



LION'S  
MATE

LILLY WILDER

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# **Lion's Mate**

**By: Lilly Wilder**

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EPILOGUE

## Foreword

I've had a lot of nicknames in my life. Savvy. Troublemaker. Princess. Stupid little -.

Well, that last one isn't very polite.

It's my fault, I guess. I go for guys that are all big swingers and hard hitters. They tend to be shallow and direct. They don't mess around, because they're not complicated enough to promise me forever. Problem is, they tend not to mind where their swings hit.

One night, my current leading asshole got a little too rough, and who stepped in to rescue me but two incredibly attractive men...who happen to be lion shapeshifters. Two alpha males fighting for the position of top dog (cat?) and willing to offer me their protection if I joined their pride...and mate.

Leo and Jackson are both big, protective, hard-hitting – totally my type.

But uncomplicated? Abusive? Just like every other guy in my life? I guess I'll find out.



## **Lion's Mate**

## CHAPTER ONE

### SAVANNAH KLINE

Every time it happened, I swore it would be the last time. But that was the problem with guys like Harry – or, I guess, girls like me.

I don't like confrontation, and I don't like dishonesty. Never have, never will. I got enough of that growing up, what with my mom cheating on my dad every chance she got and lying to his face about it, telling me she'd give me five bucks if I didn't tell daddy about all my mom's 'late night friends'. Dad wasn't much better, to be perfectly honest. The only affair he had was with his best friend Jack Daniels, but damn, did he have it often.

When I left home at sixteen, I swore to myself I would, first of all, never let myself get trapped in a terrible marriage like my parents had, and secondly, that I wouldn't waste my time with liars. Lying took so much energy, and time, and effort. And for what? A cheap little thrill?

Not for me, thanks.



I had enough money when I left to get me a bus ticket out of Nowheresville, Texas, and to Las Vegas. The bright lights and constant bustle of Fremont Street, the shows and highways clogged like arteries, and the sprawl of life in the middle of the desert appealed to me. Between backstage prop hauling, busywork for restaurant kitchens, and handing out flyers for shows to tourists, there was never a shortage of places who needed to hire a cute and approachable teenage girl without asking too many questions.

I made enough to pay for a room share for the first three years, and then I moved into my own apartment a few miles away from the Venetian hotel, where I worked as a cocktail waitress. It wasn't the most glamorous life, and it certainly wasn't the quietest life, but it was mine. It was a life I had made for myself, and no one was going to take that away from me.

I vowed that I wouldn't end up like my parents. The problem was, at least at that age, not being like my parents meant being...lonely. Really, really lonely. Vegas was full of beautiful people but they all had something to hide, or something they wanted to forget about back

home. Men had affairs with five-figure escorts, women gambled away their alimony checks, kids barely old enough to smoke stumbled around getting wasted on cheap liquor from anyone that would sell it to them.

Vegas was beautiful, and it was exciting, but it was fake.

I met Harry when I was twenty-two. Before him, there was Paul. Before Paul, Thomas, and so on. Harry had lasted the longest so far but that wasn't difficult, and said nothing to his character. Harry was an asshole, but he was honest about it. I had met him on my way home from work at three in the morning, and he'd seen me, walking along, clinging my coat around my too-short dress that I wore to get better tips. He'd called me 'pretty girl' and 'princess' – I assumed because of the askew Mardi Gras golden crown stuck in my thick black hair and the glitter that was going to take forever to wash off.

He'd caught up with me somewhere well-lit and busy, so I hadn't been afraid. He'd begged for my name, I gave it – begged for my number, and I gave it. Promised me that he would call me first thing in the morning and take me to breakfast.

And he had.

But that was the first few months. The honeymoon period, they called it. Harry never lied to me, but he also stopped calling me affectionate pet names, stopped smiling as much. He would walk me to work until it felt like he was following me to work. He'd be there when my shift ended, not so much chivalry as jealous, possessive guardianship.

He'd grab my arm when I was taking too long to leave my coworkers and friends behind, sometimes tight enough to leave bruises. He would glare at the people I waited on and more than once I got the impression that, if the bar was a little less crowded, he'd have gotten physical with some of the friendlier men. I didn't like how he behaved, but he didn't get violent in public.

Harry didn't drink, so he was better than my father. He didn't lie, so he was better than my mother. The fact that he was so attentive meant that he cared, right? My parents had ignored each other since the time I was eight, and when they did pay attention, it was to trade barbs and snide comments. Harry bought me flowers and made me promise he was the only one for me, and

when he kissed me, I knew that he would do anything he had to, to keep me by his side.

To me, that had been love. That had been better than love.

I was twenty-five when I realized that being in love was like being in a cage. But by the time the honeymoon period was over, and the butterflies had faded and been replaced by impatient, circling vultures, well, I was already in it, wasn't I? No better than my parents.

I had some cash stored away in my toilet bowl in a Ziploc bag, and a coworker I could crash with for the night, whose address Harry didn't know, on the other side of town. All I had to do was talk to my boss and tell him that I was quitting, so that Harry wouldn't come looking for me at the bar and cause trouble.

I didn't want to leave Vegas, but there were always going to be other beautiful, exciting places to wait tables at. And maybe they would be less fake, and have a less seedy underbelly, and would feel less like a cage. I wouldn't know until I went.

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Harry looked up at me as I emerged from my bedroom, dressed for work. Waiting tables and tending bar at a club in Vegas came with a certain level of implicit promiscuity. Women were expected to wear things short and tight, showing off their assets. It guaranteed better tips and happier customers.

I was used to the annoyed way his eyes narrowed at this point, but something about tonight seemed especially prickly. “You look nice,” he said, just barely hiding the hiss in his voice.

“Thank you,” I replied, turning away so he didn’t see me rolling my eyes. I grabbed a hair tie from my bag and pulled my hair up into a ponytail near the top of my head, that would make my hair bounce and swish as I walked. I preferred to have my hair down, but it got hot in the bar, especially when people started dancing.

Harry moved in on me like a cobra, one arm wrapped around my stomach as he mouthed at my neck, rubbing against me so that my dress rode up even more. I slapped his hand lightly. “Harry, knock it off,” I demanded. “I’m going to be late for work.”

“Who gives a shit,” he muttered. “If you wanna walk around looking like that for money, you can do that right here.”

I forced myself to laugh, even as his words sent an uncomfortable chill up my spine. I wormed my way free of his grabbing hands and slipped beneath him, heading for the door. I heard him chuckle, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

“You’re forgetting something,” he sing-songed. I turned around to see him holding the strap of my bag. Damn it, my phone and purse were in there, and while I had my apron at the bar and would be able to collect my tips in it, my boss frowned on us taking our aprons home and it wasn’t as secure as keeping my bag in the lockers, where I normally stashed my cash.

Harry grinned at me, that lopsided smile that I used to find so charming and boyish. I pressed my lips together and squared my shoulders.

“It’s fine,” I replied, and reached back for the door. His eyes darkened, but he didn’t advance on me. “I’ll see you later.”

I slipped out the door before he could get it into his head to chase me. I was breathing hard as I rushed down the stairs to the ground floor, tottering in my heels but managing to keep my feet. Sometimes I had to run in these blasted things so it wasn't like I couldn't keep my footing. I was nimble from years working on the streets, dodging pedestrians and floats and cars alike. People tended not to notice me, given how small and unassuming I was, which meant I ran the risk of getting run into. A lot.

I happened to evolve something to help with that, and even in heels, I was spry and quick.

I hurried away from my apartment building, able to feel Harry's angry eyes on my back from the window. I was definitely going to pay for that, later.

The thought struck me, and then a weak smile. No, because I wasn't coming home tonight. In the grand scheme of things, I guessed it wasn't that big of a deal that he had my phone and purse. I didn't have any cash in there, I had been stowing it away at the bar and in a bank account he didn't know about, for this very night.

I was going to get out. I was going to get away and be free from Harry once and for all. I just had to make it through this shift.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LEO

I really didn't like human cities that much. They were loud, noisy, and they stank like a car that had crashed into a lake and been left to decay in the water. Especially in somewhere as hot and relentless as the desert.

I liked it back on the pride lands. There was a section of the desert, in the base of the mountains separating Las Vegas and Pahrump, Nevada, that was a Government sanctioned reservation for shifters like me. We were the worst kept secret in Nevada, and had prides scattered all along the warmer parts of the United States.

Jackson loved Vegas. He loved the bright lights, the bustling of people, the noise. I didn't. But Jackson was kind of like an older brother to me, and whenever he got an idea in his head, more often than not I ended up tagging along. He was older, but he was way more hotheaded than I was, and had an uncanny ability to get himself into trouble.

Tonight's destination was a cocktail lounge in a place called the Venetian hotel. Jackson liked the hotel because the crest was a lion, and sometimes I had to laugh at how fucking stupid he was. He found humor in the dumbest shit, but he was good company, and he was paying, so I didn't complain as we navigated the haze of smoke surrounding loud slot machines, the deep hall where there were craps tables and roulettes, the Pai Gao and Poker tables, and headed towards the bar.

I didn't really interact with humans enough to know if they knew lions walked among them just by looking at us. I could certainly tell when there was another of my kind, but I supposed that was normal. Lion shifters have the reflective lenses of regular cats, and slightly narrower, less round pupils than humans did. We also tended to run taller and tanner, but that wasn't necessarily out of place in a place like Vegas.

Everyone here was flashy and golden and stank of perfume, cigarettes, and alcohol. It made my muzzle wrinkle and my tail twitch in aggravation where I had it wrapped firmly around my thigh. Jackson and I, as we came from the purer bloodline, could be almost

completely human in our shifted form. Mixed breeds tended to have a harder time fully shifting, favoring the more dominant lion genes over their softer, weaker human genetics.

The only thing that would give Jackson and me away was if someone felt my tail through my pants, caught a glimpse of my elongated canines, or my eyes flashed in the lights just right.

“Are we almost there?” I complained, as we crossed through yet another room that was so thick with smoky haze I could barely see. I had to rely on the heat radiating off of Jackson to navigate, and even that was difficult with the press of so many human bodies around us.

“Yeah, almost there,” he called back. He reached out and took my hand, yanking me closer to his side. I rumbled in thanks, but resisted the urge to headbutt or nuzzle him as I would if we were back on the pride lands. Humans were weird about that sort of thing, or so the alpha had told us when we first grew old enough to enter Las Vegas and start mingling.

The alpha was always encouraging us young ones to go out and be around people. Most of the females were

more than happy to galivant in every compass direction to see what the human world had to offer. Jackson and I were the only lions our age who still permanently resided in the pride lands.

I knew that was why Jackson wanted to come to a human place tonight, away from prying feline eyes and attentive ears. He wanted to talk.

He approached a single door, which was framed in black tile and open. From within, I heard bass-heavy music and saw flashing lights. I winced in preparation of the headache the flashing lights would cause me, and felt my vision getting narrowed and wide-pupiled in anticipation of the darkness. Cat vision was just as impeccable at night as it was during the day.

There were two large men guarding the door, and a line of people leading away from it, caged in with a velveteen rope that separated them from the rest of the thoroughfare. We joined the back of the line and Jackson let go of my hand.

I licked my lips, my slightly abrasive tongue tugging on the dry skin. Ugh, it was awful in this place. Not enough water around, just those bright slushy drinks

humans liked that made them drunk and stupid. I wished I had brought some of the cool, crystal mountain lake water in a bottle with me, but Jackson had said that humans search things like that and would likely take it away, so I'd resisted, figuring that I could handle one night of dealing with human food and drink.

We were underdressed, but it wasn't like there were tailors and fancy tuxedo shops on the pride lands. We had one lioness who would go and gather clothing for us occasionally, but Jackson and I hadn't had anything new in a while now that we'd stopped growing. At least our jeans didn't have holes in them, but as I cast my eyes over the human men with their dark slacks and golden watches, and the women dressed in more skin than clothing, I knew we could raise a few eyebrows.

Oh well. Jackson didn't seem worried, and I trusted him enough to get us inside.

Jackson turned to me and grinned. His canines were on full display and his brown eyes were glowing with giddy delight. "You're in a good mood," I noted.

"Yeah, well." His broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. The line moved forward a few paces, and another group

of humans piled in behind us. I looked back towards the rows of slot machines and saw a pair of women approaching the bar. One of them was short and slim, with thick brown hair and a tight black dress that barely covered her ass and breasts. The other was a blonde, much curvier, dressed in a shiny sequined number that barely covered her as well. They walked past the bouncers and inside without being stopped.

Jackson nudged me, grinning. “See something you like?”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “Tell me you didn’t bring me here to pick up women,” I replied.

“Well, it’s something we’re going to have to consider soon.” Jackson’s happy demeanor fell, and his expression turned serious. “The alpha is dying, Leo. That means we’re gonna have to step up soon, and that means, you know, carrying on the line.”

I sighed, but couldn’t deny it. It was one of the points of contention between the alpha and the rest of the elders. His encouragement to the young ones of going forth and prospering meant that our numbers had slowly started to dwindle over the last few decades, and

even worse when it came to mine and Jackson's generation.

As the strongest males, it would come to one of us to take over the pride when the alpha passed. And Jackson was right – he wasn't long for this world. He was old and sick and he didn't have any living sons to naturally take over from him that had been born and raised on the pride lands.

"I know," I murmured, and thought of the two women I had just seen. I wasn't a purist, I could acknowledge that humans were capable of being attractive. But it wasn't anything I had given much thought to until recently when the alpha first started growing weak.

The line moved again, and I shook my head, heaving another sigh. We fell silent, merely people watching and listening. Cats were good observers, there was a reason the domesticated pets humans kept had a reputation for being aloof and nonconfrontational. Our superior hearing and eyesight meant that we were much better as ambush predators than hunters.

We reached the front of the line. One of the men checked our I.D.'s and his eyebrows shot up when he saw the little shining hologram that denoted us as pride land residents. He gave us both a look over the top of his sunglasses. "Keep out of trouble," he warned.

"Of course," Jackson said with another winning smile, taking his I.D. back. "Have a good night, gentlemen." He put a hand on my shoulder and steered us inside.

Immediately, my pupils flared wide and my nose stung as the scent of sweat, sharp alcohol, old leather, and the vaguely musty scent of humans hit me like a sledgehammer. I growled lowly, the bass rumble in my chest enough to send one human skittering away from me, not knowing why she was afraid, but threatened by the predatory sound her ears could barely detect.

"Easy now," Jackson warned, and put a hand on my shoulder again. "Come on, let's get you something to drink. You need to loosen up."

I huffed, and let him lead me to the bar.



## CHAPTER THREE

### SAVANNAH

Despite the inherent difficulties that came with being a cocktail waitress at one of the most popular hotels on the strip, I actually really liked my job. I liked being able to move, and I liked being able to give people what they asked for. I had a good memory for drink orders and had a large pool of generous regulars who liked that I paid attention to them and knew their drinks, and could have them ready whenever they took one of the booths in the back of the bar.

The bar itself opened to a dance floor, and then there was a raised section where guests could sit at booths and tables, order food and table service, and so on, out of the hubbub of the grinding bodies on the dance floor and without having to shout their orders to the poor overworked bartenders.

There was a second bar behind this section of the lounge, where food and personal drink orders to the raised section could be placed. Only waitresses and bartenders, like me and my coworkers, were allowed in this section of the bar. It was a good place to get away

from the pounding music and shouting when I had to, although the music wasn't as bad in my lounge area.

I met Grace outside the hotel, where she was smoking a cigarette before our shifts began. She was taller than me, and blonde, her hair not as long or thick and much easier to work with. Mine was still damp from my shower and from rushing out the door, and I scratched the back of my hairline in discomfort as I approached her.

She took one look at me and her eyes narrowed. Grace had this kind of unnerving psychic sense about her, I know she would make absolute bank if she decided to ever pose as one of those spiritual healers or phony psychics that were a dime a dozen in Las Vegas. Between her good looks, flirtatious personality, and ability to absolutely eviscerate a person's inner thoughts with just a look, she'd be the best in the business.

She pressed her red lips together, and stubbed her cigarette out. "I'm going to kill that son of a bitch," she declared.

I shook my head. "He was being playful," I replied. It sounded weak to my own ears. "It doesn't matter. I still

have my stuff and cash here, I don't need a phone. I'll buy a burner if I have to, and he doesn't know the PIN to any of my cards."

"Thank fuck for that," she replied. I smiled. Grace came from a small Texas town like I did, and had grown up in one of those super Christian communities, but she didn't act like it. She looped her arm through mine and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She was wearing a silver and gold swirled sequined dress that plunged at the neckline and rode up her ass, barely on the borders of decency. She was a pro and I had modeled my own wardrobe after her when it came to work, since she always made money even on the slow nights.

She was like a mentor to me, and my best – and at this point, only, thanks to Harry – friend. I was so lucky to have her and so grateful that she was going to let me stay at her place tonight. I only had to make it through this shift, and everything would be fine.

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Grace left her packet of cigarettes and her lighter in her locker, before fishing out her little black apron and tying it around her waist. Our aprons didn't go around

our necks. I took mine out of my locker as well, my dress short enough that the apron itself was actually longer. Grace and I barely used ours for their intended purpose, since we could memorize everything but the most complicated drink orders and only used our apron pockets to hold our cash and spare pens.

I twisted my apron to one side so it hung at my thigh, holster-style, and Grace gave me an approving smile. She looked me up and down and I observed her in what had become our usual pre-shift ritual. “You have smutch,” I said, pursing my lips and tapping the corner of my mouth. She licked her thumb and rubbed the errant spot of what I assumed was lipstick or remnants of breakfast away.

“Thanks, doll,” she replied when I gave her a thumbs up. “You look flawless as always.” I smiled at her, and did a small curtsy. She rolled her eyes and hooked her hand through my arm again and we walked towards the bar, where the chef was standing and ready to give us the specials.

He rattled them off and the bartender added that he was low on vanilla vodka, so try to avoid anything that

required it and dissuade anyone specifically requesting it. I made a note of that. Aside from me and Grace, there were a half a dozen other waitresses who would be working the floor with us tonight, as well as another dozen buss boys. Our lounge was relatively small but our patrons tended to go hard and need a lot of cleaning up after and attentive waitresses.

“Good luck, ladies,” the head bartender said. He dismissed us and Grace smiled at me. We headed towards the door, and once we were in the lounge proper, she smacked me lightly on the ass.

“Go get ‘em, tiger!” she called, and sauntered off to her section, already in full hip-swaying and hair-tossing mode. I rolled my eyes and smiled at her antics, before heading to my own section.

The club was already in full swing by the time I began working, and I caught sight of a few of my regulars. “Hi guys! Great to see you again, same as usual?” They nodded, and I went back to the bar to place my orders before heading out again. After so long working at this place I had my timing down to the

second, and knew how long I could spend waiting tables before I had to go back and fetch drinks.

Along with my regulars were the normal rotation of tourists. I caught sight of two newcomers and headed over. I had to pause, admiring them for a moment in the low golden light. They were both big men, easily a head higher than me. One of them had hair so dark it looked black, and the other had more of a sandy color. They both looked about my age.

“Evening, gentlemen,” I said, placing down some napkins and handing them a menu I’d snagged from another table. “I’m Savannah, I’ll be taking care of you. Would you like to start with some waters?”

I noticed the lighter-haired one wrinkled his nose at the suggestion, but his companion spoke first. “Water would be great, thank you, and a bottle of the house red with two glasses.”

I kept my expression neutral. It wasn’t what I expected two young guys to drink, but I definitely wasn’t going to judge. I grinned and nodded. “Coming right up,” I said, and went back to the bar to get them their waters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### JACKSON

“Ugh,” Leo said from beside me, after the waitress had gone. “Water?”

“It’s perfectly safe to drink,” I assured him. He grimaced again and looked away, eyes sharp on the mass of writhing bodies on the dance floor. His nostrils flared, and I knew he was smelling the sweat and pheromones that poured off of humans like a wave. When you got them in the dark and grinding together, they were no better than animals.

Leo’s eyes narrowed for a moment, and then he turned his attention up as the waitress, Savannah, returned with our ice water. She set them on the little black napkins, two wine glasses wrapped in her long fingers. She set those down too. “I’ll be right back with the wine,” she promised, and disappeared again.

I smirked, when I noted Leo’s eyes following her. “See something you like?” I teased him again. His cheeks

darkened and he gave me an aggravated look. “Don’t look at me like that. She’s cute.”

Leo opened his mouth to answer, but clicked it closed again when Savannah returned with our bottle of wine. She opened it with an expert twist, putting the bottle opener into the apron slung at her side, and poured our glasses over half full.

“Let me know if you need anything else!” she said with another friendly smile, and left. This time, both of us watched her go. She really was gorgeous. I liked petite girls that I could pick up and carry around, and her hair was as thick and luxurious as a lion’s mane. She looked like a wildcat and moved confidently even in her heels, which made her legs look a mile long and highlighted the muscles in her calves and thighs.

Leo cleared his throat and took a long drink of his wine, breaking the moment. “Don’t get any ideas,” he warned.

I arched a brow.

“She’s got male stink all over her,” Leo continued. “She’s mated already.”



My lips pursed. “She wasn’t wearing a ring,” I replied. Humans did things like that, instead of mating bites or bonding ceremonies. Leo shrugged, and I decided to leave it be for now. I took a drink of wine. It was a little tart for my liking but went down easily enough.

“We do need to start thinking about finding some more females,” I said after a prolonged silence between us. It would never be silent in the club, but that was one of the reasons I had brought Leo here. We were far away from the pride lands and it was unlikely we’d run into another of our kind here. Talks like this had to be kept secret. If another lion from a neighboring pride, or God forbid another alpha, overheard that ours was sick or dying, they would try to challenge our claim and easily overwhelm us. Leo was a good fighter, and so was I, but there simply weren’t enough of us at the moment.

Leo let out another unhappy noise, frowning into his reflection on the surface of his wine. “Damn him,” he growled, showing his fangs. “This wouldn’t be an issue if he had summoned everyone back last year. We could have a whole slew of younglings by now.”

I agreed, but I didn't say so. Leo knew already. We had talked about it often. As the only ones our age who had remained on the pride lands, we had stayed close even when we reached maturity, unlike other males who would fight for dominance, breeding rights, or territory. I hoped that wouldn't change after the alpha died. Leo was my best friend, I considered him like a brother, and I didn't want to fight him for the position of top cat if I didn't have to.

"The girls will come back for his funeral," I said after a moment.

Leo scoffed. "Half of them are mated already and the other half won't want to stick around and raise cubs, that was why they left."

"You're in a shittier mood than normal."

"I don't like this human city, Jackson, you know that."

I considered him. "Then why did you come with me?"

His eyes met mine. He looked genuinely confused by the question. "Why wouldn't I?"

I smiled, and took another drink of wine.

Leo sighed. His fingers trailed down the stem of his wine glass, and his expression turned serious. “Jackson, I don’t want to fight you when the alpha dies,” he said. I blinked at him in surprise at his directness. I didn’t expect to have this conversation until it was time. But, I supposed, there was no time like the present. “I think that we...would be good working together, you know?”

“I agree,” I said. He looked at me again. “So how do you propose we make sure that happens?”

His brow creased, and he teased a canine over the side of his lower lip. He looked away, to the dance floor, to Savannah’s silhouette as she flitted around the tables. I didn’t need to be a lion to notice how his pupils flared, his irises taking on a reflective sheen for a moment. Whatever it was about that woman made Leo’s inner cat perk up and pay attention.

Truthfully, it made mine do the same. For a shifter, their animal side was like a second floor of their house. We could live separately if we wanted, but every now and again there was a yowling from upstairs that we couldn’t ignore.

The way Savannah moved, and her hair, and her wide toothy smile, almost made me think she was a shifter as well, were it not for the fact that her scent was decidedly human and she didn't seem to recognize that we were shifters too. It made my inner cat want to scratch curiously at the door.

“We need females,” Leo finally said, tearing his eyes away from her. “We should decide on them together. Claim them...together.”

My brows rose.

“That way one can't outbreed the other, one can't be more powerful than the other, it'll be...equal.” His lips twisted into a wry smile. “And we know how queens are.”

I laughed, and nodded, thinking of my own sister, who had gone out Northwest, as well as my aunts who had remained. Lions were deferential by nature to the women – the queens – of the pride. We had to be, they were the ones who kept the place running, after all. Men were just glorified pit fighters defending the lands, while the queens hunted and raised young and kept the peace. I had often thought, given my knowledge of human social dynamics, that human women would quite like the

arrangement, but I had never exactly gotten around to asking one.

Leo's suggestion was sound, even though it surprised me to hear him speaking so plainly. He usually kept his thoughts to himself. "Alright," I said. He smiled. "Together, then." I raised my glass. "As equals."

"As equals," he echoed, and clinked our glasses together, even though he rolled his eyes at the human tradition.

I took another drink, and sighed to myself. The alpha was going to die soon, that was no secret. If we were going to start swelling our ranks, we would have to act quickly. It wasn't going to be as simple as taking out a personal ad – we couldn't just take any woman and make her our mate. For starters, it had to be her choice. Secondly, she had to come from a good bloodline and prove that she would work well as a member of the pack. We could accommodate humans, we had houses and running water and everything they needed, but they needed to understand, not just know.

Leo's eyes gravitated back to Savannah, helplessly. He let out a soft trill, like a greeting call, as though trying

to get her attention. Of course, she wasn't a shifter, and she couldn't hear us. But it was a nice thought, all the same.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SAVANNAH

It was proving to be a lucrative night, which I was grateful for. I could use one last good hurrah before I left this place forever. I made sure to keep checking in with Grace throughout the night. She was going to be my ride, after all, and our shifts ended at the same time so I wanted to make sure nothing was going to change.

I had no idea what I was going to do if Grace had to cancel on me. I was ready to beg on my knees for her help if it came down to that, but Grace knew enough of my situation that I knew she wouldn't flake.

I managed to find a quiet moment to snag my boss' attention and tell him that tonight was my last night. He wasn't happy about it, but there wasn't much he could do. If I stopped showing up, I stopped showing up. Thankfully he didn't just kick me out on my ass on the spot. I still had a couple of hours left of my shift and I didn't need to be sitting around doing nothing for that time.

My regulars came and went like clockwork. I was waylaid a few times by non-lounge members to run drinks for them from the main bar, which I did when I was able to. It wasn't part of my job and they rarely tipped well but I was willing to do just about anything to make sure this night ran smoothly.

Over the course of my relationship with Harry, and in this job, I had gotten very good at sensing when someone's eye was on me. A lot of people tended to just stare at their waiter or waitress and hope the power of telepathy drew their attention, so I had gotten to the point where I tended to feel when someone was trying to get mine.

So I felt the two newcomers, those large guys who had ordered wine, staring at me throughout the night. I didn't feel threatened by them, it would take a significantly larger amount of them or more aggressive behavior to make me afraid, but I also knew that if Harry showed up and saw them staring then he'd cause a scene.

Besides, even if it was my last night, I wanted to make a good impression and try to get them to open their wallets and leave me a more generous tip.



They seemed like nice enough guys. They were low maintenance and their drink orders were uncomplicated. I kept their waters full, though I noticed the darker-haired one was the only one who seemed to be drinking any, and they ended up on their third bottle of wine by the time my shift ended.

“Hey, guys,” I said, approaching their table with a warm smile. The bar was beginning to quiet down, and I was exhausted, but refused to let that show. “I just wanted you to know that it’s last call, so if there’s anything else I can get you, speak up now.”

“Thank you, Savannah, we’re good,” the darker-haired one said, smiling at me all crooked. It made my stomach flutter a little. He really was gorgeous. I tried not to notice things like that anymore because Harry would be pissed if he found out I was ogling other guys, but come on, I’m only human.

He clapped his companion on the shoulder and they both stood. I had to crane my head up to meet their eyes, even in my heels. “It was nice to meet you,” the lighter-haired one said. He smiled as well, his eyes shining despite the low light in a way that looked almost

unnatural. He stepped closer and I shivered, biting my lower lip. Heat radiated off both of them like a furnace, and judging from the way their casual clothes clung to them, I could tell they were all muscle beneath. Big, gorgeous men with disarmingly sweet smiles were my weakness.

They both reached into their pockets and slid me two crisp hundred-dollar bills each. My eyes widened. “Guys, this is way more than your bill.”

“Keep the change,” the darker-haired one said. I swallowed, but was in no position to refuse this random act of kindness. “Maybe we’ll see you around.”

“I -.” I couldn’t say anything before he took his friend’s hand and they walked out of the bar. I could only blink dumbly after them, even as a buss boy came up to me and started clearing the table. I hurriedly stuffed the notes into my pocket before he could see and get bitter about the tip.

Jesus Christ. Things were finally coming up Savannah.

I grinned, watching them go, before a shadow caught my eye. My smile fell and my stomach dropped,

as I realized Harry was coming towards me, an expression of black rage on his face.

\*

“What the fuck was that?” he demanded, as he came up to me.

I glared at him and swallowed harshly, turning away and hurrying towards the back room. I hoped that there were other people in there that could be witnesses. Harry was an asshole, but he didn't do that shit in public. He was smarter than that.

“Customers,” I replied flippantly. My heart skipped a beat when I saw how closely he was following me. I rushed to the back room and pushed my way through, noting with dismay that the room was empty. I practically ran over to my locker, opened it, and stuffed the rest of my cash into my apron before I headed out the door. I had to get to the parking lot and find Grace before Harry did something drastic.

“Customers,” he repeated, snarling the word, and far too close for comfort. My heart began to race as I quickened my pace. I wanted to take off my heels but anyone will tell you not to risk going barefoot on Las

Vegas streets, and I didn't have time to risk slipping them off and letting Harry catch up to me. He was practically running after me without looking like he was trying to chase me down. "You seem to be getting real friendly with your customers, Savvy."

I narrowed my eyes, but didn't look back. I had always hated that nickname, but it beat some of the other, ruder ones he liked to sling when it was just the two of us alone. "No, I wasn't," I replied. "And even if I was, I'm a waitress, Harry, being nice is part of my job."

"Stop walking away from me!" he snapped, but I didn't slow for a second. I had to get somewhere that was not near him and I had to do it now.

I rounded the corner and breathed a sigh of relief when I spotted Grace. She was smoking by her car, clearly waiting for me, and smiled, lifting her free hand in greeting when she saw me. Her smile disappeared when she saw who was following me. I watched her stub out her cigarette and reach into the rolled down window to start the car and have it ready for me to jump in and go.

Harry must have noticed and made the connection. I felt his hand lash out and his fingers wrap around my wrist in a crushing grip. I winced, and halted, whirling to face him. “Let go of me,” I said, as calmly as I could manage.

“No, you’re not getting in that bitch’s car and leaving,” Harry replied. He yanked me close, sending me stumbling off balance and almost colliding with his chest. I caught myself at the last minute and he wrapped a hand in my hair, yanking my head back. “You’re not going anywhere but home, with me, where you belong.”

“Let go of me,” I hissed again, wincing when his grip on me turned painful. “You’re hurting me –.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Harry replied. He brought his face close to mine and let go of my hair, grabbing my chin instead in a crushing grip. “You’re not leaving me, you stupid little bitch, what do I have to say to get it through your skull?”

I glared at him, and clawed at his wrist as best I could, but I wasn’t as strong as he was and his grip was really starting to hurt. I heard Grace’s car door slam and her heels clicking rapidly over.

“Hey, asshole, let her go!” Grace yelled. Harry’s eyes flashed up and darkened. He yanked me back towards the hotel, turning us so that his back was to Grace as though he was going to be a physical barrier between us. “Let her go before I call the fucking police!”

“Call them!” Harry snapped over his shoulder.

“I don’t want to go with you,” I said, and as hard as I could, I slammed my stiletto down onto the top of his foot. He howled in pain and released me, and I stumbled back, rubbing my aching jaw and bruised wrist gingerly. He was breathing hard, and the look in his eyes was murderous when he met my gaze. “Just leave me alone, Harry. It’s over. I’m not going back with you and I want you to pack your shit and leave my place tonight.”

“Like Hell I will!”

He moved so fast that I didn’t even register it until I felt the stinging slap across my face. It was so hard that it knocked me off balance, sending me to my hands and knees on the concrete. I gasped in pain as my knees and palms got torn up, and I could taste blood in my mouth from where he’d hit me. I couldn’t believe he had hit me in public.

“What the fuck, you asshole!” That was Grace. I flinched as Harry’s shadow covered me, and held my cheek, tears of pain stinging my eyes. I could feel myself curling in, trying to hide away, like I used to when my mother and father started screaming at each other.

I knew he was about to hit me again. Maybe so hard I would pass out.

Then, I heard a roar that made my very bones tremble.

## CHAPTER SIX

### LEO

I didn't think. I couldn't think. I could only react.

Jackson and I had rounded the corner of the hotel, heading to the parking lot. I caught Savannah's scent and then heard shouting, and we were running. Jackson had longer strides than me but I was fast and could easily keep pace.

I saw the woman with the sequin dress shouting, walking over from a car. I saw Savannah, in the grip of a human man that towered over her, face twisted into an ugly scowl. I saw her go to the ground. I saw him raise his fist to strike again.

And then, my world narrowed down to that man. It was the same scent I had picked up on Savannah, it was her boyfriend or mate or whatever the Hell humans called each other. How dare he strike her! How dare any man raise a hand to a queen?

Jackson was by my side, as always, as I felt my skin ripple and tear. I barely managed to get my shirt off



before my lion form was tearing my jeans from my body, thick muscle and odd shape no match for the old clothing. I roared as loudly and fiercely as I could. Our roars had the same paralytic effect on prey animals as tigers.

Jackson hadn't shifted, but his canines were big and bared and his eyes flashed with anger. He lunged for the man and grabbed him by his shoulder, throwing him backwards so that he skidded towards me. I snarled at him, ears flat to my skull, tail swishing wildly. The man's eyes widened when he saw me and he scrambled backwards, trying to get away.

Jackson advanced on him from one direction, me from another. I prowled low to the ground, ready to rip out this miserable rat's throat with my jaws. It was forbidden for our kind to kill a human when they weren't on our pride lands, but I knew the alpha wouldn't fault me for this. Assuming he ever found out.

He didn't have to find out.

Saliva dripped from my muzzle as I stalked towards the man, nostrils flaring at the scent of blood. Savannah's blood. When I chanced a look to her, I saw

that her friend was helping her upright, and that her knees and hands were scraped and bloody. There was blood on her lip too, her cheek a stinging red from where he struck her.

Anger rose up in me all over again and I bared my teeth. I wanted to rip this piece of filth apart. I would kill him, by my own mane I would kill him for hurting her. The protectiveness wasn't new, I had always been willing to fight for my friends and pride, but the ferocity of it was like a huge tidal wave ready to sweep me under, like the rare torrential rain that could fall upon us in the desert.

I couldn't think about it. There was a monster in front of me and I had no other recourse. I lunged and the man cried out in fear, holding up his arm. I sank my teeth around his forearm and bit down until I felt bones crack between my jaws. He screamed and kicked at me. I slammed my forelegs down on his knees, snapping those backwards as well. The man screamed again, pure pain and terror in his voice. My tail lashed as I jerked my head, ready to rip his arm completely off. I heard his

shoulder pop out of place, and blood coated my tongue like fresh water.

“Leo,” Jackson whispered. I went still, and so did the man. He was sweating and pale, barely able to stay awake from the grievous injuries I’d given him. I dropped his arm as he passed out limp on the concrete.

I looked up at Jackson, ears cocked forward, then to the side. Jackson’s face was a mask of anger as well, but I could see the way he was torn. There were sirens. Savannah’s friend must have called the human police before we heard the commotion.

Jackson met my eyes, and I nodded. I wasn’t going to be able to shift back and wear my torn clothes, and the blood on my muzzle would draw attention. I stepped off of the pitiful unconscious man and went to gather my clothes, shoving them into a bundle and biting down on them so I could carry them to the car.

When I turned back around, Savannah and her friend were by a car. Savannah was staring at us with wide eyes, her mouth hanging open in shock. I tried to rumble a reassurance at her, but the sound made her flinch. Jackson held up a hand.

“Go,” he said. “I’m sorry. Go.”

Savannah’s friend nodded briskly and herded her into the car. It was already running, so the other woman got in and peeled away with a screech of tires. I watched them go, tail twitching with the desire to give chase. I wanted to remain by her side and make sure she was alright.

But I was bloody and a fucking lion and I had just attacked someone in front of her.

Jackson came over to me and scruffed me to get my attention. “Come on,” he urged. I nodded, and followed him quickly to the car. On the pride lands we didn’t use vehicles all that much, except for transport over long distances on the rare times that happened. Nature provided us most of the supplies we needed, and the busses knew of the lion stop for other things. We did, however, have one ragtop Jeep that was older than I was.

I jumped into the back and laid low as Jackson climbed in. Alcohol affected us differently, we drank it more for the taste than any drunk effects, so I knew he was okay to drive. The Jeep rumbled to life beneath me and I curled up into as small a ball as I could so that I

would remain unseen, as Jackson drove past the bleeding, unconscious man, onto the main road, then the highway, and out into the desert and the pride lands beyond.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### SAVANNAH

“Holy shit.”

I nodded, my face still burning but the rest of my body numb.

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah.” I had recognized one of those men as one of my patrons for the night. I could only assume that meant the beast was the other man. Lions. They were lion shifters! Everyone in Vegas knew about the local pride but they were talked about like some distant, unreachable place. No one knew where exactly they lived, and I had certainly never been in a hurry to meet them.

I mean, come on, they were lions. They were savage, primitive, beasts! The fact that I had waited on two of them, that I had found them so attractive and charming, and that they had apparently just rushed in to save me from Harry...

I couldn't think about that right now, but I was sure it would weigh on my mind for some time.

My grip was tight on the side handle of the door and my own thigh. My palms ached from being scraped open and my knees hurt as well. I was pretty sure I had twisted my ankle too. I grimaced and looked down with dismay when I saw it was a little swollen.

“Holy shit!”

“Can you please say something else, or I'm going to slap you,” I snapped at Grace. She pressed her lips together and I sucked in a breath, closing my eyes and rubbing both hands over my face. Only to remember at the last minute that both my hands and my face ached like a bitch. “Ow. Damn it.”

“We'll get you some ice and Neosporin or something,” Grace said. She shook her head. “I can't believe that son of a bitch hit you. I have half a mind to go back and run him over. Twice.”

“He was just mauled by a fucking lion,” I said, somewhat hysterically. “I think he's suffered enough.”

“No he hasn’t,” Grace replied darkly. Then she exhaled, and shook her head. “Lions! Jesus Christ. Do you know those guys?”

“No,” I said. “They were in my section tonight. They were nice, low maintenance. Generous tippers.”

“And then some.”

I winced.

“Sorry, that was a bad joke, but I think I’m going to lose it if I don’t joke about it.” I sighed, and nodded. I understood completely. Some shit was just so insane that you had to laugh. I could feel it, nerves and shock, but greater than that, relief.

I had gotten away. I was going to be okay. I was free.

My throat got tight and I swallowed harshly to try and stop the tears from falling, but it was no use. They spilled down my stinging cheek and aching jaw and I dabbed at them as best I could, wary of aggravating the injuries. If Grace noticed that I was a complete wreck in her passenger seat, she said nothing about it. I had never loved her more.



\*

Grace's apartment was about ten minutes away at this time of night. Las Vegas rarely slept, but for the most part traffic died down after the bars closed and people had to drunkenly stumble their way home. The only other vehicles on the road were taxis and trucks hauling freight, and, of course, police.

We pulled up outside her complex and I breathed out heavily again. "I think my ankle got messed up," I said, grimacing down at it. It was almost the same color as my wrist now. Grace hummed, and opened the door, circling around to mine. I watched her take off her heels and tuck the heels part into the deep 'V' of her dress, and had to laugh at the image of her shoes bobbing around between her breasts as she opened the door to help me out.

"Keep laughing and I'll stab you with one," she threatened playfully, and slung my arm over her shoulders once I was outside and upright. I hip-checked the door so it closed and she locked it with her fob, and together we limped our way up the stairs to the second floor where her apartment was.

I had only been to Grace's place a few times, but it was pretty straightforward as a layout. A small hallway extended past a guest room and a guest bathroom, into the living area. Grace's bedroom was behind a door on the other side, and there was a small kitchenette on the right, and windows with a view of the parking lot to the left. It was basically the same as my apartment, except whereas my couch was old and sagging and the most ugly shade of green I could stomach, Grace's was decorated much more elegantly, with silver picture frames and mirrors on practically every wall, and a big black leather couch that looked like it could easily double as a bed for two people.

She led me over to the couch and sat me down. She put her shoes and mine next to each other and hoisted my injured ankle up with a grunt. I shrieked in surprise, and then hissed when she dragged her glass top coffee table over and rested my heel on it.

"Cold," I complained.

"Keep it elevated," she replied, and went to the kitchen. I grabbed a spare pillow and bent forward to tuck it under my foot before flopping back with a sigh.

My heart felt like it was still racing and I was still reeling from what had happened.

Lion shifters had mauled my boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend? Yeah, most definitely ex. He was probably going to end up in the hospital. I hoped that the guys didn't go to jail for assault. I didn't know if Harry had seen their faces, but there was only one place a lion shifter would have come from in these parts. Maybe he was a tourist? Either way, the local pride would probably get investigated. The thought made a knot of guilt twist in my gut.

Grace reappeared with a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a dishtowel, and she delicately positioned it over my ankle before sitting on the coffee table beside me. She met my eyes. "So, that happened," she said.

"Yep," I replied, popping the 'p'.

"At least one cathartic part of this whole thing is that I got to watch the bastard bleed."

I winced. "I didn't plan on anyone getting hurt."

"Well, I'd rather it was him than you," Grace replied. I was glad that she didn't seem to give a shit or

feel guilty. It helped me feel a little better. She looked me up and down, then bit at her lower lip. “I should have some things for the cut, and we’ll ice your face too, you’re starting to swell.”

I resisted the urge to touch my cheek as she got up and disappeared into her bedroom. I heard her rooting around, and tentatively tested the inside of my cheek. It felt like I had cut the inside of my cheek on my teeth, which would explain the blood. At least Harry hadn’t knocked any teeth loose. It felt tender, and swollen, but it wasn’t bleeding anymore, so I tried not to dwell on it.

My mind kept running back to the shifters. The sheer terror I had felt, knowing Harry was about to really hurt me. And possibly Grace. If those two men hadn’t shown up...

And God, the sight of them. There weren’t any lions in Texas, at least none that I’d heard of, and I’d never seen one before. They were huge, much bigger than I thought natural lions grew to be. One of the men, the darker-haired one, had stayed human, but even still the sight of his large fangs and glowing eyes wasn’t one I would forget any time soon.

His friend, though, wow. The sight of that giant, terrifying animal, and the way he had bitten through Harry's arm like it was an ice cube had been amazing, if I was being honest with myself. The dynamics of the change fascinated me, when I allowed myself to linger on it as I waited for Grace to come back with some stuff for my injuries. He had changed shape so quickly, and seemed to understand his friend when he'd spoken.

He had defended me. He didn't even know me, but he saw that I was in trouble and leapt to protect.

It had been a long time since I'd had anyone to do that. I didn't need protecting, most of the time. I could handle myself in an equal fight. That had not been an equal fight. Part of me wondered, if we hadn't left, if the police weren't on their way, if I would have stood and watched that lion kill my ex. If I would have wanted him to.

If I would have liked it.

...Maybe I would have. Grace was right, it was cathartic as Hell. Even horrified, even scared, seeing Harry in pain had been...kind of awesome. Like he was finally feeling some of the awful shit he had done to me,

my years of discomfort and months of psychological abuse, and the hitting, and the controlling behavior, and the times he had made me have sex when I didn't feel like it, or gone out with his friends whom I hated, or any other times he had been a royal douchebag to me.

So, yeah, maybe part of me really liked the idea of watching a big ass wildcat rip the bastard to shreds.

Thankfully I didn't have to deal with that part.

Grace's return jarred me out of my thoughts. I looked up as she sat down again and squeezed some Neosporin onto her finger and started rubbing my knees. I took the tube from her and put some on my palms, grimacing at the waxy feeling.

She left one more time for another smaller ice pack for my face, and then sat. "So," she said, lacing her fingers together, "what's the plan?"

I sighed. "It's the same," I said, shaking my head and shrugging. "There's a bus to Los Angeles that leaves in...a few hours." I thought about checking my phone, and then remembered that I had left it at home. I sighed again. "Damn it. I left my shit at my apartment because Harry was being..."

Grace's eyes narrowed, and I figured I didn't need to finish the sentence. She checked her phone. "It's just past three," she reported.

"Okay, I have to be at the station by five."

Grace bit her lower lip. "Are you already packed?" I nodded. "Easily found?" I nodded again.

"If Harry took the keys or locked the place up, I didn't bring my keys," I told her. "But I keep a spare on top of the light fixture." I looked down at my wrapped ankle in dismay. "I don't think I'll be able to move that fast."

Grace stood. "I'll go," she said.

"You don't have to -."

"Honey, listen to me, I've been waiting for you to leave this asshole for what feels like forever at this point." I looked down guiltily. "And believe me, I know why it takes that long. I'm proud of you for finally getting away from him. But your stuff is still at your place, and you're going to need it. He'll be in the E.R. or at the police station after what those cats did to him, so there won't be anyone there. I'll be fine."

I wanted to argue, but I knew she was right. I nodded, suddenly so exhausted.

“Get some rest and keep ice on your ankle and face,” she said. She disappeared into her bedroom and a moment later came back out, having exchanged her dress for a pair of black jeans and a loose white t-shirt. She had her hair pulled back and it was amazing how different she looked when not dressed up for work. She grinned at me and threw me a wink. “I’ll be back in a few!”

“Be careful,” I called after her. She waved at me over her shoulder, and left. I heard her lock the door and trot down the stairs, but had my head tipped back and was passed out before I heard her car starting.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### LEO

The drive to the pride lands took a little over an hour even with Jackson driving as fast as he could without drawing police attention. Neither of us needed someone checking the inside of the car. I had shifted man to a human because it was easier to brace myself in the back of the Jeep with arms and legs instead of four paws, and clutched my bloody clothes to my chest so that they didn't go flying out the back.

Cold wind whipped my hair across my face, and I spent the time grooming myself until my face, hands, and chest were clear of blood. There was nothing I could do about my jeans, but my shirt was relatively clean and still in one piece, so that was a small blessing.

Eventually, I saw the soft glow over the hill that denoted our settlement. Jackson slowed the Jeep down and parked it along with two other cars. We kept the vehicles away from the settlement because frankly the smell was awful and no one here could stand it.

I climbed out of the Jeep and stretched, glad to have solid ground beneath my feet. The sand and dirt was cold but I barely felt it, and lions usually kept warm enough on their own that we could handle the desert at night. Jackson climbed out of the Jeep and circled to me, eyeing me and my clothes with a critical air.

He sighed. "Jolie's gonna have your head for messing up your jeans," he said. I shrugged. We both knew I didn't regret shifting so quickly in order to protect Savannah. I was certain that, had she been alone and had we not been right in the middle of human territory, Jackson would have shifted right along with me. But one of us had to keep our cool.

Apparently that was Jackson, tonight.

He butted his head against my shoulder, drawing my attention, grazed my jaw with his in a familiar gesture. I purred in response. "I'm not hurt," I murmured. He nodded, concern thawing from his eyes slowly.

"Good," he replied. "Otherwise I'd have had to kick your ass."

I grinned. "Not today."

He took my hand and we walked together over the hill. I sighed in relief when I saw the settlement, always glad whenever I went away to be home again. It was set up as a small circle of huts, and beyond it was the freshwater lake we used to drink, bathe, and wash our clothes in. There was a perimeter of fencing around the area, though it hardly did anything except mark where the settlement began.

There weren't many lions living here at the moment. Several of the huts were empty. The place was uncharacteristically silent as Jackson and I walked through the gate and into the middle of the circle. My nostrils flared, taking in the scent of decay and death.

I met Jackson's eyes. "Is he...?"

Jackson pressed his lips together and looked to the alpha's hut, right in the center of the ring. "Only one way to find out."

He undressed as well, and we left our clothes by the hut we shared. We had always lived in the same hut since we were cubs, given how close our parents were, and even with so many empty huts it seemed like too much

effort and unnecessary to move. We didn't get in each other's way.

He shook himself loose, stretching and yawning wide, and we walked together towards the alpha's hut. There were rumblings coming from inside. I opened the door and was greeted with a dark room, lit only by a single fire blazing in the middle, smoke billowing up and out through a hole in the roof.

I spotted Jackson's aunt immediately, the alpha's sister, Jolie. As a human she was skinny and aged, with long gray hair that fell to her hips and expressive eyes, so dark brown they were almost black. She looked up and chattered at us when she saw us, drawing the attention of the others.

I went to her, and crouched down beside her. The alpha lay on his bed, ghostly white, his eyes closed and face sunken in. "Is he...?"

"Not yet," she replied, and put her hand over his parted lips to feel if he was still breathing. "Not long now, though."

"Where have you been?" another lioness asked. She was a distant cousin, also older, though she kept her hair

cut short and had eyes the color of evergreens, her skin sagged and crinkled with smile lines around her mouth and eyes.

“We were in the human city, Miranda,” Jackson answered for me, kneeling beside Jolie. “Leo and I were discussing...what comes next.”

Miranda nodded, accepting that.

“I have already sent word to the scattered younglings,” Jolie said. “I imagine Alex will not see the dawn.”

Sorrow gripped me, and I leaned forward and rested my cheek on the alpha’s thigh, above his blankets. This man had practically raised me. I had been one of the abandoned cubs, where my parents had chosen life amongst the humans but wanted me to grow up among my own kind. Alex was like a second father to me, and I had always admired how wise and even-tempered he’d been. Never once had he roared at me in anger, never once had I paid for childish insolence with a swipe of his claws.

I closed my eyes and purred weakly, seeking to soothe both myself and him. His body stank of sickness

and it hurt that there was nothing I could do about it. Jolie said he was simply old, and it was his time, but alphas like Alex were meant to live forever.

Jolie put her hand between my shoulders and sighed. “Would you like a moment alone with him?”

I nodded, and Jackson chittered his agreement. He nudged Jolie’s hair in thanks, lipping at her ear, and she smiled warmly, affectionately, at him. She patted his cheek and the lionesses stood, filing out one by one until it was just me, Jackson, and Alex in the room.

Jackson crawled around to his other side and put his hand on the alpha’s leg, beneath my head. “You will be missed, alpha,” he whispered. Alex’s eyes moved slightly beneath his closed lids, and I lifted my head, rumbling quietly to him. I pushed his long, thin hair back from his face and rested our foreheads together as his eyes fluttered open, revealing a slip of cloudy iris.

His lips twitched into a smile, and I straightened, letting him see both me and Jackson. “Hello, boys,” he rasped. We each took one of his hands and squeezed gently. He coughed, and Jackson searched quickly for a pitcher of water. He poured a glass and I helped Alex sit

up so he could wet his lips. He cleared his throat and rested back down with a small sigh.

He opened his eyes again and looked in my direction. “My time has come,” he murmured. Sorrow rose up in me all over again, but I forced myself not to say anything. No one could fight death. No one was strong enough for that.

“May your journey be easy,” Jackson whispered, resting a hand on the alpha’s frail chest. Alex smiled and closed his eyes again. He did not die that moment, but I could practically hear his heart rate slow to practically nothing.

I was glad that we weren’t gone for his final moments. It felt like a proper goodbye.

“May your journey be easy,” I echoed, and closed my eyes, putting my head on Alex’s thigh again. I felt his fingers twitch, and lifted his hand so he could rest it on my head. He purred weakly, and then fell silent.

I heard movement, and smelled Jolie approaching. She sat down beside me and laced our fingers together. Lions were naturally tactile. I could smell Miranda, and

Terrance, and Evie around us. They were the oldest of the tribe, the same generation as Alex.

I knew the moment the alpha passed. It was like the sudden darkness of a single candle being snuffed out. It was peaceful, and for that I was glad. Still, I turned my head and buried my tears in the blankets.

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An hour later, the alpha's body began to smell of the truly dead. We left his hut, and the others dispersed to begin gathering the things we would bury with him. When a lion died in their human form, they were buried like a human. It had been the alpha's choice to die that way, surrounded by his pride, and not to simply wander off and disappear, as he would have had he chosen to die as a beast.

I wanted to help, but the sadness of his passing hit me harder than I expected. I went to the hut I shared with Jackson and curled up on my bed, my tail wrapped around my thigh and a blanket pulled up around my shoulders.

Jackson appeared a while later, just as the sounds of the daytime creatures began to stir. "The rest will



arrive soon,” he murmured. I grunted in reply, and sighed when Jackson sat beside me instead of going to his own bed. I opened my eyes and met his, which were shining dully in the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” I said, clearing my throat. “I guess I’m going to miss the old timer.”

He smiled, lopsided and slight. “I understand,” he replied. “Alex was a leader for all of us for a long time. Since before you and I were ever born.” I pressed my lips together and said nothing. I didn’t say that Jackson had his own parents, still, that he wasn’t completely alone. Alex had been all I had. But I didn’t want to make him feel guilty and I definitely didn’t want his pity.

Alex had had a mate, who had died several years prior since she was older than him. They had met too old for her to have children, choosing instead to live their twilight years together in contented companionship. “I hope he’s with Pollyanna now,” I said.

“I’m sure he is,” Jackson replied with another warmer smile. He met my eyes. “I know you probably don’t want to talk about it, but we need to talk about what happened last night.”

I frowned.

“You shifted, Leo. You revealed yourself to a human.”

“Yeah, that’s not illegal,” I snapped, rolling away from him.

“No, but you attacked one of them as a cat. Humans talk to each other. You might bring someone to come looking here.”

I bared my teeth at the wall. “Let them come.”

“You’re not seeing the point,” Jackson said insistently, and grabbed my shoulder, forcing me to roll over and meet his eyes. “If humans come here and see how small our numbers have grown, without our alpha, they might start...getting brave.” I frowned, and sat up, the blanket pooling around my waist. “We need to start leading. Now.”

“We need to find mates,” I finished for him. He nodded, and I sighed. “I know, and I agree with you. But we need to stay for the mourning period, at least.”

Jackson nodded again. “I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

I huffed, and rolled my eyes, flopping back down. “Message received,” I said, and gave him a thumbs up. He fell silent, his gaze moving away. Unbidden, my thoughts went to the woman we had defended. Savannah. She was beautiful and feline. She would make gorgeous and strong children. We had both gotten close enough to her to know her scent and be able to track her.

And, given what we had witnessed, she was currently single.

I rubbed a hand over my face. I had never been taken so easily by a female, human or lion. There wasn't much choice in the pride lands, but I was capable of acknowledging beauty and had gone with Jackson enough times to the human city to appreciate pretty people, but none of them had stirred more than passive interest.

Savannah, though... I couldn't stop thinking about her long, tan legs. Her thick hair. The angle of her smile. How her eyes shone even in a dark room, like a wildcat's. Even the color of blood looked gorgeous on her skin. I hated how it had gotten there, but I could appreciate the aesthetic in the privacy of my own thoughts.

I grew up with Jackson, I knew him better than anyone. At times it was like we had the same thoughts, or could read each other's. When I saw his face, I knew he was thinking of her too.

I reached up and squeezed his shoulder, drawing his attention. "After the mourning period," I said, and knew he knew what I was really saying.

He smiled, and nodded. "After the mourning period," he echoed. He finally stood from the bed and went to his own, curling up in a tight ball. We were both exhausted, having not slept, and emotionally drained. We fell asleep quickly, knowing that Jolie would wake us when the other mourners arrived.

## CHAPTER NINE

### SAVANNAH

Grace managed to get my stuff and get me to the bus station just in time for me to board the five-a.m. bus to Los Angeles. My ankle was still sore, but it was easier to walk in tennis shoes than heels and I had changed clothes into blue jeans and a black t-shirt, with my jacket over that since it was still pretty cold from the nighttime hours.

I handed my suitcase to the driver, who turned to load it. The bus looked like I was going to be one of the only people on it, which was perfect, in my opinion. I turned and met Grace's eyes. "I don't know what I'd do without you," I whispered, overcome with emotion suddenly.

Tears shone in her eyes, both of joy and sadness. She hugged me tightly and kissed my good cheek. "Take care of yourself and call me when you get settled, okay?" she urged, and I nodded. It was time to board, so our goodbyes were short. I adjusted the strap of my shoulder bag and boarded the bus slowly, wincing when I had to

put weight on my ankle. I went to the middle of the bus, where the side door opened and I had more leg room to stretch out, and sat by the window so that I could see Grace. She gave me a little wave that I returned.

There were three other people, aside from the bus driver, on the bus with me. They were all women, and all looked like Goddamn models. They were at least six feet tall, Amazonian women, curvy and tanned and looking like they had just stepped off a movie set. I was glad they were all women, I didn't need to be worrying about strange men around me all of a sudden, after what I had been through. Frankly, I would be okay not speaking to another man for a good month, thank you very much.

I hunkered down and watched them. It looked like they all knew each other, and they took a row at the front of the bus, two on one side of the aisle and one on the other. They were chattering to each other animatedly, but hushed. One of them had a slightly rounded belly that hinted at pregnancy.

The bus doors closed after the driver got on, and then we were off. I turned back so I could watch Grace until the last possible second, my heart heavy at the

thought of leaving my friend behind. But this was for the best. I could make a fresh start in Los Angeles, away from Harry and the bright Vegas lights. I could be someone else, anyone else. I'd done it before, and I could do it again.

I was exhausted, having only gotten maybe a twenty-minute nap while Grace was getting my stuff. I wished I had slept longer, but the bag of frozen peas melting and soaking my skin had started to get uncomfortable enough to rouse me. My eyelids drooped, and I took off my jacket since it was quite warm on the bus with sunlight streaming in through the windows, and I balled it up so that I could cushion my head against the window.

I closed my eyes, and was out in minutes, the rumble of the bus and the promise of leaving Las Vegas and Harry behind forever soothing me to sleep.

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I woke to the bus slowing, and blinked groggily. I startled, hissing in pain as I jarred my sore limbs, when I realized the three women had moved closer to me during the journey. Up close they were all even more gorgeous,

with thick hair and eyes that looked like they glowed in the sunlight. I thought of the last time I had seen a glow like that and swallowed back the sudden lurch of fear.

No. These women weren't lions. Lions didn't take busses.

...Did they?

The pregnant one gave me a warm smile, dimples cutting into her cheeks. "Didn't mean to startle you," she murmured. Her accent hinted at out of state, Oregon or Washington if I had to guess. I was always terrible with accents. "We're making a pit stop, if you had to pee or something."

I straightened and looked outside. The bus had stopped outside what used to be a gas station. All the pumps had no handles and the building itself looked abandoned, but clean. I frowned, and my confusion cleared as I woke up more and saw the signs for bathrooms.

"Thanks," I said, managing a weak smile. "I'd hate to have slept through a pit stop."



The woman grinned wider, and looked up as the side doors opened near us. She held out her hand and I took it, glad for the help in getting to my feet. The bus vibrations hadn't done my ankle any favors, but it wasn't as hard to put my weight on it as before, so I had to hope that meant it was healing.

"I'm Raven, by the way," the woman said, and tossed her mane of long black hair. Appropriate, I thought to myself.

"Savannah," I replied, smiling. "Nice to meet you."

Raven grinned, and cupped her stomach as she led the way off the bus, behind the other two women. "These two might introduce themselves, if they were more polite!" she said, arching a single black eyebrow and giving her companions a meaningful look.

The other two looked like they could be twins. They had the same icy blue eyes and dark hair, though one of them was slightly taller, and the other one a little stouter. "I'm Kenna," the taller one said. "This is my sister, Scarlet. Nice to meet you."

"Savannah," I said again, and shook their hands.

The front door opened and the driver poked his head out. “Have a good stop, ladies!” he called. They waved at him, and then headed towards the building. I followed along behind and went inside. I really did have to pee, and was glad for the break.

When I was finished, I washed my hands and stepped back outside. Neither Raven, Kenna, nor Scarlet had followed me in, and I frowned in confusion. The entrance to the bathrooms was around the back of the building, so I circled the building.

And froze, my eyes wide.

The bus was gone!

I ran forward, where I spotted the three women standing around our bags. Raven smiled at me. “Oh, there you are! Are you ready to go?”

“What? What happened to the bus?” I demanded, my heart in my throat at the idea of being stranded in the middle of the desert. My ankle hurt terribly from my rush, and my fast heartbeat made my cheek throb, but I couldn’t think about either of those things right now.

Raven's brow creased, and she tilted her head. Then, much to my surprise, she leaned forward and sniffed loudly at my hair.

She reared back, her dark eyes wide with shock. "Oh." She put her fingers against her mouth, and looked to her traveling companions. "Oh, dear. I think there's been a mistake."

"What mistake?" I asked, more quietly now, startled by Raven's sudden change in demeanor.

Raven winced. "Savannah, I think the driver assumed you were a lioness, like us. We always stop here."

I blinked at her dumbly. Lions? They were all lionesses? My heart skipped a beat and I took a step back from them, suddenly terrified. I had seen what they could do to a poor squishy human like myself, and there were three of them.

Kenna's nostrils flared. "You're scaring her," she whispered to Raven.

"Oh! I didn't mean to," Raven replied, shaking her head. She gave me a quietly distressed look. "I'm so

sorry, Savannah, I assumed -. I don't know why I assumed. You smelled like one of us, so I thought... Oh dear."

My brain stuttered to a halt at that. I smelled like one of them?

Oh, because of the two guys I had served at the lounge, maybe? Or because of what came after? Either way it was enough for them to confuse me for one of them. Part of me wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all, but another part of me wanted to cry. Jesus Christ, this couldn't be happening.

In the end, nervous laughter won out. "Shit," I said, and stared down the road. We had been driving long enough for the sun to be high in the sky and it was sweltering and hot already. I wasn't going to last long on foot and it wasn't like I could walk back to Las Vegas, or to Los Angeles. "Okay. Shit. Okay." I sucked in a breath. "I guess I'll just...wait for the next bus."

Raven frowned. "Savannah, this stop isn't on the normal route. It's for lions," she said. "There isn't going to be another one for a while, possibly a day. Do you have any food or water?"

I didn't, and I was sure she knew that.

“She can come with us!” Scarlet said brightly, smiling. I blinked at her. There was no way in Hell -. “Savannah, our settlement isn't far from here, even on foot for a human. We can walk with you. We have cars there, I'm sure someone would be willing to drive you back to the city.”

...Shit. I looked around again. It was so hot and I had been in the bathroom long enough to know that it wasn't air conditioned. I would bake to death out here. Not to mention what kind of wild creatures might live on the pride lands with the lions. Crap, crap, crap.

It didn't look like I had a choice.

“I hurt my ankle,” I said weakly. “I can't walk fast.”

“That's alright,” Kenna replied. “It's been a long time since I had a good stroll.” She held out her hand and I stared at her. “Come on, I don't bite.” She winked.

Another hysterical laugh escaped me. I took her hand, and she pulled me through the trio of them to our bags, which had been piled up neatly and left behind. I was the only one with a proper suitcase, the other three

just had backpacks and even those looked pretty lightly packed. I tried not to think about it as I extended the handle and prepared to pull it behind me for God knew how long.

Through the desert, no less. Fuck my life.

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We walked for a while in silence, Raven walking beside me and the twins taking the lead. Raven held her swollen stomach and seemed completely at ease galivanting through the blistering heat. I had no idea how they stood it. I felt like I was sweating to death. Sweat soaked through my clothes, I had rolled my jeans up to above my knees and tied my shirt under my bra to expose some of my stomach in an effort to cool down, and tied my hair up in a messy bun.

Meanwhile these three gorgeous women still looked completely at ease, like they could step onto a catwalk at any moment. Hah. Catwalk. They probably wouldn't appreciate a joke like that.

I cleared my throat and tried to think of something to say, because if I didn't break this silence I was definitely going to say something stupid. Or maybe just

start screaming. I had no idea if the birds circling above us were vultures or some other benevolent species but their silhouettes weaving into and out of ours was distracting me.

“Are you thirsty?” Raven asked before I could speak. She pulled her bag by one strap and offered me a bottle of water. I took it with a grateful sigh and drank deeply. It was surprisingly cool considering how long we’d been in the sun.

“Thanks,” I said, handing it back.

She gave me another warm, sympathetic smile. “It’s not much longer,” she assured me. “I’m sorry. I know you must be uncomfortable. Humans aren’t as good in the desert as lions are.”

Right. Lions. I was traveling with three fucking lions into the middle of a Goddamn pride land and their settlement where there would be more lions, and probably the lions I had met last night, and maybe they would try to eat me because now I knew where they lived and their secret and, oh God, they were going to eat me, I was going to become lion chow, I –

“Savannah?” I looked up to find all three of them giving me concerned looks. I was breathing hard. I was hyperventilating. “Savannah, breathe, you’re alright.”

I pulled to a stop and put my hands on my knees. Their eyes dropped and darkened when they saw the scrapes. Right. Shit. Raven’s eyes darkened further when I wiped at my face and winced. My wrist was still bruised, my ankle was still fucked up, I was barely limping along as best I could, and I was sure my face looked a little worse for wear too.

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s...been a long day.” Understatement. And it sounded weak to my own ears.

“Would you like to talk about it?” Kenna asked, blinking curiously at me and tilting her head.

I shook my head. “Not really.”

They nodded, but still looked concerned.

I definitely needed to talk about something, and change the subject. I grabbed the handle of my suitcase and kept walking. They fell into step beside me, so we were walking in a straight line as a foursome instead of two by two.



“So,” I began. “What, ah, brings you here?”

Scarlet made a quiet sound. “Our alpha died,” she said. “We’re attending the funeral.”

Oh. Now I felt like even more of an asshole. “I’m sorry,” I murmured.

“He was very old, and lived a long, happy life,” Raven said with a wise air. “Now he can join the realm of past kings, with his mate by his side, and watch over us from the stars.”

I stared at her, fascinated by that glimpse into their...religion? Mythology? “So you don’t live here normally?” I guessed.

Raven shook her head. “I live in Seattle,” she told me, “with my husband.”

“Is he...?” I cleared my throat. “Is he a lion too?”

She smiled. “No, he’s human.” She put her hand on her stomach. I resisted the urge to pry.

“Scarlet and I live in Austin,” Kenna said.

“I kind of assumed you guys kept to yourselves?”

“Some do, some don’t,” Scarlet replied. “The alpha was the kind of lion who encouraged us to go out and see the world. I haven’t been back here since I was a cub.” She sighed wistfully. “I wonder if it’s changed much.”

“Likely not,” Raven replied.

“So, if the...alpha...is dead... What happens after? Do you guys elect a new one, or fight, or -?” They were staring at me with clear amusement shining in their eyes, and I flushed. Thankfully I was already sweating and red as a pig so I was sure they couldn’t tell I was embarrassed. “Sorry. I don’t know much about lions except the, you know, non-shifter kind. And that’s pretty surface level too.”

“It’s alright,” Raven assured me. “There’s kind of a ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy between most prides and humans anyway. I suppose if there’s more mystery there’s less fear.” She sighed. “It’s one of the reasons, I believe, why Alex encouraged us all to go out and mingle. The more people understand us, the more they will see that they don’t have to be afraid.”

She gave me a meaningful look. “We’re not mindless animals. We want the same things humans do.

To live, and love, and be free.”

I could understand that, probably better than most.

“To answer your question, we have two potential candidates for the next alpha,” Scarlet said. “They’re the only males old or strong enough. They might fight it out, but I doubt it.”

There was something in her voice, and the knowing smile the three lionesses shot each other, that made me feel like I was missing out on something. “Why don’t you think they’ll fight?”

“Oh, those two are like brothers,” Kenna giggled. “They share everything.”

They all exchanged another knowing look. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Fine, they were allowed to have their little inside jokes. I didn’t particularly need to be a part of it. I just needed to get to the settlement, convince one of them to give me a ride back to Las Vegas, and then get on another bus before Harry got out of the hospital. I had plenty of cash for another ticket and I was sure if the lions valued money – which they must, if they were going to clubs in the city and buying three bottles of wine in a night – they would accept mine as payment.

I was glad I had squirreled so much away, otherwise I really would be royally screwed.

I considered the mention of the two males. Maybe they were the men that had saved me last night? If that was the case, I wasn't in any particular hurry to meet them. I didn't want to be lion chow, though I was sure that these women weren't lying to me when they said I could arrange for a ride back home, but it was hard to forget the brutality I had witnessed, and that roar.

Just thinking about it made me weak in the knees.

Raven stopped, abruptly, wincing and clutching at her stomach. For the first time, I saw her flush and show discomfort, and a sheen of sweat formed on her brow. "Raven, are you okay?" I asked, immediately concerned. I knew about as much about babies and pregnancy as I did about lions, but I knew that pregnancies were high risk in the beginning, and if she wasn't showing so much then it meant she was still early, right? And we were walking for such a long time in the hot sun, it couldn't be good for her.

"I will be, forgive me, I just need to rest for a moment," Raven said. I nodded and put my suitcase

down, opening it and pulling out an umbrella. I had rarely needed it in Las Vegas, but I always liked to be prepared. I opened it and lifted it over her head so she could have some shade. She blinked in surprise at me, and smiled gratefully.

I walked with her over to a small outcropping of rock, where she sat down and nursed some water while Kenna and Scarlet kept watch. We had been walking into the mountains, West of Las Vegas. I knew we were deep inside the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, or even West of it, depending on how far we had driven. I thought I could recognize Mount Charleston in the distance, North, which meant we were on the edge of the far side of the Conservation Area. Which made sense, given that we were on pride lands.

By my best guess, within another hour we would be at the foot of the mountains. I hoped the settlement wasn't much farther than that.

“Do you think maybe one of the others could run ahead?” I asked, as Raven squirmed and sweated and nursed her water. “They could come back with a car and

you would get driven to the settlement. It would be easier on you and the baby.”

Raven shook her head. “Your offer is touching, Savannah, but really, I’m okay.” She looked up at my umbrella. “The shade is helping, thank you.”

I nodded, and sat beside her, my elbow on my knee so that I could keep the umbrella hoisted. Thankfully, there wasn’t any strong breeze, although that just meant I was burning alive. But it meant nothing was trying to knock the umbrella out of my hands.

Raven cleared her throat, and looked at me. “I would...like to ask you, a second time, what happened.” I frowned, and she gestured to her own cheek. I covered mine, looking away. “I know you said you didn’t want to talk about it, but we have some time to kill, and in my experience, a problem shared is a problem halved.”

I huffed. Well, I supposed it didn’t matter. “Well...” I cleared my throat, and pressed my lips together, fixing my eyes firmly on the dirt between my toes. “There was this guy, back in Vegas. He was my boyfriend, we were together for years.” I fell silent, my shoulders tense, and Raven made a soft, encouraging sound. I startled when

she leaned in and nuzzled my shoulder, my eyes widening.

She blinked, and then blushed. “Oh, I’m sorry, forgive me,” she said. “Lions are tactile creatures. We soothe each other when we’re distressed with touch, and purrs. I keep forgetting.” She sounded guilty.

“It’s alright,” I replied. “I just... Yeah, it’s new. But it’s okay. I get it.” I had never owned a cat, but my best friend when I was growing up did, and that thing was a big, fat, hairy beast that was basically a lap cat and would insistently headbutt and nuzzle into anyone willing to give it enough attention. The thought of these big, fierce creatures doing the same was oddly endearing. “I really don’t mind, I guess is what I’m saying.”

“I’ll try to remember to warn you in the future, all the same,” Raven teased. It made me laugh quietly.

Then I sobered, and cleared my throat. It only occurred to me what Raven had said – she had nuzzled me because I was in distress. Was I that obvious? Could lions smell it? Was that why the two men had shown up, because they could smell my fear?

That was...a little unnerving, I could admit.

“Anyway, at first it was great. He was sweet and attentive, and then it turned...not so great.” I swallowed again. “He was controlling, possessive, kept accusing me of cheating with anyone I gave the time of day to. Last night I decided I had had enough and I was leaving, that was why I was on the bus. I guess he figured it out, or he just followed me to work anyway, he saw me talking to some guys, flipped out. He...”

“He hurt you,” Raven whispered, when I couldn’t finish the sentence. I nodded, and then tensed when I heard her let out a loud, viscerally angry snarl. Her lips curled back, showing me her canines for the first time, and her eyes flashed with that catlike sheen. Her growl was loud enough to draw the attention of Kenna and Scarlet.

“What’s wrong?” Kenna asked, rushing over, on the defensive.

Raven snapped her head up, her dark hair whirling around her like a storm. “This queen’s mate is the one who did that to her,” she said, gesturing to me.

“Hey, no, not my mate,” I said, holding up a hand. “And...queen?”



“Female cats are called queens,” Scarlet said quietly. Her evergreen eyes were almost black with rage, pupils flared wide. She looked at my busted knees, my bruised ankle and wrist, my sore cheek. “A male should never raise his hand to a female, mated or otherwise!”

“I’ve half a mind to go find him and teach him that,” Raven hissed. I could imagine her, muzzle wrinkled, ears flat to her skull. Just like that male lion had been last night.

“You don’t need to do that,” I said, worried that the lionesses would rile themselves up enough to do just that and leave me stranded in the middle of the desert. They looked at me. “Yeah, he hit me, but I got away, and let’s just say he’s probably in hospital right now too. So it’s fine.”

Scarlet blinked, and then her lips curled in a slow smile. “You hurt him?”

I shook my head. “Um...a friend of mine did,” I said. I didn’t want to mention the male lions, in case that was some kind of law they had broken. I didn’t want to get them in trouble, especially since it sounded like it would be the two males who were meant to be fighting

for the spot of next alpha. If there was one thing I knew, it was not to throw upheaval into a delicate dynamic like that. “Fucked him up really good. So it’s, you know, in the past. He got his, I got mine, and now I’m here.”

Raven took my hand, suddenly, and forced me to meet her eyes, her own dark and earnest. “I swear to you, Savannah, you will never have to be afraid of something like that with us,” she said. “Our males would never do such a thing, and if they do, tell me and I will show them what happens when you piss off the lionesses.”

I had to laugh, but it was shaky and weak. “Duly noted.” I cleared my throat, and eyed the sky. The sun was beginning to set, the horizon just turning pink at the edges. “Do you feel a little better? We should move on.”

“We need to get there before nightfall,” Kenna agreed.

“Yes, I daresay anger was the best medicine,” Raven murmured. She stood and I moved my umbrella to one side so she didn’t knock her head. I folded it and tucked it back into my suitcase, zipping it up. Raven returned to my side and took my hand, squeezing gently. She smiled.

“I’m glad you’re here with us, Savannah. I’m glad you got away.”

This wasn’t exactly my ideal situation, but I found myself meaning it when I said, “Yeah. Me too.”

## CHAPTER TEN

### SAVANNAH

I didn't really know what to expect when the lionesses referred to their 'settlement'. Through our journey my mind had gone through every possibility, from a network of caves in the mountain, to houses built with desert brick, to a single tree that they all sunned themselves around in the middle of a field. I genuinely had no idea.

It turned out to be a small collection of huts, made from a combination of large rocks that had been cemented together with mud and sand, thatched roofs, and a fence around it to mark the edge. I didn't see any vehicles, but I didn't let that trouble me.

Kenna and Scarlet immediately disappeared into the cluster of huts and out of sight. The sun had set by the time we arrived, and while there were some torches marking the gate, and I could see lights coming from inside some of the huts, my own human eyes had a hard time picking out details.

Raven smiled at me and took my hand. “Come, you can stay in my hut,” she said.

“I thought you didn’t live here,” I replied, as I followed her to one near the edge of the settlement. I could hear water nearby, and wondered if it was a river or lake. I couldn’t quite tell. There was a soft breeze here, making the air feel even colder, and after so long trekking through the hot desert, it was a like a balm on my sweaty skin. I loosened my shirt and unrolled my jeans with my feet as we walked.

“I don’t, but every lion has a hut they generally claimed during their youth. The settlement is only as big as the population allows, and we build for each new adult. If the adult leaves, the hut remains unoccupied, in case that person comes back for one reason or another.”

“Like a funeral?”

“Yes, or to give birth if the queen wants to leave their children here, or if something happened to their family unit elsewhere. There are many reasons.”

I didn’t pry further, though I was curious if Raven intended to have her child here. It was strange to me, though part of me had always thought I would have been

better off in the foster system than in my dumpster fire of a home.

I pushed the thoughts away. I had bigger problems, like finding someone to give me a ride back to Las Vegas.

Raven opened a door and I blindly felt my way inside, before she pulled a travel lamp from her bag and turned it on. I sighed, grateful, and found a spare patch of floor for my suitcase. There were two pallets on the floor with enough bedding to be comfortable, and while I didn't relish sleeping on the floor, I hoped I wouldn't stay long enough to need to.

Raven settled on one of the pallets and I followed suit. I could hear something like playful squabbling outside the hut, like when two dogs – or, in this case, two very dog-like cats – reunited and started wrestling. I wanted to look outside but I knew I wouldn't be able to see anything.

“So, when is the funeral exactly?” I asked.

“It will likely be in the morning,” Raven replied. “We like to greet the sun when we say farewell to the dead.”

I nodded. Again, their mythology fascinated me. “So you believe that your alpha went to...the stars?”

She smiled, her face glowing and eyes shining in the pale light of the lamp. It was pleasantly cool inside the hut, and I pulled a blanket around my shoulders, feeling like a kid at a campfire prepared to listen to ghost stories. I put my elbows on my knees and supported my head with my hand on my good cheek.

“A long time ago,” Raven said, “there was a legend that the moon and the sun were formed from the same being. Well, being is not the right word. But it was the same thing at one point.” She chuckled. “Of course, we know science has disproven that, but the legend goes that the moon and sun symbolize the two sides of our natures, the human and the cat. The cat prefers the moon, for it changes shape like our eyes, and we are most safe at night.”

I nodded along, wide-eyed and fascinated.

“So, when any of us die, we can choose to die in either form,” Raven continued. “Some prefer to die as humans, so we bury them like humans. Others choose the lion form, and wander away to go to the Earth

naturally. Often, during the first moments of sunrise, the moon is still in the sky. So we bury those who die as humans at the moment both are visible, so that they return to the Earth, and the places that made both sides of them, and are whole in the afterlife.”

“Wow,” I murmured. “And the stars?”

“The stars are simply the eyes of all cats who have come before us, peering down and giving us guidance when we think to ask for it,” Raven said. “I don’t think that has any particular basis in legend, it is just something we like to tell each other. Humans use the stars, too. There is significance in them.”

I smiled. “It sounds wonderful,” I said. “Kind of like humans have Heaven.”

“Kind of,” Raven replied, and winked. “And Hell.”

“Do lions have Hell?”

“Not particularly. It’s hard to assign human morality on an inhuman thing, I think.” She tapped her chin. “In any case, I don’t believe so. Besides, we have nine lives, so we would never get there!”



Her joke startled a laugh out of me, and that quickly turned into a coughing fit. My mouth was dry and my lips were burning from so long in the sun. Raven giggled, and tossed me her bottle of water. I drank down as much of it as I could without being rude, and set it down with a nod of thanks.

The playful wrestling noises outside had died down, and I looked up as I heard footsteps approaching. I had travelled long enough with the lionesses to recognize their gait, and this was much heavier and slower. I tensed.

Raven let out a soft purr, and stood. I followed suit. “Don’t be afraid, Savannah,” she said quietly. “Remember, you’re not among humans anymore. No one will hurt you, here.”

“Right,” I whispered, and didn’t say that not being among humans was exactly the kind of thing that I was afraid of.

There was a knock on the door, and it opened when Raven said, “Come in.”

Through the door stepped two tall, broad, tanned, muscled, and very naked men. My eyes raked down

them, widening with every inch I took in, before I forced myself to lift my eyes to their faces. It felt like my eyes almost popped out of my skull when I realized who, exactly, I was looking at.

“You!”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### JACKSON

“Where is the future alpha! I challenge him to a duel!”

I straightened up, grinning when I heard Kenna’s playful call. I rumbled in readiness and leapt from my bed as I heard her rushing towards our hut. I opened the door just as she was prepared to lunge, caught her, twisted her, and threw her back onto the ground.

She laughed, and then I was assaulted by Scarlet as she jumped from the roof onto my back, making me stumble to the ground. I snarled, and suddenly she was gone as Leo picked her up around her waist and lifted her off me. She squealed, kicking and turning her head to bite at his jaw. He laughed and let her go.

I turned as Kenna lunged for me again and effortlessly caught her, pushing her to the ground and pinning her at the wrists as I straddled her hips. She was much smaller than me and, while older, not as strong. “Yield,” I purred, nuzzling her hair.

She kicked out and hissed, pretending to struggle a moment longer before she rolled her eyes. “Alright, you big brute, let me up!”

I laughed, and kissed her cheek in greeting, before I stood. She grinned and pushed herself to her feet, dusting off her clothes as Leo showed up behind her, Scarlet draped across his back like a sack of potatoes.

“I see you two are just as big pains in the ass as usual,” Leo griped. Scarlet lipped at his hair and bite his ear in response to that, making him wince and growl in playful warning. She laughed and slid down his back before coming to stand beside her sister.

Kenna and Scarlet were Jolie’s twins, older than Leo and myself, and had been gone for many years. It was good to see them again, they had grown into beautiful lionesses in their absence. “How is Texas?” I asked, slinging an arm over Kenna’s shoulder as we all walked towards the center of the ring of huts.

“Big and flat,” Kenna replied. “How is Vegas?”

“Flashy and headache-inducing,” Leo said. Scarlet laughed and nudged him with her forehead. We all sat in the middle of the huts. “Did you take the bus?”

“Yep,” Scarlet said, popping the ‘P’. “Just as uncomfortable as always. One day, I swear, I’m going to get us our own private jet or something.”

“Ugh.” Leo’s muzzle wrinkled.

“It’s faster.”

“It’s noisy,” he replied. “If you want to come home faster you shouldn’t go so far away.”

I felt a small pang in my chest at his words. It was no secret that spreading the pack so thin caused a certain amount of melancholy. It wasn’t right that we only saw our cousins when there was something major happening, especially right now since it was so tragic.

“Just you two?” I asked.

“No, Raven came with us,” Kenna said. She frowned. “She must be in her hut.”

I nodded. “How is she?”

“You can ask her yourself,” Kenna replied, arching a brow.

I grinned. “Yeah but you girls tell each other everything. I want the dirty details.”

Kenna rolled her eyes.

Leo made a curious sound, and snuffled at Scarlet's hair. "You..." He frowned, and sniffed her again. "What is that? I know that scent." He tilted his head, and I leaned in, nudging Scarlet's hair as well. Yes, it was familiar. Faint, but there.

Come to think of it, the whole place reeked of it. Human.

"Oh, well, it's kind of a funny story," Kenna said. "There was a human woman on the bus with us, and she got off, not realizing it was, you know, a lion stop. The bus took off because we thought she was a lion that we just didn't know, and once we figured everything out, well, it was too late. So we brought her with us."

"Poor thing looked exhausted," Scarlet added, nodding. "But she's under our protection, so no scaring her." Her tone and eyes were sharp.

"Of course," I said, frowning.

Leo was still sniffing the air. His eyes widened, a moment later. "Savannah."

"Yes! That's her name, how did you know?"

Leo was on his feet in an instant. I was right on his heels and overtook, heading to Raven's hut. I knocked, hearing her voice and seeing light coming from inside. We opened the door and stepped in, and my breath stalled in my lungs when I saw -

“You!”

It was her. Savannah. She was standing beside my sister, looking just as shocked as we were. Her eyes raked us up and down, her cheeks flushing the pretty, dark pink of fresh meat. Oh, right, the whole ‘naturally naked shifter’ thing.

And the tail thing, I thought, as my own tail curled and twitched at my ankle.

Leo's breath escaped him in a rush, and he cleared his throat as Raven frowned and looked between us. “You two know each other?”

Savannah swallowed, her blush darkening.

“Yes,” I said, stepping forward. I fixed my expression into a welcoming smile, because I was glad to see my sister, and now with this strange turn of events! The stars must be in alignment. I approached Raven,

purring and rubbing our foreheads together. She smiled and cupped my cheeks, kissing the tip of my nose. “It’s good to see you, Raven.”

“And you, Jackson. I’ve missed you.”

“We’ll have to catch up,” I promised her, and then turned my attention back to Savannah. “To answer your question, yes, Savannah, Leo, and I met the other night in Las Vegas.”

Raven’s eyes flashed. She had always been extremely intelligent, and I could see the wheels turning in her head. She looked at Savannah, who bit her lower lip and looked down. Her eyes moved to Leo, who was staring at Savannah with open shock. Shock and happiness, it radiated from him like a sudden burst of sunlight from behind a cloud.

“...Ah,” she finally said, and nodded wisely. She looked at Savannah. “Your friends who rescued you and taught your not-mate a lesson?”

Savannah laughed nervously, and nodded.

“Good,” Raven said with another sharp nod. She looked between me and Leo. “Which of you taught that



son of a coyote that lesson?”

“Leo did,” I said. “He spilled the blood.”

Raven smiled proudly. “Leo.” She held out her hand and purred when he approached, kissing his forehead and rubbing their noses together. “You did well, protecting our friend. I hope you will continue to make a good impression.”

Leo nodded, his eyes gravitating back to Savannah. Mine were, as well. She had clearly suffered during the trek here – and wow, it was quite a walk, I had no idea how she had managed that. She stank of sweat and something chemical that I assumed had been put on her cuts. One side of her face was a little swollen, and there was a ring of fingerprints around one of her wrists, and her palms were still cut up. It filled me with anger to see, but also visceral pleasure to know that the man responsible was currently suffering.

Savannah was so strong to have escaped and made it this far on foot. There was a reason the pride lands were so far away from humans, to discourage someone accidentally stumbling upon it. This was fate, I felt it in my bones. Savannah was supposed to be here, just like

we were supposed to be at that club last night. Of all the clubs in all the hotels in all the cities in the world, we had been there to protect her. Now she was here, where we could protect her properly.

Savannah made another nervous sound, clearly not used to being the center of so much attention. I nudged Leo to remind him of his manners, and smiled at my sister. “We have everything ready for the funeral, at sunrise,” I said. “I imagine you’re both hungry.”

On cue, Savannah’s stomach rumbled, as did Raven’s.

I smiled. “Leo and I will go put some clothes on, Jolie is preparing the meal already.”

“We’ll go help her,” Raven said, and took Savannah’s hand.

“Um, is it okay if I change, too?” Savannah asked hesitantly, and gestured to herself. “I’ve been sweating in this all day and it’s uncomfortable.”

“Of course, Savannah,” Raven said. “I’ll leave the lamp. Come out when you’re ready.”

With that, she left. I couldn't stop staring at Savannah. Her hair was laying flat, stray smaller hairs flat to her sweaty skin. Her cheeks were such a gorgeous pink. Her clothes clung to her body from old sweat, and the exercise made her smell warm and sweet. It was mouthwatering.

“...Um.”

Right. Two naked lion shifters who just assaulted someone right in front of her less than twenty-four hours ago might not be the best company.

I nudged Leo again. He blinked slowly at me, as though coming out of a haze. I blinked slowly back, and nudged him towards the door again. He recovered, smiling sheepishly, and nodded to Savannah.

“We'll see you later. Welcome.”

“Wait!”

We both stopped, and turned.

“I -. Okay, yeah, actually I guess it can wait until you're both...dressed...” She gestured vaguely at our bodies, and it looked like she was trying with all her might to keep her eyes up. I couldn't help but smirk,

especially when her eyes kept moving down helplessly, and she seemed fascinated by our tails.

She sucked in a breath. “But I wanted to thank you. For what you did. Scared the shit outta me, of course, but in the end, you guys might have saved my life. So, thank you.”

For a moment, I was overcome with such a powerful wave of affection and the desire to protect, I almost rushed to her and hugged her. She would fit perfectly in my arms, under my chin, and I could purr for her and soothe her and make sure she was never afraid of anything again.

I resisted. Barely. My fingers flexed and my tail twitched.

“Any time,” Leo rasped, saving me from having to speak. He took my hand and led me out. When the door closed, it was like a string had been cut, and I could finally breathe, and think, again.

“Leo,” I whispered, as Leo led us back to our hut.

“I know,” he replied.

“She’s...”

“I know,” he said. “Human,” he reminded me.

“Not an issue for me,” I said. “You?”

He shook his head. His pupils were so large his eyes looked black.

“I don’t think she’ll want to stay,” I said, trying to be reasonable. “She didn’t come here on purpose.”

Leo turned to face me, once we were inside our hut. “We can still ask,” he said. “Show her what it could be like with us. The way that man treated her...” He snarled, muzzle wrinkling, upper lip curling back. “I know you would never -. I would never -.”

“I know.” I came forward and cupped his nape, scruffing him gently to calm him down. His eyes shone in the darkness, his chest vibrating with a violent, angry growl almost too low to hear. “And I agree with you. We can always ask. But we shouldn’t rush her. This is all new to her, she didn’t have a choice.”

Leo sighed, and nodded. He rubbed our cheeks together and then pulled away, towards where he kept his pile of clothes.

“I want her to stay too,” I confessed, as I moved to my own pile and found a pair of jeans that would work. They were old and full of holes but they would cover the important parts. I slid them on and carefully coaxed my tail through the hole I had cut in the back. “We just have to be careful, okay? Not come on too strong.”

“I know,” Leo snapped. His tail curled in aggravation and he sighed, rubbing a hand through his hair. “I just...” He turned to look at me, and for a moment I couldn’t help but think how young he was. How young we both were. And we were about to take over a pack and have to worry about things like zoning laws and population control and fighting for our territory. Christ.

“I feel like I can’t think when I look at her,” Leo finally said. “She’s... She’s the most beautiful queen I’ve ever seen.”

I smiled. “She’s not a lion, Leo,” I reminded him.

“No,” he agreed. “But the way she moves...”

I completely understood.

“We just have to be nice, be ourselves, and maybe she’ll like us for that and decide to stay,” I said, squeezing his bare shoulder. He hummed, meeting my eyes. “But we’re in it together, right?”

“Right.” It heartened me to hear him reply without hesitation. No matter what, he wanted us to rule together, and be equals. I smiled, and he returned it. “Hopefully she won’t be put off by your personality too much.”

I snorted, and smacked the back of his head. “Insolent cub,” I scolded playfully. He bit my shoulder in response, and I laughed. The scent of roasted meat had wafted in, and my stomach rumbled. Leo’s nostrils flared. We both walked back outside and towards the feast fire. My chest tightened with anticipation of seeing Savannah again, and getting to know more about this beautiful human that had found herself quite literally in the lion’s den.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### SAVANNAH

Okay, don't freak out.

I happened to be on pride lands with the same lions who had rescued me from Harry. Okay. Sure. No big deal. Thanks to Raven, I knew their names now – Jackson and Leo. I snorted. Leo the lion. I wondered how many times he heard that joke.

I turned to my suitcase and knelt down, pulling the camping lamp towards me so I could see better. It was starting to get cold, and my sweaty clothes were making me feel chilled. I could smell roasting meat, making my stomach rumble loudly, and I hoped the fire would be warm, but just in case...

I pulled out another pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that would cover my bruised wrist. I stripped down and changed quickly, as well as my socks which had been worn down to practically nothing during the long walk. That was what I got for only buying shitty



little ankle socks and tights for the last few years since I started working at the bar.

I was pretty sure I had blisters from walking, and after a moment, I decided to simply forgo shoes and just wear thicker socks I had packed. There wasn't anything like broken glass to cut myself on here. I balled up my dirty clothes and set them at the end of my bed, and shrugged my jacket on.

I redid my hair in a high ponytail to keep it out of my face, already feeling a little more human. I hoped there was some kind of shower situation. It looked like I was going to be at least spending the night, which was... fine. That was fine, I told myself.

I placed my shoulder bag on my suitcase and jumped when there was a chime from my phone inside. Oh, shit, right! I had promised to call Grace when I got to Los Angeles, and had the whole thing with the bus not happened, I would have been there by now.

I pulled out my phone to see several texts from her asking for updates. I had decent signal, and I bit my lower lip guiltily as I scrolled through them, before finally calling her.

“Oh my God, Savannah, I swear to shit I was ten seconds away from flying out there and tracking you down myself so I could kick your ass!”

I smiled. It was good to hear her voice. “Sorry, um, something came up,” I said.

“What? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine! I mean, I’m safe. I’m...” I sucked in a breath. “So there was a mix-up on the bus and I’m kind of in the lion’s pride lands?”

She was quiet for so long I was afraid the call had disconnected. I cleared my throat. “Grace?”

“You’re...in the lion pride lands,” she repeated, so shocked her voice came out totally flat.

“Yep.”

“Because something happened on the bus?”

“Yeah, I fell asleep and there were these other women on the bus, and it turned out they are all lionesses, and it turns out the lions have an arrangement with bus drivers to make a certain stop near their lands. So I got off because I thought it was just a pit stop, when I came back out, the bus was gone, so the lionesses said I

could come with them and they would get me a ride back to Las Vegas.”

“Jesus, only you,” Grace muttered. “So you’re coming back? If you need a place to crash you can stay with me.”

“Well, I don’t think I’ll be headed back until tomorrow,” I said. “There’s kind of a funeral going on here so I don’t want to, you know, mess with their plans. But I’ll give you an update tomorrow because I might need a place to crash.”

“Yeah, of course, just let me know,” Grace said. Then she laughed. “Good God, only you, Savannah Kline, would end up rooming with a bunch of lions.”

I had to laugh as well. “Yeah, it’s kind of crazy.”

“What are they like?”

“I mean, they’re all pretty friendly so far. They promised not to eat me, so.” I shrugged, even though she couldn’t see me. “Oh, and turns out those two lions who attacked Harry are here too, so, you know, at least my white knights are here to protect me?”

“Oh, the plot thickens,” Grace crowed. “Now I definitely need deets.”

I laughed again. I was so glad I had called her. She had always been the voice of pragmatic, deadpan humor in my life and it helped me calm down to hear her not freaking out about this. It was pretty funny, I had to admit. Only me. “I don’t have deets right now, but I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay. Be safe, honey. I gotta go to work.”

“Tell the guys I said hey.”

“Will do. Stay safe and talk soon!”

I hung up and bit my lower lip when I saw how low my battery was. I doubted the lions had outlets here, given the fact that they used torches and camping lamps for light and presumably open fire to cook. That probably didn’t bode well for a shower, too. I thought of the water I had heard. They probably bathed in a lake.

Damn. But it could be worse.

I put my phone away and stood, adjusting my shirt and my jacket, before I took the camping lamp and went

outside, following my nose and the glow of a fire I could see behind the ring of huts.

\*

I recognized Raven immediately by her thick mane of jet-black hair, and approached her. The lions were all gathered around a large fire, and within the fire, held up by metal poles that formed the vague shape of a tent, was a thick grill rack upon which sat dripping roasted meat. The juices from the meat splashed across the fire occasionally, making it sizzle and spark. The heat was amazing and the scent was fantastic.

Raven looked up when I approached her. There were logs positioned around the campfire, large enough to comfortably sit on. I sat beside her on an empty space and turned off the lamp since there was plenty of light for me to see, now.

“Hello, Savannah,” she said warmly. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” I replied. She nodded, and stood. She had a small plastic plate in her hand like what was used for camping gear. I watched her approach the fire and

pluck off two large chunks of meat, barely registering the heat. She came back and handed me the plate.

“Jesus, are you guys fireproof or something?” I joked. “First the desert walk and now this.”

Raven laughed. “Not fireproof, but perhaps just better at handling heat,” she replied. She sighed and rested a hand on her stomach.

I picked up the first chunk of meat by the very tips of my fingers, wincing at the heat but able to deal with it long enough to take a bite. While I ate, I looked around the fire. There were about a dozen lions gathered, most of them women. All of them women, actually, aside from Leo and Jackson. I wondered if that was why they were the only ones in line to be the next alpha.

I spotted Kenna and Scarlet across the way and waved at them. They returned it with wide grins. It was nice, I couldn't remember the last time I had sat down to something like dinner with friends. Probably not since my first few months with Harry, and even then, those tended to be his friends and were hardly better than frozen food and bags of chips from the corner store.

The meat was delicious, and I ate quickly. I was so hungry and devoured the food. Raven wordlessly gestured that she could get me more and I sheepishly nodded, handing her the plate and watching her stand to fetch me more. I felt a little guilty eating their food, but she had offered, and there appeared to be plenty to spare.

I felt eyes on me again, and looked to the side, where Leo and Jackson shared a log with an older female. Leo was watching me, his face unreadable, eyes shining. I hoped I wasn't making some social faux pas by asking for more food, or maybe I was supposed to wait for them to eat first? How the Hell did lion feedings usually go?

I was so out of my depth. I needed to get home to the human world where at least some things made sense.

The woman sitting on the bench with Leo and Jackson cleared her throat and stood, as Raven returned with my plate and handed it to me. I didn't eat, not wanting to be rude. "I'm glad you are all here with us tonight," the woman said. "And the warmest welcome to our special guest, Savannah." She smiled at me, and I

flushed when I felt the attention of the others snap my way. “We have been told a little of your journey here, and I speak for all of us when I say that you are welcomed, and will be protected by our pride for as long as you desire to stay.”

I cleared my throat, emotion making my voice raspy. “Thank you, you’re very kind.”

The woman nodded, and then turned her attention to the rest. “Our other cousins and siblings will be coming in over the course of the night. Everything is prepared for the ceremony tomorrow morning, where we will send off our beloved alpha, Alex, to the next life. May the journey be easy.”

“May the journey be easy,” the rest echoed.

“For now, we will toast to his life, and catch up with each other as though no time has passed.” The woman smiled again, and then sat. I looked to Raven and leaned in.

“Who is she?” I asked.

“That is Jolie,” Raven replied. “She is Alex’s sister.”



I considered that, and frowned. “Wouldn’t that make her the suitable choice for the next alpha?” I asked curiously.

Raven gave me a funny look, and then laughed. “Oh, Savannah, queens are much too busy to lead,” she replied, tossing her hair and laughing again. “Between everything else, there is simply not enough hours in the day. It is better to let the men deal with things like guarding the perimeter and fighting for our lands.”

I tilted my head. Vague memory from the half of a documentary I had watched about lions pinged in my head. Of course, that had been regarding the actual animals, not shifters, but I supposed it made sense to have the same dynamic here. Females hunted, raised the children, made sure everything was running smoothly, and the males fought each other and defended their pride from outside attacks.

I found myself looking at Leo and Jackson. They had defended me. Did that mean anything? Was I missing something?

“I spoke with my brother,” Raven continued. “He said that if you wanted a ride back to Las Vegas, he will

drive you himself. However...” She sighed, and gave me a small, guilty look. “It’s tradition that we do not leave the pride lands for three days after the death of an alpha, for the mourning period. He cannot leave until then.”

I pressed my lips together and sighed. I wasn’t going to fight them on their traditions, even though the idea of staying here for three days wasn’t exactly on my list of top ten ways to spend my weekend. “I understand,” I said, nodding. “I’m just happy for the help at all. I can survive three days here.”

Raven smiled. “I’m happy to hear it.” She patted my thigh, just above my knee. “Now eat up. There is plenty of food and you’re all skin and bone.”

I laughed, and went back to eating. The meat really was delicious, the juice dripping down my fingers and wrists as I ate. I didn’t have a napkin and I doubted it would be out of place to lick my fingers clean, so I did just that.

I heard a soft growl to my side. This time, Jackson and Leo were both watching me.

I blushed, and stopped.

“Raven,” I whispered. “Where do you guys...go to the bathroom?”

“Ah.” Raven touched my shoulder and pointed outside of the ring of fire, behind Kenna and Scarlet. “That way. Outside the fence, there is a hut, kind of like an outhouse. I promise it’s not as gross as one of the human ones, though.” Her nose wrinkled in distaste and I had to laugh. “Do you need me to come with you?”

“No, I’m sure I can find it on my own,” I replied. I set my plate down and picked up the camping light, turning it back on. I stood, and carefully navigated my way around the outside of the circle, towards the hut Raven had mentioned.

It was easy to find, and I went inside. To my surprise, the inside was flat dirt, almost paved, and the entire space was absolutely pristine. There was even a toilet, though I couldn’t see a mechanism to flush. Still, I understood the basic mechanics, and didn’t think I had ever been so relieved to see toilet paper in my entire life.

I did my business and saw, in the corner, was a small bucket. From the ceiling came a small pipe, with a small wheel. I turned it and blinked in surprise when

water dripped out. They must gather rainwater, or put a tank up at the top so that it was gravity-fed. Ingenious. I washed my hands and turned the water off, wiped my hands dry on my jeans, and went back outside with my lamp.

...And walked right into a broad, muscled chest. I yelped in surprise, and big hands wrapped around the tops of my arms to keep me steady. I looked up, recognizing Jackson's wide smile and darker hair. God, he radiated heat like a fucking furnace, and the teasing expression on his face did funny things to my stomach.

"Steady," he purred, and wow, it really was a purr. The word rumbled in his throat. I was almost overwhelmed with the desire to put my hand on his chest to see if I could feel the vibration. My face was burning and I swallowed, suddenly very aware of how close we were standing and how large and warm his hands were. They were firm, but held me so gently. It had been a long time since someone held me like that.

Jackson let me go. "Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to run into you like this."

I laughed shakily. "Nice pun," I replied.

He chuckled lowly, his broad shoulders flexing with the movement. Every inch of his bare skin was smooth and tan. He even smelled good, which I was pretty sure shouldn't be the case since he was basically living the life of a hobo, and was part cat. But he did, he smelled like roasted meat and woodsmoke and the specific afterburn of whiskey. I breathed in deeply and tried to keep my voice steady.

“I'll get out of your way.”

Jackson nodded, and I paused as I passed him, turning back around. I had forgotten how tall he was, how tall they both were. I craned my head back to meet his eyes.

“Raven told me you're willing to drive me back after your mourning period,” I said. His expression fell a little, old sorrow clouding his eyes, and he nodded. “Just... thank you, again. In advance, and for everything else. I don't want to think about what might have happened if...”

I didn't finish the sentence, but I didn't need to.

Jackson nodded again, his expression turning serious. “Savannah,” he murmured, and my eyes

widened as he stepped close to me again. He cupped my injured cheek, so gently it didn't sting. I tensed, before I remembered Raven saying that lions were tactile by nature. He didn't mean anything by it. I didn't want him to mean anything by it.

...Right?

"I want you to know that what that man did, that kind of behavior is inexcusable," Jackson continued. It was hard to hear him over the way my heart was pounding and my blood was rushing in my ears. "And while you're here, for however long that may be, you will be protected." His eyes lifted, briefly, over my head. "We will protect you."

I looked away, and saw Leo was nearby as well. God, if having one of them so close to me was bad, having both of them within arm's reach was torture. Having two incredibly gorgeous men basically promising fealty was enough to sweep any girl off her feet.

"I appreciate it," I forced myself to say. Jackson's hand fell away but the heat lingered. I would probably never stop blushing at this point. Leo stepped closer into the light of my lamp. God, he was pretty too. A little

younger, I thought, his features a little more angular than Jackson's, but his eyes were a brilliant blue that shone reflectively in the light and his bare chest was giving me more than a few bad ideas. "Really. I can't thank you enough, maybe I never will, but..." I sighed, and shook my head. "I guess if I end up back at the Venetian, you guys will always drink for free."

Leo's lips twitched in a fond smile, and Jackson laughed lowly. I wasn't sure what to do, because they were still both staring at me with an intensity that was both flattering and overwhelming. I had had a long-ass day and felt like I was vibrating out of my skin. If I didn't leave now, I would probably do something stupid like jump their bones.

"I think I'll get some sleep," I murmured. "Good night."

"Good night, Savannah," Leo replied. "Sleep well."

Sleep was the furthest thing from my mind, but I smiled and nodded. I walked back to the campfire, bid Raven a good night, and then went back to her hut. My cheek was still tingling from Jackson's touch and my

entire body felt like it was lit from within, on fire with something sudden and powerful.

Desire. Crazy how I hadn't felt it in so long, I'd almost forgotten. Being around Leo and Jackson was nothing like being around Harry. They made me feel safe, protected, wanted. I barely knew them and I wasn't planning on sticking around for long enough to know them, but they were both so handsome, and chivalrous, and the fact that one of them was going to lead the pride next suggested to me that they were worth being around. I couldn't pick up a shred of ill will from the lionesses.

I curled up under the blankets and closed my eyes, trying to get some sleep. My dreams were filled with thoughts of golden fur, warm suns, and rough growls and purrs in my ear, big hands on my arms and waist and thighs, and the feeling of being totally worshipped.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### SAVANNAH

I woke up to the sound of my phone ringing. I stirred groggily, groaning and squinting my eyes open. For a moment, I completely forgot where I was, and spent a good thirty seconds frowning at the stone wall before I remembered.

Right. Living with lions. Totally normal.

My phone stopped ringing and I rubbed my hands over my face, wincing when my cheek was still sore from being hit. Hopefully that would go away soon, I was tired of forgetting and remembering the hard way.

A note chimed from my phone with a voicemail. I rolled over and blindly felt through my bag for it, and opened the voicemail, leaning my phone against my ear without checking the number.

I should have checked the number.

From the first second, the first heavy breath into the receiver, I knew it was Harry. I sat bolt upright, my

heart in my throat and my hand trembling so hard I almost dropped the phone.

“I know where you’re hiding, you little bitch,” he snarled. “You think your lion friends are going to protect you? Think again. I’m coming for you and bringing you home, Savvy. You’re mine.”

The voicemail ended. I did drop the phone, then, all trace of sleep gone and my heart racing. It pounded against the back of my ribs like it was trying to escape. Tears filled my eyes, helpless and afraid. Fuck, of course Harry would assume that because a lion attacked him, I would have run off with them. The problem is, he wasn’t wrong. He could come here, and God only knew what kind of shit he would stir. I didn’t want him to come here, I was terrified of seeing him again.

And I definitely didn’t want to go back with him. The thought of the lions letting me go and letting him take me made me sick to my stomach.

I clutched my stomach and heaved, trying to keep my dinner down. Dawn had broken and I could hear voices outside. Raven wasn’t in her bed, so she wasn’t

going to see my complete breakdown. Which was good, because I wasn't sure I could stop it.

I was definitely panicking and I knew I was panicking but there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop it. I sobbed into my hands, trying to keep quiet, and clenched my eyes tightly shut to try and stop the tears. Nothing worked, not deep breathing or trying to distract myself or anything. Harry knew where I was and he was coming and he might even be on his way already and -.

The door slammed open, making me flinch and yelp in surprise. Jackson and Leo barreled in, their eyes wide and nostrils flared with alarm.

"Savannah, are you okay?" Leo asked, coming to me and kneeling down. He took my hand in both his own and gazed up at me with earnest eyes.

I tried to breathe in, tried to speak.

"Savannah," Jackson murmured. He knelt in front of me too, purring loudly enough I could hear it. It was a soothing sound, and I felt myself start to calm down despite the hysterical nausea welling in my throat. Leo squeezed my hand and Jackson gently touched my tear-stained cheek. "Savannah, breathe. With me."

I closed my eyes as he took an exaggerated inhale, and matched him. Then, out. I nodded weakly, and swallowed hard enough my throat clicked. I opened my eyes again to see them staring at me with deep concern etched on their faces. No one had ever looked at me with such open affection and care. It was impossible to feel anything but safe in their presence.

“I -.” I swallowed again. “I’m sorry.”

“We could smell your distress,” Leo murmured. Great, so trying to hide it did nothing. Leo rubbed his fingers up and down my wrist, like he could physically pet my pulse back to calm. The crazy thing was, it was kind of working. The repetitive motion was almost hypnotic. “What happened?”

“My -. My ex called me,” I said, hiccupping. “Harry. The one you attacked.” Leo’s eyes flashed. “He said he knows I’m here and that he’s coming and he’s going to try and take me back and I don’t -. Oh, fuck.” The nausea and panic were rising up again.

Jackson slid his hand around the back of my neck and squeezed. The motion was so foreign that it jarred me out of the freefall back into hysteria. His dark eyes

were serious when they met mine. “You are not going back with that man,” he promised.

“We won’t allow it,” Leo added.

“What if he brings cops? Or a gun?”

Leo’s upper lip twitched back. “Let him fucking try.”

I shook my head. “I can’t ask you to risk your life for me, you’ve already done so much.”

“Any lion who would not defend a queen in their territory isn’t worthy of his own skin,” Leo replied, like this was supposed to make any sense to me and like that was a perfectly normal thing to declare. The idea of one of them dying to protect me both horrified and soothed.

“We promised we would protect you,” Jackson added. “And we will.”

I swallowed, and put a hand over my mouth. “It’s too much to ask,” I insisted. “I can’t -. You guys have done so much for me. I can’t possibly be worth that, I can’t pay you back, I...”

Leo and Jackson exchanged a look. Jackson sighed, and released the back of my neck. He rubbed his hand

down my arm and smiled at me. “Savannah,” he murmured. “It’s not about paying us back. A lion’s guest is a friend. Basically a member of the pride. And we don’t turn our backs on our own.”

Leo nodded. I had nothing to say to that. I took another deep, calming breath. My skin burned where Jackson had touched me. I wanted him to keep touching me. It had been nice, having him so close. My fingers twitched between Leo’s palms, but he didn’t let me go.

In fact, he raised my hand, and parted his own enough to kiss my knuckles. I blushed, my fingers tingling at the caress of his lips. “The funeral will begin soon,” he said. “If you’d like to join us...?”

“Oh. Yeah, okay,” I replied. I didn’t want to be alone right now. If I was alone I was vulnerable. I didn’t want to feel vulnerable and weak. Harry always did that so well and I hated that feeling. With these men, I knew I was physically weaker, but I didn’t feel like I was. They were on their knees in front of me, they had smelled my distress and rushed to my side.

It was a powerful feeling.

Leo smiled, and let my hand go. “We’ll wait outside,” he promised. Jackson squeezed my hand, and followed Leo out of the hut, closing the door behind them.

I stared at the door for a long moment until I remembered they had somewhere to be and I didn’t want to hold them up. I wiped my face, wishing I had a mirror so I could see how bad the damage was. But I didn’t have anything like that. My makeup had probably all melted during the desert trek.

I changed from my pajamas into the same jeans I had worn to dinner last night, and a nicer shirt that hugged my body. It was a bright gemstone blue and had a relatively low neckline, but given that lions apparently walked around naked with no problem, I doubted I would be judged on any degree of modesty.

I pulled my hair free and brushed it out with my fingers, wincing at the tug of knots that had gathered while I slept. I fished out my brush and brushed my hair out quickly. It was still relatively cold outside, I could feel the chill in the air, and knew that having my hair down would help.

I pulled my jacket back on and stepped outside.

Leo and Jackson were in quiet conversation, and they both looked up as I left the hut. I watched, caught between amused and flustered when their pupils went wide like, well, like a cat's. I wasn't sure what caused the reaction, I was sure I looked like a mess, but there was no mistaking the quick flash of pure desire they were sending my way as I closed the door behind me.

Jackson recovered first, just barely. Leo was less subtle, and he didn't look away as I approached them. He reached out and touched my wrist, and leaned down to nuzzle my hair. I assumed because he wanted to make sure I still didn't smell like I was two seconds away from a mental breakdown, but then he let out this deep, gorgeous rumbling sound, like a hungry animal, and his fingers tightened around my wrist. It wasn't my injured one and it didn't hurt at all.

I blushed, and looked down. They were both wearing jeans, thank God, it was hard enough to stop myself from staring. But I realized abruptly that the jeans didn't really do anything to hide the prominent bulge Leo was sporting. I had gotten a good eyeful when



we first met yesterday, so I knew both of them were not lacking, but the reminder, with how close they both were and Leo breathing me in like he was starving for it, well, it was making my stomach tense and my knees feel weak.

Leo seemed to realize what he was doing, because he pulled back, looking sheepish. But he didn't let my wrist go. "You look nice with your hair down," he said awkwardly. I smiled. It had been a long time since I'd gotten a genuine compliment, without some kind of backhanded remark or subtly threatening comment after, from Harry.

"Thank you," I said, and ran my free hand through my hair, pulling it forward.

Jackson nudged Leo with his nose, and Leo jumped as though he had been shocked. He let me go, and swallowed harshly. "Let's go," he said, and led the way out of the settlement, towards the direction where I'd heard water.

I frowned, as Jackson followed behind him. I was starting to get whiplash from the hot and cold of these lions. It was clear that their friendliness and affection was a little more than just normal tactility. And while I

didn't generally consider myself a 'quick fling' or 'roll in the hay' kind of girl, there was no denying that they both made me feel like I could be.

But it seemed like every overly affectionate touch was jerked back like touching something burning. Maybe lions weren't meant to fraternize with humans? But no, that didn't make sense. Raven had a human husband, and I was sure she wasn't the only one.

Maybe it was different for males, or for future alphas. That would make more sense – have to keep the bloodline pure, except I hadn't seen them act like this around any of the other women, and there had been plenty of opportunity. Maybe it was considered bad form to behave like that during a time of mourning, but that hadn't stopped them before...

The thoughts and reasonings whirled around my head like angry bees as I followed them. My eyes dropped to their tails, swaying back and forth as they walked. They were golden and looked strong, almost prehensile. The tuft of hair at the end was darker on Jackson than Leo, matching their hair color. Their manes were probably the same in lion form.

I hadn't gotten a chance to really appreciate Leo when I saw him as a lion. I desperately wanted to get that chance, before I left.

We crested a hill and I saw the source of the water – it was a large lake, glittering in the light of the rising sun. The moon's reflection shone pale in the surface, and there was a large hole dug on the shore, surrounded by a collection of lions, shifted and human alike. There were more than there had been at dinner – more arrivals. Almost twenty at this point.

Jolie looked up and nodded as Leo and Jackson approached. I spotted Raven and went to stand by her side, so I would be out of the way. Her eyes shone with tears and she gave me a watery smile, squeezing my hand gently. I squeezed back.

“Alex was a beloved alpha,” Jolie said, tearing her eyes from the rising sun. I looked down at the hole in the ground. There was a body-shaped mound inside it, covered in a white sheet. No coffin, I noted. Maybe they didn't have the materials for such a thing, or deemed it unnecessary. “He was fair, wise, and he will be dearly missed. As the sun and moon gaze down on us today,

and will hold his memory forever, let us also hold his memory in our hearts, as we surrender him to the skies.”

“May the journey be easy,” the gathered lions whispered. Those that were shifted rumbled in chorus.

Jolie smiled, and stepped back. The lions that were in their cat forms stepped forward, and began to push the dirt onto the body with their paws and muzzles, until the grave was filled. There were only a few tears. The entire ceremony felt...peaceful, to me. Joyous, almost. Like the start of a new something instead of grief over the loss of the old.

Jolie stepped forward again. “Leo, Jackson.” They bowed their heads, and stood at the foot of the grave. “The future of this pride rests on one of your shoulders. Have you decided who will be the next alpha, or will there be a duel?”

“No duel,” Leo said, lifting his head.

Jackson took his hand. “We have decided to lead together.”

A surprised whisper broke out among some, but it didn't sound upset. Jolie blinked at them, and smiled

widely. “Together?” she repeated.

“Yes,” Jackson said. “We have known each other since we were cubs, and strengthen each other in times of weakness, comfort in times of stress, and trust each other without reservation. Together, we are stronger.”

“Together,” Leo finished, “we will lead, hopefully half as well as Alex did.”

Jolie’s smile was incredibly proud. “Very well,” she said, and clapped her hands together. She looked around those gathered. “Now begins the period of mourning. Grieve for Alex, and prepare to celebrate Leo and Jackson’s role of leadership. You are all welcome here for as long as you desire to stay, of course. For now, we will feast.”

I blinked in surprise as the lions began to disperse. “That was...something,” I said.

Raven hummed curiously.

“I liked it. It felt...natural. Humans make a much bigger deal out of funerals.”

Raven nodded, like she had experienced this herself. “I have seen this. We find it unnecessary. After

all, the sun and moon are always with us. So, too, are the spirits of those who have gone before us.” She smiled up at the sky, and I found myself smiling as well.

“I’m glad I got to see it,” I said, squeezing her hand again before letting go.

“I will see you at breakfast,” Raven said, and left with the others. Jackson and Leo were in conversation with Jolie. I didn’t want to seem like I was eavesdropping, but I was in no hurry to leave, either. The lake was so peaceful. I walked to the edge of the water, far enough away to give them privacy, and sat down on the rocky shore.

I looked at my own reflection. My eyes were red rimmed from crying but my cheek looked better. I tongued the inside gingerly. It was still a little sore, but not terrible. I reached out and dragged my fingers through the surface of the water, watching my reflection ripple.

In the silence, my buzzing-bee thoughts returned. I was still worried sick about Harry suddenly showing up, especially bringing such drama on the lions during a time when they should be mourning their dead and

preparing for new leadership. I couldn't control that – even if I left now and somehow didn't die in the desert, Harry would still show up here.

I hated waiting for something awful to happen. I hated not being able to do a damn thing about it.

The lions' promise to protect me rang in my head too. No one had ever offered that so selflessly to me. Not my parents, not my boyfriends. I knew Grace was the closest I had to a ride-or-die friend but I wouldn't expect her to defend me against someone as crazed as Harry, especially if he brought police or a gun. It was nice, and so unlike everything I'd ever known. I hated that Harry's threat robbed me of the chance to really enjoy it, instead all I felt was guilt.

I sighed, and rubbed a hand over my eyes. When I opened them again, I saw that Leo and Jackson's reflections had joined mine in the water. I looked up at them. Jackson knelt down on one side of me, Leo on the other. Like they were defending me even now from some nameless threat. The thought made me smile.

“So,” I said, aiming for something lighthearted to talk about, “you guys are in charge, huh?”

“Pretty much,” Leo said, and grinned. “Though we all know the queens rule the place.”

Jackson chuckled and nodded in agreement.

I bit my lower lip, feeling their eyes on me. I kept my gaze on the water. “The ceremony was lovely,” I hazarded. They said nothing. Strong and silent type. Internally, I rolled my eyes.

“Savannah,” Jackson said after a moment. I looked at him. His expression was nervous, shoulders slightly hunched like he was expecting a blow. “We wanted to offer you a place to sleep in our hut. If your ex comes then we would be able to protect you better there.”

My protest died on my tongue at his words. I thought about Raven, and her baby. If Harry found me there and hurt either of them I’d never forgive myself. But this also sounded like a very classic line in order to try and get me somewhere isolated. Friendly and charming though they were, they were still men, and outnumbered me.

I viciously stamped down the thought that maybe being outnumbered by them would be...rather exciting.



“Is there enough space for a third bed?” I asked. None of the huts seemed larger than the other, and Raven’s was hardly big enough for two beds.

“Yes,” Leo said, drawing my gaze. His eyes lowered. From the way I was hunched, my shirt sagged and exposed a lot of my cleavage and the top of my bra. I blushed and straightened. He did as well. Yeah, this was definitely some kind of ploy to get me alone with them. I kind of didn’t hate it.

But I didn’t like dishonesty, either. If they wanted to fuck me I would rather they just came out and said it.

So, I sighed, and decided to just tackle the issue head-on. “I need you guys to be honest with me,” I said. They blinked, frowning. “You’re all over the place. Hot and cold. You’re basically mauling me one minute and then act like I’m poisonous the next. If I’m going to sleep in your guys’ hut, what’s the actual situation here?”

Jackson coughed, and laughed softly. “I told you she’s too smart, Leo,” he teased. So they had been talking about me. That wasn’t exactly reassuring. Jackson met my eyes. “Savannah, I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“We both do,” Leo added. “From the moment I saw you. You’re gorgeous.”

I blushed darkly, and reminded my own head that compliments were nice, but they weren’t what I asked for.

“We want you to stay,” Jackson continued when I said nothing. “We want to protect you. We want to...” He made a vague gesture.

My brows rose. “Both of you?”

Leo grinned. “We agreed to do everything together,” he said with a shrug. “That means sexual partners. Assuming you’re okay with that.”

Um, being double teamed by two sexy lion shifters? Where could I sign?

Stop thinking with your damn libido.

“In the interest of honesty,” Leo said, taking my hand. “Our interest in you is...not just sexual. We want you to stay. If you stay, we will protect you, and take care of you, and make sure you never want for anything.”

I swallowed. “So...this is kind of sounding like a ‘mate’ situation.”

Jackson smiled sheepishly. “That’s pretty much what we’re suggesting, yes.”

“But you don’t even know me. We’ve barely met!”

Leo sighed, and let go of my hand. “Then let us get to know you,” he said quietly. “But I already know you’re beautiful, and strong, and you’re a fighter. You can take care of yourself, which is why it would be such an honor to let us take care of you, as well.”

...Wow. That was definitely hard to say ‘No’ to.

And I was going to be stuck here for three days anyway. It wasn’t like I had anything better to do.

“Okay,” I said. They both grinned so widely, eyes shining with happiness. “But ground rules.” I lifted a finger. “First, no sex. I’m not about to rush headfirst into something like this when I barely know you guys.” They nodded. I lifted another finger. “Second, if Harry shows up you are not getting yourselves killed, alright? I... forbid it.”

Jackson laughed. “Okay.”

“...Third,” I said, lifting another finger, “the whole super touchy-feely thing? That’s fine. I kind of like it, but

just remember the first rule.” Leo’s pupils went wide again, and he swallowed harshly. He nodded. “...Okay.”

Leo lifted his hand at chest height, and I rolled my eyes and nodded to him. “Where does kissing fall on the rules?” he asked.

I considered it. “If you promise to keep it in your pants, I don’t have a problem with it,” I said. Leo frowned and opened his mouth, and I rolled my eyes again. “I meant metaphorically. I know you guys don’t wear clothes a lot and that’s... I’ll get used to that. I just mean don’t get carried away.”

Leo smiled, and Jackson leaned in and nuzzled my shoulder. He wrapped an arm around my waist, purring quietly. I really did love that sound.

“Deal.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### LEO

Savannah was going to be the death of me. And Jackson. Probably at the same time.

She had only been in our hut for a matter of hours and already I felt like I was going to die if I didn't get to touch her. Now that I knew she was open to trying a relationship with us, that the possibility of mating with her was on the table, it was all I could think about.

Not in just a sexual way, despite Jackson's teasing I wasn't a complete horndog, but God, look at her! She was so beautiful, and smelled so good, like fresh mountain water and wildflowers and pure sunlight. And damn it, I could tell that she wanted us, too. Her arousal was sweet as honey and hung around her like a mist whenever she looked at us. I ached to touch her, to kiss her and put my hand between her legs, to wring every single soft gasp and moan I could out of her. I wanted to hold her to my chest while Jackson tasted her, I wanted to be inside her.

It was driving me crazy. My emotions felt like they were ricocheting and tossed around like leaves on a strong wind. Knowing that Savannah was being threatened by her ex – that son of a coyote, I should have killed him when I had the chance – and knowing that she wanted us, and now we were going to be sleeping in the same hut for the next few days at least...

I wasn't sure if I was strong enough to resist and not completely lose my mind.

At least she let us nuzzle her. That was enough to soothe the itch, at least a little. I could put my nose in her hair and breathe her in and try to ignore how hard I got whenever she was around. It was like her presence was a physical tug on everything that made me a man, that made me an alpha. I wanted to sire a legacy inside her. I wanted her to moan for me.

I was going to lose my mind.

I knew Jackson wasn't faring much better, though he did a better job of hiding it. He could kiss her without putting her on her back and ripping her clothes off. He could hold her in his lap and not rut against her like a mindless animal.

I...couldn't. I wanted to, but the most I could do was hold her hand, pet her wrists, smell her hair, and I felt the animal in me howling at the door. The trials of being a mixed breed orphan, I supposed. I didn't have as much control as Jackson did.

I tried not to feel jealous. In truth, I wasn't even sure it was jealousy. I wanted her to be pleased, and even if that meant I wasn't the one pleasing her, then that was alright. It was more aggravation at my own failure, my own weakness. She made me feel vulnerable and wild. It was a feeling I normally relished, but couldn't enjoy if I wanted to earn her trust and confidence.

I was determined to, though. We both were. We would prove to her that we were good mates, that we would take care of her. If she would only stay.

So to say emotions and tensions were high was an understatement. Naturally, while the lionesses were out hunting would be the exact moment her piece of shit ex-boyfriend would show up.

We heard the rumbling of an engine and immediately I was on high alert. I snarled loud enough to catch Savannah's attention, her face went pale, her eyes

wide. She knew as well as I did that a car could only mean one thing.

I rushed outside with Jackson and my nostrils flared at the scent of the human approaching. Him and his chemical car and dirty oil. I would never forget that scent, nor the taste of his blood in my teeth. Frankly, I was amazed that he was able to drive, but that was when I realized he wasn't alone.

Harry limped out of the vehicle, and a burly man dressed in a shirt with the sleeves cut off that showed off his biceps and washed out jeans with heavy boots stepped out of the car. He folded his arms across his chest to show how big he was, but I wasn't afraid. These men were only human, after all.

Savannah came out behind us. "Harry," she hissed. "You shouldn't be here. You need to leave."

"Like fuck I am," Harry replied. He looked like shit, to put it plainly. He sneered at us, and glared at Savannah. "Looks like you've made yourself nice and comfortable here."

"That's none of your business," Savannah replied. I admired how steady her voice was, how she refused to



tremble in front of this man who obviously terrified her. Harry was leaning heavily on a crutch and his arm was in a full cast, he was hardly threatening, but then again, I hadn't been abused by him for years. She had.

The reminder made me bare my fangs. Beside me, Jackson was a quivering ball of rage.

"Listen," Harry said. "I'm reasonable. Come home and we can work this out."

"She's not going anywhere with you," Jackson snarled.

"I wasn't asking you, hairball," Harry snapped. "Frankly, I'm not asking at all." His silent companion shifted his weight, the stance obviously threatening. "The cops said that they wouldn't help me with my rightful claim, since it looks like self-defense thanks to some lucky camera angles."

Lucky camera angles? Was this guy insane?

"But I don't care. I'm not leaving without what's mine."

I laughed at him. "So you thought you would come onto pride lands, with one friend for company, when the

human police won't even support you?" I took a step forward and puffed myself up. Harry glared at me. "The only reason I'm not going round two with you is because we happen to have some respect, unlike you. You are trespassing on sanctioned land."

"You're a bunch of fucking animals!" Harry snapped. Jackson growled behind me. The tension vibrating in the air was like a physical thing. "Savannah, you can't possibly be considering staying with these fucking cats."

"You have three seconds to get back in your car and leave," Jackson threatened.

"What are you gonna do?" Harry challenged, lifting his chin.

Jackson smirked, and took another step forward so we were shoulder to shoulder. He bared his fangs. "Or I'll rip your guts out through your throat," he purred. I smiled, nudging my friend in encouragement. "And we'll feed your meat to our lionesses for dessert."

Harry's face went pale. He swallowed. "You... wouldn't," he said. Even his friend looked nervous. I knew why. I felt the presence of the lionesses behind me.

They had returned from their hunt. Their snarls rumbled through the air.

“Tell me, Harry,” I said. “Who knows you’re here, aside from your friend?”

“Who would really miss you?” Jackson added.

Harry’s friend had apparently had enough. “Come on,” he urged. “Let’s fucking leave.”

Harry glared at him. “Not without Savannah.”

“Man, fuck you and fuck her. I’m leaving,” the friend said, and climbed back into the car. Harry’s eyes went wide, and he hobbled towards the vehicle. He threw a venomous glare over his shoulder at Savannah, which was enough to make me contemplate lunging for him anyway and ripping his sorry throat out on principle.

A small hand on my shoulder stopped me. I turned and saw Savannah standing next to me. She was glaring at Harry as well, as he hauled himself into the car and his friend drove away. “Leave it,” she urged me, looking up and meeting my eyes. “He’s not worth it.”

I sighed. My blood was pumping and every inch of me had been ready for that fight. To have nothing come

of it filled me with energy I didn't know how to deal with. I turned to Savannah and cupped her face, kissing her deeply. She gasped in surprise, but melted against my chest with a quiet, gorgeous little noise, wrapping her arms around my neck. Every fiber of my being wanted to take her and throw her down and mount her right here. She needed to know that I was strong, that I could protect her, that I was alpha.

But her rules. I would never break one, never without her permission. I would never disrespect a queen like that.

Still, I burned for her, and as one kiss led to another without her giving any indication of wanting to stop, I knew I had to before I did something I ended up regretting.

I broke the kiss, resting our foreheads together, breathing hard. She was panting too, her beautiful eyes wide and almost black, her cheeks red, spreading down her neck. The scent of her arousal was thick enough to drown in, fuck, she affected me so badly.

She bit her lower lip and I had to close my eyes.

“Leo,” she whispered. Her fingertips grazed my face and I turned my head to nuzzle them. “Thank you for defending me.”

“Of course,” I replied. She had to know that I would, every time, no matter what. I would die to defend her.

When I opened my eyes, she was smiling. She leaned up on her toes and kissed me again, and I snarled low in my chest, wanting to crush her against me, to spread her legs, to take her. My growl turned into another sound, weaker and thick with desire, and I felt Jackson scruff me and tug me back gently. He nudged my shoulder and purred. Savannah looked confused, but then her eyes dropped to where I was probably fit to burst right out of my clothes, and her blush darkened.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I replied.

She bit her lower lip, and looked me up and down again. She took my hand. “Come with me,” she murmured. “Both of you.”

I frowned, and looked at Jackson in question. He shrugged, and we both followed Savannah towards our hut. Oh, she wanted us to be alone. I wasn't sure my self-control could handle that.

Yes. Savannah was definitely going to be the death of me.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### SAVANNAH

I wasn't sure what, exactly, I needed to happen at that moment. All I knew was that I had watched these two men square up with Harry and his friend – I thought his name was Rick but honestly I couldn't remember – and they had been, without a doubt, ready to fight and, potentially, die for my sake.

Which was so insane and completely outside the realm of all my previous experience that it shook me to my core.

I needed to be close to them. I still wasn't quite comfortable with super public displays of affection, which was ridiculous because every lion here was adorably and overwhelmingly tactile regardless of age or relation, but if it was just the three of us in our hut...

I didn't know when I started referring to it as 'our' hut. It had only been a day since the funeral. One amazing day in Jackson and Leo's arms, held by them,

kissed and adored by them, fed from their table and kept warm by their furnace-like bodies.

I guess I was prone to falling in love fast, or at least falling into attraction fast.

Looking over my shoulder, I met Leo's eyes. He regarded me like I was most precious thing in the universe, like he could die happy if I only let him touch me. Affection warred with intense desire, making his pupils go big and round, his cheeks darkening, his breathing growing unsteady and rough as he panted against my hair.

I pulled him into the hut, and then Jackson, who while not as obviously affected, was showing signs of getting there too. I closed the door behind us, and exhaled. My heart was racing, my lips still tingling from Leo's kisses and the pressure of his tongue. Both of them had slightly rough tongues like real cats, and it wasn't painful but it sure as Hell had been shocking the first time they kissed me.

I turned around and met their eyes. Leo tensed. I couldn't help feeling like a gazelle that suddenly became aware it was without a herd, alone and vulnerable, and



could feel the eyes of a predator on it. But I wasn't alone and I wasn't vulnerable. I felt powerful, like I could send them to their knees with a word.

I stepped towards them and wrapped an arm around Jackson's waist, my other hand settling on Leo's chest. Leo growled quietly, leaning down to nuzzle my hair as Jackson held the small of my back so I was kept steady against him. The heat of them was stifling, making me start to sweat beneath my clothes. I had never been so aware of my own body, or how they affected it. Jackson's big, warm hand on my back was centering and promising. Leo's rough purrs were desperate.

I tilted my head up and cupped Leo's face, kissing him chastely and then letting it deepen when he groaned and grabbed me, twisting me around so I ended up pinned between them. Which was definitely more than okay with me. So was the way Jackson's hands flattened on my hips and his mouth went to my neck, nosing my hair to one side so he could kiss over my rushing pulse.

I gasped, arching helplessly between them and able to feel them both, hard, against my stomach and my ass.

They were behaving as best they could. One word from me and they would stop, step back, go take a cold dive in the lake or whatever it was men their age did when they had to get rid of an erection.

I didn't want them to stop.

Jackson dragged his nose up the side of my neck, making me whimper against Leo's mouth. My neck had always been sensitive, and it was like someone had drawn him a map. He licked his rough tongue under my ear and growled in a way that made me break out in goose bumps. "I'm so proud of you," he whispered. It wasn't what I expected to hear, and made me gasp again, heart stuttering in my chest. His hands slid inward, across my tense stomach. Lower, above my jeans, but stopping there. Fuck, I ached. I had never been so aware of my own emptiness before.

Leo rumbled in agreement, finally letting my tingling mouth free so he could nudge my head up with his fingers and nuzzle my hair again. "You were so strong," he whispered. "No fear."

I had to laugh shakily. I had definitely been terrified, but not for myself. Maybe that was the

difference.

“I knew you would protect me,” I replied.

Leo’s tail curled around my thigh, sliding up and squeezing like a promising hand. Fuck, their tails, I had forgotten about their tails. I clutched Leo’s shoulders helplessly as Jackson kept kissing my neck and below my ear. It felt like the only reason I was still upright was because there was no room to melt between their warm, solid chests.

“Of course we would,” Leo said.

“We will,” Jackson added.

Though they didn’t say it, I thought I could hear a ‘Forever’ on the end of that sentence.

I tipped my head back and turned so I could kiss Jackson. He purred quietly, chest rumbling against my back. His hands didn’t move, but they didn’t have to. He was so warm and it felt like heated lightning was gathering low in my stomach. Which was insane, to get this excited over some macho dominance display and then some kisses, but they both affected me so deeply and, shit, maybe this was what I was supposed to feel,

what I would feel if it weren't for men like Harry treating me like shit.

I pushed the thought away. He didn't belong here.

I turned in Jackson's arms and his hands ended up on my ass. He squeezed and grinned at me, playful and smug. "Yeah, yeah, hope you're enjoying yourself," I laughed. He kissed my cheek and then my forehead. Of the two of them, Jackson's affection was less direct. He seemed to prefer to soothe and use his soft purrs and nuzzling to communicate affection. Leo went for the throat.

Speaking of. I shivered as I felt my hair get pulled to one side, so the nape of my neck was exposed. Leo leaned in, his hands on my waist to keep me still, and bit down so lightly on the back of it. The sudden shockwave through my body was as powerful as it was startling. One of my hands flew to Jackson's shoulder, the other to Leo's hair. I trembled and moaned against Jackson's chest and both of them went still. Pleasure radiated through every inch of me, like the most intense orgasm I had ever had in my life, leaving me reeling. I hadn't -. I couldn't possibly have -.

But God, I felt so tingly and sensitive.

I looked up, still shaky and breathing hard, and a slow smirk spread out over Jackson's face. He took a deep breath in. Fuck, he could probably smell me. His eyes flashed and shone. "You liked that, gorgeous?" he purred, kissing the words to my blushing cheek. I bit my lower lip and nodded weakly, shivering when Leo slid one hand around my waist, pulling me back against him. Fuck, he was hard, they both were. I gasped at the feeling of Jackson's erection grinding against my stomach. That...felt so good. Somehow everything they were doing felt so good, like I had just been hit with the world's most powerful aphrodisiac. I wanted more friction, fullness, more.

Leo snarled lowly against my neck, kissing down my shoulder as Jackson gave my throat some thorough attention. Leo's other hand settled on my chest, like he wanted to feel my racing heart. "Savannah." The hand on my stomach slid down, hesitating at the hem of my jeans. Asking.

I nodded weakly. "Please," I gasped. Leo didn't hesitate a second time. His fingers pushed below the

hem and he growled lowly, a powerful rumble like the first time I had heard it, back in the parking lot. It made my heart race and I clutched at Jackson as best I could, my knees weak. They were definitely the only reason I was still upright right now.

Jackson caught my lips and kissed me, swallowing my loud cry as Leo's fingers found where I was sensitive, tender, practically throbbing, and snarled, two fingers curling and pushing inside me straight away. I jerked in their grip, a moan ripped from the very base of my lungs. Fuck, I could feel how wet I was, how eager to open for Leo. He tightened his grip on me and worked his fingers in and out, slow, smooth thrusts that make my toes curl and my hands shake. His palm was grinding against my clit, delicious pressure teasing me slowly towards the precipice.

Jackson's kiss was deep and felt like a claim, like a brand on my mouth even as their hands branded my skin. My hands had a mind of their own, pushing up my shirt to expose my stomach and bra, my legs spreading to give Leo more room and for Jackson to press himself closer, pinning me tighter against Leo's chest while he

rubbed his cock against my body. Leo wasn't faring much better. From the sounds he was making, he was close just from touching and kissing me. I wanted to make them feel good, too. I wanted to make them feel as safe and wanted as they made me feel.

"Jackson," I whispered, my voice coming out rough. He pulled back and met my eyes, and I bit my lower lip, which was sore in the best way from his playful nips and teasing tongue. I put my hand on the thick bulge in his jeans and squeezed, making his eyes flash, his upper lip curl back. I wasn't afraid. "I want to see."

He hesitated. "You said -."

"I know what I said," I replied. "I just want to watch. I want to make you both feel good too."

Leo groaned, desperate and high against my neck. His fingers pushed all the way inside me and he nipped at the back of my neck again, making my toes curl. His free hand rubbed over the top of my breasts, beneath my loose shirt, and skimmed the hem of my bra like he couldn't quite figure out how to get under it.

"Can I touch you, while I do?" Jackson whispered. The desperation in his eyes made the answer easy.

“Yes.”

Jackson purred, sliding a hand into my hair and kissing me again. Then, in a move that I was pretty sure they had to rehearse for how smooth it was, we were all moving. Leo pulled me to his bed and sat, positioning me in front of him and between his legs, and Jackson sank to his knees between my thighs.

Jackson smiled up at me, and rose to his knees to kiss me again, his fingers curling in the belt loops of my jeans. I knew what he wanted, and felt no shame or hesitation as I lifted my hips and let him slide them down, along with my underwear, to pool at my ankles. Leo shivered, and inhaled raggedly. I was sure without my clothes in the way, the scent of my arousal was even stronger.

They seemed to like it. I was so wet that Leo's fingers were coated and shining, when I looked down. I didn't normally like being so on display like this during sex, but the way Jackson looked at me, the sounds Leo was making in my ear... They weren't looking at me like a piece of meat, like something to be used and tossed aside when they were done.



They looked at me, held me, touched me like I was precious, like I was something worthy of worship. Like a queen.

Jackson slid his hands up my thighs, encouraging my legs to part wide enough that he could fit between them. I kicked one leg free from my clothes and slid a hand into his hair, hiking my leg up onto one of his broad shoulders. He grinned up at me, and then closed his eyes, leaning down to kiss open-mouthed, hot and wet up the inside of my thigh. I watched him ravenously and felt myself tightening with anticipation around Leo's fingers, as Jackson slowly made his way up. Oh God, he was going to put his mouth on me, none of my exes had done that for me before, I -.

I moaned with loss when Leo pulled his fingers out and held my thigh open, giving his fellow alpha room to lick broad and wet between my legs. I gasped at the sensation of his tongue. That was new, that was...that felt really fucking good, like there were thousands of tiny little bumps that nudged my sensitive clit and made it tingle.

Jackson growled lowly, like I was the best thing he had ever tasted. He slid his hands between my thighs, looked up and met my eyes briefly, and then dove right the fuck in like I was an endless helping of his favorite dessert. My thighs tightened and I gasped, melting against Leo's chest, my head tipped back. Fuck, it felt so good. Jackson's tongue pushed inside me, teasing me with fullness I was starting to crave, and then his tongue flicked tenderly over my clit and he sucked on it after. My thighs shook and my stomach tensed, sinking in. My heart was racing and my breath was coming fast.

"Oh my God," I panted, and slid both hands into his hair.

"Don't you dare stop, Jackson," Leo rumbled. With both hands free, he figured out how to unhook my bra and slip the straps free of my shoulders so they pooled around my elbows. He pushed my shirt up and teased my nipples, one of his hands still warm and slick with me. The different sensations made everything more intense, and then Leo let out a noise so low I felt it more than I heard it, and bit down on the back of my neck again.

I came with a hoarse shout, digging my heel into Jackson's back, my hands tugging on his hair as I writhed between them. They were strong and held me in place, practically hobbled at both ends as I shuddered and arched between them. Christ, it felt never-ending. Jackson didn't stop with his tongue, sending bursts of aftershocks through me as Leo played with my nipples and mouthed at my neck.

They were both purring loudly, continuing to touch and kiss me until I whimpered, oversensitive. "Give a girl a minute," I managed to gasp. Jackson pulled back immediately, grinning wide and smug. He looked good like that, especially with my own wetness coating his jaw and mouth. He slid his hands down my thighs in a familiar soothing gesture and Leo went back to holding my waist. I tipped my head back, panting at the ceiling, petting Jackson's hair as I recovered. "That was..."

Leo hummed, sounding rather pleased with himself. I was sure he wore a mirroring smirk, though I couldn't see his face. I was exhausted, the intense orgasm enough to leave me boneless and tired combined with

the stress of the day. I shivered, causing Leo's arms to tighten around me in an effort to keep me warm.

Jackson licked his lips, and rubbed his damp cheek against my knee as I continued to pet him. I turned my head enough that I could kiss Leo's jaw. They both purred for me, and the wave of affection I felt for both of them was as strong as every other emotion I had felt today.

"Savannah," Leo finally whispered, breaking the quiet. I hummed tiredly, lax against his chest. He groaned weakly as I shifted my weight, his erection rutting up against my back before he got control of himself. The sound was weak and desperate.

Jackson purred quietly, kissing his way back up my thigh. My entire body tingled with anticipation. I bit my lower lip and looked at him, but he wasn't looking at me. He and Leo shared another look, another silent agreement passing between them, and then I was being gathered up and moved again.

We all ended up shoved together on Leo's bed, Jackson behind me and Leo in front. I met his eyes and he cupped the back of my neck and kissed me deeply. His

tail twitched, came forward, and gently wrapped around my ankle. I laughed as he pulled my leg up and over his hip, his big hands flattening on my back as he kissed me and started to rut between my legs. The fabric of his jeans was rough, but it felt good to be held like this, kissed and worshipped as he panted and let out these tiny little mewls that reminded me of kittens.

I ran a hand through his sweaty hair and kissed him. Jackson reached around me and started rubbing at my tender clit, sending fresh waves of heat and sensation through me. He pressed close to my back, grinding against my ass. I bit my lower lip so that I didn't beg them to just stop being so polite and fuck me. They were being good and obeying my rules and I didn't want to get them confused or make them feel guilty about breaking them.

Jackson licked over the back of my neck, which caused the same toe-curling wave of pleasure that Leo's love bites had. How had I gone so long without knowing how sensitive that spot was? It was the first time I'd been with anyone who gave a shit, I supposed. Who wanted to learn where I was sensitive and what I liked.

Jackson's fingers teased my clit and Leo tightened his grip on me, his hips bucking rough and unsteady as he grunted against my shoulder. Tension made his arms bulge with muscle, his face twisted up in an expression of pleasure. Still, he was gentle, and never once did his touch get too rough. I tugged on his hair so I could kiss him, and he went abruptly still, shuddering as I felt new, warm wetness against my abdomen as he came in his jeans.

I smiled as his tail squeezed my ankle, and rubbed our noses together when he became too breathless to kiss me. "Good boy," I praised, and his eyes practically lit up with pleasure. He smiled, purring loudly, and kissed me as his body went still.

Jackson kissed my throat, taking advantage of the fact that Leo was finished to push his hand between my legs, sliding his fingers over my dripping entrance. He let out a sound, pure, raw desire that made me tremble. His free arm wrapped beneath my body and tugged me close. Leo bent his head and pushed my shirt up so he could kiss and suck on one of my nipples as Jackson

relentlessly teased my sensitive flesh. I whimpered, biting my lower lip hard.

He growled. “Don’t be quiet, Savannah,” he urged me. His cock felt huge against my ass, and the weight of his tail joined Leo’s, wrapped just below my knee. “Let me hear you. I want to hear how good we make you feel.”

I was helpless. Caught in these lions’ claws, I would have rather been nowhere else. I cried out as Leo flicked his rough tongue over my peaked and sensitive nipple, hips rocking forward onto Jackson’s hand and then back against his clothed cock. Leo added his fingers to Jackson’s, thumb rubbing my clit in slow, torturous circles as my breathing grew ragged and heavy.

“Fuck,” I whispered. “I’m gonna -.”

Jackson snarled, and bit down on my neck again, and that was all she wrote. My vision whited out and I trembled in their arms, desperate and helpless noises punched out of my throat as they continued to touch me. Jackson pushed his fingers inside me so he could feel how I tightened, rumbling with delight. This orgasm was just as powerful as the first, leaving me breathless and panting raggedly. Still, I liked how they touched me, I

loved how full and warm I was, how thoroughly fucked-out I felt.

If this was just what it felt like to have them touching me, actual sex would probably kill me, but what a way to go.

Jackson shuddered, dragging his sharp teeth down the side of my neck as he went still, just like Leo had, and groaned as he came, rutting against my ass. His fingers curled inside me, twitching, and I sighed heavily, closing my eyes. I wrapped one hand around Jackson's wrist, and put my other one on Leo's cheek.

"That was...amazing," I said, after a few minutes of trying to find the right word and utterly failing.

Leo purred and kissed my forehead as Jackson nuzzled my sweaty hair. There was no way I was going to be able to remain awake for long, but I was safe, in the arms of two gorgeous, protective alpha shifters, and had just had the best sex of my life, so I figured no one was going to hold it against me.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### JACKSON

I never wanted to leave her side. As she lay slumbering in my arms, my best friend on the other side of her, lazily half-dozing and tail flicking in contentment, I thought that I finally understood how my sister had felt when she found her husband. She had said it was like finding a missing piece of her she hadn't realized had been missing, that they fit together perfectly, and she was whole with him.

I had never really gotten it, myself, but now... Maybe.

I buried my face in her hair and breathed in. The insides of my jeans were sticky and growing uncomfortably cool, my mouth was coated with the taste of her and the scent of Savannah's arousal and satisfaction hung in the air like mist. It was perfect.

Leo stirred, a split second before there was a knock at the door. I rumbled in aggravation, but we were the pack alphas now and if someone needed us, it was our

duty to respond. I carefully unwound my arms from around Savannah and wrapped her in a blanket, before Leo and I shed our clothes and walked outside.

I blinked in surprise, seeing David pacing in front of the house. He was one of the young ones that Alex had encouraged go out and see the world, although he hadn't travelled far. He lived in Las Vegas, at one of the human government offices as a liaison.

For a moment, I had the uncomfortable thought that he had come back to challenge me and Leo for the position of alpha, but when he turned around and met our eyes, he looked more worried than in the position to fight.

"Alphas," he murmured, bowing his head. Leo and I approached. David straightened. He was shorter than both of us, and much skinnier, his eyes the same icy blue as the cloudless sky above us and his head shaved bald. "Forgive me for interrupting."

"What is it, David?" I asked.

"You missed the funeral," Leo added.

“I did, and I’m sorry about that,” David replied, guilty and ashamed. “Humans have a hard time understanding mourning for someone not directly related to you. I wasn’t allowed to leave the office – but my request ended up getting the attention of Mister Frank.”

I frowned, the name vaguely familiar.

“Who is that?”

“He’s the man who owns the silver mine,” David told us.

Oh. I remembered now. Mister Frank had come onto the pride lands a few times during Alex’s rule, when Leo and I were much younger. I remembered him as a short, round man, who constantly smelled of metal and machines and wax paper. My muzzle wrinkled just thinking about him.

“He can pay all the attention he wants,” Leo said. “We have this land and we’re not giving it up.” I nodded in agreement. Mister Frank had long coveted part of our land because there was apparently a rich deposit of silver running through it. Lions as a whole didn’t really put

much value in such things, but I could remember him being pretty aggressive with Alex back in the day.

“Well...” David shifted his weight, looking nervous. “You see, there’s kind of a problem with that.”

I frowned and rumbled impatiently for him to continue.

“The laws for pride lands state that at least thirty lions need to be living within a certain square milage to retain the exclusive rights to that land,” David explained. “We haven’t had those numbers in...quite some time.”

Leo cursed. “Damn Alex,” he hissed, rubbing a hand over his face. I couldn’t help agreeing, though I kept it to myself. It was the same issue I had brought up before Savannah showed up: we just didn’t have enough lions living here, and definitely not enough young enough to make more lions. Thanks to Alex being so supportive and willing to let the young ones go explore and settle elsewhere, our population was down to bare bones.

I hadn’t known about the zoning laws, though. That could really be a problem. We didn’t have enough lions

to be recognized and we definitely didn't have enough lions to defend the place if force came into play.

“Thirty lions,” Leo continued, his voice a rough snarl. “Where the fuck are we going to get thirty?” I understood his frustration; even with everyone coming back for the funeral and mourning period, we only had two dozen. After three days, that number would be cut in half.

And Mister Frank probably knew this. He wouldn't act before the mourning period was over, because he knew how to dance within the boundaries of the law and a jury would look down on him for disturbing us during this period, but that time was quickly running out.

David pressed his lips together and looked nervous. I waved my hand at him. “Thank you for telling us. We have to talk. Are you staying for the rest of the three days?”

“I have to go back tonight,” David replied, shaking his head.

“Alright. We might send you back with things to find out. Be ready,” I ordered. He nodded and scurried away. I looked to Leo, to find him striding away from me,

towards the lake. He was snarling lowly to himself, and I sighed.

I followed him, of course. We had to figure this out together.

He walked towards the lake, away from the others. As I approached, I watched him pace up and down the shore, and finally kick at the water in frustration.

“Pretending it’s Mister Frank’s face?” I asked, folding my arms across my chest. Leo glared at me over his shoulder and showed me his teeth.

“Couple people’s,” he replied. Then, he deflated, shoulders dropping. “What the fuck are we going to do, Jackson?”

I pressed my lips together and walked up to his side, unfolding my arms. I nuzzled his shoulder and tried to purr as soothingly as I could. His fingers twitched in aggravation and he turned his head away.

“Well,” I finally said, “we do have a female here.”

Leo’s upper lip curled back. He sucked in a breath. “She wants to leave,” he said quietly. “She’s not going to...agree to that. Fuck’s sake, Jackson, she won’t even let

us mount her. Which is, you know, that's her choice," he quickly added. "I don't want to force her. It's just..." He heaved a breath. "It's more complicated than just getting a head start on the honeymoon."

He tilted his head, his eyes on the water. "When Raven gives birth, that'll increase our numbers. I know she wants to leave her cubs here." I nodded in agreement. Lion shifter litters could get as large as seven, and it simply wasn't practical to have seven baby lions running around in a human settlement. A lot of queens tended to leave their children with a pride. Leo himself was an example of that.

"Raven," I agreed. "Savannah could easily bear another six or so. She's strong, she's young and healthy..."

Leo sighed. "I want to," he confessed. "But she doesn't want to stay, Jackson."

"How do you know? Did you ask her?"

Leo frowned. "She hasn't said otherwise, since asking for a car."

“Well...” I considered it, and sighed. It was painful to even think about, let alone say, but I forced myself to; “David said he was going back tonight. So why don’t we just ask her? She said she liked it when people were honest with her. We can explain the situation, and let her decide for herself. Then, you know, go from there.”

Leo was quiet for a while. Then, weakly, he said, “I don’t want to lose her.”

I didn’t want to either. The thought of not waking up with Savannah in my arms, of losing the scent of her, her heat, her smile, of never hearing her cries of pleasure again swept me up in a wave of melancholy.

But, “We have to let her decide.” Leo nodded. He knew I was right.

His lips twitched, and he turned, meeting my eyes. “May the journey be easy,” he teased, and I laughed.

“May the journey be easy,” I echoed. “Hers, and ours. Let’s go.”



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### SAVANNAH

I was aware of two things: first, that I was freezing cold. Secondly, that I was alone. The first part probably had something to do with the second part. I frowned, feeling forward blindly in search of one or two big lion shifters to cuddle up with and keep me warm, but all I found was open air and an empty bed.

I opened my eyes, and sat up. My frown deepened when I saw that I was alone in the hut. Objectively, I knew that shouldn't bother me. Leo and Jackson were leaders of their pride and they had shit to do, they couldn't stay in bed with me all day and cuddle. But another part of me, that was possessive and greedy, didn't like waking up alone especially after I had just had the best sex of my life and fallen asleep perfectly content between them.

I didn't have to pout for long. The door opened, letting in Leo and Jackson. I smiled warmly at them. They smiled back, but their smiles weren't as wide as usual. My expression fell, and I frowned as they came

over to me and sat. They were naked, but I noticed that absently. Their eyes were dark, and not with desire.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” Jackson murmured, nuzzling my hair. “Did you sleep well?”

The performative normalcy made my skin crawl. It was the same as when I had to laugh and pretend everything was fine with me and Harry, when he said something inappropriate in public or grabbed me a little too hard.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Leo winced. “Something’s...come up.”

I frowned, and bit my lower lip. Okay. They looked more sad than nervous, which didn’t really tell me anything, but I inferred that meant we weren’t directly under attack or something. Harry hadn’t come back, there was no band of wild hyenas or something out for yummy human flesh.

“What is it?” I forced myself to ask. They shared a look.

Jackson sighed. “We want to be honest with you. It’s important to us that you know – I mean, we know

you told us to be honest. But it's important to us too. We want to be honest with you, Savannah."

I swallowed. Oh God, they were going to tell me I was terrible in bed or something. This was starting to sound more like a breakup. "Okay," I murmured, proud of how steady my voice was.

They shared another look, and then Leo scrubbed a hand over his face and shook his head. "Alright. Fuck. I'll just come out and say it. So there's this law that basically says we need a certain number of lions in one place to keep rights to this land."

"Which is bullshit," Jackson muttered.

"Which is bullshit," Leo agreed. "But it's the law. And there's this guy, Sylvester Frank, who really wants a piece of our land because there's a silver vein or something. So, we have a lion who works in the zoning office, and apparently Mister Frank got wind of Alex's death and it's only a matter of time before he comes sniffing around."

"We need more lions, and fast," Jackson said, meeting my eyes. "Which means we need to start making them."

I stared at him blankly for a long time. “Um.” I sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. Right. Okay. Some bullshit archaic law about population control, they didn’t have enough for the threshold, they needed to make sure. Sure. On paper that all made perfect sense.

What didn’t make sense is why they were telling me, and why they were so sad about it.

Unless... Oh. Of course. They were alphas, so they wouldn’t want to muddy up the bloodline by mating with and breeding with a human. Not when so much was at stake. I thought of Kenna and Scarlet. They were young, close enough to Leo and Jackson’s ages to make babies with. And they would make beautiful babies, and they would save the day.

I nodded. “So that’s it then.”

Leo let out a rough sound, his eyes shining with tears. It surprised me to see. He looked really torn up about this. Frankly, I felt the same, I was better at hiding it, I supposed. Jackson’s expression was bleak as well. I didn’t want them to feel guilty about basically asking me to pack my shit and go – I wasn’t a shifter like them,

there was nothing I could do about that. This was out of my control.

“I really appreciate everything you guys have done for me,” I told them, forcing myself to smile. Leo stared down at his fists, and Jackson wouldn’t quite meet my eyes. God, they were really torn up about this. I hated that. I wished there was something I could do, but I wasn’t the one tossing a girl out because she wasn’t cat enough.

Jackson nodded, and tensed when I put my hand on his shoulder. “That member, his name is David. He’s driving back to Las Vegas tonight,” he said. “You can go with him, if you want. Or one of us can take you, after the mourning period.”

My mouth twisted at the thought. “No, that’s fine. I’ll go with David. I wouldn’t want to interrupt the honeymoon period.”

With that, I stood, pulling my jeans on and corrected my bra, and left. It was still early so there was no point storming out with all my clothes and then having to sit around and looking like an idiot. Besides, I

was too upset to pack and I didn't want to be around them with their pitying looks any longer than I had to be.

“Savannah!” I tensed at the sound of Leo and Jackson calling for me, and for a moment I wanted to stop and listen to their apologies, but I was too upset to really consider it for long. It almost made me feel... cheap. They had seemed more than into me before learning about this population thing, and okay, I got it, I was human and that meant I wasn't going to make strong shifters or whatever, I understood that.

My emotions were an entirely different story.

“Savannah!” Of course I should have known they would easily overtake me. I had been walking in the direction of the lake and barely got past the perimeter fence before Jackson was skidding to a halt in front of me, hands up and begging me to stop. I folded my arms across my chest and glared up at him, and Leo who was standing at my side in my periphery.

“Guys, I want to be alone right now,” I snapped. Jackson winced, his jaw clenching. “I'm not... I'm not mad, I swear. I know you guys don't really have a choice

in the matter, you have to keep the blood line pure and  
-.”

“Savannah, what the fuck are you talking about?”  
Leo demanded, interrupting me. I looked at him.

“You guys said you needed to make more lions,” I  
replied. They nodded, still looking confused, and I  
gestured behind me. “Well, there’s a few back there who  
I’m sure would love to have the next batch of babies. I’m  
not an option. I get it.”

Jackson had an expression like I had just squirted  
lemon juice in his eye, squinting and baffled.

“So it’s fine,” I continued. “We had a nice little  
fling, but it’s over now.”

Leo made a low, uncomfortable noise. He shifted  
his weight when I looked at him. “You...sound like you’re  
mad,” he hazarded.

I sighed. “No, I’m not mad. I just... I guess I was  
having a good time and to hear that you’re going to have  
to basically stick your dicks into every female around so  
that you can get your population back up was...startling.”

“What? Why do you think that’s what’s happening here?” Jackson asked.

I frowned at him. “You’re...you need to breed lions, right?” I replied, for the first time suddenly unsure. Maybe I had misjudged the situation. “I assumed that meant you would, you know, be with your own kind. Go forth and multiply and all that shit.”

Leo stepped up beside Jackson, both of them with their heads tilted.

“...I’m starting to get the feeling that I misunderstood.”

“We -.” They shared a look. “We thought that you wouldn’t want to stay and...do that with us.” Leo stepped forward, his eyes earnest and dark. He took my hand. “Savannah, if you gave us the honor of children, I...”

“We want you to stay,” Jackson said when Leo trailed off. “But you just got out of a bad relationship and, with your rules, we thought you wouldn’t be interested. So we wanted to be honest with you, but offer you a way out. We would never force you to do anything you didn’t want to.”



“But if you did want to...”

I swallowed harshly, my fingers curling around Leo's. It felt like my brain had ground to a standstill. They hadn't looked sad because they were kicking me out, they were sad because they thought I was going to choose to leave.

And I should. If the options were mating to two lions I barely knew and having babies for the rest of my life, and getting the Hell out of dodge to start my life somewhere new and free, then I should definitely choose the latter. A sane woman would choose the latter.

But they were offering me a choice. It wasn't like being trapped in a cage. It wouldn't be like being with Harry, I knew them well enough to know that. Even in the beginning, Harry had never been this loving, attentive, and sweet. I never got the feeling that he lived or died on my regard. That he would lay down his life for me.

And, I had to concede, the notion of getting kicked out really fucking upset me. So that was something I needed to think about, because maybe going off and living on my own wasn't what I wanted anymore. It was

hard to think clearly when they were standing so close to me, touching me, their eyes shining with hope, They wanted me to stay, but they were willing to let me go if that was what I wanted.

I thought about how sad I was to have woken up alone. Doing that for the rest of my life sounded really fucking bleak.

I sucked in a breath. “How, um, how would it work?”

Leo tilted his head.

“I mean, shifter pregnancies. I assume they’re different than humans.”

Jackson smiled, and nodded. “If you’d like, you can talk to Raven. She would know more about it than we would,” he said sheepishly, scratching the back of his head.

...Yeah. Okay. Raven sounded like a good idea.

Leo squeezed my hand. “Does this mean you’re... staying?”

“It means I’m considering it,” I said. “I need to know what having a bunch of shifter babies is going to

mean. I, just, it's a lot to take in, you know?"

"We understand," Jackson said, and Leo nodded in agreement. "And we're sorry we weren't more clear before. We caused unnecessary upset."

I had to laugh at his choice of words. "Well, I get the situation better now," I said. "If I agreed...would you guys, like, take turns?"

Their pupils flared out, so suddenly it made me shiver. I really like it when I made them do that. "...No," Leo rasped, clearing his throat. "We do everything together." I bit my lower lip, blushing as I remembered how it felt to be trapped between them, touching and kissing and so warm. I thought about feeling their teeth at my neck while the other was inside me, and then switching. It made my whole lower body grow hot.

Jackson's nostrils flared, and he looked down. Right, damn it. Lion sense of smell. My blush darkened when he smirked, and stepped close to me, taking my chin in hand and rubbing our noses together.

"You're beautiful when you blush," he murmured. Leo purred beside him, nuzzling my hair. They weren't wearing any clothes so there was no way to ignore how

they started stiffening against me. I gasped, lips parting when Jackson kissed me deeply. Leo nosed his way down my neck and I jerked back with a yelp when I felt his teeth graze my nape. If he bit me again I would probably come on the spot.

“Behave,” I hissed, without much heat.

Leo grinned at me, totally unrepentant. He looked good like that, the confidence and desire returning and warming his eyes. I swallowed harshly and took another step back, my knees weak. I knew they could smell how turned on I was, there was no sense in hiding it.

“I’m gonna go talk to Raven,” I told them. They nodded. “I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

Leo purred at me, his tail flicking lazily behind his ankle. The sight of it made me smile. I turned and walked back into the circle of huts, very aware of their eyes burning into my back the whole time.

If I put a little extra sway in my step, well, that was my business. I grinned when I heard them growl so low I felt it in my chest.

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I found Raven in her hut. I knocked and entered when she told me to come in. She was lying on her side, surrounded with pillows. Even two days later she already looked way bigger than before. My eyes widened in surprise, as I came and sat down on the other bed.

“Hi, Savannah,” she greeted. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” I replied. I bit my lower lip and fidgeted with my fingers, one knee bouncing up and down. Her brow creased, and she tilted her head as much as she was able to on her mound of pillows. “Um. I have some... shifter pregnancy questions.”

Her dark eyes flashed with intrigue, and her lips curled into a small, knowing smile. “By all means,” she purred. “Ask.”

I blushed, biting my lower lip again, which was sore from Jackson kissing me. God, where to even start?

“How, um... How long does it normally last?”

Raven hummed. “Two to three months,” she said, putting a hand on her belly. My eyes widened in surprise. That wasn’t long at all! “We generally have litters between five to seven.” My eyes fell to her stomach, and I

frowned. Yeah, she was getting big, but there was no way there were five to seven babies in there.

She laughed, catching my confused look. “They come out as cubs, Savannah,” she told me with another laugh. “It’s much easier to give birth to them that way, and fit them all in here.” She tapped her stomach.

Oh. I considered that. It was probably way less painful to give birth to something the size of a kitten. The thought of giving birth to an actual kitten was...weird, but a mental image to try and process another day. Also, how the Hell did she nurse them all? Some of the women walked around here naked just like Leo and Jackson did and they were very much the same physiologically as I was.

Raven giggled again. “There’s smoke coming out of your ears.”

I blushed. “Sorry. I’m just trying to figure out the... logistics.”

“Mm.” Her smile turned knowing. “And what, may I ask, has piqued your interest so suddenly and specifically?”

I rolled my eyes. “You can probably tell that already.”

She grinned. “Leo or Jackson?”

“Um, both, from the sounds of it.”

“Oh!” She covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. “Of course, they do everything together.” She winked at me and I was pretty sure my face was going to be permanently red at this point. I wasn’t exactly a prude, but this was Jackson’s sister and even though lions played it way more fast and loose with modesty and privacy, he probably wouldn’t want her knowing what he got up to behind closed doors. And I was certain talking about her brother’s sex life wasn’t among Raven’s top ten favorite subjects.

“Well, the ‘logistics’, as you said – one queen’s cubs are not just her cubs.” I tilted my head. “Every female takes part in raising the young, whether that’s nursing them, teaching them how to hunt, keeping them safe. We all take part.”

I nodded. “Okay, so it’s a few months, there’s like seven of them, and then...how long are they babies for?”

“Generally, the children stay as lions for the first few years, since they physically mature faster,” Raven explained. “Once the human side of their brain has matured enough, they start shifting and aging on the human side as well. I’d say as young as eight, but sometimes not until teenage years.”

I blinked at her. “So your kids are going to just be lions for years?” I repeated.

She nodded. “It’s a better assurance of survival,” she replied with a wry smile. “Humans are terribly bad at surviving on their own when they’re young. Babies are dependent on their parents for years, unable to even hold their head up! That’s no way for a species to behave.”

I huffed, smiling despite himself. “I guess,” I replied. I swallowed and lifted my eyes. I wasn’t sure I had any more questions, except for ones that didn’t have anything to do with sex or babies and realistically couldn’t be answered by Raven. She didn’t live here and she didn’t really know her brother. I doubted they wrote letters to each other every day, and they certainly didn’t have the means to call.



I hadn't heard anyone express any ill will or discontentment towards Leo or Jackson, but I had only been here for a couple of days. The only people I could ask who had known them for longer, well, they would be biased, wouldn't they? Who wouldn't talk up their alpha especially to the woman their alpha wanted to breed with?

Raven tilted her head, her long hair falling down her shoulder. "Savannah," she said, and I met her gaze. Her brow was creased, and she bit her lower lip on one side with one of her elongated fangs. "I know it's a lot to take in, but I would encourage you to think of it as not...unnatural, or foreign." I frowned, not understanding. "What it comes down to is are you willing to spend more time with us, here? Are you willing to be with Leo and Jackson, and have sex with them, knowing that it is very likely you'll become pregnant, but that you'll also have an entire pride who will help you through every stage?"

She shrugged. "That's the real question. Not 'Oh my God threesomes and shift babies and raising baby lions'. It's community versus isolation. No one will force you

either way, that has to be your decision, but it's not that complicated either."

I pressed my lips together. Community or isolation. Could it really be that simple?

What had my life up until this point gotten me? A shitty set of parents, moving out when I was a teenager, scraping to get by, and shitty relationship after shitty relationship where, inevitably, Harry would have ended up regularly beating me or maybe even killing me. I was isolated. I only had Grace and even then it was only a matter of time before Harry stopped me working and I became entirely dependent on him. He didn't excite me, he terrified me. Yes, there were lots of fish in the sea, but after getting food poisoning one too many times I wasn't too eager to dive right back in.

If I stayed here, I would be around a...family. One that cared for each other and helped each other. I wasn't a lion and I never would be, but no one here had made me feel lesser just because I was human. They were all affectionate and friendly, the food was awesome, the views were incredible – both from the mountain, the lake, and the feast of flesh in the form of the males – and

if what Raven said was true, they would help and support me.

I thought back and tried to recall if I had actually been left alone in times of stress at any point, and found I couldn't. Just the scent of my distress was enough to get Leo and Jackson to come running. Raven had immediately let me stay with her. Even before then, at the bus station, the lionesses offered to help me. They became defensive and protective when I told them about Harry.

Even further. When Leo and Jackson and I had first met. They had been quiet, low maintenance, generous tippers... I was a good waitress, but I was also realistic. Their tab had barely been one hundred dollars and they had given me four. No one's service was that good, not at a cocktail lounge. But they had left when I told them to leave, hadn't been belligerent, and when they heard and saw that I was in trouble, they reacted immediately.

Not even wildly. I had to admit that. Only Leo had shifted, and his attack had been swift, brutal, and specific. He'd compromised Harry's legs and locked him down with a good bite to his arm. Those same teeth had

been in my neck mere hours ago. The thought made me shiver, but not at all with fear.

Jackson had kept watch and told Grace and me to go when we heard sirens coming. He was calm, vocally soothing and self-aware. His priority was not making sure his pack member was okay, but making sure that we were. Because lions valued the safety and happiness of the females above all else. The males' job was to fight.

They were so ferocious. They were wild, and strong.

They were protective, without being possessive. They were affectionate and charming and sweet.

They were mine, if I wanted them.

I swallowed. "Is being mated different than being married?" I asked. "Like...marriages don't always work out. Do mating bonds get broken?"

Raven considered the question. "I suppose they could," she hazarded. "But generally the idea is that they're more permanent. But I suppose they're also less... organized?" She winced at the word. "There isn't a ceremony like a wedding. You just agree to be together, and you agree that, if children are the intention, then

that male and that female will be the ones to make it. Lineage isn't all that important to us, so the idea of one male claiming all the females is outdated." She waved her hand dismissively, and gave me another sly wink. "And you managed to swing it the other way around. Lucky girl."

I snorted. "Am I?"

"Look, I won't go into too much detail because I think it's more fun for you to figure out on your own, but let's just say lions – male and female – have a certain... innate sense." She tapped the side of her nose. "We can tell what feels good. And we have more stamina than humans."

They got that right. Leo and Jackson had exhausted me before they even got started.

"And the biting thing, I guess," I said.

She tilted her head. "Biting?"

"Like, when they bite the back of your neck." My cheeks darkened and I gestured vaguely back there. The way Raven was looking at me told me that...maybe the

biting thing wasn't that mind-numbingly good for everyone.

Lucky me.

"Thank you, Raven," I said, and smiled. "I really appreciate you answering my questions."

"Good luck, Savannah," she replied, adjusting her position and laying back down. "Have fun!"

I laughed to myself, feeling strangely giddy. Speaking with her had calmed me down a lot. I was glad that this mating bond thing didn't mean 'til death did we part, or whatever bullshit. My parents had been stuck in a loveless marriage, and while I didn't want to think that Leo or Jackson could change enough that I wouldn't want to be with them, it was reassuring to know that I could leave, if I wanted to.

Ultimately, that was the biggest factor. I wasn't going to be in a cage ever again. I was going to choose my own destiny, even if it wasn't what I originally thought it was going to be.

It occurred to me that having a bunch of babies was one Hell of a way to pay these guys back for everything

they'd done. If I got some of the best sex of my life out of the deal, then that was a bonus. It would be good, until the thing with Harry died down too and I could move on safely. I would buy myself a couple of months, have some kittens – which was still mentally weird to think about, but not terrifying – save the pride from eviction, and move on with some good memories, all the while being completely protected by these fierce, beautiful predators.

There were worse options.

I nodded to myself, realizing that I had decided pretty much already. My feet were unconsciously carrying me towards the hut I shared with Leo and Jackson. When I opened the door, neither of them were inside, but that was alright. I was still tired and it was warm enough that the hut was pleasant, so I wouldn't freeze with out them here.

I bit my lower lip, considering, and then stripped down to my bra and underwear. Then, a moment later, took those off too. When in Rome, right? Being naked wasn't even that sexual to the lions, but I figured there was no sense wearing clothes if I was going to be having sex for the next couple of days.

I crawled into Leo's bed, which still stank of sex and had rumped blankets, and laid down. I pulled one of them around my shoulders, put my cheek on the pillow so that I could see the door, and stretched out on my stomach.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### SAVANNAH

When I woke up, I was shivering with cold, my teeth chattering together, and then, abruptly, I was very warm.

I moaned in gratitude, happily snuggling up into the source of the heat – which, it turned out, was Jackson’s bare chest. I smiled against his collarbone and wiggled closer, threading our legs together and burying my toes against his calves. He didn’t seem to care about my cold feet or hands.

“Jackson,” I sighed, and he rumbled in greeting, kissing my forehead. I frowned, and reached behind me. “Leo?”

“Here, beautiful,” he replied, and slid into place behind me. My smile widened and I opened my eyes further. I must have slept all day for it to be so dark and cold. Leo’s hand smelled vaguely of smoke, and I could see a small fire in the center of the hut, painting them in golden hues and making their eyes shine.

I sighed happily, rubbing myself back and forth to warm myself up. Leo's breath hitched behind me and I paused, biting my lower lip as I felt his erection press between my thighs. My heart rate picked up as one of his hands tentatively landed on my hip, already burning hot.

Slowly, I lifted one thigh, giving him enough room to push his cock between. He groaned, hips jerking forward helplessly, and his hand tightened on the jut of hipbone.

"You stayed," Jackson said, his voice low and thick with emotion. Leo went still, apparently happy with the pressure and heat of my thighs without seeking more. At least I wasn't actively moving and teasing him at the moment.

I nodded. "Yeah, I -." I cleared my throat. "I decided to stay. I'm willing to help you guys out, grow your numbers, if you're sure you want me to be the one who carries your...cubs."

I winced at the awkward word, but it caused a visceral reaction in both the lions. Jackson's eyes flashed and he cupped my cheek and kissed me passionately, while Leo's cock twitched between my thighs and he

mouthed warm and wet on my shoulder. I shivered, already feeling myself getting wet and sensitive. My body remembered how good it felt to have them touch me and was more than willing to witness a second performance.

“You, Savannah, only you,” Leo rasped into my ear. He started moving his hips again, slow rolls that made him thrust between my thighs. His cockhead brushed against my wet entrance and I moaned weakly into Jackson’s mouth, threading a hand through his thick, dark hair. Leo’s hand slid down and found my clit, rubbing in slow circles in time with his thrusts.

Jesus Christ, I was already close, and they had barely touched me. Maybe Raven was right – it was like they had a map to every sensitive place on my body, they could smell what felt good and what I liked. Leo’s fingers parted, trapping my clit so that Jackson could take over, stroking the swollen nub with his thumb while I moaned and writhed between them.

“Fuck,” I whispered, breath hitching. “Oh my God, fuck, please, please...”

“Anything,” Jackson promised. He rested our foreheads together and Leo licked below my ear, where I

was starting to sweat. He snarled at the taste and the powerful sound made my stomach clench. I wasn't afraid, it was exciting, knowing I had these two vicious predators whose entire existence had narrowed down to me and my pleasure.

I reached down, past both their hands, and lifted my thigh further, tenting the blanket. "Please," I begged against Jackson's mouth. "One of you, inside me, please."

Leo choked on a moan, shuddering behind me. "Jackson," he rasped. Jackson broke eye contact with me to meet Leo's eyes, and he nodded.

Getting abruptly picked up and moved was going to take some getting used to. I got dizzy from the headrush of suddenly being upright. Jackson was behind me, holding me steady with a hand on my hip and the other arm wrapped around my waist. Leo sank to his knees in front of me. I gasped, wide-eyed, as Jackson gently coaxed me to bend forward. Leo caught my hands and placed them on his shoulders, keeping me steady. My hair fell down one side of my face and he breathed in raggedly, and tilted his head up to kiss me.

I cupped his face and kissed him back, remembering how much he liked my hair down. My nails sank into his shoulder as Jackson dragged a hand down my back, making it arch. He coaxed my legs a little farther apart, and tested how wet I was.

Fuck, I was practically dripping already. I heard him snarl as he confirmed that for himself.

Then, I felt blunt pressure. Much bigger than his fingers, and much harder. I moaned loudly, gasping and collapsing onto Leo's shoulder, clutching at his hair and the back of his neck as Jackson pushed into me. He was mounting me, and he felt huge, splitting me apart and holding my hips up. I wondered if he would simply hold me like a ragdoll if my knees were to collapse because that was a distinct possibility.

"Feel good, beautiful?" Leo purred into my ear. I nodded helplessly, and heard Jackson growl proudly in answer. His strong thighs met the back of mine, his exhale was explosive. I felt like I had been split apart in the best possible way.

Then, Jackson put a hand on the back of my neck, tightened down to mimic a bite in a way that made me

mewl, and started moving. It felt fucking amazing, every inch like nails down my spine and every push back in making sparks of pleasure crawl over my skin. I pushed my hands against Leo's shoulders and straightened, throwing my head back with a ragged cry as I rocked back to meet Jackson's thrusts, wanting them harder, faster, more.

Jackson was a mess of snarls behind me, deep bass things that vibrated into my bones. I bowed my head, meeting Leo's wide-pupiled eyes, and made another rough sound that caused him to smile. He took my hands and guided them to his hair, before he crawled forward, forcing me a little more upright. Jackson's thrusts sent me to my toes, and his arm tightened around my waist.

Then, I felt Leo's tongue between my legs, licking my slick flesh and flicking over my sensitive clit. I cried out again, my legs coming together out of instinct, I was so sensitive and so overwhelmed. Leo merely growled, and pushed them apart again.

"Nice and open, beautiful," he said, looking up at me. I shivered when he rubbed his slick fingers over my clit, pinching it between the pressure of his hand and the

pressure of Jackson's cock inside me. "That's it, good girl."

I gasped, shaking from head to toe. Jackson tightened his arm around my waist, his other sliding from my hip to play with one of my breasts as Leo took over touching my thighs, my hips. I was so wet it felt like I was dripping with it, smearing it across Leo's face.

Leo smiled wickedly, and dove back in. He trapped my clit and sucked on it so hard my vision went white. Jackson held me steady as I tensed and convulsed, clenching tightly around his cock as I came so hard I almost passed out. I tugged Leo's hair but he fought me, continuing to lick and suck until I was practically sobbing with overstimulation.

Jackson grunted, and bit down on the back of my neck, which felt like it threw me right into a second orgasm that tore a scream from my throat. He went still, holding me tight and gentle, and I was flooded with warmth as he came inside me.

Leo drew back, smiling wide and pleased. He purred loudly and nuzzled my belly, petting my shaking thighs. Jackson exhaled heavily, absently dragging his

fingers over my breasts, my collarbones, petting me like I was a cat too.

I kind of liked it. A lot.

“Bend forward again, gorgeous,” Jackson commanded, his voice rough. I obeyed, and winced when he slipped out of me. I could feel his release and my own dripping from my hole, and tried to catch my breath. I moaned when he ran his fingers down my thighs, scooping it up, and worked it back inside.

Right. Breeding was kind of the point of this. Nothing wasted.

I shouldn't have found that so fucking hot.

Leo snarled, his nose wrinkling as he bared his teeth. I barely had time to react before he was on his feet and pulling me into a deep, passionate kiss. He reached down and hauled me into his arms. I yelped, and wrapped my arms and legs around him on instinct, as he carried me back to bed and laid me down on it.

He climbed between my legs and met my eyes. I nodded, biting my lower lip, and he replied with another of those wicked, promising smiles. He ran his hands



down my red, heaving chest, my smooth stomach, my hipbones, before he slid his hands beneath me and grabbed my ass. I giggled breathlessly, until it was lost as he hoisted me up, his thighs supporting my lower body as he angled me – to breed, my mind supplied. Fuck, that was hot too.

He pulled my legs up until they were on either side of his head, and looked down at the mess Jackson had left. I could feel it leaking out and whined shakily when Leo, too, pushed it back in. Christ, I was going to develop a thing for that soon.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” Leo breathed, his eyes meeting mine. I reached for him, suddenly sure that I would lose my mind if I didn’t get him on top of me. I parted my legs in invitation and wrapped them around him, both hands going to his hair as I hauled him down into a kiss.

He groaned, trembling, and tightened his grip on my ass, holding me still as he rutted like an animal, his cock dragging over my skin which was still tingling from his rough tongue and the thorough fucking. Finally, he

caught, and pushed inside me with one sure, brutal thrust that jarred my entire body.

“Fuck,” I whispered. The bed dipped beside us and I turned to see Jackson sitting. He grabbed one of my hands and kissed my knuckles, eyes shining with affection. I smiled at him, and then couldn’t keep my eyes open, as Leo slid his big, hot hands up my back, gripped the nape of my neck with one and my hair with the other, and started moving.

The power behind his thrusts was overwhelming. He was an animal, quite literally. He sucked bruises to my neck and down my chest, and every time his body collided with mine it was with a loud and wet sound. He was growling almost continuously. I couldn’t help how I moaned, arching against him, so greedy for more. Maybe it was a good thing lions had such great stamina because I could quickly see myself becoming addicted to this feeling.

Leo kissed me and moved one shoulder up so that Jackson could reach between us with his free hand and stroke my clit. I gasped, sensitive, every brush making me spasm and clench around Leo’s cock as he fucked me.

My heels dragged down his back, urging him on, slipping on sweaty skin. We both were soaked with it, and I knew I would smell like both of them by the end. The thought only turned me on more.

Leo reared up, letting go of my hair and planting his hand by my head instead. His eyes met mine with an intensity that burned. He slowed, and Jackson circled my clit in the same rhythm. God, they were going to drag this orgasm out from my fucking toes.

Leo didn't look away as I came, lips parted in a soundless gasp. His mouth twitched in a victorious smile, eyes shining with pride. Jackson slid his hand up my body and pushed my hair to one side as though in offering. Leo looked up, meeting his fellow alpha's eyes, and hummed in pleasure as their cheeks brushed.

Seeing that gesture of affection made me smile. In a moment of animal instinct, they still found tenderness and mutual comfort in each other. I was so lucky to have them.

Leo bowed over me again when the moment passed, his thrusts still slow but forceful, like he was trying to fuck me through the mattress. I moaned for

each one, gasping, my free hand sliding to the nape of his neck and clamping down.

He must be sensitive there, too, because as soon as I squeezed, he went still, coming with a guttural snarl against my neck. His hips twitched as he flooded me, so much I could feel it leaking out. I sighed, completely sated and sore. Leo released my neck and smoothed his hands down my flanks, kissing my bruised neck as Jackson nuzzled my hair.

I smiled up at him, trailing my eyes appreciatively down his body. “Well, that was fucking amazing,” I said hoarsely.

Leo hummed, sliding out of me. I knew to expect the soft touch of his fingers, scooping whatever leaked out back into me. It still made me shiver, biting my lower lip. Leo moved to one side and pulled me against his chest, letting Jackson crowd in behind.

I blinked, eyes widening in surprise when I felt that Jackson was already on his way to getting hard again. I laughed to myself. Lion stamina.

Jackson wrapped an arm around my waist and kissed my shoulder. “Savannah?”

“Mm?”

“...We’re really glad you decided to stay.”

Leo nodded, smiling. I smiled back and put a hand on Jackson’s, the other pushing Leo’s hair back from his face in a small petting motion. “Me too,” I replied honestly. I didn’t regret it, and I doubted I would any time soon.

I was safe, here, and protected, while still being free as a bird, in the arms of two gorgeous men who wanted nothing more than to see me happy. What could be better than this?

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### SAVANNAH

We talked and dozed and fucked all night. Frankly it was a miracle I was able to walk in the morning.

It would be another miracle if I wasn't pregnant, by the time the sun had come back up and it was time to start the day.

It was the third day of mourning. Leo and Jackson told me that this Sylvester Frank guy would probably show up tomorrow. I was already prepared not to like him, given the threat he posed to the pride here. Hopefully by the time he did anything about it I could prove that I was pregnant. Between my kids and Raven's, we should have enough to delay any kind of population citations.

Leo and Jackson were no less affectionate with me after this whole mating thing became official than they were beforehand. That was new, too. Harry's attempts at romance or any kind of wooing ended pretty much the day I slept with him. Like he had gotten what he wanted.

Not so with these guys. They held my hand, nuzzling my hair, kissed any part of me I would allow, be it my neck or shoulders and face. One of them was constantly at my side if the other was called away, and if they both had to go somewhere, they invited me along.

It was nice, being treated like an equal. Like I was a lion like them.

My phone had died, so I couldn't call Grace and give her an update. I resolved to ask if, after the mourning period, someone could go to Las Vegas and get me some kind of solar powered battery pack. I didn't want to be completely cut off and I owed my friend an update, especially since so much had changed since we last talked, and now she knew where I was, and would likely come looking for me if I was radio silent for too long.

In the meantime, I was enjoying a lazy afternoon with my lions. Raven was out as well, sunning herself with her legs and belly submerged in the water. She looked ready to pop any day now. I rested with my back to Leo's chest, Jackson sprawled out in front of me, sunning himself like his sister.

“Jackson?” I asked, making him stir with a sleepy trill. “Can I see your lion form? I’ve seen Leo’s.”

He cracked an eye open at me, and lifted his head. He rubbed a hand over his face and gave me a look of mild concern. “You’re not... You wouldn’t be afraid?”

I smiled. I had definitely been afraid the first time, but I wasn’t anymore. “I want to see,” I said.

He nodded, and stretched his arms out in front of him, knees bent so it looked like a proper kitty stretch. Then he shook himself out, and got onto his hands and knees. I didn’t know what I expected, maybe some tearing flesh or cracking bones as they realigned and recentered themselves, but the transition was utterly seamless. One moment Jackson was a man, then he was a lion.

His skin rippled, darkening in color as it looked like all the hair on his body stood on end, and thickened. His knees reversed as easily as I might shift gears in a car, just a single backwards kicking motion that locked them the other way. His feet and hands flattened and thickened, melting together to form big paws. His hair grew and reformed into a lion’s mane around his neck,



running to between his shoulders as those narrowed and flattened down. I smiled when I saw I was right – his mane and his tail tuft were the same darker color as his hair.

He yawned, canines shifting to fit the shape of a feline muzzle. It was a quick shift and looked completely natural. He shook himself out again, blustering through his nose, and then looked at me, whiskers twitching.

I sat forward, grinning in delight, and reached out. He bowed his head and plodded over, purring roughly as I pet his velvet-like fur, warmed from the sun and an absolutely gorgeous dark champagne color. “You’re so pretty,” I sighed. “Both of you are.”

Leo grinned against my neck. “Don’t tell him that, it’ll go to his head.”

Jackson blinked at him in a way that was definitely meant to be an eyeroll, before he bared his teeth in a grin, and crouched down in a hunting position, tail flicking back and forth rapidly. I could see what was coming and scrambled out of the way with a yelp. Leo shifted as soon as I was clear, and soon the two lions

were engaged in a playful – though still quite intimidating – wrestling match.

Raven laughed from her place on the shore, and I went to sit beside her. I still hadn't quite gotten around to the idea of being naked in public, but I was wearing loose shorts that didn't hide much and a t-shirt tied below my bra. I had quickly learned that underwear was just a hindrance. My boys were insatiable.

Raven gazed on them with a fond expression. She sighed. "I can't wait until I can go home," she murmured, rubbing her stomach. "These little ones will come any day now, and then I can go back."

"Seattle, right?" I asked. She nodded. "Kind of a personal question, but what does your husband think of the 'go give birth with your pride and come home without any of them' situation?"

"He's a practical man," Raven said, shrugging. "He understands that raising up to seven lion cubs would be difficult, not to mention hard to explain to the neighbors when they started becoming human children."

I frowned. "Don't they know you're a shifter?"

“Some do,” she conceded. “There’s a different settlement on the coast. But I try not to fraternize.” I tilted my head. “Some prides don’t believe in mixing blood, some don’t believe in living among humans at all. I’d rather just skip all that drama.”

I nodded. “But you’re going to come visit, right?” I asked. “Your kids?”

“Of course! This will be my first litter here, but I’ll be certain to come back. I will bring their father once they have started shifting as well.” She met my eyes. “If you’re still here, you should meet him too. I’m sure you will have lots of mutual complaints about being the mates of shifters.”

The comment made me smile, though it was weak because of the first part. If I was still here – would I still be here?

I looked towards Leo and Jackson, who had stopped wrestling each other and were now grooming themselves while they basked, and smiled fondly. Maybe still being here in a few years wouldn’t be the worst idea in the world.

As I was watching, suddenly Leo's ears perked up, and he looked back towards the settlement. He rumbled, and Jackson looked up too. Their ears flattened at the same time, and their muzzles wrinkled to bare their sharp fangs.

"What's going on?" I asked. Leo and Jackson rose to their feet and rushed past me. Leo nudged my shoulder and looked at Raven. The order was clear: Stay here. My heart leapt into my throat, worried that Harry had come back with more of his friends to cause trouble, or that something had happened to the rest of the pride.

Raven breathed in, and snarled, her eyes flashing. "Silver mines."

It took me a moment to remember, and then anger replaced the fear. Sylvester Frank. Apparently he just couldn't wait for the three day mourning period to end before sticking his nose in things. I hadn't been here long but I was already protective of this place, and my people within it.

"Help me up," Raven said, and I hoisted her to her feet. She shook herself dry with a nod of thanks, and took my hand. We hurried towards the settlement, and my

eyes narrowed when I saw no less than three large vans had pulled up outside. They were black and looked official. Government.

My suspicions were confirmed when the side of the first van opened, and three suited men stepped out. Two of them were dressed the same, in black suits and sunglasses, Men in Black-style. They carried pistols at their hips. The third man was much shorter and dressed in a garish lavender sports jacket, with a cream-colored shirt and khakis, all of which were just a little too off color from each other to actually match.

Leo and Jackson had changed back into humans by the time we approached. Two more pairs of men climbed out of the other vans. Leo snarled as they approached the gate. "Come no closer!"

The man that I assumed was Sylvester, the terribly dressed, raised his hands in a peaceful gesture and smiled widely. "My friend, there is no need for such tension! I have not come to do you harm." My eyes narrowed further when I saw one of the escorts pull out a small camcorder. They were going to film this, in case Leo or Jackson reacted with violence.

“We have to do something,” I whispered to Raven. Her eyes scanned the perimeter, and then she looked at me, and put a finger to her lips. She took my hand and we began to slowly circle towards the vans, around the back of the huts where we wouldn’t be seen.

“You’re not welcome here, no matter what your intention is,” I heard Jackson say. I wished I could see either of them, but it was impossible given the angle of the huts. And I didn’t want them to see me and Raven and get distracted too. These guys had brought guns, I had no trouble believing they were okay with using them. “We’re in our period of mourning, Frank, leave us be.”

“Ah, yes, I was so sad to hear of dear old Alex,” Sylvester replied, his voice dripping with cloying and fake sweetness. My nose wrinkled and I scowled in the direction of his voice, though I couldn’t see him either. “I knew him back in the old days, you know, before either of you were born.”

“Leave.” That was Leo’s voice. “You will leave.”

Sylvester sighed. “Listen, boys, I’m here because -.”

“We know why you’re here,” Jackson snarled. “You’re here because you’re greedy and your

Government is corrupt. And you are violating our treaty by trespassing during our mourning period. Let your fucking cameras get that!”

There was a silence. My heart was racing, as Raven lowered herself to the ground and peered from behind one of the huts in the direction of the vans. I didn’t know what she intended to do, so I tried to be prepared for anything. She squeezed my hand and met my eyes.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“One of these vans will have more cameras,” she said. “If we can steal them, then all Leo and Jackson have to do is destroy the one the guard is holding, and they won’t have any evidence to back up their claim that we’re underpopulated, which will mean there will be an official investigation.” She put her hand on her stomach. “That gives us time, too.”

I shook my head. “You can’t go over there, they’ll see you! They have guns, Raven!”

“Yes?”

“Do you know what a gun could do to you? Or your babies?”

She sighed. “It’ll be fine,” she said, and stood. I watched with wide eyes as she melted into the shape of a heavily pregnant big cat. She was a lion, too, but her hair was much darker, almost black, so she looked more like a jaguar than a lion. Her belly looked even more distended as a cat. I swallowed harshly and put my hand on her shoulder.

“Let me go first,” I said. “I’m just a human and I have thumbs.”

I wiggled them at her, and she snorted, but nodded. I understood her logic. She’d be able to get away faster as a cat, so wanted to steal things in that form. But the van would require human hands to open. I held my breath and crept around her, keeping my footsteps slow and as quiet as I could so I didn’t alert any of the guards.

As I cleared the hut, I looked towards Leo and Jackson, who were still standing and staring at Sylvester with open malice. Leo’s eyes briefly flashed to me, drawn by movement, and widened. Jackson saw me too, but was better at controlling himself.

I held up a hand, begging Leo not to give me away. He growled and turned his attention back to the short,



unwelcome man. Sylvester sighed and held his hands out in a good will gesture. “Boys, the law is clear. You don’t have enough in your population to justify the land you use. I’ll tell you what – I’m a fair man. We can sit down and negotiate which sections you’ll surrender to me, and we can forget the whole Government involvement.”

My eyes narrowed. That sounded like a shitty deal even to me, and I had barely any context for the whole situation. Jackson’s rage was palpable, sliding along my skin like sandpaper. I shivered and kept moving.

“So that you can just take more and more and we can’t rely on the treaty once you’ve got us in a chokehold? Fuck you, Frank, and fuck your contact and your reason.” I saw Jackson take a step forward, his teeth bared in threat. “Leave.”

I remembered them saying to Harry that the only reason they didn’t kill him was because bloodshed was forbidden during the mourning period. The thought that this man could drive them to act, and that it would be caught on camera, filled me with dread. Jackson was the less emotional one of the two, in my experience, and if he

was so close to shifting and attacking then there was very little hope for Leo to stop him.

If Raven and I could steal the memory cards and cameras, all Leo would have to do is snap the one recording and then there would be no evidence of any visitation. My hands were shaking and my palms were sweaty, and I prayed to whoever might be listening that no one noticed me.

I made it to the back of the closest van, and looked at Raven over my shoulder. She nodded, barely visible in the shadows of the hut. I bit my lower lip, sucked in a breath, and carefully opened the handle, pulling the door towards me.

That was when my luck ran out.

The door opened with a creaking groan and I flinched back at the loud sound. Immediately the two guards who were in front of the van shouted, reaching for their pistols. I held my hands up, and heard so many voices shouting, and then a deafening roar.

Then, a gunshot, so loud and close it made my ears ring.

After that came a deadly silence.

I sucked in a breath, my eyes wide. I patted myself down. The bullet hadn't hit me. I saw one of the guards lowering his weapon, his eyes wide behind his sunglasses, face pale. He had been aiming behind me.

Oh, God, no.

Horror crept up my spine as I turned around. Raven was on the floor. The bullet had entered her shoulder and her dark fur and the ground below her was stained with blood. "What the fuck did you do?" I yelled at the man, and rushed over to Raven. I pulled my shirt over my head and balled it up, pressing it to her shoulder. I heard rushing footsteps and saw Jolie, Kenna, and Scarlet running over.

A roar suddenly sounded, loud and powerful enough that it felt like the ground trembled. Jackson was halfway shifted when I looked up, tears streaming down my face. Sylvester was shouting to his men, as they all turned tail and ran towards the car.

"Leo!" I yelled. "Stop him!"

Leo's eyes met mine. I didn't know if he was going to, for a moment. He might just let Jackson kill them all. "Leo!" I cried again. I couldn't let Jackson get hurt or killed in a gunfight because I had tried to help with Raven. And we had no idea if that camera was livestreaming, or if they would catch a murder on camera and use it to come here and exterminate us all.

It all happened in a split second. Jackson shifted, Leo looked at me. He looked at Sylvester, who was white as a ghost and sprinting into the vans along with his entourage. Jackson became a lion, and lunged.

Leo shifted as well, and knocked him to the side.

He didn't do more than that – even his deference to me had limits in situations like this – but it was enough for Jackson to reach the vans as the doors closed. The drivers floored it, kicking up mud. I covered my face, wincing as small rocks and dirt whipped across my bare skin. Jolie had come and knelt by Raven's head, chittering quietly and urgently to the other lionesses.

"Keep the pressure up, that's good," Jolie urged me. She lifted Raven's body up and felt around for an exit wound, grunting and nodding to herself. "It left her,

that's good." She patted Raven's muzzle. She was still breathing, thank fucking God. "Raven, honey, I need you to shift back for me, okay? You'll heal faster."

Raven groaned, and I could have died from relief. Her tail flicked in aggravation like a petulant child asking to sleep for five more minutes.

"I know, honey, I know you're tired, but I need you to shift back," Jolie said, a little harder. I looked up as the vans squealed away and there was another roar. Jackson shredded the door of one of them, tearing it clean off, but the van was fast and pulled away quickly, disappearing out of sight. Jackson took off in a sprint after them.

"Jackson!" I yelled. I didn't think he heard me, because he didn't stop. Leo looked at me, and licked his muzzle. I could barely see through the tears, guilt threatening to open me up and swallow me whole. Stupid mistake. If we lost Raven, or her babies, I would never forgive myself.

"You have to go get him," I told Leo. "Keep him out of trouble."

The lion's ears twitched, and he let out a sound like an amused snort. Then he took off at a sprint in pursuit of Jackson and the vans.

I looked back down as Raven groaned again. Her shape was slowly changing, fur melting away, paws becoming fingers, shoulders broadening and growing less angular. Jolie smiled. "Atta girl, there we go, just a little more." Raven's mouth had changed enough to make human sounds of pain and distress. Her face was pale and her hair was soaked with sweat.

"Go get her water," I said. Kenna nodded and scurried away. I kept the pressure up on Raven's shoulder, and wrapped my shirt around the back too, where I could see the exit wound better without her black fur obscuring the view.

"Oh no," Scarlet whispered. I looked down to where she was kneeling by Raven's tail. Raven was on her side, as she'd collapsed, her knees snapping back the other way and her tail jerking in pain. There was blood on her thighs. Scarlet looked up, her eyes wide. "She's going into labor."

Oh shit. “Will they make it?” I asked, not even sure I wanted to know the answer.

“Of course they will,” Jolie replied, with a confidence I envied. “Scarlet, get some towels and clean linens, and a basket for the cubs. Savannah.” She gripped my shoulder. “It’s you and me.”

My eyes widened. I didn’t know the first thing about normal labor, let alone shifter babies! But Raven needed me, and it was my fault she had gotten hurt. My hands shook and I swallowed hard, but nodded. Jolie squeezed my shoulder again and moved away from Raven’s head. She pushed Raven’s top thigh out, so her knee touched the ground and she was halfway lying on her stomach.

“Just keep the pressure up, don’t let her bleed out,” Jolie commanded. “You need to keep her talking, okay?”

Shit, what the fuck was I supposed to say?

Come on, you can do this. You used to have to talk to people for a living, you can strike up idle chitchat.

“Raven,” I murmured. I pulled her head into my lap and stroked her hair. She groaned, expression twisting

up in pain, but at least she was responding. “Hey, come on now. You gotta stay awake so you can meet your babies. They’re coming.”

Raven’s lashes fluttered. “Too... Too soon,” she said, sounding distressed.

“No, they’re just impatient, it’s fine,” I said, forcing my voice not to shake. My hands, not so much. It was a wonder I could still keep a hold of my shirt and keep pressure up. I sucked in a breath, thinking of anything else to say. “Tell me about Seattle. I’ve never been. What’s it like there?”

Her lips twitched. “Green,” she sighed. Then, “Cold.” I huffed a weak laugh. “Rains a lot. Coffee everywhere. I -.” Her words cut off in a hoarse cry, one hand moving half-limp to her stomach. The contractions had started. Kenna appeared in that moment with some water, and Scarlet had a basket, towels, and linens as Jolie had asked for. Together the lionesses lifted Raven’s hips and legs off the ground for long enough to put a towel beneath her.

When I looked up, the rest of the lions were watching on, half of them guarding the road, the other



half watching with nervous rumbles and twitching tails. My fault, this was all my fucking fault. If something happened to any of them I would never forgive myself.

“Keep her talking,” Jolie commanded, as she doused another towel in water, and Scarlet arranged the linens in the basket for a nest for the cubs.

Right. Talking. “Do you like it better there?” I asked. “I never grew up in cold places. The desert gets cold at night, I guess, but it’s not the same.”

Raven hummed tiredly.

“Come on, Raven, stay with me, please,” I whispered. Raven moaned again, her body convulsing. The scent of blood was overwhelming even to me. I kept petting her hair, kept her talking as much as I could, until she started whimpering in earnest.

“It’s time,” Jolie whispered, her expression grave. She didn’t seem as confident as she had mere minutes ago and I tried not to think about what that might mean. She put a hand on Raven’s thigh. “Alright honey, I know you’re in a lot of pain, but you need to start pushing.”

“No,” Raven complained. “It’s -. It’s too soon.”

“You’re not gonna keep those cubs in there any longer, honey. Start pushing and then we can get you something for that shoulder, alright?”

Raven whimpered, face twisted up in agony, and started to sob.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### JACKSON

I had never felt rage like this.

Not only that these pieces of filth had come here to threaten my pride, one of them had shot at my mate, and hurt my sister. The scent of Raven's blood stung my nose, and I ran so fast my paws were a blur on the sunbaked desert as I chased the vans. They were putting more and more distance between us, but I didn't care. I'd chase them all the way to the Mexican border if I had to.

I heard Leo calling for me. Good, two of us was better than one. This was what the alphas were meant to do. These men had come onto our land and hurt one of our own, they wanted to take away our home, and I wasn't going to let that stand.

Leo caught up with me, eventually. His coat was almost bronze with sweat, and I knew I wasn't doing much better. My lungs ached from running so much and my muscles burned. The vans were but distant dots on the horizon, swallowed by the heat haze.

Leo rumbled at me, begging me to slow down, but I shook my head. I refused to take my eyes off the vans. I refused to let them get away.

I could see the lion rest stop coming up on us when Leo finally lunged at me, sending us sprawling across the hot desert, kicking up sand and loose rocks. I snarled at him, baring my teeth, my hackles raised and puffed up at the threat. What the fuck was he doing? They were going to get away.

Leo panted against the ground, saliva dripping from his open mouth. He fixed me with a pleading gaze, and put himself between me and the view of the vans. I snarled, and tried to circle him, but he kept putting himself in my way. The damn cub was going to get bitten if he didn't back down.

Inside my head was a mess of yowling. It was like the upper and lower levels separating my human and animal mind had collapsed and merged into one. I couldn't tell where the animal rage ended and the human rage started, it was all just a haze of red.

Leo put himself in front of me again and I swiped at him, aiming for his flank. My savage claws dug in and

shed blood, and he yelped, snarling at me. I didn't want to hurt him, but I couldn't let them get away.

Leo dodged my next attack, his flank bloodied and dripping onto the ground. He rumbled at me, another plea for me to stop, to calm down, but I couldn't. I couldn't think of anything but avenging my sister, and my pride, and tearing Sylvester Frank limb from fucking limb.

Why wouldn't he get out of my way? I snarled at him, and Leo finally shifted forms so that he could speak to me. As a human he wouldn't be able to outrun me, I could easily circle him and keep chasing, but the part of me that knew him as my best friend made me hesitate.

"Jackson," he said. His voice was hoarse and weak, and he clutched his injured side, wincing in pain. "Jackson, you have to come back. Stop."

I glared, and moved past him, easily knocking him aside. Leo fell to the ground, too weak to resist me. He howled in pain and the sound of it caused a lance to go through my own heart. I hated the sound of him in pain, even when we play fought I never tried to hurt him.

My ears flattened to my skull, desire to chase and avenge warring with the need to take care of my best friend and fellow alpha. We did everything together, and if he wasn't with me on this, I didn't want to think about what that meant.

Blood welled up and dripped through his fingers as he got to his knees and looked at me, sweating and flushed and breathing hard. "Jackson, we have to go back," he begged. "Please. Savannah, Raven, they need us."

The mention of our mate and my sister made my chest tighten. But didn't he understand? Those men had hurt Raven.

Leo tried to get to his feet, and collapsed onto his knees again with another wince. "We can't pile up deaths," he said quietly. I growled, tail twitching in aggravation. I knew that, I knew the fucking law. It was why blood shed was forbidden during the mourning period. There was already death, why add to the tragedy? It also worked to dissuade fights for succession to be to the death.

I swallowed. I had already broken that law by hurting Leo.

Leo looked up at me, growing pale as he kept losing blood. “Jackson, please,” he whispered. “I know you’re angry. I’m pissed too. But I can’t lose you.” He reached out and touched my muzzle with his clean, trembling hand. “Savannah, Raven, they can’t lose you. The humans will kill you, or put you in a fucking zoo with one of those collars that stops you from changing. I won’t let that happen, but I can’t rule the pride alone either. I need you. Please, come back home.”

My ears flattened again, this time with indecision. I looked over my shoulder to where even the dust clouds for the vans had vanished. There were still tracks, I could still follow the scent of gunpowder and silver until I found out where they had gone, but Leo was right – they could call in additional police, and we were already in trouble after attacking Harry. I wasn’t going to make it out without risking my life, and potentially the lives and treaty of everyone on the pride lands.

Leo shuddered, and pulled his hand away from his side. The claw marks looked much worse on human skin.

He would need stitches. I whined softly, and approached him, licking at his wounds in apology. He hissed and fisted a hand in my mane.

“Please, just come back with me,” he said. “Savannah is probably scared shitless, and we can’t leave the queens on their own.”

No, we couldn’t. Leo wasn’t going to return without me, I knew that.

Finally, I sighed, and nodded. Leo managed a weak smile and rubbed his cheek against my forehead, before he forced himself to change slowly back into his lion shape. The bleeding was slower, our shifting abilities meaning we could halfway knit our skin back together. He was still injured and bleeding, but not as badly.

I met his eyes and nuzzled him again, licking his shoulder apologetically.

He nudged his head against mine, his tail curling and flopping over my back before it fell back into a neutral position. He nudged my shoulder as he so often had, and I nodded, letting him herd me back towards the pride lands.



We could avenge this attack another day. I would make sure of it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### SAVANNAH

Raven was still crying, but silently now. There were three tiny, pink cubs squealing and twitching in the nest, covered with small blankets so that they could stay warm. They were blind and making high-pitched, adorable noises.

“You’re doing wonderfully, Raven,” Jolie encouraged, rubbing her swollen stomach. Raven whined, her body jerking with another contraction, and a fourth cub was pushed out, a wriggling crying mess of black fur covered in body fluids.

Of the four cubs so far, three of them were black like their mother. One of them was golden and looked more like a normal lion cub. All of them were female.

“Is that normal?” I whispered, when Jolie declared the fourth one a female as well.

She smiled, but didn’t look away from Raven for long. “Generally the ratio of male to female cubs is about three to one,” she replied. “We should get a few males,

but it's no trouble if we don't." I nodded, accepting that. I supposed it made sense – lionesses did more for the pack in general, and too many males could mean fights for dominance. I got the impression that Leo and Jackson were not normal, in how close they were.

My heart ached, thinking of my boys. I hoped they were okay. I hoped Leo had caught up with Jackson and managed to persuade him to come home. The thought that Jackson had caught up with the vans, that Leo might have been too late, that one or both of them could be injured, or taken, or dead...

No, I refused to let myself think that way. They were fine. They were going to come back to me.

Raven groaned, rubbing her sweaty cheek against my thigh as she had another contraction. Jolie hummed. "One more big push, honey, come on." Raven whimpered, eyes clenched tightly shut, and grit her teeth. Her shoulder wasn't bleeding as badly, but she was so pale, I hoped it wasn't because she was running out of blood to lose. I was sure the lions here didn't have anything that could handle a blood transfusion.

Another little cry drew my attention, and I smiled weakly as Jolie pulled another cub from between Raven's legs. The birthing process itself seemed relatively easy and painless, which soothed my own fears. This cub was black too. "A boy," Jolie declared, wiping the cub's face and wriggling body before settling him with his sisters.

Raven let out another weak sound, trembling. She flopped her hand on her stomach, and her eyes fluttered open. "I think..." She bit her lower lip, and I could cry at the sound of her voice. "I think there's...no more."

"Are the contractions over?" Jolie asked.

Raven paused. She hummed. "I...think so," she said, and sighed in relief.

"Good," Jolie murmured. She gathered the nest of cubs to her and covered them with another blanket. I moved to one side as Jolie prowled up to Raven's head and pushed her sweaty hair back from her face. "You did such a good job, mama." Raven's lips twitched in a tired smile. "Can you sit up? We need to get some water and food in you."

Raven groaned, closing her eyes again, her lips turning down in a petulant pout. "Tired."

“I know, honey, but you need your strength and I need to stitch up that bullet wound.”

Those words were answered with another aggravated noise, but Raven pushed her hand to the blood-stained ground, and Jolie and I helped her upright. Kenna offered her a bottle of water, which she took, nursing it. The sun had set enough that the day was getting cooler, and Raven had stopped sweating from pain.

Scarlett offered her bread and jerky, which she tore into ravenously. Jolie left and returned a moment later with a sewing kit. She took one of the towels that had been unused in the birth and pushed my hand away, holding my bloody shirt, so she could clean the wounds before she began to sew Raven up.

I was so weak with relief that I could only sit and stare for a while, unable to believe it. Raven was made of fucking iron, she was so strong. She had been shot and gone into labor and was still alert and able to eat. I could only hope I was half that capable when it came my time to give birth.

As though summoned by my thoughts, the lionesses guarding the gate rumbled, and I looked up, my eyes widening when I saw Leo and Jackson returning. I let out a cry of relief, stumbling to my feet and running to them.

I froze a few feet away, when I saw the blood on Leo's flank and Jackson's muzzle. "Oh my God, what happened?" I asked, rushing to Leo's side. I knelt down as he shifted back to a human form so he could talk to me. Jackson followed suit a moment later.

Leo gave me a weak, tired smile. "I got him back," he said.

"Did -. Did Frank do this to you?" I demanded. The wounds looked decidedly claw shaped. When I looked to Jackson, he had blood on his hands too. My eyes widened as I realized Jackson must have been the one to attack Leo. I glared at him. "What the fuck were you thinking? You could have killed him!"

Jackson's face was twisted into a terrible mix of guilt, horror, and anger. I had never seen him look like that, and especially not at me. He wouldn't meet my eyes. "I know," he whispered.

“You know? What the Hell, Jackson?”

“I was angry, I wasn’t thinking straight,” he replied. He sounded so upset, like his actions caused him physical pain. “Forgive me, Savannah.”

Leo touched my shoulder. “It’s okay,” he assured me. “It’s not as bad as it looks, I promise.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe that Jackson would hurt his own friend like that.

“You could have died,” Jackson said quietly. “They could have killed you. And Raven. I was angry. When Leo tried to stop me chasing them, I reacted.” He wouldn’t meet my eyes. There were tears shining in his own. His anguish made my heart ache, cutting through and chilling the anger and fear.

I swallowed, and looked to Raven and Jolie to see that Jolie had finished stitching her up and was wrapping a piece of linen around her shoulder. I supposed I could understand, in a way. Raven had gotten hurt because of me. If she had died, I wasn’t sure anyone could stop me wanting to take my revenge.

I stood, and grabbed the sewing kit, returning to Leo's side. "These probably won't be pretty, but they'll stop the bleeding," I said.

Leo smiled at me. He was pale, but lucid, which I took to be a good sign. He rested his head on my shoulder as I pulled out a fresh needle and thread, tied a knot at the end, and began sewing him up. It definitely wasn't the work of someone skilled at this, but my only priority was getting his skin back together. Leo took it without complaint. When I finished, I cleaned him up and got another piece of linen, binding his chest firmly but so that he could still move.

"You probably won't be able to shift with this on," I hazarded.

He nodded, accepting that. "I'll live."

I swallowed, tears welling in my eyes again. I threw my arms around his neck, careful not to knock his side, and hugged him as tightly as I could. He purred quietly, embracing me back. Jackson had been quiet the whole time, watching us. When I pulled away and looked at him, he still couldn't meet my eyes.



I sighed. “Jackson,” I whispered. He looked at me. I crawled over to him and cupped his cheek. I drew him down to kiss his forehead. “Don’t do anything that stupid again, you hear me? I was so worried for you and I’m not going gray before my time.”

He smiled weakly. “I swear.”

“Good.” I had been so worried, but having my boys back with me, one of them injured but both of them alive and safe, was a huge balm on my frayed nerves. Raven was going to be okay, Jackson and Leo were going to be okay.

We would live to fight another day.

A small cry from the basket drew Leo and Jackson’s attention. I hid a smile, thinking of cats with their big pupils and perked up ears. “There are five,” I told them. “Four girls and a boy.”

Leo grinned. Jackson looked awed. He stood and approached Raven, kneeling by her side. She had her basket of nesting cubs in her lap, the blanket peeled back so she could admire them, and they could learn each other’s scents.

I took Leo's hand and led him over as well, sitting down.

"They're beautiful, Raven," Jackson whispered, gently rubbing his cheek against her temple. She purred, a soft trill, and smiled widely. She looked exhausted, and still pale, but like she was going to be okay.

My own guilt welled up in me and I swallowed. "I'm so sorry," I said, drawing her gaze. "I should have been more careful with the door. I wasn't thinking."

Raven smiled. "If I had gone alone, that bullet would have probably killed me, or one of my children," she replied. "There is nothing to forgive, Savannah. You stayed with me and helped me and Jolie. Who knows what could have happened if you hadn't been here?"

I didn't want to think about it.

I looked down at the cubs, a strangely warm feeling in my chest when I thought about how, in a few months, I would be the one with a litter like this. I wondered which of them would look like Leo, which like Jackson, or if all of them would take after one or the other. Maybe my own genetics would have a part to play, I wasn't sure.

Leo leaned against me, purring softly. I hoped he could smell how happy and relieved I was. I rested a hand on his thigh as, one by one, Raven lifted the cubs to her brother so he could learn their scents as well. Jackson then passed them to Leo, since they were both the alpha and the children would need to know their scents.

I was surprised when, after Leo was done with the first, the only golden female, he offered her to me.

“I -.” I blinked at him in shock.

“You’re the alpha mate, Savannah,” Leo explained. His voice was still hoarse, it sounded like he had been gargling sand. Which, given how far and fast they must have run, and fought, he might have actually inhaled some. “They need to know your scent, too.”

I swallowed, and took the cub with hands that I did my best not to let shake. She was almost impossibly soft in my hands, so tiny she fit in the palm of a single one. She squealed, twitching towards me, and I felt tears well up in my eyes.

“Do you have names for them?” I asked, as I offered the cubs my wrist, one by one, before returning them to

their mother.

Raven hummed. “I think I will name the boy after Alex,” she said. Jackson and Leo smiled. “I haven’t decided on the girls yet, since I didn’t know how many to expect.”

I nodded. I couldn’t wait to hear what she decided. I couldn’t wait to think of some of my own.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### SAVANNAH

The period of mourning ended with no sign of Frank returning, but none of us allowed that to lower our guards. Leo and Jackson patrolled the pride lands border every morning to check for fresh tracks or scents, and one of the lionesses took the car every other day to go to town for supplies.

I finally managed to get my hand on a solar powered battery pack, and plugged my phone in. I had no less than twenty-six texts from Grace and upwards of seventy missed calls. Jesus, she was probably worried sick.

I called her, prepared to get an earful. Leo was basking beside me, Raven with her little cubs on the other, soaking in the sun as she nursed them one by one. Jackson had taken Kenna on patrol with him since Leo had woken up feeling sore this morning, his injuries too itchy for him to be comfortable. He had healed remarkably quickly, and we had taken the stitches out

last night, though the claw marks were still a bright purple-red and I was wary of tearing them.

Jackson had a lot of guilt about that, still. Internally, I thought Leo was playing it up sometimes as an excuse to be lazy or hang out with me more. He certainly didn't seem to be in any pain when it was time for us to go to bed. I didn't mind. Having a lion as a pillow was one of those awesome perks of life I had never seen coming, but now that I had it, I didn't want to let it go.

“Savannah Maria Kline, you had better have a damn good reason for not calling me before now!” Grace said after the third ring. It was loud enough for Leo's ear to twitch in my direction. He laughed, rough and guttural, his cat mouth stretching in a smile. I rolled my eyes and tugged on his ear.

“Don't you middle name me,” I replied. “And...I'm sorry. My phone died and I only just got a charging thing. Since, you know, I'm living with the lions now. We don't exactly have electricity.”

Grace clearly wasn't happy with that answer, but she let it go. “So, what's, ah, the situation? Do I need to

come pick you up or?”

“No, you don’t,” I assured her. “I’m going to stay with them for a while. Um, some shit went down with Harry and I feel like I’m a lot safer here.”

“Yeah, Harry,” she hissed.

I frowned. “Did something happen?”

“You would know something did if you had checked one of the thousand text messages or voicemails I left,” Grace snapped without much heat. I bit my lower lip, tipping my head back to rest against Leo’s warm shoulder. He purred at me, tail flicking around to brush my thigh. “The guy went fucking postal. Started showing up to the club and starting fights, making a scene, you know. Then he disappeared for a while, and then he showed up at my apartment.”

I sat up straight, my eyes wide. “What?” I demanded. “I swear, Grace, I didn’t tell him where you lived.”

“I think he followed me home, honestly,” Grace muttered. I frowned, and heard Leo rumble quietly behind me. When I looked at him, his eyes were

narrowed, muzzle wrinkled in anger. “But anyway, the long and short of it is I’m glad you’re alive, don’t you ever go that long without calling me, and um...if I happened to need a place to crash for a few days is there a spare, I don’t know, hut with my name on it?”

My eyes widened. She must be really freaked out if she was asking to come live here, even if she didn’t want to show it. Before I could answer, Leo licked my shoulder, drawing my attention. He nodded immediately, and I smiled, overcome with affection at how easily and happily he accepted my friend. But of course he would, and so would Jackson. They protect their queens.

“Of course you can,” I said. “Just call me. I promise to keep my phone charged.”

“Alright, thanks,” Grace replied. “I have to go, but I’ll text you later, okay?”

“Okay. Be safe,” I murmured. Grace hung up, and Leo shifted his weight. I sat forward as he stretched and molded himself back into his human shape, and turned to face me. “What is it?” I asked, touching his face.



He smiled and nuzzled my wrist, before he nodded to my phone. “I can give you David’s number for her.” I frowned – David, oh, the one who lived in Las Vegas that would have taken me home had I decided to go. “And his office address. If she needed to get away quickly, she could call him, tell him I sent her. He’ll bring her here.”

I handed my phone over without hesitation. “Leo, that seriously -. You have no idea how much it means to me that you’re helping my friend out.”

He smiled at me, and drew me in for a kiss. “Savannah, you’re my mate,” he murmured. I swallowed, blushing lightly. “You have to know by now that there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.” He grinned, and gestured to his side. “I let Jackson maul me for you, after all.”

I winced, my gaze dropping. The cuts were red lines splitting deep purple bruising. I didn’t like thinking about that day, or any of the drama around it. The only good thing to come out of it was Raven’s babies, who were absolutely adorable if I did say so myself. I hoped my kids were half that cute.

\*

I made sure to keep my phone charged, as the days passed with no update from Grace. At least, nothing telling me she was coming. Nothing from David or the zoning office, either. It felt like we were all holding our breath, walking on eggshells around our daily lives.

I settled into a routine. I was used to staying up late and sleeping in, so I usually woke up in time for the boys to already be out on patrol, once Leo was healed enough to rejoin Jackson. I would go and help Raven with her cubs, and then join the other lionesses for lunch preparation. By that point Leo and Jackson were normally back, and we would bask and talk and socialize until dinner, after which I would get taken back to the hut and reminded just how awesome it was to have two sexy, attentive, adoring lion shifters as my mate.

Honestly, I needed to sleep in. My legs were jelly before noon.

Sometimes the afternoons were spent with Jolie and the older women, learning the plants that grew on the pride lands that were safe to eat, and how to prepare them, what they were used for. I was learning a lot, and had to think with a laugh that it was a lot like

memorizing a menu. Every dish had its own set of ingredients, and I had always had a good memory. It settled me to know that I wasn't going to be completely lost if I was in the forest alone.

Two weeks passed before I woke up with the worst nausea I'd ever felt in my life, like the top ten worst hangovers combined. I tore myself out of my boys' arms and rushed from the hut, a hand over my mouth until I made it to the perimeter fence and emptied my entire stomach onto the other side of it. I heaved, gagging and spitting more bile, and I heard heavy footsteps rushing up behind me.

Jackson put a hand in my hair, pulling it back from my face, as Leo ran a hand up and down my back. "Savannah, are you okay?" he asked urgently. "Are you sick?"

I had to roll my eyes. I had already missed my period, so the answer seemed obvious. "Well, given that you guys have been breeding me multiple times a day for the last two and a half weeks. I'm guessing I have a parasite or seven," I replied. I spat another mouthful of saliva onto the ground and straightened. My stomach

was still a little queasy, but I didn't feel like I was going to throw up again.

Leo looked confused, but Jackson's lips were spreading out in a slow, hopeful smile. "You think so?" he asked quietly, stepping close and putting a hand on my stomach. Leo's expression cleared, and his eyes sparked with joy. He purred and nuzzled my hair as I laughed, and nodded.

"Yeah, pretty sure," I replied. "The thing that usually happens when there are no babies hasn't happened, and it's not like you haven't been trying."

Honestly, I'd probably gotten pregnant the very first night, but the sex was amazing and I wasn't going to say 'No' to two men giving me the best, most intense orgasms of my life. I thought I could feel the tiniest little swelling, something I would normally pass off as bloating, but now that I thought about it, given what I'd learned from Raven about how short shifter pregnancies were, it wasn't impossible that I was already starting to show.

Jackson kissed me on the forehead, his entire body practically vibrating with prideful joy. Neither of them

seemed to have words, but that was okay. I was feeling pretty emotional myself. I was happy, though. I agreed to get pregnant, and since that time I honestly could say that I'd never felt happier or safer than in their arms.

I liked being here, where I was both free and held so close and gently. I couldn't think of a single other place I'd rather be.

I yawned. It was still early, and it was cold, and I was naked because there was really no point putting clothes on when it was time to go to bed. "I'm going to go back to sleep," I told them. "I guess it's time for you guys to go patrol?"

Jackson looked torn. He rumbled quietly, nuzzling me again. "I'd rather remain with you," he confessed, his hand still reverent and warm on my stomach. "Knowing you're carrying our cubs, I want to show you how much you mean to us."

"Let us make you feel good," Leo added, kissing the words beneath my ear and making me shiver.

I bit my lip to hide my smile. I wasn't going to say 'No' to that, either.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### SAVANNAH

Two weeks after that, I woke up to see a message from Grace. I smiled, and went outside to find Jackson and Leo coming back from patrol. “Grace is coming,” I told them. They tilted their heads at me. “My friend, the one who was with me the first night we met.” I looked at Leo. “Who said she was having trouble with Harry.”

Leo’s eyes darkened, and he nodded. Jackson’s upper lip curled back. “Harry?” he repeated.

“Apparently he’s been following her,” I said. “We gave her David’s number and she’s going to meet him today and come stay here for a while.”

Jackson nodded. “She is welcome here,” he said. I smiled, and kissed him, making him purr. I was a lot bigger, only the loosest of my clothes still fit me and even they were getting tight. I would have to go native permanently soon.

I doubted Grace would care. I was pretty sure she was incapable of judgement.

\*

Grace arrived at dusk, as we were preparing the evening meal. I heard the car approaching, though it parked out of sight, and grinned when I saw Grace and the lion who I assumed was David coming over the hill. Grace had a suitcase and duffle bag with her, and was dressed in a pair of sweatpants, tennis shoes, and a big hoodie to ward off the coming cold. David was a smaller lion than Leo and Jackson, more like a runner's body than their big, muscular frames.

I raced over to her and pulled her into a tight hug. She hugged me back, and then held me at arm's length. "Um, what the fuck?" she asked, staring at my rounded stomach.

Oh. Right. I hadn't actually told her about the whole 'mating to and breeding for the two alpha lions' thing. I laughed sheepishly, rubbing a hand over the back of my neck. I felt Leo and Jackson approaching behind me, their heat and scents as familiar to me as my own body now. Grace's eyes widened, and her arms dropped.

"Alphas," David greeted, bowing his head.

“David,” Leo replied with a nod of his own. The three lions exchanged affectionate nudges.

“Grace,” I said, “this is Leo, and Jackson.” I gestured to each of them in turn. “I’m, um, kind of their mate and having their babies.”

Grace blinked at me. “What do you mean kind of?” she asked.

“Kind of as in not really kind of,” I replied. I shook my head and smiled. “It’s kind of a long story. Come on, we’ll find you a place to put your stuff. Some of the huts are still free.”

Leo kissed my hair. “The one by Raven,” he told me, I nodded, and took Grace’s hand, leading her away.

“Okay, you’ve been holding out on me,” Grace said, her eyes wide with shock and wonder as she looked around us. We passed by the bonfire with more lions gathered, and I waved at them. Grace’s eyes widened when she saw Raven and the cubs.

“Well,” I began, “there’s a lot to catch you up on, I guess.” I found the hut Leo had mentioned and opened it. It was slightly musty inside, but warm despite the late



hour. Grace set her stuff down and gave me an expectant look. “So, I ended up here, as you know. Basically their last alpha had just died, and Leo and Jackson were set to take over. When they learned about Harry, they said they would protect me if I wanted to stay. I decided to, for a while, and one thing led to another...”

I shrugged.

“You’re fucking two lion shifters,” Grace said. She rolled her eyes. “Only you, Savannah, I swear to God.”

“Well, there’s also this thing where apparently they need to have a certain population to be able to keep the rights to this land. So they told me about that, and I agreed to help them out.” I winced, realizing how ridiculous that sounded. “I’m oversimplifying it, but basically they need to have a lot of kids really fast.”

Grace’s brows rose, and then she frowned. “Um... I’m not going to have to do that, am I?” she asked nervously.

“Oh, God, no,” I said, shaking my head. “They are one hundred percent about choice, here. And really into treating their females well. It’s kind of awesome.” I

sighed. “Much better than my experience with human men.”

“Savannah, you’ve been here for like a month. How the Hell are you that pregnant?”

“Lions mature quickly,” I said, shrugging. “And they come out as, you know, baby lions. So it doesn’t take as long, I guess.”

Grace pressed her lips together, and folded her arms across her chest. She looked up to the hole in the ceiling where smoke from a fire could escape, and took a big, deep breath in. “Okay. Give me a second,” she said. I nodded. It was a lot to take in, especially in the span of a few minutes. Grace rocked back on her heels, and then she nodded to herself, and met my eyes. “Are you happy?”

I smiled. “Yeah, I really am,” I replied. “I know it’s been crazy, and I’m sorry I haven’t been keeping you up to date. A lot of it happened really fast, but Leo and Jackson are...amazing.” I sighed, and shook my head. “They really care about me, you know? And I’m... I’m not caged, here. I think I could literally get away with murder if I wanted to.”

Grace huffed a laugh. “I have a few names for that list, if you’re interested.”

I grinned.

“Well, I’m happy for you, and as long as I’m not going to be expected to do the same, I could hang for a while,” she said. “Just let me know if you need me to kick anyone’s ass.”

My smile turned watery, as I was overcome with a wave of emotion. I had really missed her, and these hormones weren’t making me any less hysterical. I pulled her into a hug. “I really missed you,” I said. She squeezed me back tightly.

“I missed you too.”

“Are you hungry? We were just about to have dinner.”

“Sure, food sounds awesome right now,” Grace said, and grinned. I took her hand and led her back outside, towards the bonfire. Leo, Jackson, and David were all speaking to each other, and Jackson saw us first. He moved to the floor so we would both have room to sit,

and I settled with an awkward wince and a sigh, and pet his hand in thanks.

Just like Raven had with me, my first night, Kenna was the one to fetch meat from the fire for me and Grace. Grace ate much slower than I did, like she was too shellshocked and curious to pay attention to her food.

Jackson nuzzled my knee, catching my attention. “David says that Frank is trying to bring our population issue to the court,” he said.

I glowered at nothing in particular, aggravated at the reminder of that man. “Great,” I hissed. “I’m surprised he’s willing to come back. There’s no mourning period to protect him this time.”

Jackson’s eyes shone with humor. “It actually works in our favor. Courts around pack territories like this are slow. We likely have a few months before he actually has the means to come back.” His eyes dropped to my stomach, and I understood what he didn’t say. I would already have given birth by that point, and assuming Kenna and Scarlet were willing to stick around, with Raven, we might be able to scrape just enough to get

them off our backs. One more litter from me and it would no longer be an issue.

I smiled, and bent down to kiss the top of his head. “I’m sure we’ll have readily solved the issue by then,” I replied. Jackson’s eyes darkened, pupils flaring out wide, and he purred loudly in response. I shivered, biting my lower lip, and knew he could probably smell how hearing his purr affected me. Damn pregnancy hormones. They made me just as insatiable as my boys.

Jackson looked to Grace, and gave her a nod of greeting. “It’s nice to officially make your acquaintance, Grace,” he said, offering his hand. She shook it mutely. “I’m sorry for the way we met before, and if we scared you.”

Grace laughed nervously. “Takes more than a big cat to scare me,” she said with more bluster than real truth. Leo and I shared a smirk over Jackson’s head. “I just appreciate your offer to let me stay here for a while. It’s real chivalrous of you.”

“Of course,” Jackson said. “We would be awful alphas if we turned away a queen in need.”

I smiled, petting him again. Grace nudged me. “Queen?” she whispered.

“Female cats,” I explained. “They call them queens here. I quite like it.”

“I do too,” Grace said with a sly grin. “Sounds right, you know?” She tossed her hair, and I laughed again. I hadn’t realized just how much I had missed her until I had her with me again. I hoped she decided to stay for a while. That she wanted to stay for a while.

A sudden sound of screeching tires stopped the conversations. Every lion around the fire went completely still and quiet. Jackson growled, sniffing the air. Leo pushed himself to his feet immediately. Grace’s eyes widened as they passed her, with Jolie, Kenna, Scarlet, David, and several other lionesses hot on their heels.

“What is it?” I asked Raven. She hadn’t moved, since she had cubs to take care of, but she was growling.

Her nose wrinkled and she bared her sharp teeth. “Harry,” she hissed.

My heart stopped, and I saw Grace had gone completely white. “How the fuck did he -?” She shook her head and covered her mouth. “I knew he was following me. That fucking bastard!”

The first emotion I felt, hearing that, was rage. Harry had terrorized me for far too long, and I was finally free of him. I was not going to let him do the same thing to Grace. I pushed myself to my feet, set my plate down, and marched after the lions, into the darkness and towards the gate.

“Savannah, what are you doing?” Grace hissed, jogging to catch up.

“The mourning period is over,” I told her. “The last time he showed up here, Leo and Jackson didn’t kill him because they don’t allow bloodshed during that time. But it’s not that time anymore, and I swear to God I’m going to see the bastard suffer if it’s the last thing I do.”

Grace’s eyes widened. “You’re going to -. They’re going to kill him?”

“Maybe, if I don’t stop them,” I said. “Jury’s out on if I will. Pretty much every lion knows enough about what he did to me that they hate his guts.” I met her eyes.

“I really can’t stress how much they revere women here, Grace. Raising a hand to a queen is basically a death sentence. I stopped them killing him once but I don’t think, realistically, I want to do it again.”

I sighed. “It depends on what he does, I guess.”

Grace was clearly terrified. I was too, but I was determined not to show it. One way or another, this was going to end tonight.

I climbed the small hill past the gate, and my eyes widened when I saw Leo, Jackson, and the rest of the pride gathered in the darkness. A few yards away rumbled the snarl of a great engine. The air stank of diesel and I covered my mouth with my hand, the smell making me nauseous.

There were bright flood lights sitting on a Humvee, casting the space into bright white light. There were also police cars, their red and blue lights flashing on top of the cars. I watched with slowly mounting horror as a man stepped out into the flood lights and gave Leo and Jackson a nasty grin.

It was definitely Harry. And this time he apparently brought better backup than Rick.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### SAVANNAH

“Holy shit,” Grace gasped beside me, her eyes wide. Even outside of the flood lights, which barely touched us, she was pale and visibly shaking with fear. “What the actual fuck?”

“Last time it was just him and a friend,” I replied. “Guess he wanted to bring out the big guns, this time.”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to watch, and observe, for now. I bit my lower lip and wished I had thought to bring some kind of weapon.

I could see why Harry had waited a month to make his move. His arm was still in a cast, but it was thinner and more lightweight, and he didn't need crutches although he still walked with a slight limp. As I watched, two police officers exited their vehicles and came to stand beside him. I had no idea who or what was in the Humvee, Harry knew a lot of people who owned vehicles like that innocently, but my heart rabbited in my chest at the idea of there being stockpiles of weapons or some

crazed paramilitary or something in there that would pose a real danger to my boys and the pride.

I considered the scene. There were three cars and three visible men. Maybe Harry assumed a police force would be enough to swing things his way, even against a dozen adult lions who hated his guts and threatened to kill him last time. I wasn't going to rule out the possibility of reinforcement.

The flood lights were bright and focused forward, meaning that there wasn't actually that much space of the trees illuminated. My last attempt at sneaking hadn't gone well, and now it wasn't even a lioness with me, it was Grace, and she was just as soft and squishy and human as I was.

I knew she wasn't going to let me leave her behind, though. I sighed. "I wish I had a weapon," I whispered.

Grace looked at me, and then reached into her pocket and pulled out a small switchblade. My eyes widened as she unlocked it with a click, and handed it to me. "Um... Dare I ask?"

"I told you I thought Harry was following me," she replied, her voice flat.

I swallowed, and nodded. Right. Grace was a lot more pragmatic about that kind of thing than I was, I guess. Part of me wanted to ask where the Hell she hid it when she went to work, before I remembered she notoriously wore bras a cup size too big so she could pad them or carry things in them. The idea of my best friend carrying around a knife in her bra was both hilarious and alarming.

I gripped the handle of the blade. I had no idea how to use it but, you know, stick 'em with the pointy end. If it came down to it.

I met her eyes again and jerked my head to one side, down part of the hill where the light didn't touch. The cats would be able to see us well enough unless the flood lights messed with their vision and we were truly hidden from view, which would honestly work even better in my favor. I didn't need one of them seeing me and giving it away.

I could hear Harry talking, but it wasn't until Grace and I crept down to the bottom of the hill that I could hear what he was saying.

“Officers.” He pointed at Leo and Jackson. “These are the two animals that attacked me in Vegas, during a small dispute with my girlfriend.”

“A small dispute?” Leo scoffed. “We saw what you did to her.”

“She was bruised and cut up because of you,” Jackson added. There was a rumble of agreement from the other cats, and I felt another burst of affection for all of them. They really had taken me in and treated me like their own. Defended me like their own.

“It’s true,” I heard Kenna say, Scarlet nodding beside her. “We traveled with her from the pit stop to here, Officers. She had a bad ankle, scraped knees, her cheek was swollen, and her wrist was bruised, her palms damaged.”

“That all happened during the fight!” Harry said. “I didn’t lay a hand on her, not a single hand.” Leo snarled in anger at the lie. I had to take a moment myself, glaring at Harry from the shadows. How fucking dare he! He was not going to claim that, what, I fell? “She was perfectly fine when you attacked me. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re the ones who hurt her and tried to pin it on me.”

I froze in place, my breath leaving me at once. Was he fucking serious? The thought of Leo or Jackson hurting me was so ridiculous, the accusation so obviously false, I felt like I could start spitting venom. I looked at Harry and saw, not the man who had terrorized me daily, but a little rat. He was so scared of the kitties that he had brought in the big dogs and now was telling them lies to try and make himself look better.

I was so angry I felt like I could barely see. If I thought I could get away with it, I would go up and slap him just for trying to sell that lie to the police.

And it was a serious accusation. If Leo and Jackson were found guilty of assaulting a human, and kidnapping and abusing another, they could face some serious time. I had learned more about the various treatise and laws that governed the lion land and the human world, how one side could incite violence against the other, what charges would constitute grounds for trespassing and disbanding an existing pride.

Kidnapping and assault was one of them.

The two policemen frowned at each other. One of them was large and burly, built like a bear, with a

complexion that suggested Native American descent. It was hard to see his features since he was backlit by the flood lights and wearing a hat. The other one was a smaller white man, a rookie from the look of it. He could barely be older than I was.

“Mister Wilkinson, these are very serious accusations,” the first one said. “You told us that this was a kidnapping of Savannah Kline and Grace Tyson. Do you see either of them here?”

Grace’s eyes narrowed. “That son of a bitch.”

Harry frowned. “No, but they’re not just going to parade out the women they kidnapped to police!” He scanned the crowd, and he pointed at David. “That one, I saw him drive away with Grace in his car!”

David blinked, wide-eyed, and shook his head. “I didn’t steal anyone!” he said. “I work in Las Vegas, at the zoning office.”

“Of course you do,” Harry scoffed.

Jolie, who had changed into the form of a slim lioness, recognizable to me by the gray around her muzzle and her ears, which were slightly more pointed

than the rest of the pride, walked in front of David and sat, cocking her head to one side. The air of impatience she exuded even as a lion was pretty impressive.

The officer sighed. “Mister Wilkinson, if you can’t provide us actual evidence -.”

“I swear, she’s here!” Harry snapped. “They both are, I know they are. And I know these fucking animals took them. Go in there and do a sweep!”

Leo snarled. “You can’t come into our settlement without evidence.” The other cats rumbled in agreement.

The officer held up a hand, and looked at Harry. “He is right, Mister Wilkinson. If you could prove that the women were here, and had been taken here against their will, then we would have grounds to search. As it stands, I’m afraid we don’t.”

“I should go and slash their fucking tires,” Grace hissed.

I considered that, cocking my head to one side. An idea formed, and I smiled. I handed her the knife. Just slash the Humvee,” I said. “Be quick. I have an idea.”

Grace frowned. “What are you going to do?”



“I’m going to go out there and talk.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“I’m going to go out there and tell Harry exactly how much of a piece of shit he is, and give you enough time to fuck with his car. Then, when the cops inevitably leave, I’m going to let my boys have their fun with him.”

Grace, for a moment, was quiet. Then she let out a little laugh. “You’re fucking crazy, Kline. I love it.” She squeezed my hand and took the knife from me. “Wish me luck.”

“Don’t get shot,” I said, only half-joking. She waved me away and disappeared into the darkness. I swallowed harshly, and looked out from the trees. The tension was rising as Harry continued to sling accusations towards the lions, growing more and more bold with his lies. It was making my blood boil, hearing him accuse Leo and Jackson of kidnapping me, of hurting me and Grace.

“You can’t just leave my girlfriend and her friend here!” Harry continued, switching tactics and taking on the demeanor of a desperate, worried boyfriend. He wrung his hands together. “I’ve heard what kinds of

things these animals do. What if they're assaulting her?  
Are you just going to do nothing?"

I saw red. That was it.

I bared my teeth as though I had canines of my  
own, and emerged from the cover of the trees.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### SAVANNAH

“You,” I yelled, pointing an accusing finger at Harry, “need to take that steaming pile of shit and choke on it, you son of a bitch!”

Leo and Jackson turned, their eyes wide. The officers and Harry were watching me too, so were all the lions. Good, no one was paying attention to Grace.

Leo rumbled, frowning in concern, and reached for me as I carefully picked my way through the pride and towards them. “Savannah, you shouldn’t be here,” he whispered, worry making his eyes glow. His pupils were slits in reaction to the bright light, making him look almost alien.

“I don’t care,” I replied. “I’m not going to just stand here and listen to that bastard accuse you of raping me.” I glowered at Harry. “Real fucking rich, coming from the likes of you!”

Jackson tensed, beside me. “He...? Did he?”

I pressed my lips together and folded my arms across my chest. “He didn’t like taking ‘No’ for an answer.”

The lions snarled, visceral outrage rippling among the pack at my words. David, Kenna, and Scarlet, who had remained human so far, shifted seamlessly after shedding their clothes. They were all enraged at the idea. Because I was one of them. Because they would fight and kill and die to defend their own.

Leo was vibrating with anger, but he must have picked up a shred of my plan too, because he was trying very hard to keep it together. I hoped Jackson understood as well. We needed to make the cops go away. Then, Harry was all theirs.

I couldn’t see anything past the flood lights, but I didn’t think it was my imagination when the halo of light wobbled, and sank slightly. I hid a smile. One tire down. I was going to have one of the lionesses buy Grace a bottle of her favorite champagne when this was over.

The larger officer frowned at me, and then pulled out a small notebook, flipping through it. “I take it you’re

Savannah Kline?” he asked, sounding confused and unimpressed.

“Yes, Sir,” I replied, nodding. “And I assure you, I was in no way kidnapped, harmed, or assaulted by any of the lions here. The only man who has hurt me is him.” I pointed at Harry again. “He should be behind fucking bars. He showed up here once before and tried to harm my friends, and he has terrorized my friend, Grace as well.”

“Is she here?” the officer asked.

I hesitated. “Yes,” I finally said. “But she’s back at the fire with one of the others who just gave birth. We can leave her out of this. She just showed up today so I’m pretty sure no one has assaulted her, since I just left her side to come here.”

The halo of light wobbled again, and sank a little further.

Harry’s eyes dropped to my stomach, prompting Jackson to growl at him and place a protective, covetous hand on me, drawing me to his side. Harry’s mouth dropped open, and then he let out an almost hysterical

cry. “What the fuck?” he demanded. “Savannah, you’re... pregnant?”

“Obviously,” I muttered.

Kenna snickered beside me.

“Then why didn’t you come home?” Harry asked. He sounded more confused than anything else – confused and outraged. “Were you going to hide the fact that you’re carrying my fucking kid from me? Who does that?”

I blinked at him. “I’m not having your kid,” I said. Jackson’s hand spread out over my shirt, across my stomach, and Leo stepped up close behind me as well, his touch grazing my hip in a subtle but unmistakable way.

Harry scoffed. “I’m not an idiot. There’s no way you...” He glared at me, with so much open malice I almost recoiled from it. “I know you’re a fucking slut, but there’s no way you fucked a lion and got that pregnant. Unless... Oh!” He laughed. He was starting to sound Goddamn insane. “I get it. You were already with them, weren’t you? That was why you were going to leave me.

Because you went and got yourself knocked up because you couldn't keep your whore legs shut -."

"Harry," Leo said. His voice was very quiet, but in that threatening way that would have chilled me to the core if it was directed at me. "You are saying a lot of unnecessary, rude, and untrue things to and about someone under our protection. On our lands. Outside of a mourning period. If you insist on continuing, you will not like the consequences, which we are fully within our rights to deal to you."

Harry spat on the ground in front of him. "Fuck you, kitty cat, you're not gonna do shit."

The flood lights wobbled twice more, there was a small hiss that was lost under the threatening snarls and growls of the gathered lions. I could feel the preparedness to lunge like an itch along my skin. My fingers curled. They were ready to maul him, to converge on Harry and tear him to shreds. They were waiting for Leo and Jackson to give the order.

Leo's thumb brushed along my hip, and I realized abruptly, that they were waiting on me.

“I think we’ve heard enough,” the police officer said. Either he was just as done with Harry’s shit, or he could sense the inevitable bloodbath. He jerked his head at his rookie and pointed to their cars. “Sorry to bother you, ladies and gentlemen. You have a good night.”

They turned and headed to their respective cars.

Harry’s eyes widened, and he whirled on them. “What? You’re not going to do anything? They just threatened me!”

“You’re on their land, Mister Wilkinson,” the officer replied. “You have made allegations that are obviously untrue. This woman,” he gestured to me, “doesn’t seem to be in need of rescuing. Therefore, we cannot intervene. As to the rest, well...” He shrugged. “You’re trespassing. They are within their rights to do whatever they want to you. You made your bed. Have a good night.”

With that, they got in their cars and drove away. Without the red and blue flashing lights framing the white coming from the Humvee, it looked a lot less intimidating. I looked up. The moon was full, and the



stars were twinkling. The thought came to me, suddenly. I wondered if Alex was watching us.

Leo let out a quiet rumble, and nuzzled my hair. “My love,” he whispered. I sucked in a breath, turning to look up at him. It was the first time he had called me that. I’ve been called a lot of things in my life. My dad used to call me ‘Princess’, Harry liked ‘Savvy’, which I hated, and obviously he had a lot of other colorful names for me.

With Leo and Jackson, I was gorgeous. Beautiful. Mate. Queen. My love. I was pretty sure that one was going to become my favorite.

“Yes?” I asked sweetly.

Leo smiled, and cupped my cheek. It was the same one Harry had struck what felt like a lifetime ago. “It would be a great honor to finish what I started,” he rasped, so quiet I was sure only Jackson and I could hear it. “With your permission.”

My smile widened. Always my choice. How could I want it any other way?

I turned and looked at Jackson. His eyes glowed with anger and he wasn't taking his eyes off Harry. I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Jackson," I said. He licked his lips and squeezed the back of my neck in a light touch, showing he was listening. "Do you still want to chase?"

His eyes flashed, and he showed his teeth. "Yes."

If this was what it was like to be drunk on power, then I could definitely see the appeal. I cupped my hand over my mouth so Harry couldn't see my lips move. "Grace slashed his tires. He won't get far." Jackson's lips twitched in a dark, promising smile. "Have fun, boys."

They both looked at me, then. "Are you certain?" Leo asked.

I nodded. "Just promise me you'll come home to me," I said. They smiled so widely, and each kissed me. Harry made a low sound of disgust, and I glared at him. "You have something to say?" I challenged. God, let him dare put the final nail in his own damn coffin.

"Fuck you," Harry hissed. "Fuck all of you. This isn't over!" He turned around and stomped to the Humvee, climbing inside. He clearly didn't notice that

the tires were flat. It wasn't until he pressed on the gas, trying to rev and only creating a terrible flapping sound and the smell of burning rubber, that there was any sign something was amiss with the car.

I wished I could have seen his face, and seen the dawning horror in his eyes. Beside me, Leo and Jackson both shifted. They prowled forward, the lionesses and David converging on the vehicle like an army of ants ready to devour food. Like, well, like a pack of lions.

Grace appeared at my side, clicking her knife back into place. She winked at me, and grinned. "That was quite a speech on both sides," she noted. Harry had managed to get the car to reverse down the hill. Leo snarled, tail twitching, hackles raised. Kenna and Scarlet were on either of the alphas' sides. I knew, objectively, that the pack was small, that was the whole issue with the population thing, but there was absolutely nothing gentle about the way they were waiting, watching.

Harry pulled the car around and tried to trundle away. Jackson and Leo let out twin howls, and the lions charged.

Grace pressed her lips together, and turned away so she didn't have to watch. I didn't turn away. It was hard to see, without the flood lights and with only the moon. I was reminded of the grinding mass of dark shadows and bodies on the dance floor of the club I used to work at. I was witnessing something primal, alive, an amorphous mass of hunger and lust. For blood, for victory, for vengeance.

It made my body go warm. I cupped my stomach and vowed that I would be awake when my boys came home. I wanted to show them how much I appreciated them, how much they meant to me. I had given them a feast, and my fertility. They could have my love and appreciation for dessert.

Grace eyed me. I could feel her gaze on the side of my face, but didn't tear my own away as, slowly, the lions upended the Humvee and it fell on its side, tires spinning uselessly. There was crashing glass. There was screaming and snarling.

I sighed happily.

"You know, it's probably a good thing you ended up here," Grace finally said. I looked at her. "You're kind of

a psycho.”

I grinned. “Hormones.”

She blinked at me, and then burst into a fit of hysterical laughter. There were tears in her eyes as she fought to catch her breath. “Oh my God. Jesus. Okay, come on you crazy bitch. You’re eating for, like, a dozen, and we need to let the other woman know what happened.”

“Raven,” I supplied. “She’s Jackson’s sister.”

“Ooh, awesome name,” Grace said. She looped her arm in mine, like we used to when we would go into work together. It was surreal to be doing that now, but the familiar gesture was welcome. It was nice to know that Grace was still my friend, and always would be, even with the madness of shifter babies and healthy threesomes and lions openly killing our abuser without fear of repercussion.

All in all, I’d say it was a pretty good day.

The fire was dying down by the time we returned to Raven, who had covered up her cubs and looked up when

we approached. She smiled widely. “Sounds like quite a hunt,” she said, and winked.

“Oh, it is,” I replied, sitting back down and cradling my stomach. Honestly, I was glad that the pregnancy was only going to last two more months, tops. It happened fast but that meant it was over sooner. I had no idea how human women were supposed to carry something like this around for nine months. And then the birth after? No thank you, I definitely got the longer end of the stick on that one.

“I’m Grace, by the way,” Grace said, shaking Raven’s hand.

Raven smiled. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“So, um... Can I see your babies?”

Raven met my eyes, and laughed. “Of course.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### SAVANNAH

I looked up as the door to the hut opened. I still had the camping lamp that Raven had given me my first night here, and used it to see when there was no fire lit. Jackson came in first, then Leo, closing the door behind them. Their eyes were so overtaken by pupil they looked black. There was blood on their faces, their hands, down their chests. They had mild scrapes and dirt smeared all over them.

They looked wild. Beastly. Primal.

They were beautiful.

I sat up. They regarded me, nostrils flaring and eyes raking down my body as my blanket fell. I bit my lower lip, and tugged it off the rest of the way, already warm just from the way they looked at me. Their gazes devoured my bare breasts, my swollen stomach, my thighs as I slowly parted them in invitation.

Leo's upper lip twitched and curled back. His knuckles went white. His cock began to harden and grow

flushed as he stared at me. Jackson took a step forward and then stopped, as though he had met some invisible barrier.

I smiled. They were closer to their animal selves than I had ever seen them. And animals, lions, obeyed their queens.

“Come here,” I commanded, heart racing at the rush of power I felt when they obeyed me. I turned so my back was to the wall and they had room on either side of me to prowl onto the bed. Jackson’s hand cupped the inside of my knee, sliding up my thigh. He was making a noise I felt rattling my chest more than heard in my head.

Leo leaned in and kissed my throat, purring loudly as one of his hands rested on my stomach, then wandered its greedy way up to one of my breasts. It felt like the longer I was with them, the more they touched me, the less they needed to, to get me to respond. I was already wet enough that, by the time Jackson’s nails grazed my entrance, he could push two fingers straight in. He did, for just a single thrust that made me gasp and



moan, before he brought his fingers to his mouth and sucked them clean.

I watched him, wide eyed. Leo continued to tease my nipples, slowly alternating like he had all the time in the world as he sucked bruises and love bites to my neck. His free hand settled in my hair, knotting tight and tugging, so I tipped my head up and gave him more room to kiss me.

Jackson's eyes were locked with mine. I couldn't look away, and he was unblinking as he slid his fingers inside me again, curling up and stroking in a way he had quickly learned I liked. I bit my lower lip and he growled, moving faster, his thumb sliding up and down between my wet flesh until he found my clit, and started teasing it with slow circles.

My lashes fluttered as my breath hitched. "Don't look away," Jackson whispered. I obeyed, though it was hard to keep my eyes open as he continued to touch me. Leo squeezed the back of my neck, an action I now knew they called 'scruffing', and used to both soothe, reassure, and assert dominance depending on the context. I just

found it really fucking hot, but maybe that was a human thing.

I moaned weakly as Leo kissed his way up the side of my warm face. He tugged my earlobe, briefly, with his teeth, before returning to my sensitive neck. He squeezed my nape and replaced his free hand with his mouth, sucking a nipple between his bloodstained lips. I gasped, knotting my fingers in his hair. There was blood here, too. The scent of it, combined with my own slick, their sweat, the woodsmoke-whiskey burn of them both, was enough to make me tremble. I had just gotten worse with my pregnancy hormones and it was like they could undo me with a single touch.

“Don’t look away,” Jackson reminded me, as he quickened his pace. It was so intense, watching him watch me. His lips parted as mine did, he slide closer and guided one of my legs over his knee, spreading me out further. He rested our foreheads together, noses brushing. His tongue barely grazed my lips but he didn’t kiss me properly.

I whined, barely able to keep my eyes open. “Jackson,” I whispered. “Please.”

“Anything for you, my love,” he purred, and then he kissed me, and the same moment Leo put his teeth in my neck and Jackson rubbed my clit mercilessly. I tensed up, crying out and slamming my hands down on the bed on either side of my hips, bucking up into Jackson’s hand and Leo’s mouth, gasping into the kiss as Jackson devoured my soft sounds of pleasure.

Jackson pulled his fingers out, giving me a moment to catch my breath, and licked his fingers again. He had started doing that when I got pregnant, like he couldn’t get enough. Maybe it was a specific fertile scent that drove him wild, maybe he really got off on the whole concept of breeding. Either way, I wasn’t going to complain.

I cupped his face and drew him in for another kiss, and used my free hand to brace myself on Leo’s shoulder. I pushed myself upright, forcing Leo to straighten, and straddled Jackson’s lap. His hard cock rubbed over my sensitive, soaking wet skin. He cradled me like I was precious, eyes wide and dark as I guided him to lay down so I could sit comfortably on top of him.

I smiled, and turned to Leo. “Come here,” I said, and tugged him with a hand in his hair. I kissed him deeply, and then pulled him around behind me, so that he had to straddle Jackson’s thighs as well. Then, I bent over, bracing myself on my elbows so Jackson and I were face to face and I was presenting my wet, red opening to Leo’s greedy gaze. He snarled loudly, and grabbed my hips in a firm hold.

I arched my hips as best I could. It was difficult with my stomach so heavy and round. Jackson helped me keep my weight up, kissing me as I pet his hair and his chest, admiring the firm muscle. I could taste myself on his tongue, and Harry’s blood.

I straightened again, before Leo could push inside me. “Which one of you killed him for me?” I asked.

Leo and Jackson smirked. “We did it together,” Leo said.

“We do everything together.”

I smiled at both of them, so warm with affection, fierce and savage love making my heart race and my insides throb with the need to be filled by them again. “Well, I suppose I could try taking you both at the same

time,” I mused, more to see their reaction than anything else. Jackson’s eyes widened and Leo audibly gasped, behind me. “But Leo did technically draw first blood.”

I had been with them long enough to know never to expect jealousy. Even as I spoke, Jackson smiled, and looked over my shoulder at his fellow alpha, his expression fond and proud. “He fought well,” Jackson said, cupping my stomach and guiding me, slowly, to bow back down over him, so I was presenting to Leo once again. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders so I could rest on his chest, my nose buried in his warm neck. The head of his cock rubbed against my swollen stomach, making my skin sticky with precum.

“I learned from you,” Leo replied, his voice just as quiet and sincere. I smiled, and kissed Jackson’s neck.

Jackson chuckled. “Let’s show our queen how real men treat their mates.”

I could hear the smile in Leo’s voice, as I felt the first pressure of his cock sinking into me. “Together?”

Jackson nodded, and snaked his fingers between our bodies to rub my sensitive clit again. “Together.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### SAVANNAH

I felt the first cramps at dinner, two months later.

I paused, gingerly touching my stomach, which was, frankly, gigantic. Raven had seemed to carry this weight a lot more easily. Then again, she was taller than me by almost half a foot.

I sucked in a breath, and winced when I felt it come again. It was like a stomach ache and diarrhea and period cramps all at once, all combined and amplified by ten. Sweat broke out along my brow and my breath caught mid-sentence.

Jackson tensed immediately, beside me. “My love, are you -?”

I looked down, at the blood and other fluid staining my thighs.

“Guess they’re coming today,” I said with a weak laugh.

Jackson smiled, and kissed my forehead, before he stood and helped me to my feet. I could still walk, thank

God, but I clung to him. Leo had gone to the bathroom, but I quickly heard his steps rush over and he took my other arm, both of them supporting me as we approached the vacant hut next to theirs. Inside were fresh towels, linens, water, and baskets for new litters.

I whimpered as another contraction hit me. I felt like I was getting kicked along every vertebra. Jackson and Leo lowered me to my hands and knees and then settled me on my side. I remembered how they had positioned Raven for this, so I mimicked it as best I could, clutching my stomach and breathing hard as another wave of pain rippled through me.

And Christ, these cubs were the size of tennis balls. How the Hell did human woman push out whole human babies?

Suddenly I had a lot more appreciation for my mother, but it was washed away in another wave of pain. I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth, breathing as evenly as I could.

The door opened, and I recognized Jolie's scent, like mossy trees and fresh honey. "Out, both of you," she commanded Jackson and Leo.

I opened my eyes and reached for them in a panic. “No, I don’t want them to leave,” I cried.

“Honey, there isn’t enough room for them and me in here,” she said evenly. “They’ll be right outside. When you’re done here, you’ll see them again, okay.”

Leo gave me a strained smile, and kissed my forehead. “Good luck, beautiful,” he whispered, pushing my sweaty hair away from my face. “You’ll do wonderfully, I know you will.”

Jackson rumbled his agreement, nuzzling my shoulder. I whimpered as another wave of pain raced through me, drowning out his words. I only caught another soft, “My love”, before they had risen and were being ushered out again.

Kenna entered, ready to offer me water. Everyone had stayed behind, wary of the looming threat of Sylvester Frank and his determination to prove we were underpopulated and steal the land. Every person counted. Grace had gone home, since the whole drama with Harry was finally over, but she swore that if they got wind that Frank was coming back, she would show up and claim she lived there too to boost the numbers.



I missed her when she was gone, but I was about to have a whole lot of other little things claiming my attention for the foreseeable future.

I cried out loudly as another contraction came, this one stronger and much more focused. It felt like someone had reached into my stomach, low, through my belly button, shoved their fist through the tiny hole and were trying to stretch me out like a new baseball glove. I felt unbearable pressure, growing, growing. I couldn't think of a single thing to do but push.

So I did. I wasn't a lion but some instincts were obvious. I screamed as I pushed, another small gush of blood pouring from me, and I felt something small and soft and wriggling come with it.

Then, the tiniest, most wonderful sound in the world. A single peep. My eyes filled with tears and I turned to try and get a look at my firstborn baby, but already I was so exhausted and my body couldn't twist that way.

I tried to blink the tears away. "Boy or girl?" I rasped.

"A boy," Jolie said.

“Can I see him?”

Jolie cleaned him off and handed him to Kenna, who positioned the basket by my head so I could see inside. I lifted my head, and more tears fell as I looked at the tiny lion cub. He was almost a completely chocolate brown color, covered in golden ring-like spots. He jerked and squealed, sneezing and huffing around. I didn't know whether I was smiling or sobbing. Probably both.

Another contraction made me grit my teeth. I clenched my eyes tightly shut, and breathed hard. This time I knew more of what to expect, and maybe it was just my imagination, but the second one came out a lot easier than the first. He'd paved the way, I guess. The baseball glove was nice and stretched out.

It wasn't completely painless. I was still very much pushing a wriggling tennis ball – that had claws, might I add – through my cervix and out of my body. There was no comfortable stage in that process. But it was easier, and every time I heard one of them make a little peep or growl, my heart sang with joy.

“Another boy,” Jolie said, surprise in her voice. Then, she chuckled. “Men are always so impatient.”

“They take after their fathers, I guess,” I replied with a breathless laugh. The second one was the spitting image of Leo, with his golden fur and tiny tufts of lighter hair along his ears and tail. I lifted a hand and hung it over the edge of the basket so I could run my fingers down their backs and they could get accustomed to my scent, even as I brought the rest of their siblings into the world.

I wished Leo and Jackson were with me. I wanted them to witness the birth of their children, even though I knew that Jolie was right and there wasn't enough space in the hut. I wanted them to feel the joy I felt, though, bringing these lives into the world. Knowing that their fathers loved me so much, and would love them so much, and protect them, and teach them how to be kind, gentle, wonderful young lions.

My throat felt tight and I sobbed again, not just from pain. Kenna soothed me with a quiet rumble, combing her fingers through my hair. She offered me water and I drank gratefully, setting the bottle out of reach as another sharp contraction hit me hard enough to make me collapse.

“Jesus,” I muttered. “Raven made this look way too easy.”

“I could always shoot you,” Jolie said, deadpan. “I bet that would distract.”

I laughed shakily. “If you can get away with that, go ahead,” I joked. She chuckled and patted my thigh soothingly. The next cub came soon after.

“Another boy, goodness, you either have an entire pride in there or you’re inclined to sons.”

“Um, I’m kind of hoping for the latter. This is exhausting,” I complained. I kept telling myself that I had a maximum of four more to do. Three boys, though, wow! I lifted my head so I could see him. He was golden as well, but darker like Jackson. I smiled and rubbed my fingers over his fat little belly as he sneezed and headbutted his chocolate brother accidentally. They were all blind, as kittens were naturally born, and fluffy as a ball of soot that had met an electrical socket. I couldn’t wait to show them to Grace, she was going to flip.

I groaned as another contraction hit me, and then another, relentless. I clutched my stomach and closed my eyes, pushing as hard as I could as Jolie gently talked me

through it and Kenna pressed a cool, wet towel to my forehead.

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In the end, I gave birth to seven cubs. Of those seven, six of them were boys. The single girl was all brown, the same color as my hair, without spots. She had come last, and was the smallest one, but she was feisty and wasn't shy about headbutting and twitching her way around their basket as they all figured out how to nest together.

Leo and Jackson approached slowly, their faces a mask of awe and overwhelmed joy as they looked down at me, and the covered basket in my lap. I smiled tiredly up at them, wrapped in a blanket with a warmed bottle of water between my legs to soothe the ache.

"Savannah," Leo whispered, and fell to his knees in front of me. He kissed me deeply, and when he parted, his exhale was shaky and slow. "I..."

My smile widened as I pulled the blanket back to reveal the cubs. "Meet your children, daddies," I teased. Jackson's pupils flared wide in pleasure and he breathed in, sitting on my other side. "Six boys and a girl," I told

them, and pointed to the all-brown female. “That’s the girl.”

Leo smiled. “She has your hair.”

I nodded. All of the cubs were either gold or brown. Two of them looked just like Jackson, two of them looked just like Leo, and the other three were some odd combination that I assumed I had something to do with.

Leo’s eyes shone with happy tears. I could tell he wanted to hold them, to scent them. I took the little girl, first, and held it out to him, and then offered the firstborn with his little golden rings to Jackson. They held their children with reverent hands, their purrs loud and constant and powerful enough to shake the ground. Which felt really good on my aching body.

“I don’t care what Jolie says,” I declared. “I want you in the room, next time. I want you to see them at the same time I do.”

Jackson’s head snapped up. “...Next time?” he rasped.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “Raven had five, I just had seven. Even if all dozen – though I guess with me and

Grace it's fourteen now? Even if we all showed up and reported, that's still only..." I paused, doing the math in my head. "Twenty-six? And you need thirty. So that's at least one more litter."

They were staring at me with open shock. I fell silent, blushing. "What?"

"That means you're staying," Leo whispered. He set his daughter down and gave me a small, hopeful smile.

I frowned. "Of course I'm staying," I said. Jackson set his son in the basket as well, and I covered them. I set them down in front of me. "Did you think I wasn't going to stay?"

"We didn't know," Jackson admitted.

"We wanted you to," Leo added.

"But, Savannah, we were under no illusions. You didn't come here by choice. You didn't mate with us because you thought it would be a fun adventure."

I stared at Jackson. I couldn't even argue with any of that, because he was right. I took in a breath and tried to think of the words that would communicate, in no uncertain terms, both how much of a dumbass they were,

and how much I absolutely, definitely wanted to stay. Not because of any transactional obligation, not because I was afraid of what would happen to me if I left.

I wanted to stay because I wanted to stay. Because I was in love with these two idiot lion men. Because they were...

“You’re mine,” I said. “You’re right. I didn’t intend to come here, and I was going to get out after the mourning period. Then the Harry thing happened, then Frank. You’re right, I wanted to help. I still want to help. I want to stay because I love it here. I feel safe, protected, worshipped here.”

I met their eyes in turn, and took one of their hands each. I brought them together and held them tight.

“I want to stay, because you’re mine,” I said. “And I’m yours.”

Leo cleared his throat and put his other hand over mine, bringing my knuckles to his lips for a kiss. I smiled at him, and then laughed when Jackson practically lunged for me. He was careful not to knock the basket or strain my sore body, but his kiss was desperate and passionate and took my breath away.



I was blushing hard when we parted for air, and laughed. “So I take it you’re alright with that,” I joked.

“More than alright with that,” Leo replied, and kissed my cheek.

## EPILOGUE

### SAVANNAH

After accidentally moving in with a pride of lion shifters, getting propositioned by two alphas, going through the very unique experience of lion shifter pregnancy and childbirth, and dealing with one man obsessed with a silver mine, and ordering my two mates to literally tear my past abuser limb from limb, it was safe to say very little surprised me anymore.

Seeing Grace climb out of David's car six months later, sporting an engagement ring and a heavily pregnant belly was a top contender, though.

I blinked up at her, and arched a brow. She grinned and sat beside me, holding her distended stomach and pretty much falling the last few inches with a loud 'oof'. She looked more than happy to shed her human clothes in the comfort of the immodest pride lands, and tipped her head back with a sigh, rolling her shoulders.

"You've been busy," I noted.

She grinned. “So have you,” she said, nodding to my stomach that was starting to swell with my second litter. I laughed, conceding that. “I have no idea how you did it. Jesus Christ, I feel like I’ve had the last twenty Thanksgiving dinners in an hour and I’m ready to pop.”

I laughed. “Yeah, but it ends quickly,” I said, petting my own stomach. In front of us, children were playing on the shores of the lake. Raven’s children were older than mine by a few months, so they were already cats about the size of an adult lynx, whereas mine were still barely bigger than housecats.

Raven had gone back home last month once her children were weaned, saying she missed her husband, but promised to return if we needed her to account for numbers against Sylvester Frank. I hadn’t heard any updates regarding that, so I figured he was still tied up in court.

By the time Grace and I gave birth, there were going to be plenty of lions living here.

I smiled, as my eyes traveled to Leo and Jackson. They were in their cat form, dutifully watching the children play. My little girl had found Leo’s tail and

decided it was the perfect toy to play with. She was attacking it and chomping on it determinedly with her little needle teeth.

Grace giggled. “That one looks like a handful,” she said, as Leo made a show of being in pain and rolling over, showing his belly to his daughter. He rolled through the rocks and shallow water as she play-lunged for him, biting down on the old scars on his flank.

I nodded. “She’s my only girl so far,” I said. “I wanted to call her Grace.”

Grace fell silent, and when I looked at her, her eyes were wide and shining with emotion. “Really?”

I smiled. “Yeah, really. If it weren’t for you, God knows where I’d be. But I know I wouldn’t be nearly this happy.” I looked back at my children, and Raven’s, my smile softening when I saw Jackson rise and wade into the water to guide one of the little ones back to shore so they didn’t swim out too far and run the risk of being too tired to swim back.

“Thank you,” Grace whispered.

“And you don’t have to call one of yours Savannah, Raven already has you covered,” I said, nodding to the only large golden female from Raven’s litter. Grace laughed, accepting that with another nod. “As long as no one calls her ‘Savvy’.”

“Well, that’s officially going to be one of mine’s names.” I stared at her in horror, only a little of which was fake. She burst into laughter again.

“So, you and David finally sealed the deal, huh?” I asked. “The ring looks pretty.”

“Government money, baby,” Grace said, winking. “I like it, and I like him. He’s...like a puppy, as much as a cat can be like a puppy. He’s always happy to see me and it’s not because I’m flashing thigh or bringing him drinks.”

I understood that, probably better than anyone else here. “I’m happy for you.”

“And you absolutely will be in the room when I give birth, because I’ve been watching videos online and I am royally freaked out.”

I snorted. “You got it. It’s not that bad, I promise.”

She huffed.

I looked up and waved at David as he walked in front of us. He paused, grinning ear to ear when he met Grace's eyes, and crouched down to give her a big, sloppy kiss and rub their noses together. I made a show of gagging, though I knew I didn't have a leg to stand on.

Speak of the Devil. Jackson and Leo approached, shifted back to humans. Little Grace was still trying to bite off her dad's tail. I giggled, and caught her halfway through a lunge. She mewled at me, but settled. It made me happy to know that my children knew and understood I was their mother, even if I didn't look like them.

I pet her sleek fur and looked up as the men exchanged affectionate shoulder nudges. "Any news?" Leo asked.

David nodded. "I officially submitted the updated census," he told them. "As of today, we have a population greater than thirty. Frank can't touch us."

My boys grinned, and I gasped, my eyes wide. "But...we don't have thirty yet," I said, frowning.

“I may have fudged the dates a little,” David replied, smiling. “Grace will give birth any day now. No one is going to carbon date our children.”

“But what if you get the number wrong?” I asked.

Grace rolled her eyes and flicked my shoulder. “Only you! Ultrasound machines exist, you know.”

...Oh. I rolled my eyes. Little Grace was starting to squirm, so I let her go join her brothers and cousins. “Alright, fancy lady,” I said. I looked back up and smiled. “But that’s great news!”

“It is,” Jackson agreed. “You did good work, David. Both practical and with paperwork.” Grace snorted, and I laughed. “Good to have someone willing to do their part.”

“He says that like I’m not the one doing the part for three months for his three minutes,” Grace muttered, but her eyes were shining with mirth and she winked when David’s cheeks turned red.

“Wow, three whole minutes,” I teased. I shook my head at my boys. “David’s got you beat, guys.”

Leo growled playfully at me, his eyes flashing with intent. “Jackson,” he said without taking his eyes off me. “It appears we’re not satisfying our mate with our performance.”

“That is terrible news,” Jackson said, equally grave. I grinned, and then shrieked in surprise when they moved forward and scooped me up, each of them carrying an arm and a leg and carrying me towards our hut.

“Yeah, we’ll watch the kids I guess!” Grace called, and I laughed. I leaned over and kissed each of them on the cheek.

“I assure you, there is nothing wrong with either of your performances,” I said, breathless by the time they carried me in and set me down. I always felt so small, so adored, so powerful when we were alone. Jackson growled playfully, sweeping my hair to one side and kissing the back of my neck. My knees buckled, and Leo caught me, capturing my lips in a kiss.

“We should try harder anyway,” he said. His eyes met Jackson’s over my shoulder. “Just to be sure.”



Jackson chuckled against my warm skin. I felt his smile, his fangs, graze my shoulder. “Together?”

“Together.”

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THE END

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