



Rhea

BLACKRIDGE HAVEN BOOK 6

RHEA

Blackridge Haven Shifters

Book 6

A.F. MONTOYA

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Chapter One

NO ONE ESCAPES THE PRIDE.

My stomach clenched tightly as I read and reread the letter. It showed up on my desk, unmarked and completely unprompted. I left the pride years ago, you'd think by now they would've given up already.

Scanning the tiny station, I considered the other officers suspiciously. I couldn't outright ask any of them if they knew about it, they were human and if they didn't know about shifters then making them aware of it could be catastrophic. But the letter didn't show up here by accident. It had to be delivered by someone. Was it possible one of the guys I've worked with for years is a damn mole sent by the pride?

When I first left the pride, the next step would've been simple. Pack up, put in a transfer, keep moving. But I had a crew now and a job that I love more than anything and I was tired of running. I'm not that person anymore. If they wanted me, they were going to be facing one hell of a fight.

“Sergeant, Bart is back in hold up again.”

My gaze flicked to Martinez. He had a bemused smile on his face, completely at ease, no indication that he was the one who dropped off the letter. Still...

“Who handed out mail today?”

He frowned, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “Um... Jones, I think. He was using it as an excuse to sell his kids' candy bars again. I got three,” he grinned sheepishly.

Honesty rang in his tone and I relaxed a little. Martinez isn't that good a liar that he'd be able to dupe me, even if my animal didn't have an uncanny ability to hear lies. It's one of the reasons I'm so good at my job. It's easy to lead a conversation when you know when someone's lying.

His brow furrowed as he looked at the letter in my hand. "Why?"

Folding it, I tucked it carefully into my desk, shaking my head. "No reason. What were you saying?"

His frown deepened for a second before he let it go, handing me some paperwork. "Bart's back."

I rolled my eyes. "What's the reason this time?"

"Public intoxication. He peed on the mayor's statue again."

It was work to keep my face straight. Bart is nothing more than a nuisance, a drunk who sometimes wandered over to the government building on his way home and peed all over the mayor's statue. Since I knew the reason he was drinking so heavily, I didn't ever charge him with anything.

"Alright, let him sober up and send him out to clean it. You know the drill."

Martinez chuckled. "Yeah. You ever gonna do anything other than turf him? He's here almost every week."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why? You've got a lot on your plate or something?"

It was an easy no. This is a small town. Most of the things we managed in the town proper were the basics like teenage vandalism and drunk and disorderlies. There were always a few calls a day from the houses on the lake, rich whiners complaining about neighbors being noisy in the middle of the day. But the job was slow, which was why most of us had projects on the side to work on. Martinez did outreach for the kids, stopping in different classrooms throughout the year to teach kids about officers and that kind of thing.

As one of the highest ranking officers in the station, I was kept pretty busy but I was also a liaison for the small number of shifters in town and any that traveled through here. Not that the station knew that. They thought I just liked working with tourists.

“Fuller, come join me in my office.”

Martinez waved and loped off after I handed him back the paperwork, pushing away from my desk and heading for the Chief’s office. When I poked my head inside, he was scowling, his eyes glued to whatever paperwork was in front of him.

“Chief?”

When he glanced up, he waved me over. “What’s going on with that fire from the other week?”

I sighed. On top of everything else, I was still working on the fire at Malcolm’s construction site. Whoever caused it wasn’t human so any information I passed on would have to be doctored carefully but that would only become an issue once I actually had something. As of right now, we’ve hit a dead end.

“Nothing new. The security camera footage didn’t reveal anything that we could pick out and the one worker who was there was knocked out. Had no idea who was involved.”

His frown deepened. “He could’ve been involved. Have you looked into him?”

My eyes narrowed. Malcolm is on the same crew as me and a good man. He was pissed as hell that his site was destroyed and he’d never do something so stupid as to piss off Callisto. You’d have to be suicidal and he’s got a mate and a kid at home waiting for him.

“He’s clear. Footage showed him the whole time.”

His low growl was unimpressive but I didn’t point it out.

“It’s been weeks, Fuller. If we don’t get something soon, it’s gonna go cold. And I really don’t want to have to report that to the property owner.”

I fought back a smirk. The property owner, Aiden Callisto, is good at hiding who and what he is when he wants to but every once in a while, like when his property was destroyed and the guy working for him was hurt, his temper got the best of him. That kind of dominance was suffocating and even humans cowered and ran from him. As one of the few people on the planet who knows exactly what he is, I didn't even blame the chief for being afraid. Hell, Aiden's been my friend for years and I still had a healthy dose of caution around him.

"If it comes to that, I'll talk to him. We've got a good repore and he doesn't scare me as much as he scares you."

He shot me a dirty look. "Sometimes I don't like you."

Cracking the first smile I've had all day, I chuckled. "Would you rather talk to him then?"

Making an irritated sound, he shoved the paperwork away from him. "No. You're annoying but not wrong. He's nicer to you. Last time he called me for an update, I almost shit myself. What's with him anyway?"

I lifted a shoulder. "Rich CEO from a foreign country has a lot of power."

He made a face. "That's bullshit. The man radiates some kind of weird energy. I swear I couldn't breathe the last time I had to meet with him in person. It's strange."

Uneasiness washed over me. I'd have to call Aiden and talk to him about it. He was being too loud lately. I knew he was angry, so was I, but we both knew what would happen if the world found out our secret. No shifter would ever be safe again.

CHIEF HOLT DECIDED to hand the whole case over to me. He'd taken it from me when everything started because he wanted Aiden to feel like a priority. Given that Aiden's ripped him a new one with every phone call, the chief is understandably eager to hand it off.

Picking up my cell, I sent out a text. I knew better than to call Aiden without warning. He's a busy man and the likelihood I'd be interrupting a meeting was high. He was less likely to be an irritating ass if I gave him warning.

My phone rang a few minutes later and I answered it immediately, holding it between my shoulder and my ear as I flipped through the paperwork.

"That was quick."

His dark smoky voice filled the line. "I'm between meetings. What's wrong?"

I made a face. He's always been that way, protective even though I told him I didn't need protecting. Not anymore at least.

"Nothing. Your case has been reassigned to me, that's all. I'm keeping you updated like a good friend."

He murmured something and I could hear his assistant, Christian, speaking in the background before he returned his focus to me. "So your idiot boss finally decided to do something smart for once. Good, I'd rather work with you. Have you found anything?"

This was the hard part. The part I hated the most. The part I thought I'd lucked out at avoiding when Holt took over the case. Telling someone that their case was going cold was hard enough. But Aiden's helped me a lot over the years and I couldn't stand the fact that I didn't have anything to offer him.

"Nothing. I'm sorry, Aiden. I'm trying but—"

"But what we're looking for isn't human. I don't hold it against you. I imagine with your boss holding onto the case, you've struggled to do any real work. I'm going to be down there in a few days, we'll review and look over the site together."

I rolled my eyes. "You know I'm not supposed to do that. Informing you this often was a courtesy. For most people, they don't get to know the details of an ongoing investigation."

He snorted. “I’m not most people. I’ll see you in a few days.”

He hung up and I resisted the urge to slam my head onto my desk. He’s lucky he’s my friend or I wouldn’t be so nice about all this. I slapped the file closed and tucked it into my bag. I’d look over it again later when I’ve had time to clear my head.

My gaze shifted back to the drawer of my desk. Pulling it open, I stared at the letter. Maybe I should’ve mentioned it to Aiden... Shaking my head abruptly, I shoved the drawer closed again. No. I’m not a terrified teenager anymore. I’m a damn sergeant and an adult and I don’t need to go running to my friend just because of a letter. I can handle this.

Chapter Two

LINK

I'M TIRED. Bone deep, probably shouldn't be driving, tired. It's been this way for a while but no matter how much sleep I got, it wouldn't go away. Ever since I got discharged, I've been tired. Maybe I'd see a doctor if I knew of a shifter one who I could trust. They were rare though and even if I did, what the hell would I say?

I can't sleep.

I pulled off at a rest stop, a little worried I'd close my eyes while on the road, but the cold water I got from the vending machine didn't do much and I don't do caffeine. Scrubbing my hands roughly over my face, I tried to jumpstart my brain.

My phone ringing drew my attention and I sighed. There were only a few people who would be calling me. Most of them I wasn't interested in hearing from. I answered anyway because I like making my life difficult apparently.

“What?”

“Have you considered my offer?”

I snorted. “Yes. I already told you no. I'm not a damn spy.”

The low growl that punctuated his irritation did nothing over the phone. In person I'd be a little bit more swayed by it. Okay, a lot more. I'm not insane. Which is why I was glad this was over the phone.

“No, what you are is a special forces veteran who has a knack for woodworking. You could do the job and get

information for me without anyone finding out.”

The weariness settled heavily over my shoulders and I shook my head slowly like he could somehow see me. “I can’t, Aiden. I’m sorry, I got out of that field for a reason. It’s not who I am. Just—”

“How long are you going to keep running?”

My spine stiffened. “I’m not running.”

He made a tsk sound. “Yes you are. There are very few people who I care about in this world and I’ve seen the look on your face. You need to settle somewhere, you can’t avoid it forever.”

“Says the man who can’t sit still for longer than a day. I’m fine, I’m just not interested in playing spy right now.”

“You’re fine?” He didn’t sound convinced and I knew why. I couldn’t pull off convincing anymore. I was just too tired.

When I didn’t respond, his dark smoky voice filled the line again. “You’re lying. Here’s the deal, either you come out and see me and consider this job or I’m coming to you. And don’t think I can’t find you, you’ve made that mistake before.”

My lip lifted in a scowl. “You love bringing that up, don’t you?”

He chuckled. “Yes, well sometimes I feel you need to be reminded of your place. What’s your decision, Lincoln?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not flying to China or wherever the hell else you’re busy taking over the world. Even if I considered it, I’m nowhere near an airport right now.”

“Well lucky for you, I’m not overseas at the moment. I’m in the process of building a new compound in a small town in Montana. I’ll meet you here.”

Jerking the phone away from my ear, I looked at the screen to make sure I was talking to the right person. When I put it back, I couldn’t help the incredulous tone in my voice.

“Montana? Since when are you the small town type?”

He let out a heavy sigh. “It’s difficult to explain and not something I’m willing to do over the phone. I’ll have Christian send you the address. Unless you’d like a ride. You sound...”

Weary. Exhausted. Done. “I know. I’ll get there, just don’t expect me to rush.” I’ll probably kill myself trying if I did.

Concern laced his voice. “Lincoln...”

“Don’t, Aiden. I’m fine. Send me the address, I’ll see you in a few days.”

It took him a minute to finally hang up. It wasn’t normal for him, he’s usually so busy that I barely got in a goodbye before he was gone, but even I could hear the defeat in my voice. It didn’t used to be this bad. It’s getting worse.

My phone chimed, the address to Aiden’s new place coming up almost immediately. He’s lucky I was already headed in that direction. If I had to turn around, I might not make it.

IT TOOK another three days to get to Montana. It shouldn’t have taken that long but I could only pull off a few hours on the road at a time before I started feeling like I was going to pass out again. I was spending a fortune on hotel rooms. It almost made me wish I drove something other than my bike for this trip. But the wind on my face and against my skin was the only thing keeping me awake at this point and besides, you’d have to hogtie me to get me to ride in anything else. I can’t stand cages.

When Aiden said small town, I didn’t realize just how small he was referring to. He has houses and condos in almost all the major cities around the world. He’d probably consider Chicago a small town. But this place...

The sign as I drove past boasted barely over a thousand people. The streets were quiet, most people apparently choosing to walk instead of drive. A small river cut through the middle of it, leading to a decent sized lake. The word

quaint would fit the little town perfectly and it was so vastly different from what I'd ever expect from Aiden that I had to check and recheck the address he gave me because I couldn't quite believe it.

I could see the appeal though. The air was clean and crisp, not a hint of the city smog and car fumes. The view was insane, an intense mountain backdrop surrounding the town on all sides. And people seemed pretty familiar with each other, waving and stopping to chat. But it seemed like a place to retire and Aiden was nowhere near that point yet. Maybe in another few millennia but no way in hell would he do it now.

People watched me curiously as I coasted down the main road toward the one B&B in town. Aiden said he was staying there while his new place was being built and he'd meet me once his work day was finished. Which could be anywhere between noon and midnight. I'm not sure I've actually ever seen him stop working and I've known him for years.

When I pulled up to a stop in front of the small B&B, I wasn't surprised to find Christian already there waiting for me. He was glued to his phone, the wrinkle between his eyebrows almost permanent at this point with how often he frowned. He only glanced up when I walked up to him, giving him a knowing look. He rolled his eyes.

“Shut up. I'm glad you're here. He's been breathing down my neck since you agreed to come. If you'd taken any longer, he would've sent me out to get you and we know what a mess that would've been.”

The stretch as my lips pulled into a grin felt foreign after so long. Christian, like Aiden, was an old friend. I actually got him the job working for Aiden and I couldn't tell whether he was grateful or he hated me for it half the time. He also has zero sense of direction and can get lost in his own apartment so sending him after me would've only made Aiden's life more difficult. Pulling him in for a hug, I clapped his back.

“Good thing I'm here then. How you been?”

He hesitated before hugging me back, letting out a sigh. “I've been better. With all the shit going on with Aiden's

compound being burned down—”

I jerked back with a frown. “Hold on, what?”

His brow furrowed. “He didn’t tell you?”

A deep growl rattled my throat. Of course he didn’t. His reasoning for me taking the stupid spy job was that he wanted someone he trusted monitoring the construction. He never mentioned anything about a fire.

Christian grimaced, stepping back. “Okay, you know I don’t like it when you two do that.”

I swallowed down the noise. Christian is submissive and the dominance was rough on him. How he managed to still be working with Aiden was beyond me. His ability to withstand that man’s dominance was mind blowing.

“Sorry. No, he didn’t tell me. I’ll kick his ass for that later.” Tossing my arm around his shoulder, I let him lead me inside. There were only four rooms in the place and three were already taken so I got the last one across the hall from Aiden. Christian followed me, his focus stolen by his phone again, but when I dropped onto the bed and scrubbed my hands roughly over my face, he finally spoke again.

“You look like shit.”

“I love you too, man.”

He snorted. “Aiden’s gonna lose his shit when he sees you. If there’s someone involved in making you look like that who you’d rather he not find out about, you should probably tell them to hide.”

Dropping my hands, I shot him a look. “He’s the one who’s got people setting fire to his buildings, not me. I’m fine. I’m just tired.”

His expression was dubious but I didn’t want to get into it with him. Or anyone for that matter. I just wanted to get some rest. And summon the energy to kick my friend’s ass for not telling me everything. I would’ve been here sooner if I’d known that’s why he wanted me to be a damn spy. And now I wouldn’t be able to get out of it either. Aiden and Christian

were as close to family as I got anymore. If they were being threatened then I was going to help. No matter how exhausted I was. Am. Fuck, I need a nap.

Chapter Three

AT LEAST A FEW times a week the crew met at the bar before heading home. Corey had been promoted to manager but more often than not, you'd still find him behind the bar. He liked being there and since Ethan wouldn't go anywhere without him, we liked to gather here to relax at the end of the day before heading home.

When I pushed into the bar, I let out a long breath. It took a lot of work on Jackson's part to bring me into the crew. I didn't trust him at first. Being raised in a pride, the thought of shifters in groups made me wary. But Jackson is a good man, a great alpha, and the crew was a ragtag team of misfits who made the day better. I smiled when I saw them hanging out near the pool table and felt myself relax.

With a lift of my chin, I headed for the bar first. Ethan was already there, becoming one of the regulars now since he refused to let Corey work alone. I dropped onto the stool next to him. He took one look at me and frowned, sliding me his drink.

"Looks like you need this more than me."

I took it like a shot, grimacing against the burn. "Thanks. Long day, I guess. How about you?"

He lifted a shoulder but a snarl rattled his throat, giving him away. His animal is difficult to deal with, a result of a forced turn that nearly killed him. He had good days and bad days when it came to keeping himself under control. It was

why he didn't stray far from Corey. His mate was the only one who could keep him under control.

Two new glasses appeared in front of us, Corey giving his mate a small smile before turning to me. "Rough day for everyone, apparently. Liv got called out to deal with Derek too."

My eyebrows shot up. Derek wasn't easily riled. Not anymore anyway. "What happened?"

Ethan scowled. "Stupid piece of shit tourist mother--"

Corey cleared his throat, interrupting him just in time. Malcolm's little boy ducked behind the bar, rushing over and standing on his toes, beaming at me.

"Hi! What can I get for ya?"

I rolled my lips between my teeth, trying not to laugh. Javi was so cute and loved to play bartender whenever we were here. I told him to choose and watched him as he grabbed a shot glass and tried to fill it with soda, making a mess in the process.

Corey laughed. "You must love the mop if you keep making a mess, little man. I told you, use a bigger glass for that."

Javi giggled, trying again before dodging Corey and taking off, climbing into Malcolm's lap to escape him. Shaking my head, I tipped back my drink. Ethan did the same and I got a minute of quiet before I pushed from my seat, patting his shoulder.

"Let me know if I can do anything."

He nodded, keeping his gaze on the counter. He probably wouldn't feel better until he went home for a shift. Heading to join the crew, I glanced around with a frown.

"Where's Jackson?"

Theo made a face. "No hello? How's it going? Rude."

Rolling my eyes, I gave him a pointed look. "Don't start with me, Fido. I'm not in the mood. Where's alpha?"

“Outside. He’s had a day, approach with caution,” Malcolm warned.

Corey wasn’t wrong then. Rough day all around. With a wave, I headed toward the back. I didn’t see him on my way in so there was only one other spot he could be hiding. The back alley was better lit now, too many incidents made Corey and Robin, the owner, cautious. They also fenced it off. You need a key to get back here and the only time it was open was for deliveries. It made for a good spot to cool off if your animal was riled up.

Jackson was leaning against the wall opposite the door, his mate Esme wrapped around him. He forced a small smile in greeting but I could feel the tension coming off him. It was amazing what Esme could ignore, his dominance was heavy and made me uncomfortable.

“Wanna tell me what happened?”

He shook his head. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

I shot him a dry look and eventually he caved. I may not be alpha but I’m a cop and I would keep pestering him until he told me anyway.

“Did you hear anything about an accident on the highway today?”

I frowned. “Yeah. I wasn’t there for it, I was dealing with something else at the time. Why?”

He snarled low and Esme started rubbing his chest, a worried frown on her face.

“It was caused by a couple tourists. They were boasting about coming out unscathed while waiting for us to fix up their cars. They had been racing and ran a minivan off the road. There were kids inside.”

Horror swept through me. I heard about the crash but the chief said he’d handle it because I was out dealing with a few complaints lakeside and the rich snobs who lived there wouldn’t stop calling. I had no idea it was that bad and I was going to give Holt a piece of my mind when I got to work tomorrow.

“What happened?”

Jackson’s jaw clenched and his dominance expanded so Esme answered for him, a tremble in her voice either because it bothered her when Jackson was so upset or the situation itself.

“The little girl broke her arm in two places. The boy is in the ICU. The dad was driving, he’s okay but the mom almost died.”

Fury sank under my skin and my cat rose to the surface. “Where are they?”

They both knew exactly who I was talking about. People like that shouldn’t be allowed on the streets and I was going to tear them apart. Followed by my chief for keeping it from me.

“Your boss said he’d handle it. We still have their cars, they aren’t going anywhere.”

Which meant they were probably in the B&B. There wasn’t anywhere else to stay out here unless you knew someone and they said they were tourists. I spun on my heel, intent on going after them myself, but Jackson’s harsh bark stopped me.

“You will not go hunting. I’m not having you lose your job because you’re pissed off. We all are. You wanna go after them, you do it as part of your job.”

Clenching my fists, I glared at him over my shoulder. He didn’t back down, keeping his gaze locked with mine. It took a second before I was able to breathe right and only once he stepped up to me and put his hand on my shoulder. Warmth shot down my arm and spread outwards, draining some of the fury away. It was something only an alpha could do, putting his support into a magic touch that soothed our riled animals.

I’m not normally so quick to react, being calm and level headed was part of my job, but after that letter this morning I was on edge and more reactive than normal.

Letting out a sigh, I nodded and stepped back. I get why everyone was so upset now. And I hated making things worse.

I could hide it from Aiden but the more I thought about the letter, the more I realized I needed to warn my crew.

“Look, I hate to make things worse but I got something today and I think you need to be made aware of it.”

Pulling the letter out of my back pocket, I handed it to Jackson. He frowned, unfolding it, while Esme peeked over his shoulder. The tension, which had just started to taper, dialed up considerably and when he lifted his gaze to mine, he looked pissed.

“When did you get this?”

“This morning.”

Esme looked confused, her eyes darting between me and Jackson. I wasn't really in the mood to explain but I knew I'd have to eventually. My history has been an off limits topic since before I joined the crew. I explained briefly that I wanted my animal to be kept a secret and left it at that and no one argued with me. Now though, I'd finally need to fess up as to why.

“Time to go. I'm calling a crew meeting,” Jackson growled.

SINCE JACKSON CALLED THE MEETING, everyone was required to be there. Corey had to call in his boss to take over for him and everyone who was already in a foul mood had to be dragged away from their drinks and they were none too pleased about it. By the time we made it up the mountain to the trailer park we called home, everyone was grumbling and unhappy. It only made this more difficult for me and I paced my trailer, waiting for everyone to be ready. Carmen and Malcolm had to put Javi to bed first and Ethan needed a shift before he could sit still for a meeting.

I never thought I'd be sharing this part of my life. It was the past and I didn't dwell. But the past was coming back to

haunt me and that put my crew at risk. They deserved to know. Stepping outside, I went to face the music.

“What’s this about?” Corey queried, his hand on Ethan’s neck to keep him calm.

Jackson glanced at me for permission before turning to the crew. “Rhea’s being threatened. And that means the crew is too. From here on out, we go nowhere alone. Not until we can figure this out.”

I grimaced when the crew immediately started asking questions and complaining. But Ethan’s eyes were locked on me, narrowed and dangerous. He, more than anyone, knew what could happen if the crew was being threatened.

“Who?”

I focused on him, crossing my arms over my chest defensively. “My pride. The one I was born into anyway. I left when I became of age and they don’t take kindly to women leaving. I’ve been in hiding but apparently they’ve finally caught up with me.”

Chapter Four

LINK

IT WAS NEARING midnight when Aiden finally deigned to show up. I'd passed out at one point but I'm a light sleeper and heard the knocking just fine. Shoving myself off the bed, I threw the door open with a scowl. He looked unimpressed, raising an eyebrow at me.

“About time.”

“I thought you didn't want to come.”

Rolling my eyes, I stepped out of the way so he could enter. He was in a damn three piece suit, not a wrinkle in sight, looking cool and unaffected like the entire day hadn't gone by. I hated him a little for looking so effortlessly good, shutting the door with more force than necessary before stalking past him. I only made it so far before I spun around and glowered at him.

“When were you going to tell me that you were attacked?”

He blinked slowly. “I wasn't.”

Clenching my fists, I growled. “Don't lie to me. Christian already told me about the fire.”

He shrugged, dropping to sit on the edge of the bed. “I wasn't there at the time.”

Irritation threatened to boil over but I knew yelling at him wouldn't do shit. I swallowed down a growl, not willing to get into a dominance battle with him. He'd win and it'd only piss me off more.

“How long will this tantrum last? If I don’t get some rest Christian will berate me incessantly and I’ve got things to do,” he commented coolly.

Shooting him a dirty look, I came to sit next to him. “You know, I would’ve been more likely to come if you would’ve mentioned it beforehand.”

Another lift of the shoulder. “You came anyway.”

We were going nowhere with this conversation and I was still exhausted. Dropping back on the bed, I rubbed my face roughly.

“When do I start?”

He didn’t answer and when I dropped my hands, he was studying me, a deep frown on his face.

“What?”

“You can’t keep going like this.”

Making an irritated noise, I shifted my focus to the ceiling. “You said that already.”

“And I’ll keep saying it until you decide to listen. Shifters aren’t meant to be alone. Just because your family—”

“Don’t.” I sat up, shaking my head.

“Lincoln...” When I glanced at him, his normally stoic facade was gone and he looked worried. “You are one of the very few friends I have, I don’t want to lose you.”

Guilt sank into my stomach and I dropped my gaze to my hands. “I don’t know what else to do. It’s what I’m used to. Nowhere sticks. I feel like I’m looking for something but I have no idea what.”

His hand rested on my shoulder. “I understand.”

He would. He’s been alive a lot longer than me and he’s been alone for most of it. When our friendship was just starting out he admitted to me that he didn’t trust people but he was worried if he didn’t start making connections, he’d lose the will to live. For someone like him, that could be catastrophic. So I became that annoying person that wouldn’t

leave him alone until he trusted me and knew someone had his back. We've been friends ever since.

Glancing over to him, I lifted my eyebrows. "So? Any advice?"

An easy smile took over his face and he shook his head. "No. You know I'm no better than you are. I'm just better at hiding it. For now though, I'd like to convince you to stick around and help me with my current problem. Only if you're feeling up to it, of course. You can consider your debt repaid for the last time."

I scoffed. "Like I'd go anywhere when I knew someone was targeting you, debt or not. Do you have any idea who?"

His lip curled into a scowl. "I have my suspicions but no proof as of yet. I have an officer who's working with me, I'd like you to meet her at one point." When I made a face, he shook his head with a smile. "She's an old friend. I knew her even before I knew you. And she's good at her job."

"I still don't think I should meet her. If you want me to blend in then the less people know the better."

He considered it before dipping his chin once. "I'll leave it to your best judgment."

I nodded. While he was older, he wasn't arrogant enough to believe he's the best man for every job. It's one of the reasons I like him. Whenever he's asked me for help when it comes to his security, he's deferred to me. He can't let the animal out to handle business without the whole world finding out so he left it to me.

"Gonna tell me why we're in this tiny ass town in the first place? Doesn't really suit you."

He actually looked annoyed, a low growl ripping through the room. My eyebrows flew up. Nothing got to my friend and his reaction was unusual.

"I have no idea. I felt an almost incessant need to move, did my best to ignore it, and wound up shifting way too close to a human civilization for comfort. I was lucky that there was

a storm that day and I wasn't seen. Once night fell I went for a flight and ended up here. I haven't been able to leave since."

My eyes couldn't get wider if I tried. Aiden didn't lose control. It just never happened. Not to the point where he'd have an uncontrolled shift. And if something was keeping him here, I was more than a little concerned.

"You don't think you're—"

He frowned. "No. At least, not that I'm aware of. The only thing I can gather so far is that something important will be happening here that I need to be ready for. As for what that is, I'm still trying to work it out. The animal has been... less than forthcoming."

It was surprising, I've never seen him flounder before. He's one hell of a businessman and not someone you want to meet in the ring, though I have in the past just because I liked the challenge. Whatever was going on with him, I owed it to him to stick around and help where I could.

SINCE WE BOTH needed to get some rest, I agreed to start his little spy mission in the morning and let him go to bed. We've got a lot to go over in regards to the new threat but I didn't want to keep him awake. He'd skip sleeping entirely if he could and I didn't trust him not to start working again once he walked away so the first sign that he was tired I demanded he go back to his room to rest.

He was gone by morning, which was unsurprising. Christian met me with coffee, which I refused, and a donut, which I accepted with a smirk.

"I don't know how you survive without caffeine."

I shrugged. "Probably the same way you survive around Aiden as a submissive."

He pursed his lips. "He tries around me at least. He refused to let me come out here before he got himself under control

after the fire. Even after I showed up, I could feel his displeasure but at least I could breathe around him.”

I nodded. “So where are we at with the job? Will the guy know who I am?”

“No. Aiden said to leave that up to you if you wanted to share it. I believe the only thing he’s said was that his friend was looking for work. You’re set to meet him this afternoon at the compound. It’ll give you an opportunity to look around. Security is on site but none that have worked with you in the past. Those that know you will be restricted to night shift to avoid letting the cat out of the bag.”

I gave him a dry look for the sad attempt at a joke. “Flight shifters are hilarious,” I drawled.

He chuckled to himself. “I’m aware. Here, I’ve written out a list for you of good restaurants in the area and this is the company card. And I’m supposed to tell you...” He frowned as he scrolled through his phone. “Ah. Here it is. Aiden says if you don’t use the company card to pay for your meals, he’ll make your life difficult. Do with that what you will. I’m off to New York to handle some of the work that won’t wait while he’s... incapacitated?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know what to call it either. “That works. Have fun. Bring me back some pizza.”

With a chuckle, he jogged down the path to where a town car was waiting. He could be VP if he really wanted to but he’s got a thing for taking care of people and Aiden happens to need a lot of care. Multi billion dollar CEOs aren’t notorious for self care.

I explored the town for a little while, just to get a feel for it. I wanted to see the original compound where the fire was but it was blocked with a locked fence and police tape so I had to assume I wasn’t getting anywhere near it without an escort and that would defeat the purpose of being undercover.

The whole town felt a little like a hallmark movie and I wasn’t sure I liked it. I was like Aiden, I spent a lot of time in the city. Only recently was I exploring farther outside city

limits, searching for something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

After a quick stop in a pizza joint for lunch, I got on my bike and headed out of town to the address Christian gave me. It was pretty far out, which made a little more sense, I guess, for privacy and that sort of thing. I was still curious as to why Aiden seemed to be stuck here. A mystery to figure out later.

I pulled up in front of the compound, stopping when the security guys stepped up in front of me. They followed the book by the letter, confirming who I was and why I was there before letting me pass. I made a mental note to praise Aiden for finally hiring some decent security while I was gone. Swinging into the little parking area, I barely removed my helmet before I heard a hiss. Spinning around, I came face to face with a very angry she-cat who was barreling toward me at mach speed.

Chapter Five

I'D SWUNG by Aiden's new compound because he wanted to meet with me about the case with some semblance of privacy. His new place was on a plot of land significantly bigger than Jackson's and we'd planned on taking a walk to discuss it. Afterwards, I stopped to see Malcolm and check in and I was about to head back to my cruiser when a shift in the wind brought the one smell I've been dreading.

Lion.

Snapping my head to the side, I zeroed in on a man riding in on a motorcycle, his face hidden by his helmet. When he pulled it off and I was greeted by blonde hair and blue eyes, my hackles went up and my lioness went on high alert, ripping a hiss from my throat.

Without waiting for an explanation, I went after him, ready to fight for my freedom. He looked surprised to see me and confused at my approach but the smell of him kept hitting me in the face and I had no doubt as to why he was here.

“What the hell are you doing here? Why can't you people just leave me the hell alone?!”

I was a few feet from him when an arm wrapped around my middle, yanking me away from the man. I fought against him, angry tears burning my eyes.

“Rhea! He's with me!” Aiden snarled low in my ear.

Betrayal slapped me in the face and I took a few steps back, swinging my gaze to him. His eyes searched mine and

he shook his head.

“What are you doing?”

I bared my teeth. “I could say the same for you! I thought you were my friend!”

The lion shifter stepped off his bike, confusion written across his features. “What’s going on?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Malcolm growled, stepping up behind me. I felt cornered and all eyes were on me. My lioness was screaming at me to fight, to show them we mean business so they won’t chase us anymore, but Malcolm’s crew was crowding closer and I couldn’t hide the growl in my throat anymore.

Making an irritated noise, Aiden grabbed my arm, yanking me toward the forest surrounding the compound. I dug in my heels, trying to rip my arm away, but his grip was like a steel band and he dragged me effortlessly.

“Aiden! Let me go!”

He ignored me. I could hear Malcolm barking at his crew to get back to work and I could feel the lion behind me. My animal didn’t like giving him my back but I almost lost my footing when I tried to turn against Aiden’s forward motion and I had no choice but to be dragged deep into the forest with the man who betrayed me and the one who would take away my freedom without a single care in the world.

Once we reached a small clearing, Aiden jerked me forward. I stumbled and whipped around, snarling at him, but he was right behind me before I had a chance to blink and seriously pissed off, his dominance and the look on his face making me backpedal hard until my back hit a tree and I was forced to stop. He advanced until he was up against me, his eyes no longer human, the pupil a vertical slit and the color more intense. I’d riled up a monster.

“Don’t you ever question my loyalty again, Rhea Fuller. I have watched entire civilizations rise and fall based on loyalty. I do not choose my friends lightly and I would never betray the ones I love.”

Breathing heavily against the dominance in the air, I tipped my head and gave him my neck, a sign of surrender. He loomed closer, a low growl that was more ominous than a ticking bomb rattling the air around us. I shrank away from him, my knees threatening to give out against the force of it.

“Aiden, enough. Let her speak, at least,” the lion shifter called.

I couldn't draw in a breath and there were spots at the edges of my vision from the lack of oxygen. My heartbeat was loud in my ears, pounding rapidly. I haven't been afraid of Aiden since we met but right now I wouldn't even breathe without his permission first.

I didn't realize that I'd squeezed my eyes shut until Aiden's attention shifted and he stepped away from me. I sucked in a breath, gasping, and sank to my knees.

“Fine. Speak. Tell me why the first sign of another lion in your territory sends you into a spiral. We haven't heard from them in years.”

Still trying to breathe right, I didn't answer him. I didn't want to tell him. He's got his own problems to deal with. And right now, I was a little afraid he'd burn the forest down in his rage.

“Correct?” he demanded. When I still didn't answer, he growled again and I gritted my teeth against the whimper in my throat.

Forcing my eyes open, I lifted them to meet his gaze. His eyes searched mine for a second and the dominance grew tenfold just like I knew it would.

“When?” The word didn't come out human and I nearly retched from the power in the air.

I'd dropped my chin and given him my neck again in an attempt to spare myself so I didn't see it but I heard it just fine. Skin on skin, the punch was loud and intense and it made Aiden stumble. I whipped my head up, my mouth falling open. The lion shifter was baring his teeth and growling, chest to chest with Aiden like he wasn't facing down a monster.

“Enough,” he snarled.

And to my complete shock, Aiden listened. He sucked in a sharp breath through his nose and let it out slowly and the dominance that was crushing me lifted. The man’s snarl didn’t disappear until I could breathe again and Aiden’s eyes had gone back to normal.

My chest hurt from the showdown against Aiden and I leaned heavily against the tree behind me, my eyes closed.

“When, Rhea?”

I swallowed hard. “Monday. A letter showed up on my desk. ‘No one escapes the pride.’ They’re coming for me.”

The man, who was either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid, stepped between me and Aiden as he threatened to lose control again. It didn’t do much to block the dominance in the air but it was more than I expected from a lion. I still didn’t trust him by a long shot but at least in this exact moment, I didn’t feel like he was going to drug me and drag me back to the pride.

“Aiden, you need to calm down. You said she’s your friend. You’re hurting her.”

Aiden’s snarl tapered off and he stalked away, giving me room to breathe. This was getting exhausting and I wasn’t sure how much I could take.

“Rhea!”

My eyes flew open and my head snapped to the side. “Jackson?”

Uh oh. Jackson looked pissed but he had no idea who he was going up against. I’ve never officially introduced him to Aiden and what he housed in his middle was a very well guarded secret. I shoved to my feet, stumbling and wincing against the effort as I tried to get between him and Aiden. Putting my hands up, I blocked him from going any further.

“Jackson, what are you doing here?”

His dominance, while nowhere near as heavy as Aiden’s, wasn’t pleasant and I was already struggling. He growled low.

“Malcolm called and said you were in trouble,” he ground out, his eyes glued to the two men behind me.

I sidestepped him when he tried to go around me but my strength waned and the earth tilted. Something was wrong but I didn't have time to figure out what before I was caught against a strong chest and lifted off my feet.

“You two assholes need to pull it together! What the hell is the matter with you?”

With that he stormed off, away from the most important people in my life. I wanted to panic, he was probably using this as an opportunity to kidnap me, but he didn't go far. He stopped by a little spot of sunlight and set me down, kneeling in front of me and searching my face.

“You alright?”

Taking a few deep breaths, I nodded. “I'm fine. Thank you.”

If he heard the distrust in my voice, he didn't mention it. He looked over his shoulder at Aiden and Jackson who were glaring at each other and speaking low enough that we couldn't hear them.

“Who are you?”

When his eyes shifted back to me, I drew my knees closer to my body protectively. He reminded me of the lions back home. Tawny hair, icy blue eyes, a tension wrapped around him that put you on edge. But that's where the familiarity ended. Unlike the lions that I remembered, this one had shorter curly hair where the lions back home kept theirs long and straight. He didn't have a massive amount of unsightly muscles either. He was trim and toned without being overdone. He had a scruffy beard, like he hadn't bothered to mess with it in a while, and he was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. He seemed too casual, almost like it was forced, and the distrust only grew.

“My name is Link. I'm a friend of Aiden's.”

I had to believe that because I doubt Aiden would let just anyone punch him in the face and get away with it. And there

was no lie in his voice either. I narrowed my eyes suspiciously.

“So what are you doing here?”

He lifted an eyebrow, giving me a once over. “I could say the same for you, princess. Doesn’t really seem like your spot.”

Confused, I glanced down. It was my day off but I wasn’t going to ditch out on meeting with Aiden so I came as I was. Unfortunately for me, my dryer broke and my clothes were soaked so I had to borrow clothes from Esme. While a little girlier than I was used to, it was better than nothing.

“Are you seriously judging me by my outfit?”

He lifted a shoulder, a bored look on his face. “You judged me by my animal. Fair’s fair, sweetheart.”

Pressing my lips together, I tried to keep my irritation to myself. He pulled me away from the dominance that was choking me, I should at least attempt to be polite. Attempt being the key word.

Chapter Six

LINK

I'VE NEVER MET A SHIFTER MORE distrustful of their own kind before. Hell, she practically attacked me the first chance she got. I had no idea why and guessing from the look on her face, she wasn't about to tell me. I ignored it for the time being, looking over my shoulder every once in a while to check on Aiden. He looked annoyed but not about to start murdering people so I left him alone for now.

He was going to get back at me later for hitting him. I don't normally mess with him outside the ring because at least in the ring there are rules and he can't permanently maim me. But when he was literally choking the woman with his dominance, something snapped and I reacted. My animal didn't like what he was doing to her and neither did I.

The two men seemed to come to some sort of agreement and I pushed to my feet when they headed our way. I offered my hand to the woman but she glared at me and struggled to her feet on her own, crossing her arms over her chest as they approached.

The man who'd shown up later stepped past me and put a hand on the woman's shoulder. She sucked in a ragged breath and let it out slowly, nodding once. For some reason I was irritated with the other man touching her so I turned away and faced Aiden instead.

“You good?”

I could still feel the undercurrent of his anger but he dipped his chin before addressing me.

“You’re being reassigned.”

My eyebrows flew up. “The fuck I am.”

His expression tightened. “I’m not kidding, Lincoln. I need you to watch over Rhea. I have business to attend to and it’s not safe for her on her own.”

She started to protest at the same time as I did.

“That’s not why I’m here.”

“I don’t need a babysitter, Aiden!”

He ignored us both, his face cold and unemotional. I recognized the look. He was in CEO mode and he wasn’t going to listen to reason. Shaking my head, I turned on my heel and stalked off. I wasn’t a damn bodyguard. I was doing this job because Aiden is my friend but I wasn’t going to be tossed around at his whim like the rest of his employees.

“Lincoln!”

Taking a leaf from his book, I ignored him, heading back to the construction site. I made it only a few yards before he grabbed my arm roughly and yanked me backwards.

I opened my mouth to argue but he cut me off and leaned closer, his voice low. “Listen to me. That woman saved my life. I *owe* her. She’s being stalked by her old pride and if they get to her, the things they’ll do to her will make what you saw overseas look like child’s play.”

It shocked me into silence, my mouth snapping shut.

“This is the first time in weeks that my animal is giving me leeway to leave this area. I need to go hunting and flush them out. In the meantime, I need you to watch over her. She’s not as tough as she likes to pretend and she means the world to me. I need your help, Lincoln. Consider this a favor asked.”

I hesitated. Aiden didn’t ask for favors. Asking me to help with the security thing was because I owed him for some shit he did for me and we liked to keep things equal. The fact that

he was emphasizing the favor part showed just how much this meant to him. He'd let me say no to the security gig. He wasn't going to stop with this one. Not until he made sure that woman was okay.

"Fine. But you're going to have to get her to agree. She doesn't trust lions."

His face darkened. "She has good reason not to. You weren't raised in a pride, you wouldn't understand. Just watch over her for me. I must go."

With that, he stalked off, anger still radiating off of him. I shot Christian a text to warn him about Aiden's foul mood before turning back to the woman and her companion, who were speaking to each other in hushed tones. At my approach, she fell quiet, fury and distrust radiating off of her.

The man stepped forward, offering me his hand. "I'm Jackson, alpha to the Blackridge crew. Thank you for agreeing to help."

"Don't thank me, Aiden is the reason I'm here," I replied gruffly, shaking his hand.

Jackson nodded slowly. "Yes, he mentioned you're a good friend. We both agreed that for now, it's best for Rhea to take some time off work and for the two of you to stick close to my territory. He didn't mention how long he'd be gone but--"

I snorted. "He wouldn't. He doesn't say anything he doesn't want to. It's fine, I just need to grab my stuff from the B&B."

"No need. I'm having one of my crew meet him there now, they'll be picking up your things. The two of you will be following me back to Blackridge Haven."

The last sentence held a lot of power and I bristled but it wasn't directed at me. Rhea growled low, obviously unhappy with the developments, but what Jackson just said was an alpha order. If she's on his crew, she'll have a really hard time ignoring it.

"Rhea," he warned.

She made a tick sound behind her teeth. “I heard you,” she snapped.

He shot her a dirty look before gesturing toward the way we came in here with his chin. With a sigh that tapered into a growl, she stormed off, leading the way out of the forest.

Glancing at Jackson with a frown, I fell in step with him. “This job would be a lot easier if she wasn’t so against it. You might be able to throw around alpha orders but I can’t.”

He scowled. “I’m aware. I’ll keep an eye on her while we’re at home and hopefully she’ll cool off after a while.”

It seemed pretty unlikely, especially when she snarled at one of the construction workers who approached her with a worried frown. He put his hands up in surrender and stepped back, shooting a wide eyed look at Jackson who just sighed.

“Ignore it, Malcolm. We’ll explain when you get back.”

Malcolm watched me suspiciously as I climbed back onto my bike and pulled on my helmet. Rhea was in a classic jeep, no doors or roof. About as close to a bike as you can get without actually riding one. I’d point it out as an icebreaker if she wasn’t so eager to get away from me, kicking up gravel as she tore out of the site. Jackson shook his head, climbing into his truck and giving a two fingered wave at Malcolm before driving off, keeping his pace steady so I could follow behind him. This was going to be a huge pain in the ass.

THE PLACE JACKSON led me wasn’t far, the next mountain over. Rhea was already here, her jeep parked alongside the rest of the cars and trucks, but she was nowhere to be found. Curious faces watched as I pulled up behind her. If she wanted to leave, she needed to run it by me first and I knew that wasn’t going to go over well.

Jackson stepped up to me, tipping his head toward the crew. “Let me introduce you to everybody.”

I shook my head. “Not right now. I can’t do my job effectively if she’s going to run off. Where is she?”

He pointed at one of the trailers near the end. There were seven in total. Three on each side of the gravel road and one at the very end. The one he pointed me toward was the one farthest back on the left hand side. I made my way towards it, not bothering to knock as I stepped inside.

She was mumbling under her breath, making a lot of noise. When I poked my head into her room, it was a disaster, clothes and shoes tossed everywhere. She was on her hands and knees, digging under her bed, apparently so lost in her own thoughts that she didn’t hear me until I spoke.

“Can’t do my job if you run off, princess.”

She yelped, smacking her head on the bottom of the bed before she pulled herself out, grimacing and rubbing the sore spot before shooting me a dirty look.

“Don’t you know how to knock?”

I raised an eyebrow lazily. “Knocking implies I give a shit if you want me to come in or not.”

She snarled, launching to her feet. “You three idiots may think you know best but I’m not a damn child and I don’t need a babysitter! I can handle this on my own without—”

I cut her off, shaking my head. “Look, princess, I get that you’re pissy, but Aiden’s a good friend and he asked me to help you as a favor to him. I don’t know if you know him that well but it’s a big deal for him to be asking like that. So do me a favor and suck it up for a while. Once he comes back, I’ll be out of your hair.”

She let out a growl, marching up to me. “I don’t know who the hell you think you are but—”

“As of right now, I’m your new bodyguard. Your alpha wants you to stick around here. If you need to go anywhere else, you need to inform me first. You need a shift, you aren’t going alone. I’m your shadow from here on out. I’m not going to disappoint my friend just because you’re in a pissy mood. Deal with it.”

I expected a tantrum, shouting, screaming. All things I could handle but had very little patience for because I'm still fucking exhausted. I did not expect her to punch me. I'm too tired for this shit.

Chapter Seven

I WAS WRONG. He's just like the lions of my past. Arrogant asshole. And when he decided to completely ignore me and tell me to deal with it, my already razor thin patience snapped and I lost my temper. I took him off guard, which was a little funny, but I also pissed him off and apparently he wasn't going to just let me get away with it.

He tackled me and we ended up in an all out fight. He seemed to be intent on pinning me but I'm not a damn pushover and I didn't pull my punches. While he was focused on my hands, I drew my legs up and kicked him in the chest, sending him sprawling. It gave me the chance to get to my feet but before I could get away, he tripped me and I landed hard on my hands and knees. Using my position to his advantage, he shoved me flat on the ground but I caught him in the side with my elbow hard enough to dislodge him and flipped over, throwing another punch in his direction.

He saw this one coming and caught my hand but he didn't see the other one until I clocked him in the jaw. A growl ripped out of him and he bared his teeth, losing his patience with me. Good, if he wanted to fight with fur and claws, I looked forward to it. I didn't get to let my lioness out much, not if I wanted to stay hidden. We could use a good fight.

Instead of shifting like I'd hoped, he threw his entire body weight on top of me, grabbing my hands and yanking them over my head. Idiot. It brought his face close to mine and when I headbutted him, I heard the bones crunch in his nose.

“Rhea, stop!”

The order pulsed with power and I grunted, all the fight leaving me instantly. Jackson didn't feel the need to use his alpha voice often with me but that's three times in a week and it was getting really annoying.

Link shoved away from me, a persistent snarl in his throat, blood dripping down his face. I'd be smug about it if I could freaking move right now. As it was, I was pinned under the weight of the alpha order and couldn't move until Jackson was ready to let me. He gave me a warning look before I finally felt it lift and I could move again.

“Is someone going to tell me what the hell is going on?” he snapped.

Shoving to my feet, I glared at him before turning away, going back to searching for the stupid box I kept hidden somewhere under my bed. I heard Link grunt and the crack when he reset his nose. It made me smirk. That's what you get, asshole.

“She's throwing a tantrum because she doesn't like the new way of things.”

“Keep talking, asshole, you've got a lot more bones in your body I can break.”

“Try me, princess,” he growled.

“Enough. Both of you. This is ridiculous. Rhea, we're trying to help and we can't do that if you won't cooperate.”

Dragging the little shoe box out from the farthest reaches of under the bed, I blew the dust off it. “I didn't ask for help. I told you what was going on as a courtesy.” Flipping open the top, I pulled out the old cell phone and its charger, plugging it into the wall. Link, who was still sitting on the floor, watched me with a frown on his face.

“What's that?”

I didn't bother answering him, watching the little screen load up. I kept it for one reason and one reason only. If anyone could tell me what was coming, it was Kiara. Her and her

sister still lived near the pride, near enough to be able to get information if they had to. None of us trusted the pride not to be listening so we had these burners and the only numbers saved in them were each other's. I turned mine off when I went into hiding and I knew they'd give me shit for it but they knew why.

The phone rang and rang before going to voicemail. It rolled into record and I said the one thing that'd let them know it was safe.

“They are nothing without us.”

Hanging up, I waited. Jackson and Link looked confused but I wasn't going to explain myself. The burner rang a few seconds later and I answered on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Who runs the pride?”

“The queens who guard it.”

She sighed. “It's been a long time, Rhea.”

Guilt sank in my gut and my jaw clenched. “I know. I was hiding.”

“I'd hoped you were. And now?”

“Now they found me. I need to know what's going on.”

A low growl filled the line before she sighed. “I'm afraid I can't answer that.”

Stunned, I sat back against the nightstand. “Why not?”

“It's not just our lives anymore. Talia's son would be under threat if she got involved.”

My chest tightened considerably. “Her son?”

She hummed. “Me and you got out. She didn't.”

Pain ripped through me and I choked, shaking my head. “No. We had a plan. We all were getting out. I—”

“You did exactly what we told you to do. I check in on her now and again but I won't put my nephew at risk. I'm sorry, Rhea.”

“No, I understand. I just... I’m so sorry, Kee.”

I heard the smile in her voice. “It’s good to hear from you. Stay safe.”

“You too.”

Hanging up, I drew my legs up to my chest. I haven’t felt this lost since the day I left home. There was no getting ahead of this. No inside knowledge. Instead of the predator I was supposed to be, I felt like prey. They were coming for me and one thing lions are very good at is stalking. They’ll take me off guard and rip me away from the life I’ve built. And because I’ve been gone so long, their punishment will be severe. For the first time in a really long time... I don’t know what to do.

THEY LEFT me alone for a little while. Maybe because they could feel how upset I was and they were being decent. But more likely because they were getting their stories straight, becoming a united front against me so if I argued, they’d be able to control me. Not that it matters. They won’t be able to hide me forever and the pride will come. I already lost one friend to them, I’m not letting my crew get caught in the crosshairs.

Grabbing a duffle bag that I’d tossed across the room in my hurry, I dropped it on the bed, stuffing random clothes into it as I mentally made notes on how to get out. They knew where I worked so the likelihood that they knew what my car looked like was high. I’d need to switch it out at one point. Chief was going to be pissed when I left without notice so I probably wouldn’t be able to transfer like I’d hoped. I’d figure out what I could do for work later. I had enough of a nest egg to keep me comfortable for a while.

Buried in my thoughts, I didn’t notice Link’s approach until he was standing next to me.

“Running isn’t going to do you any good.”

I ignored him, grabbing a pile of clothes off the floor and stuffing it into the bag. Changing my identity would be a pain in the ass. I've done it before but I had Aiden's help last time. I saw him leave and I wasn't sure I wanted to ask for his help again. He's powerful but he's only one man. The prides wouldn't send the alpha alone. And Aiden can't use his animal during the daytime. I didn't want him to get hurt.

A rough hand caught mine and when I looked up at him he looked sympathetic.

"I get that you're scared but—"

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm not scared. I'm being smart. They've been after me a long time and I'm not going to let my crew get hurt by dragging them into my problems. This isn't the first time I've had to run. As long as I can get out ahead of them I'll be fine."

He shook his head, releasing me. "You can't. They've made contact. If they're smart, they wouldn't do that unless they were completely set up for the retrieval. They're probably waiting for you to run and you'll walk straight into their hands if you do."

I threw my hands up, frustrated. "So what? I'm supposed to just sit here and wait for them to come? There are families here! Children! My life isn't worth more than theirs!"

The panic was starting to set in, the hunted feeling only getting worse. I couldn't just sit around. I couldn't let them get hurt because of me. Not like Talia. It was my idea in the first place...

"No. I don't suggest that either. I'm more of an offensive player than defense."

My brow furrowed and he lifted a shoulder. "Aiden wanted me to protect you. He didn't say shit about not taking action. I say we do our own recon, figure out their plan, and get the best of them. Pick off one or two and they should run to regroup and head straight to Aiden."

I considered him, my eyes narrowed. "How do I know I can trust you?"

He could be working for them, leading me straight into a trap. It'd be playing the long game to get someone to infiltrate Aiden but the pride isn't stupid and they'll go to extreme lengths to keep their women in line.

He looked annoyed. "Anyone ever tell you you've got trust issues?"

I gave him a flat look and he sighed. "Look, I don't know what you want me to say. Trust isn't gained overnight. You've just gonna have to give me a shot or risk the run. I'll be on your ass the whole time though because I promised Aiden I'd keep you safe."

Since I didn't have any other options, I decided to trust my gut. And Aiden. He sent this asshole to watch over me, he obviously trusts him. With a sharp nod, I thrust out my hand toward him.

"I guess we're working together then."

Chapter Eight

LINK

WHEN I TOOK HER HAND, warmth shot up my arm and into my chest. Given that she yanked her hand away with a frown, I'm guessing I wasn't the only one who experienced it. Since we were short on time, I decided to look into it later. I've never lived in a pride and didn't know how they hunted but if they were anything like me, they'd wait a few days to see if the letter did its job before changing tactics. It'd give us time to figure out a plan and start our own hunt.

For the first time in a while I didn't feel like passing out on my feet. Maybe it was the thrill of the job or the fight from before. Rhea's no slouch and took me by surprise more than once.

"You broke my nose, you know."

A smug grin crossed her face. "You pissed me off."

Rolling my eyes, I headed out of her room. It was too messy to think straight in there. And it smelled like her.

Her kitchen was a study in opposites compared to her bedroom. It was immaculate, not a dish in the sink or a mess to be seen. I sat at her little table, looking around with a frown.

"Why's your room such a hell hole? You obviously know how to clean."

She'd followed me out and her lip lifted in a scowl as she headed toward her fridge, pulling out a bottle of water. "I don't clean. I trade with Esme. She helps keep the kitchen and living room clean, I buy her painting supplies so she doesn't feel

guilty using her mate's money all the time. Equal exchange and all that. She doesn't clean my room though because I like my privacy. You know, the thing you don't give a shit about."

I didn't respond to her dig. The statement still stands. If I'm going to protect her, privacy is out the window.

"Tell me about the pride."

She frowned, handing me a bottle of water as she sat down across from me. "What do you mean?"

"Who's in charge? How do they hunt? Have you ever seen them in action? Will they come alone?"

Her frown only deepened and she tipped her head. "You're acting like you've never lived in one before." At my bored look, her eyebrows shot up. "How?"

I lifted a shoulder. "Mom was human, Dad was rogue. We moved a lot, never part of a pride."

She huffed out a laugh, shaking her head. "Lucky you," she murmured.

I clenched my jaw. There was more to the story but I wasn't going to get into it with her. That wasn't my purpose here and sharing shitty childhood stories wasn't necessary for me to do my job.

"So the pride?"

Her mouth twisted as she thought it over, drawing my focus to her lips. The bottom one was thick, plump, something you wanted to sink your teeth into. The thought irritated me, she was distracting and I needed to focus on my job. Forcing my eyes back up, I watched her as she thought back.

"It's been a while. The last guy who was in charge of my pride was Paul Leoni. Nasty old man who likes fucking little girls. I don't know if he's still around though."

I scratched my beard thoughtfully. "Anyone you can call? Mom or sibling or something?"

She shook her head. "I tried that. The call I made before was to a few of my friends. They live closer, would probably

know at least the basics, but one of them got caught and pulled back into the pride. It's not safe for them to give me information anymore."

She looked pained, like it was hard to talk about, so I bypassed it for now.

"Family then?"

Her face darkened. "No. My aunts were just as pissed as the alpha that I left. They wouldn't offer me help. And my mom is submissive and wouldn't be able to even if she wanted to."

I nodded. "That's fine. We'll just go off of what you remember then. They're like a cult, they all work the same way anyway."

She looked surprised, regarding me carefully. "I think you're the first lion I've ever heard disparage the pride."

"Yeah well you're the first lioness I've ever met. We're all experiencing new things today. How do they hunt in a pride?"

We went over what little she remembered about her life in the pride and how the males worked. One alpha and all other males answered to him. They were basically enforcers to his will and none of them could have mates without his permission. They traded women amongst other prides to avoid inbreeding and women had no say in the matter. If the alpha chose her, she was expected to spread her legs without complaint. It made me sick to think about and a shudder ran up my spine.

Her hand rested on mine and she didn't look at me with hatred and distrust for once. More like cautious compassion.

"It's difficult to hear if you weren't raised in it. Maybe we should take a break. The crew is gonna want to meet you and it's Lily's night to make dinner. She doesn't know how to screw up a meal."

When she pushed to her feet and released my hand, I felt the loss of warmth. It made me uneasy so I kept my mouth shut, following her outside. It was probably my need to protect her that was drawing me to her. Nothing else made sense.

THE LITTLE COMMUNAL area in the middle of all the trailers was crowded. They were laughing and talking, all easy going until they noticed me. I tensed, not used to hanging out with crews either, but Rhea stepped up and spoke for me.

“Guys, this is Link. He’s gonna be helping out with my... situation. Link, this is—”

“Wait! You’ll ruin it!” A woman with bright blue hair called, sitting up in her chair. The whole crew groaned and she snickered. “We’ve got a tradition to uphold, people.” She cleared her throat dramatically, locking eyes with me.

“Hi, I’m Liv and I—”

“Love to annoy every single person on the crew with this stupid tradition,” a silver eyed wolf shifter called. Liv shot him a dirty look.

“Shut up. That’s Theo, he’s a dick.”

“Liv,” Jackson warned, giving a pointed look at the little kid who was sitting on the ground next to a gray pitbull, watching the crew curiously. She rolled her lips between her teeth, shooting a sheepish look at another one of the women before turning back to me.

“As I was saying,” she began again. “I—”

“Can I do it?” the boy asked, pushing to his feet and wandering closer to her. She warred with herself, she obviously enjoyed doing it, but he shot her a puppy dog look and she caved instantly, pulling him into her lap.

“Alright, short stuff. You do the introductions then. Make ‘em good.”

The little boy nodded seriously, tapping his chin with a finger. “Um... Liv’s a panther, she has magic hair. It changes color a lot.” Liv snorted, cuddling him closer.

“Derek is a big bear, bigger than Jackson, and he gives the best shoulder rides.” The giant he pointed to looked proud.

His little finger moved along the group to each person. “Jackson’s alpha, he teaches me bear stuff. Esme is a falcon, she’s got a baby in her belly and she’s a really good painter. She lets me paint with her when she stays home with us.”

The smaller blonde smiled, cupping the little swell of her belly like a habit.

“Theo’s a wolf, he helps me find the best bugs. Lily is a wolf too, she makes really good desserts. Ethan...”

The blonde standing at the edge of the group looked uncomfortable until the boy spoke again. “He’s the best swimmer. He said he’d teach me to touch the bottom.” His anxiety smoothed out and he gave the kid a small smile.

“He’s mated to Corey, did you know boys can do that?” The kid shot me an inquisitive look. When I dipped my chin, he nodded decisively. “Yeah, it’s cool. Corey lets me do bar stuff.”

At my questioning look, Corey shook his head with a grin. “He gives people shots of soda when the crew comes to visit me at work.”

“Hush, you’re interrupting,” Liv demanded before nudging the boy to continue.

“Uh... Rhea’s a police officer and she lets me play with the lights in her car.”

He pointed to the man I recognized from the construction site. “That’s Papá, he lets me use a hammer even though Mamá doesn’t like it.”

That made them snicker and his mom rolled her eyes.

“And that’s Mamá! She swears in Spanish when she thinks I can’t hear her.”

Her mouth fell open, her face turning red. “Javier!”

He grinned mischievously, pulling Liv’s arms tighter around him for protection against his mom. Liv was cackling and tickled his ribs.

“You forgot one. Your turn.”

His eyes lit up. “Oh! I’m Javi. Mama calls me Osito when she’s happy and Javier when she’s mad. And I like the crew. They’re my favorite.”

They all smiled softly at him until he wiggled to get free and grabbed Derek’s hand, pleading with him to play. The giant man pushed out of his chair, carefully lifting the little boy off the ground and onto his shoulders before wandering off to play.

Liv pursed her lips. “Okay, he did the nice version of the game. Not as fun but he’s five, I’ll let it pass.”

Rhea shook her head, sitting in one of the empty camping chairs. “You’d think after this long you’d get bored of that game.”

Liv made a face. “No way. It drives everyone nuts, it’s the best.”

They all started carping at her and she just grinned. She took great pleasure in annoying them but they all seemed to love her anyway. It was a weird crew but Rhea seemed relaxed for once, rolling her eyes at Liv’s antics.

I hovered on the outside, not wanting to interrupt them. It wasn’t my job to make friends here. I wanted to explore the property a little, get a feel for how best to protect Rhea and how the pride might come for her, but I didn’t want to ruin her good mood after the shitshow earlier. Might as well give her a few minutes to relax before we start working.

Chapter Nine

LINK WAS HOVERING BEHIND ME. I glanced over my shoulder at him but his focus was on the forest, scanning the area like he was looking for threats. The thought of the pride coming here gave me an upset stomach, especially with Javi so close to the tree line right now. Yes, he's with Derek and only the truly insane would go up against him, but the pride didn't play fair and probably wouldn't hesitate to use the crew against me to get what they want.

“So, please tell me we aren't going to sit around and wait for them to come to us this time,” Liv called out.

“Seconded,” Ethan growled.

Link frowned, coming closer. “Wait, what do you mean this time?”

Ethan's face went dark and he turned away, refusing to answer. Liv looked just as pissed off but as we all know she has no filter.

“There was a wolf pack stalking us for a bit. Instead of hunting them like I wanted, *someone* made us wait and they attacked us here in the middle of the night. Ethan got turned against his will and I'm not looking for it to happen again,” she snapped, glaring at Jackson.

He narrowed his eyes. “We had a plan, we never got a chance to put it into motion. Don't start with me. Your plan would've ended up with you in jail.”

She scoffed, turning her attention to Ethan who was growling now, a strained look on his face.

“So you want to help?” Link queried. When I looked up at him, I was waiting for the ridicule, maybe something about how women should stay at home while the men get shit done but he just looked curious.

“Uh, hell yes! Rhea’s on our crew, she’s not doing this alone!”

Warmth spread through my chest. This is why I was so reluctant to leave. I love my crew and I doubt I’d ever find a better group in my lifetime. I fought hard against it, trying to avoid them and refusing Jackson’s many invitations, but they wore me down and this place became my haven, the people my family. I didn’t want them getting hurt helping me but I’d fight hard to keep the pride away from them and keep them safe.

Jackson shot her a look. “I think Derek might have something to say about that.”

Liv glared back. “He’ll say the same thing I’m saying. Besides, he’s surprisingly stealthy. And maybe if they saw us all together, they’d realize it’d be stupid to come after Rhea.”

Link shook his head. “It’s a bandaid at most. They might think it’s a bad idea to come for her while with the crew but she’d never be able to go anywhere alone again. We need more than a scare tactic. For now, we’re focused on recon until Aiden gets back.”

“I don’t like that guy,” Malcolm grumbled, hugging Carmen closer to his side. She frowned at him.

“Por que, mi amor? He helped us.”

He gestured toward me with his chin. “He also dragged her into the forest without her permission and tried to suffocate her.”

All eyes swung my way and I let out a heavy sigh.

“He wasn’t trying to suffocate me. He was riled up and his animal is... heavy. He didn’t mean it.”

Malcolm narrowed his eyes. “And what’s his animal?”

Both Link and I looked at each other before I shook my head. “It’s not my place to say. He’ll divulge that information if and when he’s ready. For now, just know that he’s an ally. And if he’s riled up, maybe don’t stand close to him.”

No one argued but that didn’t stop them from making wild guesses and trying to gauge the looks on our faces. Luckily for me, I’m excellent at poker. Though I almost started laughing when Liv suggested a moose shifter. Aiden would be so annoyed at the thought. When I glanced at Link, he had a similar expression, though he was trying to cover it by rubbing his hand over his mouth. It only made it harder for me not to laugh and when he looked over at me, we both started snickering.

My mood improved a little hanging out with the crew but eventually Link excused himself and gestured toward the forest with a tip of his head, indicating I should follow him. It irritated me, him basically demanding it, but I went along anyway because we had work to do.

Since I’ve walked the edge of the territory with Jackson before, I knew my way around. Link followed me, constantly scanning our surroundings. It put me on edge even though I knew why he was doing it.

“Jackson put some cameras up for security but they’re all closer to the trailer park. To cover the whole property would’ve been difficult and we didn’t want any shifts caught on camera either,” I explained.

He nodded, frowning. “There wasn’t a fence on the way up here. Installing one would at least make it more difficult for them to bring vehicles. Are there any markers or signs to indicate the property line?”

He was thorough, going through every detail of the property. Some of it we’d have to wait to ask Jackson, it was his land not mine, but I knew at least a decent portion of it.

I was still uneasy around him, I didn’t trust him, but he’s been honest so far. Either that or he’s a really good liar that

even my lioness couldn't pick it up. Then again, I wasn't getting much from her right now. She seemed glued to Link and almost purring against my mind, which was distracting. So distracting, in fact, that I wasn't watching where I was going and didn't notice Link stop. I walked right into him, nearly knocking him over. A deep flush swept through me, my heart picking up a little. This close I could smell his body wash and a hint of leather. All packaged up in the strong smell of fur that smacked me back into reality.

"Sorry," I mumbled, taking a step back. He looked over his shoulder at me with a frown.

"You alright? You seem distracted."

I nodded, not wanting to say anything out loud in case I wasn't the only one who could hear lies. He didn't believe me though and crossed his arms, giving me a look. I glared at him, pushing past him to continue, but he grabbed my arm and spun me around, a deep frown on his face.

"Why are you so skeptical of me? Have I given you any reason to think I wasn't here to help?"

Apparently in my attempt to hide my emotions, the distrust showed up on my face. It worked in my favor though. Yanking my arm away from him, I growled a low warning. "I don't care. You're a lion and you conveniently showed up right after I got a threatening message. I don't trust you. Stop waiting for it, it's never gonna happen."

His head jerked back like I'd slapped him. Swallowing hard against the guilt I spun on my heel and marched away, heading back to the trailer park. Maybe Liv's right and we need to go hunting. Anything to escape this guy and all the confusing feelings he kept bringing up.

HE DIDN'T FOLLOW me and I wanted to feel relieved but it bothered me more than I cared to admit. Not in the mood to deal with anyone, I ignored Jackson when he frowned at me

showing up alone, heading to my trailer and slamming the door behind me.

Heading to my room, I dropped on the bed, fishing out my phone. Instead of texting and waiting for him to answer, I called Aiden, growing more and more frustrated the longer it rang without him answering me.

“Pick up the phone!”

When it rolled over to voicemail for a third time I gave up. Absolutely nothing was going in my favor anymore. Instead I decided to call work and let them know I’d be out for a while. Unlike Aiden, Holt picked up on the second ring.

“Isn’t it your day off? Why don’t you ever stop working?”

I bit back a smile. “Nice to talk to you too, Chief.”

He sighed. “What do you want, Fuller? I’m busy.”

“I need to take some time off.”

The line went silent and I waited patiently. I’ve never requested time off before, it had to be a bit of a shock.

“Is something wrong?”

I twisted my mouth, trying to come up with an excuse. “I have a uh... family emergency. I’m gonna be busy for a little while. Can you call in some volunteers to pick up the slack?”

“I can survive without you, Rhea. Stop acting like your presence is required for me to function.”

I waited again, a smug grin crossing my face when he sighed. “Alright, fine. You’ll be missed. Happy?”

“No. But we’ll work on it. I’ll update you when I know more.”

Hanging up, I dropped the phone onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. I kept trying to tell myself it could be worse. Any other boss probably would’ve pitched a fit or maybe even fired me for dropping work so suddenly with no warning. But this is a small town and we weren’t overly busy so that seemed flimsy. I didn’t know how else it could be worse. I was trapped waiting for the worst to happen, for the pride to catch me and—

I curled in on myself, not willing to go down that train of thought. If I did contemplate what they'd do to me, I'd start thinking about what they did to Talia and I'd start crying. When we were younger they were closer to me than my own sisters. If I'd known she'd gotten taken, I would've gone back for her. We could've figured it out together. But they protected me by keeping quiet about it. Everyone was always protecting me. I was supposed to be the police officer, the tough one, running into the line of fire while everyone else ran away. And yet somehow I was always the one that needed protection. I hated that. Hated how weak I felt. And more than anything, I hated that I needed a lion to help me.

Chapter Ten

LINK

SINCE I KNEW her crew was around to watch over her, I finished the survey of the property by myself. There was too much land to fence it and I doubt it'd stop a pride of male lions anyway. We couldn't put out traps without running the risk of one of the crew getting hurt by accident, especially with a little kid running around. The options were severely limited and while being up in a remote area like this one surrounded by trees was generally not a terrible idea, it left too much space for people to sneak around undetected. I didn't want them getting close to the trailer park but I wouldn't be able to see them even if they did until they were right on top of us.

My mind kept straying back to Rhea. She constantly looked conflicted, almost pained, and so damn distrustful. It was annoying and for some reason, my animal was demanding we fix it. I ignored it until the sheer force of his will threatened to buckle me.

Fury ripped through me. I've never been this distracted before. It was like her animal was calling to mine and it was driving me up the wall. Storming back to the trailer park, I ignored the gathering crowd, throwing open the door to Rhea's trailer. I heard her gasp and followed the sound to her bedroom. She was sitting on the edge of it, her eyes red like she'd been crying and it only made it worse, my lion practically raging and shredding my insides.

“Are you on your damn heat or something?”

Her mouth fell open. “W-What?”

“You heard me! Why the hell else would my animal be so messed up right now? You gotta be going into heat or something.”

Launching to her feet, she seethed at me. “No, asshole! I’m not! Maybe your animal is just as messed up as you! Get out!”

She’s lying. She has to be. The closer I got to her, the more riled up I got. Her scent surrounded me and I couldn’t think straight and it pissed me off.

“No! I’m trying to do my damn job! Do whatever you females do about that shit and stop messing with my head!”

This time I saw it when she launched herself at me. But she wasn’t polite enough to keep her skin this round. Her animal ripped out of her and I barely had time to let mine loose before she landed on top of me.

Bad fucking idea.

She came at me with teeth and claws but instead of fighting back like a smart lion, he decided to ignore me and wrap his paws around her neck, licking her face. It startled her and she skittered backwards out of his hold. It stopped her from fighting though. She edged away from me, wary, her tail twitching, but apparently my lion wasn’t done and he wouldn’t give up control.

Rolling to his feet, he ignored my demands to leave her the hell alone, stalking after her. She hissed out a warning, not liking whatever the stupid lion was doing, but he just kept going, a low grumble filling the room. It was as close to a purr as we could get. He backed her into a corner and she lashed out but he batted her paw away and kept closing in until she was leaning heavily against the wall, her face turned away. Slowly, he ran his big fluffy head against hers, letting out that low grumble.

He didn’t like that she didn’t trust us any more than I did and apparently this was his way to fix it. He rubbed against her, purring like a damn house cat until she finally relaxed. Only then did he give me back some control. But when she

pushed her head against mine, I couldn't find it in me to complain.

“Look, Mamá. Lions.”

The awed whisper drew our attention. The crew was crowded in the opening of her bedroom watching us, Javi wide eyed right in front. I wasn't bothered or really interested in the onlookers but Rhea bumped my head once before pushing past me towards the little boy. His eyes lit up and when she pushed her head against his chest, he hugged her tightly like she was his pet.

Their reactions were curious and I flicked my gaze between them until Jackson spoke up.

“Rhea... She's understandably quiet about her animal. She goes on crew outings with us but she doesn't shift with us. She doesn't shift often at all.”

That bothered me and my lion both. It's not healthy to ignore your animal side. But their awed staring made more sense now. Not many lions or lionesses would wander this far north. I was really hoping this mission would be over before the weather turned. I hate the cold.

Once Javi got his cuddles in with Rhea, he looked around her at me. I didn't like the idea of a petting zoo but Rhea looked at me expectantly. Deciding to give a little, I laid down so I wouldn't freak him out. He approached cautiously like a smart cub and waited until I leaned into his hand to touch my mane.

“Mamá... he's fluffy,” he whispered.

I'd snort if I could. I didn't spend a lot of time around cubs but I didn't mind his innocent exploration so much. Especially because Rhea watched without glaring at me for once.

“Can you ride a lion?” he queried.

That wasn't going to happen. I'm not a pony. Instead, I batted at him gently, knocking him around. He giggled and raced out of reach, hiding behind Rhea.

“I think that means no, thank you, mijo,” Carmen snickered. “Come on, I’m sure they’d like privacy to change back.”

He pouted, taking her hand to follow her. I didn’t know many shifters who were bothered by nudity but Carmen smelled human and it might bug her if I shifted in front of her son.

Rhea didn’t move when they filed out, watching them carefully. She didn’t seem in a hurry to shift back. Considering she didn’t shift often, I didn’t blame her and I liked being shifted so I wasn’t in any rush either. Pushing to my feet, I nudged her and moved toward the door, looking over my shoulder at her, waiting for her to follow. But the nerves were back and she edged away, unwilling. She didn’t want to go outside.

I checked the territory myself, there was no smell of lions around Jackson’s territory yet and I didn’t want Rhea trapped in here like an animal at the zoo. So I did what all smart lions do. I swatted her ass and took off.

My plan worked and she went after me, irritation pushing the fear away enough for her to step outside. Once she was out there, the rest of her crew decided to join her and as long as she was surrounded by them, she seemed fine. It put me and the lion at ease and I followed behind her and her crew, watching her back while she stretched her legs. She was a little tense at first but eventually she let the crew sniff her and let Javi’s little bear try to climb her. If his little claws digging into her bothered her she didn’t draw attention to it, licking him and sending him running back to his papa, a massive gorilla who scooped Javi up like a baby and cradled him against his chest.

This was a weird mishmash of shifters but no one seemed to mind. Once again on the outskirts, I watched over them with Jackson, who seemed to be constantly scanning the crew and his surroundings. Good alpha instincts.

Once it started to get late they all shifted back to get ready for dinner until it was just Rhea and me. She sauntered past

me, stealing all my focus and making me breathless. Is it all lionesses who are that beautiful or is it just her?

WHOEVER PICKED up my stuff from the B&B left it on Rhea's couch so when I shifted back, I tossed on a new shirt and jeans, grimacing over the one I'd been wearing earlier. I really liked that one.

"I'm sorry... for attacking you."

She was leaning against the wall, her arms around her middle. She looked remorseful but I wasn't pissed at her.

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have come at you like that. I'm not—" I sighed. "I've been dealing with my own stuff for a while and I'm tired. It messes with my head and I blamed you. I'm sorry for that."

She tipped her head. "Why are you tired?"

Sucking in a deep breath, I shook my head. "Who knows? Aiden has some suspicions but I usually take it with a grain of salt. He might be old but he's not all knowing and he projects sometimes."

She huffed out a laugh. "I'm aware. He was bitching at me once, saying I was in a bad mood because I don't eat enough. I shoved a candy bar in his mouth to shut him up. Turns out he was the one who was hungry."

Barking out a laugh, I stored that tidbit away for later to use against him. "I'd have paid to see that. Putting him in his place is fun. His head gets too big every once in a while."

She hummed out a low contented sound, her gaze drifting and a small smile on her face. I was dying to know what she was thinking but we'd reached a truce of sorts and I didn't want to pester her. While she was distracted, I took the opportunity to look her over. When she wasn't seething at me, she was really something else.

Long blonde hair fell in waves from the tight braid she'd been wearing it in all morning. When it wasn't pulled back so tightly, she looked less severe, more relaxed and sweet. Her sharp eyes, gray like clouds before a storm, were soft and distant, like she was lost in a memory. She's tall and thin, lithe like her animal, not a ton of curves but enough to make a man hungry for more. Instead of the girly shit she'd been wearing earlier, she had on dark jeans encasing her long legs and a band t-shirt I recognized.

“Who'd you steal that from?”

She blinked a few times, frowning. “What?”

I pointed at her shirt and she looked down. Her brow furrowed and she looked confused.

“I didn't steal it. I got it at a concert.”

I snorted. “No you didn't. I was there, I think I would've noticed.”

She looked stunned. “It was a huge concert!”

I couldn't hold back my grin for long and she rolled her eyes hard. “Oh my god, can you not for like five minutes? I actually didn't hate you for a second.”

Chuckling, I loped over to her, crowding her space. She didn't give an inch, lifting her chin, her eyes narrowed on me.

“You don't hate me,” I murmured.

Making a face, she crossed her arms. “I'm on the fence.”

I let out a grumbling noise like the one from before and she sucked in a breath, leaning toward me for a second. When she jerked her head up, surprised, I smirked at her.

“Liar.”

Chapter Eleven

HE LEFT me standing there gaping at him, his hands shoved into his pockets and a grin on his face. When I was shifted, that noise settled all the ragged nervous and pain I felt until I could finally think clearly. As a human, it drew me to him and made me want to bury my face against his chest. Maybe I really am going into heat. Wouldn't that just be icing on the cake? If they wanted to wait until I was at my weakest, my heat would definitely count.

Shaking off the weird feelings Link was pulling from me, I followed him outside. Lily was already hard at work with Javi at her side, her official taste tester. The rest of the crew mingled or played games. Malcolm and Theo had set up horseshoes in their yards. You had to toss the thing across the whole street, which led more than once to someone getting hurt and broken windows. Jackson made them move it to the backyards instead. There was also an old picnic table someone got from the farmer's market that Liv and Ethan were playing cards at. Carmen was talking to Esme about baby things while Corey was stretched out on the hammock Ethan bought him for his birthday. That just left Jackson, who was sitting in one of the camping chairs, a deep frown on his face. I moved to join him, taking the chair next to him.

“You look pensive.”

The corners of his mouth kicked up for a second before he sighed. “Just trying to figure everything out. If the pride does come here, I want to have a plan for Javi and the girls.”

The girls meaning Esme and Carmen. Carmen is human, she would be in serious danger if the pride showed up. And Esme is pregnant and can't shift until after she's given birth. I was concerned about Lily too. She's tough but submissive and not used to fighting. She was only turned in springtime, she's still new at everything.

"I can leave, Jackson, if you think it'd be better. They aren't after the crew and—"

"You're not going anywhere, Rhea," he snapped, shooting me a dirty look. Dropping my chin, I ground my teeth, ready to argue with him until his hand rested on my forearm.

"I mean it. You're staying right here. You're part of our crew and we've got your back. I'd need to consider this kind of thing eventually, it's always best to have a plan in place so we aren't floundering in an emergency. There's gonna be a point when even the toughest of us can't shift and we need to be prepared for it."

His gaze shifted to Liv. He may be alpha but Liv was a close second and if she cared enough to take over, she'd give Jackson a run for his money. But luckily for him she wasn't interested in being in charge. She followed his lead and had his back whenever the crew came to blows. I knew she and Derek were trying for cubs of their own. With her out of commission, Derek wouldn't be able to leave her side and that would seriously tip the odds against us.

"Don't suppose you can ask her to wait," Link murmured. He'd wandered over and was listening in, his arms crossed over his chest, apparently not concerned with privacy in any sense of the word. I glared at him over my shoulder.

"Absolutely not! They shouldn't have to put their lives on hold just because mine is a shitshow right now. That's not right."

He lifted a shoulder. "You both seem really concerned about losing her. It's just a suggestion."

"Losing who?"

Apparently we'd drawn Liv's attention and she was watching us suspiciously. I shook my head, refusing to even mention it, but Link wouldn't shut his stupid mouth.

"They're worried you're gonna get knocked up and be taken out of commission while the pride is on the prowl."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh please. Even if I couldn't shift, I wouldn't be out of commission. I'm registered and I've got excellent aim."

My mouth fell open. "Since when?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Since I was legally allowed to. Can't use claws all the time and the shop me and Gigi did our apprenticeships in was smack dab in the middle of biker territory. It was rough and I don't mess around with that kind of thing."

Jackson frowned. "I still wouldn't want you here if you were pregnant, Liv. It's not a necessary risk, we can handle it."

She shot him a bored look. She wouldn't be leaving without a fight.

"Well, you aren't right now, so maybe we can table it for the time being," I urged. I didn't want Liv and Jackson fighting because of me.

"Until we know more about how many are coming and what they're planning, it's not really relevant. For all we know, it could just be one guy looking to assert his dominance. I can handle that much on my own," Link added.

I rolled my eyes. "*We* can handle it."

He gave me the same look Liv gave Jackson and I had to fight against the urge to punch him. He's so annoying.

WITH THE STRESS from the day and my unfortunate confrontation with Aiden this morning, I was exhausted by the time dinner was handed out. I barely managed to finish my meal before I was weaving on my feet. I felt bad, the crew

usually worked together to clean up at the end of the night but when Jackson told me to get some sleep, I couldn't argue with him. There was a lot to do starting tomorrow to get ready for the pride and I would be less than useful if I was too tired to function.

I was just coming out of the bathroom after brushing my teeth when I bumped into Link. Confused, I just stared at him.

“What are you doing here?”

He gave me a flat look. “I can't protect you from another trailer, Rhea. Are you gonna hog the bathroom all night?”

Baffled, I let him nudge me out of the way. I'd expected him to stay in the trailer at the end of the road. That was the one Jackson bought for guests to stay in. But apparently Link wasn't interested. Shaking my head, I decided to just let it go. I'm too tired to fight with him again and I have a guest room I never use, I don't see the harm in him staying there.

Climbing into bed, I passed out the minute my head hit the pillows. I was plagued with nightmares, the pride bursting into my room and dragging me out kicking and screaming. Every horrible thing I could imagine they'd do to me played out in my head until I woke up in a cold sweat, gasping and shaking.

“Rhea!”

My eyes flew open, locking on Link. He was leaning over me, gripping my shoulders. He must've shaken me awake. His hands were strong and warm and it took the edge off the gut wrenching horror that still clung to me like a second skin.

“What happened?”

I shook my head. “Bad dream. It's nothing. I'm sorry, you can go back to sleep.” I wouldn't be getting any more sleep but he didn't need to know that. My heart still thrashed in my chest and I felt a little nauseous. I've never experienced that kind of dream before. It felt real. Terrifyingly real.

“Like hell. I'm staying here. Scoot over.”

For a second I was too shocked to protest and he used it to his advantage, bullying me into scooting to make room for

him. It wasn't until he slid into bed next to me that I finally found my voice.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I'm staying with you. Get some sleep, we've got work to do tomorrow.”

He pulled the blanket up to his chin, seriously looking like he was going to go to sleep right next to me. I jerked the blankets back down, shoving him.

“No way! I don't even know you, you aren't sleeping in my bed! Go away!”

He didn't budge other than to glare at me. He was seriously asking for another fight though. I didn't want him in my bed. I had a bad dream, I didn't need a cuddle buddy.

“I swear, Link, if you don't move—”

“You were screaming like someone was torturing you, Rhea. I'm not gonna just go back to bed after hearing something like that. Even if I was a complete jackass who could ignore that kind of thing, the lion wouldn't allow it. We both need to know you're safe. So for once can you not fight me on every little thing? I'm tired.”

It wasn't his words that swayed me, though they rang with honesty and the fatigue on his face worried me a little. It was the fact that when I'd tried to push him away again he'd trapped my hand against his chest. I could feel the rapid pace of his heart under my palm. I scared him. This was his attempt to deal with that.

Grimacing, I tugged my hand away. “Fuck. Fine. Hold on.”

Shoving myself out of bed, I went to the guest room and pulled the pillows off the bed, grabbing the throw pillows off the couch for good measure. When I came back he was watching me curiously, rolling his eyes when I set up the barrier between us.

“Seriously?”

I resisted the urge to bean him with one of the pillows. “Yes, seriously. You wanna stay here, you stay on your side. Either that or you can sleep on the floor.”

He sighed heavily. “Whatever. Can we get some sleep now?”

I hesitated for a second, shaking out my hands before I crawled back into bed, pulling the covers up over my shoulders. It still felt oddly intimate, even with the pillows blocking my view of him. I didn’t like it so I turned my back to him and stared at the wall until exhaustion won out and I finally fell back asleep. Luckily, a dreamless sleep this time around.

Chapter Twelve

LINK

EVEN AFTER THE interruption that I swear scared away seven of my nine lives, I woke up feeling more refreshed than I have in weeks. It could have something to do with Rhea's mattress being so soft, you basically sank into the thing. It was like sleeping on a cloud. It could also have something to do with the fact that despite her little wall, she still ended up plastered against my side, using my chest as a pillow. When I first woke up to a weight on my chest I almost panicked until she grumbled when I moved and curled tighter against me.

Now I felt a little like I couldn't move. I didn't want to disturb her. After a nightmare like the one she had last night, it probably took her a while to fall back asleep and she needed the rest. Not one part of me wanted to admit I liked having her there. Okay, that's a lie. The lion was practically purring about it. Mangy animal.

One arm was tucked under my head, the other wrapped around her shoulders while I pondered my new obsession with this woman. I've known her less than twenty four hours but I couldn't think beyond keeping her safe and figuring out some way to get her to trust me. She obviously didn't want me in the same room as her, hence the pillow wall. It was only in her sleep that she finally relaxed around me.

I heard my phone go off in the guest room and I sighed, carefully extricating myself from her arms so I could answer it. Because I didn't want to wake her, I took my time, shoving my pillow under her head to keep her almost in the same

position before slipping out of the room. I missed the initial call but it rang again a minute later and when I saw Aiden's name on the screen I frowned. He never called twice.

“Hey, man, what—”

“Stop. No time for pleasantries. Where are you?”

His voice, normally calm and stoic, was vibrating with fury and I could almost feel the dominance coming through the line. He was beyond riled up at this point.

“In Rhea's trailer. Why? What's wrong?”

“They aren't here,” he growled.

I waited for him to continue but he didn't, only a deep snarl coming through the line.

“Hold on. What do you mean? Who isn't where?”

“The pride! The damn enforcers! Only a handful are here to control the women. The rest are gone!”

My stomach hit the floor. I'd been expecting maybe a handful. “How many?”

Something shattered and he bellowed out a roar that was definitely not human. I had to jerk the phone away from my ear to save my hearing and it drew Rhea from her room, wide eyed as she stared at the phone. He was so loud it was like I had it on speaker on full volume.

“Aiden! How many?”

“I don't know. At least fifty. Maybe more. No one will give me a straight answer. The women are all too terrified to even speak and the few males here are basically teenagers, under alpha orders to keep the women here and keep their mouths shut. I need more information but—”

He wasn't in control right now, not by a long shot. He could barely get out a couple sentences before another snarl ripped through him. Rhea looked pale, staring at the phone with horror.

“But what?”

“I– I can’t. I need to head back. Is she safe?”

“She’s safe, Aiden. We’ve got time. You need to take a minute and calm down. You can’t afford another uncontrolled shift. Where are you?”

He started mumbling and I could hear his footsteps as he paced. “It doesn’t matter. I need to fly. I’m heading there now.”

Rhea snatched the phone from me, pleading in her voice. “No! Aiden, please, you’ll be seen. There’s no guarantee that they’re all heading here. They could be spread out. Do not shift before nightfall. We can handle a day. Please...”

Aiden never fully explained their relationship and his protective instincts when it came to her rivaled my own. Suspicion rose to the surface, especially when he actually listened to her and took a few deep breaths.

“Fine. I’ll head to the airport, see if it’s faster to get on a plane than to wait until nightfall. Until then, you need to stay out of sight. If they’re all coming for you, they’re starting a war with Blackridge Haven and any other crew that’s harboring an escaped lioness. This will most certainly end in violence. Prepare yourselves.”

He hung up without saying goodbye and both our eyes lifted slowly, the shock of his news keeping us both silent.

It took less than a minute before I saw the panic set in and Rhea’s eyes started darting around. She was going to try to run again and that was more dangerous than her staying here at this point. I grabbed her shoulder before she had a chance to run, keeping her attention on me.

“You aren’t running. We’re going to stay here and stick to the original plan. We’re going to figure this out. Don’t fucking panic.”

She started to tremble and when she whimpered, I yanked her against my chest, hugging her tightly. She froze for a second before wrapping her arms around my waist and squeezing me back. We took a minute, just to deal with the shock, before I urged her to get ready.

“Come on. We need to know how many are out there. Hopefully you’re right and they are spread out or something. You can’t be the only one who got away, they might be hunting all of them.”

It didn’t make her feel any better and to be honest, me either. There’s no guarantee that the other women had any sort of crew or protection. And after Aiden’s warning on what they’d do to Rhea if they caught her, it made my stomach turn over to think of any other woman getting caught by them.

We both got dressed in a rush and the silence and tension was deafening. I remember this feeling from my time overseas. Preparing for a battle you had no idea what you were getting into, hoping it wasn’t going to be as bad as they projected, wondering if you were going to make it out alive. I never liked it, it’s why I got out. I wanted some peace and quiet. The universe seemed determined to keep that from me though.

All the energy I woke up with was gone and I felt like I was dragging so when Rhea handed me a cup of coffee, instead of politely refusing, I slammed the damn thing. I didn’t have it in me to power through with shit like this. I needed to be able to focus.

“I need to warn Jackson before we leave,” she told me as we headed out the door. I wanted to get moving but she was looking out for her crew and I couldn’t hold that against her. So I followed, my eyes constantly scanning the forest as she met with Jackson.

He frowned at her approach. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” She grimaced and his face darkened. “What happened?”

“We got a call from Aiden this morning. Apparently all the alphas, all the enforcers, basically any male lion with power is gone. Only the younger ones are behind to watch over the pride. Aiden thinks they’re coming for me.”

His low growl felt heavy and I worried about Rhea’s reaction after yesterday but she didn’t even blink. It must’ve only been dealing with Aiden that knocked her on her ass.

“How many?”

She shook her head. “We don’t know for sure how many are coming here, Link and I are going to look into it today. But there were at least fifty according to Aiden, maybe more. You might want to think about moving the girls. Now.”

He sucked in a sharp breath and whipped his head toward where the rest of the crew were getting ready for the day. They all looked happy and we were about to ruin it with some really shitty news.

“Maybe you should stay here,” he suggested. “We can tell everyone to take off work and—”

“I wouldn’t suggest it,” I growled. “We don’t want to tip them off that we’re in any way preparing for their arrival. They want to take her off guard. If they think she’s gathering forces, they won’t wait around, they’ll come straight for her in force.”

His gaze shifted to mine and he looked uneasy but eventually he nodded. “Okay. I’ll... fuck, I don’t know. Rhea, this is big.”

She nodded, a pained look on her face. “I’m aware. Aiden’s coming back, it’ll help a little but for now, just trust me and Link. We’ll be gathering information and once we know more, we can make a plan. You focus on getting the girls to safety. There’s another crew just over the mountain, they’re good people. I can make a call. They’ll be safe there.”

For someone who was panicked just a few minutes ago, she was reassuring and calm with Jackson. Aiden said she was a cop and I could see it now. She pushed her own feelings aside to deal with the problem and showed no fear. It was stunning and I was so focused on her, I almost missed what Jackson said next.

“Ride down with Derek and Liv. They’ll be looking for your jeep and—”

I frowned. I wasn’t comfortable with the idea of not having my own ride but Rhea didn’t give me a chance to argue with

him, nodding and stalking away. With a put upon sigh, I moved to follow her. I hate cages.

Chapter Thirteen

MY NERVES WERE FRAYED and every shadow made me jump but I put on my sergeant mask and hid it away so the crew wouldn't be worried. No need to scare them before we knew what was going on. And Jackson took my advice, he'd be calling the alpha of the crew I suggested. I've met them before, when I was still a roaming rogue looking for a place to settle. They let me stay with them for a little while but there weren't many job opportunities in the area and I wasn't comfortable with crews so I took the first chance I could to leave. We kept in contact though and I knew they'd look out for the crew.

Link looked distinctly uncomfortable climbing into the truck. When he grimaced as Derek and Liv climbed in, I shot him a questioning look.

"I don't like cages," he mumbled.

Liv glanced over her shoulder with a frown. "Who said anything about cages?"

He shook his head. "Cages. Cars. I don't like being trapped in a big metal box."

Liv and I looked at each other and shrugged. He was being weird but there was no shot in hiding getting on his bike and the pride probably knew what my jeep looked like. If we wanted to get into town undetected, it was probably better to do the unexpected and ride in with the crew.

"So, are we going hunting now?"

I sighed. Liv's animal is a beast and she almost always was the first to volunteer for a fight. Panthers are bloodthirsty and I could see the look in her eye. She was itching to start something.

"No. We're gathering information. We need to know how many are here and hopefully what the plan is so we can be prepared for it."

She made a face. "That's boring."

I shot her a dry look. "It's safe."

She opened her mouth to argue but Derek interrupted her, a grin pulling at his lips. "You got work, kitty. You and Gigi gotta pick the prospect for the apprenticeship."

She sighed dramatically, turning back around with a pout, but she didn't argue with him. Hopefully that would keep her busy so she wouldn't go looking for trouble herself.

"Derek, you're going to Liv's shop today, right?"

He nodded. "Bear don't like bein' away from her if there's a threat." He paused for a second. "He don't like bein' away from her in general neither."

She beamed at him, cuddling against his side. Those two could write the book on what love should look like. They both accepted their differences with love and support and no matter what happened, they had each other's backs. I've seen the way he watches her. It's not like she can't protect herself, he just wants to be near her at all times and make sure she's safe. It was something to strive for if I ever had an opportunity to meet someone. It was unlikely, I've got trust issues and I'm too busy most of the time anyway. And most of the guys in this town weren't my type.

My gaze strayed to Link. He was staring out the window, on edge from being stuck in the truck. He couldn't even roll down the window because we'd lose our cover. He was so grouchy about it but he's so pretty it was hard to focus on his bad mood. I didn't think blondes were my type but maybe I was a little quick to judge. That train of thought surprised me

and I shut it down quickly. I'm not attracted to a lion. Not going to happen.

It was a little cooler in the mornings in the mountains but I didn't mind it much anymore. Link did apparently because he had a hoodie on and he was slouched in his seat, his hood pulled up and his hands stuffed into the pockets. Lions don't like the cold and I had to fight back a laugh. He must've felt me staring because he glanced at me and frowned.

"What?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. You look cold."

He shot me a dirty look. "Shut up. I'm from the south, it doesn't get cold there."

I lifted a shoulder casually. "So am I. It just doesn't bother me."

He growled at me which only made it funnier. He looked like that grumpy cat meme one of the officers sent me online.

"Get down," Liv barked without warning. Link wasted no time, throwing his body over mine as we both ducked down. Derek slowed and my anxiety kicked up but I couldn't peek my head up to look around.

Hands on my seatbelt drew my attention. Link unbuckled us both and nudged me onto the floor of the backseat, following me while keeping me covered.

"What is it?" I whispered.

Liv shushed me and didn't answer and the dominance in the vehicle dialed up a few notches as the truck pulled to a stop. We weren't anywhere near town yet, we shouldn't be stopping.

"Derek, go around it."

He growled low, obviously not happy about it, but Liv didn't give him room to argue. I felt him cut the wheel, edging around whatever was blocking him while Liv spoke on the phone.

"You seeing this?"

“I see it. It’s a threat. Don’t get out of the car.”

She had it on speaker because we could hear Jackson just fine. He was following behind us, the entire crew coming down the mountain together because it wasn’t safe for anyone to go anywhere alone right now. All because of me and I hated myself a little bit for causing my crew so much trouble.

“What is it, Liv?” I snapped.

“Not now!” she hissed. “Just keep your head down.”

I growled low. I was normally the one protecting others and I didn’t like not knowing what was going on. Link was glancing over his shoulder but he couldn’t see any more than I could. He was on top of me on the floor, using his body to hide me. When I touched his arm, he looked at me with a frown, shaking his head.

“No idea. Just do as she says, I guess.”

He didn’t like not knowing either because his growl was vibrating his chest. It was distracting considering his chest was against mine. A flush stole up my cheeks. This was really not a good time to be thinking about things like this. We were in the middle of a dangerous situation and had no idea what was going on and I was fighting back the urge to press myself tighter against him to feel more of that vibration. I needed to sit down for a minute and do the math on when my heat was because this is just ridiculous.

I could hear Liv and Jackson talking on the phone and I knew I should be listening but when Link’s eyes locked with mine, I couldn’t look away. The entire world went quiet, sucked into this moment where I was pressed against him so close that I could feel his breath against my skin. His gaze dropped to my mouth and I licked my lips without thinking, drawing a growl from him that stunned me. It wasn’t dark and intimidating like it’d had been before but it still felt like a warning. Like somehow I was riling up his animal.

“Rhea? Rhea! Pay attention!”

Blinking quickly, I forced my gaze away from Link, looking towards Liv’s voice.

“What?”

“Do you have your phone?”

I frowned. “Of course I do. Why?”

“Because I don’t think you should sit up yet. I sent you pictures instead.”

Well, that was polite. I shifted to get my phone out of my pocket and ended up pressing myself tighter against Link. He sucked in a sharp breath and the flush worked its way down my neck. I was having a hard time focusing with him looking at me like that, his eyes heated and a growl in his throat. I had to remind myself more than once that I don’t like him so I could get the stupid phone out of my pocket.

Still trapped underneath him, I could only use one hand to plug in my password and pull up the pictures Liv sent me. It did a lot in cooling my blood, my breath caught in my chest.

“Show me,” Link growled, taking the phone from me. His face darkened with every picture and I had to pry my phone from his fingers for fear that he’d break it, he was gripping it so tightly.

The pride left a message right at the entrance of the forest to Jackson’s territory. An animal, probably a deer though it was a little hard to tell with the amount of destruction, was placed strategically in the middle of the road, making it difficult to go around. That alone would’ve made me cautious but it was the claw marks in the tree next to it that pointed to exactly who was responsible.

“Why block the road?” Liv queried, her voice gone rough with her animal close to the surface.

“To get her out of the car,” Link replied with a growl. “She’s a cop, they’ll expect her to go check it out. Do you see any abandoned vehicles nearby?”

No one could see anything but that didn’t mean they weren’t there. Jackson was right. It was a threat, a message. They knew where my crew was and if I didn’t come to them, they were coming for the crew.

Chapter Fourteen

LINK

THE REST of the drive was uneventful. We went a few miles before any of us were willing to let Rhea sit up. The likelihood that the pride was watching just raised significantly and Blackridge Haven was no longer safe. We needed information on how many are coming because we couldn't just pretend it wasn't happening anymore. They weren't being patient about it. That warning was an attempt to take her, I was sure of it. And it pissed me off.

Derek and Liv dropped us off near the one grocery store in town. There was enough coverage that we could slip out undetected. They weren't looking for me so I didn't have to hide but Rhea put on a baseball cap to hide her face and we did our best to stay out of sight. It was easier said than done in such a small town but from what I could tell, we weren't being followed and I haven't smelled any lions in the town proper.

“Think they aren't down here?” she asked, scanning the road from inside the little Italian place we stopped in for lunch.

“I don't make assumptions, not when it comes to safety.” It was unnecessarily harsh but I was riled up and irritated that we've been walking around town all morning and come up with nothing. Most women probably would've gotten offended or at least bitched at me for snapping at them but Rhea took it all in stride, her eyes glued to the window.

“Your old alpha, do you remember what he looks like?”

She frowned, glancing back at me. “Yes. They all look the same.”

I lifted my eyebrows, waiting for her to continue, but she tipped her head, an odd look on her face.

“Have you never even seen a pride before?”

When I shook my head, she looked stunned. “I know you said your parents were rogue but at least where I’m from rogues pass through prides every once in a while. They have to, they’re required to check in just in case there are girl cubs produced. If they don’t, the pride will come after them. Once they find out, the rogues are required to either join the pride or give up the cub.”

It wasn’t something I’d ever heard of or experienced before. My parents never went anywhere near prides. Mom said they were dangerous and Dad never cared enough to argue with her. His family was rogue, just like him. It was why I thought Aiden’s suggestion to settle was misplaced. No one in my family ever settled, I doubt I’d be the first.

“We’re gonna have to revisit that later, Rhea. What does he look like?”

She studied me with a small scowl before she eventually nodded. “Fine. He looks a lot like you.”

My eyebrows flew up and she chuckled.

“You’re surprised? You’re a lion. Most of you are blonde with blue eyes. Though from what I remember, they preferred long straight hair because they didn’t like people messing with their manes and they were a lot more bulky.”

I scowled. “So not like me then. Don’t lump me in with those assholes.”

She laughed, the sound light and sweet, so different from the woman I’ve gotten to know that it shocked me into silence. She’s beautiful when she smiles and my lion rumbled his agreement. It stopped her laugh though and her face fell as she locked eyes with me. The tension came back but not fear. It was the same tension that showed up in Derek’s truck when she was underneath me and her breathing picked up. She’d

licked her lips and it'd taken everything I had not to recreate the movement with my tongue.

“You sure you're not in heat?” I murmured. I still didn't get it, she was stealing all my focus and it was getting harder and harder to resist her. Even now, in the middle of the crowded restaurant, I found myself leaning across the table in hopes of closing the gap between us.

She'd been thinking the same thing, or at least I thought so given that she was leaning towards me, but my question irritated her and she made a tsk sound behind her teeth, shoving my shoulder.

“No! Stop asking me that!”

I pursed my lips, failing to hide my grin. She looked so embarrassed, her face turning bright red even though she sounded pissed. When she noticed my smirk, she rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I don't like you.”

I chuckled. “Liar.”

AFTER WE ATE, we headed back out. There was a farmer's market that was open every day. It was crowded, which seemed like as good a place as any to hide and people-watch to see if we could find any bulky blonde assholes. It still bugged me that she compared me to those guys. Same eye and hair color does not mean I look like them.

We stuck to the edges, trying to keep watch without drawing attention to ourselves. The wind picked up and clouds blocked out the sun. It made tracking harder, the scents of the cooking food surrounding us. We were doing our third pass when I grabbed her elbow, pulling her behind one of the stands selling fruit.

“Hold up. Ten o'clock. Is that what we're looking for?”

Peering around the edge of the stall, she searched in the direction I'd pointed out. When she stiffened, I knew I was right. Across the market was a group of three big blonde dudes. Bulky was putting it lightly though. They looked like bodybuilders. That kind of mass would be intimidating if I didn't have a long history of fighting experience. Their eyes scanned the crowd, they hadn't seen Rhea yet, so I pulled her behind me and edged backwards away from the opening. She took a few steps back while I kept watch until they turned and disappeared down the main walkway of the market.

"I think we should follow but we need to stay back, we're upwind. Stick close to the stalls that are cooking something, it should block our scent."

I prowled forward, eager to go after them, but when she didn't reply, I glanced behind me and froze.

She was gone and I didn't hear a damn thing. For a minute I thought maybe she'd wandered off on her own until I got a few feet away where there was a dirt patch on the road next to the parking lot. There were a lot of footprints but it was the drag marks that made my hairs stand on end. She didn't wander off. She was fucking taken. The sounds and smells of the farmer's market, which I'd planned on using to my advantage, they used to theirs instead.

Fury whipped through me with gale forces and the lion rose to the surface, pushing to get out and find her. I couldn't shift here, not this close to humans, but I did let out a very realistic roar. Whoever took her from me was going to die a slow and painful death. Rhea, I'm coming for you.

Rhea

I'd taken a few steps back to stay out of sight. The stall itself had a lot of open space but the back wall was curtained off so I thought I had cover. I was so busy watching Link and the lions across the market that I didn't look behind me until it was too late. A hand covered my mouth, a fist slammed into my gut to knock the wind out of me, and I was dragged off in broad daylight. With my eyes glued to Link's back, I fought to draw in a breath. He didn't notice, the elements of the market and the wind blocking out the senses.

It took a second for me to be able to breathe but once I could, fight or flight kicked in. And I lean very heavily towards fight. I sank my teeth into the fleshy part of the hand over my mouth, making the asshole shout and drop me. When I spun around, it was just him but I knew the other three weren't far behind. I could handle one but I wasn't sticking around long enough to end up outnumbered.

"You stupid bitch!" he spat.

He'd dragged me into the forest. It surrounded the town and the market bumped up against it on one side. We were out of sight for the most part and I could see a van parked on the other side of the cluster of trees we were in. None of them expected me to fight back if they thought it was going to be that easy.

"If you think I'm going down without a fight, you've got another thing coming," I growled, shifting my stance. He's bigger but I'll hazard a guess that I'm faster.

He lunged for me with a snarl and I dodged out of the way. I didn't want to come straight at him, one punch and I'd probably get knocked out. Instead, I danced out of the way of his attempts to grab me, learning as much as I could about the way he fights. He may be tough looking but he's an idiot and always came at me the same way. On his next attempt, I

dropped and kicked out my leg, tripping him and sending him sprawling. Using it to my advantage, I popped to my feet and kicked hard between his legs. He let out a shout, curling in on himself, but I wasn't going to let him just walk away from this. So I kept kicking.

I lost myself in it for a minute, my cat salivating on getting revenge against the assholes who've been haunting my steps my entire life. But that meant I wasn't escaping like I should've been. I heard the rustle of leaves and the snap of a twig and my head jerked up from the quivering bawling mass at my feet.

Behind me in the forest were the three lions I saw at the market. The one in the middle locked eyes with me and bared his teeth. And that's when flight kicked in. I took off, back towards the sights and sounds of the market. They chased me because of course they did, some animals can't resist the chase.

“Rhea!”

“Link!”

I heard him up ahead and I picked up the pace as much as I could, thankful that my job keeps me in shape because I couldn't imagine outrunning three lion shifters without that daily training. I burst out of the forest, nearly running into Link, and grabbed his hand, yanking him with me towards the market.

“What are you doing?” he shouted.

I couldn't answer him. Someone let out a roar and I could almost feel them at our backs. We could probably beat them together but I wasn't under any illusion that there were only those four. If we could just get to the market, we'd be safe. Hopefully.

Chapter Fifteen

ONLY ONCE WE were in the market proper did I dare to look over my shoulder. I slowed to a stop, watching one of the lions pacing the tree line, the other two glowering at me. The middle one must be an alpha because they didn't move until he did. He lifted his gaze, locking eyes with me, and mouthed out something that sent a shiver up my spine.

You're mine.

Refusing to show any fear, I lifted my chin and narrowed my eyes. He watched me, a smirk crossing his face before he spun on his heel and marched into the forest, the other two following closely behind him.

Warmth at my back made me jump and I spun around, letting out a shriek. It wasn't another alpha though, it was Link. I pressed my hand to my chest, glaring at him.

“Why would you do that? You scared the hell out of—”

He grabbed my arms without warning, yanking me against his chest and crashing his lips to mine. I gasped, surprised, and he took full advantage, his tongue slipping past my lips to tangle with mine. Heat dumped into my system and after a second of hesitation, I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him back. He was growling, his arms wrapping around me and crushing my body against his. Adrenaline still coursing through my system, I didn't pay any attention to where we were until someone cleared their throat loudly.

Jerking back, I looked around wide eyed. We'd stopped in the middle of the damn market and were all over each other. People were shooting us dirty looks, obviously not appreciating the PDA, and my face burned as I removed my arms from Link's neck and pushed gently against his chest, trying to get him to release me.

"We should um... We should get out of here," I murmured.

He didn't look like he wanted to let go, the fury still painted across his face, so I leaned into him, rubbing my forehead against his chin. It soothed my cat and his as well, if his relaxing grip and more steadied breathing were any indication. Pressing his lips to my forehead, he released me and took my hand, keeping me close to his side as we headed out of the market. After a close attempt like that, I didn't protest, lacing our fingers for the extra feeling of security.

We made our way to Jackson's garage which was close by. Link was hyper-vigilant, keeping me on his right side away from the street, constantly scanning the area. He was worse than Jackson right now but I appreciated it. I wasn't entirely sure they would've stopped if he hadn't been right behind me. Lions don't recognize females as authority but they do recognize other males. Link could've been the reason they walked away without a fight.

I've been to Jackson's garage more than once, it's always busy, so when I saw the closed sign in the window, my stomach dropped and I looked around for signs of distress.

"Rhea!"

The door to the garage pushed open and Jackson waved us inside. We hurried to join him and he locked the door behind us, glaring out the window.

"What's going on? Why are you closed?"

The rest of the crew came out of the breakroom and I sucked in a breath. Derek had a black eye and Ethan was snarling. Javi was wrapped in Malcolm's arms, sniffing, and Esme looked pale. They all looked terrified or angry and I

didn't realize I'd started hyperventilating until Jackson put a hand on my shoulder and his alpha mojo did its magic.

"Relax. We're okay. Some pride members showed up here and at Liv's shop. They're gone now."

"What happened?" I was looking at Derek but Liv answered for him, a dark look on her face.

"One of the assholes grabbed my arm when I told them to fuck off. Derek went a little nuts. I just barely kept him from shifting but the dicks got the picture and took off. He'll be okay."

When I looked at Jackson, he shook his head. "No one was hurt here, they just threatened, but they knew everyone by name. This wasn't a sudden thing, they've been watching us."

Horror dumped into my system and I took a step back. Jackson's grip tightened and he leveled me with a look.

"You're not leaving. They said if you did, they'd come for us anyway for helping you escape. It's time to stop running. You're one of us, we're not letting them take you."

Link stepped up behind me, his hand resting on my lower back. "He's right. I'm betting you aren't the only one they're doing this to. It's time to stop this. They don't get to hurt people and call it pride business anymore. We're taking a stand. Give me a minute, I'm gonna call Aiden, see where he is. He's going to want to be updated."

He stepped outside to make the call but he didn't stray far, standing in front of the big glass window out front so I could see him. Every once in a while, he'd lift his gaze to mine and shoot me a reassuring look, putting me at ease.

"Malcolm, it's time," Jackson growled. Malcolm nodded once and handed Javi to his mother.

"I'll bring the truck around front. Wait here," he murmured.

When I turned my focus back onto Jackson, he filled me in. "I got ahold of the crew you mentioned. They're taking the girls in until we can get a handle on this. Malcolm will be

driving them out and staying the night to make sure they weren't followed before coming back."

I frowned. Losing someone as strong as Malcolm for an entire night seemed like a bad move but I'm not alpha and I didn't want to question him. Theo did though.

"Why him? He's massive, he shouldn't be leaving right now. Lily can drive just fine and—"

Jackson shook his head. "No. I need someone strong protecting them on the drive. And I can't expect him to leave his pregnant mate without making sure she's okay. It's hard enough for me to do it myself."

I sucked in a breath, jerking my attention to Carmen. Her face was tearstained and worried as she hugged Javi close. She nodded once, confirming Jackson's comment. It was an awful way to announce such happy news but it explained why Malcolm was going. He's got a family and a little one on the way. Maybe having him away from the battle was for the best. Javi already spent the first five years of his life without a dad, it'd kill me if he lost another one because of me.

Following the crew outside, I watched as Jackson pulled Esme into his arms, murmuring to her with his cheek pressed against hers. Her shoulders shook on silent sobs as she clung to him. Swallowing hard, my gaze shifted to Lily and Theo. She was arguing with him, trying to convince him to let her stay, but he wasn't swayed even though it looked like it pained him to say goodbye. He kissed her hard before physically lifting her into Malcolm's truck and buckling her in. She started sobbing and shaking her head and only Esme holding her hand kept her from getting back out. Malcolm buckled Javi in and Carmen slid into the back next to her son, her own eyes watering. She'd have the same goodbye once Malcolm left them with the other crew.

My heart broke and I had to look away. All this heartache because I couldn't stand the thought of staying in the pride and producing cubs for the alpha. I dragged my entire crew into my mess and they could lose their mates because of me. I almost couldn't stomach it and I stumbled a few feet away,

choking down the urge to retch, wrapping my arms around myself.

When Link stepped in front of me, I turned my face away. I was fighting back tears at this point and I didn't want to come off as weak. He didn't say anything, only pulled me against his chest and rubbed my back, shushing me softly.

"Aiden's on his way. He didn't answer so I called Christian. He got on a plane a few hours ago, he should be here by midnight at the latest. That's if he doesn't shift the minute the sun goes down. If he does, it'll be a hell of a lot sooner."

Sucking in a ragged breath, I looked up at him. Everyone else was frowning or growling but he looked calm and determined. "How are you so calm right now?"

He lifted a shoulder. "You go to war once, doing it again doesn't scare you as much as it used to."

I gasped, a million questions swirling through my head, but he cupped my cheek and kissed my forehead, shaking his head quickly.

"Story time later. Your friends are leaving."

Turning me carefully, he rested his hands on my shoulders and urged me closer to say goodbye. Standing with the rest of the crew, I waved at them, clenching my jaw to hide the tremble there. I watched them until they disappeared before turning back to Jackson. His eyes were glued to the spot where his mate left and the farther she got, the heavier he felt.

"Let's go. If we're going to face the pride, we're going to do it out of sight of the public. They want a war, they're gonna fucking get one," he snarled.

He stormed off to his truck and the crew split up into different vehicles. Liv wasn't chomping at the bit for a fight anymore and the drive was quiet. Ominous. The only person who didn't look angry was Link. He took my hand and gave me a look. Whatever was coming, we'd face it together. And to me, that meant more than the world.

Chapter Sixteen

LINK

THE WHOLE CREW was on edge. Sending away the ones who couldn't fight was rough on them. Jackson especially seemed to be radiating tension by the time we pulled up into the trailer park. And the more tense everyone else got, the more guilt I felt coming off of Rhea. She blamed herself for this and all that beautiful confidence I saw when I first met her was disappearing under the pressure of it all. I hated it, hated seeing her so muted, so when we slid out of the truck, I called the crew's attention before they could disappear into their homes.

"Listen, I understand this is difficult and fighting wars isn't normally what crews do, but you can't fight like this. Emotions are running high and you're more likely to make a mistake if your focus is elsewhere. We need to—"

"What the fuck do you know?" Theo snapped.

I fought back a growl, ignoring the interruption. "We need to discuss the plan, if we're going hunting or waiting for them to come here and how we're going to handle it. Lions are excellent hunters so splitting up won't work and—"

"You seem to know a lot about how they move. For all we know, you sent the girls away so they could be taken by the pride too. There could be a fucking ambush waiting for them. Where the fuck did you come from?"

"Theo, enough," Jackson growled. It wasn't an order though and it did fuckall with Theo's tantrum.

“No, I wanna know why the hell we should listen to him. Rhea said the male lions were her issue and here we are, being led by one? What the fuck is that shit?”

If I hadn't seen him put his mate in that truck, I'd be a little more annoyed that he was being such a dick. As it was, I was already losing my patience. Rhea's guilt was so heavy, she almost felt like a submissive, her lioness curled so tightly inside of her that I barely felt her. And he was making it worse.

“I'm here to help Rhea. In order to do that, I need to know that the people who've got her back are prepared. This isn't a regular crew conflict, this is dangerous and as the person with the most experience, I want to prepare you for it.”

Derek frowned. “What kinda experience?”

Dread settled in my stomach, I didn't like to talk about it, but I could tell they weren't going to trust me unless they had the full picture.

“I was in the military. Special forces. This isn't my first rodeo.”

It was met with stunned silence and even Rhea jerked her head to look at me, her eyes wide.

“How?”

I lifted a shoulder. “You'll have to ask my commander. There are shifters in the military but it's a very well kept secret, not even the president knows. I was recruited out of high school and they somehow skipped all blood tests and scans and pushed through the paperwork without letting it slip. I don't know how and I didn't ask. But I spent years fighting and I know for a fact, the best outcomes only come from a well managed team. You'll fail and people will die if you don't work together.”

Jackson ran his hand through his hair, considering me. His gaze moved to Rhea and when she dipped her chin, urging him to trust me, a wave of elation washed through me. Her support meant a lot and once we got a minute, I'd tell her. One of the other things I learned in special forces was to never leave

things unsaid. You might not get the opportunity to say it again.

“Alright, what do you suggest?”

I regarded the crew who all looked wary but attentive. It was better than nothing I guess.

“I suggest we go to them. They aren’t expecting it and it’ll take them off guard.”

WE CAME up with a plan and would start the hunt after nightfall. I didn’t want to wait too long in case they came here but everyone needed a minute to get their heads on straight. Jackson and Theo especially needed to call their mates and make sure they were safe so they wouldn’t be distracted. I was also giving Aiden as much time as possible to get here. I’m not arrogant enough to think one little crew can fight off fifty lions. They’re tough and dominant for sure but the lions probably have worked together before, they’ll know how to handle themselves.

After discussing the plan, most of them looked ready. Rhea didn’t. She lacked the determination and fire she had before and I knew she was still hurting from the girls being sent away. I followed her into her trailer, watching her pace her room.

“I should leave. They’ll come after me if I do, they’ll leave them alone.”

“No they won’t. You heard Jackson, they’ll come after the crew anyway for letting you leave. Then they’ll have to face the pride without you.”

She let out a frustrated growl, his hands gripping her hair roughly. Cutting off her path, I pulled her hands free, holding them tightly in mine so she didn’t start pacing again.

“Rhea, I—”

“You should go. You aren’t involved in this. You can still get out.”

She was desperate, trying to save whoever she could. She didn’t see this going our way and that kind of outlook could guarantee a failure. She needed to get her head in the game and she wasn’t going to get there without help.

Dragging her against me, I claimed her lips when she opened her mouth to start spouting off more panicked ideas. She whimpered, her whole body tense and trembling. I kept waiting for her to fight me, to get mad, but she threw herself at me instead and I grunted when my back hit the wall.

What started out as a bid to distract her turned into something more. Something significantly hotter. She pressed her body against mine, her nails dragging through my hair and pulling a groan from me. If this was the way she needed to be distracted, I was hard pressed to tell her no. Especially after she stepped back enough to rip her shirt over her head and dropped it to the floor.

For such a tough woman, I didn’t expect the lacy scrap of material covering her and I wanted nothing more than to drag my tongue across the fabric and see how she’d react. Since she was the one who was struggling, I let her take control, not willing to push her past her limits right now. She captured my lips again, tangling her tongue with mine, and I fought back a groan. It slipped out a second later when her hands disappeared under my shirt and dragged across my skin. Whenever she touched me, fire burned and I lost myself in it.

Pulling my shirt off, I stalked her until the backs of her knees hit the bed. She dropped back onto her elbows but instead of coming with her, I kneeled in front of her, leaning to lick a path between her breasts. She moaned, laying back fully so she could lace her fingers through my hair. When I sucked her nipple through the lacy material, she arched her back and cried out. I was painfully hard at this point and I had to undo my jeans to give myself some breathing room because damn. Every noise she made went straight to my dick and I was throbbing.

When she arched again as my attention switched to the other side, I reached around, unsnapping her bra quickly. I dragged it off with my teeth, grinning at the hooded lust filled look in her eyes as she watched me. Without the material in the way, I could finally feel her softness against my tongue as I sucked and nipped at her. Her hands in my hair kept me there until I started kissing father down.

Peeling off her jeans, I tossed them away. Waiting until she looked me in the eye, I dragged her towards the edge of the bed, pulling her thong down with my teeth. Her hips lifted to help me and she bit her lip, her face flushed as I put her legs over my shoulders. She was soaked and I was suddenly starving. You know how cats feel about cream.

Flattening my tongue, I dragged it from her entrance to her clit and back, growling when she arched and moaned, her legs tightening to drag me closer. She's sweet as honey and addicting and I went after her without reprieve, lapping and tracing her clit, focusing on anything that made her scream.

Her head moved back and forth, her legs tensing, and I knew she was close. I growled, wanting to taste her release on my tongue, and the noise seemed to tip her over. Her hands in my hair tightened almost painfully and her head flew back.

"Link, oh god!" It tapered into a scream as she fell apart and I lapped it up like a kid with an ice cream cone until she was writhing and trying to pull away from me. I lifted my head, my voice gone rough with need.

"Don't you know better than to take away a lion's dessert?"

Her eyes widened but I didn't give her a chance to protest before I went back for more. She's officially my new favorite treat and I wanted more.

She came again when I buried my tongue inside her. I had no interest in stopping but she yanked herself farther up the bed to escape me, her face and chest flushed from her release. Prowling after her, I grabbed her ankle.

"Come back here."

Chapter Seventeen

I SOMEHOW DREW a monster into my bed. A sex hungry, growly monster who made me come so hard I couldn't see straight twice in less than ten minutes. I saw the glint in his eyes, he wasn't done with me yet, and a part of me was thrilled but my lioness wanted more and I had to agree with her. He'd opened his jeans at one point and I could see his erection straining to be set free from his boxer briefs. Thick and long and just begging for attention.

“See something you like, kitten?”

The gruffness of his voice sent a shiver up my spine. He's never spoken that way to me before and even though I'd just finished twice, I was already aching for him just from his voice alone. He growled like he could tell how wet I was and I knew if I let him have control, he'd have his face between my legs before I could even think to protest.

I'm not a simpering submissive though and I wasn't going to plead with him to get what I wanted. I'm a damn lioness and if he won't give me what I craved, I was going to get it myself.

When he lunged at me, I twisted at the last minute. He landed on his back and I was straddling him before he could blink. He growled, running his fingers roughly up my thighs, trying to drag me up the bed, but I knocked his hands away, shifting down the bed to free him from the rest of his clothes.

Wrapping my hand around him, I smirked when he hissed and thrust into my hand. I pumped him a few times, loving the control, but I could only take so much before I had to do something about the ache between my legs. Tossing my leg over his hips, I rubbed the tip through my folds, moaning at the sensation as I coated him in my arousal. His growls were getting rougher, more demanding, and his grip on my hips was almost bruising. Deciding to stop torturing us both, I sank down on him when he caught at my entrance, the delicious fullness making me moan as he slid in to the hilt in one smooth motion.

His whole body went tense and he drew in a sharp breath. His eyes shot to mine, surprised, a strangled groan dragging out of him when I lifted up and sank back down. His eyes rolled back into his head and pleasure overtook his features, his grip on my hips tightening as he urged me on.

“Shit, shit! Oh fuck, Rhea!”

Goosebumps spread across my skin, the intense pleasure surprising me too. I’ve had sex before but nothing compared to this. To him. It was like he was hitting every nerve ending at once and I couldn’t decide whether to slow down and savor it or go faster and chase the intense orgasm that was building in my middle.

Link decided for me, yanking me against his chest and flipping us, using the momentum to draw back and thrust roughly inside of me. I cried out, my nails digging into his shoulders as he bucked against me, strained pleasure on his face.

With every roll of his hips, he shoved me closer to my release until I was keening, completely lost in it. His breath quickened and he grit his teeth, dropping to his elbows.

“Oh god, Rhea, I’m gonna...”

His warning only made it better, hotter, and I lifted my hips, chasing that feeling that was just out of my reach.

“Link!”

With a snarl, he set his teeth against my neck, nipping just hard enough to set me off. I came screaming, pure unadulterated pleasure coursing through my system. I almost sobbed from the force of it, my soul trying to leave my body after such an intense experience. Only his body wrapped around mine, his shouts of pleasure, kept me in the moment.

He collapsed on top of me, both of us breathing hard and covered in a sheen of sweat. Little aftershocks coursed through my system, making me shiver and pulse around him. He didn't pull away like I thought he would. He lifted his head and captured my lips and drew me back with sweet kisses until I could breathe right and my body relaxed.

When he pulled back, I expected him to do the regular guy thing, make some kind of asinine comment and go to sleep. Instead, he smiled softly and kissed me once before dragging himself away and pulling me with him into his arms. He carried me to the bathroom and started the shower, running his fingers through my hair with a grin on his face. He didn't leave once I was inside, climbing in with me and wrapping himself around me. I've never had a shower so intimate and so sweet. He used any excuse he could get to touch me, rubbing soap over my skin and cleaning me up. And when I moaned and leaned into his hand, he touched me until I came again before helping me rinse off. Not once did he ask for anything in return. He just took care of me and I had to fight back tears over how perfect it was.

We couldn't go to sleep, even though being wrapped in his arms in bed sounded like the best idea on the planet. My cat agreed and was really put out that I refused. The sun was starting to set and we needed to eat before the hunt began. Link stayed wrapped around me, kissing my neck and moving with me as I prepped food. I made enough for the crew, knowing that for at least a few of them, they'd be too upset right now to cook.

Propping the door open, I knew the smell would draw them in. I'm not Lily in terms of my cooking but I'm decent at it. And who doesn't like fettuccine alfredo?

They wandered in slowly, taking the bowls I handed them with tense smiles. The time I spent with Link pulled me out of my panic and I was left only with fierce determination. My crew was sticking by my side against the pride. And I was going to fight like hell to protect them.

Once everyone was eating, I looked over the group. It was quiet. Almost too quiet. The crew was never the silent type. They were always talking and bantering and I hated to see them like this. Theo especially looked like he was struggling without Lily.

Sitting next to him, I put a hand on his shoulder. “Did you call her?”

He nodded. “Yeah, she’s good. They made it fine. She’s mad at me for making her go but—” he swallowed hard. “I had to. I had to keep her safe.”

Forcing a smile, I tipped my head so he could see me better. “You’re a good mate. And when she gets back and sees that you’re okay, she’ll forgive you. Or you can just tell her I made you do it. I’d rather she be mad at me than you.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “I’ll hold you to it.”

Talking seemed to draw him out of the darkness a little and I did my best to urge the others into talking too. Liv was back to vibrating with the need to fight. Derek’s face was almost healed thanks to shifter healing. And when Link commented on it, he couldn’t help his goofy grin when he said Liv kissed it better. It wasn’t easy going like normal, there was an underlying layer of tension because we all knew what was coming, but it was better than before.

Time and time again, I looked over at Link. He leaned one shoulder against the wall, his arms crossed against his broad chest, watching over the crew with cool confidence I could only hope for. I wanted to know more about his service, about how he managed to hide his animal and what happened that made him so unaffected by the potential for war. Something clicked into place when we were together, something I wasn’t willing to name just yet. I was too afraid. I worried that if I named it right now, I’d lose him and never recover.

Once the sun fully set, I let out a breath and glanced at Link. He nodded. Time to go.

One by one we all stood, the nerves setting in. We had no idea how many were coming, if it was just the four from today or if there were several in each location. Or maybe Aiden was right and there are more than fifty coming for me. I couldn't imagine being so important that they felt the need to send that many after me but nothing about this was what I thought. I figured they'd give up after a while.

Since this was my battle, I went first, opening the door and coming up short. A very naked Aiden stood outside the door, a deep scowl on his face.

“Aiden? When did you get here?”

The air felt unbearably heavy, his animal riled and making it hard to breathe. But he stepped forward and pulled me into a hug and I felt the dominance lift enough for me to be able to hug him back.

“I'm glad you're okay. It took longer than I wanted to get back here and I feared the worst. I didn't imagine they'd wait.”

Stepping back, I shook my head. “They didn't. They tried to take me at the farmer's market today. I got away.”

A deep snarl ripped through him and his inhuman gaze shifted to Link. “And where were you? I asked you to watch over her.”

When I glanced over my shoulder at Link, he was seething, his teeth bared. “I was with her. They took her when my back was turned. She wasn't gone longer than five minutes, I would've found her before—”

“Why was your back turned then?!” Aiden barked. “Your job was to protect her! They shouldn't have gotten close!”

The air was starting to vibrate and I grunted under the pressure, wanting to stop them from fighting but unable to speak. The same thing was happening to the crew behind me and their animals didn't like it. Dominance racked up all around me and I actually dry heaved.

“Back off, Aiden! You’re hurting her!”

“You don’t get to talk to me about hurting her when you can’t do your job! I should’ve taken her with me since you cannot be relied on to watch over her!”

Link stalked forward, shoving Aiden hard. “You’re not taking her anywhere, asshole!”

They were fighting and wasting energy and my lioness lost her temper.

“Enough!” It tapered off into a snarl and I straightened my spine, glaring down the two idiots fighting like I was a damn toy. “You are wasting time and we have a job to do! I did not send my friends away to watch you two tear each other apart! So stow it!”

Chapter Eighteen

LINK

I WAS STILL ON EDGE, not liking how possessive Aiden was of Rhea. She's mine. I felt it when we were together. It all made sense now, my obsession, my inability to look away from her. I kept confusing it with her being in my head but that wasn't right. She's my mate, my other half, and I wasn't going to share her with anyone. But I was also proud of her. She got close to an alpha order, power behind her words silencing us both, her eyes flashing with fury. She brought us back to reality and I stepped away from Aiden, refocusing on her and the task ahead of us.

“You're right, I'm sorry. I'll do better.”

She narrowed her eyes on Aiden and he dipped his head once. “Acknowledged. What's the plan?”

“We hunt. We are not acting like sitting ducks waiting for them to surround us. We move as a crew and we don't go out alone. Clear?”

Jackson's hand landed on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze of support as he stepped up to join us. “Well said. You can re-approach whatever issues you two are having later. We want to take them off guard and they'll be able to find us easily if we're busy screaming at each other.”

Sucking in a breath, I let it out slowly. I needed to focus on Rhea. She's a police officer, she knows how to act under pressure, but these assholes have been haunting her all her life

and I was worried about the trauma making her freeze once things actually start. And apparently I wasn't the only one.

Aiden grabbed her elbow. "Rhea, I want you to stay near me. I will protect you until—"

I snarled. "She's staying with me. If you shift near her, you could kill her."

He bared his teeth at me. "I can control myself—"

"Enough, both of you. I already said we're all sticking together. Seriously, I thought you two were friends," she snapped, ripping her arm away.

Glaring at him, I stepped up to her, putting a hand on her lower back. His eyes narrowed into slits for a second before his head cocked to the side. The look on his face shifted from pissed to analytical as he looked between us. When he locked eyes with me again, he lifted an eyebrow. I dipped my chin once and a grin spread across his face.

"So that's why you're acting like that."

Rolling my eyes, I ignored him. "Did you not bring any clothes with you? You're not traipsing through the forest in just your skin."

He shot me a droll look. "How often do you carry clothes during a shift?"

It's not the same and he knew it. Making an irritated sound, I finally offered, "You can wear some of mine. None of the good stuff though, you'll ruin it."

When I turned around, the entire crew looked baffled, looking between us. I shrugged. "We've been friends a long time, we fight. It's not a big deal."

Theo scoffed. "Uh no, Liv and I fight. You two just had a full blown tug of war over a woman. That's weird."

I wasn't interested in talking about that again. It'd just piss me off. I still didn't know what his and Rhea's relationship was and if he tried to fight me for her, it'd be a really difficult fight. Not that it'd stop me. She's mine and I don't share.

When I came back out with a t-shirt and shorts for Aiden, he was frowning at Theo. “There is no intimate relationship between me and Rhea. She is important to me because of a matter long ago. I would not sully our friendship with relations like that.”

I snorted. “What? Like you sullied ours?”

He chuckled, taking the clothes from me. “That was another matter entirely.”

Rhea looked between us, confused. “Wait. What?”

I shook my head, kissing her temple. “It’s nothing. We should get moving.”

“Oh no, there’s no way you can say something like that and not tell us the backstory. Because it sounds like you guys had a relationship,” Liv interrupted, stepping up next to Rhea.

Aiden and I looked at each other and I shrugged. “It was a long time ago.”

Rhea’s mouth fell open and Liv scrunched her nose. “Wait, are you gay?”

My brow furrowed. “No. Not that it matters but I’m bi. I care about relationships, not gender.”

The tension in the group was gone, all the focus now on me and Aiden. It wasn’t like I was embarrassed about it but now really wasn’t the time to discuss it. I did focus on Rhea’s reaction though. She seemed closed off and quiet and when we headed towards the forest, she wouldn’t look at me.

“Does it bother you? Me being bi?”

She scoffed. “No! Why would that bother me? What bothers me is that my best and oldest friend and my mate have had sex!”

Grabbing her arm, I halted her steps, pulling her against me. She fought against it, irritated with me until I captured her lips roughly. She responded easily enough but she wasn’t done being pissed apparently because she bit my bottom lip hard, making me grunt.

“We’re not done talking about this,” she snapped, spinning on her heel. Grinning, I hurried to her side, putting my hand on her hip.

“No, I guess not. *Mate.*”

It felt good that she was acknowledging it. It was the worst timing on the planet to figure it out given where we were headed but it only made me more determined to fight. To protect her and the crew she loves. And with Aiden at our backs, I felt like this was going to go our way. It had to go our way. There were no other options.

“Why’d you put clothes on if you’re just going to shift anyway?” Liv queried. The crew was stripping, facing the crew as animals to have a better shot against them. We had heightened senses as humans but it was better as animals.

Aiden shook his head. “Believe me, it’s best to keep my animal as a last resort. Especially in an area such as this.”

She looked confused but I knew better. He wasn’t wrong. If anyone was going to accidentally expose us, it’d be him, just by sheer size alone.

“So, what? You’re gonna fight bare handed against lions?”

He just looked bored. He could probably handle himself just fine but it made me uneasy so I jogged to my bike and pulled a hunting knife out of one of the saddle bags. When I handed it to him, he looked bemused.

“Shut up. I don’t want my friend to be mauled by a lion. Let’s get moving.”

Stripping out of my clothes, I let the lion have my skin. Luckily this time he wasn’t a complete dick about it and we worked as a team like we normally would. We wanted to protect Rhea and that was best done together. She was in front, her ears flicking back and forth, listening for the sounds as we prowled deeper into the forest.

We didn’t have a location and we were unwilling to split up so it was slow going. Since I didn’t smell them on the property and the threat had been along the edge, we headed down the mountain, taking care to stay out of sight.

The easiest to hide was Liv, her panther a dark shadow slinking through the night, moving on silent feet. The wolves came next, then Corey's black bear. Jackson and Aiden walked side by side and it felt good that he had some sort of protection. Derek was by far the biggest and an intimidating sight but he was surprisingly quiet for someone so big. I took up the rear, watching their backs. Like Rhea, with my coloring I stood out but we weren't going to hide forever so it wouldn't matter in the end. At one point an uneasy feeling settled over me, like we were being watched, but I didn't pick up a scent or hear anything but our quiet movements. I kept pressing forward, staying alert.

We reached the edge of the forest before Theo took over, nose to the ground. He must've picked up a scent because he growled low and led the way to the north. I was starting to question his abilities with how far we had to walk but then I heard voices and we all slowed, stalking forward.

"Don't understand why he didn't come for her sooner. Bitch got cocky outside of the pride."

Someone snorted. "You're just mad because she kicked your ass. Suck it up, you can make her apologize on her knees for all I care."

It took a hell of a lot of work not to growl, I didn't want to give us away. But they were talking about hurting Rhea and I was going to kill them for even thinking of it.

"Fuck no, she'll probably bite me. I'll have her after Leoni breaks her proper. There's plenty others just like her who need to be broken in. Stupid bitches thought they could outrun the pride."

We reached the edge of their little encampment, the light of the fire blinding them to the fact that they were surrounded by monsters. There were only three of them, leaning against logs or lying on the ground. They looked bored, completely uncaring of their surroundings. None of them stood watch or did patrols. It almost felt like they didn't care about being caught...

Spinning around, I noticed the group of lions behind us right as they launched themselves forward. With a roar, I met the one in front head on, lashing out with my claws. I got him in the face, which pissed him off, but he wasn't going to fight fair. While I was focused on him, someone circled around and came up from behind, grabbing my leg. I let out a bellow but he was gone a second later, a gorgeous as hell lioness clawing the hell out of him. She stuck close to my back, keeping them away while I went after the ones in front. We were a team and we were doing well, but more and more kept spilling out of the trees, more than we'd hoped for. The crew was surrounded, fighting for their lives, and it wasn't until a few older lions prowled forward that I got an idea that might end this whole thing.

Chapter Nineteen

LINK

THE OTHER LIONS backed away from the older ones, giving me a minute of reprieve. The whole area went quiet, the ones not battling stepping back until there was just a ring of lions surrounding the crew. There was blood dripping from my mouth, a few lions dead at my feet already, and they didn't look happy about it. A rumble overhead signaled an incoming storm, the drops of rain the only noise now. My plan was risky, they could launch themselves at me before I had a chance to change back, but I can't speak as a lion, so despite the animal's protests, I took back my skin and locked eyes with the one in the middle.

“I challenge you for alpha.”

He bared his teeth, obviously unhappy, but what little I knew of pride life, the alpha couldn't ignore an alpha challenge. And if I won, Rhea would be in my pride and under my care. I could give her the freedom she wanted. She's my mate, I'd stick close to her, but she wouldn't have to live in fear anymore and I'd never force her to pledge to me. I wasn't even interested in being an alpha but I'd do it if it'd protect her.

The one in the middle shifted, pushing to his feet with a furious growl. “You cannot challenge for alpha in the middle of a battle!”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Where's the rule that says I can't?”

His fists clenched at his sides, a deep snarl rattling his throat. “I know you. You’re rogue, like your worthless father. You know nothing of pride life. You will drive the pride into the ground. No, you cannot make a challenge. I won’t allow it.”

Aiden’s dark and smoky voice spoke behind me. “You don’t get to dictate that. Shifter law states anyone can make an alpha challenge. Where they come from is not a factor.”

The alpha bared his teeth menacingly. “What would you know of it, *human*?”

I didn’t dare look away from the alpha or the other lions in front of me, I didn’t trust them not to attack while my back was turned. Aiden stepped closer, letting his dominance fill the forest and rattle the air. The alpha’s eyes widened and his face paled in the limited light of their campfire.

“What are you?”

There was a sneer in Aiden’s voice. “Your worst nightmare. And unless you’d prefer an alpha challenge from me instead, I suggest you take the one already offered to you. Or are you too much of a coward to face him?”

The alpha didn’t like that and snarled low. “Watch it. You may be big but there are more of us than there are of you.”

I could almost see the look on Aiden’s face, the smug, challenging look I’ve seen him give so many CEOs and people of authority in the time I’ve known him. It pissed off the alpha but he was smart enough to remain wary, his gaze flicking between me and Aiden before he dipped his chin once.

“Fine. Challenge accepted. But you cannot get involved.” He pointed his finger roughly in Aiden’s direction.

Aiden stepped back. “So long as the battle remains honorable, I will refrain from interfering. But if you do anything stupid, you best be prepared to face my wrath.”

The ring around us widened as me and the alpha shifted back. He attempted to circle around me, doing the whole song and dance, but I wasn’t going to let him close to my crew. I felt the energy coming off him. There wasn’t an honorable

bone in his body. He was going to try something if things didn't go his way. So when he came up at my side, expecting me to circle, I went after him.

I may have been raised a rogue without any connections to a pride but I knew how to fight like a lion. My dad wasn't weak and he started teaching me how to brawl when I was young, before my mane had even fully come in yet. Not only that but my time in the military made me ruthless and unaffected by dominance. It's one of the reasons Aiden and I are friends. He likes that I can be around him without worrying about his moods.

The older lion pushed onto his hind feet, coming out claws first. I knew better than to let him get on top of me and I'm bigger than him by a significant amount so when I went after him, I knocked him back by a few feet from the sheer force of it, slapping and clawing at him. His focus was on keeping me away, mine was on his neck. Claws slashed and I felt my skin part on my shoulders but I didn't let the pain distract me. I let it fuel my rage as I managed to get myself on top of the old asshole.

He was tiring quickly. He wiggled free the first time I pinned him but the second time he couldn't quite manage it. He bellowed and roared and tried to use his back feet to get me off him but I latched my teeth against his neck and bit down just enough to prove a point. Move again and I'll kill you without hesitation. He froze, panting heavily, and I waited for his next move, growling out a warning. Only when he went lax beneath me did I release him. He was defeated and they all knew it.

Blood streamed from the holes in his neck and he glared at me but he couldn't deny the outcome. Not with this many witnesses. I now controlled his pride and I was going to set all those women free. Free to find their own mates and live their own lives. Free to make their own crews or find ones that suit them. If they felt the need to stay for protection, I'd figure it out but I wouldn't be breeding any of them. I have a mate and she's all I need.

Stepping back, I glanced over my shoulder at Rhea, letting her know with the look in my eyes that she was free. Instead of the relief I thought I'd see, she let out a roar and launched herself at me. No, not at me. She darted past me, meeting another alpha head on as he attempted to sneak up on me. The one who'd lost launched to his feet and on top of me, snarling. The battle started up again like the alpha challenge didn't happen and the crew wasn't prepared for it, on the defensive almost immediately.

Cowards. Each and every one of them. Unwilling to accept the results of a challenge, they attacked while my back was turned. Getting the upper hand on the old man was easy enough, rolling us and going after his neck. This time I didn't hesitate, ripping his throat out. I went after the other two old ones, knowing they were important, but everyone seemed to forget the terms of the challenge. Aiden said he wouldn't step in unless the challenge was unfair. And attacking me after I'd already won wasn't fair in his books.

It hit like an explosion of power, blasting through the trees, leveling a few in his general vicinity. The crew was too close so even though it was dangerous, after I finished off the old timers I turned my back on the battle in front of me, moving to help the crew closest to Aiden so they could get away. His body expanded and the air around him heated and the lions were starting to look nervous now. They should. They just picked a fight with the biggest monster out there. And he doesn't leave survivors.

I'd just knocked Ethan out of the way when Aiden shifted. The power of it tossed everyone close to him to the ground, including me. Luckily, no one could use it to their advantage because they were too stunned at the massive red dragon leveling the forest around him with his mass. A low hissing growl made a few of the lions turn and flee and I knew I needed to get the crew out of here. Aiden's got good aim but we were too damn close right now and a forest was no place for dragon fire.

Rolling to my feet, I went after Rhea first. She stood over the body of the alpha who'd tried to sneak up on me, red

streaked across her coat. She, like me, knew what Aiden was and it didn't surprise her. She wasn't done fighting though and went after a few that were stunned frozen in front of her. Running up to her, I helped her with the one she was fighting before knocking her down. With a roar, I tried to get her mind off the battle and onto me. We need to get out of here, kitten.

She bounced back pretty quick and rolled to her feet, moving to follow me. We dodged out of the way right as Aiden let loose a breath of fire so hot I felt it singe my tail. Asshole. I'd bet good money he did it on purpose because I punched him. He's always saying how excellent his aim is.

The rest of the crew was either still locked in battle or hovering, unsure what to do or where to go. Derek was brawling with a few lions, Liv right at his side, raking her claws down the back of one of them who tried to go for Derek's neck. Rhea darted forward to help him while I went after the one pinning Corey. Ethan beat me to him, latching onto his leg and jerking his head. The lion released Corey with a bellow and I took the advantage to go for his neck, ripping it open with a quick motion. Corey was panting but he looked okay, hauling himself to his feet. I watched Jackson take down another with Theo helping him. I didn't need to help with that one but once he was finished I headed him off from going after more. They were fleeing now, trying to outrun the dragon fire. They wouldn't get far. Like I said, Aiden doesn't leave survivors.

Chapter Twenty

THE AIR WAS hot and smokey and it was hard to breathe. If we'd had a choice, I'd never have suggested bringing Aiden into the forest to fight. As it was, the rain was doing very little to stop the fire. The crew ran, heading back toward the trailer park and away from the spreading flames. Luckily we were really far from town so the likelihood of someone seeing Aiden was slim, especially with the clouds covering the moon, but the fire was going to draw attention and firefighters would show up and question the marks on the ground where his blasts were concentrated. I didn't know what we were going to do about it but we didn't have time to make plans. The heat was against our backs and we needed to flee.

Even though we didn't find them in a straight path when we left, we found our way back easily enough. Jackson knows his territory and the minute we stepped onto it he veered off. We followed behind him, only the sound of our footsteps and panting breath in the air. Relief hit me once I saw the trailer park in front of me but it was short lived because it wasn't empty like it should've been. There were three more lions here, though one was already dead. They were facing off against Malcolm and a pure white wolf. Lily?!

Theo saw her at the same time as I did and lost his ever loving shit. He flew past us, landing on top of the lion closing in on his mate without hesitation. It was dangerous, he's a lot smaller than the lions, but he didn't give a flying fuck. And he wasn't alone in the fight. The rest of the crew swarmed the trailer park and the lions, ripping them apart. It wasn't a fair

fight but I didn't give a shit. They didn't fight honorably and we weren't going to give them that courtesy either.

Once the lions were gone, Theo shifted, still snarling as he stormed toward Lily. Her shift was slower, she was still learning, but he grabbed her as soon as she finished, yanking her into a bruising kiss.

“Esme?!”

I spun around, watching as Esme and Carmen stepped out of Jackson's trailer, Javi in tow. My mouth fell open. They were supposed to be gone, safe over the mountain.

Jackson's reaction was very similar to Theo's, his hands in her hair as he fused his mouth to hers. Carmen stepped unsteadily towards Malcolm, her hair sticking to her skin as the rain picked up. He didn't shift back, still on edge, but he let her lean against him, lifting Javi so he could wrap his little arms around his neck.

“What are you doing here?” Theo's voice shook, his hands everywhere as he checked Lily for injuries. She looked unhurt, which was stunning.

“We couldn't stay behind and let you do it alone. It wasn't right!”

He snarled, not happy with her answer, but we didn't have time to sit around right now.

“Guys, we need to get out of here. Rain or not, the fire is heading straight for us. We need to move!”

The orange glow from the fire was getting closer. Soon it'd hit Jackson's territory and be on top of us not long after. We were sitting ducks right now.

“Wh- What is that?!” Lily cried.

Out of the darkness came Aiden, a massive red dragon the size of a cargo plane barreling towards us. Carmen cried out and most of the crew grew tense but he veered off and let out another jet of fire.

“What is he doing?”

Link watched him with a frown. “Creating a barrier. The trees hit directly will be reduced to ash, the fire won’t be able to jump it and it’ll stop heading this way. It’ll be hard to explain to the fire department but...”

But at least our homes were safe. Jackson’s territory was safe. We were finally safe...

It hit me like a ton of bricks and I stumbled a little. We were safe. I was safe. The alpha who Link challenged was Paul, the alpha of the pride I was supposed to belong to. He’s dead along with any alpha who showed up here today. That meant I was free. I didn’t have to avoid my shifts and suppress my animal. Yes, we were still hiding from humans but I could handle that. I wouldn’t be looking over my shoulder, waiting to be ripped away from the people that I love.

A whimper escaped me and I felt Link’s arms wrap around me, pulling me against his chest. He seemed to know exactly what I needed and he shushed me quietly, rocking me back and forth and petting my hair while my shoulders shook on suppressed sobs. Intense relief left me dizzy and I clung to him, letting myself be weak for once. He never faltered, scooping me into his arms when my knees buckled and I couldn’t stand on my own anymore.

“Everyone, let’s head inside. I think we could all use a drink,” Jackson urged, leading Esme back to his trailer. Everyone followed, Link keeping me tucked up against his chest. The longest he strayed from me was to grab us some clothes. Everyone settled in Jackson’s living room, on the couches, chairs, even on the floor, wanting to stay together after the stress of the evening. Link sat on the floor with his back against the wall and I curled into his lap, leaning my head against his chest. I still felt out of sorts and overwhelmed and when the bottle of whiskey passed our way, I took a heavy swallow, grimacing against the burn.

“Okay, elephant in the room. Or should I say dragon. Because what the hell?”

Liv was of course the one to break the silence, her big golden eyes locked on me and Link. I knew they’d have

questions but it took effort to summon the energy to sit up and look her in the eye.

“What do you want to know?”

Her mouth opened and closed but no words came out. She couldn't seem to decide where to start and it eased the tension a little. Liv was never silent so to watch her flounder made the crew chuckle. She scowled and sat back, her arms crossed as she glared at no one in particular.

“What the hell am I supposed to say? Dragons are myths!”

“And we'd prefer if it stayed that way,” Aiden remarked as he stepped into the trailer. He was dripping wet and covered in soot but otherwise uninjured. Jackson tossed him a towel and Link had clothes waiting for him. Objectively, Aiden is really attractive with his rippling muscles and dangerous energy. And his package was nothing to scoff at. He didn't make my blood heat like Link did but I wasn't the only one checking him out. One by one, different mates started growling as the women and even Corey checked out the dragon shifter as he towed himself off.

“Keep staring and I'm going to have to remind you of who you're mated to,” Link growled low in my ear.

Glancing at him over my shoulder, I pursed my lips. “You've slept with him. I feel like I'm entitled to look.”

He smirked, nipping at my shoulder. “It was a long time ago.”

Yeah, that didn't really matter. Aiden's hot and there's no way I could compete with that. Like he could hear my thoughts, Link tightened his arms around me, running his tongue along the spot where a claiming mark would go.

“There's only one person in this room I want to see naked and I get the feeling I'm going to have to wait. Don't test my patience, kitten. I'll claim you in front of everyone if you aren't careful. That way they'll all know you're mine.”

The dark threat sent a thrill up my spine and I melted back against him. There was still a lot to discuss and this night was nowhere near over but I wanted his mark. Not enough to let

him give it to me in front of the crew, but enough to know I wasn't going to sleep without it.

Once Aiden was covered he sat down next to me and Link, rolling his eyes when Link pulled me away from him. I repeated the gesture. Out of the both of us, I had more reason to be jealous than he did, but I wasn't going to start with him. The crew had questions and we were the only ones who could answer them.

Lily spoke up first. "How many of you are there?"

Aiden lifted an eyebrow. "Of me? Just one."

Link swiped a hand out, just missing smacking him. "That's not what she meant, asshole."

Theo snorted. "Dude, is it really smart to hit a dragon?"

I made a face. "He's still a person. And sometimes he needs to be put in his place."

"I remember him saying the same thing about me a few days ago," Link chuckled.

"Where do you think I learned it from?" he muttered. Turning his focus back to Lily, he sighed. "To answer your question, I'm not entirely sure. Less than a dozen and our numbers are continuing to dwindle. I've made attempts to father more dragons in the past but I have yet to be successful in that endeavor. I am only truly friends with two other dragons. We don't gather often as we are territorial by nature and fighting between us is one of the main reasons for our low numbers."

"And how do you know Rhea?" Esme's voice was quiet. She still struggled with speaking up around strangers, like me she was on the run for a while, though her ex boyfriend was in the same town. He was a violent asshole and beat the hell out of her and she still hesitated around people she didn't know, especially men.

Aiden glanced at me. "Do you want to tell the story, or shall I?"

I smiled softly. “You go ahead, it’s just as much your story as mine.”

He nodded once and drew in a deep breath as he recalled the start of our relationship.

“Rhea saved my life. She was still young, a tiny little thing barely older than that one,” he pointed at Javi. “I was lonely, too afraid to get close to anyone. Dragons live a long time. We are not immortal but five thousand years is not unheard of. I’ve lost a great many friends and loved ones over the years and it hurt too much. I lost the will to live and found a cave in the desert to die. I’d barely been there a few days when a little lioness found me. She wasn’t afraid like most are of me, though she was appropriately cautious. We spoke for a while and her innocent views on life gave me hope for the future. When she asked me why I was hiding, I didn’t have the heart to tell her I was dying so I said I was sad. She offered her friendship freely and gave me a little stuffed toy she’d made herself to make me feel better. And then she made me promise to play with her again and neither my dragon nor I could find the will to disappoint her. So I stayed alive, day by day, and she kept coming back to speak with me until I was ready to live again. Then she made me promise to come back and visit her. In return for saving me, I vowed to watch over her and the rest is history, so they say.”

When he turned to look at me, his gentle smile brought me back to that day in the cave when I found the giant red dragon. I thought I was dreaming. And then I thought I should probably run away but he looked so heartbroken and I couldn’t bring myself to leave him. My pride was close by and my mother never cared if I wandered off. I thought about introducing him to my friends but he told me dragons were a secret and I couldn’t tell and I didn’t want to disappoint him. So I kept him just to myself until we were older.

“Aiden is the one who helped me escape the pride. I told him how scared I was when my birthday approached. He got me and two of my friends tickets in different directions to throw off their scent and set each of us up with housing and anything else we needed once we settled.”

My heart stuttered. Two of us got free. One didn't. What would happen to her now that the alpha was dead? Lots of them were but I doubt all of them. A lot of them ran away when Aiden shifted. And there were men watching over the prides now. Who's to say what they'll do once they find out their alphas are dead. Let them go... or take their place?

Chapter Twenty-One

LINK

I COULD FEEL Rhea's unease, the tension wrapped around her. Aiden answered the crew's questions and they seemed to accept him for the most part but Rhea went tense after talking about how he helped her escape and she hasn't settled since.

It was late and the crew was exhausted. Only Aiden refused to get some rest, wanting to remain cautious for at least a while longer to make sure no stragglers showed up here to cause problems. I highly doubted any who saw the dragon would be coming back for more but I didn't argue with him. I needed to take care of Rhea. Scooping her up, I hustled through the rain to her trailer. It was coming down in sheets now and we were soaked by the time we got inside even though it wasn't that far. Rhea felt chilled and she started to shake so I stripped us both and dried us off before pulling her in the bed, trying to warm her with my body heat. She didn't say anything, just rested her forehead against my chest and cuddled close.

“You've been quiet. What's wrong?”

She sighed. “I'm just thinking...”

“About what?”

She didn't answer right away so I leaned back a little, trying to get her attention. When she lifted her gaze, she looked worried.

“Tell me. Please?”

Her gaze dropped. “What about the others?”

I frowned. “What others?”

“The other lionesses. Not all the alphas were dealt with tonight, we saw them run away, and Aiden said they were being guarded. I can’t—” She grimaced. “I told myself I would never go back there but I don’t think I can just turn my back on them knowing they’re still trapped. They all deserve their freedom and a chance to start over.”

Nodding, I considered it. “So then we help them.”

She jerked her head up, surprised. “Really?”

“Why would I say no to that? You’re right, they deserve to start over. I’m sure if we talk to Aiden, he’ll be happy to help. If he can leave, that is.”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

I lifted a shoulder. “When I first showed up, he said his dragon wouldn’t let him leave town. He only managed to get out when he found out you were in danger. Now that the threat to you is over, I’m not sure if the dragon will go back to keeping him here or not.”

“That’s strange. I’ve never heard of an animal not letting someone leave an area. Is it something we should be worried about?”

“Not sure yet. I originally came out here to help him figure out who burned down his compound. Once I know you’re safe and settled, I’ll look into it more and see if it’s connected at all to why he can’t leave.”

She scowled. “That’s my job. I’m the officer on the case.”

A slow grin crossed my face. “I guess we’re working together then.”

It came out a purr and I felt her body respond, a shiver rolling through her, her nipples pulling into tight peaks against my chest. Now that I knew what was making her unhappy and we had a plan to fix it, there was another matter I had to attend to. Namely, claiming my mate. She seemed to have the same line of thinking because she nudged me onto my back and straddled me without hesitation.

I've never been one to give up control. The only other person who managed to take it from me was Aiden and that was more a matter of inexperience. He was the first man I'd ever been with and since I didn't know what the hell I was doing, I couldn't lead like I preferred. With Rhea though, I liked the fight, both of us wrestling for control until someone got the upper hand and we both got what we needed.

Her tongue tangled with mine, she didn't expect me to roll us over, just like I didn't expect for her to keep up the momentum until I was back on my back. When my eyebrows went up, she smirked at me.

"Gotta do better than that if you wanna pin me, handsome. I'm not going down without a fight."

With a wicked grin, I lunged at her, trying to grab her wrists to pin her. Just like the first time we fought, she didn't give an inch, though this time was a lot less painful and a lot more fun. We wrestled and laughed, getting in touches and licks where we could. At one point our momentum sent us tumbling over the edge of the bed. In an effort to spare her from getting hurt, I twisted so I hit the ground first with her on top of me and she took full advantage, slipping down my body and pulling my cock into her mouth before I had a chance to do anything else.

My head flew back and I let out a shout. "Fuck! Rhea!"

She chuckled, the vibration making me arch and grit my teeth against the urge to fuck her mouth roughly. She gave me no mercy, bobbing her head and using her hand to cover whatever didn't fit in her mouth. I couldn't watch her, the sight of her lips wrapped around me, her beautiful gray eyes lust filled and hungry as she watched me fall apart, it was too damn much. I was fighting hard against my release, my hands slipping into her hair and tugging helplessly.

"Rhea... ah, fuck... You need to stop..."

I couldn't actually tell if I meant that or not. It felt so good I wanted her to keep going and the thought of filling her mouth with my cum almost forced my finish but I wanted to

claim her more than I wanted to do anything else and if I came now, I'd have to wait a little while before I tried again.

She ignored me, relentless, until I was toeing the edge of my release. Desperate to stop her and needing her to keep going at the same time, I writhed beneath her, tugging a little more roughly. She released me with one last rough suck that had my stomach dipping and my eyes squeezing shut. I needed a few seconds to focus on not finishing despite the fact that she already stopped.

Her sultry chuckle drew my attention and I finally sucked in a breath. "Damn, woman. You're gonna kill me."

Her smile did something to my insides and I felt warm all over. "Never. I have so many more ways to win."

Growling, I tugged her on top of me, guiding myself to her entrance and slamming home. She was soaked and my eyes rolled back at the sheer pleasure. Fuck, she's perfect. I never expected being with a mate would be that much more intense but as I rolled her beneath me and snapped my hips, all my snarky comments disappeared and I could only concentrate on the noises she made and the lightning shooting up my spine, threatening to force my finish first.

Her long legs wrapped around my hips and she dragged my lips to hers, still trying to be in control even though I was the one on top of her. Not willing to back down, I skimmed my lips down her neck, nipping lightly at the curve, right where I was going to claim her. She tightened around me, whimpering and tipping her head, but before I got a chance, she struck first. Her teeth sank into my shoulder and white hot pleasure shot through me, shoving me over the edge without warning.

"Fuck!"

I couldn't breathe to save my life. It was so good, so hot, that I stalled out and froze as it slammed into me. It was the lion who forced me to respond. The minute Rhea released my skin, he pushed forward enough to remind me to reciprocate. I bit down hard and she exploded around me, dragging out my pleasure until I went blind from it.

When I finally blinked and came back to myself, I was collapsed on top of her, both of us panting and covered in sweat. She didn't seem bothered by the weight of me, her fingers gently trailing over my back, settling me further. Pushing up onto my elbows, I brushed my lips over hers, savoring this feeling. Nothing in the world would ever be as perfect as this, as being wrapped around your mate and knowing she was safe and happy. She smiled when I drew away enough to see her, leaning into it when I pressed my forehead against hers.

“You're perfect,” I murmured.

She hummed, shaking her head. “No one is perfect. But you're perfect for me and that's all that matters.”

My chest tightened and I rubbed my forehead against hers. I've heard of the mating pull but I never thought it'd be this quick. A few days with this woman and I was falling hard for her. I didn't say it though. I didn't want her to think it was a reaction to the shit that happened today or the claiming. She should know it's all about her. My whole life is hers. And I was going to find a perfect way to tell her that.

Once I had enough energy, I dragged myself off the floor, keeping her cuddled against my chest. I didn't have enough energy for a shower so once I laid her down, I went to get a warm cloth to clean her up. She looked surprised, gasping when I dragged the cloth gently over her sex. I cleaned the blood off her shoulder, the wound already healing thanks to her animal side. And when I climbed back into bed and wrapped myself around her, she let out a sigh, scooting back until there wasn't an inch between us.

Settling my hand on her hip, I kissed her claiming mark. “Careful, kitten. Keep rubbing that sweet ass against me and I'm gonna think you want to go another round. You need sleep.”

Glancing over her shoulder, a sly grin crossed her face. “Who said you were sleeping in here with me? I barely know you.”

With a snarl, I went after her, laughing when she wiggled out of my arms and took off. The fatigue disappeared and I ran after her, tossing her over my shoulder and hauling her back to bed once I finally cornered her. Then I spent the rest of the night making sure I knew every single inch of her very intimately. And when we finally fell asleep, she pulled my head against her chest and wrapped her arms around me, and I couldn't imagine a more perfect way to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I WOKE UP ALONE, which was disappointing, but the bed was still warm so Link hadn't been gone long. Stretching out, I stole the pillow he'd been using, burying my face in it. It smelled like him. I never thought I'd be the kind of woman who'd crave the smell of a man but Link is my mate and I craved everything about him. I wasn't going to tell him that though. I didn't want to inflate his ego.

Spending a few minutes dozing, I contemplated going back to sleep, but I could hear voices in the other room and I knew I'd have to get up eventually. With a heavy sigh, I forced myself out of bed. Since we never bothered to get dressed last night, I grabbed some clothes off the floor and tossed them on. Link commented on the state of my room but I couldn't find it in me to be embarrassed. After a long day at work, the last thing I wanted to do was come home and clean.

Scrubbing my eyes, I wandered into the bathroom, brushing my teeth with bleary eyes. Is there such a thing as bedside coffee service? Because I wouldn't feel awake until I've had at least one cup.

When I eventually joined them, I was still struggling to wake up. And Link hadn't even made a pot of coffee, the jerk. I could feel their eyes on me, watching me as I grumpily started the pot, but I ignored them. Need coffee.

"Morning, kitten," Link murmured, hugging my waist and kissing my neck. I growled out a warning, surprising him. He'll learn eventually, I'm not a morning person.

Aiden chuckled. "I warned you."

Link made an irritated sound. "Don't start. If you play the who knows Rhea better game, I'm going to hurt you."

If I wasn't so tired, I'd probably laugh. Aiden would have a significant advantage on that game, I've known him since I was a kid. Even after he went back to his life, he came to visit me almost every week. It wasn't as often once I got older, we both got busy, but he always made time to come see me. He helped me study for the police academy and when he came to stay with me, he always brought me a souvenir from his travels. He's my closest friend and Link had no reason to be jealous. I've never seen him as anything more and neither has he.

Me on the other hand, I had every reason to be jealous and it still bugged me. And since I was grouchy and without caffeine, when I turned to face them both I was glowering.

Link looked a little confused, tucking my hair lightly behind my ear. "What's wrong?"

I scowled. "Couldn't be bothered to make any coffee? You got up first."

His eyebrows jumped up. "Oh. I don't drink coffee so I didn't think about it. I'll start it from now on though. You obviously need it," he smirked.

My eyes went wide. Who survived without coffee? "What's wrong with you?"

Aiden barked out a laugh. "I've been saying the same thing for years. Lincoln partaking in caffeine is more rare than seeing an eclipse."

I shot him a dirty look. "You're on my shit list too. Why didn't you tell me the dragon wouldn't let you leave Ridgeview? You said you were setting up here so you could get some R&R."

Link snorted, like he couldn't believe I fell for that, but up until now Aiden has never lied to me and it never occurred to me to question him.

He frowned. "I am. While I don't understand why the dragon was acting that way, I made the assumption that we needed a break and he would only allow it if we were close to you. You stopped me from fading, little one. I would not care to stray if I started feeling that way again."

"Oh." It settled me a little and once Link handed me my coffee, I felt less like I wanted to bite everyone's head off.

"What about now? Are you still stuck?" Link asked, his hand rubbing my back relaxing me.

Aiden tipped his head, his expression thoughtful. "No, I don't think so. Though I do believe I will continue building my compound here. Visiting with Rhea has eased some of the stress, I feel I should be doing it more often."

That made me light up and I beamed at him. "I'd like that."

He nodded. "And now I guess I'll be visiting Lincoln as well."

I felt Link stiffen and when I turned to face him, he looked stunned.

"What is it?"

His mouth opened and closed a lot like Liv's last night, too shocked to speak. And when I glanced at Aiden, a wicked grin crossed his face.

"I told you so, my friend. Tell me, do you still feel tired?"

Link blinked, his gaze slowly moving between me and Aiden. When he stopped on Aiden though, he growled low.

"You did it on purpose."

Aiden shot him a bored look. "Did what?"

"Brought me here. You knew. You said you wanted me to meet her. How the hell did you know?"

Aiden was doing a poor job hiding his smirk. "I didn't. There was the thought that the two of you would get along but I wasn't certain. I just felt it was important to bring you to the

person who helped me when I was feeling the same way. Though, I am pleased with the result.”

It took me a minute to connect the dots. “Wait. You wanted us to get together? You never even mentioned him coming. Why’d you tell him but not me?”

His expression flattened. “I did not mention it beforehand because of your history. Had I had the chance, I would’ve introduced you in a more controlled manner where you wouldn’t instantly feel the need to attack my friend.”

I flushed, still embarrassed about my reaction to Link’s arrival. “Okay but to be fair, I’d just received a threatening letter and then he showed up. It scared me.”

Link tightened his arm around me, pulling against his side. “I don’t blame you, kitten. Besides, I like it when you fight with me. Keeps things interesting.”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “A warning, Rhea. Link has no sense of decorum and will gladly share why he’s in a good mood after relations.”

I waved my hand to stop him. “Nope! We aren’t talking about what you two got up to, it’ll only make me jealous and I love you too much to ever allow myself to hate you even a little. So no, thank you. Link, did you tell Aiden about our plan?”

They both seemed really amused at my attempt to change the subject. But until Aiden was mated and had someone to distract him, I didn’t want to hear about him and my mate’s exploits. Maybe not even after that. I feel like having to meet one of your mate’s exes is a little cruel. Considering one family was messed up.

WE WERE DISCUSSING the logistics of the trip when Jackson knocked on my door. He seemed a lot less stressed but he had a tight grip on Esme’s hand and he didn’t seem to want her even an inch away from him. I couldn’t blame him. Esme’s

my friend and I was pissed that she came back in the middle of a war. So many things could've gone wrong with just Malcolm and Lily here to protect them.

“Morning, Jackson. Want some coffee?”

He nodded. “I'd appreciate it.”

I poured him a cup, glaring at Esme when he dragged her with him to accept it. Her eyes hit the ground and she frowned hard and the guilt ate at me instantly. Letting out a small sigh, I stepped up to her and hugged her gently. She broke down instantly, hugging me back and sobbing into my shoulder. Jackson sighed.

“Do you have any idea how long it took for me to get her to calm down?”

I made a face. “That's because you're doing it wrong. Esme, I've got something to show you.”

She pulled away slightly, sniffing and rubbing her eyes. “What?”

Tipping my head, I tugged the neck of my shirt, exposing the claiming mark Link gave me. Her eyes went wide and she beamed at me, pulling me back into a hug.

“I'm so happy for you!”

It stopped her tears and when I shot a smug look at Jackson, he rolled his eyes. “That's cheating.”

I lifted a shoulder. “Still worked.”

Esme and I were close, ever since I shared my story with her when she first arrived. She's quiet and thoughtful and I liked sitting down with her and talking about nothing related to work. It's not something I got to do often before I joined the crew and it started with her. She likes to talk about painting and the shenanigans the guys get up to at the garage and it's always relaxing to spend time with her. She's mentioned before that she wanted me to find someone so I knew it'd make her happy that I did.

“So, I actually came over for a reason,” Jackson remarked, pulling Esme back into his arms. When I tipped my head, he

raised his eyebrows. “We haven’t discussed what will happen next. I don’t know about you but I’m struggling to find some way to explain a large patch of burned land so close to us. It’s not like we can hide it, the air smells like ash. And we never got to do a body count to see if that was all of them. Can we expect more? Are we still in danger?”

Aiden answered for me. “You don’t need to explain the fire. The land belongs to me and I have an extensive PR team explaining it as a fire caused by lightning put out by my own people. No one will even get close to inspect it. As for the continued danger, we will be working on that. Lincoln, Rhea, and myself will be heading to each of the prides to make sure the women are released and no alphas come back to force them into breeding again. We were just making plans as you approached.”

Jackson looked stunned. “Hold on. You own that land?”

Aiden nodded. “I own that entire mountain. It’s where I have my compound, I need the space, as I’m sure you can understand. I also own the mountains to the west and south of here.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

LINK

APPARENTLY NO ONE had any idea that Aiden was buying land but me. Christian had explained it to me when I first got here. I had no idea it was that extensive though. Dragons have large territories, that's for sure, but his territory surrounded Jackson's on almost all sides and it didn't look like Jackson liked that.

“So we're not just neighbors, we're surrounded on all sides? When were you going to tell me about this?” he growled.

Aiden frowned. “Never. I didn't know you and I'm under no obligation to tell people where I'm buying property or why.”

I grimaced internally. Aiden wasn't always known for his tact. And I could think of several different ways he could've worded that. Jackson looked pissed and the dominance in the room kicked up a few notches. It might bother me too, an incredibly powerful shifter you had no hope of beating surrounding your land on all sides. If Aiden was at all interested in stealing power, it'd make me nervous as hell. Luckily, Aiden's not that kind of guy. Not unless you were a competing business that was in his way.

“If you think for a second that because you own so much of these mountains that we answer to you—”

Aiden raised an eyebrow. “Did I say you did? I assure you, I have no interest in running a crew. I'm far too busy for such

things.”

I snorted. “Don’t lie. You don’t want people under you because you’re afraid you’ll accidentally hurt them.”

He shot me a dirty look. “Mind your tongue.”

Giving him a smug grin, I raised my eyebrows, daring him to argue. There’s more than one reason that Aiden is selective with his friends. Rhea is the first person I knew that spent time with Aiden that could be affected by his dominance. I was numb to that kind of thing and Christian... I had no idea how he did it. He’d react like Rhea if I got riled but for some reason he could stand being around Aiden just fine. If I didn’t know how Aiden felt about relationships, I’d wonder if there was something going on there. Esme is submissive too and apparently unaffected by her mate’s moods.

Jackson still looked pissed but Aiden wasn’t going to change his mind. Aiden wasn’t used to not getting his way and given how long he’s been alive, he had more money than anyone on the planet needed so he probably paid for everything without blinking. It was a done deal by now. Deciding it was better to change the subject and give Jackson a chance to come to terms with the idea, I turned to Rhea.

“Did you want to call your boss first before we head out?”

She ran her fingers through her hair, sighing. “I don’t know. I told him I had a family emergency, it might be better if I just stick with one lie instead of adding more. I don’t know how long this is going to take. I don’t even know where all the prides are or how to find them.”

Aiden waved a hand dismissively. “Leave that to Christian. He’s excellent at finding the information I want. I believe we can take a few days before we leave. I want to do a sweep of the area to make sure there aren’t more alphas in hiding before we leave. It is possible I missed some, though I’ll be sure to remedy that soon.” His voice dripped with venom and he stood abruptly.

“I will call once Christian has arranged our flights. I must go for now.”

He left without waiting for a reply and I had to try really hard not to laugh. He wasn't leaving because he was busy, he was leaving because he was getting riled up again. Kissing Rhea on the cheek, I jogged after him, meeting him by the entrance to the trailer park.

“Need a ride?”

He sighed, shaking his head. “I'd forgotten myself for a moment and thought I could fly. There are times I miss the middle ages. We could fly freely without worrying about hiding.”

I put a hand on his shoulder. “Yes, but you were also hunted and didn't feel safe. You told me that, remember? I couldn't imagine having to hide my animal as much as you do and I know you're tired. Should I be worried?”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face and he shook his head. “No. I promised I'd watch over Rhea. That will include her cubs, should she choose to have them. She may be your mate but she means the world to me. If you ever upset her, I'll do more than burn your tail.”

I froze and snarled at him. “I knew you did that on purpose!” When he started laughing, I had to fight the urge to hit him again. “I take it back. You can walk home. Asshole.”

Chuckling, he put his hands on my shoulders, leveling me with a look. “I'm glad she found you. You are both important to me and your happiness brings me peace. For whatever reason the dragon brought me here, I'll be happy as long as I get to see the two of you more often.” Patting my shoulder, he released me. “And yes, I think I'll walk. I'd like to get to know my territory a little. I haven't had actual land that wasn't in the city in a long while. I'm going to explore a little.”

Waving, he loped off. I still worried about him but he doesn't break his promises. If his promise to Rhea was important to him, I had to believe he'd stick around to watch over her. And I wasn't jealous about it. I was glad she was loved and watched over. No matter what happened, she'd always be safe.

RHEA and I took the few days we had before our rescue mission getting to know each other. We took walks through the territory, simultaneously checking for signs of the other alphas while she showed me her favorite spots. She did head into work to officially take leave, though she kept up with the family emergency lie so there wouldn't be any confusion. Since the small town wasn't all that busy, her superior didn't have any issue with her taking some time off. I wasn't overly surprised when he said she didn't do it often and encouraged her to get some rest in the process. She's tough as nails and I felt like she wouldn't be happy sitting around.

We spent time with the crew too. Now that his mate was back, Theo no longer hated me. Those two were attached at the hip and now that I had Rhea, I could understand how rough it must've been to send her away. Unlike Jackson, who wouldn't let Esme out of his sight and tended to hover, Theo kept Lily in his lap for the most part and she soaked up his affection, cuddling against him. From where I was standing, I could see a baby boom happening in this crew. None of them could keep away from their mates and affection was given freely. It wasn't what I was used to, my own parents were pretty closed off with their affection but it also meant I didn't need to tamper myself around Rhea either and she never turned me away.

My gaze shifted to her. She sat in the chair next to me, her fingers laced with mine as she spoke to Corey about the possibility of some themed nights at the bar. He and his boss wanted to make things more interesting but they've had trouble in the past with rowdy clientele and didn't want to invite trouble. The thought of having cubs with her didn't make me balk like it used to. I never wanted to settle, always got the urge to keep moving after too long in one spot, so I never bothered with relationships beyond one night. I was afraid of the mood striking me again but when I looked at her, I settled again. I'd do anything for her. She's happy here with the crew and I never wanted to take her smile away. I might be

able to convince her to take some vacations with me, there are a lot of places in the world I've been to that I wished I had someone to share it with, but calling this place home wouldn't be that bad. As long as she was here with me, I felt like I could finally put down roots.

My phone ringing stole my focus and I pushed to my feet, not wanting to interrupt Rhea while she was speaking.

“Yeah?”

“Lincoln. It's time.”

I hummed my acknowledgement. “When and where?”

“The plane leaves tonight. Meet me at the airport.”

Letting out a breath, I hung up. Rhea's eyes were on me and when I dipped my chin, she nodded. Time to go. We had no idea how long this was going to take or if we were even going to be successful. But it was important to her and so it was important to me too. It's time for the pride to stop living in the dark ages. We're going to tip the odds and bring the lionesses back into play. After all, in the wild, it's them who hold the most power.

The crew wished us luck and when Rhea looked a little nervous to leave them, Liv called out to her.

“Go! Handle business! I'll watch over them.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “That's my job.”

She lifted a shoulder lazily. “Women do it better. I'm sure Rhea agrees with me.”

That seemed to settle Rhea a little and she laughed. “Alright, alright, I'm going. Liv, don't cause trouble while I'm gone. And no one get arrested! I'm not here to rescue your butts!”

Since we weren't sure what was going to happen we were traveling light, a backpack for each of us with a few outfits and toiletries. I headed to my bike, shoving it in the saddlebag, when Rhea came to an abrupt stop.

“Absolutely not. I’m not getting on a motorcycle. Do you have any idea how dangerous those things are?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I raised an eyebrow. “More dangerous than a jeep with no protection that has a tendency to roll? You’ll be fine.”

I could see the refusal in her face but I wasn’t giving her a chance to argue with me. I drew her against me, kissing the frown off her lips. “Trust me,” I cajoled, dipping to press my lips to her claiming mark.

She sighed heavily. “Fine. But if we die, I’m going to make your afterlife a living hell.”

I chuckled. “Deal. Let’s go, kitten. We’ve got chaos to create.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

EARLY FALL in the desert was still hot but my hands were clammy and there was a chill in my bones. I haven't been home since I was barely a teenager and my lioness protested our return. I knew Paul was dead, I got to watch him die, but I still didn't feel safe here. I wanted to go back to the mountains, back to my crew. Only the knowledge that there were countless women who didn't get that safe feeling kept me steady as we drove onto the massive private compound the pride owned just outside the city.

"This place is creepy," Link murmured, frowning. I had to agree with him. There was a massive chain link fence with barbed wire around the entire thing. The houses were all uniform, no one was allowed to lock their doors so the alpha could enter freely, and all the women were required to dress and look the same. It's basically a cult and I had no idea if some of these women had some kind of sick loyalty with their keepers that would cause issues.

"Do they know we're coming?" My voice was barely a whisper, like I would somehow disturb the weird calm of the place.

"They do. We're meeting with the last of the males who are guarding them and a small group of females. There's a ranking system among them apparently and those who have been here longest agreed to meet with us," Aiden replied.

That made me uneasy. I remember the old biddies who liked to act like they were in charge. They had no actual

power, the men all made the decisions, but the older women bullied the younger ones, taking what little authority positions they could just to feel like they were in control. I was worried about them putting up a fight, trying to keep their power by refusing to allow any changes to be made. That wouldn't stop anything but I didn't want to hurt any women in the process.

The compound was built like a miniature city, with everything people needed being delivered and controlled by the pride. It meant the women didn't have to work so they were reliant on the men. It also made it incredibly difficult for anyone to leave because they didn't have cars or money or even much of an education. I had to get my GED once I escaped so that I could go to the police academy. We made our way to the middle of the compound where the community center sat. There were six lions in total waiting outside, all of them looking like teenagers who were decidedly uncomfortable. And standing behind them were five older women, including one I didn't think I'd ever see again.

Stepping out of the town car Aiden insisted we show up in to make appearances, much to Link's chagrin, I stepped forward. We all agreed that the one speaking should be me so it didn't come off as another male taking over under some sort of pretense.

"You're Rhea Fuller?" one of the teens asked, trying to sound tough even though I could see his hands shaking.

"That's correct."

"I..." He frowned, glancing between the other lions before pushing forward. "I'm going to need to see some ID, to confirm—"

"No need, Lance. She's who she says she is."

I lifted my gaze to the speaker, forcing my face to remain neutral. "Hi, mom."

She nodded uneasily. "Rhea. You've grown."

"That happens when you leave for more than a decade. Are we going to get on with this thing or not?" The oldest woman snapped, already glowering.

Lance spoke up, shaking his head. “We still need to search her, Paul said—”

“Touch her and I’ll remove your hands,” Link threatened. Aiden’s growl of agreement made me want to roll my eyes.

“Link, don’t threaten teenagers,” I demanded.

When I glanced over my shoulder at him, he still looked pissed but he stepped back and fell silent which was more than I was expecting, honestly. And the fact that he listened seemed to stun the little congregation, even the angry one gaping at me. I gestured to the community center.

“Shall we?”

Since none of the young lions wanted to test Link or Aiden, they decided not to push the searching thing. They wouldn’t find anything, if I was going to fight here it would be with teeth and claws, but I wasn’t interested in them getting handsy either so I just went with it. We headed into a room that looked a lot like a conference room, with the pride on one side of the table and us on the other.

The eldest woman took control and none of the lions put up a fight which showed just how far down the totem pole they were. “So what is the meaning of this? We explained to the fellow over the phone that the alpha wasn’t here and—”

“Paul is dead,” I interrupted. Gasps went up around the room and the lions started looking nervously between each other.

“Isaiah then, he also is away and—”

I put a hand up, silencing her. “Let me clear things up if you don’t mind. Any alpha who participated in the hunt to bring back any rogue lionesses is no longer with us. And if they are still around, they won’t be for much longer.”

Her eyes widened and she was shocked into silence so my mom took over.

“Why are you here, Rhea? Is that man the new alpha?” Her voice was quiet, timid, just like I remembered, and her hand shook as she pointed at Link.

I shook my head. “No. We’re not here to instill a new alpha. We’re here to liberate the pride.”

The eldest woman spluttered. “Wha– What does that mean? You murdered all the men and are now going to toss us in the street like trash? You haven’t liberated us, you’ve doomed us!”

The other women murmured amongst themselves and no one looked happy.

My irritation racked up a couple notches and I curled my fingers into fists on my lap, my nails biting into the skin to keep me steady as I spoke. “Those men came to my home, threatened me, attempted to kidnap me, ignored the results of an alpha challenge, and tried to murder my family. Those are the people you want in charge of your lives?”

They went quiet again and I reminded myself that these women are victims and need to be treated gently, no matter how obstinate. Sucking in a deep breath, I lifted my chin. “No, we are not tossing you out in the street. We have a plan in place to help each and every one of you set up your lives how you wish. Plane tickets, housing, college funds for the cubs, it’s all provided.”

Mom frowned. “Why?”

I forced a small smile. “Because I know what it’s like to be trapped here and I know what’s waiting on the other side. I couldn’t stomach the thought of leaving women in this kind of environment when I had the means and the connections to help. It’s time to stop living under the thumb of the alphas of the past. You’re free to find your happiness, however and wherever you want.”

The oldest didn’t look so angry now, uncertainty tainting her features. “And what if we don’t want another life? Some of us have been living here all our lives. This is our home.”

I nodded. “We’ve made allotments for that too. Those that truly wish to can stay if they choose. You will become your own pride and the person or people in charge will be decided

fairly amongst yourselves. We are willing to help keep you comfortable until you are able to sustain yourselves as well.”

Her mouth fell open. “A female led pride? There’s never been such a thing!”

I couldn’t help but smirk. “No. But things change. And I think the women of the pride have been vastly underestimated. You could go far if you didn’t have to answer to a bunch of men.”

It came out a little more disdainfully than I wanted and I felt Link pinch my leg, a smirk tugging at his lips. I’d make it up to him later. He’s an exception, not the rule, when it comes to male lions.

The woman looked considerate now, her eyes narrowing. She was starting to see the possibilities.

“Let me be clear, this offer has conditions. It will be completely voluntary to stay behind and if someone chooses to leave at any time, they have full freedom to do so. If at any time we find that the balance of power has flipped and people are being kept against their will again, we will come back and we will be a lot less accommodating,” Aiden added with a growl. It filled the room for just a second, giving them a taste of exactly who they were dealing with. And to my surprise, the elder smirked at him.

“Believe me, we have no interest in returning things to the way they were. If there is to be a power shift, it will be in favor of those who truly run this pride.”

After they fully understood our purpose, the conversation moved a lot more smoothly. None of the males had any complaints and when Link did manage to get them to speak to him, they were honest in that they didn’t want to be in power, they just wanted a chance to be kids. None of them were over eighteen and they were being groomed to become enforcers and they had bigger hopes and dreams than that.

We spent a good deal of the afternoon going over the plan and explaining what would happen next. It would be a long process, we’d have to meet with each family individually to

see where they wanted their futures to go. There were a lot of young mothers who needed support, pregnant teens who were frightened of their futures, and a few more stubborn women set in their ways who would need to meet with their elders to really understand what was going to happen. And this wasn't the only pride. It was one of the biggest but we had a whole list to hit and we'd be bouncing between them a lot during the transition.

Letting out a long sigh, I leaned against the wall outside, taking a minute to get some fresh air. We've been in there for hours, I don't know how Aiden pulls it off. He didn't falter or ask for a break even once, treating the whole thing like a business in need of new management. He was definitely going to be integral to the whole thing and luckily no one seemed to worry about him taking control. They were more wary of Link than Aiden.

His scent surrounded me as he pulled me gently into his arms, rubbing my back and soothing my frayed nerves. I did my best not to show it but I was nervous this whole thing would cause more trouble than we'd thought.

“Doing okay?”

Leaning into him, I sighed. “Yeah. Just needed a minute. Aiden's a monster.”

He chuckled. “I know. I called Christian. If he's not around to keep Aiden in line, I'm worried Aiden will overwork the poor women on accident.”

Snickering, I wrapped my arms around his middle, soaking in his comfort. When he leaned back to look at me, I forced a smile and he shook his head.

“Don't do that. You're allowed to have feelings about all of this. I know you didn't want to come back here. What's wrong?”

I sighed. “This is going to take time, Link. Between meeting with all the prides and getting everything set up properly, I don't see us going home any time soon and I...” I swallowed hard against the guilt.

“You miss the crew.”

When I nodded, he cupped my neck, sipping my lips and easing the tension. “You’re allowed to miss them, Rhea. They’re family and we’ll go back as soon as we can. Knowing Aiden, he’ll probably have people step in to oversee the transition because even he has to get back to work at one point. Don’t stress just yet.”

He knew just what to say to settle me and I knew without a doubt that he’d be by my side every step of the way. At least with him here I could get through it. If I had to leave him behind too, I don’t think I would be able to pull this whole thing off. I’m not normally a needy person, I’ve survived a long time on my own, but it felt good to know he had my back and would be there to support me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

WE FINALLY DECIDED to call it a day just before dinner and that was mostly because Christian showed up and swept in to rescue us from Aiden's ruthless business practices, berating him for not looking like he'd been sleeping well. Link and I were heading out, hand in hand, when I heard a timid voice call my name.

My mom stood just by the door to the community center, hovering uneasily. She looked like she wanted to say something but when Link approached her eyes hit the ground and she exposed her neck automatically. He grimaced, not liking the women's responses to him, and kissed my cheek.

"I'm gonna go wait in the car. I'll give you two a minute."

I watched him as he walked away, a small smile on my face. I couldn't wait to go back home. He was happy there and he didn't have to feel guilty about his animal. I knew for a fact that he wouldn't be shifting anywhere near the pride and it only pushed me to get through the initial stuff quickly so he wouldn't struggle pushing down his animal like I've had to do most of my life.

When I turned back to my mom, she watched me with a frown.

"What's wrong?"

Her gaze shifted to Link and back to me, her brows furrowing deeper. "Why, if you're so eager to set us free, are you not doing the same for yourself?"

Sighing, I shook my head. “Link’s not my alpha, Mom. He’s my mate. The alpha of my crew is a bear shifter named Jackson. He’s a good man, takes good care of his people and everything is fair and equal. I’ve got a good life in Montana.”

She forced a small smile, nodding quickly. “That’s good. I thought about you... while you were gone. I’d hoped you’d find happiness. I’m sorry... for the way things went and for my part in it. I truly am.”

Putting my hand on her shoulder, I tipped my head to catch her eye line and smiled softly. “I don’t blame you for what happened. You were a victim just like everyone else.”

She seemed uneasy, skittish, and I hated that she was like that. She’s always been quiet, even when I was a cub, but she’s gotten worse. Hopefully after some time out from under the thumb of the pride, she’ll get better.

“Have you thought about what’s next for you? You don’t have to stay, you know.”

“Oh... no, not really. I have your younger siblings to think about.”

Shock stole my breath away and I barely managed to choke out, “I have younger siblings?”

A small smile pulled at her lips. “Yes. Twins, Kai and Scarlet. They’re five now. Would... would you like to meet them?”

Beaming, I nodded. “I’d love to.” I hesitated for a second. “Do you want to meet him? My mate? I promise, he’s nothing like the pride members. He wasn’t even raised around them. His family was rogue, he’s not—”

She put her hand on my arm, quieting my muddled and awful defense of Link. “If he makes you happy, then yes I’d like to meet him. Do you have somewhere to go for dinner? I promised the twins I’d make lasagna. It... it was your favorite when you were little.”

Something deep in my chest settled and I felt like a heavy weight had been lifted. I came out here to set the lionesses free but I never thought my mom would want anything to do with

me. I figured I broke her heart when I left and she'd never forgive me for it. But she was offering me a chance to be part of the family again and invited me home without a single word about my leaving. I fought back tears, holding her hand as I led her to the car where Link was waiting. I had a family waiting for me in Montana but maybe, if I was lucky, I could convince my mom to come with me. I'd like to be closer to her. I want to make sure she can thrive.

AFTER MEETING MY SIBLINGS, a pair of rambunctious cubs who didn't have a shy bone in their body, introducing them to Link, and sitting down for a meal with my mom for the first time since I was a teenager, I was on cloud nine. Mom offered to let me and Link stay with her but we already had a place to stay outside the compound and I felt like I could use a little break from all the craziness. Mom was giving the cubs a bath and they made me promise not to leave before they went to bed so I promised to tuck them in before me and Link headed out for the night.

While she was busy, I found myself wandering outside. I spent most of my time outside as a kid. I didn't like watching how the men treated my mom and she didn't really mind if I wandered around as long as I came home before dark. Squatting near the back fence, I found the hole hidden behind a bush that I discovered when I was a kid. It was just barely big enough for me to fit through as an adult but there was somewhere I wanted to revisit, somewhere important to me.

Walking the path that followed a bunch of big rocks, I made my way to what I'd once thought was a big hill. It wasn't until I went around the other side that I realized it was a cave. It's where I found Aiden all those years ago, radiating sadness and heartache. I sat with him and talked to him and formed a bond that would last the rest of my life. Running my fingers along the walls, I could see the spots where his scales had scratched into the surface, the smoky smell that always

filled the cave just a memory now. I was smiling softly, lost in thought, when a voice spoke.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

Lifting my gaze to the cave opening, I smiled. “You found me.”

Link looked a little irritated, stalking into the cave. “You can’t wander off like that. I nearly lost my mind, I was so worried about you. We still don’t know if all the alphas are gone and—”

Shushing him lightly, I put my hand on his chest to soothe him. “I’m okay. This was where I met Aiden. I just wanted to see it again.”

He looked around with a frown. “He fit in here?”

I smirked. “It’s hard to imagine, right? But when he was so close to death, he wasn’t as massive as he is now. He looked thin, almost starved, and he’d curled himself tightly into a ball like he was trying to hug himself to ease the pain just a little. He needs love like he needs food and water. I’m glad he’s going to be nearby more often. I doubt I’d ever convince him to join the crew but he needs people or he’s going to fade again.”

Pulling me into his arms, he rested his head against mine. “I know. We’ll watch out for him. We just can’t be too obvious about it though or he’ll start bitching and we’ll never hear the end of it.”

Snickering, I cuddled close. “Maybe to you. He’s nice to me.”

He made an irritated sound and pinched my butt, making me laugh and dart away from him. A sly grin crossed his face.

“Careful, kitten. You don’t want to start a game of chase with me. I always catch my prey.”

I lifted my chin in challenge. “Come and get me, pretty boy.”

WE SPENT a few days with my old pride before moving on to the next. Link was right, Aiden had Christian set up teams in each area to handle the transition. He's had a lot of shifters working for him over the years and they were happy to help. I made my mom promise to call me, I started the process of convincing her to join me in Montana and I wasn't done wheedling her yet. She was cautious but she did say she'd come visit and see what it's like and that I felt was a step in the right direction.

The next few prides were pretty much the same. We explained what was happening and the women stepped up to get things moving. Word spread quickly throughout the prides and with each new place we went, the conversation was just a little easier since they knew what was headed their way. We were under no illusions that it'd be perfect though and we had our first pushback about a week later with a pride in the deserts of Nevada. The gates were locked and the alpha refused to allow us in. He had males of all ages at the gates to block us, some as young as eight, terrified and pale in the face of Aiden, who was radiating his fury.

"What's the plan?" Link queried, his own dominance off the charts. It bothered me less now that we were mated but Aiden still made me uncomfortable so he stood between us, blocking Aiden's energy the best he could.

"I'm not sure. I don't want to send in Aiden unless we absolutely have to, they're scared enough as it is. Look at their faces, they don't want to be here. They're only following orders."

A large percentage of the males standing guard were shaking and terrified. Only a few were glaring and growling, ready for a fight they wouldn't survive. It wasn't our goal to go around murdering people though. The only people we had an issue with were the alphas and enforcers suppressing the women and children. If they were forced to fight, I wouldn't want to hurt them just for doing what they were made to do.

Link squeezed my hand lightly. "I'll handle it."

Confused, I watched as he marched closer to the gate, bellowing out a challenge. "I am here to challenge for alpha!"

It sent a stir through the guards and made me gasp. The alpha can't ignore a challenge, he'll look weak and he already did by hiding behind a fence. But I didn't want Link to fight. He's a strong fighter but that didn't make him invincible and I didn't want to lose him.

"Be still, Rhea. He knows what he's doing. Link is an excellent fighter."

He said that but he was clenching his hands into fists and almost vibrating with fury. He didn't want Link to do it either. Because as long as it remained a fair fight, we couldn't step in to help him. And I got the feeling this was going to be a fight to the death.

Chapter Twenty-Six

LINK

I COULD FEEL Rhea's worry and Aiden's anger. I probably should've discussed it with them first but the only way I could see this going well was if it was done by the books. I could take the alpha and set the pride free. I wasn't worried about a fight, I've been fighting all my life. And now that I had Rhea, I wasn't exhausted and struggling anymore. I was full of energy and the need to provide for her, willing to put my life on the line to help her achieve her dream.

The gate opened and I could see the alpha waiting in the middle of the square. He wasn't going to come to me though. When I took a step forward, Aiden protested.

“Lincoln! It could very well be a trap.”

I nodded. “I know. But I can't show them fear. If we want this to work, I need to meet him head on. Watch over Rhea for me.”

I didn't give him another chance to argue with me, moving past the gate and into the compound. The last time I was part of an alpha challenge, they tried to attack me after a very obvious win. I wasn't going to allow that this time. These people would never be free unless he was gone.

He was a big man, bigger than the old timers I fought and with a lot more dominance. He doubled down, trying to get me to flinch from it, and his face faltered when I didn't even blink.

“That doesn’t work on me, asshole. Are you going to accept my challenge or crawl away like the coward you are?”

He bared his teeth, growling. “I’m not no coward!”

With a bored look, I crossed my arms. “You were at the fight in the mountains. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have known to prepare for our arrival and refused to let my friends inside. Which means you ran like a coward when faced with the monster you unleashed. You’re lucky it’s me and not him that challenged you today. Will you be a man and get this done or will you run again?”

He sneered. “Fighting you would be easy. I’m not no old timer on their last legs looking to recapture a bit of pussy that slipped through their fingers. And when I win, I’m gonna teach her a lesson about who’s really in charge. We’ll get the other prides back soon enough. We got the plans in the works already.”

I growled low, him threatening Rhea setting me off. “So let the animal loose. Let’s see who the real alpha is.”

Instead of shifting like he should’ve, he chuckled instead. “See, that’s the thing about alpha challenges. No one said it had to be as animals.”

I didn’t have time to figure out what he meant before he pulled out a gun and shot me in the chest. I staggered against the force of it, my gaze dropping to the red blooming through my shirt. I heard Rhea’s scream and felt the pulse of Aiden’s power but when I lifted my eyes back to the coward who shot me, he looked smug.

“I’ll make sure to take care of your girl. She should be a real treat to break in. The ones who fight back always are. See you in hell, asshole.”

He fired again and this one knocked me onto my back, my eyes staring blankly at the sky above me. I probably should’ve listened to Aiden. He said this was a trap. At least he’d watch over Rhea. I’d never forgive myself for leaving her behind. My eyes slipped shut as fatigue pulled at my senses.

I’m sorry, Rhea. I love you.

LOW MURMURS DREW MY ATTENTION, pulling me from the deep sleep. I felt like I'd been asleep for way too long. My mouth was dry as the desert and my chest itched. I reached up to scratch it but someone pulled my hand back down, murmuring quietly to me.

“Don't do that. It's not safe. Just relax, you're going to be alright.”

I faded again, my mind too tired to keep up with what was happening. Where's Rhea?

When I woke again, I was a little more alert and very aware that I was being moved. My chest didn't bother me much anymore but I was still struggling to wake up. What the hell was happening to me?

The lion pushed at my skin, not liking the feeling of being trapped like this, but a hand patted my shoulder lightly. “You're okay. We're just moving you somewhere more comfortable. Just rest.”

I don't need to rest. I need to wake the fuck up. But when I tried to force it, another wave of exhaustion slammed into me and I passed out just as I felt the sun on my face.

This fucking sucks.

I woke up again surrounded by a very familiar scent. Rhea. I sucked in a deep breath, trying to draw in as much of it as I could. The edges of my senses were still fuzzy from whatever they'd done to me to keep me asleep but when I started moving again, no one stopped me this time. I forced my eyes open, looking around slowly.

How the hell did I get to Rhea's trailer?

I swallowed hard against the dryness in my throat, using what little energy I had to try to sit up. I growled when I felt a hand on my shoulder but when I turned to see who the hell was trying to stop me, Aiden's tired smile eased the tension a little.

“Don’t. If you move too much, you’ll wake her and it took me hours to convince her to get some rest.”

Glancing down, a heavy breath whooshed out of me when I saw Rhea cuddled up against my side. She had dark circles under her eyes and a deep frown, even in her sleep. I wanted to pull her closer but I was worried if I did I’d wake her, so I laid back down and drew my arm gently around her, resting it on her shoulder. Facing Aiden, I winced when I tried to speak, choking back a cough. He reached for a bottle of water on the nightstand, helping me drink before setting it back down.

“What happened?”

He glared at me. “It was a trap, like I said. You were shot and almost killed, Rhea got hurt trying to protect you, and I—” He turned his head sharply to the side, pain and regret on his face. With my free hand, I reached for him, putting it lightly over his. He didn’t move aside from flipping his hand over to grip mine tightly.

“Rhea... is she okay?” It tore me up that she was hurt. I didn’t panic, I could feel her breathing and her warmth, but it was a close thing and I drew her closer automatically.

He nodded, his eyes shifting to look at her. “She shifted and charged the alpha to protect you. He shot at her, got her in the shoulder, but she was fine. She’ll have a scar to always remember that day. But then again, so will you.”

He looked pointedly at my chest and I dropped my chin to look. I’d expected a few holes where the bullets went in but there was a long red scar right down the middle. When I shot him a confused look, his face darkened.

“He shot you in the heart. Your healing tried to fix it, kept you alive until we could get you to the hospital, but you wouldn’t have survived if they didn’t go in with surgery. It was incredibly difficult, they had to work fast around your healing and you kept fighting the anesthesia so they had to keep drugging you. The doctor had never done anything like that before but I threatened his life and he managed to save you. We kept you under while you healed, worried you’d shift and hurt yourself if you woke up. Rhea got angry with me for

keeping you like that and demanded we bring you home. She felt that if you felt safe, you'd keep your skin long enough for us to explain things to you. Turns out, she was correct."

Stunned, I leaned back into the pillow, staring at the ceiling. It shouldn't have been possible. Shifters are strong healers but we aren't immortal. Getting shot in the heart should've killed me instantly. The likelihood of surviving that was...

"Nearest I could figure, one in ten billion."

When I glanced at him, a ghost of a smile drifted over his face. "You're trying to figure out how you could've survived, correct? I did the math, needing something to distract myself while you healed and Rhea fell apart. One in ten billion. You're a lucky man."

He said it with such heartache, like it hurt to admit out loud how close I was to dying.

"I'm sorry. I should've listened. I was just trying to help."

His brow furrowed. "I'm aware. And even if they'd acted honorably, I'd still be angry with you. If you died, it would kill Rhea. And if I lost you both, I would not survive."

I squeezed his hand. I hated myself a little for being so brash, so cocky that I could withstand any fight that I didn't think things through. I'd be paying for it the rest of my life, trying to make it up to him and Rhea.

I felt her stir in my arms and when I glanced down, she curled closer, a small whimper escaping her. Aiden sighed.

"She's been having nightmares. She'll be awake in a minute. I'm going to give you the space to grovel properly. I'm close by. I couldn't bear to leave so I've been sleeping on the couch but Jackson has offered for me to stay in the trailer next door. It'll give you privacy. I'm... I'm going to go call Christian. He'll want to know you're awake."

He was avoiding saying something but I couldn't figure out what and he didn't give me a chance to figure it out. He strode out of the room without looking back. It was then I realized that for the first time since I met him, he was in jeans

and a t-shirt. I've never seen him in anything other than a suit. It showed just how out of sorts he was and how much I hurt him. Guilt threatened to overwhelm me until Rhea sucked in a sharp breath and I turned my focus onto her.

Her face scrunched, her head jerking sharply in her sleep. Cupping her face gently, I whispered to her, trying to wake her.

“Hey... you're okay. I'm here.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THAT DAY in the desert played on repeat in my mind at all hours. I avoided sleep as much as I could because whenever I shut my eyes, I saw it clearly like it was happening all over again and I had to keep reliving it. I fought every time, desperately trying to get to Link before he got hurt, but no matter how fast I ran, how close I got, I never reached him in time.

“Hey... you’re okay. I’m here.”

His voice drifted over me and my eyes flew open. I sat up quickly, looking at him. When he smiled at me, I burst into tears, throwing myself at him. He was quick, twisting and wrapping himself around me the second I touched him. There wasn’t an inch between us and still it wasn’t close enough.

“Shhh... it’s okay. I’m sorry, I never meant for that to happen.”

I wanted to yell, to rant and rave over how stupid he was, but I knew better. He did exactly what I would’ve done if I was him. There was no way any of us could’ve seen that coming. I’ve never heard of an alpha resorting to gun violence in response to an alpha challenge. It wasn’t how things worked with our kind. With any shifters for that matter.

I didn’t let go until I could draw in a breath without it shuddering through me. I kept my face buried against his neck, breathing in the smell of him. He didn’t rush me, petting my hair and holding me tightly. When I pulled away enough to

look him in the eye, there were tear tracks across his cheeks and he looked so ashamed of himself.

“I love you.”

It wasn't what I'd planned on saying. I was going to tell him that I forgave him, that I understood why he made that choice. I didn't regret it, it was true, but all the same, I hadn't planned it.

His eyes went wide and he searched my face wildly. “Say that again.”

Cupping his cheeks, I rubbed my forehead against his. “I love you, Link. I love you so—”

He cut me off, his lips slamming against mine. It was desperate and needy and I threw my arms around his neck, kissing him back just as roughly. When he pulled away, it was only far enough to whisper to me, his lips brushing against mine as he spoke.

“I love you, Rhea. You're my mate, my everything and I never want to leave you again.”

I choked back a sob, kissing him until I was breathless. Until the desperation stopped and the mood shifted, his tongue slipping between my lips to tangle with mine. Heat pooled in my belly and I had to drag myself away or risk completely losing my head.

“We can't, Link. You still need rest.”

He growled, rolling until I was underneath him. “I do not. I need you.”

The plea made me shiver and I wanted to give in to him but the doctor said a few more days of rest just to be cautious. Surgery that extensive on a shifter had never been done before and he wasn't sure how Link might react.

Pressing my lips softly to his, I shook my head. “Consider this your punishment for not listening to Aiden. The doctor will be by again soon to check on you. Until then, you're on bed rest.”

He let out a groan that sounded a lot like Javi when Carmen was telling him to pick up his toys. And I don't know if it was just how put out he was, the fact that he looked like he was pouting, or the elation I felt that he was alive and okay, but I burst out laughing and couldn't stop no matter how much he griped at me.

It took a while for me to settle. I tried to get out of bed and get Link some food so I had a minute to calm down but he refused to let me go and the grouchy look on his face only made me laugh again. It was a scorching kiss so hot my toes curled that stopped the laughter. He tried for more, his hands sliding under my shirt before I slapped them away, but his little plan worked in getting me to calm down. Sort of. Now instead of laughing, I was insanely horny and couldn't do a thing about it.

“You're mean.”

He scoffed. “Am not. I'm completely willing to follow through. You won't let me.”

My gaze dropped to the scar on his chest and I frowned. I almost lost him. I couldn't do anything that might lead to him getting hurt, no matter how badly I wanted him. It took a long time for Aiden to convince me it was safe to sleep next to Link. I was afraid to just hold his hand, worried I'd wake him and he'd fight the anesthesia again. My fingers trailed lightly over the scar until his hand came up and flattened them against his chest.

“I'm okay, Rhea. I didn't even feel it.”

Rolling my eyes, I scowled at him. He chuckled, shaking his head.

“I swear, I'm not lying. I felt the impact but not pain. Pretty sure my brain blocked it out from the shock. Every time I woke up, I was thirsty but not in any pain. Itchy at one point too, like something was tickling my chest.”

When I scrunched my nose, he tipped his head. “What?”

“They said you woke up during surgery and tried to scratch an itch. That's a little freaky.”

He looked a little green at the thought. To distract him and myself, I pressed light kisses down the scar, familiarizing myself with this new addition. It didn't take away from his good looks but it was a reminder that shifter or not, we needed to be more careful. If I'd lost him, I wouldn't have been able to recover.

His hand cupped the back of my head and he sighed. "Now who's being mean?"

Snickering, I kissed his chest one more time before cuddling closer. He wrapped his arms around me, running his fingers through my hair.

"I want to ask you something but I don't want to upset you," he murmured.

I leaned back, frowning at him. "Ask me what?"

His face darkened. "What happened after? Aiden didn't say much. Only that you got hurt. I'm so sorry, Rhea, I never wanted you to get hurt."

I shook my head, running my fingers along his face to settle him. "It's okay. I didn't even feel it."

It made him snort and eased some of his guilt. Carefully, I maneuvered us so that his head was against my chest and he was relaxing properly. The rest of that day was... dark. Really dark. And it would hurt Link to hear about it. I almost didn't want to tell him but keeping it from him wouldn't help anyone and it'd only hurt him more.

"After you got shot, I shifted to get to you. The ones at the gate, little kids who had no business being there, scattered immediately and I had no trouble getting inside but the alpha shot at me and Aiden... Aiden lost it. I barely managed to shift back and tell people to run before he started burning down the entire compound. He ripped the alpha apart, burning him and leaving nothing but ash. He wasn't in control at that point. The dragon was on a rampage and set fire to the buildings, sending families fleeing and screaming. The only thing that got him to come down was when I yelled at him that your heart was still beating and we needed to get you some help. I don't know if

you've ever flown with him before but it's absolutely terrifying."

Link went tense during the story and I could feel the guilt eating at him. "It wasn't your fault, Link. I explained what happened to some of the prides when they called demanding answers. They said you did the proper thing and that using weapons was against shifter law. You can't blame yourself for this and neither can Aiden. He thought he lost his best friend and then they shot at me. He reacted."

"Was anyone hurt?"

I grimaced. "Hurt, yes. Dead, no. He had enough of his mind that he didn't go after anyone after they ran. The only ones who died were the alpha and a few of the enforcers who tried to go after me while Aiden was burning down the compound. I called Christian the second I could so he could send help to the compound."

He pressed his forehead against my chest, the guilt still raw. It'd take time for me to convince either one of them that they weren't at fault. The only person to blame was the alpha who shot my mate. He knew what Aiden was, he knew what would happen if he didn't fight honorably. He did it anyway. He's the one who pulled the dragon's tail.

"What now? Are we going back? There are still more--"

"No." It came out harsher than it needed to but the thought of Link going anywhere near a pride again scared me and I wasn't going to let him. "After Aiden's little demonstration, the rest of the alphas backed down. We've been asked to step back for now. The prides that we already worked with are taking on the task of reorganizing with the help of the teams that Aiden originally sent out. His animal is no longer a secret and people are wary. They don't want to work with him. Or me because of my connection to him. Our part is done."

The guilt that Aiden felt because of that day was felt throughout the trailer park. I'm pretty sure that's the entire reason that Jackson let him stay. He was still angry about Aiden buying basically an entire mountain range minus Jackson's land but he couldn't bring himself to completely

ignore the man who saved his crew. They have a tentative alliance and I think as long as Aiden isn't a complete ass, they'll get along eventually.

“Is it wrong of me to say that I'm glad?” he mumbled.

I shook my head slowly. “No. I'm glad too. We're home and you're okay and that's all I need.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

LINK

IT TOOK three days before the damn doctor was willing to let me off bed rest. And that was only after a barrage of tests and images that had to be burned immediately after they were through. All of them pointed out the thing I've been saying since I woke up. I'm okay. Healthy as a horse. Or a lion. And tired of my mate avoiding me. She's even put that stupid pillow wall back up because she doesn't trust me to keep my hands to myself.

When I stepped out of the trailer and got my first breath of fresh air in days, I had to stop and take it in. The air was getting crisper, it was going to start cooling down now and even though I hated the cold, I didn't mind so much when I knew I had Rhea to keep me warm.

"Hey! He's alive! Welcome back!" Theo called.

Opening my eyes, I smirked at him. "Thank you. And thanks everyone for helping take care of Rhea while I was laid up. She threatened to tie me down if I didn't stay in bed."

"That sounds fun," Liv smirked, drawing Derek's attention.

"Really?"

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head, scanning the trailer park. "Anyone seen my mate?"

Jackson jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "She went for a shift not long ago."

Nodding my thanks, I headed around his trailer toward the path behind it. I found Rhea's clothes tossed on the ground in the clearing and chuckled to myself, picking them up and hanging them on a branch before shedding my own clothes. The doc cleared me for a shift but everyone was nervous about it. Everyone except me and my lion. He surged forward and when my paws hit the ground, I stretched languidly. No aches. No instant death. I'm okay. And now I needed to find my mate to prove it to her.

She couldn't have been gone very long but the crisp air made it a little harder to follow her scent. I went off of instinct alone, following the trail around the lake and along the edge of Jackson's territory for a while. One of her favorite spots was a little farther up and when I saw a flash of gold fur, I slowed down, stalking towards her.

She was laying in the grass, soaking up the sun, completely oblivious to the predator stalking her. Or at least, I thought she was oblivious. But right before I launched myself at her, she rolled to her feet and took off. I had to book it to keep up with her. At one point I lost track of her but she appeared on my side and tackled me, play biting me. I let her knock me down, wrapping my paws around her neck and licking her face just like the first time we shifted together. This time she didn't skitter away. She licked me back, the bristles of her tongue running along my cheek. When she pushed away from me and shifted back, she was laughing, tossing her long blonde hair out of her face.

Rolling to my feet, I padded toward her, pushing my nose against the juncture of her thighs. She squealed and shoved me away, dancing back a few feet.

"Oh no, absolutely not. You want to touch me, you shift back, you monster!"

Well that sounded fun. I took back my skin, pushing to my feet and going after her the second I could. She tried to run but I had her on the ground and underneath me in a matter of seconds. She's been sleeping next to me and I haven't been able to touch her in days. We could play later. I wanted more right now.

Claiming her lips, I pulled her hands up over her head, lacing our fingers together. It stretched out her body so that every inch of her was at my mercy. Maybe the whole tying to the bed thing wasn't the worst idea in the world. I dipped my head, sucking one nipple into my mouth, loving the noises already coming out of her.

“Link, please...”

Groaning, I ground my hips against her. I had very little patience right now and I was trying to be a gentleman but if she kept pleading with me like that, I wouldn't be able to control myself.

She tugged at her hands and like an idiot, I released her. A really fucking smart idiot. She took full advantage, shoving me onto my back, but she didn't tease me. She grabbed my dick, lined me up at her entrance, and sank down on me without hesitation. My head flew back and I gripped her hips roughly, trying to gather what little brain cells I had left to focus on her. She didn't let me, lifting herself almost all the way off and slamming back down until my eyes crossed.

“Fuck! Rhea!”

She kept the pace brutal, a flush working its way down her chest. I couldn't see straight, too caught up in the pleasure, but I knew if I didn't do something fast, she was going to make me come before her again.

Desperation coursed through me and I rolled her underneath me, putting her calves on my shoulders. It surprised her and her mouth fell open as I started moving again.

“Link! Link! Oh god!”

A snarl rattled my throat, her body tightening around me only making it that much harder to fight off my release. She clawed the ground beneath her, her screams echoing through the forest, and her eyes slipped shut. I felt myself getting impossibly closer to release and I had to grit my teeth against it but thankfully, she came screaming, pulsing around me and throwing me over the edge right along with her. I let out a

shout, thrusting through it until her legs slipped down and I collapsed against her.

She never complained about me laying on top of her. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, combing her fingers through my hair, and I melted, completely at her mercy. There's no other place I'd rather be. Lions may be the king of the jungle but she's my queen and she controlled all of me.

"If you didn't get the doctor's permission to be out here, I'm going to hurt you," she warned between pants.

Grinning, I nipped at her claiming mark, reveling in her little gasp. "One hundred percent healthy. I'm all clear."

Her face softened and she leaned her forehead against mine, taking a minute to just hold each other. But three days of sleeping next to her and not being able to touch her is a long time and I wasn't through with her yet. When I twitched inside her, her eyes flew open and she gasped.

"Wha—"

I smirked. "Oh, kitten. You didn't think I was done with you yet, did you? You've been teasing me for days. I'm not letting you up until the sun goes down."

Her mouth fell open, surprised, and I took full advantage, tangling my tongue with hers while my hips rocked. For every time she flirted with me and walked away the past few days, I was going to make her come screaming my name. We might be here a while.

RHEA EVENTUALLY HAD to go back to work. It made us both a little uncomfortable to be apart but after everything that happened, it wasn't overly surprising. I promised to come see her for lunch and she promised to go for a ride with me. She didn't hate the bike as much as she thought she would. Considering I'd have to put it away once the weather turned, she decided to give a little and go out with me more while it was still nice out.

After she left, I went to see Aiden. He had dark circles under his eyes and he was growling, but he settled a little when I fed him and got him to talk to me. I arm around his shoulders, listening to his regret and heartache. I tried apologizing again but he wouldn't hear it and threatened to make me leave if I opened my mouth.

“Where's Rhea?”

“Working. We'll meet up for lunch and start working on your fire problem once she's had a few days to settle back in.”

“No.” His voice was rough and inhuman and when I shot him a confused look, he pushed to his feet, stepping away from me.

“You won't be working the case. Neither of you will. I will not put my friends into danger again. You will stay here with your mate and be well. I'm stopping construction on the compound. I'm going back to work.”

My stomach sank. He was leaving, after he promised he'd stick around me and Rhea. I knew he felt awful but drowning himself in work wasn't going to help and there was still a threat.

“Aiden, I'm fine, I swear. I said I'd help you and—”

“NO!” he roared. It was so loud it shook the little trailer and his jaw clenched against the effort to keep himself under control. “Lincoln, I need... I need some time to think. Please. I'll visit with you more later.”

And for the first time since we met, he dismissed me, heading to his room and closing the door so I wouldn't follow him.

I left him alone, not wanting to force him while he was still struggling so much, but once I got outside I didn't really know what to do. I came out here to help Aiden. I stayed for Rhea. But I didn't really have any plans on what to do with my time. I can't sit idle, it's not who I am.

While I tried to figure it out, I went digging through my stuff. I haven't touched my woodworking projects in months but I still carried the shit around with me. In the past, it was

the only way I could think, keeping my hands busy so my mind could sort through shit. I sat in one of the camping chairs alone, carving absentmindedly while I tried to figure out what I wanted to do.

I spent most of the day there, hoping maybe if I sat there long enough, Aiden would come out and we could talk. But he never did and I didn't have a damn clue what else I would do. My head lifted when the cars and trucks began slowly filtering into the trailer park. Rhea was going to be late, she already texted me, so I wasn't really looking for anyone in particular. My melancholy mood must've been obvious though because instead of going to their homes they all moved to join me instead.

“Something wrong?” Jackson asked.

I sighed. “Aiden's... struggling. And he won't let me help him anymore. I'm just not sure what I'm going to do with my time now. I've never sat still long enough to have a real trade.”

Malcolm frowned. “Weren't you comin' to meet me for an interview?”

I paused, pursing my lips. Technically that was an undercover thing but Malcolm didn't know that. Maybe if I stuck with the original plan and looked around for a bit, Aiden would have time to deal with his grief and when he was ready for me to help again, I'd already be ingrained in the team and could get information easier.

“I forgot about that. Job still open?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Rookie couldn't hack it, had to let 'im go when he put a damn hole in the wall. Stupid little shit kept tryin' to skip steps 'for efficiency.’” He held up his fingers, doing air quotes, and rolled his eyes. “You look like you're decent enough with woodwork, sure you'll do fine.”

I glanced down at the little figure I'd been making. I hadn't really been focused on it but apparently with my mind on Aiden, my hands decided to make his dragon. It was still rough, needed a lot of work and details, but everyone seemed interested and crowded around to see it. When they started

making requests for their own animals, it warmed my middle. I've never had a crew before and I kinda thought I'd be on the outs coming in last when everyone was already settled but they never made me feel like anything other than part of the crew, teasing and joking and talking to me. And when Rhea pulled in and my face lit up, Liv didn't fail to point it out and say something snarky. I gave her the middle finger and jogged across the trailer park to meet my mate.

This wasn't anything like I'd planned. And I never thought I'd end up here. But with these people and the perfect mate, I finally found a place to settle. A place to call home.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

AIDEN STILL WASN'T SPEAKING to anyone. It's been a few weeks since the pride attack and he's been trapped in the trailer at the end. Link told me he was planning on leaving but when I confronted him about it and his promise to stay close, he said it didn't matter. His dragon decided that he wasn't going anywhere no matter how hard he tried to force it. He grew angry and resentful and hid away in his trailer avoiding everyone. Avoiding me.

Too bad that tactic never worked on me. It didn't work on me as a kid and it still doesn't work on me now. So I kept showing up, doing his laundry and making him dinner. He carped and complained and even tried yelling at me, but I just ignored him and kept showing up. And he never locked the door so I knew he was just hurting and didn't actually want me to leave.

Pushing into his trailer, I set his laundry on the couch. He was sleeping, which wasn't overly surprising. I picked up the laundry on the floor, tossing it into the basket, and went to cook him dinner. The smell would wake him up and he'd come out to start carping at me eventually.

Washing up the few dishes in the sink, I set to work making spaghetti. It was easy and simple and also happened to be his favorite. I wasn't under the illusion that it'd make him feel better but it was the little things that were important right now. Until he was ready to face what happened and get past it, I just wanted to make his life easier.

“Rhea... what are you doing here?”

His low growl didn't worry me. I know what he'd do to protect me, he wouldn't ever hurt me.

“Spaghetti for dinner tonight. I bought garlic bread earlier, I know you prefer real baguettes but I'm not that fancy so—”

“Rhea, please... I'm begging you. Leave me be.”

I ignored him. “Link pointed out that I do more chores for you than I do in my own home. I think he's just complaining because Esme does part of it for me and he has to handle the room to make it fair. I'm not *that* messy.”

His frustrated sigh ended in a whimper and when I glanced over my shoulder at him, he was leaning an arm against the wall, resting his face against it. He looked so tired and it made my chest tighten. The last time he got this tired, he started to fade. I wouldn't allow it. He's my friend. I need him.

“Sit down and eat with me. Link is coming home late, apparently they're close to finishing on their current build and everyone wants to push through so they can have a long weekend. I'm all yours tonight.”

He grumbled under his breath but didn't argue, trudging over to the table and dropping into the seat. Setting the bowl in front of him, I turned back to make my own, unease spreading through me. I don't like him like this and I didn't have a clue how to fix it. When I was a kid, I just kept showing up but it didn't feel like it was working anymore.

When I sat across from him, he hadn't touched his plate. I nudged it closer. “If you don't eat after I cooked for you, you're going to hurt my feelings.”

He shot me a dirty look but it still worked and he started shoveling food into his mouth. He ate quickly so I'd leave him alone.

“Is the dragon still refusing to let you leave?”

Pausing, he finally looked up at me. I've been steering clear of the important stuff, not wanting to set him off. I

figured light and easy like when I was a kid was the way to go but it was time to try something new.

“Yes. He used to let me at least go to the edge of my territory during a shift but now he won’t even let me leave the trailer.”

I pursed my lips. “And you still don’t know why?”

He shook his head, frowning at his bowl.

“Care to hazard a guess?”

His dry look made me smirk. “Okay, I guess not. Is Christian handling things alright?”

He nodded. “He could run the entire company on his own. He’s angry with me though, for not letting him come out here. I told him if I had any more people caring for me, I’d end up with someone wiping my ass for me.”

It made me snort and when I glanced up, I saw the first hint of a smile before his face darkened again. It was progress though.

“Wanna hear what I had to deal with today?”

I didn’t know whether he was just being polite or whether we were making progress but he sat at the table and listened to me complain about rich snobs getting arrested for making false reports and tourists ignoring the speed limits because ‘nobody is out here, why does it matter?’ While I cleaned up, he scrubbed his hands over his face, his long hair a complete mess.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear sweatpants before. Where’d you get them?”

“Lincoln. He said if I was going to be a lazy shit who refuses to get out of bed, I should at least be comfortable.”

Dropping my head back, I rolled my eyes hard. Link is not the comforting type. He was fine with me, sweet and gentle, but with everyone else he didn’t put in that kind of effort. He even told Javi skinned knees make stronger bears when he cried after falling down and got whacked in the back of the head for it.

“I’ll talk to him later. Not that I don’t want you to be comfortable. I just think he could use some tact.”

Sighing, he pushed to his feet. “It’s fine. I’m not deserving of tact right now. I’m going to bed.”

Spinning around, I called out to him. “Aiden.”

Glancing over his shoulder, he locked eyes with me, sadness coming off him in waves.

“You promised you’d watch over me. You said you never break your promises.”

He stared at me for a moment. “It wouldn’t be my wish to break my promise, Rhea. But... sometimes I don’t get a choice.”

My eyes narrowed. “Bullshit. You’re a freaking dragon. You get a choice. Keep your promise, Aiden. I need you.”

Another long pause and I held my breath, worried that he’d already given up and I was running out of time. But eventually he nodded.

“I’ll try.”

It was more than he’s given me so far. Hopefully it’ll be enough.

EVERYONE WAS HOME and around the fire pit when I stepped outside. Link was talking with Jackson, a bright smile on his face, and it helped a little with the heartache sitting on my chest. I walked up to him, not stopping until I was wrapped around him. He stopped mid sentence, hugging me tightly.

“Nothing?”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t know. I thought maybe I was making some progress but then he said some things that worried me.” Leaning back to look at him, I let him see the fear in my face. I spent so long hiding my emotions, trying to

appear tough so that no one could get to me, but with Link I felt safe enough to be vulnerable. “I’m afraid he’s going to start fading again if we don’t do something.”

His face darkened. “We’ll think of something. Maybe I should kick his ass. Make him angry. Might tip him in the right direction.”

When I slapped a palm on his chest, he chuckled. “I’m kidding.”

“You better be. Don’t piss off a dragon, Link. I don’t want to go looking for a new mate.”

That made him scowl and he nipped at my neck roughly. He didn’t like me even joking about that but I didn’t like him joking about getting hurt either. I’ll stop when he does.

“Hey, the crew is going for a shift. Wanna join them?”

“No, I’m okay. You have fun.”

Turning to walk away, I stopped when he tugged on my hands. He pulled me back until I was standing in front of him again.

“Rhea, you haven’t shifted in a few weeks. You can’t punish yourself just because Aiden is having a rough time.”

My brow furrowing, I shook my head. “That’s not why. I just... haven’t felt the urge, I guess. I didn’t shift much most of my life. Maybe I just got used to it?”

He didn’t look convinced but I was being honest with him. My lioness was quiet, she didn’t ask for time. I just didn’t feel the need to right now.

The crew gathered and I urged Link to join them. He looked like he might refuse until Derek came blasting out of his trailer, throwing his fist into the air and letting out a whoop. Liv trailed after him, a bemused look on her face. At our confused looks, she shrugged.

“I’m pregnant.”

She said it so nonchalantly, like they hadn’t been trying for the better part of a year. It was only when people started

shouting and congratulating them that the smile spread across her face and she beamed.

While everyone surrounded her and Derek, I tipped my head, narrowing my eyes. Now that I think about it, she stopped shifting a few weeks ago. How long was she waiting to tell—

My eyes went wide and I froze. Was I...?

She eventually convinced the crew to go on their shift and Derek only agreed to go with them when I promised I'd stay back with her. Carmen and Esme liked to walk with the crew and Derek wasn't leaving her alone for even a minute. I followed her back to her trailer, waving at Link over my shoulder before heading inside.

She dropped herself onto the couch, letting out a sigh. "I thought he might pass out, he was so excited. I know he's gone back and forth on wanting cubs but I think once he's holding them, he'll do just fine."

I smiled, sitting next to her. "I have no doubt. He's great with Javi." I thought about waiting to ask but it was going to drive me nuts. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

She rolled her head towards me, lifting an eyebrow. "Sure. Shoot."

"What tipped you off? Were you taking tests a lot or...?"

Shaking her head, she pursed her lips. "Nah. I stopped wanting to shift. I love shifting and Derek and I would go out almost every night but suddenly, I didn't want to anymore. I just wanted to cuddle and stay home. Derek didn't question it but it felt off to me so I took a test."

That sounded familiar and my stomach flipped. I need to go buy a test.

Her eyes narrowed on me. She's always been observant and it was like she could see what I was thinking. Her eyes widened and a huge grin spread over her face.

"Wait. You don't want to shift either, do you?"

I shook my head quickly. “Not for a few weeks. I thought it was because I was suppressing my lioness for so long, I was just getting used to it.”

She launched herself off the couch, yanking me with her.

“What are you doing?” I yelped.

“I’ve got another test. We’re gonna do this now. You gotta pee or do you need water?”

I dug in my heels, shaking my head. “Liv you just announced your pregnancy, I don’t need to be stealing your thunder—”

“Shut up, that shit is stupid. Come on, if we’re pregnant at the same time the guys will lose their freaking minds. All that’ll be left is Lily.”

Shoving me into the bathroom, she pulled the test out of a box on the counter, handing it to me and crossing her arms. I lifted my eyebrows.

“You gonna watch?”

She sighed heavily. “You’re such a prude.” Spinning on her heel, she faced the wall but refused to leave the room.

I wanted to refuse but I was also dying to know so I said to hell with it and peed on the stupid stick. And when the three minutes was up and it was time to turn it over, Liv held my hand and we both stared at it.

“Ha! You’re pregnant too! It’s contagious! Theo’s gonna freak out.”

She was joking but I couldn’t stop staring at the two little pink lines on that stick. We hadn’t been trying, I was on birth control. The chance of getting pregnant on birth control was slim, I did the research, but apparently Link’s not the only one with insane luck.

Liv was chattering, excited and giving me ideas on how to tell the crew. How to tell Link. But my first thought was telling Aiden. This might be just the thing to make him keep his promise. He said he’d watch over my cubs. Now that I was having one, would he stick around?

Since Liv was chomping at the bit to tell the crew, I knew I had to tell Link as soon as possible so I went to the clearing where they'd all meet up when they were through. I didn't know how he'd feel about it but the longer I sat with it, the more excited I got. I never wanted to get close to people, I was always worried they'd find out what I was and tip off the pride. But the crew drew me in and Link stole my heart and the pride was no longer on my radar. I get to be happy now. I'm safe here. My mate is safe here. And my cub will be safe here too.

Link strode out of the forest, shifting and running his fingers through his hair as he strode over to me in all his naked glory. He tipped his head at me, wrapping himself around me.

“Change your mind?”

I shook my head. “I figured out why I haven't wanted to shift.”

He frowned. “Why's that, kitten?”

I twisted my mouth, fighting a grin. “How do you feel about cubs?”

His mouth fell open and his eyes were the size of saucers. I lost the battle and a smile spread across my face. We were always trying to one up one another. I think this round, I won.

Aiden's Mountains Series

COMING SOON

LET ME GO.

It's time.

We've been here long enough.

They will be fine without us.

Nothing I said to the stupid dragon would get him to change his mind. I had my hand on the doorknob, desperately trying to summon the will to walk out the door. The sun was down, I could shift, but he wouldn't allow it and he wouldn't give me a clue as to why. Why won't you let me leave?

A low rumble vibrated through my chest, his displeasure at my insistence more than obvious.

I released the door and stalked away, pacing. The longer we were trapped here, the more irritated I got. We were supposed to be a team. Have been for two millennia already. He's never acted this way before and I resented him for trapping me here.

Spinning back toward the door, I tried to rush it, hoping to take him off guard. I could actually feel him rolling his eyes at me. I was being foolish, I couldn't pull the wool over the eyes of my other half, but I felt foolish anyway being unable to leave this stupid little trailer.

The voices of the crew filtered into the old trailer, so filled with warmth and laughter. It was a good place for Rhea, for Link. They are my friends, the most important people in my

life, and I'd do anything to make sure they were this happy for the rest of their days.

The memory forced itself upon me and nearly knocked me to my knees. The screams of women, children, innocents who had done nothing to me and mine, unfortunate victims to the wrath of the dragon. I gritted my teeth, trying to do anything to drown it out, but like always it slammed into me in waves and threatened to drown me.

The grief over that day was... all encompassing. Overwhelming. I would have rather ripped my own heart from my chest than to hurt innocents. But when that man shot my best friend, shot at the woman who saved my life, the heartache and loss catapulted me into a complete loss of control. The dragon took over and destroyed the pride that killed my friend and it wasn't until Rhea said he was still alive that I could take back control and stop to help them.

While I was carefully gathering Rhea and Link into my claws, I finally looked around. I saw the screaming children, the injured, the terrified women who were victims we'd been trying to rescue. I was supposed to be there to help them. I nearly killed them instead. And I couldn't even stay to help. My need to get Link help overtook all other thoughts and I flew away, leaving them to handle their problems on their own.

Digging my hands into my hair, I let out a roar. "Let me go!"

Spinning on my heel again, I stormed toward the door, ripping it open. I made it down the steps this time and the first breath of fresh air in weeks slammed into me. I sucked it in sharply, stumbling forward and sinking to my knees. I had the strength of will to leave the trailer but I couldn't go any further. Dropping my head, I took the time to breathe deeply. At least for the moment, I could enjoy the fresh air. For however long this lasted before the blasted dragon forced me back into solitary.

Headlights flashed over the little trailer park but I ignored it. There were no threats right now, not to anyone but me at

least. I still never found out who was attacking my compound but what did it matter? Maybe someone would finally put me out of my misery.

A growl from the dragon. He didn't like the way my thoughts were swaying as of late. What do you expect? I've been locked up for weeks.

Shoes crunched on gravel but I didn't bother to look up. Whoever it was, they were smart enough not to approach me and didn't speak until Jackson's voice could be heard coming out of the line of the forest.

"Andrew! You're early, we weren't expecting you until next week."

"I know. I wanted to surprise Ethan. Where is he?"

My brow furrowed. Why did that voice sound so... not familiar, I feel as though I'd remember it, but it sounded like somewhere deep in my soul, I recognized it.

"He's out with Corey right now for a shift. They always take the longest to get back, his animal needs more time than most. Why don't you hang out a minute until they get back?"

They moved about but I was still wracking my brain over where I heard that voice before. I didn't want to look up, whoever it was could be an enemy and if they recognized me and the struggle I was having, it would put me at risk. However, that voice...

"Hey, Esme. You're practically glowing at this point. How do you feel?"

The smile in her soft voice was easy to hear. "I'm good. I started feeling movement recently. Jackson hasn't been able to feel it yet but we're hoping soon."

The man hummed his acknowledgement and another layer of recognition washed over me. Even the dragon was silent at this point, listening. Who is that?

"Hey... what's wrong with him?"

"Oh... that's Aiden. He's having a rough time right now. It's probably best to leave him be."

“Aiden? Is he new?”

My name on his tongue sent a shiver up my spine and realization through my body. My head snapped up and I locked on the man standing across the trailer park next to Esme.

Standing tall and poised in an expensive suit, he looked a lot like the men I’ve dealt with in my work. It screamed businessman but I’m sure I would’ve recognized him if we’d worked together in the past. His golden hair was gelled and styled away from his face, longer on top and shorter on the sides. His square jaw was clean shaven, hiding nothing on his face. Strong jawline, straight nose, clear fair skin. He belonged on the front page of a magazine, not in a tiny trailer park in the middle of nowhere.

The dragon wasn’t quiet anymore. The reason we’ve been stuck here for weeks on end just walked into the trailer park and I was flooded with emotions ranging from relief, to elation, to seriously pissed off. What kind of sorcery was this that this man managed to ground a dragon?

“You!”

Shoving to my feet, I stalked toward him, the air vibrating around me in my fury. Normally I would be fighting to keep myself under control but control wasn’t really a forethought right now. The man looked my way and frowned and the dragon raged about fixing whatever was bothering him.

What do I care of this human? I do not even know him.

I was on him before he could blink, shoving him against Jackson’s trailer so hard it rocked. He looked stunned, gripping at my arm that was pressed heavily against his chest, trapping him there.

Scenting the air, I searched for some sort of clue to this man’s power. I haven’t heard of warlocks since the dark ages but that didn’t mean they didn’t exist. But the air didn’t scent of magic. It scented of this man. Cedar and musk and something unique, like the very essence of him had its own scent. It made me dizzy and my head spun against the assault.

Fury compounded and I bared my teeth. “Who. Are. You?”

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