



*Restoring*  
THEIR TRUST

AISLING  
COUSINS  
THE LOST THERIAN OMEGA

# RESTORING THEIR TRUST

THE LOST THERIAN OMEGA

BOOK TWO

# AISLING COUSINS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*For those who never give up*

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am a British author; as such, my books are written in British English and use slang from across the British Isles. Be prepared for lots of 'u's where you might not be used to them and 's' instead of 'z'.

*Restoring Their Trust* is book two of *The Lost Therian Omega* series, which should be read in order. If you haven't read [\*Shifting Their Ideals\*](#) please do so before continuing.

This is a why choose romance—meaning the main characters do not have to choose between love interests. It is a slow burn and medium build which means there is no spice and the full harem is not confirmed until later in the series. It does deal with some sensitive topics, which will be listed below. If you have any triggers, please read these before reading the book. Your mental health is more important than pages read. If you have any questions, please reach out to me at [author.aislingcousins@gmail.com](mailto:author.aislingcousins@gmail.com)

The book has been through several rounds of editing, but sometimes errors still slip through. If you find any, please reach out to me at the above email or on social media rather than reporting to Amazon, and I will get the errors fixed.



# CONTENT NOTE

- Death
- Violence
- Insinuation of Torture
- Mentions of Sexual Assault and Rape

This book also contains explicit language and scenes of sexual nature. There will be group scenes, knotting, heats, and MM content.

If you feel anything is missing from this list, please reach out via email or social media and I will update it accordingly.

# CHARACTER RECAP

**Kyliana (Kya) Jenson:** a therian omega shifter, which means she can shift into the form of any mammal. She is the eldest Jenson child and was kidnapped along with her mother, Aurelia, by the Jameson pack when she was eight. She escaped on her eighteenth birthday with her younger half-brothers, Ryder and Brooks. She is an artist specialising in nudes and co-owns a small gallery with her fae godmother, Fi.

**River McBearty:** a wolf alpha shifter, who holds the position of pack Beta in the Wilson pack. He was the first to meet Kya at a club, and they had a one-night stand where she snuck out after seeing their matching fated mate marks. He has one eye with heterochromia, brown on the top and blue on the bottom. The other eye is blue. His pet name for Kya is Banphrionsa (Gaelic for Princess).

**Knox McBearty:** a wolf alpha shifter. He is the twin brother of River; they're identical except for the heterochromia. Knox has one eye with blue on top and brown on the bottom. The other eye is blue. He has been in a relationship with Kota since they were teens. His pet name for Kya is Firebug, and he calls Kota Ounce.

**Axel McBearty:** a grizzly bear alpha shifter. He was the second McBearty to meet Kya when they were called to the school because of a fight between Cole, Brooks, and Ryder. He joined the younger shifters for morning training sessions at the Jenson's cabin. During a gauntlet run in late November, he sealed the mate bond with Kya. His pet name for her is Little Minx.

**Kota McBearty:** a snow leopard alpha shifter. He spent the most time with Kya and her brothers besides Axel. They trained at the gym owned by the McBeartys, opposite Kya's gallery. He is in a relationship with Knox. His pet name for Kya is Chibi Girl, and he calls Knox, Payaso (Filipino for Clown).

**Lucian McBearty:** a mountain lion alpha shifter. He's the tech guy of the Wilson pack. Kya claimed him as her mate while at the height of her heat. She calls him Lucy-Lou, and he calls her Bunny.

**Casper McBearty:** a Kermode bear alpha shifter. He is the youngest and tallest of Kya's fated mates. Although he played a key role in her abduction to the Wilson pack's lands, he was also the first claimed mate. His pet name for Kya is Älskling (Swedish for Darling).

**Ryder Jenson:** a wolf beta shifter, Kya's half-brother. He is ten years younger than Kya and two years older than Brooks.

**Brooks Jenson:** a wolf beta shifter, Kya's half-brother. He is the youngest Jenson, twelve years younger than Kya.

**Flynn Wilson:** a wolf alpha shifter, holds the position of Wilson pack Alpha. One of Kya's biological fathers. Twin to Connor.

**Connor Wilson:** a wolf omega shifter, holds the position of Wilson pack Omega. One of Kya's biological fathers. Twin to Flynn. Calls Kya, Li-La.

**Cole McBearty:** a wolf beta shifter, youngest McBearty and biological brother to River and Knox.

**Gran McBearty:** a wolf beta shifter, biological grandmother to River, Knox, and Cole. She took her grandsons in after their parents and original pack were destroyed by hunters.

**Henrick Jameson:** a wolf alpha shifter and Jameson pack Alpha. Responsible for the original kidnapping of Aurelia and Kya and the abuse of Aurelia within his pack. He worked with Principal Anderson and Tilly to drug Kya in order to kidnap her again.

**Fjord Jameson:** an unknown alpha shifter, son of Henrick Jameson and heir to the Jameson pack.

**Seraphina (Fi):** Seelie fae, an old family friend of the Jensons. She crafted the necklace that hid Kya's omega scent and suppressed her heats. She co-owns the gallery and brokers sales and commissions of Kya's art.

**Tilly:** human school administrator and Kya's best friend. She aided the Jameson packs' latest kidnapping of Kya by giving her spiked water.

**Brody:** a gorilla beta shifter. He was previously the Wilson pack Beta until he helped kidnap Aurelia and Kya for the Jameson pack. He was presumed dead until resurfacing after the Jameson pack tracked the Jensons' location. He is now the Jameson pack Beta.

**Principal Anderson:** Principal at Cole, Ryder, and Brooks school. Tilly's boss. Has an obsession with Kya.

**Aurelia:** (deceased) was a wolf beta shifter and mother to Kya, Ryder, and Brooks. She was the claimed mate of Flynn and Connor Wilson, though they were not her fated mates. Aurelia was killed when Kya was sixteen, Ryder was six, and Brooks was four.

# PROLOGUE

## KOTA



Even while continuing to dance with Knox, I keep my eyes on Kya, tracking her as she moves across Teddy's diner with Tilly. The two females pause briefly for Kya to wave Axel and Casper from following them. My pack-brothers are even more protective of our fated mate since she claimed them. Lucian too. I understand their hesitance to let her out of our sight, but Kya, no doubt, needs some air. A chance to decompress with her best friend. The last few months have been a lot to process, and I wasn't the one drugged, kidnapped, and then forced to live with males I barely knew.

The thought makes me want to wince, but I manage to hold it back. It will draw questions I'm not ready to answer.

If Flynn and Connor want a relationship with their daughter, I think it's safe to say they went about it in completely the wrong way. Feelings of gratitude for how Kya hasn't held the circumstances around our living arrangements against us well up, filling my chest with warmth. My mind drifts back over the day, a frown pulling my brows down, when I remember the spells of dizziness and unbalance she's been exhibiting.

"Hey, Ounce? You okay?" Knox asks, and I flick my eyes up to meet his mismatched gaze. I give a half-hearted shrug and pull a face, unsure how to explain what's bothering me.

"I don't know. Something just feels..." I rub my forehead, thinking over the day. "Off? I don't like that Kya has been getting so dizzy. She's been living with us for over two months, gone through a pretty intense heat," he lets out a snort

at my oversimplified description, “amongst other things, but she’s never shown signs of vertigo before or even being sick in general.”

The song we’ve been dancing to draws to an end, and I motion to the makeshift bar. Knox nods pensively, processing my words as we walk over to get our own drinks. It’s not an expression I’m used to seeing on my playful Payaso and goes to prove how much Kya has affected us all in such a short time.

River and Lucian separate from the scouts they were talking to and head towards Axel and Casper, joining them in the booth and looking out the window, no doubt watching Kya and Tilly. If the music and ambient noise inside the diner wasn’t so loud, I’d suspect them of eavesdropping. Looking at the four shifters now, all over six-foot, I wonder how Ryder, Brooks, and Cole ever managed to fit in a booth with us.

*:Danny just told us that Alpha Jameson, his son, and several pack members were seen crossing the town borders this morning.:* River’s voice comes through our mind-link. His words make my muscles tense, only adding to the sense that something’s wrong.

*:Why are we only just hearing about this now?:* Axel growls, leaning his forearms onto the table, hazel eyes scanning the diner for threats.

*:Apparently they told Flynn and Connor, but they didn’t ‘consider it important’ or something we needed to know.:* Lucian adds, his tone dry and unimpressed. Knox grunts next to me as I grab two bottles of water and hand one to him.

*:It’s fucking bullshit. They make all these comments about wanting to keep her safe, and yet the day they get a report saying the guy who already kidnapped her once is in town—with back-up—they don’t even consider cancelling this ridiculous party.:*

I go to crack the seal on my water as Lucian continues speaking through our link, when I realise it’s already broken. That’s... odd. I pull the lid off slowly, and my gut twists. Remembering the feeling I had earlier that something was off,

I sniff the water as Knox frowns at me. He raises the bottle to his lips, and I quickly bat it away.

“Kota! What the hell, man?”

*:There’s wolf’s-bane and silver in the water bottles!:* I shout through the main pack mind-link. Every shifter needs to know to be careful, not just my family.

“Didn’t Tilly take water out for Kya and her?” Knox stares at the now discarded bottle as it rolls to a stop on the floor.

“Silver doesn’t—”

“Kya!” I whirl around at the frantic shout that rips from River.

Sprinting to the diner door, I yank it open hard enough to slam and get stuck in the wall. That will require a *lot* of explaining, but right now, I need to get to my fated mate.

Feet pound against the ground as the others follow me outside. A car door slams, tyres squeal, and Kya’s truck speeds away from the diner.

I’m already pulling my shirt over my head, preparing to shift, when snarls rend the night. Wolves, foxes, bears, jaguars, mountain lions, and coyotes appear between the gaps of the parked vehicles. The Jameson pack. *Fuck.*

Screaming rips through the air from within the diner. I know I shouldn’t turn my back to the shifters surrounding my brothers and me, but there are humans inside Teddy’s. Humans my mate considers friends, people who are important to her. Spinning around, scanning the crowd quickly, I notice Flynn and Connor fighting several attackers still in their human forms. Ryder and Brooks are engaged with others, while Cole and Gran are trying to herd some of the townspeople out the back via the kitchen.

There isn’t a chance to check on any of the rest of my pack before a heavy weight lands on my back, claws digging into my skin, teeth grazing at my shoulder. I shift my stance, reaching up to grip the jaw of the animal behind me. Blood coats my fingers as I pry their mouth open, a whimper sounds from their throat, and before I can think about what I’m doing,



I wrench my hands apart, shredding my fingers in the process. A loud crack echoes in my ears as I break the creature's jaw.

Taking a brief moment to glance around, I try to calculate their numbers. There's no need to though; it's obvious they came prepared to win. They easily outnumber us five to one, maybe more. We won't win, even with all our training; there's just too many of them.

Claws rake down my back, pulling a pained shout from my lips. Twisting my body, I shift my hands so I'm not without a weapon of my own, and lash out, catching two coyote shifters across the throat and snout.

A sharp pain sears into the side of my neck, and my vision starts to blur as I spin around to face my new attacker. A tall, slender woman grins maliciously at me, a syringe held aloft. Looking around, I stumble repeatedly as whatever drug she's injected me with tries to drag me into unconsciousness. Axel is the only one of my fated brothers still fighting; I watch in semi-horror, semi-resignation as the Jameson pack overwhelms him and he falls to his knees.

Knox and River are being dragged across the car park as the drugs spreading through my system affect my balance further. The twins are shoved into a van as my knees hit the ground hard, and my vision fades to black.

# CHAPTER I

# KYA



“See you on the other side.” The words barely leave my lips before the crack of the bones in my feet and ankles ring out as I begin to change. Forcing my body to shift slowly makes the process more painful, but it’s my best chance to slip out of the silver chains binding me to the chair.

“Kyliana! Stop!” Flynn pushes his alpha command on me, and my omega, so close to the surface, reacts, instantly reverting me back to human. “Have you lost all sense?” he hisses, “What do you plan to do *if* you get free? This is not the time nor the place for your petulant games. You need to take this seriously!”

Clenching my jaw, my anger builds as he continues to berate me, as though I have no idea of the danger we’re all in. I’m the one that’s likely to suffer the most at the hands of Henrick Jameson and his pack. Not only am I a female omega, I’m also a therian shifter, and if he finds out... I suppress the shudder that wants to overtake me. No, I’ll do anything and everything within my power to prevent him from learning what I am.

A scoff echoes from one of my mates in the temporary silence as my fathers wait for me to respond. Flynn turns his head slowly to River, and my eyes ping between the two alphas.

“Are you serious? You’re going to accuse Kya of losing all sense when *you’re* the ones who went ahead with that party? Even after receiving reports that Jameson and his pack had crossed the borders? You could’ve told *us* about the threat too,

but you didn't. If we'd known, we could've protected our mate. We would've been on high alert. You're not fit to be the Alpha of a pack." His voice lowers with each sentence until each word is practically a growl.

"Riv—"

"No, Kya." He cuts me off, his expression softens as his mismatched gaze snaps to me. The brown and blue of his heterochromia is barely visible in the low light. "They failed you. We failed you. *I* failed you. I have a lot to make up for, Banphrionsa, and I plan to start by ensuring you'll be safe and living in a pack with an Alpha who actually cares about you and your best interests. An Alpha who, although stubborn and sometimes puts his foot in his mouth, would set the world on fire and gift you the moon if you asked." He turns back to Flynn, all the softness and warmth leaving his face, his gaze turning hard and cold as he locks eyes with my father. "Flynn Wilson, I challenge you."

"River!"

"What the fuck?!"

"No fucking way."

"How *dare* you!" Connor's roar drowns out the shocked exclamations from my mates and brothers. Flynn says nothing in response; he just keeps staring at River. Neither alpha blinks, and as the voices around me drop off once more, it occurs to me that this is more than a staring contest. It's a dominance battle, the first to look away will be submitting to the other. If Flynn loses, he'll no longer be the Alpha of the Wilson pack, and Connor would no longer be the Omega. As River's fated mate, I would be. *Fuck that.*

"Stop it, both of you," I hiss across the room. "Changing your pack's Alpha is not helpful right now."

"It's too late, Li-la, the challenge has been issued," Connor says with a resigned sigh, not taking his eyes off the silent battle. "Just be grateful it's not a physical dominance fight. Those are to the death."

“Fine.” I retort sharply. “Well, while you two have your alpha measuring contest, I’ll go back to getting unchained so I can free everyone else. You know, something *helpful*.”

“And how do you plan on doing that, Petal?”

I snap my head to the now open doorway. How did I miss the sound of it opening? I meet the dark gaze of Fjord Jameson. His green eyes flick over to River and Flynn before returning to me; the edge of his lips twitch with a smirk, and he quirks a heavy, black brow.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” I shrug and remember to wince as if the silver chains affect me like they would any other shifter. Fjord steps towards me, his t-shirt pulling across his broad shoulders, though not as broad as my bear mates. His eyes are alight with curiosity and challenge as he takes me in. A grunt from Flynn and River pulls my attention back to them and away from the unknown shifter.

River and Flynn are no longer looking at each other, and their expressions are guarded giving me no idea who won. Scanning the faces of Connor and my other fated mates does nothing to enlighten me either, but I’m not about to ask who the Alpha of the Wilson pack is with the Jameson heir present.

“Ah, Fjord, good you’re here already,” Henrick acknowledges his son as he enters the room, closely followed by Brody. Growls rise up from my fathers at the sight of their old Beta.

“Flynn, Connor. You know, you really should have listened when I tried to help you. If you hadn’t mated little Kylie’s mother and stolen the Jameson pack’s rightful omega, all of this,” Brody waves his hands to encompass the room and chains, “wouldn’t have needed to happen.”

My laughter bubbles up; I try to hold it in. I really do. But even after all this time, they still believe my mother was an omega. A chuckle escapes and another quickly follows it.

“You think this situation is *funny*, little omega?” Henrick storms across the room and backhands me with enough force

my head snaps to the side. A gasp leaves my lips, but it doesn't kill the amusement I find at their stupidity.

Henrick grips a fistful of my violet hair, wrenching my head to the side and exposing my neck and Casper's claiming bite.

"Just like your whore of a mother, mating outside of the one marked for you. Mating multiple males. *Disgusting*. Was that just her influence, or are all omegas filthy sluts?"

"Firstly, my mother wasn't an omega—she was a beta, which is why she never had a heat, dumbass—and she wasn't a whore. Women like sex just as much, if not more, than men. Pretty sure there have been studies to prove it too. Secondly, sorry to burst your bubble, Alpha Dickhead, but I'm mated to three out of six of my fated mates. Check their fucking wrists; the marks match. So get over yourself. Let us go, and piss the fuck off."

"Impossible." He spits the word, jaw clenched and anger burning in his eyes as he looks at me.

"No, not impossible, because, ya know, it's happened. And I plan on completing the bonds with the other three. Maybe a couple of them at the same time," I muse aloud, tilting my head to the side and letting my mind wander off down that enticing path for a moment. "Still can't call me a whore though."

"I will call you whatever I want, *daughter*."

I gag dramatically at Henrick's statement. Am I being ridiculous and overly antagonistic? Yes, yes, I am. I'm hoping if he's focused on me, he won't think of using my brothers against me.

"She's not your daughter, you pathetic bastard!" Flynn cries, spittle flying from his lips as he strains against his chains.

"Not biologically, no. She will be, though, via the fates." Henrick steps closer to me, reaching out and stroking a finger along my cheek. I jerk my head away and glare up at him. "They selected you as the saviour of my pack. The omega to

save us.” Well, it’s official—not that I needed confirmation—Henrick Jameson is certifiably insane.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Knox snaps, and a slow, maniacal smile spreads across Henrick’s lips as he beckons behind him.

“Fjord, come here. Show them.”

Fjord strides forward, his body language exuding cocky arrogance, while his mouth forms a sneer as he looks down at me. My eyes are drawn to his wrist as he holds it out, rolling up the sleeve of his plaid shirt.

“No.” The word leaves my lips with no conviction, just whispered horror.

“Kya, what is it?”

“Älskling? Answer us.”

“Say something!”

Axel, Casper, and River fire their questions at me one after the other. Henrick chuckles darkly as I fail to answer my mates. Even after he pulls Fjord around and I hear the intakes of breath, the shouts of denial, from my fathers, brothers, and fated, I still stare at the empty space where Fjord’s wrist had been.

What the fuck were the fates thinking? Why would they mark the son of my enemy as one of my mates?

## CHAPTER 2



# KYA



If Henrick knew his son was my fated mate, why didn't he have us interact while I was here? He kept us completely separate from the rest of the pack. We only ever saw the men who would *visit* Mum.

A dark chuckle from the Jameson Alpha breaks through my thoughts.

“So you see, you *will* be my daughter. But first, we need to know your animal.” He moves back in front of me, reaching down to grip my chin.

Henrick tilts my head back until I meet his gaze, then strokes his thumb across my cheek before speaking again. “Well, little omega, will you make this easy on yourself and tell me what I want to know? Or will we have to get... creative? You're not a wolf, like Aurelia—”

“Don't you *dare* say her name! You have no right after what you put her through!” Connor shouts. Henrick steps back, dropping his hand from my face and sending a pulse of his Alpha power out, causing my omega father to whine before falling silent.

“What *I* put her through? She was *my* mate! We grew up together. Our ceremony was all planned. Then I was sent on an assignment for the Council, tracking a group of hunters with the aim to free those they'd taken for their twisted experiments, and when I returned, she was gone from our home and wearing *your* claiming bites!”

“You were gone for six years! She thought you were dead. Even if she hadn’t, nothing she did or didn’t do excuses the treatment she received at your hands after you kidnapped her and Kyliana!” Flynn screams, his face flushing red and neck tendons sticking out as he argues with Henrick, but the Jameson Alpha doesn’t appear to be listening.

Henrick turns back to face me; bending down, he takes a fistful of my hair and brings it to his nose, inhaling deeply. “Definitely not a wolf. So what are you, little omega?” He locks eyes with me; a maniacal gleam shines in his gaze before he roars, “Tell me!”

I’m proud of myself for not flinching and instead run my tongue across my teeth. I contemplate spitting in his face, but that will piss him off and might be enough for him to consider using someone against me.

“Well, there’s not much fun in just telling you what you want to know. Plus, I doubt you’d believe me, so…” I shrug, trying to appear nonchalant.

“Kya, no!” Ryder and Brooks shout out, glaring at me.

“We’ll have to get creative, then…” His words trail off as there’s a knock on the door. Fjord makes his way across the room to open it.

“Sorry to interrupt, but, Alpha, sir?”

“What is it?” Henrick doesn’t turn, keeping his focus on me while addressing his pack member.

“Erm, it’s the human girl, Alpha. Sh-she’s being difficult and demanding to speak with you.”

“Henny? Is he in there? Henny!” Tilly’s voice sends rage flooding through me anew.

*Henny?* I’m not sure if I want to gag or laugh at the ridiculous nickname. Henrick growls, shoving my head back as he releases me and stands.

“Fjord, come with me.” They both exit the room, and I focus to catch what’s being said.

“Henny, there you are. No one will tell me where Kya is. You promised she’d be safe with you, is she? Is she safe now?”

Brody’s hand clamps down over my mouth, and my words are too muffled for Tilly to hear as Henrick leads her away from the room.

“Of course, your friend is safe now, baby. She just needs some time to adjust. You were amazing at helping reunite us. I’m so *very* lucky to have you. I just need to finish up some things here, but Fjord will escort you back to my rooms.”

I bite down on Brody’s hand, pushing my teeth to shift, to inflict as much damage as possible.

“Fucking shit!” He wrenches his hand free, slapping me hard across the face with the other as Henrick re-enters the room. The Alpha scowls at me.

“A true pack Omega would never be as forthright as you. We’ll have to break you before you can take on the position. I doubt it will take long, and then your retraining can begin; just like with your mother.” Henrick pauses, waiting to see if I’ll respond. I’m not sure whether or not I disappoint him when I stare ahead, keeping my expression as blank as possible.

“Brody.” He snaps his fingers, and the gorilla shifter storms over to the door, pushing it open and gesturing for the two men waiting in the corridor to enter. They stalk towards me as the room erupts with shouts of protest from my mates and fathers. They’ve caught up to what my brothers had already realised—when Alpha Jameson said they’d get creative, he meant I was in for a world of pain.

The rough hands of one newcomer grab at me, latching onto my biceps, while the other dons a thick pair of leather gloves and removes the chains. Brute number one pulls me up from the chair. I kick out, twisting my body, trying to break free, but another set of hands joins the first, each now taking one of my arms. Their grip is painfully tight as they half drag, half carry me out of the room. Henrick and Brody both wear matching gleeful expressions—which is never a good sign.

I continue twisting and thrashing my body, kicking out at the two shifters holding me. I can't break their hold. If I try to shift, they could easily overpower me or worse.

And isn't that what they want? To see my animal? Though why that matters, I'm not sure. Henrick is completely unhinged, so I really shouldn't try to make sense of anything he's doing.

I'm carried into another room, my eyes latching onto the drain in the middle of the concrete floor.

*A fucking drain.*

My attention returns to the present when a powerful blast of cold water hits me full in the face. The shock pulls a small shriek from my lips. Low rumbling male laughter from the goons holding me has me renewing my struggles.

"Feisty thing for being so small," Brody muses, lowering the now-empty bucket.

*Laugh it up, dickhead.*

Low chuckles from all the males renew as the two brutes holding me on either side hoist me up into the air so my feet dangle above the ground.

"Strap her to the chair." Brody's command cuts through the air, and my eyes snap up, latching onto the chair in question. It's wide, hard, solid wood, but what has me channelling every ounce of my strength into escaping their grasps is the restraints. Metal cuffs of silver with four thin hooks lay open on the chair's arms. A single bar of wood runs between the front legs with another set of metal cuffs in the middle and one on each side. They'll either lock my ankles together or spread them wide apart.

"Behave, or we'll bring in one of those runts you call a brother. I'm sure once their blood's dripping on the floor, you'll be a good little omega and do as you're told," Brody goads.

My nostrils flare as I try to suppress my rage. I won't let this sick fuck touch a hair on my brothers' heads, but I'm also not going to allow myself to be abused. I'm still dressed,

though, so maybe they're not planning on assaulting me yet. I just can't bring myself to trust Brody—or any Jameson pack member. I know I'm not leaving this room, let alone this compound, without new trauma.

The two brutes force me into the chair, securing my wrists and then my ankles—thankfully on the middle bar, so my legs are closed.

“Nice to see you can follow directions. That should make your training quicker.” Brody taps a finger against his chin as he looks down at the table next to him. I can't see what's laid out on it, but I don't feel any surprise when he picks up a sharp, jagged blade. “Of course, we'll still have to be thorough. Need to ensure you're suitably docile and broken before you can be mated to the future Alpha.”

The door opens, and Henrick walks in with an infuriating air of confidence—no, arrogance—as he heads towards me.

“Now, before we start, I'll ask nicely, just this once; what is your animal?”

“Not my Alpha, not my mate, not my friend... So, I'm not telling you jack shit. Go suck a duck's dick.”

With a growl, Henrick's hand snaps up, covering my mouth and nose.

“You think this is a joke? You think I won't force the answers from you? Do not test me, omega.” As he speaks, he increases the pressure, completely cutting off my ability to breathe. “You will break. You will *beg* for me and mine and *not* just when you're in heat.”

My heart rate increases, and his grin widens at the sound.

“We'll try this one last time. What. Is. Your. Animal?” He imbues the question with his Alpha command; my omega wants to answer, but there's no compulsion to force me to do so. He drops his hand, standing up straight, looking down at me with a smug expression. He thinks he's won.

I lick my lips and glance around the room at Brody and the two guards before returning to stare at Alpha Henrick. Defiantly meeting his gaze, I take a deep breath.

“My animal is,” his eyes spark with triumph as I speak. “None. Of. Your. *Fucking* business.”

Henrick’s face contorts with rage. He slams his hands onto my shoulders, spraying me with his saliva as he rages in my face.

“You will tell me!”

“Alpha, I’m sure we can get it out of one of the others—or we can use them against her. Little Kylie was always so soft-hearted when it came to others. She cried for a week when one of the deformed runts—”

“Trevor was *not* deformed!” I cut across Brody. I may have been young, but I still remember Trevor. He’d been one of my best friends; there weren’t many children in my fathers’ pack. Trevor was a few years older than me. He was only nine when he was in a car accident and lost his leg. Within a week, he was gone.

“What would *you* know?” Brody sneers. “You were a child. That pup would have never shifted, never joined a hunt. He would have been a burden on any pack. A liability. Going to the hu—rehab facility was the best thing for him.”

I open my mouth to argue, but Henrick grips my jaw, forcing me to focus my attention back on him.

“Enough, Kyliana. The only reason for you to speak is to answer our questions. If you don’t, then I have some friends who will be delighted to spend time with you. Do whatever you need to do to get her animal to emerge,” he orders. My eyes jump from one male to the next while I wiggle my ankles and wrists, testing the tightness of my restraints. My left wrist isn’t as restricted, and I glance down at the cuff.

“Go ahead, try to shift. Those cuffs are silver. You won’t complete the shift before we subdue you, but you’ll have answered the Alpha’s question,” one of the guards says with a smirk.

I freeze my movements, flicking my gaze back up to find all four men looking at me. The guard who spoke steps towards me, eliciting a growl from Brody.

“Come on, little omega. If you don’t tell us, I can’t prevent what will happen next.” His voice is warm and soft, coaxing my omega to the surface. If he thinks I’m that easy to manipulate, I’m, quite frankly, insulted.

“Do. Your. Worst.” I grind the words out between clenched teeth. He sighs, shoulders drooping for a moment before he straightens them again.

“She stays clothed.” The Alpha command pours from Henrick. Brody’s nostrils flare, and the ferocity of the anger and hate in his gaze has me sinking into my chair for a moment. Only a moment, though, because as soon as I realise what I’m doing, I straighten my spine. Never show a predator you fear them; don’t give them power over you. That’s what my mum used to say.

“She’ll stay clothed.” Brody acknowledges, and as if that was all he was waiting for, the Jameson Alpha nods before leaving the room. Silence descends after the door clicks shut. Brody stares down at me for a few moments; a malicious smirk promising pain plays on his lips.

“Mitchell, Davies, you can both leave. Little Kylie isn’t ready for an audience... yet.” He places a hand above the cuffs on each of my wrists and leans down until his black eyes are level with mine. His smirk blooms into a grin full of sinister and malevolent intent; everything inside me is screaming to head-butt him, spit in his face, or bite his nose off. Okay, maybe not that; I don’t want any part of him in my mouth.

“Well, now then, looks like it’s just you and me, little Kylie. Let’s see if we can’t get you talking.” He raises the knife he picked up earlier, pressing the jagged blade to my cheek.

## CHAPTER 3



# FJORD



I pause as the door closes behind me. Inhaling briefly, trying to calm my tiger. All he wants to do is storm back into that room and shred my father and Brody to ribbons for even considering touching our mate. But we can't; we have a part to play.

“Come on, you don't disobey Alpha.” I refuse to look at the human woman. I'm too on edge as it is, barely holding onto my control without having to deal with my mate's pathetic excuse for a friend. *Tilly*.

She reaches out to take my arm—as if I would escort her around like my father does. Turning sharply, I avoid her touch and hide the snarl that curls my lips while heading towards my father's rooms.

“Slow down. I can't walk as fast as you, and I want to know where Kya is. Where is my bestie?”

*Bestie? She's not serious?!*

She sold Kya out so easily—too easily. That's not a friend, let alone a 'bestie'. Once I work out how to get Kya, her brothers, the McBeartys, and Wilson twins free, I'll definitely be having words with my mate. No one needs friends that sell you out for withered-up cock—or *any* cock.

“*Fjord*, why won't you *answer* me?” Has she always been this whiny? How does Kya put up with her?

“You drugged your friend and handed her over to us. Why feign interest in her welfare now?”

“She’s my best friend! Of course, I care about her welfare. Henny said the men she was with were manipulating her, messing with her head. I didn’t want to believe it at first, but then her messages were so weird. They didn’t sound like her. Ryder and Brooks were suddenly best buds with the kid they had a fight with—none of it made sense. Kya would never just disappear for months like that.”

“Do you think *maybe* Kya isn’t ready to see you yet? From what I’ve heard, she’s feisty and has a bit of a temper...” I look back at Tilly, keeping my expression as neutral as possible. Her steps falter, and she chews her lip.

“Did I do the wrong thing?” Her words are little more than a whisper and quiet enough that I can pretend I didn’t hear them.

“Alpha’s rooms are here. You can unlock it, but I’d advise against wandering around. He’ll come and meet you when he’s free.” I hold the door open, not crossing the threshold, releasing it as soon as Tilly enters. I double-check the lock has engaged before striding away.

I never wanted Kya back here. After she escaped with her brothers all those years ago, I thought she’d be safe from shifters like my father. Turns out her own fathers are probably just as bad. I should count us lucky that the Wilson twins despise Henrick. If they’d worked together... Well, there’d be no hope of Kya having a normal life. All three of them see her as just an omega. They focus on what she can bring to a pack. They want her mated and popping out pups left and right.

“Yo, Fjord, you okay, man?” Blinking, I look up and notice that I’ve walked down to my father’s office while lost in my thoughts.

“Yeah. Yeah, Tan, I’m good, just waiting my turn.” I force a smile for the lynx shifter before slipping the mask of the loyal heir back into place. I keep walking, taking the long route back through the halls to where Kya’s family are being held. There are many within the pack who disagree with how Henrick is going about securing a shifter to fill the role of Omega. I’m not sure if Tan is one of them or not.

I've heard mutterings late at night when patrolling the dorms. Some shifters think we should try petitioning the Council again. Jump through their hoops to secure meetings with those of omega designation who don't hold the position of pack Omega.

At one point, I would have agreed with them. There are enough packs out there that at least one must have more than two omega-ranked shifters—one to hold the role and a spare in case anything happens to the first. I've sat in enough meetings now, though, to suspect the Council are lying, or at least embellishing, the number of omegas manifesting.

Now my focus is on working towards a coup to overthrow Henrick and Brody. Cull the pack of those siding with them, and eventually, hopefully, prove myself to my mate. It's a long uphill battle, but we have a plan, and only knowing a select few identities of those involved is part of it. A security precaution so if one person is ever caught, or someone joins in the hopes of turning us over to my father, the whole plan won't be compromised.

A scream rings out farther down the hall, and my head snaps in that direction. My tiger roars in my mind as Brody's scent and omega blood reach me. My feet carry me past my original destination. Gritting my teeth, I open the door and take in the scene before me.

Brody hisses, throwing a chain across the floor. His other hand is wrapped around Kya's throat. Her eyes roll back as she struggles to remain conscious. Bruises darken her usually pale skin, and blood drips down her cheek and cut up arms.

"Should've known you'd have a fae charm like the twins." Brody's attention hasn't left Kya. Bending down, I scoop up the chain. Clenching my jaw at the silver burn, I quickly deposit the chain in my pocket. The Beta inhales deeply, taking in her intoxicating scent of ginger, apple, and vanilla, and chuckles. "Well, well, well, isn't that a pretty scent—but what are you, Kylie?"



## RIVER

It took a while for us to all calm down after they dragged Kya from the room—especially Casper, Axel, and Lucian. We're now all sitting in relative quiet. Only the ambient noises of the compound and the creaking of chairs from trying to relieve the burning pressure of the silver chains breaks the silence.

Her defiance has been running through my head on repeat. The way she snapped back at the Jameson Alpha, telling him she planned to complete the bond with all of us, including me.

The small smile tilting my lips falls away as I recall her expression of horror and shock when Fjord revealed his fate mark. My wolf is restless, pacing inside me, wanting to reach out to her. To offer support to her through whatever they're subjecting her to.

I've never regretted not having a mind-link with her more than I do now.

"So any ideas how we get out of here? This silver is getting more than uncomfortable now," Knox asks in a low voice. "And I don't trust them with Kya. She won't break, but I'm worried about what they'll put her through to try..." He shudders, and then hisses at the pain from the chains.

"Sounds like a question for the pack Alpha, doesn't it, River?" Connor responds, his voice frosty enough that I wouldn't be surprised if the air around him dropped a degree or two. I'm not going to engage him. I should have challenged his twin as soon as I knew Kya was mine. Taking the position—becoming the pack Alpha—is only step one towards proving I will be a good mate. A worthy mate.

"Ryder, Brooks, we never asked before, but do you have a mind-link with Kya?" My question has Flynn scoffing.

"Of course, they don't. You need an alpha to hold the link \_\_\_"

“Actually, we did. It makes a lot of white noise, though. Fi said the buzz makes her feel like she’s getting a root canal.” Ryder cuts Flynn off, not even sparing the ex-Alpha a glance.

“We didn’t use it on pack lands for that reason. It’s easily detected—though, now Kya is mated to three alphas, it might have balanced out.” Brooks tilts his head to the side, a faraway look glazing his eyes. I can’t tell if he’s analysing the risk or simply trying to link with Kya. “There’s always some residual static in the air with any mind-link, but we could try.”

The door bangs open, cutting off our conversation, and the two guards who dragged Kya out earlier enter with Henrick. The Alpha steps into the centre of our semi circle so all ten of us can see him.

“I’ve no doubt Brody will get the information I want from Kyliana. However, if one of you were to answer the question for me, then I can call him off.” His gaze scans across us all before he steps closer to Axel. Henrick lowers his voice, his tone becoming more menacing as he looks down at my pack-brother.

“You’re fully mated. Do you think you’ll feel what my Beta does to her? Will you feel her pain as if it were your own?” He moves along until he’s in front of Casper. “Will you really let her suffer the indignity of what Brody will do? Surely, as her mate, you’ll tell me what I want to know to save her?”

“We’re not telling you jack shit,” Casper spits out.

“You would let your mate suffer? Abandon her to Brody’s mercy?” Henrick shakes his head, clicking his tongue against his teeth.

“You can stop pretending you care. She’s strong and smart. Kya won’t break for you,” I say, drawing his attention to me.

“You’re making the same mistake we did.” Knox tilts his head back to look the Jameson Alpha in the eye.

“And what mistake was that?”

“You’re underestimating her,” Kota answers.

Henrick stares at my snow leopard pack-brother. The Alpha's face turns red with rage, and his lips curl back from his teeth in a vicious snarl. He lunges forward, gripping Kota by the throat and toppling the chair backwards.

“You dare—”

A piercing scream full of pain and anguish rends the air. Every head snaps to the door, and the room fills with shouts of Kya's name and nicknames.

“Looks like you're the ones who underestimated my Beta.” Henrick slams Kota's head against the floor, long black strands of his bun coming loose from the force, before pushing back to his feet. “Pick him up. See what information you can get from them before our fae guest arrives,” he orders the guards, then turns, striding to the exit with a smug grin playing across his lips.

The door slams behind him. Movement from the two guards pulls my attention, and a growl starts up from my twin as they approach his lover.

We have to get out of this room, find Kya, and then burn this place to the fucking ground.



## FJORD

“That's enough.” A sliver of my alpha command reinforces my words. The gorilla shifter looks towards me, not releasing his grip on my mate.

“Take a walk, Fjord. Your animal won't cope with what needs to happen here.”

“I'm not leaving, Brody. You can try and pull rank, but your dominance is beta; mine is alpha. Challenge me, and you *will* lose.”

“Are you threatening me, pup?” He straightens and stalks across the small room to me. “You think you can order me about? You're not Alpha yet, and I'm the Beta of this pack.”

He slams a fist across his chest, abandoning any thought of not antagonising him, I roll my eyes.

“It’s not a threat, Brody.”

“Then what was it, huh? Because it sure sounded like you were threatening me.” He steps into my personal space, trying—and failing—to intimidate me.

“I’m reminding you of the facts, so you won’t do something foolish like losing your position as Beta.” I square up against the gorilla shifter.

“Alpha tasked me with breaking little Kylie. You need to back off and let me do my job.”

“She can’t answer you if she’s unconscious.” I wave a hand at the woman in question to prove my point. Brody turns and actually looks at her face, grunting when he sees her eyes closed and her head lolling to one side.

“She’s faking.” He stomps back over and grips her hair in his fist, tugging her head up. “Wakey, wakey, Kylie. We’re not done yet.”

“You’re done, Brody.” I take a step closer to them; my animal surges forward when the gorilla shifter raises a hand to hit my mate again. *Not a chance.* I snatch his wrist and squeeze until he releases his fist.

“What’s going on here?” My father’s voice drifts from the open doorway.

“Your pup is interfering.” Brody continues to glare at me, his jaw clenched.

“Stop being dramatic. I’m merely keeping the omega alive.” I glance back at my father, dismissing Brody as a threat, which causes the Beta to growl at the insult. “She’s not healing quickly enough; if he keeps this up, we won’t get any answers and risk killing her. You said yourself the pack needs an Omega, and her fate mark matching mine means she’s our best shot.”

Henrick moves closer to my mate, and I suppress the urge to vocalise my displeasure. Fighting with my animal side is

new. We used to agree, but since finding Kya and now kidnapping her, we've been at odds. He wants to act now, but I know we need to be smart, just a little longer playing this role, and then we can destroy this pack. Eradicate those who would use her and rebuild as a healthy stable group.

My father tilts Kya's head from side to side, looking closely at the bruises and cuts across her exposed skin and tracing a finger along the thin red mark where Brody ripped her necklace from her neck.

"All this damage, and she still didn't tell you her animal? Did she attempt to shift?"

"No. She barely made a sound. She screamed once, which is when your pup came in," Brody answers.

"Hmm, perhaps a different approach is needed." Henrick straightens and looks over at us, his eyebrow quirking upon seeing my grip on Brody's wrist. "Let him go, Fjord. Take the omega, clean her up, and then put her in a separate room from the others for the night."

"As you wish, Alpha." I nod before dropping Brody's wrist and moving to the side table. Pulling on the thick leather gloves, I release the silver cuffs from my mate and scoop her into my arms. She's so tiny. So fragile, but not. Turning, I head to the door, exiting the room and making my way through the compound until I reach the stairs leading to my rooms.

Scenting the air to ensure no one is following or nearby, I let my mask fall, shifting her weight to one arm and tuck a strand of dark violet hair behind her ear with my free hand. I thought the silver restraints weren't affecting her the same as they were the others, but her healing's too slow. Worry that something is seriously wrong with my mate gnaws at me. I'll get her some food and a shower. I'll take care of her. My animal purrs his contentment and agreement with my decision as I open the door to my rooms and lay Kya on the sofa.



## CHAPTER 4

# TILLY



*What the fuck did I do?*

*Shit. Shit, shit, fucking shit. I'm the worst friend in the world.*

Pacing the expansive living room of the Alpha suite, my thoughts fire in multiple directions. My thirsty bitch va-jayjay overrode my brain, and now I'm an accessory to multiple abductions and—if that scream was anything to go by—torture. I have to *do* something. I don't know the guys, but that scream wasn't a guy, I don't think?

Even if it wasn't Kya, someone had made that bloodcurdling sound. The pain, anguish, and desperation in it will probably haunt me until the end of time. If it was my best friend, then it's my fault. I might not have inflicted the pain on her, but my actions brought her here.

*Idiot. Stupid fucking moron.*

I pause my steps, chewing the inside of my cheek. A frown pulls my brows, and I don't even care about the possibility of wrinkles. I should have known better. I should have suspected something when Henrick was so friendly with Anderson.

*Fuck, I drugged my best friend and handed her over to psychopaths.*

Thinking back on it now, with the full benefit of hindsight, it's so easy to see how much of a fucking moron I was. Kya had disappeared with the bartender and then Malik introduced me to Henrick as I was getting ready to leave. Trusting Malik that night might be one of my biggest mistakes. At the time,

Henrick seemed so sweet, taking me to the late-night burger van, buying me cheesy chips to help soak up some of the booze.

A month of being wined and dined and multiple orgasms clouded my judgement further. Then he flipped the switch, showed his true colours. His true species.

He's not the first asshole who hid his abusive nature to suck me in. I thought I would've learnt from my past, but I guess not. Though, maybe the whole 'not actually human' thing helped him hide. Which is something I can't unpack just yet. My brain can't handle processing that fully on top of everything else.

Especially since I almost fell for his bullshit *again*. Henrick laid it on thick about how the McBeartys and Wilsons were going to harm Kya, force her into matings. Ryder and Brooks were too calm for that to be true though. They'd made friends with Cole.

The plan to drug Kya and bring her here seemed like a way to get the McBeartys and Wilsons to put Henrick down. Kya knows about my past. Once I can explain what happened—how I knew I wouldn't be able to just run from Henrick like I did my ex—she'll maybe understand and forgive me. Though, I should have realised they weren't going to leave strong shifters free to come after us.

That's not happening now, considering I overheard they had them all here and chained in silver. They can't help, but maybe *I* can. There has to be a way I can help Kya. My pacing resumes, a copper tang hits my tongue, and I realise I've chewed my cheek to the point of bleeding.

*Think, Tilly. Focus and think.*

The longer I'm here, the more the others ignore me. When Henny—Henrick—first brought me to the compound, I'd been under heavy scrutiny. I could always feel eyes on me. It had made me uncomfortable, but I'd pushed the thoughts aside. Told myself I was being paranoid. I should've known better. Now, though, they mostly ignore me. I can walk around freely without a guard or 'escort,' as Henrick called them.

Rolling my eyes that I ever believed that lie, I turn to the main door. Kya will need a map of this place. I can do that. Under the guise of taking a stroll to pass the time, I'll wander the various halls. Make note of any cameras or security features. I don't know how I'll get the information to her, and she might never trust me again, not that I'd blame her.

If I do nothing, though... Nope. Not an option.

Steeling myself, rolling my shoulders back and straightening my spine, I stride to the door. One deep breath to calm my nerves, I flip the lock and pull it open, slipping through into the hall. Flashing a smile at the guard, I turn and begin walking.

"Where you off to, little miss?" I glance back at the large man.

"Just a walk. It's boring in there on my own, and I haven't gotten my steps in today. Some of us have to work to stay in shape." I sigh, letting my eyes trail over his broad chest and down to his combat boot clad feet.

"There're some visitors arriving. I'll escort you to make sure they don't give you any hassle."

"Why would visitors give me hassle?" I'm genuinely curious this time. He flashes me a small smile.

"How many fae have you met before?"

"Fae? As in fairies?" His smile falters as his eyebrows climb to his hairline before dropping back into a neutral expression.

"Uh, yeah. I'm definitely coming with you." His long legs close the distance between us in two strides, his hand hovers against my lower back but doesn't make contact. "Don't mention fairies around the fae. They're more like the old Celtic myths than the Disney versions."

"Um, okay. So, bad?"

"No." He draws the word out, canting his head from side to side. "They have a different moral code. They're all fairly mischievous, and they like various levels of chaos. Think of it

as... shit, I don't think I know how to explain this to a girl like you."

"A girl like me? What kind of girl is that?"

"One that doesn't understand gaming or *Dungeons and Dragons*."

"I know some *Dungeons and Dragons* stuff. I've never played, but I've watched it online."

"Really?" I huff in annoyance at his scepticism.

"Yes. Why is that so surprising?"

"Dunno." He shrugs. "Just is." The corner of his mouth twitches with suppressed amusement. I roll my eyes at him before continuing to walk.

"Anyway, the fae?"

"Right. Think of the Seelie court as chaotic neutral and the Unseelie as chaotic evil. Best bet is to avoid both unless you can't."

"O-kay, I'll keep that in mind and do my best to stay out of the way." I let that sink in for a bit, focusing instead on looking for cameras as we head back down to the ground floor.

We walk in mutual silence for a little longer before my need to ask questions gnaws at me.

"What kind are visiting?" I glance up to see him raising one brow at me.

"Think you had part of that conversation in your pretty little head there. Want to fill me in?"

"The fae. Are they Seelie or Unseelie?" He lets out a gust of breath and runs a hand over his face and through his short, blonde hair.

"Fucking hell, Tilly," he mutters.

"You know my name?"

"Yeah." He frowns at me for a moment before understanding lights his face. "You don't know mine? I'm like,

one of what? Three? Four? Enforcers who have been assigned to your guard since Alpha first brought you here.”

“Oh. Well, now I feel even more shit.” I am the worst person. No time for pity parties though.

“More shit?”

“Hmm, yeah. Don’t worry about it.” I wave him off, take a deep breath, and exhale slowly before looking back up at him. “So what’s your name?”

“Tanner. Everyone just calls me Tan, though. And to answer your previous question, I’m not sure. I’d guess Seelie, since I think they work with the Council, as well as with some of the hunter factions. Honestly, though, it could go either way.”



## KYA

A groan slips past my lips as I curl into myself, burrowing into the softness beneath me. Everything hurts. My eyes snap open as it registers that I’m no longer restrained to the hard chair. The Jameson heir is sitting on a coffee table in front of me. His legs are spread with his hands clasped loosely together between them.

“Easy. Can I help you sit up, or would you prefer I keep my distance?”

“I’m fine,” I grunt. It takes longer than I care to admit to manoeuvre myself into a sitting position, but he lets me do it on my own.

“Yeah, that was painful to watch. I won’t push you into accepting help, though—yet.” He mutters the last part, and I choose to ignore it for now.

“Where am I?” Looking around, I take in the neutral cream walls, hardwood floors, and dark brown furniture.

“My rooms. No one will bother you here. Do you want a shower or to eat first?” he asks as he stands and walks into the

kitchenette.

“What?” I turn my head, not wanting to lose sight of him. A hiss escaping as all my muscles protest the sudden movement. He grabs a glass from the cupboard above the sink and fills it with water before returning.

“Hey, careful. Brody did a lot of damage in a short amount of time. I got there after you screamed and passed out.” His words trail off, and his eyes sweep over my body. “Here, drink this. You’re not healing properly. You probably need something to eat. I can make you something.”

He holds his free hand up to placate me when I open my mouth to argue.

“You can supervise and dictate my every move. I know you have no reason to trust me, but you’re my mate.”

I scoff at his words but take the water, cradling it in my hands as I watch him.

“I have mates already.”

“You do.” He nods slowly, thoughtfully. “Getting you all out is gonna be tricky. I’m not having you stay here, though. Henrick is fucking unhinged. He needs to be put down.”

“You expect me to believe you’ll kill your own father?”

“Sperm donor.” He folds his arms across his chest and sits on the coffee table again. “He didn’t give a damn about any of us kids until I manifested as an alpha. Then I was taken from my mother and began my training.”

“Right. It’s going to take more than that to make me confide *anything* in you. If you think the whole fake affection thing will make me talk, or tell you what my animal is, you’re wrong.”

“That’s fine. I don’t really care what you shift into. You have seven alpha-ranked mates and two beta brothers. You escaped this hellhole once and survived on the run for years. Whatever you are doesn’t change that. Though you probably should be more careful about your choice of friends going forward.”

“She called him *Henny*.” A shudder of repulsion runs through me, and Fjord grimaces.

“Yeah. She whines all the fucking time too. Henrick isn’t even nice to her. I’d have suspected he had a fae use magic to charm her, but the one he’s working with wasn’t in the area when he and Tilly became whatever the fuck they are.”

“He’s working with a fae?”

“Yeah. Not the same one you work with at the gallery though.” My shoulders slump in relief at not being betrayed by Fi again. I’m still not sure how I feel about her part in my last kidnapping.

“I need to stop being kidnapped. This shit is just getting ridiculous now.”

“No arguments from me, Petal. Oh, here, I figure you’ll be wanting this back.” He stands again, reaching into his pocket with a hiss, and drops my necklace on the table.

“Thanks.” The clasp is bent but not broken, it’s still wearable, but it won’t be very secure.

“You’re welcome. Now, shower or food? I won’t cook anything until you’re out of the bathroom if you want to wash up first.”



Standing in the relatively small bathroom, I contemplate my options. Take a shower, get cleaned up, listen to the son of my enemy—or shift and climb through the air vent, find my mates, brothers, and fathers, free them, and fight our way out of here. Doesn’t really seem like a question, does it?

Turning the shower on, I carefully remove my clothes. I’m healing slowly for a shifter, but still faster than the average human. Shifting should help speed the process along too. Glancing around the room, I spot the vent. Going small enough to fit through will mean leaving my necklace behind. Whilst not ideal, it’s certainly not the end of the world. Brody already ripped it from my neck. Fjord touched it too, so they



both know silver doesn't affect me like it does other shifters. They know I'm an omega, and given Brody's reaction to my scent, it's highly unlikely they'll identify me as a therian.

Still, I'd rather not leave the charm behind. Which means I need to think outside the box a little more. Quickly removing my necklace, I shift into a chipmunk and hastily stuff my necklace into the mouth pouch. Thank the gods it's a small pendant. I climb up the counter onto the sink and jump across to the towel rail. Once I'm above the half tile wall, my progress is much quicker. Sinking my little claws into the plaster, I scurry up to the vent, squeezing through the grate.

I should have at least a ten minute head start, if not more. That's plenty of time to find my way back to the room we were being held in.

My claws make light scratching noises as I scamper along the vent. I have a moment when I reconsider my animal choice as I come up to an intersection that drops down to another floor, but Fjord's rooms aren't likely to be on the same floor as the prisoners—are we prisoners? Maybe captives? Abductees?—anyway, the guys are probably down a floor. So down I go without the aid of gliding, meaning the *thunk* as I land is loud enough to draw attention.

Putting on a burst of speed, I make my way across the newest level of metal, only slowing when I pick up the drone of male voices. I carefully place each step to make as little noise as possible. I can't move silently, but it's pretty close, and my scent is more likely to give away my location anyway. I pause once I'm directly above the room to listen.

“And you have no idea what her scent reminds you of, really?” a melodic male voice I've heard before, but can't place, asks.

“She's not got a scent as such—”

“Then how can you guarantee she is an omega like you claim?” the same melodic voice cuts Henrick off, hissing with annoyance. “If you have called me here simply to waste my time—”

“No. No, of course not. She went into heat. That’s when she claimed the mountain lion. I have detailed reports from those loyal to me within the Wilson pack. She *is* an omega. They just don’t know her animal.”

“Very well. Where is she?”

“With my son. He’s fated to her. They share a mark. Unfortunately, we didn’t get to her before three of the McBearty alphas corrupted her.”

“Hmm, so she has already been claimed. That may cause an issue...” His voice trails off as a door opens, and heavy footsteps enter the room.

“Alpha. Lord Aralar. Sorry to interrupt. Should we single out one of the boys for questioning? I think going after them will make Kylie open up about her animal quicker than if we question one of her mates or fathers,” Brody’s voice asks, reminding me I’m not in the ventilation system to eavesdrop.

“You have many options. I am intrigued. I’d like to meet the mates, fathers, and brothers of this omega.”

“My pack’s Omega, Lord Aralar, she stays here. That was the deal,” Henrick growls as the three of them leave the room. I hurry through the vents, following their progress while remaining as quiet as possible. It won’t do to get caught now.

“Tilly, what are you doing back down here? I thought Fjord escorted you to my rooms.”

“Oh, err, he did but, um, I got bored and thought a walk would help. I haven’t been alone, though, always with an escort—like Tan here.”

“Go back to my rooms. Wait for me there, or you can visit with your boss.” Henrick’s tone drops to a menacing growl, and I’m suddenly curious and a little anxious to know what happened to Principal Anderson.

“St-Stephen? Wh-where is he?” Tilly stutters, and as annoyed as I am with her, stuttering is not something the feisty brunette does. She gave me the drugged water, set me up to be brought back into the Jameson pack, but maybe I wasn’t a

completely awful judge of character? Maybe she'd been manipulated?

“Miss Tilly, allow me to escort you back upstairs.”

“Ye-yes, okay. Thank you, Tan.”

“I'll be up late. Be ready for me,” Henrick murmurs as Tilly passes below me, and I see her tense up at his words. Whether or not she initially liked the man, she definitely doesn't seem to find the thought of waiting up for him appealing. Can't fault her there.

“Anytime today, Alpha Jameson. I know we live long lives, but this monotony is growing tiresome.” The fae male's tone is dry. He almost sounds bored, but there's a sharpness to his words that undermines that assumption. I don't have time to wonder about him though. My focus needs to be on getting the guys free and getting the fuck out of here.

## CHAPTER 5

# RYDER



“How long do you think it’ll be before someone comes to check on us again?” I ask as Brooks casts a sideways glance at me.

“Why?” he hedges.

“Dude, we’ve been here for *hours*, at least. I need a bathroom.” I fidget in my seat, wincing at the burn of the silver chains. I almost wish I’d inherited the therian gene too. Not only would I not feel like the skin on my wrists is slowly melting, but I’d also be able to help free the others. We could bust out of here, find Kya and escape. Daydreaming isn’t going to help us, though.

“Yeah, a bathroom break would be appreciated right about now.” Casper sighs, glaring at the door as though he can summon someone by sheer force of will. The two guards were called away not long after they’d righted Kota’s chair. Small mercy but I doubt it will last. At some point, the Jameson pack will try to use us against Kya. I lean my head back to stare up at the ceiling.

“What was it like before? Do you guys remember?” I’m thrown off by the white-haired bear shifter’s question. It’s not memories I ever focus on; Kya never wanted to discuss our time here, and, well, I was only six when we left.

“I don’t. I was four,” Brooks responds to Casper with a shrug, then hisses again from the chains. “I definitely don’t remember any silver chains, though.”

“No. No chains. Just a cold room with concrete floors. There was a cupboard or something; Mum or Kya would hide us when anyone came to *visit*.” I straighten my head and find all eyes on me. “It’s not a time we talk about. And I was six. The memories are hazy.”

“The person to have asked isn’t here. Probably should have spoke to our sister instead of all arguing and talking over each other,” Brooks states; apparently, being kidnapped makes him bold.

“That’s fair.” Axel nods. “We’re still learning.”

“Some of us more than others.” River sighs.

“That wasn’t a dig towards us, was it, River?” Flynn growls, watching the new Alpha through narrowed eyes.

“If it wasn’t, then it should’ve been. If you’d been more interested in her safety, we wouldn’t be here right now,” Lucian snaps.

“Do not act as if you know *anything* about keeping her safe!” the old pack Alpha spits vehemently.

“Because you two did such a stand-up job.” Knox snorts. “Lucian’s right. You wanted to mate Kya off to us and didn’t care how it happened.”

“How dare you!” Connor hisses, his voice cold and sharp. “An omega needs their mates—”

“*Right*. Having mates is instant security and safety in your eyes.” I glare at my mother’s mates. “Because you both did so well protecting Mum and Kya. That’s why Brooks and I exist.”

The Wilson twins turn cold, rage-filled grey eyes on me, but the door to our spacious prison slams open before they can respond.

I was expecting Henrick to follow Brody into the room. Instead there’s a fae male whose sharp lavender eyes scan each of us as he moves further into the space. Stopping in front of Brooks and me, he runs a finger over his lips before tapping

the digit against his dimpled chin. With a nod, he turns away from us and steps in front of the Wilson twins.

Brooks' sharp inhale has me glancing at him, but his wide-eyed gaze is locked on the fae. No, not the fae, just his wings. Wings! Holy shit. I thought the wings were an embellishment to the old stories. Fi doesn't have any, and we never questioned it again after she informed Brooks in a glacial tone that she wasn't a character from fairytales or Disney and therefore, didn't have wings.

"Do you know which you want to question first?" Henrick asks. I hadn't noticed him entering the room. It makes sense, though; I doubt he would miss the chance to see any of us questioned.

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps? What does that mean? You either know, or you don't." Brody scoffs.

Henrick grabs the larger man's arm and spins him around, dropping his voice to a low snarl. "Brody! That is not how you speak to a fae lord who is assisting our pack."

"Let's start with the fathers." The fae flicks his wrist at Flynn and Connor. "Bring them to the questioning room. I trust it has been cleaned since you finished with the omega?"

*Cleaned. Fuck.*

I share a wide-eyed look with Brooks, while River, Flynn, Kota, and Lucian demand to know what they've done to Kya. Connor and my sister's other mates strain against their chains.

"Yes, Lord Aralar." Henrick bows his head towards the fae male, ignoring us all completely.

"Excellent. Let's get on with this then. I have other duties that will require my attention soon." Aralar turns sharply and walks with so much grace, it's like he's gliding—actually, maybe he is. He does have wings, after all.

Henrick calls in the two guards from before. They collect the key and pair of gloves from beside the door before approaching Connor. One assists Brody in taking a struggling

Connor from the room while the other and Henrick escort an enraged Flynn.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Flynn. We wouldn’t want your twin to suffer for your actions, would we?” The Jameson Alpha smirks. Flynn snarls but doesn’t fight their hold. The guard with the gloves pauses by the door to return them and the key to the small hook there. Arrogant arseholes. Quiet besides a soft scratching and tapping from the vents fills the space after the door bangs shut behind them.

“Well, that was...”

“Unexpected?” Kota finishes Knox’s sentence.

“Yeah.” Knox looks over at Brooks and me. “I’m glad they didn’t take you two, but, well...”

“We seem the obvious choice, yeah. We’ve spent the most time with Kya, we know what kind of shifter she is, and she’d do almost anything to protect us.” Brooks’ words echo my own thoughts.

A small shape works itself through the vent grate above us, dropping down into Casper’s lap, who lets out a strangled yelp. The other McBeartys chuckle, but Casper takes a deep breath, his nostrils flaring before glaring at the chipmunk that’s spooked him with its sudden appearance.

“Not funny, Älskling.”

The chipmunk’s cheeks are huge as it sits on his thigh and pulls a necklace from inside its food pouch. The sound of cracking bones fills the space, and then my sister is sitting on Casper’s lap. My very naked sister.

I look back up at the ceiling, suddenly fascinated with the exposed pipework as Brooks groans.

“Oh, hush, you two. Nudity is part of shifter life,” Kya sighs, and I swear I can hear her rolling her eyes at us.

“We know. But same as you don’t want to see our pasty white arses, we don’t want to see yours,” I point out.

“Especially when we can smell your mates’ reactions to you,” Brooks adds.



“Okay. Fair.”

“Kya, get me out these chains, and you can wear my t-shirt,” Axel’s deep voice mumbles.

“Deal.” We’re all quiet. The only sounds in the room are those of Kya releasing Axel and the ambient building noises.

“Thanks. Unlock the chains and I’ll grab those gloves, so I can help free the others.” Axel’s large shirtless form walks past me, and I look back at our group, taking in the visible bruises littering Kya’s skin.

“What happened?” River asks as Kya moves over to free Brooks.

“Brody used me as a punching bag and pin cushion until Jameson’s heir stopped him. Who won the dominance stare down?” My gaze pings between the two, resting on River.

“I did,” he says quietly.

I look back at my sister. Her face is a blank mask as she works to release the final chain on Brooks’ wrist.

“Okay, not to sound completely self-absorbed, but what does that mean for me?” she asks as Axel makes his way over to River, pulling on the pair of thick-looking gloves. The giant bear shifter kneels down to release his new Alpha’s ankles.

“What do you mean, Bunny?” Lucian rolls his neck, the ensuing pop and crack sounding extremely loud.

Kya pulls Brooks to his feet and moves to me, releasing both of my wrists before answering.

“I have zero interest in being in a pack. Pretty sure we’ve already covered that, *but* I’m the fated mate of the new pack Alpha. I don’t wear River’s bite yet, but I will, eventually, most likely—”

“Once I earn it,” River cuts in. Kya looks over at him briefly before removing the last chain from my ankle.

“Mhmm, anyway. That would make me pack Omega instead of Connor, right? I’d be responsible for the emotional welfare of the entire pack. Which is, what? Fifty shifters?”

“Kya, I’m not going to force you to join the pack. I’m not going to force you to take on the role of pack Omega either. There’ll be teething problems, but I don’t see why Connor can’t continue to fill the position.”

“How about we all focus on finding the Wilson twins and getting the fuck out of here? We can figure out pack dynamics once we’re all safe at home,” Lucian cuts in, and it doesn’t take much for everyone to agree. Kya and Axel continue to move through the group until we’re all free. I rub my wrists, looking to my sister for the next step as she re-secures her necklace, hiding her scent once more.

“So what’s the plan?” I ask, rocking on my heels.

Before anyone can answer me, the room fills with an oppressive blue light.



## KYA

The room tingles with fae magic before the door slams open and Jameson pack members swarm in, filling the space. Henrick, Brody, Fjord, and a fae male I never expected to see again enter behind them.

“Shit,” I mutter, my eyes locking onto Aralar, his hands glowing with the magic he’s casting. I knew the voice sounded familiar, but I didn’t see him from the vents. Why the hell is a Seelie Lord *here*?

“Now, now, little omega, this is not the correct response to our hospitality.” Henrick tuts, walking towards the edge of the blue dome. “How did you manage to get back in here and remove the silver chains without gloves?”

Casper and Knox fidget, edging closer to the barrier. Shooting my hands out, I grab hold of their wrists before they can touch it.

“Don’t.”

“So wise.” Henrick grins, turning back to address Aralar while my mind spirals, trying to put the pieces together. “As you can see, we’re still having some *teething* issues, but they’ll be resolved once the mating is complete and she’s under a firm hand. Omegas must sometimes be broken before they can be allowed amongst a pack.”

“I didn’t realise Kya was the omega in question. How interesting,” Aralar’s melodic voice responds to Henrick, but his gaze never leaves me. “It does answer some questions I’ve had for a while now.”

“Kya?” I glance over to Lucian, who raises a questioning brow and tilts his head towards the fae. “How do you two know each other?”

How do you tell your mates and brothers that the fae helping hold us all captive is also someone who helped ease your past heats? Yeah, think I’ll pass on that discussion for now.

“Oh, we know each other... intimately.” Low growls emanate from the chests of the McBeartys at Aralar’s statement. So much for not having *that* discussion. The fae male’s nostrils flare as he takes a deep breath. “You still have that charmed necklace? Oh, I don’t think there’s a need for that anymore. After all, everyone here knows your designation. Your scent has already flooded the halls. No need to hide anymore, is there?”

With a twist of his hand, the blue dome dissipates, and gold vines of light spring up from the floor, encircling our ankles, moving up our legs until we’re all wrapped tightly and unable to move.

I wish I’d stumbled across him without Henrick and Brody nearby. Maybe then I could’ve tried to bargain with him. Though bargaining with a fae is almost as dangerous as with a demon.

“What an unexpected surprise, Aralar. It’s been years. How are you? How’s court life?” I smile sweetly, canting my head to the side and attempting to look innocent.

“Busy, my dear. So very, very busy,” he mutters, striding forward until he’s standing right in front of me. Long, slender fingers trace across the bite marks on each side of my neck before he unclasps my damaged necklace and slips it into his pocket.

“How did you get it back? Brody there said he ripped a charm from your neck that burnt him as though it were silver.”

“I gave it back to her.” Fjord’s voice cuts through the room.

“Why would you give it back to her? You have no idea what it does,” Brody snaps.

“Mind your place, Beta. Considering while she wore it, we garnered no scent from her, I think it’s pretty bloody obvious what it did. Or do you not remember commenting on how good she smelt after you ripped it from her throat?”

“That doesn’t answer why you gave it back to her, son. Or how she came to be back in this room *without you*,” Henrick queries.

A commotion rises up in the hallway, voices shouting for someone or something to stop. One of the Jameson pack guards stumbles into the room, his shirt half soaked in blood.

“What the fuck happened to you?!” Brody demands.

“The... the omega... the wound... h-hit an artery.” The guard sways, his hand clutching his side. “The alpha’s... gone feral... s-sir, h-he... the omega’s dead.”

Curses explode from Henrick and Brody. Fjord and Aralar turn their attention to me, looking for my reaction. It feels like an eternity for the words to process. Flynn storms through the doorway, half shifted and completely feral. The remnants of the broken restraints dangling from his limbs finally has my brain snapping back into gear.

Connor is dead.

## CHAPTER 6

# KNOX



Flynn roars, spit flying from his foaming mouth. His eyes scan the room, bypassing Henrick and instead locking onto Brody.

“*You,*” he snarls. Leaning forward, Flynn charges, angling his body to tackle the gorilla shifter to the ground. It feels as though the whole room takes a single collective breath as the ex-Alpha’s shoulder hits Brody. For a short run-up, Flynn gathered a reasonable amount of speed, and the Jameson Beta releases a gust of air as he’s knocked off his feet. Flynn follows him down, and the two wrestle on the floor.

“Don’t just stand there! Restrain him!” Henrick orders, causing some of the pack members to scramble into action. His heir steps up to his side, murmuring words too low for me to hear. Especially with Flynn snarling and the jumbled shouts of the others talking over each other, trying to come up with a plan of action.

The fae turns from watching the fight, casting some form of magic that slows everyone else and focuses his attention on my Firebug instead. “Well, this is a nice diversion, but now I have a question for you, dear Kya.”

With a flick of his long fingers, the restricting vines loosen their hold on my torso, retracting down to my waist. A quick glance shows the rest of my family in a similar position. Kya remains quiet, canting her head to the side, waiting for him to continue. His lip twitches in one corner before smoothing back into a neutral mask. My wolf feels restless and possessive with their familiarity. I swallow down the growl that wants to rise up at his casual flirting. “I know you’ll be itching to join the

fray, so I've encased us in a speed bubble, and it's a simple, quick little question. Henrick has a human female in his rooms. She's a friend of yours, yes?"

"Really!? *That's* your question? Whether Tilly is a friend of Kya's?" I lean into her back, resting my hand on her shoulder as the fae mouths Tilly's name. Kya reaches up and gives my fingers a quick squeeze, probably hoping to reassure me. It doesn't work. I want us out of here as fast as possible, preferably locked in her nest for a week, watching movies and snuggling. I'd like other stuff too, but I'd be a happy camper as long as Kya and Kota are safe. My mate's voice pulls my attention back to the conversation.

"Yes, Aralar, she is, or was, my best friend. She drugged me and handed me over to Henrick, so I'm not sure if it's a present or past tense relationship."

"Now really isn't the time for this chit-chat. Mr fae lord, person, can you release the glowy gold vine things completely? I would like to kick some Jameson pack arse and get the fuck out of here," Casper interrupts. My brothers and I grunt in agreement as Aralar rolls his eyes and then focuses back on Kya.

"I get an introduction to your friend."

"Just an introduction?" The fae nods once in answer to Kya's question, strands of his pale gold hair falling into his face with the movement. "All right. I'll introduce you once we—that is McBeartys, Jensions, you, and my friend—get out of here alive."

"We have an accord." He flicks his fingers once more, and the magic holding us in place dissipates along with the bubble surrounding us. Kya surges forward, more than ready to exact vengeance on Henrick and his pack.

"Kya, stop!" River barks, rushing to block her path. I don't try to hide my groan; this is possibly the worst time for those two to butt heads. Our tiny omega squares her shoulders as she marches right up to my twin and pokes him in the chest. In any other situation, I might smile or laugh at the foot height difference, but for once, I know now isn't the time.

“No! *You* stop. Stop treating me like I’m *fragile* and *weak* because I’m an omega and female!”

“That’s not what I’m doing!” he snaps, though not even a hint of his Alpha command leaks out. I look over at Kota and Lucian, raising my eyebrows. It would appear River really is trying to prove his worth and not be a total dick.

“Really? Because you’re not stopping anyone else!” Kya retorts, throwing her arms wide to indicate her brothers and us. I’m staying behind her, but the others have all surged forward to join the fight.

“Of course, I’m not!” River’s words have me wincing. He was doing so well... for him.

“So why me? Why are you doing this? Why won’t you *just trust* that I can look after myself? That I can hold my own?”

“That’s not what this is about!”

“Then what *is* it about, River? Because it’s something! Why won’t you treat me like any other pack member?”

“Because I’m not in bloody love with them, am I?!”



## KYA

River’s chest heaves as he catches his breath. It almost feels like everything pauses at his declaration. The sounds of fighting and Henrick bellowing orders at his pack fade into the background as my Grumpy Wolf takes a step closer to me.

“I’m aware you can kick arse, Kya. That doesn’t mean I want you going into danger head first. You’re already hurt.” His hand reaches up, his thumb trailing lightly across my cheek. Those mismatched eyes that mesmerised me the first night we met scan each scrape, bruise, and cut on my exposed skin.

“As romantic and I assume long past due this conversation is, now is really *not* the ideal time!” Aralar’s lilted voice snaps me from the bubble. The sounds of the fight crash over me as I



take in our surroundings again. My brothers and the rest of my mates—except Fjord and the twins—are fighting Jameson pack members trying to reach Henrick. I can't see Fjord or Flynn and Brody through the mass of bodies anymore.

“Right, yes.” River coughs, a light blush just visible on his cheeks as he rubs the back of his neck. I smile up at my Grumpy Wolf. This side of him is kind of adorable. If he keeps this up, I'll need to find a new nickname to call him. However, adorable is not the River we need right now.

“We can discuss once we're back home, curled up on the sofa, and *after* I spank you at *Mario Kart* again.” River rolls his eyes at me, but a smile plays on his lips, even if he is trying to hide it.

A roar pulls my attention back to the fighting. Some of the Jameson pack have shifted into their animal forms, allowing me to see through to where my father last was.

Flynn swipes his claws across Brody's face with one hand and slices the neck of one of the braver pack members who had moved too close. I was expecting Flynn to have been overwhelmed by now with so many shifters in the room. His half-shifted form rises to stand over an unconscious Brody, the surrounding ground speckled with blood and more casualties from the Jameson pack.

“What the fuck are you all doing?! *Restrain him already!*” Henrick screams. Instead of entering the fray, several pack members look at the feral wolf-man and scramble to the door, pushing and shoving to get out and away from my father. He follows them out of the room.

“Aralar, do you know where the Alpha's rooms are? Tilly is up there, and something tells me no one is going to be safe from Flynn's wrath...” I let the words trail off as the fae meets my gaze. His lavender eyes scrutinise me briefly before he nods and disappears from sight with a small *pop*.

Cracks ring out amidst the sounds of flesh hitting flesh as my mates and brothers work together to try and clear a path. This is our best chance of escaping, and I've stood on the sidelines long enough.

Henrick storms towards me, rage pouring off of him in waves.

“You’re an omega. Stop Flynn *now*, or I will ensure your brothers are the first ones introduced to the hunters.” He snarls, pushing his Alpha command into the words. This asshole just never learns. He’s not *my* Alpha. I was never linked into his pack, so he can’t control me.

“Why the fuck would I do that? Why would I ever do anything to help you?” I spit the words at him with all the pent-up venom and hate that’s been brewing inside me for years.

More shifters stream through the door. Henrick laughs cruelly as my hope for escape plummets like a rock thrown into the ocean. Until the new shifters turn on their fellow pack members.

The Jameson Alpha’s laughter falters as the tide begins to turn. Snarls and roars join the sound of cracking bones as more people shift into their animals. Axel’s grizzly bear surges forward, getting closer to the exit, batting a coyote shifter out of his way. I try to keep track of who appears to be helping us and who isn’t. The last thing I want to do is hurt an ally.

Henrick’s body vibrates, malice burning in his eyes. “You’ll pay for this, omega.” His lips curl in a snarl as though the chaos and carnage around us are somehow all my fault. “You will submit. You will save this pack. *My* pack!”

“No thanks. I think I have a hair appointment. Sorry, not sorry.” A furious growl rips from his throat as he lunges at me. I spin quickly, trying to dodge out of his grasp. Henrick’s fist wraps around my hair, twisting and yanking my head back. Throwing an arm out, I try to connect with his torso. The downside to only being five-foot-three in a world of shifters all seemingly over five-foot-ten means I don’t have the reach until he pulls me in close.

His breath flutters against the nape of my neck, and I repress the shudder of revulsion. I don’t have time for my omega side to push forward. Right now, I need to be Kya, the

feisty MMA-trained shifter. I need to use every advantage I can against the Jameson Alpha.

A force rams into us, knocking Henrick off-balance and causing his grip on my hair to loosen. Spinning to the side, I wince as strands of my hair are ripped from my scalp. Turning, I freeze momentarily at the sight of a freaking tiger clamping its jaws around Henrick's throat, claws scraping bloody lines in the soft skin of his stomach. Shaking off the shock of seeing a tiger, I remember to scent the air. Taking a deep breath, the spicy scent of Fjord hits me. Why the hell is he attacking his own father?

Henrick strikes his claws into Fjord's underbelly. The tiger shifter releases his father for only a moment. Still, the Alpha wastes no time shifting into his wolf and darting away from Fjord's tiger, teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

"Kya! Don't just *stand* there!" Tilly's screech has my head snapping back to the door. Aralar and a lynx shifter have positioned themselves between her and the chaos of shifters around me. When I told Aralar to get her, I meant for him to keep her safe, not bring her into the middle of the fight.

*What the fuck is she doing down here?!*

The fae's hands glow with a blue light once more, and the air in front of the trio shimmers slightly as he creates a shield of magic.

I rip Axel's shirt off, shifting into my wolf form before the fabric hits the ground. Darting in amongst the mass of bodies, I try to get closer to my friend. I'm still not sure how I feel about her part in drugging me and bringing me here, but that doesn't mean I want her to get hurt or worse.

Fjord's tiger roars behind me, and my head swings in his direction, my omega recognising him as a mate. I really need to have words with my shifter side. He's the son of my enemy.

The striped beast's teeth sink into the soft skin of a wolf's throat. The wolf struggles, becoming frantic for a few seconds as it thrashes around. There's a sickening crunch as the tiger's powerful jaws clamp shut, and the wolf falls still. With a toss

of its powerful head, Fjord throws the wolf's body aside. It hits the nearest wall with a thud, sliding down to the ground as it slowly returns to its human form—Henrick—in death.

Every shifter linked into the Jameson pack has paused in their actions. Those fighting against my brothers and mates stop and shift back into their human forms. Once the sounds of cracking bones subside, the space feels eerily quiet.

“Holy shit, that's a lot of free-flying one-eyed snakes.” Tilly's voice fills the void. Aralar lets out a groan that has me laughing—or as best I can in my wolf form. The lynx at Tilly's legs pushes against her until she turns around, facing the hallway instead of the room full of naked shifters.

## CHAPTER 7

# KYA



“Kya?!”

“Where is she?”

“Where’s Flynn?”

“And Brody, he’s missing too.”

“Kya! This isn’t funny.”

Huffing, I weave my way through the surrounding bodies, stopping in front of River, Axel, and Lucian.

“That’s Kya’s wolf,” Ryder speaks up, pushing through the crowd. I hold back the urge to roll my eyes. It’s not like they couldn’t scent me; he’s just trying to be helpful and ease some of the tension my mates are exuding.

“Banphrionsa, move behind us and shift back, please.”

*:Why? We have no idea why they stopped fighting us. I’m not shifting and placing myself in a vulnerable position.:* I push the words through into the pack link, the air filling with a mild static. Murmurs start up from the Jameson pack behind me, making me think I pushed into the wrong link.

“No one will attack you, Petal. I’m the Jameson pack Alpha now. You’re my mate, and while I regret how we ended up meeting, I’m glad my father can no longer put you at risk.” Fjord’s voice rings clear from behind my wall of mates and brothers.

“Yeah, not how the coup and rescue were planned to go, but can’t say I disagree with the outcome,” one of the pack

members quips. Growls rise up from my mates—including Fjord.

“Have some respect for those who didn’t make it out of this unscathed, Mitchell!” Fjord barks. “My mate has lost one father because of Henrick and Brody’s actions. The other is feral! And you’re going to stand there and say you ‘can’t disagree’ with the outcome?!” Murmurs of apologies and shuffling feet greet his outburst.

The new Jameson Alpha strides forwards, and my vision goes dark as hands cover my eyes. A quick sniff reveals Casper is the culprit of my sudden inability to see.

“I’d apologise, Älskling, but I’m not sorry.”

Shaking my head, trying and failing to dislodge his hands, I resort to shifting back.

“Shit. For fuck’s sake, Kya,” my white bear grumps at me. I turn in his arms and smile sweetly.

“What?”

“Don’t *what* me all innocent and cute and naked.”

“Give her your shirt, Casper,” River barks, adjusting his stance along with Axel, so I’m hidden from view.

“Seriously? We’re all shifters here. Well, minus Tilly and Aralar. Nudity is par for the course,” I mumble.

“Yeah, but like these two have made me face the wall, I reckon they don’t want other guys ogling your goods, chica,” Tilly calls out to me. Her words sound like her normal self, but I know her well enough to pick up the slight shake and hesitancy.

Accepting Casper’s shirt from him, even though Axel’s is on the floor nearby—most likely—I pull the soft cotton over my head, the hem dropping to just past mid-thigh. I push between Kota and Knox, picking my way through the crowd towards Tilly, ignoring the quiet words Fjord is saying to his pack.

The lynx is no longer standing next to my friend; instead the tall guard I saw her with while I was in the vents is glaring

at any shifter looking in their direction.

Aralar clears his throat; a quick glance in his direction and, seeing the pointed look he's giving me, has my right eyebrow rising.

"No, the deal has not been fulfilled." His lavender eyes narrow, but he gives a sharp nod, pursing his lips. I'll stand by the accord we struck, but he has to hold up his end first; only then will I formally introduce Tilly to him.

Casting a wary glance back at the guard, I sidestep his large frame, placing a hand on my best friend's shoulder. Tilly jerks and turns to look at me. Her eyes scan me over and over, pausing on each bruise and cut. A choked sob cuts off in her throat as she brings her hands in front of her, twisting her fingers anxiously.

"Kya. I-I am so, so sorry. I—" Tilly shakes her head. "I am the worst friend in the history of friendships."

I hold up a hand to stop her before she begins to ramble.

"And I kept some pretty big secrets from you. Maybe if I'd been a little more honest and open, you wouldn't have been manipulated by Anderson and... *Henny*."

"Oh, God!" She covers her face with her hands, peeking through her fingers at me, cringing at hearing the nickname said back to her. "I thought if I annoyed him enough, he'd get sick of me and let me go."

Aralar and the guard both growl at her words. I wave a hand to shush the fae, which only intensifies his growling rumble.

"Stop impersonating a pissed-off badger," I snark.

"Tanner, I'm fine," Tilly reassures the guard, gently placing her hand on his arm.

"No. You're not, but you will be. No one will harm you like he did again." The lynx shifter shares a look with Aralar before stalking away to the back of the room where Henrick's bloody body is.



“Tilly, I owe you an apology. I had no idea what the previous Alpha—my father—was doing. I should have looked into your apparent betrayal of my mate more closely and realised that you weren’t, ah, as interested in him as it first appeared.” Fjord’s voice comes from behind me, much closer than I expected, not having heard his approach.

“It’s done. Let’s not dwell on it. I-I wasn’t disinterested the whole time. So I really can’t fault anyone.”

“Oh, you can. You can fault Henrick and Anderson,” I tell her as some of the pieces of what she’s experienced click into place. Turning to address a question to Fjord, my nose almost brushes his chest. His very naked chest. Blinking quickly, I look up, focusing on his face and the smirk playing on his lips.

“Yes, Petal?” he asks in a playful tone. I clear my throat quickly.

“What happened to Anderson?”

Fjord frowns at my question. Tilly shuffles a step closer, leaning around me to look up at the new Jameson Alpha.

“Yeah, I’ve not seen or heard from him since Kya’s party.”

“Ah, how attached were you both to him?” Fjord asks us, rubbing the back of his neck.

“He was my boss for the last few years, not my favourite person, especially after all this,” Tilly speaks up first. Fjord nods slowly. His gaze is focused on me as he listens to her.

“And you?”



## FJORD

Kya’s brow furrows, and she wrinkles her nose at my question.

“Um, did you really not hear the absolute crazy that spewed from that man’s mouth? About getting turned so he could be with me?” Her body shudders with the obvious revulsion she feels at the memory.

“Wait, what? I knew the guy had a crush on you, but becoming a supernatural creature is a whole other level.” Tilly wrinkles her nose, her mouth pulled in a grimace.

“I *knew* he was shady. We got in trouble way too often for trivial bullshit,” Kya’s brother grumbles. My mate leans to the side, looking past me at the teen.

“Right.” She rolls her eyes at him. “Tell me, Ryder, when did fighting become ‘trivial bullshit’?”

“Come on, Kya. We got into trouble for fights, sure, but you also got called down because I wore ripped jeans. And there was the time Brooks corrected the maths teacher—”

“He was wrong! And I proved it. Hell, even Kya managed to solve it, and she sucks at maths.” Brooks cut across his brother, apparently still very passionate about that incident.

“Seriously? Why are you bringing up my maths abilities—no, you know what, never mind.” Kya holds a hand up to stop them both from continuing and looks back up at me. “So Anderson, what happened to him?”

“After he left you, he insisted on not waiting to be turned.” Releasing a heavy sigh, I rub my hand over my short buzz cut. “I don’t know exactly who bit him. I wasn’t in the room; it could have been Brody or Henrick. Anyway, it didn’t go well.”

“Humans aren’t meant to be turned.” River’s comment pulls my attention from Kya, and I notice how close the McBeartys have moved. I nod at the Alpha wolf.

“Right. Henrick fed him some bull about if he had shifter blood, it would work. It was a crock of shit obviously. Anyway, Anderson’s body got stuck mid-shift.”

“So, he’s what? Dead?” Tilly asks with a frown as her eyes widen and lock onto my own. “Holy shit, is he dead?!”

“I believe so. I saw his transition.” I take a deep breath, suppressing the shudder that threatens to wrack my body as the memory surfaces. “I can’t imagine he survived.”

“While this is, I’m sure, fascinating and necessary, perhaps relocating to the other pack lands might be prudent. Henrick

did mention hunters were on their way, and now is probably not the time to face them.” Aralar steps up behind Kya and Tilly, resting a hand on their shoulders.

“You want me to invite you and the Jameson pack onto my pack lands? Are you delusional or simply insane?” River looks at the fae like he’s lost all sense, and I’m inclined to agree.

“Neither, he’s fae,” Kya mutters under her breath looking back at the male before shrugging. “What? You are.”

Aside from rolling his eyes, Aralar ignores her comment and continues addressing River. “You share a fated mate with the Jameson Alpha. A merge of members and assets is the obvious outcome.”

“Whoa there, Aralar. Back up a step—or ten—we’re not mated. I *could* reject them.” Kya’s words have both River and me stiffening. Now we’ve met her, scented her, our animals will accept no one else. If she rejects us—me—it would be akin to sentencing us to a life of misery.

“Dramatic little thing, aren’t you? I’d forgotten about that.” Aralar rolls his eyes. Kya glares at him, and growls rumble up from the McBeartys and me. “Touchy, touchy, alphas. You won’t reject them, Kya. Alluding that you would is cruel. You’re far too soft-hearted for that.”

“Who and when I mate isn’t up for discussion right now. I just want to go home,” Kya says, looking to River and the other McBeartys before her gaze settles on her brothers.

“I want to make sure Gran and Cole aren’t hurt. We probably need to call Fi too, make sure she knows we’re all fine,” Ryder speaks up.

“Okay, so how are we getting out of here and back home?” Casper asks, looking around at the large group.

“There’s a couple of MPVs outside. I can drive you back to the diner.”

“What about my truck?” Petal asks, her stormy grey eyes moving to rest on me, one eyebrow arching in challenge.

“Oh, um, about that...” Tilly trails off as Kya spins around to look at her friend.

“What did you do? Wait, no. No, Tilly, tell me you didn’t drive my truck?”

“Umm...”

“You don’t know how to drive manual!”

“I know! I know, I’m sorry. I’m sure one of your guys can fix it though?” Tilly casts pleading eyes on the McBeartys.

“I can fix it. It’s already in my shop,” I grunt, scratching the back of my neck. “I’ll drop it off at the diner once I fix the gearbox and the clutch for you.”

“All right. Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

Kya looks around the room again, her brows pulling down in a frown as her eyes continue scanning the space.

“What is it?” Lucian asks, stepping up to her and pulling her into his side with one arm around her shoulders.

“Where’s Flynn?”

## CHAPTER 8

# KYA



Everyone stops and looks around the room. Lucian, Casper, and Axel move amidst the carnage of the fight, checking bodies for my father. Fjord looks down at me with a solemn and remorseful expression.

“I’m sorry about Connor, Kya.”

“Thanks? I’m not sure it’s sunk in, really, or how I should actually feel about it...” Blinking rapidly, I avert my gaze from his and look to the open doorway. “We should probably find him, maybe Flynn went back to h-his body?”

“Brody’s missing too,” Lucian states to the mismatched group.

“Alpha Fjord?” I glance back to see it’s the lynx shifter who protected Tilly, addressing the new Jameson Alpha.

“Yeah, Tan?” Fjord answers with a soft exhale. In this moment, he looks tired. Not that I know what he normally looks like, but his shoulders slump, and my omega is pushing me to comfort him.

“Shall I prep one of the MPVs? I can put some tarp down in the boot for transporting the Wilson Omega,” Tan queries, and Fjord looks at me, waiting.

“Petal?” he prompts after a moment when I don’t say anything.

“Why do you call me that?” I deflect. My brain feels bogged down and overwhelmed by the events of the past few—how long have we even been here? Hours? Days?

“No idea. It just came out, and now it’s stuck.” Fjord’s words pull my focus back to him as he shrugs his broad shoulders. “Do you want Tanner to prep the car?”

“Do MPVs count as cars? Don’t cars only seat five people, MPVs can do what? Fifteen? How big does a vehicle have to be before it’s no longer a car? And how long have we been here?”

“Err, Little Minx, Kya, you okay?” Axel steps in front of me, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear and running his knuckle across my cheekbone.

“She’s deflecting and disassociating. It’s what she did the day Mum died too,” Ryder answers quietly, slipping between Fjord and me, taking my hand and tugging me towards the hallway. “Come on, Ky. Let’s see if we can find Flynn with Connor. Maybe we’ll locate Brody too, and you can give him some new scars?”

I scoff. “He’d probably heal too fast to scar.”

“Eh, but we can try, right?”

I force a smile up at my brother. “Sure.”

I wander out into the hallway, keeping pace with Ryder as he leads the way. Footsteps of the others following us echo in the space as we head down the corridor, retracing Flynn’s path. It’s easy to find, what with all the blood and bodies.

Fjord gives orders to his pack members, who break off, heading in different directions. My shifter senses that I normally have to focus to use seem to have taken over. Maybe it’s a form of self-preservation? Who knows?

In my peripheral vision, I notice Aralar slip past my mates, appearing on my right.

“Your part hasn’t been upheld yet,” I mutter before he can say anything.

“I am aware. I wasn’t going to push... much,” he adds when I roll my eyes at him. “We’ll get to that. It won’t be long now, and you’ll be on your way. I wanted to warn you though.” The seriousness in his voice pulls me further from the

brain fog, and I turn my head to look at him as we continue walking.

“Henrick Jameson was a power-hungry man. His fixation on having an omega—specifically you—means he made some unsavoury deals.”

“What did you do, Aralar?” I stop walking, letting go of Ryder’s hand and turning to face the fae lord.

“*I* didn’t do anything. However, that doesn’t mean I’m unaware of things Henrick and other,” he waves a hand haphazardly in the air as he searches for the word he wants, “more nefarious parties agreed to.” His lavender eyes flit past my head, focusing on the men and Tilly behind me. “Part of my job here was to find out if Henrick was working with hunters, as rumours and gossip have indicated.”

“He was,” Fjord grunts. “He already called a couple to come down. It’s one reason I want to get all of you home sooner rather than later. I don’t know what kind of shifter you are, Petal, and honestly, I don’t need to know. But I do know you have an immunity or at least a resistance to silver. Your necklace burned Brody and me when we touched it. If—and that’s not as big of an *if* as I’d like it to be—Henrick mentioned anything to the hunters about you, they’ll be determined to at the very least get a blood sample.”

“Not gonna happen.” I’m surprised that the growl comes from Kota. My snow leopard fated always seemed so much calmer and more level-headed than the others.

“Shit.” Ryder’s curse has me spinning to locate him. He must have continued walking after I let go of his hand. He looks back at us from where he’s standing outside another open door. Running a hand through his strawberry-blonde waves that remind me of our mum’s, he gestures into the room before him.

“It’s empty.”





The room Ryder found was the same one Brody had *questioned* me in. Except there was a lot more blood on the floor. So much blood. Any spark of hope I'd had that Connor wasn't dead fled at the sight. My mind shut down, retreating into itself; my relationship with my fathers wasn't great. I knew that, they'd treated me like a child, handed me to my fated mates and forced us to cohabitate. There had been hope that we could heal. That we might eventually have developed a father-daughter relationship of sorts. I'd never achieve that now. Never know what could have been if the Jameson pack hadn't ambushed us.

Strong arms lift me up, one under my thighs, the other around my back. I'm cradled into a warm, hard chest that vibrates with a purr-like sound. Blinking, I look up into Axel's hazel eyes.

"I'm okay, Growly Bear. I'll be okay," I say softly, reaching up to pull him down for a kiss and enjoying the scratch of his beard on my skin.

"Let's get you all off the compound and back to McBearty pack lands." Fjord moves ahead, leading the way outside and to an MPV.

Tan climbs out of the driver's seat, leaving it running.

"All fuelled up, Alpha," the guard says, but his eyes are focused on Tilly as he speaks instead of Fjord.

"Pop me down a sec, Axel?" I ask, patting a hand on his chest. Once my feet are firmly on the ground again, I make my way over to Tilly, grabbing her arm and tugging her a few steps away. It's purely the illusion of privacy since they can all hear us, clear as day with their enhanced hearing.

"You have options. You can come with us, or you can stay with blonde and broody—" Aralar coughs pointedly, and I pause to throw a scathing glare at him. The fae simply twitches one eyebrow and smirks at me. "There's also Aralar."

"The one with the pretty wings?"

"Yes, the one with wings. I won't comment on if they're pretty, but yes, he's fae."

“And hunters are coming here expecting to see a female who can touch silver?” Tilly asks, raising her voice so that even without their shifter and fae hearing, all the men would be able to hear her question.

“Yes,” Fjord and Aralar answer at the same time.

“Then... then I’m going to stay here.” She lifts a hand to silence the guys, throwing a stern look at Tan and Aralar when they continue to protest. “No. I’m staying. We can convince the hunters that Henrick lost the plot. That he, I don’t know, imagined I was a sh-shifter?”

“Tills—” I start, but she places her hand over my mouth.

“No. Kya, you wouldn’t even be here if I hadn’t betrayed you. I did the one thing I swore I’d never do. I hurt you because of dick! Not even good dick—not that any dick is an excuse—but bad, gross dick and stupid manipulation blinded me to common sense. This is the least I can do. If it helps keep you safe.”

I wrinkle my nose and pull her hand from my mouth. Studying her face, I take note of the hard set of her jaw and the stubborn determination shining through her eyes.

“*Fine.* But! Tan and Aralar stay glued to your side.” I look over to the fae. “You get them out of here the instant it’s no longer safe for her.”

The fae lord steps away from the group and bows low in front of us, his pale gold hair falling forward over his shoulder. Lifting his eyes, I lock my gaze with his.

“You have my word, Kyliana.”

“All right then. Tilly, I’d like to formally introduce you to Lord Aralar of the Spring Court of Seelie. Lord Aralar, I formally introduce you to Matilda Baillieu, though if you ever call her Matilda, she will gut you like a frog in a high school biology class.”

Aralar returns to his full height. I used to think he was so tall, but compared to most of my mates—especially Fjord, Axel, and Casper—his six-foot stature seems average. Only Kota is shorter than him.

I pull Tilly into a quick hug. “Let me know if they upset you, hurt you, or anything. I may be tiny—”

“But ye be mighty.” Tilly finishes the sentence with a soft laugh. “I know, Kya. Go. Go home, and I hope your father turns up safe.”

“Thanks, Tills.” I give her one final squeeze, then turn and walk into Kota’s arms, wrapping an arm around his waist.

“Come on, Chibi Girl.”

Fjord climbs into the driver’s seat since none of the rest of us knows where we are or which direction we’d need to get back to town.

The vehicle falls silent as everyone retreats into their own minds, sorting through all that’s happened. My brain flits back further to that fateful night back at the beginning of October when I woke up in the McBeartys’ house for the first time.

“You guys know, of all the kidnappings I’ve woken up from, you’re the only ones who’ve changed my clothes,” I muse aloud.

“Are you... are you serious right now, Ky? *That’s* where your mind’s gone?” Ryder throws his head back, staring up at the MPV’s interior ceiling.

“What? I asked before, but Knox didn’t answer. I have them all in the same place, and we have time on our hands. There’s fuck all else to do. So, yeah, I’m asking the question.”

Lucian and Casper exchange a glance before looking back at me.

“Bunny, do you remember the dress you were wearing that night?”

“Of course, I do.” I frown at him, not following the point he’s trying to make. “It was one Tilly bought for me, dark blue with little cutouts here.” I wiggle a finger over my side by my hip.

“Right.” Casper nods.

“That doesn’t sound like your style.” Fjord’s dark eyes look back at me from the rear-view mirror, then flick to someone else—either Lucian or Casper. I can’t tell from where I’m sitting. “And it also doesn’t explain why you changed her clothes.”

“Well, yeah, I wear men’s t-shirts fairly regularly. It used to just be old tops from Ryder and Brooks, but I’ve started hoarding a small collection from the McBeartys too.”

“Wait? You have?” Knox snaps his head in my direction. In response, I shrug—or as best I can, sandwiched between Axel and Kota.

“We’re not talking about that, though. We’re talking about changing me out of my dress. What happened to it anyway?”

“I had it dry cleaned, and it’s in your closet.” Lucian twists around, resting his arm on the back of his seat.

“Yeah, that dress looked hot on you,” Casper adds with a wistful expression.

“But why did you change her?” Fjord repeats, a hint of exasperation entering his tone. It’s kind of cute that he seems to care so much.

River clears his throat, drawing my attention to him in the passenger seat. “Where were the cut-outs on your dress?” I frown at him. I already said where they were.

“Not sure I’m following where you’re hoping to lead me.” I stare at him for a moment, then flick my gaze over all of my mates—claimed and pending—Casper’s cheeks have a soft pink blush growing across them.

Why would he be blushing? It’s not like—oh—my eyes widen as the realisation hits.

“The cutouts meant I couldn’t wear underwear,” I mutter.

“Exactly.” Lucian’s cheeks also have a faint hint of a blush. Axel and Kota shift in their seats next to me.

“I just—we thought,” Casper corrects after a sharp glare from Lucian and a pointed “Oi” from Knox. “Well, *we* thought

it would be better to wake up covered than to wake up in a short dress with nothing underneath...”

“Neither option was ideal, but we’d already been forced to kidnap you. We were basically in a lose-lose situation, so we hoped it would gain us brownie points? Or at least provide a silver lining? Then we could eventually get a win,” Lucian adds with a half-hearted shrug.

“Which we did, or at least the three of us with your bite have—and no, Kya, I’m not saying we won you. You’re not an object or a prize.” Axel’s voice rumbles in the confined space. “We won your trust, your confidence—”

“I knew what you meant. We’re good. I was just curious. Well, at the time, I was confused and more than a little uncomfortable, also a little pissed off.” I shrug. “But if I’d been aware of the options, and that I’d be seeing my fathers again after waking up? Then, yeah. I would have chosen the men’s t-shirt and shorts over Tilly’s dress, too.”

Conversation lulls again as Fjord continues driving towards the diner.

“I can’t believe that was the question your brain went to,” Brooks mumbles from the back seat behind Axel, Kota and me.

“Oh, yeah? What would your question be?”

“I don’t know... maybe how many more mates you’re going to collect?” Ryder pipes up, and I turn as best I can to glare at them.

“He’s right; for someone who never wanted a mate, you sure have a lot,” Brooks adds unhelpfully.

“You did announce at the compound that you were going to claim the other three. I believe your words were ‘maybe a couple of them at the same time’. So when will I find myself on the approved list?” Fjord asks.

I look at my brothers’ raised eyebrows as they share a loaded glance with each other.

“What makes you think I’ll ever add you to the approved list? The only reason you’re even here now is because we needed someone to drive who knew where they were going.”

He chuckles, “Keep telling yourself that, Petal.”

“You drugged me. I’m not accepting the bond with you.” He snorts, and he’s not the only one, but coughs cover the sounds before I can pinpoint who else found my statement amusing.

“Pretty sure Lucian drugged you too. And yet you have his teeth marks on your skin there and Casper’s on the other side.” Fjord looks up, holding my gaze through the rear-view mirror again. “Weren’t they the first mates you claimed? Yet they’re the ones that drugged and kidnapped you?” he muses, a smirk playing on his lips. I purse my own, folding my arms across my chest and remain silent.

It’s not like I can argue with him. Everything he just said is true.

He laughs again when I don’t respond and turns into the diner car park. “Yeah, I think my odds are pretty good, Petal.”

## CHAPTER 9

# TILLY



Staring at the bend in the road where the MPV disappeared from sight, I gnaw my lip worriedly between my teeth. Fjord wasn't exactly nice to me, but he was never hostile, either. He never did anything to hurt me, and besides, not only can Kya kick arse, but she has her brothers and six other shifters with her.

And sure, I could argue she had them all with her before, but my betrayal played a huge part in her ending up here.

*She'll be fine. I'll convince the hunters that I'm the one Henrick called them about. Then I'll figure out how to make amends and rebuild our friendship.*

A thumb tugs my lip free from the onslaught of my teeth, rubbing gently to soothe it.

"Nervous?"

I snort a laugh at Aralar's question. "Oh, no. Why would I be? Meet with mysterious, ambiguously ominous hunters. While my friend—who I betrayed—drives off with the son of the man who orchestrated all of this. Why on Earth would any of that make me, or anyone, nervous? Nope, this is a typical Wednesday for me."

"It's Sunday," Tanner points out. When I shoot him my best unimpressed glare, he simply smirks in response.

"You're human. You'll be fine," the shifter guard tries to reassure me. It doesn't escape my notice, though, that he only specified that *I* would be fine.



“What about you? And Aralar? Will you both be *fine*, too?”

“Picked up that omission, did you?” Tan asks sheepishly as he rubs the back of his neck. “I should be okay. I’m low on the food chain, so to speak. Aralar, on the other hand...” his words trail off and I follow his gaze to the fae’s wings.

“I’ll pull a glamour over myself,” Aralar says in a bored tone, waving a hand dismissively. “It won’t be my first encounter with hunters. They’re human, which means they lack the olfactory sensitivity to pick up my differences.”

“I almost feel like I should be insulted on behalf of my species, but you both just smell good to me.” I shrug, a faint blush crossing my cheeks as I realise what I just admitted.

“Oh, we smell good, do we?” Aralar grins.

Thankfully, I’m prevented from having to answer him when two blacked out SUVs appear on the road heading towards us.

“Might want to do that glamour trick of yours, Butterfly,” I sass to hide the spike in my heart rate. Tanner laughs while Aralar sputters indignantly. “Now, Aralar!” I hiss, panic that he’ll be seen almost overwhelming me. My reaction to him is something I’ll look at later when I’m alone and have time to really analyse it.

“We *will* be revisiting that choice of pet name later,” he huffs before flicking his wrist. The captivating wings disappear, the glow of his skin dulls, while his pale gold hair becomes a subdued blonde and his lavender eyes turn grey.

“They’re gonna ask for Henrick or Brody or Fjord. What do we do?” I ask Tanner with wide eyes as the reality sets in.

“Wing it,” he shrugs with far more nonchalance than I feel.

Aralar stifles a chuckle, and I turn to face him as the SUVs slow to a stop in front of us.

“I have the strongest urge to slap you both,” I hiss.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, love,” the fae responds with a wink. He smirks at my stunned expression

because of all the responses, I did not expect that one.

The doors of the vehicles all open as if the occupants synchronised their watches. Black combat boots land heavily on the gravel. My eyes track up to the black combat fatigues covering their bodies to clean-shaven faces and the cliché aviator sunglasses.

“Where’s Henrick? He’s expecting us,” one of them declares with a commanding tone.

“Dead,” Tanner replies, crossing his arms over his chest, making the muscles of his biceps bulge. Not gonna lie. It’s mildly distracting.

“What do you mean ‘dead’?”

“Generally, that’s not a word that requires much explanation, but I’ll attempt to explain.” Aralar smooths his expression into one of great concentration. “Henrick is bereft of life. Dead as a dodo or a doornail—still not sure what’s so dead about that, coffin nail would be more fitting.”

“Did you just reference *Monty Python* and Dickens in the same sentence?” I ask him.

“Two sentences, but yes. I’m glad you caught that. It shows how much we already have in common.”

“*Right*,” I drag the word out as I continue to stare at the fae male. “Because, clearly, *that’s* important to determine at this very moment in time.”

“Well, time could be classed as more wibbly-wobbly—”

“Do *not* quote *Doctor Who* at me.” I raise a hand and place a single finger over his lips to shush him.

“Are you two quite finished?” hunter man number one barks, making me jump. “What happened to Henrick, and where’s Brody?”

“Henrick is dead, Tanner answers, keeping his tone detached and cold. “He was challenged by his son and lost. Brody fled, no idea where he’s gone. Alpha Fjord left to notify the Council.”

“Well, who did he leave in charge?”

“Me,” Tanner and Aralar say at the same time. I’m impressed when they don’t so much as glance at one another. Nothing about either male gives away that that isn’t strictly true, hopefully my face doesn’t say different.

One of the men from the back vehicle pushes forward, and I notice for the first time that he’s dressed slightly differently. He’s wearing the same black combat boots and combat fatigues but with the addition of a red cross and the staff of Hermes on his arm.

“Henrick arranged for a blood draw with a new pack member. Will that still be possible, or have we travelled all this way for nothing?”

“Schmidt,” Hunter One snarls. Before discovering shifters are real, I would have called his tone a growl. Now, though, it was missing that animalistic edge.

“I’m the newest female here. I’m not a pack member, though.” I pipe up, shuffling a few steps forward. “I’m not sure how my blood would be useful to anyone.”

Schmidt lifts the case in his hand. “It will only be a small draw. Well, more like testing your blood sugar levels than a true draw, if you consent?”

I shrug, then nod. Schmidt smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. When he moves closer to me, Hunter One puts his arm out to stop the medic.

“I think we should wait to confirm this is the right female.” He lowers his voice, but I can still hear him.

“Henrick and Brody both confirmed a potential anomaly. There should also be a package for us to collect. Perhaps you can focus on retrieving that and leave the medical aspect to me?”

As the two converse, I begin to wonder if I misjudged who’s actually in charge of this merry band of men. After a moment of semi-intense staring that has both Tanner and Aralar raising their brows, Hunter One looks away, clenching his jaw tight enough to form a tic in the muscle

“Fine,” he hisses before focusing on Tanner. “Are you aware of a package Henrick set aside for us?”

“If it was already prepped for you, it’ll be in his office. I’ll show you the way.” Tanner turns as soon as he finishes speaking. His eyes lock with mine, then move past me to Aralar. They share one of those guy nods that somehow conveys an entire conversation before he walks away, three of the hunters following.

“Miss? Would you mind coming over to the car? It’s just a little easier if I can rest the equipment on a flat surface.” Schmidt motions to the open passenger door of the front SUV, where he’s placed his case on the seat.

Trepidation fills me at approaching their vehicles. I glance back at Aralar, who gives a nod and follows with one hand resting on my lower spine.

“Thank you. It will just be a prick on the finger. I’ll only need a couple of drops to run the preliminary test.”

I force a smile to my lips, holding my hand out to him. He chatters away while cleaning my finger with antiseptic wipes. Each question seems innocent on the surface. He asks about me, the pack, and how I came to be here as he moves on to pricking me with the little needle pen. I’m suddenly feeling incredibly grateful for the years of fielding parents and students with non-answers. Aralar’s lip twitches as I navigate Schmidt’s curiosity without telling him anything of significance.

A breath of relief leaves me when the hunter medic switches his focus from collecting my blood to analysing it. I’m not sure how long it will take or if he wants me to wait here next to him, but that gut feeling that made me uncomfortable about approaching the SUV is still niggling at me. Sliding my foot back, I push into Aralar’s hand and he steps backward, turning his body so he can see behind us while still keeping an eye on Schmidt.

His fingers clench against my top and I look over my right shoulder, noticing the remaining hunters have moved closer to

almost surround us. My heart speeds up in my chest as fear grips me.

Schmidt curses and slams a fist against the car's doorframe.

“Negative!” He spins around to face me, nostrils flaring. “You’re the only female recently brought here? No others have arrived in the last two-three days?”

“N-no. Just me. Wh-what’s wrong?”

He takes a deep breath to calm himself, and in my peripheral, I see the other men back off, giving us space once more.

“Henrick and Brody said they’d found a unique female who might be able to help me with some of my work.” He turns back to his equipment, muttering under his breath. I don’t catch whatever it is he says, but once again, Aralar tenses beside me. Schmidt snaps the case closed and turns around, pausing when he’s facing me. “Thank you for the assistance.”

“I-um, you’re welcome? I’m sorry I wasn’t more helpful...” I hedge, but he doesn’t respond as he stalks to the other SUV and climbs into the backseat, slamming his door closed.

Aralar guides me back to where we’d been standing when the hunters arrived. It doesn’t take long for Tanner to return, his lips set in a grim, thin line. The three hunters behind him carry coolers to the boots of the SUVs.

After they finish loading, Hunter One addresses us. “Have your new Alpha call us. We would hate to lose the working relationship we’ve built with the Jameson pack over the years.”

“Of course, I’ll pass along the message,” Tanner says with a nod. The hunter’s eyes scan over each of us, lingering on me for a moment longer than I’m comfortable with. He barks out an order to ‘load up’ and the men climb into their vehicles and drive away.

“What was the package?” Aralar questions as we watch the disappearing cars.

“Anderson,” Tanner grunts. My head whips round to face him.

“What?” I almost shriek.

“He was already dead, and I’m more concerned with why they wanted to test your blood. Did they say anything while I was gone?” Tanner asks, once again folding his impressive arms over his chest.

“They didn’t divulge their grand master plan of evil, no,” I sass back at him.

“No, but Schmidt did comment that you had no shifter DNA,” Aralar muses, still watching where the road bends and obscures the view of potential traffic.

“Well, that’s not surprising, is it? I am human, after all.”

The fae male hums before looking down at me. “If his mutterings are to be believed—along with the results on his little screen. You’re only eighty-nine percent human.”

“Well, his machine malfunctioned then, didn’t it.” When neither male responds, I huff out an exasperated breath and stomp back towards the main building. “I’m going to call Kya and update her.”

## CHAPTER 10

# RIVER



Torn between saying something to the Jameson Alpha beside me or leaving, I lean back against the headrest as the others climb out of the vehicle. Maybe I should just follow my brothers, Kya, Ryder, and Brooks. My fingers tap against my thigh in a haphazard melody.

“Just say it,” Fjord sighs.

“I’m not sure what to say. That’s the problem.” I pull the tie from my hair, scraping my fingers against my scalp before retying a hasty bun.

“Really? I would’ve thought you’d be warning me away from your mate.”

“*Our* mate. We’re both fated to her, unless that mark on your wrist is fake?” Sitting up straight, I look over at him.

“As real as yours and your pack-brothers’,” he says, pushing up his sleeve and twisting his wrist towards me.

“I’m not going to help you win her over—mainly because I’m still figuring out how to do that. I fucked up, a lot—but I’m not gonna stand in your way. You killed your father—”

“Sperm donor,” Fjord cuts in forcefully. “That man wasn’t a father to me. The way he treated women...” He pauses, pursing his lips before releasing a heavy exhale. “There was no way on this earth that I was going to let him keep Kya. Brody shouldn’t have managed to do the damage he did. I should have stopped him sooner. We’ve all fucked up where she’s concerned.” Silence falls, but surprisingly, it’s not



uncomfortable. Glancing out the window, I see Darla rush out of the diner, wrapping Kya into a hug.

“Give me your phone.” Turning back to face Fjord, I hold out my hand, and after a moment of hesitation, he places the device in my palm. “I’m putting my number in and sending myself a text. The fae was right. We’re fated to the same woman. And both our packs will need an Omega, so we may as well look into a merge.”

“All right.” He nods slowly. “That’s something I’d be willing to discuss on one condition. There were spies for Henrick in your pack, and there will be shifters loyal to his way of doing things in mine. I want those whittled out and removed before Kya is exposed to them. Omegas take on enough stress from a pack without members being twisted like Henrick.”

“Agreed. Also if you find anything that can help us locate Flynn, I’d appreciate being kept in the loop,” I reply, handing back his phone. He nods slowly, the mood turning more solemn.

“Yeah, I’ll share anything I learn about the Wilsons or Brody.”

“Thanks.” Opening the door, I climb out, shutting it behind me, and make my way over to where the others are waiting.

*:Everything okay?:* Lucian asks through the mind-link. My pack-brothers look over to me without making it too obvious we’re using the link. Ryder quirks an eyebrow at me while Brooks distracts Kya with Darla’s inadvertent help.

*:Yeah, for now. Let’s head home. I want to check in with Gran and Cole, and then we’ll need to organise a pack social.:* I answer, keeping my expression neutral until my little mate turns to look at me, then I offer her a small smile.

*:Confirm to them that you’re Alpha—:*

*:And introduce Kya as our mate and potential new Omega for the pack.:* I cut Lucian off.

*:That’s gonna go down like a lead balloon.:* Kota’s voice joins in.

*:With Kya or the pack?:*

*:Probably both.:* A groan slips from my lips at Kota's statement. I hate that he's likely right.



Instead of heading back to our house, I pull up in front of the Alpha house. The door flies open before I finish turning off the ignition, and by the time we all climb out of the cars, Gran is down the porch steps and fussing over Kya.

“Ach, Little Shadow, I’m glad ye home. Let’s get yer inside and cleaned up.” She wraps an arm around my mate’s shoulders, steering her back up the steps and into the house. Gran throws a look back at the rest of us. “Well, donnae jus’ stand there. Get yer backsides in here and tell us wha’ happened and how we gained a new Alpha?” She levels a glare in my direction at the last part of her question. It’s incredible how quickly one look can make you feel like a teenager in trouble.

Knox claps me on the back. “Good luck with that, twin.”

“Thanks,” I grunt, frowning at his jittering shoulders as he tries to conceal his laughter.

“Cole! Cole, get the kettle on. We’re all gonna need a hot toddy to go with this story, if I’m no mistaken,” Gran calls out as she ushers Kya into a chair in the breakfast nook. Cole enters the kitchen shortly afterwards, his gaze scanning each of us, cataloguing every scrape, bruise and cut. A frown pulls at his brows as he takes in all the damage, but when he reaches Kya, his eye twitches and his jaw clenches. My little brother takes a deep breath before turning away from Gran and Kya, casting his eyes over Ryder, Brooks, and our family.

“Thank fuck, you’re back. When we couldn’t find any of you after that ambush...” His words trail off, and Knox pulls him into a one-armed hug.

“Yeah, we missed you, too. Come on, I’ll help with the drinks while River explains everything to Gran.”

It takes longer than I thought to catch Gran and Cole up on all that happened. When I tell them about challenging Flynn, Gran huffs ‘about bloody time’ and wastes a good fifteen minutes berating me for not challenging him sooner. When we tell them about Connor’s death and Flynn’s disappearance Gran breaks down with worry for the old Alpha. She doesn’t settle until Kya tops up her drink with more whiskey and reiterate several times we’ll be searching for him and Brody. That fucking gorilla has to face the consequences of his actions. Preferably by losing his head.

By the time we finish, it’s late afternoon.

“I’ll need to call a pack social. Is tonight too soon?” I ask her. Gran dabs her tear-stained eyes before draining the last dregs of her drink. The rosy tint to her cheeks belies how many times we topped it up.

“I’ll make it happen. No one has lef’ pack lands since yer been gone.”

“How long were we gone? No one ever answered me back at the compound.” Kya turns to give her full attention to Gran and Cole.

“Only two days. Nay ta bad, given the circumstances. I’m sorry yer birthday was ruined, though, Little Shadow.” Gran cups Kya’s cheek in one hand, patting it absentmindedly. “We can use the social ta introduce ya, as well as a belated birthday celebration. Aye, that’s what we’ll do.”

“What about Christmas? Won’t there be a social then? We don’t need to host a separate social when Christmas Eve is tomorrow. I’m honestly fine ignoring the whole birthday thing, Gran. I promise.”

“Och no, lass. Christmas is family time. We donnae celebrate as a pack, that’s fer Hogmanay.” Gran smiles at Kya, a twinkle in her eye as she mentions the New Year celebrations.

“Um, well, if you’re sure?” Kya glances around at my brothers and I, presumably to confirm Gran’s words.

“Hogmanay has always been the bigger celebration for us. Loads of food, a bonfire, music and dancing. Then once the bells toll, Gran will declare Axel the first footer, ply him with coal and bread and have him enter each house.” Casper grins, leaning back in his chair.

“First what now?” Ryder asks, resting an elbow on the table.

“First footer, tallest dark-haired male present crosses the threshold of the house—or houses, in this case—first to bring prosperity and good luck to the home for the coming year,” I explain.

“I can’t just walk into the houses though,” Axel adds, giving a long suffering sigh that no one quite believes. “I have to enter with the traditional gifts too.” He lifts a hand to tick each item off on his fingers. “Cash, something edible—normally shortbread—a lump of coal or wood for the fire, and a dram of whisky. They represent wealth, food, warmth, and good cheer. Right, Gran?”

“Aye. That’s right,” Gran acknowledges as she gets to her feet. The front door opens and closes, soft footsteps heading towards us, and I groan internally at having to deal with a pack member before the social. “I’ll go round up some of the pack lassies, and we’ll spread the word for the social. Any of you boys up for a food run? We’ll need meat.”

“Oh, I think I can be of help with that,” Fi says as she rounds the corner to the breakfast nook. “You all look as though you could use some rest, and what’s the point in magic if it can’t help supply a party?”



“Maybe this was a bad idea. Kya’s still healing. We could do another social later; no one said it *has* to be tonight,” Casper grumbles as we walk to the centre of our pack lands.

“Gran and Fi have already made the food. At least half the pack knows Kya’s been with us these last few months,” Lucian

sighs, pushing his dark wave behind his ear. “We’re probably lucky no one came to investigate.”

“They knew Flynn and Connor’s daughter was staying with us. If they put two and two together, they’d have worked out she’s our mate.” Kota pulls Kya into his side, his arm over her shoulders, as we continue walking to the gathering area.

“How big is the pack? I don’t think anyone has ever clarified numbers. I know there were a few at the diner for my party, but that was interrupted, obviously.” Kya looks around at our group.

“I think only some of the scouts and enforcers came to the party.” Mentally, I go through who I remember being there. “There were ten or fifteen pack members at the diner. Tonight, it should be the whole pack, which is fifty adult shifters. Mostly beta designation. You’ll be the only omega.”

“I figured, doesn’t make me feel better having it confirmed, though,” she mutters, and Kota pulls her closer.

“One of us will be by your side the whole night. Plus, your brothers, Cole, Gran, and Fi will be there,” Knox reassures her. It’s strange seeing this side of my twin. I’m used to him being playful and a bit of a clown—hence Kota’s pet name for him.

“Kya, we,” Axel gestures between himself, Lucian and Casper, “all wear your bite as you wear ours. The pack are good people—”

“Minus those who spied on us for Henrick,” Kya cuts in, raising her eyebrows and giving Axel a pointed look, daring him to argue with her.

“Okay, minus those, but they’ll be the minority. We’ll find them and exile them from the pack. Even if you weren’t my fated, I’d exile them. You don’t betray your pack, and you definitely don’t endanger an omega.”

Kya looks over at me, nodding slowly. “All right. Let’s get this over with. I hate peopling, so one of you stays glued to my side all night. Promise me.” She stops walking, pulling Kota to a stop too.

“Banphrionsa...” I look around at all my brothers, each nodding in turn, focusing their gaze on our fated. I step closer to her, cupping her cheek, and drop a soft kiss to her forehead. “You have our word. One of us will be beside you all night.”

Her stormy, grey eyes scan each of our faces before settling back on me.

“Okay, how much further?”

“Just through the trees there,” Knox points out. Kya huffs out a breath. Casper laughs at the disgruntled expression on her face.

“Come on, Kya, the sooner we get there, the sooner we can eat.” He crouches down, turning his back to her. “Want a piggyback? See what it’s like to look down on everyone for a change?”

Kya rolls her eyes. “I’m not *that* short. You’re all just giants.” She smiles, shaking her head, but moves out from under Kota’s arm, jumping onto Casper’s back. When the white bear climbs back to his feet, Kya looks around at the rest of us. Since Casper is the tallest, she’s able to look down on us, and a grin spreads across her lips.

“Okay, yeah, I’m short,” she laughs, and we all begin walking again.

It doesn’t take long for the smell of meat cooking, and the low drone of conversation to reach us. As soon as we walk into the clearing, a hush descends on the assembled shifters. I find myself scanning the crowd, weighing up each individual. Does anyone look shocked to see us all back here?

*:Lucian, Axel, Casper, stick close to Kya. Knox and Kota, I want you two to mingle, report back anyone who’s acting cagey or smells like guilt. The Jameson pack knew too much about us, and I want those spies Fjord mentioned Henrick had in our pack found.:*

*:And we trust Fjord? Why?:* Axel questions, rightfully so. We’ve had very little interaction with the new Jameson Alpha, but he killed his father to protect Kya.

*:You think he killed Henrick for Kya?:* Knox presses.

*:You don't?:* I ask back.

“Well, this is fun. You all having a private chat over my head. I’m gonna go say hi to Gran and Fi,” Kya huffs, sliding off Casper’s back before walking away from us. A quick look at the white bear shifter as I jerk my chin in Kya’s direction has him following after her quickly.

*:Gran, has everyone eaten?:*

*:Aye, you waited long enough. Ye have time ta eat yer self, though. Donnae make yer poor mate sit through the packs’ emotions to yer words without a’ least feedin’ her first.:*

“Let’s grab some food, and then I’ll make the announcements.”

“Never been so glad to not be you, twin.” Knox grins, slapping me on the back before making a beeline to the table next to Gran, heavily laden with food.

Pack socials always have great food, and a lot of it, it’s a big part of shifter life. Tonight, Gran has truly outdone herself, which I’m sure is partly thanks to Fi and her fae magic.

There’s something for everyone. Ribs, steak, chicken, sausages, burgers, mac ‘n’ cheese, and my personal favourite, giant prawns cooked in garlic butter. As much as I want to overindulge and relax with my family, celebrating our return home, I know the pack is waiting.

After eating enough to sate my wolf, I climb on top of one of the central tables. Letting out a sharp whistle to garner everyone’s attention, though most members were already watching me. Well, us. Since we entered the gathering area, I’ve noted eyes on my family, especially on Kya.

“I know you all have questions. I’ll do my best to answer them, and I’m hoping the majority of you have at least sampled Gran and Fi’s culinary exploits.” A smile pulls at my lips as some of the crowd chuckles. “Can’t blame me for not wanting to keep hangry shifters from a good cookout.”

“You sure you’re River and not Knox?” someone heckles.

“I resent that! I’m much funnier than my twin,” Knox shouts back as I raise my hands, motioning for them to all settle down.

“Let’s start with the change in Alpha that I’m sure you all felt through the pack link.”



## CHAPTER II

# KYA



The few murmured conversations that had still been going on after River climbed up on the table cease at his words. Tensions increase, and the combined weight of all the emotions push heavily on my omega senses.

“Some of you may have already guessed that I challenged Flynn for the pack, and you would be correct. If I’m honest, it’s something I should have done months ago. Flynn was a good Alpha to us, but his decisions were becoming more and more questionable of late. The attack at Teddy’s diner took us by surprise. Flynn knew the Jameson pack had been spotted crossing the town’s borders. He knew Henrick Jameson was after his daughter, yet he ignored the threat. As a result, a small number of locals were exposed to our existence. My brothers and I, along with the Wilson twins, their daughter, and her brothers, were abducted.” River pauses, casting a quick glance in my direction. Axel sits on the bench beside me, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me into his side.

“Henrick Jameson and his Beta, Brody Viljoen, tortured our omegas,” River continues, returning his gaze to the crowd gathered around him. “They beat and bled Kya until she lost consciousness, trying to gain information. When that didn’t work, they moved on to Connor. During their interrogation, Brody killed him. Connor Wilson is dead.”

Voices rise up. Pack members shout out questions, demanding to know what this means.

“Who will be the pack Omega now?”

“Has the Council been informed?”

“We’re all going to go feral!”

“Where’s Alpha Flynn?”

More and more voices call out. The turmoil comes off the pack in waves. Everything inside me wants to do *something* to help them, to ease their minds and animals. Without my necklace to stem my nature, being amongst this many shifters with such strong emotions is overwhelming. If it’s hitting me this hard now, I dread to think how it will feel if I join the pack and take the position of Omega.

“Close your eyes, focus on me. Focus on Lucian, Casper, whoever you need. Use your bond with us to block them out,” Axel whispers in my ear.

The bench moves as someone sits on my other side. I barely register it’s Kota before I’m pulled into his lap from Axel’s embrace.

“Breathe, Kya, I’ve got you. We’ve got you.” He slows his breathing, rubbing a hand up and down my arm. “Breathe with me. It’s just us. Shut everything else out.”

Closing my eyes, I focus on the rise and fall of his chest. With each inhale he takes, I follow suit.

“That’s it. In. Good. Now out. There we go.” He rests his forehead against my temple.

“Enough!” My eyes flutter open at River’s Alpha bark. The pack falls silent, obeying their Alpha instantly. “I will be in contact with the Council and can put in a petition for a pack Omega—”

“Isn’t *she* an omega? Why can’t she take the position and save us?” a male voice calls out. I can’t see who it is amongst the many heads that turn my way. So much attention. I will *not* appear weak to them though. Forcing myself to sit up straighter, I meet each set of eyes and hold their stare for a moment.

“Kya is not part of our pack, and we will not force her to join. We will never force someone to join or stay in this pack,”

River declares, drawing some of the attention back to him. The pack members who continue watching me have a range of expressions. I can't pinpoint emotions, but the glare from certain members doesn't require omega insight to understand.

"Isn't she supposedly your mate, though? Why wouldn't she join? Has she rejected you?" a female calls out, the sneer in her voice all too clear.

"Maybe they rejected her," another female answers, her tone more hopeful. My omega bristles at the thought of someone wanting the pain of rejection inflicted on me.

"My Beta, Lucian, as well as Axel and Casper have already completed the mate-bond with Kya. She is also fated to Kota, Knox, me, and Fjord Jameson," River answers, his stare cold and hard as he answers the women.

"Fjord Jameson is the new Alpha of the Jameson pack, having killed Henrick. Given that we share a fated mate, we will be opening negotiations into a pack merge. Again, the Council will be notified. If any of you have concerns, we can arrange a time to discuss them."

*Say what now?*

I look up at Kota, then over to Axel and my other mates. Their outward expressions are neutral save for perhaps a flare of the nostrils from Axel and Kota's eyes widening ever so slightly. Their emotions, though, tell me that the news of a merge is throwing them off like it is the rest of the pack. Why wouldn't River have mentioned that earlier today?

"I'll hold office hours in the Alpha house in the same way Flynn did. However, I will continue living with my family and Kya in the McBearty house." He looks around at the gathered shifters. When no one else says anything, he gives a nod. "Please continue to enjoy your evenings. We'll be around if you'd like to arrange a time to talk with Lucian or me. Thank you."

He jumps down from the table, eyes focused on me as he weaves through the pack to join us. As he passes, a few shifters call out to him, and he stops to listen to them,

arranging appointments to go over details and hear concerns in private. He gives each member his attention, but I don't miss how his gaze flicks toward me every so often.

“Kya, I meant to ask, your necklace...” Fi leaves her question open. I lift a hand to rest on the hollow of my throat.

“Aralar took it,” I answer, not missing the flare of annoyance in my godmother's dark eyes. “It's fine, Fi. I can't hide forever, though adjusting to the empathic side of being an omega will take some getting used to.”

“Are you all right? We can leave if this is too much.” Smiling up at River, I shake my head.

“I'm okay. I have to learn to navigate this sooner or later. May as well start now; I mean, it's not like I'm going anywhere, is it?”

“You're not a prisoner here, Kya,” Lucian says, leaning across the table to take my hand in his.

“No, I don't think I've been a prisoner for a little while now.” Patting Kota's knee, I climb out of his lap, giving Lucian's hand a squeeze before letting go. Turning to River, I tilt my head back slightly to look him in the eye.

“I'm not sold on joining the pack; we need to talk about that more. About what it would mean and what would be expected of me.” Pausing, I take a breath, licking my lips and bolstering myself for what I'm going to offer. “That said, I'm not going to turn my back on so many shifters and risk them going feral. I'll help. Only in an interim capacity until a final decision is made. Whether that's me joining or the Council sending an omega to the pack.”

“Are you sure, Ky?” Brooks asks hesitantly. His voice pulls my focus from River, and I nod.

“Yeah. Hiding doesn't seem like an option anymore, so maybe I should put aside my prejudices and try to be an omega.”



This last week since the social and Christmas has been exhausting. I feel like I've barely seen the McBeartys or my brothers. We've all been busy. Whether that's generic day-to-day life stuff, or trying to find a lead on Flynn and Brody, or where Connor's body ended up. River and Lucian are also adjusting to their new roles in the pack, as am I. If I'd realised how time-consuming even being the interim pack Omega would be, I might have reconsidered offering to help out. Though as one of the elder shifters pointed out today, I'm already mated to three of them, destined for the other three, including the Alpha. I'm not going to abandon my mates, so I may as well just join and officially take the position.

Gran finally stepped in, running interference with the pack this afternoon so that I can have some time with my mates. My injuries from Brody and Henrick have finally healed, and I'm hoping to locate at least one mate, if not more, to join me in my nest for a lazy day.

First, I want to check in with River. I've seen the least of him, which isn't surprising. There are a lot of members who want to talk to him now that he's Alpha, especially in light of the proposed pack merge. Gran mentioned he'd cleared his schedule, so I'm hoping he's here at the house.

Noise drifts towards me as I climb the front staircase to the landing where River, Lucian, Knox, and Kota's bedrooms are. A smile pulls at my lips, my muscles relax, and the tension leaks away as the comforting scents of my mates mingle together.

River's bedroom door is pushed open, and I lean against it until the wood hits the wall. Except it's not River in the room. A leggy blonde is busying herself stripping the sheets, humming an off-key melody as she moves from one side of the large bed to the other. When did he even move his bed from against the wall?

"Who the fuck are you?" The question slips out, and the blonde looks up sharply. Her pale green eyes scan me from head to toe and back up. She quirks one heavily pencilled eyebrow and sneers at me.

“Vanessa.” She straightens from where she’d been leaning over the bed, folding her arms across her chest.

“Why are you in River’s room?” I try to keep my tone mild, curious, but not belying my omega’s distress of finding an unmated female beta in my mate’s room.

“I see to *all* the Alpha’s needs, in any and *every* capacity.” She waves a hand at the bed, no doubt trying to insinuate something happened between them. I suppress the urge to laugh in her face. The room smells like fresh sheets and mildly stale air, as though someone was trying to air it out after it hadn’t been used much recently. Instead of entertaining her delusions, I ask another question.

“Who said you could come into the house?” She blinks at me. To some, it wouldn’t be something high on the list of things to ask, but I don’t like the idea of people just walking into our personal spaces. I’m incredibly grateful that the entrance to my nest is hidden.

“I don’t need permission.” She huffs a laugh, flicking her hair over one shoulder. The neck of her oversized jumper slips down, exposing the lacy strap of her bralette. “As I said, I take care of *all* of the Alpha’s needs. *Whatever* he may require, I’m the female he’ll call on first.” Quirking an eyebrow at her, I process what she’s saying—and insinuating—I’m torn between my omega’s feelings of jealousy and my increasing desire to laugh in her face.

“You did this for Flynn too?”

“Exactly,” Vanessa smirks at me, looking all too pleased with herself.

“Sooo, you were my father’s, what, side piece? And you expect me to believe River is suddenly going to have you warm his bed too?” I laugh.

“It wouldn’t be the first time. And better me than an overgrown child who thinks she’s too good for the pack!” she spits at me.

“Good to know.” Her words hurt, but I keep my smile firmly in place. Everyone has a past. I might question his taste,

but I won't condemn him for it.

"Kya?" Lucian calls as he exits his room. "Everything okay?"

"Yup," I answer, popping the P and not taking my eyes off of Vanessa. "Just meeting Vanessa here. Apparently, she'll be taking care of *all* of River's needs now that he's Alpha. Isn't that nice of her?"

"Oh, boy," he mutters so quietly I don't think he meant for me to hear. Lucian clears his throat. Walking up behind me, he slowly rests his tattooed hands on my shoulders, pulling me back into his chest, and drops a light kiss on my head.

"Hey, Vanessa. River changed his sheets last night. You can leave those and head on home. If he needs anything, someone will let you know," my mountain lion says with a cool detachment.

Vanessa smiles up at him, batting her eyelashes as she simpers, "Of course, Beta Lucian. You all know how to reach me anytime. Day *or* night." She casts a pointed glare my way before leaving the room, brushing up against Lucian as she passes us. He curses softly under his breath and glares after the female shifter. I fight to contain the snort as she sways her hips in an exaggerated motion that I assume is meant to be enticing.

"Sooo, anything I need to know about *Vanessa*?" I ask, tilting my head back to catch Lucian's blue gaze.

"Uh, well, no?" he hedges.

"Mhmm, that was super convincing. Kitchen? You can fill me in while I cook." He pales slightly but nods, probably thinking of the new knife set that appeared a couple of days ago. He doesn't have anything to be worried about though. Everyone has a past, and as long as Vanessa and any other previous lovers stay in the past, we won't have any issues.

"Sure. Lead the way."



## CHAPTER 12

# LUCIAN



*Shit. Fuck. Bollocks. Which idiot let that parasitic hyena in here?*

“Don’t you dare warn anyone we’re on our way down or what just happened, Lucy-Lou.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Kya looks back at me over her shoulder, raising one eyebrow in disbelief. That’s fair. I would have been letting the guys know what had happened if I wasn’t busy trying to figure out which of them accidentally gave her permission.

The only female pack member to have ever stepped foot in this house before Kya was Gran. There’s no way any of us would have invited any of the others in, and especially not Vanessa.

My mind is still occupied trying to figure out what could have happened when we turn into the kitchen. Kya stumbles to a halt.

“Holy shit.”

I groan at Kya’s words, hoping we’ve not just walked in on Knox and Kota having some couple time. A subtle sniff of the air reveals neither of them are in the kitchen.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Kya exclaims.

Looking up, I take in River and Fjord on the far side of the island. All the upper cupboard doors have been removed, and the contents emptied onto the central island and other work surfaces.

“Err, what *are* you doing?” I ask, looking from the chaos to the two Alphas.

“Hey, Petal.” Fjord smiles at my—our—mate before turning his gaze to me and nodding. “Lucian.”

“Hey,” I acknowledge him while Kya stares River down.

“River, what the hell are you doing to my kitchen?”

:*She just met Vanessa in your room.*: I shoot the message to my brother before he can answer. Kya spins on her heel, eyes narrowed in a deadly glare.

“You said you wouldn’t warn anyone.” Holding my hands up in surrender, I take a tentative step back.

“In my defence, you said not to warn them we were on our way down, and we’re down now, so...” my words trail off, even I can hear how pathetic the excuse is.

“Vanessa?” River asks, frowning at Kya and me. Our omega turns back to face him, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Yes. Vanessa, blonde, long legs, around five-foot-seven, apparently the female of the pack who you’ll be calling on first for *all* your needs.” Fjord takes a subtle step away from River, trying to distance himself. Not sure I’d do any different in his shoes. River stares at Bunny open-mouthed. “I mean, if you want my father’s sloppy seconds or thirds or whatever, then you do you. But don’t take it out on my kitchen. I was going to cook and bake. Dammit, now I need a different outlet.”

River places the screwdriver I hadn’t noticed earlier onto the counter next to him.

“Kya, Banphrionsa.” He moves around the island until he’s standing in front of Kya, blocking her in between his body and mine. Bending his knees, he crouches down until he’s closer to her height. “Once upon a time, *before* I knew about you and *before* Vanessa was involved with Flynn and Connor, I made the error of sleeping with her. I would never touch her or even entertain her now. I know I’m an idiot at times, but I’m not so much an idiot that I would risk hurting you like that.”

The room is quiet as we wait for Kya's response. After a moment, she sighs, scratches her neck and looks over her shoulder at me, then back to River.

"I'm not mad you guys have pasts. That would be hypocritical. Hell, part of my past helped us at the Jameson compound and is making moves on Tilly." She waves a hand somewhat dismissively. Which is fine, but we will circle back to Aralar at a later date. "As long as they stay in the past, then it's a nonissue. I just don't want her in your bedroom. Or in the house at all, if possible."

"That's fair. We've never allowed any of the female pack members into the house. Only Gran's been here," I murmur.

"So why was she here?" Kya asks with an air of exasperation.

"That's probably my fault." River sighs, standing back up to his full height. "At the end of the social, she asked if she should continue on as the Alpha's assistant. I wanted to get back to you and see how you were handling being around everyone. I brushed her off with a 'yes' but didn't stop to think about how she viewed the job." He runs a hand down his face. "I'll make sure she understands she's only needed in the Alpha house and only during office hours."

"Okay," Kya drags the word out, then looks over to Fjord. "So wanna tell me what you're doing to my kitchen?"



## KYA

Fjord and River blink down at me, then glance at each other.

"If this is some kind of weird Alpha bonding thing, that's cool, but when will the kitchen be back to functional?" I ask.

"I brought your truck back good as new." Fjord walks over and hands me the keys. I grin at them, pleased to have them back. Making a mental note to check-in with Tilly and also review my commission requests, try and fit some painting time in between the pack's need for an Omega.

“Thanks, Fjord.”

“You’re welcome, Petal.”

“He arrived as I was unloading supplies from my car and offered to help. Gran banished me from the Alpha house, but, well...” River’s sentence drops off, and he looks over his shoulder as though expecting his Gran to appear behind him.

“We do have stuff to discuss with the merge, and getting to know each other better can’t hurt, right?” Fjord finishes for him.

“Okay? And what exactly are you doing?” I press.

“I mentioned before about changing the cupboard shelves when we realised you were climbing on the counters to reach stuff.”

“And I said you didn’t need to change anything.” Lucian coughs behind me, and River looks down at me with an expression that screams, ‘you’re missing the point’, and I probably am. Fjord cuts in to finally explain what they’re up to.

“These new shelves work on a pulley system. You’ll be able to pull this handle at the bottom of the cupboard, and it will bring the shelves out and down so they’re more accessible for you.”

“Huh, well, that, that actually sounds really helpful.”

“Mhmm, yeah, I thought so too when River mentioned how much you like to cook. And bake.” His dark green eyes twinkle with suppressed humour.

“He told you about the pet treats, huh?” I ask innocently as Lucian and River chuckle.

“Yup, heard all about them and turning his room into a studio.”

“Okay, that one was Casper.” I grin. “But I kinda loved it. River napped in my room, so my sheets held his scent every night.” My cheeks warm with a blush as I realise I said all that out loud.

In my peripheral vision, I see a huge smug grin spread across the wolf shifter's face. Thankfully, Lucian swoops in to rescue me from having to say anything else.

“Hey, Bunny, I believe I still owe you a modelling session, right? Feel like painting instead of cooking?”

Painting one of my mates in his birthday suit? Uh, yes, please.

“Sure, we can do that.” I turn and smile up at him, hoping the look conveys how grateful I am for the change in conversation. He takes my hand and leads me out of the kitchen. At the doorway, I look back over my shoulder.

“Will you be done by tonight? We can have a family dinner? We all need to get to know Fjord if you're merging, and we're fated and everything.”

“Yeah, we'll be finished by tonight.” Fjord smiles softly at me.

“Knox and Kota won't be home 'til late, though. They're dealing with some stuff at the gym,” River adds. Acknowledging his words with a nod, I let Lucian lead me away.



“So, how does this work? What do you want me to do?” Lucian asks from the doorway as I move about my studio, pulling out a prepped canvas and settling it on the easel.

“Hmm, well, you'll need to strip.” I muse, looking around the space, working out in my mind how to change things to make him more comfortable. “I'll be right back.”

Turning, I quickly exit the room and head to Lucian's office next door. He spends hours in his desk chair. It's something he'll be comfortable sitting in. I wheel the black and blue leather chair from his office to my studio, smiling at him as I move it into position.

“Um, why'd you bring my chair in here?”

“For you to sit on, obviously.”

“You want my naked arse sat on a leather chair for hours?” His tone is incredulous as his gaze moves between the chair and me repeatedly.

“Problem?” My brows pull down in confusion. What would he rather sit on? The floor?

“Err, it’s gonna get sweaty, and my arse will stick to it.” Oh, didn’t think of that.

“Hmm, what if I got a sheet? That would be a barrier between you and the leather? Or I guess you could stand, but that won’t be comfortable either.”

“I’ll sit. I’ll just let you know if I need a break, yeah?”

“Okay, yeah. If you’re okay with it, I can take a couple of photos too, to use as a reference point if you get called away.”

“Ph-photos?” he stutters, staring at me.

“I don’t have to,” I hedge. Nudity is part of shifter life, but I guess naked photos could be uncomfortable.

“Your eyes only?” he asks warily.

“Of course!” I push the easel to the side. If he’s not comfortable, I’m not going to push for him to model. “Okay, A, it would be unprofessional to share them, and B, no way I want anyone else seeing your goods. You’re my mate. Mine. I don’t have to paint you; I can paint a commission piece or something.”

“Who knew you were so possessive,” he chuckles as I roll my eyes.

“You should pay better attention if you only now think I’m possessive.”

“Hmm, well, I wouldn’t want anyone to forget I’m yours. We should probably do something to ensure your scent is all over me.” Lucian’s voice drops to a low, husky tone.

“Oh?” I look up at him, eyes wide with feigned innocence. “How would you suggest we do that? I’m supposed to be painting.”

“Oh, we can paint and scent mark each other at the same time.” Tattooed fingers grip my chin, tilting my face up as Lucian dips his head down to deliver a searing kiss to my lips. He licks at the seam until I open my mouth and his tongue slides in to join mine. A moan rises in my throat as I arch my back, trying to close the distance between us even more.

He breaks the kiss, leaning away from me. My moan morphs into a mewl of displeasure.

“We need to set up a sheet as our canvas, and we need to lose our clothes, don’t we?” It’s a rhetorical question, but I nod anyway.

“I have a sheet.” I wave a hand in the general direction of where I stashed the linen. This wasn’t what I’d had in mind, but Lucian’s idea of painting sounds much more fun.

With a final heated kiss, he moves across the room, retrieving the sheet and spreading it out on the floor. I help him weigh the corners down and then pull out some of the less expensive paints. I love the man... Holy shit; I love him. Them. All of them? Maybe? But, regardless, there are some hard limits when it comes to painting-by-sex.

The rustle of clothing has me turning back to see a shirtless Lucian push his sweatpants down and toe them off each ankle before kicking them to the side with his discarded Henley. My eyes scan the length of his body, his very naked body. My tongue darts out, licking my lips as my gaze returns to his hard cock.

“Bunny, you’re overdressed,” he chastises lightly.

“Am I?” I feign shock as I look down, taking in my green jumper and black dungarees. “Oops, guess I am.”

Lucian lunges across the sheet and scoops me up into his arms, causing me to drop some of the tubes of paint I’d been holding. He spins me around before lowering me to the ground. His deft fingers make quick work of undoing the straps on my dungarees. One hand moves between my breasts as he pushes me back against the sheet.



“I’ll handle these. You get that jumper off,” he murmurs against my mouth before pulling my bottom lip between his teeth and sucking it until it pops free. Lucian lifts my hips to rest on his thighs and slowly pulls the dungarees down. Shuffling backwards, he gives a quick tug, divesting me of the denim garment, and tosses it to the side with his clothes. My jumper and tank top join the pile less than a second later.

“How attached are you to this underwear?” Lucian purrs, sending shivers of desire down my spine, and the room fills with the scent of our combined arousal. His hands come to rest on my hips.

“It’s not a favourite set. Why?” He flashes me a grin before the sound of tearing fabric fills the quiet. “Okay, should have seen that coming.”

I push up onto my elbows and unhook the front clasp of my bra before he can get trigger-happy with his claws. Lucian sucks one newly exposed nipple into his mouth, twirling his tongue around the peak before releasing it with a pop and repeating the move on the other.

He pulls back as my hands sink into his hair; leaning back, he reaches for the paint.

“Any preference for who wears which colour?” he asks, removing the cap off a tube of cobalt green.

“Nope, just don’t ingest it. It’s not edible paint,” I answer as he drips the cool paint onto my abdomen.

“Hmm, no, but I’m going to buy you some that is.” His blue eyes flick to mine. “For next time.”

I pluck the tube of paint from his hand, squeezing it onto his shoulder. Lucian grabs another tube, and we repeat the process, dripping paint across each other’s bare skin. He leaves my breasts free of paint, moving between sucking my nipples and tongue fucking my mouth.

Our hands roam freely, exploring the areas that are sensitive to the other’s touch. A mischievous gleam enters my mate’s eyes as he paints slow, sensual swirls down my neck, between my breasts and around my belly button. His fingers

move across my hips and around my thighs, pushing them open as he lowers his head to my core.

His tongue darts out, licking from taint to clit. He sucks the bundle of nerves into his mouth, drawing a gasp of pleasure from my lips. My breaths pick up as he feasts on me, driving his tongue into my channel, only to pull it out each time I inch closer to my climax.

“Lucy,” I gasp out as he once again changes his ministrations. He hums around my clit, sending new waves of pleasure through me. My desire is coiled so tightly inside me, but each time the edge appears, he switches pace. Over and over, he brings me to the brink to let me drop back.

“Lucian, please,” I cry out, my hands moving from where they’ve been locked in his hair to my breasts. Pinching and rolling my nipples, I try to reach the crest and fall over into orgasmic bliss.

“Oh no, Bunny. You don’t get to play today.” His fingers encircle my wrists, pulling my hands above my head as he rises up over my body. I wrap my legs around his waist, applying pressure until Lucian rolls onto his back, the momentum taking me with him. He lines himself up and gravity aids in sheathing his length inside me.

Rocking my hips, I lean forward until each movement has my clit rubbing against his pubic bone.

“Fuck, yes, Kya.” His words are a soft hiss as his eyes flutter closed.

I keep my movements shallow, moving my body in a sensual dance. As I reach the top of the peak once more and throw my head back in anticipation, Lucian flips us. Hooking my left knee over his shoulder, my right leg wrapped around his waist, he thrusts into me.

His jaw clenches as he speaks through gritted teeth.

“When we fall, we fall together. You are mine, and I am yours.” As soon as the last word leaves his lips, he bends down, sinking his teeth into his claiming bite. I cry out as my orgasm finally crashes over me. Lucian’s cock pulses inside

me, extending my climax. My muscles shake and twitch as I come back to myself.

Lucian turns his head, kissing my knee before lowering my leg and rolling to the side. He smiles softly at me, placing gentle kisses on my forehead, nose, and lips.

“So, think we can get away with having our sex sheet on the bed in your nest?” he asks with a grin and raised eyebrow.

“Not a chance.” River’s voice pulls our attention to the doorway, where he’s standing with Casper.

“Unless we all get to make one and alternate?” Casper winks, bypassing the Alpha and lifting me into his arms. “Let’s go get you cleaned up, Älskling. Then we can order take out.”

“What? Why? I thought we were going to have family dinner with Fjord?” I look between Casper and River.

“Slight hiccup getting the new shelves installed. We *will* do the dinner, though, just not tonight. We’ll plan it and ensure everyone will be there. Knox and Kota would have missed tonight, anyway.”

I nod slowly. It would be better for us to all be together.

“Okay. I still don’t want take out, though.”

“I’ll ask Gran if we can borrow her kitchen,” River answers as Casper carries me from the art studio and up the back stairs to my bedroom and ensuite.

## CHAPTER 13

# KOTA



“Ounce, let’s just go to bed,” Knox’s tired voice says, breaking me out of my focus.

I look up at Knox and nod. The paperwork and plans for combining what’s left of the Wilson and Jameson packs can wait until morning. Pushing up from my seat, I roll my neck until it cracks, then round the table and wrap an arm around Knox’s waist.

“Yeah, bed sounds good.”

He drops a quick kiss on top of my temple before striding out of the office we’ve been using in the old Alpha house. No way River will move in here—well, Kya won’t move in here, and River isn’t going to live separately from her.

The night air helps pull my brain free from the clutches of sleep, and I begin to get a second wind. A glance to my side shows Knox has perked up some too.

“Which room?” I ask him as we enter the house via the back door. My eyes stray to the back stairs that lead to Kya’s room. I would love to wake up with her sandwiched between us. One day—hopefully soon—I’ll be able to.

“Yours, it’s closest.” Knox’s words snap my attention to him, and the mischievous grin pulling at his lips tells me I was right in thinking the walk helped wake him up. I don’t respond; just move by him, brushing my body against his as I pass. A low growl rumbles in his chest, and I smirk before increasing the speed of my steps and taking the stairs two at a time.

Knox is right behind me, and when I open my bedroom door and jerk to a stop, he collides into my back.

“Ounce?” I shush him with a wave of my hand then point to my bed. His sharp inhale when he notices our tiny mate curled up in the centre of my bed pulls my gaze from her sleeping form back to him.

“You think she’d be okay with us sleeping in here too, or should we go to my room?” he whispers, trying not to disturb her.

“I climbed in here because I missed you, so get into bed so we can sleep,” Kya mumbles, heavy with sleep, and I’m not completely convinced she’s awake. I raise a brow at Knox, silently asking his opinion. He gives me a look back that clearly says, ‘don’t be an idiot’ before brushing past me and pulling his shirt off as he approaches the bed.

With a shrug, I step fully into the room, closing the door behind me. Toeing off my trainers first and setting them to the side of the chest of drawers, I turn back to the bed in time to see Knox sliding under the covers behind Kya. I undress, only leaving my boxers on before joining them and slipping under the covers, rolling to my left so I’m facing them both.

“Clothes off. Off. Mates should be naked in bed. I’m making it a rule,” Kya mumbles. I look over to see Knox already removing his boxers and dropping them to the floor. With a shrug, I do the same. If my fated mate wants me naked, I’m not fool enough to refuse.

Knox leans over Kya and places a chaste kiss across my lips, then on her temple, before settling down against the pillow. I place a soft peck on her nose before burrowing down and closing my eyes.

A smile settles across my lips for the first time since before Kya’s birthday as I fall asleep.



**KYA**

Rolling over, I hit a wall of warm, hard muscles. A smile pulls at my lips as I blink my eyes open and look up into Kota's dark eyes. He raises a finger to his lips, letting me know to be quiet. A quick glance over my shoulder reveals Knox, still fast asleep. I wiggle up the bed slightly until I'm level with my snow leopard and press a soft kiss good morning on his lips. His hand strokes up my arm and around my neck, his fingers spread into my hair, holding me in place as he deepens the kiss, nipping my bottom lip. Hard velvet flesh presses against my thigh as he pulls me closer.

*Well, good morning, Kota.*

Heat and desire coil and burn low in my stomach. Claiming my sweet snow leopard sounds like a perfect start to the day. Opening my mouth when he licks the seam of my lips, I suck on his tongue as I trail my fingers down his chest and abs. His breath hitches when I hit a ticklish spot, and I file that tidbit away for another time. It's always good to know which mate is ticklish and where.

Continuing my exploration, I let my nails scrape across every dip of his abs and Adonis belt before wrapping my hand around his hard length. My fingertips barely meet my thumb as I adjust my grip, increasing the pressure with each movement, drawing a soft hiss from him.

Kota pulls my hair, breaking our kiss and tilting my head back so he can lick my neck. His other hand dips between my legs, fingers stroking through my folds. A purr begins in his chest when he finds me slick and ready for him.

He leans back, releasing my hair and tilting my head so he can look directly into my eyes. I don't want to wake Knox, at least not yet, so I mouth the words to my snow leopard, letting him know I want this—want him.

“Mark me. Claim me, Kota.”

His fingers abandon their exploration as he grips my leg behind the knee and pulls it up to wrap around his waist. I guide his length to my entrance and let go when his tip pushes inside.

He enters me slowly, rocking his hips so after every new inch I take, he pulls out slightly. It's a delicious torture, and to keep from begging him to hurry up and fuck me, I focus on trailing kisses along his jaw and lips.

The feel of another hand moving across my waist and down until fingers circle my clit gives me pause.

"Hmm, room for one more over here?" Knox's voice is still husky with sleep. He nuzzles into the side of my neck, sucking on my skin, no doubt leaving a love bite behind.

"What do you say? Can Payaso join us? We could both fill you, mark you, claim you." Kota's thrusts get harder with each word.

"Would you like that, Firebug? For us to both be inside you at the same time?"

I can't form coherent words to answer them.

"I can't wait to see you take his knot. He'll only knot for you. You haven't taken a knot before, have you?"

I shake my head.

"No. Gods, I want Knox's, though." I get the words out on a moan. Pleased humming pours from Knox, and Kota suddenly pulls out and spins me on the bed, so I'm now facing one of my wolves. Fingers scoop slick from my pussy and spread it around my back hole.

"A first knot probably shouldn't be in this pretty arse." Kota's voice drops to a low timbre. "And I want to be the first of us to fill you here." With his words, he pushes one finger inside to the knuckle, checking how much stretching I'll need before slowly adding another finger.

Knox slides down my body, showering my skin with kisses, pausing to take one breast into his mouth, sucking the nipple until it pops free, then doing the same to the other. He continues down my body, nipping my ribs and making me whimper at the emptiness I desperately want filled.

"Please," the word slips out, and if it were any of my other mates, I might regret the blatant pleading in my tone.



“We’ve got you, Chibi Girl. We’ll make you feel so good. You’ll wake the rest of the house when you scream our names.”

Knox lifts my leg, opening me so he can lick my pussy and swirl his tongue across my clit. My head falls back against Kota, who pulls his fingers from my arse, replacing them with his cock. He repeats the slow torture, but this time, I’m not impatient. It really has been a while since anything bigger than a butt plug went in that hole.

I let the pleasure of Knox’s tongue and Kota’s cock wash over me, bringing me closer and closer to the edge of orgasm. Knox scraping his teeth across my clit sends me over the edge and forces incoherent praise for them both to fall from my lips. Kota continues to thrust into me, having found a rhythm that has me climbing to another climax before the first fully fades.

Knox licks me one final time before moving back up the bed, pushing my leg up higher.

“You ready to discover knotting together? Ready for us to claim you and be claimed by you?”

“Fuck, yes,” I practically purr.

Kota chuckles softly behind me and stops his movement while Knox pushes into my channel. He’s girthier than Kota, and even with the slick from my orgasms, there’s still that slight sting from where he stretches me.

Once he’s fully seated, they both lean in and kiss me. Knox, my lips, and Kota, my shoulder, and then they start to move. There’s no awkwardness of finding a rhythm; they move in tandem, one pulling out as the other thrusts into me.

Knox holds my thigh, keeping my leg lifted up and out, giving them the room they need. Kota wraps his arm around me, just below my neck, pulling me flush against his chest.

“You’re such a good girl, taking us both like this, having us fill you completely. The perfect mate,” Kota purrs into my ear, sending a shiver through me. “So many ways we can please you. Would you like one of us to be the sandwich next

time? What do you think about me fucking Payaso while he's buried inside you?"

*Holy fucking shit. Yes, please!*

My inner walls clench around them.

"Oh, I think our mate likes that idea, Ounce."

Kota's purr increases as his thrusts become more erratic.

"Tell us, Chibi Girl, what would you like?"

"You to claim me, then fuck Knox while he knots and claims me, so it's like you're fucking us both."

Kota's grip on me tightens as he finally buries his teeth into the back of my neck, marking me as his while slamming into me hard and pulling me over into another orgasm with him. The only part of him I can reach is his forearm. I pull it up and sink my teeth into him, claiming him as my mate and sealing the bond between us.

Knox slows his movements, giving us time to come back down. Once Kota releases me, he kisses my temple and pulls out, shuffling to the edge of the bed. Before I can question or protest him moving away from me right after claiming me, Knox shifts our positions. I'm flat on my back with my jokester wolf hovering over me.

"My turn." He grins down at me, pulls my legs around his waist as he kneels on the bed and increases his speed, fucking me hard and fast into Kota's mattress.

The sound of a drawer opening and closing has me turning my head to see my snow leopard making his way around the bed. One hand holds a bottle of lube while the other strokes his dick back to attention. The snap of the lube cap opening has Knox stilling so Kota can prep him.

A soft growl emanates from Knox as Kota pushes into him.

"Holy shit, this is... *fuck*, yes." Watching Knox drop his head, eyes closed with an expression of pure pleasure, has me clenching around him.

Kota grips our wolf's hips as he increases his speed, fucking Knox harder and faster than he did me.

“*Fuck*, that feels so good. You feel so good, Kya. Flick that bean for me. Flick it until you're screaming for us.”

I reach between us, following his instructions, flicking, swirling, and pinching until my back arches up off the bed, and I scream my release.

Knox leans down as his knot starts to swell, locking us together. His hips slow as he pushes in as far as he can. His cock twitches inside me as he comes and sinks his teeth into my right breast. The combination of his claiming bite and knot has another orgasm crash over me. I tug at his hair, needing to claim him.

Kota grunts as he finds his release and swats Knox's arse as he pulls out. My wolf mate licks his mark on my breast, sucking my nipple one last time before rising up and exposing his neck for me.

“Claim me where it will always be visible, Firebug. Show everyone I'm yours.”

*Well, when he puts it like that.*

I push myself up and bite the side of his neck so no matter what he wears, it will always be visible.

“Fuck, that's hot.” I pull back from Knox and look over to the door where Casper is leaning against the frame, watching us, his eyes heated with desire. “Next time, I want an invite to the party.”

## CHAPTER 14

# BROOKS



I'm stretched out on the sofa in the den, reading while Ryder and Cole watch a movie we've all seen numerous times before. A handful of popcorn lands across the page, and I look up with a glare at my brother.

"Stop studying."

"I'm not. It's one of Kya's books," I huff, lifting the book from my lap so he can see it clearly.

"Oh, well." Ryder's brow furrows as he looks at the cover. "Wait, you're too young for those—"

"Not one of *those*, well, I guess it is, but it's smut-free," I cut him off before he gets himself worked up.

"Kya has smut-free books?! Are you sure?" Cole looks between us, and I fight a sigh. Sharing a Kindle library might have scarred Cole a little bit.

"Obviously, since I'm reading it." I laugh before turning my attention back to Ryder. "Why did you throw popcorn at me?"

"Oh right, wanna play a video game?"

Before I can answer, there's a heavy knock on the front door. Cole pushes up from the sofa, sharing a confused glance with Ryder and me. Placing a scrap of paper in the book to mark my page, I stand and follow Cole into the hallway, Ryder close behind me.

Cole looks through the small glass panel at the top of the door. His brows pull down in a frown, and he waves us to

move out of sight before opening the door.

“Err, can I help you?”

“We’re looking for Alpha Flynn Wilson,” a deep accented voice answers Cole.

“Ach, well, get in line,” Gran pipes up from behind me. I glance over my shoulder, eyes wide at the woman who has taken my brother and me under her wing as surrogate grandchildren.

“Gran,” Cole hisses, but she waves her hand at him, moving forward and opening the door wide enough for me to see the four shifters standing on the porch.

The lead shifter frowns. His gaze bounces between us before he takes a step back, looking up at the house. “This is the Alpha house for the Wilson pack, correct?”

“Aye, it was. We’re not the Wilson pack anymore though. We’re the McBearty pack, and the new Alpha lives with his brothers and their mate in the old Beta house.”

The shifter crosses his arms over his chest, looking down on Gran. “And where would that be?”

“Well, down the lane a wee bit. The Alpha willnae like yer at his house, though. Best ya come in. I’ll put the kettle on.” Gran turns her gaze to Cole. “Let the Alpha know he has visitors.”

“Sure thing, Gran.” I pull the door open wider at Cole’s reply. The shifters step into the house, eyeing us up as though gauging if we’re a threat or not. “Who should I say is here? He’s gonna ask.”

“Enforcer Daniels from the Council.”



**KYA**

“*Knox?*” I smile sweetly, the picture of pure innocence as he glances at me over the back of the sofa.

The usually playful twin narrows his eyes at me, likely because my hands are behind my back. I probably look a little suspicious and like I'm up to something. I guess I kind of am. Well, not up to, but I am after something.

“Yes?” The hesitancy in his tone has nerves fluttering in my stomach. Which is ridiculous. I'm asking for a tiny favour, nothing strenuous or taxing or dramatic. Taking a quick, deep breath, I step closer to the sofa.

“Would you—could you—will you do my hair in one of those fancy braids you always put yours in?” My question starts off slow, and then the words fall from my lips so fast, they jumble together, and it takes a moment for his brain to decipher.

“You want him to braid your hair?” Kota asks as Knox sits up and pats the space in front of him.

“I can do your hair, Firebug. Come here.” My smile is so big as I scurry around the sofa that my cheeks twinge with a small ache. Settling myself between his legs, I pass Knox the hairbrush, comb, and hair tie I'd had behind my back.

“Wanna watch something while I do this?” Knox nods to the TV, taking the brush, and slowly starts working out any tangles, starting with the ends of my hair first.

“Sure, Kota can pick, though.”

“Choose carefully, Ounce,” Knox teases.

Kota rolls his eyes and stretches his arm out to grab the remote from the coffee table.

“Movie or show? Oh, wait, never mind. I know what we can watch.” He flicks through the various streaming services, pulling up one for anime.

“How's your Japanese, Chibi Girl?”

“Err, non-existent? Why?”

“Kota watches anime in Japanese. I'm sure he'll put the subtitles on for you though.”

“Hey, that makes it sound like I don’t put them on for you.”

“Eh, to be fair, I rarely watch. I tend to get distracted with other things.”

“Like what?” I ask, tilting my head back to look up at Knox. He tuts me and moves my head back to where he wants it.

“Stay still.”

“But—”

Knox leans down until his mouth is next to my right ear. “I get distracted by Kota. Ounce has very lickable abs.”

“Oh. Well, yes, he does. So do you...” I let the sentence trail off as my mind flicks through the mental snapshots I’ve stored of all the McBeartys’ abs. The guys’ soft chuckles pull my focus back to the present. The slight tug on my hair is oddly comforting as Knox separates the strands to braid it. Wiggling slightly to get comfortable, I settle my gaze on the TV and the anime my snow leopard has selected.

“Kota?” I ask mid-way through the first episode. He hums in acknowledgement but doesn’t turn to look at me. “So I have a question.”

“Yeah? What is it?” He twists around, looking at me with a confused frown.

“How’d you learn Japanese?”

“What do you mean? Why wouldn’t he know it?” Kota throws a cushion at Knox.

“Don’t make it sound like I’m Japanese. You both know I’m half Filipino.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Knox chuckles, and I glare up at him half-heartedly. The playful wolf tries to wink at me before giving up and dropping a kiss on my forehead. “I’m sorry, I’ll behave.”

“That would make a nice change. *Highly* unlikely, though.” Kota smirks, shaking his head at his lover. He



switches his focus back to me, and I get lost in his dark obsidian eyes for a moment before he continues. “I learnt Japanese by watching anime as a kid. You know how kids pick up languages better and stuff? Well, I loved the art style, and my parents left me to my own devices a lot, so I’d spend hours binge-watching episodes online.”

“That sounds like a fun way to learn a language.” He flashes me a grin before settling back onto the sofa and returning his attention to the show, which I’m enjoying, despite having zero clue what’s happening.



After Knox finishes braiding my hair, I move over to the other sofa to snuggle with Kota. I’m half focused on the TV and half on trailing my fingers across Kota’s abs in a lazy pattern when my blissful morning is interrupted.

*:Kya, there’s a group of shifters at the old Alpha house. They’re saying they’re enforcers from the Council and that they have a warrant to search pack lands for an omega being held against her will. What the fuck is going on?:*

My head jerks up at Brooks’ voice drifting through my mind. It’s been so long since we even attempted to use a mind-link. The familiar feeling of white noise and static doesn’t accompany his voice this time though. Maybe bonding with the guys altered it somehow?

I’m not sure, but it’s a question that can wait for another day. A day when there aren’t a bunch of Council enforcers looking for me.

*:I’ll grab a couple of the guys, and we’ll head over. Is Gran at the house? Can she stall them?:*

*:Yeah, Gran’s here. Ryder and Cole are too. They’re helping her fish for information.:*

*:What?!:*

Scrambling off the sofa where I am leaning on Kota, my elbow digs into his side with my sudden movement, extracting

an *oof* from him. I rush over to the front door, grabbing the first pair of shoes I spot that will fit.

“Kya, where are you going?”

Footsteps sound behind me, and a tattooed hand pushes the door closed when I try to open it.

“Not a chance in hell, Kya. You’re not going over there.”

“Um, does someone want to fill the rest of us in?” Knox queries, coming to stand on the other side of me with Kota.

“Cole just linked me. There are Council enforcers at the old Alpha house.” River steps around Lucian, reaching out and cupping my cheek in his palm.

“I’m assuming one of your brothers let you know?”

“Brooks.” River hums at my answer.

“Did he mention that they asked for Flynn instead of me?”

“What?”

“Didn’t you notify them?”

“Guys!” River barks, getting his twin and Kota to stop asking questions. “Yes, I notified the Council the day after we got back. Maybe there was a crossover between dispatching the enforcers and receiving my update. Either way, they want to speak to the pack Alpha.” His eyes focus down on me. “And that is not you, Kya.”

“I’m aware, but it’s probably *about* me.”

“Don’t go asking for trouble, Kya.” Kota wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me further from the door.

“I’m not. I’m being logi—” My words are cut off by a phone ringing. River sighs, fishing the device from the back pocket of his jeans. His brows dip when he sees the name on the screen, and he answers with a grunt.

“Fjord.”

“River. I’m going to cut to the chase. I fucked up.” Even without having the call on speaker, it’s easy to hear the tiger shifter on the other end.

“Explain,” River grits out, eyes flashing as he looks over at me, reassuring himself that I’m still here.

“Don’t Alpha me. I’m an Alpha too, and it won’t end well. I’m only calling because we share a mate—”

“Who hasn’t claimed you.” My Grumpy Wolf cuts Fjord off. If it was meant to deter him, it doesn’t.

“Has she claimed you?” Fjord fires back. River grinds his teeth at the question, and after a moment, the other Alpha continues. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Now as I was saying before I was rudely interrupted: I thought I’d found and deactivated all of Henrick’s fail safes. I missed one. A big one.”

“Fjord.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep your panties on, River. Henrick had cameras around the compound. I thought I’d deleted all the footage of Kya. Turns out there was a backup, and it went to the Council. With the footage was also an email chain expressing concern for a rare female omega, who was being held against her will and forced to mate with every alpha-ranked shifter in the Wilson pack. It looks like Henrick was trying to claim that Kya was always meant to be in his pack.”

“So the enforcers *are* here about me?” I level River and Lucian with an ‘I told you so’ glare.

“Kya? Fucking hell, River. You could have said she was there.”

“Of course, she’s here. Where else would she be?” Casper growls. I hadn’t noticed him, or Axel join us.

Gang’s all here if we count Fjord’s voice, which I’m going to.

“Right, well, let’s go talk to the enforcers. We can show them our fated marks, and they can ask their questions. Do you think they’d help look for Flynn or Brody? It’d be good to get some extra help with that since we’ve not found much yet. Fjord could come over, update us on what he’s found and then we can all have dinner together.” I clap my hands as if that’s

everything decided. The McBeartys all stare at me like I'm an adorable idiot.

“Fucking hell, she's serious, isn't she?” Fjord asks, though no one answers before he says he's on his way over and hangs up.

## CHAPTER 15

4-5-9



The loud buzz signalling a set of the main doors opening fills the air. My brain is hazy from the latest concoction of drugs being pumped into me. The mental fog isn't as heavy today though. I'm adjusting. I always do, but it doesn't bring hope like it once did. The longer I've been here, the more years that pass, and I grow and mature, the quicker they are to try new mixtures.

How long it will be, I wonder, until they lock me in a cell with another creature like me, yet not. They weren't a single-natured being, like my tormentors. They each held another form, just one other, yet the scientists here referred to us as though we were all alike. They blanket us with the term 'shifter'. But we're not alike; they're not like me. No one is ever like me.

The door to the room slides open as Miller enters. His white lab coat has a coffee stain on the lapel today. He barely glances at where I'm restrained to the steel table, rotated so I can almost fool myself into believing I'm standing of my own volition, before hurrying over to his cohort.

"Have you heard the latest report?" Miller bounces excitedly on the balls of his feet. What new level of hell have they concocted for me this time?

"No. Is it actually something interesting this time, or just another feral wolf? We have too many of those, and that new one is insane, even by feral standards," Arenski replies, not taking his eyes off of the tablet in his hand.

“Nope, not a wolf. You’ll never believe me—”

“Just tell me,” Arenski cuts Miller off with an exasperated sigh. The older male’s patience has been rapidly declining over recent months.

“Fine, fine.” Miller’s enthusiasm is in no way dampened by the gruff reception. “They think they found another anomaly like Unit 4-5-9 here.”

That grabs my attention; another like me? Trying not to let them know I’m aware of their conversation, I keep myself still, my breathing languid as though the drugs still hold me in stasis.

“What rank?” Arenski asks; suspicion mingles with curiosity in his tone before it gives way to resignation. “We don’t need another alpha; keeping this one drugged to compliance is a money pit. And betas have all proven to have little differential sequences of interest. None of the trials from them have proven fruitful.”

“Not an alpha. No. An *omega*—”

“What?!” Arenski finally looks up from his work to meet his young coworker’s excited gaze.

“*And* a female!” Miller’s excitement makes sense now. My blood chills at the thought of anyone being subjected to the treatment I’ve experienced here, let alone a female. “Imagine how much more progress we could make if we could force a mating. You know, they wouldn’t be able to refuse us more funding or access to the less common shifters then.”

“That’s if 4-5-9 responds to this omega. None of the others have had any affect on him over the years, even when we induced their heat cycles. We’re barely keeping him from going feral as it is.” He pauses, turning back to his task of entering data from the tablet into the console before him. “Is it confirmed or a rumour?” Arenski questions, though the same excitement as Miller is now leaking into his voice too.

“Confirmed, as far as I know. A tipoff came with footage of her shifting from a chipmunk to human to a wolf. Schmidt is going to do a follow-up. Reports from that shifter Council

group are saying the omega is allegedly being held against her will, forced to accept mating bites from multiple alpha-ranked shifters. There's a plan in place to investigate and find out if she really is an anomaly, like our friend here."

Mates. She has mates. That means she's grown, matured, not an easy target. Will they keep her safe though? So many come through these halls. I can smell the different pheromones when they move me from my sleeping room to the testing rooms. Will this omega's mates keep her safe?

"And if she is? How will we get her here if she has mates?" Arenski questions, his voice dragging me from my tumultuous thoughts.

"They'll just eliminate the mates." Miller waves a hand dismissively as he begins prepping for today's test. "Or bring them in if they're of interest, but we certainly don't need any more wolves or bears. We'll just wait for the shifters to do half the extraction for us. If they take her away from her mates for questioning, it will open the door for our guys to grab her."

Arenski steps back from the console finally; his cool gaze sweeps over the room. He does this every day, inputs data in a slow, meticulous manner, and scans the room to check he has everything he could possibly need within line of sight.

He claps his hands, rubbing them together before approaching my table.

"Nothing too exciting today, Unit 4-5-9. Just some sample extractions to see how you're reacting to the new sedatives."

Miller moves to my other side, pulling his little wheelie tray of syringes behind him. After tapping my arm twice above the crease of my elbow, he picks up the first syringe and flushes the port.

The day-to-day monotony falls back into place, and neither male mentions the omega supposedly with more than two natures, like me.

I try to ignore the small kernel of hope that sparks to life deep inside my soul. The hope that I may not be truly alone on this earth after all.



## CHAPTER 16

# KYA



Walking into the Alpha house—which we should really rename, since River isn't living here—I look to Brooks, where he hovers by the door.

“Gran took the enforcers to the kitchen,” he says in greeting, pushing his glasses up his nose. “The breakfast nook.”

“Let's go get this cleared up, and then we can move on to other stuff. No rest for the wicked. Not that we're wicked... know what, forget I said that,” I ramble, giving my baby brother a quick hug in an effort to reassure him.

He mumbles under his breath about the wicked always finding us no matter what. Making a mental note to spend some one-on-one time with both of my brothers, I lead the way into the kitchen, Brooks and the McBeartys following behind.

“Ach, yer no listening. Do ya need ta clean yer ears out?” The exasperation rings out crystal clear in Gran's voice. “Cole, lad, go grab the cotton buds from the bathroom.”

“That won't be necessary, Mrs McBearty.” Given that I don't recognise the accented voice, I smile at the thought of Gran ruffling the feathers of the Council's enforcers. Rounding the corner, I lean against the wall, so far unnoticed.

“Pish. They clearly need cleaning, or are yer sayin' yer being deliberately obtuse?”

“I-no. That's not what I'm trying to say,” The shifter sitting opposite Gran responds with the same accented voice I

heard before. “Ma’am, all I’m trying to do is ensure no omega is being mistreated by this pack—”

“Well, I’m the omega, and I say I’m good here. So we done?” I pipe up, drawing the attention of the four shifters sitting around the table with Gran, Ryder, and Cole. I subtly inhale, trying to pick up their scents. Two wolves, a bear, and a feline shifter I can’t quite place.

“Hey, Kya.” Ryder pushes up from his chair, walking over to give me a quick hug. A hug from my teenage brother, and he initiated it. Things must be worse than I thought.

“Ry, you okay?” His arms tighten around me, squeezing the breath out of my lungs. A quick, forceful pat on his back has him loosening his grip. “I do need to breathe, just a reminder.”

“Sorry. I just...” His words trail off as he shoots a look back at the table. Or, more specifically, the Council’s enforcers at the table.

“I’m River, the new Alpha for this pack.”

One of the enforcers stands, holding out a hand to River.

“Isaac, I’m the team lead for this enquiry.” His dark eyes scan over River’s neck and shoulders—or the skin that’s not hidden by his crew neck jumper at least—before flicking to me. I smile sweetly, knowing my turtleneck means he can’t see any of my mating bites.

“Hi, Isaac, I’m Kya. The omega in question.” His nostrils flare as he inhales deeply. A low growl rumbles behind me. Without looking to see which of my mates made the sound, I reach back, gripping a hand and giving it a quick squeeze while releasing a small burst of calming energy.

“You’re not pack.” I expected the statement to come from Isaac, but instead it’s one of the other enforcers who speaks. His bright amber eyes make me think he’s the feline shifter. I’ve never seen eyes like that among wolf or bear shifters. That doesn’t mean much though. My interaction with shifters, even now, has been minimal.

“Yeah, what can I say? I’m stubborn, and we had a bit of a bumpy start to our relationship. It’s on the to-do list, though, right, Grumpy Wolf?” I look over to River with the last question.

A choking noise comes from the enforcers still sitting at the table.

“Did you just call your Alpha ‘grumpy wolf’?”

“Maybe you should grab those cotton buds after all, Cole.”

“Kya.” The warning is clear in River’s tone. He thinks I’m pushing my luck, and I probably am.

“Okay, Isaac, what’s the quickest way to resolve this? We’re fated mates. We can show you the mark. Is that enough?”

“Marks can be faked. Not easily, but it’s been known to happen.” He sighs, rubbing a hand across his jaw.

“Okay. Well, what then? Want to interview us one at a time?”

“Yes. Actually. Originally we wanted to discuss how Alpha Wilson found you, and why he believed you were his missing daughter. With him being replaced by one of the males accused of coercing you... Well, it would be best for us to speak with you alone, preferably off pack lands.”

His wording makes it sound like they think Flynn isn’t wanted here. Do they really believe River and the rest of us wanted things like *this*?

“No way. You’re not going with them alone,” Casper bursts out before I can finish processing my thoughts. The growls and grumbles from the rest of my mates show they agree with his statement.

*:Underestimating me again, guys?:*

“You have a penchant for being kidnapped, Firebug. We’d feel better if eyes were on you and that you were nearby.”

“If there’s a neutral party that we all agree on, I don’t see that being an issue,” Isaac answers.

Chewing my lip, I think through the options. I could suggest Fi, but she might not be viewed as neutral, being my self-proclaimed fairy godmother.

“How about Darius Laroux? He’s a vampire, heir to his clan. Would that be a neutral enough party for you? He has no ties to the pack other than me, he’s a client and a friend. His interest would be in my safety, which will appease my mates.”

“You would allow a bloodsucker near your mate?! Near an omega?!” One of the enforcers who hadn’t spoken since we’d arrived blurts out.

I turn to face him, and Cole scoots his chair away from the other shifter after glancing at the fury no doubt burning behind my eyes.

“Watch. Your. Tone.”

“Or what, omega? You’ll cry?” he scoffs.

“Enough,” River barks, glaring from the seated enforcer to Isaac. “Who I allow on my lands is not relevant to this conversation.”

“Of course it is! You have a free omega on your lands. Anyone you carelessly allow access to her could cause her harm or abduct her.”

“I mean, what’s a fourth time? Not like I’ve not been kidnapped before.”

“Not helping, Kya,” Lucian mutters behind me.

“Isaac, do you have an issue with Darius standing in? I’m sure Julian will tag along too; he usually does.”

“Julian?”

“Yeah, Darius’ mate. Half-vampire half-fae, about yay high, kinda cocky, but amusingly so,” I sass before Kota’s hand slides in front of my mouth, blocking my words.

“Please stop being so antagonising.”

“Is she always like this?” Isaac asks, and the room fills with voices saying variations of ‘yes’, ‘pretty much,’ and ‘most definitely’.

Rolling my eyes, I pat my pockets, looking for my phone.

“Here.” Axel holds out his phone with a sigh and a knowing smile. I shrug sheepishly, taking it from him as Kota releases my mouth.

“Thanks, Growly Bear.”

“Where did you leave it this time?” Knox asks as I dial Darius’ number.

“Erm, it’s probably in Kota’s room or the art studio. I’ll find it once we’re back home.”

“Or I’ll run over and find it before you go to your interview with Isaac and his team,” Kota says, dropping a quick kiss on top of my head. “Be good.”

“Do I get a reward if I am?”

“Ew, Kya! Gross!” Ryder scrunches his nose, grimacing.

“Yer miss the fresh claiming bites on him and Knox, did yer, Ryder? Ach, maybe yer need glasses like yer brother,” Gran sasses.

“Oh my gods, can we not? I don’t need or want to know.”

“Huh, okay, well, if you don’t wanna know my kinks, don’t read my smut?” I quip back, making him gag dramatically.

“Well, I was going to ask why Axel McBearty was calling, but that tidbit answers that. What can I do for you, Kya?” Darius’ voice comes from the phone in my hand, and I quickly put it to my ear.

“Hi, Darius. How are you? Not keeping too busy with heir to the clan life.” His soft chuckle follows my statement.

“Yes, life or unlife is ticking by as usual. What can I do for you? We don’t have a sitting scheduled for a few more weeks.”

“No, we don’t. I am actually on the scrounge for a favour. You know, because you adore me, and I’m your Pieni Maalari and Julian’s Nulikka.”

“Mhmm, is this going to cost me?”

“Nope.”

“Then we’re in,” Julian’s voice cuts in. “Where do you want us, and do we need clothes?”

“Yes,” I snort out a laugh, “you need clothes.” The enforcer with the amber eyes grunts a huff. I shoot him a glare. We’ll be best buds by the end of this, mark my words.

“So, apparently, someone reported the McBeartys to the Council. Supposedly, I’m here against my will and being forced to mate them.”

“Ha! I knew it. How many have you claimed,” Julian gloats.

“Not what this is about, Jules. The Council has sent a team of enforcers; they need to question me away from the guys—”

“O-ho, bet that’s going down like a sack of shit.” I smile, bemused that I phoned Darius and end up speaking with his mate instead.

“Exactly. So, wanna chaperone?”

“Sure. Can it be somewhere with food?”

“Yeah, I don’t see why not. Teddy’s?” I suggest.

“Perfect, we’ll be there in fifteen.” Darius hangs up.

“So nice of you to include us in those plans, omega,” the feline enforcer snarks.

“Kya. *Kai-Ah*. Say it with me, *Kai-Ah*. It’s a very easy name, a whole three letters and two syllables. You can manage if you try, I’m sure.”

“*Okay*. Anan, rein it in,” Issac tells his teammate before looking back at me. “Kya, can we give you a ride—” He begins before being cut off.

“Not a flaming chance in hell. We’ll drive her. You can follow,” Axel grunts.

“One of us will pick you up once you’re done, Banphrionsa.”



Pushing the door open, I walk into Teddy's diner with Axel and Lucian on my heels.

"We're not going to run off with your omega. You're not helping your case by restricting her freedoms like this," Anan, the feline enforcer, comments as they follow us inside.

"And we told you we'll leave once we see Darius and Julian," Lucian replies, his tone cool enough. I half expect his breath to be visible.

"Also, in case you forgot, since we know you struggle with things like remembering, I have a name and don't go by my designation. Someone has kidnapped me three times. The latest was just over a week ago. You'd be protective and on edge, too."

Axel sighs, resting a hand between my shoulder blades and nudging me forward. "Try not to antagonise them to the point you get yourself arrested, Little Minx," he pleads in a low voice.

"Well, hey there, Sweetie." Darla greets us with a wide smile. "How many of you am I squeezing into a booth?"

"Hey, Darla. There'll be seven of us. Lucian and Axel can't stay. I was meeting Darius and Julian."

She frowns slightly before recognition flashes in her eyes. "Oh, your suave gentlemen friends. They're already here." She points over her shoulder to the back corner booth. Turning to Lucian and Axel, she asks, "Can I get you boys anything for the road?"

"Well, I think it would be a crime to leave here without some of your pie, Darla." Axel grins down at the auburn-haired human. I'm glad he got over his discomfort around her and Lizzy; they like to gossip and tease, but all in harmless fun.

"Nulikka, there you are," Julian calls out as he makes his way towards us from across the diner. Holding up a finger to



the half-fae, I turn back to Axel and Lucian.

“You have your phone?”

I pull the device from my pocket and show it to him.

“Yes, Lucy-Lou, I have my phone.”

“Okay, well, let us know in the group chat when you’re done; one of us will come get you.” He looks past me to Julian. “Do not leave her alone.”

I expect Julian to make a smart-arse remark, but he surprises me by placing a hand over his heart and bowing. “You have my word, Beta Lucian of pack McBearty. Your mate will be safe with me and any member of the Laroux clan until safely returned to one of her mates, fated or claimed.”

Axel walks back over to us with several pie boxes in his arms.

“Did you leave any for the rest of us?” Isaac asks, and I almost crack a smile. Almost.

“Course I did. I’m not risking Kya missing out on pie, but I’m also not foolish enough to not take some back for her brothers—”

“Or Gran,” Lucian adds.

“You’ve seen she’s with the Larouxes, so you can leave now, and let us do our damn job.”

“Anan, seriously? Shut the fuck up,” one of the other enforcers—I should find out their names—reprimands.

“Don’t start,” Isaac barks at his team. Taking a deep breath, he exhales slowly as he turns back to my mates and me. “We’ll go take our seats with the Laroux heir.”

He jerks his chin at the other three, and they all make their way to the booth.

“Julian, I’m not going to ask you to keep her out of trouble because, frankly, I think you’d just join her for shits and giggles. But don’t let her get kidnapped or arrested, please.” Axel’s words pull a small frown across my face.

“I will do my best. Though if she does get arrested, I’ll join her and then magic us home.” He wiggles his fingers on the word magic, making Lucian and me roll our eyes.

“Kya, behave, please. River will blow his nut if you don’t come home.”

“Oof, sounds painful, and I probably want his nuts intact...” I muse.

“Kya,” Axel drawls.

“Okay, okay. I will answer their questions and try to stop winding them up. But if Anan keeps calling me omega instead of my name, I might stab him with my fork.”

Lucian sighs, sharing a glance with Axel before pulling me into a hug.

“We’ll see you later.” He tilts my chin up, planting a soft kiss on my lips, then steps back, taking the pie boxes from Axel so he can say bye.

“We’re having a date night soon, mate of mine. I have something I want to show you.” His arms wrap around my waist, and he lifts me up, my feet dangling in the air as he kisses my nose then my lips.

“Date night sounds perfect.”

He pops me back down on the ground, hazel eyes twinkling with his grin.

“Come on. The sooner we get this chat over with, the sooner you can get back to your mass orgies and multiple orgasms.” Julian grabs my hand and leads me to the booth as my mates exit the diner, shaking their heads at the half-fae’s antics.

## CHAPTER 17

# KYA



Julian ushers me into the seat next to Darius and then scoots in on my other side so I'm sandwiched between the two. Isaac and his team sit opposite. We order drinks and I, of course, also get pie, as does Julian.

"You sure I can't get you boys anything to eat?" Darla asks as she drops off my slice of caramel apple pie and Julian's strawberry rhubarb.

"No, thank you, ma'am," Isaac answers for his team and himself.

"Not today, Darla," Darius says with a closed-lip smile.

"Well. Okay, then." Her keen gaze moves over each face before settling on me, and one thin eyebrow rises up briefly as she focuses on me. "I'll let you be, but shout if you need anything, okay, sweetie?"

"Yup, you got it, Darla."

She purses her lips, scanning the men at the table again, then, with a nod, heads back behind the main counter.

"Take it you're a regular here," Anan comments, taking a sip of his coffee.

"I've helped out from time to time. Darla and Lizzy are good people. I could wax on about their awesomeness, but that's not why we're here. So what's your first question?" Cutting off a piece of my pie and popping it into my mouth as soon as I finish speaking. The warm gooey caramel and

buttery pastry melt on my tongue, and I barely suppress the moan of pleasure.

“Do you need to be alone with that pie, or can we do our job?”

“You know, Anan, you should pull that stick out your arse. You’d be more comfortable and potentially more pleasant,” I quip, waving my fork at him. Isaac coughs into his fist, while Julian and Darius just grin at each other over my head.

“How about you start by telling us how you met the McBeartys and the Wilson-McBearty pack?” Isaac leans forward, resting his arms on the table, hands cradling his coffee mug.

Nodding, I take another bite of my pie and a sip of coffee before delving into the story. Darius and Julian stay silent during the back-and-forth question-and-answer session. I run out of pie and coffee far too quickly; surprisingly it’s Anan who suggests a short break so Darla can refill our cups. The temptation to order more pie whispers in the back of my mind, and I almost hold strong. But you only live once, and what is life without pie?

The next round of questions goes deeper. The Council’s enforcers ask specifics about my relationship with each of my mates. I don’t get the feeling they’re digging for issues, though, more just being thorough in their investigation. Which is the main reason I answer, even if it’s uncomfortable.

Finally Isaac sits back in the booth seat.

“Five claimed mates. That’s a lot.”

Julian chuckles. “That many alphas are needed to have a hope in hell of attempting to rein Kya in. She’s a force to be reckoned with.”

I let out a mock gasp, clutching a hand to my chest.

“Julian, you make me sound wild.”

“No, not wild, just stubborn and independent.” Darius smiles, a small flash of fang visible.

“A force to be reckoned with,” Julian repeats.

“You’re definitely not like any omega I’ve met before,” Anan murmurs.

The diner door opens, drawing my attention as the newcomer scans the room and then makes a beeline to our table.

“Friend of yours?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. Darius and Julian sit up straighter, both going on alert as the enforcers all share a pointed look before Isaac sighs and climbs out of the booth.

“Schmidt. What can I do for you?”

“I’m part of your team, inter-government cooperation and all that.” As the smaller man speaks, Anan and the other two enforcers climb out of the booth, blocking the table from view.

“How’d you know we were here, Schmidt?” Anan asks, folding his arms over his chest. The four enforcers all appear more tense, on edge. I glance at Julian and Darius, unsure what to do next. Darius taps one finger against the mate mark on my left wrist and then my phone. Sliding the device off the table, I send a message to the group chat.

ME

I think we’re done here.

AXEL

Why only think?

ME

Some guy just showed up. The enforcers are blocking him from seeing the table.

FJORD

I’ll pick you up. I’m on my way to meet River. Save anyone else coming out.

CASPER

One of us can get her.

ME

When was Fjord added to the chat?

RIVER

Fjord will pick Kya up. Casper, you have a job to do anyway.

CASPER

Fine.

Not a hair on her head best be out of place.

“Kya.” Julian nudges me with his elbow, and I glance up to see Anan looking at me.

“Where’s Isaac and the rest of your team?”

“Dealing with Schmidt.” He taps his fingers against his thigh, looking over his shoulder before leaning over the table and lowering his voice. “Unofficially, the Council has been trying to build a working relationship with the human government. Schmidt is one of the liaisons sent as an ambassador of sorts. He smells like deceit, bad decisions, and darkness. Until he actually *does* something, we can’t act against him.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you have a smart mouth and little self-preservation instincts, from what I can tell. Stay alert and warn your mates.”

“He shouldn’t have known you were here?”

“No. He tracked us somehow. Omegas are rare. I don’t need to tell you that, or at least, I shouldn’t need to. Just...” His words trail off, and he glances over his shoulder quickly before looking back at me. “Watch yourself, Kya.” He pushes

back off the table, heading to the counter. After a brief chat with Darla, where he hands over money to no doubt cover their share of the bill, he leaves without a backwards glance, passing Fjord, who's speaking into his phone in the doorway.

"Yeah, I'm here now... Of course I can see her, I have eyes... She's still with the Larouxes." Fjord lets out a sigh as he reaches the table. I give Julian a little push so he'll let me out of the booth.

"Petal, talk to your bears." He holds the phone out to me, and I take it, bringing it to my ear.

"Hey, bears," I chirp.

"You're okay?" Casper asks at the same time Axel comments, "Little Minx, you can't send messages like that and then disappear."

"I'm sorry you were worried. I was going to send another text, but Anan wanted a word before he left with the rest of the team." There's a shout in the background calling their names.

"Fuck, we gotta go. We'll see you at home, and you can fill us in on what Anan said," Axel hurries.

"If Jameson tries anything, honey badger his arse." Casper adds.

"Most definitely," I reply with a laugh. Another shout has them hurriedly saying bye and hanging up. Handing the phone back to Fjord, I turn to face Darius and Julian.

"Thanks for sitting in on all that."

"Of course. Though, before we let you go, I do have one question."

I frown, tilting my head to the side at Darius' words. "What is it?"

"I was wondering why the new Jameson pack Alpha is the one picking you up—"

"Instead of, you know, dead?" Julian cuts in to finish the sentence, eliciting a growl from Fjord. Right, I left that tidbit about the matching mate marks out of the conversation with



the enforcers. I mean, it really wasn't relevant to their investigation into the McBearty pack.

"That a threat, bloodsucker?" Resting my hand on Fjord's forearm, I squeeze, tightening my grip briefly.

"Enough. You're not helping," I tell him softly.

"Nor was Julian," Darius adds, casting a scathing look at his mate, who simply shrugs before returning his attention to me.

"Right, so you remember how at brunch I said I had six fate marked?" I ask, waiting for them to both nod before continuing. "Well, I was wrong."

"*He's* your mate?" Julian's tone is incredulous as his eyes widen slightly, flicking between my face and Fjord's.

"Fate marked yes. Not claimed," I clarify.

"Yet," Fjord adds with a smug smirk, pushing his sleeve up to reveal his left wrist. I glare at him while Darius and Julian process this development.

"So you're not represented by the full moon then, as I had originally thought." Darius lifts my wrist, examining the tattoo-like mark there. "Maybe you're represented by one of the trees," he muses after a moment, tracing the two trees with a finger. I turn back to him, my frown from earlier returning.

"There are two trees though," I point out because surely he can't be suggesting what I think he is.

"Yes. Despite my age, my eyes work perfectly well." Why am I surrounded by smartasses?

"You think there's an eighth with the same mark?" I ask, just to be sure we're on the same page.

"I am not dealing with another omega," Fjord mutters, folding his arms across his broad chest, causing his shirt to pull tightly against his biceps.

"Well, I don't want to deal with eight alphas. The seven of you are infuriating as it is," I snark back at him.

“Then it would seem you should both hope that whoever the other tree represents is a beta. Hmm,” Darius adds, a slow grin pulling at his lips. His eyes sparkle with amusement as he watches our interactions.

“I think another omega could balance out the group nicely. I’m sure your final fated will be one,” Julian pipes up, pulling all of our attention to him.

“Really?”

“Oh, no, Nulikka. Not at all. I’m sure you’re going to have eight alpha-ranked mates and one very sore—”

“Enough, Jules,” Darius cuts his mate off quickly with a stern look. Though his eyes still hold a heavy amount of amusement, so it’s not as stern as it could have been.



## FJORD

Fucking vampire and half-vampire pretentious twats.

It takes a few more minutes before I can steer Kya out to my car. Like the gentleman my mother wishes I was, I help my little mate into the passenger seat and buckle her in, ignoring her snort and eye roll.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to treat me like a child?”

“Oh, trust me, Petal, there is nothing child-like about the way I view you,” I say as I get behind the wheel and drive out of the diner car park, heading towards the grocery store.

Kya is quiet, staring out of the window until I make the turn.

“Where are we going? This isn’t the way home.”

“Family dinner, remember? It was your idea. The McBeartys don’t strike me as the types to keep a well-stocked fridge. So we’re going shopping for supplies.”

“Fair. Before I joined the household, they lived off take-out and frozen stuff.”

“Very diplomatic.”

“Hmm? What?”

“‘Before you joined the household.’ Also known as, before they drugged and kidnapped you.”

“Mates in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,” she replies. I flick my gaze from the road to her, noting the smirk playing across her lips.

“Touché,” I reply, a smile of my own pulling at the corners of my mouth.

Pulling into a space near the entrance to the store, I pull on the handbrake and turn off the engine. Twisting in my seat, I rest my right arm on top of the steering wheel.

“I make jokes, but I do hope you’ll give me a chance. I’m not Henrick or Brody, or the sick arseholes who hurt your mum. Even if this merge doesn’t happen, or you reject me, I’m still going to cull my pack. Shifters that could and did treat someone the way your mum was treated aren’t people I want in my pack.”

“River trusts you, and Lucian too, since they let you pick me up.”

“Casper doesn’t,” I point out unnecessarily.

“Nope.” She pops the P as she unbuckles her seatbelt. “Honestly, I think it would freak me out if they were all okay with you without really knowing you.”

“That’s fair.” I nod slowly. Neither of us moves to open our doors. “What about you?”

“I’m not sure yet. Let’s see how you survive tonight.”

“All right. Let’s go grab a trolley and stock up. There’s a few different recipes I wanna try on the guys,” I say, opening my door and climbing out of the car.

“*You* want to try on the guys? Are you just planning to take over my kitchen, Jameson?” Kya asks as she exits the passenger side, closing the door and walking around to join me.

“You can veto anything I suggest. I might be a pack Alpha, but if you think about it, you have the real power. Without you, we’ll go feral. Alphas and betas need omegas, and usually, that’s a quid pro quo arrangement.”

“But not with me?”

“Nope. The difference between you and an omega born and raised in a pack, a healthy pack, is you’re independent. You made it on your own, taking care of your brothers. You didn’t just survive on your own, Kya. You thrived.”

She blinks up at me for a moment, a bashful smile in place.

“Thanks, Fjord.” The words are quiet, almost whispered and lost on the wind. Kya pushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear and hurries over to grab a trolley.

“Tell me about these recipes you want to try, then, big guy,” she prods while steering the trolley into the shop.

## CHAPTER 18

# KYA



The kitchen, thankfully, was no longer in chaos. All the items that had been strewn across the island and work surfaces were once again back inside their cupboards. Fjord refused to let me help carry any of the bags in. I get not wanting to make multiple trips to and from the car to unload, but there's two of us. I could've carried one or two of the bags.

Instead I opened the back door and set all the ovens to preheat before sending Ryder a text to make sure he, Brooks, Cole, and Gran McB joined us later. If this was going to be a family dinner, it had to include them. If Fjord is going to be one of my mates—and let's face it, the odds of me saying no are minimal—then he needs to be able to get along with my brothers, brother-in-law, and gran-in-law. Though, Gran was more than just an in-law.

“Okay, what do you want to start with? Are we marinating the meat or just base seasoning?” I ask, setting my phone to one side after connecting to the wireless speaker. My ‘pop goes classical’ playlist fills the quiet kitchen.

“Interesting music choice, Petal,” Fjord comments, unpacking the groceries and passing items to me to put away since he doesn't know where anything goes.

“I can't tell if you're taking the piss or being serious?”

“Little of both?” He shrugs.

“I have an eclectic taste. I like what I like.” I hold up a pack of ribs and another of steak, waving them back and forth. “Marinate or not?”

“Marinate. Homemade barbeque with a hint of honey and whiskey. Think you can handle that?”

A scoff leaves my lips. “Yeah, big guy, I think I can handle barbeque marinade.”

Fjord crosses his arms over his chest, leaning one hip on the island counter.

“That so?” he queries with a smirk at my answering eye roll.

“I’m a foodie. I like creative outlets; painting and cooking are the primary ones I indulge in. Sometimes I sing, not often, though.”

“Gonna sing for me? Serenade me while we cook?”

“Hmm, nope. I think we’ll save that for group date night. We can all go to karaoke—but at one of those places in the city where you get a private room. Not an open bar where any Tom, Dick, or Harry can rock up and listen.”



## AXEL

“Why are we entertaining this again?” Casper asks from the passenger seat beside me. His disgruntled tone is on the verge of a whine, and my bear is already on edge.

“Matching mate marks. Think about it this way, man. If Flynn and Connor had found Fjord before Henrick decided to play father, we’d have likely grown up with him too.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t. We just have to trust that the Jameson heir, now Alpha, is nothing like his father?”

“*We* have to trust *Kya*. We owe her that—” My words get cut off by Casper’s phone ringing. Secretly I’m grateful because I really have no clue where I was going with that comment. We do owe *Kya*. We’ve underestimated her and dismissed her—some of us more than others—but that needs to stop.

“Hey, River, what’s up?” Casper asks after putting his phone on speaker.

“So much.” Our Alpha sighs, and I can picture him running a hand over his face. “Are you guys on your way back? Did you manage to fix what was wrong at Vanessa’s?”

“There was nothing wrong.” Casper hesitates. Neither of us are the hyena’s biggest fan. But River and Lucian know her best. Possibly too well actually.

“Was there a leaking pipe or not?”

Casper glances at me, and I nod towards the phone.

“Well... there *was*...”

“*But?* I can hear the but in your voice, Cas. What the fuck happened?”

“The pipe had been loosened; it wasn’t damaged or corroded. We just had to tighten the adapters. One needed to be replaced because the threading was fucked.”

“How does that—never mind.” River lets out a long sigh. “Was she there?”

“Yup,” I answer, popping the ‘p’ like Kya does while Casper growls beside me. “Think she expected you or Luc? Her face fell a bit when she answered the door to us.”

“In the skimpiest lingerie. Fucking ugliest shade of yellow-green I’ve ever seen. I’m sure some people can pull that colour off, but it’s not Vanessa,” Casper blurts out.

“Fuck me...”

“Didn’t know you swung that way, Riv, but I’m sure something can be arranged.” I grin as the line falls silent before a sharp laugh comes through.

“Yeah, no. Not what I meant. I know Kya doesn’t mind, but my dick is for her and her alone. And no one is fucking my arse.”

“Wonder what side of the coin Fjord will land on?”



“Right, family dinner. Can you guys stop at the Alpha house and pick Gran up? Pretty sure Kya told her not to worry about making anything—”

“But it’s Gran, and she baked enough for the whole pack,” Casper finishes our Alpha’s sentence.

“Exactly. I’d bring her, but I need to finish some paperwork for the Council and then talk with Isaac and his team before I can head home.”

“No worries, we’ll be there in five.”

“Thanks.” River sounds exhausted when he hangs up, and I can feel Casper’s eyes on me.

“Maybe a merge will be good? Share the burden?”

“Maybe. Though I think it’s gonna get worse before it gets better. He needs to do something about Vanessa.”

“Hmm, or just pull his head out of his arse, bite Kya into the pack and claim her as his mate.”

“Yeah. I’m not sure that will stop Vanessa, though. She’s...”

“Something else. Like a dog with a bone or a hyena with, whatever hyenas covet and chew on.”

“We can raise it with Luc. He’ll keep an eye out and nudge River to make a decision.”

“Yeah, but what decision?”

We fall silent as I pull up in front of the old Alpha house. Casper climbs out and runs up the porch to greet Gran and help carry her baked goodies to the car.

The drive doesn’t take long, and before I can think more on the day’s events, I’m opening the back door for Gran. The smell of cooking meat hits me full force, and my bear rumbles in my chest with hunger.

“Something smells mighty good in ‘ere. What are yer making us, Little Shadow?”

“Hey, Gran.” Kya grins over at the woman who has become the most prominent maternal figure in all our lives. “Everything’s ready. We were about to load up the table.”

“Sounds perfect. Now where do yer want the desserts?” Gran waves a hand behind her to Casper and me, both with our arms full of trays.

Kya sighs but wisely doesn’t say anything about the mountain of baked goods.

“Pop them on the island unless they need to be kept cold?”

“Och, no. It’ll all be fine out here. You heard yer mate, boys, on the island they go.”

After depositing my trays on the available surface and leaving Casper to find space for the ones he’s carrying, I walk around the island, bypassing Kya. Dropping a kiss on top of her head, I snag one of the freshly buttered cobs of corn from the platter next to her.

“You’re too good to us, Kya,” I say before sinking my teeth into the salty, sweet delicacy. Melted butter and juice from the corn dribbles into my beard as I hum appreciatively at the taste.

“Enjoying that, are you, Growly?” Kya grins up at me while I nod.

“Oh, most definitely. You spoil us, Kya, and I, for one, will never tire of your culinary skills, or any of your other skills.” She laughs as I wiggle my eyebrows at her.

“Thanks, Growly, but I just helped out. The menu and recipes were all Fjord today.”

I gape from my mate to the tiger shifter and back again, swallowing a mouthful of corn before responding. “Seriously?”

“Yup.”

“You know how to cook?”

“Yeah. My mum was a bit of a foodie, and well, the pack wasn’t exactly a healthy environment, ya know? So she kept

me close to her, and we'd cook together," Fjord says somewhat hesitantly as we carry platters through to the dining room.

"Well, you can help these guys learn then. Axel's getting there. He doesn't burn everything now." Kya grins, giving me a wink before setting the platter of ribs down on to the table.

"I figured one of us should learn to at least cook some basic stuff for when you're in heat. I'd hate to think what you'd do to us if we gave you takeout." I return her grin, and the rest of the guys laugh.

"Hey, Snowball. Catch!"

Kya launches herself at Casper, who surprisingly catches her, spinning to reduce the momentum before letting her body slide down his own. Keeping his arms wrapped around her back, her head tucked against his abs.

"Erm, did you just call him snowball?" I ask, tilting my head to the side.

"Yup. Why?" Kya looks between Casper and the rest of us.

*:This should be good.:* Knox's voice chuckles through the mind-link.

"Älskling, you know I'm *not* a polar bear... right?" He looks down at her with a besottedly bemused smile.

"Err, maybe?" Her eyes flick around the room, taking in our amused expressions.

"Maybe? *maybe?*" Casper stares at Kya incredulously, mischief sparking in his eyes. He adjusts his hold on her until she's trapped against him before his fingers move along her sides, tickling her mercilessly.

Panting, gasping breaths intersperse her laughter as she squirms against the giant as he corrects her assumption.

"I am a Kermode bear. We're rare and majestic and *not* polar bears, even if we are white."

"I'm sorry," Kya gasps out between laughs. "I'm sorry. I'll never call you a polar bear again."

“Settle down, now,” Gran orders with a laugh as River, Lucian, Cole, Ryder, and Brooks walk in through the back door. “Everyone grab yer seats and let’s enjoy this wee feast.”



“Right, then.” Gran’s eyes sweep around the table, checking we all have full plates and glasses before settling her shrewd gaze on Fjord. “Now we’ve all got food and drink. When are yer moving in? And when do yer plan to finalise the pack merge?”

Fjord chokes on the mouthful of the ribs he’d just taken a large bite of. River reaches behind the tiger shifter, pounding him on the back.

“Gran,” our pack Alpha growls; there’s little heat to it though. Fjord waves a dismissive hand at River and takes a sip of his water before attempting to speak.

“Not the questions I expected.”

“That mean you’re not going to answer them?” Cole asks from his seat beside Gran.

“This was meant to be a family dinner. Get to know each other a little—” Kya starts but is cut off by Ryder and Brooks snorting.

“Yeah, no. You knew that wasn’t gonna happen.” Ryder shakes his head, attention returning to the ribs on his plate.

“If you wanted something that was less like an inquisition, you wouldn’t have invited us,” Brooks adds, waving his fork between himself, Ryder, Cole, and Gran.

“Probably still would’ve gone down this line of questioning anyway, Kya. I know I’m just as curious as they are,” Casper pipes up from his seat at the end of the table.

“It’s all right, Petal. I figure I have the most to prove, given who my sperm donor was.”

“Why do you do that?” I ask Fjord; when he raises a questioning brow at me, I clarify, “You always call Henrick

your sperm donor, but you were his heir. Was there nothing of a father-son relationship between you?”

“No. Not what I’d consider one anyway.” His large hand twists the glass in front of him, turning it round and round on the table.

“Okay, then. If we’re hitting the heavy shit before dessert, I’ll go grab the booze, shall I?” Kya voiced it as a question, but the whole table knew it was rhetorical.

“I’ll grab it, Chibi Girl. You cooked. Payaso, wanna give me a hand?”

“Not in the kitchen, you two,” River grunts, casting a warning look to Kota and Knox.

“Dirty mind, twin, dirty, dirty mind. Never catch me twisting an innocent statement like that.” Knox shakes his head, but the whole table can see the smirk he’s trying to conceal.

Kota playfully shoves Knox’s head before they both disappear into the kitchen. The sound of clinking bottles and the fridge doors opening and closing drift through to us. Gran’s eyes sparkle as she watches Fjord, River and Kya. No one speaks until Knox and Kota return, somehow finding space on the overfilled table to place bottles of beer, cider, and harder spirits.

“Here, Gran,” Knox murmurs, placing a bottle of Penderyn and a glass of ice in front of her.

“Ach, yer are good to me.” She smacks her lips together, pouring a healthy-sized dram into the glass. “Fix yer drinks then. We’re doing this right, and I donnae want questions left unanswered. T’morrow is Hogmanay—”

“Hog-what now?” Fjord asks, looking up from the bottle of beer he was opening.

“Hogmanay, Scottish New Year. It’s a big deal for our pack, courtesy of Gran here,” River explains.

“It wasnae all me. I just gave the Wilson twins a nudge to follow the traditions of their blood, is all.”

“Flynn and Connor were Scottish?” Kya splutters. Gran leans back in her chair, taking a long sip of her whiskey, while the rest of us finish fixing our own drinks. Even Ryder and Brooks have beers in front of them, though a sharp glare from Kya has Brooks pushing up from his seat and heading into the kitchen.

“The Wilson twins werenae born in Scotland, no. Their Gran was born an’ raised in Glasgow though,” Gran explains as Brooks returns with a bottle of lemonade. I watch the Jenson boys curiously as they each make up a shandy with the lemonade and beer.

“That’s a tale fer another day, though, Little Shadow. Right now, we’re working out this pack merge and when Fjord here is moving into yer house.” Gran drains her glass, and I reach over to refill it. “Ah, thank yer, Axel.” She pats my cheek fondly, and I can’t help the smile that pulls across my lips at the mischievous old woman.

“We don’t have space for Fjord to move in here,” Casper mutters from the other end of the table.

“Och, jealousy is not a good look on you.”

“Jealous? Who said anything about being jealous? Kya already claimed me; I don’t have a reason to be jealous.” Casper cuts into his steak as he speaks, shoving a huge bite into his mouth and groaning appreciatively at the taste.

“Fjord made a good marinade for the steak, huh?” Kya smiles over at the white-bear shifter.

“*Fuck*, that’s good. Okay, yeah, he can move in. We can build an extension or something.” Laughter resounds around the table, and a small amount of the tension that had been floating in the air dissipates.

“I can share with Ounce.” Knox shrugs, looking across the table to Kota. “Not like we sleep separately anyway.”

“That’s true; I don’t think yer two ever didn’t share a bed once you started bumping uglies.” There’s a moment of stunned silence after Gran’s words before Knox and Cole

shout her name in shock. Kota's face turns pink with a furious blush, and he practically buries his head in his dinner plate.

Casper, Lucian, Ryder and I burst out laughing. Kya shakes her head while River takes a long deep drink of his beer, but I can see his lips twitching with mirth. Brooks and Fjord both seem unsure of how they should react to Gran's blunt words.

"Okay, moving on. We can circle back to living arrangements later. Much, *much*, later," Kya adds, fidgeting in her seat before looking to me with slightly widened eyes.

"How would a merge work, exactly?" I ask and smile as my mate's shoulders sag in relief. Kya mouths a silent 'thank you' to me, and I wink at her before taking a bite of my steak.

*Fuck*, Casper wasn't wrong. This is really fucking good.

Fjord sits up a little straighter and glances at River next to him, who nods.

"Well, first, we need to cull the rot. I don't want anyone in my pack—whether we merge or not—who agrees with the way Henrick and Brody did things. I know most of the obvious members I'm going to exile. I was—" He twists in his seat to face Kya. "Well, I was, err, hoping you might sit in on some of the interviews. I don't want anyone who hurt your mum in the pack."

"You think our fathers are still with the Jameson pack?" Brooks' eager voice cuts through the air, and the tension ramps up once more.

## CHAPTER 19



# KYA



“No.” The word slips out, my voice sounding almost too loud in the tense quiet that follows Brooks’ question.

“How would you know?” Ryder narrows his eyes at me.

“I’m not saying no, that they’re not still part of the pack. I’m saying no, you’re not going to be involved with the interviews.”

“You don’t get to make that choice!” Ryder raises his voice, slamming a fist next to his plate.

“I’m your guardian. So, yeah, actually, I do!”

“Not if we join a pack without you.” Brooks’ voice is still low, almost quiet enough that I could pretend not to hear him.

“Guys, I’m not bringing you into the pack without your sister,” River says, breaking the stare-off between Ryder and me.

“Yeah, well, newsflash, you’re not the only pack Alpha at this table,” Ryder snaps, his eyes moving to Fjord.

“Enough!” I push up from my chair. “You do *not* get to dictate this.”

“Well, neither do you! We’re not kids anymore, Kya.” Brooks pushes his glasses up before draining his shandy.

“Guys, I don’t know you that well, but what you’re asking?” Fjord sets his cutlery down before taking a sip of his beer. “Look, I’m calling it an interview. It’s not. This won’t be a sit down chat over pie like Kya had with the Council

enforcers earlier. To protect your sister, to protect you as potential pack members, I have to be ruthless.”

“We can handle ruthless.” Ryder sits up straight.

“You don’t know what ruthless is. You’re sixteen and fourteen!” I splutter. How is this the conversation we’re having right now?

“At sixteen, humans can sign up to join the military! I’m more capable than that. If a sixteen-year-old human can go to war, we can handle the ‘interviews’,” Brooks admonishes. “You trained us to handle ourselves—”

“I trained you so you wouldn’t be defenceless. I trained you because we were on the run, we were in hiding. I did not train you so you can get your fists bloody—”

“We have the right to meet him, or them, if we don’t share a father. We should get to play a part in this. She was our mum too!”

“I know that! I fucking helped deliver you both!”

Casper clears his throat, then pulls my brothers’ drinks towards him, topping both up.

“Are you seriously giving them *more* alcohol?” I question him, incredulous.

“Kya, I love you. You’re my mate, my light, my life, but hard chats like this, the ones that will leave you raw and at least a little broken? They need booze. It’s still a shandy. You all have survived a ton of shit.”

“It’s not like we’re breaking the law, either,” Brooks pipes up, adding his two cents.

“Exactly, it’s only illegal for us to *buy* drink. And neither me or Brooks *bought* it,” Ryder adds, crossing his arms over his chest and looking far too smug.

“Fine,” I snap.

Fjord reaches back and pushes my chair in until it nudges the back of my legs.

“Come on, Petal. Sit down, and we’ll talk while we eat.”

“Yeah, don’t let the food go cold after you worked so hard on it, Firebug.”

Cracking my jaw, I take a deep breath before sitting down again. Kota jumps up and refills my glass, dropping a kiss on my temple before returning to his seat on my other side. Stubbornly refusing to look at anyone, I shovel a heaped forkful of food into my mouth, chewing slowly as I process everything that just happened. When my brain replays Casper’s words, I choke.

Kota pats my back, and Fjord passes me a glass of water, but my eyes lock onto Casper. A pink hue rises up his neck and cheeks the longer I look at him.

“Casper—” I start, but I’m not sure what to say. The timing feels off now for me to return the declaration, especially in front of everyone else.

“We can circle back later. Bigger fish to fry right now.” He waves me off, grabbing the cob of corn on his plate and taking a huge bite. Cole’s eyes dart between us until he suddenly barks a laugh.

“Holy shit. Tell me that was not the first time you’ve said you love her?”



## CASPER

Stupid genetics, stupid pale skin that shows even the smallest hint of a blush. I didn’t mean to tell Kya that I love her like this. *Obviously* I was going to tell her, but I wanted the first time to be just us.

“Cole. Back off.” River looks across the table to his younger brother.

“No way. You’re mated. Well, most of you are mated, but you haven’t dropped the L-bomb? Seriously?”

“Not your business, Cole,” Knox says around a mouthful of mash.

“But—”

“No. No buts. Our relationship is not the topic of this dinner,” River cuts Cole off.

“It kind of was, though,” Brooks points out. “Family dinner, so we can all start to get to know Fjord, right? Since he’s got the mark, too.”

“He killed Henrick. Can’t be that bad a guy if he took out his own father to try to help Kya.” Ryder shrugs. “Now we were talking about Brooks and my fathers still being part of the Jameson pack,” Ryder continues, his gaze moving between River, Fjord, and Kya.

“No, we’re talking about interviewing the pack members to cull those who held, or hold, viewpoints that align with Henrick,” Fjord rumbles. “I don’t know who your fathers are, or even if you have the same one. I don’t know who,” he pauses, clearly struggling to find the words.

“You don’t know which of the pack *visited* our mum,” Kya supplies, and Fjord nods.

“Can’t you, like, scent if we share a father?” Ryder asks slowly.

“Never thought to try, honestly.”

“We could ask one of the scouts, maybe Tony. He scented Aurelia on you two, which is why we moved here,” River muses, rubbing a hand along his jaw. “Luc, send him a message and see if he’s free in an hour or so for a chat?”

“On it.” Lucian leans to the side in his seat, pulls out his phone, and quickly taps out a message before placing the device on the table between us.

Brooks opens his mouth, eyes locked on his sister. I nudge his leg with mine under the table and subtly shake my head.

“I’ll be wanting this recipe for yer marinade, tiger boy.” Gran waves her fork from her plate to Fjord.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Och, none of that. Ma’am feels like yer addressing a queen. I’m just Gran.”

The table falls quiet as we all turn our attention back to our food. I exchange glances with Axel at the opposite end of the table. We’re both waiting for Ryder or Brooks to bring up the interviews again, and it doesn’t take long.

Brooks places his knife and fork down, drinks half his glass of shandy before he levels Kya with a determined stare.

“Nope,” she mutters, barely looking up at him.

“Why? Give us a solid reason that’s not ‘because I said so’ or relying purely on our ages. We might not have the exact memories you do, but that doesn’t mean we have no memories.”

“Exactly.” Ryder jumps in when Kya doesn’t instantly shoot them down again. “You know we have memories. We’ve all had nightmares. Yeah, yours have always been worse, but that doesn’t—shit. Brooks, what word do I want?”

“Negate. Kya’s nightmares don’t negate ours.”

“Yup. That.”

“Guys, I’m not saying that you suffered less. I just don’t see how being there will help.”

“Älskling, there’s a sense of closure that this could bring. None of us at this table have happy stories, but there’s a reason we each grew up with Gran.”

“Cas.” Lucian places a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t need to get into that—”

“I’m good. We know Kya’s backstory, or well, more than she knows about us.”

“Casper, Lucian’s right. You don’t have to get into heavy stuff now.” Kya sighs, looking around the table. “Do I want to know how you all ended up living with Gran and part of my fathers’ pack? Yeah, of course. Do I need to know right this second? No.”

“I get that, Kya, I do. But I think hearing my story might help you see how your brothers going along to the interviews could help.” Kya chews on her lip and then finally nods. I let my eyes drift over everyone at the table.

“So you know how wolves have packs and mixed shifter groups have adopted that term too? Well, I was born into a sleuth.”

“Bear only version of a pack?”

“Right. Well, my sleuth didn’t have an Alpha. My parents were both beta ranked. We’re not super common, not the rarest of shifters by any means, but uncommon enough to not go unnoticed. There was another sleuth just a few miles south of where we lived, and they had an Alpha. Rhodes. We’d kept out of his way for the most part, crossed paths in town when we’d go for supplies, not much else. My parents warned us that Rhodes and his sleuth could never see us shift. Which was fine. I was nowhere close to shifting and my sister was a homebody. There was more than enough space north of the house where they could all shift without fear of ever being seen. Then the Wilson pack came through and their scouts found both sleuths.”

“Looking for Mum and me?”

“Yup. The scouts asked my parents to come down for a meeting. My sister had just turned eighteen the day before, had her first shift but wasn’t in full control. Rhodes took a-a liking to Norah. He cornered her after the meeting while my parents were still talking with Flynn and Connor about my mark.”

“Casper.”

“He didn’t hurt her. Not that night anyway, just scared her until she lost control and shifted. Norah ran, not wanting to be spotted in town. I saw her from the window of the building we’d been in and shouted to my dad. Rhodes kept coming onto our land after that. He wouldn’t give up. He wanted Norah for a mate, figured it would raise his standing.”

My words falter as the memories of that night flow freely. A chair squeaks across the floor as it’s pushed back from the

table. Gran picks up the story, but her words sound distant, muffled. A small hand wraps around my wrist, lifting my arm. Kya's comforting scent of vanilla, apple, and ginger hits me as she climbs into my lap. A wave of her omega's calming energy flows through our mate bond and the sounds of the others become clear again.

“Casper was having dinner with us. Meeting his future bond brothers, it was going well too. When Flynn and Connor told me they'd found another, I was shocked, and then, with him being younger than the others, I was worried they'd pick on him. I didnae think he'd be the prankster of the group.” There're a few chuckles from around the table at that. I bury my nose into the side of Kya's neck, closing my eyes and grounding myself in her presence.

There's a lull as the momentary laughter dies down and the mood grows serious once more. Kya's fingers stroke through my hair before she whispers, “You don't have to keep going, Casper.”

“I'm okay.” Pressing a kiss to her nape, I sit back up, ready to continue. “Rhodes decided if he couldn't have Norah as a mate, then no one could. He refused to allow anyone else to gain the standing... He sabotaged the gas line. It was a small leak, but still, one of us should've smelt it. I still don't know how it went unnoticed. Wh-while they were asleep, he set fire to the house.”

Coughing to try and push down the rising emotions, I reach around Kya to grab my drink. After a long sip, I absentmindedly pick at the label on the bottle with my thumb.

“How'd you prove it was him?” Ryder asks into the quiet.

“Took a few years. Once I could shift, I went back, found Rhodes' sleuth and asked some questions. No one recognised me as the thirteen-year-old who'd left with the Wilsons almost six years previously. Rhodes, he bragged about it. Boasted. Used my family as a 'teaching moment' for the other betas.”

“Casper came back two weeks later, never did say much about what happened,” Gran fills in. Kya looks up at me, her stormy grey eyes searching mine for something.

“You got closure.”

“Yeah, Älskling. I did.”

“And you think sitting in on the interviews will give something similar to Ryder and Brooks.”

I nod, never moving my gaze from hers. Kya reaches up and pulls my forehead down to touch hers. Her eyes drop closed, and she lets out a long, shuddering breath.

“Okay.” The word is little more than a whisper, but she repeats it louder, twisting in my lap to face the table and specifically, her brothers. “Okay, I will compromise.”

“Compromise how?” Ryder asks.

“Ryder can go *as long* as Fjord agrees. *And* you have to be open to me. If I sense it’s getting too much and I want to pull you out, you leave.” Her gaze turns to Brooks. “I’m sorry, I know you want to go too, but I—you’re fourteen, I just—”

“It’s okay, Kya,” Brooks cuts her off. “It’s probably better not to have two hormonal teenagers present. I’d probably puke at the first sight of blood anyway.” He smiles weakly.

“We can start next week, once everyone’s recovered from the New Year celebrations,” Fjord suggests, and then he and River start discussing other aspects of the merge. Gran, Cole, and Lucian ask questions, make suggestions. Kya stays on my lap and snuggles back into me.



## CHAPTER 20

# KYA



“You know, all dressed up, it’s even harder to tell you two apart,” I comment as we make our way from the house to the clearing for tonight’s Hogmanay celebrations.

“Are you implying you can only tell us apart because we dress differently?” River smirks down at me.

“No, I think we’ve proven I can tell you apart. Remember at the diner? I asked Knox for his order, and the table stared at me like I’d grown a new second head.”

“In our defence, it was pretty impressive,” Axel points out while tugging at his shirt collar.

“By which he means it took him almost a year to tell us apart, and we were living together,” Knox adds with a chuckle.

“You two would switch rooms and clothes. You deliberately tried to confuse us.” Casper grins as he thinks back on their teenage years. Knox and River share a look and start to laugh.

“Okay, yeah, we would do that.”

“To be fair, we did it before you guys came to live with us. When it was just us, Gran and Cole, we’d switch clothes and rooms—”

“Pretend to be each other in class too.”

The guys reminisce about the various pranks they all pulled on each other and Gran for the rest of the short walk. As we enter the clearing, a surprised gasp leaves my lips. My

head swivels every which way as I take in the vast differences from the previous week.

“Not what you were expecting?” Knox grins down at me.

“No.” My eyes ping from section to section, taking in all the changes. “I know the last social was short notice, but I never expected there’d be so many decorations tonight.”

“Hmm, yeah, when we said Hogmanay was the pack celebration, we weren’t kidding.”

“No, you most definitely weren’t.”

“Well, let me give you a tour of the available festivities for the evening.” Knox holds out his elbow like an old-fashioned gentleman from a period drama. A wry laugh falls from my lips as I loop my arm with his, and he leads us around the outer edge of the clearing.

“Now, in the centre, we have the bonfire. We’ll add different branches to it throughout the night. Which may sound superficial, but different trees burn differently. Some burn fast, some slow, some let off the most enticing scents. My personal favourite is the spruce; amazing smell, especially after we’re all several drams down. We’ll have a mix of dancing, depending on who’s playing the music.”

“What do you mean?” I ask as we pass a small group of pack members tuning instruments.

“Well, there’s the traditional ceilidh dancing. Kota hates it, so I’m claiming you as my dance partner for those.”

“Knox, I don’t know how to ceilidh!”

“We’ll teach you.”

“We?”

“Yeah.” He looks down at me, a soft smile on his face as he cants his head to the side in a very wolfish way. “Don’t tell me you thought I’d be the only one of your claimed and fated mates that would want to dance with you tonight? Not to mention the pack.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about all of that. Do I *have* to dance with everyone?”

Knox pauses, considering my question as we continue walking past more pack members with instruments. “Hmm, no. I suppose not, but it wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

He brings us to a stop on the edge of the clearing. We’re shadowed by a giant tree, and he drops his voice low so as not to be overheard.

“You don’t have to dance or interact with everyone. That would be exhausting, and tonight is meant to be fun above all else.”

“But?” I press.

“But you’re still not officially pack. You’ve been amazing at helping out and filling the role of Omega—”

“River hasn’t mentioned anything about me joining.”

“Kya.” Knox’s tone is admonishing, and I grimace.

“I know.”

“Do you?” he presses.

“Yes. River won’t bring it up because he knows how anti-pack I’ve been. If I want to join, I need to make the first move and bring it up with him.”

“Exactly. Look, there was a time—and not that long ago—where he would’ve steamrolled ahead and asked for forgiveness instead of permission.”

I hum in agreement, my eyes scanning the ever-growing crowd. Unlike the last social, tonight, there are children in attendance.

“I’ll talk to him tonight—or tomorrow.”

“I’m not rushing you, Kya. None of us want to rush you into a decision.”

“I know. I do, and I’ve been talking it over with Tilly when she has signal wherever she is.” Tearing my eyes from the pack members arriving, I look up into Knox’s mismatched

gaze returning to the main subject instead of my best friend. “There’s a lot of kids in this pack, Knox. No child should be worried about going feral because there’s no omega to help take the emotional burdens. I can be selfish, and honestly, if I could pick and choose, there’s probably members I wouldn’t help.”

He chokes back a snort, clearing his throat before he falls into a coughing fit.

“But I’m not that much of a bitch where I’ll condemn children to the effects I’ve witnessed from afar.”

“Never thought you were, Firebug.” Knox pulls me into his side, and we begin walking again. Pack members call out greetings as we pass, and I find myself feeling more relaxed than at the first social. Someone calls Knox’s name, and he drops a kiss on my head.

“You okay for a sec? I need to catch up with Niall about some stuff with the gym.”

“Yup, I’m good. Go channel your inner River.” I smirk up at him.

He laughs, giving me a quick hug.

“You’re cheeky. I can be serious and professional when I want.”

“You just don’t want to very often.”

“Exactly. So glad you understand.”

It’s my turn to laugh as I wave him off and head towards Casper and Axel, where they’re standing by the grills.



## KNOX

“Alpha River, can I get you anything? A fresh drink perhaps?”

“Huh, what?” I look at Vanessa in confusion as she continues to blather on at me as though I’m my twin. I’m about to correct her when she switches topics.

“Honestly, Alpha, it’s truly despicable how you’re being forced to consider mating that *omega*. There’s a few of us that are *completely* on your side. We fully understand the delay, but you know.” She rests a hand on my forearm, stroking me in a poor attempt at seduction. “Even if you allow her to join the pack, that doesn’t mean you have to take her as a mate. No one would blame you for looking for someone more suitable.”

“More suitable?” I pull my arm away from Vanessa, taking a step back to put more distance between us. “Like you, you mean?”

“Everything okay, Knox?” Turning to the side slightly, I smile at my mate. Before I can answer her, Vanessa scoffs, flipping her blonde hair over one shoulder and glaring at Kya.

“Knox is over there with Kota. You should really learn to tell them apart. It’s just common decency.”

One brow rises as Kya regards Vanessa, then turns to me. Leaning in, she inhales loudly. A pleased hum is just barely audible as my scent hits her.

“Definitely, Knox.” She turns cool grey eyes on the hyena shifter. “Not only does he have a different scent than River, but they also have different heterochromia. So even if you can’t scent that it’s Knox, you could use your eyes and notice. I mean, that’s just common decency, right?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, you two-bit whore,” Vanessa hisses, fists balled at her sides.

“Actually, she does. I am Knox. Always have been.” I pull the neck of my shirt open, exposing Kya’s claiming bite to the meddlesome beta.

“You claimed him! You stole Kota’s mate?” Vanessa shouts.

Vanessa’s shriek draws the attention of some of the surrounding pack members. Kota and River look up from where they’d been sitting on one of the picnic benches, feet planted on the seat. Vanessa continues to shriek and berate Kya, and River stands, jumping down from the bench, and strides towards us, Kota on his heels.

“You understand that for the bite to work, Knox consented and bit me too. Or did you miss Mating 101?” Kya asks, her voice full of sincerity that has me second guessing whether she’s genuine right now or not.

“You expect me to believe that?!” Vanessa throws her arms wide. “You expect *any* of us to believe that Knox left Kota for *you*? They’ve been together for *years*!”

“They still *are* together.”

“Kya.” Her name leaves my lips with a hint of a groan. The pack—and specifically Vanessa—don’t need to know the details of our sex lives.

“Everything okay over here?” River draws Vanessa’s attention, and the beta shifter wastes no time launching into her version of events.

“It’s not right! She can’t be our Omega if she misuses her effects on alphas to steal mates!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, I didn’t *steal* anyone’s mate! Kota claimed me too! In fact, he claimed me before Knox did.” Pushing her left sleeve up, Kya shoves her wrist with our fated mate mark under Vanessa’s nose. “Look familiar? Or do you need me to spell out what this is?”

Kota looks over Kya’s head to me, quirking his brow subtly enough that I’m not convinced anyone else will have noticed. He pulls off his suit jacket, and I do the same. As one, we roll up our left sleeves, exposing our matching fated mate marks. Kota steps right up behind Kya, stretching his arm out so his wrist is in line with hers on the left. I place mine to the right; the contrast of size and skin tone does nothing to detract from the identical moon phases and entwined trees marking us as fated.

Vanessa splutters, eyes widening in disbelief.

“Oh, are we showing off our marks?” Casper grins, thrusting his wrist over mine. “We’re a matching set.” He leans down to me, faux whispering to my ear, “I thought everyone knew we all shared a fated mate? Why do you think they thought we all lived together?”

“Probably thought Knox and I corrupted you with our dicks, except for River and Luc,” Kota answers.

“Why not Lucy-Lou? River I get because blood relation with Knox... though I guess that wouldn’t stop him from sampling the snow leopard express,” Kya muses, pulling laughter from several of the gathered crowd. Kota leans down and nips her ear.

“Nothing ‘express’ about me, and you know it, Chibi Girl.”

“To answer your question, though, Bunny,” Lucian says, joining our group and the growing crowd of nosey onlookers. “I’ve never met a guy that I want to explore things with in that way. Never say never, but don’t hold your breath either.” He shrugs nonchalantly.

“I challenge you!” Vanessa’s shout pulls my attention back to the shaking woman; her eyes fixed on Kya are hard and full of fury.

“Vanessa, she’s an omega. You can’t,” is called from the crowd.

I look at my twin, wondering if there’s anything we can do—that he can do—to stop this. Kya is a fantastic fighter, and she’s bested each of us, but we’ve never used our dominance against her. Vanessa outranks her and will have no qualms about fighting dirty.

“You what now?”

“I, Vanessa Mann, challenge the omega shifter, Kya, for the right to mate pack Alpha River.”

“Vanessa—”

“Don’t worry, Alpha, I won’t let her win and mistreat you like she has your brother.”

“Mistreat me? Who the fuck said Kya mistreated me? Or anyone, for that matter?” I snarl, stepping closer to the shit-stirring beta.

“Knox,” River barks my name. The force of his Alpha command gives me pause. “An official challenge has been



issued. You can't interfere."

I stare into his eyes, so similar to my own minus the colouration flip. His gaze darts to the side, and I turn my head an imperceptible amount to see what he's trying to point out to me. My jaw clenches as I notice the Council's enforcers watching us from the far side of the bonfire.

"Fine," I growl, sounding more like Axel than I probably ever have before.

"Enforcer Isaac, care to do the honours? I fear in this instance, I will be unable to remain impartial," River calls out.



Isaac agrees, and within minutes, we have a circular area cleared for the challenge. Pack members gather around the invisible edge, everyone instinctively knowing where not to cross.

The four enforcers stand in the middle of the space with Kya and Vanessa. Isaac speaks to both women in a low tone that even shifter hearing can't quite penetrate.

Anan says something that causes Kya's lip to twitch with a smirk and Vanessa to frown. After a few more moments of discussion, both females nod. Isaac jerks his chin at his team, and the three enforcers move to stand at different points around the circle. If Kya and Vanessa were the centre point of a compass, the enforcers would be at the East, South, and West markers.

"McBearty pack," Isaac raises his voice, not enough to be considered a shout, but for shifters, it's close enough. Everyone falls quiet, minus a few whispered exchanges of members placing bets on the outcome. Rolling my neck to release some of the building tension there, I do my best to ignore the number betting against my mate.

"A challenge has been issued. As unorthodox as it is, beta Mann and omega Jenson—"

"McBearty!" Casper shouts out. "Kya's a McBearty."

“Not according to my ID, Snowball,” she calls back. I suppress the chuckle at the nickname. Casper hates being confused with a polar bear. Kya’s going to call him Snowball whenever she’s upset with him or wants to rile him up.

“Kya—”

“Later, Snowball. We can discuss name changes later.”

“Indeed,” Isaac agrees, a smile pulling at his lips. “Rules have been discussed. There will be no restriction on shifting. The fight will continue until one yields or is unconscious. This is *not* a death match.”

His stern gaze roams over the crowd before settling on both Kya and Vanessa, waiting for them to acknowledge his words.

With sharp nods from each female, Isaac steps back, taking his place on what would be the North point of a compass. “Face off.”

Kya adjusts her stance. Vanessa bares her teeth in a snarl. The difference in emotion and posture is astounding.

“Scrap,” Isaac shouts, and Vanessa charges forward.

## CHAPTER 21

# CASPER



“Remind me why we’re not putting a stop to this?” I grouch, already knowing the answer, just not liking it.

“Vanessa issued an official and formal challenge. In public. My hands are tied, you know that,” River replies, his voice subdued as he watches Isaac step back from the centre, leaving Kya and Vanessa alone.

“There should be a rule of exemption for fated mates though. What are you going to do if Vanessa wins? Mate her?”

He levels a glare at me as Isaac calls for the two females to face off.

“Of course not! It’s a moot point anyway. Banphrionsa isn’t going to lose.” River folds his arms over his chest, returning his gaze to Kya as Isaac calls the start to the challenge, and Vanessa charges forward.

I’m more nervous watching this fight than I care to admit. It’s ridiculous. I’ve fought Kya; I’ve seen her fight with my brothers and Flynn. My mate can hold her own against alpha shifters. She’s won against us; a beta should be nothing to worry about. Yet I am.

Kya waits until the last possible second before dodging Vanessa, kicking out a leg to trip the hyena shifter before turning so as not to lose sight of the threat.

The watching crowd calls out in encouragement and discontent, depending on who they’re rooting for.

Vanessa catches her balance, spinning back around to face Kya. Her lips pull back in a snarl while Kya's face remains expressionless and stoic.

“Why do I feel like Älskling is toying with her?”

“Because she is?” Axel shrugs next to me. “We've all sparred with her. We know what she's capable of; Kya isn't going in for the attack. She's waiting.”

“Why though?”

Vanessa runs at my mate, raising her fist to strike at Kya's face. Once again, Kya dodges and sidesteps the attack. The jeers and questioning from the crowd grow louder and louder.

“Does the omega even want Alpha River as a mate? She's not fighting, just defending.”

“Exactly! If you wanted him as your mate, you'd be possessive and fighting tooth and nail.”

Vanessa wipes her blonde hair from her face, chest heaving with her laboured breaths. Releasing a growl, she rips off her dress and shifts into her hyena, drawing applause and cheers from the watching pack members.

“Come on, Kya!” Kota cups his hands around his mouth as he calls out to her.

“You got this, Firebug!” Knox shouts right after.

Kya glances in our direction briefly, but it's enough for Vanessa to slip through her defences and knock her to the ground.



## KYA

Stupid. So freaking stupid. I should know better than to get distracted during a fight.

Hot, rancid breath hits my skin in panting waves. I dart to the side as she lunges for my throat. There's not a lot of room to manoeuvre, but I manage to move just enough that

Vanessa's snout hits the packed earth beneath me instead of my neck.

Refusing to let the momentary advantage where she's dazed from the impact go to waste, I pull my knees up and kick with all my strength to dislodge her. As I roll to the side, I call forth my shift. The seams of my dress pop and tear, the fabric shredding with the sudden change.

By the time I'm up on all four paws, Vanessa's hyena has shaken off the momentary befuddlement. Her eyes widen as she takes in my leopard form. A wave of smug satisfaction sweeps through me as my omega enjoys our opponent's hesitation, even if it doesn't last long.

We charge at each other. Vanessa's jaw opens wide, preparing to sink into my flesh and shatter bones. Raising a paw, I extend my claws, swiping across her face while trying to clamp any part of her that I can reach between my teeth.

She rolls and dodges, turning and aiming for my front leg. The biting sting of almost getting caught within her jaws has me jumping out of reach and putting some distance between us.

We circle each other, darting in and out, each looking for the other to drop her guard first. To provide that opening for an incapacitating attack.

We repeat this pattern until it dawns on me that getting hurt is the only way to win. I'm slow to heal, but even a shattered bone will heal.

Decision made, I crouch low, haunches raised, ready to pounce. Vanessa scampers back a step, letting out that infamous bark that sounds so much like laughter. Keeping my head low, I push forward with all the speed I can muster.

As she lunges for my neck, I jump. Her jaw clamps around what would be my bicep in my human form. The conical teeth pierce flesh and bone, and the crack rings out loud and clear as my humerus breaks from the force.

Roaring with pain, I twist, reaching around the back of her neck and sinking my own teeth into her flesh. A hush falls

over the gathered pack members. Vanessa stills beneath me, but I don't relax my grip. Nor will I until she releases me or Isaac calls the fight to an end.

After a moment where all I can hear is the sound of our pounding hearts, Vanessa tightens her hold. A small whimper slips free, audible even with my mouth full of hyena. Turning the whimper to a snarl, I deepen my bite, twisting my head, ripping her flesh further, and flooding my mouth with her blood.

"Enough." Isaac's voice shouts out both into the clearing and through our minds. Still, Vanessa doesn't release me. My eyes sweep around the crowd as Isaac and the other three enforcers on his team approach us.

"Ladies, release each other. Now."

Vanessa's grip on my leg loosens a minute fraction, and I reciprocate. Anan steps between us, dropping two blankets over us as we sit.

"Shift back," Isaac commands before turning to address the pack. "The omega, Kya, wins. Do any contest this decision?"

During the pause where he waits to hear if anyone objects, Vanessa and I shift back to human form. I wrap the blanket around me as best I can, my left arm hanging uselessly at my side.

"I didn't submit! How is *she* the winner?" Vanessa snarls, one hand holding the blanket loosely around her and the other pressing against her neck. Blood trickles down her shoulder from my bite.

"She wins because you would have been dead before losing consciousness," Anan snaps at her, his face twisted into a sneer. "Or should we have let you die? Is that what you want?"

Vanessa glares at him then at me. I can tell this isn't over; that is one pissed off hyena. With the damage we've both sustained, there won't be another challenge tonight, and I don't think she's desperate enough to come after me outside of

an official challenge. She'll heal faster than me, though, so I need to stay alert. Keep my wits about and pay close attention to my surroundings. And I think it's time River and I have a long chat about me joining the pack and sealing our mate bond.

"Ladies, I suggest you get cleaned up and your injuries seen to. Hopefully, this folly won't prevent you from enjoying the rest of the night." Isaac looks down at us both before walking off with his teammates towards Gran and the tables of food.

"Hey." Casper drops to his knees behind me, scooping me into his arms, being careful of my arm. "I got you, love. The Alpha house is closest. You can shower there, and one of us will run back to our house and grab another dress for you."

"Colour preference?" Kota asks, stroking my hair behind my ear.

"Nope, surprise me," I answer with a small smile. My snow leopard drops a kiss to my forehead before racing off in the direction we'd come from what felt like half a lifetime ago.

"Banphrionsa—"

"River."

"Let's get you inside. We probably don't have anything for the pain, but we can check."

"Sounds good."

Casper carries me towards my fathers' old house. As we pass Ryder, Brooks, and Cole, they fall into step, walking with us. My brothers berate Vanessa for challenging me before turning on me for allowing myself to get hurt in order to win.

"It's not like I could switch animal after shifting into a leopard," I sigh, exasperation and pain lacing my words.

"Well, you could have, but it would've been a bad idea with the Council's spies here. You could've picked a different animal to fight as though."

"Oh, well, apologies for not picking a better mammal. Seriously? What would you have picked since you're all so



wise and all-knowing?” I snark, rolling my eyes as they both grumble under their breaths, but neither volunteer what they would have opted for if they’d been me.

“All right, Bunny. Don’t bite their heads off. They’re just worried.” Lucian gently chastises me as he holds the door open for Casper to carry me through.

“I’ll get you a glass of water.” Knox moves off towards the kitchen while Casper carries me into the den, settling me gently onto the sofa.

“I wish we had painkillers or something to help you,” he murmurs, crouching next to my head and brushing my hair behind my ear.

“Should one of us call Fi?” Axel looks from me to my brothers. “She could help heal your arm, right? Fae have magic and shit like that.”

Ryder and Brooks shake their heads.

“No, Growly. Her magic doesn’t work like that. She might be able to find something that will take the edge off while I heal, though?” I explain as my mates growl their displeasure.

“Well, I’m going to call her,” Axel grunts, leaning over the arm of the sofa to kiss my forehead. “You were amazing. I wish it hadn’t happened, but I doubt anyone will question you as our mate again after that display.”

A scoff sounds from the doorway as Knox walks in with a glass of water and a straw.

“Vanessa won’t let this go. No way. You didn’t hear the shit pouring from her mouth before Kya came over to me.” He crouches down next to Casper in front of the sofa, holding the straw to my lips so I can drink. As I take small sips, he fills us all in on what the beta had said.

“Guess we’ll be running some interviews on our own pack, as well as the Jameson pack, before this merge happens.” Lucian scowls, pulling his phone out of a pocket. “I’ll update Fjord. Axel, phone Fi, see if she has anything to help or knows another fae who can.”

Kota strides in with a dress bag over one arm as Axel walks into the kitchen to call Fi. “Hey, I got you another dress, but we can skip the rest of the night if you’d prefer.”

“No, I don’t want to spoil New Year’s for the rest of you any more than I already have.” I twist my neck as best I can, looking around the room and noticing one of my McBearty mates is missing. “Um, where’s River?”

“I’m right here.” The man in question strides into the den. “I had to speak with some of the pack and with the enforcers, then I called Fi.”

“She tell you what she just told me, Riv?” Axel asks, walking back into the room.

“Depends. Did she say we should call Aralar?”

Axel nods then turns to look down at me. “Fi seemed to think you’d refuse his healing though. Why would you choose to be in pain if he could help you?”

“That would be because of the *way* his healing magic works.” My nose wrinkles as I answer, my mind whirling, trying to figure out the best way to explain this in front of my brothers.

“Unless you’re about to say something absurd—”

“Sex!” I blurt, then wince at the stunned faces around the room.

“And on that note, I think we’ll take our leave. Right, Ryder?” Brooks mutters, moving towards the door.

“Yup. Don’t think we need—or want—to hear this. We’ll just head back to the party and let Gran know you’ll be okay, Ky.” Ryder smiles, but it looks more like a grimace before he follows Brooks out. Quiet hangs heavily in the room for several beats. Once we hear the backdoor close behind my brothers, River takes a step closer to the sofa I’m lying on.

“Want to elaborate on that for us, Banphrionsa?”

“Err, right. Okay, so, you know the stories of incubus demons?” I begin when Knox cuts me off.

“Erm, Firebug—”

I hold up my hand. “Humour me. I’m not just hosting story time for shits and giggles.”

“All right. What about incubi? Incubuses? Whatever the term, what about them relates back to Aralar?”

“In the stories, when they get hurt, they can heal themselves via feeding on sexual energies, right?” I wait for each of my mates—minus Fjord, since he’s not here—to nod. “Well, Aralar’s healing magic has some correlation with that lore. Except, instead of him feeding off of sexual energy, he heals through sexual contact.”

“Are you saying that in order for him to heal your arm, he’d what? Have to sleep with you?” Lucian is the first to speak.

“Not full sex, it’s not a life-threatening injury...” I trail off as they each erupt into their own protests.

“Why would Fi even suggest that as an option?” Casper demands. He’s the only one I can easily reach, so I rest my hand on his to regain his attention.

“Fi is *fae*. She’s shit-stirring.” The rest of the room falls quiet at my words. My eyes roam over each of my mates, taking in the various disgruntled and pissed off expressions. “My first heat was rough. Aralar and I crossed paths right before my second one, and he, well, he got me through it. And the next few.” I rush out the words, hurrying to continue before they can cut me off. “*But* it wasn’t emotional. We each had a need. We struck a deal, and that deal ended once Fi found me again. It’s a broken arm.” I wave my good hand over the one Vanessa damaged. “It will heal on its own. I may not heal as fast as any of you would, but I’m not healing like a human. I’ll be fine in a week, two tops.”

River purses his lips and looks over at his twin, silently communicating. Knox nods once, and River turns, leaving the room with a quiet, “I need to see to the festivities.”

Knox steps up behind Casper and Lucian, crossing his arms over his chest. “Okay, do you want to go home, snuggle

in your nest, watch movies, or get dressed and join the pack for Hogmanay?”

“As much as option A appeals, let’s go with option B. No way I’m letting Vanessa think she scared me off.” I groan, forcing myself to sit up. The blanket pools around my waist, exposing my bare breasts to five of my mates. “Once this arm heals, though, I definitely want more nest time with all of you.”

“Sounds good to me. Come on, let’s torture ourselves by dressing your gorgeous body.” Kota nudges Knox, Casper and Lucian out of the way, a rich hunter-green silk dress in his hands.

“Um, Kota, underwear first.” I hold out a hand expectantly.

“Huh, oops. Guess I forgot them. Probably would’ve given you visible panty lines anyway, and you wouldn’t want that.” A slow grin spreads across his lips as I stare at him.

“Fuck, this is gonna be a long night,” Knox mutters.

“Long night? Try long week. No way any of us are getting any while her arm’s healing.” Lucian groans, wiping a tattooed hand over his face.

“Nah, that’s just you and River, Lucy-Lou... these four can help each other out,” I smirk.

“Especially if you get to watch?” Kota grins at me.

“I would never impose that stipulation. However, I also wouldn’t object to watching.”

“Hmm, well, we’ll have to see if we can accommodate that for you, Little Minx,” Axel hums. Lucian groans again, pushing up to his feet and waving Kota towards me so I can get dressed.

My broken arm’s not feeling so bad now.

## CHAPTER 22

4-5-9



“You’ll never believe this!”

“What?” Arenski draws, never once looking up from his paperwork. Real paper. Actual sheets, it’s been so long since I’ve seen any of them use anything other than their necessary tablets and computers. I’m pretty sure he’s looking back over old data. The stuff that didn’t end in a catastrophic failure or marginal success. No, if it’s on paper and not already part of the electronic filing system, that means it has to be in that middle ground no one deemed noteworthy enough to transcribe.

“Schmidt thinks he met her.”

“Who?”

“The omega! Christ, Harold, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about her already?!” Miller exclaims, throwing his hands in the air in a rather dramatic display. Arenski adds a mark to the top sheet he’s been analysing while I float in this slimy viscous liquid.

I keep my eyes mostly closed, not wanting either male to know I’m awake and listening. Though, they probably assume that I’m unable to hear them clearly, submerged as I am. Their voices are muffled, slightly distorted, but the words are clear enough.

No one has mentioned the omega female in at least a week—or at least not in front of me.

“Why does he think he’s met her?”

“The team he was shadowing tried to ditch him.”

“That’s not unusual.”

“No, but when he caught up with them, they were in a diner in a small town with a *Laroux vampire*.”

“So, not, in fact, the female omega.” Arenski sighs. “I knew it was too much to hope for. We got our hopes up for no reason at all.”

“I’m not so sure. The enforcers blocked Schmidt from approaching the table, but he said there was a female there. *Plus*, we got another tip.”

“More footage?”

“Yeah, a challenge fight. Definitely the same female from the Jameson footage, and this time, she shifted into a leopard.”

“Interesting.” Arenski rubs his jaw, pulling his tablet closer, tapping away quickly. “We have evidence of this one female changing to a chipmunk, a wolf, and now, a leopard.”

“Yes! But that’s not the best bit!” Miller grins, taking the tablet from the older scientist. His fingers fly across the screen in a blur—though the blur could be from the substance surrounding me affecting my vision.

“Look.” Miller thrusts the tablet under Arenski’s nose, a smug, gleeful grin on his face.

The older man squints at the device’s screen for a moment before pulling his glasses off and cleaning them on his tie. After replacing them, he peers down at the tablet once more, then jerks his head up, his gaze landing directly on me.

“You realise it’s a match. Do you know what that could mean?”

What’s a match? What the hell is on that screen? And what does it have to do with the female omega?

Arenski pushes his chair back, the legs screeching against the floor. Rising to his feet, he walks purposefully over to my chamber. Miller follows close behind him.

“Drain the chamber. I need to check his wrist myself.”

Why?

Goddammit, why won't they explain?

The viscous liquid surrounding me begins to drain. It's a slow process, one I usually suffer alone. Today, however, both Arenski and Miller share my impatience. My gut twists and clenches; they've never been impatient before. Through years and years of testing, every scientist and medical professional I've encountered here has been methodical. Clinical. They conduct their experiments, assess the data retrieved, make adjustments and then repeat the process.

"There. There on the same wrist. It's the same image! You agree it's identical, yes?" Miller rushes, tapping the glass near my left wrist.

"I'm inclined to agree. We need to get a closer look, take some images and forward them to Schmidt..." Arenski's words trail off as his eyes glaze over while his mind whirls.

"So it's *not* a tattoo like we originally thought?"

"It could be," the older male muses. "I doubt we'll know until we can get the female here."

My feet hit the bottom of the chamber as it continues to empty. My knees buckle, unable to support my weight after being suspended for hours. The mask around my nose and mouth releases, the burning sting has my eyes watering slightly as the blood returns to the area where the mask dug in to create an airtight seal.

I retreat into myself as my body readjusts to gravity once more. Miller and Arenski's voices become indistinct as they continue to discuss my wrist. It almost sounds as though they're implying that this female omega, this shifter who has been captured changing into three different creatures, shares my birthmark.

No one has identical birthmarks though. Do they?

Unless it's not a birthmark...

My mind drifts back to those early days when I'd first found myself at this facility. We'd been kept together in



groups to begin with, until they could identify what kind of shifter we were. An ancient shifter who had smelt like river beds, wood, and tree sap had made a comment upon seeing my birthmark one day.

*We were in the allotment gardens; it was planting season. I'd been placed next to him to dig the holes for the seeds. It had been slow, gruelling work. My hands were sore, blisters forming from not being used to the manual labour. I'd reached up with my left hand to brush my hair out of my face, and the too-long sleeve of my overalls slipped down, revealing my wrist.*

*The old man moved with more speed than I'd ever have thought possible, given his outward appearance. Shifters aged more slowly than humans, even then, I'd known that, but this male had been grey-haired with deep crags and wrinkles in his deeply tanned face.*

*"By the gods," he had whispered, his dark brown eyes locked onto my birthmark. At the time, I hadn't been able to identify his expression; now, looking back, I thought it might have been reverence. Though that could be my mind playing tricks on me.*

*The child I'd been hadn't understood much of what was happening. Not with why I'd been brought to this place or why we'd all been stripped of our names, given numbers and matching grey-blue outfits.*

*"Don't let them know what that is, boy, ya hear me? Yer can never let them know yer blessed."*

*"Wha-what do you mean, mister?" My words stuttered as I tried to understand him. Everything about him was so intense that it was almost overwhelming.*

*"You know what that is, boy?"*

*Shaking my head quickly, I moved my wrist to look at the dark mark. "The-they said it was a tattoo, but Eomma always said it was a birthmark."*

*"It's a little of both and neither at the same time."*

*My brows furrowed in confusion at his words.*

*“That mark.” He reached out and tapped my wrist with one long finger. “That means the fates have smiled upon yer. Somewhere out there is yer perfect match. The other part of yer soul. You’ll never be whole, never be complete, until yer find them.”*

*“Them? There’s more than one?”*

*“Maybe... it’s a detailed design.”*

*“It’s jus’ a birthmark, mister.”*

*“That detailed? All phases of the moon and intertwined trees. No, lad. Yer blessed. The fates smile down on you. Gives me hope.”*

The following week, I learnt that hope was a dangerous thing. That the fates were figments of that old man’s imagination. No one was watching out for us. No one in this place was blessed.

My younger self had watched as the guards used the electric sticks to shock the old man until his whole body shook. Bones cracked, and while he was still mid-shift, darts hit him in the side of the neck. That old man’s agonised screams as his body failed to complete his shift still haunt my sleep.

The rush of cold air as Miller opens the chamber door pulls me back from the memories. Years of practice enable me to keep my muscles lax. Making my body a complete dead weight that takes both males’ full attention to manoeuvre. Once I’m placed onto the gurney, I allow my head to loll to the side.

The trolley with the different instruments and tools from today’s tests is a few inches shorter, allowing me to see the screen of the tablet Arenski had been looking at earlier. I blink repeatedly, not believing my eyes. My gaze flicks to my visible skin, then back to the image.

The skin peeking through the seven moon phases and entwined trees is too pale to be my own. There’s no hint of olive or warmth in the wrist on the screen.

The old man's words drift through my mind once more. *"The fates have smiled upon yer. Somewhere out there is yer perfect match. The other part of yer soul."* And for the first time in the years since he uttered them in the allotment garden, I allow myself to believe he wasn't just a crazy old man. That he wasn't clinging to myths and tales of make-believe as a coping mechanism.

Maybe, just maybe, he was right.

Maybe, out there, somewhere, is the missing piece of my soul.

If that's true, if the omega Miller and Arenski have been discussing is my mate, she cannot come here.

Fire ignites within my veins; determination alights within me.

No more complacency.

No more docile alpha pretending the drugs work.

I have a mate. And I will die before she sees the inside of this facility.

## CHAPTER 23

# RIVER



My office door opens and closes. Why does no one knock anymore? Did Flynn have to put up with this kind of disregard for tradition too? I glance up, expecting to see one of my brothers, or perhaps Isaac. The shifter standing in front of my desk is neither of those though.

“What are you doing?” I try to keep my voice neutral, polite. No matter my personal opinion of the hyena shifter, I’m still the Alpha of this pack.

“I want my job back, Alpha. It’s not fair that I’m being punished—” Her voice holds a whine that makes my wolf restless. The female is like nails being dragged across a chalkboard.

“Vanessa, you’re not being punished. I am not the same kind of Alpha as Flynn was. I don’t need an assistant.”

“Of course you do!” she splutters with barely concealed outrage. “Even more so, with taking over another pack—”

“It’s a merge, not a takeover.” Holding up a hand to silence her, I push up from my desk chair. “Vanessa, it’s late. I’m tired, and frankly, you’re trying my patience. So let me make this abundantly clear. You are no longer my assistant; you are not the assistant to Lucian either. Alpha Fjord of the Jameson pack does not require an assistant. There. Is. No. Job. For. You. Here.”

“This is all because I challenged that omega whore!”

“Enough!” I bellow, releasing my Alpha command into the word. Her jaw snaps shut as I stalk around my desk towards

her. “You are banned from this building. You are banned from my home, too. Your misguided opinions on Kya are simply that, misguided. You know nothing about her or our relationship. How and when we seal our bond is not something *you* get an opinion on. Am. I. Clear?”

Vanessa’s eyes widen as her lips thin, but she nods once, sharply.

“Good. Do not make me exile you from the pack, Vanessa.” Straightening, I tug at my waistcoat and move to the office door, opening it for her. “Now, as I said, it’s late. Good night, Vanessa.”

“Good night, Alpha,” she mumbles as she exits.

Once I’m sure she’s left the property, I secure the papers regarding the merge and the search for Flynn in my desk and make my way out. After ensuring the office door is locked behind me, I head home, desperate to fall asleep with my mate tucked in my arms, but I have to earn that. And I will. Eventually.



Light hits across my face as someone opens my bedroom door. I inhale, scenting the air, and sit up when the smell of apple, ginger, and vanilla hits me.

“Kya? What’s wrong?” My voice is groggy from sleep. I have no idea what time it is, but I doubt I’ve been in bed long if the yellow glow of the hall light is any indicator.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” Her voice is soft, keeping her volume low so as not to wake the others, but there’s an accusation in her tone too.

“What?” Rubbing a hand over my face, I push up onto my elbows and squint at my fated. Her body is cast into silhouette, with the only light source behind her. My eyes feast on her subtle curves before her words pull my attention from my baser desires.

“You’ve been avoiding me. Why?”

“Banphrionsa—” I start, but she cuts me off.

“Don’t feed me a bunch of bullshit either, River. I want to know why. You said you loved me weeks ago, and I know you’ve been busy with the pack merge, and trying to find out what happened to my fathers. Now with the Council’s enforcers here... I-I know I’m difficult. Then everything last week with Hogmanay and Vanessa.” A growl rumbles in my chest at the mention of the hyena bitch. Kya continues, not noticing my reaction. “I know I’m not the omega the pack or you would pick—”

“Stop,” I bark, pushing myself up and moving to sit on the edge of my bed, holding onto the duvet to avoid flashing her. “I didn’t say I *loved* you. I said I *love* you. Present tense, not past—never past.” Closing my eyes, rubbing the bridge of my nose, I need to explain to her. Make her see how much she means to me. “Banphrionsa, I would pick you every single time. I’m not going to force any of this on you though. You’ve never wanted to be part of a pack and certainly didn’t ask to be thrust into the position of pack Omega.”

She steps closer to my bed, twisting her arm so I can see her fate mark. “We’re fated. You’re Alpha. Fjord will be co-Alpha once the merge is complete, and I’m fated to him, too. You avoiding me doesn’t change that.”

“If we don’t complete the bond, you don’t *have* to take the role.” The words leave my lips as a whisper.

“If I don’t, then who will?” Kya throws her hands up in exasperation.

Shit, she’s got a point. There aren’t any other omegas in the pack. Without her, we’d be no better than the Jameson pack under Henrick. That doesn’t mean she shouldn’t have a choice. My mind kicks into gear, jumping from thought to thought, trying to find a solution.

“River?” she prompts after the silence stretches between us.

“I don’t know.” I sigh, lifting a hand up from the mattress to hold off her next words, “I don’t know, but I will *not* force

this on you.”

“So what? You’re never going to mate me?” she demands.

“Kya—” I try to answer her, but now the questions are pouring out of her, I can’t get a word in.

“You’ll never join us during my heats?”

“Kya—” Again, I try to interrupt.

“Don’t I get a say!?”

“Of course you do!” I finally yell, needing her to listen, to understand. “You think I *want* to distance myself?! You think I *want* to spend the rest of my life sitting outside your nest? Or only getting off to the memories of that night in the hotel? Because I don’t. But I’m not putting the pack, or myself, above you. *You* are my priority whether we wear each other’s bites or not.”

“So,” she draws the word out, a smirk playing on her lips that has me twitching against my thigh. “To be clear, you *want* to claim me? You *want* me as your bonded mate and as the pack Omega. But you’re holding back because *you* think it’s not what *I* want?”

“Yes. Exactly,” I grunt, punching my pillow and falling back on it to look up at my ceiling, straightening the covers across my waist. “I’m trying, Kya. I’m trying to earn your love. Your trust. I know over the last few months since we blindly followed orders, I’ve been a giant arse. A prick of epic proportions. I, especially, have a lot to make up for. And I’m probably fucking up again. Hell, it probably won’t be the last time I fuck up either, but I’m not gonna trap you here.”

The rustle of fabric against skin has me turning my head back to Kya and choking on my own spit, watching as she drops her t-shirt to the floor.

“Banphrionsa...” The word leaves my lips like a whispered breath.

“You’re right. You are fucking it up. And you probably will again. I’ll probably fuck up too. We’re not perfect, River. I’m okay with that. Perfection sounds boring and exhausting



anyway.” She moves towards me, pushing her sleep shorts down, stepping out of them once they fall to her ankles.

“We do this. You’re stuck here, with us, with me,” I say as my eyes feast upon her now naked body. My gaze snaps to her face as she huffs a laugh.

“River,” she sighs like I’m missing something obvious. I probably am, but show me a male whose brain works at full capacity when the woman he loves is naked in front of him. “I’ve already claimed and been claimed by five of the alphas in this house. Where the hell would I go without them? They’re not going to leave you, and I wouldn’t want them to.” Climbing onto the bed, Kya moves a leg over my hips, straddling me. “What I *really* need from you, Grumpy Wolf —” She grinds down against me, the only barrier between us is the duvet. “—is to stop making decisions *for* me.”

I groan as her words register. *I’m an idiot*. “I keep fucking this up.”

“Not really. At least no more than I am.”

“How’s your arm?” My hands slide up her thighs, over her hips to caress her sides, careful not to tickle her and break the mood.

“It’s fine, though it’d feel better if you kissed me already.”

“Healed with a kiss, huh?” I smirk at her as I sit up, pulling her closer to my chest. She hums as my lips meet hers. Kya’s tongue licks the seam of my mouth, and I open for her, threading my fingers through her hair as we devour each other.

*:I love you, Kya. I think part of me has since you first bumped into me at the club; you captured my heart and soul in those storm-grey eyes of yours. I’ve been yours ever since.:*

She pulls back, breaking our kiss at my mental words. Her eyes scan my own as she licks her lip. “You mean that? It’s been eight months since then, River.”

“I know.” My smile grows as she looks at me, a multitude of expressions flitting across her face as she processes what I’m saying.

“But... Do you mean... You—”

“Haven’t been with anyone in eight months? Yeah, that’s exactly what I mean, love. I never want anyone else in my arms or my bed.”

“No other mouth around your cock?” She wiggles her eyebrows, pulling a laugh from me.

“Don’t do that. Knox does that eyebrow wiggle thing, and this is not the time I want to be thinking about my twin.” The only response I get to that is a mischievous grin. The fates definitely ensured my mate would push back. Which is probably what we both need to an extent. “And no. I don’t want any other mouth on my body but yours.”

Leaning forward, she presses a sweet kiss to my lips before trailing more along my jaw and down my neck. Her dark violet hair tickles my bare chest as she traces my tattoos with her tongue, nipping and sucking on my nipples as she descends my body.

Taking the opportunity when Kya rises up to adjust her position, I rip the duvet from between us, kicking it to the floor right before she takes me in her hand and sucks the head of my cock into her mouth.

Dropping back onto the pillows behind me, I close my eyes briefly as she swirls her tongue around my length. “Fuck, Banphrionsa, your mouth is heaven.”

She pulls back, my cock leaving her mouth with a subtle *pop*. “My mouth is heaven, huh? So that’s your favourite hole of mine, is it?”

“Each and every way you touch me is my favourite.” Wrapping my legs through hers, I flip us so she’s lying on her back beneath me. “As much as I love your mouth,” I kiss her lips before moving to her neck, “your tongue,” I lick down to her collarbone, “your touch,” pressing a kiss between her breasts, I run my hands over her hips, “I need tonight to be about your pleasure.”

Nipping at her ribs, I continue trailing kisses down her body. With a soft grip on her thighs, I spread her legs and run

my nose across her pelvis and down to her core. The sweet and spicy scent of her arousal consumes my senses. Home. Mine. Everything I've craved for the last eight months, and I'm going to savour every second of my time with her.

Flattening my tongue, I lick up her seam, sucking her clit into my mouth once I reach it. Kya's back arches, a small moan of pleasure slipping from her as I flick the tip of my tongue over that bundle of nerves before dipping lower and pushing into her channel.

I lose myself in her taste. Kya's hands sink into my hair, pulling and playing with the longer strands that I usually keep tied up. She bucks beneath me, my name leaving her lips in a breathy plea.

Closing my lips around her clit, creating a vacuum, I suck and gently scrape my teeth across the sensitive nerves. Kya's legs jolt, her back arching once more as she falls over the edge into her orgasm. Turning my head, I sink my teeth into the top of her inner thigh, as close to her core as I can get. With a tug of my hair, she pulls me up; I climb back over her, balancing my weight on my forearms, and fall into her kisses.

Kya's hand trails between us, gripping my cock, lining me up with her entrance. Before she releases me, she gives me a squeeze. "Mine."

"All yours, Kya. Always yours," I murmur against her lips as I thrust forward, sheathing my length inside her. Holding still, I try to control my instincts and let her adjust to my intrusion.

"Gods, River. *Move.*" She wraps her legs around my waist, rolling her hips, encouraging me to take her.

"As you wish, mate of mine."

Grinding against her before withdrawing almost completely, I pause until she growls my name, then sink back into her. I grit my teeth, circling my hips as she clenches around me.

Lowering my head, I suck on the side of her neck, being careful to avoid the mate marks from my brothers. Tonight is

about the two of us, our bonding, claiming. Kya's nails scrape across my back, mixing a small amount of pain with the pleasure of being buried inside her. Grabbing one of her legs, I pull it onto my shoulder.

"Mmm, this feels familiar." She smiles up at me with lust-hooded eyes.

"That night is burned into my memories. You have no idea how often I relived it with my hand." Shifting my hips slightly, I angle my cock to stroke and hit new spots within her. Kya's grip on my back and side tightens as she edges closer to another orgasm.

Reaching between us, I pinch one of her nipples as I snap my hips, driving into her and pulling my name from her in a cry of ecstasy. Bending down, I bare my throat to her.

"Claim me as yours, Banphrionsa." No sooner do the words leave my lips, her teeth sink into the nape of my neck. My own climax erupts, my knot swelling as it ties us together.

Once she releases my skin and licks the bite, I carefully lower her leg from my other shoulder and pepper kisses across her face.

"Let's roll to the side, so I don't crush you while we're knotted." She nods her agreement to my words, and it doesn't take long until we're lying side by side, one of her legs still wrapped over my waist.

"Was this your plan when you came in and woke me?" I ask after a moment.

"Hmm, yeah. I knew you wouldn't claim me while my arm was still broken, but—" She tilts her head back to look up at me, "—please don't think this was my main reasoning because it wasn't, but Vanessa..."

"Didn't want her to challenge you again?"

"Or anyone else. I'd already accepted that I'm yours. I knew that before my disastrous birthday party. Joining the pack and taking on the Omega responsibility took a bit to wrap my head around, but I wanted this. Us." Kya buries her face

back into the crook of my neck, inhaling deeply. My mind flicks back to earlier this evening in my office.

“I banned her from the house, this one, and the Alpha house. Even with us claiming each other, she might still cause issues. We’ll deal with it together, though, if she does.”

“Together?”

“Well, with Fjord and Lucian, too. Co-Alpha and Beta will have a say,” I admit. She hums into my skin, nuzzling closer, if that’s possible.

“I like the sound of that, making decisions together, but I think the whole family should be included.”

“Gran, Cole, and your brothers?” I frown, not seeing how that could lead to anything getting decided.

“No.” She huffs a laugh, poking me in the ribs. “Our fated family. Should probably look at moving Fjord in, too. We all need to get to know him better.”

“He’s coming over in the afternoon. We can bring it up then.”

We fall asleep, waking when my knot releases, only to fall into each other again and end up connected with Kya on top of me this time. Tonight, she’s all mine, just mine. When the sun rises, I’ll be content to share her again.

## CHAPTER 24

# KYA



“Urgh!” My Kindle flies across the room, landing on the sofa opposite where I’ve been curled up reading for most of the day. The guys have sheltered me more than I expected this last week while my arm heals, and I’ve been able to make a small dent in my ever-growing TBR list. Which, as much as I love reading, the lack of physical activity—minus the bedroom aerobics with River last night—is wearing on me and making my patience thin. Even with fictional characters.

“Everything okay there, Petal?” Fjord’s voice pulls my attention to the archway connecting the living room to the rest of the house. My eyes scan over the seven males, all but one claimed as my mates. A mixture of physiques that look so much alike, yet dissimilar at the same time.

“Fine. Why?” I ask, pretending they didn’t just see my miniature hissy fit with my book.

“Hmm, well, you did just throw your Kindle across the room, Chibi Girl,” Kota hums, approaching the back of the sofa I’m currently curled up on.

“It had a soft cushioning. It’s not hurt.”

“Are you sure, Firebug?” Frowning, because Knox has a point, I stretch out and stand, moving over to the other sofa and scooping up the e-reader. A quick glance over shows there’s no damage, and it turns on to the frustrating scene that had me throwing the device in the first place.

“What happened?” River asks from right behind me. When did he move so close?

“Hmm, nothing. Why?” My response is met with a raised eyebrow as River tilts his chin down to look at me. His expression all but screams I should behave, but sometimes being a brat is just more fun. Last night was sensual and seductive in a sweet way, very different from my first experience with River. I like both sides of my Alpha, but I *might* be pushing to test what will bring my Viking back out.

“Kya, you just looked at your Kindle with outright disgust when you turned it back on. So clearly something happened,” River presses, and a sigh leaves my lips, knowing I won’t be able to gloss past this.

“It’s nothing.” I wave my hand dismissively. “The character did a dumb, it annoyed me, so I threw the Kindle.”

“What?” several voices ring out in confusion.

“The character did that thing, where even though they’ve had multiple warnings and have a bad feeling about someone else, they still go off with them—alone—and then act surprised when things go bad. Obviously, things go bad, that’s why there were *multiple* warnings,” I explain, holding my head high and refusing to allow them to knock me for reacting so passionately about fictional people.

“Ah, and it hits too close to home.” Knox nods slowly after processing my explanation.

“What? How?” I sputter, confused as to how he made *that* connection. Axel looks at Knox, scratching his beard before adding his two pennies’ worth.

“Yeah, because you trusted Fi, and we trusted the Wilson twins—”

I cut him off, raising my hand as I ask, “Are you saying I’m a ‘too stupid to live’ character?”

“Umm...” Axel and Knox glance quickly at each other and then at my other mates.

“Wow. *Wow*. You guys suck.” I drop the Kindle back onto the sofa, staring at all seven males.



“Nope. River, Luc, and I leave the sucking to you,” Fjord jokes, “and those who lean that way.” He adds with a shrug and a glance at my other mates. My mouth falls open. That was not what I’d expected any of them to say, least of all him. The other guys all take a step back and away from Fjord as I narrow my eyes on him.

“You went there? Seriously?”

“You’re getting too worked up over a *book*, Kya.” Fjord steps further into the living room but keeps the sofa between us.

“Books were my solace and escape from a really shitty existence after getting away from *your* pack the first time. It’s not like we stayed in one place long enough for me to make real friends to begin with. And making friends requires social skills, which in case you missed it, are not my strong suit. Besides, weren’t you bitching about some random arse sports team the other day? How is that *any* different?”

“Well, for one, they’re real people,” Fjord says, folding his arms over his chest and quirking an eyebrow at me in challenge. Or at least, I take it as a challenge.

“Did you have a bet on the game?”

“What? No,” Fjord answers as Knox asks, “What does that have to do with it?”

“Well, why does the outcome affect you? Why get so worked up over which team wins or loses? You gain and lose nothing. Same as I gain and lose nothing with my books.” Fjord opens and closes his mouth after I finish speaking. He exchanges a look with Knox and the other McBeartys all who shrug in response apart from Kota.

My snow leopard reaches over the back of the sofa and picks up the Kindle, switching the screen on before scanning the page. It won’t make much sense unless he’s already read the book, but whatever floats his boat.

“I’m not convinced it’s really about the book,” Kota muses. “I think this just tipped the scale.”

“I’m fine,” I say without any conviction, crossing my arms and flopping back down onto my previously vacated seat.

Kota stalks around the sofa towards me, and I’m once again reminded that, just like my other mates, he’s a deadly predator.

“I think you need some stress relief.”

“Had that last night,” I mutter and hear River cough. From the corner of my eye, I spot him trying to hide his smirk behind his hand.

“You weren’t thrilled about becoming a pack Omega and then with the merge—I imagine there’s a lot of emotional turmoil feeding through,” Kota continues, ignoring my comment.

“Maybe.” I purse my lips, thinking over his words.

“Plus, the challenge from Vanessa and breaking your arm. Not being able to work out every morning, all of that would take a toll. So, we—as your mates—need to ensure you don’t get burnt out.” Crouching down, he runs his palms gently up and down my biceps and shoulders. “Your arm is healed?”

“Yeah. Just a little weaker than it was before,” I answer, drawing a nod from my snow leopard.

“You’ll need to build the strength up again. I can do yoga with you, any of us can spar with you, or we can go run the gauntlet—”

“*Or* we can go barricade ourselves in your nest,” Knox cuts in with a waggle of his eyebrows. I roll my eyes, but my lips twitch with a smile.

“*Or* we can get started on the pack interviews, if you’re up for that, Petal?” Fjord’s question has me spinning around, leaning on the back of the sofa to face him.

“Really? Her arm is barely healed, and you want her to interrogate the scum who hurt her mum? What the fuck, Fjord?” Casper explodes, moving into the tiger shifter’s personal space.

“Her arm is fine enough for sparring or mating River, but not for the interviews? That what you’re implying?” Fjord snaps back; neither shifter moves to back down.

“Whoa, Snowball.” I clamber over the sofa. As soon as my feet hit the floor, I move to stand between Casper and Fjord, my hands on the white-haired alpha’s chest. “Maybe I’m not the only one feeling the effects of all the changes?”

Looking around the room at all seven men claimed and fated to me, I spot the tension in the lines of their shoulders. The tick of a jaw, the clenching of a fist. It’s clear we all need an outlet.

“Right. You want to know what will make me feel better?” I pause, ensuring I have their undivided attention. “Family date day.”

“And what would that entail?” Lucian asks in response to my announcement. A slow grin spreads across my face as I look them each in the eye before replying.

“We’re going to run the gauntlet.”



## CASPER

“Where the fuck are we going? And why did Kota and Kya go off separately?” Fjord asks after we’ve barely been in the car for five minutes.

“We’re going to the gauntlet at Kya’s old cabin,” Axel answers the first question from the driver’s seat while Knox taps the window, pointing out the bike that zips past us.

“Kya rode with Kota instead of squeezing into this tin can with us.”

He’s not wrong; it’s a tight fit. When they say a car can seat seven, they’re not referring to grown adults, much less shifters all over six foot tall. Axel was smart in offering to drive; not only does it give him more legroom, but he knows the route the best. Somehow, even though I’m the tallest of all

these fuckers, I'm the one practically bent double in the back seats.

"Before you ask, we're not telling you what the gauntlet is." I'm being a twat, and I know I'm being a twat. I just can't seem to stop myself when it comes to the Jameson Alpha.

*:You need to deal with your issues here, Cas. We're merging the packs, and he'll be co-Alpha soon enough.:* River doesn't even turn in my direction as his voice drifts through our mind-link.

*:I know. Maybe the gauntlet will help. My bear is... I don't know, unsettled? Whenever he's been around, I've been out on jobs, I've spent the least time with him. It'll work itself out.:*

"Here we are, the ol' Jenson cabin," Axel announces as we pull to a stop in front of the double garage, effectively ending my mental conversation with River.

Kota's black Triumph Bobber stands to the side of the building, two helmets balanced on the seat. Once the engine is off, we all begin the process of piling out of the car. It takes me a couple of false starts, and once I'm outside, I reach up, stretching every kink from my body.

"I'm too tall for that back seat."

"Should be faster at calling shotgun then, shouldn't ya, *Snowball*." Knox grins, reaching up to muss my hair as he passes.

"Nope. No way. No. You do *not* get to call me that," I call after him as we all head around the cabin in search of our little mate and Kota.

"Cheater!" Kya's disgruntled shout is followed by Kota's laughter.

"What did you do, Ounce?" Knox jogs over to the two of them where they're standing at the top of the hill.

"We were doing hill sprints. He cheated." Kya glares as Kota continues to laugh.

"Having longer legs is not cheating."

“Piggyback will give you an advantage, Petal.” My bear roars in my mind at Fjord’s suggestion. I push past him, scooping Älskling into my arms before he can reach her. “What the hell, Casper?”

“I’ve got the longest legs; makes sense for me to give *my* mate the piggyback, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Casper put me down,” Kya grumbles, tapping my hold on her until I settle her back on the ground. “This is getting ridiculous. *This*—” She waves a finger to encompass me, “—whole jealous, possessive alpha-hole routine is not you. You’re my prankster partner, my mischief maker. I get Fjord is a new dynamic to the group, a group you’ve grown up with and had time to adjust to. But I don’t think he’s done anything to warrant this much animosity.”

I open my mouth to argue, then promptly shut it again. What am I going to say? That he kidnapped and drugged her? Hello, pot meet kettle.

“Logically, I know that,” I hedge, trying to figure out why I feel insecure and off-kilter around the tiger shifter.

“Is it your bear or your human side that’s got the problem with me?” Fjord crosses his arms over his chest, tilting his head to one side.

“My bear,” I pause before continuing, “I think.”

“Is this like a pecking order kinda thing? Does your animal side need to prove hierarchy?” Kya’s question has all of us pausing and giving her our full attention. “Not in regards to me,” she adds hastily, “But just as alphas.”

“Maybe.” Fjord shrugs, returning his focus to me. “We can spar? I don’t plan on going anywhere, the merge is happening, and I plan to claim Kya as my mate once she’ll have me. We need to find a way to co-exist.”

“Rather than beating each other to a pulp,” Kya says before I even open my mouth to respond. “We did come here for the gauntlet. Why don’t you race?” She points over her shoulder, down the hill to a trail path amongst the trees.

“Sounds like a good idea. We can all do it together, like a pack run.” River walks up behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders and gently squeezing them.

“Clothes bins full or empty, Little Minx?” Axel asks, with a smirk on his lips as the faintest blush creeps across her cheeks.

“Hmm, possibly empty, but we’re shifters. No one minds being naked, right?”

## CHAPTER 25

4-5-9



“Where the fuck am I?” The loud shout pulls me from my sleep. Something about the voice niggles at my memories. I can’t place it with the incessant thumping sounds reverberating through the otherwise quiet space. With a sigh, I open my eyes, checking if the infrared camera is still off. The tell-tale red lights are absent around the lens, but if he keeps up this racket, it won’t be long before someone takes notice.

“Open this fucking door!” my new neighbour shouts, slamming fists against his door once more. The idiot will bring attention to the wing that I can’t afford. This is my haven, the space where I don’t have to pretend to be a soulless drone. An empty husk, devoid of emotion and feeling. It’s also where I’ve begun to implement my escape.

Heaving myself up, I shake off the last dregs of sleep and the latest drug concoction Arenski injected into me. Keeping my movements slow to avoid triggering the camera’s motion sensors, I make my way across the small room to the glass-topped door.

“Someone let me the *fuck* out of here!”

“Quiet!” I hiss, looking through the window to the newly occupied room opposite. Surprisingly, he listens and lowers his fist before it can slam into the sealed door again.

“Who are you? Where the fuck am I?” he demands, his grey-eyed gaze locking onto me, once again stirring a long forgotten time. A time before this place. The boy I was then is



long dead, though. There'll be time for a trip down memory lane eventually, but not tonight.

“I'm Unit 4-5-9. You're at the facility.”

“Unit—That's, that's not a name, lad.” He runs a hand roughly through his silver grey hair, huffing out an exasperated breath.

“It's the only one I have anymore.” I shrug. Names aren't necessary when there's no one to talk to, and it's also not vital information he needs right now. If he doesn't want to call me by my number, that's his choice. “Does the camera in your room have red lights around the lens?”

“What camera?” He turns his head, looking behind him. I know as soon as he spots it because he freezes, not even turning back around before addressing me again. “Why are there cameras? Where the hell am I?”

“They only refer to it as the facility. Humans test us here; from what I've gathered over the years, they want to control us. Build an army of shifters. You should return to your bed. Once they think you're asleep, the camera will go back to audio-only.”

“Audio-only? So we still won't be able to speak freely.”

A soft chuckle escapes my lips, startling me. When was the last time I made a sound like that? Too long. “This is a human facility, remember? They forget our senses are heightened. You can hear me through both doors and the corridor, yet my voice is barely above a whisper. Their audio equipment doesn't register our words if we stay quiet.”

I watch as the man moves away from the door. His steps are slow and steady, and it doesn't take long for him to disappear from view. The gentle creaking of the bedsprings let me know he's followed my suggestion. Good. If they think he's settled, they won't send anyone down to investigate. Unless they already have.

“You still hear me, lad?”

“Yes.” My reply is a little curt, but I'm trying to look down the corridor, keeping my senses on alert in case someone exits

the lift. With the ruckus my new neighbour was making, it wouldn't surprise me if one goon or another came down with a 'sedative'. Blissfully the corridor remains clear and empty.

"Name's Flynn. You sure you don't have a name besides that number shit?"

"If I did, I don't remember it." That's a lie. I remember it, the same as I remember him. There's a long pause where I think he may have fallen asleep or decided to ignore me, but Flynn speaks again. He's a chatty one, it seems.

"How long have you been here?" Even with my enhanced hearing, I almost miss the question.

"I'm not sure. I have few memories of life before finding myself here. My eomma was killed in an accident. My pack's Beta ordered me to be brought here..." My words trail off as I fight the memories. I don't need to go down that path. "Once they know what you are, they'll move you to that wing. I'm different. I stay here."

"Eomma." He sounds the word out slowly. "That your mama?"

"Yes," I clip, my tone leaving no illusion that I don't wish to speak about her. Another silent pause stretches between us.

"How are you different?" Flynn asks eventually. I sigh before launching into the explanation.

"They split us here. Different animals live in different wings. Each wing is broken into designations. They don't know what I am... I don't have one animal side like the others. They can't put me in one of their neat little categories, so I stay here. Alone."

"You're trusting me with a fair bit of intel."

"No, I've told you nothing you won't find out in the morning. I needed you to be quiet. To not draw attention to my space. Plus, I don't want a headache. No one has been placed down here for a long time. I'm not used to sharing." I look down at my wrist, tracing the fated mark of moons and trees with a finger. "I think I'll have to learn to though."

“Why? Because I’m down here now?” Flynn’s question has me jerking my head up, not having meant to say that last bit aloud to him.

“No. Once they know your animal, they’ll move you to the corresponding wing.”

“Can’t agree to that, lad. I lost my head for a bit. Someone, well, someone I trusted a long time ago, killed my twin. Kidnapped my baby girl.” He snorts, and I can almost picture him lying on his little twin bed, shaking his head. “Not much of a baby anymore. Twenty-eight. My daughter is twenty-eight years old, and she’s had it rough. Lost her mother and one father because of a sick, twisted, power-hungry fool. She has her mates and brothers, but still, I need to get out of here. Get back to her... make amends.” The last two words are a mere whisper on a breath I pretend not to hear.

My mind plays over and over his voice saying her age. Twenty-eight, if that’s her age now, then I’m thirty-two. I’ve lost twenty-three years to this place. Shaking off the thoughts before I follow them down a dark path, I refocus on my old Alpha.

“You should try and get some rest, Flynn. You’ll need it when they come for you in the morning.” I hesitate as I step away from the door, intending to return to my bed and follow my own advice. “The drugs don’t work on me,” I tell him, though the reason why escapes me. “I don’t know if it will be different for you. If it’s not, don’t let them know. Play the part, and your time here will be easier. If you truly want to escape and get back to your daughter, you can’t draw attention. Don’t give them a reason to watch you.”

“All right. Thanks for the warning.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me, and then make my way to the twin bed tucked into the far corner. My eyes lock onto the corner of the room beneath the camera, where I’ve been slowly digging a potential escape tunnel. I won’t risk it tonight, but tomorrow? Tomorrow night, I’ll make up for the lost time.

I will leave this place. One way or another.



Today, I'm hoping for some time outside. Not because I relish sitting still and pretending to be mindlessly incoherent, but because I need to reconfirm the security out there. There's always a weak spot. I just need to pinpoint it, exploit it. Staying here, being a pawn for their serums and tests, was never ideal. Of course, I've thought and contemplated escape before, but I also witnessed the many failed attempts by those older than me when we first arrived. That was so long ago now though; there hasn't been even a whisper of an escape attempt in years.

I may not get to interact with the other shifters, but they're not the only way to get intel. The staff gossip in the halls and during the testing setup phases. Their gossiping is how I found out about my mate in the first place after all. Add in an abundance of time to hone my observation skills and the fact that the number of guards has been dropping steadily over the years. All while the scientists have grown overconfident in their ability to control us, control me. I suppose the serums might actually work on the others, but they've never worked well on me.

I'm always awake, always aware, even when the humans think otherwise, like now. Miller pushes the gurney I'm lying on after the latest round of blood and fluid draws, rounding the corner of the hallway and heading towards the lift. A rush of fresh air flows through as a set of security doors open ahead of us, and a voice I vaguely recognise calls out.

"Arenski, just the man we were looking for."

"Schmidt," the older scientist acknowledges, "something you need?"

"Is that Unit 4-5-9 you have there? We saw his room was empty, so I was hoping he was with you."

"It is. He's unresponsive currently. We've been testing different dosages of serum delta-9. It's definitely keeping the feral nature at bay. Still, he's little more than a vegetable until

we can get the balance right.” Two sets of squelching footsteps echo in the enclosed space—it must be raining again—as Schmidt approaches. He’s not alone, but I can’t move to see who else is with him without alerting Arenski and Miller to the fact their new drug is completely ineffective.

“I saw your note regarding his wrist marking. I was hoping my associate here could have a look? You see, Brody has spent some time with the omega anomaly, so he might be able to confirm the match.”

“Really? You’ve spent time with her?” Miller’s exuberance for any information on my possible mate has my inner beast itching to take control and destroy them. She’s mine. They cannot, will not, touch her.

Taking a calming breath before I give away the fact I’m coherent almost has me choking on the smell of wet gorilla. A scent I haven’t smelt since I was a child. No. He shouldn’t be here. My mind is playing tricks because of Flynn’s arrival. Old memories are being pulled to the surface. Still, how many gorilla shifters named Brody can there be?

“You sure he’s knocked out?” The voice is gruff, familiar in ways I wish it weren’t. The stench of damp hide intensifies as the bald-headed man leans over me.

*Do not react. Do not blink.*

He’s older. The lines across his forehead and around his eyes are deeper than they were all those years ago. Will he recognise the male I am now as the child he dumped here?

“Quite sure, yes,” Arenski insists. There’s an edge to his tone that announces clearly how he feels about being questioned by someone he views as lesser. The old man is by no means the worst in this place, but he definitely views himself—and humans in general—as better than shifters. “The mark you wanted to see is here.”

Cold fingers grip my left arm, twisting my wrist until it’s easily visible to all four of them. Brody moves his attention from my face to the exposed mark. I watch as he purses his

lips and nods while rubbing a hand over his short, grey-speckled beard.

“Yeah, that’s the same mark as Kylie’s.”

*Kylie.* I repeat my mate’s name in my mind, rolling it over and over. Could he mean Ky-Ky? No. That’s too much to hope for.

I vow to spend each day absorbing every single snippet of information about the omega. Building my knowledge and incorporating it into my plans, I’ll find her. Warn her, protect her, *mate* her. My mouth tingles as my teeth begin to shift; I fight the change. I need to stay in control. There’s too much at risk now; even a momentary lapse is unacceptable.

“And the males, her mates?” Schmidt asks, reverting my attention to my surroundings and their conversation.

“Yeah, same as them. I didn’t check each of the McBeartys, but it definitely matches the mark Jameson’s son has. Looks like little Kylie is a revolving door... Eight alpha mates. That’s gonna be one battered and stretched-out cunt.” Brody’s lips twist into a sneer before finally straightening and moving away from me. I push the rage his words cause aside, focusing instead on the information he revealed. Names. Each one is another step closer to finding my mate.

Besides, I have his scent. I can find him after I know Kylie is safe. Teach him the errors of disrespecting her in front of me, and repay him for my time here.

“What else can you tell us? Do you know what species she is?” Miller peppers the shifter with questions. He’d likely continue without allowing anyone else a chance to speak, but Schmidt puts a halt to the onslaught.

“That’s another reason we’re here. The recent feral wolf-man, have you had any luck returning him to his human form?”

“Ah, yes. Unit 8-2-5-W reverted to human late last night. I’m not aware of him waking yet, though,” Arenski says at the same time Miller queries why they’re asking.

“8-2-5-W is the omega’s father.” My body stiffens as I absorb this knowledge. Is it Flynn? If not, I have to get to 8-2-5-W. He’ll have all the answers I need. Perhaps he could be an ally?

“I imagine he has a lot of useful intel for us,” Schmidt continues, his tone oozing smugness and a hint of condescension. “He was also the previous pack Alpha. He’ll know the strengths and weaknesses of the security systems and protocols. We’ll be able to plan a much more efficient and strategic assault on their pack lands to retrieve the omega.”

“We haven’t moved him to the wolf wing yet; he’s still in the room adjacent to 4-5-9.”

My heart picks up speed in my chest. My mate is Flynn’s daughter. My mate is Ky-Ky, the waif of a child from my old pack.

This changes my escape plans, but not drastically. I’ll have to move up the timeline. Once Flynn’s transferred to the wolf wing, I won’t be able to get him out too. Though he said he needed to make amends. Would taking him with me put me at a disadvantage with her? More so than I likely already will have. I’ve grown up here. I have little, if anything, to offer a mate. Especially one with seven other alphas.

These are all issues that can be dissected another day. Mentally shaking myself off, I refocus on the conversation happening around me.

“We’re heading that way now. Would you like to join us? We can collect 8-2-5-W and begin testing some new truth serums while you ask your questions.” The gurney bounces slightly as Miller’s excitement gets the better of him.

Once we’re on the move again, I allow my mind to wander whilst still being careful to keep my emotions contained. It wouldn’t do to have them leak out and alert Brody to my state of awareness.

No, it’s all too clear which side he’s on.

And it’s the wrong one. Again.

## CHAPTER 26



# LUCIAN



“This was not what I had in mind,” Kya calls out to the two idiots currently attempting to beat the ever-loving shit out of each other. The rest of us stand in a row at the gauntlet treeline, watching as Fjord’s tiger swipes a paw across Casper’s snout, eliciting an aggrieved roar from the Kermode bear.

The race was a tie, unsurprisingly, since neither of their animal forms are long-distance runners. Though competing on the gauntlet course was never going to be enough to settle Casper’s bear. I knew that; pretty sure the rest of my brothers did too, but Kya? Well, my Bunny was overly optimistic. Moving up behind her, I bend down, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“They need to do this. It’s an alpha thing. They probably won’t do any permanent damage.”

“*Probably?*” Her voice squeaks as she looks up at me. “That does not make me feel better.” I drop a kiss on her forehead and resume watching the two males give in to their instincts. Teeth gnashing, paws and claws striking out only for them to back up, circle the other and then charge again.

Casper gets in a powerful strike, knocking Fjord to the base of the hill Kota and Kya had been sprinting up when we first arrived. The large tiger pushes back to his feet, shaking his head before charging in to tackle Casper.

“Think of it like a sparring match at the gym,” Knox says nonchalantly, with a shrug. “It doesn’t bother you when we

train—”

“Because *this* is not sparring. They’re not trying to learn and improve or stay in shape. They’re *actively* trying to hurt each other.”

“We’re alphas. It would be a lot worse if we hadn’t had—” I cut the sentence short before saying Connor’s name. Somehow we’ve gone these past few weeks without really mentioning him, Flynn, or what happened at the Jameson compound.

“You can say his name, Lucy.” Kya pulls my arms tighter around her and leans her head against my chest.

“How you doing with everything, Bunny?” I ask her quietly.

“Hmm, not sure. I haven’t really sat and processed yet. It’s —” She pauses, tilting her head to the side as she searches for the word. Now is not the time for this conversation, and I feel like a jackass for bringing it up. “—complicated. They were my fathers but also still practically strangers. I think I’m mostly sad for you guys and for what I could’ve had.”

Fjord’s tiger pins Casper’s bear under his substantial weight. Kya pulls against my hold, trying to step forward. I open my mouth, but Cole’s voice drifts through the mind-link before I can say anything.

:*Alpha?*: His tone is so serious, it instantly has me on edge. Casper must sense something, too, because he shifts back to human. Fjord jumps off the other male and changes back as well.

“What’s going on?” the Jameson Alpha questions, looking over to our group of spectators.

“Cole, our younger brother. He’s reaching out via the McBearty link,” Knox answers aloud while River responds to the younger wolf.

:*Really, Cole? You’re calling me Alpha?*: he asks with a strained chuckle that I hear in surround sound with my ears and through the link.

*:Well, you are. Besides, I wasn't sure if the message might slip through onto the main pack link.:* Cole groused.

*:Nah, you're just in the McB link. What's up, lil bro?:* Knox cuts in before the conversation can go off on a tangent, which is what usually happens.

“Why can't I hear him?” Kya frowns.

“Good question. I'll look into it once we're back at the house. You struggle with links, though, right?”

She hums, neither agreeing nor disagreeing as Kota catches her and Fjord up on what we've said so far. I make a mental note to dig into that. We're mated. She should be part of the family link as well as the main pack link.

*:The enforcers want to speak with River, Lucian, and I think Fjord too. They weren't super clear on that bit, but there's a human with them, and Anan looks pissed.:* Cole's voice pulls my attention from the puzzle of Kya and the mind-links to the reason for him reaching out. Once Kota repeats this, Fjord moves over to his pile of clothes and begins pulling them back on.

*:Anan always looks pissed.:* I point out with a huff. I've been butting heads with the lion shifter. Anan is the tech guy on his team, and I've always had a hand in our pack's digital footprint. He's been scrutinising my work, and it's ruffling fur, to say the least.

*:Okay, fair. But this is different to his usual pissed. Even Isaac seems on edge. If it was just them, Gran would've invited them in to wait, but the human...:*

*:Not passing the vibe check?:* Casper asks when Cole's words trail off, leaving his statement unfinished.

*:Yeah, exactly.:*

*:Your vibe check or Gran's, Cole?:* River asks, his tone more alert and serious, indicating he's switched from older brother to Alpha.

*:Why does that matter? You know what? Never mind. Gran's. She said she doesn't want him on pack lands, let alone*

*inside her house.:*

*:Isaac and Anan are at your place? They know we don't live there.:* River shares a frown with me as he sends the message to Cole. My mountain lion's hackles rise, and he begins pacing in my mind.

*:Another reason the human isn't passing the vibe checks. The guys he's supposedly working with are withholding intel. Honestly, Riv, I think you should get back here asap, this guy's impatience is next level.:* Cole sounds distracted, which has all six of us who can hear him tense even more. Kya slips from my grip, her grey eyes wide as they ping-pong across all of our faces.

*:Okay, the three of us will head back now.:* River reassures his brother before repeating his words aloud.

*:Cool, but can you hurry? I'm not sure Gran's patience will last much longer with this goof.:*

*:Yeah, I'll drive us back.:* I answer, and the link falls silent until Cole sends a 'good luck' to River. Casper snorts as I roll my eyes. They act like I'm as much of a speed freak as Kota, which is ridiculous. The snow leopard has two speeds. Stop and go. I'm nowhere near that level, but I will get us to Gran's house—as I prefer to think of it now—sooner than legally possible.

River and Fjord have been chatting quietly while the tiger shifter ties his boots but calls Kya over before he finishes.

“Hey, Petal, there was a human with the enforcers at the diner when I picked you up. Think it's the same one?”

She makes her way over to them, and once the three are engrossed in their conversation, I move over to Kota and Casper.

“You'll need to distract her. She'll want to come back with us, but if Isaac and Anan are deliberately misleading this human...” I keep my voice low, not wanting Kya to overhear.

“You think the human is interested in Kya?” Kota asks, looking up at me sharply.

“Maybe? I don’t know. We got free of the Jamesons, and then enforcers show up and haven’t left. The wording Isaac used for the challenge on Hogmanay makes me wonder if they wanted Kya to do multiple shifts? There’s more going on than we know. The Council shouldn’t be *this* interested in our pack or our mate.”

“Don’t worry, we can distract her. Naked in a secluded area with our mate, you’ll probably have to send a search party out to retrieve us.” Casper grins.



## KYA

“You need a distraction,” Kota murmurs into my ear as I watch River, Fjord, and Lucian race up the hill back towards the cabin and their car.

“You have something in mind there, Ounce?” Knox queries, moving to my other side, caging me between his and Kota’s bodies.

“Casper did say he wanted an invite to the next party. What about you, Axel? Want to join us in preoccupying our mate’s mind?” The snow leopard’s words are a seductive purr that makes my thighs clench involuntarily.

“Is that something you like the sound of, Little Minx? Do you want to relive our claiming but with additional players?” Axel rests a finger under my chin, tilting my head back to look up at him as he questions me.

*Holy hell, did they plan this?* Of course not. It was my idea to come out here. Unless they plotted in the car while I rode with Kota on his bike?

My eyes glance between the four of them. Their gazes burn with lust and desire. My tongue darts out to lick my lips, and they each track the motion, soft, satisfied growls rising from their chests as I nod.

“I do... but—”

“We’ll give you a head start. If you evade us, we’ll head back so you can be nosey and infuriate River and Lucian with your need to interfere.” I open my mouth to argue, even though Kota has a point, but he places a silencing finger over my lips and continues. “If we catch you, we’ll distract you how we see fit. Pleasure you until you forget your own name, much less what’s happening with the pack.”

“What do you say, Firebug? All of our animals are close to the surface. You up for a little primal play? Let go of society’s standards and give in to your base instincts?” Knox asks.

I swallow, my throat suddenly dry as all the moisture in my body seems to migrate to between my legs.

“We need words, Kya,” Axel says as he and Casper step closer. All four of them surround me. The only space free from their bodies is at my back, where the entrance to the gauntlet waits.

“How much of a head start?” I ask, my voice sounding like someone else, the need and lust turning it husky.

“Oh, now, where’s the fun in telling you that?” Casper’s face lights up with his mischievous smirk. “Is that a yes though?”

“Yes,” I nod, tilting my head to look each of them over. Casper’s nakedness makes the effects of my words obvious, but I can also see the others’ cocks hardening as my consent registers.

“Well, then, Chibi Girl. You should probably start running,” Kota whispers before nipping the tip of my ear between his teeth.

As soon as he releases me, I turn and sprint towards the treeline, calling over my shoulder, “Safe word’s octopus schlong!”

Their surprised laughter catches on the wind and is swept away as my bare feet pound against the worn bark and decomposing leaves. I’m incredibly grateful Kota suggested running the hill sprints barefoot, as it means I don’t need to pause to remove them. I unhook my sports bra as I run, casting

it aside into the forest before I shift into a fox, darting ahead, weaving between trees and attempting to lay a false trail. Here's hoping I have something left to wear at the old cabin.

Not even thirty seconds pass before the howl of a wolf sounds, and instinctively I know they're hunting me. Adrenaline zips through my body, my hackles rising with anticipation, despite this being something I want.

Yeah, I might *want* to lose, but I'm not going to make it easy for them to catch me.

Spotting a fallen tree—possibly the same fallen tree Axel claimed me on—I scramble under it, hunching as small as I can and listen. If I switch forms, they'll hear my bones break, and I won't risk getting caught so soon.

All is quiet, minus the typical ambient sounds of the forest and my racing heart. The pounding is abnormally loud in my ears. Slowing my breaths, I focus on my surroundings. I may not have lived here for a few months, but I know this woodland. I lived here for years, cultivated the gauntlet and ran it every morning. Even if the guys are in super stealthy sleuth mode, completely tapping into their predatory hunter side, the other residents would react to them.

Poking my nose out from my hiding spot after a minute or so, I sniff the air, checking for any scents. The direction of the wind puts me at a disadvantage, but I refuse to be a sitting duck. I won't just wait for them to find me.

My paws pad across the damp leaves, and I make my way towards the cave tunnels. The bird song ceases as a twig snaps behind me. My ears swivel, my heart rate picks up, and I bolt, narrowly evading the pouncing snow leopard behind me. A snarl rips through the air as I evade my hunter. My moment of smug confidence is cut short as a howl to my left answers Kota's snarl, and I jerk to the right, switching directions. Racing through the trees, my lithe form weaves and darts through gaps too narrow for the snow leopard and bears—wherever they are—to follow. Abandoning the pretence of stealth, they give chase, barrelling after me. Branches snap as

they charge through the brush and shrubs, not slowing when thorns catch in their fur.

Another howl calls out, and from my peripheral, I see Knox's wolf keeping pace with me to my left. He alters his path, no longer running parallel and instead hurtling directly towards me.

No. Despite the growing desire and aching neediness, I'm not ready for them to catch me yet. I have the advantage; I know the landscape. The only one who could possibly anticipate my plan is Axel. Still, even then, he has a few months of knowledge versus my years' worth.

Switching direction once more, I dart ahead only to draw up short when a creamy white bear bursts out from a blueberry bush.

*They fucking herded me! You overconfident, idiot, Kya.*

Skidding to a halt, I turn, slipping through the gap between Knox and Casper before they can close it. Elation surges through me at my narrow escape. Circling back around, I run as fast as I can towards the gauntlet start and the base of the hill. They can 'catch' me at the cabin, where we can make use of my old bed.

My plans and satisfaction with my evasion skills are short-lived as I'm tackled and knocked to the forest floor. A warm, heavy body presses me down, and the all too familiar sound of breaking bones fills the suddenly silent woods.

"Shift back." Kota's voice oozes his alpha command. My omega whimpers in response. "*Now, Kya.*"

My shift is seamless, and as soon as I'm back in my human form, Kota grinds his hips against my arse.



## CHAPTER 27

# KYA



“Mine,” Kota purrs into my ear, then nips at it like he did before I started running from them. The ambient sounds of the forest fade away as my mate’s presence consumes me.

As I try to wriggle out from under him, my chest heaves with each breath. One arm wraps fully around my waist, holding my back flush against the corded muscles of his chest. Kota’s hot breath feathers across my neck right before he scrapes his teeth along my skin and bites down on my nape where his claiming mark is. Without warning, he flips me over. My heart rate spikes as my naked back hits the forest floor, and I look up into his obsidian eyes.

Kota’s hands push against my shoulders, holding me in place as his knee parts my thighs, spreading them open for him. I buck against him. Not entirely playing a role. I really wasn’t ready to be captured. Once he positions himself between my legs, Kota slides his torso down the length of my body. Releasing his grip on one shoulder, he pushes his arm under my knee, resting his hand just above my hip. The pressure keeps me still beneath him as he moves his other hand and rubs his nose across my mound, inhaling deeply.

The warmth of his breath tickles my sensitive flesh in contrast to the chilled day and has me arching into him. His tongue darts out, licking my seam. The purr in his chest grows in intensity as he tastes me. Crawling forward on his knees, he lifts me up until only my head and shoulders are still touching the ground.

The bruising grip of his fingers kneading into my skin shouldn't feel so good, but it does. His teeth brush against my clit before he pulls the bundle of nerves into his mouth, sucking hard and drawing gasping cries from my throat. My vision blurs at the edges as he devours me.

The air around us fills with growling moans and panting. The sound of breaking bones suddenly accompanies my cries of his name as the first orgasm washes over me.

Blinking my eyes open, I gaze up in time to see Knox wind his fist in Kota's hair, pulling the other man's head back for an all-consuming kiss. Knox's tongue darts out, licking the evidence of my arousal and climax from Kota's face.

The wolf shifter's growling hum of pleasure joins the purr still resonating from Kota. While they're lost in their kiss, Casper appears, standing over my head, fisting his cock and pumping it slowly as his eyes trail over my body.

Reaching over me, he grabs my calves from Kota's shoulders, and the world flips. Branches and bracken graze my skin as Casper switches my position so I'm on my hands and knees. Dragging open-mouthed kisses up my spine, one large palm alternates between my breasts, rolling and pinching each nipple. The blunt tip of his cock brushes through my folds, making my entire body jerk as it taps my sensitive clit.

"Oh, gods," I whimper as he lines up and slams into me. There is nothing slow or sensual about the way Casper takes me. His hips snap back and forth, the sound of flesh hitting flesh distracting me from Knox and Kota.

A small coherent part of my brain realises they're probably using the mind-link to orchestrate their plans and desires. It's a very quiet part, and it's soon silenced when Casper's palm splays open over my chest and pulls me upright and against him.

Casper spreads his legs, adjusting them for the new position and our height difference, never once stopping his thrusts. Kota crawls forward, sinking low onto the forest floor, returning to his exquisite brand of torture. A husky groan

leaves Casper's lips as Kota's tongue laps at where we're joined.

Twisting my head back, I look for Knox. It doesn't take long to see him next to Casper, feeding the bear shifter his cock. My inner walls clench at the sight, pulling a muffled moan from Casper's occupied throat. He looks at me from the corner of one eye as Knox places one hand into Casper's white hair, gripping it and taking control of the blow job. The wolf shifter's lips twitch as he looks down at me. I have no doubt that my cheeks are flushed and pupils dilated with arousal thanks to the sensations and the ministrations from two of my mates while watching another take his pleasure.

Casper's hips slow as he adjusts to match Knox's speed and pace. Kota's focus never wavers as he continues to lick, suck, and nip at me. In the back of my mind, I wonder where Axel is, but the thought is pushed aside as my mates pull my body closer and closer to the edge of nirvana.

My vision erupts with stars, with one final teeth-scraping suck on my clit from Kota. Casper pulls out with a grunt, pushing me forward onto my hands and knees as hot, wet bursts of cum land across my arse and lower back.

Blinking to refocus my eyes, I come face to face with Kota's cock. He grips the base of his length, tapping the tip against my lips until I open my mouth. Hands run up my thighs and over the cheeks of my arse, pulling them open. Fingers from another one of my mates swirls through the cum, moving it to my back hole. I roll my tongue around Kota's hard shaft as either Knox or Casper pushes a single digit into me.

Kota runs his fingers through my hair, gripping my scalp and taking control of the rhythm. From behind, one of my mates spreads my legs wide enough that he can move between them.

So many sensations wrap around me. Kota using my mouth, Casper and Knox behind me, one stretching my arse, readying me for a cock. The other moving beneath me, gripping my hips with sticky fingers before driving his hips up

and impaling me on his thick, hard length. Looking down, I make out the tattooed torso of Knox beneath me. He pushes up onto his elbows, bucking his hips, causing me to grab hold of Kota's so as not to lose my balance.

Kota hits the back of my throat, and I swallow around him. The hand in my hair tightens its grip, and the sound that echoes from his throat has every nerve in my body igniting with heightened desire.

"Fuck, that's hot," Casper whispers huskily from behind me. "I wish I had my phone. Fuck me." His fingers continue working to stretch me as he speaks. A soft whimper leaves me when Casper removes his hand. Though, with the sounds of pleasure emanating from Kota and Knox, I'm not sure anyone hears me.

The absence of that stretch is a momentary loss, and within seconds, something thicker and harder is pushing into me. The ecstasy of my mates filling me completely consumes me. Without uttering a single word, they each adjust their thrusts as though they've been ravaging women together for years.

Knox swirls his hips, grinding against my clit, and I scream another release around Kota's dick. He buries himself to the back of my throat as he comes, and I suck down every last drop as his orgasm rips through him.

Knox and Casper join us moments later. The wolf shifter falls back against the forest floor. Kota drops a sweet kiss on my lips before crawling off of Knox and collapsing next to him. Casper pulls out and kisses my shoulder with his mating bite.

"Holy hell, that was... that was..." I gasp, trying to catch my breath.

"Not over yet, Little Minx," Axel growls as he drops a bag by one of the trees and stalks towards me. I'm scooped up into his arms, my legs automatically wrapping themselves around his waist. Releasing me with one hand, he guides his length to my dripping entrance and slams in to the hilt as my back hits the rough bark of a tree.

I lose track of time as I'm passed from mate to mate, sometimes one-on-one, sometimes shared. Teeth scrape, nip, and bite my skin. Nails drag across my flesh, and I claw at my mates as we let go of our humanity and indulge in the primal, satisfying need to claim one another. Until I'm nothing more than a sticky rag doll.

My eyelids are heavy with sleep, my body more sated than it has ever been. I snuggle in closer to Axel and Casper, enjoying the heat their large muscular bodies exude.

"Cold?" Axel's rumbly, growly voice has my core clenching again like the greedy, needy bitch I am. Casper's nose twitches, and he looks down at me with the softest expression yet.

"Not tired you out, Älskling? We'll have to do better."

"This hungry for our cocks and not in heat?" Knox looks down at my mini mate-pile. "How the hell did you survive her heat, Casper?"

"Lots of snacks and being taken over by the rut. But, *fuck*, it was worth it."

A laugh slips free at the white-haired male's words, and I gently shove his shoulder.

"Conserve your strength and stamina, guys. I don't think the next one is far off now. I'll check the calendar once we're home—or we find our phones," I say, looking around us as if the devices will magically appear.

"Phones are in the bag I brought with me. Along with water and some granola bars. I also grabbed a blanket from the cabin." Axel says all this with his face nuzzled into the side of my neck. He nips the skin, then helps me sit up. "Come on, Little Minx. Let's get you hydrated and fed. I don't want you to crash, so let's get you some suitable aftercare."

"I am thirsty," I reply, smiling up at him. My mates' soft chuckles fill the air, and Kota pulls the bag over. He and Knox join our naked huddle and hand out water bottles and granola bars, making sure I get mine first.

“I don’t think my limbs have ever been this sticky. You all quite literally coated me in pleasure.”

“Oh, fucking hell, I did *not* need to hear that!” The sound of my brother’s voice has me jerking upright. Ryder has his back turned to our forest huddle while Cole stares up into the trees above us.

“What are you guys doing here?” Knox asks, getting to his feet.

“What happened with the enforcers? Is everyone all right?” I ask, my earlier worries flooding back as my eyes frantically look over the two teenagers.

“Fine. River and Fjord were taking them on a tour, so you know that will take hours,” Cole answers, barely glancing in my direction. Kota drapes a blanket over my shoulders to cover me.

“That scout guy, Tony, turned up at the house. He’s really agitated. Gran thinks he needs an omega’s calming, so she sent us to come find Kya,” Ryder continues, still facing away. “You all stink of sex, though. No way you can meet him without showering.”

“And you know what sex smells like?” As soon as the question leaves my lips, I regret it. “You know what, pretend I never asked that. Let’s just head up to the cabin. A quick shower, and hopefully, I still have some clothes there,” I mutter, raising a hand towards Knox so he can pull me to my feet.

“We’ll wait in the car with Brooks,” Ryder says before heading back down the trail towards the cabin.

“Why’d he stay in the car?” Casper asks with a suppressed laugh.

“‘Cause he was smart enough to figure out what we’d likely be walking in on.” Cole shudders.

“Be glad you didn’t get here ten minutes earlier!” Knox shouts after the two retreating teens. He and Casper both burst out laughing. Part of me wants to be embarrassed, but mostly

I'm just glad they didn't turn up in time to see my mates in action. Talk about scarring my brother and brother-in-law.

Knox pulls me into his arms, dropping a kiss on my temple.

“So will you want company in that shower? Conserve water and save time by bathing together. Seems like a smart decision, right?”

I can't help but laugh as he waggles his eyebrows at me.

“Normally, I would be up for that, and all that comes with it. As it is, I'm probably walking funny, and if Tony's animal is that agitated, I should get back sooner rather than later.”

He gives a dramatic sigh, pouting out his bottom lip, which is equal parts adorable and ridiculous.

“Come on, goofball. Let's go de-stickify me. No hanky-panky though.” I point a finger up, barely missing booping his nose.

“I'll be nothing but a gentleman.” He grins as we begin the walk back to my old cabin.

We're maybe a little later at getting back to meet with Tony, but it was worth it.



## CHAPTER 28

# BROOKS



“Are they on their way?” I ask Cole in a low voice as he joins Ryder and me on the porch.

“Yeah, Luc’s driving, so it won’t be long. Maybe five minutes.”

“Didn’t they go to our old cabin?” Ryder questions with a frown.

“Yeah, I thought they were going to run the gauntlet? I swear that’s what Kya said. Did they change their minds?” Our old house is a good fifteen-minute drive without traffic.

Cole shakes his head, a small smile making the corner of his lips twitch. “Nope, no change. Luc just doesn’t believe in speed limits. He’s not as bad as Kota, but...” He trails off with a shrug. Before we can start a new conversation, raised voices from the five males congregating on the path leading to the house draw our attention.

“I have every right to be here. I’m assigned to this team the same as the rest of you.”

“Yes, Schmidt, we know. However, not every non-human is comfortable with humans being in their space. These are pack lands. They’re a sacred haven of sorts; you can’t just demand entrance,” Isaac explains, sounding tired and exasperated.

I don’t blame him. I’ve lost count of how many times the enforcers have tried to get Schmidt to understand his presence isn’t helping matters.

The McBeartys' SUV speeds around the bend, pulling to a sharp stop half a foot from where the human and Council enforcers are standing.

"What's going on?" River asks as soon as he's out of the vehicle. Lucian climbs out from the driver's side, eyes scanning the group of enforcers and narrowing when he reaches Schmidt. Fjord is the last to exit the car, and he looks a little pale.

"Guess the new Alpha isn't a fan of Luc's driving skills," Cole mutters under his breath so only Ryder and I can hear him.

Isaac casts a pointed look at Schmidt before approaching my sister's mates. I doubt the human will pay any attention to it though.

"River, Lucian." He gives them both a nod, then turns to Fjord. "You must be the Jameson Alpha. I'm Isaac. Behind me is my team; you met Anan at the diner, I believe. The Council asked us to oversee the merge between your packs in light of the false allegations made regarding the omega's welfare."

"Yup, that's me. You can just call me Fjord though." His dark eyes look past Isaac, ignoring Schmidt and land on me. "Hey, boys, you all okay?"

"Yeah, all good. Gran's inside, but she said, and I quote, '*donnae let that wee bastard into my house, or yer'll be eating stuffed courgette morning, noon, and night.*' So not sure where you want to take this party."

"Isn't this the Alpha house? Why would you listen to your *grandmother* about who can enter your own home?" Schmidt sneers with apparent disdain.

"You think you can come on to our lands and insult the woman who raised us?" River takes a menacing step forward while Lucian's teeth pull back as he snarls.

The door behind me opens and closes with a bang. Gran pushes between my brother and Cole, arms crossed over her chest.

“Ach, I told yer, pal. Manners cost nothing. Yer be wanting something from my lads, yer going the wrong way about getting it. And I’ll tell yer tha’ fer free.” I never thought I’d see the kindly old shifter take such an instant dislike to someone. As soon as Schmidt turned up at our door, it was like her wolf’s hackles rose up.

“This is ridiculous. We’re government officials. We’re not the boogeyman!” Schmidt throws his hands in the air, his cheeks flushed with annoyance. I really don’t think he’s used to not getting his own way.

“Och, we know that! Yer look nothin’ like Darryl,” Gran sasses, and I fight to keep my face straight when the human whirls around to gape at her. His mouth opens and closes as his brain tries to process Gran’s words.

“The boogeyman is real?” he finally gasps out.

Fjord and Lucian look as though they’ve swallowed their tongues, trying to contain their laughter. Anan has a hand over his mouth. Isaac looks pained, and the other two enforcers have turned to face away from the group, their shoulders shaking.

Gran blinks down at Schmidt. “No! Yer daft pillock. O’ course, there’s no such thing as a boogeyman! Whoe’r raised you deserves a blasted sainthood!” She continues muttering under her breath before inhaling sharply and relaxing her shoulders. Gran tilts her head, looking directly at River. “This fool isnae entering my house, yer ken?”

“Yes, Gran. We’re fine out here. I doubt this will take long, anyway.”

She huffs out a breath and turns to Cole, Ryder, and me. “In yer go, boys. Yer can help me with the shortbread I jus’ made.”

“Why?” Cole asks warily as she herds us in through the front door.

“Yer really questioning yer Gran giving yer baked goods?”

“Before dinner? Yeah, Gran. I am. ‘Cause what happened to ‘don’t ruin yer appetite and all that stuff?’ he presses as we

file into the kitchen and see every inch of counter space is filled with cooling shortbread.

“Might’ve made a tad more than I planned ‘sall.” She pats my cheek affectionately as she bypasses us, heading to the fridge. “Now, what will ya have ta drink with yer snack?”



## FJORD

Schmidt stares slacked-jawed after the McBearty’s Gran as she ushers the three teens back inside the house. My eyes water from the effort of holding in my laughter, and I make a mental note to never get on that woman’s bad side.

“Who’s Darryl?” I ask Lucian and River, trying to disguise the mirth in my voice with a cough. River finally cracks a smile before composing himself.

“He’s a Tasmanian devil shifter. Owns an antiques store over on Bond Street.”

Lucian snorts and clarifies. “He’s always decked out in a three-piece suit, monocle, and even has one of those fancy Victorian walking canes.”

A choking noise slips out of one of the enforcers, I’m not sure which one, but the sound has the human composing himself. He tugs the cuffs of his button-up shirt and suit jacket down before fiddling with the knot of his tie.

“Well,” he sniffs, turning to face River, Lucian, and me once more. “Where is the omega? I’d like to get a visual to confirm she’s not under any duress.”

“She’s not on pack lands,” River responds without a single inflection.

I’ve barely contained my mirth at Gran’s boogeyman comments, and my future co-Alpha and bond-brother is as calm as can be.

“Why not? Where is she?”

“Not sure that’s any of your concern,” I say, narrowing my eyes at the smaller man. “If you were concerned that she’s been held here against her will or was ‘under any duress’, surely knowing she has the freedom to come and go as she pleases would be a good thing?”

“Why would *you* need to check, anyway?” Lucian asks, his thumb moving across his fingers one by one and cracking the knuckles. “You’re human. You have no authority here.”

“I am on secondment to Isaac’s team—”

“We already cleared the omega situation, Schmidt. We’ve been over this,” Anan growls.

“I’ve been asked for my own report on the matter,” Schmidt replies with a pretentious tone and a dismissive wave of his hand.

“By who?” Isaac questions, “Why would any of your superiors need a report on that and not on the merger?”

“Obviously, I’m to report on both. Just because we’re human doesn’t mean we fail to understand the importance of an omega to a pack.”

“Oh yeah? Explain it to me then.” I keep my gaze locked on the only person here who is putting my tiger on edge. My nostrils flare as I try to inhale his scent, but the nuances get lost amongst the other shifters and our environment.

His eyes widen slightly, but he schools his expression quickly. Clearing his throat with a small cough, he glances at his ‘team,’ none of whom appear eager to step in on his behalf.

“Omegas are the balance. Without them, shifters, specifically those of alpha designation, run the risk of being overcome by their more animalistic natures. Your beasts would take over rather than your humanity.”

Well, fuck. That’s pretty accurate. Some of the stronger betas are at risk, too, but not to the same degree. I don’t praise his knowledge, though. Instead, I murmur, “Close enough,” and look toward Isaac.

“Did you need us for anything?”

“Or can we get back to our mate?” River adds his question after mine.

“Actually, yeah, since you three are here, it’d be good to clarify how the pack merge is going and what your next steps are.” The lead enforcer from the Council sounds tired. Can’t say I blame him if he’s been having to deal with Schmidt this whole time.

We go back and forth, answering various questions and explaining some of the reasons behind our plans to trim numbers. No way I’m going into the gritty details. The Council might already know about the things Henrick ordered and participated in, but Schmidt? Nope. I refuse to give him anything extra than I absolutely have to.

River and Lucian seem to have the same idea, given how clipped and short they are, too.

“So these lands will be the permanent residence once the merge is complete?” Schmidt pipes up after having been quiet for the majority of Isaac and Anan’s questions.

“Yes,” I answer without a second thought. River and I hadn’t discussed that yet, but it makes the most logical sense. They already have homes built, and Kya has her nest here.

“We have space for more homes to be built. We just need to finalise the numbers.” River waves a hand to the side of his Gran’s house. “Would you like to see the proposed sites?”

Schmidt’s eyes light up with far more interest than a tour of vacant land should warrant. Lucian excuses himself, claiming he has a shift at the gym in town that the pack owns. I’m pretty sure River has given him a job, though. It’s what I’d do, have my tech guy look into Schmidt.

Not being in a pack link with them is more frustrating and isolating than I expected. The merge can’t be completed fast enough in that sense.

Having Kya and her brother sit in on the pack interviews coming up this week, though is something I’m in no rush to experience.

I'm quiet as I follow River around his lands. Hanging back, I allow more and more distance to grow between myself and the group. Call me overly suspicious or paranoid, but there's something about Schmidt that I don't trust. My gut and my tiger are telling me he's up to something. There's a reason for that. My conscious mind hasn't processed it yet, but my subconscious has. I just need to wait. Either he'll do something more obvious, or my brain will catch up with itself.

Fifteen minutes later, Schmidt starts to slow his pace before stopping next to one of the pack houses. He leans against the wall, removes his shoe and makes a show of removing something from inside.

River's eyes meet mine briefly, and I give a nod before he looks away, trusting me to handle whatever comes next. The wolf shifter leads the enforcers around the back of the house, heading back towards the clearing they use for social gatherings.

Schmidt replaces his shoe and taps a finger on the window next to him. Clearly, whatever his role is with the human government, it doesn't involve espionage. The man would make an awful spy.

The door opens, and a tall, lithe blonde female walks out. She lifts her nose and inhales. Smart, not blindly trusting Schmidt that the coast is clear. I slink back into the shadows of the building and trees to my left, angling my body so I can still see the human male.

Pulling out my phone, I open the camera, flicking to video and zooming in as much as possible without the image becoming so pixelated they'd be unrecognisable. I don't know every shifter in River's pack yet, but he'll know who Schmidt met with, and we can add them to our list of interviews.

Hitting record as Blondie slips around to meet Schmidt, I squint as she hands something to him. I can't quite make it out at this distance. Whatever it is, Schmidt pockets it instantly, then pulls a manila folder from under his jacket.

*What the fuck?*



Blondie grabs the file, looks over her shoulder once, and then re-enters her house. I stop the recording and shove my phone into my back pocket before adopting a brisk pace and approaching Schmidt.

“Hey, everything okay? Where’s River and the enforcers?”

The man doesn’t so much as flinch, and I fight to keep my expression neutral. Perhaps I underestimated his subterfuge skills, after all.

“They’re not far. I had a stone in my shoe. Downside of being around all this nature,” he remarks, waving first at his shoe and then at the surrounding forest.

“Ah, so you’re a city guy,” I observe, falling into step beside him as we round Blondie’s house and spot the group a short distance ahead.

“Something like that. I grew up more on the boundary. Five minutes in one direction was a metropolis and in the other, fields and farmland. Not somewhere many shifters end up, not quite enough space for them to stretch their legs. Or so I’d imagine.” He adds the last sentence hastily before changing the subject. “You don’t live on these lands yet, do you?”

“No. Not yet. Once the merge is complete, I’ll move along with the rest of my pack,” I answer as we rejoin River and Isaac’s team in the social clearing.

“I don’t envy you guys having to do that ceremony. Mergers are complex and exhausting enough, and then you have to bite the members in... it’s gonna take you all night,” one enforcer mutters as he looks around the clearing.

“It’ll be a long day—” River starts.

“And night,” I add.

“Hmm, yes, and night. It’s the logical thing to do though. We’re fated to the same mate, and she can’t be a member—or Omega—to two packs.” River turns to address Isaac. “Anything else you need from us today?”

“Nope. Nothing else from us,” the lead enforcer answers. “Come on, Schmidt, let’s get you back to your car and leave the Alphas to enjoy the rest of the day. I think we’ve taken up enough of their time with this impromptu tour.”

We say goodbye and watch as the five males walk away. Once they’re out of human hearing, I pull my phone from my pocket.

“Can you tell me who this is?” I say, hitting play on the video of Schmidt and Blondie.

A growl rises from River’s chest, and his eyes flash to those of his wolf.

“Vanessa.”

## CHAPTER 29

# KYA



“Thank you, Omega.”

I smile as Tony, one of the pack scouts, leaves River’s office. Even though he’s a beta shifter, his coyote’s been getting increasingly agitated, likely from all the recent changes. My omega side is happy that we can help soothe our new pack members. Bring them a sense of calm and peace, but I feel completely unqualified. This role is more akin to a human therapist, and people need degrees and shit to do that.

*I paint nudes for a living. Even though I love my job and feel inordinately lucky that my art has enough of a following that it consistently put food on the table. Life as a pack Omega is so far outside my comfort zone I almost want to run.*

Twisting in the desk chair, I turn to face the computer. As I tap my fingers next to the keyboard, the cursor blinks at me from the search bar.

“Suck it up, Kya. You’re here. You’re not going anywhere. This is your new reality, so adjust.” My little muttered pep talk doesn’t help as much as I’d have liked. Rolling my neck, I pull the chair in closer, tucking my feet beneath me and type in the words to find online classes.

I can’t hide from who I am anymore, so I need to get the tools to do my new job. Which means starting with a basic understanding of psychology for both humans and animals.

The door bursts open as I’m scrolling the list of entry requirements for a distance learning degree. Expecting it to be

one of my mates, I don't look up until I hear the last voice I expected.

"What *are* you?" Vanessa demands. The taller blonde woman stands in front of the desk, one fist on her hip as she glares at me through narrowed eyes. Her perfectly red lips are twisted with a sneer, and a manila folder held in her other hand taps against her thigh.

"I'm an omega," I reply, turning the monitor off and lowering my feet to the floor. No way I trust Vanessa enough to not be on guard, poised to defend myself should I need to.

"Are you, though? Are you even a shifter?"

"I'm sorry, *what?* Am I a shifter? Did you miss the part where I turned into a motherfucking leopard when you challenged me? A leopard that beat your arse, I might add."

"You didn't beat me! The enforcer called a halt. I didn't submit. I will *never* submit to an *omega*."

"*O-kay*. You can tell yourself that until you're blue in the face, Vanessa, but you did submit."

"You're not a shifter. I don't know what you are, but I *know* you're not one of us. However you've wormed your way into the Alpha's bed, once he learns the truth, he'll discard you. All of them will. No alpha wants a liar and non-shifter for a mate. They'll reject you—"

"They won't. Wanna know why?" Placing my palms flat on the surface of River's desk, I push up until I'm standing and leaning forward. The move would probably be more impressive and intimidating if I wasn't so much shorter than the hyena, but I can't change my height.

"Why?" she huffs out with a condescending tone.

"Because I *am* a shifter, I *am* an omega, and I *am* their fated mate."

With a screech, she throws the manila folder down onto the desk. I barely glance at the pages that flutter out until she stabs her finger at them.

“Leopard. Wolf. Chipmunk. We have proof, and you *will* be exposed.” Vanessa lifts her finger from the still images and pokes me in the chest. “I will find out how you’ve bewitched them, whether you used your vampire friend to compel the McBeartys or you used that fae to mess with them. I will save them from you.”

“*Save* us? Who the fuck said we needed to be saved?” Vanessa whirls around at Fjord’s rumbling voice from the open doorway where he’s standing with River. The Jameson Alpha turns his head, making a show of looking River over. “You don’t look like you’re in distress or need to be rescued from your mate. So,” he returns his gaze to Vanessa, one eyebrow quirked up. “What am I missing?”

“Yes, Vanessa, what is it you’d be saving us from? Fjord hasn’t completed the mate bond yet. Why not give him your pitch?” River’s eyes never leave the other woman, and I’m not even remotely upset about it. If I thought his eyes had been hard and cold when he challenged Flynn all those weeks ago, then I have no words to describe the look he’s levelling on Vanessa.

The hyena shifter squares her shoulders, lifting her head. Begrudgingly, I give her props because I’m not sure I’d be able to hold myself with that much confidence if River’s glare was focused on me.

“She’s not a shifter. A pack Alpha should have a stable and strong mate. Someone who can aid and benefit the pack as a whole. Eventually, whatever magic or compulsion she has you under will wear off, and you’ll be alone.”

“Why would we be alone?” Fjord asks, taking one step into the room.

“Whatever is beguiling you doesn’t affect the whole pack. The betas will leave, one by one, family by family. She’s not a true omega. She can’t ease the alpha beasts inside of you all. It’s only a matter of time before you turn feral—”

Fjord waves a hand, cutting her off as he takes another step into the room.

“If Kya isn’t an omega, all of that would still happen, wouldn’t it? Unless you’re secretly an omega? Are you?” He leans down and gives an exaggerated sniff before tutting. “No, just another beta.”

“I might be a beta, but there’s nothing *just* about me.”

Part of me wants to jump in and redirect the conversation. I can handle women like Vanessa, but it’s also nice to let someone else handle shit. It’s probably the most significant adjustment for me, learning that I can share burdens with my mates. It’s not me against the world with my kid brothers anymore.

“Why should alphas like you and the McBeartys settle for sharing one inadequate female? There’s no way *she* can satisfy River’s appetite, let alone Lucian’s.” Vanessa lifts her hand, trailing her fingers up Fjord’s chest. Rage begins to boil inside me. I want to snatch her hand away and smash her face into the desk.

My nostrils flare, but I don’t move from my spot, choosing instead to watch how my mate and my fated will respond.

Fjord bats her wrist, knocking her hand away from him. Taking a step back, he looks over his shoulder at River, who steps into the office finally and slowly stalks towards Vanessa. Her red lips pull into a self-satisfied smirk, and she casts a glance at me, her eyes filled with a triumphant gleam.

“Kya handled more of my *appetite* as a one-night stand back in May than you ever managed. You think you know what I like? What Lucian likes? If any of the females in the pack had remotely scratched the surface of what we wanted, what we needed, we wouldn’t have gone to specialist clubs.”

Hearing about River and Lucian’s past exploits is not high on my list for today or ever. I tune out their voices as they continue their... discussion? It’s not really an argument, but it’s not a simple conversation either. Discussion feels like it fits.

With a mental shrug, I look down at the desk and the contents of Vanessa’s folder.

My brows pucker together as I frown. Reaching across, I drag the images closer to me, studying them with renewed interest.

There are several photographs that were clearly taken as stills from video footage. I trace my fingers across Casper's chained form in the first four. These were taken from our time as *guests* of the Jameson pack under Henrick's leadership. A chipmunk falling from the ventilation system, landing on Casper's lap and then shifting into me. My arm, thankfully, blocks my nakedness from the camera.

The next set is again from our time with the Jamesons. This time, it's the chaos of the fight after Connor died and Flynn went feral. The focus of the photographs, however, is, once again, me. Each shot shows the process from me pulling Axel's t-shirt off through the shifting process until a black wolf stood in my place.

Another set showed the challenge with Vanessa at Hogmanay, and again my shift was the main subject. There were fewer images in this bundle, and they were more pixelated. Still, my transformation from human to leopard was captured there for any and all to see.

"Where did you get these?" I ask, pushing the sheets back to the side of the desk closest to them all, cutting off River as he and Vanessa continue their back-and-forth diatribe.

"What are they?" Fjord's eyes flick between the desk and Vanessa briefly before he walks over to look at the file's contents.

Vanessa sneers at me as Fjord picks up the first bundle of images. His lips thin as he flicks through them before handing them to River and stepping in front of Vanessa.

"You were asked a question. Answer it."

Vanessa's sneer loses some of its intensity as she jerks her head back from the tiger shifter. She rallies, though, flicking her hair over one shoulder and straightening her spine.

"Members of both packs are concerned. We don't want our Alphas corrupted by a snake."



“Snakes are reptiles. That’s outside my wheelhouse,” I snark, pushing the chair back and making my way around the desk to stand beside River. “You didn’t take those images, Vanessa, so who did?”

“How does an *omega* hold their own against a stronger designation?” she challenges brusquely, glaring at me before turning imploring eyes to River. “That’s just more proof she’s not what she claims. As soon as we shifted, she should have submitted to me. I’m more dominant than she is!”

“That’s your argument? Kya can’t be an omega because you lost a challenge?” Fjord questions with a disbelieving laugh.

“Everyone knows omegas are weak. They roll over and give in to their betters because they need us for protection.”

“You think Connor was weak?” River asks Vanessa, his tone like ice. We all have conflicted feelings around my fathers, but weak is not a word I would have used to describe either of them.

“I-I wasn’t. I didn’t mean him,” the other woman stutters, then flings an arm out, pointing directly at me. “It’s *her* fault he’s even dead! She’s ruining everything the pack had—”

“No.” The word leaves my lips quieter than I intended. My entire body feels cold and numb after her accusations, but I won’t let her stand there and say shit like that.

“No,” I repeat, louder this time and succeed in cutting off her rant. “Connor died because of Brody. He died because Henrick Jameson was twisted and bitter. I was eight the first time I was used as a tool against my fathers. My existence and presence does *not* alter what happened. You weren’t there. You don’t get to paint the narrative.”

One of River’s large hands settles on my back, and he slowly begins moving it up and down in a soothing and caressing gesture. His touch helps to ground me. My fists, that I hadn’t realised were clenched tight, relax as he continues stroking my spine. I practically melt into him, remembering again how I’m no longer alone.

We met via an incredibly unorthodox route, but I'm not sure I would have ever given him, or the others, a chance if my fathers hadn't stepped in with their crazy plan.

Just as my omega lets go of the growing anger and desire to punch the hyena shifter in her lady balls, River speaks up.

"Vanessa, I believe we had a conversation where I informed you that you were banned from this building. Originally, I planned to exile you from the pack if you didn't rein in your vitriol against my mate. In light of these," he holds up the stack of images, "And your reluctance to share how and where you got them, I can't in good conscience allow you to leave. Not until you provide us with any and all information we will need to keep Kya safe."

Vanessa's eyes widen at his words. A soft buzzing whispers through my mind, and I assume River calls for Axel and Casper as they enter the office a few moments later.

"Escort Vanessa downstairs, then come back to the house. It's already late, and I think our mate could do with a family dinner and movie night." River looks down at me, his eyes softening. "Sound good, Banphrionsa?"

I nod in response and glance at Fjord.

"If you want me there, I'm there," he answers my unspoken question, and a soft smile pulls at my lips.

"I'm *not* going downstairs! You're not locking me in a cage and leaving me there for god knows how long!" Vanessa screeches, her voice getting more and more shrill until it's almost painful to listen to. I'm beginning to wonder if she has some banshee heritage.

"Sheesh, that's, ow," Casper says, sticking a finger in his ear and wiggling it about. "Damn, Vanessa, I know we're all shifters, but that doesn't mean you need to try and turn your voice into a dog whistle."

"Kya, can you calm her hyena?" Fjord asks me as Axel and Casper approach Vanessa.

"Um, I can try, but if she's not open to it—"

“Just try, Banphrionsa, please. I can use my Alpha command on her, but I’d rather not.”

I roll my eyes at River’s words. No matter which of us uses their influence, we’re still manipulating her.

Vanessa raises an arm and slaps Casper’s hand away as he reaches for her.

“For the record, I do not like doing this. Do not expect this to be a regular occurrence.” I poke River in the chest as I speak.

“Understood.” He nods solemnly.

I study his eyes, searching them for proof of some kind that he understands how much I dislike this request. A scuffle breaks out as Vanessa tries to evade Axel and Casper. With a sigh, I turn back to look at them and push calm into the room. I try to direct it at Vanessa, but everyone takes a hit.

“Thanks, Kya.” Axel smiles sadly at me, taking hold of one of Vanessa’s arms as Casper grips the other.

“We’ll be down in the morning, Vanessa. Take tonight to think through how much you want to tell us and if it’s really worth withholding information,” River says as the two bear shifters half walk, half carry the hyena from the office.

I move back around the desk, turning the monitor screen back on, and shut down the computer.

“Think she’ll give him up?” Fjord’s question has my head jerking up to look at the two Alphas. River cants his head from side to side.

“Probably. If she doesn’t say his name first thing in the morning after spending all night down there, then we’ll send Knox down to serenade her.”

“Singing not a talent of his?” Fjord asks with a laugh.

“Nope. The singer in our group is our mate.” River turns warm eyes to me, but the compliment doesn’t distract me.

“You know who gave her those photos?”

“Yeah, Petal. I saw Schmidt give them to her earlier. Got the exchange recorded on my phone.” Fjord pulls the device from his pocket, swiping his thumb across the screen to unlock it. After finding the video, he steps closer to me so I can watch the screen.

“She gave him something. Do you know what?” I ask as it replays.

“No, but we’ll find out,” he promises as he puts the phone back in his pocket.

“Also, find out why Tony decided he had to meet with you in my office tonight,” River adds, a slight frown pulling at his brows. He rolls his shoulders back with a sigh, smoothing his expression to neutral. “You ready to head home?” He holds his arm out for me. I nod and walk over to him, tucking myself into his side, and we finally leave the office and head back home.

“So, ‘reptiles aren’t in your wheelhouse’ but chipmunks, wolves, and leopards are?” Fjord asks quietly as we walk.

“Hmm, well, yeah. Any mammal is possible, although I haven’t tried a platypus.” My musing trails off as I look at Fjord and see his brow furrowed with confusion. “Oh, uh, right, you don’t know.”

“Know what?” River queries, glancing between us.

“That I’m a therian.”

“Therian? Seriously?” Fjord stops walking and stares at me dumbfounded. “Fuck.” He runs a hand over his face and buzzed hair. “If Henrick had known that... fuck.”

“You really didn’t know?” River looks from Fjord to me, raising a single brow. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

“In my defence, to begin with it was a trust thing. Then I figured someone mentioned something, or he figured it out?” I scrunch my nose, realising how weak my excuses sound. “I kinda forgot he wasn’t here for the challenge with Vanessa, and I don’t know?” Shrugging, I step next to Fjord and rest my hand on his forearm. “I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be. I could’ve asked, I just assumed Henrick was more far gone than he’d appeared. You shifted into a wolf at the compound. The pictures of you as a chipmunk explain how you snuck out of my bathroom though.” He smiles down at me and begins walking back along the path. “I’ll just remember to ask questions when I have them, that’s all.”

As the house comes into view, I turn to look at my unclaimed mate. “I have a question.”

His eyebrow arches up, and he rolls a hand. “Can’t answer it unless you ask it, Petal.”

After poking River in the side for his soft chuckle and suppressing the urge to poke my tongue out at Fjord, I ask.

“When exactly are you moving in with us? And are you going to become a McBearty too?”

## CHAPTER 30

# FJORD



After setting the moving box down in front of the chest of drawers, I look around the recently vacated room. That wet paint smell still hangs in the air from where we touched up the walls after removing Knox's things. I'm almost impressed by the amount of stuff the wolf shifter managed to accumulate in the six months they've lived here. A small twinge of guilt surfaces again at the thought of him giving up his space for me.

The ripping of plastic pulls my gaze over to the king-sized bed where Knox is wrestling with the protective wrapping on my new Eve mattress. Kya insisted on replacing the old one, even though it wasn't *that* old. Though, as *up close and personal* as I'll likely get with all the McBeartys during Kya's heats, once she claims me, I'm not going to turn down fresh bedding. Knox is a nice guy, but he doesn't strike me as one who uses a mattress protector.

Clearing my throat to get the wolf shifter's attention, I ask, "Are you sure you're okay with this? I could take a spare room in your Gran's house. The Alpha offices are there anyway—"

"Nah, you're good," he cuts me off as he finishes removing the plastic wrapping. "I'm either in Kota's bed or Kya's most nights, anyway. And if I did sleep in here, one or both of them were with me." He shrugs before unrolling the mattress onto the bedframe, stepping back and watching as it slowly decompresses.

"It's true. I can't remember the last time he slept alone," Kota adds as he brings another box of my stuff in, setting it

down to the side of the door. Dusting his hands off on his sweats, he looks over at me. “There’s fresh coffee in the kitchen, and Kya made snacks. Wanna grab some before bringing in the last of your stuff and starting the joyous task of unpacking?”

“Sure, sounds good,” I say, the laugh on my lips petering off as Knox fires question after question at his boyfriend.

“What kind of snacks? Has anyone pissed her off recently? You’re *sure* they’re safe?”

“Sounds like a guilty conscience. What did you do, Payaso?” Kota crosses his arms over his chest as he scrutinises Knox.

“Nothing. But I didn’t do anything the last time and nearly ended up a victim. Can never be too careful when it comes to our mate’s wrath,” Knox mumbles as he walks past Kota and me.

“The pet treats?” I question, following both men from my new room.

“Yeah, though at least that time I didn’t go from her being a honey badger to a skunk. Seriously, thought she was gonna spray me.” Knox shudders as we head downstairs. Kota glances back and catches my confusion. He launches into the regaling me with the time they tried to stop Kya going to brunch with Fi and the Larouxes. When we finally enter the kitchen, I have a smile firmly in place on my lips, and the other two laugh as they finish the story.

Axel looks up as we walk in, eyes bouncing between the three of us. “Oh, are we sharing cautionary tales with Fjord now? They must like you, or they’d leave you to figure it out for yourself.”

“Here’s one for all of you,” Casper says, entering from the opposite archway. His cheeks are slightly flushed and eyes wide as he beelines for the coffeepot. “Triple check when Kya has a commission piece, or better yet, avoid her studio at all costs. Maybe we can implement a sign or a sock on the doorknob. You know, like in those college movies.”



“Get an eyeful of wrinkly ol’ dick or tits, Casper?” Knox laughs, grabbing mugs from one of the cupboards.

“If only.” The giant shivers somewhat dramatically as he takes a mug from Knox, opens another cupboard and pulls out a bottle of whiskey. “Nope, I walked in on the Laroux’s. Darius and Julian’s session.” He adds a substantial splash to his coffee before pouring in a dash of milk.

“What about their session has you so freaked out?” I ask, curious about what’s caused this reaction; I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so rattled.

“Well, they were both butt arse naked—”

“Yeah, dude, that’s a given since she paints nudes,” Knox cuts in.

“Ha. Ha,” Casper snarks back at the wolf before taking a large gulp of his spiked drink. “Being naked is one thing, but they... they were, I mean, it was—”

“Cas, spit it out,” Kota demands, looking just as perplexed as I feel.

“They were feeding—”

“On Kya?” Axel doesn’t wait for an answer before pushing away from the island, stretching to his full height and moving to the archway Casper had entered by. I straighten, stepping away from the work surface I’d been casually leaning against. Knox and Kota both look more serious and alert. Casper darts in front of us, blocking the most direct route from the kitchen to Kya’s studio.

“No, you fucking twats. No one was feeding on Kya.” He glares at us with a mixture of hurt and disgust. “You really think I’d come in *here* to get a drink if they were *feeding on our mate*?”

I deflate along with the other three, and we all mumble apologies before returning to our previous spots around the kitchen.

“Arseholes. Fucking hell, as if you think so little of me,” Casper grumbles. “Bunch of dickheads.”

“What did you see, Casper?” I ask. “Just tell us before we jump to another dumb conclusion.”

Axel rubs the back of his neck and stares into the mug in his hand. Casper sighs and levels us all with a disappointed glare, taking a swig of whiskey direct from the bottle before answering.

“Darius was feeding from Julian while also sucking that lollipop.”

Stunned silence follows Casper’s words as we all simply stare at him.

“Yeah, I said what I said,” the white-haired shifter states, waving a hand in the air. He turns his back to us, refills his coffee cup—this time without the whiskey—and returns to lean against the island.

“So moving on,” Casper states, popping a piece of a scone Kya made this morning into his mouth. “Fjord, I have a question for you.”

I blink at him, then shake my head to refocus. “Okay, shoot, what’s the question of the day?”

“When are you going to claim Kya?” Not what I was expecting. If he notices my eyebrows shooting up to my hairline, he doesn’t comment on it. “You’ve been pussyfooting around her since taking over the Alpha role with your pack, but you’re going to be living here now. You want her, she wants you, but you’re both being stubborn and standing in your own way.”

Apparently, today is the day when everything out of Casper’s mouth renders me speechless.

“Uh, Cas, weren’t you the one who was being all jealous, possessive alpha-holish about Fjord? What, two days ago?” Kota places his mug down on the island counter, then reaches across, pulling the plate of scones towards him.

“We’re gonna be one pack. So Casper isn’t wrong. Think about it. This merge would never have happened if both Kya and Fjord didn’t think they’d be accepting the mate bond,”

Axel adds, leaning against one of the fridges, sipping from his refreshed coffee mug.

“You’re gonna give me whiplash, Casper,” I finally say, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Hell, all you guys are, and that’s without adding Kya to the equation. And we all know she’s front and centre to the whole thing.” I rub my hands over my face, the dull ache of a migraine making itself known.

“Yeah, I was a bit of a prat, but that was before the endorphin release in the woods.” He grins sheepishly, then sets his cup down and runs a hand through his hair. “Look, I’m not going to stand here and say I’m not anxious or worried about adding another alpha to the group. Seven alphas is a lot of testosterone. We’ll butt heads, and there’s gonna be a steep learning curve. But I think she needs you the same as she needs each of us. You don’t underestimate her, and she’s comfortable with you.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Axel muses, scratching his jaw through his beard. “Plus, you can cook with her without needing supervision. I’m learning, but it’s still hit or miss whether the final product is actually edible.”

“The more of us that can make *something*, the better. Being able to cook will be a really useful skill when her next heat hits. I’m not sure I can go back to takeout every night,” Knox mumbles, stuffing a scone into his mouth and releasing a happy little noise at the taste.

“I don’t think it will be long either, maybe a week or so. She’s started getting antsy again. We sparred for over an hour this morning, and that was after she got back from a run with Luc.” After finishing his statement, Kota drains the last dregs of coffee from his mug.

“Yup, her heat’s definitely coming up. I love that woman, but thank fuck I’m not the only claimed mate this time,” Casper proclaims as Lucian walks in, heading towards the fridge behind Axel.

“You weren’t the only one claimed the last time, either,” the mountain lion states, lifting the leg of his grey sweats to show Kya’s claiming bite on his calf.

“Meh. Fine, you helped for the last day, happy?” Casper snarks and pokes his tongue out like a toddler.

“To answer the question of when. I don’t know.” I shrug. “Completing a mating bond right now feels, I guess, a bit rushed. I’m not saying anything against how any of you went about claiming our mate or being claimed by her. But, so many decisions have been made *for* her...” I shrug again, not sure how to articulate how I feel fully. “I’ll wait for Kya to come to me. I’m in no rush.”

Julian laughs as he enters the kitchen in a short silk robe. “You’re all so besotted. I think that woman could tie a silver chain around your balls, take you for a walk around the entire territory, and you’d still beg for another mile.”

I frown heavily at his words. I would not beg. Choosing to ignore his words, though, I ask, “What are you doing here, and where the fuck are your clothes?”

“Not going to deny it? Hmm, smart move, boys. To answer your questions though, Fjord, Darius and I had a sitting with Nulikka. He commissions a new portrait every year. We keep trying to shock her, but your mate, so far, has been unphased.”

“Yeah, we know about the sitting. Casper walked in on you and probably needs some form of therapy,” Knox says with a laugh.

“And it doesn’t explain why you’re in the kitchen instead of Kya’s studio or why you’re out of said studio without clothes,” Lucian points out, raising one brow at the interloper.

“Refreshments, of course.” The half-fae, half-vampire smirks at me as he heads directly to the cupboard with the glasses. “You’d be amazed at how thirsty one can get sitting still.”

I take my cup to the sink and give it a quick rinse before placing it into the dishwasher.

“I still have some boxes to take upstairs. Any of you guys free to give me a hand?” I ask the McBeartys, offering them an out of this situation.

“*Well*, I knew Knox and Kota had their little *tet-a-tet*. I hadn’t pegged you as one to join in like Casper and Axel do.” Julian purrs while the McBeartys all mutter agreements to help me finish moving in.

“Julian, stop bothering my mates.” Kya sighs as she walks into the kitchen. Still dressed for painting, she looks adorable in the oversized overalls as she scrunches her nose at her model. “I’m never sending you to grab me a glass of water again. You’re too easily distracted.”

Lucian cuts in before Julian can respond. “No distractions here, Bunny. Except you.” She groans at the line, rolling her eyes at the pack’s Beta. “We’re gonna go finish moving in the rest of Fjord’s stuff. Fancy a hot chocolate once we’re done?”

“That’d be great. Do we have plans for tonight? I was thinking we could maybe do a games night?” Her gaze sweeps across us all before settling on me. “Only if you want to though.”

“Sounds good. I’ve heard a fair bit about your *Mario Kart* skills. Need to see them for myself.” I grin down at her as she bounces on her feet slightly.

“Great. When you lose, you can explain why I haven’t attended any of the pack interviews yet.” She shoves her hands into her pockets, looking up at me like she has me caught in a trap.

*Nice try, my feisty mate.*

“Don’t need to wait to tell you that. The interviews I wanted your help with haven’t happened yet. I had to narrow down the list. If you’re up for it, we can start tomorrow? You still want your brother to come along?”

“Want is a strong word. I don’t *want* him anywhere near the shifters who hurt Mum. But he’ll be seventeen this year. I can’t shelter him or override him just because I think I know best.” She shrugs, her expression sad and pensive. “So many of my choices were made for me by various people; I don’t want to do that to my brothers. I’ll finish up with Julian and

Darius, then go over and chat with Ryder and Brooks. If they want to tag along to the interviews, I won't stop them."

"All right, Petal." I walk over until I'm standing inches from her. Tucking a wayward strand of her violet hair that's fallen loose of her bun behind her ear, I tell her, "I have information I need to get from them, but if any of the shifters who hurt your mum are there tomorrow? You and your brothers can call the shots."

"Thanks, Fjord."

## CHAPTER 31

# FJORD



Opening the door to one of the side buildings at the compound Henrick claimed for the pack, I'm still not convinced having Ryder here is the best idea. My wishes, though, are ultimately irrelevant. I still have so much to learn about Kya, her life and everything she's been through. That will all come with time, and once the merge is settled and life isn't so hectic, it will be easier. At least now, I'm living in the same house, and we can talk over meals and coffee. I know even less about her brothers, considering outside of a couple of dinners, we've had no real interaction.

Obviously, I heard enough rumours growing up within the Jameson pack to know that the Jensons haven't been exposed to the good side of pack life. Which is why a large part of me wants to keep them from witnessing these interviews. Kya and her brothers have seen and endured nothing but negativity and trauma at the hands of our pack. I don't want them associating River or myself with Alphas like Henrick, but I guess I can take comfort in the fact Brooks ultimately chose not to come.

Clearing my throat, I look back at Kya and her brother. Ryder might be taller than his sister, but they both look so small as they follow behind me. Maybe coming back to the compound was a bad idea... The rooms are set up almost perfectly for our needs, and the shifters I want to talk to are already here. Better for us to come here rather than bring potential threats onto McBearty land.

"Henrick set this up like a bunch of the old cop shows. He was kind of obsessed with them. Anyway, you'll be able to see



through the glass, but it looks like a mirror from the other side. No one in the main room will see or scent you,” I explain as we continue down a hall until we reach the observation room.

“How do we let you know if we recognise any of them?” Ryder asks once we’re inside, his amber-brown eyes squinting as though he could see through the interview room’s far wall to the waiting shifters.

“That’s what I want to test now.” I turn and point to Kya. “I want you to use the mate mind-link.”

“The what now?” Her eyebrows shoot up as she looks at me with incomprehension. That doesn’t make sense, but if she wants me to explain, I will.

“Mind-link, the telepath—”

“I know what a mind-link is.” Kya cuts me off with a sigh. “You know, I’m not a complete lost cause when it comes to intelligence. What did you mean by a *mate* mind-link?”

“Why’s that different?” Ryder asks, looking just as confused as his sister.

*Well, fuck a duck.*

“Your mum didn’t—no one’s explained the different links to you?” The shock is evident in my voice. They both look at each other, then back at me, shaking their heads. My jaw goes slack as my mind reels. If they don’t know this, what else don’t they know?

“No. So care to explain?” Kya asks, crossing her arms under her breasts, trying to disguise her discomfort, but her feet shuffling as she fidgets gives her away.

When I’d thought about what could happen today—or any day with Kya—this was not a conversation I expected.

“Okay, short version now, and we can go into more detail another time with Brooks, too.” They both nod their agreement, and I take a moment to gather my thoughts and condense the explanation. “Okay, so there’s the main pack link, where all members can talk as a whole. The Alpha and Beta of the pack can pinpoint individuals and open a private

channel, but it's rarely used. Then there's the family link, blood family, sometimes chosen, can communicate like a normal everyday conversation. That's what the McBeartys use and what you would have used between yourselves." I pause, waiting for them both to nod that they're following before I continue. "The mate-link is deeper; normally, it wouldn't be possible to use without being fully claimed. But with fated mates, the link can be accessed ahead of that."

"You said the mate-link is deeper? How's it deeper?"

"I was getting to that." I run a hand over my buzzed hair, noting it's grown enough that I'll need to get the clippers out sooner rather than later. "The mate-link isn't just thoughts and words, it's... it's emotions and feelings, too," I rush out, opting for the rip the plaster off method. "Strong matings have reportedly been able to use the link at a distance to convey pain, fear, or any other kind of warning."

"You'll be able to feel what I'm feeling? *All the time?*" Kya practically screeches, causing me to wince.

"Well, that's gonna be awkward," Ryder mutters. Kya narrows her eyes at him, but I cut in before this conversation can devolve further.

"We're getting off-topic. Yes, *eventually*—huge, *huge* stress on eventually—I'll be able to know or sense your feelings. Not today. For one, we're not mated, and two, the bond and friendship between us is new. I'm not sure we'll even manage the link, but without biting you, it's the best solution I have."

"All right, I guess." She purses her lips, a frown creasing her brows together. "We're not done discussing this though."

"Nope, not at all, Petal."

Ryder softly coughs, more to remind us he's still here than to clear his throat.

"Maybe the, err, mate-link side should have the McBeartys involved too? Brooks and I can sit that bit out."



## KYA

Rolling my shoulders back, I release the tension that's been slowly accumulating there since we arrived at the Jameson compound.

“Okay, so how do we use this mate-link thing?” I ask Fjord. “Should I test it with one of the others first? What if I can't do it?”

“You can test it. Also, give them a heads-up that we'll need to sit down and chat about it. I wouldn't have sprung this on you like this if I'd known you didn't know.” The remorse is clear on his face.

“It's fine. I imagine it's one of those things you learn growing up in a pack, and well, I *did* grow up in a pack, but...” My words trail off. I chew my lip, unsure how to finish the sentence without being too harsh or blunt.

“You grew up in a toxic hell hole, Petal.” Fjord looks to Ryder next to me. “I know you got out when you were eight, but you and Brooks then grew up on the run. There's gonna be gaps in your knowledge. I should have been more aware of that.”

“Nah, you're fine, dude.” Ryder waves Fjord off, then turns to me with a growing grin. “Kinda wish I could be a fly on the wall to see the guys' faces when they realise you didn't know they could feel your emotions.”

“I should feel them too, though, but I don't,” I murmur, rubbing a hand over my brow.

“You didn't hear Cole in the family link either. Maybe there's something blocking you? Or it's a Therian thing?” Fjord theorises quietly.

“Won't know until you try. Give it a go, Ky.” Ryder nudges me with his elbow. “Then we can get started on these interviews, get some answers.”

“Hopefully, get more evidence against creepy Schmidt to give to Isaac and Anan. Then they can take it to the Council and get the guy removed from ‘shadowing’ them.” Letting out a breath, I crack my knuckles and look up at my—as yet—unclaimed mate. “Okay, big guy, what do I need to do?”

“Let’s try closing your eyes. Focus on one of the McBeartys,” Fjord instructs.

I do as he says, closing my eyes and adopting the calming breathing pattern I use for yoga and meditation while focusing on Kota before giving a nod. Fjord talks me through, searching within myself for the threads that connect my soul to my mates. It feels as though I’m sinking into a deep meditative trance, but eventually, I find what he’s been describing. Within my mind’s eye, I can see a wall surrounding the ball of light that represents me. Twelve threads of varying thickness and brightness are pinned under the metaphysical barrier.

I imagine running a finger across each one, gaining a sense of who it belongs to. Seven threads are all of a similar brightness. The family link with Ryder and Brooks is the thickest, followed by each of my McBearty mates. The next brightest after those is Fjord’s thread, followed by the McBearty family link. The last two links are the dullest and thinnest, linking me to the McBearty pack and someone else.

“Motherfucking Julian was right,” I grumble aloud.

“About what, Petal?” Fjord asks as I open my eyes.

“I have an eighth mate. The thread’s there; it’s weak, but it’s there.”

Fjord licks his lips and gives a subtle nod. “All right. Well, we can deal with that back at home. Do you want to reach out to one of the McBeartys or try linking with me?”

“I think I know why I’m not good at hearing or using the links. I want to try something but—”

“Maybe wait until we’re not on the Jameson compound about to conduct interviews into the shady practices of the former Alpha and Schmidt the Shit, yeah?” Ryder cuts me off,

and as much as I want to try breaking that mental wall, he's right. Now isn't the time or place.

After half an hour of trying, I finally manage to push a message through the mate-link to Fjord without creating a headache-inducing amount of white noise.

"All right, I'll go next door, and we'll get started on the interviews. If either of you wants or needs to stop, just let me know. We can always come back tomorrow or the next day. Okay?" Fjord asks, hand on the door handle. He doesn't exit the room until Ryder and I both nod.



Four hours and several uninformative interviews later, Fjord barely glances up when the door opens. Ryder looks at me when the middle-aged male shifter walks in. It's the same look he's given me when any male has entered into their interview. Holding in my disappointment, though that doesn't feel like the right word, I shake my head.

"No, he doesn't look familiar."

Ryder drops his head dejectedly and scuffs the toe of his trainer on the floor as Fjord speaks in the other room.

"Hey, Oscar, take a seat. This hopefully won't take too long."

"What's going on, Fjord?" he queries as he pulls out the chair opposite Fjord and sits, running a hand through his salt and pepper hair.

"Alpha, Oscar. I'm your Alpha, not your friend."

"Thought Alphas were meant to be both. You lead the pack, but you're meant to be approachable. Your father ran things that way." Something about his tone niggles at a memory. The pattern's familiar even though he's not.

"And I killed him," Fjord growls, leaning forward across the table. "Ripped his throat out with my teeth. That should tell you we didn't see eye to eye."

Oscar gulps, fidgeting in his seat. Fjord inhales and leans back in his chair, pulling his ankle up to rest on the opposite knee.

“I have a few questions, and I’m hoping you can help answer some of them.”

“I-I can try, Alpha.” The other man nods again, reaching for the glass of water on the table in front of him.

“Let’s start with something more recent and then work our way back, hmm?” Fjord taps the folder Vanessa had so kindly delivered to us. “Someone pulled images from our security footage. I just need to know who, why, and if anything else was handed over. Think you might be able to help with that?”

“I don’t know, Alpha, but if I can help, I will. That’s what pack does.”

“Great.” Fjord flips open the folder and extracts the close-up images as well as the wide shots, passing them over to Oscar.

The older shifter reaches out a tentative hand, pulling the wide shots closer.

“Who-who is that?” He taps one of the images as he asks. I’m assuming he’s pointing to either one of the guys or me.

“Funny you should ask that. The female in those stills is my mate. The boy you’re tapping is her brother.”

“Her brother? Are you sure?” His gaze shoots up to lock with Fjord’s.

“Yup. So, tell me, Oscar, what do you know about Aurelia Jenson-Wilson?”

The shifter jerks back away from the table like the picture burns him.

“Why would you ask me about her? She’s been dead and gone for like two months now. A better fate than what your dad and Brody had planned for her, too.” He mumbles the last part, not making eye contact with Fjord.

“What the fuck?” Ryder blurts out, and I step closer to the glass separating me from the other room. “What’s he on about, Ky?”

*:Fjord, my mother has been dead for ten years.:* I force the words through the mate-link, watching Oscar closely, scrutinising his every breath for a sign that he’s lying.

“I know I was only a cub back then, but Aurelia Jenson-Wilson died ten years ago. Why would you say different?”

“What?” The older male looks at his Alpha with deep confusion etched across his face. “No, she was in a coma for ten years. Henrick unplugged her when we first arrived here. My mate, Izzy, was one of the nurses brought in all those years ago to help care for her. She came home in tears at the end of November. Your dad had been ordering daily blood draws from Aurelia, but then...” he pauses, taking another gulp of water. “Look, Alpha, I’m not my brother. I’m not any better than him because I suspected what was happening, but I turned a blind eye to it. I was a coward, and judging by those photos—that boy is the spitting image of my brother, minus the glasses. So I’d guess that boy’s my nephew.”

Blood rushes to my ears, and Ryder staggers forward a step, then sways next to me. I reach out to him, gripping him in a hug as much to keep myself standing as to comfort him.

“What happened with Aurelia, Oscar?” Fjord quietly prompts. He’s leaning forward again with both feet on the ground.

“Henrick and Brody went to the clinic room, Izzy was just finishing her break, and I was just left when she overheard them.”

“What did you overhear, Oscar?” Fjord presses, his alpha bark slipping through.

“Brody said something about wards being down finally. Then they... they discussed what to do with her next. Apparently, they’d been trying and failing to get an omega pup from her.”

Ryder's knees give out, and we slump to the floor. Tears track down his face while my mind rebels against this new information.

“After they left, Izzy said she wouldn't let them use Aurelia as an incubator. W-we went back during the shift change a-and un-unplugged her. I'm sorry, Alpha, but comas aren't something shifters suffer. If we take that much damage—well, it was only the machines keeping her alive. Izzy gave her morphine, so she wouldn't have felt anything.” Oscar rushes to get the words out.

“Do you have proof of this?” Fjord's voice is so quiet I can barely make out his words over the raging turmoil erupting inside my body.

I lose track of the conversation happening in the other room, instead focusing entirely on holding my brother and rocking him as we cry and break all over again for the loss of our mother.



## CHAPTER 32

# KYA



“I don’t understand.” Ryder shakes his head, pushing up from the floor and beginning to pace as he repeats Oscar’s words back to me. “Mum wasn’t dead? She was still there. We *left* her with that, that *monster*?”

He spins around to face me again, eyes bright with unshed tears and cheeks flushed as he processes everything we just heard. The door opens, and Fjord slips in, closing it behind him.

“*You* left her.” Ryder’s lips pull back from his teeth as he sneers at me.

“Ryder—” Fjord says, his tone a mixture of admonishing and sympathy, empathy.

“No!” My brother swipes a hand in front of him as he cuts my mate off. “No. Do *not* defend her. We just sat here and listened to how *your* father and his Beta tried to *breed* our mother while she was in a *fucking coma*. I was eight when we left. Brooks was six. We couldn’t have done anything. *We* wouldn’t have known to even look for signs that Mum wasn’t really gone.” He turns his attention back to me, and my heart breaks at the intense look of hurt and betrayal. “*You* should’ve known better. *You* should’ve questioned them! You could have done *something*, Kya! If you had, maybe we wouldn’t have grown up without a mum.”

“Ryder!” Fjord snaps before taking a calming breath. “That’s not fair. You’re hurting. You *both* are, but lashing out, placing blame anywhere but at the feet of Henrick, Brody and

the other arseholes in this pack isn't fair. I've been raised as the heir, and *I* had no idea. There's no way Kya could have known. Deep down, you know that."

"You gave Henrick an easier, swifter death than he deserved." The cold malice lacing my brother's tone makes it almost unrecognisable to me, but it's nothing compared to the glacial glare he levels me with. "Some omega you are. You couldn't even sense Mum's distress. How the hell are you meant to help a pack when you couldn't help your own mother?"

He doesn't wait for a response before pushing past Fjord, wrenching the door open so it slams and reverberates off the wall.

"Petal?" Fjord crouches down in front of me, cupping my face and wiping my tears away with gentle strokes of his thumbs. "I don't know him well, but he's hurting. He's just lashing out at you because he cares about you and feels safe to do so. He doesn't really mean it."

"He does, and he should. He's right; I should've known." Closing my eyes, I take a jagged breath to try and regain some composure. "We should go after him. Head back. I'll need to tell Brooks about all this, too."

"All right, but first, look at me." Fjord's fingers flex on the back of my jaw and neck when I don't open my eyes immediately. "Kya, look at me."

Opening my eyes, I try to bring myself to meet his stare but can't.

"Don't make me say it again." He laces his alpha command through his growled words, and my eyes flick up away from the side of his nose to meet his steady green gaze. "You seem to have a block on your senses, and even without that, you were sixteen when you thought she died. Eighteen when you gathered those boys and got the fuck out. At no point were the links or omega abilities explained to you. You did the best you could with the information you had. You hear me, Petal?"

Blinking back the cloud of emotions threatening to overwhelm me, I nod.

“Words, Kya.”

“Yeah, I just...” My words trail off, and I lower my eyes from his and draw in another jagged breath.

“Need to process?” Again, I nod in answer to him. He drops a chaste kiss on my forehead. “All right, take the time you need to do that. It was a lot of information, but until you get out the other side, I’ll be here to remind you that what happened was *not* your fault. *Never* your fault.”

Fjord strokes my cheeks with his thumbs one last time before standing and then reaching down to pull me up to my feet.

“Let’s go find Ryder and get home. Whatever you need, I’ll make sure you get it, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper as he leads me from the room and back towards the car.



## FJORD

As soon as we pull up outside the main house and before I can even turn off the ignition, Ryder jumps out, disappearing through the door without a backwards glance.

“Want me to come in with you?” I ask quietly. Kya opens the passenger door, shaking her head.

“No. Thanks, but I think this needs to be the three of us.” She offers me a small smile that falters and drops from her face faster than it appeared. “I’ll see you at home though. I just, I need to be there when Ry tells Brooks what Oscar said.”

“Call one of us once you’re done—”

She cuts me off. “I can walk back, but sure, I’ll call if River or Lucian aren’t here once I’m ready to come home.”

I give a sharp nod, my eyes scanning her bloodshot ones. Leaving her while she's hurting feels wrong on multiple levels, but I'm not going to be the dick who doesn't respect her wishes. Besides, I want to talk to the McBeartys about why they'd never mentioned issues with linking to Kya.

"I'll see you at home then. Want me to prep anything in particular for dinner? What's your ultimate comfort food?" I ask, silently kicking myself for not already knowing the answer.

"Um, I kinda fancy toad-in-the-hole, mash, and some tender stem broccoli?"

"Okay." I draw the word out while I rattle my brain to connect her words with a dish. Thank fuck for the internet, so I can search for whatever it is.

"You don't have to make it. It's fine. Honestly, anything you want to make will be great." She forces another smile before closing the door and following her brother into the house.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I do a quick Google search before turning the car around and heading to the store to gather the ingredients.



"Fjord, do I want to know why you appear to have bought a shop's worth of flour, milk, eggs, and sausages? I know I'm inept in the kitchen, but what the fuck are you making?" River asks from where he's leaning against the island counter with Axel as they work their way through a sharing bag of crisps.

"Kya wants toad-in-the-hole. So I'm gonna make toad-in-the-hole."

"Where is our little mate, anyway?" the large bear shifter questions around a mouthful of crisps.

"With her brothers." My reply is short, but I'm still a little worked up over the way Ryder spoke to her. I get it was a shock. Of all the things I expected to learn during the

interviews, what Oscar told me was nowhere on my list of possibilities.

“Fjord? What happened?” Glancing over at River, I notice both he and Axel watching me with wary eyes.

“Who said something happened?”

“Dude, if you’d slammed the cupboard door any harder, it would have snapped off its hinges,” Axel grunts.

“Not to mention the potential to dent the bowl or work surface with how heavy-handed you’re being,” River adds, standing up straight and crossing his arms over his chest.

“We learnt a few things.” I abandon the bowl I pulled out to make the batter in and instead move to put the sausages in the fridge. “First, why have none of you spoken to Kya about the different mind-links? I asked her to try tapping into our mate-link today, and she had no idea what I was on about.”

“I haven’t felt any emotions from her, but I just thought she was deliberately blocking them,” Axel murmurs, looking from me to River.

“With everything that’s happened these last few weeks, I didn’t think about it. Now that you’ve said something, it makes sense she wouldn’t have known. I doubt Aurelia went into details about the links before she died.”

“Yeah, that’s the other thing we learnt.” I proceed to explain my entire conversation with Oscar and then Ryder’s reaction afterwards. By the time I finish, the other four McBeartys have all wandered into the kitchen, and I busy myself prepping dinner while Axel and River fill them in.

“She cried?” Casper runs his hands over his head, fisting his hair. “I wish we could bring Henrick back to kill him over and over and over again.”

“You and me both,” I reply, my tiger adding a rumble to my voice. “Brody’s still out there somewhere, though. We’ll find him.”

The guys nod stoically, each falling quiet as they sit with their thoughts and process everything in their own way.

Kota walks around and taps the bag of potatoes I pulled out. “Mash?”

“Yeah, Kya wanted toad-in-the-hole, mash, and broccoli, so that’s what we’re having.”

His face loses a bit of colour. “Toads?” he queries, and I fight my laugh because my initial reaction was the same.

“Sausages in Yorkshire pudding,” Lucian answers before me with a grin. “Strong choice; that was one of my favourites as a kid.”

“I had to Google it, told her she could have whatever she wanted and then panicked, thinking I’d have to find actual fucking toads.” I chuckle, and the rest of the guys laugh with me as Kota relaxes and begins peeling potatoes.

The front door opens and closes, drawing our attention. Soft steps pad across the floor until Kya appears in the archway. Her hair looks like she’s retied it into a bun numerous times. Her skin is blotchy from her tears, and her grey eyes are more bloodshot than when I left her at the main house.

The laughter dies as the guys take in her appearance. Kya clears her throat and swallows a couple of times before pointing over her shoulder.

“I’m, err, gonna hit the gym for a bit, if that’s okay?”

“Of course, Banphrionsa. Do you need anything from us?” River steps towards her but stops when she steps back, shaking her head.

“No. Thanks. I thought the walk back would give me time to clear my head, but I just need a bit longer.” Her voice cracks as she reaches the end of her sentence.

“Okay, Firebug. One of us will come get you when food’s ready, yeah?” Knox asks, his voice softer than I’ve ever heard it.

She forces a smile and nods before turning and walking down the hall. We all watch her until she vanishes into the gym.

“Fuck. She looks so broken. How do we fix this?” Casper asks, but no one answers. Probably because we’re all asking ourselves the same thing.



## CHAPTER 33

# KYA



As soon as the gym door closes behind me, I pull off my jumper, letting it fall to the floor and shimmy out of my jeans. It's a little chilly in just a tank top and underwear, but I'll warm up once I start working out.

Bypassing the treadmills and bikes, I make a beeline for the punching bags in the far corner. Should I pause to wrap my hands? Yes. Do I? No.

I need that extra dose of pain. In a twisted way, I'm punishing myself while also working through... everything.

With each hit of my fist against the heavy bag, I allow the conversation with my brothers to flow over me.

*"I can tell Brooks what happened. You don't need to be here."* Ryder's voice is so sharp as I enter the den that I almost want to check myself for cuts.

*"What the fuck, dude?"* Brooks stares at Ryder incredulously before turning to me. His blue eyes scan my face, then bounce back to Ryder. *"What happened?"*

*"A lot. Too much."* Ryder slumps down onto the sofa opposite our brother. I step further into the den and take the unoccupied corner of Brook's sofa.

*"Gonna elaborate so I know why you're being a royal dick to Kya?"*

*"There's no easy way to say this, Brooks,"* I say quietly, drawing his attention to me. *Licking my lips, I drop my gaze to my lap, focusing on my fidgeting fingers instead of the*

*teenager I'm about to crush. "Most of the interviews were pointless. Uneventful. Just people with no real information. Except for one."*

*Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves and raging emotions, I force myself to meet Brooks' eyes as I recount everything Oscar had said.*

*Ryder gets more and more agitated as I speak, and we watch Brooks' world shatter around him.*

*My youngest brother throws himself at me when I finish, engulfing me in a hug.*

*"It's not your fault, Ky," he whispers in my ear, squeezing me tightly.*

*"The fuck it's not!" Ryder jumps to his feet, fists clenched at his side. "Kya's meant to have the ability to read emotions and feelings. She should have known Mum wasn't dead!"*

*Brooks pushes back from me to look at our brother.*

*"That's not fair, Ryder, and you know it. You can lash out and be a giant donkey arse prick, but don't put this on her."*

*Ryder rips his shirt over his head, throwing it to the floor as he storms out of the house. Sitting in silence with Brooks, we easily make out the sound of Ryder's shift.*

*"I'm sorry he's making this harder, Kya."*

*I shake my head slowly. "I get it. I do. Honestly, I don't think I disagree with him. When Fjord talked through the link with me, I could see the threads for each link. There's this fuck off giant wall on top of them, hampering them. Until I figure out how to get rid of that, I'm going to struggle to help anyone in the way a pack Omega should."*

*"Bullshit. You've already helped people here—"*

*I cut him off; he means well, but I'm just not ready to hear it.*

*"Brooks, are you okay if I head back? I still need to tell the guys and..." My voice trails off. I have no idea what I'm*

*saying. Words simply spilt from my mouth, hoping to get me the escape so I can find somewhere to allow myself to break.*

*“Sure, Kya. Want me to walk back with you? We don’t have to talk.” Brooks’ eyes shine with so many emotions, I can’t say no.*

Pain sears through my knuckles as I hit the punching bag again, the skin splitting and eliciting a hiss from me. The sharp sting pulls me from reliving the discussion again. Instead, my mind whirls, finally focusing on that stupid wall.

Closing my eyes, I sink back to that place within me that Fjord guided me to earlier. I focus on the barrier in my mind, ignoring how the brightness of my link with my brothers has dimmed. Ryder is a hothead, always has been, always will be. We’ve butted heads over the years, but nothing has ever permanently damaged our relationship. I have to believe this time will be the same.

With each hit of the bag in front of my physical body, I picture my mental body striking that damn wall. I lose track of time. With each punch, I pour every ounce of hurt, shock, grief, and self-loathing into my assault. Slowly, so slowly, cracks begin to spread from the base of the mental block.

When my fists slip from the bag, knuckles numb with pain, I alternate kicks into my attack. Chunks break away and disappear into the ether of my mind. With each dent and crack of progress, new emotions of determination and resilience bubble up inside.

My limbs grow sluggish, almost unresponsive, but I can’t stop. Ridding myself of this barrier consumes me. I can’t go back and save my mum, but I can eradicate a hurdle so that if any one member of my family or pack cries out in need, I’ll know.

The air stirs, but the reason why doesn’t register until I’m being pulled back from the bag. I’m engulfed in the spicy, exotic scent of Fjord and overwhelmed with his feelings of worry, empathy, and anguish at my pain but also the golden glow of his love for me.

“Kya, come back to me,” Fjord whispers in my ear, his voice full of soft warmth that makes me want to curl up, surrounded by him like a blanket. “Please, Petal, open those baby greys that pierce my soul.”

With one last scathing mental look at that blasted wall that’s definitely looking worse for wear now, I blink open my eyes. Each flutter of my lids brings Fjord into sharper focus, and with him comes my true awareness of the pain shooting through my limbs.

A soft hiss, and I’ll admit, a strained whimper leaves my lips. Fjord turns me in his arms, then walks over to one of the bench presses, setting me down and crouching between my thighs.

“You did a number on your little hands,” he murmurs as he gently examines the split and bleeding knuckles.

“They’ll heal—” I attempt to brush his concern off, but he interrupts me.

“Not quickly enough.” He stands, resting his hands on his hips as he looks down at me. “Come on, we’ll clean them up before dinner.”

I open my mouth to protest, tell him it’s unnecessary, but he places a single finger over my lips.

“Don’t argue. You’re independent. I know that, but you don’t have to do everything alone. You don’t have to put on a mask with me or the others. We’re your mates. If you can’t trust us to catch you when you fall, then we’re doing a shitty job.”

The emotion pouring through the newly open link only amplifies the sincerity in his voice. I watch as he moves back towards the door and grabs the green first aid bag from the floor.

“I thought you might need this. Didn’t realise how hard you were gonna go at it, or one of us would’ve come to check on you earlier,” he murmurs as he kneels between my legs again, opening the kit and pulling out the antiseptic wipes.

“You don’t need to do that, Fjord.”

“I know, but unless you safe word me, I’m gonna continue.” He glances up from the kit to my face. “Are you saying ‘octopus schlong’ to me cleaning your hands?”

His question pulls a surprised laugh from me. “How do you know that’s my safe word? You weren’t at the gauntlet when I picked it.”

A mischievous smile pulls his lips. “Nope, I wasn’t, but knowing your safe word is important. They didn’t discuss details, but they did let River, Lucian, and me know about octopus schlong. Nice choice, by the way. That’s definitely not something that’s ever likely to come up in casual conversation.”

He dabs my knuckles with the antiseptic, drawing a wince from me.

“Not gonna ask me about what happened with Brooks?” I ask after a moment.

“Nope. You want to tell me, I’ll listen. Same as any of the other guys would, but I won’t ask,” he answers as he continues to clean, then bandage my hands.

“I have a different question.” Chewing my lip, I glance between his tender touch and his face as his emotions continue to trickle through the bond. He cants his head to one side, humming at me to continue while he packs the first aid kit back up.

“Why have you never kissed me?” I blurt out. He stills before turning to lock gazes with me. I almost lose myself in his green eyes that always seem to see more than I intend to show.

When he answers, his voice is huskier, lower, more growly than before, and I know his tiger is close to the surface.

“Because when I kiss you, I know I won’t want to stop until I’m sinking inside you, claiming you with every ounce of my body, heart, and soul. I want you to consume me. To take over every thought, breath, and heartbeat. When you’re ready for that, Petal, I’ll be here.”

A smile plays on my lips as I think back to a month ago, waking up in the Jameson compound, and how much has changed since that first meeting. Flashes of different memories flit across my mind of our time together since then. Mentally, I watch him care for me, love me, offer support, and with each recollection, some of the turmoil inside me settles.

Fjord finishes packing away the first aid kit, but before he can stand, I rest one bandaged hand on his cheek. Turning him to face me, I lean forward and brush my lips against his. He stiffens at the first contact.

“Kya... You don’t have to do this,” he mumbles against the kiss. Instead of answering with words, I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer to me. As I deepen the kiss, I focus on pushing my feelings for him through our mate-link. How safe I feel with him, the way my soul feels lighter when he laughs. How my heart sometimes skips a beat when he smiles at me. His shoulders relax as his hands trace up my thighs, gripping my hips and eliminating any space between us.

I trace my tongue against the seam of his lips. He opens to me, sucking my tongue into his mouth. Fingers toy with the waistband of my underwear, stroking my skin, increasing the burn of desire that’s building with each touch.

There’s a moment’s pause before the sound of tearing fabric fills the room as Fjord rips my panties from my body. Breaking the kiss, he runs his hands up my hips, under my tank top, caressing my overheated flesh as he slowly undresses me. Deft fingers quickly remove my bra, and he leans back on his heels. His green eyes are dark with desire as he slowly catalogues my naked body.

“I told you what would happen if I kissed you,” he says quietly.

“Yeah, you did,” I reply in a low voice as his finger trails over River’s mate bite on my inner thigh, up to Knox and Axel’s bites on my breasts before continuing to my neck, where Casper, Lucian, and Kota claimed me.

“Yet I’m the only naked one here, so I’m wondering if you’re having second thoughts?” The sass slips out before I can stop it. His lip twitches with a smirk as he runs his fingers down my left arm. Lifting it up, he caresses the moons and trees that mark us as fated.

“No. No second thoughts,” he assures me before pulling my arm to his lips and sinking his teeth into the forearm just above the fated mark. My breath leaves my body in a rush as I watch this large and sometimes imposing Alpha claim me while on his knees before me.

He runs his tongue along the bite, a satisfied gleam in his green eyes.

“Your turn, Petal,” he states as he stands, pulling his t-shirt off with one hand before unbuttoning his jeans and pushing them to the floor.

“You went commando for the interviews?” The question slips out even though it’s clearly rhetorical, as I’m currently eye level with his dick. It stands at attention, curving slightly upwards towards him. He turns slowly, giving me a full view of his impressive physique.

“Where are you going to place your claim, Kya? What part of my body will you mark to show the world I belong to you?”

He smirks once he’s facing me again. Leaning down, he wipes a thumb across my bottom lip. “No need to drool over me. You can feast whenever you want.”

Batting his hand away, I edge forward on the bench until I’m able to lick the line of his Adonis belt. My tongue trails up to his abs, then across and back down the other side of that delectable V.

His breathing picks up, and his cock twitches as I draw near to it. Flicking my tongue across the tip, the salty taste of pre-cum ignites my taste-buds. A soft groan leaves Fjord when I wrap my lips around him, sucking the head before taking him to the back of my throat.

My head bobs back and forth as I twirl my tongue around him, alternating between hollowing my cheeks when I suck to



swallowing until there's no length left to take.

“You need to stop, Kya. I have no intention of ending this before I'm deep inside you with your teeth in me,” he grunts out, taking a step back until I release him.

Leaning back on one elbow, I spread my legs wide and skim my fingers slowly down my body until they reach my core. Fjord's eyes track every movement as I twirl one finger across my clit before dipping into my centre.

His nostrils flare as he inhales, taking in the heavy scent of my arousal. Then he's on me, lifting me up with one arm while the other wraps my leg around his waist. With purposeful strides, he walks over until my back rests against the door.

He buries his face in the crook of my neck, taking in my scent as he pushes his cock into me. Taking his time, he inches in, then withdraws before repeating with shallow thrusts. Fjord peppers my neck with kisses as he waits for my body to adjust to his girth.

Desperate for him to move, I clench my inner walls around him. I arch my back and hips to achieve even the minutest amount of friction. He withdraws, then rocks into me, sheathing his full length. Swirling his hips, he grinds against me before pulling out.

One of his large hands squeezes my arse cheek while the other runs up to my breast. His feelings of pleasure, awe and devotion flow through the link, enhancing my own. Each thrust and swirl he makes edges me closer and closer to my orgasm.

“You're perfect for me, Kya. I'll thank the fates every day for giving me to you and you to me,” he whispers hoarsely before taking my lips in a hungry kiss. Bending a knee, he adjusts the angle of his thrusts, hitting a spot inside me that sends me crashing into bliss. I bite down on his lip as I shatter around him.

Inside my mind, another chunk of the wall falls away, and the thread tying me to my tiger alpha flares to match the brightness of my other six mates. I push the ecstasy and love

into our link. Fjord growls as he snaps his hips once more and succumbs to his own orgasm.

After releasing his lip with a soft lick, I smile sheepishly at him.

“My lip? Gotta say, Petal, that’s not where I expected you to bite me.” He chuckles and rests his forehead against mine.

“Well, you did say about me marking you to show the world you’re mine. You can’t hide that bite, even if you wanted to.” I shrug, chewing my own lip.

“I’d never hide it,” he says seriously, licking the tender flesh.

“If you two are done giving us all blue balls, can we eat dinner? Though I’m also open to a mass orgy in Kya’s nest. Either or. Firebug’s choice,” Knox calls through the door.

## CHAPTER 34

# KYA



Pulling my jeans back on without my underwear is not a particularly pleasant feeling. Fjord laughs softly when I scrunch my nose as the rough fabric brushes against my more sensitive areas.

“Dinner’s kept this long; it can wait for you to run up and grab pyjamas or yoga pants or something from your room, or you can wear my shirt?” he asks, holding said shirt out towards me.

“I doubt the guys will complain if I’m wearing your top. Though I probably should go clean up.”

He shrugs as I take the shirt from him and pull it on, then shimmy my jeans back off.

“Entirely up to you. I’m not going to complain if you choose to stay dressed like that.” He smirks, buttoning up his own jeans before stalking towards me.

After a heated kiss, we make our way back to the kitchen and dining room, where the other guys are gathered. The table is set, drinks have been poured, but no one is eating. My eyes scan the dishes laid out, and emotions threaten to overwhelm me again, except this time, all positive ones. Feelings of gratitude, love, acceptance and comfort fill me.

My six other mates all look up at me at once.

“You figured out the bond then,” River observes, rising from his seat and walking over to me. “I’m sorry none of us explained the mate-link to you.”

“It’s fine. It wouldn’t have worked before now anyway. Apparently, I’m very good at building walls to keep my emotions in. Who knew?” I wave them off when they open their mouths to speak. “Guys, it’s fine. I am very aware that I’m a closed-off person. Some progress has been made; I’ll work on breaking that mental wall completely, and then you’ll all be sick of the emotional roller coaster that is being female. Now, feed me, mates. *Feed me.*” I mimic the plant from *Little Shop of Horrors*, and Casper and Kota both frown while the others snort. Clearly, we need a movie night soon.

Before Fjord and I can take our seats, there’s a flash of light from the kitchen, and Tilly’s voice fills the space.

“For fuck’s sake, Aralar! I said let me call first. They could be mid-orgy. I am not suffering the wrath of Kya if we’ve interrupted her O-time.”

“Not mid-orgy—” I call out.

“Unfortunately,” Knox cuts in.

“We’re just about to eat, though,” I finish, shooting a look at Knox and mouthing for him to behave. The cheeky wolf simply blows me a kiss across the table and grins.

“Food enough for three very impromptu guests?” Tilly questions, poking her head around the corner.

“Sure, I’ll grab some extra plates. Take a seat,” Fjord says, pushing up to his feet and heading back into the kitchen. He shares a bro nod and clasps Tanner’s forearm as he passes him.

Aralar smiles at Tilly as he walks by her and over to one of the empty chairs. “See, it was fine.”

“Not the point. It might not have been fine. We do not need to see any of them naked,” Tilly snarks as she slumps into the seat next to me and gives me a quick hug. “Although judging by this ensemble, we only just missed interrupting happy, fun times.”

I smile weakly at her, and her brown eyes look between mine, a frown tightening her forehead.

“I’m fine, before you ask. Shit’s happened, but we’re figuring it out. Now you’re here and won’t cut me off because you think the phones are bugged; we can catch each other up on everything,” I comment as Fjord returns and hands Tanner, Aralar, and Tilly plates.

“Eat first, catch up afterwards,” River says with a pointed look at me. Lucian grabs my plate and starts dishing up toad-in-the-hole, mash, and the tender stem broccoli before covering it with the rich gravy.

“Eat,” he says quietly, setting it in front of me. I want to roll my eyes but refrain. They’re just showing that they care, and I need to remember that I can lean on them.

“Ah, yes, it’s around that time for you to stockpile calories, isn’t it,” Aralar muses aloud as he takes a bite of mash.

“What?” My fork freezes on its journey to my mouth at his words, and I frown at him.

“February is only a few days away.”

“What does that have to do with Kya’s calorie intake?” Tilly demands, glaring at the fae male.

“Her heat will be coming up soon, no?” Aralar states, looking perplexed.

“Oh,” I let the syllable hang in the air for a moment. “Uh, anyone got their phone so I can check that, like I keep meaning to?”

Lucian hands his over to me, and before I can ask for him to unlock it, the facial recognition lets me in.

“When did you set that up?”

“Hmm, not long after you moved in. I don’t have any secrets from you, Kya. My phone, your phone.” He shrugs and goes back to eating his dinner.

“Right. Okay, then.” I’m not a hundred percent sure how to respond, but the casual way he said it makes my soul do a little happy dance. Flicking through to the calendar app, I quickly log in to my shared calendar with my brothers and send the

link to my mates' phones. Scrolling back to November, I see Lucian has a purple heart emoji on the date I claimed him.

Those feelings of warmth, acceptance, and love flow through me into the link. I know he notices because he glances down at me with a soft peachy-pink highlighting his cheeks.

“Well, when should we clear our schedules for Bunny?”

Looking back down at the calendar, I count off the average cycle and purse my lips.

“Well, that explains my moods,” I murmur before looking up and locking eyes with River and Fjord. “It will probably hit before the end of the week, maybe sooner.”

“Well, we definitely need to have a catch-up and girls' talk before you get dicked seven ways to Sunday,” Tilly sasses.

“Isn't that saying 'six ways'?” Tanner asks no one in particular.

“Yes, but Kya has seven mates, so I used creative license. I doubt any of them are gonna sit out the O-express... Hmm, no. That doesn't work. I'll need to think on another way to say it.” Tilly taps a finger against her chin, then shrugs before resuming eating.

The rest of the meal passes with light chit-chat. Once everyone has eaten their fill, Tilly excuses us and drags me into the living room space.

“Okay, so I have a lot to catch you up on,” my best friend states as she pulls her legs up onto the sofa.

“Yeah, you didn't really explain anything over the phone or in your texts.”

“I know. I know, but those hunter dudes were sketchy as fuck. There was a vibe, and I'm pretty sure they did something to my phone after I called that first time. I'd rather play it safe than risk their hinky arses finding you.”

Holding in my laugh at her use of 'hinky,' I clear my throat. “Right, well, we think they found me, anyway.”

At her frown, I explain in more detail everything that's happened with Vanessa, the Council's enforcers, and Schmidt.

"Schmidt? That's a name of the human vamp—"

"What? Human vamp?" I cut her off. "You can't be both human and a vampire, Tills."

"I was just referring to the medic who pricked me and took my blood for some test. Vampires are real, too?"

"Oh, um, yeah." For some reason, probably the ease with which she accepted shifters and fae, I was not expecting this reaction.

"Fuck. Another reason to potentially lose sleep."

"No vamp is gonna come into your house when you have a fae and a shifter in your bed, Tills," Tanner calls from the kitchen. I look at my best friend with raised brows as she blushes.

She leans over the back of the sofa to yell at him. "Shut up, Tan. The illusion of privacy only works if you don't shatter it!"

Laughter erupts from the men in the kitchen, and I bite my lip to hold in my own amusement.

"Tills, if you know they can hear us, why are we pretending they can't?"

"Because," she answers, settling back into her previous position and levelling me with the most serious expression I've seen from her, aside from when we were at the Jameson compound. "My puny human brain is still in denial."

"Not human, remember," Aralar calls out, and Tilly glares at the kitchen.

"You can butt out 'n all, *Butterfly*."

I choke a laugh back at the nickname my best friend is using for a high fae Seelie Lord.

"Tills, hey." I snap my fingers in front of her face to draw her attention back to me. "Hi, wanna explain what he means by 'not human'?"



“Okay, so Cliff Notes. Schmidt was the name of one of the hunters who turned up at the Jameson compound. He took my blood, ran some test, and declared me not who they were looking for, some of his hunter goons collected Anderson’s remains, and they left. Before that, he muttered under his breath, now *I* didn’t hear him, but Aralar did. Schmidt made a comment about me being eighty-nine percent human.”

“What’s the other eleven?” I ask her.

“Fae, apparently. That’s what we went to Faerie to find out.”

“Whoa, back up. You went to Faerie? Are you insane? Do you have a death wish?”

She leans forward and covers my mouth with her hand, giving me one of her work looks. This one screams, ‘if you shut up for two seconds, I’ll explain.’ I mime zipping my lips shut, and then wave a hand for her to proceed.

“We had to go to Faerie to figure out which Court I’m tied to, plus it was an irrefutable way to prove I have some fae blood. I might not have accepted the whole ‘you’re not human’ thing to begin with. *Anyway*, I was able to cross through without Aralar taking claim of me, and I claimed Tanner so he could tag along. Some Seelie fae apparently had a great time on Earth, and spawned a bunch of crotch goblins, who in turn had their own parasites, who then got drunk and made me.”

“Tilly, did you just refer to one of your grandparents as a ‘crotch goblin’ and which parent is the ‘parasite’?” I ask around my laughter.

“Yes. I’m not wrong, either. You didn’t know my grandparents. Goblin is a perfectly acceptable descriptor for all of them. Actually not sure on which parent, but Dad was never around, so.” She shrugs rather than finish her sentence with words. Fair enough.

“Okay, okay,” I say, trying to appease her so I can ask a different question. “Jumping back from that. You ‘claimed’ Tanner? How does one ‘claim’ someone into Faerie?”

My brows inch up in surprise as a very uncharacteristic blush spreads across my best friend's cheeks. "Tilly? What did you do?"

"Me," Tanner says from behind me. Spinning round, my gaze bounces from the shifter to Tilly and back again.

"So," I draw the word out, "you're mated?"

"Um, yeah. Aralar too. It's been a whirlwind. *But—*" Tilly raises her voice, not allowing me the chance to ask anything about that... yet. I'm definitely circling back to find out how *that* happened. "The main reason we materialised in your kitchen is because of some intel we got. Trust me, you want to hear this." Tilly pauses, drawing in a deep breath and I ready myself for the stream of words she's about to unleash. "From what Tanner told me, it's always been assumed that the hunters were an independent group of humans who discovered supernaturals are real and decided they needed to be 'dealt' with."

"Okay?" I hedge, waiting for the big reveal I can feel her working towards.

"That's not strictly true though. They're a *government* branch." Tilly barely pauses for that to sink in. "Right, so, one of the High Lords that Aralar knows—they're like a cousin or something—said some hunters approached him, looking for possible solutions to shifters succumbing to the whole rogue/feral thing. When he questioned why they wanted that, because shifters simply needed a pack and an omega, hence your whole situation—"

I click my fingers in front of her nose, cutting her off. "Tilly, focus. What did the hunters say to Aralar's cousin?" I ask. My best friend's face sobers and her lips thin as she looks at me.

"They said an omega wouldn't make a good soldier."

"Wait, what? I'd be an amazing soldier." Sitting up straight, I puff out my chest as if that somehow backs up my statement. A large warm hand lands on my shoulder, massaging the muscle.

“Yes, you would, but you’re not an average omega,” Axel placates while continuing to knead my trapezius.

“Oh, are we done pretending we’re not all part of this conversation?” Aralar questions. It’s clearly said rhetorically because he nudges Tilly forward and seats himself behind her. “Now then, perhaps you should call in those Council enforcers you mentioned earlier. We can deliver them all the information we’ve gathered, and they can take it to the Council or arrange a meeting for us to reiterate it to your powers that be.”

“That’s not a bad idea. If the hunters are looking to turn shifters into mindless drone soldiers, we need to report it,” River muses, rubbing his jaw.

“I’ll call Isaac and see if they’re available,” Fjord states before pulling out his phone and scrolling through his contacts. He wanders back to the kitchen, pacing around the island as he explains things to Isaac. There’s a pause before my tiger mate utters a mildly surprised “Really?” before returning to the living room.

“Yeah, no, that’s fine. We can definitely meet tomorrow.” He looks around at us all as he listens once more to Isaac. “Okay, yup, thanks. Bye.” After hanging up and shoving his phone into his back pocket, Fjord runs a hand over his head. “They were taking Vanessa in tomorrow for further questioning after reporting Schmidt’s activities with her. So Isaac said we should tag along and fill the Council in on everything at the same time.”

## CHAPTER 35

# AXEL



The alarm on my phone goes off far too early for my liking. All I want to do is pull my mate back into my side and fall asleep again with her hair across my chest. We have the meeting with the Council today, though.

With a groan, I reach across to the bedside table and turn the alarm off.

“Not happy to be awake, Growly Bear?” Kya’s soft voice is a little husky from sleep.

“Too early,” I grunt, lying back down, pulling her tight against my side, and dropping a kiss on her head.

“So, remember how I said a couple weeks back about wanting a date night ‘cause I had something I wanted to show you?” I ask, looking down at Kya.

“Mhmm, yeah, then drama, drama, drama happened, and we didn’t schedule anything.”

“Right, well, we have a little time now. If you don’t mind skipping the date bit.”

“The thing you want to show me is here, in your room?” she questions with a raised eyebrow. When I nod in response, her other brow joins the first in her hairline, and she pushes up so she’s leaning over me. “Growly Bear, is it your cock? Because while I’m not opposed to that, I have seen it before.”

I bark a laugh. “No, Little Minx, it’s not my cock. I can definitely get on board with that plan if you want to see it again. I had something else in mind, though.”

“Huh, colour me curious.” She pulls her legs underneath her and twists until she’s sitting cross-legged with the duvet pooling around her waist. Disentangling myself from the covers takes a moment, and then I cross the room to my chest of drawers. With each step, self-doubt creeps in.

“Right, so, probably not the best timing for this, actually. Plus, now I’m thinking it’s a dumb thing to gift an artist—”

“Axel, deep breath. Whatever it is, I’ll love it because it’s from you.” She smiles up at me. With the mate-links more open now, I can feel the sincerity and warmth emanating from her. “Growly Bear, if you’re that worried, you can wait. We can just watch a movie, cuddle or go grab breakfast. We could even do a mini date tonight, lay next to each other and read? Honestly, I don’t expect gifts from any of you.”

“No, I want to give this to you.” Nodding as I speak, steeling my resolve, I open the top drawer and pull out the gift. Holding it behind my back, I make my way over to the bed and sit next to her.

“I’ve never told you my back story. It’s not harrowing or traumatic like some of the others. I wasn’t rescued or saved by Flynn and Connor, but joining a pack was an adjustment. One of the ways I coped with the sudden proximity of so many shifters was exercise. It’s how I first bonded with the guys; obviously, we eventually opened the gym together. Also spent a big chunk of time helping out with the construction jobs. My size was an advantage there.”

She nods along with my words, listening intently without even a hint of hurrying me along.

“I had another outlet. It didn’t come as easily to me as the others, but I wanted to get better, to improve. Then life got in the way, and responsibilities crept in, and free time dwindled, ya know?”

“Yeah, maybe not exactly in the same way, but I understand how you have to prioritise your time differently as you get older.” She looks up at me, her grey eyes bright with understanding and curiosity, but still, she doesn’t press me.

A smile pulls my lips, and I push my gratitude for her patience down our connection. Cupping her cheek, I lower my head to kiss her softly.

“Just remember, I’m out of practice and even with hundreds of hours to hone my skill, I would still never hold a candle to you.”

Before she can say anything in response to my words, I place the sketchbook in her hands.

“You draw?” Her grey eyes sparkle when she glances up at me, and I nod before her gaze returns to the book. Kya glides her fingertips across the cover reverently. “Sketchbooks are very personal things, Axel. Are you sure you want me to look inside? There’s no rush—”

“I know, and I also know you won’t judge how rough they are.”

“Art is subjective. That’s what’s so great about it, so freeing. One person’s rough is another person’s goal,” she murmurs, playing with the corner of the leather-bound book.

Leaning over, Kya plants a gentle, chaste kiss on my lips. My eyes fall closed as I savour the moment with my mate, and when I open them again, she’s looking over the first sketch.

“Oh, Axel,” she breathes as she strokes the drawing of her profile. It’s rough; the likeness isn’t quite right.

“I couldn’t get you out of my head after that first meeting. That was the night I dug out this book and decided to dust off my old hobby.” A dry, self-deprecating chuckle follows my explanation.

“You did all of these from memory?”

“No, some of the later ones I, erm, used photos from my phone as a reference.” My cheeks heat with my blush. Thankfully, my beard covers the evidence.

Kya turns each page carefully as though she’s looking through something old, delicate, and priceless. My heart warms as she praises elements of each sketch. A few laughs slip out when she reaches the more recent images.

“I can see my 6B and 9B pencils went to good use.” Kya nudges my side with her shoulder. “Seriously, Axel, these are great, and this one—” she taps the last sketch, an image of her laughing with both Ryder and Brooks. “—I want to frame this one.”

“Really? It’s pretty rough.”

“Hmm, so are we,” she hums. “It’s your art, but if I were to pick a favourite? It’d be this one. Those moments where we’d laugh and just *be* are the ones I treasure the most. You captured that here.”

“Then we’ll find a frame for it, and you can put it in your room or wherever,” I tell her quietly.

“Thank you, Growly.” Kya cups the side of my face, stroking my jaw with her thumb before pulling me down for another kiss.

Unfortunately, as I’m contemplating taking things further, there’s a bang on Casper’s door, then mine.

“Wakey, wakey! Rise and shine! No time for the hanky-panky. We have to get going to meet the Council,” Knox’s voice sings out.

“If you want coffee before we go, you need to get up, guys,” Kota adds.

Kya groans as she pulls back from me. “I need caffeine, but this is not over. We’re simply sticking a pin in it to revisit later.”

“Definitely on board with that plan, Little Minx.” Grinning, I follow my tiny mate from my room, hoping this meeting doesn’t drag on too long.



## KYA

This is a waste of time. The Council are listening to River and Fjord as they explain all of Schmidt’s behaviour that they’ve witnessed. Isaac and his team have already explained their



experiences. From Anan's whispered comment in Lucian's ear beside me, Vanessa has also been through an initial questioning. All of which should make me feel confident that we're being heard, but I don't.

The longer we sit here, the antsier I'm becoming. My skin itches and my body feels like an army of fire ants have taken up residence. The not-so-subtle sniffs from the Amur leopard councillor have passed from leaving me uncomfortable, and moved to simply pissing me off.

Fidgeting on my chair, I lean closer to Lucian, and my arm brushes his. Desire and lust coil tightly in my centre. I want to slap myself for being so oblivious, for not realising what's happening. Reaching out for the mind-link and hoping I'm in the right one, I push a tentative thought out.

*:Err, guys?:*

*:Everything all right, Petal?:* Fjord asks almost instantly, never once moving his eyes from the Council shifters across the table.

*:Um, yeah, just, I think we should excuse ourselves and head home now.:* I try to convey the urgency I'm feeling to get out of this building, away from strange alphas and betas, without alerting said alphas and betas.

*:We're in a meeting with the Council.:* River states as Casper finishes up explaining the night they escorted Vanessa down to the basement at the main house.

*:Yup, I'm aware, but I'm about to go into heat and—:*

"I'm very sorry, Councillors, but we have some urgent pack business just come through the link. We need to get back," River announces, cutting off my mental message and rising from his seat. He buttons his suit jacket, stepping forward and leaning across the table to shake hands with the now bewildered councillors.

*:Get her to the car, don't stop for anyone.:* Fjord's voice demands through the link before he follows River's lead and makes his own goodbyes and excuses to the councillors.

Knox and Kota move until I'm standing between them. Axel leads the way out of the meeting room, with Casper and Lucian walking behind me. I'm completely encased by my mates.

*:Why didn't you say something this morning?:* Axel's voice growls through the link. My core clenches at the sound, and slick soaks my underwear.

"Fuck," Kota breathes out. "Walk faster. We need to get to the car *now*."

*:To answer your question, I didn't know. This is my first heat without my charm. I just assumed the symptoms were so intense because of that.:* My mental voice holds strong, but a small whimper slips from my lips as my omega worries about upsetting her mates.

*:You're doing great, Kya. We'll be at the car soon, and then we'll be able to help you.:* Lucian reassures me, rubbing soothing circles across my lower back.

"Kota, are you driving or am I?" Lucian asks aloud as we finally reach the SUV.

"I'll drive. Keys?"

Axel pulls the keys from his pocket and tosses them to Kota. The snow leopard catches them, and my mates rotate around me until he's in front and unlocking the car.

"Casper, back seat with Kya. Axel, up front with Kota. Knox, take the second row with River and Fjord. I'll squeeze in the back, too. It'll be a tight fit, but it's the best bet for now," Lucian orders quickly.

Everyone nods and bursts into motion. Kota opens the driver and back passenger doors before taking his seat behind the wheel. Casper climbs into the back seat first, reaching back for my hand and pulling me in after him. Lucian follows while Axel walks around to wait on the other side for River and Fjord. Knox is last to get in and closes the door, pushing the locking mechanism to prevent anyone from opening it back up.

“We’ve got you, Firebug. Casper and Lucian will make you feel good and help ease the edge, and Kota will drive like a demon to get us back to your nest.”

Another whimper slips free at Knox’s words.

My nails claw at my clothes, the fabric suddenly feeling too coarse and rough against my skin. Casper reaches around me, resting his hand on the button of my jeans. “Kya, Älskling, I still need to hear your consent.”

“Yes. I consent to my mates getting me through this heat by any means necessary. *Please, please, Casper. I-I need—*”

His lips seal over mine, his tongue diving into my open mouth as he flicks the button open and slides his hand below the waistband of both my jeans and girl boxers. I’m vaguely aware of the doors opening and closing after River and Fjord before the vehicle starts moving. Still, the majority of my focus and awareness is on Casper’s fingers.

The roughened digits dip between my wet folds, stroking and swirling up and over my clit. Each pass causes me to moan around his tongue. Casper leans back, breaking the kiss as he sinks his middle finger into me. Lucian turns my head to face him, pulling me to him and devouring my mouth.

My hips lift from the seat as Casper inserts another finger and uses the heel of his hand to rub and grind against my clit. I clench around him while reaching to pull Lucian closer. A soft curse sounds from one of my other mates, but I’m too lost in my heat to know which.

Breath hits the mating bites that my jumper leaves exposed, and a shiver of delight and pleasure zips through me. My toes curl in my boots as I approach the edge my body is so desperately chasing. Lucian’s hand trails from my face down my throat until he reaches the top of my wide-necked jumper. He pulls it down, exposing my bra, pinching and twisting my nipple through the thin fabric as Casper thrusts once more and grinds the heel, sending me screaming into the first orgasm of my heat.

The first but by no means the last.

The haze descends as I hear one of the McBeartys mutter, “We’re never using this car again without chubbing up. *Fuck*, she smells *good* though.”



The car pulls to a stop, doors open, and my mates pile out. Lucian passes me to Knox, who moves into the house with surprising care and speed. I’ve barely registered our kitchen before we’re through and halfway up the stairs to the hallway with my room and nest.

The nest door is already unlocked and open. Once we’re inside, Knox bypasses the sunken bed, heading straight for the ensuite bathroom.

He sets me down outside the large shower alcove and runs his fingers under the hem of my top. With torturously slow movements, he lifts the fabric up, and my arms rise of their own accord, assisting him in stripping me. Dropping the top to the ground, he quickly removes his own in that one-handed move that makes my inner walls clench around nothing.

Slick pools between my thighs, and another whimper escapes me. I need him. I need my mate, all of my mates.

“Knox, please.” The plea leaves my lips in a whisper. He drops to his knees, bringing his mouth level with my chest, and sucks one pebbled nipple, flicking it with his tongue before releasing it with a pop. Drawing the other one in for the same treatment, his fingers hook onto the belt loops of my jeans, pulling them down my legs. Leaning back slightly, he licks a path down my sternum, nibbling my ribs and heightening the burning desire coursing through me.

Rubbing his nose against me, he inhales deeply and groans before looking up at me with a heavy, lust-filled gaze. “In the shower, Kya. No outside scents in your nest. Just us, only us.”

Climbing back to his feet, Knox steps past me to turn the water on, then guides me to stand under the warm stream, falling from all three waterfall showerheads as he sheds the rest of his clothes.

My hungry gaze traces the tattoos that cover his arms, flow across his chest and back down until they end at the opposite wrist. He stalks the short distance between us, wrapping his hands around my thighs and lifting me up until our lips meet in a crash of heat and lust.

Reaching up, I pull the hair tie from his topknot, working my fingers through the braid. His dark-blond hair falls to his shoulders, obscuring the undercut beneath.

A hand runs up and down my spine. I arch back, breaking my kiss with Knox, to see River has joined us in the shower.

“This might be more than a one-twin job, brother,” Knox murmurs as he slides me down his body.

“The two of us can ensure our mate is fresh and clean.” River takes my arm, guiding me directly under the water. Knox reaches for the body wash, pumping it into his palm before rubbing his hands together and then over my shoulders.

River’s fingers comb through my hair, carefully working out the tangles. His blunt nails scrape against my scalp in a massage that draws a moan of blissful pleasure from me.

Knox’s hand moves down my body in enticing swirls and circles. His movements slow as he reaches my hips, trailing one finger lightly across my pelvis, then kneading the muscles of my thigh. As River works the shampoo through my hair, Knox drops to his knees and lifts my leg, placing it over his shoulder.

“Gotta make sure every part of you is clean, Firebug,” he murmurs before spreading me open with his thumbs and laving a deliciously slow lick over my sensitive core.

River tilts my head back to rinse the suds from my hair fully as I gasp and mewl beneath the attentions of his twin’s tongue. I lose track of what he’s doing with his hands as they thread through the strands of my hair.

The scrape of Knox’s teeth over the bundle of nerves at my centre causes my thigh to clench and try to close around his head. River reaches around, taking hold of my nipples, rolling each between finger and thumbs. My entire body feels alight

with the burning need to come. Knox thrusts two fingers inside me as he sucks hard on my clit. River pinches and plucks my nipples at the same time. The edges of my vision blur with the intensity of my climax.

River lifts me into his arms, and he carries me out of the shower like a new bride being carried across the threshold. Knox shuts off the water before moving around his twin to fetch a towel to tuck around me before River walks back into the main room.

My eyes blink as I register the sight of all five of my other mates standing around the sunken bed. All completely naked.

Casper steps forward, his brown eyes alight with hunger. Stopping in front of River, he leans down to speak next to my ear. His warm breath elicits a shiver up my spine, and goosebumps pebble across my skin.

“Are you ready for this, Älskling?” Casper asks, his voice low and husky in my ear. “Hmm, think you can handle all seven of us? You realise by the time we leave this room again, you’ll have tasted all of our seed, have been filled by each of us in every hole. I think the twins will fuck you last, one knotting your sweet cunt, the other your tight arse. You’ll be sandwiched between them for a while; don’t worry though. We’ll distract you. We’ll keep your mouth busy... but which twin will knot where, hmm? Who will the rest of us kneel over as we feed you our cocks?”



## KOTA

The room floods with the scent of Kya’s arousal as she reacts to Casper’s words.

“We should warm her up before one of them knots her pretty little arse,” I say as different positions and scenarios flit across my mind. Casper removes the towel, dropping it into a heap on the floor. River tuts, handing Kya to the white-haired bear before bending down and retrieving the towel.

“It won’t dry if you do that,” our Alpha mutters as he shakes it out and quickly returns it to the bathroom. Casper’s grin as he turns to the rest of us tells me he dropped the towel deliberately, knowing River wouldn’t leave it be. Sneaky. I approve.

“Any requests, Petal?” Fjord asks as Casper sets our mate on her feet in the middle of the bed.

“Everything. I need everything, everywhere. Now. *Please.*” As her plea falls from her lips, I take her hand and pull her down onto the mattress. Axel and Casper share a loaded look, but I ignore them. If they want to let the rest of us in on whatever that’s about, they’ll speak up.

Kneeling behind Kya, I run my fingers over her slick coated thighs, gathering as much of the nectar as I can and spreading it between the cheeks of her round, pert arse. Lucian moves in front of her, and our hungry little mate wastes no time in wrapping her lips around his length, sucking him down as I press one finger into her back hole.

Fjord stretches out next to us, reaching over to play with Kya’s nipples. I continue working to stretch her. As an omega, it’s not strictly necessary, but it doesn’t hurt to ensure she’s ready. There’s seven of us, after all. Our mate is going to be a sticky mess by the time we surface from our ruts.

Movement to the right draws my attention. Glancing over, I watch as Axel lies down on the bed and spreads his legs open, and Casper sits in the space between his thighs. Moving his legs to either side of the grizzly bear shifter’s hips, my eyebrows shoot up as my brain catches up to their plan.

“How about you two get comfortable, and I’ll help prep our omega before you double team her sweet pussy?” Fjord words it as a question, but before anyone can answer, Kya releases Lucian’s cock from her mouth and straddles the tiger shifter, pulling me with her.

“I think that’s a yes from Bunny,” Luc states, then chuckles as Kya beckons him closer to her and opens her mouth wide.

From my angle, I watch as Fjord grips himself and pumps twice before lining up with Kya's cunt. He rocks his hips, inching inside, then slams to the hilt with a powerful thrust.

"Kota, if you're joining, do it now. I'm not holding still for much longer."

Without needing to be told twice, I adjust my angle and press the tip of my cock between Kya's arse cheeks. Pushing in slowly, I feel Fjord through the thin wall between us.

Lucian buries one tattooed hand into Kya's hair, holding her still. Once I'm fully seated within her passage, I give a nod, and he starts moving again, fucking her mouth as Fjord and I thrust in tandem.

"Fuck, that's hot," Knox breathes out in a whisper. Turning my head, I open my mouth, offering it to him.



## KNOX

Watching my cock disappear into Kota's mouth while he continues fucking Kya's sweet arse has me twitching and growing harder than I thought possible. The room is full of the sounds of carnal pleasure. Flesh against flesh. Moans, groans, and gasping cries of ecstasy.

I can't decide where to look. My eyes bounce from Kota's mouth—hollowing out his cheeks and sucking me down like a starving man while twisting his tongue around my length as I draw out—to his dick disappearing between Kya's cheeks as he shares her with Fjord.

Resting my palm on the top of my Ounce's head, I pump my hips, fucking his mouth to the same rhythm he uses to fuck our mate.

Lucian's curse pulls my attention to him, his fist clenching in her hair, his hips thrusting erratically. With a groan, he stills, and Kya's throat moves as she swallows every drop of him.



Fjord's jaw clenches, his hand slipping between his body and hers, no doubt reaching for that delicious nub, rubbing it until she screams her release, and he roars his.

Kota swallows, pulling me deeper into his throat, and I lose control, filling him with my cum. Kya turns to watch with heavy-lidded eyes as I finish in our snow leopard's mouth. He leans back with a long slow suck as I withdraw. His tongue darts out, licking the side of his lip.

"Kota." I rub my thumb across his lower lip. "Make our mate feel as good as you just made me." He grins up at me salaciously before leaning over Kya, trailing kisses along her spine.

"My pleasure, Payaso," he responds in a husky breath. Gripping her hips, Kota drives into her with renewed speed, drawing gasps and mewls as she climbs towards that edge her omega's craving.

Lucian drops to his knees next to Kya, lifting her chin so she's forced to meet his gaze.

"Scream for us, Bunny. Let the whole pack know how well your mates care for you. How thoroughly we fuck you. Flood the bed with your slick, consume all our senses with your scent and need." As the last word leaves him, he crashes his lips against hers, devouring her mouth in a heated kiss as she shatters into another orgasm, clenching around Kota. With a grunt, Ounce buries himself deep inside Kya, biting her back below the shoulder blade as he climaxes.

They collapse in a pile of limbs, and a soft chuckle sounds behind me as River moves next to me. With a glance, I know what he wants me to do. Bending down, I help lift Kota off Kya, peppering his neck with open-mouthed kisses.

River scoops Firebug into his arms, cradling her to his chest.

"Need a rest, Banphrionsa, or are you hungry for your bears?" he murmurs, running his nose along her temple.

"More, please. Need more."

“Two-in-one should count as more, right, Axel?” Casper asks from where the two bear shifters are still lying, the bases of their cocks touching. They alternate stroking their lengths in a corkscrew motion.

“Gods, yes, *please*,” Kya pleads.

“Shh, Firebug. They’ll make you feel so good. They’ll stretch you ready for our knots, don’t worry,” I promise as River moves her to straddle Axel and Casper.

Crawling on my knees next to them, I reach across, guiding their combined cocks into Kya’s wet, hot channel as River slowly lowers her down. The sight of her pussy stretching over Axel and Casper’s cocks has mine hardening again. Her gasps and cries of pleasure consume me, and my mouth waters to taste her again.

Leaning back with her hands on Casper’s hips, Kya begins to move. It’s the most sensual and captivating lap dance, and I can’t look away. Slowly, she changes from grinding down against them in small circles to rolling her hips like a wave.

River latches onto one of her breasts, sucking the nipple taut until it pops free. I can’t sit still and simply watch. I have to touch her. Taste her. Leaning forward, I run my tongue under her navel, smiling when the action is rewarded with a gasp from Kya and Axel. I lap against her clit, twirling my tongue over her sensitive flesh before sucking.

I lose track of the others around us, my sole focus on helping my mate reach the heights of another orgasm. Wanting her to clench around Axel and Casper and drain every drop of their seed while I watch.

“You’re so good to us, Chibi Girl. Look at you, taking both bears together while the twins lick and suck you. Are you almost ready to take their knots? I can’t wait to watch you be filled by them both, locked in place, while the rest of us take turns fucking your mouth. Casper was onto something with that comment. It’s gonna be hotter than a brothel in Hades.” Kota’s words tip the balance, and Kya screams as her muscles twitch from the force of her climax.

A small rest, a minor pause for us all to catch our breaths,  
and then I'll be sinking inside her, knotting her to me,  
relishing in the pure bliss of my mate.

## CHAPTER 36

4-5-9



“They ever let you walk anywhere, lad?” Flynn’s voice drifts across the hallway. I still don’t know why they haven’t moved him to the wolf wing. There has to be a reason. I just need to gather the puzzle pieces and put them together. If they’re watching him too closely, we won’t be able to escape. My new plan will rely on far more luck than I like, but if Flynn’s joining me, it can’t be helped.

“Physio sessions, yes. Outside of that, no, not so much. I think my limp in this form bothers them,” I respond to his question absentmindedly while I continue working on creating an access point to the sewer piping.

“Limp?”

“Mhmm, I was an amputee when I arrived. One of the first things they did was an experimental leg transplant.” A pause follows my admission, and I suspect he’s grown tired of my dismissive replies and tone when he speaks again.

“You know, for someone who doesn’t remember his name from life before the facility, you sure remember a lot of other stuff,” Flynn observes, his voice making it clear how sceptical he is about my memory lapse.

*Time to come clean. Especially if we’ll be escaping this hell together.*

“I believe I said I didn’t have another name anymore. The name of the nine-year-old boy who arrived here, that name died with him.”

“You’re not dead though,” Flynn says in a low, quiet voice.

“I’m not a nine-year-old boy abandoned by his pack either.”

“True, but you’re not a number. You’re a man!” he exclaims before chuckling to himself, and I move over to the door, peering through the glass top over to his room.

“Why are you laughing?”

Flynn shakes his head, the smile fading from his lips, before looking at our surroundings.

“There was this old TV show, *The Prisoner*. The characters were all called numbers; the lead would shout, ‘*I’m not a number, I’m a free man,*’ or something along those lines at the start of each episode,” he explained.

“I... see.”

“You don’t. Probably never will.” He sighs, turning to the side and leaning his temple against the glass. “It’s not like you can watch it in here, and we’re never going to be allowed to leave this place. Unlike in the show, there’s no illusion that we’re anything but prisoners.”

Silence falls between us and stretches. Flynn moves back from his door and out of sight. A question that’s been playing on my mind since I first arrived here bubbles up, and I find myself breaking the moment of quiet.

“Why?”

“Why, what?” Flynn’s confused, disembodied voice asks.

“Why did you order me here?”

“Order you?” There’s a poignant pause before Flynn speaks again. “Lad, were you in *my* pack?”

“Once upon a time, yes. Brody delivered me here, but I never knew why.”

“You were nine.” Flynn’s words are barely audible as he takes the puzzle pieces and puts them together. “A lower leg amputee... Trevor?”

His face appears at the window of his door, palm splayed against the glass.

“Trevor Lee? *This* is where he brought you! No. No, no, no. Dammit!” His fist slams against his door before he turns, pacing back and forth in front of the glass, muttering and cursing with each step.

“There’s something else you should probably know,” I tell him, drawing his attention back to me.

“What?”

Instead of answering, I press my left wrist to the window. Flynn’s eyes squint then grow wider and wider as the mark I bear registers in his mind.

“Do they know? Is she a target?” He fires questions at me in rapid succession.

“Yes,” I nod, “that’s how it appears from what I’ve overheard. Brody’s working with them too.”

Flynn grips his hair in both hands, pulling roughly at the strands and cursing under his breath.

“Shit. Have they made a move on her? She can’t be here. If she were, they’d have probably put her with you. Maybe? Fuck.” He looks back over at me, taking in my relaxed stance. “Why are you so calm?”

“Because I have a plan,” I answer, a smile curling my lips. “Well, I have multiple plans. Which one I go with depends on you.”

“What about me?”

“Are you coming too?”



The one part I’ve been struggling with since deciding to leave this place and find my mate has been how to avoid the guards noticing I’m not in my room. As I relay my plan to Flynn, he tells me the tale of how three inmates used soap and hair to create fake heads. These placed into their beds with blanket bundles fooled the guards long enough for them to escape their prison.

I'm typically not given soap outside of the weekly shower block visit, but I can get to the cupboard where they store the supplies. My routine here hasn't changed in years, so whenever I'm alone in my room, I slip out of my clothes, shift, and scurry through the network of pipes. Get in, grab some soap, get out and back to my room. Rinse and repeat until I have enough supplies to fashion a fake head.

It's slow work, much slower than I would like. I'm hindered by not having a mirror to compare the likeness to. It won't be perfect, though; it doesn't need to be.

Finally, it's finished.

It's time.

No more planning, no more recon, no more anticipating any and all variables where we could fail. The time for all of that has passed. We leave tonight. Come sunrise, we'll either be free or dead.

"Are you ready?" I ask one last time. My next move depends on his answer. If he says no, I'll turn right when I crawl through to the pipes behind the wall. If he says yes, I'll turn left.

"Yeah, I'm ready. Probably a liability, but I'll do whatever I can to get back to my daughter. Try and make amends, fully grieve for my twin." Flynn's words trail off before he clears his throat. "Let's go home, lad."

I nod even though he can't see me. A loud bang resounds from his room, the intention being to draw the guards' attention to his camera instead of mine. After placing the fake head on my pillow, I arrange the additional blankets I acquired into a makeshift body. Thankfully, I've always been on the leaner side, so within a matter of seconds, I'm back in the camera's blind spot. Removing my clothes, I shift down to my rodent form and slip through the gap to the pipe network.

The overconfidence of the humans in charge is a blessing. There are no cameras or motion sensors in this part of the facility. I could question why, and I have many times since first using these pipes to traverse the building. Today, it's too



late to worry about it. My focus is on reaching the wing furthest from our escape route.

Climbing up and over, to then jump down or duck under the pipes, I navigate my way to the east wing. Dropping into the service tunnel, I still, taking in the sounds around me. Pipes gurgle, creak, and groan. The hiss of steam whistles in the air, along with the faint buzz of electricity.

*All clear.*

Shifting back to human, I wince as my leg protests the abuse of breaking and reforming. Pushing the pain to the back of my mind like always, I approach the junction box. For this to look the most authentic, the cables should be chewed through. I have zero desire to electrocute myself though, so I reach in and rip a handful of wires out, plunging the corridor into darkness. By the time the red emergency lighting kicks in, I'm already moving to the next box a few metres down, where I repeat my sabotage.

The damage will draw the guards out from the security room, which is my next stop before returning to Flynn. We can't risk proceeding to the next stage if the guards are still watching.

Back in my rodent form, it doesn't take long to reach the vent that overlooks the security room. Multiple screens cover two walls, with each screen split into four separate images. They left a single guard to monitor the camera footage while the others head to the east wing. Shifting my eyes back to human so I can scan the grey-scale pictures from my hiding spot, I search for evidence that the guards and facility staff will be otherwise occupied for the foreseeable future.

The east wing is in chaos. The double doors separating different sections hang open at odd angles where shifters have tried to get out. Some of the doors appear to be short-circuiting and malfunctioning, repeatedly jerking back and forth.

Animals and humans roam the halls. The image quality isn't good enough to work out their expressions, but no one appears to be acting aggressively, which is a relief. As much as

I want to leave this place far, far behind me, I wouldn't feel comfortable with someone else being hurt in the process.

Before reverting my eyes back to those of the rodent, I look over our planned route. Flynn can't access the pipe network from his room, so we're going to have to use the main corridors for parts of our journey. Everything appears clear, though that can all change in an instant. Linger here is just wasting time.

I need the guard's keycard. Some areas will still be off limits, but those should be the main labs, the offices where the research is stored, and places that security rarely goes to. All I need is access through the hall doors, maybe some of the back access passageways too. The night guard will have clearance for those areas. If I wanted to go deeper, this wouldn't be my best option. I want to taste fresh air, though. To hunt down my mate and then eventually destroy Brody for the part he's played in my captivity.

Pulling my mind back to the task at hand, I wait until the guard is relaying information into a walkie-talkie, coordinating the movements of his co-workers. Once I'm convinced he's more focused on the screens in front of him than his own surroundings, I slip through the vent, shifting back to human as I fall. He turns at the sound of my bones breaking, but before he can utter a sound about my presence, I smash my fist into his face. It's not hard enough to knock him out, but the second punch does the trick.

Moving quickly, I search the drawers for the restraints they use on us before the drugs either make us compliant or we simply give up hope. Making quick work of adjusting the height of the backrest, I pull his wrists through the gap on either side of the support bar, then clasp each wrist with the first set of cuffs, restraining him to the chair. Pushing him over to a corner, I cuff the base chair cylinder to the radiator before relieving the guard of his keycard.

We're on a time crunch now. This was also one of the riskier parts of the plan; there's no going back now though.

Placing the precious keycard between my teeth, I jump up, gripping the vent's edge and urging my body to shift at a slower rate. Starting with my feet and legs, then moving up until I'm able to scramble back into the passageway and scamper back to Flynn.



Slipping out of the supply cupboard, I adjust the new set of scrub-like pyjamas they give us to wear here. Something tells me Flynn will probably appreciate me being clothed when releasing him. I approach the main doors to our corridor at an even pace, or as even as my limp allows. Swiping the card through the reader, I breathe a sigh of relief as the little light turns green and the air fills with that familiar buzz as the door unlocks. Picking up my pace, I reach his door within seconds and swipe the card again.

As soon as the door swings open, Flynn steps through.

“Lead the way. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

I simply nod in response and head back to the main doors.

Once we put two more corridors between us and our rooms, I look over my shoulder at Flynn and ask, “Did they dose you with anything today?”

“Yeah, I don’t think it did anything much. My sense of smell seems off, not as sensitive. I can still feel and hear my wolf though,” he mutters as we slip into the service passages and are able to increase our pace, knowing the cameras won’t pick us up.

“Scenting and hearing if anyone’s approaching is the only way we’ll get any warning. We have to go through the main halls again soon to reach the roof service shaft.” I keep my voice low, straining my ears for any sound other than our breaths, our heartbeats, or the subtle sound of our footsteps.

“I know, lad. You made a good plan on short notice. Even if we are relying on a hell of a lot of luck. It’ll be worth it to see Kya again.”

Shrugging is the only response I can come up with. As we continue, we fall into a somewhat comfortable silence and I count off the doorways, searching for the one we need.

Even with my limp slowing us down some, we make good time. I know Flynn could've likely reached the roof on his own by now, but he doesn't comment on it. Probably because he needs me to navigate the labyrinth this facility can feel like.

There's a moment where I think I hear footsteps following us, but when I pause to listen and scent the air, I only pick up Flynn and me. Shaking my head, I push open the door back to the main hallways. Another swipe of the keycard, and we're through to the north wing.

My heart thunders in my chest, the sound in my ears almost drowning out everything else. So close. Two more corridors until we reach the door to the roof service shaft. In silent agreement, we increase our pace. Our steps ring softly in the quiet space.

One more corridor. My mind whirls, thinking of how to introduce myself to my mate. Trevor, the boy she knew, is long gone. Perhaps she'll help me find a new name? One to go with my new beginning.

Nodding to myself, I let a soft smile slip across my lips. Yes, I like the idea of a new beginning and a new name to celebrate it.

It feels like I blink, and we're in front of the door to the roof. Swiping the card, I pull the door open and step through, reaching for the ladder that will take us up and to the final stage of our escape.

"Interesting place you two have found yourselves on this little midnight stroll." The voice doesn't belong to Flynn. Looking over my shoulder, my eyes widen at the sight of the large male in the still-open doorway.

"Brody," Flynn snarls, his voice purely primal, bordering on feral.

## CHAPTER 37

# KYA



After making excellent use of the ensuite bathroom and ensuring every part of my mates' bodies are squeaky clean, we all exit my nest. Ducking into my room, I rummage in the closet for comfortable, baggy clothes, then follow the guys down to the kitchen.

“I think Gran came and restocked the fridge for us,” Casper says with a grin as he peels a post-it note from the fridge. “Apparently, you’re too quiet, Kya, cause Gran says, and I quote, ‘if we cannae hear yer at the main house, yer no doing her right.’”

My eyes go wide enough that they’re probably bugging halfway out of my face. My cheeks flush red hot with momentary embarrassment before I compose myself.

“Well, considering I spent the majority of my sexual awakening years trying *not* to be loud, I think you guys do a pretty decent job of leaving me hoarse.” I smile sweetly, nudging him aside with my hip so I can open the fridge.

“Well, if you ever feel like practicing, I’m sure at least one of us will be more than happy to be of service.” Lucian moves behind me and drops a kiss to my exposed shoulder, where the neck of my—technically Fjord’s since I stole it from him—t-shirt has slid down.

*:Unidentified car approaching the old Alpha house at top speed!:* Tony’s voice screams through the pack-link, and my mates burst into action. Axel scoops me up, spinning around, and races back towards the stairs to my room and nest. From

over his shoulder, I see Kota and Knox rush out the backdoor, shredding their sweatpants as they shift instead of taking them off. Axel bounds up the stairs, using his long legs to his advantage and simply bypassing every other step.

*:How did they get onto pack lands?:* River demands, his mental voice vibrating with his Alpha bark.

*:Drove straight through. They knew where the turning was and never even slowed down. Guards were blindsided.:* Comes the reply from a pack member I don't instantly recognise.

Axel unlocks my nest and sets me on my feet. He grips either side of my face, his hazel eyes searching mine for a moment. "I need you to stay in here until we give the all-clear."

I open my mouth to argue, but he cuts me off.

"I know you can fight. I know you can hold your own, but I *need* you safe. *We* need you safe. Just humour us, Kya, please. Give us this. Let us deal with whatever threat this might be without thinking you're directly in harm's way," he pleads.

"Okay, okay," I whisper, clutching his fingers against my cheeks before kissing him hard.

As soon as he retreats back into the hall, I secure the lock on the hidden door and curse the lack of windows. The rational part of my brain completely understands why they only installed sun tunnels, but right now, not knowing the danger, I feel almost like a sitting duck.

Though, even if there *was* a window, I'd be at the wrong angle to see any approaching cars.

I suppose it's a catch-22. On the one hand, without windows, no one approaching the house will see that this room is occupied or exists. On the other hand, if there was a window, I could break the glass, climb onto the roof and glide down to the ground. It would provide me with an escape route. Though, in this instance, since they're not coming *here*, it's a moot point.

Sinking down into my sunken bed of a nest, I take comfort in my mates' scents. I close my eyes and focus on the links I have with them all. There are no images. I can't see what they can, but the impression of sounds filters through along with their need to protect and defend our lands.

The sense of tyres squealing and a door slamming reach me right before my mates' emotions of anger and grief flood the links.

*:What's happened?:* I send the question through the mate-link, then the wider pack-link when no one answers.

More emotions of anger, sorrow, and grief bombard me through both links as howls rise up from the pack enforcers and scouts as they arrive at the main house.

*:Someone answer me!:* My mental voice cracks as I scream into the link. Rushing back across the room, I unlock the door and sprint down the stairs, using all the links I have access to, to call out each of my mates' names, then my brothers', Cole's, and Gran's as I run.

Throwing open the front door, I race towards the main house, only to stagger to a stop when I see all seven of my men standing in a semicircle in various states of dress.

"What's going on?" I ask, stepping up to River and Fjord in the middle of the group. Their much larger bodies block my view of whatever's on the ground in front of them.

"Kya, go inside with Gran and your brothers. You don't need to see this." Fjord's words are even, almost completely devoid of emotion. My omega is so much closer to the surface these days, though, and I can feel the turmoil brewing inside him.

"Don't shut me out. I can *feel* you. I can feel *all* of you! *What's happened?*" I push against his side, trying to see around him. River turns, attempting to herd me to the porch and into the house, but as he moves, I catch a glimpse of what they've all been staring at.

Of what the unidentified car dropped off before speeding away.



Grey eyes, so much like my own, stare vacantly up to the sky.

Dark brown hair, I remember always being neat and perfectly styled, is mussed, and sticking up in all different directions, highlighting the speckles of white and grey from age.

My eyes take in all the little details. Damaged cuticles, cracked lips, broken nails with dirt buried beneath them. Purple and black bruising on his temple. Dried blood under his nose. The strange pale blue scrubs with a navy long sleeve top visible beneath.

The note stapled to the centre of his chest.

*Return 4-5-9*

What is 4-5-9? Why would anyone think we'd know what that is, let alone where it is?

“Kya? Banphrionsa?” River’s voice penetrates the fog clouding my brain as I try to make sense of the sight before me. His hands run up and down my arms as my eyes bounce from the note to the body and back again.

My lips part, but I don’t know what to say first. What to ask. How is this happening?

“Petal? Say something.” Fjord crouches down in front of me, consuming my field of vision with his presence.

“Is that—” I lick my lips. The euphoria and natural high from the end of my heat seems more like several hours or days ago instead of mere minutes. I blink, trying to clear the oppressive fog and numbness that’s taken over my body.

“That’s Flynn.”



## KOTA

As soon as the words leave her lips, Kya’s legs give out and buckle beneath her. Fjord catches her and walks straight up the

porch steps and into the house. I follow him inside with Knox, Casper, and Axel. Behind me, I can hear River and Lucian ordering the enforcers and scouts to secure the perimeter and increase patrols.

“There’s a room yer can use upstairs. Come, I’ll show yer.” Gran’s voice is subdued and heavy with emotion as she guides us up to a spacious room. Daylight reflects off of the light lilac walls. The large bed looks soft and inviting with its cream damask duvet. Everything smells fresh and new, exactly what Kya likely needs right now.

What we all need.

I’m not sure what any of us were expecting when Tony warned us about the car. For it to screech to a halt outside the house, throw open the back door and dump Flynn’s lifeless body by the porch steps before speeding away again wouldn’t have been in my top one hundred guesses.

“Kya, what do you need?” Fjord asks as he settles on the mattress with her in his lap. His fingers weave lovingly through her hair. He presses a kiss to her temple as he continues stroking the loose violet strands.

“I-I don’t know,” she stutters, gripping his shirt in her fist. “How? How did this happen? What did that note mean? Why would they think we know *anything* about three random numbers?” Her voice rises an octave with each question until I almost want to wince at the high pitch. Somehow, I control the urge.

“Lucian will pull all the footage. He’ll trace the license plate. River will phone the Council. They might have made progress on their investigation while you were in heat,” I say, trying to reassure her as I climb onto the bed beside them.

“I’ll go call Isaac and his team. Try and cut through the bureaucratic tape and get some answers sooner.” Fjord presses a kiss to the top of Kya’s head before sliding her off his lap. With a nod to me, he climbs off the bed, fishing his phone from his pocket. “At least one of us will be with you until you’re sick of the sight of us.”

Casper takes the vacant spot in front of Kya, and she instantly buries her face in his chest. I run my hand up and down her back in a soothing motion.

“We’ve got you. You can let the emotions out, love,” I whisper softly. Her shoulders shake, then a snuffle escapes her lips.

Axel moves into the bathroom as a wrenching sob breaks free from our mate. A tap turns on briefly before being shut off. The dark-haired bear walks back into the room and over to the foot of the bed. He climbs up and gently lifts one of Kya’s ankles, placing her foot in his lap. Using the damp washcloth he brought out of the ensuite, he slowly and meticulously cleans her feet.

All the while, I stroke her back, and Casper murmurs affirmations of love and support in her ear.

“Break for as long as you need, Älskling. We’re all here to help glue the pieces back together afterwards. We’re not going anywhere.”

Knox kneels on the mattress behind me, reaching across me to stroke Kya’s hair. “I feel like I should offer you tea... or whiskey.” Kya twists her head to look back at him with red-rimmed, puffy eyes. “Do either of those sound good, Firebug?”

“Both?” she questions with a minute shrug.

“One whiskey tea, coming right up.” Payaso leans his weight onto me as he drops a kiss on Kya’s forehead. He moves off the bed and heads out the door without another word. My heart feels torn. I need and want to comfort them both, and I will. Right now, Kya needs me. Needs us. Later, once she’s asleep, I’ll comfort Knox.



“She’s finally asleep,” I announce as I walk around the corner of the kitchen an hour or so later and into the breakfast nook, all but collapsing into the vacant chair beside Knox. “She’s

wrapped around Casper like a spider monkey, so he's staying with her."

"Like he would've left her even if she wasn't. You're just sad she didn't wrap around you," Axel says quietly with a forced smile. "Pretty sure we'd all prefer to be the one curled up with her, given the choice."

"Of course we would," Knox murmurs from beside me as he stares into his near-empty mug. "I need a fucking refill. Anyone else?"

He nods after everyone says 'yes,' or in Gran's case 'aye,' to his question. He pushes up from his seat at the table in the breakfast nook and disappears into the kitchen. Brooks turns the corner and hands a laptop to Luc before taking a seat between the mountain lion and Gran.

"You really think you can find out something about whatever 4-5-9 means?" Ryder asks, looking at the computer warily as Luc boots it up.

"If Schmidt was linked to this, I'll find the connection," he replies, levelling the teen with a serious look. "The Council hasn't found anything in the last four days. I'm not gonna sit here with my thumb up my arse waiting for them to do something."

"See if there's a link to Brody too," I say softly, though they all still hear me.

"Why? What are you thinking, Kota?" River asks, watching me intently as he lowers his phone to the table.

"The last time any of us saw—" I swallow around the lump in my throat. As much as I disagreed with his actions since finding Kya, he was still the Alpha who pulled me from a bad situation and gave me a home. "—Flynn, he was fighting Brody at the old Jameson compound. Once Henrick was dead, we couldn't find either of them. Then Isaac and his team turn up. Vanessa starts causing drama. Schmidt just *happens* to find Isaac at the diner with Kya. Then he turns up here." I shake my head, and the others nod or purse their lips, realising how many *coincidences* there've been. "We know he was using

Vanessa and others to gather intel on Kya. Plus, Tilly and Aralar said there was a Schmidt with the hunters they met at the compound. I don't know, but it won't hurt to check for a link with Brody. Either Schmidt and Brody or this 4-5-9 thing and him." I shrug one shoulder, growing uncomfortable with all of the attention on me.

"I'll see what I can find." Lucian nods as he cracks his fingers before losing himself in the tech stuff that none of the rest of us understands. Knox walks back in, carrying a tray of coffees, plus a bottle of whiskey.

Taking my mug, I hold it in my hands for a moment, staring into the dark liquid. My leg bounces restlessly under the table until the need to do *something* overwhelms me.

"I'm going to go search Vanessa's house again. Maybe we missed something before." I shrug, knowing how unlikely that is, but I can't sit and wait for Lucian to do his thing. Glancing at Knox, I raise one brow. "Want to join?"

"Yeah, sure." He pushes his chair back. "Two heads are better than one and all that. Maybe my wolf will sniff something out that your feline nose missed." Knox smirks as we leave the breakfast nook and I roll my eyes.

## CHAPTER 38

# KYA



The downside to breaking the mental wall is now I can feel not only my grief and conflicted emotions over Flynn's death but also those of the entire pack. After crying myself into a hyperventilating, snotty mess, I fell asleep, and my dreams were just as tumultuous and overwhelming. When I return to consciousness before peeling open my puffy and swollen eyes, I can scent that I'm in my room at the McBearty house... my house.

With a groan, I sit up, rub the sleep and crusted remnants of my tears from my eyes and blink until my vision focuses.

"Instead of breaking that damn wall, I should've just made a door or something," I mumble to myself.

The sheets on either side of me are still warm, letting me know someone has been with me, likely trying to soothe me the whole time I was falling apart.

Slipping from the bed, I pad across the floor, determined to shower and then channel all of my emotions and the pack's emotions into something more productive.

"Shower, clothes, art." I repeat the three words over and over, turning them into a chant.



"You need to get out of this room, Kya."

I glance at the open doorway where River's standing. The paintbrushes in my mouth muffle my response, causing his lips to twitch, one side pulling up into a smile. He walks into my studio, stepping right up to me before tugging the brushes from between my teeth.

"Want to try that again without the obstacle this time?" he asks softly.

"I'll come out once I finish this piece—"

"No. You've been saying that for two days," he cuts me off, placing a finger against my mouth when I go to argue with him. "Kya, you've been in this room for nearly a week. When any of us have tried to get you to come out the last two days, you've said, 'once this piece is finished.' I love you. We love you. Standing back while you work through all of your feelings, your grief, I can do that. But I can't let you neglect your health and well-being in the process. Banphrionsa, you need to sleep. You need to eat. And you *really* need a shower."

My mouth drops open at the emphasis on really. Frowning at him, I turn my head and give a subtle sniff and promptly fall into a coughing fit. Ripe does not even begin to cover how bad I smell right now.

"Okay, you have a point. I'll go shower. I just need to clean the brushes first, though, and the palette."

"I can do that. You go with River, get cleaned up, and eat something. I'll make sure everything in here is taken care of," Lucian offers, stepping up next to River and taking the brushes from him.

"How are you guys so... normal?"

"We're not, Älskling. Everyone goes through grief differently. We've been processing in our own way. You've been in here. Which isn't a bad thing. You've been processing through your art." Casper's voice pulls my attention back to the door where the rest of my mates are gathered.

"I'm sorry." The words leave my lips on a whisper. I should've been there for them, they needed me, and I hid away



in my art, burying my head in the proverbial sand, ignoring everything else but my own selfish feelings.

“Why?” Kota asks, his brows pulling together into a frown. “Why are you apologising? You—”

“I spaced on you guys! We’re a team, and I hid myself away when you all probably needed an omega most.”

“Nope. Stop.” Kota marches across the room until he’s on River’s other side and grips the side of my face, forcing me to make eye contact with him. “This isn’t about alphas and omegas. It wouldn’t matter if you were any designation. You could be a shifter, fae, human, hell, even a vampire. *None* of that dictates how you handle your grief. Some people process by getting angry and wanting to fight. I’m one of those. Knox, well—”

“I like to fuck,” the wolf in question finishes for Kota.

“I throw myself into work.” River shrugs. “You get lost in your art.”

“Do you know what that tells me, Petal?” Fjord asks, and I shake my head once Kota lets me go.

“No, what?” I ask, genuinely curious as to his answer.

“It tells me you trust us. You trust us enough to retreat, to hide, to process, and grieve. You feel safe. You know we’ll look after your brothers. Seven alpha mates is a lot, but part of what comes with being our mate is knowing we’ll pick up the pieces. We’ll hold you together while you figure out the glue.”

“He’s right. We’ve got you, same as you’ve got us.”

My eyes land on Axel as he finishes speaking. “I haven’t had you, though. He was barely a father to me. You all, minus Fjord,” I shoot him an apologetic look, which he waves off, before looking back at the McBeartys, “had a closer relationship, probably a more parental relationship, with Flynn and Connor than I ever would. You’re the ones who should be grieving, not me.”

“Not how it works, Kya.” River threads his fingers through mine and pulls my hand up to his lips. “No one gets to say

how we handle a loss. Besides, you're not just dealing with your own grief and feelings. You're being hit by all of us, your brothers and the rest of the pack. That's more than one person should ever have to try and filter." He brushes his knuckles across my cheek. "You're amazing for coping at all."

I'm at a loss for words. My mouth opens and closes enough times for Knox's playful nature to slip through.

"You've either fried her brain, or Firebug has confused herself with a fish. I have a rod you can latch onto if you want to embrace the fish thing?"

"Or," River cuts in, "how about you go shower? And then I'll take you out to the cliffs? A picnic, some fresh air, and time away from the pack to recharge? Grab your phone; maybe the landscape will inspire a future painting."



## RIVER

Kya tightens her grip on my waist as she leans forward, raising her voice just enough to ensure I can hear her over the sound of the quad bike.

"So what did I miss? Did you find out anything about that note?" There's a hint of desperation in her tone, and I pause, thinking over how best to answer her. The engine's rumble feels ominous as it fills the lull in conversation.

"Honestly, not a lot." I turn my head so my voice carries to her whilst I can still keep my eyes on the trail. "Kota dismantled Vanessa's house looking for anything that could shed some light but came up empty."

"That's to be expected, though, right? She wasn't really in league with him, just a convenient source of information?" Kya's grip tightens slightly on my waist as she leans closer to my ear.

"Yeah, from what she told us and then the Council, that's the case. Her story's been consistent but not rehearsed. I think we can believe her on this..." My sentence drops off as I

reconsider if that's the wisest course, but the hyena shifter is out of my reach now. Clearing my throat, I return my focus to the path ahead, looking for the obscured turning that will lead to the cliff clearing. "Anyway, Lucian's been trying to hack into the agency Schmidt works for. He's barely been away from his desk except to check on you."

"Schmidt was on loan or something to Isaac's team, right?" she questions, and through our bond, I can sense her determination. Like she has a puzzle to solve, and until it's done, she'll be restless. It's something we have in common.

"Inter-agency collaboration, yeah. Luc's having trouble finding out which agency Schmidt actually works for though," I say with a sigh, slowing down as the trail we're following turns.

"What do you mean?" she asks, her lips brushing my ear.

"Don't expect me to explain the details." The words leave my lips on a laugh and are almost whipped away by the wind. If we were human, I doubt Kya would've heard me. "He went into greater detail, but the bit I understood, well, he's searched the usual suspects, but he didn't find anything with the MoD, NCA, or SIS. That doesn't mean Schmidt isn't on their payroll —"

"Just that Lucy-Lou hasn't found him there," Kya finishes my sentence.

"Exactly," I agree.

"Okay, and who exactly are those acronyms?" she questions. "I just want to make sure we're on the same page."

I compose my grin so she won't hear the smile in my voice before I answer her. "Ministry of Defense, National Crime Agency and Secret Intelligence Service. MI5 and MI6."

"What about the overseas organisations?"

"Luc's checking those next," I say, turning my head slightly towards her. "It's unlikely, but he's determined to find Schmidt. We'll find him, Kya. Then you can get answers and hopefully some closure." Reaching back, I give her knee a

reassuring squeeze before returning it to the handlebar. We both fall quiet for the final stretch of the journey.

One of the reasons I love this spot is because there's a steep incline leading up to it. A gasp of delight falls from my mate as we crest the top of the hill, and the clearing comes into view.

"River... This-How did you find this place?" She stammers as I bring the quad bike to a stop and turn off the engine. Kya pushes up from her seat behind me, jumping down and taking a couple of steps towards the cliff edge.

She turns back around to face me, and the soft glow of the late afternoon sun catches her hair, highlighting the tones of purple.

"This is beautiful. I mean, look at that view!" A delighted laugh falls from her as she spins to take in the cascading forest and mountains around us. Warmth and affection well up inside me, and I push the happy, loving emotions through our link. She's been essentially drowning in grief, anguish, and anger, probably some frustration, too, from all of us and the pack this past week. I'd hoped bringing her here would help, but I never could have guessed how much.

Smiling, I climb off the quad bike and unload the picnic supplies.

"How close to the edge do you want to sit?" I ask after setting the picnic basket down and unrolling the blanket.

"Not too close. I don't fancy rolling off. It's a long way down." She peers over the cliff, balancing on one foot so as to see further over the side without approaching it. Her hesitancy draws a soft chuckle from me, causing her head to whip in my direction. "Don't laugh at me, Grumpy Wolf. If I go over, you'd have to come after me."

"I always plan on coming after you," I quip back with a wink and grin when her mouth falls open.

"That's something I'd expect Knox to say," she says around a laugh after recovering from her shock.

“I have had almost thirty years for him to influence me. Besides, don’t all younger brothers pick up some of the older siblings’ habits?” I say with a shrug before laying the blanket down.

“Wait, *Knox* is the eldest?”

Looking up at her incredulous tone, I nod. “Yes. I guess he doesn’t act like it. Gran always said it’s because his birthday’s April Fools.”

“*His* birthday? You’re twins with different birthdays?” Kya asks as she settles on the blanket and begins unpacking the basket. “Oh, yum, pastries.” She tears off a piece of raspberry-filled croissant, popping it into her mouth and releasing a happy moan as she wiggles contentedly.

Clearing my throat and adjusting myself in my jeans as discreetly as possible, I answer her questions. “We were born six minutes apart. I was born one minute past midnight, so yes, different birthdays, but still twins.” I finish emptying the basket and remove the caps from two bottles of Innis & Gunn before handing one to her.

With a murmured ‘cheers,’ we clink bottle-necks and take a long pull of the honey-hued beer. Stretching out on the blanket, I pull Kya closer, kissing her head softly. The quiet hum of pleasure and happiness she gives in response has my wolf practically purring in satisfaction.

I wasn’t sure we’d ever get to this point. There are so many things in our past together that she could have held against me. This moment, alone, fed and simply enjoying each other’s presence, is the perfect end to the last few months.

My breath catches in my throat as I realise it’s been ten months since we first met. Six months since she woke up in our house. Six months since she ‘found’ her fathers, only to lose them again.

Feather-light kisses dot my shoulder and neck as Kya makes her way to my lips. I open for her, sliding my tongue to join hers, embracing the start of this erotic dance, the food and

beer forgotten. She pulls my bottom lip between her teeth, nipping at the flesh before sucking it into her mouth.

“Thank you for this, River.”

With a growl, I spin us until she’s on her back beneath me, pinned between my forearms as they rest on either side of her head.

“Our picnic date has only just started. I think there’s still several ways I can distract you. Ways you’ll enjoy, though the surrounding wildlife might flee from your screams.”

“Oh, *my* screams? Maybe they’ll be fleeing from your vocal begging,” she taunts with a sassy smirk.

“I don’t beg, Banphrionsa.” My chuckle cuts off at the sound of a twig breaking underfoot. The scent of a shifter wafts towards us from the tree line to our right. Pushing up onto the palms of my hands, I brace myself protectively over my mate. My eyes scan the surrounding forest for any sign of movement, yet nothing stirs.

Kya drops her legs from around my waist, rising up onto her elbows.

“I don’t sense—no, wait—” Kya doesn’t get a chance to finish her thought. I spot a flash of a black and silver before a gorilla charges out from the trees to a few feet from where we heard the twig snap. A hard, heavy body slams into me and teeth sink into my shoulder as I’m knocked off of Kya.

Twisting to try to break the shifter’s hold, I look to the side into a pair of dark soulless eyes. Feral eyes.

“*River!*” It sounds as though my name is being ripped from her throat as the creature above me changes its grip. Teeth pierce the soft flesh of my neck.

I need to shift.

I need to protect my mate.

Pain sears through me as I fight to free myself. I can’t change form while its teeth still pierce me. The warm, wet, dampness pulsing across my skin isn’t a good sign. My vision

grows hazy. The enraged roar of a leopard fills the small clearing.

I hope it's not more shifters coming to ruin our happiness.

*:River! We're on our way!:*

*:Hold on, brother, we're less than ten minutes out.:*

My bond-brothers' words flit through my mind as the world grows black and then nothing.



The Lost Therian Omega  
will continue in  
Uniting Their Pack





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This book was so much more challenging to write than the first. I am incredibly grateful for how many people have read *Shifting Their Ideals* and wanted to continue Kya's story with me. The pressure was unexpected. It seems silly to say now, no matter how many people read. I'd still have felt that pressure. There was just a hell of a lot more of you than I ever expected.

So readers, thank you. Thank you for reading, for your patience and perseverance. Juggling a full-time job from home with a toddler—who entered the clingy monster phase as I started writing this book—has been a learning curve. I'm not a full-time author, maybe one day, but even if it takes me a few months longer than others, I promise to get the books out. I love seeing your reactions to my characters. Thank you for taking the chance on a baby author and for your support.

Angelique, I don't know if you fully comprehend how much your friendship means to me. You are my absolute rock when it comes to this writing thing. When we started talking for NaNoWriMo 2021, I had no idea what the year would bring. Thank you for brainstorming with me, for talking me down when the bad reviews hit hard, and for pushing me to write the dang words! Please don't ever change. Same brain for life.

Mary, not only do you keep me organised, you are so encouraging. I don't think I can put it into words. You're my PA, but I also consider you a friend. I have learnt so, so, much from you, and I still have so much to learn—especially around commas—but you're always patient and kind. I will forever be grateful that you took me on because I would have likely fallen apart or forgotten a million hops, parties, and timezone changes without you.

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This year has been a whirlwind. The journey is far from over and I hope you'll all stick around and continue it with me.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aisling is a book addict living in London with her Scottish husband, their tiny tornado of a daughter and their fur baby affectionately known as Tw@Cat.

Aisling has always had a brain full of fantasy worlds and fictional scenes, and now they're being put down on paper to be shared with the world.



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