeah," she said. "How do you like that?"

Letitia growled and lunged again, forcing Addison to run backward while trying to keep the ferocious wolf at bay with the end of the cumbersome iron bar. Letitia pushed the advantage and darted in to grab Addison by the ankle. The pain was excruciating.

Addison brought the bar down as hard as she could on the wolf's back and was relieved when the pressure on her leg was released. It occurred to her for the first time that she could actually die here. The fear coursed up her spine, sending a spike of adrenaline to her heart. Her mind cleared, and everything suddenly came into sharp focus.

“I refuse to die here,” she said to the snarling wolf. “If you think I’m going to back down, you are sadly mistaken.”

Her next step back took her into the open space. Great, now the odds were a bit more even. She raised the bar in trembling hands, her eyes never leaving that of the wolf’s.

For a while, Letitia circled her. Addison’s leg was in agony, and the wolf kept feinting on her weak side, causing her to put weight on it. *I get what you’re doing, and you’re not going to get away with it*, Addison thought.

She made a swipe with the bar, but Letitia had been waiting for just such a move. With lightning speed, she leapt over it and suddenly had Addison pinned to the ground. It was only the iron bar between them that stopped Letitia’s jaws from closing on Addison’s throat.

Addison could hear Cassia screaming in the background, and her head spun from where it had hit the ground in the fall.

She reflexively brought her knees up, managed to get her feet into Letitia’s belly, and kicked with all her might. The wolf went flying, landing hard on her side with a grunt and lying motionless.

Addison willed her body to get up and finish the evil woman off, but she was still feeling stunned from the bash to the head. She managed to roll onto all fours, shaking her head desperately to clear it.

Both women staggered to their feet at the same time. There was a new quality to their circling now. Both were far more wary. Both were hampered by injuries. One mistake and that would be it for one or the other of them.

Addison watched carefully. Letitia was lame on her left foreleg and was bleeding from a gash to her head, the blood trickling down her face into her eye. If Addison could maneuver her to the wall, then she could force her opponent to turn, and she could monopolize on her injuries.

Carefully, she sidled to the side of the chamber. Too late, Letitia realized what she was doing. She leapt lamely just as

Addison swung the bar like a baseball bat and hit her hard in the side of her head with a sickening thud.

The wolf dropped to the floor like a stone ... dead.

“Addison!”

It was Tyler’s voice. *Sweet Tyler*, Addison thought as she passed out, falling into his strong, welcoming arms.

THIRTY



TYLER

Every mating ceremony was different.

Some things were the same in all of them. In any mating ceremony, the two partners would declare their love before an audience. They would embrace each other. But beyond that, there was a world of different traditions and versions to draw from. Even if Addison and Tyler had confined themselves to the mating ceremonies as performed in Somberglen, they would have had dozens to choose from.

They hadn't. They had planned a mating ceremony that reflected them. It would be formal and solemn, as it had to be, but also passionate and personal. In his own way, he was proud of the ceremony they were about to perform. But mostly, he was just happy. He was happy that he finally had a day to celebrate a relationship that had made his life better in every way.

He walked into Cassia and Liddy's room. Addison was there, helping Cassia straighten up her dress and look nice for the ceremony. The children would all play a special part in it.

"How are my girls doing?" he asked, smiling. His wolf stirred at just being near his little family.

"Tyler," Addison snapped. "Haven't you heard it's bad luck to see your mate before the mating ceremony?"

"As if you've ever brought me bad luck," said Tyler, rolling his eyes.

Addison was certainly a beautiful sight in her dress. It was deep purple with a bright blue sash in the middle to accent it.

The dress was cut so that his bite mark was entirely visible. She looked as beautiful as ever but also uniquely stately. Every movement she made was surrounded by a torrent of fabric. There was no questioning that she was a royal. She emanated dignity with every step and motion.

“Let’s let the girls decide,” Addison said. “Liddy, Cassia, is it okay for Tyler to be here even if it might be bad luck?”

Cassia thought about the question seriously. She always thought about questions before she answered them. “Can bad luck actually hurt people?”

Addison smiled and shook her head. “No. It’s just a superstition.”

Liddy interjected. “Then I think it’s okay. I like it when both of you are together.”

“Are you ready for your part in the ceremony?” Tyler asked.

“Yes!” Cassia said. “I even practiced, so I know I’m gonna get it just right.” Liddy nodded her agreement.

“You’ll both do great,” Tyler agreed. He turned his attention to his soon-to-be mate. “I just wanted to check if there was anything you needed. As far as I can tell, everything’s on schedule.”

“There were a few guests who needed rides and waited until the last minute to ask,” Addison said. “But I’ve got them all dealt with. I think we’re just about ready to go.”

“All right then,” said Tyler. “I’m about to open the castle gates for the audience.”

Addison looked nervous for a second. “You’re sure they’re going to be okay with me?”

Tyler laughed and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Addison, after hearing that you took down a shifter to save your daughter even though you can’t shift yourself, I think most of them think you’re cooler than I am.”

“All the kids I’ve played with say their parents like you,” Liddy agreed. “One of the kids said their mom told them it

was okay to not be a shifter because you're not a shifter, and you're the queen."

"Liddy's right," said Tyler. "And you're a lot more than just the queen."

Addison couldn't hide the fact that she was a little choked up. "You should let people in. It's about time we get things started."

Tyler gave her a quick hug and kiss, then started for the door.

"See you soon," he added, walking out into the hall.

The next few minutes were a whirlwind. Somehow, the guests all made it to their places, and so did Tyler and Addison. It was time to begin.

The ceremony was to take place in the castle's grand hall. Tyler, Addison, the officiant, and their closest family and friends would be on the balcony. Invited guests would fill the first few rows of seats, and the rest of the space would be filled with any of the two kingdoms' subjects who made the trek to see the ceremony.

The room was decorated with banners of both kingdoms, and somehow, they'd managed to make it feel cheery. The officiant of the ceremony was a minister chosen by Addison's family. Slowly, the packed room went quiet.

"We are here to celebrate two members of our Great Pack who have found love with each other. Will Tyler Giles, of the Somberglen Kingdom, present himself?"

Tyler stepped up, dressed in a perfectly fitted suit with a crimson cummerbund.

"Will Addison Hart, of the Autumhart Kingdom, present herself?"

She stepped forward.

"Do you, Tyler Giles, declare your love for Addison Hart with the intent to share your life with her entirely and fully?"

"I do," he answered.

“Do you, Addison Hart, declare your love for Tyler Giles with the intent to share your life with him, entirely and fully?”

“I do,” Addison said.

“And, Tyler Giles, will one who knows you vouch for your sincerity?”

“I will,” said Louis, his beta, stepping forward.

“And, Addison Hart, will one who knows you vouch for your sincerity?”

“I will,” Cassia said as loud as she could, and the crowd laughed and cheered for her enthusiasm.

“Then I declare the bond valid,” the officiant proclaimed. “You may kiss.”

There was no need to ask them twice. Tyler and Addison fell into each other’s arms, and as the music began to play, the entire crowd burst into cheers.

A tear welled in Addison’s eye. There was no mistaking the joy of that sound. The people had accepted her just as Tyler and the girls had told her they would.

Just as Tyler had.

A few minutes and many brief greetings later, the two of them were dancing to a slow, romantic waltz. The ceremony was over. The party had already been planned. All they had to think about was each other.

“We really made it,” he said, pulling her tighter against his body. “I guess I always knew we would have a mating ceremony at some point. But I never thought it would make me this happy.”

She relaxed into his arms. “And to think, you only had to fight one family member to the death to make it happen.”

Tyler laughed. “In my defense, he started it.”

“You certainly can’t say we didn’t earn some time on our own.”

“Is that what you want?” Tyler asked, grinning. “Some time with just the two of us?”

“Gods, I want that more than anything.” She leaned back into a dip.

“Well, why not? We’re done with the part of the ceremony they needed us for. Why don’t we make our way upstairs?”

Addison thought. “You don’t think that the family would be disappointed? I wouldn’t want anyone to think we’re rude.”

“I think they know we’ve earned a little break, too,” he whispered. “We stopped a plan to overthrow the whole kingdom. Surely, they can figure out a buffet line without us.”

“You’re right,” Addison said, giggling. “Let’s get out of here.”

Tyler grabbed her hand and led her toward the door, trying to look as busy as possible. Unfortunately, they had only made it about halfway there when Lexi and Xander ambushed them to congratulate them on finally figuring themselves out.

After a brief but happy conversation, the two had almost got to the door when Taryn called them over, and she and Declan held their attention for another few minutes.

Finally, they made it out and quickly headed up the stairs and into their room. It was only when the door was finally closed behind them that Addison breathed out. They had made it. No one would be wishing them well now.

“Well, then,” said Tyler, laying his hands on her back and then letting them slip down her body. “Now that we’re finally on our own, what would you like to do?”

Addison wrapped her arms tightly around Tyler’s waist. “There are a few things I could think of ...”

“Making a life with you is going to be fun,” Tyler said, guiding her toward the bed.

“I can’t wait,” she replied and kissed him with all the love her heart would forever hold.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

Hi! I'm Milly Taiden. I love to write sexy stories featuring fun, sassy heroines with curves and growly alpha males with fur. My books are a great way to satisfy your craving for paranormal romance with action, humor, suspense and happily ever afters.

I live in Florida with my hubby, our son, and our fur babies: Speedy, Stormy and Teddy. I have a serious addiction to chocolate and cake.

I love to meet new readers, so come sign up for my newsletter and check out my Facebook page. We always have lots of fun stuff going on there.

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