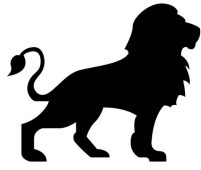




HIS
DAMAGED
PRIDE

JENA WADE
LORELEI M HART

His Damaged Pride



Asilo Pride

Book 1

Jena Wade & Lorelei M. Hart

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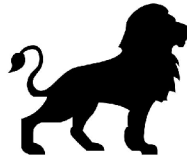
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Chapter 1

Gideon



The door to the small cabin I called home let out a click as it closed. I took in the scent of the person who had just entered. Of all the people, why did it have to be him? Did he have no self-preservation?

“Kian, I told you it wasn’t safe for you to come here.” We both knew this, and yet there he stood.

My brother’s hesitant footsteps sounded across the room, an echo in the nearly empty space.

“Jaden and his cronies are going to attack or whatever. I guess they were talking about it today at dinner.” His voice shook with fear, and I regretted not sending him away the minute our old alpha passed away and Jaden took over the pride. I knew we’d be wearing targets, and still, I thought somehow I’d be able to make things better. And now what? My brother was in danger that he didn’t need to be—imminent danger from the sounds of it.

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh. This day had been coming. Ever since the pride Alpha mysteriously passed away and the leadership of our pack was left in limbo, I knew it would be chaos for us. His son, Jaden, had taken over, but not in an official sense. No one else had stepped up to stop him, though.

Half of us didn't want him to the lead, and the other half was too scared to stand against him. Yet with the way his father had ruled, none of us felt confident in each other to come together and forge a solution. The pride had never been strong, though we were long-lived. We never had an instilled sense of trust among us. And now it was coming to bite us in our butts.

As one of the oldest prides in the shifter world, we should have had more stability, but it just wasn't there. I had tried to rally some of the other lions with me to fight against Jaden, but even though I was an alpha, I wasn't a lead Alpha. So far, my efforts have been failing.

They were scared. I got it. But if I had been stronger, maybe, just maybe, I'd have been enough to squelch that fear and get this pride back onto the right path. I wasn't, though, and now we were worse off than we had ever been.

"Kian, I need you not to be around me when things start going south. I've called Cooper, you remember my friend, right? He can help, but if word gets out that I'm trying to overthrow Jaden, it's not going to be good." And it wasn't that I even wanted to be Alpha. I didn't. I just couldn't allow Jaden to destroy this pride further.

Kian came to where I stood at my kitchen sink. I had been in the middle of tidying up before he came in. He was so tiny compared to my massive alpha frame. My years of milling wood for our pride and surrounding packs had built muscle like no other. Kian, as an omega, was naturally slimmer.

“Can we both leave? Please, Gideon. I don’t want to leave you alone,” he pleaded. I didn’t want him to be alone either, but I’d rather that than see him dead.

“I’m not sure. I don’t know how I can take everyone and keep them safe. There’s a lot of omegas here that need shelter if we leave. There are places out there that can help them. They’re few and far between these days because situations like ours are not common, but I’ve heard of some.” At least, I hoped it was still true. I was going on rumors and hearsay, but when you look for hope, sometimes that is enough.

Kian nodded. “Okay, tell me what to do. Tell me where to go.”

I put my hand over his. “You will be safe here with Jaden, even if he takes over. Keep your head down.”

Kian’s eyes blazed with anger. “No, I can’t stand by and watch him hurt others.”

I admired my brother’s spirit and the fire in him, but he was still so young. He was close friends with Jaden’s youngest omega brother, and I was banking on Jaden being kind to him because of their friendship. Or maybe not kind, but not cruel.

“Jaden’s brother isn’t going to let anything happen to you.”

“Still, there are others—”

“Kian, I need you to promise me that you won’t try to be a hero here.” I couldn’t do what I needed to do if he didn’t.

“And what about you? If we leave this place, we can—”

“Kian, I don’t want to abandon our pride.” The decision weighed heavily on me. Was I making a mistake? Sending Kian away would be the smart thing to do. If only Cooper were here now, he could help. That was what I was waiting for. He knew of places Kian and other omegas could go to be safe.

“They’re talking about moving soon and taking down some of the elders.”

I sucked in a breath. “Jaden said that?”

Kian nodded. Tears filled his eyes.

I thought that Jaden’s attack on the pride structure would begin smaller than that, but he seemed to have the notion that he should cut the head off right at the top. When you took risks that big, there were always casualties. It just was how it was.

“You’re sure?”

Kian gripped my hand, squeezing it with more strength than an omega like him should have. “I didn’t try to hear any more. I came straight here.”

“Were you followed? Kian, if you do something outside the ordinary, they’re going to—” My lion roared to life as the crunch of boots on the gravel path outside reached my ears. Though my cabin was tucked in the woods, there was a small stone path that connected my cabin to the rest of the pride, and

it gave me the warning I needed. At least I crossed my fingers that it was enough.

Fear flooded Kian's features. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine," I said. "Listen, there's a place, a pride called Asilo, or there are enforcer packs out there that can help us. Valford and Steelwick are the ones closest to us. If they're coming here to kill me, then I want you to run."

"No, I won't let them—"

I clamp my hand over his mouth. "Promise me that you will run if anything happens to me. Get as far away from these people as you possibly can."

Fuck. I thought I had more time, but Jaden was more insane than I thought, and now I couldn't bank on them keeping him safe just because he was Jaden's brother's friend. They would do so many terrible things to him. He was an omega, and I had protected him my whole life. Until now, when he needed me most. He was my little brother. The only person in the world I had left.

"When it's safe, call Cooper. He can help you."

"I've never met—"

"I know," I said. "But he's a friend of mine. I promise he will help. You can trust him."

Kian nodded. "Can we both leave? Please."

"There isn't time." How I wished there was.

There was a flash of light, and glass broke. Fire filled the space. Fuck they weren't playing around.

"I need you to run. Now." There was no room for argument. As it was, it might already be too late.

"What about you?" he whispered, his fear palpable.

"I'll hold them off. They might not even think you're here." Please let that be the case.

"Come out, Gideon," Jaden shouted from outside. "We will not tolerate traitors on this territory. Surrender now when we just might let your brother live."

Kian's eyes went wide with fear as the seriousness of the situation hit him.

"Go," I said. "Run. Take my phone and call Cooper."

Kian bolted out the back door, shifting to his lion quickly. My brother was fast, one of the fastest in the pride, and I knew he could outmaneuver most anyone through the woods. I had high hopes that I could stop whoever was there and keep them from getting to him. All I had to do was slow them down enough to give him the head start he would need.

There were so many innocent lives within this small pride that I wanted to save. If I had organized faster, worked harder to get everyone around... I was an alpha, but that didn't mean I was Alpha material. My lack of authority with everyone left us all vulnerable. I knew the situation wasn't entirely my fault, but I couldn't help but wonder if there had been more I could've done—should've done.

Most of the other alphas in the pride steered clear of me due to my immense size. They saw it as power and not from the physical labor I did that made me strong. Physical labor was something too many in the pride seemed allergic to.

The door smashed open. It had begun to get too hot in there for me to stay much longer anyway. Had it not been for me giving my brother a chance, I'd have already left. As it was, I was surprised they hadn't indicated they saw him run. If they had given me any hint, I'd have already attacked them as a mode of distraction.

Pippen, one of Jaden's lackeys, leered at me. Her eyes glazed with hunger. I always thought that she had a crazed look about her, like her lion wasn't quite right. She gripped my hair and pulled me forward, pushing me out the door until my knees hit the dirt.

"So you finally decided to grace us with your presence?" Jaden said.

A few of Jaden's right-hand lions held torches and other weapons. One had a bat; the other had a long piece of rebar. I forced myself to stand so I could look down at the wannabe pride Alpha.

Jaden, like most others in the pride, was several inches short than my six foot seven frame—something I knew he hated. I was a reminder to him that he wasn't physically the best one for the job. He wasn't the best in any category, but this he could see every time he looked in the mirror, and it stung.

Several of the pride who I considered his followers stood around, not all of them totally accepting of the treatment he was bestowing on me. But none of them were doing anything to stop it. None even looked too conflicted.

“Stop this nonsense,” I said. “Is this the legacy you want? Leading by violence?”

He backhanded me across the face. My anger grew, but I kept myself calm. I would get a chance to fight back. But I wasn’t starting too soon. The more time they focused on me, the more time Kian had to run.

“You will be silent. I’ll be making an example out of you. Being a traitor in my pride will only get you pain. And death.”

I stood up straighter. Fine. “Then fight me for real. Lion to lion. Winner gets the pride.”

Jaden turned back to me. “You’re challenging me for leadership of the pride?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“No one challenges me,” he said.

“By pride law, you have to respect a challenge and give me a fair fight.”

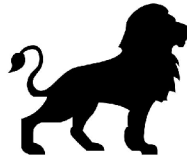
My knees were kicked out from underneath me, and his two lackeys, Phippen and Scout, held my shoulders so I couldn’t stand. It took both of them to keep me down. They pressed until I had no choice but to fall to the ground. Then my breath left my lungs as another kick landed in my midsection.

Jaden gripped my hair and forced me to look at him. “There will not be a fair anything. I am the leader of this pride now, and I determine the laws. When you challenge me, you take on me and my betas.”

That was the last I remembered. After that, it was just a mess of pain and blood until, eventually, I closed my eyes and didn't open them again.

Chapter 2

Morgan



My leopard did not have the attention span for group yoga today. The yoga class was a group meditation time that the small group of omegas currently residing in Asilo participated in at least three or more times a week. For them, it was a great way to stretch, focus, and strengthen within the safety of the group, safety being something some of them never had before. I appreciated all the benefits it had for them; it just didn't work for me today.

Some of us, like myself, were morning animals who got up early and meditated as the sun rose. I found it to be a fantastically peaceful way to start my day, and having others around distracted me. One of the many things I tried to help our pride achieve was giving the omegas what they needed. There was no one-size-fits-all. And yes, we were all omegas, and it had to remain that way. The horrors some of our temporary residents had faced at the hands of an alpha made that a necessity. You couldn't feel safe while surrounded by your greatest fear.

This day wasn't like most. Today, my leopard awoke and chose violence. Why? I didn't even question him. He rarely pushed through like this, and trying to squelch it only made it worse. We would spend the day in a power struggle, and there would be no winners. And worse, the losers would be our guests here, my mind unable to focus on their needs.

Today was one of those days I wasn't going to keep calm and quiet as I went about my day. Somehow I awoke on the wrong side of the bed, and no amount of persuasion would keep my leopard content. No amount of stillness would satiate the beast inside me who wanted to roam and run. And so I left my lieutenant in charge of group therapy, and I took off to the forest.

I was one of the few people in the territory who didn't always stick to the trails. Many of the omegas who came here were searching for peace and calm for a chance to heal. We had designed the trails around the territory so that they felt comfortable with them. They were strategically designed in a way that afforded them privacy without ever being out of earshot, adding a layer of comfort for many. Knowing they were but a scream or roar or growl away was reassuring. And, of course, those who wanted more privacy were permitted to do so, but few did.

I needed the chaos of the forest, something not on the beaten path and not the closeness of work. And most days, I didn't think of what I did here as work. It was more of a calling, but there were days when it weighed heavily on me and I needed a

day off. Rarely did I get one, but a run in the forest... that I could usually squeeze in.

It had been ages since my beast behaved like this. I couldn't help but wonder why. What was happening today that had him riled? Was there a storm coming we weren't expecting, or was it something deeper than that? Only time would tell—or possibly wouldn't. You never knew with my beast.

I took to my fur and let the beast take over, navigating through the forest, and leaping around the trees. There were several hundred yards before my feet even touched the forest floor. The dense canopy of trees allowed me to jump around them. To my surprise, he didn't try to push me down. He wasn't attempting to take over; he just needed out.

We ran and jumped, my beast moving with purpose, a purpose he didn't explain to me. Then the winds shifted, and everything changed. The scent that hit my nostrils nearly knocked me to the ground. I lost my footing and only caught myself at the last minute. All of my hair stood on end, and my claws extended.

There was an alpha in my territory.

Alphas were not allowed on my territory except on very few occasions, and there were very strict rules in play for that, starting with having permission, which this one most assuredly did not have.

I sniffed the air. Along with the Alpha scent, there was something more... something delicious—something that

beckoned me in a way it shouldn't. No! I shipped that thought away, unable to even go down the path it was leading me.

But then there was also the coppery scent of blood in the air. Lots of it, and my beast started to rush toward it. He didn't care if I gave him permission or not. He needed to help this alpha, and so did I. Fuck the rules; this alpha needed help.

My heart thundered in my chest, and my beast let out a hiss.

I slowed my beast down enough to remind him we needed to do this right. Rushing to nowhere would get us exactly there—nowhere. I stuck my nose to the ground, sniffing out where this alpha could be. Nevermind the danger of me approaching an animal I didn't recognize; I needed to find whoever it was and help them. Then I needed to find out what that lighter, more delicious scent was.

The sight I fell upon had my knees buckling. There in the forest lay a man, a shifter in his human form, naked except for a pair of torn pants that may have been jeans at one point. There was a scrap of fabric wrapped around his arm. A shirt, maybe?

His chest was bare, but protruding from his torso was a thick rebar rod. The wound festered and smelled of infection. He wasn't a random hiker who got hurt or even a shifter whose car had died in the worst place possible. These injuries were intentional and, if left untreated, would quickly become his demise.

I shifted to my human form; this man was no threat to me, not now, anyway. And my gut told me, not ever. He couldn't so

much as lift a finger to touch me, much less hurt me. Heck, I wasn't even sure he was alive.

My heart hurt at seeing his injuries. Whoever did this to him wanted him to suffer while he died. The cruelty of it. I focused on his body, relieved to see his chest moving in extremely shallow but steady movements. At least the steady breaths gave me hope.

I put a hand to his skin and almost jumped back at the heat of it. He was deep into an infection. His long hair was matted to his face, and he was dirty. Oh, so dirty.

“Who are you?” I whispered.

Mate, my leopard called back.

No, it couldn't be.

Fate wouldn't be so cruel as to give me a mate who was knocking on death's door. The man might be alive now, but he had mere minutes left to live if he didn't get some help, and even then, the odds weren't on his side, not with him near sepsis. My brain scrambled as I ran through what I needed to get done.

I choked back a sob, the reality of what was playing out before me almost too much to bear. If this truly was my mate, what did that mean? Who had done this to him and why? And how did he make it here, of all places? We were careful and hidden. It was a necessity. The omegas in our care counted on it.

Closing my eyes, I let out a combination scream slash roar, knowing that safety protocols would go into effect. Those who

needed to go into hiding would do so, and my team would find me. My lieutenant and two backup people would come to defend anyone in danger. They would think it was a safety issue for the pack, but that couldn't be helped. The stranger beside me didn't have the time left in this world for me to run and collect help. This was the only way.

Most times, I was happy with the way we lived, the simple life of it all, mostly void of electronic communications like a phone. But right now? Oh, how I wished I had the modern convenience of a phone to call for help and have them bring the right supplies. We needed to take this man back to my house before I could do the simplest things to help him.

I leaned closer to him and put a hand to his face. He leaned into my touch and moaned. That was something.

“How are you still conscious?” I said.

“Kian,” he muttered.

“What was that?” I said. “Kian? Is that your name?”

He shook his head. “Omega. Br—” He couldn't get the words out.

My back straightened. My alpha had an omega already.

That was no matter. It wasn't like I was going to leave him for dead just because my mate was taken—another nice cruel act of fate.

“We're going to get you fixed up, okay? Just stay with us.”

Fuck how can I even move him?

“Any chance you can shift?” I asked, already knowing the answer was no, but hoping that, by some miracle, I was wrong.

“Pipe,” he croaked. I hadn’t even been thinking about the pipe, his infection scenting stronger and stronger by the minute. His lack of ability to shift from the pipe did explain why whoever did this left it there. It was calculated. Fuckers.

“Yeah, no kidding.” It wasn’t light, but if I spoke of it in the true seriousness of it, I’d break down and sob. “I suppose you can’t really shift with a pipe going through your stomach.”

His head moved again, but this time it fell limply to the forest floor. I thought for a moment, my heart wrenching in my chest, that he had died. The pain was so immense, and I didn’t even know his name.

My cat let out a snarl as footsteps sounded around me. My lieutenants were there to help me.

“Holy shit,” Emery said. “What is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But we’ve got to help him at least as much as we can.” We’d never had an alpha on our territory that we needed to help, but we weren’t going to ignore him. We couldn’t. This wasn’t a *we can help find someone to help you* situation. As it was, we might already be too late.

“Okay,” Jasper said. He turned to Emery, “Go back to the storage shed and get the stretcher we use for our safety courses.” Once Emery took off, Jasper turned back to me. “Who is he?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know where he came from.” I put a hand to his forehead, pushing back the locks of hair there. “He’s my mate,” I said quietly.

“He’s your what?”

“My mate,” I said. My eyes brimmed with tears. Hearing my beast say it was one thing. Listening to my own admission was quite another. It somehow made it more real.

Jasper kneeled beside me and put a hand on my shoulder. “He’s going to be alright. We’ll get him fixed up. He came to the right place.”

I needed Jasper’s words, a sense of despair filling me as I looked down at my broken mate.

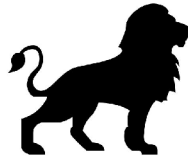
It seemed so hopeless, looking at him then. His wound was yellow and red with infection. There were so many cuts and bruises all over his body. One of his arms looked like it might be broken, based on the odd bend to it. And the three-foot-long chunk of rebar stuck out of his midsection. If he weren’t a shifter, the injuries would have likely killed him long before now. As it was, his lion was barely hanging on.

“Good goddess, it must have taken a whole pack of shifters to do this to a man his size,” Jasper said.

“No kidding.”

Chapter 3

Gideon



Pain. Searing pain that was debilitating to the point that I couldn't even scream or cry. It had me frozen where I was, but I couldn't stay like this. My brother needed me. My body didn't care, and I couldn't even reach my beast. I was stuck like this in a torturous state of pain and anguish, unable to do the one thing I needed to do—save my brother.

If they did this to me, I couldn't even fathom what they would do to him, and I refused to allow my brain to wander that way. There was nothing I could do until I managed to break free from this torture.

That was all I knew for what felt like decades—pain and fear—fear for Kian. It was as if I had no other memories in my brain, just my brother and the pain that enveloped me so completely. The burning pain was like a fire licking at my skin, leaving charred flesh and ash in its wake, the crushing pain as if I were trapped under a block of concrete, the emotional pain of possibly losing the most important person in my life.

My mind raced, unable to focus on anything except the pain. It was as if my body existed outside my consciousness. I couldn't tell where I was or who was around me. The only thing I knew was the pain, constant, never-ending. But I wasn't alone. I knew that much. It couldn't be people from my old pride; if it were, I'd be dead by now. They were cruel, but at the end of the day, Jaden wanted me to be with the goddess. He lost his attention to shiny new things quickly and based on what memories I could pull of the challenge, my blood had been that shiny new thing.

Eventually, the pain changed. Not a lot, but enough that for specks of time, I thought I was healing. But when it felt like for a moment it was retreating for real, the searing pain would crash back twice as hard like waves against a rock wall. Constant like waves, unyielding like the rock. I didn't know how long I could continue to hold on like this. Had it not been for my brother needing me, I'd have let the sweet peace of death take me already.

Finally, one day, morning or night, I had no idea of the timeframe, I opened my eyes, and light poured in. The brightness was too much for me, and I slammed them back shut again. The pain, however, was there, but it was veiled as if there was something between us, protecting me from the worst of it. I'd never felt anything like it before. I was covered in some sort of shroud—but not a physical one others could see and hold. It was there, though.

The pain pulsed beneath the surface, just waiting to crash back into me as if some sort of wall was holding it back, only that

wall was crumbling and crumbling fast. I was coming out of whatever this was. I had no idea if it was for good or only as long as this force was there, holding it back. But whichever it was, I was going to greedily accept it.

“Are you there?” a voice asked, a voice I didn’t recognize, but with the whooshing in my ear, that didn’t mean it wasn’t someone familiar to me.

I attempted to move my head, to no avail. It was too heavy. With extreme effort, I managed to move my eyes, sweeping them across the room. Wherever I was, it seemed to be a nice place. The air was warm, the ceiling a pale white. There were two windows that were letting in light from the outside. I lay in a bed. That much was obvious.

“Where am I?” I asked, my voice barely coming out, the hoarseness making my words barely decipherable

“You’re with a pride.” Not which pride, just “A” pride. “You’re safe. You’re safe here,” the voice said. I wanted to believe them, and part of me did. But for how long would that last? I had been beaten near death by my own pride and stripped of my place. For many prides and packs, that made me a criminal and unworthy of even the time of day.

The shifter moved closer now; chair legs scraped against the wooden floor. Then they were at my side, and their scent wafted over me. My body reacted instantly. My body that was broken beyond repair rallied for this scent—his scent.

Mate, my lion urged, the first time I was aware of him since I started to come around. He’d been so hidden, so pushed down,

that there were a few terrifying moments I thought that I had lost him. He was there, though—there, only quiet and subdued, like the pain.

“What happened?” I said. “What about Kian? Is he safe?”

“Are they your omega?” the voice asked, a tension in his voice that had me slightly on edge.

I attempted to shake my head, but then the pain radiated, the veil lifting momentarily. I only managed a few centimeters, if that. It was too hard.

“Don’t try to move. We’ve got some pretty interesting stuff that we tried on you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that.” His hand patted my arm. “Tell me about Kian. Who are they?”

“My brother,” I said. “He ran to safety, I hope, right before we were attacked.”

“Who attacked you?”

I took a deep breath, though it made the skin around my mid-section pull tight against the wound there. “The alpha of my pride, where I came from. He has plans... ideas, terrible ones. If he gets my brother, I can’t even imagine.”

“Did you do anything to provoke the attack?” he asked, and I understood why. Protocol required it. If I was an outcast, stripped from my pride for breaking shifter law, my being here put his pride in danger.

Even knowing this, my anger still rose. My fists clenched, and I moved to sit up, but then the pain hit me again.

“Don’t move. The more you fight, the faster the pain is going to come crashing back. We’re only holding it at bay with a whole lot of luck.” There was no anger in his voice. He wasn’t trying to hold his authority over me like most shifters would in this situation. I still couldn’t figure out what to make of him, unlike my beast.

“What’s wrong with me?” The last thing I truly remembered about the altercation was fading away. Everything from that moment on was a blur until I woke up here. I was a mess. My body told me that much, but what kind of mess—what kind of injuries was I facing? That I couldn’t pinpoint.

The omega sighed, and then their face hovered over mine. Their hand cupped my cheek. “We’re not sure. You’re not healing the way that you should be, even though your lion is there. But you were in very rough shape when we found you. If you want to live, you’re going to have to fight.”

I wasn’t out of the woods yet, something I hadn’t even considered. Fuck. My brother needed me, and I might not be there for him.

Help me. I pleaded to my beast. I needed all the strength I could garner.

Glancing up, the omega looking down on me nearly stole what little breath I had from me. Now that my eyes were adjusted to the lighting, I could take him in fully. He was stunning, this

omega beside me who smelled so good and who my lion assumed was ours.

“Mate,” I said, unable to hold it in and not even sure if I wanted to.

He nodded. “Yes. Mate. My leopard senses it as well, and we don’t want to lose you. I know nothing about you, but I know I don’t want to lose you. So you have to fight.”

“My name is Gideon. I come from Highridge pride. The Alpha passed away a month ago, maybe longer now. I don’t know how much time has passed.” For all I knew, I’d been in my current state for months. Time just didn’t exist here. “His son took over. He has a very different outlook on life than what it should be.”

I closed my eyes, not wanting to say the next part, but knowing it was important not to hide anything from my mate. The last thing I wanted to do was scare him, and hearing about Jaden’s opinions on omegas could do just that, if for no other reason than to know his mate came from that pride.

“He doesn’t believe omegas deserve rights, and he believes that shifters should be at the top of the world. There’s been dissent among the rest of the pride, and a rift was formed. I should have done more to protect my pride. I should have.... My brother. I sent him away when Jaden attacked my home. I thought he would be safe because I know people who can help.”

Only I was too late. If they wanted to track him, they had the time. Even with them ganging up on me, there were others

who would do Jaden's bidding if for no other reason than to save their hide or that of someone they loved.

"We'll send someone to investigate Highridge," he said without skipping a beat.

The omega moved away from me, but I gripped his arm, immediately regretting that I had moved that quickly. My body was all but useless.

"They're dangerous. You can't go." He didn't understand. He couldn't, not from the snippets I told him.

"I won't be leaving," he assured me. "But we can't just let them run wild. I'll be staying here. You're safe here. That doesn't mean I can't make the calls that need making."

"Where is here? I told my brother to run, to go to Asilo. Can we check to see if he made it there?"

The light left my mate's gaze, and the soft smile he had on his face while looking at me dropped. His eyes took on a haunted look. "I'm sorry to say your brother didn't make it to Asilo."

"How do you know?" I said.

"Because that's where you are. This is Asilo. I'm the Forerunner, Morgan."

Fuck. My brother didn't make it. He was still out there, on his own. Or at least I needed him to be on his own and not back at our pride. Jaden—he would hurt him, hurt him for his own pleasure and to make an example of him. And that would only be the beginning.

It wasn't fair. Kian was the one who was supposed to make it here to have the shelter and safety that I now had. It wasn't supposed to be me. I was the protector, and I failed him—failed our pride so completely.

Tears started to form in my eyes, and my mate—Morgan came over and patted them with a soft cloth, the empathy in his eyes only making the tears more plentiful. I wasn't supposed to be like this, broken and in his refuge. I promised Kian I would take care of him and keep him safe, and I failed him on all accounts.

And now what? I was so weak my mate needed to dab my tears.

“You said I'm not out of the woods, right?” It came out as more of a sob, the tears not for me and my pain but for my brother.

“You aren't, but you are strong. Fight. Fight for yourself. Fight for Kian. Fight for me. Fight Gideon. I only just found you.”

There was so much to say, but all I managed to get out was two words before the pain started hurling back at me; “I promise.”

Chapter 4

Morgan



“So it’s hopeless,” I said, my gaze pleading as it bounced between Franklin, a witch and healer with the Fractured Fang pack, and Lissy, a healer from the Greycoast pack. Then there was a man I’d never met before. He was an older gentleman named Mortimer, who was a retired healer, but one who literally wrote the book on the methods Lissy and Franklin used every day. He knew of the ways of old.

They were the strongest healers I knew of, Franklin and Lissy also coming to the table with human doctor skills. If anyone could help my mate, they were in this room with me.

“We don’t know,” Franklin said, and he bit his lip. “I can’t see anything. I’ve tried. Sometimes I can. But this time...” He shook his head, his heart so visibly broken by his admission.

In a way, I understood his turmoil. Having an ability to help that wasn’t always consistent had to be frustrating, especially when you saw a man whose life was slipping away and were now helpless to assist. I wasn’t a healer, but working as

Forerunner, I wasn't always able to assist all who needed it, and it hit hard.

I took a deep breath. "I don't expect you to read the future for me," I said, wanting to alleviate the pressure Franklin was putting on himself.

We all sat in my kitchen. My gaze roved around the room. It was painted a pale blue, like my bedroom, meant to calm those within the walls. Everything about my home, my entire territory was designed to provide calm and stillness, a sense of healing. Yet right now, at this moment, calm was the last thing that I felt. The room might as well be filled with fluorescent lighting and painted red for all the help the current decor was giving.

Anger bubbled up inside me, threatening to spill out. I wanted to shout at everyone. The animal inside me wanted to claw its way out and tear apart the painting on the wall meant to instill peace and tranquility. How very fitting that it sat on the wall that separated me from my mate at that moment.

My anger wasn't at the people in this room. It was at Jaden and the harm he caused his pride and my mate. Some people do not deserve the oxygen that they breathe. He was one of them.

It wasn't that long ago that I was so sure I didn't want a mate. Why would I? I had important work to do as the forerunner, work only an omega could do. Finding a mate meant that I would have to give up my calling. I hadn't been ready for that. And maybe I still wasn't. But a mate. It felt right.

Maybe it was saying I didn't want a mate that had one showing up on my land. Had I inadvertently done this to myself? Had I jinxed my own self by thinking that way? Was fate giving me what I thought I didn't want but secretly did—so secretly that I didn't even realize it myself?

“Whatever substance that was on that bar that your mate was impaled with is an old concoction,” Mortimer said.

Shit. I hadn't even thought of that. I just assumed it was a weapon, one that was on hand and easy. One meant to kill but miraculously did not. Of course, it wasn't. That made so much sense.

“I've only ever heard stories on it. The fact that it exists out there either accidentally or on purpose is terrifying for shifters,” Mortimer continued.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “And how would someone stumble upon this concoction?”

The old man's jaw tensed. “The ways of old were only written down in journals, personal histories of packs or prides. Most of which are kept within the archives at the council, under lock and key. The dangerous things anyways. Things that would hurt other shifters.”

I had known that most pack histories were kept very secure, but in my naïvety, I had always assumed it was to preserve them. I hadn't considered that it was to protect what was in those volumes, on the scrolls, and who knew where else in the archives.

“Our histories are shared for everyone, of course. That’s why we have historians that travel around gathering stories, but the dangerous stuff... the magic that used to run rampant in our souls, those aren’t for everyone to know.”

“So how did it end up on rebar and impaled through my mate’s midsection?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” the old healer answered. “Our best guess is that Highridge has histories that they have passed down through the generations. But the fact that someone out there decided to gather the ingredients to make this poison is concerning.”

He said someone, but I heard Jaden. And maybe it wasn’t him and was one of his betas, but that would’ve been under his command.

“That’s what’s dangerous about the books and these histories. They tell stories of creatures that no longer exist in our world. I honestly didn’t think the concoction that I assume this could be was made with the currently available plant life. I was wrong.” He let out a low breath. “But some packs, old ones, have histories we haven’t been able to dive into yet, and if those get into the wrong hands...”

“It sounds like it has with Highridge,” Lissy said.

I appreciated her bluntness. Now was not the time for being coy or sugarcoating any of this. If we were going to come up with a way to save my mate before his time ran out, nothing could be hidden or dressed in pleasantries. There just wasn’t time.

“The investigator from Steelwick is here,” Franklin said. He put down his phone. It hadn’t even fully registered that he had been on it. My head was in too many places at once, and I needed to focus. Too much was on the line.

“He can come in,” I said. If Franklin trusted him, so did I. Franklin had worked with Steelwick for years; he knew them as well as he knew his new pack.

Franklin shot off a quick text.

The omegas in my pride, the ones that were healing, stayed away from any visitors who came to Asilo. But my regulars, the ones who stayed with me full time, didn’t mind the occasional visitor. Lately, though, it seemed we were getting more and more of them. The quietness of the pack remained, thanks to most of our supplies being provided by others, but things were different. There had been a shift. It was still to be determined if it was a good one or not.

The door to my home opened and Marcus, an omega rabbit shifter who was our regular contact at Steelwick, walked in. After him came another omega, this one a species I didn’t recognize; it was something reptilian.

“Hello, everyone,” Marcus said. “Forerunner, it’s nice to see you.”

I bowed my head to him as he had done to me as a sign of respect. Though I was an omega, I was the leader of this pride. Forerunner was basically the alpha of our pride minus the being alpha bit. It was more complicated than that, but that was the gist of it.

“This is Saunders, another investigator with Steelwick.” He introduced his companion but not his beast, which would have been rude if he had. Still... I was curious.

Saunders smiled. “Nice to meet all of you,” he said. “Though, of course, we wish the circumstances were different.”

Didn't we all?

“We'll get right to it.” Saunders began. “We've begun our investigation into Highridge. Honestly, we suspected that when the previous alpha died, things would go this way. We've kept a close eye, but unfortunately, it doesn't seem we were close enough. For that, I'm sorry.”

As if they could be making sure all packs were doing what they needed to do at all times. Steelwick had a huge territory to monitor. It was a miracle they were able to accomplish as much as they did.

“Of course, it's not your fault,” I said. “What information do you need from us?”

“I'd like to get a scent of Gideon.”

My beast rose to the surface, and it took all I had to contain him. Gideon was ours, and the thought of another male intentionally scenting him had my beast on edge.

“I mean... if I know his scent, then it'll be easier to discern who his kin is. Not everybody at that pack is a bad person, and if we go in and eradicate them, we don't want any unnecessary casualties.”

Eradicate. Steelwick's purpose was so different than that of Asilo's. We were about healing and peace. They were about putting an end to the horrors that our kind sometimes displayed.

I swallowed thickly. It was one thing to help the omegas heal from situations like this. It was quite another to be at the beginning of the process, a process that included intentional death. I knew it needed to be done, but still... it was a great deal to take in.

"He's resting now," I said. "I don't know how much he will be able to share when he wakes. If he wakes."

"That's fine." Marcus sat down. He opened up a notebook and began writing. "Can you tell us everything he has told you? If Gideon can talk, I will speak to him, but if not, anything you can tell me is more than I had walking in here."

I relayed as much as I could about what I had gotten from Gideon, emphasizing that his brother was still in Highridge. Potentially. And that saving him was my mate's top priority.

"If he's not there, then can you be on the lookout for him? Gideon is very worried about him." I was too. This Kian was my family now, too, since he was my mate's brother.

"Of course," Saunders said. "We will have our experts taking a look."

"You said Gideon mentioned a friend of his? A historian?" Mortimer said.

I nodded. "Cooper."

“I’ve heard of him. I think I’ve met him. Perhaps we can get his contact information from the council.”

I wasn’t sure how much I trusted the council, but if they were an end to a means, so be it.

Saunders took a note. “We will start there, for sure. If Gideon contacted him before the attack, then he will have more details.”

“When it comes time to go to the Highridge territory, see if you can find any old documents, books, journals, histories of their pack that would indicate that they have knowledge of the ways of old,” Mortimer chimed in. “If they do... we’ll have to get it into the hands of the historian. He’ll know what to do with it.”

“Not the council?” I said,

The old man shook his head. “The historian, as it is with many of them, has a calling to preserve our histories and protect us even from ourselves. If there’s anything in there that he doesn’t believe any of us should know about, he’ll keep it in the right hands. He’ll know what to do with the work.” He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t trust that the council would have the discernment to do the same.”

Not one person in the room gave even a hint that they disagreed.

Franklin shuddered. “The timing of this is all very strange,” he said. “I’ve been having dreams lately of old creatures that have

long since been forgotten, and talking about the old ways just gives me goosebumps.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What old creatures?”

“Centaur. Mermaids. Krakens.”

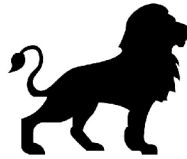
The old man snorted. “Fairytale.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve always thought, but what if it’s not? We always thought this anti-healing concoction was a myth, yet here we are.”

“Indeed,” I said. “But let’s focus on one thing at a time. I want my mate healed.”

Chapter 5

Gideon



The pain ebbed and flowed, never leaving me quite long enough for me to fully wake and move, but at least I could rest and listen. It was something. I knew the healers were working on it and also knew they hadn't quite figured out a solution. My mate tried to keep that from me, but not in a secret way. No, he was just trying to keep me calm and my anxiety at bay, fully aware that the pain was plenty for me to handle. I appreciated it. It had been so long since I had someone looking out for me and even longer since I needed someone to.

My mate's voice lulled me into a restful state in which I could simply listen to their voice. There was something so calming about his cadence. I could see why he was the forerunner. As horrific as this entire situation was, he was reassuring and strong but also comforting.

Morgan told me everything. All that he could about himself, how he grew up, and why his home was made within Asilo. He even told me about how he picked the colors for the walls and why he arranged the paths the way he did. I teased him

that there was too much to study for the test, and he giggled at the notion, assuring me that he would repeat anything and everything I needed him to and not to give a second's thought about it.

I wanted to tell them about me too. Morgan knew so little, and what he did know was all the horrible things. I wanted to share with him my love of woodworking. How turning a piece of timber into something useful, or in some cases just pretty, brought me joy.

Oh, how I longed to tell him about my brother, what a great man he was becoming. How he lit up a room and how he wanted to see the good side of things, even when there was none to be had. I had a feeling the two of them would get along quite well. I couldn't think too hard about that, though, because the reality was it was unlikely that Morgan and Kian would ever meet. And if they did, the odds were even greater that I wouldn't be there to experience it. I didn't want to allow those kinds of thoughts to seep in, but they were my reality, and it couldn't be helped.

I knew Kian would have been safe here with Morgan, just like I had hoped. All those weeks, months, days ago. I had no idea how long it had been at this point. But my idea to send him to find Asilo had been a good one; I just didn't push him hard enough or soon enough. That was something I was going to regret until my dying day.

It was me here at Asilo, not Kian. Nothing was how it should be, and worse than that, there was nothing I could do about it.

It wasn't until one particular day that I opened my eyes far enough that I could finally fully take in the sights around me. It was as if I finally put on glasses for the first time and could see past the fuzz. At least, that's how I assumed human glasses worked.

The room had been cleaned recently. The scent of bleach was still hanging in the air. It was such an odd feeling not to know how long I had been in this room, in this bed.

I knew my wound opened several times, having half-memories of those. They didn't hurt, not more than the pain that was already radiating through me.

Someone had mentioned the blood soaking through the sheets more than once. It wasn't my mate, his voice I knew. It was someone else, and it had to have been longer ago than I suspected because there was no scent of blood in the air anymore.

Morgan's Lieutenant... Jasper, I think his name was, had been there that morning—or a morning. Time was such a jostled mess. Whenever it was, I rested throughout his visit. Whereas when Morgan was around, I tried to bring myself to a more conscious state. I didn't want to miss the limited time we had together.

The pain in my side had lessened enough that movement was possible. Not a lot of it, and it had to be very slow, but I wasn't frozen in place, and that was a huge step in the right direction. The feeling had started returning to my limbs, a feeling that

wasn't shards of pain like broken glass being rubbed over my skin. The sensations I felt now were softer, gentler.

I craned my neck. My muscles protested the movement. The softness I felt was a fresh blanket. A fleece one, and then there was a quilt on top of that. I wiggled my toes enough that I saw the blanket move. It was progress, huge progress. But how far did the progress go?

Could I stand? Would it be stupid of me to try? Of course, it would be. But would that stop me?

My throat ached, and I knew my voice would croak with misuse if I tried to say anything. How long had it been since I spoke out loud? How long since I drank a glass of water? It felt like eons, but that was impossible. I'd be dead for sure if it were very long at all.

In my mind, I had talked with my mate to tell him just as much about me as he had about himself. But that was all it was, pretend. Maybe not all of it, but most of it. I was pretty sure I got out the bit about taking a test, but the personal stuff? That had been too much between speaking and thinking. It just hadn't been a possibility as much as I wished it had.

"Morgan," I croaked, but my voice cracked and didn't go far enough to actually communicate with anyone. I tested moving my arms, pushing up until I was full-on sitting. I took deep breaths, having to calm myself to keep from falling over at the use of my muscles.

Finally, when I could sit up without feeling dizzy, I moved my legs enough that my feet touched the floor. The hardwood was

cold beneath my feet. Blood rushed throughout my body, warming up the atrophied muscles.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Morgan’s voice echoed in the room. He was at my side instantly. His hands touched my shoulder, pressing me back down to the mattress. “Goodness gracious. I leave for two hours to run a therapy session, and I find this. What were you thinking?”

“See you,” I said. My voice still was not working, and my breath came in heavy pants. It was as if I was at the end of a long chase after prey. My lungs burned.

“See me? You wanted to see me. You couldn’t have waited?”

I swallowed.

He took pity on me, putting the cup from the nightstand to my lips. The cool liquid smoothed the sharp edges of my throat. I wanted more, but drinking too much too soon would have my stomach revolting.

“Well, how does it feel now that you’re sitting?” he asked, the panic that had just been on his face fading away.

“What the hell happened to me?” I hadn’t meant for it to come out like that. It wasn’t Morgan’s fault. None of this was.

Morgan had explained something about dark magic or old magic. At least, I think he had. Had that been a dream? It was when I was still more out than in.

He pulled up the chair he had spent countless hours in and explained it all again. At least this time, I understood it, or at least understood it at a non-healer level.

“So, am I cured?” I asked. “Am I all better?” I didn’t feel all the way better, but sitting up was huge.

Morgan bit his lip, looking away.

My long hair fell in front of my face, and I attempted to push it away, but my arm didn’t quite cooperate. And since I wasn’t holding myself upright anymore, I nearly fell over. Morgan grabbed me, his strength more than I expected.

“Can you lay back down, please? You are making me nervous.” Which was fair enough because, at that point, I was making myself nervous. The last thing I needed was a face-plant on the floor.

“Will you lay with me?” I asked.

I had no right to ask that of him. He was my mate, yes, and he had acknowledged it. I knew it. But that didn’t mean I had a hold on him. He might not accept my claim. Not when I was lying broken in his home. Not when I’d already brought so much trouble his way.

I averted my gaze. “I’m sorry. I just—”

“I’ll lay with you,” he said, not even hesitating.

“You can tell me more tales of these omegas of yours. That young one that arrived recently sounds like he’s going to be a handful.”

Morgan chuckled. “So you heard all of that?”

“I think so. It’s hard to tell what’s real and what’s not. You might have to tell me again.”

“If I do that, how will I know if the test results are accurate?” He grinned, and had I not been struggling at that moment, I’d have laughed. Instead, a smile would have to do. “There’s nothing I love more than talking about my family.”

“There’s nothing I love more than hearing about you and those you care about.” I wanted to look away from his penetrating gaze, but I couldn’t. Sure, I was a big old softie as far as alphas went. I saw no need to strut and flex my muscles at every turn. I would much rather cuddle on the couch than fight any day. Not that I wouldn’t fight if I needed to. I fought to save my brother. I hoped it hadn’t been in vain.

“You’re thinking of Kian?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I know Steelwick, an enforcer pack, is looking. If your brother is out there, they will find him. I’ve been connected with them for years. They’ve saved many, many lives.”

I swallowed. “Thank you, mate. That means the world to me.” I did as my mate requested and lay back down, not only because he wanted me to but because I needed to.

He did as I requested, laying beside me, his hand on my chest. He covered half my body, the less injured half. I winced as the breath came in and out of my body. The pain was coming back now.

“The healer, Mortimer, said the pain would come and go. We think you’re through the worst of it. But we’re not certain.”

“I hope I don’t die,” I said.

“You’re not going to,” Morgan assured me.

I kissed the top of his head and breathed in his delicious scent.

“Now that I’ve found you, I refuse to leave you,” I said. “But I don’t think I have a say in that. I was pretty sure I was a goner, and I’m not convinced now that I’m completely cured.”

“Recovery takes time,” Morgan said. “I’ve seen it before.”

“Injuries such as this?” I asked.

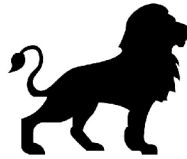
He grimaced. “Not quite, but you’d be amazed at what the body can recover from and the mind as well. We’re not giving up.”

“No,” I said. “I won’t. Not for anything. I will fight for you always, mate. But if I don’t make it, please don’t mourn me. We haven’t known each other long. It’s possible you could find a different mate or no mate at all if you didn’t want that. Just know that I would love you so very much.”

A small droplet of a tear hit my chest. “You’re going to be just fine, Gideon. I’m not letting you die.”

Chapter 6

Morgan



Gideon finally fell into a restful sleep by my side. The pain meds I'd given him earlier kicked in, and he settled into his bed. Even his lion was content now.

Seeing him sitting up and then nearly toppling over had taken years off my life, I was sure. But hearing him ask me to lay with him, that had done other things to me, things it was far too early to think about.

It was as if the initial tendrils of a mate bond had already formed between us, not only because of how my body was starting to react to his but also because when his lion settled, my leopard did as well. My human brain, on the other hand, was not feeling so settled. Everything I planned for my life, everything I'd known up until the moment I found Gideon broken and battered on my territory, was thrown through a loop, tossed sideways, and flipped upside down.

Alphas weren't allowed on Asilo territory. It was a rule, one that was there for a reason. It was on extremely rare occasions that they visited, and when they did, the rule was beyond

strict. They were not to be in places where they could accidentally cross an omega. The omegas here had been through enough, and taking out the alpha factor was the very least we could do to aid in their feeling safe and secure.

And while there were extremely rare incidences of an alpha visiting, they most certainly did not take up temporary residence, much less permanent ones. The one exception I had made was not that long ago when a friend's alpha mate had stayed the night. But he had essentially been locked in a cabin for the duration of his visit.

So what the hell did that mean for me when my life's work was here, taking care of omegas who needed me? But my life, the man who could very well be the love of my life, and most likely would be since fate rarely stood us wrong, was currently asleep in my bed, fighting for his life. I had a choice to make and both had serious consequences attached.

I couldn't abandon my mate.

I couldn't abandon Asilo.

So where the fuck did that leave me?

I left the bed where my mate slept and made my way outside to the back porch of my house. It was a small, modest cabin with only two bedrooms and quite cozy. The second bedroom was set up mostly as a guest room in case we had an overflow of omegas, which hadn't happened in quite some time, and that was a good thing.

Things were changing in our world. Omegas were treated a lot better now, thank the goddess. The preventative work that we'd done to educate packs, to show them that the ways of old were harmful in many cases, and to take a hard look at their pack dynamics really made a difference, a far greater one than we had even dreamed possible even a handful of years ago.

Sure, there were still asshole alphas out there. There were even asshole omegas out there who treated their own like chattel. The sad reality was that there would always be a need for places like Asilo to take in those who had been taken advantage of. But we weren't quite so overrun as we had been in the past. And I was grateful for that.

I pulled in a long breath, inhaling the sweet scent of the evening air. My mind still raced with possibilities, questions, and concerns that I had for the future. But they would not be answered on this night. I pushed down my pajama bottoms and pulled off my shirt, then took to my leopard form. It had been a long while since I had stretched my legs, and both my beast and I needed it.

Knowing that I could feel the calmness of my mate's lion, I let myself go for a nice run. Unlike the other omegas in the pack, I didn't stick to the designated trails. I instead weaved my way through the thickness of our forest, scenting every once in a while to make sure that no one had entered our territory. There was just us and the faint sense of Gideon still lingering where we had found him.

If I hadn't gone for a run that day, what would have happened to my dear mate? When would I have found him? He'd have been gone for sure, already with the goddess. But my beast had known that day, maybe not that our mate was there, but he knew we were needed and where. If it hadn't been for him—I refused even to entertain how different things would be.

My leopard let out a yowl of displeasure, not enjoying the what-if scenarios playing through my mind. The bottom line was that we had saved our mate, and that was what was important.

I made my way over to the pond, where one of our trails ended. There was a nice spot there where we had made a small beach. Emery taught yoga out here to the omegas we were helping to heal. So the beach was a very nice place where they could enjoy the calmness of the water. We had even installed one of those fountain things that had a calming effect when turned on. It wasn't the ocean by any means, but it was comforting and cool.

It was important for our healing to be near the water. It cleansed the soul. At least, that was how it was explained to me when I took over as forerunner. I believed it, though, and saw it in action many times over.

I leaped up onto a large boulder and lay down, overlooking the water.

Twigs snapped in the distance, and I stood upright, my eyes narrowing as I looked out into the forest.

My pride, the permanent omegas of the pack, all walked off of the trail one by one. There wasn't a lot of us, but we were solid. It was necessary to have a permanent pack here; it gave stability to Asilo. It also gave me my family.

Jasper, my lieutenant, Emery, Pol, and Thomas. One by one, they all bowed their head to me then lay down in the sand. Likely they had felt my distress through our pack bond, probably because I had shut off any of the traffic of emotion toward my mate so that he could rest. I didn't think to clamp that down between my pride mates. I knew better. Maybe a small part of me wanted them to come find me?

After a few minutes, I shifted to my human form, though I remained sitting on the rock.

The rest followed suit, taking their skin and finding a place to sit. I took a deep breath. There was a lot to discuss, more than I had realized.

"Okay," I said. "I'm sure you are all curious. I know Jasper has filled you in as much as he could about the alpha staying in my house."

"We just want to make sure that you're okay," Emery said. His past was darker than most of us, which was why he opted to stay here at Asilo and help those in need. He had no desire to return to a regular pride and try to find a mate to share his life with. Been there done that, and he had the scars to show for it.

I bristled at the idea that they felt threatened by my alpha, though I knew that was an irrational feeling. They didn't know

Gideon. Not like I did. Heck, I barely knew Gideon. But he was a good man. I could sense it.

“You’re all safe. Gideon’s nearly completely immobilized, and he would never—”

“We’re not worried for our safety,” Thomas said. “Any alpha fated to you would have to be a good one. We’re worried that you’ve taken on a lot of stress. Your mate showing up at your doorstep this way... It has to be weighing on you.”

Tears pooled in the corner of my eyes, and I shut them. “I’m scared for him,” I said, revealing emotions I didn’t want to say out loud. But I knew that it was important to speak them. I’d be a hypocrite if I didn’t practice what I preached to the omegas who came here for healing. Talking through things helped. Even if it was uncomfortable.

“Part of what you teach us in our therapy is that not everyone is like the people who abused us. We can’t paint all alphas in the same way simply because it was alphas who treated us the way they did.” This was Emery talking now, and he was accurate. I spoke of that, and often, I never wanted to diminish what people felt, but just reminding ourselves that not all alphas were the same could be powerful.

“I know that, but when omegas come here, they need time to heal,” I reminded him. Some were so newly out of the horror they had escaped from that they trembled just seeing me. They were nowhere near ready to be greeted by an alpha and surely not one the size of my mate.

“And perhaps if your alpha stayed here, he couldn’t be our leader. We wouldn’t want that anyways. But that doesn’t mean he couldn’t make a home here.” Thomas’s words surprised me.

I mean, of course, he couldn’t be leader. Forerunners were omegas. But the notion of him making a home here? That was what had me figuratively scratching my head. Was that even a possibility?

“What kind of alpha would be happy taking a back seat to his omega who was in charge?” I asked.

“A good one,” Pol said, and we all laughed.

“This Gideon came here for a reason. From what Jasper has told us, it sounds like he was going to send his brother here. He trusted us with someone he loves deeply and that was before he even met us. He knows and understands the work we do here, at least on some level. I think you should have faith that your alpha might just want to be here with all of us,” Emery said.

I sighed. “Perhaps you’re all right. But time will tell. We know it’s the waiting that sucks. The time it takes to heal, to gather all the information, to process it—” and then there was Kian. He wouldn’t stay here a second longer than necessary if his brother was still unfound. I didn’t blame him.

“We know,” Jasper said with a smile. “We’re saying take the advice that you give all of us and take it one day at a time, one hour at a time if you have to.”

I grinned. “Thank you, guys. I do appreciate that.”

We chatted a few minutes more, and then I took my fur back. I had a lot to think about after our conversation, and I needed some alone time with my beast to do so.

I hopped off the boulder, took a long sip of cool water, and then took off into the treeline to be alone with my thoughts. They made it sound so easy. Fate sent Gideon to me; therefore, he belonged by my side. They extrapolated that to mean he would want to do so being here. And maybe he would. Traditional pride life had shown him no kindness. It would make sense that Asilo might be a better fit.

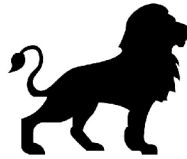
But even if that were the case, he wasn't the only one to consider. Would the omegas be accepting, or would it make what was once a safe haven now someplace people were unsure of? I wouldn't keep him hidden away the way we did alpha guests. What kind of a life would that be?

I jumped over a log.

There would be no answers today, no matter how hard I searched for them, so instead, I gave my beast full control to run as he will. And where did he take me? Right back to Gideon, of course. It was official. My beast was smarter than me, and for that, I was grateful.

Chapter 7

Gideon



The scent of maple syrup and pancakes wafted down the hallway and into my room. They had always been my favorite breakfast, not that anyone here could've known that. Had I not promised Morgan I wouldn't get up without assistance, I'd already be on my way to the source of the delicious goodness. Instead, I just stayed where I was and crossed my fingers and toes that they were for me.

Morgan had been really careful as he introduced foods back to me. After so long without eating solid food, I couldn't just jump back in and expect a welcome part in my middle. That wasn't how it worked.

The door had been left open a smidge like it always was. I wasn't sure if it was so that I didn't feel trapped or if it was so Morgan could hear me better if I needed him, but in either case, I appreciated it. It made me feel less alone, somehow.

Something about the day brought me energy, and for the first time in a while, I felt like I could almost sit up without any trouble. I used my arms to push myself to a sitting position,

then leaned against the headboard, breathing heavily just from the small movement. There was no dizziness, and nothing hurt. It just took a bit more energy than normal. So much better than the last time I tried.

For the first time since I arrived, my head wasn't overly cloudy. I was able to take in the room fully for the first time. I'd seen most of it in bits, but it was more like looking at puzzle pieces than the whole. Today it was like they were finally snapped in place.

The comforter that covered me was freshly cleaned, though it did have a hint of my mate's scent. I knew that's what Morgan was to me now. There was no second-guessing my beast or my senses. We were in agreement, and Morgan felt it too. Our conversations might still be foggy in my mind, even the one from the other day when I'd tried to get up, but they were still there, and I remembered so much. He had told me quite a bit about himself, and everything he said had me liking him more.

The room was painted a pale blue with a border at the top that was hand-painted sunflowers. They gave the room a nice touch. There was a tall dresser with various knickknacks on top of it. Everything in the room scented heavily of Morgan, and it occurred to me just then that in the time I'd spent laying there, nursing my injuries, I was putting my own mate out of a room. This wasn't a guest room at all—it was his, and he gave it up so freely.

How many times had I woken up to find him sitting in the chair next to the bed? Was my mate not sleeping comfortably

as he should be? I would ask as soon as I saw him. Maybe he had an air mattress on the floor some of the time? I hated to think of him sleeping in the chair and tried to think of a thousand other places he might have laid his weary head and came up with a whole lot of nothing.

The scent of the pancakes grew thicker, and within a few minutes, Morgan's footsteps sounded down the hallway, and he pushed open the door. He held a tray in his hands. His eyes widened when he saw me.

"You're sitting up again," he said, stepping closer to the bed.

I chuckled. "Quite a feat." Although a billion times better than the first time.

Morgan smiled. "It is worth celebrating. How do you feel?" I must look as better as I felt if he wasn't arguing with me to lay back down. I was calling that a win.

I nodded. "Not terrible, considering. Better than I have in a long time, that's for sure."

"Do you feel like eating? I thought maybe today would be the day you could eat something a bit more substantial."

"Yes, I think so." I had been mostly drinking my meals and having a few nibbles here and there. It was good to ease my stomach into it, but I was ready.

The IV drip had been removed a few days earlier, and when he came to remove it, I hadn't even been aware it was there. I'd been so focused on the places in my body that hurt that I failed to notice anything different about the places that didn't.

Morgan had been giving me protein drinks. Or that's what he called them, along with some medicine the old healer gave him. Mortimer, I think his name was. I understood the reasoning for both, but the highlights had been the crackers and the tiny bits of other food I attempted. I was so looking forward to the pancakes. My belly was ready.

"Your color. It looks good." Morgan stood closer to the bed. I was confident that good was an exaggeration, but given how much better I felt, it was probably true, relatively speaking.

"I feel pretty good." Even better now that I was sitting for a bit.

"Good. Maybe we can see about getting you out of that bed."

His words were music to my ears. Even sitting on the porch would be amazing. No. Better yet, maybe I could take a bath. That sounded absolutely delightful.

But first—breakfast.

"Of course," I said. "I finally realized I'm completely putting you out of your own room, aren't I?"

Morgan shot me a look. "Nevermind about that. I meant that we need to get you standing. Maybe get you a proper bath."

I raised a brow at that. "A proper one? Have I had any sort of bath since I've been here?"

He smiled at me. "You were unconscious a lot. Jasper and I did give you a sponge bath."

My cheeks heated. “I appreciate all you’ve done for me,” I said, pushing back the embarrassment. It wasn’t even embarrassment about my mate seeing me; it was more about Jasper seeing how weak I was, which was silly given everyone here had pretty much worked together to bring me back from the brink of death.

I was lucky to have him and his pride willing to do the things that they did for me. “Is it necessary for me to leave Asilo? I can imagine my presence here is causing distress to some.”

Morgan sat on the chair and lifted his coffee mug to his lips. “Not as much as you’d think,” he said. “I spoke with my lieutenants and some of the others that are permanent pride members. You’re welcome to say as long as you need to.”

Not forever. As long as I needed to. There was a big difference. I understood that us being mates would be a challenge, and I expected this, but still... it stung.

“Still, I don’t wish to impede your mission. Surely there are places that an alpha can go...” I refused to make his mission any harder than it was. I was fully aware of the amazing work he did. That was why I sent Kian here in the first place.

Morgan swallowed thickly. “Do you want to leave?”

My gaze met his, and I knew the question held more than just what the words said. “Absolutely not,” I said. “If it were up to me, I would never leave your side. You are my mate. Don’t think I didn’t miss that detail just because of the state I’ve been in.”

Morgan set his cup down and rested his hands in his lap.
“There’s a lot to discuss.”

“You told me about how you came to be the forerunner.”

“Yes.”

“And it is my understanding that generally, alphas don’t stay in prides like Asilo. They’re meant to be alpha-free so that omegas can heal.” As harsh as that was, I understood the reasoning.

“That has been the case in our history, yes.” Morgan rubbed his chin. “My lieutenants and I have discussed it, and we trust you.”

My eyebrows raised at that. “You don’t know me.”

“You’re my mate. Fate wouldn’t do me wrong.” Morgan squared his shoulders.

“You believe that?”

Morgan nodded. “I have to. Besides, I can see in your heart. Since the moment you came here, your only concern has been for your brother and for your old pride mates with whom you still have connections. You knew of Asilo and the work we do. You supported it, and you trusted us long before you got here.”

“I still do both support and trust you all,” I said. “You make this world a better place.”

Morgan bit his lip, and I desperately wanted to reach out and soothe the bite marks he left. I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the plump bottom lip stuck between his teeth. I must be

feeling better because all my thoughts now went to tasting his mouth.

“We want you to stay. Especially as this investigation occurs. Soon enough, we’ll hear back from Steelwick with what they have found.” Not soon enough. I was trying to be patient, but it was getting harder the better I felt.

“Do you think my brother is still out there?” I spoke in but a whisper, afraid of the answer.

“Do you?”

I nodded. “I feel it in my heart. I think that if Kian were gone, I would know. But I have to know for sure.”

“I respect that,” Morgan said. He got up then and sat on the bed with me. “You’re a good alpha, Gideon. You have a good heart.”

“I’m afraid I will scare your omegas. I might not look like it now, but standing upright, I’m a bit of a brute.”

Morgan laughed, and the bed shook. He brushed my hair back from my forehead. The length had considerably grown since I had been laying still, but it wasn’t the tangled mess I expected.

“Did you wash my hair?”

This time Morgan’s cheeks pinked. “I did and brushed it. I wasn’t sure how you’d like to wear it. So I didn’t braid it or anything.”

“I pull it back in a ponytail sometimes or a braid when I’m working in my wood shop.” And a not-so-small part of me

would have loved to have woken up with my hair braided by my mate.

“Regarding your size, Alpha, I am well aware of all of your proportions. As I said, you did get a sponge bath from me. And it was Jasper and me who carried you from the forest to here.”

My lips twitched into a smile. “I kind of wish I could have seen that.”

“It wasn’t easy considering you had a three-foot rebar pole sticking in your side.”

I flinched at his words.

My brow furrowed. I remembered the moment that they stabbed that into me, but for some reason, I had blanked out on it still being there when I arrived.

“Hey,” Morgan said, cupping my cheek in his hands. His fingertips smoothed over the wrinkle on my forehead. “I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

I wished I had the strength to lean forward and kiss him like I desperately wanted to. I wanted to hold my mate in my arms, but I did not have the strength to do so. Thankfully, he saw that need on my face and leaned forward, pressing his lips to mine.

I moaned against him.

He pulled back. “You should really eat your breakfast and get some rest.”

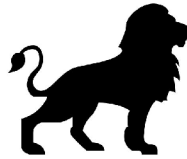
I sighed. “All I have done is rest,” I said, but I picked up my fork and obediently took a piece of my pancake. I dipped it into the syrup and lifted it to my lips.

“There’ll be time soon when you can get up and walk around. But first, food.”

It was just as delicious as it smelled.

Chapter 8

Morgan



My leopard had been content to let our mate sleep alone while he had been in our territory. We slept in the chair next to Gideon's bed or in the guest room. But something about tonight wasn't working. My leopard refused to surrender to sleep, and I had a feeling it was similar for Gideon.

I walked across the hall from the guest room to where my mate lay in my bed. He was so much better now than when he'd arrived. It wouldn't be long now, and he'd be up and running, shifting, working on new projects, or whatever he wanted to do.

The gratefulness I felt and absolute relief at having my mate alive and doing well was indescribable. I wasn't sure how I'd go on if I'd lost him. Even with so little I knew about him, I knew he was a good man, one I was honored to call mate.

Gideon shifted on the bed, not staying still. The blankets were twisted and crumpled around him.

"Having trouble sleeping?" I asked.

Gideon jumped. His hand flew out from underneath the blankets. “Morgan. I... I didn’t wake you, did I?”

The scent of his arousal was thick in the air, and my body responded in kind. I bit back a groan. My mate was a gorgeous man, and right now, his body was slick with sweat. Ever the caregiver, I touched a hand to his forehead.

“Do you feel all right? Are you hot? I don’t think your infection has returned.”

He shook his head, pulling away from my touch. “I’m fine. Just...” He cleared his throat. “I want.”

“You want...?”

His gaze met mine, and the desire I felt for him was mirrored on his face, but for me. “You. I know we can’t... I just... want.”

My gaze dipped lower to the considerable bulge tenting the blankets. “Oh,” I said. “I... I want you too, Gideon.”

Without thinking too hard about it, I trusted my leopard and Gideon’s lion not to lead us somewhere that would do my mate any harm. Slowly I pulled the blankets away, revealing the naked body of my mate. Gideon’s thick cock stood straight and proud, begging for my mouth or my ass to bring it to release. That I could do. That I wanted to do.

“Morgan, please. Don’t feel like you have to—”

“Gideon, I don’t do anything I don’t want to do. And I want this. So much. You’ll tell me if anything hurts?”

He nodded.

I pulled the t-shirt I wore as pajamas from my body and removed my sleep pants as well.

I lay down next to my mate, kissed him deeply, pulling in the taste of him so I would remember it always. My fingers trailed down his torso, mapping out his features so I knew where he was most sensitive and what areas made him gasp. His nipples were sensitive, so I brushed my thumb over them and pinched the nubs. He squirmed beneath my ministrations.

With more strength than I knew my mate possessed at the moment, he wrapped an arm around me and swung me up so that I straddled his hips. Goddess bless, he was big everywhere.

I laughed. "You've been holding out on me," I said.

He shook his head. "Never, mate. I just feel stronger, better when you are close to me."

I grinned. "Well, we're about to get as close as two people get. So, buckle up."

"Gladly."

Gideon gripped my hips, fingertips pressing into my skin with a gentle firmness I had begun to associate with my mate.

Slick seeped from my hole, and I knew it wouldn't take much for me to take his full length, thick and long as it was. I reached behind me and opened myself for him. He spent his time watching, letting his gaze wash over me like a caress. He squirmed beneath me. He wanted to move, to touch, to flip me

over and take me, but he knew his body wasn't ready for that. It was all right; we had time.

"Next time, I want this to be you," I said. "I want you to slip your fingers inside me, just like I am right now."

"Yes, mate," he groaned.

I gripped his cock, and using the slick meant to loosen me up, I stroked.

Gideon's eyes pinched closed, and he moaned. "Fuck, mate. Please. Please, I need inside you so bad."

I smiled. "This is probably my only chance to have you like this, huh?"

He shook his head. His eyes open now. "No, Morgan. You can ride me anytime you want. Hell, if you wanted to top, I'd let you. I'd love that. You're my mate. I want anything that will make you happy and bring you joy."

My cock thickened at his words. Nothing sexier than a man who puts your needs before his.

"Fuck, Gideon."

I held his cock to my hole, then sank down on it. He filled me so completely I thought my body might burst with desire for him. I met his gaze when I sank as low as I could go. His hands were on my hips now, holding me steady. The muscles in his arms flexed.

"Ride me," he commanded.

I didn't hold back. I rocked and moved, drawing his cock as deep into my aching hole as he could possibly go. His fingers dug into my skin. He wanted to move, but he knew better than to try.

"So close, baby. Can't hold back." He moaned and held my hips tight like he wanted me to slow down. Instead, I doubled down.

He gripped my cock, while I gyrated and drew his release from him.

Gideon threw his head back. His eyes pinched closed as his hips jolted ever so slightly, and my body filled with his release.

"Mark me," I asked.

Gideon pushed himself up and put one hand behind my neck. He pulled me closer, and his teeth sunk into my flesh where my neck met my shoulder.

My cock jerked, and cum splashed between us. I licked the spot on his neck where my mate mark would go, and my canines dropped. I bit down on the flesh as my mate's knot grew within me.

Gideon released my neck, and I, his. I admired the mark I left there. It would tell all others that he was taken. His scent and mine would also change, mold together in a unique blend.

Gideon sank back into the bed. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He smiled up at me, moving his hips slightly.

I hissed, and my cock came back to life. His knot pressed against my inner walls in the most delicious way.

I glared at him. “Feeling better, mate?”

He grinned. “Yes. You’ve got magic to you.”

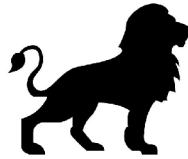
“It’s us. Together.” Slowly, I rolled us over so that I lay next him. He was on his good side now. I rubbed my fingertips over his scar from where he had been impaled. “Do you hurt at all? I didn’t come in here tonight intending for this to happen.”

He shook his head and pushed my hair behind my ear. “Not at all. I’m honored to be your mate, Morgan. I promise to cherish you always.”

I kissed his lips. “And I, you.”

Chapter 9

Gideon



For the first time since I arrived, I was allowed to leave the room that had been my sanctuary since arriving at Asilo pride just over three weeks ago. At least I was now aware of how long I'd been there. The brain fog that had days melting together had been difficult. It made the line between dreaming and reality blurred.

Oh, how much my life had changed in that three weeks. It was hard to process the highs and lows of it all. I'd never been the one who needed protection, and here I'd been, unable to even get out of bed, my injuries too severe. And being in such a situation with my brother unfound only amplified my helplessness.

And then there was the whole attacked by my former pride and left for dead part of things. I wasn't even sure how long ago that happened, even now. How pride members could turn so easily on me to the point of dark healing added a layer of horribleness to it. It was expected of Jaden; it was who I

always knew him to be, but the others? I thought better of them.

The fear in my middle, the nagging voice that said I'd never see my brother again, only grew louder as I healed. I still wasn't anywhere near strong enough to go and find him. I had to leave all my trust in Steelwick. I knew their reputation. They'd taken down packs larger and more ruthless than Highridge. I had to trust that if anyone could find and save him, it would be them.

And Morgan. Dear, sweet Morgan. How difficult it had to have been to find his mate in the condition he came upon me. By all accounts, I should be dead. And if he had come even a few hours later, I probably would have been. The torment his beast must have gone through over that. Morgan the man understood the ways of the world, including the dark sides no one should have to experience. He took his anger over the monstrosities he saw and turned it into good. I would never understand how fate thought I was worthy of this omega, but I would strive to be until my last breath, which miraculously hadn't been already.

If only I could have gotten my brother out of Highridge sooner, I could have met my fated mate simply because my brother was in the safe care of Asilo. Instead, I was in the safe care of Asilo, and Kian was... who knew where. Everything always came back to my brother, and I hated that I saw no way to fix things for him. Shit, I didn't even know where he was.

Emery looked me over as I did the stretches he indicated. I'd never had to "work out" before in any capacity. The work I did kept me strong. But I needed this. My body had all but forgotten how to work. My legs were weak, pain still radiated through me, and my coordination had taken a turn for the worse.

Emery's knowledge of our human form and animal one was impressive. He had me doing strength exercises to rebuild my muscle mass while also helping with my dexterity. I could feel the simple moves making a difference, and that only encouraged me to work harder. Exercise, especially in my side where I had been impaled by the rebar, sucked, but not doing it would suck far more in the long run.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as I held my stretch.

"Good," I said. "I feel stronger. Not quite back to normal, but better than the first day I woke up." Not even close to back to normal, but "normal" wasn't going to be "normal" ever again, and I needed to accept that.

He nodded. "You are rebounding quickly, quicker than humans, but slower than shifters."

I let out a sigh. It wasn't unexpected. Not when such horrible methods were used to harm me. And I still didn't understand the why's of that. They could have killed me on the spot, but instead, they used darkness. There had to be more of a reason for that than just being sadistic, right? Or maybe that was it. Maybe Jaden had lost his sense of right and wrong? If he ever had it.

“That’s what worries me,” I said. One of many things.

We hadn’t yet talked about the fact that the poison that had been in my system was not something the shifter world had seen in a long time. But I knew that discussion was coming. Mortimer had been on the phone with my mate numerous times, and I had been getting updates from him as they did their research. Morgan and Mortimer both seemed to be happy with how I had been improving, and with Emery’s help, I was able to stand and walk for longer periods of time. Standing wasn’t fully functioning, but it was closer than I’d been.

Now I had met several of the main members of my mate’s pride. Emery, Jasper, Pol, and Thomas all seemed to have accepted me. Though sometimes they did look at me with a bit of a questioning glance. I couldn’t tell if it was because I was still alive, and they couldn’t figure out how or if it was because I was their forerunner’s mate. In either case, it wasn’t fear or hostility, two things I initially feared.

“You know Morgan better than I do,” I said.

Emery raised an eyebrow. “Based on the bite mark on your neck and the matching one on his, I really don’t think I know him quite the same way you do.”

I smiled and touched my fingertips to the mate mark my leopard had given me. In so many ways, it had been too soon for us to mate. With me not out of the woods, it tied him to me for life, not knowing how long mine might be. Sure, things were looking promising now, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t change with the wind. There was no documentation of the

long-term effects of the poison in the doses I had. Why? Because everyone died.

“I mean that you know his mental state better than me. You’ve known him longer. How is he handling me being here and the changes and turmoil I’ve brought along with me?” I should really be asking my mate this, but out the question flew.

“Morgan is strong,” Emery said.

“I know that.” I’d witnessed it firsthand.

“He can handle just about anything we throw at him. Three years ago, we had eleven omegas delivered to us one night by an enforcer pack. They were all huddled in a van. Dirty. With countless injuries that we couldn’t even see because they would not pull apart from one another. I don’t think Morgan slept for three days as he worked through how to situate and help the omegas heal.” I hated that I lived in a world where shit like the situation Emery was describing still happened—shit, that they ever happened. I could never understand the cruelty of it.

“He keeps his cool. Definitely puts on a face for everyone but in a good way. But he also knows not to get burned out and to not be overwhelmed because then he won’t be good to anyone. Just keep being the supportive mate that you are. Don’t ask too much of him too quickly, and you will do just fine.” He said it as if it were easy as pie, but there was a lot to unpack there. And I’d make sure I did. It was the least my mate deserved.

“Thank you,” I said. “What happened to the eleven omegas?”

Emery smiled then. “After months of rehabilitation therapy and a whole lot of other care, they all found a home. Most went to the same pack, but some have gone to other places as they have found their mates or decided to establish their own home within the human world. We see that sometimes. Shifters no longer trust the shifter community, so they live as humans.”

I winced. I couldn't imagine choosing that life. But then again, I found my mate here, so of course, I wouldn't see that as a future I'd choose.

“But there was one who didn't do either of those things. Pol stayed here with us.”

“Do you think that my staying here will impede your mission?” They were too important for me to risk harming them. If I needed to live off property to make it possible, I'd figure out a way to make that happen as much as it would suck.

Emery shook his head. “We've talked a lot about it. We understand you are a woodworker or carpenter or whatever?”

“Yeah, once upon a time, after our pride leader died, the new leader didn't give me any jobs or allow me to contribute. I mostly just played in my workshop to pass the time.”

The first few days, it was a miracle I didn't get hurt as I figured out the equipment, but once I had it all sorted, I discovered that I had a way with wood and could make both beautiful and useful items without too much trouble. Plus, I loved it.

“Well, the shifter community always needs that skillset. Even if they aren’t part of a large pride, we do a lot of trading with a lot of packs. We get donations from them and other things. We can’t be quite as self-sustaining as packs like Greycastle or Northbay simply because we don’t have the numbers to support that. We might exploit your talents as a way to give back.” Exploit wasn’t the correct term, not when they had already given me so much.

I perked at that. “That would be amazing. I would love that. And I’m sure there’s work I can do here. The cabins that you all have surely require some maintenance.” So far, everything I’d seen was in really great condition, but homes need repairs over time. That’s just how it was.

“They do, and all of our skill sets are mostly around therapy. Yoga, healing the mind and body. Not so much healing our homes. Don’t worry so much about the future, Gideon. Keep resting. We will all be here for you. And Kian when we find them.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Are you about done?” Morgan asked as he came in. “I thought I might steal my mate for a little while.”

I loved it when he called me that. It was so possessive but in a sexy way. I could just sit there and listen to it all day long. I smiled as Morgan walked into the room.

Emery rolled his eyes. “Maybe I changed my mind about you staying here. If I have to stare at that lovesick face for the next decade, I’m not sure.” He let out a soft laugh.

Morgan chuckled as well. The two were close. I didn't need to be told that to see it. It made me happy that my mate had been surrounded by people who loved and respected him.

"Can he go for a walk outside?" he asked.

"Yes, please," I said, looking to Emery, knowing he was judging my physical state. It was time for me to feel the grass beneath my feet and take in the fresh air. Lately, I had been sticking my head out the window just to get a fresh sense of the forest. It wasn't the same, but it was better than nothing.

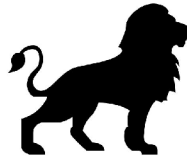
"Make it short. Stick to the path. Probably the North one since it's flatter. Turn around if you get too fatigued," he ordered.

"Can I shift?" I'd listen to him if he said I couldn't, but my beast needed to be let out.

He nodded. "It would be good to let your lion get out. He makes you stronger."

Chapter 10

Morgan



Gideon and I walked together, hand in hand, out the back door of my house and to the path that led to the woods where we could let our animals loose. At first, Gideon was slow and careful with each step, as if he couldn't quite trust himself yet. But as we got further and further away, his confidence grew, and we ended up walking at a nice yet leisurely pace.

"We should stay on the trail, like Emery said," I said. It wasn't completely flat, but the terrain was much easier to walk on than the woods.

Gideon's jaw tensed, but he nodded.

"Something on your mind, mate?" I asked.

He smiled. "It's good to be out in the open air. But it feels wrong to take a leisurely stroll while my brother is out there fighting for his life. And my former pride mates are potentially suffering under Jaden's wrath."

It was so easy for me to focus on my mate and him getting better, but Gideon didn't have that luxury. He had the

memories of those he loved and cared for pushing at him every step of his recovery, and now that things were slowing down, they were growing.

And even still, I couldn't help but notice that he called them his former pride mates. Already his lion was settling into my territory as his home. The doubtful voice in the back of my mind wondered how long that arrangement would make him happy.

There weren't many alphas out there in the world who would accept their mate being the leader of a pride. It went against everything most shifters had ever experienced or even heard of. My mate was not like those alphas who couldn't look past it, though. Or perhaps I just didn't give the others enough credit. Perhaps other packs and clans would be open to the notion if only they thought it possible.

"We talk about this a lot in our therapy groups for the omegas who come here. Many have had to leave others behind, perhaps those that—" I grimaced "—died in whatever horrors brought them to Asilo. Survivor's guilt is real and a valid way to feel."

He nodded grimly. "I feel like I should be doing more."

I touched his arm. "Steelwick is investigating. They'll have an update for us soon. I trust them very much to find the answers to all this, and you are doing everything you can by regaining your strength. You know that, right?"

"I know. And I know that if I push myself, I will overdo it and set myself back. The waiting is hard. My hope is that Kian at

least got to safety and that he's just biding his time. If he's still there..." A shudder ran through my mate. "I hope he is safe spending time with Jaden's little brother. He and Kian are close."

That did put my mind at ease. Jaden sounded like pure evil, but when a little brother was involved, the odds were good that he'd at least not be too awful to my mate's brother. Or at least I hoped so.

"Do you know much about your pride's history?"

Gideon shook his head. "I know that we were one of the original prides on this continent when shifters had to flee our home countries during the times when shifters were hunted. Our longevity has not yielded any stability, though."

Those had been really dark times in shifter history. Most packs didn't share that side of history with their young, not wanting to scare them. I felt very strongly that they should share it with all the gruesome details, age-appropriate, of course. But without knowing our history, how will future generations avoid repeating it? I didn't think it was possible.

"The old pride leader was a direct descendent of the original leader," Gideon continued. "I had only been in their house a handful of times. As far as pecking order goes in the pride, I wasn't exactly top. My size aside, I was not a fighter. I'm still not."

"You took out how many of the alphas in your pride and came out alive? I would say you've earned the title."

He chuckled. “Perhaps or maybe that was luck. However, bits and pieces of the fight have returned to me. I think... I’m pretty sure I may have killed one of his betas and severely wounded the other.” There was a sadness in his voice. He did what he needed to do to protect his brother and himself, and he felt bad about killing those who meant to do him harm. My mate was such a good man.

I squeezed his hand. “It was self-defense, Gideon.”

“I know, and I was doing it to save my brother. But it’s not easy.” He squeezed my hand back.

“It is not. If it helps, you can talk with Jasper or me about it. We’ve been told we are good listening ears and well... this is what we specialize in.” I didn’t want my mate to think I was trying to fix him, but also I wanted to open the doors to any services he might need. It was a balancing act, and I wasn’t sure which way was best.

Gideon leaned over and kissed my cheek. “I’m lucky to have found you, mate. And I’ll never forget that.”

My heart warmed. “Thank you for saying that.”

“It’s the truth.”

We walked for a little while longer. Gideon’s energy level seemed to be good, but he was moving slower than I was. I kept pace with him.

“Anyway, I’ve only been in the alpha’s house a handful of times and only one time in his office when I requested to build an addition to my workshop. He had a lot of papers. Old

papers. The whole office smelled of old papers.” Gideon wrinkled his nose at the memory. “I guess that’s the best way I can describe it. Many of them look like handwritten journals. Leather bound with ties, not like the bound books you see today.”

“What were they?” I asked, the path curving slightly.

“Pride histories,” he said when he had seen me glancing at him. “I didn’t think then to ask why they weren’t digitized like most other shifter histories were nowadays.”

I’d normally have assumed it was out of pure laziness, but after discovering the poison, I was skeptical.

“Perhaps it was because he wanted to keep the information from the council?” Or they were too old-fashioned. Both were possible, but given what they had done to my mate, using weapons they shouldn’t have even known about in the first place, I suspected it was the first—hiding things from the council.

“Hard telling.”

I couldn’t get a good read on my mate and what he meant by that. Was he serious in that he couldn’t tell, or was he being noncommittal as he continued to try to work this situation out?

“Steelwick will find out which. But we may have to let them know what you know.” Or maybe we needed to just stay out of their way. Steelwick earned the reputation they had. “Do you want to try shifting today?”

I needed to but I would wait if he wasn't ready. My beast wanted out, sure. I wasn't going to put his needs ahead of my mate, though. He came first... always. So my animal could chill his ass and wait.

Gideon and I were only about a quarter of the way through the loop that would bring us back around to my house, and already my mate was slowing down. I didn't sense any pain, just being worn out, and it made sense. He hadn't really moved at all for so long. And pairing that with an injury, it would be a while before he would be back to his old self, if ever.

"I think so." He stopped in his tracks. "Emery said that I am ready, or at least I should be."

Being physically ready wasn't the same as it being a good idea. His beast had been trapped for a long time as he recovered. He could easily use the shift as a way to gain some freedom, effectively pushing my mate down.

"Think so, or you are?" I wanted him to be sure.

"I am. I'm more than ready."

"Great." I pulled my t-shirt over my head, then pushed down the joggers I wore and tossed my clothes off the side of the trail. They would be safe there or not. It didn't matter. No animal would mess with them, and if one of the omega guests felt the need to take them, then they officially needed it more than me, and they could have them.

Gideon groaned as he looked at me. "How do you expect me to concentrate on shifting when you have disrobed in front of

me?”

I laughed. “Think about something else.” Although now that he brought it up, I couldn’t think of anything other than seeing his naked self. My stupid cock was already filling. Maybe this wasn’t the best of ideas.

“With your gorgeous ass in front of me? How do you expect me to do that?”

I focused on bringing forth my leopard form. Once I was on all four paws, I looked at him. “How about now?” I tried to convey my thoughts with my body language.

He grinned. “You’re beautiful. In both forms.”

Gideon slowly but carefully pushed down the sweatpants he had on and shucked the t-shirt. The wound on his side had closed but was still an angry red. I suspected it wouldn’t take much for it to open again, and I hated it

I watched as he dropped the shirt to the ground. The wound seemed to pull every time he moved. The skin was a bit tighter than it should be, or maybe it was just not as flexible as it should be. In any case, it was painful to watch, and I was sure more so to experience.

“It doesn’t hurt so much these days. I promise.” Then he closed his eyes, and his lion was there.

I wanted to believe him, but seeing it, I had my doubts. I didn’t think he was lying, just that after long bouts of the torturous pain he’d been experiencing would have even severe pain feeling not so bad. Pain was relative like that.

His tail was moving, and I took a step back just so I could take all of him in. He was absolutely massive in his human form and in his animal one as well. No one would see him in the wild and not know he wasn't a normal lion. If anything, they might think he was in their imagination. No lion stood that tall; only my lion did, and he was glorious.

Gideon was both taller than me and broader than me, just all around massive. I bet if he opened his mouth, I could fit my whole head inside. I wasn't tiny, either. I'd been told more than once in my lifetime that my beast looked more like an alpha than an omega. Being a teen, that sucked. But now, I took it as a misguided compliment of my perceived strength.

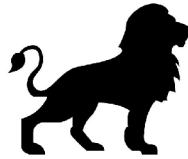
Gideon stretched in his fur, and that's when I saw the scar on his side. It seemed that it was going to be stuck with him no matter what form he was in. That wasn't common. In fact, I couldn't remember ever seeing anything like that. Fucking poison.

I nuzzled into his mane, pulling in the scent of him, making sure that my leopard was wrapped in it.

Then we were off, trailing on the path. He followed along with me. Every so often, he would bat at my tail, and I had to turn around and give him a playful hiss. Never before could I remember a time that was so enjoyable. Even if we were in the midst of turmoil, at least we could find comfort in these moments together.

Chapter 11

Gideon



Since being able to go outside with my mate and being able to move around and do my exercises with Emery, it was as if my stir craziness grew exponentially. The more I could and did do, the more I longed to use that newfound strength to fix the mess that was my past life. Add not feeling like I had a purpose to the mix, and I was not in the best frame of mind.

My mate was an important member of the pride, and he was busy each and every day. I was proud of him, and he did amazing work. I would never want that taken from him. Too many omegas needed him.

A lot of the time, it seemed as if I only saw him briefly for breakfast and then again at dinner. The two of us crashed early in his bed, our bed. I was thankful that he was able to sleep in there with me now that I wasn't hogging the entire space. There was something so comforting about sleeping next to our mate.

We didn't have as much time together as I would have liked, but it was only that way because the time was moving at a

snail's pace when he was away from me. And really, was it possible for us to spend as much time together as I wanted? I doubted it. Because if I had my way, we would be together all the time.

I desperately needed something, anything to keep me busy while I anxiously awaited news about Highridge from Steelwick. I trusted the process. Really I did. But that didn't mean I was cool sitting back and just waiting nonchalantly for news. I wasn't. If anything, my inability to feel settled made it nearly impossible to do that, even for only a few hours—heck, one.

Resting and relaxing weren't cutting it as a to-do list item. Did I need it? Begrudgingly, I admitted I did to my mate when a day was particularly rough on me. There were only so many times I could tidy up my mate's cabin. Our cabin. I needed a real purpose, and there weren't enough things to do at home to keep me busy and feeling productive. Not even close.

It was looking more and more likely with each passing day that this would be our permanent home. I was perfectly happy with that. Morgan's pride mates had accepted me wholeheartedly, and even when I caught sight of the other omegas through the window or the rare times that I was outside, they seemed accepting of me as well. News had spread about our mating, and people were pleased.

It probably didn't hurt that the omegas had been made fully aware of my unfortunate circumstances. I came here every bit as broken as they had. That was a lie. I was significantly more

damaged. I suspected that was a large portion of the reason why they hadn't rebelled about my presence.

I had just finished up my physical therapy for the day when the old outbuilding that I had never seen anyone use caught my eye. No part of me loved my PT, but I understood that I would never get back to full strength without it.

At this point, I'd have been getting up to half-strength. Baby steps.

I grabbed my phone. Morgan had made sure I got a new number so I was able to keep in contact with him and everyone else. Eventually, I would need to get my brother's number and Cooper's so I could get in touch with them. As far as I knew, no one had been able to get hold of Cooper since I'd been attacked. Not the council, not Steelwick, not me.

"What is in the old outbuilding just behind the house?" I asked.

It was a few minutes before my mate texted me back.

"That thing? We've never used it for anything. Ozzy, from Greycoast, put some of his old tools in there because we had room, and he didn't. And he thought we might benefit from them. At some point, we were going to set up a basic tools course for the omegas, but then he got pregnant."

"Can I go in there?" It was odd to have to ask my mate for permission, but this was his territory, and I was still learning the boundaries for myself as the only alpha. If Morgan would prefer me not to go places, I would respect his wishes.

And it wasn't just him I was referring to. If I so much as heard half of a rumor that my presence on pride lands was making another person uncomfortable, I'd be out of here.

Eventually, I would need to build my own space so I could have my wood shop. I wasn't even sure what people wanted to buy. I could make cutesy things or practical. The sky was the limit if I had the right tools.

"Of course. Have at it," my mate replied.

I grabbed a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Morgan had ordered me new clothes, thankfully. I was getting a bit tired of wearing sweats 24/7. Morgan said he liked me in the sweatpants. I preferred something a little more sturdy, although with my side still being a festering pain in the ass, sometimes sweatpants were a nice change.

I crossed the lawn from my home to the outbuilding quickly. I opened the shed door, felt around the wall for a light switch, and finally found one. Only one very dim light came on, but it was enough to illuminate the space. Thankfully with my cat eyes, I could see pretty well in the dark.

There were no windows on the building, just one main door and one sliding door. I didn't wish to call attention to whatever I would be doing in here, so I kept the sliding door closed but kept the main door open to let in more light. It looked as if someone had done a haphazard job of trying to organize the space. There was some lumber piled in one area and a workshop table set up with various tools off to one side.

Everything else was covered in layers of dust. The area had been a catch-all for things, and I tripped over a few of them.

There was some space to move around, but not a whole lot. All it needed was a good cleaning, and with the tools I had here, there was a lot I could do to keep my hands busy. I thought about the “good cleaning” and all that would entail. It was doable, and goddess knew I had the time lately.

Once it was cleaned up, would it be productive for the pride? I didn't know, but it was better than sitting around. If nothing else, I could learn to make toys or something for the omegas' kids who were housed with Asilo.

I got to work moving things out of the way and eventually found a few workshop lamps and turned them on. The difference the additional lights contributed was mind-boggling. It was then that I took the space fully in for the first time. The space was set up nicely with storage areas and plenty of table space to work on.

Time quickly passed as I worked and worked. I tried not to overdo it, but the excitement of what I discovered and the possibilities over what I could do with it had my adrenaline running high.

I was out there for quite a while before my hair stood on end and my lion let me know someone was there with me. My nose twitched, and I turned to find a wolf. He was not a member of the pride, nor was he any of the visiting omegas, but he was an omega. His belly was round with child, and he

had another toddler, maybe four years old, strapped to his back.

“Hello,” I said. They were clearly not a threat, but that didn’t mean they didn’t still have me on high alert.

“Who the heck are you?” he asked. So much for a friendly interaction.

“Who are you?” I asked, not wanting to give too much away, given I was the one who lived here.

“I asked you first.” He stared at me as if daring me to test him.

“I know for certain that you’re not a member of this pride.”

“Is that so?” I said.

“It is, so I would think it would make sense for you to tell me who you are.” He was protective. I liked that. But also, he was being a pain in the ass. And honestly, I kind of liked that too. It made the day far less boring than it had started out to be.

I grinned. “This is my territory.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh, is it now? I know for a fact that you’re not a part of this pride. At least I think I do...” his nose twitched. “Your scent of Morgan. It has been a while since I visited.”

“Who are you?” I asked again.

“Ozzy from Greycoast.”

My shoulders loosened. “Oh,” I said. I let out of breath. “I’m Gideon. Morgan’s mate. I know who you are.” He was the one

who had left these tools here. We had woodworking in common.

I held out a hand, and he tentatively shook it. He wasn't scared of me. If he were, he wouldn't have let his young be this close to me. But he still didn't know quite what to make of me, especially given I was sort of messing with his shit.

"Morgan's mated?" He looked me up and down. "Goodness. I am out of the loop. Either that or someone told me, and I forgot. Pregnancy brain will do that to you." He rubbed a hand over his belly.

"You're Ozzy who does the woodworking, right?"

He nodded.

"Yeah, I just came here to drop off a bed and a desk for the new cabin that Asilo is outfitting," he explained. "I had it finished up, and I'm running out of space in my workshop."

He was very pregnant and still making and delivering furniture, all while he had a young one running around. Impressive.

"Really?" I said. "Was Morgan expecting you?"

He shook his head. "I sort of came here on a whim. I needed to get out of the house. I should have contacted him first."

"No, no, it's fine." I couldn't imagine he'd be upset with a friend stopping by with supplies the pride needed. "We're happy to have you and thankful for the furniture."

“What are you doing out here?” he asked. “How are you on this territory?”

I knew that Greycost was a friendly pack that we trusted, so I filled him in as best I could without going into too many details about the investigation into Highridge. He mostly listened but did ask a few questions for clarity, especially when it came to how things were in my old pack. I knew he had initially come from a decent pack, but his birth pack had quite a few members who had sought refuge there. Ozzy understood the horrors of a bad pack, even if he'd never been part of one. His empathy shined through as I talked of my brother. I appreciated it more than he could know.

When I finished, he let out a low whistle.

“Damn,” he said. “So you’re trying to keep yourself occupied doing some woodworking.”

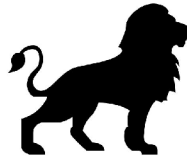
I nodded. “I mill all the wood for Highridge, or I did. I used to make a lot of the furniture there too. I like it and am good at it. It made me feel like a valuable part of the pack when I had no official purpose.”

Ozzy eyed me up and down and smiled broadly. “You know, I might just have a plan for you.”

A throat cleared, and both of us swung around to find my mate standing in the doorway, arms crossed. Anger rolled off him in waves. That wasn't good. Maybe he wasn't too keen on having a friend stop by after all.

Chapter 12

Morgan



I was not a jealous person. At least I'd never considered myself one. If someone had hinted that I was the type, I'd have brushed them off. I wasn't that kind of omega.

Except apparently, I was.

Never before had seeing any partner of mine interacting with another person driven me into any sort of rage or even discomfort. I'd had relationships before while growing up in the pride that I had. None of them were my fated mate, of course, but still, I had cared very deeply for some of them. Not once had this feeling stirring in my belly arisen for them.

I prided myself on being a level-headed individual. Heck, I taught others how to manage their behaviors to make their lives more peaceful. But then I see my mate talking to my friend, who is not only mated but with child, and my emotions run away from me. There was something about seeing my mate interact with another omega that flared up a jealousy inside me that I did not recognize.

And I hated it.

Ozzy was a friend of mine, and he deserved so much better than my ire. He'd visited our pride on numerous occasions. He built all the furniture we relied on inside and outside our homes. He was an amazing person, and still, there I was, ready to challenge him for my mate. It was a mess.

Gideon smiled when he saw me. Then he seemed to scent the air and sense my distress. He instantly came over to my side and pulled me into his arms. I relaxed the second he wrapped his arms around me.

Of course, it was irrational for me to be upset that my mate was talking to someone else. Cognitively I knew this. But sometimes you can't help how you feel, and sadly this was one of those moments. I couldn't keep him locked up in my home forever. Perhaps it was just the lingering threat of his old pride that had me so on edge.

"Hey, Morgan," Ozzy said. "I came to drop off the new beds. When I saw the door opened out here, I thought maybe someone was looking to get this area cleaned out, and I would have to move all my old tools."

I grinned. Ozzy was my friend, and he was happily mated with many children. So, of course, he wasn't setting his sights on my mate. How ridiculous of me.

"No, they're pretty safe here," I assured him.

"Yeah, I was just talking with your mate." He broke into a huge smile. "Congratulations, by the way."

“Thank you,” I said.

Gideon kissed the top of my head.

“Seems he has an affinity for woodworking, similar to me. Y’all are welcome to use any of the tools I have here. That was what their intention was, to begin with,” Ozzy said.

“Great,” I said. I look to my mate. He was smiling widely.

“It’ll be nice to get out and be productive, to feel useful again.” Gideon was already eyeing the tools. I appreciated Ozzy’s generosity when it came to them.

“You’re still healing, love,” I said. “You can’t push it.”

He nodded. “I know I am. I will take it slow.”

I believed he would, but I’d have felt horrible not saying something and having him get hurt. He was quite the good patient, better than some of the others I had had in my pride before. Better than I would have been, for that matter.

“Pretty soon, you won’t even need me to deliver new furniture.” Ozzy chuckled, and he was most likely right.

That wasn’t a bad way to think of things, I loved Ozzy’s work, but if my mate was capable and we could have it done here, that would provide something for him to do as well.

“So my mate is in town, waiting for me to come back so we can enjoy lunch together.”

I felt bad that his mate wasn’t welcome here, but it was how we kept the space feeling safe for the omegas in our care. Had Gideon not been my mate, he wouldn’t be here, for sure. And

even now, it had taken some really serious thought and conversation to allow him access to more of the pride lands than just the house.

“Ya’ll can come along if you don’t mind a few screaming kids with us.”

I’d not experienced his kids being anything but well-behaved. I wasn’t under the delusion that he had perfect kids, but they were surely not going to be the reason I didn’t do something social with him.

“They do pretty well at the restaurants, but depending on their mood, that can change in an instant.”

“I’d love to go,” I said. “Gideon, are you sure you’re up to it?”

He nodded. “You may have to drive, and I might fall asleep in the car, but it would be nice to get out and see the area. I need to familiarize myself with my new territory. And maybe they will even have fries.”

Of course, my mate was feeling a little out of sorts, having never stepped foot outside my house until recently and, from the looks of things, doing a bit more than he should have as far as working. But if french fries he wanted, french fries he was getting.

“Of course,” I said.

We worked on unloading the brand-new bunk beds that Ozzy had built for us. He kept trying to help, but we were having none of that. If I’d had my way, Gideon wouldn’t be helping

either, but he was stubborn, and I wasn't his parent. Pushing would've only caused stress between us, and who needs that?

The furniture would work perfectly in the new cabin we had built for any guests we had staying long term. We had three levels of residences: those that were for permanent members of the pack, like my home or Jasper's. Then we had cabins for people who were staying a short time—those who needed to heal for a few days or have just a rest stop between travels. And then there were the longer-term homes that groups of omegas stayed in when they were here. They allowed for accommodations of their children as well as themselves and came equipped with their own kitchens and everything that a home would need.

Many times we needed to double up on people, though, and bunk beds or smaller twin beds were ideal for those situations. We had just recently built a new cabin, and we were in the process of furnishing it. It wasn't enough, but it was a start.

Pretty soon, we were on the road toward the diner in town. It was owned by an Otter shifter who was friendly to the pride and, as a bonus, was an amazing cook. I didn't think he knew what our pride did exactly, but he knew we existed here and always treated us well. He was nothing but friendly to shifters and humans alike, and it made his place a pretty popular establishment.

The otter and his wife ran the place. He was mated to a human, which was not common in the shifter community. And his bevy had kicked him out years ago because of it. He didn't

seem to mind. He had carved a place out for himself here and spent his days side-by-side with his mate.

Ozzy's mate Kade was already there with their two older children, Zoey and Dylan, named after Ozzy's brother. Gideon introduced himself and shook hands with the other alpha. Kade's eyes widened when he saw Gideon standing upright, and he took in his size.

"Damn," he said. "They build those lion prides differently, don't they?"

Gideon chuckled. "I suppose so. My brother, he's an omega. He doesn't quite have the bulk I do, but he's still six-three."

Kade let out a whistle. "Ozzy mentioned there was an alpha on Asilo territory. I was surprised to hear it." As he should be. It didn't happen, and yet it did.

"It's a long story," I said. "One, unfortunately, we can't share too much about." I looked around the room, and he nodded in understanding.

It was one thing to have a shifter's human mate hearing us talk all things shifters. It was quite another to have random humans picking up on shifter business.

"But congratulations are in order, though," Kade said.

I couldn't help but smile because, despite the scary situation of having my mate in danger, I was still happy to have found him. I loved him, and my life was infinitely better for having him in it.

"Thank you," we both said.

“Gideon is a woodworker just like me,” Ozzy started in, his voice showing how excited he was about the whole situation, “And I’m thinking...”

Kade smirked at his mate, and he helped unbuckle their middle child from the carrier. The oldest sat at the table already, playing on a tablet. They were adorable, and I found myself imagining what it would be like to have kids with my mate.

“Oh, yeah? What are you thinking in that busy brain of yours?” Kade sing-songed, not for his mate’s benefit, but for his youngest child. He was a good father. I already knew this, but seeing it in action never failed to make me smile.

“Well, I’ve had to say no to quite a few furniture requests recently because the kids are getting older, and there’s always the possibility we’ll add more to our little family even after this one.” Of course, he was already thinking about more kids when he was still pregnant.

Kade narrowed his eyes. “Is that so?”

“Oh, hush.” Ozzy rolled his eyes. “You know, we want to have at least six.”

We all laughed along with that. Though I doubted he was joking. Six felt like a lot, but then again, I supposed when you had your first, that felt like a lot too.

“Gideon will need something to keep his hands busy. Maybe we can find a way to have him do some of the commission’s that I would normally take. If he wants to.” He hadn’t seen any of Gideon’s work yet; he was offering this all based on trust.

“We’d have to find a way to transport back and forth since we wouldn’t want anyone visiting Asilo territory unnecessarily.”

“Absolutely. But it could work,” I said.

“We would need to expand the shop,” Gideon noted.

Or, at the very least, make sure it wasn’t the catch-all for all the things the pack might possibly someday use despite not having used it in the past five-to-ten years or so.

“Perhaps we could even explore the idea of having some of the omegas learn the trade as well,” Gideon said.

I loved the idea in theory, but it was one thing to have Gideon on pride lands and have the guests feeling safe enough not to mind and quite another to have them comfortable with him teaching classes.

I nodded, smiling at my mate. We’d figure it out. There was absolutely no reason to bite off trouble where there currently wasn’t any.

“Many of them come from quite sheltered lifestyles. All they know is kitchen work,” I said. It was an all too common tale: Omegas were good for cooking, cleaning, and having babies. It didn’t matter what they wanted out of life. “Having a skill like woodworking, understanding the tools, it’d be great for them.”

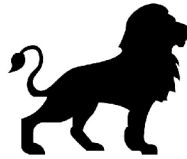
“Absolutely,” Gideon agreed, and he squeezed my hand. “You don’t think I would scare them?”

“No love. I’m sure they won’t be scared.” At least not after some time passes. Possibly the first lesson offered would start

with some trepidation, but after that, I had faith they would feel at ease and be excited by all the doors a skill like this would open for them.

Chapter 13

Gideon



Having a purpose within my new home helped to alleviate the stress of the unknown. So each morning, when my mate got started with his work day by taking care of the omegas in his care, I set to work in the woodshop.

I kept a running list of the improvements I could make to the building itself, as well as additional building tools and other things that I could perhaps get to make it possible for me to accomplish more around the pride. My wishlist was far bigger than my budget, which was pretty much non-existent. That was okay. It gave me goals to work up to, especially if I could turn this into an income stream for the pride the way Ozzy did for his pack.

Meeting Ozzy and his family really opened my eyes to the possibilities of what my skills could actually bring to the pride. I'd never be able to help the omegas, not in the way the other members did. But making things, fixing things, and bringing in some income? That I could do.

If I ever had access to my old wood shop on my old pack, it would be nice to move my tools from there. I had spent years collecting them and hated that they could easily have been destroyed in one of my ex-pride alpha's rage. The worst part was that some of them weren't replaceable. I loved a good modern invention that made my work easier, but sometimes it was the antique pieces that truly made a piece of furniture all it could be.

The longer I sat with my memories of my old workshop, the more I thought about the *what-ifs* of Jaden. Just envisioning him destroying the collection for no other reason than a big old fuck you to me had a huge ball forming in my belly. I remembered that he and his cronies had sent a torch through one of my windows, and something had caught fire that night. Had my house burned? Probably. He was so filled with hatred that he'd destroy valuable pride property. What kind of a fucking leader was that.

In retrospect, he probably thought he was killing my brother without having to do any real work. Or maybe he assumed it would have my brother fleeing, giving them the chase they loved. I didn't even know, but I knew the most important thing of all: Kian was gone before the fire got out of control. Of that, I was confident.

I wished I could recall more about that night. Some things came back in bits and pieces, but the order was still hazy, and so many pockets of time were gone. For instance, how the heck did I even get here? I was so broken they had to carry me from where they found me to get treatment. I couldn't have

walked there, could I? They say that high adrenaline moments gave you superhuman or in this case, super shifter strength, so I guess it was possible.

I wished with all my being that I had sent Kian to safety long before the problem had escalated that far. I couldn't change the past and had to keep reminding myself that I did the best I could at the time. But being aware of that didn't make me any less guilt-ridden and worried.

It had been almost a month now since I had arrived at Asilo. Two weeks since I had claimed my mate. Not a night passed that the two of us didn't share a bed or more. And not a single night went by since I was conscious that I didn't dream about my brother. It was such an odd thing having both the best and worst things that ever happened to me to be in succession like that.

I had cleaned the wood shop out, so I now had an open space to work with my materials and to have my beast less irked about the stale, dusty scent. I even had a small desk in the corner once I rearranged things. Woodworking wasn't an office kind of task, but it was great to have a place to sketch out plans for future projects like I was doing now.

My mate's home, though perfect for the two of us, left much to be desired by way of adding to our little family. We hadn't officially discussed having children, but I saw the way he looked at Ozzy's growing family with longing. I recognized it because I had the same one in my own eyes. My big worry, the one I hadn't shared yet with anyone, not even my mate, had

been that maybe the poison made it impossible for me to give Morgan a family. Lately, there had been some hints that it was not the case, and that was what had my butt in gear.

Morgan's, now our home, had his office space in the guest bedroom, as well as a guest bed. I wanted him to continue to have that space. He used that office daily, and while I was sure he'd give it up without question for our young, I didn't want him to have to. And that was what had me sitting down to sketch now. If I could build an addition with a bedroom, it would be the best all the way around.

Isuspected, though I hadn't confirmed it, that my mate was with child. His scent had altered ever so slightly, though he remained symptom-free. I didn't have a ton of experience around pregnant omegas, but I knew the condition came with morning sickness and other interesting things in the early days, including sheer exhaustion. But even if I was wrong, being prepared for when it did happen never hurt.

In addition to sketching out another room for our home, I had other sketches I hadn't yet shown my mate. A cradle, some toys. There were other things I planned on making for the little ones that were here with their omega parents who had fled to safety. I had far more ideas than I had time and putting them all down on paper saved the ideas for when I could get to them. I still didn't trust my memory to keep all my notions in order, not since I was hurt.

Did I need to make toys? Probably not. We had plenty of secondhand toys donated to us by other packs or prides, but

there was something special and more personal about handmade toys. It was like getting a hug, and one thing was for sure, most of the kids who came here needed that. I'd already begun building blocks and other play toys for the children who were here. It worked twofold by keeping me busy but also helping the omegas to trust me. Best of all, it spread sunshine into the children's days.

I was just wrapping up for the day when my phone rang. It was my mate calling me, and I answered it right away.

"Are you home early?" I asked.

"Sort of," he said. "I wanted to give you a heads up that Steelwick will be here soon. They have news."

"Of Highridge?" I said, pushing myself to stand. My energy levels had returned almost back to normal during my recovery. There were some instances when I surprised myself with how tired I would get, but my animal was back in full force. My wound healed completely, though an ugly scar remained and always would.

"I don't believe they have news of your brother. But they do have news of Highridge, and they want to share it with us."

Disappointment flooded me. More than anything, I longed for them to say my brother was with them, that he was on his way here and happy as could be. But that wasn't the case, and I hated it.

"Okay," I said, forcing myself to calm down. Not having news of my brother wasn't necessarily a bad thing. No news was

good news, or so the saying went.

Hopefully, they at least had a plan for taking care of Jaden and what he had done to Highridge. I wasn't one of those shifters who were bloodthirsty, who believed in the laws of old where punishments were death and challenges ran rampant. But in this case, I'd have welcomed news of his death. He was too dangerous for the pack and not just my immediate family, either. There were other omegas and even alphas there who were innocent and needed to get to safety.

I sucked in a deep breath, forcing myself to remember that they were looking for Kian and that if anyone could find him and bring him here safely, it would be them.

"I'll be there shortly," I said. "I just need to put away a few things." And time to pull myself together. My mate didn't need the extra pressure of seeing me upset over something neither of us could control. He had enough on his plate.

"All right, mate. I'll be there too." His voice held a tinge of concern, and I couldn't tell if it was for me or the visit—possibly both.

"Thank you," I said and slipped my phone into my pocket.

I felt as if I had brought nothing but stress and heartache to Morgan's pride. And despite that, he and his omegas were nothing but supportive of me and the troubles I brought to their door. They accepted me with open arms even before they knew who I was or if I perhaps deserved what had happened to me.

It didn't take long for me to put away my papers and make my way back to the house. I waved at the little children who played on the swing set behind the cabins. It wasn't always that way. They used to hide from me, and I completely understood why. I loved that they no longer had any trepidation when it came to me.

The swing set was another something I thought could use a bit of updating. They had a simple swing set but not anything more. Shifter kids needed more. They needed to climb and jump and twirl around. It strengthened their beasts and their connections to them in a way other activities couldn't. It was one of the reasons why human schools weren't ideal for them. A fifteen-minute recess just didn't cut it.

I added that to my mental list of things to do. I'd put it near the top in the morning. A pack that invests in their children is a pack that understands their priorities. Even without a ton of money, I could make their play area more suited to their needs.

We didn't have anything by way of dinner in the house, at least not prepared, so I got started on preparing a few sandwiches. Guests deserved better than some bread and meat, but it was what we had that I could get together quickly enough. I didn't know if Steelwick would be hungry when they got here or if they had stopped along the way to grab a meal. Either way, they would see that we attempted to welcome them the way they deserved to be treated, and that mattered to me.

I was sure hungry right then, but the anticipation roiling through my middle shut that feeling down tight quickly.

The sandwiches were just about ready when Morgan came in. He helped me finish up, thanking me for making a start and chatting about little details of the food that didn't matter. He was nervous about what Steelwick would have to say and putting on a good game face.

Not too long after that, the sound of Steelwick's motorcycles sounded off in the distance. Morgan had made sure that the omegas staying with us knew we were having guests and that they were safe, also telling them that, for their comfort, he understood if they stayed out of sight. They would have anyway, but Morgan was a firm believer in giving them "permission" in cases that set them at ease.

Morgan met them at the door. Marcus and Saunders were back, but they brought with them Armand, their alpha-elect, Syman, and Baxter. The amount of strength in our small home was undeniable. Marcus introduced us all, and then we sat around the table, munched together, and ate sandwiches as Marcus filled us in.

Marcus was the unofficial point of contact with Asilo. The shifters here were comfortable with him in a way they wouldn't be with the alpha bear.

"I apologize for not letting you know it would be all of us," Marcus said, "We were on our way back and felt it best to let you know what we know right away."

I appreciated that. Every second without news wore on me.

“Highridge is not the pack it once was, not that they had ever been role model worthy. But they have been getting into some really bad shit, illegal not only by shifter law but also by the laws of humans.”

“I didn’t know.” I thought Jaden had been shitty and horrible at his job, a shifter on a power trip. Not once had I considered he might be participating in activities that brought the pack into danger from the outside, the way breaking human laws did.

“I’m not sure even all of the betas know,” Armand said. “But the situation is serious enough that we need to go in and take them down.”

I was itching to ask what they had gotten their paws into but understood that sometimes having information like that put you at risk, and in this case, it would affect my mate and his pride as well as our guests. Scratching my nosy curiosity simply wasn’t worth it. They would tell us what we did and did not need to know. Of that, I was sure.

“We never suspected you knew. But we are here not only to tell you that we need to take them down but to ask for your help in doing so,” Armand said. “It is a big ask, and we wouldn’t even broach it if it weren’t necessary.”

“What do you need from me?” Not helping wasn’t an option. Not when they so clearly needed me. They wouldn’t have asked otherwise. Marcus and Saunders had seen firsthand how bad things had been for me.

“We have a plan, but we need someone who knows both the layout of the pride lands and Jaden’s routines and habits,” Marcus said and then continued to tell me what they would require from me, explaining the risks and assuring me that I was under no obligation to say yes.

I did, of course. Anything I could do to stop Jaden, I would. It was only right.

“One last thing,” Saunders pulled out a photograph. “We were hoping you could identify the omegas in this picture.”

My stomach dropped when I saw not only my brother but his bestie, who happened to be Jaden’s brother, Maddox, along with other omegas from the pack.

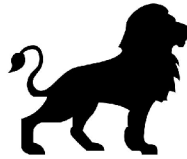
“This is my brother, Kian.” I placed my finger on the photograph. “I thought you didn’t find him.”

“We haven’t. We just managed to get this photograph and wanted to be sure that we knew who all the omegas were so we could protect them when we went in.”

I pointed out each one, the glimmer of hope that sprung when I saw Kian’s face extinguished. He’d been there the whole time.

Chapter 14

Morgan



I stood in the kitchen, scrubbing the same dish over and over again, staring out the window at the woodshed where my mate was spending a lot of his time these days. I was more than thankful that he had a passion for something and that it kept him busy and also had the benefit of providing for the pride. I saw his healing progress so much more quickly after he found it.

Knowing he was doing meaningful work and that he found joy in it told me we could just continue on with that cycle. He wasn't one of those alphas who needed to feel in charge or only do certain types of work. Had he been, I doubted we would've been able to stay here, and I wasn't sure I could survive that. Being the forerunner was my purpose.

Working with my omegas and helping them heal was what I was born to do. And with Gideon, his skill manifested in the form of beautiful pieces of furniture and toys for our pride children. He also showed the omegas that not all alphas were

abusive shits. Between the two of us, this was, without a doubt, where we belonged.

The two of us had talked about him eventually teaching the omegas how to build their own things. Woodworking could be as little as something they tried once and never wanted to do again or a hobby all the way to a career for them. I'd not been about to do something like that as part of their refuge before Gideon came here. My mate made Asilo a better place.

This life we were leading was a perfect, beautiful existence. So peaceful, such a sharp contrast compared to the lives most of these omegas once lived.

If only we didn't have so much hanging over us. Gideon had his mission, the one he was going to assist Steelwick with coming up soon, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't terrify me. It did. But it was also necessary. Not only did my mate have information that could help Steelwick accomplish their end, but Gideon also had his brother out there. He'd never forgive himself if he could've helped save his brother but didn't because it wasn't safe or he had a rocking horse to finish that he thought was more important. No, he had to go as much as it worried me to bits.

I let out a long sigh and finally placed the plate I had scrubbed so incredibly clean in the strainer. Gideon came into the room, his hair wet from the shower. He wore only a pair of slip-on lounge pants and nothing else. My mouth watered at the sight of him. But now was not the time to get too excited about my mate.

He raised a brow. “I scent a lot of things coming from you, mate.”

“I’m worried,” I admitted.

He nodded. “That is understandable. And I don’t wish to worry you, but you know I have to do this, right? You understand?”

I turned and faced him, wiping my wet hands on a towel and then tossing that to the counter. I wanted to choose my words wisely, having him in danger because I said something that upset him and threw him off his game wasn’t an option. It was a balancing act, and as his mate, I owed it to him not to fall.

“I know, and I understand, but Steelwick does these missions all of the time. Can they not just go without you?” I hated saying it and immediately bit back my words. “Ignore me. That was selfish.”

Gideon’s jaw tensed at my initial words and relaxed ever so slightly at my attempt to salvage them. So much for being wise with my word choice. I hated that I even asked him. I knew why he had to go, but I despised it nonetheless.

“They could go without me. And they are more than willing to, but if I go, I can definitively tell them who is a threat and who is not.” He stepped closer and cupped my cheek, running his thumb across my cheekbone. “There are other pack members there who are innocent—victims in many cases. I wouldn’t want to see them caught in the crossfire.”

“I understand. I was speaking from a selfish place filled with my own emotions. You wouldn’t be able to live with yourself if you didn’t go.”

He kissed my forehead.

“I wouldn’t. And it’s not just my pack. I have Kian to consider. He’s not going to know who to trust. I don’t want him running scared and getting himself killed.”

I hadn’t thought of that part. He was right. The confusion of a rescue can have unintended consequences.

“I know, and I’m sorry.” I closed my eyes and sighed, trying to alleviate the anxiety coursing through me. Even mediation wasn’t going to touch this worry.

“Don’t be sorry, omega mine. I love that you care enough to worry about me so.” Another kiss to my forehead. “Plus, if they see me there, it will throw Jaden’s team for a loop. Everyone thinks I’m dead.”

He meant it to be funny, and if he had said it after he returned, I might have seen it as such. But instead, tears came to my eyes at the thought of that. Having seen firsthand just how close my mate had come to dying, I wasn’t ready to tease about it. I’d held him in my arms when I first found him; I had scented how close his soul was to leaving his body. He didn’t need to remind me, not even in jest.

“I know, and I want you to get Kian and bring him here. I can’t wait to meet him.” And I couldn’t. He was family, even if I didn’t know him yet. Although, in a way, I felt like I did, his

brother regaling me with stories about him when his emotions allowed.

Gideon smiled. “He’s going to love you. I’m going to have my hands full with the two of you. And when the baby comes, he’s going to be a great uncle.”

“Baby?” I said, placing a hand over my middle. I had been extremely nauseous for the entire day. But that was due to the impending battle, right? No, we hadn’t heard about that until just over an hour ago, Steelwick not wanting to make plans too far ahead because they wanted to go the second they saw a window of opportunity.

My eyes widened. “You’re sure?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I think so. Your scent has changed. It was slight at first, but it’s getting a bit stronger. I’ve always had a good nose. Probably how my lion was able to get me here in the state I was in.” I hadn’t considered that, but it made sense. Fate sent him for me, and of course, his beast recognized me before his human self did. That was how shifters worked.

“Your scent is incredibly sweet right now. I can only remember smelling something like that one time in my life. It was when my mother was pregnant with Kian.” I sometimes forgot how much of an age difference sat between the two. “We have claimed each other and spent countless nights in bed with one another. What did you think was going to happen?”

“This is true,” I said, leaning in closer to my mate until I was wrapped in his arms. “Are we ready for this? I want this, but

what if we aren't ready.”

He kissed my neck and chuckled. His breath tickled against my skin. “I think we will need to be ready, regardless. We have time, though, love. A leopard’s gestation period is six months?”

“Five or so. But it could be a little lion in there.” This was the first time being a human sounded better. They had more time to get ready for their little ones.

He shook his head. “I’m going to guess we’re having a little leopard like you.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “You’re going to be amazing at this.”

“The pride...” I said.

“Will be amazing as well. Think of how many doting uncles our cub will have. Perhaps we can bring on a few more permanent members to help out. You’ve mentioned before that your current omegas are spread a little thin. Plus, I will be here, and while my contributions are great, I will be around to take care of our child when you need to be with your omegas.”

“And you’ll be fine with that? Being an alpha who stays home with their child?”

My mate grinned. “It would be my honor,” he said.

And just like that, I fell even deeper in love with my mate. He was incredible, the absolute perfect man who had the strength of ten lions and could take on anyone in the world, but yet was content and proud to stand behind me and support me in my endeavors.

“How did I get so lucky?” I said.

“You deserve it.” He wrapped his arms around me tighter, kissing my lips. “You deserve everything.”

“I think we have enough time to maybe...” I ran a finger down his chest, “Have a bit of alone time before it is time to go.”

We didn't have much, but the thought of letting him leave without scenting like him from the inside out was too much for me to bear. I needed this, and from the way his body was reacting to my touch, he did too.

He led me to the bedroom, where he removed my clothing, and when we were both naked, he helped me onto the bed and joined me by my side. We didn't have time for slow and sweet. If anything, he should be bending me over the edge of the bed and pounding into me until he came so Steelwick wouldn't ride on up looking for him, only to find us knotted together.

But that wasn't what we needed. We needed to kiss each other, taste each other, let our hands memorize the planes of each other's bodies. We had just discovered we were going to be parents, and my mate was about to leave on a dangerous mission. A fuck and go just wasn't right for this moment. Other times? Absolutely. But for now, we needed to make love.

And make love we did. Our kissing turned to hands exploring, and when I couldn't stand for him not to be inside me any longer, I pulled him up onto me. The weight of his body pressed against mine had me enveloped in a sense of such

safety. I wasn't sure what it was about this position that just did it for me, but boy, did it.

"I would love nothing more for you to stay right here like this for always." I held his cheek. "But time is not on our side, and I need you inside me more, alpha mine."

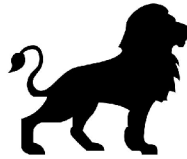
He didn't need to be asked twice, settling in between my legs and placing a pillow beneath my hips before lining himself up with my entrance and sliding home with ease. Slowly at first, he started to thrust in and out of me, but his tempo started to increase as I met him move for move until the both of us were frantically chasing our orgasms, the reality of our limited time far too close to the surface.

Gideon barely had his hand wrapped around my cock when I started to come, his name on my lips as I did. He followed right behind me, pulling out just before his knot started to fill. I understood why he did it, but I hated it. Being knotted together was one of the best feelings in this world. We would just have to make up for this far too quick time together when he got home safely.

And he would come home safely. I refused to even consider otherwise.

Chapter 15

Gideon



If my life taught me anything, it was that plans rarely worked out as written. So it shouldn't have been a surprise to me that Steelwick learned something new on their way to get me that put the mission on hold. Steelwick needed time to get ready for the mission based on this new information.

It was a far better way to run missions than to go in all bearing teeth and claws only to discover that the person they were there to stop was on vacation or worse, that they had a heads up and were waiting for Steelwick with human weapons. The plan now was that in two days' time, we would leave in the dark of night, and with any luck, I would come home with my brother.

I'd been in my workshop when Jasper approached me with the idea of having a party for my mate. I was hit with a round of excitement I hadn't felt in a long time, save for when we found out we were pregnant. Then I immediately felt guilty that I would be celebrating just two days before going to Highridge

to rescue my brother and anyone else who was there who was innocent.

The longer I thought about it, the more I understood that stopping our lives wouldn't do anyone any good. If anything, it had Jaden winning again and again and again. He didn't deserve that power. Shit, he didn't deserve the breath in his lungs.

Morgan's second, Jasper, understood this better than I did. I wasn't fully aware of his history and the situation that led him to be in Asilo, but I had a feeling it wasn't good. Not even close. He, along with the other omegas, Emery and Pol, had planned a fantastic little surprise baby shower for my mate.

Highridge never had anything like it that I remembered. Sure, families were happy when they were expecting. I still remember the look on my mother's face when she told me about my brother. She'd been so filled with joy. But there was no party. It just wasn't done.

I really had no idea what a shower would be like. I assumed there would be cake because, in my mind, all celebrations were better with cake, but beyond that... nada.

Though it was incredibly early in his pregnancy, the omegas felt it was important we celebrate all things and often. It was a good way to live, especially with so many people being here after experiencing very bad ways to live.

Our baby wouldn't be the first one born here, of course. It wasn't unheard of for an omega to arrive here with child. There have been quite a number of babies born at Asilo, but

never one to a permanent member of the pride. Our baby would be the first.

Jasper was a firm believer that a shower would have the added benefit of healing the current omegas who were there and were recovering to see excitement and happiness from a mating and a new birth. It would give them hope for their own futures.

Keeping Morgan out of the house so we could set it up was not as easy as it could be. I didn't realize just how often he would stop in to grab a snack or drink or switch over laundry throughout the day. I wasn't sure if it was always like this for him or if the pregnancy had his instincts keeping him close to home, but whatever the case, it made our job of keeping the surprise exceedingly difficult.

Together we all worked pretty hard to keep him away from the house so that I could get the place set up and other omegas could come and get their presents wrapped and put together. Most of them were either second-hand or handmade, and that made them all the more special.

Many of the omegas there with us had children of their own. The children might not have been raised in ideal circumstances, but they were still loved by their omega parents—loved so deeply that their omega parent brought them here to be safe.

The parents had all begun a list of tips and tricks for Morgan, and me for that matter. We had gotten a leatherbound notebook that each of the omegas wrote their advice in. I had taken a peek at a few of them. It was wonderful advice. I couldn't wait

to read it all with him and I planned to take it all to heart. I'd be foolish to think I knew enough about parenting that we could just do it on our own without the benefit of their wisdom.

The number of gifts is what surprised me the most about the party we were putting on. I had expected a few small things, but as always, my mate's pride never ceased to amaze me. They came with many gifts, gifts from the heart, including their favorite sleeper from when their babies were little and a crocheted blanket. I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of love.

And then Ozzy arrived with his mate and their children, who quickly ran off to play with the other few littles we had running about. They brought a few gifts and a huge amount of hand-me-down toys and clothes for our little cub. But best of all, they were going to put a smile on my mate's face that was the size of a mountain just by being there.

"We heard that the cat shifters go through a lot more clothes than the wolf shifters as children since y'all get to shift within a few months." Ozzy looked down at his belly. "I know it's the norm, but I can't imagine chasing after a wolf during newborn naptimes."

"I grew up with that as the norm." I shrugged. "But it is true; clothes can get messed up with a shift," I said. "Plus, cat shifters have sharper claws than you all."

"Teeth, too," Kade said.

I patted my mating bite with pride. "I know. I was there."

We were just a few minutes away from my mate coming to the house. My phone pinged, and I pulled it out of my pocket, held my finger to my lips to let everyone know I was going to answer it and not just text back, then said, "Hello, mate."

"On my way, I'm ready to put my feet up." He sounded exhausted, and I crossed my fingers he didn't mind too much that his plans were going to be thwarted. He could still have his feet up for sure, but we'd have a bit of a crowd here for a while as he did so.

Everyone took their places sitting around the living room, and my mate pushed open the kitchen door after a few minutes.

"Gideon? Are you here? Or are you at the wood shop? I should've asked when I called," he said, the door not fully open yet.

I stepped all the way into the kitchen in his line of sight. I broadly smiled when I saw him. There must have been something on my face giving me away; he shot me an odd look.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Yes?" I said, hating that it came out more of a question than anything. "Why don't you come in and get your feet up?"

"I hope you're not expecting anything too crazy for dinner. I know I said I'd cook tonight, but I am just whooped. I am way more tired than I expected to be." He rounded the corner and stepped foot into the living room when a loud round of surprise burst from everyone. My mate jumped and gasped.

Maybe the surprise part wasn't the best choice. Scaring my pregnant mate to death was not on the list of party activities.

"You guys!" he shouted. His eyes filled with tears, and all concern I had about not letting him know this was happening fell away.

The back wall above the fireplace held a banner that read "Congratulations," and there were balloons with little baby bottles on them. The whole room was decorated in light pinks and blues. We didn't yet know the sex of our child, and we probably would wait to find out, letting it be a surprise.

That was the extent of the decorations. Jasper said they didn't want to overdo it because anything they did would have to be undone, and I could see his point. And besides, this was plenty. I wasn't even sure how they found baby bottle balloons, of all things.

My mate cried even harder when he saw the pile of presents in the corner, all very obviously hand wrapped, many by children who were under the impression that the more tape you had, the better.

"This is too much, guys. Thank you!"

"Oh, we're just getting started! This is party one. We'll have more later. We're giving you the whole shebang!" Jasper said. "Put your feet up. Your mate can sit next to you and rub your feet. We've got games to play!"

He didn't need to be asked twice. As happy as he was about the party, that didn't take away his exhaustion. At first, he tried

to say he didn't need his feet rubbed. I reminded him that no one *needs* it, but he deserved it, and somehow that worked, and he gave me his feet to pamper.

It was quite a sight to see his plate of cake sitting on his belly like it was a table as I rubbed his feet. If I could spoil my omega like this every day, I would. Although truth be told, I didn't think my mate would like that too much. He enjoyed his work and making the lives of others better. He wouldn't want a life that included his pampering when he could be helping. It just wasn't him.

The party went on without a hitch. Perfectly executed by Jasper, Emery, and the gang. I loved seeing how much everyone adored my mate. I saw the amazing man that he was, and knowing others had seen it as well just gave me the feels.

We played a super fun game where you were blindfolded and tried to find the metal diaper pins in a bowl of rice. It was deceptively harder than I ever thought it would be. And it was hilarious to watch everyone try. Emery had found it on the internet, and it was a win for sure. I could envision different versions of it being played for birthdays or holidays. Anything that kept people laughing like that was worth doing again and again.

There were lots of moments of laughter as the omegas in the room, who seemed not to mind my presence at all, shared stories of when their children were young and the things they went through as babies. Though their home lives might not

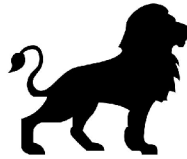
have been perfect, they could find a few happy stories to share about their children.

I sat back as my mate opened the baby gifts, taking in the entire room. When I first came here, even in my broken state, there had been worry that my presence might be too difficult for the omega guests. My mate hadn't said as much, but I knew, a half memory of when they came to help me here to heal starting to come back.

They had been right to worry. I was both an alpha and huge. Nothing about me was meek, and blending was not a thing I did well...or at all. And yet, here they were, not only accepting me but being relaxed enough around me to celebrate with my mate and I. Asilo truly was where I belonged, and while I hated how I got here, I was happy to have found my home.

Chapter 16

Morgan



“So, what should I plan for dinner tomorrow?” I said after Gideon and I had finished our meal. We hadn’t even cleared the table from tonight’s meal, and I was already looking toward the next. It wasn’t because I was already hungry or needed the plan time either. Not really. It was the anxiety starting to build over what would happen after this meal, manifesting itself in my need to over-plan.

The two of us were lingering at the dining room table together. Neither one of us made a move to get up and put our plates away, knowing that the end of our meal meant the start of Gideon’s journey back to Highridge. Each minute that ticked by put us closer to when Steelwick would arrive to pick up Gideon.

Unlike last time, this one was going to happen. Steelwick had planned the mission down to the tiniest of details. They never let us in on why things changed the last time, not fully, anyway. But Marcus sounded very confident this time, saying

that the information they had gleaned was making this mission one of the most well-laid-out ones they had had in a long time.

I wouldn't normally have found that comforting. If anything, it shouted that they usually went in half-cocked, but I knew that not to be the case. They just had times when the second there was an opening, they had to take it. And this time, that opening came with enough time to be fully prepared.

The group of them would leave shortly after they arrived, and I wouldn't know what was happening the entire time they were gone. They wouldn't be texting me updates or calling me to let me know they were about to take down Jaden. I would be completely in the dark, most likely until Gideon came back to my territory. That was going to be rough.

“Kian's favorite meal is salmon and rice. I should have thought of that before now.” My mate said, and I instantly went into planning mode, sending my desires up to the goddess that Kian would be with Gideon when he came back and that they were both unscathed from the mission.

I smirked. “I don't think I'll get a chance to get the good salmon before tomorrow. I'll see what I can do,” I said. “We might not get anything fresh caught, but we might have some filets in the freezer.” And it really wasn't that bad. Fresh? No. But it was tasty enough especially if I whipped up a fancy dill sauce to go with it.

“He also likes pasta with Alfredo sauce or some sort of creamy cheese sauce. I swear he would take any combination of cheese and make macaroni and cheese out of it.” The hope that

infused my mate's voice while talking about his brother was new, and it made me so happy.

"I don't blame him. Pasta is pretty delicious." And lately, it was all I wanted to put in my belly. Pasta hit in a way most foods didn't. Pasta and toast were all I wanted lately.

"It is," Gideon said. "He'll love your lasagna; I can tell you that much."

"I do have all the ingredients to make that." I had planned on making it a few days ago, but that was a bad morning sickness day, the morning part of that being a lie. On days it hit, it was all stinking day long. "I could make a batch. I'm gonna get the guest room ready for him too. Can you think of anything else he might need?"

I had a list in my head, most of which were the things we needed when Gideon had come here. I didn't want to dare talk about how I was preparing to have Lissy and perhaps Franklin here to be our healers. But well, we needed to be prepared.

My thought was that, by mentioning getting the room ready, it would give Gideon some positive thinking as he rolled into what would be a very intense mission. Did I hope he was going to bring his brother home? With all that I had. Was I as confident as I attempted to sound? Not so much. I'd seen firsthand what Jaden was capable of, and it wasn't good.

Gideon pushed his plate away and then stood from the table. He came over to my chair, wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "Thank you, mate. I would be lost without you."

I leaned into his embrace, willing myself not to break down. He would be back. It would be a short mission. He would be back. He would be back. It was becoming my mantra. I refused to think of any other ways this could end. I just got him, and fate couldn't be that cruel. They just couldn't.

“Go and take care of the bad guys. Come back to me soon.” That was all I asked.

“I will come back to you,” he said. “And when I do, I will rub your feet the way you like.”

“And I will rub the bits that you like being rubbed.” I looked up at him and winked. I'd have probably gone into more details about what else I was going to do to him, but there was no time.

The sound of tires on gravel had us both jumping. They were here, and all too soon, my mate would be leaving with Steelwick, the badass enforcers who balanced the power between packs and the council.

The members of Steelwork didn't even get out of the van. Not that I needed them to. They were on a timetable, and it was best they got on the road to get the events in motion.

“I have to go.” Gideon held me tight, and I kissed his lips far too briefly.

“I'll see you in the morning,” I said. “Or in the afternoon. Whenever you get here, I'll be waiting. I can't wait to meet Kian.”

However long he was gone, it was too long for my liking.

“You’re going to love him,” Gideon said, and I would too. He meant the world to my mate. He would mean the world to me too.

“I don’t doubt that,” I agreed.

Gideon knelt down, rolled up my shirt and pressed a kiss to my still flat belly. “Take care of your daddy while I’m gone. Maybe don’t make him throw up too much. He doesn’t like it. Papa loves you.” He kissed my belly one last time and then stood up, kissing me on the lips. “I love you, omega mine.” And before I could answer him back, he was out the door.

I wanted to walk him out to the van to capture any time we could have together. But if I did, I would break down, and in doing so, I’d make my mate’s mission not only more difficult, I’d make it more dangerous. He needed all his focus. Thinking about his sobbing mate, begging him to stay with the tears flowing from his eyes—yeah, that wouldn’t work. This was better, as much as I hated it.

Closing my eyes, I stood there, standing alone for far too long before I dared look. The sun was setting, and while it would normally be time for me to wind down and crawl into bed for the evening, I was not feeling any sort of tired. It wasn’t as if I would be able to get any sleep tonight. And if I did, it would be on the couch and not in my bed, where everything smelled of my mate. It would be too difficult.

I wasn’t helpless, though. There were things I could do to prepare for what was to come. And really, I had a lot to prepare for, just in case. No one had any idea what might or

might not happen tonight, and for all we knew, they would return with a group of omegas who would need us.

As the forerunner of Asilo, I needed to be prepared for any and all omegas who might come. And in a way, that was a good thing because it gave me something to focus on that wasn't my mate and a situation I had no control over.

I set to work. I made a list of the meals we might have to get ready for the next few days and double-checked that we had all the ingredients. As a rule, I tried to have a stockpile of easy-to-make meals in case of an unexpected influx. I preferred not to use it if we didn't have to. If we got under a dozen omegas, we wouldn't. But knowing it was there did take a layer of stress off me.

I added three to our headcount, assuming there would be Kian and maybe two others. But just in case, I let Jasper know we should be prepared to pull from our emergency stores. Housing would be an issue if there were more than a few, but we would make do, just like we always did. And we had a buffer of maybe three after that before we had to resort to sleeping on the floor. My mate had talked about building more cabins, and when he got back, I planned to talk to the betas about that. Having extra space for people in need wouldn't hurt anyone, but not having enough... that could present a problem.

Then I set to work on the laundry, preparing sheets and other things that would be needed for the guest room. They were clean, in theory, but the stale scent of having been in the

storage closet for so long was far from welcoming. Newly washed would be far better since I had the time and needed the distractions that rewashing them would give, it was a win-win.

From there, I went on to get the cabins ready. We had one that was empty right now. It would be easy to move a family in there or possibly some omegas who already knew and trusted each other. It was not in shambles, but I couldn't recall the last time it had been cleaned or aired out.

The night was dark, and I had no business working this late. By all accounts, I should be in bed resting or, better yet, long asleep. I knew it was best for me to get the rest, but I also recognized that my body would not let me rest until I was absolutely exhausted or my mate returned. Whichever came first.

I stepped inside the cabin, the stale air reminding my stomach that it was currently at odds with the rest of my body. I tried to ignore it as I opened all the windows. It was a good thing it was a dry evening. Had it been raining, this staleness would've been what greeted our possible guests, and I wouldn't have been too surprised if they'd opted to sleep as their beasts under the starlight instead.

The cabin was clean, but I gave it a fresh wipe down and sweeping. It was our least fancy cabin, and looking around, it needed a lot of work. The cabinet doors were all sagging just enough to be noticeable, the ceiling was starting to peel in one corner, an indication there was a water issue to be dealt with, and the top step coming in wobbled. But even with all of that,

it would do, especially after I made up the beds with fresh linens, stocked the bathroom with clean towels, and grabbed some basics from the communal pantry to make sure they understood that they had their basic needs met whether or not they were ready to join us for meals or activities just then.

We were officially ready for our guests. Now it was up to Steelwick and my mate to help them arrive.

Hours had passed since my mate had left the territory. I didn't know how many more would go by before he returned. But I was running out of ways to keep busy.

I stood on the back deck, breathing in the cool air. Morning would come soon. And there was no way I was getting any sleep.

I needed something to keep myself busy. Anything.

Twigs and branches breaking at the edge of the forest line snapped me from my thoughts. A loud thump, followed by a whimper, had me leaping off the deck and crossing the line quickly. I didn't know what I would find, but something told me I needed to go.

Nothing prepared me for finding the omega version of my mate lying in the dirt.

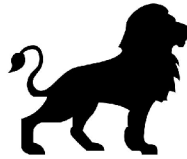
He looked up at me, his eyes going wide. "Is this Asilo?"

"Kian?" I said.

He nodded and then fell unconscious.

Chapter 17

Gideon



I had no experience with planning an attack on anything. I'd never even really needed to fight before shit went down that night. I was huge and minded my own business, and that was enough to keep people who wanted to cause trouble away.

I could plan out a new build, whether it be a house, a shed, or a new table. Even something as simple as a birdhouse took some planning, but it was nothing like the level of planning the guys with Steelwick had put together. It was their job; I knew this. But that didn't make it any less impressive.

There were four of them, and two my surprise, those four included the two omegas I had already met, Marcus and Saunders. It made sense, given they were our first point of contact. But also—it was surprising that in a pride of so many strong alphas, they chose omegas. That was until I realized that it could be their relationship with Asilo and what that might mean. Did they think omegas were in trouble? That my brother was in trouble? I refused to let that thought fester. It

would only manifest itself in me being distracted, and in this situation, that could be deadly.

The two alphas were Armand, whom I had met before, and Rainer, whose reputation was one even I had heard of back in my Highridge days. He was a badass shifter who lost part of his leg on a mission and still could outfight anyone. With the crew they sent, we were as well equipt for the mission as we could be.

Steelwick all wore black tactical gear. I knew most of them and was on their side, and their appearance even intimidated me. In this case, that was a good thing. They needed every step up they could get. Marcus explained that their clothes were built in such a way that when you shifted in them, they fell away easily enough, so you weren't tangled and didn't ruin them with your shift.

I was able to borrow some gear, though they admitted they had a hard time finding any that would fit me. Apparently, there was a bear shifter in the Valford pack who was my size and they used his sizing as a best guess. It worked as long as you didn't look too closely. My pants were pretty much clam diggers, but so be it. It was far better than the t-shirt and jeans I had climbed into the van in.

“When we get there, we need you to stay behind us, or if you feel more comfortable, you're welcome to stay in the vehicle,” Marcus began.

Staying in the van was not an option. Not even close.

“It’s our understanding that there will be some omegas and maybe even some alphas there who don’t follow this alpha as closely as he might think they do. And we don’t want them caught in the crossfire. We need them to trust us, though. It might help to see a familiar face they trust. This will be especially true when we find Kian,” Marcus explained.

I nodded. “Have you any intel on him? If he is still here?”

They nodded. “Just a few days ago was our last day here. We have his picture now, so we all know what he looks like.”

I wasn’t sure if it was a good or a bad thing that he was still here.

“And Cooper?”

We still hadn’t heard from my friend Cooper. Even the council didn’t know where he was, and they were technically his bosses.

Marcus shook his head. “Nope, we haven’t seen him.”

My gut clenched. I couldn’t focus on that problem just then. Perhaps he had simply gone on a different mission. Perhaps he had stumbled upon Highridge pack like I had asked him to do and paid the ultimate price for it. My stomach twisted at the thought.

“Let’s focus on finding Kian and the others right now. Our next step will be recovering anyone else, including Cooper. All right?” Marcus put a hand on my shoulder.

I nodded. “Thank you. Thank all of you.”

“This is what we do. That’s why we’re here. Although with the way the world is going these days, with a lot more education and prevention of these types of situations, these missions are becoming fewer and farther between. Not that we’ll complain about that.”

Morgan had said something similar. It would be nice to think of a day when the enforcer packs mostly had to focus on council overreach and a random alpha who might not be suited for his position. I really wanted that to be our future, especially for my babe.

“That’s good to hear,” I said. “The pride wasn’t so bad before the late alpha passed. It wasn’t perfect there, of course, but we didn’t burn each other’s houses down.” If only that had been hyperbole.

They explained the plan to me as we drove. We were to arrive at Highridge and drive right up the driveway like we were supposed to be there. Just show up as if it were no big deal. I was skeptical of the wisdom of this, but Steelwick had planned it out, and I trusted them to know better than I did. The van we were in was a delivery van, much like what they used to get grocery deliveries. Today was a day that they expected to receive a delivery, so it wouldn’t look odd for the van to show up. Sure, it was early, but that wouldn’t seem too off in theory.

They would come out to unload and boo, when they opened the back... there we were.

It all went according to plan. We pulled up into the drive. They parked where the delivery man usually went. A few of the

alphas that I recognized as Jaden's right-hand guys came out, only they were pulling two omegas with them. I'd never seen that before, and the poor omegas were looking worse for wear, hardly able to walk for being so weak or possibly injured.

"Everybody looks sluggish," Rainer said.

"They've all been experimenting with different drugs," Marcus whispered.

That was the first I heard of that. When we were told they had turned to illegal activities, one of my initial thoughts had been drugs. But I assumed selling, not using.

"At one point, they had some human drugs here. Combine that with whatever the hell concoctions they've come up with from the old journals..." Marcus shook his head. "Mortimer wouldn't go into some of the details about what was in there, but he did mention that there were specific drugs or alcoholic beverages that had been created by shifters for shifters that would affect shifter bodies differently. When we observed some very odd behavior from this group, we showed him the footage. He said that was likely what was going on here."

As it was, when we finally did have the back doors open and all of us out, it all seemed too easy. The two alphas fought back against Marcus, but their movements were sluggish, and they were knocked unconscious and bound before the fight even started. These were some of the same people who had nearly killed me, and we subdued them long before any of them even recognized I was there.

Rainer and Saunders helped get them in the van, where Armond restrained them. We had no idea if the omegas in question were on our side or not, and we didn't have time to wait until they were conscious to ask them. And even if we were one hundred percent sure they were with us, not against us, they were high and a danger to themselves and others. So this was the safest and kindest option, as sucky as it was.

As for the alphas, I felt not an ounce of pity for their restraints which I could see from my angle were significantly tighter than the others.

"Don't hurt us!" the group of omegas cowered away from us, holding up their hands, and surrendering. We wouldn't, of course, but for all they knew, we were drug dealers coming to raze the place to the ground.

I recognize them, and when I left, they were anti-Jaden, only less vocal about it. In a way, that was smart. It kept them alive. I indicated for Steelwick to leave them be and assured the omegas we would be back to check on them. The youngest of the group appeared to recognize me but didn't say a word about it, instead trying to get his friends to follow him out of harm's way.

The door of the main house burst open. Jaden was there, his eyes blazing mad with rage. His two right hands stood behind him—Scout and Peter, who must have replaced Pippen after I'd killed her. Unlike the alphas who met us at the van, these three looked strong and sober. It wasn't going to be as easy to subdue them,

“You!” Jaden said, his eyes zeroing in on me. They widened.
“You’re dead. Are we hallucinating?”

He grabbed Scout by the collar and shook him. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing? He was dead. We killed him. He was dead.”

That explained why they let me live...they didn’t. At least not to their knowledge. They thought I was dead, making my “death” the thing that saved my life.

“I’m not that easy to kill,” I said. “Where’s Kian?”

Jaden let out an evil laugh that had my skin crawling. “When you died, he became our little plaything. Then we killed him.”

I saw red, and I launched, but Armand and Rainer held me back. Charging after Jaden wouldn’t have brought Kian back if Jaden was even telling the truth. It didn’t feel like my brother was gone. If he were, I’d have known it. At least, that was how it was with my parents.

The door burst open again, but this time it was Jaden’s little brother, Maddox, coming out. “Gideon! You’re alive.” Unlike his brother, he was happy to see me.

“Get back in the house,” Jaden yelled.

The omega continued. “Stop this! All of you. Gideon, please. Jaden’s lost his mind. He’s doing terrible things.”

What a strong omega. Standing up against evil isn’t easy on the best of days, and in this case, he was standing up to family as well. My brother had picked a good friend, even if I hadn’t seen it at the time.

“Where’s Kian?” I asked.

“I don’t—”

Jaden’s hand flew up, and he gripped his sibling by the neck, tossing him down into the dirt. “You be quiet. I should have killed you when I had the chance.”

It was his brother, and he treated him like a random rodent or other pest.

Maddox tried to stand, but Jaden pounced, switching to his lion. The shift was grotesque and slow, the bones breaking and changing as I’d never seen before. What had he done to himself?

That’s when Steelwick struck, each of them shifting. Even with all four of them against one Jaden, it wasn’t as easy a fight as it should have been. Jaden’s beast wasn’t right, not in mind and not in body. It was like seeing the old-time weightlifters back when steroids were all the rage. Even his beast looked off and unnatural.

I rushed to Maddox and pulled him as far out of the way as I could get him while still being close enough to jump in and help Steelwick. In theory, they shouldn’t need it, but Jaden’s animal was terrifying, and I couldn’t count on them taking him down alone.

Jaden outmaneuvered them with every step they took, almost as if he saw what they were going to do next, but then Rainer, on his three legs, managed to get his teeth into Jaden’s neck and rip it open, dropping the nearly lifeless body to the

ground. How he didn't die, I had no idea, but his body shifted, blood still oozing from the wound that even a shift couldn't fully heal, and the Steelwick had his hands and feet bound before the man could so much as sit.

It was only in retrospect later that I figured out that Jaden was using people's movements to anticipate what they were going to do next. With Rainer, because his beast didn't move with the same gait as others, he was unable to do so, letting the fierce cat end Jaden right there on the spot.

I helped Maddox to his feet. Jaden was waking up and spouting off incoherent evilness about blood and death and days of old. If he hadn't been bound, the situation could've gotten even more ugly right then, his strength almost creepy.

So many parts of me wished we could put him to death right then. He deserved it, and it would make the world a safer place to not have him in it. But he would await trial. The council would want to know what he had done with the things he made and how he had learned that knowledge. More importantly, the council needed to discover who he might have shared that information with.

"Are you all right?" I asked Maddox.

He nodded.

"Where's Kian?" I held Maddox's shoulders as gently as I could, but my lion was pushing hard for me to find my brother and take him to safety.

Maddox's eyes filled with tears. "I don't know. He was here yesterday when they all went on their bender. But then he disappeared right after. I think he left and went to safety. He's not dead, though, Gideon. I promise you he's not dead."

"Thank the Goddess. We'll find him," I said.

Marcus was at my side just then. "I'm calling in one of our best trackers; he's on local standby." Of course, there was more to the plan than I knew. I was so grateful for their help. "We'll find him. We have his scent, and we know what he looks like."

"He doesn't know you're alive, Gideon. He's pretty sure you're dead. We all were," Maddox said.

I grinned. "I'm not that easy to kill, although it didn't look good for a while. This is Steelwick, and you can trust them," I said. "They're gonna have a lot of questions for you. It'd be best if you cooperate and tell them what your brother has been up to. Whatever he got into is dangerous, and I can't even fathom what it could do if it went beyond this small group."

"I'll tell them everything. There's no love lost for my brother. He harmed so many, not an ounce of empathy to be seen," Maddox said.

"Do I have time to call Morgan before we begin the search?" I asked Marcus. I didn't want to wait, but a pregnant mate worrying wasn't good for either him or our baby.

He nodded. "Absolutely. Don't give out any details of what transpired, but you can let him know you are safe and that we

are beginning to look for Kian.”

I took out my phone and hit send; he picked up on the first ring, “Thank the goddess you called. He’s here. Kian is here. Come home.”

My brother was alive, and he’d done as I told him... he found Asilo.

Chapter 18

Morgan



Jasper and I were able to get Kian into the spare bedroom easily enough. It had been harder when we were moving my very large alpha mate than his smaller brother. I could almost carry him on my own. Though Jasper wouldn't let me do that, not in my condition. He did exactly as his brother told him to and found our pride.

I could see my mate in his face. Kian was younger and smaller, but they shared a nose and cheekbones. He was in better shape than his brother had been in, but not by much. He was going to need a lot of time to heal.

We got him cleaned up and tended to his wounds. Still, he remained mostly unconscious, mumbling a few things here and there but not saying much else.

“How was it that he found us?” Jasper asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “It's possible he could have followed his brother's trail.” There were times when our senses could become heightened in stressful situations. “Or maybe he

remembered what his brother had told him about finding us? Whatever it is, I'm glad he's here and will be far more glad when he wakes up."

"It's been weeks since your mate arrived; I doubt it was his scent," Jasper said. "And we've had rain. I can't imagine there was much, if anything, left to pick up on."

I shrugged. "Perhaps Kian was just lucky, but it doesn't matter. He's here now."

I was so relieved when Gideon called. I didn't have time to go into details but knowing my mate was safe, letting him know his brother was here, and telling him to get his booty home had been enough. I didn't even stay on the phone long enough to find out when he would get here. He was safe, Jaden was caught, and that was all that mattered at this moment. I didn't even care how many other omegas were coming. We'd figure that out when they got here. For now, it was all about tending to my brother-in-law.

After speaking with Gideon and knowing he would be on his way very soon, I called Franklin. He arrived before my mate did. He wasn't the closest healer, but he was also a witch and medical doctor and had been part of Steelwick. He had more bags of tricks than anyone I knew.

"I had a feeling I'd be needed, so I had my mate bring me out here for a nice lunch in town. He's at the hotel with the triplets. There's a pool, so they are all excited."

I wanted to reach out and hug him.

“I’m afraid we may have to add a pool to our territory soon... Apparently, the pond is ‘not the same thing,’” he said, mimicking a child’s voice.

It wasn’t, but that was neither here nor there.

I smiled. “We appreciate it,” I said as I let him into the house. “More than you can know.”

Franklin went straight to the spare bedroom. He took a look at Kian. “He’s in better shape than his brother was, that’s for sure.” That wasn’t saying much.

Franklin opened his medicine bag and pulled out a few vials. “We’re going to do much the same as what we did for Gideon. Make sure he rests, and keep him clean. Did he have any wounds?”

I shook my head. “Scrapes and bruises. His feet are in pretty rough shape. He must not have had any shoes, but nothing I’d consider a serious wound by any means.”

“Did you check for any trauma or signs of assault?”

I sucked in a breath. “I didn’t. We focused on getting him cleaned up. There was no blood, though, from his rectum or any defensive wounds that we saw. No broken bones either.”

I willed myself not to break down at thoughts of what might’ve happened to Kian running around in my mind. I needed to focus on what we knew and how to make things better.

“That’s a good sign, then.” After a few moments of Franklin looking him over, he gave Kian an injection of some sort and

set up an IV drip to get him fluids. “If you’ll excuse me, gentleman, I’m going to do a more thorough exam.”

Had it been anyone else, I’d have felt the need to stay and make sure everything was going as it should. But I trusted Franklin completely, and I wasn’t sure how much Kian was or wasn’t aware of at this point. Leaving for a minute would add a bit of privacy to his shitty day. It was a tiny thing, but one I could do.

Jasper and I left the room, giving Franklin and Kian the privacy needed to check for any other wounds. I desperately hoped that my mate’s brother hadn’t suffered so under Jaden’s leadership, but we were prepared to help him heal, and if he needed more than medical care, we were going to make sure he got that as well.

Being supportive of whatever care Kian needed was the least we could do. I was just thankful he was alive and within our care now. Relief flooded into me, knowing I was brought up to speed on Highridge and how they had been taken care of. It was up to Steelwick now to fix all the details, and they would too. It was more than their job; it was their purpose, and shifter kind was lucky to have them.

I made a fresh pot of coffee and some tea for myself. After a while, Franklin joined us at the table.

“All we can do now is wait,” he said.

“I feel bad taking you away from your home,” I said.

He waved his hand away. “This is what we’re here for, what we do. My mate is here with the triplets and they are all acting like its some sort of vacation.”

“I suppose that’s a silver lining then.” I took my tea bag out earlier than I did even a week ago, not wanting it too strong.

“It is indeed. We also brought some painting kits and wool from Gabe and Macs. Of course, Levi sends his love.”

“We miss them,” I said. Especially Levi. He was one of the coolest kids I had ever met, and whether he realized it or not, he taught us a lot during his time here. Fractured Fang was his home and where he belonged, but we would always have a place for him here if he ever needed or wanted.

It was agony waiting for Gideon to come back. Knowing he was safe helped a lot. But I needed to see him, to feel him before I could fully believe it.

Finally, after what felt like decades, the van pulled into the driveway, and he was home.

I held him in my arms. He was dirty, and he scented of death and decay, but he was safe, unharmed, and home.

“Let’s never do that again,” I said.

He chuckled and kissed my lips. “I sure hope not, mate. Kian? Can I see him?”

“Yes, of course.” I tugged my mate down the hall into the spare bedroom where his brother was. “But take a shower first. He is under Franklin’s care, and you scent off.” I refused to tell him he smelled exactly like I assumed a zombie would.

He agreed and took the quickest shower, coming out of the bathroom with wet hair and pajama pants on, nothing else. Gideon sat at the chair and held his brother's hand. I had hoped that perhaps scenting his brother and being in his presence would bring Kian out of his deep sleep, but it didn't seem to be doing the trick.

"He just needs rest and time. Like you needed," I said.

"Injuries?" Gideon asked.

"Not that we could find. He's just exhausted. We imagine it was quite the long trip for him," Franklin said.

"That it was," I agreed.

Franklin had bandaged his feet, and many of the scrapes on his arms were now cleaned.

"We'll set up rotations," I said. "That way, someone is always with him. When he wakes, he'll know he's safe. We can explain to him where he is. Perhaps if we get a blanket from our room and put it on him, so he has your scent."

Gideon nodded. "It's a good idea. Thank you for taking him in."

"Of course, mate. He's family."

We were back in the living room, and though I had made one of Kian's favorite meals, he, unfortunately, wasn't going to get to enjoy it.

Gideon dug in, though.

“Since I’m here and will be staying close by for a day or so until Mortimer can get here, would the two of you like to see your child?”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean? “

Franklin picked up a notepad and pen. “I have a gift,” he said. “As many witches do. Mine just happens to be that of sight. Seeing things that aren’t seen.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. I’d heard of Franklin’s gift.

“I’ve prepared a tea for you to drink. It will allow me to hone in on your child, and I can get a picture ready for you. Sometimes, most of the time, the picture just comes out as a normal human ultrasound would. Every once in a while, my gift throws a curveball, and I can draw what your child will look like later. But I can’t control that aspect of it. Would you like to see?”

I nodded. “Would you?” I asked Gideon.

“For sure. I’d love to see my little girl.”

Franklin chuckled. “You’re so sure it’s a girl?”

“Mostly sure.” My mate shrugged.

We had originally not wanted to know, but if my mate was so sure, maybe it was best we did.

“All right, let’s begin.”

He handed me the drink, and I drank it down. It wasn’t gross, exactly, but it wasn’t yummy either. After that, I sat on the couch where he indicated. He placed a hand over my stomach,

and with his other hand, he put pen to paper. It didn't take long at all. It seemed as if his hand moved faster than my eye could follow it. And finally, he turned the image around, and it was just as a human ultrasound would be, but the fancy 3D kind, not the blob kind.

Right there on the paper was a picture of our baby's profile view of him or her.

"Do you know the gender?" Gideon asked. "That is if my mate wants to know?"

Franklin chuckled. "If the two of you would like to know, I can see that much."

"We would, right?" Gideon looked at me.

I nodded. "I want to know."

"Your mate was right. It is indeed a girl and a leopard." Franklin's smile faltered, and his expression turned serious. "I have seen something else as well that I think is worth you both knowing."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Though I didn't see any trauma in Kian that indicated assault, I can tell you that he will be having a child in five months' time."

"What?" Gideon said. The happiness that was on his face just moments ago crumpled away.

"Your brother is pregnant."

I felt the anger rolling off my mate.

“Those bastards. I’ll kill them.” He gripped my hand.

“We’ll support Kian. No matter what,” I assured Franklin. When he first told us the news, I didn’t think it was his place, but now that I saw how my mate was reacting, I changed my mind. It was better for Gideon to process his big feelings now and not when his brother first woke up.

“Of course, we will,” Gideon said.

“And those alphas are all in custody with enough evidence to have them executed very shortly,” Franklin reminded him.

They were all so sure it was one of the bad guys, and maybe it was. But for all we knew, Kian had fallen in love or lust with another. So jumping to conclusions wasn’t the best of ideas.

“I should have gotten there sooner. If we hadn’t waited—” Gideon closed his eyes.

“You got to him as soon as you possibly could, with the right people to get him safe. Had you gone early, you wouldn’t have had the cover, and who knew what might’ve happened then?” I reminded him. “And Kian followed your advice. He came here, where he knew he would be safe. He’s here under our roof, and we’re going to support him.”

A tear trailed down my mate’s cheek, and I brushed it away.

“Of course, mate.” Gideon rested his forehead against mine. “I love you so. This is all— everything is—”

“Hard, but nothing we can’t work through together.”

Chapter 19

Gideon



It felt good to keep my hands busy. In the four days since Kian had found us, I had spent countless hours in the shop working when I wasn't at my brother's side or in my mate's arms. Working in the shop, organizing, cleaning, setting up my own tools—it gave me purpose and helped me keep my head straight. The last thing I wanted to do was be all up in my head and unable to be the alpha my brother needed me to be when he woke up.

I still couldn't believe he was pregnant. There were so many questions floating around about his pregnancy, from how he got pregnant to if he even knew he was. I mean, I knew *how* he got pregnant. There was only one way. It was more the conditions surrounding it and if I had to bleed anyone over it.

And then there was my daughter, the one growing inside my mate. She was coming into a world that was safer than the one that existed only a month ago. But that didn't mean it was safe, and that notion weighed heavily on me, especially with everything not settled with the council over Jaden along with

how well the drugged omegas would recover from their forced addiction.

I took in a deep breath, enjoying the scent of the sawdust. Maybe if I made something for my brother's child, that would center me? I grabbed a chunk of wood and turned it in my hands, looking for inspiration. I twirled it in my hand until inspiration hit. A duck. My brother's baby needed a duck.

It took a bit to plan the critter in my head, but once I did, I grabbed my knife and went to work. Whittling like this gave me calm and allowed me to think in a way other woodworking didn't. And now that I had some of my old tools back, including my best knife, I was ready to do all the carving.

Steelwick had gone above and beyond, going through the ruins of my home and my old wood shop to find my belongings that had survived after their initial investigation. They were not only able to recoup a lot of my tools but also some projects that were in progress. Luckily, many of my tools were still in good order. At this rate, I would need an additional building soon and that was a good problem to have, especially with the growing project list I had going.

Steelwick had spent their time getting the Highridge territory cleaned out of any evidence they needed for both making their case and putting a stop to what was happening there. They found "a lot of important evidence." I didn't ask a lot of details about it, though. And I doubted they would tell me anyway.

The information was a need-to-know basis kind of thing, and I appreciated it. The last thing I wanted was for the council to

call me for a trial because I “knew stuff.” Yeah, in this case, ignorance was bliss.

Highridge had, in fact, put out the fire in my home, which confused me. But now that I knew drugs were involved, I guess it sort of made sense. Steelwick went through the house and packed up the meager belongings I had that weren't charred or smoke damaged. Most of it was gone, ravaged by Highridge, but not everything. My personal belongings at the house were not nearly as plentiful but more than nothing.

Steelwick also took the time to pack everything up and onto a trailer and shipped them to me.

“Alpha Gideon,” someone called from the opening of the wood shop.

I turned around and found a young omega there, not a child, but barely a man. His name was Ocean, if I remembered correctly. He wasn't one who came out around me... pretty much ever.

“Just Gideon,” I said. “How can I help you? Are you looking for Morgan? He's in the house with Kian.”

“No. I—” They hesitated a little bit.

I did everything I could to remain still and not make any sudden movements. I didn't wish to treat these omegas as if they were glass and walk on eggshells around them. They were stronger than I could ever know, but I didn't ever want to appear threatening in any way. It was a fine line, one I wasn't sure where it even was.

“The bookshelf in my cabin... The top shelf snapped in half this morning.” He laughed a little. “I think I set too many books on top of it or something. If you have time, do you think you could take a look?”

My heart absolutely warmed. “Yeah, sure,” I said. “I would be happy to. And if it had too many books on it, maybe you need some more shelves as well.”

His face lit up, “Really?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. The kids are in school from three to four today, doing some science lessons on the trail. That might be a good time to be there. But anytime is fine. As long as you don’t mind some curious little ones asking questions.”

I smiled at that. “I’ll stop by when the kids are there. I could show them how to work a tape measure.”

The omega smiled. “They would like that. Thank you.” He bowed his head and turned away. Not all of the omegas in Morgan’s care would feel comfortable with me around. But Ocean wasn’t particularly uncomfortable with me either, which made me feel good.

My phone buzzed at the table, and I picked it up.

“Morgan, hey. The greatest thing just happened.” I smiled at my mate’s words for the first time in days, my heart already knowing what he was going to say. New hope for the future and all that.

“Come up to the house. Kian’s awake.”

I dropped my phone to the floor and sprinted off toward the house. I was there as quickly as I could be.

Morgan was in Kian's room, sitting at his bedside. He wasn't just awake. He was awake and alert. He was sitting up ever so slightly, propped by a few pillows. It was hardly what most people would consider "sitting," but I did, and it had my heart soaring.

"Gideon," he said, tears coming to his eyes. "Morgan said you were alive, but I almost didn't believe it. Of course, everything around here smells like you. Even this guy." He pointed to my mate.

Morgan flushed a little. "That was the first thing he asked—if we were mates."

Kian chuckled, then held his side.

"Are you hurt?" It was a dumb question. Of course, he was.

He shook his head. "No. Not really. Morgan tells me there are no broken bones." Which wasn't the same as not hurt, but I wasn't going to spend my first few minutes with my brother in ages arguing semantics. "I'm just sore and achy all over. Like maybe I hiked a really long way."

I went over to the opposite side of the bed and held his hand. "When you're up to it, we have so much to discuss. I'm so sorry I left you there."

Kian shook his head. "You didn't leave me. I would have gotten to safety. I really would have, but you cried out, and I

was sure you were dead. I shouldn't have gone back. I should have listened to you.”

I shushed him. “All of that's fine. You're safe now. But Kian... I'm so sorry for all the things you had to endure there.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “It wasn't so bad. You were right; since I was friends with Maddox, they weren't terrible to me. Mostly they just talked and did these weird drugs, substances that made them crazy, and then...” Kian shook his head and yawned. He wasn't bored; the talking just took that much out of him.

“We'll talk more later when you have more energy. The enforcer pack Steelwick will want to talk to you too.” I started to walk away and realized that holding it in any longer would be the same as lying to my brother, and he deserved better than that. “Kian... I just... we have to know... You should know...” I looked at Morgan, wanting to see if he was on the same page, and he gave me a subtle nod. “There was a witch who is also a healer and doctor here who looked you over, and he told us you're pregnant.”

Kian gasped and put a hand to his stomach. “Pregnant?”

“Yes,” I growled, or more accurately, my beast did. “I don't know which one of those bastards—”

“None of them,” Kian whispered. “Cooper. Did you guys save Cooper? Where's Cooper?”

My brow furrowed. “Cooper? What about him?”

“He’s there. Do you remember that old cavern, the one we played in it as kids? He’s there. Jayden kept him prisoner. Steelwick found him, right?”

I looked to my mate, who gave me his best “I have no fucking clue” look. When I focused back on my brother to figure out exactly what to tell him, his eyes had already fluttered closed. He was so weak he couldn’t even stay awake long enough to finish a conversation as important as this one. I half wondered if he would even remember we had it.

When I first came to, I forgot far more than I remembered. I had poison in me, but recovery is recovery.

With the help of my mate, we helped my brother lay back down in a more comfortable position, his body not stirring once the entire time. He was so still I listened for his breaths. They were there but shallow. I wanted to call Franklin to check up on him, but he had three kids and wasn’t exactly close.

My mate and I stepped out of the room and closed the door most but not all the way.

“You didn’t hear anything about someone in a cave, did you?” my mate whispered.

“No. I didn’t specifically ask, but they knew I was looking for a Cooper.” Just when I thought everything was over, it wasn’t. “Did you get the impression he was saying that Cooper was his baby’s father, or was he having two conversations at once?”

Not once had I sensed a connection between those two, but he was my baby brother; it wasn't something I'd been looking for.

"I couldn't tell at all. But your brother didn't seem upset about the baby. That's a good sign."

"He also didn't seem to know about it."

My mate gave me some serious side-eye.

"What?" I asked.

"We didn't know that early either." He reminded me.

"I didn't think of that. Well, we won't get any answers gossiping about it." I sounded like my mom, and that had me smiling. "I'm going to call Armand and let him know about the cave. Can you call Lissy and see if she can come and check on my brother? It was weird he fell asleep the way he did. I just want to make sure it's nothing serious."

I called but ended up leaving a message for Armand, who wasn't answering his phone. For all I knew, my brother was talking about his dream, and there was no there—there. But it was best to call in either case.

Morgan had better luck than I did, and Lissy showed up a little over an hour later. Much like Franklin said, she wasn't quite sure what he'd been through. I had a feeling we might not know for quite some time. She did change up some of his medication now that he had woken up even if for just a little bit. It was progress, and I'd take it.

My poor brother had been through so much in his young life, but at least now he was here, with us, in someplace safe and surrounded by love. There had been a time I feared I'd never see him again. Having him here under my roof, that was enough for now. The rest would just take time.

Epilogue

Morgan



My mate knew that something was up. It was as if his lion sensed it like he had when I was first pregnant. Or maybe it wasn't that at all; it was just that I was so close to my due date that he was not leaving me alone. I didn't mind having him around. He was my favorite person, and seeing him smile every time I turned around was quite a treat.

Except when it was literally a pain in the ass. I'd tried to sneak around him at his workshop to grab something, got my shirt caught on a board, lost my balance, and then fell against the corner of the table saw, bruising my ass. He used that as proof that he needed me at all times, and I nearly needed to call Franklin to ask him how to get my eyes unstuck after rolling them so hard.

As a rule, Gideon was great about giving me the space I needed. Had this been months ago, when he first arrived, I wouldn't have been able to humor him, so the omegas wouldn't have been comfortable with Gideon in the shadows all the time. But now? Now they loved him, and even the most

tentative of the bunch chatted him up when they passed by while on a stroll. In so many ways, Gideon made the work of this pride so much stronger simply by being the man he was.

This past week having him there was extra helpful. As my pregnancy progressed, I had a tendency to forget what I was doing. I'd walk into the kitchen to grab something, arrive there, and have no clue the reason I was there. I loved that I could work and go about my day, but he was always there in case I needed something, usually to run to grab something I forgot. He was hanging out in the background for all the things, even for the yoga session I had led that morning and the group therapy we had that afternoon.

Today, when it came time for me to return to our home and I didn't see him, I thought perhaps it was my turn to escape for a bit. My leopard had been quiet; perhaps he was gearing up before the big event, but I felt no indication that I would be going into labor anytime soon. The baby rested quietly in my womb as she had done for several weeks now. It was the nighttime when she was most active, bouncing around and kicking. She seemed to have a whole party in there.

I called Lissy about it when my baby first slowed down, worried something was wrong. She came by and reassured me that it was perfectly normal and that my little one had simply started running out to room and didn't have the space to be doing her gymnastics routine in there. She also gave me hints on how to encourage movement if I got worried by drinking some juice.

Before she left, Lissy made me promise never to hesitate to call her if I was worried about anything citing that a good chunk of her job was relieving people's worries so they didn't stress. I loved her so much, and if she were ever looking for a change of scenery and wanted a new job, we'd have scooped her up in a heartbeat for Asilo. She'd never leave Greystead, though; it was her home. So we just had to continue borrowing her.

My hands were on my belly, and I tried to think of all the places my mate might have gone and figured he was probably chilling with his brother, needing a break from protective mate duty. I didn't dare disrupt my lion to ask his opinion, he seemed to be resting, and when it was time for delivery, I would need him.

I opted to go for a walk, or rather waddle, to the beach spot so I could relax. A few weeks ago, Gideon had built a few Adirondack chairs that we now had at the little beach. I sat down in one, regretting it almost instantly.

I was comfortable. But would I be able to get myself up and out of the chair? That would be the challenge. They sat just low enough that I had my doubts. Oh well, I might as well enjoy it while I was there.

It was such a peaceful spot, and I enjoyed the calmness. Within five minutes of sitting there with my eyes closed, though, I realized my true error, and it wasn't being stuck in the chair. I may have wanted some space, but perhaps I took too much. My once quiet, calm belly began to morph and

move as my little girl woke up. Then my middle started to feel hard. Shit. I was in labor.

When the first contraction gripped me, I nearly doubled over. Had I been standing, I'd have toppled to the ground for sure.

My leopard hadn't been resting all day. He had been shielding me from the contractions he held at bay. I knew they did this, and yet, not once had I considered it was the current situation.

I let out a howl of pain, half human, half beast.

Somehow Gideon must have heard me because I heard his answering roar rip through the woods. I say somehow, but if the next county over didn't have people wondering what the sound echoing through the woods was, I'd have been surprised. Gideon was at my side nearly instantly.

"Mate? What's happening?" His eyes were glued to mine, the worry on his face palpable.

"We've got to get back to the house, back to the birthing room," I bit out.

His eyes widened. "She's coming now?"

I nodded. "I thought I was just going to rest by the beach for a little bit. I was wrong."

Today was my official last day as acting forerunner, at least for the next two months. I'd planned it a while ago, and apparently, my baby decided to take it as a challenge or something because here she was, ready to enter this pride whether I still had things to do or not.

Gideon and I had spent many long conversations trying to decide how we wanted to handle our sweet baby's arrival. We ultimately decided that eight weeks of time with my baby before starting to retake my forerunner responsibilities was probably a good place to start. After that, I would return to work part-time, increasing my time as it felt right. And if anything made us uncomfortable along the way, we would reevaluate and adjust accordingly.

Jasper was more than equipped to take over for me for the next eight weeks. And, of course, I was only a conversation away in case he needed anything. I wasn't at all worried about that. If I felt the need to quit and be a stay-at-home omega, the pride would be fine. I wouldn't be, though. Being the forerunner was my calling.

Asilo was at a low right now, numbers-wise. It wasn't intentional; it just happened to work out that way. We had just sent off the last of our omegas, and we were expecting another group of them next week. It was rare they came one after another. Usually, there was a slightly chaotic period of overlap instead. I wasn't complaining about the calm. I had needed it more than I realized.

"You're absolutely certain that you're having this baby right now?" Gideon asked, and I glared at him for a solid thirty seconds trying to figure out how to respond without snapping at him.

Eventually, I nodded. "Pretty far into labor. It feels like I have to push."

“No, you can’t. We’re in sand. She’ll get sand on her.” The fear on his face had me wanting to comfort him, but I couldn’t. I was at the barely-holding-it-together stage of things.

“Can you take me back to the house?” I pleaded. It was the only thing I could think of.

“Yes, of course.” Gideon pulled me into his arms, and though my stomach ached with the contractions, I knew our best bet would be to get us back to the house. I could wait until then.

Probably.

Maybe.

I hoped.

He took off at a full sprint, cradling me to his body and not showing any sign that I weighed more than a bag of cotton, much less a big old preggo.

“I’m sorry,” I said as he ran with me in his arms. “I thought it would be fine. I had no idea.” Although, in hindsight, I should have.

“Shush, mate, it’s alright. We’ll get you to the house. And we’ll tell our dear girl about how her daddy almost had her in the sand.”

We had decided a few weeks ago to birth her at home, and we were fully prepared for it. As much as we loved Lissy, when Mortimer offered to help with the birth, we were overwhelmed by the gesture and accepted it immediately. Mortimer had opted to stay for a little while and was here to assist with the delivery and anything else we might need as a pride. A not-so-

small part of me dreamed of him falling in love with us and opting to stay forever.

Mortimer was already in the bedroom, preparing, when Gideon burst through the door. Gideon narrowed his eyes in confusion, and had I not been in such pain, it would've had me laughing.

Mortimer just smiled. "Yes, I expected the two of you today."

Gideon growled. "You didn't think to give us a heads up?"

"None of that. Your animals knew. You've been hanging around your mate for days, and Morgan's leopard has been helping things along. Won't be but a moment now." He said it as if it was no big deal, only "but a moment" was a huge ass one.

"A moment?" I croaked.

Mortimer just smiled at me and then went about giving Gideon directions.

Gideon jumped into gear and placed me on the bed, and removed my pants. My shirt was soaked through with sweat, both mine and Gideon's.

"I have Lieutenant Jasper getting supplies as we speak. Gideon, I assume you will be comfortable with Jasper in the room?" I wanted him there, but having Mortimer pause to ask only solidified my desire for him to join us.

Gideon nodded. "No one else, though."

“No, we will let others know as the time comes. I am well aware of your birth plan.”

Our daughter was born within a few minutes of Mortimer instructing me to push.

I nearly cried, sobbing tears of joy when her little cry split the room. At that moment, it was as if my life felt complete.

Mortimer had her cleaned up and placed in Gideon’s arms. He immediately brought her to me, and I gazed down at my daughter for the first time. “I thought I understood love before, but when I look at you, my sweet girl, I realize I had no idea of its true power,” Gideon said. “Thank you for coming into this world and giving me such a gift.”

“She’s incredible,” I said, holding back the emotional tears that formed at listening to my mate talk to my daughter for the first time.

Jasper and Mortimer stepped out to give us privacy, neither far in case we needed them.

“She is,” Gideon agreed.

“She looks like you.” I smiled.

“I was thinking the same thing.” He placed her gently in my arms. “There’s a bit of you, too, though. She’s a mix of both of us.”

I looked down at her sweet face. “I don’t know about that,” I said. “She almost looks a bit like your brother too.”

“He’ll be pleased to hear that. He has always said he was the better-looking one,” he teased.

I laughed, totally believing that. He was wrong, though. There was no more handsome alpha on this planet. Though I suppose I could let Kian think that way. His road to recovery had been a long one, but he was in a good place now.

“I can’t wait to introduce her to our pride,” I said. They were going to adore her.

“Me too, but let’s maybe wait a few hours,” Gideon said. “I’m selfish, and I want this time all to ourselves.”

I stifled a yawn. “Absolutely. There’s no way I’m getting up from this bed for a long, long time.”

“Actually,” Mortimer said, stepping back inside, our privacy a ruse. “It’s best if you stand up and walk within the next hour.”

I groaned. “Of course it is.”

“Everything looks to be in shipshape, though. Your body will heal nicely. It may take a few days to feel normal if you keep up some movement and shift from time to time. Don’t push it, but also, don’t be a slug. Enjoy your time with your little one,” he advised.

“Thank you,” I said.

He left the room, leaving Gideon and me alone with our little girl.

“Mable,” I said. “It means something to do with love.”

“Absolutely perfect,” Gideon agreed. “Welcome, sweet Mable. Your daddy and I are so happy to meet you.”

He climbed onto the bed beside me, and the two of us just sat there together in wonder, admiring our sweet baby girl and the life we had built here—together.

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Many of the side characters in this story have stories of their own! See Franklin's story unfold in [Fractured Fang: Alpha](#) and Ozzy & Kade in [Finding His Potential](#).

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The Prince's Barista

The Prince's Teacher

Lights of Fate

Blue

Purple

Orange

Bake Sale Bachelors

[Sugar Cookie Kisses](#)

[Apple Pie Pair](#)

[Mint Chocolate Mayhem](#)

[Blueberry Pie Beau](#)

[Salted Caramel Chaos](#)

[Red Velvet Regret](#)

[Rocky Road Rendezvous](#)

Tall Tails

[Unexpected Packages](#)

Rochdale Security

[The Bodyguard's Charge](#)

[The Bodyguard's Relationship](#)

[The Bodyguard's Professor](#) (with Lorelei M. Hart)

[The Bodyguard's Assistant](#)

[The Bodyguard's Technician](#) (with Lorelei M. Hart)

[The Bodyguard's Christmas Surprise](#)

[Rochdale Security Boxset](#)

Millerstown Moments

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[All Revved Up](#)

[Crying Out Loud](#) (with Lorelei M. Hart)

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[Life is a Lemon](#) (with Lorelei M. Hart)

[Millerstown Moments Boxset](#)

[Heaven Can Wait](#)

Vale Valley

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Dragons

[Dragon's Fire](#)

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Directions

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Shorts

[Alpha Student](#)

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About Jena Wade

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I live in Michigan with my husband, two dogs, and three children. By day I work as a software developer and at night I write. I was born and raised on a farm and I spend most of my free time outdoors, playing in the garden or tending to my landscaping.

I like my books sweet, sexy and full of romance. I love to hear from my readers and would be more than happy to answer any questions you may have about my work! Feel free to email me at thejenawade@gmail.com.

In the meantime, [visit me on Amazon](#).