



Casey

Safe Haven Wolves Book 8

SHERRY FOSTER

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Casey

By
Sherry Foster

Dedication

To the family I adore,
my friends who keep me sane,
and the readers who love to read.

A special thanks to the man who
continues to believe in me.

I have some incredible readers.
I want to thank each and every one
of them for reading these books.

A special thanks to the JIT team

Kelly

Kimberley Devine

Monica Hendrix

Natalie Cream

Tiffany Steinert

Melanie Robinson

If I missed anyone I am terribly sorry.

This book is a work of fiction.
All of the Characters, organizations, events,
and places portrayed in this novel are products
of the author's overactive imagination.

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ASIN: B07RPJ1NPF

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Chapter One

Trey watched the helicopter land. He hadn't thought Marcus would be so quick to send Casey and the others to his territory. He knew they planned on leaving to rescue the children soon, but Roberts had called him earlier to tell him the bird was thirty minutes out. He had rushed to arrange rooms for everyone, and now he waited to pick up everyone and take them back to his house. Marcus really didn't want Nathaniel in his territory if he took the time to send them and Casey over. Trey figured they would wait till after the current mission was over to send them.

Trey had talked briefly with his dad concerning Alice, and after the initial refusal, his dad had come around. Alice might not be able to help figure out a way to break the curse, but with her intelligence and abilities, Trey wanted to try. He hoped Nathaniel was good with children, or rather, an adult in a child's body, which was how he saw Alice.

Casey was the first to climb out of the helicopter and turned to help a man Trey assumed was Nathaniel. Considering how much Gabby and Trina talked he wasn't surprised at the man's appearance, though with those blue highlights in that blond hair he would stick out like a beacon in the territory. Trey grimaced at the thought and hoped the majority of his pack didn't find out who Nathaniel was and how instrumental he had been in cursing their people. The consequences could be catastrophic, and they didn't need problems right now.

Trey wasn't happy about having the man in his territory either; he didn't think any Alpha would be pleased to host the man who helped cursed their race. He planned on having a long talk with the man about the situation. All he had to go on was what Trina told his mate, and he didn't fully trust Trina. Although to be fair, he thought Trina had been dealt a bad hand at life, and he was hopeful, for Gabby's sake, he could put the past behind them and move forward now that he understood more about her.

Gabby told him Trina was having a hard time, harder than expected after finding out she was a true-Seeker. Trey had no Seekers in his pack; he wished he had at least one. His sister would never have gone through a night of terror all those years ago if the pack had a Seeker. He had talked the situation over with Marcus once a few months ago. He thought having a Seeker visit his territory once a month to look around would be an excellent idea, but he hadn't figured out how to get the guy in without offending his people. Knowing Trina was one, and sister to his mate, opened up possibilities.

The only problem with that scenario was the fact Jaden was still sore about him asking Trina to leave his territory. Gabby was jumpy and skittish around people, especially men, but Trina was jumpy in an entirely different way. His men hadn't enjoyed having a gun pulled on them if they surprised Trina and they were too much wolf to make a noise as they walked, so they often surprised Trina. He would have to talk with his dad and mom and try to figure out how to salvage the relationship with Trina. She wasn't a comfortable person to be around. He shook his head and vowed to consider how to repair the relationship later. For now, he needed to concentrate on the company arriving.

"Casey, you're looking good. Better than a couple of days ago. Kate, Craig, good to see you came through the fiasco yesterday and made it out alive. Sibeal, Conall, welcome to my territory. And you must be Nathaniel and dog." Trey didn't trust himself to shake the man's hand, so he just nodded toward him.

"I feel better. Marcus said you couldn't get to my house?"

"Yeah, about that. You weren't in any shape to lift the protections you had on the house when I got you out and as it stands Gabby and I were the only two who could enter the house. You never invoked the protections to keep us out after you let us borrow it in December. We put some plastic up to keep the snow out, and Gabby and I cleaned up the inside the best we could. Most of the windows shattered; there is a huge hole in front of your door. We will have to get some dirt hauled in, but we can't do that until the roads clear up some. I

had Kyle plow the road earlier, and we can get you up to the cabin, but unless your magic can do something about the weather, it will be damn cold inside until we can get the new windows in. I don't know shit about putting in a window so you will have to let Cain in the house to work. He ordered the new windows for you, but it will be a few days before they come in. We got you a new door waiting for you to lift the protection so they can put it in. We have the cabin out by Sam's you can stay in for now. It has two bedrooms so someone can stay there. Under the circumstances, it would be better if Nathaniel stayed at my house."

"You know?"

"Trina and Gabby talk every night so yes, I know he was instrumental in cursing our race. Trina said the little war they had yesterday didn't break the curse and Kate and Nathaniel working on finding a solution. Did he tell you why I wanted everyone here?"

"It wasn't to get us out of his territory and give his people time to calm down? You know most of them know the truth, right? Do your people know? About Nathaniel, I mean?"

Trey shook his head, "No, my pack doesn't talk to the members of Marcus' pack. I don't plan on telling them either."

Casey bit her bottom lip before looking back at the others, "Probably better that way. So why did you ask Marcus to send us here if not to get us out of his territory until things calm down? You know he wants Craig and the others to revoke their pack oath?"

"No, shit, I hadn't heard that. Damn. If Marcus revokes their pack oath, no one else will take them after finding out what they are." Trey looked over at Craig who shrugged. The family had a shattered look of loss about them. If Marcus were turning them out, he wouldn't stop with one; he would turn out the entire family. Trey couldn't imagine asking one of his pack members to leave because they mated to a witch and problems occurred. Pack was family and family stuck together. Things must have gone worse than Trina let on for the situation to get to this point. Trey shook his head and turned toward the

Suburban. As he opened the back for everyone to place their luggage, he noticed Nathaniel didn't appear to have any.

“Look, man, as long as I get to spend some time with my niece and her family I don't much care where we are but why did you want us here?”

Trey stared over Nathaniel's shoulder at the snow-covered mountain before bringing his gaze back to the man responsible for the destruction of their race. Bitterness swamped him as he realized he would have to work with the man. Grey eyes, weary with knowledge and loss, stared back at him.

“I have someone in my pack I want you to meet. No, that's a lie. I don't want you to meet her, but I think with her ability to analyze data and see possibilities the rest of us can't she might be your best chance of changing the future of our race. For my part, I don't give a shit about you, or your guilt, or how you feel about the situation. I don't want to hear your apologies or sorrow. I can't even feel sorry for your loss, not when you were so instrumental in causing so much loss for my people. But I will grasp any chance, even as far-fetched as this one, if it means our race may have a future.”

“What makes you think the person you have can help? Is she so old she can remember a time when our races were allies? Does she know a weakness that we don't know about?” Sibeal had heard the bitterness in Trey's voice when he spoke with her uncle. She understood the bitterness; she had a bit of it herself. But bitterness and living in the past wouldn't change the future.

“No. She is so young she isn't tainted with the knowledge of age. She gathers information and seems to see patterns others don't see. My parents are adopting the child so tread carefully with her, it would put me out if you offend my newest sister.”

Kate's eyes opened wide as she realized who Trey had to be talking about. “Wait, wait, you want us to work with Alice? No, no, I have heard about her. Dawn had a lot to say about the girl. I don't think working with someone who can aggravate you in three words or fewer and make you contemplate her

demise in less than ten words would be the ideal situation. Perhaps you haven't met the golden wolf? Maybe you have forgotten how quick the wolf rises at the least hint Craig, or I suffer. According to Dawn, anyone who spends over two minutes in her company suffers."

"For fuck's sake, Kate, you haven't even met her. Look, I don't much care how anyone feels about anything. At least, not any of you, except maybe Casey. We have been friends for too long for me not to care about her. But the rest of you, well, to be honest, you are all mostly strangers to me. I barely got to know any of you when we rescued you and Craig. I care only in the sense that you are partial shifters and or related to our race. What saves one of us saves us all and as anyone can see what damns one pack damns us all." Trey snarled the last sentence while looking at Nathaniel. "If there exists the slightest hope for our race I don't care if that hope is a damn witch or a freakishly smart child I am gonna take that chance and hold that hope tight."

Kate, forehead wrinkled stared at Trey before a small grin formed. "You don't much care for the child either do you?"

"She scares the shit out of me to tell you the truth. But that doesn't change the fact you will be kind to her and treat her like a normal child. No, wait, not like a normal child. You will treat her like a" Trey paused, "you will treat her like a treasured gift who just happens to be smarter than all of you put together."

The ride to Trey's was a quiet one.

Chapter Two

“I can’t believe you spent all day at mom’s house yesterday and never said a word to anyone about Samson. How could you Trey? You are so mean. I swear when he gets here, I am so telling him you have been mean to the whole family.”

Once Trey got word that Marcus was sending Samson home, he called his family together to give them the news. Stormie was not taking it well, which surprised no one. His guests were again in the conference room except for Casey, who was sitting in one of his recliners watching the family drama unfold.

“Stormie, my dearest sister, give it a rest. If I had told anyone yesterday, you still wouldn’t have seen him until today. And you know he keeps his phone off, so all you would have accomplished is calling his number over and over for nothing.” The exasperation in Trey’s voice caused Casey to snicker.

“Yeah, but you have known since Thursday Samson had a mate and said nothing. It is Saturday morning. How could you?” Stormie wailed.

“Actually, I have known since Tuesday.” He gave a pointed look at her stomach before continuing, “do you honestly think I should have told you Tuesday? The way you worry and fret over the people you love you think I should have told you earlier than today?”

“But Trey—”

“No, Stormie, I love you. But you have to realize at some point that not only am I your favorite brother but I am the Alpha of this pack. My word is law, and my job is to protect this pack with every fiber of my being. That means every member of this pack even the unborn. I would be a shitty Alpha if I told you that Samson was in danger knowing how you stress. Do you think I would jeopardize the life of my unborn nephew by causing you one moment of worry if I

didn't have to?" Trey gave an evil grin just before he threw his best friend under the bus, "Besides, David knew Tuesday also, and I don't see you fussing at him."

"Way to go. asshole." David glared at Trey before turning Stormie around in his arms.

"You knew? And you didn't tell me? I thought you loved me." More tears formed in Stormie's eyes as she looked up at David.

"Darling, don't cry. I love you. More than life itself but your brother is right. Look at you now. You know Samson and his new family are only two hours out, and here you are crying and making yourself sick with worry over what could have happened. We didn't tell you because we only want happy tears from you. Now stop crying. Samson is safe; his mate is safe as are the two small children she is bringing with her. Not only are you getting your brother back but two new sisters and a little brother. Shhh, baby please don't cry. You are ripping my heart out."

"But what if he had failed?"

"Stormie, stop, he didn't fail. Come on. This is Samson you are talking about. Do you think your brother would have gone for his mate and failed? Wait till he gets back, and I tell him you doubted him." Casey's lips twitched as she tried to bring Stormie out of her funk.

"I never doubt Samson. Samson is my favorite brother; he never fails." Stormie turned on Casey in indignation.

"Hey, I thought I was your favorite brother."

"Nope, you can't be my favorite brother today. You were mean to me." Stormie turned her nose up at Trey before laying her head against David and glaring at the others.

Trey held his hands up in mock surrender before turning to Casey. "Are you sure you are good with me sending Craig and his family to Cara's cabin for the night while you and Nathaniel stay here? We could set up a bed down in the cabin's basement for you if you want to get away for a bit, but Nathaniel absolutely can't leave my house without an escort."

“Why not? He seems nice enough, and he isn’t an Alpha. Why don’t you let him stay in the basement at Cara’s with the others and keep Casey here? She is like family, and I know she is looking forward to meeting Samson’s new mate as much as we are.” Stormie glared at Trey. She had asked about Nathaniel yesterday, but her brother wouldn’t tell her anything.

“Nathaniel is my business and not any of yours. He stays where I can monitor him, and that is all I will say on the matter.” Power rolled from Trey with his words.

“Um Trey, can I talk to you in private for a minute?” Casey looked toward the door before looking back at Trey.

Trey shrugged his shoulders before heading toward the door. As he waited for Casey to put her coat on, he looked toward the room they had just left. He could hear his sister making plans for the new arrivals and smiled to hear her laughter. He thanked the gods David could put up with her mood swings which had only gotten worse with the pregnancy because he knew, as much as he loved her, he would have strangled her long ago if he had to live with her emotional roller-coaster.

As he and Casey stepped outside her shiver caught him by surprise, and he realized in all the years he had known her she had never seemed bothered by the cold. Since his kind was warmer than humans, the cold didn’t affect them as much, but he realized he didn’t know as much about Casey as he thought.

“Are you too cold? We can step around the corner and get out of the wind.” He offered.

“No, not really. Our people can handle the cold fairly well; I don’t care that much for it though.”

“So what is so important you didn’t want anyone to hear?”

“Look, Trey, I get why you want to keep Nathaniel so close. Your wolf doesn’t trust him, to be honest, I don’t much trust him either. But he isn’t the power of that bunch, Kate is. You didn’t see his face when he found out that Sibeal was his dear niece who he helped raise. You didn’t watch him as his heart-mate gave his life up for him. I don’t like the man, well, no

that isn't true, I like him, but he scares me. I don't trust him, but then again, I have never had a child of my own. Sibeal is the closest he will ever have to a child, and he thought he lost her. How far would you go, how insane would you go if you lost your child? I mean after you have one? If Sibeal is like a child to him, then Kate is like the granddaughter he will never have. He would give his life for those two. He turned on his own to save Marcus' pack because his family is part of that pack. And he will give his life for those two females if he thinks for one minute he can spare them one moment of pain. They are all he has left besides his dogs. I know you want to keep him close. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer and all that. Your wolf demands he stays so you can watch him. But Trey, my friend, you can't touch a fraction of the power he can call. I don't want to be in the same house with a depressed witch. I know you are the Alpha of this pack and your word is law but as your friend who also is a paranoid witch, I am advising you to fix up the basement of Cara's cabin for him and put all five of them there. It is still in your territory, and you can still feel what is happening there without having to worry about his emotional state. He needs to be with his child and grandchild. That is how he sees them, you know."

"Shit. I don't like it. My wolf doesn't like it."

"I know, but you don't want to piss off the Golden Wolf. I don't want you to piss it off. Your brother is coming home with his new family. Trust me. Please. Send him with the others. They have the book, and he knows some of the language. He can train them to be safer with the power they hold. In the end, we want them on the side of the shifters and safe. If Marcus turns them out, I don't know that they will want to stay loyal to your people."

"Why are you loyal to my people over yours?"

Casey looked away for a moment. Sadness wafted from her so strongly Trey could smell it, and he regretted asking the question. "I have my reasons."

"Okay. Let me make some calls and get the cabin fixed up for the five of them. I don't want a depressed witch around

either. I am trusting you know what you are talking about. Are you sure you are okay? I mean, you don't seem too happy yourself, and a friend of mine just pointed out I don't want a depressed witch around."

Casey snorted with laughter, "I agree with David, you are an ass. But you are a dear friend, and I thank you for worrying about me. I will be fine." She shrugged, "We don't always get what we want, and sometimes life throws lemons at you and you don't have the sugar to make lemon-aid. Now come on, we gotta get ready for Samson and his new family. I told Gabby I would help her cook. You go do what you have to do, and I will go do-" She waved her arms in the air, "stuff."

As she turned to walk back in the house, Trey reached out his hand to stop her. Turning her head, she looked at him, curiosity on her face. "If you ever need to talk, I can keep a secret."

Casey laughed, "Yeah, and isn't your sister mad about that right now." She sobered up before adding, "Thank you, Trey."

Trey watched the door close behind her and wished he could find a male who would cherish her. Maybe he could talk Gammon into letting Casey visit to see if she could find a mate from his territory. As many times as she had flown him to Alaska not once had she ever been inside the territory, and Trey knew now she would have to cross the boundary or be within a certain distance before it would alert a male if she were his mate. He made a mental note to ask Gammon about it later when things calmed down. He headed back in the house to make the arrangements for the others and let them know of the change in plans. He hoped it didn't come back to bite him in the ass later.

Chapter Three

Casey had elected to stay inside and allow the rest of the family to meet with Samson's mate and her siblings first, but she couldn't resist sliding the curtain to one side to watch. Stormie could be a loose cannon at times, often causing problems for her family and the pack. Casey had ideas about why Stormie was the way she was, but she would never broach the subject to Trey or any other shifter for that matter. The shifters did what they had to protect the females, but Casey knew how damaging it could be emotionally and mentally to be away from your family. They called it safeguarding, a haven for females, but Casey thought it wasn't much different from the rogues. Put a female in Gammon's territory for safekeeping but keep her away from her family at the same time. At least she was grown when her family and the clans expelled her. The young shifter females were sent away young to be raised by strangers.

Without the hearing of the shifters, she would have missed most of the conversation. Fortunately, she had a few skills no one knew about, or magic, however one wanted to label it. A snort of laughter escaped her when Nicole shut Stormie down so quickly. She was still smiling when she opened the door for Nicole and her siblings.

"You best hurry. You caught her by surprise, but she will rally faster than you think. My name is Casey and welcome to the family." Casey whispered after closing the door behind the three. She looked back through the window of the door to see that Samson had gotten stopped by Stormie. Catching his eye, she gave him a wink and a nod to let him know she would care for his family until he could break free of his sister.

Turning she eyed the three before she shrugged, "Stormie is an amazing woman, and you will grow to love her, but sometimes she smothers the ones she loves a bit too much. However, while the rest of the family tries to help your mate

escape, I will show you where the guest rooms are, and you can get started on your baths.”

Casey watched Nicole’s lips tighten as she looked back toward the door. “She isn’t off to a great start. We are tired, we smell, and we want some time to feel clean and normal again.” She knew the moment Nicole realized who she was by the change of expression on her face. “Casey, the witch who no one knew was a witch. How did they not smell you were different?”

“They did, but no matter what their brains and noses told them the curse somehow made it seem normal to them, I guess?” The hesitancy in Casey’s voice didn’t escape Nicole’s notice.

“You guess? Isn’t this something you would have—you know what, tell me later? Samson will want to know everything so we might as well leave it for now.” She turned to the little girl, “Sammy, baby, what does Casey look like?”

“She’s pretty NikNik. Can we take a bath now?”

The smile on Nicole’s face could have powered a room as she looked at Casey. “Yes, you said you would show us the way?”

As the three started toward the guest rooms, Casey couldn’t help herself, “Thank you for saying I am pretty little one. As banged up and bruised as I am, I don’t feel pretty.”

Laughter peeled out from Nicole, “She wasn’t looking at your face when she said you were pretty. She was looking within, to where your heart is, or something. Little Sammy is a true-Seeker.”

“Seriously? Damn, the guys must have loved finding that out.” Casey tried to keep the horror from her voice and her face.

“Yep, it thrilled them to no end. Their amazement and joy ranked up there with the words rabies and parvo. In fact, they probably would have been happier if those were the words used.”

Casey opened the door and ushered the three inside the guest room. The children's eyes grew wide, and their breath quickened as they looked around the room. Nicole's eyes darted from side to side as she took in the surroundings. The left side of the room contained two massive beds, one in each corner. One of the beds was decorated in browns and grays, but the other bed was fixed up as a children's bed with yellows and greens. Almost every inch of the bed contained some sort of stuffed animal. Between the two beds were two doors, both open. One led to a walk-in closet while the other led to a bathroom. But it was the opposite wall which held the children's attention the most.

“Are they for us?” Chris asked in an awe-filled voice.

“Christmas, NikNik. Look, can we play with them?”

Nicole turned toward Casey.

“Stormie may have gone a bit crazy as soon as she found out about the children. She rallied the pack to get the room ready and raided the store for all the toys and stuffed animals she could get her hands on. She knew you and the children were coming with nothing, and she wanted the kids to know they were part of a loving pack. She was the baby of the family, and she was beyond thrilled to find out she was getting a baby brother and a baby sister. We thought, for the time being, no one would want to sleep alone. We have another couple of rooms the children can use when they feel secure enough. That is, if the four of you are staying here for a while?”

Nicole waved her hand toward the floor covered with toys. “She did all this? For children she didn't even know? She knows that the kids will be Samson's brother and sister but not exactly hers, doesn't she?”

Casey snorted, “Yeah, you go ahead and tell her that. This family is beyond thrilled to welcome you and the children, and they want you to know, from the very beginning, you are all now part of them. We didn't know the sizes for anyone, so Stormie got a few different sizes of clothing for you and the

kids. If you want to start their baths, you don't have to wait on Samson to break loose from Stormie."

Casey watched as Nicole herded the two children into the bathroom. She watched the longing on the kid's faces as they realized they had to wait to open the toys. She figured if the children had their way those showers would be the shortest ones in history. When she heard Nicole directing the two, she realized the children didn't have their sister wrapped around their fingers. She was careful to keep her laughter to herself as she closed the guest room door behind her. Nicole would have to stay on her toes if she thought she could keep the children from being spoiled by her new family.

She sobered when she remembered back to when Samson's family had taken Stormie away. Samson had sat in the swing at her house for hours, crying. The family had kept Stormie hidden for years, rarely letting her outside to play. Unable to handle raising their child in such a way but unable to fully trust their Alpha they had given in and taken the child to Gammon's. Samson had been inconsolable at the loss of his little sister. Trey had David to play with growing up, but Samson had been closer in age to Stormie. The two were inseparable for the few years she lived at home and Samson had been lost without his sister. Casey thought it was that event that put Samson on the path he followed.

She remembered returning Samson to his home that evening. The entire family had taken Stormie to Gammon's and only returned the day before. Samson wasn't supposed to be roaming so far from home. Charles and Leah had been frantic with worry when the boy had disappeared and stayed gone all day. Charles had attempted to shift and track him, but the task had proved impossible as much as the boy had roamed outside, with trails crisscrossing each other. Charles had shaken his head when she pulled into the drive. Memories flooded her as she thought back.

"What is it about you that my sons find their way to your house? First, you bring Trey and his friend back and now Samson. I swear if I didn't know better, I would think you have some magical charm that entices my boys to you. None of the

children should have even been on your mountain, yet both my sons and Jordon's son have found their way there in the last couple of years."

She remembered her laughter and the conversation that had followed between her and the boy's parents. That was the beginning of her acceptance into their family.

In truth, she didn't know what caused the boys to gravitate toward her mountain. David had never shown up alone at her cabin, but Samson and Trey could often be found sitting in her swing underneath the large pine tree. Sometimes together but more often alone. Every time she had returned them to Charles and Leah within a few hours. Wolves loved to roam, but the boys were roaming her mountain years before they gained the ability to shift. Charles had made the trip once without shifting to his wolf, to see how long it took in human form. Six hours to make the trip as an adult.

For years Casey had clung to the hope the boys were gravitating toward her because one of them sensed she was his mate, and the other felt the connection. She had discussed it once with Charles and Leah, but neither of them believed she would prove to be the mate to either of their boys. Not because they didn't think her worthy of being mated to one of them, but because they believed her to be a strange smelling human and shifters didn't, couldn't true-mate to humans. After the first discussion, where she had explained her heritage only to have them promptly forget it, she had kept her hopes to herself. As time passed, she realized the boys gravitated to her for a reason other than growing up to mate her. Flashes of the future kept her near the pack, but she still never saw a clear glimpse of why.

After everything that had happened recently, she was as sure as she could be the reason the area called to her, the reason the family accepted her and the reason the pack took her in wasn't because of her future but because of the book. She needed to be in the right place with the right people for the book to go to the ones who needed it the most. For a moment, the weight of her thoughts bore down on her. The book had used her to get into the hands of Kate and her mate.

Swallowing against the bitter realization that she was just a vessel the book had used, she headed to the room she was staying in while at Trey's. She needed a moment to collect herself before facing the rest of the family. She knew when she stole the book she was taking the responsibility and burden of caring for the book upon her shoulders. She knew once she claimed the book, it would never go to anyone else as long as she lived other than the Golden pair. She just never realized the book would direct her life as it had. Every glimpse of the future had been a road to get her to where the book would be needed. Tears scalded her cheeks at the knowledge of how completely the book had used her. She wondered if stealing it had even been her idea or something planted in her thoughts.

She rubbed her chest to relieve the ache spreading through her heart. She wouldn't trade what she had now even if she could go back in time to before she stole the book. But knowing it used her and accepting she had been chasing a dream was a bitter pill to swallow. If the book had used her the least it could have done was use her honestly. She had watched true-mated pairs over the years, and every single time she had longed for that kind of love and commitment. She had doubled down on finding a mate for herself, believing she had a purpose of helping save the shifters. Lifting her head, she squared her shoulders. She served her purpose, and the book was in the hands of the Golden pair. It was time she gave up on finding a mate of her own and focused on training herself. It was time she took care of herself for a change instead of blindly following the hints of the future the book had obviously thrown her way.

She had no intention of going anywhere at the moment, but once things got back to a more normal course, she would take the time to evaluate her life and figure out what she wanted to do with the next thousand years or so, if she managed to live that long. But first, she needed to wash her face and help Gabby get the food out. A few more days and she would be back in her cabin. She just needed to pretend her life hadn't just shattered with her realization until she could return to her home. Knowing her luck if anyone suspected anything was wrong they would think it was due to Samson bringing home a

mate. The last thing she needed was for anyone to believe she had something other than friendship for Samson. She didn't want anyone's pity for something she wasn't upset about. Hell, she didn't want their pity for the things that did upset her.

Casey looked around the room. Nicole had put her siblings down for the night, and Leah had tucked Alice to bed in one of the spare rooms, much to the child's dismay. Listening to Alice made it hard to remember she was still just a child and needed to go to bed early. Fortunately, Leah didn't let the advanced conversational skills of the child lull her into forgetting to treat the child as a child when required.

With a cup of coffee in hand, she sat back and listened to Samson and Nicole tell about the abduction and the rescue. She was not the only one with tears of laughter streaming from her face as Samson described the events surrounding breaking the news to his partner. As the two wrapped up their story, Samson turned to Trey.

"They tracked Drew down, and Rimi has the man at their house in Slidell. They offered to bring him here so we could take care of him. I need to borrow Cara's cabin. The concrete basement will do nicely for what I have in mind."

With narrowed eyes, Trey stared from Samson to Nicole and back. "Ground is frozen. You know I hate trying to dispose of bodies in the winter. I have company staying at the cabin, but I will move them back here in the morning. Tell Rimi to go ahead and bring them. But you are cleaning up the mess and figuring out how to get the body in the ground."

"Yeah, yeah, clean up my mess. I thought that was your job? Cleaning up messes members of your pack make."

Nicole leaned closer to Casey, "Are they always this casual about getting rid of bodies?"

Trey grinned, "We do what we have to do to protect our people. If that means occasionally we have an extra body laying around, well, we have a graveyard just for them."

Casey just shrugged, “Sometimes we make it look like a hiking accident. We have planned a mountain climbing accident. We once had a rock slide go terribly wrong just in time to catch a rogue. Shame so many accidents happen here, but nature can be deadly. And wolves are some of the most dangerous of creatures.

Nicole laughed, “I can see how the shifters have rubbed off on you. Unless— are witches usually so deadly protective of their families?”

Casey stilled as she thought about the question. When she answered her voice only faintly exposed her pain, “No, the clan has no hesitation in shunning family. All you have to do is disagree with the leadership to lose everything.”

Nicole bit her lip before telling Casey, “I am sorry. But if it means anything, Samson may not have known you were a witch, but he told me about you as though you were family. I, for one, am looking forward to being part of the same family you call your own.”

Casey smiled, and if the smile was a bit bitter, no one could blame her. They may not have remembered anything about her being a witch, but the stories of being cast out from her family had been memories the others could hold.

Chapter Four

Dacron looked at Rimi and snorted, “Mela is crazy, and now I see where her insanity comes from.”

“Hey, that’s my sister you are talking about. Mela is not crazy. She just thinks a bit differently from everyone else.” Dracula protested the slight against his favorite sister. Actually, his only sister, but he didn’t feel the need to examine the technicalities too closely.

Dacron raised his eyebrows and shifted his attention back to his friend. “Your sister is crazy. How no one else sees this is beyond me. Do you realize she wanted us to find her herd for her without telling us the coordinates of the planet? She showed up at Dominick’s house with an insane tale of someone stealing her herd and demanded we find it without giving us any information on where to look. Not to mention the on-board timing system she had on her craft was set to rotate through four different planet times. How she never got lost in the immenseness of space is a testament to how advanced the technology is on her craft. Your sister is insane. I think the lot of you aren’t far behind her. First, you go tearing off to catch your mate, leaving no information behind while leaving a huge mess that makes it look like all of you went on a killing spree. Then, once you catch up to her and strand her on this planet, do you return home to file any reports and possibly gather more help in catching her? No. You get your sister, who followed you, to help you hide your ship behind the moon of this planet thus stranding the three of you on the planet. A planet I might remind you that has no space going capabilities so you can’t even bring Catherine back to pay for her crimes if you catch her. Do you realize Mela followed you by lock-beaming your ship? Your sister stole a lock-beam and installed it on her ship and taught herself how to use it. She found the Deyarian race, the very much extinct Deyarian race and used them for a blood supply for two thousand years. If you ask me your idiot sister has learned every law we ever made with the sole intention of breaking them one by one, and

you think to convince me she is not crazy? No, Mela is crazy, and the three of you aren't far behind her if you haven't surpassed her already. I have to wonder if the three of you rubbed off on her, or if it is the other way around."

"There were extenuating circumstances you know." Rimi threw his hands up before storming out of the room. Dacron could hear the cold box open, and moments later, Rimi walked back in the room, beer in hand.

"You have been here for eighteen hundred years. You have blasted tales about vampires spread around to the point they have entire cultures built up around the stories. You go tearing off, using the ship entrusted to my care, to potentially start a war, dragging me with you. We are not supposed to involve ourselves in other civilizations, and you lot have not only involved yourselves you have spread tales of our people far and wide. Did you think, for one minute, that any of our people coming to this planet and staying for any length of time wouldn't hear of the tales of vampires and connect the stories to the Reliant race? By the Great One, you even collected a pathetic human and tortured him for hurting one of these lowly primates. These people are not your people; they are barely civilized. Even now you have one of them tied up in a closet waiting to give him over to others who will torture and kill him. How far have you fallen from where you started? You insist there are extenuating circumstances to your continued presence on this backwater planet, but you won't tell me what they are. I can't help you if you don't give me something."

"We adapted to our environment."

"You should have returned home centuries ago. For the last few days, you have told me every variation of why you are still here without once telling me the truth. You have not lied to me, but you haven't exactly been truthful either. I don't care what you told Mela all these centuries or why she believes you are hiding on this planet trying to catch one criminal. I care that you tell me the truth. You swore oaths to our people Rimi; you learned all the codes, all the rules, all of you did or you would never have made rank. But what you have done,

abandoning all to stay here and chase one solitary female, no matter how horrific the crime, makes no sense.”

Dracula bowed his head, “It does if you know the truth.”

Dacron watched the man he had called a friend, before the men had fled their homeworld, turn and walk away before he turned back to his brother, “That is the heart of the problem. I would understand if I knew the truth. What the three of you have done would make sense if I knew the truth. But yet, no matter how many times I ask, none of you will tell me the truth. How can I help you return home without the truth?”

Rimi shrugged, “You wouldn’t ask it of us if you knew the truth. And the truth isn’t my story to tell. I am sorry, brother, but my honor demands I support my Enforcer. My life for his, my blood is his to shed, and his secrets are mine to keep. Convince him, and you will understand.”

“I have a better idea. Why don’t I just beat the lot of you and stuff you in Mela’s transport? Dock it in Drac’s ship and return you all home.”

Dacron knew his eyes were changing color as his anger rose. The emerald green gave way to a smoldering red as his brother stared at him in silence. Fist clenched he took a step, but before he could reach Rimi, Talbort broke the silence.

“Take us back with you and condemn us to death. It doesn’t much matter at this point, does it? We are lost to our people if we stay here, but we are doomed if we leave. Either way, you lose us. Why don’t you try something new? Give us the trust we should not have to ask for and help us instead of demanding we leave with you.”

Dacron threw his hands up in the air. His tongue darted out to stroke his fangs as he tried to calm down so they would retract. “I could ask the same of you. Give me the trust I shouldn’t have to ask for and tell me the truth.”

“Like Rimi told you, it isn’t our secret to tell. So make your choice. Trust us and help us or condemn us to die. But while you are deciding, did you say Mela found the Deyarians? Impossible. Everyone knows they went extinct eons ago. We

still have the coordinates to their dead planet in our data systems. History tells us they were not space going and yet the planet was devoid of all their race from one turn to the next. I have been to their planet. I have seen the archeology reports. They left no clues of where they went, just the bones of the dead. The environment took back what the race had claimed until the only things left were the stone ruins where once mighty cities rose into the air. We have so many records of the race before and the barren cities after, but no clue what happened to them.” Talbort paced as he talked. Archeology was his hobby, and the Deyarian race had been his focus growing up and whenever he got the chance to get away and explore other planets.

The Deyarian race had been treasured, not because of any trade agreements or partnerships but because the blood of the race had some extra kick to it other races didn't have. Few knew the coordinates to the race for fear the information in the wrong hands could prove fatal to the Deyarians. It was possible to harvest a race to extinction, but it would take decades or longer. But somehow the race had disappeared in a matter of two years or fewer with no trace. History records showed a massive investigation had occurred, but no evidence found to incriminate anyone from their race and no clues to explain what had become of such a delicious race. At the time of Talbort's birth, the Deyarians had been gone from their planet for many millennia.

“Seriously? That is the only thing you are worried about right now? An extinct race Mela claims as hers?”

“Are you kidding? We have archaeologists who would kill, literally kill, to have the coordinates to the Deyarians. Some of these people have spent their entire lives researching what happened. If you are telling me she found them, and she lost them, that means she could be in danger. Tell me more about them, what did she say about them? Is she willing to take anyone to their planet? Did they disappear like before?”

Dacron stared at Talbort in disgust. “I don't give a, what is it they say on this planet, shit, about a dead race. I want to get this mess cleared up and go home, with the three of you. So

get your heads out of your asses and help me figure out how I can help you find Drac's mate so we can return home."

"Ah, yeah, well I promised Samson I would bring this piece of shit to him this morning so how bout we talk about it when I get back?" Dracula walked back in the room, dragging a disheveled human behind him.

Dacron wrinkled his nose and drew back from the smell. "Is it still alive? Why does it smell so terrible? The ones we helped the other day did not smell like that. It has been a while since I was last on this planet, but I don't remember feeding on any who smelled like that. I wouldn't have fed from any creature with that strong an odor. Is it sick?"

Rimi laughed, "No, it pissed itself and then shit itself."

"I am not riding in the craft with anything that smells so bad. Take it out and spray it down. Use something to make it smell better. Use that stuff you cleaned the floor with yesterday."

"You want me to use floor cleaner on it? That is not very safe." Drac eyed Drew who cowered on the floor at his feet.

"I don't care. I am the one who borrowed the craft, and therefore I am responsible for it, and the last thing I want is to have to tell Mela I messed up her craft. She will never let me live it down, and I refuse to give her anything to hold over my head. So take it outside and wash it with that floor cleaner."

"You know, she is my sister. I think I am more than capable of taking responsibility for borrowing her space runner and using it for a short errand. I don't think she would mind if you shared the codes with me."

"Again, I am not sharing the codes nor the controller, not with you, not even with my brother. I don't know why the three of you stranded yourselves on this dirtball, but that spacecraft is my only way off this planet, and I am not turning the codes over to three who chose to strand themselves. I can't make myself take that chance. Although I know Dominick would come back for me, space is large, and accidents happen, and I don't plan on being stuck here if something were to

happen to Mela or Dominick which kept them from returning. For all I know you want the codes so you can figure out the programming and send it to the backside of this moon to keep your own spaceship company.”

“Seriously? Do you think we would do that to you? Damn. I can’t believe you think that of us.”

“What am I supposed to think Rimier? The three of you were good at your jobs and highly ranked. Dracula was up for promotion. Suddenly the three of you disappear, leaving a massive crime scene behind you. It took days to take care of all the bodies. Three hundred and nineteen bodies of a sentient race drained and slaughtered on land that had recently been registered to Dracula. But you didn’t just run; you stayed gone. No word, no explanation, nothing. The evidence left behind was incriminating enough, but if you had grounded Catherine here and returned and told your side everything would have been fine. Hell, it isn’t like you can lie during a tribunal. But you didn’t return which only cemented your guilt. Eighteen hundred years later, and the three of you are a cautionary tale in our history books used to train recruits. And you won’t even tell me why you never returned. So yeah, I seriously think you could strand me here with you. Can you blame me?”

Drac snarled as he reached down and grabbed Drew’s collar. Dragging the crying human behind him, he left the room.

Rimier, lip curled in disgust, turned to leave the room behind his Enforcer. “Come on Talbort, if you find the box cutter we can cut those clothes off the scum vermin and wash it. We’ll be ready to leave as soon as we get the thing cleaned up, Dacron.”

Dacron watched Talbort leave the room behind his brother. His chest hurt with the pain of finding his brother only to lose him all over again. For centuries he had gone over the evidence, read everything, researched everything they had on the crime scene searching for a reason for his brother’s involvement in such a heinous crime. Despite all the evidence, he had never believed the three guilty. As the days turned to

weeks and the weeks to centuries, he had given up hope of finding his brother alive. But he and Dominick had never stopped searching for some clue of where the men went. They had searched countless planets for any trace of Dracula's ship. They had even searched this planet once, but they hadn't explored the moon. Dacron fought the bitterness he felt. They had been so close. If they had circled the moon even once the ship's beacon would have given away the location of the vessel. But they had spent that trip crisscrossing the world beneath the moon. Watching and hoping for the ping that would signal an Enforcer's ship was nearby. The men had been close once, but now it felt like he was losing a part of his family all over again.

Taking a deep breath, he shook his head. Ten minutes later, he was staring at the reason the men wouldn't leave the planet, and the shock and horror had him rooted in place.

Chapter Five

Samson looked around the bare basement. The room differed from how he remembered from years ago. When Trey had rescued Trisah years ago and fought Jordon and won the Alpha position, one of the first things he had done was clear out the cabin of everything. Samson had come home on leave from a mission just hours after everything had gone down. He had walked in the cabin looking for Trey and seen the basement before they cleared it. He remembered the bed, the chains, the bookshelf, and the toys. He remembered the horror he felt as he looked around yet another prison of yet another little girl who stayed cooped up year after year, never seeing the sun, never getting to run and play. The sight was familiar to him, but the location, in his home territory, shook him to the core. This basement room was where he had taken a knee to give his pack oath to his brother.

The memory of that day came rushing back. The feeling of loss, of something not right that settled in his soul as the plane touched down. The drive back to the pack territory, with his wolf clawing at him. The attempts to call home that went to voice mail as he pushed his truck to the limits racing home. His calls to the pack as he got closer, unanswered, he couldn't hear anyone. The sick feeling pervading his thoughts as he almost broke the door down, getting inside his parent's home to find everyone still alive but in a different pack. He hadn't known, until that day, that the leadership change would sever the bond that made him pack. The new Alpha needed his oath bond before he could talk to anyone. That gut-wrenching moment when he learned he was pack-less, if only briefly, was a memory that still caused the occasional nightmare. He couldn't think of a worse fate than to be without a pack.

He had walked into the cabin and made his way to the bathroom and from there to the basement. He could still see his brother sitting on the bed, a stuffed bear in his hands. His forearms were resting on his legs while he stared at the floor. Trey had looked up, tears in his eyes. "This is what you are

fighting against, isn't it? This." He had swung his arms around the basement, "How do you stand seeing this time after time? How do you comfort the ones you save from the pain of this?"

"How can I not save them? What is my pain compared to theirs?" He had fallen to his knees in front of his brother, "It doesn't go away. The horror will always be there for you. I wish I had known. I would have spared you having to live with this."

Trey had shrugged and looked away. "You live with this horror every day." He cleared his throat, "I guess you know you have a choice to make? Can you handle me being your Alpha?"

"From what I heard, you went after Jordon with a vengeance, determined to destroy him for what you found here. How could I not serve you when you put your life on the line to save a child you had never met?"

With the evidence of a child's captivity all around; Samson had knelt on the concrete floor and pledged his life to his brother.

A whistle broke his concentration and brought him back to the present. He looked up and saw Casey standing on the steps leading to the basement.

"I have been trying to get your attention for a while now. Trey headed out with the others. He said you and Nicole should head over to the landing field if you want to be there when Dracula and the others arrive. Nicole is waiting, impatiently I might add, in the jeep. She threatened to leave without you if you don't hurry. Do you mind if I ride with you? Trey forgot I rode here with him, so he kind of stranded me here with no way to go and he isn't answering his phone."

"I can call him through the pack bond and get him to turn around if you want. But I also don't mind if you ride with us. Who knows, Nicole might want the support of another female. Often the females we rescue do you know." Samson gave a final look around the bare room, the only addition being the ropes he had dumped on the floor. "Come on, move move, there is a real possibility she will leave us if we don't hurry."

Samson pushed Casey up the steps as he suited actions to words.

Casey stared in awe at the ship in front of her. “I want one. I really, really want one.” She whispered to Samson. “Where did they get that? No way they have had that this whole time and kept it hidden from us.”

“Rimi’s brother showed up a few days ago with it. I didn’t have time to talk to them about it much, but apparently, he came with Mela and stayed behind with her space runner when she left.”

“How did she leave if he kept her space ship? I kinda thought their ships would be bigger.”

“From what little I could find out, remember we had a mission going on at the time, that ship would be the equivalent of a motorcycle towed by an RV.”

Casey stared at the ship with longing, “I still want one.” Her eyebrows shot up, “Are they seriously dragging a naked man over here? In the snow? Holy shit. Nicole will not have to worry about making him pay for anything; he will freeze to death first.”

Dracula laughed as he heard Casey, “To be honest we forgot it would be so cold here. South Louisiana is fairly warm this time of year.” He pulled Drew upright by his hair as he reached the three.

Everyone winced as Nicole immediately kicked the man in the balls. He would have fallen if Dracula hadn’t been holding him up. With his hands tied behind his back, he couldn’t protect himself, and Nicole kicked him again before anyone could say anything. She laughed as the man screamed. Dracula dropped him and backed away.

“The last time he screamed like that he wet himself. He is all yours. Where’s Trey? I thought he was meeting us here.”

Samson stared at the pathetic waste of oxygen on the ground in front of him as he held Nicole. Tilting his head to the side, he told the men, “He should come around the curve in

a few minutes. We will get that,” he pointed to Drew, “to the cabin. Can Casey hang out with you until Trey gets here?”

Dracula nodded and watched as Samson grabbed Drew by the hair and started dragging the screaming man toward the jeep. He turned to Casey and with a smile motioned toward the ship. “I see your face; you want one. So do I. Come on I will let you look inside while we wait for Trey. Besides, it is too cold out here.”

Dracula ducked to enter the craft and moved to the side to allow Casey to enter behind him. Dacron had been silent the entire trip and other than a quick indrawn breath he stayed silent as the pair boarded the ship. Rimi and Talbort watched Dacron with wary eyes when they saw his eyes turn red. Casey’s lips twitched when she saw Dacron’s fangs descend.

“No, I am not a snack so you better retract those fangs if you don’t want to lose them cause I will light you up.”

Rimi watched his brother clench his hands into fists and knew from experience Dacron was on the edge of exploding. “Casey, I would like you to meet my brother Dacron, Dacron, this is Casey. She is someone we call friend, so be nice. Don’t take your anger at us out on her. If you don’t mind, we would like to keep her around a bit longer.”

“She is a friend? You dare call yourself a friend of theirs? Get off my ship! Get out of my sight!” The last was directed, not at Dracula, but Casey.

Casey turned to stare at Dracula in bafflement, but her confusion was nothing to the three men who were all staring at Dacron in varying stages of confusion and disbelief. She turned back to Dacron and noticed him rubbing his chest. She thought his brilliant green eyes would rival any emerald when she first laid eyes on him, but now she thought the fiery red eyes would almost match the flames in her own eyes when she got upset.

“Excuse me? I know you did not just take that tone with me. You don’t know me, and you know nothing about my friendship with these guys. I don’t care if you are Rimier’s brother; you are an ass.”

“I am the ass? With the power you hold, and your ability and you haven’t used it to help your friends, but I am the ass? Little one you do not understand how much of an ass I will be if you don’t get off my ship. I know what you are. I know what you can do. Your kind can’t hide from me even if you hide on this planet in the middle of no-where. What the hell is it about this planet that everyone comes here to hide?”

“What the hell are you talking about? I didn’t come here to hide. I was born here like my mother before me and her mother before her. This is our planet. We were born here, and this is where we will die. Come on Dracula; the atmosphere here is not as nice as I thought it would be. Trey should be here soon.”

Dracula followed Casey off the ship after one last look of confusion directed at the others. Rimier just shrugged his shoulders; he had no idea what Dacron was so upset about either.

Chapter Six

“What in the hell was that about?” Rimier turned on his brother as soon as Drac and Casey were off the ship.

Dacron, still rubbing his chest, stared at the door and didn't answer.

Talbort felt Rimier's stare. “Don't look at me, man, he's your brother. No clue what it was about.”

“Earth to Dacron! Hello!” Rimier snapped his fingers in front of his brother's face, but Dacron gave no notice of being called or the sudden movement of Rimier's hand inches from his nose. His eyes still glowed red, and his fangs still protruded from his mouth.

The two men watched silently as Dacron rubbed his chest and stared at the door Casey and Drac had walked out of moments before. When Dracula re-entered the craft, minus Casey he found his Hunters staring at Dacron who in turn stared at him with something akin to hatred before turning back to the controls of the ship. The questioning look he turned on Rimier resulted in a shrug and Talbort just shook his head. As he strapped in Dacron finally elected to say something but the men were left clueless as to the meaning.

“You have one of those as friends, and yet you stay here. What other secrets are you hiding?”

No matter how many questions the men threw his way, he refused to say anything else during the trip back to Louisiana. When they reached Slidell Dacron let the men out and closed the door. Moments later, the ship with Dacron in it disappeared.

“There is no way they don't know.” Dacron muttered as he docked the space runner with Dracula's ship. While he waited for the air pressure, he stared out the window into the darkness of the cargo hold. He jerked his head up when the ding sounded. Exiting the little runner, he took a moment for the

ship to acknowledge his presence in the hold. He looked around as the lights came up. He hadn't been on a Yili this old in centuries. Bitterness seeped through him as he thought of all the wasted years the men had spent on the planet below. How long they had known members of the Calian race was a question Dacron had not dared ask. Not because he didn't want to know but because his fury and bitterness were too raw at the moment. As he strode through the ship to the command center, he thought of everything he knew of the Calians.

Sitting down at one of the computers, he went through the start-up sequence to bring everything online. Dracula had told him Mela regularly brought them up to the ship to check things and keep it maintained. Dacron wondered how much maintenance they could do on the ship with it up in space like it was. Even if they found something that needed replacing Mela would have been hard-pressed to get them the parts for something this old.

Hours later, he was staring at the information the computer had on the Calian race and cursing his brother and the other two. More searching led him to the conclusion the files had never been accessed on this ship. Which could very well mean the men below didn't have any idea of what their friend was or what she was capable of doing. He stared blankly at the screens in front of him while the information downloaded to his link. Lost in thoughts, he didn't notice he was rubbing his chest again. He hadn't noticed the action back at Trey's either. Had he realized it, he would have been even more upset about the dangerous race on the planet below.

He wondered how long ago the race had fled to this planet and what they had done with their ships. Hounded by others for their abilities the race had been hunted to near extinction. Fleeing their home planet, the Calians had disappeared before his brother had been born. A cursed race with a bounty on their heads, few would take them in. The woman had said she was born on this planet as was her mother and Dacron wondered how long ago the race had settled here and how far across the Earth they had spread. If word got out the planet below would be ground zero for intergalactic war.

When his link pinged, he disconnected from the computer and with one last look around, he powered everything down and made his way back to the cargo hold. He thought about what he would tell the others as he walked and was no closer to an answer when he lifted out of the cargo hold and headed back to Earth than he was before he left.

Chapter Seven

“He was rude. I’m telling you, Nathaniel, he looked at me with absolute hatred in his eyes and ordered me off the ship. But that isn’t the strange part. He said he knew what I was and what I could do. He said my kind couldn’t hide from him even if we did choose to hide on this planet in the middle of nowhere. Then he asked why everyone picked this planet to hide on.” Casey paced across the meeting room until she reached the wall then spun around and paced back. Flames danced in her eyes as she relayed the story to the others.

Everyone turned to look at Nathaniel, who drew back from the stares. “Whoa, don’t look at me. I was born here. Are you sure about what you heard, Casey? No way you could have been mistaken?”

“I told you what he said. Maybe I didn’t get it word-for-word, but I got close enough.”

“He must have mistaken you for someone else, or something else.” Trey looked around the room at his company. He had brought the others back from the cabin but forgot Casey rode with him, so he had driven to the landing field to pick her up. She had been fuming when she got in the Suburban with him, and she still hadn’t calmed down. “Look, none of the others have ever indicated in any way they thought Casey was anything but a human born on this planet. I don’t know this new guy, but if he blew up in front of the others, he must have told them something by now. Let me call Rimi and find out what he knows. It is probably going to be a simple misunderstanding, and the next time we see the guy, he will be apologizing. Until they came here, they traveled to different planets, so I am sure it will turn out to be nothing. Gimme a minute.”

Kate got Gabby’s attention when Trey pulled his phone out and pantomimed eating, which got Craig’s attention. Craig’s furious nodding got the attention of Sibeal who quietly offered to go with Gabby and fix sandwiches for everyone.

“Rimi, my main alien vampire, how’s it hanging? What’s going on with your brother? He all but accused Casey of being from another planet, and no one here has any idea what he is talking about.”

I wish I could tell you. He didn’t say a word from the time he ordered Casey off the craft until he dumped us off at the house. Even then he didn’t say anything we could make sense of, just You have one of those as friends and yet you stay here. What other secrets are you hiding? We thought he was getting off with us, but instead, he shadowed the craft and left. No idea where he went, no idea what he meant. We have been racking our brains trying to figure out what he was talking about.

“Well look, if you figure anything out give me a call. I have about six people here who are very interested in knowing more, not including me and Gabby.”

Will do.

Trey looked around the room at the others. “Well, I have no idea what to tell you except, I’m starving, let’s go see what Gabby and Sibeal are fixing.”

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say is let’s eat?”

“What do you want me to say, Casey? Rimi hasn’t got a clue what his brother was upset about and if he doesn’t know I damn sure don’t know. Nathaniel is, I assume, the oldest witch in the room and he doesn’t know. We don’t have any way of finding out. At this point, all we can do is wait for Rimi to talk to his brother and call us back. So yes, all I have to say is let’s eat. Craig over there looks like he is about to fade away from hunger and I don’t think I am far behind him. This last week has been stressful for all of us. Since we can’t do anything about whatever Rimi’s brother is upset about my suggestion is we eat and then relax before meeting with my parents and Alice later this evening to see if the child has thought of another way we can approach the problem we know about. To tell you the truth, I don’t care where you or your people came from; you are here now, and to me and mine, that’s all that matters. Yes, okay, I would be going crazy with curiosity if I

someone accused me of — something. But curiosity isn't going to get us any answers. The only thing we would gain is more questions.”

“I know. It's just frustrating. You didn't see his face Trey, none of you saw his face. He had a look of absolute hatred. I think, if the others hadn't been around, he would have tried to kill me. Whatever he thinks I am, he hates with every fiber of his being. Even though I knew I could turn him into a fireball, he still scared me a little.”

Everyone filed from the room behind Trey in search of food. The last one to leave was Nathaniel who gave a longing look toward the Golden Book laying on one of the tables. He wished again he could read the entire book. The book was said to be as old as the race, and he wondered what magic the book held that he didn't yet know. He had an idea it held more secrets than he had believed. If Casey knew how to walk the paths, he suspected she had learned from the book. He sent a speculative look her direction. Maybe he could convince her to teach him more of the old language.

Chapter Eight

Marcus pulled Krys close and rested his cheek against her. “I don’t know what to do love. I don’t know the pull of a true-mate. How can I send him away for something he doesn’t control? But how can I keep him when he can prove to be a danger to us all? This pack is our family. Help me know what to do.”

Krys wrapped her arms around him. Her ear against his chest, she listened to his heartbeat. The steady thump-thump soothed her. As strong as he was, he couldn’t stand alone. No Alpha should have to make a decision such as the one facing their pack. “Our world is changing. It has always been changing, I think, but it was just so slow we didn’t notice. But things are different now. A month ago we had no idea witches existed. We didn’t know our kind was cursed. We fought to keep our kind alive without understanding what we fought against. We thought we fought against dishonor and weakness — men who would take with no regard for the feelings of the ones they took. We believed only the strong survived to birth a new generation. But now we know we fought against all of that because of something we can’t control. Magic we don’t understand is an enemy we can’t fight. Marcus, my love, it doesn’t matter whether you understand the true-mate call. It matters not one whit if you agree with the direction we are forced to go in the fight to keep our people alive. Only one thing really matters in the long run. Craig is family. He has been part of this pack since the day he was born. If Kate belonged to another pack, he would have to choose between the two, but she doesn’t. She is his mate, which makes her family. We can’t; we won’t turn family away. Of course, once you accept that, then you have to realize if we understand what we were told the mating between those two make them the strongest witch combination out there and we really, really want the strong on our side in this fight. And if you follow that line of thinking out, we get her parents, which gives us Nathaniel. No, don’t growl. I understand your hatred; he isn’t my favorite person in the world, either. But he is the one who

set the curse, and if we are to ever get out from under it, we need him on our side. Even if Craig were not family and we had the opportunity to get him in our pack I would vote in favor of it. But he is family, and nothing else matters. The rest is just icing on the cake.”

“Or shit on the sidewalk, depending on how you look at it.”

“Stop growling. You know you want to keep Craig, and I know you are just upset because suddenly things are spiraling out of your control and Alphas hate that. Before the recent spate of matings, life was fairly routine. Get a lead on a rogue, send the Seekers out. Search out abnormalities in police reports, send the Seekers out. Get a phone call for help, send the Seekers out. Rescue the maidens and keep the company going to pay the bills. But now you have witches and magic and curses, and female Seekers. Our world is turning upside down, and you have lost control of the direction the pack is going. The question isn’t do we keep the ones we have, because you already know the answer. What you want to know is how do you remain in control if Craig is stronger than you. But sweetheart, the strength he has because of the mating isn’t Alpha strength. It is something new and different we don’t understand, and we never will if you were to send him away. Only Alpha strength can lead a pack. If you doubt that you have only to look at Trey. He is weaker than Jaden when it comes to maturity and strength, but he has the core of strength only an Alpha can contain. As he matures, he will make Jaden look weaker, but it will take decades maybe even centuries for him to come into his full potential. Craig will never have that core because he isn’t an Alpha. Without that Alpha core, it doesn’t matter how strong a man is; he can’t hold a pack. He might win the pack from an Alpha, but he couldn’t hold it. Jaden almost has that core. He could hold the pack for a while, but not long. Craig doesn’t have it, not even close. So if you want to make the best decision for this pack, make the right decision. Keep the strength of the family together.”

Marcus picked her up and carried her to the couch. As he arranged them so she was cuddled in his lap, he tilted her chin up so he could look into her eyes. “See, this is why you are my perfect mate. You see the real me, the worries and concerns

that keep me up at night. You see them, and you always know the right thing to say. I love you. I can't see how I could love you any more if we were true-mated. You complete me, and I love you more every day than the day before. I know I am not your true-mate, and it kills me to see that look of loss on your face when you remember the past. I would do anything to be able to take that sorrow from you, and I wish somehow I could make the magic happen that would bind our souls together as one. I don't know the soul-shattering loss that you have been through, but I can't imagine living without you in my life. I honestly don't know what I would do without you. Thank you for giving me the chance to love you and be a part of your life all those years ago."

Krys reached up to cup his cheek. "Oh my love, you don't have to thank me for loving you. You saw a shattered woman, and you painstakingly put me back together one piece at a time. Day after day, you showed me that my life didn't end the day I lost him. I love you. Maybe it is a different love, maybe it is a different feeling, but that doesn't make it any less. I am the one who should be thankful that you saw something inside of me worth saving. Now, let's call Craig and tell him his oath still stands, so he better get busy fixing this curse problem."

Marcus wiggled his eyebrows up and down, "I have a better idea. Why don't I take you to the bedroom and lick you all over?"

He leaned down with his tongue out to take a swipe at her cheek. Shrieking in laughter, she struggled to keep his face away. "Eww no, don't lick me. Kisses, baby, kisses!"

"But you taste good, and I like licking you."

She continued to struggle until he lost his grip on her, and she went tumbling to the floor. Still giggling she crawled away trying to stay out of his reach. "No licking me!"

Marcus followed her onto the floor. Grabbing her leg, he pulled her back to him. Running his fingers up and down her ribs, he caused the house to echo with her screams of laughter until he finally leaned his forehead against hers. He ran his tongue across her mouth until she parted her lips, and for the

next few hours, the only thing either of them thought about was the wonder they always felt when they made love.

Chapter Nine

“How did Mela sneak all this off our planet without anyone realizing this stuff was even missing? Look at this, you have, shit, no one but Enforcers are supposed to even have this.” Dacron held up a chakata for inspection.

“In case it escaped your notice, I happen to be an Enforcer.” Dracula pointed out.

“You may be an Enforcer, but you have been missing for hundreds of years, so I don’t think that counts. Mela isn’t an Enforcer, and you can’t tell me Dominick helped her out and make me believe that.”

“Well, let’s say the security isn’t as good as it should be back at Headquarters. If I were there, some changes would be made to the way they do business. Do you realize no one ever revoked or locked my security clearance, nor did they change the codes allowing me to access anything I wanted to since I left? Which means that anything I need my sister can get for me. The only problem has been, we can’t very well keep up with all the new toys the Enforcers get. Often Mela accidentally gets things for us while trying to get other things. Security is very lax back home.”

Dacron paused what he was doing. Thunderstruck at a stray thought he turned to stare at Dracula. “Your sister is devious and underhanded. That sneaky, conniving little—” He broke off what he was about to say as the full ramifications hit him. “For the last thousand years, your sister has been sharing her Deyarian blood stash with us, potent blood with an extra kick. She has been using that blood to worm information from us about the Enforcers. She gets us relaxed, almost drunk on the blood and gets us talking. By the Great One, I can’t even count how many of our laws your sister has broken to help you and the others. Did you know she was doing that? Did you put her up to it?”

Dracula’s eyebrows shot up. His blue eyes held a hint of red, and his fangs descended. “No. I thought she was

incredibly resourceful. Now that I think about it, I never gave her my code. Not intentionally, she just seemed to have it one day. I thought she had become a master hack and had broken into the computer system back at Headquarters. Wait a minute. The blood, she brings us blood occasionally. She told us a researcher back home had invented a way to give the blood that kick. Are you telling me she has been using Deyarian blood to get information from us to help her help us? Do you remember how Talbort wanted to ask you about the Deyarian race? Maybe now would be a good time to tell us more about this race than what we know.”

Talbort and Rimier nodded.

Dacron looked around the room. Not all the technology was up to date, and some of the items were a mix of Reliant technology and Earth technology. But some of the things in the room were so secret no one outside of Enforcers and Hunters had ever even seen them. He paled as he realized the lengths Mela had gone to and the laws she had broken for her brother and his Hunters. Mela aggravated him to no end; she made him want to wrap his hands around her neck and squeeze, slowly. He often wanted to shake her until she saw sense, and occasionally he did, not that it ever helped but it made him feel better. But he didn't want his friends to lose their sister and if Headquarters ever found out everything she had been up to the last few centuries he didn't think he could save her from death.

“I don't know anything more of the race than the three of you. A few weeks ago, Mela came screaming into Dominick's house, throwing a fit about someone stealing her herd. She made it sound like she had a herd pinned and someone took them. You can imagine, after what happened with the three of you, how we took that news. But it turns out her herd, the ones she considered her select pets, lived on an island. She was their healer, and they trusted her. She went twice a year to check on them and harvest blood, with their consent according to her. The last time she went, the island was deserted, not as if a storm had wiped it out, but as if they had taken everything and abandoned their homes. She discretely searched the planet and found no trace of them anywhere. Now since two other races call the planet home, she couldn't search everywhere,

but she searched enough to believe the race is gone. Completely gone from the planet with no trace. Does that sound familiar?”

“Just like before. Except, we don’t have ruins to study, if what you are saying is correct we have a recently abandoned planet. She has to tell the archeology department back home. We need to study what happened. This could be our clue to what happened to them the last time they vanished. I need to see that planet. They must have left something, some clue. You have to take me there.” Talbort turned to Dracula with a pained look on his face. “We have to find Catherine and settle this so we can leave. We have to. I need to see the place they were. This is an archaeologist’s dream come true.” Talbort’s shoulders slumped as the realization hit him that he couldn’t leave.

“And that brings me to the other reason I wanted to talk to all three of you. Now, you refuse to tell me why you followed Catherine and never bothered to come back. What if I tell you I know why you never left?”

“Oh, somehow, I doubt it.” Rimi muttered.

“Tell you what, why don’t the three of you go ahead and take your shirts off and get comfortable?” The corner of Dacron’s mouth quirked up as he watched the men’s reaction to his suggestion. “No? Some reason why you don’t walk around your own home with no shirt on? Something you are hiding, maybe? You know, I didn’t think about it the first few days I was here. I was too busy catching up with everyone and trying, desperately to figure out what you were hiding. Frankly, I can’t say I ever would have noticed, but after what I saw earlier, I did some thinking. I have been here for how long now five or six Earth days? In those days, I have seen all of you freshly showered but completely dressed. I knew all of you for hundreds of years before you vanished and I have to say seeing you get dressed again after your shower is unusual. Walking around in sleepers would be normal, walking around in briefs would be normal, walking around with shirts on, not so much. Since none of you seem to want to share what it is

those shirts are hiding why don't we talk about something else? Tell me what you know about the Calian race."

"The who?" Talbort asked.

"The Calian race. Tell me what you know."

Dracula frowned. "I can't say I've ever heard of them."

"Yet you call one of them friend. How do you have one for a friend yet claim to know nothing of the race?"

"Are you talking about Casey? She is a witch. Born here on Earth so I would think that would make her an Earthling." Rimi, who had been watching his brother and trying to figure out how much he knew was the one to volunteer the information they knew about their friend. He hadn't figured out what game his brother was playing yet, but he would. He just wished he knew if his brother was fishing for clues or really had seen one of them without a shirt on. They had been careful, possibly too careful if Dacron had noticed they never went shirtless around him. Apparently, at some point, they had screwed up, unless Dacron was just throwing things out to see what might stick.

"Earthling, huh? Like little Margo? I suppose we should have left the little girl on this planet since she was born here. I mean, by your reasoning being born here makes her an Earthling and we don't have the right or the authority to remove a sentient creature from their homeworld. In fact, that flies in the face of so many of our laws we would be lucky to escape death."

"That's different, and you know it. Catherine used technology to splice her DNA into the little girl and create a clone-like one of us."

"Look, Drac, man you are starting to piss me off. My point was, just because she was born here does not make her one of them. Would you like to convince me your little friend Casey is like that creature you had in here this morning?" Dacron crossed his arms and leaned against his shoulder against the window frame.

“No, but then neither are the shifters. I have no reason not to believe this planet is home to three different races. It isn’t unheard of for a planet to support more than one sentient race. We never gave it much thought. We knew she was different, but since the shifters never said anything about her differences, well, nothing ever happened to make us bring it up either.”

“You’re right Talbort, it isn’t unheard of, but in this case your little friend, even if she was born here, isn’t from here. She doesn’t belong here. I can’t believe not one of you have heard of the Calian race. Did all of you sleep through that class? Did they quit teaching about the race at some point between when the race went extinct and when you went to school?”

“We said we don’t know so why don’t you tell us where you are going with this? What is so special about the race that you interrupted your interrogation of us to ask about them? You have bounced from talking about Mela and the technology we have acquired through her efforts, to talking about why we are still on this planet, to Casey and your belief she isn’t from here. I am starting to get whiplash from listening to you.”

Dacron looked over at his brother and nodded, “Fair enough; they do all link together if you know the whole story. I downloaded some information from your ship while I was gone. Here, catch.” He tossed his link to Rimi before speaking again. “Let’s see, where to start? The Calian race was one of the most hated and the most feared race our people ever came across in all our space travels. They had a magic unrivaled in the vastness of space. Abilities never seen by any before. They could weave fire and warp minds. With the right type of magic, it varied from person to person; they could destroy the mind of someone or heal a body near death. Some could see the future; some could see parts of a future that could be if only the person took the right steps. The abilities they had were, no I guess I should say are—for we thought them dead and gone long since. We thought they had been hunted to extinction.” Dacron fell silent and dropped his gaze to the floor.

Just as Rimi opened his mouth to ask for more information, Dacron looked back up. The faint sheen of tears in his eyes took the men by surprise, but his words left them speechless. “That race needs to die. Our race can heart-bond with them. But they can break another’s heart-bond with a thought and a touch.”

Having dropped the bombshell, Dacron turned and walked from the room, leaving three stricken men behind him.

Chapter Ten

“Trey? Some guy is on the phone. He said he is Rimi’s brother. He wants you to come to the field he landed in earlier and pick him up.” Gabby walked into the bathroom with her mate’s cell phone. “What do you want me to tell him?”

Trey brought the towel down and stared at Gabby. “Tell the man I just got out of the shower, and I will be there as soon as I am dry and dressed unless he would be okay with David coming to get him. Never mind, love, hand me the phone.” Trey reached his hand out.

“Hello?”

As your mate mentioned, this is Rimi’s brother. I need to see your little Calian friend. The one you call Casey. Is she still in your territory and will you come to get me?

“Why do you want her?”

Does it matter?

“It does to me. She told us how you treated her. I’m not inclined to bring you around her after the impression of rage she picked up from you this morning.

I need to ask her something. I give you my pledge that I will not harm her this day.

“This day? I notice you do not speak for the future.”

Who can know what the future can bring save the Calians? I am not of their race; therefore, I haven’t their powers.

“If all you want is to ask her something I can give you her number or I can put her on the phone, and you can ask your question. You didn’t have to come this far for a question.”

When you have a Yili distance doesn’t matter much. I have landed it in the field where I landed before. It is shadowed from sight. Will you come to me? I am willing to enter your territory with a pledge for her safety from my hands this day.

“I don’t think you understand what she is or what she can do. I don’t worry so much about you hurting her. I don’t want to clean up the mess or have to tell your brother what happened to you.”

I know what she is, and I know what her kind can do. If I am not worried about my safety, you shouldn’t.

Trey hadn’t paid attention when Gabby left the room, but when he heard her coming back with Casey, he wrapped the towel around his hips. Gabby stuck her head in the door and looked him over before holding the door open for Casey. Trey raised his eyebrows at her. She mouthed get him before making a shooing motion and backing out of the doorway.

“Dacron? Give me time to get dry and get dressed, and I will come. I am trusting you to honor your pledge, not because I trust you, but because your brother has talked of you many times and he believes in your honor.”

I will wait.

Trey dropped the phone on the sink and grabbed a dry towel. He walked into the bedroom, using the dry towel to attack his wet hair and looked at Casey. “Unless you plan on staying while I get dressed, you need to leave.”

Casey snorted laughter, “As if it would bother you if I stayed. Not a single one of you has a modest bone in your body, except Gabby and that’s just cause she doesn’t know any better. Hurry up and dress and come tell us what he had to say. Gabby missed some of the conversation when she came to get me and let me know what was happening.” Turning she grabbed Gabby’s arm and pulled her from the room, “Nuh-uh sister, I don’t trust you to stay. He is about to get naked, and you have a terrible habit of distracting him when that happens.”

“Hey! She helps me pick out what to wear.”

Trey heard Casey’s gurgle of laughter through the door she closed as she walked out. “Trey, you have been dressing yourself for decades, trust me you can manage one more time by yourself.”

When Trey walked into the meeting room, it was to find everyone gathered waiting. He looked around the room. Even after all these months, Gabby was still not as comfortable around half-naked shifters as females brought up in a pack, so he was happy to find the two males shifters fully clothed. Nathaniel he didn't have to worry about, the man stayed impeccable dressed. Though he was surprised to see the man since he didn't leave his room once he had turned in for the night. Almost everyone still had damp hair from their showers since the phone call had come as everyone was preparing for bed.

“He didn't say what he wanted so I can't tell you much. He wants to ask Casey a question, and I highly doubt he has any idea the rest of you are in my territory. If he was enraged to see one witch, I can't imagine what he will feel to see three witches and one hybrid, not to mention the two witch mated shifters. The only unusual thing he said was to call Casey my Calian friend so does anyone have any ideas what a Calian could be? I searched the Internet already so put your phones away. The only thing I found was a Canadian company by that name, and that was not what he meant.”

Nathaniel and Sibeal shook their heads, and Conall just shrugged.

“Alright, he said he knows what Casey is and what her abilities are, no wait, he said he knows what her kind can do, not necessarily what she can do. Gabby talks to Trina almost every night and keeps up to date on what is going on in that pack and in turn, she tells me. Stop growling Craig; you try to stop sisters from sharing shit. I probably know more than you realize but less than I would like about what has happened lately. Now, together, Craig and Kate have no rivals when it comes to power, but they are dangerously untrained. Sibeal and Conall are possible next in power, or would that be Nathaniel? No, never mind, it doesn't matter, the point I am going for is, Dacron did not sound the least bit worried about Casey and what she could do but even so he pledged he would not harm her today. From his tone, I got the feeling he could harm her if he chose to do so. His pledge, he made certain to say, was only good for today. Because he doesn't know about

the rest of you, I don't have a pledge from him not to do anything to anyone else. I have no desire to lose my house to untrained powers or pissed off witches. This is what is going to happen, and it isn't up for negotiation. No one will leave this room while the man is here. I will take him into my office with Casey, and he can say whatever he came to say in there. Gabby will stay in here, with everyone with the intercom on. You will be able to hear what is said and if anyone has a question, they will relay it to Gabby who will, in turn, tell me via the pack bond."

"I don't like it. We don't know the man and Casey said he had murder in his eyes this morning. Ultimately this is your territory and your home, and I haven't the right to question your decisions, but my mate is under your roof at the moment, and I do have the right to ensure her safety."

"Shut it, Box Man, I want to know what the alien has to say."

"Dammit Kate, ow, would you quit hitting me. I am trying to protect you."

Kate drew in a deep breath and rolled her eyes. "In case you missed it, I have done an excellent job of protecting myself."

"Yes, a fabulous job. That is why we had to mount a rescue to save you."

"You know I wasn't the one who tried to storm an enemy compound by myself almost getting killed in the process."

A piercing whistle split the air. "Children, can you fight about who can better protect the other and who saved who later?"

Trey sent an appreciative look toward Conall before turning toward Craig. "If I thought he lied he wouldn't be coming into my home where my mate is. I don't know him, but Rimi has told me enough for me to give him the benefit of the doubt. Like I said he only pledged not to harm Casey so if you want me to arrange something else I can take him elsewhere."

"He doesn't want you to arrange anything else, Trey. He is fine with the arrangements you made. Aren't you, dear?" Kate

glared at Craig, daring him to contradict her.

The only answer was a savage growl from Craig which caused Trey's lips to twitch in amusement.

“Good, we are all in agreement, with the exception of Craig, who doesn't get a say unless it makes Kate happy. I will return shortly with the man. I will let Gabby know when I get closer so you can make sure everyone is in this room with the door closed except Casey. Casey, if you would be so kind as to wait in the living room for us?”

At her nod, he headed for the door. As soon as he was out of sight, everyone started speculating on what Rimi's brother could want with Casey and why he obviously thought she was not from Earth.

Trey thought as he drove. He had known Rimi since he was a teenager, and although the alien was hundreds of years older, they shared a love of technology. In the normal course of events, he would never have come to the notice of the trio of aliens had it not been for a hiking accident. He had been roaming the mountain when his wolf had caught the scent of blood. Curious as to the unusual smell he had followed his nose until he found Rimi, unconscious, bleeding and trapped underneath some loose rocks. He had known the man wasn't human or shifter, but he had been confused as to what he had found. With night approaching, he knew he couldn't leave the man where he lay. His kind weren't the only predators in the mountains. Had the man been human, he didn't know if he would have helped him, but curiosity wouldn't let him walk away. He spent some time carefully digging the man out. He had no way to wrap the wounds or treat the broken bones, so he had done the only thing he could think of; he had packed the man on his back to Casey's cabin. By the time he arrived, it was well past midnight, closer to morning, he was covered in strange smelling blood, trembling with fatigue and faint from hunger. He had collapsed at her door, the weight of the strange creature, neither human nor shifter, weighing him down. His last remaining strength had been used to knock on the door from where he had fallen. He still remembered

looking up at Casey from the ground when the door opened and having to get her attention focused downward. He had staggered to his feet and helped her drag the man inside, explaining as they pulled. She wasn't strong enough to lift the man, and he had no strength left to help, so the man had lain inside the door while she had gone for towels and her first aid box. She had tossed him a pack of cookies and given him a glass of water before she even looked at his prize. He gave an internal chuckle as he remembered her words that night. Cats are the ones that drag dead or dying things home with them. Are you sure you are a wolf?

Casey had called his parents to let them know he was safe and would be staying with her for a couple of days. She hadn't breathed a word about their visitor. It took the man two days to wake up and another two weeks to heal enough he could sit up. He had called his friends as soon as he regained consciousness and they had arrived within hours. Trey had, by that time, returned home to fill his parents in on the events and pack a bag to stay longer to help Casey so he wasn't there when the man woke up and he had not made it back by the time the other two arrived. They had tried to convince Casey they were human but gave up the effort when he had walked in the door with his bag in one hand and some groceries his mother sent in the other. The following two weeks were spent learning about the men and their history. Dracula and Talbort were beyond grateful to Trey for having saved Rimi's life. Over time a true friendship had grown between the four and Trey felt he knew Dacron well after all the stories the men had told.

Although the man had been on the planet for a few days, he hadn't met him this morning. He had meant to, but Casey had jumped in the Suburban as soon as he drew to a stop and, with gritted teeth, demanded they leave immediately. He wondered how much the man had changed from the brother Rimi left behind and hoped he hadn't changed so much that he didn't still value his honor.

As Trey approached the field, he saw a sliver of light from the alien craft. He brought the Suburban to a stop far enough away he felt confident he wouldn't hit the invisible ship. The

light abruptly faded, and he could see the man approaching. He didn't bother offering his hand when the man got in since he knew the gesture wasn't one their race used, but he did nod his head and exchange greetings. He turned the Suburban around and headed back to his house with his passenger.

"I would have come sooner to honor the Krauant you have with my brother had I been able. His debt is my debt. His Krauant is mine to shoulder, as it is his."

"Your brother is my brother; your honor is my honor. May my shoulders be ever ready to serve as only family can." Trey carefully repeated the words the men had taught him long ago. He wasn't sure what the exact interpretation of the word Krauant would be, but the men had made sure he knew how much weight the Krauant carried with their race and the expected response if he should ever meet anyone else who treasured Rimi. He had painstakingly learned the exact words the men had taught him even though no one expected he would ever be in a situation to repeat them. He might not have an exact translation, but he understood fully what he had just promised Dacron with his response.

"May it be ever so. I would like it if you could tell me the story of how you saved my brother's life one day, but that isn't why I came tonight. I apologize for coming so late, it could have waited, but I fear I have no patience for this situation."

"What did bring you up here tonight? The question you have to ask Casey couldn't have been asked on the phone?"

"No. My brother tells me you and your kind can smell a lie so you will understand. I need to see her face when I ask my question. I need to smell the air around her as she answers. If she can answer."

"You don't know if she can answer your question? So why come?"

"I have to know. The others, they have been here centuries. I have asked several times since I came why they never returned. They could have left at any time to return home for help after they stranded Dracula's mate here. I only found out today why they never left. I didn't ask if they had shared that

information with you, so forgive me if I don't share it. Some secrets even family keep from each other. Rimi says few of your kind know of the ties between our people, is this true?"

"Yes. It isn't shame that kept me silent but fear the others would not honor my honor. Such secrets are only for family in my world. I don't know what reason beyond the need for justice kept the men here. If they have another reason, they did not share. How can I help?"

"Your Casey, she is a Calian. I don't care what your world calls her kind. I only know what others call them. She said she was born here as was her mother before her. So tell me, are there many of their kind here?"

"Here? In my territory? A few."

"No. I questioned badly. I meant on this planet."

"I don't know how many are on this planet. Centuries ago, some things occurred that led to our race being cursed. Until recently, we didn't remember they existed."

"It would have taken a strong Calian to change the future of an entire race. It would take royalty to break such a curse."

"We have royalty, but I get the feeling you aren't talking about human royalty. Where would one find royalty to break a curse?"

"You wouldn't. The Calians were, no I guess are since you have some here. For so long, we thought them extinct. The race is feared and hated because of their abilities. They were hunted. Most races want them dead; others want to bind them into slavery to use their powers. They fled their homeworld over five thousand years ago. We tracked them and killed them where we found them. You won't find royalty because those were the first killed. I don't know how many of the race may have survived, but if others find your race sheltering the survivors, they will bring death and destruction to your planet. Thousands if not millions, will perish in an attempt to kill the survivors. Your race isn't advanced enough to be protected against the kind of war that would fall upon your planet."

“Well, damn, that isn’t news I wanted to hear. How sure are you that Casey is one of these Calians?”

“You wonder if there is a chance she isn’t? She is. I have no doubts. The others you have in your territory, are they older than Casey? Would they perhaps know more of their history?”

“They claim to know nothing. The word Calian did not get a response at all beyond puzzlement.”

“You spoke with others tonight since I called? Do you think I could question them also? I give the same pledge of no harm to them today as I give to your Casey.”

“I don’t think it would be wise. Two are newly come to their powers and not yet trained. I like my house and well, not trained is an understatement when it comes to those two.”

“I don’t seek to question the young, only the old.”

Trey turned the request over in his mind, but ultimately he thought he should leave the decision to the witches, so he passed the request to Gabby to pass on to the others. In a moment he had his answer. “The older ones are willing to meet with you. The younger ones are not willing. I should say, Kate is willing, but her mate is not, and the elders agree.”

“Good enough. You understand I don’t come as their friend, but I will not come to them armed. I didn’t ask Rimi but is this Casey the same as the one who helped you the night you saved my brother?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Thank you for telling me. I didn’t know how common the name might be and since he didn’t mention her using her powers to heal him, I thought possibly-” Dacron broke off what he was saying when Trey pulled into the drive. As they two got out, Trey was trying to remember the exact wording he needed to use to welcome the alien into his home. He smiled to himself when he pulled the phrasing from his memory.

“May you be ever welcome to come and ever welcome to go. My home shall be your refuge if ever you need a place to rest your head. Welcome home brother.”

“I must say, Rimi didn’t forget anything when he accepted the Krauant with you, did he? I am honored to be welcomed, home brother. Now, lead me to your little Calian if you would.”

Trey snorted, “I don’t think Casey is going to appreciate being called my little anything if she hears you.”

“Not here to win friends or influence people. I just want answers.” Dacron shrugged as he followed Trey down a short hall. He looked around the room at the people gathered inside. One of the females inside came over to Trey and linked her hand through his; this then was Trey’s mate. He nodded his head toward her with respect.

The little Calian they called Casey was sitting beside a much larger, older member of her race. Two others were seated side by side across from them. He pointed to one of the males, “You are not one of them, but you are bound somehow. Few races can bond to the Calians.” He turned to glare at Trey.

“Hey, don’t look at me. I didn’t know I needed to mention it. You had a question for them?”

Dacron turned around and looked at Nathaniel who he had figured was the oldest in the room. “I’yli ty c’iste biesi’t?”

He jerked his gaze to Casey when she gasped and replied, “C’iste Pi’it trinis ghisist?”

Everyone in the room watched as Dacron clenched his fists. His emerald eyes turned a bright angry red, and his fangs descended. Surprise held everyone silent as he spun on around and headed for the door with a curt, “I need to leave now.”

Trey raised his eyebrows at Nathaniel who shrugged. Everyone heard the door slam as the alien left the house, but all eyes were on Casey who sat beside Nathaniel rubbing her chest with a look of shock on her face. Nathaniel finally reached out and shook her arm.

“What was that about? What did he say? It sounded almost familiar but not.”

“He speaks the language of the dead,” Casey whispered. “How does he know the dead language?”

“What did he say?” Nathaniel’s voice, more forceful this time, got Casey’s attention.

“The words don’t translate exactly, but basically he asked us why we were here, well, he asked you, and I, in turn, asked him how he knew the old language. He didn’t seem happy about my question. Not at all happy. Trey, go find out what made him mad.”

Trey rubbed his forehead before turning to leave the room. “He said he had one question to ask. He didn’t say he needed the question answered exactly.”

When Trey got outside, he saw Dacron was sitting in the passenger seat. “Damn he was serious about only needing to ask one question.” He muttered before climbing in the driver’s seat and cranking the vehicle. “Back to the ship?”

“Yes. Please. I need to do some thinking. If Rimi happens to call you, I would appreciate it if you told him nothing more than I visited and left. If he must know where I went from here, tell him I went to the moon.”

“Would you mind telling me what just happened?”

“You wanted proof; the others wanted proof that your friend is a Calian. I just gave you the proof.”

“How exactly did you give us proof?”

“I asked them why they sheltered here, and the little one asked me how I knew their language. The language we spoke is the Calian language. Since this planet is not a space going planet, no one would know that language unless they were Calian.”

“But you know the language.”

“I know many languages. In my lifetime, I have seen the Calian race fall. I watched as they took revenge upon my people for atrocities we did not commit. I watched them shatter heart bonds and laugh. I walked the halls of their government and spoke to their Queen. By my hand and mine alone did she die when she refused to control her people. I hunted them where they hid and destroyed as many as possible. I know their language. That they still take revenge

upon the innocent tells me they haven't changed. They cursed your race for what? The actions of a few or the actions of all?"

"It doesn't matter." Bitterness dripped from Trey's voice, "You said only royalty could break the curse and they died at your hands, the first killed. I guess it doesn't matter if they had a reason. They didn't, but it doesn't matter anymore. My race will continue to struggle, and maybe, one day, something will change. How sure are you that only a member of their royal family can break a curse?"

Dacron reached his hand out and placed it on Trey's shoulder, "I am sorry, brother. I wish I could tell you differently."

"Why were you so angry to be proven correct?"

"She could have healed my brother, but she left his life to chance. I think I realized that when she spoke. I mean, I knew, but hearing her speak in a language long thought dead made it real. It infuriated me to see them deny what they are. How can they know their language and deny they are Calian?"

Trey stopped near the field and turned on the dome light. He turned slightly in his seat to face Dacron.

"I don't think she has the powers you believe her to have. I don't doubt she is what you say, but even the others think her weak in powers. Maybe she couldn't heal him. She did help me save his life, though. Does your chest hurt? You keep rubbing it."

Dacron looked down. Trey watched him lift his hand and stare at it as if he had never seen it before. Trey waited, but Dacron continued to stare at his hand in silence. Without saying a word, the alien opened the door and stepped out, still staring at his hand. Trey watched him walk in the direction of the ship. When light spilled from the craft, Trey realized Dacron was still staring at the hand while holding it away from his body as if it had something on it. He didn't leave the area until he felt the disturbance in the air of the ship leaving. His brow wrinkled in puzzlement as he headed home and he wondered what it was about the hand that had disturbed the man so much.

Chapter Eleven

Dracula's voice broke the stillness. "He said they could break the heart-bond of another. All the centuries, all this time. Why didn't Casey ever help us? We were honest about why we were on the planet. She cared for you day after day; she saw the markings; she had to have known what tied us here. Why didn't she offer to help?" His Hunter's faces mirrored the shattered look on his face. "Rimi, find out what is on that link. Maybe Casey doesn't know how to do it? We have known her for fifteen years or so, and I have to believe she would help us if she knew how. See if that link has instructions she can use to help us. We could have befriended one of the witches in the beginning, I mean, if we had known."

"If we had known, that is the thing. Casey is the first witch we have ever known. You would think we would have met others through the centuries, but if we did, we didn't know them for witches so we still would have been stuck here." Rimi turned to the strange hybrid computer he and Trey had built to combine their technologies and connected the link his brother had thrown him. Drac and Talbort pulled chairs up and stared at the screen as Rimi opened files.

"Go to the next one, all that one has is a description of the planet the Calians call home."

"No, Drac man, I was reading that. Go back Rimi."

"Dammit, Talbort, now isn't the time to let your archaeological thirst for knowledge loose. Don't listen to him, pull up the next file. Just tell yourself you can visit the abandoned Deyarian planet if we can get off this one."

"Shit, listen to Dracula, go to the next file. Just skim it, man."

Rimi pulled up the next file, and the men read and skimmed through four more files before he stopped on one. The men stared in disbelief at the screen. Dracula read the file name in a hushed whisper.

“Kill on sight. Stop! Holy shit! What did they do to get a death warrant on the entire race?” The men started reading, scrolling forward, and scrolling backward until they had gone through everything in the file. “Well if that doesn’t sound familiar. It seems the shifters aren’t the only race the Calians screwed over. You would have to piss off a lot of people to have an order of extinction served on your race. How old are these files, and why did we never hear anything about them? I could believe one of us sleeping through lessons on the race, but somehow I don’t think all three of us slept through this stuff. I would have remembered this shit.”

Rimi searched until he found dates showing the information was several centuries older than they were. Dacron was almost three thousand years older than his brother, so if the dates were correct, he would have lived through the events talked about in the extinction order.

“I guess enough time had passed with no sign of the race they stopped teaching about it. I have never seen an extinction notice, but I do recall—didn’t we learn that in all of known history only one extinction order had ever existed? So we did hear about the Calians but not to know them by name.” Dracula pointed to the screen, “Open the next file, the one labeled Approaches.”

A few minutes later, Rimi leaned back in his chair. “Damn, they weren’t taking any chances. Detailed descriptions on how to identify and exterminate the race. Not just how our people can approach and kill them, but they made sure to catalog how each of our allies can kill them depending on available weaponry and skills. Our people didn’t order the extinction notice; the entire Coalition signed off on it. No wonder Dacron was so pissed. Where is my brother anyway?”

Talbort looked up from the screen. “I heard him come in a bit ago. I am guessing he went to his room.”

“I didn’t go to my room assholes. I have been sitting here watching you three for the last hour. If we get you off this planet and back home you are going to have to go back through some training or give up your jobs. There is no excuse for you not to have been aware of me from the time I walked

in the house. No wonder you have been chasing your tail on this planet for so long.”

“What are we going to do about this?” Talbort pointed to the screen.

“Do? Nothing. We are going to lock this planet down. By the time I am done turning in paperwork on this place, the Coalition will have it locked up so tight not even Enforcers will be allowed to visit.”

Rimi stared at his brother, “Hold on a minute. This morning you said the race needed to die. And apparently you have the knowledge to kill them, and now you want to—what— protect them? I mean, I am all for protecting some of them. Casey saved my life, and she is someone I value. Some of the others, well I don’t know them, but after reading these files, I have no problem reducing the population. We swore an oath to do our jobs and upholding an extinction order would fall under our job description. I don’t think I can be asked to kill someone who helped nurse me back to health though. You got heartburn? We have some stuff in the medicine cabinet for that. What did you eat? Some of the food around here is too spicy for our stomachs. Well, for your stomach, we have a sort of tolerance for it, but still, not all Earth food agrees with us. You didn’t snack on someone, did you? They have some drugs on this planet that will make you so sick you will almost beg for death if you drink from someone using them. We have some sources if your body needs the nutrients blood provides. When did you last feed? Are you low on necessary nutrients?”

Dacron looked at his hand before looking back at his brother. “No. Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.”

“If it’s nothing as you say why are you looking at your hand like it betrayed you?”

“I said it’s nothing. Drop it. We need to figure out how to get the little Calian to break that heart-bond I saw evidence of on Dracula’s back, and then the three of you need to explain to me why neither of you,” he pointed to Rimi and Talbort, “returned home for help. We could have brought a force large

enough to track her down despite the lack of technology on this planet.”

Dracula froze. “When did you see? How?” his voice petered out.

“When the three of you were trying to clean that creature earlier, you ripped your wet shirt off. I had just stepped outside, but like I said, the three of you need to go through some training again. You are dangerously unaware of your surroundings after being on this planet so long. The markings on your back explain why you can’t leave the planet, but it doesn’t explain why your Hunters didn’t leave you here and at least one return home for help. No one would have blamed you for staying. They might have blamed you for heart-bonding, and you would have still had to clear your name.”

Dracula cradled his head in his hands and stared at the floor, elbows propped on his thighs. “Show him.”

“Show me what?”

Rimi looked at Dracula then turned to Talbort and nodded. Both men stood up and removed their shirts. Turning around, they showed their backs to Dacron. It was several minutes before he quit swearing. The others had started counting how many languages he used and had just held up another finger when he finally stopped.

“Why would either of you do that? It is forbidden for a reason. What were you thinking? You know there is absolutely no way we can explain those marks away but at the same time no way we can explain your failure to return without admitting to those marks.” Dacron shook his head; eyes narrowed he glared at his brother. “I know you were raised better than that, smarter than that. I don’t care how close you are to your Enforcer you don’t ever bind your life to his heart-bond.” He closed his eyes, rubbing them he tried to ease the sudden headache. “How could you have been so stupid?”

Rimi drew back from the venom in Dacron’s voice and narrowed his eyes. Lips curled in disgust he said, “We didn’t do it. You never met Catherine, or you wouldn’t accuse us of such an act.” He looked at Dracula, but his friend was still

looking at the floor. For all the centuries the men had been together, the guilt had never lifted from Dracula's shoulders. Talbort and Rimi didn't blame him for what had happened. They couldn't blame him without sharing the blame. He watched as Talbort left the room and listened to the refrigerator open. A couple of minutes went by before he returned with a bottle and four glasses. He snorted but didn't turn down the shot, Talbort poured. Drawing in a deep breath, he got up and moved to the couch.

"We got word of a penned herd, sentient beings held for harvest. We went in undercover following leads when we met Catherine." He gave a short, bitter laugh, "You should have seen this woman. She had the most amazing laugh and a body you would kill your best friend to possess. When she looked at you, she made you feel like you were the only person in the entire world. And when she walked, holy hell that woman knew how to move her body. But even then we didn't get distracted from our mission. But being undercover, we used her to help us blend in. We drew for the right to date her. We had to make it look good. The best way to explain our continued presence in the village was if one of us were dating a local. Hell, even Mela met the woman. Well, we found our guy, and we took care of him, the report is still on the computer on the ship. But signs indicated he had an accomplice and we couldn't find the man. But somehow Catherine found out what we were and she set a plan into motion. She drugged us and," he shrugged, a look of confusion on his face, "we woke up with Dracula heart-mated to her and Tally and I wore matching soul bonds on our skin." He held his glass out for another shot while he gathered his thoughts.

"We didn't know it then, but Catherine had figured out before we got the man what we were and she must have thought being heart-mated to an Enforcer would provide her immunity or something. We have had centuries to talk about the events, but we don't know everything, so some of this is speculation. We think she figured it out and put her plan into motion and only after she was heart-mated to Drac did she find out we killed the old man. He was her grandfather and she, the accomplice we were trying to find. When she got word her

grandfather had been killed, she went nuts on us. We were still reeling in shock from waking up marked and groggy from the drugs, so we weren't at our best. I know that isn't an excuse for what happened."

"What happened? I know there's more to the story, so keep going."

"Not much, really. She was screaming about how we killed her grandfather and carrying on, and then she stormed out of the apartment we were staying in. We didn't know who her grandfather was, and we were trying to figure out what was going on. Talbort is the one who realized she had to be the unknown accomplice. We started looking for her, and of course, the first place we started looking was the old man's farm. Well, you saw the mess she left. She was gathering some of her things, we think, so she was still there when we got there, but we were trying to see if anyone in the herd was still alive, so we didn't know she was inside the house at first. By the time we realized she was there, she was leaving. We stayed one step behind her from then until now. We lock-beamed her ship, but you know a lock-beam won't stop a ship, keep you close enough to follow it. She headed here and, well, you know the way the heart-bond works. We forced her ship down, but it was too close to a populated area, and she managed to get transportation before we could get down. Mela had followed us, so we set her to watching the ships while we went after Catherine. The technology on this planet sucks now but back then they didn't have any at all. So even when she would kill it might be weeks before we would hear about it. The technology is only recently advanced enough that we get word of her atrocities within minutes or hours instead of weeks or months. But without a ship, we still have to drive or fly on one of their aircraft to get somewhere, and by then she is usually long gone. Dracula got the idea to spread tales of our kind, calling us vampires, so we could, in theory, track her easier. Reports of vampires, must be Catherine, and off we would go. But, the stupid humans fell in love with the tales and added to them to the point they hold no fear of vampires and even have books and movies about that shit." He glared at Dracula.

“How was I to know the idiots would take the stories and create entire worlds from them? It worked for centuries, until they lost their superstitious tendencies.”

“Well, we have a Yili, so transportation at a moment’s notice isn’t a problem. We can approach this problem one of two ways. We can wait for Dominick to get back with the rest of his Hunters and we can go after this Catherine in force, which will happen anyway after what she did to that little girl. After we have her, the heart-bond can be broken, though they may want her back at headquarters to interrogate, if that happens the three of you will still be bound. Or we can try the second option. The Calians can break a heart-bond.” He grimaced with disgust and started rubbing his chest again.

“Would you quit rubbing your chest. I told you we have some medicine for that. Talbort, get the heartburn pills, you had them last. Wait, leave the bottle, what are you doing man? Don’t take that; I’m not done with it.”

“I said fucking don’t worry about it. You don’t have medicine that can fix it. Just drop it.” Dacron roared at his brother.

“Whoa. I ain’t your bitch; you better check that attitude at the door. If you have something wrong with you, I think you need to tell me. I don’t want you dropping dead on me after finally getting to see you again after all these centuries.”

“I am not about to drop dead on you. I may kill you, but I don’t plan on dying on you.”

“Kill me? Damn man, you just found me again. Kinda cold there don’t you think?”

Rimi ducked the glass Dacron threw at his head. “What the hell, man?”

“You want to know what is wrong? You really want to know?”

“Uh, maybe not if you are going to be such a drama queen.”

“A what? What the hell is a drama queen? Quit using fucking slang. You know the translation download isn’t up to slang.”

“Dracula, tell my brother what a drama queen is.”

“No fucking way, man. You started it. Tally my man, do we have any popcorn in the house?”

Eyes blazing red Dacron ripped his shirt off and threw it at his brother. He pointed to his chest. “Do you see that shit? Do you? That is your fault!”

Rimi shifted his eyes left to look at Dracula and raised his eyebrows. Dracula’s mouth was open, and a look of shock on his face as he stared at Dacron’s chest. Rimi shifted his eyes to take in Talbort’s expression, which held an identical look of shock. Finally, he looked back at his brother. “Alright, I’ll bite. What the hell am I looking at, and why do I get the feeling I’m the only one who doesn’t know?”

The three men turned their attention to Rimi, but it was Dracula who answered. “How can you not know?”

“Well, since I don’t know what it is that I am looking at I can’t very well tell you how it is I can’t know now can I?”

Talbort’s voice sounded loud as he explained the strange marking on Dacron’s chest. “It’s a heart-bond calling mark. Find the female who has the matching mark, and you will know your brother’s mate.”

“Hold the fuck up, you are mated, and you didn’t think to tell me? Wait a minute; why doesn’t Dracula have one? That is a mark heart mates share? Dracula is heart-bonded to the she-devil, and he doesn’t wear a mark on his chest, only the one on his back.”

“He doesn’t have the mark because he is heart-mated with a fake bond, not a true heart-bond mating. She bonded him to her without the soul being involved, but you knew that, you were there when we woke up to that shit. Your brother has the mark but not the mate.”

“How does he have a heart-bond mark if he doesn’t have the mate?”

“Because dumbass, it is the calling mark. Somewhere on this planet is a female who wears the matching mark; he just has to find her. His heart is calling for its mate, and until he

finds her, his chest will hurt, or some such shit. I thought that was just a story.”

“It burns; it doesn’t hurt. It is like a faint achy burn. Barely noticeable so far. But from what I remember, the longer I go without claiming my mate, the more the mark will burn.”

“So how do you find your mate? You have to search the whole planet or will it be like the shifters and someone who has passed close to you? Cause that still leaves a shit ton of territory to cover. Or can you close your eyes and track them down? Why wasn’t this shit covered in our schooling? You know, I think I should ask for a refund for my early education. I am finding it seriously lacked some critical information.”

“I paid for your education, and I think the only thing lacking was your attention.”

“That is also possible. But you still haven’t answered the question, how do you find her?”

With his eyes glowing a deep red and his fangs pushing from his mouth, Dacron turned on his brother, “I don’t have to find her. I know where she is. If I am smart, I will kill her and free myself.” He snarled before turning and walking from the room. Moments later, the three men heard the bedroom door slam.

“Uh oh, you don’t think?”

Dracula snorted, “Don’t think what, that his mate is going to be Casey? I don’t know. Maybe it is one of the shifters? But the look on his face, yeah, Tally my man, he is pissed, beyond pissed. Why would a man be so pissed about finding a heart-mate unless it was from a race he hated with everything in him.

“I don’t know; I wouldn’t be too happy to have a heart-mate. Not after all the shit, we have been through because of yours.” Rimi poured another shot before looking back at Dracula. “Nope, I would kill the female and run if I had one.”

“That’s because I don’t have a heart-mate. I have a heart-bond. Two completely different things.” At Rimi’s look of confusion, Dracula’s brow furrowed, “Okay, think of it like

this. You have the shifters, right? They have true-mates, and then they have rogues who force the mate bond. That is as close as I can get to the difference. In fact, other than the way we bond to each other, that is almost exactly what the difference would be.”

“So you are telling me whatever female wears the mating mark on her chest is my brother’s true-mate?”

“Yeah, close enough.”

“So if he doesn’t bond with her, he will go crazy?”

“What the hell? No, we aren’t fucking shifters. He could kill her and be free of the bond. Hell anyone could kill her and free him. Same as what we are trying to do with my she-devil. Find her, kill her, free us all. We need to find his mate. Alright, let’s think this through. He hasn’t been anywhere without us until today. I haven’t noticed him rubbing his chest until tonight. The only females he has been around are, Casey and Samson’s mate Nicole. But, I don’t know how close we have to be for that mark to form, or how long it takes to show up. It wouldn’t be one of the females we rescued on the last mission because he said he knows where the female is, and some of them went to Gammon’s and some to Marcus. He hasn’t been either place. So unless he went somewhere earlier, other than the backside of the moon the only place he has been is Trey’s.”

“What are we going to do? He can’t mate a Calian.”

“It isn’t our decision to make, and at this point, all I can do is be fucking happy you don’t have a Krauant with Casey. I like Casey. I appreciate what she did to save your life. But if I have to choose, I will choose your brother over her.”

“Fellows, don’t you think we are jumping the gun a bit here? It may not be Casey. We don’t know where he went earlier. In fact, he has left twice today. His mate could be anyone in the world. For all we know, he could have popped over to Egypt and had a picnic on the bank of the Nile and met someone there. It’s late; we have had some real shit thrown at us today. I say we give it a rest and start fresh on everything tomorrow. Hell, by this time tomorrow night we could all be free. We just have to convince Casey to break the heart-bond,

somehow. And if being a Calian is a surprise to her, I don't think knowing how to break the bond will be in her go-to book of spells."

Rimi turned out the light as they left the room. "You do realize Casey hates it when you talk about her having a spellbook right? Dracula, don't let me forget to tell Casey that Talbort is going around talking about her having a spellbook again."

"No, man I thought we were friends."

"We are, but it is still funny as shit to watch you dodging fireballs. Kind of reminds me of the westerns Dracula watches; you know the ones where the villain starts shooting near someone's feet making them dance? Just like that."

Rimi was still laughing as he closed his bedroom door.

Chapter Twelve

When the scream shattered the silence, Trey jumped from his bed and raced down the hall. He shoved the door open and looked first at Casey, standing in front of the mirror before looking around the room. Seeing nothing to alarm him, he turned his attention back to Casey. In a voice groggy with sleep, he asked her, “What happened? Why did you scream?”

She turned toward the door and pointed to her chest, her naked chest and half screamed: “What is that?”

Gabby, who had followed Trey down the hall tugged on his elbow, and when he looked down, she held his pajama bottoms out to him while still pulling his elbow with her other hand. Red-faced, in a furious whisper she demanded he put some clothes on.

Rolling his eyes, Trey slid the bottoms on, but before he could continue the questioning, Gabby pushed between him and the door frame. Seeing Casey had no top on, she spun Trey around. Craig demanded to know what was going on, but he couldn't keep the laughter from his voice.

Kate pushed passed both men and into the room, “What is what?”

“This! What is this?” Casey pointed to the center of her chest where an intricate scrolling tattoo was visible.

“Oh, wow, that is pretty. Where did you get it done? What's wrong with it?” Kate moved closer and reached out one finger toward the tattoo.

“I didn't. I mean, I don't know what it is. I don't have tattoos. I was laying on the bed reading, and my chest just kept burning, an itchy achy burn that is just constant. I finally got undressed to see if maybe I had a bug bite or something and this was there. Do you see it?”

Kate's eyebrows shot upwards. “I am pretty sure everyone sees it. What do you mean you don't have tattoos? You clearly

have one right in the center of your chest. If it isn't a tattoo, what is it? Cause if that is a bug bite I want one."

"I don't know. It isn't mine. I mean, I didn't do it. It wasn't there this morning when I got dressed."

Kate lightly touched the mark, "It isn't flush with your skin. I mean, it has a raised pattern to it like a welt but a beautifully done colorful welt. So let's look at this logically. What were you doing when you first noticed your chest burning?"

"I don't know. I don't remember when it started. I just know it wasn't there this morning. Where's Nathaniel, maybe he will know."

Sibeal, standing behind everyone else in the hallway, laughed. "If you think getting Kate out of bed is hard, you should try to get Uncle Nate up. We won't see him until in the morning." She pushed against Craig and Trey in an attempt to wiggle her way into the room. "Move guys; I want to see."

The men moved into the room rather than away, thus forcing Gabby into the room with them. It wasn't long before everyone in the house with the exception of Nathaniel had examined the tattoo. The females, except Gabby, had touched it in their examination; but the males, even with the laid back attitude shifters had toward nudity hadn't even tried.

"I can call Shelley to come look at it, but I don't think the good doctor would appreciate being called out at midnight to look at a tattoo." Trey grimaced as he considered the options. "Take a picture of it, and we will reverse google the image to see what we can find online."

"You are not taking a picture of Casey's naked breasts." The red flush of embarrassment on Gabby's face hadn't gone away yet, and her mate's suggestion only caused the red to darken.

"Dear heart? We only want the tattoo, not the rest of the chest. Come on, let's go turn on the computer while Kate snaps a picture and see if we can find something." He rolled his eyes at Craig as they left the room, and they heard him whispering to Gabby as they walked. "I don't understand how

you can be so modest after living the first half of your life with your uncle and aunt. It boggles the mind how you can be so bothered by nudity.”

“Well, it isn’t like they walked around naked around us.”

“Maybe they should have,” Trey muttered as they turned the corner.

Kate turned back toward Casey, “Let me see your phone, and I will get a picture.”

Half an hour of fruitless searching later, they were no closer to solving the mystery of the magical tattoo than before they started. Craig sent the picture to his Alpha with the request Keith research it and everyone headed to bed for the third time.

Chapter Thirteen

“I feel like shit.”

Dacron laughed, “You look like it. Where’s Talbort and Dracula?”

“I dunno, still in bed. Coffee.”

“I don’t understand how you can drink that shit.”

“Shut up. Coffee.” Rimi staggered to the counter and reached for his mug.

“What are you going to do if we get the planet locked down? That shit probably won’t even grow back home. You better learn to live without it now cause you will be sucking when we go home.”

“Shut up. Need coffee. Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“What are you bitching about? Just fix the damn drink, so I don’t have to knock you in the head.”

Rimi looked at the coffee pot with a look of pure sorrow. “We forgot to set it.”

“Are you serious? Just do whatever it is you do and make some. You are like a fucking child.”

Rimi’s sorrow turned to rage, and he turned on his brother. “I need my fucking coffee. Shut the fuck up till I get my fucking coffee. Don’t fucking talk to me until I have my fucking coffee.”

Dacron snorted while backing away. “You know what? I don’t have time to deal with this. Fix the damn coffee. I will be in your rec room. Fucking loser.”

He met Talbort walking down the hall. Still pissed about his brother’s attitude he shoulder checked him into the wall. He may have only been on the planet a few days, but he had learned a few things in those days. Talbort and Rimi were addicted to a morning drink, and until they got a mug, they were like the zombies he had seen on one of the movies the

men had watched a couple of days back. If they were able to get the Calian to break the heart-bond so the men could go home they were going to have to go through training as intensive as the training they went through when they first joined the ranks. Maybe everyone would forget Rimi was his brother, and he wouldn't be embarrassed by his human-like traits.

Talbort bounced off the wall and muttered, "Coffee," as he too staggered into the kitchen.

If he didn't have a burning symbol on his chest and planet full of Calians, he might find the pathetic addiction funny. But with everything going on he wasn't amused by much. He was bothered by the soul marking on his brother's back. He knew the doomed race could break a heart-bond, but he had no idea if breaking the heart bond would destroy the soul mark. He hoped so. In fact he was counting on it. In theory, the marks should vanish with the death of the heart bonded one. At least, the books claimed they disappeared. He saw Dracula sitting at the computer reading more about the Calian race when he walked in the room.

"You know, it isn't their fault."

"What isn't? What are you talking about?"

"The coffee addiction isn't their fault. When we thought we lost Rimi in the mountains, we searched for two days. Up and down where he had gone hiking. No sleep, only the food we could carry, and not much water and no blood to replenish the nutrients we were using, deer are damned fast, you know. We were back in the cabin we lived in bare minutes when the call came in that he was alive. But he wasn't really. Casey helped him make the call, and even if he doesn't remember much about those weeks, he was more dead than alive. We barely slept. If he moved wrong, he would start bleeding again. The human medicine didn't work on him, the shifter medicine we could get our hands on didn't work. We had to watch him around the clock. Blood was hard to get with the shifter blood being poison and us not sure what Casey was or if her blood would provide the nutrients he needed. Casey and Trey were barely making it when we got there. Neither of them knew

what he was, what we were. They didn't know he needed blood to replace the nutrients, they were spoon-feeding him broth. That would have been fine if he had been healthy. But feeding us the equivalent of junk food doesn't help replace the nutrients we get from blood. We lucked out when the boy understood the need for blood to replace the loss. He went hunting and brought back animals we could drain to get substance in Rimi. Between the broth and the blood, he pulled through. But the only damn thing that saved him before we got there was their burning curiosity to know what he was and they couldn't do that if he died. How he didn't bleed out before Trey got him to Casey's is a question I would love to have answered. That boy must have stopped every few feet to shove more moss under Rimi's clothes, we saw the pile of blood-soaked moss outside. We took a walk, Talbort and I did while we were there. Not at the same time, but we backtracked the drops of blood. Trey carried him across the damn mountain to get him to Casey's. His home would have been closer I think. He doesn't remember much of the trip and Casey said he looked like he had been the victim of a mass killing spree. But we stayed awake, coffee got us through that week until we felt comfortable enough to sleep. By the end of the week, Talbort was addicted to the coffee Casey kept pouring down his throat. It didn't help that we went so long without blood to make sure he had enough.

“That doesn't explain why my brother is addicted and why you aren't.”

“Have you tasted that shit? Once that week was done I swore to our ancestors I would never take another swallow of that shit. As for Rimi, that is Talbort's fault. We thought we located Catherine and we were staking out the area, trying not to sleep, We had three different ways in and no one to relieve us. Talbort introduced Rimi to the wonders of the magical brew. What is this file about? I mean, I can read it, but some of the stuff in the report is a bit cryptic and doesn't fit the file.”

Dacron looked over his shoulder at the computer screen. After skimming through the information, he gave a snort of surprise. “That shit isn't right. We got all of the royal family. I don't know why—back up. Who wrote that report? That can't

be right. Why would he put that note at the end of the report then bury the report under other reports.”

“Why would they put a note like that in a file detailing the crops and food production of the planet? I mean, that reads like they got a royal child out but if they were going to save a child why put it in the report to be found by anyone?”

“I don’t know. But I will.” Dacron’s nostrils flared out in anger as he re-read the note. “That idiot has always been bad about tagging little notes onto his reports so he can keep up with things.”

“You know him? The guy who wrote this report?”

“Know him. The fucker was on my team. Our job was to go in and try to negotiate with the Queen about the crimes her people were committing. She had the authority to restrict them to the planet. She had the authority to make a lot of concessions to the Coalition, but she refused. Not only refused but laughed in our faces. But I had the order to take her out if she refused to consider any sort of sanctions on her people. They thought they were gods. They thought they could rule us all. She was the first one I killed. We went through the palace like a god of war, destroying all in our path. They didn’t have time to prepare, and since they thought us weak, we could strike before they knew what was coming. The reports we had to do later, oh Great One the reports. The Coalition wanted everything. We raided government offices for months gathering information. The stench was, I can’t describe the stench of the planet. We left the dead where they lay.”

“How did the Coalition manage to kill an entire world?”

“They were arrogant. I told you, they thought themselves gods. We had teams from everywhere. We made kinetic strikes on the planet. Once the Queen was dead, the teams were given the go order, and the planet became a blood bath. Every man woman and child we could find we killed. But if that little forgotten line in that report is true, then we had a traitor on our team. A traitor that managed to get at least one member of the royal family and her Golden to safety. If you keep reading, you can find more reports on the destruction of the world.”

Dracula gave a start of surprise. Aiming for an air of nonchalance, he didn't feel he asked, "Golden what?"

"Hmm?"

"You said according to the note in that file a traitor managed to rescue a member of the royal family and her Golden, so I asked Golden what?"

"Guard. The royal family's guards were called the Golden Warriors. They were the dangerous ones. You had to catch them by surprise to kill them. It wasn't as hard as we thought. Not because they weren't as powerful as we believed, they could level cities, we found that out the hard way."

"If they had such power, how were they destroyed?" Rimi walked into the room. Dracula could tell he had caught enough of the conversation to be alert to what Dracula was attempting to find out. He had a guarded look on his face, and Talbort coming into the room behind him wore a similar look. With Dacron's attention on the computer screen, he didn't see Talbort widen his eyes for a brief moment.

"Arrogance combined with duty. They had such power they were dangerous to their own people. Too much power to protect the ones they needed to protect. How do you protect a world when you hold the power to destroy the world with your protection. They never thought they would have to moderate their power to protect the ones close to them. They were more of a force to be used against others, away from their home planet. You know what the funny thing is, not funny in a laughing sort of way for them, but funny to us as their executioners. They had the ability to train their powers downward. We found references to a book, a golden book, that if used correctly would have trained the warriors to their powers. We never found the book even though we tore the palace apart. Hell, we tore everything apart, trying to find out how we could duplicate their powers. Oh, the governments would never admit they were trying to recreate the powers, but we knew. That's why some few of the race are scattered amongst the Coalition as slaves. Not that any would admit to it. Some members of the Coalition put forth the idea that if the golden book were found, we would be able to duplicate some

of the powers. I never thought that. We don't have the genetic make-up to duplicate all of their abilities."

"So no one ever found the book? How do you know one of the other races didn't get it?" Rimi looked over his brother's shoulder searching for the note the two had been talking about.

"Honestly? We don't know they didn't. For weeks the planet was a bloodbath. The surrounding space wasn't much better. We lost a lot of people in that war. The only thing we can do is hope the possible royal survivor didn't make it to adulthood. For years we searched out any hint of survivors and killed them where they were found. It's possible one of the ones killed was the royal child this note talks about."

"What if they survived? What would it mean?"

"At this point? Probably nothing, if they managed to save enough of the race, and stay hidden, they aren't likely to surface, not with a kill on sight order on them. If the royal child survived, she could, in theory, call their people back together and reclaim their planet. But they wouldn't live long enough to prosper so they would never try. What worries me though is someday, somewhere, someone will find that golden book."

Dracula looked at the other two. Rimi, lips drawn tight, teeth clenched shook his head. Dacron had arrived on the planet after the witch war by a few hours, so he wasn't around when the men heard about the explosion at Casey's cabin and her trip to Marcus' afterward with a golden book. But Trey had told them how close he came to touching the mysterious golden book and the resulting explosion at Marcus' because of a book. Dracula had a bad feeling about the book, and his questioning look at his Hunters was to gauge their thoughts on sharing the information with Dacron. Decision made he decided to change the subject.

"So we don't have much chance of finding Catherine, not unless she makes a move that brings her to our attention. I am past ready to be done with the markings that keep us tied to her. I called Trey when I got up and requested we be allowed to visit. He said he still has a household full, but we are more

than welcome to come. He has a picture to show us of something that happened last night. He started to tell me, but apparently, someone startled Kate, and she started a fire before I could find anything out.”

“I don’t recall meeting a Kate when I was there.”

Rimi narrowed his eyes and glared at his brother. “You didn’t meet anyone when you were there except Casey. You never left the ship, and you were damn rude to her. I mean, I understand now why but still, why would you, wait a minute, when did you go back?”

“After I gave you the link. I borrowed your phone by the way. Interesting technology.”

“Why did you go to Trey’s?”

“You have a Krauant with him. I went to exchange the vows of honor and family and to ask Casey a question. I met Nathaniel and Casey. They were the only true Calians there. I met another couple there, but they were a strange mixture of Calian and shifter. The air around them tasted different. The young were not in the room so I could not taste the air around them to see what they were, but Trey said they were newly come to their powers so they would not have known what I needed.”

“Again, what did you need?”

“I needed to ask them why they were here, on this planet.”

“Cause they were born here. Where else would they be? What did you hope to prove?”

“The three of you have doubted me since I said your little friend was Calian. You questioned if I were correct. So I asked in their language, and Casey answered in the language of their race. Were they not who I said them to be they could not have answered me in the language of their ancestors. No one outside the race would ever communicate in that language for fear they would be mistaken for a Calian by the undereducated and killed.”

“Oh, this I have to know. What smart ass comment did she make?”

“She didn’t make an unusual comment if that is what you mean. I think she was the only one in the room who knew the language, and she asked me how I spoke the dead language. Her words would loosely translate to, how do you know the language of our past? What I want to know is: who taught her the language if no one else speaks it?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t we go find out?” Dracula suited words to actions and headed for the door, the others close behind.

Chapter Fourteen

“I don’t want to ride with you if you are just bringing them right back here. The cream I tried didn’t work. The burning sensation is stronger today than it was last night. The tattoo hasn’t changed in shape or color, but still, it seems to be getting worse. I called Shelley to come by on her way to the clinic so she can look at it.” Casey rubbed her chest with one hand and cut her waffle with the other. Reaching out, she grabbed the syrup bottle and proceeded to drench her waffle. She pointed her fork at Trey, “I don’t feel like putting up with that guy’s ass hat attitude today. My chest hurts, and it is only getting worse. If he wants to talk to a witch, he can talk to Sibeal or Nathaniel. I am done with him. He flew all the way here from the southern part of Louisiana just to ask me why we were refugees on this planet. As soon as I asked him how he knew our old language, he got mad and left. I’m telling you that man, alien, vampire, whatever you want to call him is the rudest Reliant I have ever met.”

Trey laughed, “You have only ever met three others of that race, so I don’t think you had a wide selection to make your judgment. Did he use the word refugees? That wasn’t what either of you told me last night.”

Casey gave a half shrug and popped a bit of waffle in her mouth. While she chewed, she thought of how to explain. Swallowing, she pointed her fork at him again and narrowly missed dripping syrup on her leg. “The language is like any other language, not everything has an exact translation. It could loosely translate to refugee or hiding, maybe if you stretch it, you could say he asked why we lived here. I thought about the question he asked last night and tried to translate it to English as best I could. You have to understand Trey, my mother and I don’t talk much, and she was the one who taught me the language from birth. The Golden Book and the language are my heritage, she said. My family has had the caring of the book since time began only adding to it occasionally. I can read the book from front to back, but I

don't know anyone else who speaks the language. Nathaniel can read a few words but to sit and have a conversation in the dead language, well I haven't had anyone to talk to for a couple of centuries."

"I thought you left home close to a hundred years ago."

Casey smiled before she said, "What's a hundred years or so between friends? The point is, without my mother around, I haven't had anyone to talk to, and I am a bit rusty in the spoken word. I translated closely to the actual meaning."

"So how old are you? I know your kind live long lives, but you age as humans do for the first part, right?"

Nathaniel choose that moment to walk into the kitchen. "Casey left home when she was barely old enough to feed herself. She is a child, still. An intelligent, resourceful child but still a child."

Casey turned to glare at him before turning back to Trey. "Don't listen to the old geezer. He was around when dirt was invented. I didn't leave home until I was in my forties. That's how long it took me to realize the clans were arranged to suck the power from the witches less powerful than them. The only thing that would have ever happened would be for the powerful to grow in power as the weaker ones fell. I don't agree with that at all. It isn't right, nor is it fair."

Gabby wasn't even trying to hide her laughter at hearing Nathaniel described as an old geezer. No one had said how old Nathaniel was, but the description Casey had shared of her first impression of the man was spot on. He had the body and the looks of a god. No human looking at him would have pegged him much over twenty-eight though he had to be well over three-hundred. He had a sadness to his eyes that made her wish she could have met him before the loss of his partner and seen the flashy attitude Casey had met.

"It has always been our way. One clan to lead all and one ruler above all. The problem wasn't the way the clans did things, the problem was Miranda had no moderation. She wanted to be all-powerful at the risk of any and all beneath her. I don't think that one person can rule unchecked. Initially,

she had people in place to keep her grounded and to keep her from getting arrogant and tyrannical. They had a falling out, and Miranda became the dictator rather than the benevolent ruler.”

“Why do the clans even need one ruler? Why not a council or some type of governing body. How do they decide who rules?”

“I was wondering that myself.” Craig walked in the kitchen, supporting Kate with his arm wrapped around her waist. Trey took one look at her face and slid slightly left, so he was in front of the knife block and glared at Craig. Trey watched as the man pushed everything away from his mate’s spot at the table and guided her to a seated position where she promptly lay her head on the table and went back to sleep.

He hadn’t liked the interaction the first morning the two stayed when Craig brought a half-sleeping Kate into the kitchen with him. That morning had been the first morning he ever saw a wolf roll his eyes with a long-suffering sigh of patience. Apparently, the morning routine had become just that, routine. Conall told him later Kate was not a morning person and a wise man let her sleep. Craig wasn’t wise. Craig would half lift half drag Kate from bed, she would try to hit him with whatever was at hand when she woke enough to grab anything. The wolves would rise and circle, waking Kate more firmly, she would swear at Craig, and the process would begin all over again the next morning as he tried to turn her into a morning person. So far, from Trey’s understanding, she had singed her mate’s hair a few times and stabbed him twice. The second time was here in his kitchen, and it had taken longer to calm his wolf than it had to clean up the small amount of blood. Trey questioned Craig’s intelligence each morning. He was persistent if nothing else. Although the list of names Kate called him in the morning was impressive nothing as nice as the word persistent came close to what was in Kate’s descriptions.

“Have a seat bitches, and I will give you a history lesson.” Nathaniel looked over at Kate with a thoughtful pause, before waving a hand in her direction. “I think she can still reach the

jelly, move it a bit further away from her right hand. If she wakes and I am the one talking I would hate to have to dodge the jar. Someone can fill that poor thing in later when she wakes up.”

Trey’s phone vibrated, and a glance at the screen showed him their friends from out of town had just landed. He held up a finger, “Hold that thought I have to pick up the others. Casey, why don’t you ask Nathaniel about that thing while I am gone.” Trey reached around Gabby and grabbed a couple more slices of bacon before leaning down to kiss the end of her nose. He used the pack path to talk to her as he drove to the landing field.

Make sure when you see the Golden Wolf stir you give them plenty of room. I would hate to kill everyone because you got hurt because Craig is an idiot who can’t let him mate sleep late.

Gabby giggled before sending her thoughts back toward her mate. Yes, love. Hurry back and be safe. The weatherman said it snowed last night. I called Kyle and told him to go ahead and plow just in case, so maybe he will have gotten out that far.

I will take the jeep. Thanks for calling Kyle. I didn’t think about the roads.

Well, love, you have told me over and over and over and —

Trey’s laughter interrupted her, What is it I have told you.

We are in this together. I love you crazy man. Now go pick up your aliens and bring them back so they can talk to your other alien friends. Trey?

Yes, baby?

Do you ever think that maybe the world has gone crazy around us or that it’s just us? I mean, a year ago I didn’t know shifters existed now I am playing hostess to aliens and shifters and hybrids. Sometimes I wonder if I will wake up trying to figure out what I ate that caused me to dream insane dreams.

Well, the aliens aren’t so hard to get used to if you consider how impossible shifters are according to science. If you think

about it, aliens make more sense and are more realistic than our people.

Still, isn't it strange that everyone seems to end up on our doorstep? I mean of all the places and people in the world you end up with two alien races as friends. How is that even possible? Do you think our world is littered with aliens to such a degree that one family located in the middle of the mountains could befriend two separate races from different parts of the galaxy or universe or wherever they come from?

I sleep better at night if I don't think about that.

Are you at the landing field yet? You missed the best show just now. Casey started stripping her shirt off at the table, and Nathaniel drew back in surprise and told her he still bats for the other team. She ended up throwing her shirt at him, but she missed, and it landed on Kate's head. The button got tangled in Kate's hair, and no one wants to touch it now so Kate is wearing Casey's shirt on her head and well, you should have seen it. Oh, and Nathaniel doesn't have a clue about the symbol on Casey's chest. Craig said Keith can't find anything in any database he has access to, but it will take a while longer for the computers to run all the images available.

Alright. Look, love, I have an idea. Does Casey still have her shirt off?

Yes. I told you it's on Kate's head.

Well, she could have gone for another one. Listen, if Dacron is so knowledgeable about Casey's race, then he may have a clue what the tattoo is but I don't think Casey would want to ask him. Not after the way he has looked at her like she was vermin to be killed. So try to keep her top off and maybe he will say something about it. That way, she doesn't have to ask him because if she were to refuse to ask, I would have to respect that.

So we just won't ask?

Something like that. I just pulled up to the field. Gabby?

Yes, dear, still here.

Don't tell anyone but Dacron is rubbing at his chest like Casey has been doing.

What do you think it means?

No clue. Can't be a sexually transmitted disease between the two races unless they only need to be close to pass it.

Trey! It isn't a rash!

Gabby, darling, you have to remember both of our friends come from different planets. We don't know what a rash looks like on their worlds. We can't judge their bodies by ours. Hell, for that matter, we don't react the way humans do to everything. We will be back shortly. I will try to find out anything I can on the return trip.

Okay, be careful. Are the roads very bad?

Not terrible. Kyle is working on them.

Chapter Fifteen

Marcus sat straight up in bed swearing.

Krys moved closer and drew in a deep breath. “Go back to sleep. The pack is quiet this morning, and you told everyone to take off today until noon. We have to wait on the shipment to get through with more material anyway.”

Marcus turned a stricken look toward his mate. “We never called Craig. He must be going insane wondering what my decision will be and whether he will have a home to come back to when he is done trying to help Trey.”

Krys stretched, and her hand drifted across her mate’s stomach. His indrawn breath was her only warning. She rolled to the side of the bed before he realized she was moving and stood up. “No, I have to pee. I have to brush my teeth. And you have to call Craig.”

“If you hadn’t added that last part. Are you coming back to bed after?”

“No, I am going to fix you breakfast and feed it to you one bite at a time. So get up.”

Marcus reached for his phone as his eyes roamed down Krys’ body. “Can I use you for a plate?”

Krys laughed. “No, you can’t use me for a plate, but I will be dessert. But you have to get up first.”

“Can I have dessert first?”

She rolled her eyes at the question and headed for the bathroom, laughing, calling back over her shoulder she told him, “No. Dessert comes after the meal. Call Craig.”

“Fine. But I want you to know you spoiled a perfectly good meal by putting the dessert last.”

He grinned at the laughter he heard in response before scrolling through his contacts to find Craig.

Marcus.

“Craig, my brother, I was wrong. I let a moment of fear and uncertainty dictate my words. My actions were unworthy of family.”

So, I still have a pack?

“You might as well ask do you still have a family.”

What of the rest of my family? My in-laws-by-mating?

“Are you sure you want to keep them?”

Of course, I am sure. I think. I haven't had any problems yet if you don't count the total lack of support in getting Kate to face the mornings.

“Fuck, are you still dragging her out of bed when you get up? Why do you do that to yourself? No, a better question is why do you do that to everyone else. You haven't caused any problems at Trey's doing that have you?”

No, of course not.

Marcus heard Craig answer, but apparently, the man was around the others, which meant the phone call could be heard. From the laughter and mocking he heard in the background, he didn't think Craig saw the situation the same as everyone else.

“Quit dragging your mate out of bed before you cause someone to get hurt. I would hate for one of mine to cause a problem in another Alpha's territory no matter how well we are getting along.”

I am not going to cause an incident or let anyone get hurt.

Marcus heard more laughter, and after ending the call, he stared at the phone for a long while. When Kry's came to check on him, he was still staring to the phone.

“Well, all better now?”

He turned startled eyes toward the bedroom door.

“Oh, baby. What's wrong? Did something happen to Craig?” Kry's rushed to the bed.

“No, everything is fine. I think.”

“Then why were you looking like that when I walked in?”

“Did you ever get the impression anyone at Trey’s could be swingers?”

“Could be what?” Kryz reached out to feel his forehead, “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

Marcus jerked his head away, “I don’t have a fever I feel fine. I called Craig, and while we were taking the others were discussing getting Casey’s shirt off of Kate’s head and talking about touching Casey’s chest. It sounded sexual to me, but I didn’t think true-mates could be swingers.”

Kryz stared at him in confusion, “You must have misheard something.”

“Run your finger down the center of Casey’s chest and watch what happens. Casey, I think Kate is going to keep her head buried in your shirt for a while longer. Do those sound like I misheard something? What the hell is going on at Trey’s?”

Kryz shrugged, “I don’t know. Do you want to order Craig home?”

“For having an orgy? I don’t think I can order him home for doing... whatever it is he is doing. He was surrounded by people and apparently having fun. An orgy isn’t my idea of fun, I don’t plan on ever sharing you but hey, if it makes them happy. Whatever.” A slow smile crossed his face as he realized how close Kryz was to the bed. Before he could grab her and pull her back to him, she jumped away.

“Oh no, you don’t. I told you I am cooking this morning so behave.

“But baby, I am ready for dessert. You promised me dessert.”

“I said after you eat.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Food, Marcus. After you eat food, that I cook, on the stove.”

“Fine. Spoil my breakfast. But I’m gonna remember to get my dessert.”

“I hope you do. Now come on, get up. I’ll be in the kitchen.” She blew him a kiss as she walked backward out the door.

“Oh yeah female, you are gonna be the one begging by the time I am done.” He whispered.

“I heard that.”

“You were meant to hear it. Come back to bed.”

“Nope. Cooking.”

Marcus stuffed another pillow behind him and lay back, head cradled in his hand behind his head. He would wait. She would be back to check on him, and when she saw he was still in bed, she would make this cute sound of disgust and glare at him. She would tell him the food was done and he would smile. She would glare harder, if that were possible before she turned around and went back in the kitchen muttering. Then she would return with the food on a tray and insist on them eating together. Afterward, well, he would probably have to help her clean up the mess again and buy new plates. But making love with his mate in the early morning hours was worth it.

Chapter Sixteen

“Dammit, Kate, I swear.” Casey ducked another fork.
“Craig, you idiot, next time leave your mate in bed to sleep.”

Kate looked around the room blinking. “Why am I in the kitchen and,” She tugged on the shirt on her head again, “ouch, what is on my head?”

“My shirt. And if you will be still, I will get your hair untangled from the buttons. That is what I was trying to do when you woke up and tugged it the first time. Now be still and quit throwing things at me. Remember, all of this is Box Man’s fault. Throw stuff at your mate next time, not the innocent bystanders who are just watching the train wreck about to happen with no place to run.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why is your shirt on my head?”

“Oh, that’s Nathaniel’s fault.”

Kate closed her eyes and blinked a few times before laying her head back on the table. Everyone watched her to see if she had given up and gone back to sleep or was just trying to process. When she lifted her head again, more than one sigh of relief echoed through the room.

“Let me see if I understand. Speak slower. Why am I wearing your shirt on my head?”

“Well you see, I was going to show Nathaniel my chest and he got snarky and said he still bats for the other team and I ended up throwing my shirt at him, but since he was standing on the other side of the table it fell short and landed on your head.”

“So you, a heterosexual woman took your shirt off to show your chest to a homosexual man, that you already know is gay, and then when he reminded you he is gay you threw the shirt at him thus exposing your chest to not only him but a room

full of—” Kate’s voice petered to a stop as she woke enough focus on Casey. “Where did you get that tattoo, and why does it look like it is pulsing?” Kate shook her head a couple of times and closed her eyes.

“Um, Kate, sweetheart, last night? Casey screaming? Internet search? Any of that ring a bell?” Craig watched his mate with wary eyes and saw the moment she woke enough to remember the previous night.

“Oh, yeah. Wait, it was not pulsing like that last night. When did that start?”

“Right after Trey left.”

“Gabby? I don’t know when Trey left. I wasn’t here.”

“Actually, you were. In fact, I put you right there myself.”

When Kate snarled Craig backed up a few feet. “I realize you moved me from the nice comfortable bed I was in, to this chair. I don’t know what you thought you would accomplish or why you keep insisting on doing that, but I will tell you one thing. Tonight you will find some place else to sleep. You are not sleeping with me. Cause when you sleep with me you wake up with me, and for some reason, you seem to think I need to get up when you get up, and I don’t. So until you can figure out how to get our of bed by yourself, you will be sleeping by yourself.”

“Wait, you can’t do that. I mean, it wouldn’t be fair to Trey and Gabby to ask them to open up another room for me when we can share.”

“I’m not asking them to open another room for you. I am just letting everyone know they will have to step over you in the hallway when they pass by cause you are sleeping on the floor, outside, in the hall.”

“No.”

“Oh for the love of little green apples will the two of you stop it. Every morning it is the same thing. Craig, stop dragging your mate around while she is asleep or I will personally lock you out of her room tonight and make you sleep on the floor.”

Every head in the room jerked around to stare at Gabby, who was holding her hand to her mouth, eyes wide. The outburst seemed to have startled Gabby as much as everyone else in the room.

Before anyone could say anything else the door opened and Trey walked in followed by the four Reliants. Everyone froze. Casey, who had gotten her shirt untangled but was still holding it in her hand was the first one to move as she gave a small squeak of surprise and fumbled to get dressed. She wasn't modest, not really, she just didn't want the ass hat alien to see the tattoo and run his mouth about anything.

It was Rimi who broke the silence as he crossed the room to her side and grabbed her hands before she could button the shirt. Holding both wrists in one hand, he reached a finger out to touch the pulsing symbol. Before his finger could touch her skin, chaos erupted in the kitchen.

“NO!” Dacron shouted while diving toward his brother.

Kate and Craig stumbled back as their golden wolf rose to stand at Casey's side, hackles raised, a silent snarl upon its maw.

The table crashed into Nathaniel throwing him onto his back, dishware falling around him. Near the door where Conall and Sibeal stood their copper wolf rose to stand between them and the others in the room. Trey grabbed Gabby and thrust her behind him as Dacron's dive sent Rimi crashing to the ground. Dracula and Talbort still stood in the doorway with mouths agape at the chaos. Half eaten food lay strewn on the floor, syrup dripped from the cabinets, Nathaniel's impeccable dress and hair was a disheveled mess. Gabby was screaming while Casey was trying to back away from the golden wolf. She knew what the touch of the wolf could do from reading the book, and she was desperate to put as much space as possible between her and the wolf, but the wolf kept pace with her until she backed into the wall.

Dacron turned on his brother furiously as he struggled to untangle himself from one of the chairs. “Are you crazy? What

the hell were you thinking? You don't touch a Heart-Bond Calling Mark belonging to another."

While everyone was still trying to figure out what had happened, Dacron grabbed his brother by the arm and slung him toward Dracula and Talbort. With chairs in the way all he accomplished was to cause Rimi to trip and roll, coming to a stop on his back looking up at Trey. The look of confusion and astonishment on his face was mirrored by most of the people in the room. Casey took the time to button her shirt while Rimi struggled to his feet. She wasn't sure what was going on, but apparently, the ass hat did indeed know what the mark on her chest was for and wasn't going to let his brother touch it.

"Fuck, you could have just said don't touch it. Damn bro, what the hell is your problem?"

"My problem? You stupid, ignorant ass, you could have gotten yourself killed just then. Which part of you don't touch the mark belonging to another did you miss?"

At some point, Craig had forced Kate behind him and was currently holding her captive with his body. She managed to get her head around his blockade so she could see Dacron. "Why? What do you think would happen? I touched it, Sibeal touched it, you might want to notice we didn't die."

"You're both females. Why the hell do you think you would die?"

"You just said if you touch the mark you die."

"Again. You're female."

"What is that?" Kate pointed to Dacron's chest. No one had noticed in the scuffle that his shirt had torn. Every eye in the room followed Kate's finger to see a mark similar to Casey's pulsing on his chest.

"You bastard. What did you do? You gave me some kind of fucking alien rash, didn't you?" Casey screamed the last couple of words.

Everyone's attention swung to Casey before turning back to Dacron. Unfortunately, Dacron's focus was now firmly on her, and his eyes blazed red. His fangs dropped as he pointed to the

golden wolf. “Where did you get that?” He turned, so his body was between his brother and the golden wolf and used his body to back Rimi into Dracula and Talbort and kept pushing backward.

“It isn’t mine.”

“I didn’t ask you if it was yours, princess. I asked you where you got that abomination.”

“Whoa. I know you did not just call our wolf an abomination. Boy, you don’t know who you’re messing with. You need to get back on your little ship and fly back where you came from.”

“Shut up Box Boy. If you haven’t noticed, he is the only person in the room who knows what is going on.”

“Whew, damn man, your mate done demoted you to boy.”

“Talbort?”

“Yeah, Drac?”

“Shut up.”

“Just trying to break the tension a bit. In case you missed it, the spines are out.”

Dracula slew his head around so fast his neck popped, and it was then he saw the small poisonous spines all Reliants had were barely protruding from Dacron’s spinal ridge and shoulders. He realized all of Dacron’s attention had shifted from Casey to Kate and Craig and knew he had to do something before events spiraled out of the range of recovery.

“Dacron? Have you forgotten the Krauant?” Dracula watched as the spines slid out of sight and breathed a sigh of relief. They needed to get Dacron out of the area. He turned a thoughtful look toward Kate and Craig before looking at the golden wolf still guarding Casey. “Ah, I see, a Golden Warrior.” He gave a last glance at Casey before he reached behind him and opened the door. “Trey, can you give us a ride back to the ship? Maybe this wasn’t the best time to come.”

“Are you serious? Like Kate said, your friend there seems to be the only one who knows what is going on so until the

rest of us know, nobody leaves this house.”

“Princess you don’t tell me what I can do. I should have killed you when I had the chance. Don’t push me now because I will still find a way to kill your warrior without disgracing my brother, and when I have your warrior down, you will follow.”

“Whoa, easy there killer. I don’t think you realize what we can do. We don’t back down, and we don’t threaten easily.”

“Princess, I don’t think you are in any position to be sending threats my way. Your kind went under our weapons once before, and the kill order has never been rescinded.”

“The kill order? What are you talking about?” Trey held up his hands. “Everyone just calm down for a minute and let’s see if we can get this straightened out. First off, do you know what the mark is on Casey’s chest?”

“I personally want to know more about this kill order and what he means by my kind going under their weapons once before.” Casey moved but immediately stilled when the golden wolf moved with her. “Kate, can you get your wolf to leave me alone?”

“I would, but they aren’t listening to us right now. We have been trying to recall them.”

“You can’t recall your warrior abomination as long as the Princess is in danger.”

Casey frowned down at the wolf before looking back at Dacron. “I wouldn’t be in danger if the wolf would go away.”

“By the Great One you really are clueless about your kind, aren’t you?”

“Look, ass hat, I am getting tired of you calling the wolf an abomination and accusing me of being ignorant and wanting to kill me. We are witches, she” pointing at Kate, “is currently the most powerful witch on the planet, and I can assure you that you do not want to piss her off any more than you already have. It won’t end well for you.”

Dacron snorted, “No Princess, she is not the most powerful if the Golden Warrior is at your feet. How you managed to breed a Golden Warrior to a wolf, though, is a mystery. She may be the most deadly witch on the planet if she is your Golden Warrior, but the most powerful would be whoever the Golden Warrior guards. From where I stand, that would be you.”

“Whoa, your mate is the missing princess?”

“Rimi? Remind me to kill you later.”

“Back the fuck up. His what? I am not his mate. Rimi, have you been drinking?”

“Stop it!” The words rolled with the power of the Alpha and caused Craig and Conall to whimper.

Dacron turned his head to look at Trey as he took a deep breath. “That is fascinating. You changed the flavor of the air around you. What did you do?”

“He does that sometimes. Usually, when he is pissed off. All the leaders of the packs can do it. The shifters feel it inside somehow. They can’t smell the change.”

“Remarkable. When we get time, I would love to study it.” His attention was again on Craig and Kate, so he missed his brother’s nod of agreement. Rimi had been trying to figure out how the Alphas could change the flavor of the air around them for years.

“Before we get distracted again, did anyone see where Nathaniel went?” Trey addressed this question mostly toward the older couple still standing near the door into the rest of the house.

“I went to change bitches. And shower, Dacron’s mad dive across the table destroyed my clothes. Did you get everything straight while I was gone? What did we find out about the strange marking on Casey’s chest?”

Dacron studied Nathaniel for a moment before his lips twisted into an evil smile. “Have you felt it? Can you see if the marking feels differently from the rest of her skin?”

“Wow, evil much, ass hat? No, he hasn’t touched it. No one is touching it again until we find out if you were lying about it being deadly for another male to touch it.” She looked around the room of destruction before she whispered, “And I am going to guess you weren’t lying if you did all this to keep your brother from touching it.”

“Yes, but he is neither male nor female, is he? And I must admit to a morbid curiosity.”

“He is most definitely male.”

Dacron sniffed the air before shaking his head. “No, you lie. He is both and neither at the same time. He prefers his own sex to your sex, does he not?”

Casey sniffed the air. “How can you tell that from smelling the air? I don’t smell anything different. Trey?”

Trey drew in a deep breath of air before shaking his head. “He smells the same as any other witch to me. I don’t notice a difference.”

“You didn’t answer. He prefers his own, doesn’t he?”

“So what’s wrong with that?”

Dacron raised his eyebrows, “Nothing is wrong with it. Why would you think that? I only stated he is both and neither, and because of that, I want to see how the mark reacts to him. If it kills him, well that is one less Calian for the Coalition to concern themselves with finding and destroying.”

“Do you think it would kill him?”

“Hey, I’m right here. Appreciate it, pumpkins, if you stop talking about me like I am somewhere else.”

“No, I don’t think the mark would sense danger from him. But I can’t help but wonder how deeply the mark can see.”

With the tempers in the room calm again the golden wolf drifted back toward Kate and Craig and split as it reached them, each wolf fading into their other half. The copper wolf had long since returned to Kate’s parents. Dacron watched until they were utterly gone before he turned his attention back to Casey.

Trey rubbed his temples, he could feel a headache coming on, and it felt like it would be massive. “Alright. No testing marks, no killing anyone, no fighting, no arguing. Dacron, I would appreciate it if you would start at the beginning and tell us what you know.”

“The best way to do that would be to show you. I can’t show you from here. I would need the link set back at Dracula’s house and to run the link set I would need their computer.”

“I have one of their computer setups here. So you only need the link.” Trey slapped his hands together, “Alright, this is what we are going to do. Dracula, you take my jeep and drive Dacron to the landing field so he can go get the link he needs. While you are gone Rimi and I will move the computer we need into the meeting room and get it set up with the screen so everyone can see.”

Dacron grimaced, “I can get the links, but the reports are in our language. The best I could do would be to show you videos we captured of the carnage.”

“The files had videos? I didn’t see them.”

“That’s because you didn’t get that far. We captured the death of an entire race and wrote up the reports on the history we found, you can’t get through that in one night.

“Why would you kill an entire race?” Gabby asked in a hushed whisper.

“To keep them from destroying us all.” Dacron turned and pushed past the others. Dracula shot a glance toward Trey.

“Keys are in the jeep. Don’t wreck it in the snow.”

Dracula nodded as he followed Dacron outside.

Chapter Seventeen

Casey followed Trey and Rimi as they walked across the hall to the office. “Rimi, you know what’s going on don’t you?”

He mumbled a reply and stepped away from her.

“No, you don’t get to turn and walk away. I didn’t turn and walk away from you sixteen years ago. I opened my door to a creature more dead than alive, and I did everything I could to make sure it lived. That creature was you, and you owe me. I have never asked you for anything in all these years. I have valued our friendship, and I am proud to have been part of saving your life. I never considered you owed me for your life, not once. I always believed our friendship was worth every minute I spent wrapping bandages around you and staying up to stop the bleeding. But our friendship has to be worth something to you. I have a tattoo that started out as an achy itch and has grown to a pulsing burn in the last day. Why? What is it, and why has your brother gone from calling me that little Calian to Princess? What is going on?”

“Yeah, the rest of us would love to hear the answers to those questions also.” Kate’s voice sounded from behind Casey.

“Fine. I don’t know a lot. Witness my stupidity in trying to touch the mark, but I will tell you what little I do know. Let me help Trey get everything hooked up. In fact, I will talk as we work. Move and let us through, everyone, meeting room if you want to know what I know.”

“Alright. Let’s see, where to start. First, you have to understand my brother is well over three thousand years older than I am, so he lived through what I am about to tell you. All I did was read about it last night and more this morning.”

“That’s fine. Just tell us what you do know. I hate being in the dark while the ass hat knows everything.”

“Some time in the past other races came into contact with your race. Things didn’t go well. In order to protect themselves from your people the Coalition, which is a group of many races, agreed upon an extinction order. They ordered the deaths of your race. Apparently, your race doesn’t play well with others and are prone to cursing them and creating death and destruction in their wake.”

“Holy shit! Princess!”

“Dammit Trey, not you too. Don’t call me princess. I don’t know what made ass hat call me that but I hope we are friends enough for you to not copy that ass hat.”

“No, I wasn’t trying to be mean. I asked Dacron yesterday about the curse. He said the person who cursed our race had to be powerful and the only person who could break a curse like that would be a member of the royal family. He said the royal family was dead but what if you are a princess?”

“He was being an ass hat. I am not a princess.”

“Um, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we have reason to believe a traitor got a member of the royal family away. The royal family had special guards, planet-killer guards called Golden Warriors. The Golden Warriors could have been trained down to a manageable level of power if they had wanted to, but they chose not to do that. The instructions for training a Golden Warrior were contained in a golden book. A golden book that no one ever found when they stripped your people’s planet. Does any of this sound familiar at all?”

“But that’s impossible. Casey is weak compared to many other witches. She can’t be a powerful witch, she would know if that were true.”

Rimi scrubbed his hand across his face, “Look, Nathaniel, I don’t know but what I read and I didn’t get to read that much. I can tell you that by the oath I took I should be helping kill you all, not explaining why I have indirect orders to kill you.”

“Fine, the mark, what can you tell me about this mark on my chest?”

Rimi looked at Talbort, who shook his head. “No, man, you tell her. Don’t get me involved. She didn’t help save my life.”

“The mark on your chest is called a Heart-bond Calling Mark. Basically, as I understand from the others, it is like a shifter finding his true-mate with one major difference.”

“Your brother is not my mate.”

“Well, no, he isn’t. And if he has anything to do with it, he never will be.”

“So he can make it go away? Why didn’t he do that when it first happened?”

“Would you die to get rid of the mark? Would you die to release my brother from the mark?”

“No, of course not.”

“That’s why you are still alive. No, wait, you are still alive because he wasn’t sure if you helped nurse me back to health and he didn’t want to move until he knew; plus you are under Trey’s protection, and he can’t kill you without bringing dishonor to Trey. I mentioned the major difference? The only way to get that mark off if for one of you to die. Death releases the other from the calling bond.”

“That’s insane. Who would do that?”

“The gods and they are some sick fucks sometimes.”
Talbort offered this latest observation with a bitterness Trey had never heard him use.

Chapter Eighteen

“So what are you going to do? You can’t kill her without bringing dishonor upon the family. You hate her, so bonding with her would be a terrible idea.”

Dacron gave a deep sigh and buried his face in his hands. “That isn’t exactly true. I don’t hate her. I don’t know her to hate her. I hate what she represents. I admire her for saving my brother’s life. Think about it. You are on a planet you believe to be your world. Your world doesn’t have visitors from other worlds. You think you are possibly the only planet with intelligent life and on your planet are exactly two races, humans, to include witches, and shifters. One night a young shifter shows up at your door with something other than what should be on your planet. They worked together to save Rimi, not knowing if he meant them ill, not knowing what would happen to them if he lived. I admire that kind of courage. I also admire the fact she hasn’t got a clue what is on her chest, but she isn’t screaming and crying and falling down in some kind of fit. She is angry, she is lashing out looking for answers, but she is doing it with courage. In the last day, her life has been threatened, she has gained a heart-bond mark, which doesn’t mean anything to her, all she knows is that it hurts, she has found out the Golden Warrior protects her and yet she stood defiantly daring me to harm her. Yet, she is Calian, I can’t bond to her. I could never take her home. I could never have a family with her without endangering my family. I can’t kill her, and I can’t let her live. What would you do in my shoes?”

“I am probably the last one you should ever ask that question. You saw my back. You saw the mark that ties me to the she-devil. I wouldn’t wish anyone to be tied to another through a bond like that. But then again, I have never seen a true heart bonded pair. All I know is the hell I have lived and the hell that I brought my best friends into. Tell me, have you ever met a heart bonded pair?”

“I have. They once were many. Now, so few exist, I don’t personally know any.”

“What happened?”

“Your shifter friends weren’t the only ones cursed. Our people don’t bond anymore because they broke the pathways. Most don’t mind, the ones who never knew I mean. Your grandparents were a bonded pair.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“No, it took hundreds of years for the Calians to move through our people breaking the bonds. We didn’t know, we thought the magic that tied our couples together was slowly dying or changing in some way. For a thousand years, they worked among the races slowly destroying from within. We thought them allies, we called them friends. But they weren’t allies, and they certainly weren’t friends. Do you know why our people cover their backs, always? Why the only taboo clothing is the clothing that bares your back for any to see? Because the mark of bonding is forever branded upon your skin unless a Calian comes to call, and even then the mark stays, just not as you would want it.”

“Or your mate is killed.”

“That is not precisely true. Killing your mate by your own hands merely fades the mark to black and breaks the bond, and our people would name you a destroyer. If your mate is killed by another, the mark changes to a pale mourning blue and the bond is broken. In either case, the mark is changed, it doesn’t disappear. But if a Calian takes your mark, you lose the connection to your mate’s heart, and the mark turns black signifying you killed your mate. Your mate becomes like a stranger, and you forever have the stigma of having killed the one you should hold most precious to you. You can’t get the connection back. You can’t feel their emotions or taste the flavors of their skin from a distance. Most of the people you find my age or older will have the black mark of the destroyer on their back. Your grandparents didn’t leave the planet to give the young ones more room to grow. They didn’t leave the planet because they wanted to retire elsewhere. They left for

the same reason, so many of the older ones have left in our lifetime. To escape the past no one can run from, and no one can fight. Most of our people didn't leave their heart bonded when the marks turned black, and they couldn't feel their mates anymore. They had a lifetime of memories to draw from and a love that surpassed the magic of the bond. But for some, losing that connection was more than they could handle. They chose death over losing that bond. It was a mess."

So if the Calian can break the bond, all we have to do is get one of them to break the heart bond on me and the calling bond on you and then we can figure out what to do next."

Dacron gave a bitter laugh, "Well, we can get your bond broken, but they can't touch mine."

"Why not? If the Calians can break anyone's bond, then they can break their own."

"No, they can't."

"How do you know they can't break yours? You haven't even tried."

"I told you, Dracula, our people can bond with them. Do you think in a thousand years no one ever did? When we found what had happened, and saw the devastation of our people, of the bond, everyone went a bit crazy. They called for the death of all the Calians, even the ones bonded to our own. The infighting was bitter, and riots were a daily occurrence. Finally, a compromise was reached, of sorts. The Calians would agree to have their bond broken and leave the planet, or their mate would be put to death in front of them, and they would be banished from the planet. Oh, and any children would be killed in front of them also."

"I'm guessing something went wrong?"

"We put a lot of our people to death before we knew the Calians did not lie. They could not break the bond of another Calian with our race."

"Couldn't you smell the lie or the truth? Didn't they say they couldn't do it?"

“No, how could they. They were heart bonded, and no one would willingly give that up. We thought they lied but believed the lie so strongly it smelled true. Many offered to break the bonds of their friends and family and face banishment from the planet rather than watch their mates and children die in front of them. We thought they played at breaking the bond. We are a noble race, why would we destroy our own for something they couldn’t fix? But they couldn’t break the bond, and we killed the mates and any child they shared before we banished the Calian mate from the planet. We being the race as a whole, not everyone agreed with the decision.

“Insane.” Dracula muttered as Dacron settled the craft down in the back yard, “I will be back with the link in a moment. You need anything from inside?”

“No.”

“Got it. So one more question. If the mark turns black and the bond breaks, why did it take so long to figure out what was going on? I mean, if you feel the bond break and a Calian is there, wouldn’t that have raised questions earlier?”

“No, because the bond didn’t break immediately. The Calians can break the bond with a word and a touch, but they can touch you today and break the bond tomorrow.”

“And you know how they can do it? I mean, they aren’t going to know so who will teach one of them what to do? And how do you know they won’t then use the knowledge to start breaking shifter bonds?”

“I know how they do it.” Dacron’s lip twitched up in a bitter twist. “Now you see why our people turned on them so strongly we were willing to sacrifice our own people to rid ourselves of the race. You are suddenly no longer sure they won’t turn on the shifters. These people you call friends are now someone to watch with wary eyes.”

“Ah, well, about that.” Dracula drew a deep breath, “Nathanial is the one who cursed the shifters to begin with and

although he did it for what he thought was a good reason and now seeks to undo the curse I don't trust the man."

"The princess could undo the curse if she knew how. But she won't know how, not without getting some of the files we have on the race so she can learn. We raided their places of knowledge, so although we don't have the ability to use their abilities, we do have all the information used to train one of them. Dracula?"

"Yeah?"

"I need a moment to think. Let me be for a moment."

Dacron guided the Yili to the landing field and shadowed it from sight. He sat inside while Dracula got out and got in the jeep. Finally, he climbed out and closed the door behind him, sealing off the ship. He had no idea what he would do about the little princess, but he wouldn't mate her. He couldn't do that. Not again, never again.

Chapter Nineteen

When Dacron walked back in Trey's house, he knew his brother had been talking. Well, that was the reason he left him behind, to save him explaining so much. He wished they could speak telepathically like he had been told the shifters could. He cast a wary glance around the room at everyone gathered and tossed the link to Rimi to start everything. He expected Casey to begin demanding the calling mark be taken off her chest again, but what she asked took him by surprise.

"Is it true what Trey said? Did you tell him only a member of the royal family can break the curse?"

"The one on the shifters? Yes."

"And according to Rimi, you believe I am the princess of the race?"

"Well, I don't know that I would say the Princess. You could have sisters for all I know. Your people have bonded their warriors to wolves, and the warriors only protect the royal family so if your ancestors still live, then yes you would be a princess, not necessarily the Princess. But if you are the last of your line, you would be their Queen."

"My mother lives, my grandmother was killed a few centuries ago."

"No other?"

"No. Just the two of us. Are you going to tell me my mother is the Queen of the witches?"

"No, I am going to tell you she is the Queen of the Calian race, not that it will do her any good."

"My mother is weak in power. She has no golden wolf or warrior to guard her. If the warriors guard the royal family, shouldn't they be guarding her?"

"I don't know what changes your people could have introduced into your race once you fled your home." He stopped talking and pointed to the wall where the screen hung.

Rimi had the link in and was searching files in a haphazard method looking for the videos. “Let me go help him find the right files.”

Half an hour later, the only ones left in the room were him and Casey. The others had fled one by one after seeing the images on the screen. Gabby had been the first to escape, he could hear her puking as she ran.

“So many babies. How could they kill the babies?”

“Honey, your people started the war. That picture right there, that was your people’s work. Your race killed billions over the centuries. They didn’t miss a single race. They wanted to rule everyone, and if they couldn’t rule them, they wanted to destroy them.” Dacron switched to another image. What was on the screen sent a shock wave through him. He flipped to another image as quickly as possible, but he wasn’t fast enough.

“Wait. Go back.”

“No.”

“But, that was you. I mean, your hair was shorter, but it was you.”

Dacron got up and headed for the door, but she caught him before he reached it. She tried to jerk him around to face her, but he stood firm, so she moved in front of him. “That was you on the screen.”

“Leave it alone, Casey. I didn’t know that image existed. I certainly didn’t know it was in the files.”

“No. I want to know who you were holding. Who was in the picture, and why are you in the files?”

“Damn you! Leave it alone.”

“I won’t. You hate our race, but I never did anything to you. I helped keep your brother alive. But you want me dead, and I don’t deserve your hatred. I was born on this planet, not whatever planet you say we came from. This is my home, these are my friends and family.”

“And that was my son damn you. That little boy was my entire world. And your people killed him and laughed. Even then, we tried to find a compromise, a way to stop the killing. As the ambassador of our people, I had to stand in front of your Queen and ask for a compromise. Knowing your people killed my son, had she been willing I would have had to work with her to stop the war. But she laughed in my face, and I killed her. My soldiers and I ripped through that palace like it was made of paper. We didn’t leave a single person alive that day. Man, woman, and child, we killed them all. Even the babes in their cradles. You threaten me with your Golden Wolf, little girl I killed your Golden Warriors and spit on their bodies.”

“Oh my god. They killed your baby, so you killed theirs?”

“Yeah Princess, cause babies grow up. And we couldn’t afford to let your race live.”

“But we aren’t them.”

“How do you know you won’t become them?”

Casey shook her head, “Whatever our people might have been we aren’t now.”

“Explain that to your friends who are living under a Calian curse, why don’t you. Tell them your people are different now and you don’t destroy the innocent. Go ahead, Casey, tell them your people have changed.”

Casey staggered back from him in shock. “Every race has good and bad people. You can’t condemn an entire race for the actions of a few.”

“That wasn’t a few, a few did not scatter out among the stars and systematically destroy entire cultures and lives. That was a planned attack centuries in the making.”

“I am not like that. I would never hurt my friends. You don’t know me.”

“No? I may not know you, but I know your kind. You shelter one right now you should have killed already. You let him live though he cursed an entire race to die. Did you not see any of those images on the screen? If you let him live, you

are no better than the Queen who once ruled. You would let a criminal live and enjoy his life while the ones he cursed face extinction and you claim you are different? From where I stand Princess, your kind hasn't changed at all."

Dacron stormed from the room, and Casey heard the front door slam. She made her way to one of the couches on legs made of rubber and sat staring blindly into nothing. She didn't notice when Nathaniel came back in the room and sat beside her.

He cleared his throat, "He's right, you know. I knew my power, and I still turned it against people who had never hurt me. I still tried to destroy people who had never done me any wrong. My only punishment was to live without my little Merry for three centuries. Because of my anger, I cursed an entire race to extinction. I caused countless females to be kidnapped and sold into a bondage they can't escape from. Even away from our homeworld, I became the very thing they eradicated our race to prevent. Maybe he is right, and our race has more power than we can handle, and maybe he is wrong. But the one thing he got right, if you are the future leader of our race, if you are the one, and you let me live knowing my crime, you are no better than the Queen he once faced. Casey, I don't want to live without my Thomas. But I do want my nieces to live long and happy lives. If killing me will win him over and make him believe our race has a chance of redemption, my life is a small price to pay. I get the feeling after seeing some of those images that his people and this Coalition he speaks of would not hesitate to destroy this world if it meant ridding it of us."

Casey looked over to see a sad smile on his face. She cupped his cheek, "But Nathaniel, I'm not a killer. I talk big, but the only time I have killed is to protect myself, and even then it was the protections I surrounded myself with that killed, not me."

"I don't think it matters. He sees you as the Princess, and that makes you royalty. Royalty owns its people. Well, I mean not in this day and age but I can remember a time when they did in the not too distant past. So, order my death and make

him my executioner. I want it this way. Life without my Thomas, even if I have my nieces in my life, well it isn't the same. To satisfy him, to save our people, condemn me to die and let me go to my Thomas. Only you have to know that I choose this route; that I am asking for the easy way out. Far easier to leave this world behind than to live with what I have done. Then to watch Kate and Craig have children knowing the child will have none of the Golden Wolf protections. Knowing if the child is female danger will dodge her heels for her entire life. What I did in anger was wrong. But our race, our people shouldn't have to suffer for it. Rimi said the book trains the warriors down in power. Use it to train your warriors and use your warriors to police our people. Fix what I destroyed and send me home to Thomas."

"Wow, nothing like being asked to judge someone and find them guilty and condemn them to death all before noon. Sibeal will never go for it. Not after losing you for so many years. No one will listen to me or obey my authority because I don't have any."

"In his eyes, you apparently do. And for what we are trying to do the only one we need to worry about is the man who can call down death upon all of us."

"You think he will?"

Nathanial shook his head, "I don't know."

"Well, only one way to find out. I think it is time we went looking for our favorite ass hat."

"He isn't my ass hat. I don't wear his brand on my chest. Have you seen his ass? You could bounce a quarter off that ass. I would love to run my tongue up his back."

"Eww T.M.I. Seriously? The man wants you dead, and you want to lick him?"

"Have you seen his ass? Of course, I want to lick him. I may be getting ready to die, but I ain't dead yet."

"You can stop talking now."

Chapter Twenty

“You didn’t tell us the pictures would be so graphic.”

Dacron looked at the three men gathered under the garage. “I didn’t think I would have to. Do you think we would place an extinction order on a race because they served us the wrong food?”

“I thought you had pictures of their culture and their way of life, not the atrocities and the deaths.”

“See Rimi, this is why you missed so much in school. I said I had images of the carnage. Clearly, that meant the carnage.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. A lot of my decision will be determined by what the Princess does next.”

“Why do you call her the Princess and not Casey?”

“Because, you aren’t always one or the other, sometimes you are both, but sometimes you can only be one. For the decision I just put in her lap, she can only be the Princess. She can’t make the call as Casey. Now whether she will understand what she has to do and make the right decision, I can’t know. I don’t think she will, but she could surprise me.”

“What decision did you give her?”

“Now that brother is none of your concern.”

The four men turned at the sound of the door opening. Casey stepped outside and tilted her chin up. Drawing in a deep breath, she approached the men but never took her eyes from Dacron.

“I wish to know, you keep calling me Princess, why?”

“Because the Golden Wolf stood at your feet earlier.”

Casey nodded, “I thought maybe it meant something to you.”

“It does. It means that failing all else you are the rightful ruler of the race. That you have no planet to rule doesn’t make you less their leader. That your people don’t know you as their ruler doesn’t make you any less their leader. By birth, according to the position of the Golden Warrior, or Wolf, in this case, you are the Princess, and every bit of power your Warriors hold is to hold your rule. How your people have been doing it, I don’t know. How they will want to continue in the future, I don’t care. At this moment in time, the Golden Warrior has identified you as the one to protect.”

“So even if I don’t recognize my place as the ruler of my people you do?”

He nodded.

“So you would take a decision I made for my people as law?”

“Now you are pushing it a bit. You see, you don’t rule me so I can’t take your position as law for to do that would be to give you the authority to rule.”

“Now, I am confused. It doesn’t matter. I have considered what you said earlier, and you are right. To allow Nathaniel to live is to make me no better than the Queen you faced long ago. As the Princess, assuming my word is law over my people, whether anyone recognizes it or not, I have judged Nathaniel of attempted genocide and found him guilty. By his words did he curse a race to die and by my words do I sentence him to death. The only problem, we don’t have an executioner.”

A sudden gasp had everyone turning toward the door. Sibeal stood in the doorway, a look of shock on her face. “You can’t do that. You don’t rule us. We were born and raised on this planet, and we don’t have a royal house within our people. You can’t go around killing people. How dare you. Who do you think you are?” Sibeal approached Casey but before anyone could say anything, indeed before anyone could determine if Sibeal meant Casey harm the Golden Wolf phased through the wall to stand between Casey and Sibeal. “No!

Why would my daughter's wolf stand against me? And my wolf not even rise to protect me?"

Kate and Craig came running outside with Kate telling him. "I told you the wolf went to her again. Casey? Why is our wolf standing between you and my mum but facing mum?"

Craig looked around the garage. The four alien men and Casey all stood facing Sibeal with Casey being a few feet in front of the men. Between Casey and Sibeal stood his wolf, their wolf, guarding Casey.

"I know that no one will pay any attention to this at all, but I am going to try again. Apparently just to hear myself speak but why not. I don't have anything on my schedule for today. Alright, people listen up, the Golden Wolf is the apparent equivalent of a Golden Warrior. The Golden Warrior only ever guarded the Queen and her family. Most specifically, the Warriors guarded the Queen and the Princesses. So if you have a Golden Warrior, even in wolf form, then that Warrior will guard the member of the royal family until death. Whether that is the death of the Warrior or the death of the royal doesn't matter."

"She still has her mum. Angelica isn't dead. We don't have rulers but even if we did Angelica would outrank her."

"Does this Angelica have a Golden Wolf?" Dacron asked Casey.

"No. The golden ones are rare and well, rare. It has been hundreds and hundreds of years since the last one. My mom never had any kind of guard like that. The closest she ever came to a Golden Wolf was to be friends with Sibeal growing up."

A look of brief confusion crossed Dacron's face as he glanced over at Sibeal a moment. Casey tried to remember how much they had told him about the wolf, but so much information had been passed around in the last day she couldn't think if who Sibeal was had been part of that information dump or not. "Sibeal has a copper wolf and is the mother to the Golden Wolf. My mom and Sibeal were friends

growing up, and Sibeal's mom was the most powerful witch alive, until a week ago when Kate took her place.”

“That is interesting. So Sibeal was in place to guard your mother, the Queen, had events occurred to allow it?”

“That is not what she said. My mother would never have allowed anyone to override her authority, especially not someone as weak as Angelica.”

“You came from a line of warriors? Your line held the power?” Dacron snorted before pointing to the Golden Wolf. “Do you think that cares what anyone calls them self or how much power they have?”

“That isn't how it works with our people. The strongest lead and the weaker follow. It has always been so.”

Dacron blinked a couple of times before turning to look at his brother, “I almost want to apologize to you. I am beginning to see a pattern here. The younger generation only hears what suits them.” He looked back at Sibeal. “I know I am wasting my breath, but I am going to try this a-fucking-gain.” He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Your people are not from here. Your people could not have been on this planet for more than five thousand years. You can not use the argument that something has always been so when your people are relative newcomers to this planet. You can not say it has always been so when the only history you know of your people is the history you lived. I have history on your people dating back tens of thousands of years. You remember hundreds of years and think it history. Don't tell me it has always been this way when you have a warrior standing against you to protect your Princess. Because from where I stand the evidence contradicts your claim.”

“She isn't my Princess. I'm sorry Casey, you seem like a nice enough person and you have helped my family immensely and helped our people rid ourselves of my tyrant of a mother by helping my daughter and her mate figure out the golden book but—” She cut off what she was saying with a squeak as Dacron lunged for Casey.

Grabbing her arm, he swung her around, the murderous look back on his face, “You have the golden book?”

“Hey! Let go. Ow, you’re hurting me. Hey, why isn’t the wolf protecting me from you?”

He loosened his grip as he felt a small bump against his thigh, “For one, I am not hurting you. I may have startled you, but I am NOT hurting you. For two, the Warrior senses the mark, he won’t come between mates. The book? You have the book?”

“Let go of me.” Casey twisted her arm, trying to free it while reaching up with her other hand. With her index finger extended, she poked Dacron in the chest. “We are—” she gasped as heat raced through her body, She felt Dacron shudder as he also gasped. He released her so fast she almost fell as he tried to put distance between them. She stared at her finger in shock before turning her attention back to Dacron. “What was that? What did you do to me?”

Rimi turned his attention from Casey to his brother, one eyebrow cocked high, he watched the ripples race across his brother’s skin. He turned an incredulous look toward Dracula, but before he could say anything, his friend was shoving him and Talbort toward the door. “Show’s over people, come on move along. Inside everyone, inside.”

Kate drew back from his push, “Excuse me? Look here Sparkles, I am not going inside until I find out what’s going on.”

“Sparkles? Sparkles? Oh, now that is better than Box Man. Which one did she just name Sparkles? I just need to know so I can share with Gabby. Who in turn will share with her sister, who will share with her mate, who will share— hey hey, Alpha here, show some respect.” Trey had just stepped outside to find out why half his company had retired to the garage where it was cold but now was laughing so hard he could barely get the words out much less put up a defense against his friend’s shove. “Sparkles.”

Dracula growled at Trey and shoved harder, “Help me get everyone inside.”

“What’s the rush? Hey! You’re serious.” Trey took in the look on the three alien’s faces who were trying to push everyone inside. Dracula’s face held a hint of desperation. He looked out to see Dacron bent over, panting hard while Casey was on her knees moaning. Pushing out with every fiber of Alpha power he could he ordered everyone inside. Craig bowed under the power but picked Kate up, kicking and screaming and threatening bloody murder and hauled her inside, shoving her mother ahead of him. Once they were inside, Dracula pulled the door closed behind him and sank to the floor, his back against the door, arms wrapped around his knees, forehead resting on his knees. Rimi had a look of horror and shock on his face while Talbot’s face was blank of all expression.

Gabby looked at the three men, but they weren’t moving. She sent a questioning look toward Trey, but he was just as confused as she was. Kate was demanding answers but getting nothing in return. The men were clearly in shock and Trey had no clue how to help them. He half pushed Talbot and found the man was easily moved, so he directed Craig to guide him into the meeting room and get him seated. He repeated the process with Rimi, starting him in the right direction, and having one of the others push him along. Dracula was a different story. When Trey tried to pull him up the man lifted his head and shook Trey’s arm off before dropping his head back down.

“You’re scaring my mate. Come on, man, get up. Tell us what happened?”

“Gotta guard the door.”

“Consider it guarded. No one will come in or out. But I need to know why?” Trey raked his hand through his hair in frustration.

Dracula looked up, but Trey could tell he wasn’t seeing anyone with his glazed hundred-yard stare. “I have to guard the door.”

“Get your butt up, Sparkles, and tell us what is going on. You shoved us inside but left your brother and Casey outside.”

Craig walked back into the room with a furrowed brow. “They are just sitting there staring at nothing. Sibeal and Conall are trying to talk to them but,” he shrugged, “it’s like the lights are on, but no one is home anymore. Do you think you should call your doctor to stop by and give them a look?”

“No fucking clue, man. All Dracula will say is he has to guard the door. I can’t go through him to check on Casey and to tell you the truth, I don’t want to try. She’s a witch, and a princess and she has your wolf to guard her. How the fuck does your wolf leave you to guard her? How the fuck is your wolf even physically capable of doing whatever it is it is doing?”

“Seriously? You’re asking me? How should I know? It just does things, without consulting me I might add. I got mated, and the wolf and I aren’t exactly one anymore.”

“That has to suck.”

“Not really. I don’t know how to explain it, but it is like we are one but separate now. Sometimes I like it, most of the time, not really.”

“You never told me that. How can you not like it? I freaking love our wolf.”

Craig gave a sad smile, “Yeah, but you have never known anything but the wolf we share. I grew up with mine being the other half of myself, and now he isn’t exactly. If I look within myself right now, he isn’t there, and,” he paused and shook his head, “I feel kinda lost.”

Kate walked up to Craig and wrapped her arms around him. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

He snorted, “Why? What can you do?”

“Hello? I know that stuff is important, but Sparkles is moving, finally.”

“Gabby? I love you like a sister but don’t call me Sparkles. We are not the vampires of your stories, and we do not sparkle in the sunlight.”

Trey burst out laughing, “Since you are the one who started the vampire stories on this planet then yes, all the stories are a direct result of your stories, and since they are based on your race, you are the vampires of our stories.”

“Trey?”

“Yeah.”

“Get bent. Where are Rimi and Talbort? Has anyone seen them?”

“In the meeting room, where we were trying to lead you.”

“Good, we still have everything set up there, I need to dig into, no, we don’t have everything. Dammit, I need—” He shook his head and tilted his face toward the ceiling. “Maybe.”

“Look Sparkles, we don’t know what you need, we don’t know what is wrong, we can’t get the other two to talk to us and you left your brother and Casey outside to face whatever it is we ran from,” She glared at Craig, “whether we wanted to leave or not. I think we deserve some answers.”

“Do not call me Sparkles dammit.”

“Don’t encourage her man, the more you fight it, the more she will call you by that ridiculous name. Just give in, you can’t win.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, I can’t get there anyway. Nothing we can do at this point except wait.”

Kate closed her eyes, and they heard her mutter, “Just a little patience, we don’t kill our friends, we just need to have a little patience and don’t kill the allies.”

“So what is going on in my garage?”

Dracula shrugged, “Maybe nothing. I don’t know. We wait.”

“Well let’s wait in the meeting room.”

“Sorry Trey, the rest of you can go, but I have to guard the door. I will not leave this door unguarded. The garage door is closed, and no one will be opening it from outside, right?”

“No, but if it is so important, I can put out a pack call to stay away.”

“Please do so.”

“But you won’t tell me why?”

Dracula shook his head, “We wait.”

“You do realize I am the Alpha of this territory, this is my house, and that is my garage and Casey is my guest, right?”

“WE WAIT.”

“Fine, we wait. But if something happens to Casey, I will not easily forgive. The rest of you, yes Gabby darling, even you, go wait in the meeting room. That wasn’t a request, Kate.”

Kate glared at him before turning away, and Trey heard her huff as she walked out.

Chapter Twenty-one

Casey clutched her stomach as waves of heat raced through her body. She fell to her knees when her legs refused to hold her any longer. Her chest burned, her nipples tingled and heat pooled between her thighs. A rush of pleasure outweighed the pain for the briefest second before the mark on her chest doubled down on the heat. She screamed and tried to claw at her chest with one hand while the other braced against the concrete. She barely noticed when Dacron fell to his knees beside her. He jerked her hand away from her chest and with one hand on each arm held her, so she was facing him instead of the floor.

“Stop fighting Princess.”

“It hurts. It burns. What did you do? Please make it stop.”

“With your death?”

“Oh gods no, don’t kill me you ass hat.”

Dacron looked at her, tears streaming down her face, hands clenched into fists and wondered if she was worth saving. He cursed his brother for getting him involved. His eyes closed, and he moaned as pleasure flooded his body, followed by the intense pain.

Casey was trying to focus on his face, but the tears in her eyes blurred her vision. “What did you do to me?”

“You did it.” He felt his skin ripple as she moaned before screaming in agony.

“I. Did. Not. Do. This.” Her jaw ached as she struggled to communicate through clenched teeth.

“You touched the mark. What did I say about touching the mark.”

“I didn’t touch you.”

Dacron’s quick indrawn breath stopped his next comment, and it was a moment before he could recover. “You poked me

in the chest.”

“It was your fault. You weren’t listening. I was trying to get your attention.”

“Princess, you have had my attention since you strutted through the door of my ship.”

“I did not strut.”

“Yeah, you did, like you owned the ship. Just like a Calian.”

“What is happening?”

“The marks are calling to each other.”

“Make them stop.”

“With your death?” This time the note of hope was absent from his voice.

“No, ass hat. Yes, yes, oh gods, it hurts so.”

Dacron’s lips twitched in amusement before the next wave of agony hit. He was tempted, at that moment, to take her life. But he was bound by the Krauant he had taken as his own. He could not kill her with honor. He wasn’t sure he wanted to. She was a fierce fighter, she had sacrificed her time and health to save his brother’s life. Rimi has recounted the tale, Dracula had described the female, and having met her, he couldn’t help but wonder if she was worth saving. But it was probably just the mark twisting his logic. “Look at me. Quit fighting. Listen to me. Stop. Relax. I need you to stay with me here, Princess.”

“I am not a princess.”

Dacron shook her, “Look at me. Focus.”

“Holy hell, what is that?” Casey forgot the pain when she saw the ridge on his shoulders with some kind of spikes poking through his shirt. Rimi had been naked in her bed, in her cabin for days and she knew he didn’t have spikes.

“That’s it. Focus on something else. It won’t hurt so much if you stop fighting it.”

“Stop telling me to stop fighting. If you knew how much it hurts, you wouldn’t tell me to stop fighting.”

Dacron rolled his eyes, “In case you didn’t notice I have the matching mark. What hurts you, hurts me. And the more you fight, the more I hurt.”

“I don’t care. This is your fault.”

“Fine, blame me for you poking my chest. I don’t care. Pay attention. Do you want to live?”

“What kind of monkey-fuck question is that?”

“I am not going to pretend I even understand that, but I am guessing you are agreeing on wanting to live?”

“Yes, yes, I want to live.”

“You realize your life will have to change?”

“Will I quit hurting?”

Dacron’s lips twitched again, “Sure.”

“Then fine, make it quit.”

“Let me see your hand, not that one the other one. I need you to lift your shirt so I can see the mark.” While Casey did as he asked, he ripped his shirt open. When she had her mark bare, he placed her hand against his chest at the same moment, he rested his other hand against her mark. The orgasm hit them both at the same time. Their screams echoed through the small garage.

He didn’t know how much time passed before he regained consciousness to see her laying on the concrete beside him. Her legs twisted in an uncomfortable-looking arrangement. He closed his eyes as the enormity of what he had done struck him. He had answered her calling mark and forced her to answer his and in doing so bound his heart to hers. What had he done? He looked around with a sick feeling in his stomach, but he didn’t see anyone else. He looked down at his pants in distaste. He was going to need clean clothes. He picked her up and cradled her in his arms. As he headed for the door, he wondered if the black, heart-bonded mark he had worn for most of his life was still black or if the new mark had changed it. He had never known anyone to heart-bond again after the Calians destroyed their bond. With his arms full of his new

mate, he couldn't open the door, so he reached out with his foot and kicked it a few times. When Dracula opened the door and saw Casey hanging limply in his arms, his eyes widened. When he twisted her up so Dracula could see her back, the surprise turned to sorrow as Dracula turned on his heel and walked away, leaving him standing in the doorway.

"Is she dead?" Dacron swiveled his head to look at Trey, who was staring at Casey in horror.

"No. Although don't think that option did not occur to me, often. The option is still on the table by the way, if you want to lift your protection of her and take care of it for me."

"Are you insane?"

"According to Rimi, yes. But don't worry, he says if it were contagious, he would have caught it long ago. Although, now that I think about it, yeah it probably is cause the lot of them are completely insane. I did the only thing I could, in honor do. I mated my heart to hers."

"So, how does that work, exactly?" Trey gave a half-laugh, "It can't be like our mating, we would die to protect our mates not look for people to kill them."

Dacron laughed, "Yeah, well, we aren't exactly like that."

"Obviously. You might as well cover her up and bring her into the meeting room. Everyone else is already there. We have been waiting. We don't know for what because that is the sum total of what Dracula said, *now, we wait.*"

"Go ahead, I am right behind you. Wait, my hands are full, can you pull her shirt down for me? And Trey?"

"Yeah?"

"What is a monkey-fuck question?"

Trey snorted in laughter, "A monkey-fuck question?"

Dacron nodded.

"Hell, man, I don't know. Who said it?"

Dacron dropped his eyes to look at the woman cradled in his arms, dipping his chin down at the same time.

Trey's lips twitched with suppressed mirth before he shrugged. "No clue. A stupid question, maybe."

Chapter Twenty-two

“Wha..” Casey tried to sit up, but someone pushed her back. She looked up into the amused smirk of Dacron. “What did you do to me?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I do wish you would quit blaming your mistakes on me. I did nothing.”

She heard some muffled coughs and turned her head to find herself the center of attention in the meeting room. Her brow wrinkled as she lifted her hand and felt her chest. Sliding her hand under her shirt, she felt for the mark. A smile touched her lips as she realized the mark was gone, and her chest didn't burn. Before she could get too excited, she looked back at Dacron. The smirk on his face seemed positively evil. Her eyes narrowed as she asked again, “What did you do?”

“I? I didn't do anything except what you asked me to do.”

Casey racked her memories, and a blush flooded her face. “You bastard. What did you do.”

“Yeah, the rest of us are in the dark about what happened. We would like answers to that question. What did you do?” Trey asked.

Dacron gave one last look at his mate before his eyes widened. He realized he was in striking distance of her hands, and he had no idea how she would react to what he was about to say. He had remained crouched beside the couch after laying her down, so he helped her to sit up before putting some distance between them. Once he gaged he had enough people between him and his new mate, he started his explanation.

“Several thousand years ago our people had heart-bonded mates. Rimi and the others explained how the shifter mating works, the true-mates and the mate bond between couples not true-mated. Heart-bonded mates are not really connected like that. At least, I don't think so. A shifter, if I understand correctly, will do anything to keep their mate safe and they can find their mate no matter where the person goes. We don't

have that ability. But then again the ability to heart-bond mate ceased for us when the Calians got involved with our people. We didn't know it then, but they found our weakness and exploited it. They," he pointed to the three Reliants, "have never seen a true heart-bonded mate and probably thought them a myth. When a pair is heart-bonded, their hearts beat in sync with each other. They can feel what the other feels, they can smell what the other smells, and they can taste the other." He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. "I am trying to figure out how to explain that, Talbort assured me you can smell a lie, but not like we smell them. Emotions have a smell, he said your people have a similar way of knowing the emotions around you. More of a feeling though than ours. We can scent our mate with our tongue." His lips tightened, "Okay, see that look right there, you can get that look off your face, I don't mean taste them like that."

Craig laughed. "Then you are doing things wrong."

Kate hit him.

The tension in the room eased, and Dacron continued his explanation. "You see, once we had calling marks, what you saw on Casey's chest and on my own. The gods are a fickle bunch with a lousy sense of humor. Once you come in contact with your mate, you have very little time to claim them and gods help you if you ignore the call. I can't say we are like the shifters in that your true-mate completes you, but heart-mates are happy matings. Our people, once their heart-mate bond broke, chose to remain with their bonded mate even though they were free. If a member of the opposite sex touches the mark and they do not have the matching mark, they die. But if the one who holds the matching mark touches the mark, you have mere minutes to kill them or bond your heart to them. The only two ways to survive the heat of the mark. I suppose you could try to outlast the other, letting them die in agony and hope you survive. Because as soon as their last heartbeat fades, the mark disappears, and you are free."

"So why did Dracula shove all of us in the house?" Kate broke into his explanation to ask the question she most wanted an answer to at the moment.

This time it was Dacron who blushed. “During the bonding, the couple is vulnerable, and the male protects himself and his mate by bringing death to any around him.”

“So you’re telling me you would have killed your own brother if he had stayed.”

The grimace on his face answered Kate’s question.

“I thought that was a myth.”

“Well, I appreciate that you left anyway little brother because it was not a myth.”

“Well, you can thank Dracula for that because I probably would have stayed to see what happened.”

“Myth or not, I wasn’t taking any chances. The stories say when the spines rise flee, so we fled.” Dracula told him.

“What spines? How do we undo this? I don’t want to mate an alien who hates me. Wait, what do you do with those spines? They were sticking through your shirt. What is so bad about them?”

“The spines rise during a bonding. If movement from any but the female is tasted in the air, the spines fly out in an arc around the male taking out anyone around them. We don’t direct the spines, nor can we stop them. When they strike death soon follows. You want to undo the bond?”

“Yes. I don’t want to be mated to someone who hates me.”

Dacron turned to Trey. “You heard that; she gave me full permission to kill her.”

“What the hell! No, I didn’t. Are you insane?”

“Let me try this another way, Princess. The only two ways to break a heart-bond is by death and by Calian. And the last one only works if neither of the heart-mates is Calian. I have no intention of dying so if you want to break the bond, I can arrange to have you killed.”

“That’s heartless. Why would your kind mate to someone you don’t love?”

“Because love always follows the heart-mate calling. Sometimes it just takes a while.” A slow sensual smile formed on his face, “Let’s do a little experiment. Open your mouth and breathe in while thinking about me.”

Casey’s eyes darted around the room. Everyone’s attention was fixated on her mouth. She gave a nervous laugh. “No, that’s alright, I’ll pass.”

“Humor me.”

“Come on, Casey, do it and tell us what happens.” Kate urged.

“Fine. Whatever.” Casey glared at Dacron when she opened her mouth, drawing air in the glare turned to awe, and she stuck her tongue out as if she could lick the flavor from the air around her.

“Hey!! Careful. Stop that. Put your tongue back in your mouth. Are you insane?” The shouted words penetrated her daze, and she jerked her attention back to the room.

Dracula, Rimi, and Talbort had their faces buried in their hands, shoulders shaking as they tried to hold their laughter in. Dracula was the first to lose control, but Rimi was the one who fell from his chair onto the floor holding his stomach, tears streaking down his face. Dacron stared at them in disgust while the rest of the room stared at them in confusion.

When the men finally calmed down enough to talk, Trey turned to look at Dacron, but he wasn’t there. Looking back at Dracula, he asked, “Where did Dacron go?”

“Probably to the restroom after the stunt Casey pulled.”

The three started laughing again, and Rimi struggled to get the words out, “I would have microwaved a bag of popcorn if I had known that was going to happen.”

“Pretend the rest of us don’t know what happened,” Trey muttered.

Dracula pointed to Casey, “I think we said something about tasting your mate. True heart bond or not if you are in the

room with your mate, you can taste your mate in the air. Our Casey here just started foreplay with her mate.”

“WHAT? No, I didn’t. I just did what he told me to do.”

“Oh no, now I have to take up for Dacron on that one. He said, Open your mouth and breathe in while thinking about me. At no point did he say stick your tongue out and lick me in front of everyone.”

“You’re joking? But, the air tasted delicious. It was the most marvelous thing I have ever tasted.”

“And now you see why a couple will stay together if they don’t much care for each other in the beginning. Love always follows, always. But until love,” Dacron winked as he walked back into the room.

“See, I told you I bet he tasted delicious.” Nathaniel looked at Casey in envy.

Dacron grinned at the man and winked. “And she only tasted the air.” He turned to Casey, his voice firm, “Do not do that again unless you want me to return the favor.”

“So, what happens now?” Craig asked him.

“That is something Casey, and I will have to work out between us.”

“Considering our wolf is her protector, I think the outcome concerns my mate and me just as much as it does you and Casey.”

“You might be right. But for now, my only concern is myself and my mate. Trey, would you take us to the landing field?”

“Excuse me? You do not order me around. You ask if I want to go.”

“Actually, I wasn’t ordering you around, nor was I inviting you. If you would like to go, I will let you. If you want to know more about what the future holds for you, I will be more than happy to tell you what I know. But for right now I want to get back to Dracula’s and get a shower and a change of clothing.” Dacron shrugged, “Come, don’t come, it doesn’t

matter to me yet. My chest no longer burns, and I actually know what happens to heart-bonded mates.”

“Holy shit, ow, Kate I swear if you don’t stop hitting me. It slipped out. You can’t blame me.”

“Except for the wording used I have to say I am in agreement with my mate on this. That was a horrible thing to say to Casey.”

Dacron turned to look at Kate, “I don’t actually care, yet. I added the yet. Look, I am bonded to someone I can’t take home, and I can’t kill. I know what will eventually happen, but that doesn’t mean I am happy about what is going on right now. Not that it is any of your business, no maybe it is. Most of the people in this room have an extinction command hanging over their heads, and I have an oath to carry it out. That I haven’t is because Trey once saved my brother’s life and all of you are in his house under his protection. Stop provoking me.”

“You are still an ass hat,” Casey muttered as she headed for the door. She swiveled around to stare at Dacron, “If I go with you, do you swear not to harm me or allow anyone else to harm me?”

His lips pinched together before he gave one clipped nod. “On my honor.”

Casey looked at Rimi, who nodded his head.

“Fine. Your brother has vouched for you. I will go with you, and you will explain everything to me in detail. I will get my things.”

Once she was out of hearing, Dracula turned to Dacron, “Do you think that’s wise?”

“Will you kill her for me?”

“No.”

“Then it seems I don’t have a choice, do I? Don’t worry. A heart-bond created from a heart calling isn’t anything like what you have. Love will follow. I may have regrets now, but I won’t always. Unless someone volunteers to break the bond.”

“We are not killing Casey. No one is killing Casey.” Trey’s exasperated voice broke in.

“You can’t blame me for trying.”

Casey’s scream cut through the house, and everyone took off running toward her room except the four Reliants.

“What do you want to bet she caught sight of her back?” Dracula asked.

Talbort shook his head. “No bet from me. I don’t think she is pleased.”

“What happens if someone of the opposite sex touches that mark? Are the stories about that true?”

Dacron gave an evil laugh, “Oh yeah, completely true Dracula, completely true.”

“Don’t you think you should warn them?”

Just then the air was flooded with cursing.

“No, I think they figured it out.”

Trey came back in the room, shaking his hand. “You are a complete asshole.”

Dacron smiled, “Yes, I know. So are you ready to take us back now?”

Without waiting for an answer, he headed for the door, the others trailing behind.

Chapter Twenty-three

Casey was pacing while Dacron watched her with wary eyes. The others had retired to the rec room when they got to Dracula's while he and Casey had settled in the living room to talk. "I can't believe you didn't warn me, warn anyone. Did you know it would hurt if another man touched the mark on my back? You had to have known. You are just full of surprises, aren't you? Why did you do it? You hate me. Why did you bond to me?"

"I don't hate you. I hate what the past has taught me of your race. I hate what has happened in my life and to my people because of your kind. I hate the losses and the pain your people caused. But I am trying hard to remember you were not part of that past. Do I want to be mated to you? Casey, I am going, to be honest with you. Sit down. Please." He waited while she considered her options and finally sat in the chair opposite of him. "We don't have true heart-bonded mates anymore. Not that I'm aware of I should say. But in my lifetime, I have known many. I had one."

Casey waited for him to continue, and waited, but he was staring into a past she couldn't see. She cleared her throat and watched him shake himself.

"I won't lie and tell you I am happy about this, but I can't lie and say a part of me isn't happy. You see, I don't know what your shifter friends' bonds are like, but I know what one of ours is like. They say for a shifter it is a sudden bond, they mate, and it is like they have the other half of themselves. But our bond is different. It pulls at you and tangles you up until you don't want to let go. It grows over time and gets stronger till you don't know where you end and the other person starts. If you are sad, I will know from half a world away. Do you know how it feels to have someone who always knows when to say a kind word to you? If you are happy that joy is magnified through the bond. You can be across town, and something happens that brings you joy, and your mate is

flooded with joy with you. Come here a minute, let me show you something, turn around.” Dacron gritted his teeth as he reached for her back. He braced himself as he slid his hand under her shirt, seeking the mark. When his fingers grazed it, they both moaned. He felt himself harden and smelled her desire. He slid his hand out as she turned. He watched as she struggled to get her breathing under control.

“Is it always like that?”

“Yes. For as long as you wear that mark your desire is mine, and my desire is yours and the mark, well it is the focal point.”

“So let me get this straight, I lick the air, and I am licking you, you touch my mark and turn me to jello?”

“I’m not sure what jello is but if you mean does it open your desire for me then yes. The mark is highly sensitive to the touch of the mate.” He narrowed his eyes as he saw her open her mouth and poke her tongue out. He moaned as she drew air in over her tongue. “Stop it unless you want me to retaliate.”

“Wait. You can mess with my mark and the air? That isn’t fair.”

“I don’t understand where fair comes into this. What you can do, I can do, and the reverse is true.”

“Turn around. I want to see.”

“I do not lie Casey.”

“So turn around.”

Dacron shifted on the couch until his body was positioned where she could reach the mark. As her hand slid under his shirt, he drew in a sharp breath and braced himself. He found out he shouldn’t have bothered. He had forgotten how sensitive the mark was as his body hardened to the point of pain. Instead of removing her hand, Casey seemed to have gotten stuck in the pleasure. He shifted away, finally leaning forward away from her fingers. “You are killing me with pleasure little one. Have mercy.”

“It feels so good. I don’t understand. How can you hate me but feel so good and taste so good?”

“What kind of monkey-fuck question is that?”

“You have no idea what that means, do you?”

“No, but I thought it might get you to stop tasting me through the air.”

“It means crazy. And the question wasn’t crazy. I dreamed most of my life of having someone to love me beyond all else. To treasure me and well, love me. It is kind of heartbreaking to know I can’t have that.”

Dacron let out a huff of air, “Look at me. No, look at me. I can’t give you the instant bond I understand shifters have. We aren’t shifters. But I gave up my entire world for you. I don’t particularly like you at the moment, but I know that over time, I will love you beyond all else. I can never take you home to my world for fear someone would see you. If I take you home, I have to sneak you in and keep you hidden and hope no one who remembers the past ever sees you. But we can’t stay, the risk would be too great.”

“I could stay here while you go home. I mean if it takes time for the bond to grow, it doesn’t matter if you are here or there.”

Dacron looked down at the floor before dragging his head back up. “No Casey, In Trey’s garage, when I made the decision to let you live, when I accepted the bond, I made the decision to give up my world for what the bond would bring me. I can’t leave for the same reason Dracula can’t leave the planet. Our hearts beat with the same rhythm, and they can’t live too far apart. I could live around the world from you, and my mark would be content to stay that close. But I can’t travel the stars without you. I can’t get that far for that long. It’s funny when you think about it. Shifters can follow their nose or whatever to find their mate half a world away but as long as our marks are on the same world, we won’t suffer even if we never see each other again. But the love won’t grow, the heart will ache, not terribly but it will ache, and you will never again have sex with anyone. Not as long as I live. And I will tell you

this right now, if you make the choice for us to live apart and never see each other again, I will kill you. I don't plan on living thousands of years without sex. How Dracula isn't insane, more insane is beyond me. I don't love you, I don't treasure you, I don't know you. But if you want that, then you have to be willing to try to make this work. After a certain time, you won't be trying anymore, you will wake up one day and realize the air is better if I am in the room. The room tastes sweeter if I am around, and you will realize that there is no place you would rather be than in my arms. I am not conceited or arrogant when I tell you this, I am speaking from experience. Did I want this? No. Would I lightly give it up? No."

"I would believe that easier if you quit asking people to kill me for you or let you kill me."

Dacron shrugged, "It is easy to ask for something you don't want when you know everyone will say no."

"You are an asshole."

"I know. But do you know the best part? One day you will be completely in love with this ass hole. Unless you choose not to try. In which case, I don't have anything to lose, and I really will kill you."

"This constant wish to kill me doesn't endear me to you."

He winked, "You did say I am an ass hole. I would hate to not meet your expectations on that."

"So if I kill you, I go free?"

"Sure, if you think you could survive the rage my brother would feel. Of course, even if you managed to take out all four of us to be free of me, you wouldn't survive past Dominick finding out about you. And the gods could never help you if Mela got her hands on you for killing Dracula. I mean, you could kill me, but you wouldn't live long enough to enjoy being free of me. If you just want to die, I can make that happen with fewer casualties. And then there is the fact Dominick would go looking for evidence of what happened to the four of us. He would get on Dracula's ship looking for

clues. He would see the files I pulled. He would find out Calians are on this planet. He would realize our deaths were probably caused by your kind and he wouldn't bother coming to look for the killer. He would take the information straight to the Coalition. The Coalition would put together a war party of every race harmed by the Calians, and within a few months, this planet wouldn't exist anymore. I don't think, after the past, the Coalition would hesitate to destroy an uncivilized planet to wipe out your race. So by all means, if your desire to be free of me means so much you are willing to kill the entire world to gain a few months of freedom, be my guest. I don't guarantee I will die easily, though."

"Dacron?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

Dracula looked up from the computer when Casey walked into the room. “Are you alright?”

“No. No, I am not alright. But Dacron tells me if I am willing to work on this with him, I will be happy one day.” She furrowed her brows in thought, “He failed to mention how long it would take. So how long?”

“How long what?”

“Before we have this great and powerful love, he claims will eventually happen.”

Dracula looked sideways at Talbort before looking back at Casey. “We don’t know. We are too young to have ever seen a heart-calling mark. I remember reading about it but,” he snorted, “who would believe something like that. Who would choose to be tied to one person for life.” Bitterness oozed from him so heavy in the air Casey could smell it. He turned his attention back to the computer.

Casey bit her bottom lip as she struggled to find the right words. She had overheard the men talking as she came down the hall. They thought she should be able to do something for them, but without training, they didn’t know how she would manage.

“You know what? Stop. Everyone just stop what they are doing. Dacron told me we have two options to end this bond. He can kill me, or I can kill everyone here and be free for however long it took the others to find out and destroy the planet. Since I am not really feeling killing an entire civilization for a few months of freedom, I have decided to go for it. But the three of you have been noticeably cooler toward me since Dacron shared so much of the past. Losing three friends because of something that happened before any of us were born is insane. Now, if you want to keep up this cool attitude toward me, I can send a bit of heat your way to warm you up.”

Dacron walked in the room just as Rimi was running out. “Where are you going?”

“To grab a fire extinguisher, Casey is a tiny bit upset.”

Dacron turned to look at his mate. “Seriously?”

“What? They are assholes to me. I feel like I am losing three friends because of something that happened before I was born, and I don’t think it is right or fair. I am not saying what happened in the past is right, or that I should make light of it, but it was not my fault. I wasn’t there. You wanna know what I think? You said many of the Calians mated to your people. They offered to sacrifice their love to save their mates, to save friends and family. So you know what that tells me? Not every one of those people was bad people. You condemned an entire race to death, even those mated to your own people. But if the love was so great, I am betting those mates would have gladly turned away from their own kind to save your people. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“If I thought you were wrong, if I thought no Calian could be good, I would have killed you.”

“Well, then why don’t you tell these jerks that?”

He shrugged, “I shouldn’t have to, they are part of the reason I accepted you could be worth having in my life.”

“Excuse me? I could be worth having? What gives you the right to determine my worth?”

Dacron turned a confused look toward Dracula. “Do you ever actually win with this one? She does realize I am on her side in this argument, right?”

Dracula eyes wide shrugged, “Hey man, don’t bring me in the middle of your domestic dispute.”

Dacron raked his hands through his hair and closed his eyes. “I forgot just how difficult mates can be.”

“How difficult mates could be? You do realize you are now one of those mates, right? And I have to agree with you mates are difficult. You are an arrogant, egotistical asshole.”

Looking at her with narrowed eyes, he smirked, “I know.” He winked before he turned around to leave.

“LOOK OUT!” Talbort yelled.

Rimi stared in shock and shook his head as he pointed the fire extinguisher where moments before Dacron had stood. Casey stared at the spot in disbelief. Then she looked around the room in confusion. The others just shook their heads and looked as baffled as her.

“Where did he go?” She started to ask, but it changed to a scream as she was grabbed from behind, arms held tightly to her body. She kicked her feet and threw her head back, trying to knock her attacker in the face. “Let me go you bastard.”

“Oh, did I forget to mention? I can walk the paths. How do you think I took your Queen and her Golden?” he snarled, “Never throw your fireballs at me.”

Casey froze.

The others started demanding to know what he had done and how he moved so fast, but he didn't stop walking, nor did he let go of Casey.

“Hey, where are you taking her?”

“To talk.”

The men heard the back door slam. “Damn Rimi, I would hate to get on your brother's bad side. What the hell does it mean to *walk the paths*?”

“I have no idea. But I want one.”

“One what? What the hell are you talking about?”

“That is some serious technology there. Hold on. If he has the technology to disappear like that, why didn't we get it when we went through training?”

“Rimi? I don't think that is technology. I think your brother has been keeping secrets from us. I mean more than we knew. I don't think they will be back anytime soon. Come on, help me look for something that will teach Casey how to break our bonds so we can go home and leave that she-demon here. They have everything from crop rotation to descriptions of the Golden Warriors; they have to have something in here about the bond breaking. I mean, that was some serious shit, they have to have something on it.”

The three men gathered around the computer. If there was an air of desperation to their search, no one knowing their story could have blamed them.

Chapter Twenty-five

“Put me down. I don’t want to go with you.”

“Even if I promise to show you the most amazing sight you have ever seen in your life?”

“Oh my god, your ego.”

Dacron’s lips twitched, “I wasn’t talking about seeing me naked, but nice to know your mind went there.”

“Oh, you ass. Where are you taking me?”

“How would you like to see the back side of the moon? After seeing Earth from space?”

Casey stopped struggling. “You are going to take me to space?”

“If you would like to go. I don’t think our conversations need an audience, and I can’t think of any place more private than the silence of space.” He put her on her feet and spun her around then he offered his hand, “Would you like to go for a ride, Princess?”

“Are you going to toss me out of the airlock and swear it was an accident?”

“Are you going to shoot fireballs at me? I have to tell you I don’t know if Dracula’s ship is up to code on fire suppression, it is a couple of thousand years old. It should have been scrapped centuries ago. In space, there is nowhere to run if you can’t control your temper.”

She took his hand, “You didn’t answer my question.”

He gave a long-suffering sigh, “It is definitely a trait of the young.” He tugged her forward as he opened the ship.

“What is?”

“Not listening. I told you I would not kill you. Tossing you out of an airlock would certainly kill you, unless you know how to survive in the vacuum of space, and that was never an ability your people had.”

He fastened the belts to hold her in the seat beside him, and moments later, she was staring in awe at Earth from two hundred miles up. "It's beautiful."

"Most planets are. It's only when you get to the surface that you see the turmoil and hate, the waste and devastation of an uncivilized race. If my people find out the Calians are refugees on that planet the devastation the natives have done to the surface will be nothing to what the Coalition will do."

"You hate them so much how can you think you will ever love me? You have so much hate and bitterness inside you. I don't see how it can ever be anything else. Every time you say the word Calian, you have such a wealth of hate in your voice such as I have never experienced."

Casey stared at him, waiting for an answer, but he was staring down at the planet and didn't answer. Just as she gave up on getting an answer, he started talking.

"I had a mate once. She was the most incredible being the gods ever created until she gifted me with a son. So tiny and fragile, born early we thought he wouldn't make it through the first day. And her smile when I lay him in her arms the first time. No more beautiful sight could ever exist than to see your mate holding the child you made together."

"What happened to her?"

His lips twisted and Casey saw the tear trickle down his cheek, "The Calians hated children born of mixed parents more than they hated any other race. They wanted to keep their blood pure. They saw a mixed child as an abomination. Nothing could bring their wrath down like seeing a mixed child."

"You called the wolf that, an abomination. Does your kind hate mixed children also?"

"I was furious to see a Golden Wolf. That wolf could only be alive if royalty let it live; if royalty approved a mixed child. I was furious."

"But why? I don't understand."

“Princess, if your Queen of old had approved of mixed children I would still have a son. I would have taken my family and run so far, no one would have ever seen us again. I know there are good Calians out there because my mate was one. It broke my heart all over again to see a mixed Calian child and to know that child is safe. A mixed Golden Warrior, alive and treasured was like having my heart ripped from my chest.”

“I still don’t understand. Why didn’t you run then? I mean, if your mate was alive and war loomed why didn’t you take her and run?”

“Her family came to the death ceremony. They didn’t know I had learned to walk the paths. I listened as they bragged of killing my son. I heard them talking of stripping the bond from us. My mate was with them when they bragged of the atrocities they committed.”

“But you said they couldn’t take the bond from a Calian mated pair.”

“They didn’t take her mark. They took her heart, and I took her life. I thought she was in on it. I struck her first. I couldn’t stand the pain. It blinded me to the truth. They laughed at me as they had been laughing at her. Not with her as I thought. We were both in such pain. She couldn’t defend herself from their attack, and I hurt too much to see the truth. Casey, I wouldn’t kill you. I would never kill you, but I don’t deserve what you can bring to my life. The pain was more than any person should ever have to live with, and I didn’t do a very good job of living, but I did an excellent job of killing. My people sent me because they knew I had managed the paths, and no one else stood a better chance of getting to the Queen than me. No one stood a better chance of destroying the royal line than me. And no one had a better reason to destroy the palace than I did. And thanks to my mate having grown up in the palace, no one knew the palace better than me. The order to kill my son came from the Queen herself. I will not apologize for what I have done in my life. But I gave up my entire world because I know how powerful the love between mates can become. I have lived five thousand years with the pain of my loss. I can

be bitter and angry. I hurt. It still hurts. It never stops hurting. I didn't want to mate you because I never want to live with the pain of losing a mate again. I certainly didn't want to mate with someone who I will have to hide for the rest of our very long lives. But I won't willingly give up the chance for that kind of bond. I don't love you, yet. If someone kills you, I won't mourn you, yet. I might even thank them. But I am asking you to give us a chance. Give me a chance." He turned to look at her and held up his hand, "Hold on, I'm not done. You get upset when I say things about someone killing you. I get that, but look at me and tell me if someone killed me tomorrow you would mourn my loss."

"I can't. I guess, maybe if I had lived your life, I wouldn't want a mate. I don't know. I have never had the kind of love you had. But, I want it more than anything in the world. However, you really have to stop asking people to kill me as a favor to you."

"I can't make any promises."

"You are an ass."

"I know, my mate tells me that same thing, often."

Casey shook her head. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Well, now that you mention it."

"No, not until you are not an ass anymore."

Dacron blinked a couple of times. "So, no sex ever? That is no way to be. You haven't even tried sex with me yet."

"I don't understand why no one has killed you yet."

"They tried. Does that count?"

"So, you don't plan on changing?"

"No, why should I, in case you didn't notice I managed to get a mate just the way I am."

Casey rubbed her index fingers against her temples, "As I recall your mate got stuck with you, she did not choose you."

His lips twitched as he watched her frustration. "Seems I promised you a trip to the moon. Are you ready to fly to the

moon with your mate?”

“Do I have a choice?”

He gave it some thought, “Well, not unless you can walk to the moon. I can let you out here if you’ve changed your mind.”

“No, best take me with you. From what I heard, my mate plans on keeping me around a while longer, and apparently, I am a sucker for punishment.”

“Oh really, now that sounds exciting.”

“Do you ever stop?”

“I can if I am bothering you. Beautiful weather we are having today.”

“Fine, be your asshole self. I am not talking about the non-existent weather we are having up here.”

“Hold on. If you thought this ship could move coming up here, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

“What are you-” Casey’s scream echoed through the small ship as Dacron turned it toward the moon and took off.

Chapter Twenty-six

“Do you think he killed her?”

“You ask me that every day and every day I tell you the same thing. I don’t know. I mean, he said he wouldn’t, but then again they have been gone for a month.” Dracula gritted his teeth before turning back to the computer. “I wish my sister would come back. I didn’t realize how much I missed having a ship at my beck and call until your brother took off.”

“Here, get up. We are going to take a drive, go to the beach, go to the mountains something. We have gone through file after file every day, and we still haven’t found anything.” Talbort’s foot shot out, and he forcibly shoved Dracula’s chair away from the computer.

“We found something.” Rimi’s voice rang with bitterness.

His two friends shared a look of pity and tried to direct Rimi’s attention elsewhere. He had been furious when they found the file about the ambassador’s role in the war. Dacron had told them he was the one to kill the royal family, but he left a few details out. He left out his former Calian mate, her death at his hands, the son killed before Rimi was born. So much of Dacron’s previous life was in those files, and the men were certain the man had no idea. They had been going through the data for a month and still had so many records they hadn’t gotten to yet. They wavered between hope and despair that they would find a clue to breaking a bond, but so far their search hadn’t turned up anything. They called daily, and everyone fretted about the couple who disappeared a month before. Kate had come to call, and life had gotten ugly for a while. She wanted to know more about her people, and if her wolf was going to disappear if something happened to Casey. The only person who could answer their questions wasn’t around, and no one knew when, or if he would be back. They hadn’t told a soul that Dacron had killed one mate already. The file didn’t have the details of what happened but

knowing he had killed before gave them no confidence Casey was still alive. All they could do was wait.

Chapter Twenty-seven

“We should head back today.”

Casey giggled. “That’s what you said yesterday.”

“Yes, well, they must think we are never returning by now. We really should head back.”

Casey had gone looking for Dacron when she woke up and finally found him in the cargo hold checking over the ship they flew up on. She walked up behind him and slid her tongue from her mouth. Breathing in, she watched his back. His heart mark pulsed with color except for the thick black outline surrounding the mark. She remembered how his face looked when he realized the evidence of what he had done would always be on his back. He had looked so broken that her heart had stuttered in her chest and if she had to say when she realized she wanted him in her life, it would have been that moment in time.

He shivered before whirling around. Dragging her to him he brought her into his arms, sliding one hand up her back, he stroked her mark. Leaning down, he kissed her. She had been shocked to find his race didn’t kiss. Kissing was apparently a human thing. He had taken to kissing like a duck to water, and her toes curled when he slid his tongue inside her mouth. If breathing in the air around him tasted divine, it paled in comparison to sliding their tongues against each other. She moaned as heat swirled through her body to pool between her legs. Her voice was husky with desire as she begged him.

“One more day. We can stay one more day.”

“Casey, love, we are out of food. We can’t stay. Behave and pack so we can return to the surface.”

“Pack what? You brought me up here with nothing.”

“And you look good with nothing on. But we should at least get dressed in the clothing we wore up here don’t you think?”

Casey looked down and blushed. “Oh, yeah. Perhaps we should get dressed. After.”

“No, no after. Please.”

“Fine. But you owe me.”

“For what? Trying to keep you alive by returning to the place where we can get food? Casey, love, listen to me. We are out of food. We have to go back. Your blood could give me the nutrients I need to stay alive for some time to come, but you have to have food to produce that blood. Reliants only eat food because, well, it tastes good and it provides some small bit of nutrients. Besides, didn’t you promise me we could make love under the stars in front of your cabin? You said you have always wanted to do that. I am trying to make your dreams come true.”

“It is still winter there. We can’t make love outside we will freeze.”

“Well, I can keep you inside where it is warm until the weather is nice enough to go outside. Now, seriously honey, stop that. Get dressed.”

“Or what?”

He reached for her ribs, and she gave a half scream and ran for the door. “That is not fair.”

He watched her run away and laughed. She had taught him to kiss, but he had found out about tickling on his own. Seems his mate had some human in her after all. Who would have guessed five thousand years ago that the royalty of a race who arbored mixed children would one day be mixed? He wished the old Queen could see the beauty of the one who now stood in her place. He laughed as he got the ship ready to return to the planet. He had work to do. He hadn’t forgotten his brother’s dilemma and the need to break that bond and free the three men stuck down on the planet below. If he was going to stick around the planet for very long, he needed to help the shifters recover from what the Calians had done. He needed to figure out what he was going to tell Dominick when his

Enforcer returned with the other Hunters. He didn't have much time before that happened and he wanted to be ready.

Casey bounced into the small cabin, and he put everything to the back of his mind as he strapped his mate in for the trip back to her planet and probably where he would spend the rest of his life.

Epilogue

Rimi was the first to hear the couple when they returned. He turned his head toward Talbort. “Did you hear that?”

Talbort looked up from the computer and cocked his head. “Is that Casey?”

All three men were staring toward the door when Dacron walked into the room, dragging Casey behind him. Rimi looked at them, their clasped hands, the smiles on their faces, and snarled. “I see you didn’t kill this one like you killed the last one.”

As the laughter fled from their faces, Casey felt her mate tense and tasted his pain. She turned on Rimi in a fury, eyes blazing. “How dare you. He told you he wouldn’t kill me. Do you doubt your brother’s honor?”

“I do when I have seen the evidence of his dishonor.”

Shaking loose from Casey Dacron turned around and left the room, leaving the three men staring. Casey could feel his pain as it ripped through her. She had spent the first two weeks on the ship learning about her mate and the last two falling in love with him. By the time she felt the emotions he had sworn she would one day feel most of the discussions concerning the past had been laid to rest, so she hadn’t encountered shared pain before now. She clenched her stomach as wave after wave of pain shattered her soul. With a choked cry, she fled in search of her mate. She had to do something to ease his pain. His explanation of how the pain rebounded between the two didn’t do justice to the emotions flooding her system. She hadn’t thought they would ever be sad again, not after the way the last two weeks had gone. As she went after her mate, she heard Rimi speaking to the others.

“I don’t think she knows what he did. She wouldn’t run after him if she knew the truth.”

“Rimi?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up. I’m pretty sure the bond they have is complete, and if that’s true, she won’t care what he did in the past. I told you, we don’t have the full story. I said we should wait and ask him what happened, but you had to let your hurt get the better of you.”

“We don’t have to ask Drac, we saw the reports. We saw the pictures. What more evidence do you want?”

“Let me put it a simpler way. You need to go find your brother and his mate and apologize and beg his forgiveness because you ran off the only two people who might have a chance of getting us back home.”

“I’m not sure I want to go home. Not if our race is full of men who went around killing their mates. He was the fucking ambassador to the Calian race, and he killed his mate because she was one of them. That is not honorable, and we don’t know what he has planned for Casey, but I can’t see trusting him not to kill her also.”

Dacron and Casey walked back in the room. “What was it you told me about understanding if I knew the truth? Seems that is fine for you, but you condemn me without question.”

“You owe your brother an apology. Not because he taught me to break your bond so you can leave the planet but because he is your brother and he deserves better than the welcome you just gave him. You have no idea what happened back then. All you have are reports and the history as told by the winners of the war.”

“Wait, you can break my bond?”

Casey shrugged her lips twisted into a snarl, “I can. But I won’t. Not if that is how Rimi is going to treat my mate.”

“He is my brother, and I think I am entitled to treat him how I want after what I found out.”

“No, he is my mate before all else and if I know the truth and understand what happened and I don’t hate him for the mistakes and choices he made you damn sure have no right to hate him.”

“Shh, love, he is hurt.” Dacron pulled her closer and stroked her back through her shirt. A slight shiver raced down her spine, but the cloth kept her from feeling the full effects of his touch.

“I don’t give a monkey fuck, that doesn’t give him the right to cause us pain.”

Talbort, who had been quiet until now interrupted Casey to ask, “What did happen? All we have are pictures and reports, and I have to admit I felt concern when we found the file on your part in the war.”

“What file?”

“You didn’t know? There is an entire file devoted to you and your part in the war. From the loss of your son to the murder of your wife at your hands to the death of the Royal House of Calian.”

“No,” Dacron tensed his shoulders, “I had no idea. I guess I should have expected it after seeing the picture of me holding Gileus, but I put that part of my life in the past. Until I laid eyes on Casey, I thought to never see those files again. The war was brutal, and the casualties were unbelievable. Those of us who fought and later collected the information we could, never looked at the reports after making them. We never wanted to revisit the pain. There were so many of us gathering information and creating those files that no one person could have seen everything in them. I mean, we could have if we had spent months or years studying them, but no one who lost so much ever wanted to see anything on the race again. Not even those of us who mated into the race.”

This time it was Casey who stroked Dacron’s back as she leaned into him.

Rimi stared at his brother for a moment longer before he asked, “Is it true? Did you kill your heart-bonded mate because she was Calian?”

“No. I loved her despite what she was. I didn’t care what she was when we fell in love, and I didn’t care what she was at the end. When we mated, we thought our two races friends and

allies. She came from the Royal House, but she was a lesser member of the family in importance. I mated her because we had the mark. Our relationship had the full approval of both races, we thought. But the Queen was good at manipulation, and when the time was right, she ordered the death of our son, her nephew. Then they played the grieving father against the grieving mother and—” he paused as he looked at the floor.

Casey had learned that look in their first week together. He was reliving the past, and he wouldn't be back without some prompting. Instead of shaking him or trying to get his attention, she took up his story. “They set it up to look as though his mate killed their son. They set her up to look like she was involved in destroying the heart-bondings. That one overheard conversation is how the Reliants found out what had happened to their bonds. He struck against his mate in pain, the loss of a child is soul-shattering, and they were both so hurt, and the pain just continued to rebound between the two that he didn't, couldn't feel her pain. He thought his so great that her pain had to be a mockery. As his blade ended her life, her family laughed at him. The Queen wanted the child dead, she didn't want a mixed child in the Royal line. She ordered the child's death, and she ordered the bond broken. Dacron only heard part of the conversation, but it was enough to blind him to the truth. I bet your report doesn't mention how he held his son in his arms as he breathed his last breath. How days later, after having killed his mate, his government ordered him to undertake the task of requesting the Queen work with the others to end the horrific acts. He had to stand in front of the woman who had his son killed and caused the death of his mate and attempt to compromise. She laughed at him, and he destroyed her. Before you judge him, you find out the truth.”

“I'm his brother, how do you think it makes me feel to know he never told me?”

“What would you have him say? Do you know how he describes the pain? He says the pain of losing a child is so great that no language ever spoken can describe the loss. He says the loss of a true heart-bonded mate is probably as bad, but he can't know since they both happened so close together the pain didn't end. He relives the horror in his dreams at

night. He cries out for a son he never got to see grow up. He freezes up and relives the past when he talks of it, so he doesn't talk of it. I know, because he didn't think, without that information, I would be willing to give him, to give us a chance. He was probably right, I have found over the last month he is frequently right about many things." She gently shook her mate's arm as she turned to lead him back to the room he was staying in before they left. He was so sarcastic and biting cruel that to see him like this was heartbreaking. But she knew how to get his mind focused on the present and the future that waited for them. She slid her hand up his shirt as they walked, but the time they reached the bedroom, he was laughing between moans as he fought to get her hand out of his shirt. It was hours before the two felt like meeting with the others and she really hoped, as they went in search of food and family, that the men had used the time to think.

They found the men in the rec room, and after looking around, she wondered how often they left. "This place is a dump, have you been in here the entire month we were gone?"

Dracula's eyes shifted left and right before he looked at her. "We went to the beach one day."

"Seriously? One day? You've been studying those files the whole month?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, we needed to find something about breaking the bond. If you have never been trained, how will you break it?"

"Dracula, you are an idiot. Dacron told you he knew how. Did you think he wouldn't teach me? Come here."

Dacron smiled down at her as she reached out and slid her index finger down Dracula's arm. Stepping back, she closed her eyes and muttered the words just as her mate had taught her. Moments later, Dracula screamed.

Rimi and Talbort grunted in pain before they started screaming.

Casey looked up at Dacron, "The she-devil is going through the same pain, right?"

He gave an evil laugh, “Oh yeah. It hurts like someone laid a burning stick on your back and held it there. The pain goes all the way to the bone. I don’t think burning alive could feel much worse than what they are going through.”

Soon enough, the men were gasping for air as the pain abruptly vanished. Moments later, the men were ripping their shirts off to look at each other’s back. The red soul mark on Rimi’s and Talbort’s backs was now a pale pink color while Dracula’s back had the black of a destroyer’s mark. All three men had the sheen of tears in their eyes, and Casey didn’t think it was from the pain they had gone through. After almost two thousand years, the men were free to return to their planet and the lives they had to leave behind.

“So now you will go home?” she asked Rimi.

“Oh, hell no. We can’t, we have to find and kill the she-devil first, but we can get further than the moon. We have been tied to this planet for so long we have forgotten how it feels to drift through space. The moon was the absolute furthest we could get from the she-devil. Besides, Dominick will be back soon with his Hunters, and then we can have some fun. If we go home now, with Dracula branded with a black bond mark, they would ask us if we killed her and we can’t lie. So they would put two and two together and figure out we found a Calian. So no, we can’t put you in danger by going home. You are stuck with us until we can find Catherine and end this once and for all.”

“But you have been trying to find her for centuries, why are you so sure you can find her now?”

Rimi wiggled his eyebrows up and down before he answered, “Well now we have Dacron, and he has Mela’s Yili. We can find her, we have found her before, but this time we can be there in minutes. She doesn’t stand a chance.”

The men laughed at the glee they heard in Rimi’s voice. Turning to Dacron, Casey stood on her tiptoes and whispered, “How about we go find something to eat while they celebrate and then I will let you put lotion on my back. It feels dry.” She

giggled before whirling around and heading to the kitchen, barely staying ahead of her mate.

Talbort shook his head, and in a voice filled with awe, he told the others, “We can go check out the Deyarian planet.”

Rimi groaned as he realized Talbort would give them no peace now that he knew the Deyarians still lived. “We haven’t even been free ten minutes, hold up making plans until we have a better idea of what we need to do next to keep Dacron’s mate safe. Now I don’t know about the two of you, but we have been cooped up in this room way too long. What do you say we go find a nice rare steak and celebrate our freedom?”

“I don’t even know how to be free anymore.”

“Well, first off let’s see if my brother will let us borrow your sister’s Yili and we can go from there. Come on, we need to catch them before they get out of the kitchen, or we may not see them for days.”

The men raced to the kitchen to convince Dacron to let them taste their first bit of freedom in centuries. As they pushed and shoved their way into the room, Dacron looked up from the sandwich he was eating. “No, you can’t borrow it. I will take you up to get Dracula’s ship, but I will warn you now, we ate all the food. You are going to have to restock before you can go racing across the galaxy.”

Dracula wanted to snarl, but his face seemed set in a permanent grin, “Well, hurry up, man, I want to fly.” He approached Casey and lowered his forehead to touch hers. “If ever you need anything, I am yours to command. Thank you, little sister, of my heart, for giving me back that which I believed lost.”

The other two repeated the gesture while Casey stared at Dacron in confusion. He shrugged and grinned, “Don’t look at me, they are your friends.”

Casey laughed. “You’re right, they are, and they have been for many years. I just never imagined I would be the one to free them. Wow, their debt to me just keeps growing.”

Casey looked around the room at the men. Tomorrow was soon enough to figure out what to do about the rest of her race on Earth and start training her Golden Warrior Wolf, for today she would enjoy the laughter and love of her new family.

The end.

I always say that, but it is never the end for any of the characters in this series. They are all family in one way or another, and they pop in and out of each other's lives so frequently you never know who you will see in the next book.

Stay up to date on what's happening by following the series on Facebook.

<http://www.facebook.com/SafeHavenWolves/>

Amber is the next book in the series, and even though it takes place in Australia, we will still see interactions with characters from other books.

<http://mybook.to/AmberSHW>

Author Notes

This book is the 8th one in the series and my favorite one to date. I think it is possible the book is my favorite because Dacron stars in another series, which is not yet published. I loved the character when I started his journey to Earth with Mela and Dominick and was thrilled when I found out he wanted to be the one to mate with Casey. However, I was shocked and dismayed at the information he told me about his past. Yes, some of us authors do talk to our characters and allow them to lead the story. Sometimes we don't have any clue where the story is going and we are as shocked as the readers when we get to a twist or a tangle. If a scene makes you cry, chances are I bawled my eyes out when writing it, walked away, texted a friend to complain about the character, looked at the screen and begged the character to let me write something else. Spoiler alert: they never listen.

I remember sitting in my car in my driveway and texting a friend of mine to complain about the story. I told her it was going terribly, horribly wrong and my fans would tar and feather me for screwing up the story. She gave me an amazing piece of advice—you *have the keyboard* she told me, *write what YOU want*. I laughed and laughed—then I asked her how that worked out for her. (It doesn't.)

But at the end of the day, or in this case the end of the story, I was in love with the book. I thought Dacron was an so much fun to write and I sincerely hope that you, the reader, love this story as much as I do.

I had so many problems getting this story to my team. In fact, they never got the correct version. My computer, which was just suppose to be a temporary computer to write Kate, (you may remember I lost my computer and all my files days before Kate was due to be published) all but crashed on me. I ran out of memory and the story refused to save to the external

hard drive I bought to give myself the storage room the computer lacked. Probably I suck at technology and the entire situation was user error. I don't mind admitting this.

A special thanks to my team for their advice and help.

Melanie Robinson for telling me the story didn't exactly match the blurb (Amazon description) and I should probably fix it. (The blurb usually is written before the book is complete so sometimes I have no idea the characters are going to go a different direction.)

Tiffany Steinert pointed out to me that I never really told anyone how often the vampires need blood or the exact purpose of the blood intake. (I went back into the story and added some points about it.)

Monica Hendrix for two things, allowing me to use her last name for a character in the last book, and telling me she was waiting for the epilogue for Casey.

Natalie Cream gave me an incredible boost of confidence about the book. She is very pedantic about punctuation and since the team got the old file she had to read the book riddled with punctuation errors. (I am not great with punctuation and that is why I have an editor.) Despite this she loved the book.

Kimberley Devine keeps me grounded when I panic. She and I are connected in a couple of groups and she is quick to tell me to not worry about things, to slow down and take it easy.

Kelly made me laugh and was instrumental in the addition to the story also. She told me the original ending felt like getting to taste the cake batter but not finishing the cake cooking.

Not only did Monica ask for more to the story, the rest of the team pointed out I had too much of a cliffhanger ending. As a result the original Epilogue became Chapter 27 and

another Epilogue was created. I do have a couple of more team members but unfortunately they were unable to get to the book due to scheduling conflicts. Ellie Brearley is currently on vacation, Leisa Holden had problems loading the file but I think she finally got it to work, not at an ideal time for her work-wise.

Oh my gosh, I almost forgot. If you loved the book please leave a nice review on Amazon so others will be intrigued enough to pick the book up.