



Taken

BY MY

Werewolf

BODYGUARD

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

MARIAN TEE

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*Note: Taken by My Werewolf Bodyguard was previously published as The Art of Claiming an Alpha: My Werewolf Bodyguard, which is the novelized version of Wolf Fight, Wolf Games, and Wolf Kisses. This edition also includes My Werewolf Husband.*

**I need werewolf prince Alejandro Moretti as my bodyguard, but he wants my body in exchange for his services.**

Calys has two things standing in her way of being alpha of her panther pack. One: she's an adopted human, and two: she's a woman. However, if werewolf royalty Alessandro Moretti agrees to be her Cavaliere, she just might have a shot at being the next pack leader.

A good plan, right? Or at least it should be...until Calys learns that the infamous playboy werewolf will only fight for her if she agrees to do everything he says...in bed.



# Taken by My Werewolf Bodyguard



by Marian Tee

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# Part One







# Prologue

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Norman Bailey was afraid. He was also jealous and angry. He may be the bodyguard to Princess Adelardi, but that was how he felt. Worse, the more time he spent with the princess, the more Norman hated her.

In front of him, the princess continued to carefully clean off the blood from her mask. It looked like it was made of human skin. Just looking at the mask made Norman want to throw up. Of course, he knew the princess hadn't killed anyone for it. The truth was, he had been with her when the princess knocked on one of their farmers' door and was given a dead goat.

Norman shuddered, remembering the glassy look in the goat's eyes as the princess laid it on the ground and knelt next to it. After praying over the carcass, the princess had calmly taken its skin to sew herself a mask. She had even used thread that was the color of blood.

When she was done, the princess had looked at him over her shoulder. In a cheerful voice, the princess had asked, "Do you want to try it out?"

Norman had fainted dead away in response.

That night was all Norman needed to know the truth. Calys Adelardi was truly The Human Monster. Like everyone, he had heard the rumors about her. They said she was so crazy and strong she could kill panthers thrice her size. And with her bare hands, too!

Norman used to laugh at the stories. But then he became the princess' bodyguard, and he learned the truth. The stories didn't even come close. It just didn't.

*If only he had been the one adopted by Venetto Adelardi, Norman thought jealously. He would not cause his bodyguards trouble. He would act the way royalty should act. And he*

would definitely *not* pretend to be a male shifter in order to fight at The Den.

*And here they were, six days now and counting,* Norman thought sadly. If the pack found out about the princess' secret activities at night, they would surely kill him and it would be all her fault!

He had pleaded and cried for her to stop this madness. He had even threatened to kill himself. But the princess had only looked at him with her scary, all-knowing blue eyes. And then she said in her sweet voice, "You must understand, Norman. We will all be dead if I do not do this. I have to do this for the good of the pack."

And that was that. Princess Calys might be a tiny thing, but she was also a tiny stubborn thing.

"Norman?"

The princess' delicate-sounding voice made Norman jump in his seat. Making sure none of his real feelings showed on his face, he said, "Yes, princess?"

She was standing in front of the mirror now, a small girl with a very shapely body. Her boyishly cut hair only made the princess look more feminine. Her big blue eyes were terrifyingly innocent. Norman always did his best not to look into those eyes when talking to the princess. It was very hard to lie to those eyes.

The princess was no beauty, but he had seen how she kept turning heads wherever they went. Norman couldn't really understand her appeal. Maybe it was because she was unique. She looked so delicate and yet she was also ridiculously strong. Like a Hulk Barbie.

"I have good news to share," the princess was telling Norman as she laid her mask, now clean, on the table. Her costume, freshly washed and ironed, was next to it.

The smile on the princess' face made Norman uneasy. "What is it, princess?"

The princess clapped her hands in childish delight. "I've just learned something wonderful. My request to fight in the

heavyweight class has been approved.”

Norman whitened. *Heavyweight?* Wasn't that the strongest fighting class here? Wasn't it made up of the deadliest shifters in The Den? And she, at barely five feet, was *thrilled* to go against them?

The princess was gushing, “Isn't that wonderful? I thought I'd be stuck with choosing my future consort from a group of baby-faced shifters who think *capoeira* is a kind of pasta.” The thought had the princess rolling her eyes. “But now! Oh, I'll get to see the real warriors! I get to fight with them, and—oh my God! Norman? Norman? Are you all right?”

But Norman had already fainted dead away in response.



IN ANOTHER PART OF The Den, a tall masked figure in black was leaning against the wall, his foot tapping impatiently. His name was Alejandro Moretti, one of the most famous princes of the Lyccan race. Shifters of every kind knew him to be the more amiable of the Moretti twins, a charming werewolf who used to be known for his strength and bravery in combat.

Nowadays, however, he was better known for two things. First was that he was brother to Domenico Moretti, the disgraced heir of the Moretti pack. Second was his recent preference for sex...in public.

In The Den, however, Alejandro was simply known as The Masked Wolf, a persona he donned only when he couldn't fuck his way out of a bad mood. And right now, he was in an extremely bad mood.

He needed to fight. He should have been fighting now, should have been inside the damn steel cage and covered in blood by now. But he wasn't. Alejandro cracked his knuckles, trying to control the urge to go berserk.

Fighting was the only way to forget. But because he wasn't fighting, memories hounded his every step.

Earlier tonight, Domenico had warned him and his twin not to attend the ball at Lyccan Hall. “It’s going to be more vicious than usual tonight,” their eldest brother had said. “They will be laughing behind my back all the time, and I do not want either of you to see it.”

Domenico Moretti used to be the most powerful and feared warrior in the entire Lyccan race. But then his human wife left him. Domenico had not bothered to hide his heartbreak, and he had become a laughingstock after that. Nowadays, other Lyccans had taken to calling him a dog, a pet to humans. Nowadays, everyone liked to sneer at Domenico about his wife taking a gay-looking Faerie for a lover.

He and his twin Alessandro had, of course, ignored Domenico’s warning. They had gone to the ball because Morettis always stuck together. In minutes, Alessandro’s hot-headedness had gotten him involved in a brawl. His way of avenging Domenico’s name was direct: to punch whoever had a bad thing to say about their brother.

Alejandro’s form of revenge was more subtle. He found a woman to fuck in one of the balconies. Her name was Monica. She was beautiful and voluptuous, just the way he liked it. She was also the wife of one of Domenico’s enemies, also the way he liked it.

In minutes, he had her screaming. In fact, Monica had screamed so loud it was obvious she had forgotten she was married. By the time they came in from the balcony, all the guests were staring, including her husband. It would have been the sweetest revenge if only Domenico hadn’t stared at Alejandro with a tight-lipped look of disappointment on his face.

And then...

Alejandro swore. He wished he could throw the memory out of his mind for good, but it was impossible. He remembered it so fucking clearly.

Domenico, humbly delivering an apology on his behalf—

Domenico, being slapped like a goddamn slave by Monica's husband, a fat old man who would never have stood a chance against his brother if Domenico had been in the mind to fight him.

Domenico, not bothering to retaliate because he was taking the blame for Alejandro's dishonor—

It had been too much.

And so here he was.

Only in The Den could he fight. Only in The Den could he pretend. Only in The Den could he forget that Domenico, once the most powerful wolf of their race, was now called The Prince of Dogs, and there was not a damn thing Alejandro could do to make things right for his brother.



# Chapter One



## CALYS

My breasts hurt.

The pain was similar to having a pair of sore giant lumps connected to my body. The pain reminded me of something I tended to forget. I may have been raised with panthers, but I wasn't one. I was human, and I could die of breast cancer.

*But the pain's all worth it,* I told myself valiantly. Tonight was proof of it. My aching breasts, the result of an opponent's hard jab to my chest, were also proof of it. I was in The Den. I had made it to the strongest fighting class. And because of that, I finally had the chance to pick my future partner from the cream of the crop.

Black Mamba, my first opponent, had potential. He had an eight pack, a must for me. I was also an expert when it came to guesstimating body mass indexes, and just by looking at Black Mamba, I knew he was at 24.4. That meant only a little over one-fifth of his body was made of fat. Not bad at all, although he really could have gotten that down to twenty-three. A couple more push-ups each day would have done the trick.

Rare Bear was good, too. His skills in tae kwon do were amazing, but there was something strange with the way he fought. He always had his pinky finger turned up, like a queen holding a teacup. Could that mean anything?

I continued mentally scoring potential consorts as I hurried down another tunnel. If all roads led to Rome, all tunnels under Naples, Florida led to The Den. The tunnels were dark and narrow. Lights were only installed in the intersections. They were sparsely decorated with plain wooden tables and chairs, and they served as waiting areas for fighters without dressing rooms.

Behind me, the shouts of the crowd were still loud.

*“Bite his neck!”*

*“Break his claws!”*

The Den was the only one of its kind in the States, an underground fighting arena for shifters. Night after night, huge crowds turned out to watch the fights. To make battles more exciting, special chemicals had been injected in the air. These chemicals had the power to neutralize the extraordinary senses of shifters. As a result, wolves no longer had the best sense of smell and bird shifters no longer had the best sense of hearing. Everyone was basically equal, and because of that only brute strength – and tactics – could win the battle.

My breasts ached more painfully with every minute that passed. Since I was the best in my previous fighting class, The Den had given me a dressing room. But that was still five intersections down, and I didn't think I could make it that far. I had to do something before I went crazy and cut off my own breasts.

Turning right, I took a detour. In minutes I came to an empty intersection and nearly expired with joy at the sight of it. I hurried to the corner and took off my loose shirt and overalls. My choice of costume was strategic. Leatherface's clothes were big enough to hide the fact that I was, well, a girl.

Under my costume, I wore a tank top and a skimpy pair of black nylon shorts. I pulled my top up and unwrapped the layers of cotton bindings around my chest. *“Aaaah.”* Tears actually formed in my eyes as my breast bounced free of its restraints.

*Note to self: make an appointment with a doctor ASAP.* I knew how to do things. Hot wiring a car was easy. Saving a choking stranger with the Heimlich maneuver was easy. But girly stuff like finding out if I had breast cancer? I could vaguely remember watching an infomercial that said I had to touch myself to find out if I had breast cancer. But the why or how of it? Not one clue.



The pain in my breasts reminded me of my unwanted task. With a grimace, I started groping my breasts. They were bigger than I was comfortable with, so there was a lot to grope. I really wanted to have them reduced. Panthers outside my pack tended to think just because I had big breasts, I was stupid. Worse, they also thought the bigger a woman's breasts were, the smaller her brain was. I just couldn't understand them. It wasn't like breasts took up space inside my head.

The damp air inside the tunnels made my nipples pucker up. It was embarrassing, and I felt my cheeks heating up at the sight of it. *I really wish I was born a man instead*, I thought glumly as I continued touching my breasts.

The weight of my breasts in my own hands was also embarrassing. Maybe it was time to seriously consider breast reduction surgery. Maybe—

“Do you need some help with that?”

With a gasp, I whirled around, shocked at the voice. I should have heard someone approaching, but I had let down my guard, being too busy worrying about breast cancer.

The intruder was a tall masked man clad entirely in black. He had dark hair and green eyes. I recognized him instantly.

He was The Masked Wolf.

He was The Den's #1 fighter.

And I was his #1 fan, but he didn't have to know that.

For a moment, I could only gape. *The Masked Wolf. The Masked Wolf! THE MASKED WOLF!*

Growing up, I had never been interested in boys. I had always thought of myself as one of them, only we had different body parts. But then I saw The Masked Wolf fight. And I totally fell in love. Just by looking at his body, calculating his weight and height, I knew – oh I just knew he had the perfect body mass index.

And oh, the way he fought inside the cage! It was poetry in motion, art painted in blood. The groans and moans of pain from his defeated foes were like hymns to the deadly beauty of

his moves. But most impressively of all, he was honorable. The way he conducted himself inside the cage, the way he never baited those weaker than him, the way he always gave the bullies the comeuppance they so deserved—

He was my superhero, and right now my superhero was staring at my naked breasts.

CRAAAAAAP!

I quickly covered my breasts at the realization. For the first time in my life, I wished I had longer hair. Really, really long hair, the kind that could cover my breasts completely. Or maybe I could be a mermaid and have one of those shell-made bras.

He was still staring. The fierce look glittering in his eyes, which were a stunning shade of green, made me feel like he could see through my hands. It made me turn pink all over.

“Stop staring.” Just saying the words made me feel more embarrassed. God, what did he think of me now? I had secretly fantasized about the two of us meeting inside the cage. I had secretly dreamed that he would be so bowled over by my fighting skills that when he realized I was soon to be a pack leader, he would fall down on one knee and declare himself my devoted Cavaliere.

But considering I was half naked right now, I had a feeling all he’d want to do was double over in laughter.

Or stare.

Which he was still doing now.

I hugged myself more tightly in reaction, wishing there was something I could do to control my body’s reaction to him. My nipples had prickled in awareness at his unswerving gaze. “Please stop—”

“It’s impossible not to stare, my beauty. You have the most amazing looking breasts.”

The words should have sounded like the worst pick up line, but when he said it so matter-of-factly, I just couldn’t help

but feel beautiful and sexy. I have never felt that way either before.

“Why were you touching yourself in such a public place?”

“It’s not what you think,” I mumbled.

A sexy, cocky smile touched his lips as he asked wickedly, “It wasn’t?”

For a moment, all I could do was stare. Was The Masked Wolf actually *flirting* with me?

Seeing that he was still waiting for an answer, I said lamely, “They hurt.” Unbidden, my gaze strayed to my costume on the floor. Realizing my mistake, I looked back at him quickly, but it was too late. His gaze had followed mine. When he looked back at me, the recognition in his eyes had me biting my lip in dismay. *Crap*. My cover was busted.

When he spoke, I expected him to say something lewd. But instead his voice was quiet as he said, “I caught the last few minutes of your fight earlier. I saw where he hit you.” He took a step towards me.

“Don’t come closer!” The words burst out of my mouth, but he didn’t stop walking. The closer he got, the more panicky I felt. The tunnel suddenly felt claustrophobic. Just the thought of his proximity had me forgetting all my years of warrior training. It made my mouth dry and my body tingle all over.

I wanted to take a step back with every step he took forward. But I stood my ground. I didn’t want him to think I was afraid—

Oh, crap! He was just a step away from me now. Warrior pride be damned. I turned around and tried to run away.

“Not so fast.” His chuckle was husky, his voice a velvety murmur tinged with amusement as he caught my wrist. He spun me around to face me. In another second, he had pushed me back against the wall. He put my arms over my head just as his hard body pressed against mine.

Oh...wow. This was not my first time to have a man's body next to mine. I had been raised as a warrior. I was used to having a man's body on top of me, under me, next to me. Men's bodies and mine tangled in all kinds of positions during battle practice.

But this was different somehow. With him so close, the heat of his body making my own body burn, my whole world compressed into one single thing: him. The fact that I was in The Den didn't seem to matter anymore. The fact that this was a public place, that I was half-naked – none of it mattered.

When I looked up at him, I saw that he was staring at my breasts. Again. I should be mad. But I wasn't. If I had to be honest, I was...turned on. It was the strangest feeling, something I had never experienced before. But I wasn't so innocent I didn't recognize the feelings of lust that had taken over my body. The men I trained with talked about it all the time. They would say how the urge to have sex could be so uncontrollable all thoughts of common sense were thrown out of the window, that the thought of it was enough to make them gasp, to make them groan, to make them ache...

When The Masked Wolf bent his head, I didn't even think of resisting. To deny one's feelings would be to lie, and warriors never lied. A whimper escaped me when I felt him sniffing my neck. I could feel his lips forming a smile against my skin at the sound of my whimper. His smile oozed of sexiness and cockiness. It embarrassed me, but it turned me on even more.

"You're human." As he spoke, his hot breath tickled my skin, making my nipples harden. My body's reaction had me biting my lip. This close, I knew he would feel my nipples pricking his chest.

"I'd never have thought Little Leatherface would be human."

My heart leapt at hearing him say the name I used while fighting. He really did recognize me!

"And you're a woman." He murmured the words as if marveling the fact. "You intrigue me very much, my beauty.

There are a lot of questions I want to ask, but right now all I can think about is how beautiful your body is. And how sensitive.” He paused. When he spoke again, his voice was a sensual purr. “Does that mean you want me very badly?”

When he lifted his head to look at me, I immediately twisted my head away to avoid his gaze. If he looked into my eyes, he’d have the mortifying answer to his question. I did want him, badly.

“Look at me, little kitty.”

The seductive invitation in those words was irresistible. The endearment was just as hypnotizing. It made me want to curl and rub my body against him, just like a little kitty. “I’m not your little kitty.” I said the words even as I found myself following his command. It was a pathetic comeback, I know. But it was all I had.

“Oh, but you are,” he countered silkily. “You may not want to admit it, but your body knows the truth.” As if proving his words, he traced my lips with his own and just like that, my body jerked as if lightning had struck it. Such a simple soft touch and yet I felt like I had been burned.

“Passionate and fierce.” I could feel his smile turning possessive. “Definitely a girl after my own cock.”

The way he had twisted the simple phrase and made it sound so wicked had me choking. How could he so easily say something like that?

My surprise had his lips twitching slightly. “You amaze me.” I could tell he meant it. He pushed closer towards me, his head bending close again. “You’re a mass of contradictions.” His whisper tickled my ears. Goosebumps popped all over my skin, and it was all I could do not to shiver.

“Do you know I loved watching you fight?”

“Y-you do?” The words came out as a gasp. It was hard not to when he was whispering his words into my ear and making my body melt as he did.

“I admired the way you didn’t let your size handicap you but instead used it to your own advantage. Of course, now that

I know you're Little Leatherface, I don't know if I approve of you fighting—"

"It isn't for you to approve," I cut him off stiffly.

He only smiled in response before saying huskily, "But I have to admit, little kitty, now that I know it was you fighting...I find your skills in the cage damn hot."

The words had me starting in surprise, causing my body to press against him, my nipples brushing against his chest. I would never have expected him to say something like that. Most shifters were chauvinistic to the core. I had honestly expected The Masked Wolf to be that way. I would have even forgiven him if he had undermined my skills. He was a shifter, after all. He was born chauvinistic.

But instead, The Masked Wolf had openly admitted he admired the way I fought.

Maybe he was my superhero after all.

When I looked up, intending to thank him, I realized he was staring at my breasts again.

Oh crap. How the heck had I forgotten I was still half-naked in his arms? And what the heck did I have to do to make my nipples behave? They were so proudly erect it was as if they were begging to be touched.

By the time The Masked Wolf's gaze returned to my face, I was a bag of nerves and I wetted my lips—

"You shouldn't have done that." It was my only warning.

My mouth parted in surprise at his cryptic words. "What did I—"

His lips closed over mine.

Oh...wow.

The Masked Wolf. Was. Kissing. *Me*.

His tongue sliding into my mouth had me gasping. Every sense I possessed came alive as he kissed me more deeply. Even as all my inhibitions tried to hold me back, it was impossible to resist the lure of his kiss.

This kiss felt like it was meant to be mine alone. This kiss felt like it could only be beautiful because *he* was kissing *me*. So tell me, how could I resist that? How could I not have my tongue tangle with his, shyly at the beginning then more boldly when I heard him groan in pleasure at the contact? How could I keep my body from writhing with each kiss, my breasts rubbing against him, my nipples turning harder and harder?

He pulled away with a rough expletive. He was breathing hard, and I tried to catch my breath even as confusion filled me. What now?

The Masked Wolf looked down at me with green eyes that glittered with passion and possessiveness. I had never been on the receiving end of such a look. Normally, when men looked at me with passion, it was because they wanted to kill me.

“Tell me why you’re fighting here.”

I had heard The Masked Wolf speak when he was being interviewed after winning a fight. He had a dulcet and languid way of speaking. He spoke like how I imagined a prince would speak. But the way he spoke now was different. His words were clipped, his tone harsh. He spoke like an alpha used to command.

*I* was an alpha myself, but there was something about his voice that made me want to submit. It was as if...as if he was *my* alpha. The only alpha who could command me.

And so I spoke the truth. “I am looking for a Cavaliere.”





## Chapter Two

---

**A** Cavaliere, in English, loosely translated to ‘champion’. By the look in The Masked Wolf’s eyes, I knew he recognized the word. Shifter packs rarely needed one because a Cavaliere only served a female pack leader. As far as I knew, *I* was the only female officially in line to inherit pack leadership.

The Masked Wolf was looking at me closely. For once, he wasn’t looking at my breasts. Reminded again of my situation, I tried to wriggle free. “Aren’t you going to let me go?”

He said briefly, “Never.”

I blinked at his answer. When he didn’t look like he was going to take it back, I yelped, “Are you serious?”

He answered simply, “Yes.” Before I could ponder that, he continued on with a question, “Why do you need a Cavaliere?”

“The normal reasons.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Then you are about to be a pack leader?”

I said stiffly, “Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I can’t lead a pack.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t, but you will have a damn hard time doing so, little kitty.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Is it too un-alpha-like?” he asked with a smirk. “Perhaps you prefer hellcat?”

“I don’t want you to call me anything,” I said exasperatedly. “All I want is—”

“Another kiss?”

“Stop putting words in my mouth.”

“Gladly, princess. I have something much better to put inside your mouth.” And then he promptly put his tongue inside my mouth with another heated kiss.

His kiss felt even more addictive, but this time I tried to resist. Now that I had broached the topic, I realized that I had indeed hit upon the perfect solution to my problems. The Masked Wolf would make an ideal Cavaliere. And the fact that I, err, enjoyed his kisses was a bonus. Maybe someday, he could be my consort, too.

The thought had me blushing, but it also had my toes curling. I managed to pull away, breaking off the kiss by twisting my head.

“What?” His voice was rough, and he was breathing hard.

“W-would you be my Cavaliere?” I asked breathlessly.

“That depends. Does it mean I get to fuck you?”

The question stunned me. “*What?*”

He repeated the question patiently. “Does being your Cavaliere mean I get to fuck you?”

I did hear him right! “How can you ask me that?” I couldn’t decide whether I was flattered or disappointed by his question. A moment later, I decided that disappointment won over flattery by the slightest margin. “Do you really mean it?”

His voice had a note of genuine surprise when he asked in return, “Are you truly dismayed by my condition?”

I would have thrown my hands up if they weren’t already over my head. Yes, he still had me in that position. Yes, it was still quite a turn on. But I couldn’t – shouldn’t – think about that right now. “I can’t believe you would only accept being my Cavaliere j-just for that. I truly need your help, and as a superhero you’re—” Oh crap. What did I just say?

The Masked Wolf blinked at me. Twice. Thrice.

And then he drawled, “Is it just me, or did you actually call me a superhero?”

Craaaap.

Before I could even think of a way out of that one, we both heard it. The sound of footsteps. A lot of footsteps.

Double crap.

I looked at him in panic. I couldn't let anyone know I was here – and certainly not in this condition. The Masked Wolf must have understood my concern. In a burst of inhuman speed, he had whisked both of us behind a metal beam and even had the presence of mind to swipe my clothes and hide them under one of the tables.

I sighed in relief, unaware of how this caused my breasts to shake with each deep breath I took.

I looked up, intending to thank him for saving us from having both our covers busted. But no words came out from my mouth when I saw where he was staring at. I quickly covered my breasts, face flaming.

His face became solemn. He pressed a finger to his lips. *Don't make a sound.*

Oh, good. He finally remembered we were in trouble and this was no time to think of...breasts. I nodded in understanding. *Yes, sir.* We definitely didn't want the other shifters to know we were here.

A second later, I realized I totally got it wrong.

In a blur of movement, he had again pushed me against the wall, taken my hands off my body, and took one pouting nipple into his mouth. *This* was what he wanted me to be quiet about.

The pleasure was...unimaginable. Indescribable. The Masked Wolf was sucking my nipple, and he was sucking it hard. He was practically a stranger, and he had his mouth on my breast. Was this really happening?

A part of me tried to struggle. This wasn't right. We didn't know each other. I had to save my body for my future mate, my consort. I tried to push him away, but he simply responded by sucking harder. My body jerked, my toes curled, and my eyes squeezed shut.

Oh God, God, oh God...it was so good. My hands, which had curled against his chest, started to move on their own accord. By the time I realized what I was doing, I was already gripping his hair, pulling his head towards me. *More. I wanted more.*

He looked up.

And smiled.

God, that smile. It frustrated me. It turned me on. It confused the heck out of me.

He bent his head again, this time moving to my other breast to suck that nipple. He started soft and gentle and then he started sucking deep and hard. I ended up pulling his head towards me again. I would have completely forgotten the world if not for the thudding sound of a body being thrown to the ground.

My eyes flew open. The Masked Wolf was even swifter to react. In the next moment, he had already rolled my tank top down and pushed me behind his back. Tiptoeing to see over his shoulder, I caught a glimpse of a short wiry man curled on the floor, a few feet away from us.

He was bloody and beaten, and when he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was...us. I stiffened, knowing he could point us out to whoever was attacking him. We could be a distraction for him to save his life.

But he didn't.

Instead, he looked away, as if not wanting his approaching attackers to even suspect there were other people here.

My heart overflowed with gratitude. What an honorable man! I pulled on the back of The Masked Wolf's shirt. When he looked at me, I mouthed, *We must help him.*

He shook his head, mouthing back, *This is not our fight.*

I almost gasped. How could he say that? He was The Masked Wolf! Of course he had to do something!

But before I could mouth back an answer, someone else had spoken.

“We’re not through with you yet.” The voice was lined with disgust, and when the speaker came into view, my lip turned down. It was none other than Butcher, the leader of the small pack of hyenas that often frequented The Den. Butcher was tall and built like an ox, characteristics that were unusual for his kind and which I suspected the other man didn’t hesitate to use to bully others.

When Butcher kicked the man on the ground, I bit my lip hard. It was the only way to keep me from crying out and rushing in to help him.

“You know the problem with ya birdies? You see and talk too much. You shoulda fucking mind your own shit!”

When Butcher kicked him again, I shook The Masked Wolf. Hard. Several times.

He only shook his head at me. I couldn’t believe it. He was The Masked Wolf! He was stronger than most people! It was therefore his duty to protect the weak! Didn’t he know that?

“Please, please stop,” the man begged, but he only received another kick in response, which crushed the other side of his ribs.

And then it was silent, the bird shifter having passed out in pain. I tasted blood at the sight. My lip had started to bleed. Tears slipped out of my eyes, but I quickly wiped them away. Righteous fury set my heart on fire. I had no choice now. My honor was at stake. If The Masked Wolf was not going to do anything, then it was up to me to make those men pay.

“Let’s be done with him,” Butcher said. “Ain’t no one gonna look for him here anyway.”

“Crush him in one?” a third man asked.

Butcher’s grin revealed a mix of yellowed and blackened teeth. “Hell yeah. Been some time since I got myself some brain splatter to grease my boots.”

Ten boots were raised in the air—

“STOP!” I rushed past The Masked Wolf and forced my way into the circle of hyenas. The evil on their faces sickened

me. *They were doing this simply for fun*, I realized. But why? I just didn't get it. How could causing others pain be something fun?

Something inside me flamed into life. It was black, terrifying, and powerful, a monster that lived in the depths of my soul, waking only when I was in distress. Like now. I wanted to lash out. I wanted to kill every one of them because they didn't deserve to live. But I did my best to calm myself down. My father always told me that violence was never the best answer, and it should never be the first answer to any problem either. In times of conflict, a good alpha would always be the first to offer an olive branch. And so I said in a controlled voice, "If you promise not to do this again, I will forget about this."

There was a moment of silence before the hyenas cackled in laughter.

"You sure are good at making jokes, pretty lady. I gotta give you that." Butcher licked his lips. "It pleases me, so whatdya say about me makin' you happy, too?"

Butcher unzipped his pants to show me his...thing. It was the last thing he did. It was the last thing any one of the hyenas did before hell came for them.



## Chapter Three



When I was four years old, I came upon a hunter while playing in the forest. He had been the first human I had met. He had been on his knees, mutilating a deer while it was still alive.

The last thing I remembered was the excruciating pain shining in the deer's eyes. Everything else was shrouded in blackness. When I woke up, the hunter was dead, mutilated in the same way the deer was.

Three more memories would be forever lost to me by the time people finally realized what was going on. In all those instances, I remembered seeing something bad and passing out after. And when I woke up, the only clues I'd have to those missing minutes of my life would be the dead bodies around me.

The worst of those incidents happened when I was seven. My father had thrown a party to celebrate my birthday. One of the guests' younger sons had tried to rape one of our house servants. I never saw the boy again after that day.



*A PART OF ME WAS NOT surprised when I heard the knock on the door and then my father coming in. I sat up on my bed as he sat next to me.*

*"How you doing, cub?" His voice was gruff. I could tell he was still worried about the older boy that went missing in the party.*

*"I'm sorry, Papa." I looked down at my clenched fists. I was trying very hard not to cry. It was my fault all those men were angry at Papa. I wished I could tell them where the boy went. I knew a part of me would know where that boy was. But I just couldn't remember.*



*“You did nothing wrong.”*

*I looked up at his harsh words. “But Papa—”*

*He shook his head. “Listen to me. Have you ever known me to lie?”*

*“No, Papa.”*

*“Then you know I am telling you the truth when I tell you that you have done nothing wrong.”*

*My heart eased at his words. Warriors never lied, and since Papa was the greatest warrior of all then it must be true. I had done nothing wrong.*

*My father cleared his throat. “I have something for you.” My eyes widened when I saw Stefano’s prized comics in his hands. “Do you know what these are?”*

*I nodded. “Stefano’s comics. They’re about superheroes.” Sometimes, Stefano let me read them, when I wasn’t being “stubborn”, whatever that meant.*

*“I want you to read them, too.”*

*“Why?”*

*“Because their stories are just like yours.”*

*My eyes widened at Papa’s answer. “They are?” I glanced down at the comics he gave me, which were new and still covered in plastic. I realized then these weren’t actually Stefano’s. Papa had really bought them for me.*

*Thinking about his words, I asked slowly, “Are they also adopted?” Was that what he meant?*

*“Well, some of them are, but that’s not the point. You see, cub, they are all ‘different’ like you. Unique. They had... powers...abilities...that no one could understand. Even they didn’t understand their own powers at the start. So when people saw them using their powers—”*

*“The people told them to stop.” I remembered the boy’s mother screaming at me. She had told me to stop. She had called me a monster. “They thought I would...” I shook my*

head, confused. *“They thought the superheroes might hurt them.”*

*“But they were wrong.”* Papa’s voice was vehement. *“The superheroes you read about in these comics...they don’t care what those other people say. All they want is to make the world a better place, and they sometimes need to use their powers to do that.”* My father paused. Then he looked at me and said in a serious voice, *“You are like them, Calys. You make the world a safer, happier, and better place for everyone. But your powers are very strong, too. So before you can help others, you need to learn how to control your powers. You need to do everything you can first without...”* Papa stressed the last word. *“—your powers.”*

*“Why can’t I just help them with my powers?”*

*“Because people are terrified of them. You can’t help other people if they’re terrified of you.”*

*I shook my head. “Even if I don’t use my powers, Papa, they are already scared of me.”* I remembered how Papa’s guests had looked at me when they realized the boy had gone missing. *They were all scared of me.*

*It took a long time for Papa to answer. “They just don’t understand you, Calys. That’s all. But you cannot let it stop you from helping others, and you cannot let what they think of you make you believe you are doing something wrong.”*

*“I’ll try, Papa.”* I said the words because I knew it was what my father wanted to hear. *But warriors didn’t lie. And so I added sadly, “But Papa, I’m worried. What if they will always be afraid of me?”*

*“Not everyone will be afraid of you, cub. And you know why? Because there are other people like you.”*

*“Like me?”*

*“Yes. Other kids who are also like superheroes. And they will be your friends – your best friends. They will never be afraid of you. Ever.”*

*Someone who wasn’t afraid of me...*

*Only Papa, my sister, and Stefano weren't afraid of me. But they were different. They were family. But if I found another superhero, then I would finally have my first friend. Someone who would not be afraid of me...even during the times when I was afraid of myself.*



STEFANO WAS THE FIRST one to describe my incidents as “dark fits”. He was twelve when he invented the term, and back then he was very much into Stephen King. He said one of the author’s characters had a darker half who did bad things. Mine did bad things, too, but to bad people.

As time went by, I became more aware of what was happening when I had one of my dark fits. But awareness was all I could achieve, and even now, controlling what I did during my dark fits was beyond me.

*“Stop.”*

The word was spoken in a coolly commanding voice. It was the first time my darker half had heard a voice addressing her without fear. She looked at the person who spoke the word and was instantly besieged by emotions, so many of them, and none of them she had ever experienced.

*Concern. Courage. And, strangely, anger...but not directed at her. It was, rather, for her.*

All the emotions lent power to that one word, *Stop*.

And so my darker half stopped. In the middle of breaking the arm of one of the hyenas, she stopped by throwing him against the wall. He groaned as he fell to the floor. She ignored the sound, turning slowly instead towards the man who had dared to tell her to stop.

The Masked Wolf walked past my darker half, and she watched his every move. I sensed her amazement as he resumed the fight, not breaking a sweat as he methodically demolished those who stood against him.

*Strange. Strong. Beautiful.* Those were her last thoughts as she faded back into me.

She slept.

I woke.

And knew that I had found *him*.

*My superhero.*



## Chapter Four



The first thing I became aware of was the bodies. Most of the hyenas had been knocked down to the ground. I could vaguely recall my darker half beating the hell out of them. The rest was his.

Crap, oh crap. It had been a long time since I lost control of myself. But...

*It's not my fault*, I thought defensively. Butcher had shown me his...thing. It was a traumatic sight. Of course I'd freak out. And of course my darker half would freak out, too. She might act like a psycho most times, but she was an *innocent* psycho.

"I told you not to help him." The Masked Wolf came to stand in front of me as he spoke.

I studiously avoided his gaze as I said, "I had to help him. My honor was at stake."

"It was more like your *virginity* was at stake, you stubborn little hellcat."

It wasn't the cool fury in his voice that made me flinch. It was his last word. I wasn't his little kitty anymore. Now, after what he had seen, I was...

"You idiot."

My head jerked up, and my eyes clashed with his. First I was a kitty. Then I was a creature from hell. And now I was an idiot? He was no superhero right now. If anything, he was a super jerk.

Another second passed, and it hit me.

I paled.

Seeing it, he smirked. And then he said very succinctly, "You idiot."

*He was not scared of me.*

No one who was scared of my darker half would have had the courage to call me a hellcat *and* an idiot.

I blinked several times, wondering if after a few more blinks, he'd disappear. But he did not. Instead, he remained in front of me, tall, strong, and, like my darker half noticed, *beautiful*.

"You're not scared of me?" I blurted out. I had to ask. I had to know. I had to be sure.

"While you did look, for a moment, like some damn extra for a Paranormal Activity movie, I hate to disappoint you, little kitty, but *no*. You did not scare me." His face hardened. "But you damn well made me angry."

In a second, he had hauled me to his arms, his mouth crushing mine in a rough kiss. I gasped against his lips, but that only seemed to inflame him more, making him pull me closer to him. This close, I could feel his heart beating madly. It took me a moment to understand that it wasn't because he was mad. It was because he had been *scared*. For *me*.

Me. The Human Monster.

The thought was liberating, humbling, and electrifying. With a little moan of surrender, I gave myself up to his kiss, my arms going around his neck. I felt his body become taut just a moment before he released a low growl that had my toes curling.

His kiss became deeper, and his hands were suddenly everywhere, caressing my sides before they returned to my breasts. He groaned the moment he cupped my breasts, groaned with such longing it was as if he badly missed touching them.

Without breaking our kiss, he hauled me up, and my legs automatically went around his waist. He started walking and when my back hit the wall, he kept me up with just one arm while he used his other hand to take hold of my tank top—

*Riiiiip.*

I let out a little gasp, unable to believe that he had ripped my tank top into two. But then his mouth was back on my breast, his lips closing over my nipple. He sucked and sucked, with seemingly no intentions of stopping. He sucked my nipple so hard that I couldn't stop my body from bucking against his, couldn't stop myself from releasing these embarrassingly sensual moans every few moments.

When he let go of my breast, I couldn't help but moan in protest.

He chuckled in response, but it was a pained sound.

I turned red, realizing how wanton I was being with him.

"You want me." God, how his voice vibrated with sheer male satisfaction. It should have made me mad, but it just made me want to curl up and rub against him like a stupid little kitty seeking affection.

"Don't you, little kitty?"

The words were whispered into my ear, and my body bucked against him again.

My telling reaction won a smile, and his voice was just as silky as he murmured, "And I want you as much." He slowly slid me to my feet. Before I could figure out why, he had captured my hand and brought it to his cock.

I gasped, but my fingers instinctively tightened around the silken rod at the same time. It twitched in my hold, making me gasp again as my stunned gaze flew to him.

"That's my cock, little kitty. Do you feel how much it wants you?"

"I..." *I didn't know what to say.* All I could do was look at him, helpless with desire and excitement. It seemed to be enough because with a groan, he was kissing me again even as his hand covered mine, teaching me how to pleasure him.

"Suck my tongue," he commanded huskily.

With a shudder, I did what he asked, and the pleasure of submitting to his command was nearly as great as the feel of sucking on his tongue and hearing him groan because of it. As



I sucked his tongue, my hand didn't stop moving, familiarizing itself with the rhythm and speed that his cock responded to the most.

"Fuck, you're hot." The words seemed to have been torn out of him. He took command of the kiss once more, and I gladly surrendered to his control. Passion had completely taken over me. All I wanted now was to do what he wanted. His fingers gripped my hips just before he hauled me closer so he could grind his cock against my belly. He began dry humping me, and I could have cried at how good it felt. Every thrust, rub, every moment of friction created by his cock coming into contact with my belly had me shuddering and writhing.

"Tell me your name." His fingers dug hard into my buttocks just before he ground his erection against me, harder than ever.

I gasped, "Calys." I looked up at him with dazed eyes. I couldn't believe, after everything that happened, we were only exchanging names *now*. "A-and you?"

He said roughly, "Why don't you find out for yourself?"

Another moment passed before I realized what he meant. My heart sped up at what he was offering, and my fingers shook as I reached for the strings that held his mask in place.

He squeezed my breast, hard enough for pain to become pleasure, making me whimper. "Go on, beautiful Calys. Find out who I am."

With a little tug, the mask dropped to the floor.

I whitened. "You."

He raised a brow, as if not knowing how to take my shock. "Me."

*Alejandro Moretti.*

I couldn't believe my superhero was none other than Alejandro Moretti. On one hand, he was everything I expected from one of the famous Moretti twins. Or rather, make that *infamous*.

With his mask removed, he made an even more alluring figure. Cute guys had never been able to turn my head, but Alejandro Moretti wasn't cute. He was beautiful. Lethally so. Everything about his face was perfection. I wished I could say he was so pretty he looked like a girl, but he didn't. He was all male, his face a picture of both strength and beauty.

No wonder I found him irresistible. Panthers in my pack talked about him a lot, not because he was the savior of shifter kind but often because he was bedding his way to becoming the most sexually prolific shifter in history.

The thought made my stomach turn even as I told myself I shouldn't care about his past – or even his present.

“You are disappointed to find out I am who I am, aren't you?”

His tone was bland, but even so, I couldn't make myself admit the truth. It just wasn't in my nature to say something that I knew could hurt another person, even if it was just his pride.

So I shook my head.

He said dryly, “You're a bad liar.”

“No. I'm not.” But I couldn't meet his eyes. In my mind, I could so easily imagine him surrounded by so many women.

Only a shifter living under a rock wouldn't know that his pack's name had been dragged through the mud. And *he* didn't seem to give a crap about it. At least his twin cared enough to get into fights over it. But Alejandro? Every time I heard news about him, it was always in connection with some other woman.

But...there had to be a reason for his actions. Even superheroes made mistakes at the start, right? All of them had started flawed, but they eventually got their act together.

Looking at him, I said slowly, “I know what you've been through.”

A smile that didn't reach his eyes started to play on his lips. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

He cupped my face.

Oh, crap. I had a feeling he was going to do something to shut me up. I said in a rush, “I know it’s unfair, what’s happening to your pack. I won’t pretend to *understand*—” I ended up gasping the last word out as Alejandro bent down to kiss the corner of my lip. Craaaaap. Such a simple kiss, and yet my body was on fire.

*Concentrate, Calys, concentrate!*

“Go on,” Alejandro murmured before nibbling on my lip.

I shuddered. God of superheroes, save me. Lend me the strength to remind him of his purpose.

“You must remember that we all have our own trials to face, and we can’t blame fate for it...” As Alejandro started nuzzling my neck, I couldn’t help leaning to one side to give him better access. “All we can do is face our problems and find the courage to *overcoooooome*...” Oh my God, he was sucking on my neck and it couldn’t feel any better.

“So, I just want to tell...you...” I gasped as his hands reclaimed my breasts and my eyes squeezed shut in utter pleasure as he started pinching my nipples between his fingers.

“Tell me what?” He pinched my nipples harder. His nostrils flared as if the scent of my arousal was an aphrodisiac in itself.

Even as my body swayed towards him, a silent plea for Alejandro to continue pinching my nipples, I tried valiantly to reclaim my thoughts. “I wanna tell you that...you are no ordinary...*Lyccan*.”

Boy oh boy, but he wasn’t, not when he was so masterfully good at making my body melt. Those wonderful fingers of his were pulling on my nipples now, plucking and plucking them like a flower with an endless stream of petals.

I found myself gripping his shoulders. Hard. I had to. My knees had practically given out at his relentless attack on my

senses. A whimper escaped me as Alejandro lowered his head. Oh, no. He couldn't—

*He did.* His mouth replaced his fingers, his lips closing over my nipple like a favorite candy meant to be savored. It felt so good, but I couldn't let myself be swept away by it. If I didn't speak my piece now, I must forever hold my peace.

When I felt his teeth actually scraping against my nipple, I knew I was *this* close to losing my mind. The words tumbled out. “You can restore your family’s name. You’re not Alejandro Moretti for nothing. But you have to remember... aaaaah...”

He bit my nipple.

I gasped, “You have to remember that with great power comes—”

Alejandro stopped biting my nipple. He raised his head and asked, “Did you just quote Spiderman to me?”

Voices coming from another approaching group of shifters saved me from the embarrassment of replying. Before I could figure out what was happening, Alejandro had swiped my costume from the floor and got me into it. And then we were speeding away.

When he finally stopped, the world spun around me. Although the shifters in my family could be as fast, I didn't really make a habit of letting them sweep me into their arms and using them as mobile cars. When the world stopped moving, I realized he had brought me to my dressing room.

My eyes flew to him in surprise.

“I traced your scent back to this place,” he said simply. Looking at me with a hooded gaze, he said, “I’ll be your Cavaliere.”

That stunned me even more. “Y-you will?” He couldn't even be bothered to defend his own pack's reputation, but he was willing to give me his allegiance? It didn't make sense, and I found myself blurting out, “Don't you care that I'm...”

He raised a brow. “That you're what?”

“That I’m...” *That I’m a human monster*, I wanted to say but couldn’t.

Understanding dawned in his gaze. “Do you mean when you transitioned from kitty to hellcat?”

I choked. Never had I imagined my abilities described in such a way.

“Am I right then?”

I nodded.

“If you want me to be honest...I find it a fucking turn on.”

My eyes widened.

He shrugged. “I told you, little kitty. You’re the kind of girl after my cock. You intrigue me.”

“A-and that’s it?” I asked incredulously even as I did my best not to blush at his words. How easy it was for him to say such things. “You’ll be my Cavaliere because of that—-”

He said coolly, “I will not be for free, little kitty.”

Oh. He wanted money. I told myself I wasn’t disappointed. “You want payment.” I hadn’t heard any rumors about the Morettis being poor, but maybe he had been disinherited recently for his wrongdoings.

“Yes. I want payment. Every time I help you, I get to do whatever I want with your body.”

My jaw dropped. I waited for him to say it was a joke, but when he only continued to stare at me with those hooded green eyes, I shook my head in bemusement and whispered disbelievingly, “You’re crazy.” And good at turning me on. God, he was good! His words alone had desire rising inside me once more, but I fought hard against it.

His lips curved in a slight smile as he said agreeably, “Crazy for you, little hellcat.” He added lightly, “So you must count yourself lucky for that.”

Before I could answer, he had stolen my hand. I tried to tug it away instinctively, but he held on fast as he murmured, “You must take good care of yourself, my princess.”

There was something in his eyes that made my heart twinge. It was as if...as if I had suddenly become his anchor, and only I could keep him from going adrift.

He started stroking the back of my hand, caressing my knuckles in a way that made my toes curl even more. “Your beautiful skin has become precious to me in so short a time, little kitty. I will kill anyone who leaves a single mark on it. That is the kind of Cavaliere I will be. The only kind I can be. Do you understand?”

I couldn't answer. He had turned my hand over and was licking my palm, the action completely taking my voice away. By the time I managed to open my eyes, Alejandro Moretti was gone.



# Chapter Five



“Smile, cub.” The command was issued with a smile of his own by my father, Venetto Adelardi.

My lips quickly stretched into a smile. There were many reasons to smile, really, but all I wanted was to mope. The drive home last night had been completely spent just thinking about Alejandro Moretti, and it was the same when I got home. I had tossed and turned in my bed, wondering why I should care so much about a man who clearly didn't take his duties to his pack seriously. He had everything – *everything* – needed to be a superhero, and yet he had turned his back on his responsibilities.

It was a glorious day, the sky a clear blue, and the surrounding pine trees lent a fragrant scent to the air. But for once in my life, I failed to take pleasure from the land I loved and had been raised to protect.

I looked up absently, but the bright morning sun had me silently groaning and looking away again. My head hurt. It was as if thinking so hard about the werewolf had given me a hangover. I hated how obsessed I was about him. So he kissed beautifully and made my body hum with such pleasure it was as if I had been born to moan his name. It didn't mean no other man could do it, right?

So he looked at me like no other man had ever looked. As if I was desirable and not the human monster that everyone feared. It didn't mean no other man could like me the way I was...right?

In fact, that was what this morning's auction was all about. My pack possessed genetic ties to the near extinct species of Florida panthers. Adelardi shifters could command them by will, and they could transfer the command to another person – even a human. For the first time in history, my pack was auctioning some of our baby panthers. It was bait, pure and



simple, to get the most eligible shifters to come into our territory.

“Are you mad at me?” Venetto asked as he continued to smile at the guests we had milling about, checking the panthers that were prowling about, their fur coats sleek and shiny, their eyes flashing with alert intelligence.

My smile also in place, I answered, “Of course not, Father.” I wasn’t. I was just...not as resigned as I should be to having my choice of consort taken away from me like this. One of the panthers had reached my side, rubbing his head against my thigh. I bent down, obliging its demand for attention by stroking its back.

Shifters in front of me gaped. I pretended not to notice. I couldn’t blame them. An idiotic guest had tried petting one of the panthers earlier and ended up in our medical center to get stitched. Shifters healed very quickly in general, but not when bitten by one of our cats. He was lucky it had been a cub. A full-grown panther would have cut off his arm completely.

My father said under his breath, “I would have postponed this if I could. But we’re running out of time. Last night was your last chance to hunt.”

I choked. “You make me sound like a cougar.”

Venetto snorted. “I’m not. I’d be doing them an injustice if I did.”

I made a face. “Very funny, Father.”

Instead of answering, he simply looked at me closely, his bushy brows coming together in a frown. Venetto was a solidly built man and one of the most respected and feared pack leaders of the Panthera. He didn’t talk much, but he was mighty observant. I kept my face expressionless, not wanting him to guess my thoughts.

Finally, he said, “You have not yet told me about why you always come home with bruises. I told you to find a man worthy of being your consort, not your sparring partner.”

An image of Alessandro Moretti flashed through my mind. He would make a worthy sparring partner and an interesting

consort. As soon as the thought occurred to me, I pushed it away. There was no point thinking about him. He hadn't even asked how we would meet again. The world of shifters might be small, but not *so* small that he would easily find out which pack I belonged to. Clearly I had only been a momentary diversion to Alejandro Moretti. It was only to be expected from the most licentious wolf in history.

"I just wish I didn't have to choose at all." It was the most selfish thing I had ever said, but I had to say it. Warriors didn't lie and I needed to voice my true feelings, even just this once. "You know I can lead the pack on my own, Father. You *know*."

He answered wearily, "Your abilities have never been the issue. You know that, too, daughter. I've raised you myself. Trained you myself. You're a hundred times more a warrior than my greedy nephew could be. I know better than anyone that you can be the future alpha of my pack, and each and every panther in our pack would gladly follow your command and die to protect you."

"But I'm human."

"But you're human."

It always boiled down to that.

"The Panthera would never allow a human to lead one of the packs. You need a natural-born shifter as consort, or at the very least a Cavaliere to rule at your side. If I let you lead the pack on your own, it will only serve as a temptation for every panther to challenge your authority and win leadership from you."

"I can handle the challenges—"

"You can. But what about the rest of your pack? Each challenge means war, and every war has casualties."

"Stefano will—"

"—not always be with us," he finished gently. "He has his own pack. He will eventually return to them. No shifter can ever turn his back on his birthright." A sigh emerged from Venetto. "I am old, Calys, and I am tired."

The words had me stiffening. I hated it when I was reminded of his age. Even though his shifter blood allowed him to look decades younger, the truth was, Venetto was close to being a century old now. He had been my rock, and I couldn't imagine life without him.

If choosing a Cavaliere today could make a difference, if it could ease his worries and prolong his life, then so be it.

I bowed to him. "I beg your leave, Father. I will start circulating and look for potential consorts."

"Make sure Stefano is with you at all times."

"Yes, Father." When I straightened, I saw that a grave look had fallen on Venetto's face.

"I'm sorry for placing pressure on your shoulders, but we simply have no choice. War is upon us, cub. I cannot be at peace until I'm assured you are not alone in defending our pack." He nodded towards the other shifters. "Be quick in choosing, Calys."

The words he left unsaid hung in the air.

I did have to make my choice, quickly, if I did not want The Conclave making the choice for me.



## Chapter Six



### ALEJANDRO

“I would like to ask you to draft a contract that frees me to be a...Cavaliere...to a pack princess of the Panthera.”

The words should have come as a shock to the heir of the Moretti pack, but when Domenico Moretti looked up from the documents he was quietly perusing, his handsome face was unreadable. His tone was just as bland as he said, “Please take a seat.” Everyone who knew him, however, would also understand that the words were not a request but a command.

When his younger brother was seated, Domenico asked, “Why is there a need for a Cavaliere?”

“It appears that her father is on a husband-hunting mission for her.” Alejandro cracked his knuckles as he spoke the words. It did not sit well with him that his little kitty might be given to another man.

Domenico studied the play of emotions on his brother’s face with interest. “May I ask which pack princess is this?”

Wordlessly, Alejandro pushed forward the invitation he had wrangled from another pack princess, this one the stunning and worldly eldest daughter of the pack of the Garridos. She had been the only Lyccan he knew who had been invited to tomorrow’s auction, and that invitation was vital since panthers were notorious for being distrustful of strangers.

One eyebrow arched questioningly as Domenico read the invitation. “They must need to have her mated as soon as possible. Those panthers are famous all over the world. I can see a lot of pack leaders’ sons hurrying to attend this event.” He paused. “Do you plan to be her Cavaliere just for the sake of owning one of those panthers?”

Alejandro said idly, “Would it be hard to believe if I said yes? Those panthers, as you say, are world famous.”

Domenico wasn't fooled. His younger brother might insist on making others see him as nothing but a carefree playboy prince, but he knew all of his siblings well. With this brother of his, the charming sophisticated façade he presented was just that: a façade.

“If you become the princess' Cavaliere, you will need to spend a lot of time with those panthers. They are not exactly friendly with strangers. You will need to bear a lot of prejudice there.”

A pair of ocean-blue eyes flashed in Alejandro's mind as he questioned his decision. The memory of the taste of his kitty's lips and the feel of her body had kept him awake and aching the entire night, so much so that in the end he had found himself masturbating and pleasuring himself in the shower – something he had not done since he was a boy.

When his younger brother only shrugged, Domenico remarked casually, “You know, my first thought was that this would be more to your twin's liking. As we all know, Alessandro's been rather aggressive. That would make him feel right at home there.”

*No fucking way*, Alejandro thought blackly. Only when Domenico started talking about panthers and his twin in the same sentence did Alejandro remember one important thought. He had an identical twin, and he did not like to think about what could happen if his little kitty realized the same thing.

Would she want Alessandro more? Perhaps. She seemed to be the type of woman who was all for grand gestures, and what was grander than one Lyccan prince fighting a dozen other shifters, all for the glory of defending their pack's reputation?

“Alessandro would not make a good Cavaliere for her. She's already too passionate. He's too hotheaded, especially when you consider he's a college professor.”

Domenico smiled but said evenly, “As you are too charming for a paid fighter.”

Alejandro stiffened. So Domenico knew of his nocturnal activities then. He waited for his brother to ask about it, but no question was forthcoming.

“Nonetheless, I’m thinking about whether Alessandro should accompany you to this party. What do you think?” Domenico asked even though he really had no plans of having both twins attend the party. He only wanted to push his younger brother into revealing his thoughts. Alejandro worried him in a way Alessandro didn’t. This brother of his kept too much to himself even as he continued to charm everyone with his lazy wit and courteous ways.

“Whatever the pack leader’s heir decides,” Alejandro said.

The words were spoken in a dulcet tone, but the muscle ticking in Alejandro’s jaw gave Domenico hope that all was not lost. Pride had lost him the woman he loved, and he was determined that none of his younger brothers would follow in his footsteps. In Alejandro’s case, it appeared that the fate of his heart lay in the hands of a panther princess.

Domenico took careful note of the princess’ name even as he kept silent. It would be healthy to let Alejandro sweat it out a bit. Calys Adelardi. He must find out everything about her and ensure that she was the ideal woman for Alejandro.

## CALYS

Selflessness came in many forms, and not every warrior’s deed had to be dipped in blood. It was like what The Dark Knight said when he had decided to give up his cape. That a hero could be anyone—

Stefano Guidicelli, tall, blond, and blue-eyed like a real-life Prince Charming, came to stand in front of me. “Princess.” As he bowed, he not so gently stepped on my foot, saying under his breath, “Stop daydreaming.”

I blinked rapidly in pain even though I badly tried to look as if I was flirting with my father’s right hand man. I wanted to yelp in pain, but I didn’t. A true warrior always suffered in

silence. When he straightened, I mumbled, “I’m sorry.” I *had* been daydreaming for the last couple of minutes. My eyes had started to glaze the moment the men started talking about going to beach parties and attending some event that sounded like a cross between a coach and Cinderella. I just couldn’t believe the future pack leaders of the Panthera were so... *shallow*. Didn’t they know that war was at our doorsteps this very moment?

As Stefano came to stand behind me, he murmured glacially, “You need to focus on sizing each and every eligible shifter that comes your way. One of them could potentially be leading your pack with you or for you. The future of your pack hinges on your choice of consort. Is that matter so boring to you?”

Stefano’s words had me paling. “I’m sorry.” God, what was wrong with me? I used to consider finding a consort an honorable task. I had looked forward to the opportunity to serve my pack. All I had been able to think back then was what I would gain for the Adelardi pack.

But after last night...

After Alejandro Moretti...

Now, I was starting to think of what I could lose.

Crap, crap, crap. This had to stop. Pushing the thought away, I straightened up and pinned another smile on my face. “Elias, Elijah.” The panthers I called immediately came to my side, stretching by my feet lazily before looking around them with disdain. I could empathize. All three of us were for show, but we had to do what we had to do for our pack.

A crowd of guests immediately surrounded us. The questions started coming in, and I answered them pleasantly while I calculated each shifter’s BMI. Sadly, not one of them rated below overweight. What kind of warrior training did these princes have? Did it take place next to the bed and the refrigerator?

It was nearing noon when Stefano spoke again. “Princess.”



I jumped at his voice. Crap. Had he seen my eyes glazing when the prince kept droning on and on about taking a selfie with my panthers? A selfie! He was a warrior! And he wanted a selfie!

“Would you like to take a walk while the panthers are given water?”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Finally. Stefano was allowing me to have a break from princess duties. “Yes, please.”

Stefano bowed to the crowd of disappointed guests in front of us, murmuring our excuses. I listened to him with admiration. Both of us had the same tutors, the same training, the same everything. But why was it he had mastered the art of smooth talking and I couldn't?

Stefano walked beside me, a right he had earned as an honorary member of our family. My thoughts turned to Alejandro Moretti once more. I didn't want to think about him, but I couldn't help it.

*If only he truly meant to be my Cavaliere*, I thought wistfully. It would have been ideal, and it had nothing to do with the fact that the Lyccan prince happened to be very attractive and an absolutely great kisser. Absolutely not. Stuff like that was just like...like icing on the cake. Yes, icing – deliciously hot and sweet icing, with the way his lips so expertly claimed my own, with the way his large strong hands shaped my body as if it was a toy to be molded to his will, and oh with the way he could make my nipples—

“Princess, you seem like you are about to drool.”

Stefano's puzzled observation had my eyes flying open. Crap. I *was* about to drool. But before I could think of an excuse, someone called out to us. “If it isn't the Human Monster and the Bastard.”

It was a group of young cubs, and the leader of the group had an insolent look on his face as he sauntered towards us.

“Take it back,” I said coldly.

“Princess,” Stefano said warningly.

I didn't heed it. Stefano never liked it when we made a fuss over him, but he was family. And anyone who thought he could be insulted because he was a bastard did not deserve to be treated with respect.

"What are you going to do if I don't?" the leader jeered.

I knew his kind. He had heard stories about me and thought he would claim his manhood by beating me. The Human Monster. If he had only insulted me, I might have allowed him to leave without harm. But he had insulted someone under our pack's protection and without provocation at all. He had to be shown the error of his ways.

"Apologize if you know what is good for you."

"And I keep asking you, bitch. Whatcha gonna do if I don't? Flutter your eyelashes at me and kill me with a look?" His friends snickered at his words, and it made him puff his chest out like a peacock.

He turned to Stefano. "And then there's you. You've got a nice and cozy setup here, don't you? Thrown out by the jaguars, but like any greedy bastard, you managed to claw a spot for yourself with the panthers. Probably want to marry her yourself, don't you? Match made in hell."

More snickers.

He was really getting on my nerves.

"You must learn to control yourself, princess."

I knew Stefano was right. Sadly, this cub's attitude wasn't any different from the rest of the other panthers. Panthers in general were racist and uncivilized. If you weren't a panther, then you didn't amount to anything.

Or at least for now. It was my calling to change that. I knew in my heart I was destined to reshape the future of the panthers. And I could start right now. Struggling to control my temper, I said, "There are certain rules we must abide, panther. One is to respect the owner of the house and its guests—"

"Fuck you."

Then he looked at Stefano.

And spit.

Stefano's curse was the last thing I heard before I went dark.

When I looked up, I no longer existed.

My darker half said in a silky voice, "That was a bad thing you did, little boy."

Silence fell at her words. When my darker half woke, she made everything just a little darker all around her. You could feel her power thrumming in the air, and it wasn't the kind that reassured you. It was the kind that scared the crap out of you, and the poor cubs that thought to mess with me were scared.

One of the cubs tried to make a run for it. In the blink of an eye, my darker half had blocked his way, moving as fast as any shifter, and with a beautiful smile on her face, she aimed for his knee. There was the sound of bones cracking, followed by his scream of pain before he crumpled to the ground.

In another blink she was back at Stefano's side, facing the other cubs. They weren't scared now. They were about-to-pee terrified. Unfortunately for them, they had good cause since right now, my darker half was in a bad mood. The kind that wanted blood spilled and lives taken.

She raised her arm. "Don't even try to escape or it will be worse."

Crap.

She was going to kill all of them.

I willed myself back in control, but it was impossible. There seemed to be an invisible wall separating the two of us, and there was no way around it.

When my darker half prepared to strike, I screamed. My eyes closed involuntarily, unwilling to witness the slaughter of innocent lives even as I screamed and tried everything in my power to wrestle back control of my body.

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was Alejandro Moretti. The sun shone behind him, making him look like an avenging angel. I shared a moment of confusion

with my darker half. Why was he here? And why was he wearing a suit?

“Easy now, little kitty,” he told my darker half softly. I marveled at the sheer absence of fear in his voice and the clarity of his gaze as he looked at her. Even Stefano had an impossible time controlling my darker half when she was this pissed, but somehow, there was something about Alejandro Moretti that seemed to make her listen, like a beast that knew its master.

She cocked her head to the side. “Why do you call us this?”

Her words stunned Alejandro. Even Stefano became more alert. Heck, even I myself was shocked. She had never referred to me in any way in the past.

The air vibrated with even greater tension as she waited for his answer. Leaves ruffled above us, and even the ground seemed to respond to her, like it was only waiting for her command to break apart.

But Alejandro appeared oblivious, a mysterious smile playing on his lips as he answered, “Because you look like one to me. A little kitty.” His smile widened ever so slightly. “*My* little kitty.”

I heard everyone drawing their breath as he took a step towards her, calm as you please, like he wasn’t about to get close to a hungry predator. In many ways, that was what my darker half was. “As my little kitty,” he continued in a seductively persuasive voice, “you should let me, your Cavaliere, do the fighting for you.”

The sound of a needle falling could have been heard at the silence his words caused. My heart was beating so fast now, and my body felt restless and incomplete at his words. I couldn’t believe he had really said that out loud.

My darker half considered him with a thoughtful expression. Finally, she spoke. “You would make them pay?”

Solemnly, he said, “Yes.”

“You will show them the error of their ways?”

“Yes.”

“Then fight.” A pause. “I want all of them *unconscious*, wolf. I will be displeased if any one of them can remember his name when you are done.”

The leader of the cubs actually started to cry.

But all Alejandro said was, “Your wish is my command, little kitty.”



# Chapter Seven



“What are you doing here?” One moment I was alone in my bedroom, combing my hair while daydreaming about conquering battles with my faithful Cavaliere at my side. The next thing I knew, *my Cavaliere was* indeed at my side.

*How the heck did he get in—*

A gust of wind teased my hair and I grimaced, realizing he had sneaked into my room through the balcony. Darn shifter stealth. And my darker half had allowed it, obviously not considering his presence in my bedroom a danger.

These days, I was really torn. Was my darker half really on my side or his?

He came to stand behind me, and our shared reflection on the mirror had me swallowing. He looked so powerful and dark, and he made me feel so small and womanly. Not at all like a warrior. Mouth drying, I watched as he slowly lifted a hand and rested it on my shoulder, my body shivering at the way his fingers curled around my nape.

When he bent down, my nipples came alive, pricking against the cotton nightshirt I wore. He was still in his suit, and the contrast between our appearances suddenly struck me. He was so elegant, and I was...not. “W-why are you wearing a suit?”

A pained expression briefly crossed his face. “I had the mistaken impression that your auctions for panthers worked the way horse auctions normally do. That it would be a formal occasion.”

A nervous giggle escaped me. “Panthers *never* have formal affairs.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, but for now...” In a blink, he had taken me off my dresser’s stool and had me up against the

wall. My arms and legs automatically wrapped around his body.

“You remember what I said?” he purred.

“No?”

He smirked. “You can do better than that, little kitty.” His head moved forward, giving me a short hard kiss. It was the briefest contact, but it was more than enough to have me gasping. When he lifted his head to look at me, I could only gaze back at him, knowing my eyes couldn’t hide how much I wanted more of his kisses.

“Do you want me, princess?”

Warrior brides had to be virgins in their marriage bed. But warriors didn’t lie.

The latter won, but I had to say my piece first. “I can only do this with a consort,” I told him breathlessly.

He smiled. “I’m sure you do.”

The words confused me, but by now I wanted him so badly it didn’t matter. I moved my head close, taking the initiative for the first time. His lips curved into a smile, content to wait. I blushed at my boldness, but my embarrassment didn’t stop me from moving closer and closer. I wanted his kiss so badly.

Our lips touched.

It was magic.

Alejandro groaned against my mouth, and that was the extent of the control he allowed me. He took command again, and I was more than eager to have him in control. He swept me into his arms without breaking the kiss, carrying me to my bed.

He only broke the kiss when he laid me down, and I couldn’t stop staring at him as he started taking off his clothes. His emerald gaze didn’t leave mine as he shrugged his jacket off and laid it on the bedside table. I would have giggled at how neat and proper he was being if I wasn’t so nervous. Things were happening so fast. A part of me wanted to put a



stop to it, but the larger part of me was just swept away by the excitement of it.

Moonlight filtered into the bedroom from the open doors of the balcony. It cast silver streaks of light on his hard chest, which he revealed inch by inch as he worked on the buttons of his shirt next. This, too, he lay next to his jacket, making me smile again.

When he looked back at me, he caught sight of my smile. “What are you smiling about, little kitty?”

“You’re so neat,” I confessed. “If it were me, I’d probably throw...” My voice trailed off as I took in the full sight of his half naked form. He was smooth and hard all over except for the light smattering of hair on his chest. Somehow, it made him seem manlier, more warrior like.

And then he started taking off his pants, and all semblance of rational thinking left me.

His legs were hard and muscular. I had seen men’s naked legs, too, of course. Lots of them. Back in the day, part of our warrior training required us to swim against the tides in the middle of winter. When we’d come out of the water, those parts of men that stood were, well, standing. So, really, the sight of an erection – or at least hints of it – was something I was impervious to.

But apparently not this one.

Alejandro was naked now, and his erection jutted proudly against his belly, steel sheathed in silk. He saw me looking and smirked. “Like what you see, princess?”

“I’m not sure,” I said weakly. Common sense told me it would fit, but common sense also told me it would likely hurt like crap. Serious crap.

“I’m sure *I* would like what I’d see when I have you naked.”

And then he was joining me in bed, and I couldn’t help but gulp as he loomed over me. Unlike him, I wasn’t wearing a host of clothing. With one swipe of his hand, he had my nightshirt over my head. Since I never wore a bra to bed, I was

immediately naked save for my panties, and that Alejandro disposed of just as quickly.

And just like that, I was naked.

“My little kitty’s so beautiful.”

His whisper made me want to curl up and rub myself against him. I held my breath as he leaned down. I expected him to take my mouth in another wild and rough kiss, but instead his lips landed gently on mine. He nibbled on my lips for a long time, and by the time his lips moved down, I was completely relaxed.

My arms wound around his neck as he nibbled on my shoulder blade, and I sighed with sheer pleasure when his lips moved even lower and nuzzled the valley between my breasts. I was vaguely aware of his hand parting my legs open, and then he was settling between them, his weight resting against my body.

Our bodies brushed against each other and I gasped, every nerve in my body jumping in excited awareness. He was hard all over. Unbelievably hard, and it made me feel so wonderfully womanly. In his arms, I forgot that I was the human monster.

When his mouth moved over my nipple, my fingers dug into his shoulders. And when he started to suck, my legs went around his waist. I found myself gripping his head, pulling him closer so I could have my nipple deeper into his kiss. Oh, God, how he sucked.

After a while, he moved to my other nipple, sucking it passionately in his mouth. I writhed in his arms, feeling like I was about to explode if I didn’t have something I couldn’t quite name. I felt his hand moving again, and I tensed. When I realized where his hand was going, I tensed even more but there was no stopping his questing hand.

The first brush of his fingers against my folds had me gasping, and I gasped yet again when he started stroking my folds. I was making so much noise that surely the guard outside my door had heard me by now. I blushed, knowing that

he might think I was pleasuring myself. But I forgot all about it when I felt something push into my folds—

*Oh.*

Alejandro slid one finger in. It was strangely beautiful, the feel of having a part of him inside of me. When he started to move his finger in and out of me, it was in rhythm with his kisses on my nipple, sucking hard as he pushed his finger back inside me. Being pleased in two different ways simultaneously had me breathless, and my head began to twist against the pillow.

A long moan erupted from me when I felt Alejandro sliding a second finger inside my body. The pleasure was more intense now, and I couldn't imagine how much better it would feel if it was his cock entering my body next.

His thrusts became harder and faster, and his mouth worked more fiercely on my nipple. With each stroke, with each tug of my nipple, I gasped, the pressure building inside me until suddenly I was there. I screamed as I came, the pleasure of my orgasm taking my breath away.

When I opened my eyes, Alejandro was lying next to me on his side, propping his head up with his hand while playing with the bangs of my hair.

He smiled. It was his sexy, cocky smile and my body tingled in complete awareness of it. Dawn was breaking outside, making me realize with shock that I had slept for hours.

“Yes,” he said. “I pleased you so well you passed out.”

I turned red. “I didn't pass out,” I mumbled. “I...fell asleep.” But honestly, it did feel like I had passed out. Crap.

“Your Stefano came knocking on your door earlier.”

My eyebrows shot up. “My Stefano?” Oh my God – did that mean Stefano knew I had a man in my room? Did that mean Venetto knew, too? If they did, why weren't they raising a fit?

Alejandro's voice was distinctively cool when he answered, "Yes, *your* Stefano."

I finally noticed how he had stressed the word 'your' and I shook my head quickly, realizing how he could have misinterpreted things between Stefano and me. "We're like siblings."

"Of course."

"No, I mean it," I insisted. "He doesn't like me that way and I don't like..." Seeing the inscrutable expression on his face, I told him exasperatedly, "I don't lie. Warriors don't lie."

Alejandro's lips slowly curved into a smile. "And since my little kitty's a warrior, I guess I should take your word for it then?"

"Yes."

He looked at me for a moment. "Then I believe you, little kitty." He reached for something behind me, causing his body to press against mine. When he pulled away, I was breathless, my nipples erect at the brief brush of contact with his chest.

He grinned.

Oh, crap! He had deliberately—

"Cocky wolf." But I couldn't help sighing when he only bent close and took my lips with a quick, deep kiss.

"Beautiful little kitty," he purred against my lips, "And you're all mine." He pulled away and handed me a sealed envelope. "This came from Stefano."

It took me awhile to get my senses back, my fingers trembling as I tore the envelope open. The first part of his message had me frowning. Stefano and Venetto had gone away to one of our northern territories. It seemed my father's nephew, Raoul, was starting a rebellion there. If Venetto hadn't adopted me or my sister, he would have been next in line to the pack's leadership. But he would never make a good pack leader, not even if he was a natural born shifter. He cared too much for himself and too little for the pack.

The second half of the missive had my eyebrows shooting up.

“What is it?”

I shook my head. “I’ve received a proposal from Pasquale, heir of the Hernandez pack leader.” I rolled my eyes, but when I looked at him, I realized that Alejandro was oddly tense. Maybe he thought I was being disrespectful to a peer?

I said apologetically, “I’m sorry if I offended you. You see, this prince and I have a history. He’s a nice enough sort, but he’s made it clear if I were to choose him, he will not settle for being my Cavaliere. He wants to be my consort.” I shook my head. “It’s time I tell him...”

“Tell him...what?”

Alejandro’s question had me blinking. “That I’ve found my consort?” I expected him to smile. I expected him to make a joke. But instead, he was quiet.

When he spoke, his words weren’t what I wanted to hear. “And who is your consort, little kitty?”

Coldness wrapped its arms around me. I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation. “Who do you think it should be?”

He didn’t answer.

I whitened. “I told you last night, didn’t I? I could only do this with a consort.”

He said flatly, “I thought you were playing hard to get.”



# Chapter Eight



## ALEJANDRO

“You can’t be serious.” He spoke the words tightly as he swiftly put on his clothes. His little kitty was doing the same, and for a moment he imagined that those naked curves were being caressed by another pair of hands.

His blood went cold with rage.

No fucking way.

Calys turned to him with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

He cursed at the sight of it. She was obviously hurting, and she was just as obvious in her desire not to show her pain. With another muttered curse, he turned away and pulled his shirt over his head. He couldn’t risk looking at her any longer. The longer he looked, the more tempted he would be to change his mind about being her consort.

*Consort.*

That was just another term for husband in their world, just one step away from being a mate. Had he really thought she was just fooling around when she told him she would only go to bed with him if he were to agree to be her consort? The question made Alejandro uncomfortable. Guilt started to stir inside him, but he ignored it. Even if he had subconsciously known she meant the words, he had not taken her virginity. She was still pure, a worthy bride for any pack leader’s heir.

Not that she needed to be anyone’s bride.

He was her Cavaliere. She didn’t need anyone else to be by her side while she had him. Unfortunately, he had to make her see things his way first. *Not exactly an easy task*, Alejandro considered as he looked back at Calys, who was now fully dressed and still obviously hurting.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Frustration made him say the words. He had the strongest urge to haul her into his arms. Even though he had been the one to hurt his little kitty, Alejandro knew instinctively that he was the only one who could heal her as well.

She answered with a brief smile, one that didn’t reach her eyes either.

He wanted to curse again. She was so damn open with her emotions. Alejandro remembered her words. *Warriors didn’t lie*. God, she was so damn naïve. How could she believe something like that? Warriors were as human as the rest were. Warriors lied. Some better than the others.

When his little kitty still didn’t say anything, he said finally, “You should think this through first.”

“I *am* thinking this through. He wants to be my consort. You do not.”

“It’s not like that, dammit.” He hadn’t meant to shout, but he did anyway. *Fuck*. He was sure there were still guards outside her room, and that meant they heard every word. He hated making a scene. The Moretti pack was already involved in too many *scenes* as it was. His pack didn’t need one fucking more.

“Then what is it about?” Calys was shouting, too, and her body shook with each word.

The question hung in the air, but Alejandro knew he would not be able to answer it. She might not have any problems letting him see how much control he had over her, but Alejandro knew he would not be able to do the same for her.

This smacked too much of the same shit that his older brother went through with his own human wife, and Alejandro didn’t want that. He had known Calys for two days. Two goddamn days, and the connection between them was already too strong and powerful. Alejandro could only imagine how much stronger their feelings would grow once they’ve known each other longer. How much more would he want his little



kitty if her body also belonged to him? How hard would he fall if he became her consort?

“I can only be your Cavaliere, little kitty. Take it as you will.”

The sound of a door slamming made him look up, but it was the scent of unshed tears that was his answer.

## CALYS

Tension filled the throne room of our keep when the iron doors were pulled open by the stewards and Pasquale strode in. Of average height, he was one of the few shifters who did not seem to have ever experienced bloodlust. Ever since we were kids, Pasquale had always stood apart. When we played battle games, he had always opted to stay behind, preferring to strategize rather than charging into a fight.

*Maybe this was destiny*, I told myself. I was his exact opposite. Actually, he was the exact opposite of Alejandro Moretti, too. He could serve as a calming influence over me in a way that the Moretti prince could never do.

Pasquale was formally attired, and it made me flush in realization that I was once again vastly underdressed. Even Alejandro, despite not having any change of clothes with him, looked more authoritative than I was.

The thought of Alejandro had me biting my lip, but I valiantly resisted the urge to look at him. He had insisted on being with me during this meeting. He had made his demand in front of all the other Adelardi pack warriors, and not one of them had blinked. In fact, they were already treating him like my right hand, like my Cavaliere. The ease with which he took command of my men made me foolishly want to cry. Couldn't he see how it would be if he was my consort instead?

I came to my feet and walked towards Pasquale, meeting him halfway. “Thank you for coming so quickly,” I told him with a smile as I offered my hand to shake. But instead of shaking it, Pasquale brought it to his lips, making me start in surprise.

Behind me, I could literally feel Alejandro's cold deadly gaze sharpening towards us. I could feel his Lyccan half bristling, like a wolf ready to attack.

When he released my hand, he murmured, "Thank you for the privilege of your prompt response, princess." His dark brown eyes moved to Alejandro. "Is he Stefano's replacement?"

"No." I softened my answer with another smile, but I was determined not to entertain questions I did not like answering. He was not my consort yet. I didn't owe him any answers.

"Your father and Stefano? Are they well?"

"They have been called away on pack business. I expect them to return within the week." Adelardi pack business was nobody's business but us Adelardis. "Shall we proceed to the dining hall and have refreshments served while we talk?"

Pasquale was silent for a moment before he answered, "If it does not displease you, princess, I would prefer we talk about my proposal in a straightforward manner. I have stated everything in the missive I sent to your father. Have you read it?"

"Stefan has passed the missive to me, yes."

"And do you approve?"

"I have certain conditions that I hope you will agree to, but other than that, yes, your proposal to merge our packs in one shared leadership between us is to my liking."

Pasquale gestured for me to continue. "State your conditions then. If they are not unreasonable, I will gladly agree to them."

Looking at him and no one else, I said, "The first is that I will have Alejandro Moretti as my Cavaliere, and I shall maintain his services even after we are married."

Pasquale's tone sharpened as he asked, "Why would you need a Cavaliere when you already have me?"

"He is apparently the only one who can...talk sense to me when I have one of my dark fits." Like all other panthers,

Pasquale knew what I was. But unlike the others, he at least had not called me “The Human Monster” to my face.

“And why is that?”

“The reason does not matter to me. He has already proven on two occasions that he is able to control me even in one of my dark fits. Such skills are of vital importance as in time, it may allow me to use my own skills for the good of the pack.”

“I will not lie to you, princess. I don’t like you having a Cavaliere. It’s sure to cause talk. But that can be handled...” For a moment, Pasquale’s disdain for Alejandro showed on his face. “I know the likes of him. Being a younger son, he has no place in the Morettis. I suppose he thinks ingratiating himself to you will give him a chance to achieve a higher pack position.”

I knew that wasn’t true. Whatever Alejandro Moretti was, he wasn’t like that. But I hardened my heart. Even though I knew it was wrong, I just couldn’t make myself speak. I wanted him to hurt...as much as he had hurt me.

Pasquale was visibly pleased when I did not protest his insinuations. He practically strutted as he came close to Alejandro, forcing me to turn around. Alejandro’s gaze was inscrutable, his face bland, but there was a muscle ticking in his jaw. It was obvious Pasquale’s words had hit a raw spot.

“Do you swear you will serve my princess faithfully, Cavaliere?” He smirked. “Or should I call you *dog*?”

My head whipped around. “*Pasquale!*” I was aghast at the term. It was the lowest insult one could give to a werewolf. Crap, crap, crap. This had totally backfired on me. I wanted him to be in pain, but I didn’t want him humiliated this way.

“Alejandro—” The rest of my words died at his look. I knew then and there he believed Pasquale and that he hated me for it. But more than that, there was pain in his eyes that broke my heart. One day in the near future, I would find out just what that term meant to Alejandro, and it would break my heart all over again.

In that moment, I didn't care about how much he had hurt me by refusing to be my consort. All I wanted was to heal the pain. "Alejandro..."

But he cut me off. Without looking at me, Alejandro murmured to Pasquale, "I will be faithful for as long as the princess requires my services."

Pasquale left a few minutes later, claiming a prior engagement he had to attend to. When the doors closed behind Pasquale and the guards left Alejandro and me alone, I tried to work up the courage to apologize to him. I was miserable and upset. I hadn't meant for that to happen. I never wanted him to be called a dog. He would believe me, right? Surely he knew that I would never want him to suffer so because I...

My head shot up, my face paling.

*I loved him.*

Oh God, I loved him. I couldn't understand how such a powerful emotion could come into being in so short a time, but it had happened. I loved him. I loved him with all my heart.

"Princess?"

"Yes?"

And that was my only warning. In moments, he had me up against the wall, and I didn't even think of refusing his kiss. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, feeling like this was the best place I could ever be in my life. He kissed me hard, and I kissed him back just as fiercely.

When he pulled away, I opened my mouth to tell him I was sorry, to tell him that I would break my promise to take Pasquale as a consort. I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but all the words died at the cold look in his eyes.

"I will fight your battles with you, princess, and for you. I will lead your army and make them the mightiest in the land. Your foes shall rue the day they ever crossed swords with you. Every shifter shall know that you are my princess, and I am your Cavaliere, sworn to obey your every word."

I held my breath, knowing that there was more.

“But when we are alone, princess, it will be the other way around. When we are alone, I shall be your master and you will be my slave, sworn to obey *my* every word.” His smile was feral. “If I want you to take me in your mouth, you’re going to take it and you’re going to ask me how many times I want to come in your mouth. If I want to fuck you like a dog, you’re going to let me—”

“*Why are you talking to me like this?*” I cried out.

“Can’t I fuck you like a dog? After all, that’s what you really think of me, don’t you? That’s why you thought I’d make a good Cavaliere.”

“No, it’s not—”

“Don’t bother lying,” Alejandro snapped. A bitter smile slashed his lips. “There’s no shame in speaking the truth. After all, warriors like you and me...we don’t lie, do we?”

I couldn’t answer. How ironic that it was when he was telling the truth, I realized I was wrong. Warriors lied – and they could lie to themselves the way I had done.

I was soon to secure my inheritance as pack leader, and I had the strongest warrior at my side. It was everything I had dreamed of, but my future had never seemed bleaker, knowing that Alejandro now hated me as much as I loved him.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I never...” My voice trailed off. He would never believe me now. I should have spoken up earlier, but I hadn’t. And now I had to pay the price for lying. I knew I wasn’t the only one at fault, but that didn’t matter. He had hurt me, and I had lashed back only to realize too late that by hurting him, I would only hurt myself more.

“I’m just so sorry.” It was the only thing I could say.

“I’m sure you are, little kitty.” His voice was softly mocking. “But I will make you sorrier in the next few days. Be assured of it.”



# Part Two







# Chapter One



## CALYS

I wasn't used to parties. I might be a pack princess, but my pack didn't consist of fancy birds or powerful wolves. We were panthers, and that meant growing up outdoors – and *fighting*.

I was more at home in the woods of the Everglades than the red-carpeted ballroom of a first-class hotel. I preferred to be dressed for combat rather than a velvet gown so tight it felt like I wouldn't be able to breathe without bursting a stitch open.

I knew how to kill with a lipstick, an AK-47, and duct tape – *separately*. But ask me how to wrap a gift without a paper bag? Or – like now – figure out small talk with shifters I had nothing in common with?

“The party is to your liking, Princess Calys?” a noble from my fiancé's pack asked.

I smiled brightly. It was the best answer I could come up with. Warriors didn't lie, you see, and as the future alpha of our pack, my father had raised me to be one.

An awkward silence was born as the noble waited for my answer.

When it became clear all I was going to do was smile, my fiancé Pasquale Hernandez smoothly stepped in. “She is a very shy thing, my betrothed.”

That was a big fat lie, and we all knew it. But then Pasquale was not a warrior by choice. Even when we were young, he was the only panther I knew who preferred to watch from the sidelines, using his brains to manipulate rather than clawing his way to victory. It was a good tactic, and I admired him for it. Maybe, when we were married, I could get him to teach me to be as patient as he was.

When the nobleman walked away, Pasquale told me in an apologetic voice, “I apologize for this, princess. I know you are not used to such gatherings, but it is what my pack expects.” His voice was smooth and courteous, as perfect as his princely appearance. He was probably the only panther in the world to feel more comfortable with a shirt than without one, and the more formal, the better.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I am the one who is in the wrong.” The more time I spent with Pasquale, the stiffer I became. I knew he had the makings of a Prince Charming, but honestly he felt more like a headmaster – the kind that hated people who talked using contractions. With him, I always ended up saying ‘I am’ and ‘you are’, and heaven forbid if I ever used ‘gotta’ or ‘wanna’.

Pasquale’s gaze strayed to the main doors, where guests came through like an endless stream. “I see some more of my friends arriving. Would you like to join me...?”

I shook my head. “You will only have to worry about me if I did. Please enjoy yourself with your friends. I am more than happy here.”

“If you are sure?”

I nodded. “I am.” *So please go*, I couldn’t help but think guiltily, *before I forget how to speak proper English*.

When Pasquale left, I managed to survive for three point five minutes. Two hundred and ten seconds of not looking at the dance floor...where *he* was.

Alejandro Moretti.

The charming playboy prince from the Moretti werewolf pack, brother to the heir, and – for over a week now – my Cavaliere. It meant bodyguard and P.R. guy among other things, a champion that potential female alphas like me needed in order to rule a pack without any objection from the Panthera.

Tall, dark-haired, and possessing his pack’s famous emerald-green eyes, Alejandro was one beautiful specimen. I should know – I had seen him naked. It was just once, but it

was more than enough. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't make myself forget. The look of it. The feel of it—

I irritably pushed the rest of my X-rated thoughts away. I had to stop thinking of him that way. Especially now that I was engaged.

Especially now that he was like...*that*.

Yes, I had lost the battle. I was now looking at my bodyguard, who was anything but. Bodyguards were supposed to stick close to their charges. They were supposed to be single-mindedly focused on anticipating and eliminating threats, but the only threat Alejandro seemed to care about right now was *not* getting laid.

He was on the dance floor, a wicked smile on his lips as he flirted and danced with a female panter. Wait, I meant *panther*. The way she was so obviously panting after him had me distracted.

He was dressed completely in black, as was his usual. The way his hands were roaming up and down her slender body, however, made it obvious that he might not be dressed for long.

The thought had me sucking my breath in. I knew I had no right to be hurt, but I was.

“Princess?”

My lips curved in a relieved smile when Stefano suddenly appeared at my side. Tall, blond, and gorgeous beyond belief, Stefano Guidicelli was also an impressive warrior. He had, in fact, all the makings of a true alpha but because he was the bastard son of a jaguar pack leader, he had ended up becoming my father's right-hand man.

“You appear troubled.” It was his way of asking if I was about to cry. Warriors were not supposed to cry, and he was basically telling me to go somewhere private if I was about to forget that lesson.

“I won't be troubled if we dance.”

Without a word, Stefano took my hand and whirled me onto the dance floor. He had spun me so fast it made me laugh as I placed one hand on his shoulder while his other hand clasped my waist. No sparks flew as our bodies came close. From the very start, Stefano and I had always known his heart belonged to my younger sister. I was totally fine with that. Stefano, however, was still in denial.

“You do not need to force yourself to do this, you know.” The words were deliberately vague, but because we had known each other for so long, his meaning was clear. Others who may have overheard him were likely to think he was referring to my engagement with Pasquale, but that wasn’t it.

I shook my head briefly. “It’s what the pack needs.” And by that, I meant Alejandro Moretti. Although seeing him flirt with women wherever we went – and he *had* been doing that – cut my heart to pieces every time, the thought of terminating his services hadn’t occurred to me. And it never would. “You’re just too stubborn for your own good, that’s what this is all about. You *may* be the one to inherit pack leadership, but you’re too young to make decisions like this. You’re only nineteen—”

“Fate rarely calls upon us—”

Stefano sighed in exasperation. “Don’t.”

I blinked innocently up at him. “What?”

“We both have the same taste in movies, princess. So don’t.” When I opened my mouth, he said dryly, “Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen.”

*Crap.* He really was good, to know that I had been quoting Optimus Prime.

“I hate how you know all my favorite quotes,” I grumbled.

Stefano smilingly ruffled my hair. “How could I not? All the comics, video games, and movies you got to enjoy were from me—” He whirled me to the edge of the floor, and when I spun to a stop, I found myself looking up at Alejandro.

He asked with a charming smile, “Good evening, princess. I believe it’s my turn for a dance?”

I couldn't make myself return it. "I'm sorry, no."

Around us, the shifters gasped.

Stefano frowned.

My cheeks flushed red in shame. I had been so flustered by his sudden question that I forgot all about the extraordinary hearing of shifters.

When I turned to face Alejandro to apologize, he beat me to speaking, his charming smile still in place. "I understand, princess. My deepest apologies for forgetting my position."

My cheeks turned redder at his words. He made it seem like I was refusing his offer to dance because he was *just* my Cavaliere, but of course it wasn't that at all!

"I think I need to go to the ladies' room." I meant it. The way everyone was watching us even more intently now was suffocating, and the way Alejandro was making me feel so guilty wasn't helping.

At my words, Alejandro surprised me by suddenly bowing. "Of course, princess. Let me lead the way."

I glanced at Stefano.

He nodded. "I'll let Pasquale know where you are if he asks."

After, I found myself following Alejandro, more than a little bemused at the sudden turn of events. A while ago, he seemed hell-bent on ignoring me, dancing with one woman after another, and now he was acting like he couldn't serve me fast enough. Was it just him, or were all Lyccans this moody?

When I saw that we were heading towards one of the ballroom's side exits, I halted in my steps, asking warily, "Where are we going?"

"The ladies' room inside here is always full of people. I thought you'd prefer some privacy, princess."

"Oh. You're right. T-thank you." As we resumed walking, I couldn't help but stare. How could a man appear so beautiful and sexy even when he had his back to me?

It shouldn't be so, but that was how it was, and I wasn't alone in admiring him. All the women we walked past had the same look on their faces, a look that was part wonder, part adoration.

Alejandro turned left at a narrow carpeted hallway at the end of the lobby, stopping in front of a door, which he opened with a card key.

“Princess?”

It was only when I had stepped past him into the room that it occurred to me: ladies' rooms weren't supposed to be locked with card keys, were they?

And that was when I saw it.

This was *no* ladies' room. This was one of the hotel's guest rooms, with a luxurious king-sized bed in the middle and its own appointed suite.

I whirled around just in time to see Alejandro lock the door.

My eyes widened. “What do you think you're doing?” I hurried towards him, reaching for the doorknob, but the next thing I knew, he had gotten hold of my shoulders. Another second and I was trapped between the door and his arms.

He was suddenly too close, and my world seemed to shrink until everything I sensed was from him. The sound of his breathing, the hard feel of his body against mine, the seductive smell of his aftershave.

“A little uppity at the dance floor, don't you think, kitten?” His voice was ominously soft over my head.

“This is all about me refusing you a dance?” I demanded incredulously even as I turned my head to the side, not wanting him to see my face. I didn't want him to know how affected I was by his nearness.

“Yes.” Alejandro growled the word into my ear, making me jump, and the hairs at the back of my body rose in heightened awareness. A shockingly delicious sense of warmth started to spread all over my body, making me cringe

inside. I couldn't believe I was so turned on when he hadn't even done anything to me.

“Why did you refuse me?” This time, he cupped my face to make me look at him.

“Why does it matter?” I shot back. “You've got so many ladies after you, anyway.”

A wicked gleam flashed in his green eyes. “Are you saying you're jealous, kitten?”

I flushed, realizing that it was true. I *had* been jealous. I had no right to be. I was utterly stupid to feel that way, in fact, but it was the hateful and shameful truth.

“Nothing to say, kitten?” he purred.

Unable to lie, I found myself going on the offensive, anything to avoid admitting the truth. “You disappoint me. The way you remain so carefree even when your pack's name is still tainted—” The moment I said the words, I knew it was a mistake. I had good as called him a ‘dog’, a racial slur against his kind.

“You *dare*...” Fury darkened his gaze. It was the last thing I saw before his lips slammed down on mine. My eyes involuntarily closed even as my body stiffened in shock. A second later, I recovered myself and tried to struggle, but it was too late. He was kissing me the way I loved to be kissed – the way *he* taught me to kiss. His lips, his tongue, his teeth – Alejandro used everything in his sexual arsenal to possess my mouth, dominating my senses in such a way that I barely noticed his hands expertly working on the back of my gown.

I only realized what he was doing when I felt the gown falling to the floor, leaving my body completely bare except for a skimpy pair of black lace panties. But that was soon gone, too, Alejandro breaking our kiss to rip the scrap of lace away from my body.

“Did you wear that for him?” he demanded savagely.

I shook my head. Right now, he was more animal than man, but instead of being frightened, I found myself even

more hopelessly attracted, the triangle between my legs slowly becoming wet.

“For who then?” he growled. He cupped my chin and kissed me hard before demanding once more, “Who, damn you, tell me!” His fingers dug into my hair. “You owe me the truth, princess. In places like this, I’m the one you should follow. So tell me,” he snarled. “Who did you wear that for?”

His fangs clamped hard on my shoulder right after, a bite that was so painfully arousing it broke through my resistance. “*You.*” My knees gave out, and I clutched his shirt hard for support as I choked the word out in an inaudible voice.

Triumph glittered in his gaze.

I should be bothered by it, but there was no time to even think of breathing, not when he was kissing me again, and this time he was kissing me in a way that told me it was just the beginning. As we kissed, he started taking off his clothes and I tried to help him, tugging on his belt while he shrugged off his formal jacket. As we gasped and kissed, he worked on the buttons of his shirt while I unzipped his pants.

Shrugging off his shirt and throwing it to the floor, he lifted me up in one push, and my legs automatically wrapped around his waist while my hands settled on his shoulders for balance. I gasped, the new position allowing his cock to nestle between my legs.

For a moment, we looked at each other. His eyes were dark with desire, his face flushed. I was sure I looked the same.

When we looked at each other, it was impossible not to see that underneath the passion were more turbulent emotions, words that we both wanted so much to say.

God, those emotions. I wanted him to bare them to me. If he did, maybe I could be honest with mine, too.

I whispered, “Alejandro—”

Something about my voice made me shudder. His gaze suddenly shuttered, and he rasped, “No more talking.”



His mouth latched onto my breast, and my lips parted in a silent moan as he started to suck. He sucked my nipple long and hard, the sounds he made only adding to my arousal. My head tossed and turned, my fingers digging deep into the blades of his back, but it didn't stop him from torturing me with such exquisite agony.

Wanting him to feel the same excruciating pleasure, I leaned forward so I could reach down. It pushed my breast further into his mouth, allowing him to suck harder and drive me even more insane with need. It was so hard to retain my senses, but my desire to make him wild kept me going, and I moved my hand again.

My fingers brushed against the waistband of his pants, making him freeze, his mouth still on my breast. Although I had him unzipped, his pants were still buttoned, requiring me to wriggle my fingers into the opened slit. My hand dipped in, lower and lower, and I slowly pushed the silk covering his engorged erection to the side.

Finally, it was skin against skin and Alejandro groaned against my breast when my fingers encircled his cock.

He started sucking and I started stroking. Long and leisurely, quick and hard, our rhythms matched, his tongue, my fingers.

I moaned silently in protest when he suddenly stopped kissing my breast, but he quieted me soon enough when his lips covered mine. His fingers replaced his tongue on my nipple, tweaking and pulling. Oh God, how he pulled and pulled until my nipples were practically pricking him. I cried out against his mouth, my fingers stroking him faster when I felt his hand leaving my breast and moving down.

When his fingers dipped into the flesh between my legs, I bit his lip hard.

He laughed, as if amused by my aggression, but the sound was abruptly cut off when I moved my fingers until I could cup his balls. He groaned when I squeezed them, and then it was my turn to moan when he slid one finger inside me.

My head dropped against his shoulder as he started to thrust his finger in and out of me. When a second finger slipped in, the pleasure sharpened, making my fingers tighten around his cock. When a third finger joined in, I started to sob against his neck, the sensation of having my pussy filled making my head whirl.

My body bucked with each thrust, muscles contracting and expanding, not wanting to let his fingers go as Alejandro fucked me long and hard.

“Alejandro.” His name was the faintest moan as I felt my body reaching for the peak, my fingers moving even faster as I stroked his cock.

He knew what I was begging for and he gave it to me. His heart might never be mine, but his body was and whatever I wanted from it, he would always give.

“Come for me, kitten.” His low growl was accompanied by one fierce downward push of his fingers, and that was it. I bit his shoulder as I screamed my pleasure, my body shuddering as I came long and hard.

My body was still shaking with the aftershocks of my release when I heard a knock on the door. “Prince Pasquale is looking for the princess, Your Highness.” I recognized the voice as belonging to one of the Moretti wolves who accompanied Alejandro, bodyguards of my bodyguard. The thought would have made me giggle if I wasn’t reeling from the numbing realization of what we had just done.

Looking straight into my eyes, Alejandro said coldly, “Distract him. We will be there soon.”

When I heard Alejandro’s man leave, I tried to shrug out of his hold, but Alejandro’s arms only tightened around me.

Unable to understand why he wasn’t letting me go after what we’ve been told, I jerked my head up in confusion. Our gazes met, and my own eyes widened when I saw the fierce and hungry possession glittering in his.

He hated it. It was clear in his eyes. He hated the fact that another man was calling for me.

Hope flared inside my heart and I whispered unevenly, “Tell me.” I knew I was laying my pride down the line once more with my words. I did it before, for him, and he had ended up shaming me. But here I was again, doing the same darn thing.

“Should I go to him?” I swallowed. “Tell me what I should do and I will listen.”

He didn’t say a word.

But a second later, I felt him gently lowering me to the floor. Over my head, his voice had become cold and clinical. “You’re already doing what you should be doing. You have a future consort to support your claim for alpha and you have me as Cavaliere to protect your independence. And at times like this, you’ve proven capable of comforting your *dog* when you need to.”

His hands dropped to his side as he turned away. “I will leave you to dress, princess.”

I nodded and bowed my head.

There went my pride again. The thought had me breathing deeply as I willed myself not to cry. Warriors did *not* cry and if they had to, it shouldn’t be over something like this.

This time I really had to accept the truth.

Alejandro Moretti would never forgive me for making him feel like he was nothing but a dog.



## Chapter Two



### ALEJANDRO

All noise inside the well-appointed conference room came to a halt when Calys entered, her bearing regal. Her blonde hair was combed straight, her deep blue velvet gown just the slightest bit wrinkled. She didn't smell like him, which was a pity, but Alejandro had been the one to make certain of it.

There were less than thirty of them inside the room, with only Stefano and Alejandro not belonging to the Hernandez pack. Standing at the back of the room, Alejandro was able to observe the panthers around him, and what he saw made him wary and vigilant. Calys' appearance seemed to have made half the Hernandez panthers uneasy. The other half appeared furious, as if itching for a fight.

He glanced at Stefano. "Where are your men?"

Stefano answered reluctantly, "It's only me."

*Fuck.*

Alejandro didn't like this. The numbers were too skewed, even if he had Hulk Barbie by his side.

Calys had finally reached her fiancé's side. Pasquale was smiling down at her, saying, "I was worried about you, princess."

Alejandro despised the possessive tone of the Hernandez heir. It made him want to punch Pasquale in the face.

Pasquale drew Calys close to him, his hand settling against her hip. Alejandro had never seen him being this touchy with Calys before, not even during their own damn engagement party. It was disturbing. If all this touchy-feely shit was supposed to make Alejandro jealous, the panther prince was definitely doing a great job of it.

“Why are we meeting here?”

Pasquale’s face turned grave. “I am afraid we have unfortunate news, princess.”

He tapped the table in front of him, and Calys looked down. The table had a digital display showing the map of the state. One of the marked territories was the Adelardi pack’s stronghold in the north.

Calys sucked in a quick breath at the sight of it. “What happened?”

“We’ve found out that your cousin Raoul has planned an ambush.”

Alejandro’s gaze met Stefano’s. The Adelardi pack leader’s right-hand man had an unreadable expression on his too-angelic face, but he sensed Stefano feeling the same skepticism about the news.

“An ambush? Targeting whom?” Calys asked.

Pasquale answered simply, “You.”

Her eyes widened. “Me?”

“You *are* the only one standing in his way to the throne, Your Highness.” This from one of the Hernandez nobles, his tone contemptuous, making it sound like Calys was an idiot for being surprised.

Calys didn’t even blink, didn’t even seem to care about the slur that was directed her way. But Alejandro did. In a second, Alejandro had the man against the wall, his fingers wrapped around the noble’s throat.

“*Alejandro!*”

Alejandro didn’t understand Calys’ shock. It was as if she hadn’t expected him to come to her defense. Looking at the man he held by the neck, he said grimly, “Apologize to the princess.” The air in the room was rife with tension, influenced by the aura of danger surrounding Alejandro.

“Release my man—” But Pasquale’s voice died down when he caught a glimpse of the cold fury glinting in the

werewolf's eyes. Dammit, why did this Lyccan care so much about Calys? The Moretti prince was the only blight in his horizon, an unpredictable factor that made Pasquale leery of making any unplanned move.

“I mean you no offense, prince—” The tone, rather than the words, had Pasquale's teeth gnashing. The Lyccan's voice was polite but bland, making it clear he didn't really give a shit about what Pasquale said or not.

“—but I only owe loyalty to the princess,” Alejandro finished. He waited for Pasquale to argue. Privately, he hoped that the other prince would argue. If he did, then Alejandro would have the right to kick his—

Pasquale looked at Stefano. “Are you not going to reprimand him?”

Alejandro was disappointed.

Stefano shrugged. “As the wolf said, he is only under the princess' command.”

Humiliated fury turned Pasquale's cheeks ruddy. *Damn jaguar*. He should have known he wouldn't get any support from the bastard. Once Calys was his wife and he had her under his thumb, Pasquale would make the Guidicelli by-blow pay.

Summoning a smile, Pasquale said to Calys, “Surely you would at least side with me on this, my princess?”

## CALYS

The look on my fiancé's face made it obvious what he expected me to say. I bit my lip, trying to think of the best way to resolve the situation. Stefano and I were used to the insults that were directed my way, but I should have thought of warning Alejandro about it.

“Calys, my dear?” Pasquale was beginning to sound testy.

Before I could answer, we heard a yelp of pain, and I winced in horror when I saw Alessandro extending his arm, effortlessly carrying the man's weight as he pushed the panther further up against the wall.

“Alejandro,” I protested. “His head might—”

“Are you going to apologize?” Alejandro asked.

The man spit at my Cavaliere.

Alejandro’s arm shot straight up, and this time his captive’s head did hit the ceiling. Repeatedly. There was no change in Alejandro’s expression as he hammered the ceiling with the panther’s head.

“What are you doing?” Pasquale shouted, making no move to help his pack member.

“Is it not obvious, prince?” Alejandro hit the ceiling with greater force, causing the man’s temple to start bleeding. “There,” he said in a very helpful manner. “Is it obvious now, Your Highness?”

I was torn between horror and amusement. Maybe I really was a human monster, but I just couldn’t make myself feel sympathetic for the panther Alejandro was currently treating like a jackhammer. I had never done him any harm, but like most shifters, he had hated me on sight.

Pasquale stalked towards Alejandro and struck him from the back.

I gasped. “Pasquale!” Without thinking, I moved towards them as well, but Stefano was suddenly there, holding me back.

Stefano said in a low, grim voice, “Stay, princess. He cannot be your Cavaliere if it’s you who comes to his defense.”

Knowing Stefano was right, I tried to appeal to Pasquale instead. He had never been this confrontational, so I couldn’t get why he was being so antagonistic. “Pasquale, please don’t \_\_\_”

But it was as if he didn’t hear me. There was a twisted look of satisfaction on Pasquale’s face as he looked around him and saw all his men. He had the numbers on his side, giving him a sense of false bravado.



Pasquale shoved Alejandro from behind. “Let him go.” Another hard, taunting shove.

Alejandro stiffened, and the air around us suddenly became heavier.

Stefano muttered under his breath, “Your fiancé has it coming now.”

Pasquale didn’t seem to know it. “Damn you, let him go, *d*—”

Without letting go or stopping his hammering, Alejandro’s head slowly turned to face my fiancé.

If he wasn’t mad before, he was now.

“Before you finish what you’re saying, *prince...*” My Cavaliere’s voice lowered, turning his next words into a threat. “You need to remember one important thing.”

“Is that so?” Pasquale sneered, but his voice shook in the end.

“Yes.” A smile slashed across Alejandro’s lips. “You are in *my* city. *My* territory. So if you think having this paltry few will keep you alive, *think again*. This hotel is surrounded by Moretti wolves. Right this very moment, they’re all around us. Outside our door, on top of us, below us. They’re *everywhere*.”

My head snapped to Stefano, but he didn’t seem surprised. He must have sniffed out their presence well before now, and it just showed how ill-trained Pasquale’s pack was. I looked back at the panthers and saw the same truth dawning on their faces as fear filled their gazes.

*How many?* I mouthed the question to Stefano. *Dozens? Scores?*

Stefano shook his head. *Hundreds*.

My jaw dropped.

Alejandro’s voice became silky. “You were saying, prince?”

Pasquale’s face was white with humiliation, but it was clear Alejandro wouldn’t let him go so easily.

Behind him, one of the older panthers said nervously, “Your Highness, we wouldn’t want a war on our hands with the Morettis.”

It was true. No *sane* alpha would want a war with the Morettis. The Lyccan pack alpha’s heir might be *persona non grata* right now, but it didn’t mean the Morettis were poorer or weaker than they were before. If the periodic reports my father commissioned were correct, the Morettis had one of the strongest shifter armies in the world.

Alejandro said mockingly, “Your Highness?” He dropped the man he was holding, as if finding him no longer interesting. The panther fell to the floor and curled into a ball. His pack members rushed towards him, exclaiming over the huge bleeding bump on top of his head.

“Prince Pasquale?” Alejandro was slowly and steadily walking towards my fiancé while the panther prince backed away.

“Stop. I command you to stop!” Pasquale was clearly freaking out.

Alejandro didn’t. “I’m truly interested in what you had to say earlier. What was it? *Damn you, let him go—*” He lifted his hand.

Pasquale’s eyes widened, and he yelled, “*Dugong!*”

Silence fell.

Alejandro’s hand froze in the air.

Slowly, I covered my mouth. *Dugong...like...the cousin of the manatee, a heavy, slow-moving creature that was so ugly it was considered terribly cute?*

Stefano just as slowly looked at the ceiling, as if suddenly finding it fascinating.

In my mind, I was imagining Pasquale saying those very words. *Damn you, let him go, dugong!* Oh God, was that better or worse, calling a Lyccan royal like Alejandro Moretti a... *dugong?* Did dugong shifters even exist?

I looked at Alejandro, and again the words replayed in my mind. *Damn you, let him go, dugong!*

I tightened my hold over my mouth. Dear God, please do not let me laugh.

## ALEJANDRO

Alejandro bent over the sink and splashed cold water on his face several times, hoping it would work like a dose of reality. He had always prided himself for being able to keep his cool. Unlike his twin Alessandro, he preferred to be more subtle when fighting. Or at least he used to be all that before Calys came into his life.

Switching the tap off, he straightened and glared at his reflection on the mirror. *What the fuck are you doing, Alejandro Moretti?*

He had sworn to himself he would no longer be emotionally involved in any way with Calys Adelardi, but no, he had done the opposite earlier. He came to her defense, even knowing she didn't really need it, and ended up adding Pasquale Hernandez to the already long list of enemies of his pack.

His phone rang, the screen showing his older brother's name. "Domenico," he greeted.

"Alejandro. I'm sure you know why I called."

Even though the heir to the Moretti pack's tone was lazy, Alejandro could still feel himself flushing. Only Domenico had the knack of making him and his twin feel like they were adolescent boys again.

Alejandro tried to sound blasé. "I have no idea what you mean, brother."

"The last time you were here, you told me you were just trying to cure your boredom, and that's why you became the princess' Cavaliere. But now I'm receiving reports that you've just made an enemy out of the Hernandez pack."

When Alejandro didn't say anything, Domenico continued in a sober voice, "I know you don't want to hear this, but you

will hear it anyway. You and I both know the princess means more to you than you're willing to admit."

Alejandro's jaw clenched. "Let's just put it this way. Your wife was – is – nice, but look what happened. My princess? She isn't half as nice as Misty is, so we're better off this way."

There was a moment of silence before Domenico spoke again. "No. You're not, but I think you have to learn that the hard way." His voice turned brisk. "Just take care of yourself. Hernandez may seem like a wimp, but I've always considered him cunning. He would never have maintained his position among the Panthera if he wasn't."

"Understood. I appreciate the warning." Ending the call, Alejandro was about to leave the restroom when he heard voices outside the hotel's men's room. He recognized the voices immediately and he stopped, his hand falling from the doorknob.

"Be serious, princess." It was Stefano, his voice a mixture of exasperation and anger.

"I am being serious, and that's why I am commanding you to go back to our den and stand guard. I have the rest of Pasquale's pack with me." This was Calys, her tone adamant.

Alejandro grimaced. He knew that tone. When his hellcat used it, there would be no way of getting around her.

"Do not be so stubborn—"

"I'm not."

Stefano cursed under his breath. "I just don't like this. Your cousin has never acted so openly against your father. It's not in his character."

"People change. You know it's true."

Alejandro stiffened at the way Calys spoke. There was something she wasn't saying, something that made her very emotional.

Stefano said in a low voice, "If you are talking again about \_\_\_"

“Yes, you know I am. And that’s why I am giving you this order as heir to the alpha. *Go back to the den and stand guard.*”

A beat of silence, and then Stefano said, “Yes, Your Highness.”

“Thank you. I’ll go back to Pasquale’s side now. If you see Alejandro, please let him know we’ll be leaving tonight for the north.”

When Calys left, Alejandro opened the door and came out. He was absolutely certain Stefano had detected his presence, so why not tell Calys about it?

The blond jaguar didn’t even blink as their eyes met. He was on the phone, and Alejandro’s eyebrow lifted in surprise when Stefano started to speak.

“I’m heading your way. Shut every window in your room, lock the door, and don’t come out no matter what.” His voice was fiercely protective. After a moment, Stefano hissed, “No arguments. Do you understand?”

When Stefano was finished with the call, Alejandro blocked his way before the jaguar could even attempt to leave. “What exactly is there between you and Calys?”

Stefano’s stoic face didn’t change. “I don’t believe you’re in the position to ask that.”

“Does she know?” he bit out.

“Know what?”

His eyes bored through Stefano’s. “About the other woman in your life.”

“That’s not for me to discuss with you. However, if you may, I would like to ask you for a favor. As you have heard, the princess has ordered me to leave her side. I can only rely on you to protect her.” Stefano paused. “You are an honorable man, Moretti, so I hope I am not doing the wrong thing by trusting you to do your duty. She only has you to protect her now.”



# Chapter Three



## CALYS

It was close to midnight when they reached the edge of the Everglades. Its eerie atmosphere fed the legends surrounding it, and shifter packs that lived within and beyond the forest of towering pines did what they could to keep the stories alive. The more terrifying the stories, the better, for it kept prying human eyes away.

Alejandro was looking around us warily. “I don’t like this.”

In truth, I felt the same way. There was just something foreboding in the air, making me feel swallow uneasily.

“We should go back and leave in the morning.”

In front of us, Pasquale laughed. “Did you hear that, men? The werewolf is afraid of the dark. A-woo!” Obnoxious laughter from his men followed his joke, which had been one of the many. It was evident Pasquale wanted to make up for the embarrassment he had suffered earlier, and he took every chance he could to pick a fight with Alejandro.

“We can’t risk going up against Raoul if it’s true he’s set up to ambush us.” I didn’t stop walking as I spoke. Even in the dark, it was easy to navigate my way around the forest. This had been my home for over eighteen years, after all.

“Why can’t we?” Alejandro demanded under his breath.

I answered simply, “Because it would mean pointless bloodshed, and I will always do everything to avoid that.”

Alejandro didn’t answer. When I glanced at him, his eyes bored through me and I pursed my lips. I knew what he was thinking even without him saying a word. Clearly he didn’t think Pasquale’s men would be any great loss.

I was trying to think of a superhero quote to teach him about the importance of protecting innocent lives when I heard a rustling sound. I froze. “Did you hear that?”

Alejandro pushed me behind him. “Stay close.”

In front of us, Pasquale and the rest of his men had also gone still. A line of nervous tension formed around the prince’s mouth as he said stiffly, “I do not hear anything.”

Another rustle and then—

“Calys, is that you?”

A sigh of relief escaped me as I identified the voice and spotted a familiar figure emerging from my left. It was Juriaan, a forest ranger that had been assigned to our territory over a year ago.

Alejandro still hadn’t budged in front of me. “Who is he?”

Juriaan came walking towards us, still in uniform, with a backpack slung over his shoulders.

“Hi, Juri.” Unable to get past Alejandro, I was forced to poke my head out from behind to smile at him. Tall and fair with the same baby blue eyes as mine, he would have passed as my twin if his hair wasn’t more white than gold.

“Hello, Calys. It’s nice to see you again.” He looked at the men behind me curiously.

Pasquale was suddenly at my side. “Introduce me to your friend.”

His suspicious tone made me realize that all the shifters, including Alejandro, hadn’t heard Juriaan coming until he was right next to us. Maybe it was because he was here all the time and able to use the forest’s noises to mask his footsteps.

Mentally shaking my head at the mystery, I gestured to Pasquale. “Pasquale, this is Juriaan. He’s one of the rangers assigned here and a close friend of the family.” With humans, we always referred to the pack as family since it was safer that way. “Juriaan, this is my...” I faltered. Although it had been a week since our engagement, I realized that now was only my first time to introduce Pasquale as my fiancé.



He was my fiancé, my future husband, but he wasn't the one who had me half naked hours ago. His name wasn't the one I moaned and screamed, and he wasn't the one who had made me come so hard my body went totally limp after.

Pasquale took my hand and brought it to his lips. "Your shyness is becoming, princess."

His action and words were unexpected. They were also something I wasn't used to, and I found myself flushing as I felt everyone looking at me.

Still clasping my hand, Pasquale told Juriaan, "I am her fiancé, Pasquale Hernandez." He said it like he had announced he was king and he expected Juriaan to kiss his feet for it.

Unbidden, my gaze strayed to Alejandro.

His eyes bored through me, like he was begging me for the right to knock some humility into the panther prince.

I looked away hurriedly before I could end up giggling.

"It's nice to meet you." Thankfully, Juriaan didn't appear to mind Pasquale's obnoxious tone. Glancing at me with concern, he asked, "Isn't it kind of late for you all to be out here?"

"Umm..." Pasquale had already rejoined his men, leaving me with Alejandro. I looked at him for help, but he only shrugged. "We're h-here f-for r-research." Lies always had me stammering. I gestured to Alejandro. "He's a writer."

"Oh?" I could see Juriaan had a hard time believing me, and I couldn't really blame him. Alejandro, with his in-your-face good looks, appeared too flamboyant to pass as a writer.

"You're writing a book?" Juriaan asked Alejandro.

Fearing Alejandro's answer, I said quickly, "Yes."

"About what?"

I searched madly for a topic, and all I could think about was reality. "About...vampires?"

Juriaan blinked. "Really?"

Beside me, I could feel Alejandro trying to glare me into shutting up. “Yep. Fiction. Like, there’s...umm...Eddie? And he, umm, likes...Bell?”

“That sounds like Twilight,” Juriaan said.

I blurted out, “Did I mention Bell’s a guy, too?”

Juriaan looked at Alejandro with interest.

“It is...true,” Alejandro finally said.

Crap. Alejandro was really going to chomp me into pieces after this. As I tried to think of something to say that could prevent my death, Alejandro was speaking again, asking Juriaan about his work.

“Yes, I know this place like the back of my hand.”

“I see. Would you mind accompanying my, err, team for the meantime? I’ve just realized I have one last thing to do before I can leave the city.”

This was news to me, and I couldn’t help but ask, “Where are you going?”

## ALEJANDRO

Calys’ expressive eyes belied her casual tone. She was *jealous*. It should have made Alejandro happy, but it only pissed him off. Whose fault was it that she couldn’t straight out say what she felt? Pasquale loudly claiming to be Calys Adelardi’s future husband still grated on his nerves, and it was one of his reasons for leaving her side. If he stayed one minute longer in their company, Alejandro would really end up killing Pasquale. He hated it – he goddamn hated it every time he saw Pasquale touch Calys and *not* have the right to do anything about it.

But he also had another reason for leaving, one more pressing and one he didn’t want to tell Calys about until he was sure.

To Calys, he gave a mocking bow and said, “It’s my off-duty hours, princess. So I’m afraid I don’t owe you any answers. I’ll come back as soon as I can. Stay close to Mr. Ranger here.”

Juriaan was frowning. “If you are under her employ and were hired to guard her, you must not stray from her side.”

Alejandro snorted. “Trust me, she is no shrinking flower.”

“She is a *woman* and as such, she must be protected.”

So this boy not only looked like a fucking angel, but he spoke and thought like one, too. Alejandro knew there was a reason why he hated him at first sight.

Baring his teeth in a smile, he said, “It’s a good thing you’re here then.”

Turning his back on the ranger, he bowed to Calys again. “I’ll see you soon, princess.”

And then he left to start killing vampires.

He had noticed the bloodsuckers following them the moment they got past the city limits. No one should have known they were taking this route to reach the Adelardi lands in the north. But the vampires had known, which only meant they had a mole among them, and Alejandro was determined to find out who it was.

Changing to his Lyccan form, he loped through the forest, his preternatural speed turning him into a blur. He spotted them a few meters away from where Calys was and clawed his way to the top of a tree. And then he watched and waited.

They were young and inexperienced vampires, their powers fed by bloodlust but not much else. It took them a full minute to realize they were not alone, but by then it was too late.

Alejandro Moretti had already learned what he needed to know. It took bare seconds to decimate their numbers. Blood streaked his thick white fur as he slashed their throats with his claws. The air around him began carrying the stench of death, and soon it would reach Calys and the others. It was Alejandro’s warning to whoever was snitching on them.

He would be found, sooner or later, and when he was, he would know what would be the end of him.

Alejandro left one alive for him to interrogate. The vampire was on the ground, trying to crawl away from him.

Shifting to human form, he landed one light kick on the vampire's side, enough to have his body flip on the ground and the bloodied creature looking up at him.

*Damn.*

This was no vampire.

It was a shifter, a hyena, and one of the men he and Calys had fought when they were at The Den.

“Who sent you here?” he demanded. “Answer me truthfully, and I may not kill you.”

“A scarred man,” the hyena choked. “Not shifter, not vampire. Something different. But not human. Sometimes, he smells...like he's decaying...from inside.”



# Chapter Four



## CALYS

Alejandro arrived on our second night in camp. It had been raining most of the day, forcing us to seek shelter inside nearby caves. Rain didn't make for good and safe travel. It had the power to wash away both sound and smell, making us blind to incoming attacks. The delay had Pasquale throwing a prissy fit, and the fact that we would need to considerably slow our pace because of having Juriaan – a human – among us only worsened his mood.

“Good evening, princess,” Alejandro murmured as he took a seat between me and Juriaan, forcing the ranger to move away. I scowled up at Alejandro but he only responded with a lazy smile, one that made my heart beat just a little bit faster.

Looking around, he asked, “Everyone's outside?”

I nodded. It had been so since it started raining. Apparently, if their prince was sulking, everyone had to sulk, too.

“Welcome back,” Juriaan said politely to Alejandro. “Were you able to do what you were supposed to do?” There was something about his tone that made my head snap towards Juriaan, but his face only showed mild curiosity.

“Yes. And then some.” Alejandro, meanwhile, appeared extremely satisfied.

I was instantly jealous. I knew I had no right to, but I was and I wondered if it was deliberate on Alejandro's part.

“I was just telling Calys about the recent onslaught of visitors coming from the Bay,” Juriaan was saying. “All of them, apparently, have been personally invited by her cousin Raoul.”

Alejandro frowned. “Is that normal, princess?”

I shook my head, Juriaan's words making me worry. What if all those supposed guests were actually Raoul's allies – people who were willing to do whatever it took to usurp my father's throne?

“Princess?”

I looked up, realizing belatedly that Alejandro had come to his feet and was gazing at me questioningly.

“I was asking if we could speak privately for a moment. Stefano has sent word.”

If that was so, then it must be about Anastasia. “Of course,” I mumbled, trying not to let my alarm show even as I scrambled to get up. It was an unspoken rule in our pack not to talk about Anastasia or do anything that would remind the world of her existence. Only the gravest danger would have made Stefano break the rule.

“Juriaan's helped me set up a tent inside here,” I told Alejandro absently as I led him further inside the cave.

“And did he watch you over your sleep?” Alejandro asked silkily.

I turned around to scowl at him. “No. I don't need anyone watching over.” Looking at him, I realized Alejandro appeared tense.

“And Pasquale?”

I rolled my eyes. “As you can see, he's mad at me and has been pretty much since you left.” When we reached my tent, I said, “We can talk privately here.”

Alejandro pulled the flap open and stepped aside. Bending down, I entered the tent first and Alejandro followed behind me. Seating myself on the sleeping bag, I watched Alejandro zip the door and windows shut. It made me more nervous and I demanded, “Could you please tell me what Stefano said?”

He turned around. “Nothing.”

I gaped. “What do you mean nothing?”

“I lied.” A second later he had me on my back and his body was on top of me, one knee nudging my legs to part open.

“I just wanted to be alone with you.” And then he was kissing me.

I tried to struggle at first. “No...don’t...” This wasn’t right. It couldn’t be right when I had already promised myself to another man...and *he* had allowed me to do so.

“You promised me,” he whispered into my ear. “Everything I want when we’re alone, you’ll do...”

His hot breath in my ear made me shiver, weakening my resistance. Passion was clouding my mind, my senses overwhelmed by his warm, hard body and the way his cock just kept getting bigger and harder against my belly.

Calling on my last reserves of resistance, I managed to wrench my lips away from his kiss and tried shoving him off me. “You don’t really want to do this.”

Even though I was trying to get him off me with all my might, it was as if my fists had no effect on him. With my lips unreachable, Alejandro only moved down, kissing my neck. “Of course I want to.”

“No. You don’t. You’re an honorable...warrior.” God, it was so hard to think with his lower body grinding hard against mine.

He laughed against my throat. “I’m not sure I agree, but even if I did, what the *fuck*...” He bit my neck, and I almost whimpered. “...does that have to do with anything?”

I managed to raise myself on my elbows, trying to inch away even as our gazes encountered each other. “You know, deep inside, you want to help me even with nothing in exchange—”

This time, his laugh was without humor. “You really think that?”

I said seriously, “I’m like Alfred.”

He stilled. “*Alfred*?”



“Batman’s butler. It doesn’t matter how many times Batman makes a mistake. He won’t ever give up on Batman, and I won’t ever give up—”

Alejandro clasped my waist and pulled me back down. His eyes glittering down at me, he rasped, “You talk too much.” But there was a look in his eyes that made me blink furiously. Warriors didn’t cry, not even in times like this.

I whispered, “I’m sorry, Alejandro. I’m sorry I was so angry and hurt that I allowed him to call you a dog. It wasn’t what a warrior would do.”

His lips twisted. “Nor a superhero.”

I tried to smile at his quip but couldn’t. “Could you ever forgive me?”

He didn’t answer for a long time, and each second that went by made me closer to passing out since I was holding my breath all the while.

Alejandro seemed to realize it. “Breathe, princess.”

I shook my head. “Not until—”

“*No.*”

I exhaled, mostly out of numb shock.

“I’m sorry, princess, but for both of our sakes, I don’t think I will ever allow myself to forget...or forgive.” Before I could even think of what to say or think, he was swiftly working on removing my clothes.

By the time I recovered, I was down to my panties—

“Alejandro,” I hissed.

*Riiiiip.*

Make that nothing. I was down to nothing, with Alejandro tossing my underwear aside. I tried to get him off me without causing a sound, but he was and would always be too strong. With just one hand, he captured my wrists and locked my arms over my head. Another hand worked on his pants, and I heard him unbuttoning and unzipping himself.

My legs thrashed wildly at that. I had to get him off me. It was now or never. If he ever—

Alejandro shifted over me, and when he lowered his body back to mine, his cock was right between my folds. When he held my gaze the same time he started rubbing the head of his cock up and down my pussy – that was it. I was doomed.

That I was engaged, that he hated me, that he swore to always hate me – none of it mattered anymore.

With each stroke, my legs parted open wider and wider and I could feel myself slowly getting wet. When the head of his cock slipped inside my pussy fraction by fraction, I felt my body moving on its own accord, my hips straining up because I wanted more of his possession. Our roles were now reversed, with Alejandro breathing hard as he tried to push my hips down and prevent himself from taking my virginity. That he was doing so should have embarrassed me to death, but no such thoughts were left. All I cared about was having his cock inside me. I had fantasized about it more times than what was right, and I wanted it now. I hungered for it now—

When he pulled his cock off my pussy completely, I let out a protest, but the sound was swallowed by his kiss.

“Don’t make a sound if you don’t want the others to come running here,” Alejandro growled against my mouth.

He let go of my hands to cup my breasts, and I immediately wrapped my arms around his neck. He choked, laughing and groaning against my skin when my legs also curled around his waist and I tried to get him to fuck me.

“Behave, princess,” he gritted out as he snaked a hand between our bodies.

I shook my head. No. I was not going to behave. I wanted this night – just this one night to have a taste of Alejandro’s possession. I writhed under him, trying to have his cock slip inside me but instead I felt his fingers, stroking my folds.

I moaned in protest, but again his lips were there, swallowing the sound into silence.

“Behave,” he growled just before he sank his fingers inside me, all three at the same time.

I arched against him with a soundless whimper, the unexpected penetration making my eyes roll back in pleasure.

Oh my God, oh my God, it felt so good.

He started to fuck me with his fingers, faster and harder with each thrust. He gave me no time to relax or even breathe – my body was enslaved by him the moment he claimed my pussy with his fingers.

His eyes locked with mine. “Don’t make a sound.”

It was the only warning I had before he was moving down on me. I looked down as he pushed my legs wide open.

Oh my Goooooooooooooooood——

I let out a voiceless scream as he pulled my folds wide open and thrust his tongue inside me. His wet fingers found my clitoris and began pinching it in rhythm with his thrusting tongue. My hips jerked up and down, and I found myself clutching my breasts as they ached with heavy need.

Our eyes met, and his darkened with fierce desire as he saw me holding my breasts.

Without thinking, I started to play with my nipples.

His fingers pinched my clitoris hard, and then he was fucking me faster and harder with his tongue. The pleasure spiraled out of my control in my body, and I knew I was just seconds away from climaxing. I clutched his head hard, and Alejandro seemed to understand because the next thing I knew, it wasn’t just his tongue inside me. His finger slipped inside as well and it was like two Alejandros taking me at the same time——

My body curved up as I came, Alejandro gripping my hips hard as he lapped up every drop of my release. I shook with every second that passed, everything in me completely shattered by the force of it. When I slowly collapsed back against the bed, I saw Alejandro on his knees, furiously stroking himself.

I touched my lips, unable to find the strength to speak.

But it seemed Alejandro understood, his eyes widening at what I was asking.

I parted my mouth.

In a second, he had my body between his legs and he was looming over me. All I could see was his engorged cock, red veins popping as Alejandro's fingers moved faster and faster. I reached for his balls, squeezing—

Alejandro's lips parted in a groan, his face twisting in agonized pleasure. His eyes locked with me just before he came, his powerful hard body jerking as he shot a stream of creamy white liquid into my mouth.

Looking at him, I swallowed as much as I could and every time I did, he shuddered above me, as if aroused by the sight.

My eyes drifted closed as I licked away the last drops of his come. *Surely*, I thought drowsily, *he knew now*. This thing between us was too special for either of us to give up on.

When I woke up, Alejandro had a hand over my mouth. He was fully dressed and, a second later, I realized I was as well.

*Vampire*, he mouthed at me.

My eyes widened.

He placed a finger over his lips. *No matter what happens*.

I nodded.

Taking my hand, he whisked us out of the tent and sheltered us in the darker shadows of the forest. Above us, dawn was just breaking, leaving streaks of purple light against the skies. When I looked at Alejandro, I found him already in wolf form, having shifted silently.

He cocked his head towards our left.

A shadow streaked past us—

Alejandro lunged towards it. The battle was fast and bloody, but it was clear right from the start who would win it. When it was over, Alejandro shifted back into human form,

naked. He held the vampire by his throat. “You only have one chance to tell me the truth. Lie and I will punish you with a slow, long death.” As Morettis were known never to mince words when fighting, I knew the vampire understood it was no idle threat.

Alejandro’s fingers tightened around his throat, making the vampire choke. “Who hired you?”

His fingers eased.

“A scarred man—”

“Did he say why?”

“No,” the vampire gasped. “Only that the human monster was to be killed, and the reward claimed from Pasquale Hernandez—”

Alejandro’s eyes met mine just before he snapped the vampire’s neck, keeping his promise.



# Chapter Five



## ALEJANDRO

The town of Midway was aptly named, being the only town located at the halfway line of the Everglades. Before and beyond it were pine trees, hundreds of them, their gnarly limbs and tall thin bodies eternally blurred by cold mists.

But unknown to the human hikers who ate at the town's cozy-looking restaurants and rented rooms from their bed and breakfasts, Midway was a shifter town, a melting pot of non-human races. Bear shifters served as the local police and gossip birds worked at the exclusive boutiques lining the streets.

Wherever Alejandro looked, a different kind of shifter would be greeting him with a smile. It was as if every shifter race was represented in Midway, with the possible exception of the near-extinct race of the *Mariposa*.

"Is it your first time to be here?" Calys asked.

"Yes."

She looked at him hopefully. "And how do you find it so far?"

"It's nothing like I expected," he answered honestly. He had heard others talking about Midway being an open town of sorts, but the harmony that existed between the different races was still surprising. Normally, birds and rodents were instinctively antagonistic toward each other but if he wasn't mistaken, the couple at the bakery across him was exactly that: a male rodent and a female bird.

"Princess?" Pasquale suddenly appeared in front of them. Unlike him and Calys, the panther prince still insisted on dressing formally even while trekking through the forest. As

such, his fine white shirt was spotted with dirt and his expensive pants were caked with mud.

Hernandez made a ludicrous picture, but instead of amusing Alejandro, the fact only served to make him testy. Was his hellcat truly serious about marrying the most idiotic panther on the planet?

“Yes?” Calys smiled at her fiancé.

The smile made him crack his knuckles.

The sound had Pasquale moving away from him, which was good. But it also made him crowd closer to Calys. That was *not* good.

“Are you sure we need to stop for the night here?” Pasquale was unsuccessful in keeping the irritation out of his voice. Stopping at Midway was not a part of his plan, and all these delays were making it harder for him to nail down a time and place for Calys’ assassination. When the vampire he had paid to kill her last night was a no-show, Pasquale realized that her death was just something he had to take care on his own. It was the only way to get to the next step of his plan.

Calys had a painful grimace on her face. “I’m afraid we do. It’s *that day* for me.”

It took a while for Pasquale to understand what his fiancée meant, and when he did, he had even greater trouble hiding the fact that he found her condition grotesque. She was really a human monster, lacking even the delicacy not to talk about things like that with a prince like him.

“I’m already feeling weak as it is. Later, I’ll be taking medications to knock me out.”

The last words caught Pasquale’s attention. One of the reasons why he had other assassins take care of Calys was because of her freakish strength. But if today meant she’d be bedridden all day, maybe this unscheduled stop would work in his favor.

Alejandro was more disgusted than surprised when Pasquale suddenly appeared in high spirits. The panther really



did want his hellcat dead. And he was so narcissistic that he didn't even care how obvious he was being.

“If that is the case, Your Highness, then bed rest is in order.” He was all solicitous warmth now as he fussed over Calys' condition, asking about her medication. “Maybe you should increase your dosage,” Pasquale was murmuring helpfully. “You would not want to be waking up in the middle of the night in pain.”

Alejandro watched Calys nod, her big blue eyes full of trusting agreement. Well, there it was. Apparently, she could lie if she deemed it for a good cause.

“I'm going to rent one of the cottages at the end of the road.” Calys pointed to the location she and Alejandro had decided on using to set their trap for Pasquale. “I've told Alejandro to stand guard while I rest. He'll be at the other house to ensure that no one comes to disturb me.”

Pasquale nodded. “I see, I see...”

Yes, they did see. They saw how his mind was now working furiously, going over the information Calys provided him. It was like watching a man tie a noose around his own neck to hang himself. When Pasquale left, he and Calys gazed at each other.

“It is done.” But he was saying it to give her a chance to back out. Because if she really wanted to save the panther's damn neck, Alejandro would make it possible, even if it went against his good judgment.

Calys shoved her hands into the pockets of her cargo pants. “I know.”

He said quietly, “You're not to blame. You know that.”

“I know.” Her smile was clearly for his sake. “You've told Juriaan to go ahead of us?”

It was a deliberate change of subject, and Alejandro obliged, knowing that the princess' too-soft heart made her feel guilty over Pasquale's inevitable fate.

“Yes. He didn’t ask questions.” Alejandro had a feeling he knew why it was so, but he held himself from voicing his suspicions. There was time enough later to talk about the ranger. For now, they were better off concentrating on trapping Pasquale and finding out why he wanted Calys dead.

Calys’ answering smile was more genuine this time and tinged with relief. “I’m glad. I wouldn’t want him harmed.”

Privately, Alejandro doubted the younger man was easily harmed. Someone who could so easily mask his footsteps, even against shifter hearing, wouldn’t be the kind that was easily killed.

“He will be all right, princess,” he said.

“I hope so.” She sighed, and Alejandro found his gaze straying towards her breasts and the way they heaved against the scooped neckline of her tight shirt. His gaze moved downwards, Alejandro taking in how her boyish pants only served to emphasize her tiny waist.

His cock stirred to life, and when he heard Calys gasp, he saw her looking at his crotch.

Alejandro felt himself flushing. It was no proper response from a Cavaliere to his lady, but he didn’t think there was any way for him to kill his erection without cutting his dick off.

When Calys swallowed, licking her lips, his cock strained harder against his pants and he heard himself asking, “Would you like to take a drink with me?” It was stupid to spend more time alone with the princess. He knew that, but even so, he could not help it.

When she smiled at him, his chest tightened, yet another proof that what he was doing was stupid. Dangerously so.

“I know just the place,” she told him.

Moments later, they found themselves in a bar reminiscent of an Old West saloon. Even its staff was dressed in costume, the men sporting tall cowboy hats and the women outfitted like milkmaids.

“Howdy,” one of the servers tipped his hat as he came to their table. “What can I get you fine folks?”

“Just orange juice for me, please,” Calys said.

“Ice-cold beer,” Alejandro said.

When the waiter left, they looked at each other, and an awkward silence was born.

“This is like our first date.”

Clearly, his hellcat had a knack for making things even *more* awkward.

Alejandro shook his head firmly. “We are *not* going to talk about that.”

A crestfallen expression fell over her face.

He steeled himself against that look. “No.”

“But—”

Before she could finish talking, the doors of the bar swung open and a group of shifters swaggered in. Panthers – and drunk, by the smell of them. They kicked chairs out of their way before settling on the stools behind the bar.

“Do you know them?” he asked Calys under his breath.

“I think they’re from the Cortez pack. Mean drunkards, almost all of them,” she whispered.

As the panthers shouted for beer, one of the newcomers slapped the behind of a milkmaid passing by, causing her to drop the tray she was holding and splash water on the panther.

“You’ll pay for that, slut.”

At the words, Alejandro’s fingers wrapped around Calys’ wrist, knowing she was the type to interfere.

Her blue eyes were fiery with superhero fervor. “He must be taught the error of his ways.”

A sense of déjà vu hit him, and he immediately checked the princess’ eyes for any signs of a dark fit coming over her.

Calys made a face. “No, I’m not going to *change* just like that.”

He said readily, “You did before, the moment you saw someone about to be bullied.”

“That was different. I wasn’t sure about you helping me right a wrong. But now I am. You will—”

“Look who’s here.” A mug of beer was slammed down on their table, forcing Alejandro and Calys to lean away from each other.

“It’s The Human Monster and the Moretti Dog.”

### CALYS

The way Alejandro’s jaw tightened made my chest squeeze in pain. It was so unfair how everyone treated him when he hadn’t even done anything to deserve being called like that. It was his brother, Domenico, who had caused his clan to be the butt of everyone’s jokes. But even what Domenico Moretti had done wasn’t a sin. He had only chosen to love his human wife with all his heart, and for that, the other wolves had called him a dog.

Before I could think of what I was doing, I had already shot off my seat and slapped the panther’s face.

“Apologize to my Cavaliere now.”

The panther rubbed his jaw. “You fucking slapped me, bitch.”

I glared at him. “I’ll do more than that if you don’t say sorry to him now.”

He looked at his companions, and in unison, they jumped off their stools and stalked towards us, menacing scowls on their faces.

Alejandro gently pulled me back. “Princess, let it go.”

I shook my head. “No. I was wrong to let them call you that before. I promised you, remember? I won’t let it happen again.”

“Even if you fight them off, it won’t change a thing.”

I winced. Wasn't he basically dumping me right now – in public – for the *nth* time?

Alejandro cursed.

“What the fuck?” the panther roared. “Are you actually having some stupid lover’s quarrel right now?”

“No!” Alejandro denied.

“Yes,” I snapped at the same time. Then I realized what Alejandro said. *Riiiiight*. He really *was* dumping me in public.

The panther burst into laughter. “I think The Human Monster just got dumped.”

I was so depressed I couldn't even muster enough strength to get mad. *Yay for you, Cortez panther. Way to go, rubbing salt on my wound.*

Alejandro's cheeks had stained with color. “It's not like that, dumbass. The princess is engaged to Prince Pasquale.” He took my hand, surprising me. “Also, I think you're right.”

I blinked. “I am?”

“They *should* be shown the error of their ways.”



IT WAS ALREADY EVENING when Alejandro and I came out of the bar. It had taken us longer than I expected to knock everyone out. The panthers had put up a good fight, and there was also the fact that they did outnumber us ten to one.

“Why didn't you have one of your fits, dammit?” Alejandro bit out as we headed to the cottage I had rented for the night.

“I told you, it doesn't work like that. She only comes out when I feel angry. Or I'm in real danger.”

Alejandro was incredulous. “You were fighting off *ten* panthers and that's still not enough danger for her?”

I shrugged.

His teeth audibly gnashed against each other.

“She knows how strong I am.”

“I don’t think she knows how *weak* you are.”

Sighing, I changed the subject, knowing there was no point convincing him that my darker half knew what she was doing. “Did you notice that none of Pasquale’s pack came to help us?”

Alejandro’s face became grimmer. “I did.”

When we reached the cottage I had rented out, he said quietly, “Good night.” His eyes spoke a different message. *Take care.*

“Good night,” I said quietly. *I will.*

Inside the cottage, I took my time showering. Under the stream of water, I also found myself praying. I had a feeling tonight might be the last time I’d ever see Pasquale.

Our plan to trap Pasquale was simple. It had to be since there were just the two of us. Alejandro would circle the town, waiting for whomever Pasquale would hire to kill me. No matter how many they were, we both knew he would be able to handle it. He was not The Den’s #1 fighter for nothing.

As for me, all I had to do was wait. Once Pasquale realized none of his hired assassins would be coming, he was likely to come to me and finish the job himself. Knowing Pasquale, he would engage me in small talk first, hoping to take me by surprise.

That was the plan, but it was an epic fail.

Pasquale was already knocking on my door when I came out of the shower. Right way, I knew something was wrong. It wasn’t right that he was here too early. Running down the stairs, I grasped the doorknob as I checked the peephole.

Pasquale was smiling, and he wasn’t alone. He had a young boy with him, a bird shifter, and Pasquale had a gun pointed to his head.

I opened the door. “Pasquale—”

“Hello, my princess.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes.

I didn't even think of pretending. "I'm not going to fight. Just let the boy go, and I swear, on my father's honor, I will do whatever you ask me."

He stepped forward, pulling the boy with him, and I moved aside to let them in.

"Close the door," he said pleasantly, still holding the gun to the boy's head. When I was done, he gestured to the couch. "Sit down, Calys."

Again, I did as asked. The boy's eyes were filled with fear, and my heart clenched for him. "It's going to be okay—"

"Will it?" Pasquale snarled. "I've a mind to make you kill yourself right now—"

"If I do, will you let him go?"

He barked out a humorless laugh. "Always so damn heroic, even when everyone calls you The Human Monster. All these years, you've known how the panthers never thought of you as their own. So why do you damn keep trying to force yourself on them?"

"I'm not forcing myself on anyone—"

"Yes, you are!" he shouted. "You should have killed them all. If I had your powers, I would have killed them all!" Sheer fury had his hand shaking, and the boy started to cry as Pasquale's gun knocked against his head.

Swallowing, I said, "Please, Pasquale. Please, anything —"

Someone knocked on the door, making all three of us freeze.

Pasquale's eyes burned into mine, and I knew one wrong word from me and the boy was dead. Trying to keep my voice from trembling, I asked, "W-who is it?"

"It's Juriaan."

Oh my God, no.

"I really need to talk to you."

“Get rid of him,” Pasquale hissed.

I nodded. “Just let me think of—”

“Calys, I really need to talk to you. It’s about Raoul.”

For some reason, the mention of my cousin’s name had Pasquale tense. “Get him to come in,” he bit out.

I shook my head furiously. “No, please, let me just make an excuse—”

Pasquale cocked the gun. “I won’t ask you again.”

*Crap. Crap, crap, crap. Dark Half, if you can hear me now, you need to come out.*

But a second passed and nothing happened. Forcing my limbs to move, I called out, “Just a sec.” I tried to think of a way to reverse the situation without risking any harm to the boy or Juriaan, but nothing came to me. *Nothing.*

Slowly, I opened the door.

“I’m sorry this is sudden, but I really have to talk to you about Raoul.”

I heard footsteps heading towards me. Behind me, Pasquale hissed, “Get him to come in.”

I forced a smile. “C-can we talk about this inside?”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” There was something odd about his smile, but I was too anxious to figure out what it was. All I knew was that I now had two innocents relying on me to keep them safe. *God, please help me,* I prayed as I reluctantly pulled the door open.

I waited for Juriaan to come inside, but he did something else. Something that I never thought he’d do, something I would have never imagined possible.

Wings spread wide open, and then Juriaan was flying inside.

Behind me, Pasquale roared and the boy let out a scream of terror.





# Chapter Six



## ALEJANDRO

Alejandro had only been waiting in the dark for a few minutes when his guts told him something was wrong. Around him, his surroundings were quiet, but not too quiet. Birds still sang, frogs croaked, and the wind was whistling as it should.

It was normal, in other words, when it shouldn't be.

For a second, he hesitated. If he left his post now and his hunch was wrong, he would be allowing assassins into Midway. It wasn't just Calys who might be hurt. Other innocents might be harmed, too, local shifters who had welcomed them with open arms and human guests who were only guilty of being in the wrong place and time.

But if he was right?

Then it might mean Calys was going to fight for her life against Pasquale, and he might not be alone.

With a curse, he swung away and leapt back towards town, shifting into his Lyccan form as he did. His speed was greater when he was on all fours, and he reached the street leading to Calys' rented cottage in record time.

Even from afar, Alejandro saw the door to her cottage was left open and his heartbeat tripled in fear. If anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

Howling in fury, Alejandro crashed through the window, using his sense of smell to find his target and take him by surprise. The sound of glass exploding was only Pasquale's clue of his presence. By the time he turned around, Alejandro's wolf form had already smashed into the house, his fangs latching onto the panther's arm.

In the periphery of his vision, Alejandro saw something black – *wings* – followed by a strong gust of wind.

He wrestled Pasquale to the ground, but desperation lent the panther greater strength. Shoving Alejandro off, he aimed his gun at the wolf—

“Noooooooo!”

Alejandro was already running straight to Pasquale, confident in his ability to dodge a bullet, when he heard Calys scream. The next thing he knew, Calys was there in front of him just before Pasquale fired his gun.

Blood splattered on his face as the bullet wheezed through her heart.

*Calys’ blood—*

A drop of it fell to his fangs.

He was tasting Calys’ blood—

*Calys’ blood—*

There was no fucking way, just no fucking way for a human to survive a bullet through her heart.

Alejandro snapped.

Terror exploded inside Pasquale when he saw Alejandro look at him with crazed fury. He let out a howl, the signal for his men to come to his aid.

But it was too late.

Pasquale Hernandez was already in pieces by the time his pack got there.

Soon, they, too, were in the same shape as their alpha’s heir, all their flesh ripped apart and their bones crushed into bits.



“ALEJANDRO?”

“Alejandro?”

“Alejandro?”

He heard the voice but didn't heed it, thinking it was only his imagination. Calys was *dead*. She was *dead* because he had been too late to save her.

“Alejandro, please wake up,” the voice that sounded like Calys whispered as a hand brushed gently against his fur.

Alejandro didn't stir, didn't bother shifting back into his human form. He smelled blood and knew it was because of him. He had killed so many tonight, but somehow it did not feel enough.

And then she whispered something in his ear.

Something so strange that it roused him from his self-pity.

Something so familiar, it reminded him of a scene where Peter Parker was unable to believe his beloved Gwen—

His eyes opened as he shifted into human form.

A blond, blue-eyed angel was gazing down at him, tears streaking down her face. She gasped upon seeing his eyes blink open. “Peter? I mean, Alejandro?”

*God*, it really was her.

But he cupped her face just to be sure. Half of him expected his hands to feel only air, but instead he held between his hands warm, supple flesh. She was real. She was alive. Calys was alive.

Emotions, too many of them, too powerful and violent, swirled inside him, but he pushed them all away. Right now, only one thing mattered.

Calys was not dead.

He pulled at her hard, causing her to tumble down on him. Ignoring her gasp of surprise, he fisted her hair and angled her head. Calys' lips parted just in time as his mouth crashed down on hers. He kissed her hard, his arm tightening around her soft, curvy body.

When he pulled his mouth away, he asked hoarsely, “Did you really just quote Spiderman to me when you thought I was

dead?”

“Yes.” She laughed and cried as she answered him.

It wasn't really a joking matter. That was fucking weird, but for now he would let that slide, relief still coursing through his body. Tucking her head under his chin, he let his gaze scan his surroundings. They were back in his room at one of Midway's bed and breakfast, and outside the window he saw that it was still dark.

Even though he would rather spend the rest of the night enjoying Calys' body, Alejandro forced himself to confront his memories. It gutted him, recalling the time he saw Calys being shot in front of his very eyes—

“How did you survive that, Calys?” he whispered.

She stirred in his arms at his question. He waited for her to lift her head to look at him, but instead she burrowed closer into him, as if fearing his reaction when he answered.

“I found out...I'm not actually human.”

He frowned. “Not human?”

She nodded against his chest. “I'm like...Juriaan.”

Suddenly, Alejandro remembered the dark shadow that flew past him inside the cottage. And wings. He thought he saw wings, and maybe he really had. “Was he the one with black wings?”

“Yes. I'm like him.” Finally, she lifted her head and when their eyes met, he saw how she had prepared herself for rejection. “I'm not a shifter, and as it turns out, I'm not human, either,” she whispered haltingly. “Do you mind?”

He looked at her.

Did he mind?

Maybe he should. But he didn't. All he cared about was that she was alive.

Finally, he said, “What are you?”

“Juriaan didn’t tell me. When I was shot, I did feel like I was dying. I *knew* I was dying.” Her eyes took on a faraway look, and Alejandro tightened his arms around her, knowing she had lost herself in her memories.

“Juriaan flew me out of the cottage. It was so painful the whole time we were flying, and when we finally stopped and he had me lying on the ground, I thought that was it. I saw him taking out a knife...” She let out a teary laugh. “I thought he had gone insane, and I tried to fight him off but of course I was too weak from the loss of blood. He flipped me over and then he sliced my back twice. It *hurt*...more than being shot, it hurt so bad—”

Calys fell silent.

Alejandro, face white, demanded, “And then what?”

Something burst in the air.

Wings. Huge and sleek, its feathers the shade of silver, and they were connected to Calys’ back.

She whispered, “What do you think I am?”

Her gaze told him what she wanted to hear from him. But somehow he didn’t want to say it. If she was what they both thought it was, then that was bad. That might make her unreachable, untouchable – undeserving of someone like him, and Alejandro didn’t want that.

So he said, “A dove.”

She grimaced. “No, I told you, I’m not a shifter. I can’t shift. I tried, but I just can’t. And Juriaan tells me I’m not.” Calys gave him a hopeful smile. “Any other guess?”

He said slowly, “A witch with wings?”

Disappointment flickered on her face. “No, something else, maybe?”

“A leprechaun with feathers?” When Calys scowled, Alejandro knew she had caught on. He said musingly, “Maybe if not that, then...”

“A wolf-eating ogre?” she asked sweetly.

He choked back a laugh.

“Horrible wolf!” Calys beat his chest.

He choked again, this time out of pain, because her wings seemed to have made her stronger.

Calys immediately stopped. “Did I hurt you?”

He rubbed his chest. “What do you think?”

She said in a small voice, “I actually don’t know what to think. A messenger from the Panthera came here a while ago. They want to question me tomorrow.”

Alejandro smelled her fear, and he reacted to it instinctively. Rolling her under him, he told her fiercely, “I won’t let them do anything to you. You have nothing to fear, princess. You did nothing wrong. They were the first ones to attack—”

“But it will be my word against the Hernandez pack, and I’m *not* a panther.”

“What you are is the one telling the truth, and that’s all that *should* matter to them.” Unable to help it, he stroked her hair away from her face and placed a reassuring kiss on her forehead. It was a tender gesture, too tender for someone like him who had sworn never to love, but tonight – tonight was a night filled with exceptions.

He had almost lost her, and just remembering what it felt like to lose her was enough to have his chest constrict with the most agonizing pain. Tomorrow, he would figure it out. Tomorrow, he would find a way to protect himself so he would never experience that kind of pain again.

But tonight—

He held Calys’ face and rained kisses over it. “Don’t be afraid. You’re not supposed to be afraid of anything. You’re my little hellcat. My human monster.” His teasing words were rewarded by a smile, albeit fragile.

Alejandro traced her lips. “And I’m your Cavaliere. I will always protect you. Always.” When she didn’t say anything,

only gazing at him with an odd look in her blue eyes, he asked, “Calys?”

She whispered, “I was thinking...you really sounded like a superhero—”

A cross between a laugh and a groan escaped him just before he kissed her again. It was crazy, but her earnest belief in him was such a huge damn turn-on, his cock never failing to turn hard as a rock every time she looked at him and talked to him like he really was a damn superhero. His little hellcat cracked him up, and it was too damn sexy for him to resist.

As Alejandro kissed her, he ran his hands against her back and only remembered she had wings when she shuddered at the way her feathers brushed against his fingers. He stroked them, softly, leisurely, and each time he did, she shuddered in her arms.

“Is it that sensitive?” he whispered against her lips.

“Y-yes...” But as soon as she said it, her wings were folding back, inch by inch, until they were once more a part of her skin.

He chuckled, knowing why she had done it. “Spoilsport.” But if she thought he wouldn’t be able to drive her crazy even without her wings, she was wrong. And she would know it soon enough.

Alejandro undressed her as his lips moved down her body, whisking her top off her head before nuzzling her neck. He cupped her breasts, loving its heavy weight, and bit her nipples before unclasping her bra. Tossing it to the floor, he went back to her nipple, sucking on it so hard it made Calys clutch his head with a whimper.

He moved further down, leaving a wet trail on her skin and pausing when he reached her pants.

The sudden lack of action had Calys blinking in bewilderment at him. “Alejandro?”

But still he waited.



She began to writhe, her lovely face showing how unbearable she found it to wait for his touch. “Alejandro, *please.*”

“Please what?” In the back of his mind, he knew he was being unfair. But he no longer cared. She had to be his. Tonight.

Her eyes were wide with frustration as they met his. “Please,” she begged again.

Holding her gaze captive, he slowly unbuttoned her pants and pulled it off. A shiver racked her body as he ran his hands down her bare legs. She shivered and shivered as he caressed her knees and brushed the inside of her thighs with his fingers.

When he bent his head down to lick her satin-covered folds, her legs fell open involuntarily. Calys moaned his name, again and again, before becoming incoherent with pleasure as he licked her hard and practically ground his mouth against her sweet wet flesh.

When he lifted his head, she let out a whimper of protest. “Please.”

Again, he demanded, “Please what?”

Her dazed eyes found his. “Please,” she whispered. Writhing under him, her hips lifting off the bed in search of his mouth, she looked at him and begged, “Please...take me.”

They were exactly the words he needed to hear.

With a growl of pleasure, he went back up to settle his body fully on top of hers. Both of them reacted strongly to the feel of their bare skin against each other. She gasped, her eyes becoming dilated with pleasure, her hands clutching his shoulders hard. Alejandro was caught in the same maelstrom of sensual bliss, his body becoming painfully taut with arousal.

Kissing her, he worked determinedly on making Calys lose her mind in pleasure. It was essential, the only way to ease her pain once he took her virginity. He kneaded her breasts, and when they became heavier with her need for him, that was when he bent down to take a sweet nipple into his mouth, one at a time. He sucked them lovingly, passionately, and when she

started to writhe again, he nipped the pointed flesh between his teeth with just the right amount of strength – just enough to make her gasp his name.

Mouth still latched to her breast, he held his cock and started rubbing it against her flesh, wanting her so wet that she would start dripping with it. His cue came when her legs moved restlessly against his. Reaching down, he applied pressure to the tiny secret nub of flesh that was the core of her pleasure. One, two, three hard flicks and her eyes flew wide open, her lips parting as her body shook with her orgasm.

The look on her face was unbelievably sexy and he groaned, trying to control the demands of his body, knowing he had to give Calys more time. But it seemed Calys herself had other thoughts. She suddenly pulled him down, her arms wrapping around his neck. She whispered into his ear, “Please don’t stop this time—”

His control broke, the urge to possess her completely taking over, leaving him mindless except for one goal. To make her his.

He rose to his knees and parted her legs. He watched her swallow nervously, but her eyes only shone with an emotion he didn’t want to acknowledge.

Alejandro forced himself to say the words. “There’s no turning back after this, kitten.”

“I want this.” Her voice shook only in the end, but her eyes never wavered from his face.

Her fierce courage took his breath away, making him want her more than ever. Slipping a pillow under her hips to ease the pressure of his possession, he slowly guided his cock into her. “This will hurt no matter what I do.” He had to warn her. He was not exactly small, and her pussy was exceptionally tight.

She responded with a tremulous smile—

It was his cue, and he pushed forward with one thrust, knowing that making her anticipate his possession would only cause her greater pain.

Calys gasped as his cock broke against the flimsy strip of flesh inside her body, her nails scraping against his arms.

“Alejandro.” Tears sparkled in her eyes.

He bent down and kissed her. “It’s done.” He controlled himself with an effort, making sure not to move even though the feel of having his cock inside her pussy was impossibly beautiful. He breathed hard, waiting for a sign, and it came moments later, Calys gingerly moving her hips under him. A whimper slipped past her lips when it made his cock slide deeper into her body.

Her eyes flew to him, wide with surprise.

He managed a grin, the way she couldn’t believe how good sex with him felt only making him want to fuck her harder. “It’s only going to get better, baby,” he promised roughly just before he started to move. Holding her legs wide open, he pushed into her, slowly, deeply, keeping his thrusts steady.

When her hips began to move again, Calys moving to meet his thrusts, he increased his pace, shoving his cock into her faster. He reached for her breast, wanting to increase her pleasure, twisting her nipple as he continued to thrust inside her.

“Alejandro, oh my God, oh my God...”

Her cries made him growl, and he pulled her forward as he seated himself on the bed. She fell into him, impaling herself fully on his cock with a choked cry. Grasping her hips, he bounced her up and down his erection the same time he captured her nipple with his mouth.

“Too much,” Calys gasped. Her fingers grasped his hair as she pushed her nipple further into his mouth.

He laughed against her breast. “Never.”

“It is,” she sobbed, but even so, she was rocking against his body on her own. As she ground her hips against his, she choked out, “I think I’m going to come again.”

Releasing her breast, he held her by the hair, making her look at him.

“*Alejandro.*” She shuddered when their eyes met, as if just looking at his face brought her much closer to her orgasm.

Grasping the round cheeks of her bottom, he lifted her up, freeing his cock completely.

Calys sobbed in protest. “No—-”

He pulled her back down, his cock filling her to bursting as she sank down on him. She gasped, and the way she ground her hips hard on him told Alejandro he had thrust into her at the right angle, in a way that would make her clitoris feel like it was burning with pleasure.

“Alejaaaaaandro—-” Calys screamed as she came, her movements turning wild and uncontrollable.

Her scream fed his own pleasure, and with a growl, he came as well, his thrusts just as frenzied as he shot his seed into her.

Alejandro held her tightly to him as they shuddered against each other, both of them still coming.

After, he pulled out of her slowly, placing a kiss on her shoulder before leaving the bed. He washed himself first before returning to Calys’ side with a wet washcloth. She stirred but didn’t open her eyes as he cleaned her, and when he joined her in bed, she immediately snuggled into him like an affectionate kitten, even rubbing her nose against his chest.

It made him smile, and against his good judgment, Alejandro kissed her hair once more.

Calys sighed under him, murmuring sleepily, “I love you, Alejandro.”



# Chapter Seven



## CALYS

A knock sounded on my door at promptly ten minutes before seven, the exact time Alejandro told me he would be back to accompany me to dinner. I hurried to open the door, but my smile faded when I saw his face.

Gone was the tender lover I had been with the whole night, the one who had woken me up with kisses and even served me breakfast in bed.

The werewolf in front of me was as handsome and as powerful, but his face was devoid of expression.

My voice faltered. “Is something wrong?”

He shook his head. “No.” His lips curved in an odd smile. “You look beautiful.”

“T-thank you.” I had dressed carefully for tonight’s dinner, knowing that appearances were a must. Not wanting to look too young or too feminine, I had opted for a pinstriped jacket and matching skirt.

“You look good, too,” I mumbled. Alejandro was dressed as formally, also in black and white. I knew he was only a couple of years older than me, but when he looked like this, he felt light years ahead of me.

He took my hand. “Are you nervous?”

“Yes.” But it wasn’t for the reason he thought I was. He was the one who made me nervous, but even I couldn’t explain why that was.

Alejandro held my hand as we went down the stairs, heading straight to the dining hall where representatives from the Panthera awaited. “Before we enter, you should know that your cousin Raoul is also here, together with a few members of your pack.”

I stuttered to a stop. “Why is he here?”

“The Panthera invited him.” Alejandro’s hold on my hand tightened. “Whatever happens, I am here for you. Remember that.”

I shook my head. The truth was beginning to sink in. The whole Panthera might not believe me. They might think I was behind the deaths of Pasquale and his pack members. I could tell them that they were the first one to attack me, but it would be my word – an outsider’s word – against a panther whose reputation in life had been beyond pristine.

“They might sentence me to death.”

I didn’t realize I had said the words out loud until Alejandro said very decisively, “No.” Protectiveness glittered in his gaze. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Remember that.” And then he was pulling the door open.

The men inside the room stood up as I entered. There were eight men and two women. Four of the men were from the Panthera, the rest consisted of Raoul and his companions.

It was always hard for me to look at Raoul. He looked so much like Venetto, and the resemblance was heartbreaking. He could have been a brother to us if he wanted to. We would have loved him and faithfully served him, but he hadn’t wanted that. He would never want it because he wanted to be Venetto’s only heir.

“Thank you for granting us your time,” the man standing at the head of the table murmured. Benito was an old friend of my father, a silver-haired man who held the highest position in the Panthera. “You know everyone here, I assume.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Benito, like my father, was also alpha of his pack. I glanced at Alejandro. “May I introduce my Cavaliere? Prince Alejandro of the Lyccan Morettis.”

“An honor,” Benito murmured.

“The honor, Your Majesty, is mine,” Alejandro returned.

When Benito inclined his head, all the men took their seats while Alejandro pulled back the chair at the foot of the table

for me. This placed me adjacent to Raoul while Alejandro sat across him, right next to one of Raoul's female companions.

"I would like us to enjoy this meal in comfort," Benito began, "and as such, I believe it would be better if we postpone our talk tomorrow. This is fine with you, Calys?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Raoul?"

"Of course, sire. Whatever you think is always best." He had always been obsequious, my cousin.

Course after course was served. The food was delicious, but all of it tasted like ashes in my mouth. The roast beef placed in front of me made me want to puke. It reminded me of the scene inside the cottage when Juriaan had flown me back to the place at my insistence.

I had wanted to be sure that Alejandro was all right. He was, but the others were not, all of them reduced into bloodied pieces of flesh on the floor.

The thought caused my hand to shake, and my knife slipped from my hold, clanging to the floor.

Almost all eyes went to me and I flushed, mumbling an apology. The server behind me moved to pick it up, but I shook my head with a polite smile. "It's fine, I can do it."

"I will fetch a new knife right away, Your Highness," the server said with a bow before turning away to leave.

Bending down, I reached for the knife, and that was when I saw it.

The woman next to Alejandro was doing her best to fondle Alejandro under the table. In his defense, he kept moving her hand off his legs every time she reached out for his cock. He was trying, but in my opinion, he wasn't trying hard enough.

I straightened on my seat.

The woman next to Raoul smiled at me, a Cheshire smile that made me want to lunge at her and scratch her eyes out.



“Everything all right, Princess?” Her voice was mockingly solicitous.

I sent the knife flying, and she screamed as it zinged over her head, pulling out a strand and nailing it to the wall behind her.

She was still screaming.

“Please relax,” I said in the same solicitous voice. “I have very good aim. You had nothing to fear of.”

Alejandro’s profile had become tense, and I knew he had realized exactly *why* I was furious. Then again, it wasn’t really that hard to guess why, was it?

“Are you insane?” the woman – Dolly was her real name if I recalled correctly – demanded, her voice shaking with fear.

“Not at all,” I answered politely. “I just take offense when someone attempts to touch what’s mine.”

Realization dawned on her face and she laughed, the sound jarring my ears. “Are you talking about this beautiful man next to me? Surely you’re being too possessive over your Cavaliere? It’s not like he’s your Consort—”

Without looking at Alejandro, I said quietly, “He is the man I love.”

Silence followed, one that I hoped Alejandro would be the one to break.

But in the end, it was Raoul who spoke. “And there it is.” He threw a contemptuous look my way. “The reason why she had Pasquale Hernandez and his pack members killed...and the death knell of our pack if she becomes Queen.”

## **ALEJANDRO**

Alejandro stood before Calys’ bedroom door, a drawn expression on his face, his body stiff with tension.

*He is the man I love.*

Even though dinner had long been over, Calys’ last words kept echoing inside Alejandro’s mind, which still grappled

with disbelief. Had she really said that? And in front of the Panthera *and* her enemies?

His fists clenched in frustration. If he had doubts before, he had none now. His princess was extremely good at making things *more* awkward. Hell, *most* awkward.

It wasn't only his mind that was affected. His heart was, too, the way it had been thundering against his chest since he first heard her speak the words.

Goddammit, why did she have to say that?

Why?

Didn't she know those words would make it impossible for him to stay at her side like before?

Slowly, he raised his fist to the door. He only had to knock twice before Calys opened the door. She looked tired and scared, and he knew he – and not her almost dying – was the reason for it.

“W-would you like to come in?”

He nodded, and she stepped aside, closing the door behind him. After, Calys walked to stand in front of him. Gnawing at her lip, she looked at him, as if waiting for him to speak. When he didn't, she blurted out, “Aren't you going to say anything?”

He said tonelessly, “I am.”

She held her breath, but seeing her do it only made him furious. With her and himself. Goddammit, why did she have to do that? Why was she setting herself up for pain when he had laid everything so damn clearly to her from the very start?

He said flatly, “You made a mistake.”

Calys shook her head, confusion clouding her expression. “I don't understand.”

He spelt out, “You made a mistake about saying you love me.”

“But I didn't.” When he didn't say anything, she insisted, “I *didn't*, Alejandro. I love you. I know I do. I...I've k-known

it for a long time.”

She had known she loved him for a long time. She had loved him for a long time. Goddammit to hell, why did she have to say that? Why did she have to feel that?

“Then I’m sorry.” It killed him to look at her, but he knew he owed Calys at least that. “I’m sorry you feel that way.” He could have said something more, but he didn’t, knowing it would amount to nothing. What was the point? In the end, his decision – his feelings – would remain the same. He would *not* allow himself to love her back.

When he turned his back, Calys cried out.

The cry was filled with so much pain he spun around, wondering if she had somehow hurt herself—

Tears were running silently down her face.

“Just like that?” she whispered. “After everything, you’re going to leave me just like that?”

Why, goddammit, why did she keep asking questions that were too damn awkward to answer?

He forced himself to shrug, to turn away once more and move towards the door. “I’m going to check on what your cousin is up to—”

“Look at me,” she begged.

He reached for the knob.

Behind him, Calys said brokenly, “You don’t really care, do you? You just want this to be over. You’ve lost interest in me because I’m no longer a challenge. I thought I was different, but I wasn’t. After everything, I’m just l-like a-all t-those w-women. You took them and left them.” She choked on a sob. “I’m right, aren’t I? *Aren’t I?*”

His hand shook as he turned the knob. It took everything in Alejandro not to say a word, not to look back, not to stop moving until he had shut the door behind him. The last thing he heard was Calys crying.

Warriors never cried, she liked to say, but she was crying now. Crying so damn hard it was as if she could no longer breathe.

*God. God. God. Make her stop crying. Make her realize what he knew.*

It was safer this way.



# Part Three





# Chapter One

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**O**nce upon a time, there lived a race of winged creatures. Their wings were every shade of the rainbow, and they could soar so high into the skies it was as if they could knock on heaven's doors. These creatures were known as Souris, and the first of them were angels sent to earth and made mortal. They lived quietly among themselves, deep in the forests and high in the mountains, so quietly they faded into myths and legends.

*The innocent and the just, wise humans and loyal non-humans, all of them eventually forgot about the Souris' existence. But not the damned. Those with evil in their hearts circled their land day and night, waiting, skulking, knowing there would come a time they would have a chance to destroy and desecrate the Souris' idyllic existence.*

*One day, that moment came.*

*Jealousy had filled the heart of the King, for he thought his people loved the Queen more than him. Blinded by greed, he became vulnerable to the insidious whispers from the dark. Day by day, his angelic blood was poisoned by his own thoughts until there was no trace of humanity left in him. And so amidst beauty that only the gentle-hearted could create, the King turned into the first Vidange. Like the Souris, this new, soulless race was not immortal, possessing wings a thousand times more powerful than the largest and fiercest bird. But unlike the Souris, they were not heaven's children. They were from below, and forever they would dwell underneath the earth.*

*Half of the angels' offspring became Vidange, seduced by promises of power and wealth by the King. The other half remained loyal to the Queen, their hearts grieving for the loss of innocence in their land.*



*A battle then ensued, and no part of the earth was saved from it. Blood rained down from dueling warriors, fires razed fields that once bloomed with the rarest flowers, and dead bodies drifted among lakes that had turned crimson from azure.*

*Up in the tower, a young Prince was able to defend his beloved mother by killing his own sire. But alas, it was not the end of their cursed days. The King's first act as Vidange was to strike an unholy alliance with the soulless. Guided by his traitorous words, vampires and the sin eaters were able to find the chamber where three precious babes rested. They took all three, knowing one of these infant girls was the Queen's beloved daughter.*

*It was their hope that they could one day force the Queen's daughter to mate with the King's bastard son, a Vidange like him. Such an offspring would have great power, perhaps enough to rule the world.*

*But fate intervened. Tormented by his guilty conscience, a Souri who had not yet completely lost his soul and become Vidange sought atonement. At the cost of his life, he was able to escape the Vidange and hide the babies in the mortal world.*

*One of those babes was Calys.*

*When the Queen discovered her princess living among the panthers, she chose to love her daughter from afar, knowing that Calys' life was safer with the shifters. She had hoped that Calys, despite being known as The Human Monster, would be able to lead a life blessed with peace and happiness. But it was not to be.*

*Vampires had found their way into Calys' world, and sooner or later, they would know that she was no human monster. She was more, and when they realized who she was, they would come for her.*

## **CALYS**

It was the fifth day for the Panthera to gather, this time to hear the sides of both accuser and the accused. The room was vast and airy, large windows allowing rays of sunlight to turn

the wood-paneled walls a darker shade of brown. The room was the largest in the inn, where locals and guests mingled for town festivities. But this morning was completely different, with one person's sentence the only thing to be celebrated.

Alejandro Moretti, werewolf prince, stood directly behind Calys Adelardi. Small, blonde, and blue-eyed, the princess he had sworn to protect remained calm and motionless in her seat. At first glance, she appeared innocent and vulnerable, but those who were aware of who and *what* she was knew better of course. She was *not* called "The Human Monster" for nothing, and today – if Raoul Adelardi was to have his way – she would soon be known as a murderess as well.

Thoughts of Calys' cousin had Alejandro reluctantly looking back at the younger man. He stood tall and proud at the center of the room, and it was clear by the look on his face that he loved being in the limelight. *Raoul Adelardi loved it so much*, Alejandro thought, *that he probably wouldn't mind killing again and again if that was what it took to stay there.*

"She is human." Raoul spat the last word out, a fairly predictable way to start his closing speech. The contemptuous look he threw at Calys was just as predictable, and Alejandro almost cracked his knuckles at the sight of it. If the others in the room were not shifters like him, able to hear a thousand times better than humans, he would have done so, just to let the little shit know Alejandro was *this* close to taking his life. On the spot. And to hell with the consequences.

"That alone should disqualify her as being heir to the alpha. It sickens me, thinking that a human, with not a single drop of panther blood in her, was made heir of our pack, one of the oldest and most respected of our race. Only out of respect for my beloved uncle did I not say a word, but now? After what happened?" Raoul furiously pointed at Calys. "It's clear for everyone to see that she's the one behind Pasquale Hernandez's death."

Raoul opened his mouth to speak again, no doubt to spout more lies, but one of the Panthera intruded, his voice reasonable as he asked, "And what is your evidence for such a claim?"

Raoul's gaze swung away from Calys. "The Lyccan behind her."

Alejandro stiffened.

"It is evident that she is in love with the wolf, and because of that, she's regretted her decision to marry Pasquale. Perhaps they've gotten into an argument. Or maybe Pasquale refused to let her go. We will never know what happened between them, but what we can be sure of is that she wanted him out of the way. If she can do that to her childhood friend, how are we to know that she would not do the same to her own adopted father—"

Calys burst out of her seat, and she would have rushed to Raoul if Alejandro hadn't already anticipated her move. He held her back just in time, and when he felt her trembling hard, he knew that she was extremely close to having one of her dark fits.

"Calm down," he said softly. "You and I both know it is not true. Most of all, your own father knows that is not true, and isn't that the only thing which should matter?"

But Calys continued to tremble in silent fury.

Damn, this was bad. There were times when Calys going berserk and kicking ass was damn helpful, but this was *not* one of those times. Changing tacks, he said, "A warrior does not let his emotions get the better of him."

A full second passed before Calys asked in a not-quite-Calys voice. "Is that from a movie?"

"Of course," Alejandro lied without hesitation. "I'm surprised you don't recognize it."

"I don't." Another second. "But you're right."

At the same time, Raoul sneered, "Do you see how they talk and whisper to each other like lovers? They dare be like that in front of you, the Panthera! They think no one's going to stand in their way to claim the pack's throne."

Alejandro's teeth gnashed, and unable to help it, he looked at the panther. He simply looked, and it was enough to have

Raoul swallowing. “Do you see how he looks at me?” His voice was shrill with fear. “Do you see—”

Alejandro interrupted quietly, “What *I* see is a panther quaking in his boots and accusing another man of treason and murder simply because he didn’t like being looked at a certain way.”

Humiliation and rage had Raoul’s features twisting into something ugly. “You will pay for that, dog,” he snarled.

At the slur, Calys had stiffened again, but Alejandro only tightened his hold. “Let me fight my own battles, my princess,” he murmured. “I wouldn’t be much of a bodyguard if you fight mine for me.”

“If he knows what’s good for him,” the princess answered in the same not-quite-Calys voice, “that will be the last time he’ll call you that. If he does it again, I will cut his tongue out and make his own dogs eat it.” This time, her words weren’t a whisper, and they traveled throughout the room, causing Raoul to curse her in a mixture of fear and fury while the Panthera gazed at her with indecipherable eyes.

“We have heard your side, Prince Raoul. Thank you.” The words left the panther no recourse but to step down and stand opposite Calys.

The older man from the Panthera gestured to Calys. “It is your turn, Princess.”

Alejandro winced at the way Calys briskly walked to the center of the room, her every movement screaming warrior rather than princess. Now was the best time for her to play the role of a vulnerable princess. As a Lyccan, he abhorred dishonesty above all things but if it was what would save his little hellcat from being imprisoned and sentenced as a murderess, he wouldn’t mind at all if Calys had pretended to mourn Pasquale’s death.

But of course, even if he had suggested that, he knew Calys wouldn’t even consider it. Warriors did not lie, after all.

“Your last words about the matter, princess?”

*Please say something—*

“I have my alpha’s confidence and trust.”

—*girl-like.*

But he should have known better.

She looked at the Panthera, one by one, her eyes so guileless it made some of them uncomfortable. *His princess’ P.R. skills*, Alejandro thought with a grimace, *definitely had room for improvement.* “That is all that I deem necessary.”

Instead, Calys had basically said “screw you” to the Panthera if they chose not to believe in her testimony.

The spokesperson for the Panthera cleared his throat. “Will that be all, Princess Calys?”

She nodded.

“Then this meeting is adjourned. We shall convene once again when the Panthera has reached a decision.” The Panthera stood up in unison, being the first to leave the room by way of seniority. Raoul and his men quickly followed, clearly not wanting to be left alone with Calys and Alejandro.

When they were finally left alone in the room, Alejandro said with a sigh, “You should have learned to use your feminine wiles more.” He looked down at Calys as he spoke and was relieved to find her looking like her ordinary self, which meant she was no longer in danger of having a dark fit.

Her lips curved in a slight smile as she answered simply, “I can’t.”

“Because you’re a warrior.”

Her smile widened. “Because I’m a warrior.”

They looked at each other, and unbidden, they simultaneously remembered the last time they had spoken.

*He was inside her bedroom, and he was breaking her heart.*

*“You made a mistake.”*

*Calys was shaking her head at him. “I don’t understand.”*

*“You made a mistake about saying you love me.”*

*“But I didn’t.” Her voice was tinged with desperation as she told him, “I didn’t, Alejandro. I love you. I know I do. I... I’ve k-known it for a long time.”*

*“Then I’m sorry. I’m sorry you feel that way.”*

*And the sound she had made after that – he didn’t think he would ever forget that. Not a single day would he forget the sound, not until the day he died. It was the sound of him completely breaking a warrior’s heart.*

*“Just like that?” Calys had whispered. “After everything, you’re going to leave me just like that?”*

That was three nights ago. But if he had to do it all over again, he knew he wouldn’t have done anything differently. Or maybe he would. His answer would be the same, but maybe he would have tried to make it less hurtful, would have found a way not to have her crying when he told her he didn’t love her.

In front of him, Calys had turned completely white.

Earlier, he would have given everything to have her looking vulnerable like this. But not now, not when he knew it was exactly how she felt and it was all because of him.

Cursing under his breath, he said urgently, “Calys—”

She shook her head vehemently, her eyes glassy. “You don’t have to say a thing.” She turned away abruptly, as if unable to bear another moment of seeing him.

She was practically marching towards the doorway, but he caught up to her easily. “We need to talk about this,” he muttered fiercely under his breath as he fell into step behind her, conscious of the proper distance he needed to maintain between Cavaliere and Princess.

She shook her head again, running down the stairs three steps at a time. It had Alejandro gritting his teeth and he forced himself to slow down, not wanting her to accidentally trip herself because of her need to get away from him.

“Be careful, dammit.”

Still, she ran.

He came to a stop.

She sensed it and slowed down. But she continued to walk, not looking back, not even when she had reached the front doors of the inn.

His heart clenched at the sight of her leaving him. *Was this how Domenico had felt when Misty disappeared on him?*

This soul-crushing pain, this bone-gnawing fear of never seeing her again and never getting her back?

He raked a hand through his hair. *He had done the right thing*, Alejandro told himself. It was better to draw the lines this early before she fell any harder for him. Before *he* fell any harder for her. It should be enough for both of them that she was his princess, and he her Cavaliere.

When he came out of the inn, the first thing he saw was his little hellcat surrounded by her new family. He still hadn't a fucking clue what they all were. The only thing he knew and did *not* like was that they had wings. Those damn wings were too powerful by half, and it meant Calys would one day be able to fly away from him – and he would be unable to run after her.

He took a step towards them, and they turned to him in unison. The Queen, the Prince, the Knight, and the Princess. *His* princess. Calys. The way they were looking at him – everyone but Calys – made Alejandro rigid with tension. His instincts told him he was better off turning around and walking away. If he didn't give any of them the chance to speak, nothing would change.

When he reached her, Calys immediately raised her gaze to him. Her eyes were glassy, but she was able to look at him straight in the eye, as if she was determined to prove to herself she could face her fears.

“Calys—”

She didn't give him a chance to say anything else. “I have spoken with my family, and we have all agreed that this is the best thing to do under the circumstances.”

She bowed deeply to him, as if in gratitude, and he hated it. He didn't understand why, but her next words explained it.

“From here on, you are formally and honorably discharged from your position as Cavaliere. My sincerest gratitude for the services you have rendered, but after this...” Her voice broke. “After this, I trust you understand if I tell you I n-never want to see you again.”





## Chapter Two



### CALYS

“I can’t believe you were around all these years and I never knew.” I was the first one to break the silence as we reached the gazebo the locals had built at the edge of the town. Made of reclaimed wood, the beautiful whitewashed structure offered stunning views of the bay and was often rented for mating ceremonies between shifters.

“I’m not surprised. You never struck me as the sensitive type.” This, from Juriaan, who was not, as it turned out, as gentlemanly as he had portrayed himself to be in the past. Apparently, that was all to win my trust. And it worked, I had to admit. It had made me look upon him like a younger brother, with his unassuming boy-next-door air about him, even if he was in fact a couple of years older than I was.

“Stop teasing your cousin, Juri.” This was from Amalia, my mother, who, as I soon found out, was overly protective of me. The first time we met, I had found myself overwhelmed by how much alike we looked. The same blonde hair and blue eyes – we could have passed as twins if she wasn’t a head taller than I was.

“But it’s true, Your Majesty. She has this way with words that reminds me of...” Juriaan pretended to think then glanced at Amalia in feigned shock. “Why, she reminds me of *you*, Your Majesty.”

My mother laughed, the sound drawing smiles from all of us – even my brother Vladimir. The prince had black hair and violet eyes, his skin dark. I had heard from Juri that he took after our father, the King who had gone mad and tried to kill us all. It was probably the reason why he appeared extremely forbidding, his beautiful face rarely softening with a smile.

When he saw me looking at him, his voice was quiet and gentle when he asked, “What is it, little sister?”

I blurted out, “You need to stop feeling guilty about what happened.” The first thing he had said to me when we met was sorry, like he – a five-year-old boy back then – was responsible for my kidnapping.

Behind me, the Queen gasped, and unease flashed in Juriaan’s eyes. Vladimir stiffened, but he didn’t say a thing, forcing me to continue awkwardly, “Every time you look at me, I see guilt in your eyes. It’s like you’re blaming yourself for what happened—”

“You know,” he said musingly, “they warned me about your candidness.”

“I’m sure they said I was appallingly blunt.”

“Yes. They did.”

I lifted my shoulders in a helpless shrug. “I can’t help it. I was raised as a warrior.”

Juriaan, Vladimir, and my mother exchanged looks.

“We were warned about that, too.” Amalia was clearly trying not to smile.

Seeing my confusion, Juriaan explained, “In our race, girls are, well, girls.”

I asked slowly, “Do you mean...that I’m the only female Souris who has dark fits?”

“Ah, well, that one is a royal trait, I’m afraid. The Prince and the Queen share it with you and so will your eldest sons and daughters. But what I am referring to is your warrior-like ways. Female Souris do not fight. At all.”

“I see.” I tried not to feel disheartened by the fact. I had hoped that the Souris would be where I’d finally feel normal, but I was beginning to accept that place didn’t exist.

Amalia reached for my hand. “It’s all right, you know. Remember, I am the same, too. And it’s *necessary*, this difference of ours, because it’s what allows us to defend the people we care for.” She sent a knowing look to her son. “Another royal trait is how we take our responsibilities to heart. Too much so in some cases.”

“I am to blame,” Vladimir said matter-of-factly. “I was five, not one. I understood what was right and wrong, and I chose to believe that Father would change his mind when I overheard him talking to those creatures. I chose wrongly.”

Amalia raised a brow at me, as if asking, *Do you see what I mean?*

I certainly did. “Vladimir...” I paused, trying to search for the right way to tell him it was not his fault. Nothing came, and I ended up resorting to what I usually resorted to when I was lost for words. “That pain in your heart...if you think feeling guilty and punishing yourself will make it go away, it won’t. You just have to learn to embrace it, you know? It’s like what Charles said.”

Vladimir blinked. “Charles?”

I nodded fervently. “The ability to bear the pain without breaking. It’s our greatest gift, and it’s what makes us stronger.”

He said carefully, “You make sense, but may I ask...”

I said eagerly, “Anything.”

“Who is Charles?”

“Oh. The professor. You know? Charles Xavier? Professor X?”

Juriaan was the first to laugh, followed by my mother, and even the Vladimir cracked a smile. “They warned us about that, too.”

I immediately knew what he meant and I protested, “Just because a superhero said it doesn’t make it any less true.”

Vladimir stepped forward and ruffled my hair. It was his first time to touch me, and I felt his immense strength, courage, and power through that touch. “You’ve done well, little sister. With all the adversities you have faced, I am impressed with the way you have remained unblemished with cynicism.” His tone was quiet and serious as he said, “You are definitely a warrior I would be proud to have fighting at my side.”

His words sobered me. They reminded me of the inescapable present and the choices that awaited me. “I’m glad you said that.” I tried to smile but failed. “I’m hoping it won’t turn out that way, but if it does...”

“We stand behind you and beside you, daughter. Your enemies are our enemies.” Amalia was the one who answered, her voice eerily cold, and when I looked at her, I realized that she was and wasn’t herself. It was as if her darker half had emerged, but it was under Amalia’s control, her dark powers leashed and the Queen’s to command.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” I whispered.

Vladimir said, “It takes time and practice, but we’ll do our best to train you so that, you, too, may exercise the same control as soon as possible.”

“That would be nice. I’m hoping things will end peacefully, but...”

Amalia laughed, and the sound of it made me shiver. “You may wish it as much as you can, but we all know that peace in this situation can only be won by having blood in our hands.” Danger flashed in her wise blue eyes. “And I will not stop to ensure that it’s their blood – *not yours* – that’s shed.”

Vladimir reached for Mother’s hand. “Your Majesty, *enough.*”

Seconds passed before the ice-blue fire in her eyes faded.

“When we get older,” Vladimir explained to me without taking his eyes off Amalia’s, “turning starts taking a toll on our physical bodies.”

Amalia’s strained face was proof of it, and she wryly admitted as much. “I’m afraid it’s true. But if you both think that’s going to stop me from helping you two in battle, you are dead wrong of course.” Her voice turned extra sweet. “Be reminded that I am the Queen, and in the end, it is what I decide that must be followed.”

That was true, too, but I was determined she’d never have a reason to fight. Seeing my mother weakened after turning –

that was what they called my dark fits – was terrifying. I didn't want to lose her when I had just found her.

I looked at Vladimir. "Maybe, if my plan works, there won't be a need to fight."

"For the sake of your adopted family," my brother said in a chilling voice, "I do hope that you are right."



# Chapter Three



## ALEJANDRO

It was too bad Lyccans couldn't get drunk. If only he could, then maybe he would have started feeling numb a long time ago. But he wasn't and so the pain caused by Calys' last words continued to gnaw at him.

*Calys no longer wanted to see him.* Alejandro's fingers tightened around his mug at the thought. Just thinking about it made him want to smash something, but it was the memory of her trying so hard to look at him without crying that made him want to kill. Goddammit, he hadn't wanted to hurt her like that. She kept saying she was a warrior. If she really was one, shouldn't she have been the first to realize that love was just bullshit spelled with four letters?

His thoughts were interrupted as the doors behind him swung open, and boys from Calys' new race strolled in. Souris, they were called. Angels with mortal blood. He had heard about them, of course, but he had thought they were just rumors. Even now, Alejandro couldn't quite wrap his head around it, especially when he considered the fact that his hellcat was one of them. They were a quiet bunch in general, but the young boys behind him were a bit noisier, probably because of their age.

"What time will you be leaving?"

"Just a little after midnight." The rueful answer was from the boy seated in the middle. "I've been tasked to go to the monastery, where the Lady Cayan lives."

The third boy whistled. "Darn, that's far. You know you gotta cross mountains to reach that place, don't you?"

"They say that place's full of chicks," the first boy said a little enviously. "If any one of them looks even half as pretty



as the Invisa Julianna, then I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat."

"But I heard they have a vow of chastity. I don't think I can even steal a kiss from one of them. And I can't really stay long, you know? My mission's to ask the Lady Cayan if she can think of a proper match for the Princess—"

The three boys fell silent, rendered speechless by nervous fear as a werewolf prince looking larger than life suddenly appeared before them.

Alejandro asked in a menacingly soft voice, "Which princess are you talking about?"

The three boys looked at each other. Finally, the oldest-looking one mumbled, "Princess Calys, Your Highness."

"And you say you're in search for a proper...*match*?" Alejandro felt like he was hearing someone else speak the words coming out from his mouth. Jealous rage had him cracking his knuckles every few seconds, the sound reverberating throughout the bar, which was now quiet as a tomb. The boys gulped and stared. It was as if they feared taking their eyes off his knuckles, fearing that the first one to do so would get a taste of his fist.

When the boys didn't answer, Alejandro asked again, "Wasn't that what you said?"

The oldest boy nodded reluctantly. "We are to formally announce the royal house's need for a proper match for the Princess, a husband—" He stopped speaking when the werewolf prince turned and walked away without a word.

*No fucking way.* The words repeated over and over in Alejandro's mind as he stalked his way towards Calys' place. The room she rented was at the topmost floor of the inn, and when he reached the place, he immediately saw the guards stationed on each side of Calys' bedroom door. Souris as well, by the scent of them.

He turned to face them, but their faces remained stoic. Looking at them, he suddenly thought of Misty Wall, the human girl his eldest brother married as part of his plan to rule

the race. Misty had been fascinated with all non-human creatures and had grown up listening to stories about them. She would have loved to know about the Souris.

Thinking about Misty made Alejandro realize something else. The absence of bitterness – a feeling he had been denying all this time. Before tonight, he had been unconsciously bitter about Misty. His brother was the strongest of their race, the most powerful, and yet she had so easily exposed his weakness by making him fall in love with her.

He had hated her for it, but he had never been able to admit it to himself because even he knew it was wrong. Love could destroy anyone. Alejandro finally understood that. It had the power to make anyone weak and vulnerable, and there was no exception to the rule. Not Domenico, not Misty herself, and certainly neither Calys nor him.

But...

It could be avoided. Love could be avoided, and he had to make Calys see that. He also had to convince her that she didn't damn well need another fucking fiancé to solve her problems. *Been there, done that.* Didn't they have that kind of cliché up in panther land? Or were they too busy busting each other's balls to learn about common sense?

He started for her door. Tonight, whatever it took, he would make Calys realize that all she needed was *him*.

The guards didn't move a muscle as he stopped before Calys' door. He knocked on the door hard. "I'd like to talk to you." A part of him expected the guards to react at his curt tone, but they didn't even blink. Smart of them. In the mood he was in, he might just end up knocking them out cold if they tried getting in his way.

The door slowly opened.

A face peeked from behind, one with swollen eyes. His heart clenched at the sight of it, and it clenched even more when Calys' voice was hoarse when she said, "It's very late."

His teeth gnashed. *Goddammit, Calys. Weren't you the one who told me that warriors didn't cry?* So why was she looking

like that? He knew he was being unfair and unreasonable in his anger, but he didn't give a damn. What he did give a damn about was figuring out a way to stop her tears.

“Didn't I tell you I don't want to see you again?”

He breathed hard at those words. It was her second time to tell him that, but it still made his chest constrict, the words choking the life out of him. “You did tell me that.” Green eyes clashed with blue. “But I'm choosing not to listen. Are you going to let me in or not?”

“Whatever you have to say——”

He snarled, “Is it true then?” His hand slammed against the wall, making her flinch as the cement cracked under his skin. “Are you looking for another fiancé?”

She paled. “Where did you hear that?”

“Answer the question,” he roared.

She cried out, “Yes!”

“Why the fuck would you do that?” he shouted back. “You already have me——”

“No, I don't. You're no longer my Cavaliere——”

“I am and I will be your damn Cavaliere for as long as I choose to——”

“I don't need you anymore, okay?” Her voice broke, but this time he didn't feel pity. All he could feel was jealousy, rage, and desperation, and all three emotions had one objective: to make her realize that what she was saying wasn't true. She *needed* him. She goddamn needed him as much as he had just realized he needed her.

And it should be enough.

Need should be enough.

Calys was shaking her head. “I don't want to talk to you anymore——”

When she tried to close the door – that was it.

Alejandro's control snapped.

He snaked one hand in, firmly but gently pushing her to the wall as he kicked the door open. She let out a gasp, her shocked gaze flying to her guards. “Aren’t you going to do something?” she demanded shrilly.

“We have been told by the Prince not to interfere in your personal affairs, Your Highness,” one of the guards replied flatly.

The words had Alejandro laughing, but it was a humorless sound and it didn’t stop him from picking up a thrashing Calys in his arms. Kicking the door shut, Alejandro carried his struggling hellcat into the room.

He threw her to the bed and followed her right after, not giving her a single second to escape. His body crashed down on hers, and he felt Calys freeze under him when his bulging erection throbbed directly against her wet heat.

Her face was red with ill-concealed desire, her eyes hazy, and her voice weak as she said, “I can’t believe you’re doing this.”

Looking down at her, he said in a hard voice, “I can’t believe you thought you could get rid of me that easily.” Alejandro expected her to protest, but instead Calys looked stricken.

She whispered, “Of course I can.” Her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard, looking like she had a hard time speaking. “*You* taught me that when you did the same to me.”

Alejandro whitened. “I *never* wanted to get rid of you, Princess.” His voice was rough with regret. “I just wanted you to see that what we have is more than what most people could ever dream of having in a goddamn lifetime. They could be reborn again and again, but not everyone can have what we have.”

His hand shook as his knuckles brushed against her soft, tear-stained cheek. “What we have is a rational need for each other, an understanding that’s not blinded by logic—”

Calys let out a teary laugh. “Do you hear what you’re saying? Do you really hear what you’re saying, Alejandro?”

That's *love*. That's love, but without the L-word."

He said unflinchingly, "You can think what you want to think about it, but just know I will never give you the words, not in public, not in private, not ever."

Calys didn't answer right away.

And just when he thought she wouldn't ever answer, she said in a pained whisper, "Do you know how much you make me want to say yes? I was raised to value myself, but you make me want to be good with second best." She choked on the last words, and her lips started to tremble. "But I don't want to. I *can't*. I owe myself more than that, and that's why I'm better off marrying someone else, someone who's at least willing to try—"

Alejandro's vision went black as the full import of her words sank in. The image of Calys marrying another man, of another man claiming her body, ravaged his brain, and his entire body shook in wrath. His fingers curled around her hair, tightening in a symbol of possession as he growled down at her, "*Never*."

She opened her mouth to protest, but this time he was no longer in the mood to hear her out. His mouth slammed down on hers, a wet, hard kiss so flagrantly carnal it had their bodies instantly flaming up in passionate heat.

*If all she had to say was about her belonging to another man*, Alejandro thought savagely as he took hold of her nightgown's neckline, then it was better to let their bodies do the talking instead.

"Alejandro, no—"

With one firm yank, Alejandro ripped her nightgown into two. The pieces of silk fell apart, exposing her silken body, and with another growl he moved down to cup one breast, squeezing it hard before his lips closed over her puckering nipple.

She screamed, her fists hitting his chest hard even as her body arched in pleasure.

“You can hit me all you want, but I won’t stop until I have you crying out my name.” As he sucked hard on her nipple, his other hand slid below her curvy body, squeezing one plump cheek of her bottom before using it to bring her body up. The action had his swollen cock rubbing insistently against her folds, and the contact made Calys shake her head as if in denial, her fisted fingers beating irregularly on his shoulders.

“Don’t do this.” But Calys’ voice was weak and trembling, her body betraying her at every turn.

“You’re mine,” he rasped out as he moved to her other breast. “And before this is over…” Bending down, he let his teeth graze tantalizingly against her nipple, making Calys cry out, “—you won’t be able to deny it.”

He pushed one finger inside her as if to punctuate his words, and Calys shuddered, her legs winding around his waist in response.

Alejandro worked hard on worshipping every part of her body, his possessive need for her making him primal. He sucked on her nipple, fucked her with his fingers, and toyed with her clitoris, tormenting the sensitive bud with flicks and twists. He didn’t stop with the simultaneous attack on her body, waiting for her complete surrender.

And finally, she did, her eyes nearly dilated as her nails scraped painfully against his back. When their gazes met, she begged, “Please.”

“Then tell me,” he gritted out as he raised his body from hers, making Calys cry out in protest when his cock left its hot moist home against the swollen folds of her pussy.

“Tell me who you belong to!” He flipped her around, pulling her up and towards him until she was on all fours. As her hands slammed down against the bed, he bent over her, making Calys scream and buck against him as his teeth latched onto the tender skin of her neck. He sucked hard, and she screamed again, bucking harder against him, trying to get his cock into her from behind.

But Alejandro was in control, and with one hand firmly holding her hips, he was able to keep his cock from even touching any part of her, making Calys release a keening cry in sheer frustration. He sucked hard on her neck, laying a claim on her in the most basic way a man could claim his woman.

When he released her, his mark burned hot against her skin, and she shook her head, twisting around to look at him. “What did you do?” she whispered.

“I marked you.” He straightened up on his knees, and his eyes capturing hers, he began to tease her pussy from behind, rubbing the head of his cock against her slippery folds. “No shifter, no creature, no goddamn man with any self-respect would claim you when he sees that.”

Alejandro squeezed one round cheek before slapping it hard to make it blush. Calys yelped, and the sound was a fucking turn-on, and he slapped her other cheek, wanting to hear the sound again.

“Alejandro!” But her voice shook more out of excitement than anger.

He squeezed both cheeks, harder than before. “Tell me now. Tell me you know you’re mine.”

She shook her head.

“Tell me or I can’t fuck you hard.” He pushed forward, allowing his cock to slide just a fraction inside of her, making him groan and Calys moan. He pulled out right after, snarling, “Tell me, Princess. Tell me what we both know is true so I can give you my cock—”

Calys sobbed out, “Please.”

“Then tell me—”

She cried out, “I’m yours!” She pushed hard against him. “I’m yours, okay? I’ll always be yours, so please—”

With a growl of satisfaction, Alejandro gave them both what they wanted, his cock shoving straight into her, hard and deep. She screamed, her muscles tightening around his cock,

and he shuddered at the intense pleasure of it. He began to move, thrusting hard and fast. He bent over her, reaching for her breasts so he could pinch her nipples as his cock moved in and out of her. She cried out, again and again, her soft curvy body shaking beautifully against him, making him want to ruin her over and over, the wet slapping sounds their bodies made adding to his pleasure.

“*Calys.*” He roared out her name as he fucked his way nearer to the precipice. His movements became out of control, his need for her so powerful that the wall behind the bed began to crack.

“*Alejandro.*” She said his name so beautifully it had him shuddering, and when her hand covered his hand on her breast, the tenderness of the gesture had him snapping.

Releasing one nipple, he moved his hand down. Pressing hard on her clit, he withdrew his cock from behind to the hilt before shoving it back in.

She screamed, coming instantly, and he came right after her, growling her name. Holding on to her hips, he didn’t stop thrusting in and out of her as he came. The sight of her bottom up in the air, her fingers curled tightly against the bed sheet, and her mewling sounds of pleasure – all of it made Alejandro shudder, prolonging his release.

When they were spent, he collapsed on the bed, their bodies curled spoon-fashion, his semi-erect cock still inside her, pulsing ever so softly and making Calys shudder.

When he felt her body relax and become heavy against him, Alejandro placed a kiss on the mark he had made on her neck. He might never be able to give her the words, but he could at least do something so she would never think she was second best.





# Chapter Four



## CALYS

“It has been three days, my dear.” Amalia spoke the words reluctantly, and I knew she was aware that the words would force me to face reality. The two of us, together with Juriaan and Vladimir, were the only ones inside the inn’s dining hall. In the days I had spent with the Souris, I came to realize how formalities meant a lot to them. I had grown up enjoying my meals with the entire pack, but it was different for the Queen and the Prince. They preferred privacy and never spoke about anything important if other people were around, be they Souris or not.

Sensing my mother’s gaze still on me, I looked away from the windows. I had been looking at windows more often than I wanted, and I know it was because deep inside my heart I was hoping to see Alejandro come back.

“I’ll make a decision today.” The words sounded as hollow as I felt. I knew I should be thankful for what my new family had done. They had accomplished the impossible and gathered offers of proposals from the most illustrious and powerful families from just about every non-human race that existed. Whichever proposal I accepted, it would be something that the Panthera wouldn’t sneeze at, an alliance that would come more than handy if the prophesied war between good and evil ever came to be.

The hours passed, day became night, and my hopes dwindled into nothing. As I joined my family in front of the proposal bearers, I questioned myself why I even cared about waiting for Alejandro. Hadn’t he made it clear he would *never* love me? Would I really sink so low and accept crumbs of his affection when I could have so much more?

“The rites for selection shall now commence,” Juriaan said in a strong, clear voice. Like Amalia and Vladimir, my cousin

was dressed formally in silver and gold, the colors of the Souris' royal family. It should have looked extremely flashy, but somehow Juriaan and the others made it work. While my jewelry consisted of silver and gold as well, I wore my pack's colors, a quiet statement of where my loyalties lay first and foremost.

The first proposal bearer stepped forward. "Greetings from Riyu Delicazzi, the current head of the Delicazzi clan of the Caros."

And so it went, until thirty-four proposals had been formally offered.

Amalia inclined her head regally in acknowledgment. "Before we proceed, please convey my gratitude to your leaders for their prompt response. It is much appreciated." She looked at me. "Princess?"

Before I could answer, my brother moved forward. "I believe we have one last candidate left."

Amalia was visibly surprised, but then Juriaan went to her, saying something too low for me to hear, and she nodded in understanding. "I see." When she straightened, she glanced at me with unreadable eyes. "Apparently, the Prince is right. There is one last candidate for you to consider."

Almost as if on cue, the doors opened, and the first one I saw was my own father, Venetto Adelardi.

But he was not alone.

Behind him was Domenico Moretti, the infamous heir of the most powerful Lyccan pack, and next to the werewolf prince was his younger brother Alejandro.

"Father?" My voice was faint with shock.

"My dear," Venetto said, his eyes twinkling despite his tired appearance. His eyes met the Queen's. "Your Majesty."

My mother's answering smile was warm. "It's a pleasure to finally meet the man who has taken great care of Calys. I hope you may grant me a moment of your time tonight. I would love to personally extend my gratitude for being there

for my daughter..." She paused. "Our daughter...when I couldn't be."

Venetto visibly relaxed at the Queen's words, and it was only then I realized that he had been wary about the kind of welcome he would receive from my birth mother. "It would be my pleasure to speak with you, Your Majesty." His tone was gruff with emotion. He glanced sideways at Domenico, and his voice took on a wry note. "I must confess, however, that meeting Your Majesty was not the only reason I have come here. As you may know, my lands have been unfortunately subjected to a good deal of upheaval. It is for this reason that I greatly welcomed the proposal Domenico Moretti presented me with."

*Proposal...from Domenico Moretti?*

"But he's married," I gasped.

*Silence.*

My father looked like he badly wanted to laugh while none of my family wanted to meet my gaze. The other proposal bearers, however, had no qualms. Half of them were grinning. The others were also avoiding my eyes discreetly.

I looked at my father in confusion. Well, *wasn't he?*

Unbidden, I found myself looking at Alejandro.

That one looked like he wanted to kill me.

Finally, Domenico Moretti cleared his throat. Like his younger brother, he possessed the same black hair and green eyes as well as the tall, lean build the Morettis were known for. All in all, he looked a lot more handsome *and* intimidating than what rumors led me to believe and when his intense gaze landed on me, I did my best not to fidget, not wanting him to think I was some silly princess.

His lips twitching, Domenico said solemnly, "Yes, I *am* indeed married and will stay that way permanently." He glanced at the younger man beside him, one who had remained silent all this time.

Again, I found my gaze straying towards him, and when our eyes met, he snarled, “You idiot.”

I gasped, but everyone around me burst into laughter. Even Vladimir cracked a smile.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Alejandro snapped as he stalked towards me. “You don’t need another prince other than me. You don’t need another Cavaliere other than me. You *don’t* need anyone but me.” He shook my shoulders hard with each word.

“B-but—”

He growled, “*I’m the one proposing marriage. Idiot.*” He said it with such furious relish it was as if he was dying to say it to me a hundred times more.

I echoed disbelievingly, “Marry...you?”

“*Yes,*” he roared. “I’m the one who’s proposing marriage and if you know what’s good for you, mine is the only proposal you’ll consider.”

My head reeled.

Alejandro was breathing hard, and he looked like he was having an internal struggle. Half of him seemed to want to strangle me, the other half wanted to do...well...unspeakable stuff. When he cupped my face, I couldn’t help but tremble. His voice low, he said, “I cannot and will never love you, Calys. But I offer you everything in me – my life, my honor, my strength. And if you marry me...” He knelt down on one knee. “I also offer you the entire might of the Moretti pack.”

In the background, gasps and whispers abounded, for the promise he made was no small thing. To have Alejandro Moretti as my Cavaliere was already a feat in itself, and that was only with no one knowing he also happened to be The Masked Wolf. But to have the entire Moretti pack fighting for us? Warriors who were almost as good as Alejandro but just as loyal and cunning?

Alejandro held my hand and touched his lips to my knuckles. “Choose me, Princess, and I swear to be the warrior who will win *every* battle for you.”

## CALYS

“Excuse me, but do you know where my father’s gone?” I tried not to sound desperate as I asked the panther stationed at the end of the hallway leading to Venetto’s room. I had been to his room and Amalia’s, hoping to catch sight of Venetto, but he wasn’t in either place.

Paulo appeared surprised by my question. “I thought he was with you.” In his mid-forties, he had worry lines on his forehead, something I was sure had to do with the monumental task of looking after my father. Venetto hated having guards with him, seeing them as babysitters he didn’t need.

At his reply, it was my turn to be bewildered. “Me? But I haven’t talked to him since we met at the hall.”

Paul scratched his head. “Well, that was what the pack leader told me. He’d be meeting you at the back, I think.”

“Oh. Maybe he sent someone around to ask for me.” Venetto, like most old-school pack leaders, didn’t own a mobile phone. “I’ll go look for him there. Thanks, Paulo.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No, it’s all right. But maybe if I miss him again and you see him first, could you tell him to wait for me?”

Turning around, I headed to the back, hoping I would indeed find my father there. I badly needed to talk to him. I had to know if Venetto was aware of what was between Alejandro and me, needed to be sure that he was aware he had practically given the werewolf prince the right to break my heart over and over by showing his support for Alejandro’s proposal.

Just the thought of what happened back at the hall had me stumbling on my own feet. I couldn’t believe he had said all those things. And they were both the best and worst things he could say. The good part: he promised me an army any general would be proud to lead. The bad part: he also promised he would never be able to love me.

The urge to cry and laugh was almost uncontrollable and I took several deep breaths, trying to control my hysteria.

Going through the inn's back doors, I called out, "Father?" It was completely dark outside, which was strange. There was a beautiful garden here, one that was usually ablaze with lights because the owners of the inn were extremely proud of it. Taking a step onto the stone path, I moved forward and called out again. "Father?"

No one answered, not even a single cricket cricking, and that was when it struck me. It was too silent here. *Too* silent. The whole place smacked of danger that had gone past, danger that didn't make me have a dark fit because it was not directed at...me. It was directed at someone else.

*Oh God, no.* All thoughts of Alejandro fled and all I could think about was Venetto. My heart racing in fear, I called out again, "Father?"

In the darkness, something caught my eye, a glint of metal.

A sword.

Heart in my throat, I ran towards the spark, my mind blank with terror. *Please let it not be him, please let it not be him, please let it not be him.* The stone path curved to the left, and there, I saw it, an upright sword—

*"Nooooooooooooo!"*

Tears of disbelief streaked down my cheeks as I rushed towards where my father lay unmoving on the ground, his own sword protruding from his bloodstained chest.

Crashing down on my knees, I reached for his shoulders with shaking hands. "Father?" *Please God, please make him open my eyes. Please.* But his eyelids remained closed. Clasp the hilt of his sword with both hands, I pulled it carefully out of his body—

Behind me, someone gasped.

My head twisted around, and I found two men halted in their tracks at the sight of Venetto's dead body on the ground, my hands on the sword that killed him.

"Dear Lord." The whisper came from Benito, the head of the Panthera's face turning a sickly shade of white.

The second man was Raoul. “*What have you done, Calys?*” His voice was filled with hurt incredulity, but in his eyes was the truth – the real feelings he felt, and they were nothing but triumph.

And I knew. I cried. And when I looked at him, I was no longer myself.





# Chapter Five



## ALEJANDRO

The first inkling he had of the trouble brewing around him was something that couldn't be explained. It was more than feeling someone had just walked over Alejandro's grave. Rather, someone had jumped on it, over and over, each footfall harder than the last. *Pay attention*, the person over his grave seemed to scream. *Pay attention before Calys dies*—

The mug he held in his hand crashed to the floor, and the people around him became silent and wary, their warrior bodies going taut as they waited for their prince to explain his actions.

Seated next to him at the head of the table, Domenico Moretti asked calmly, "What happened?" The noise in the bar was reduced to nothing when he spoke, all the shifters inside on the alert. They, too, had started to sense the same thing that was making Alejandro restless.

And then they all heard it—

*Nooooooooooooo.*

It was Calys, screaming like someone had just taken her life.

Alejandro broke into a run, and so did Domenico and the rest of their pack. Chairs crashed to the floor in their wake as they burst out of the bar, none of them bothering to hide their shifter speed. The air about them was raw with violence, telling them there was no second to lose.

Over and over, he heard the sound of Calys screaming, and it made Alejandro run harder and faster, feeling all the while he wasn't running hard or fast enough. His sense of smell showed him the way, and they all headed towards the back of the inn. He smelled death, and it made him bristle with fear and aggression.

When they reached the back of the inn, everyone was fighting. Adelardi panthers against each other, and other panthers against Souris, their wings tensely drawn against their backs, just a second away from spreading open to give them an aerial advantage over their opponents.

His gaze searched the battle scene wildly, and he found her a moment later.

Calys. She was alive. Thank the fuck she was alive.

Relief crashed into him as he stared at her, and that was when he realized she was not quite herself. She was having one of her dark fits, and it was extremely clear that she was hell-bent on killing Raoul. The younger man was on the ground, fighting for his life. He shifted into his panther form the next second, but it made no difference. Calys was relentless in her attack, every swing of her father's sword deadly in its precision. Metal clashed against claws, wounding both skin and fur.

Raoul's gaze found him. "Stop her," he demanded in a voice made shrill with fear. "She's gone mad," he gasped. "She's killed her own father and now she wants to kill me—"

Alejandro tore off towards them, knowing he couldn't allow Calys to kill Raoul without any justification. Once her rage died, he knew she would blame herself forever for it, and he didn't want that kind of burden on her.

"Princess, stop—" He managed to step between Raoul and Calys.

"Get out of my way!" Her eyes blazed with fury as she struck at him, hard enough to send him flying. It was the distraction Raoul was waiting for, giving him the time to scramble away. He knew he would never win against Calys. He had known her far too long to underestimate her skills, but it also made him aware of her weakness.

She was a warrior, and warriors had their silly codes of honor.

By the time Calys faced him, Raoul held Venetto's lifeless form in his arms. "If you take my life, know that I will take

your father's form with me. He'll die scarred and dismembered, nothing like the warrior he was in real life!" To show her he meant it, he drew a line on Venetto's throat and blood started to seep out.

Calys screamed at the sight of Venetto's neck being slowly decapitated.

Memories assailed her.

Of Venetto playing with Calys and Anastasia, tossing their young bodies in the air at the same time before catching them one by one—

Of Venetto patiently teaching her to wield a sword while Anastasia clapped every time Calys was able to bring their father down—

Of Venetto telling her he was so proud of her and that she and Anastasia were children of his heart—

Her dark half relinquished control of Calys' body, and she came back to herself with a cry, the sword dropping from her suddenly nerveless fingers.

Her tear-blurred eyes sought Raoul's. "*Stop.*" She would never forgive himself if Venetto ended up beheaded because of her quest for justice. "You can do anything you want, just please don't make my father any less of a warrior."

"Call off everyone on your side," Raoul snarled.

Without taking her eyes off Venetto, she said hoarsely, "You heard him."

One by one, the Souris, the Lyccans, and the Adelardi panthers loyal to her stepped back, a traditional symbol of ceasefire among non-humans.

The tension on Raoul's face eased, and his smile turned feral. Too late, Alejandro caught the look the panther sent to his men.

"No—-" But dozens of panthers had rushed at him, preventing him from reaching Calys in time. The last thing he saw before going berserk was a panther striking Calys' head from behind.

## Alejandro

“You have to talk to me at some point.” Two days had passed since Venetto’s lifeless form had been discovered, two days of Calys being locked in the dungeon – something all shifter towns secretly possessed because of its unusually strong inhabitants. Unlike most others, however, Midtown’s was natural rather than manmade, painstakingly built from damp stone caves underneath the Everglades. Thick steel bars that were spaced only inches apart made up its cages, and the keys to its heavy locks had been turned over to the Panthera.

Both of them were seated on the ground, Calys’ knees huddled close under her chin while Alejandro lay against the cave’s walls, one leg propped up.

Her silence ate at him, making his chest squeeze painfully. “Talk to me, Princess. Please.”

But Calys only looked at him, her face wan and her gaze blank. She had not been eating for days, and only the knowledge that he would bring war to his race and hers kept Alejandro from forcibly breaking her out.

Above them, the Panthera remained locked in a meeting, Raoul doing his best to force the elders of his race to condemn Calys for killing Venetto Adelardi. As the Panthera was traditional to the core, Calys’ judgment would depend on their decision as a whole. DNA evidence did not mean anything to them, but even if it did, Alejandro knew the tests he had secretly asked his men to carry out would yield no clues. He had studied Venetto’s corpse, and it had been a swift, clean kill, with no signs of a struggle. Venetto had *known* the killer – and he had not expected the other person to be his murderer.

His gaze returned to Calys. It was clear she was still in shock, her devastation over Venetto’s death making her drown in self-pity.

“You need to snap out of it.” His voice was tight with worry. Gripping the bars that separated them, he demanded, “Aren’t you worried about your sister?” He had only recently learned about her human sister from the Souris, and apparently it was the girl that he had overheard Stefan talking to.

Calys finally looked at him, but her tone was dull when she said, “Stefano will look after her.”

They were the first words she had spoken, and Alejandro’s eyes held hers immediately, not willing to let Calys drown herself in her grief once more. “And what about your pack?”

Her body jerked at the mention of her family, the first sign of life she had shown. It gave Alejandro hope, making him press on, “If you continue to stay like this, what do you think will happen to your pack? They will be under your cousin’s rule.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to hear this—”

“Tough, because you will hear it, whether you want to or not.”

She clapped her hands over her ears. “I just want to...” Her voice choked. “I just want to grieve. It’s my fault Father’s dead. *My* fault. *My* fault. *My* fault.” She started beating her chest.

“Stop it!”

“My fault, my fault—”

His temper ignited the same time his fear over her hurting herself rose, and he snarled, “Stop it, dammit!” When she kept crying and beating herself, he roared, “Stop with the self-pity! If Venetto raised you as a warrior, then fucking act like it!”

Calys froze.

The pain etched on her face was so raw it made him ache to take her in his arms, but he knew that it wasn’t comfort she needed from him. That would come later. Right now, she needed him to make her strong and if he had to lash out at her to do it, then that was what he was going to damn well do.

“Tonight is my last chance to be with you, Calys. I’ve made sure that none of Raoul’s men are near enough to hear us – they all think we’re doing...” Alejandro grimaced.

Calys asked faintly, “Doing what?”

*Sex*, Alejandro thought. It had been the only rational explanation for his desire for privacy, and it was better than have everyone realize that instead they were plotting to extract vengeance. “Never mind what they think. You only need to know that this is the only time I can talk to you.” He paused, disliking what he had to say next. “The Panthera has asked me and my brother to leave. He’s asked the same of your new family.” Everything inside him roared in protest against the very idea, but he knew that it was necessary, not just because disobeying could bring war but also because doing so was tantamount to their plan.

Forcing himself to continue, Alejandro said, “Benito says that your race desires to mourn Venetto’s passing in private, but I fear doing so makes him fall right into Raoul’s hands.”

When Calys’ eyes widened, Alejandro knew she had understood perfectly what he meant. Drawing her breath unevenly, she whispered, “You can’t be serious. He can’t... why...how could he even think he’d get away with killing the entire Panthera?”

His eyes bored through hers. “The same way he or whoever it is he asked to kill your father managed to get away with it. He would make it appear that *you* were the one behind it.”

Calys looked down at her hands. In a low whisper, she said, “I barely managed to control myself back then. If I see him again, I know I’m going to kill him.”

“If our plan works, you will have the right to. But Princess...” He waited for her to look at him, and when her blue eyes met his, he said emphatically, “*None* of this will work if you don’t get a grip on yourself.” His voice hardened. “Do you understand, Calys? If you truly want to avenge your father, you need to promise me – you need to promise to yourself that you will be strong.”

Several seconds of silence passed before she whispered, “On my word as a warrior. I promise.”





# Chapter Six



## CALYS

Everything in my body knew the moment Alejandro Moretti and the rest of his pack left. It was an absence that slowed down the beat of my heart, made my skin prickle in uneasy awareness, and my muscles freeze. Raoul came down to the dungeon as soon as they left, and my dark half snarled and demanded to be let out the moment I saw him.

*Patience. Patience. We can't kill him now,* I whispered to my darker side.

He strutted towards the cage, looking and acting more peacock than panther. I smelled his fear underneath his arrogant stance and knew he still remembered the terrified state he was in when I had the sword in my hands over his body.

When he reached my cage, he spat at me. His saliva dripped down my face, and I wiped it away silently with my shackled wrists.

“You know you’ll rot here until you’re sentenced to be beheaded, don’t you, little cousin?”

I only looked at him silently, not trusting myself to speak. I focused on his face, my gaze unblinking as I started counting the ways I could torture him.

*One, castration.*

“Not going to say anything?” he sneered.

*Two, pull out his nails, slowly, one at a time.*

“Uncle Venetto was wrong to trust a monster like you. He had been nothing but generous to you and how did you repay him? You had a dog between your legs and you began to kill every panther that got in your way.” It dawned on me that he

was speaking too loudly, like he wanted the people above us to hear him.

*Three, skin him alive, peel his fur inch by inch.*

“If I hadn’t been raised to respect the Panthera, I wouldn’t bother waiting for their sentence. I’d have given you to my men and let them treat you like the slut that you are and when they’re done, I’ll have you chopped into pieces and fed to the dogs you so love. I doubt they’d know the difference.”

*Four, slice his scalp open and turn his brain into a pincushion.*

He spat at me again. “If you’re smart, you’ll be praying for a quick death at their hands.”

*Five, sew every opening in his body shut. From his eyes, his ears, nose, mouth, and even the slit in his cock. Every damn opening.*

As he turned away, I whispered, “You should pray for the same, too. *Cousin.*”

The words had Raoul tripping on his own feet.

It should have made me smile, but it didn’t. Maybe, maybe when my hands had turned red with his blood, I would regain my sense of humor.

Raoul and his men left not soon after, just like Alejandro had predicted he would. When the massacre happened, Raoul would not be in the scene, which provided him an alibi of sorts. I counted the seconds, needing them to be far enough to be out of earshot before I made my move.

*Five minutes...ten minutes...fifteen minutes...*

I stood up. Vladimir or Amalia hadn’t gotten around to teaching me how to control my dark fits, but I didn’t think I had to worry about that in this case. What I felt, she felt. What I knew, she knew, and what mattered to me, mattered to her.

Tonight, we both knew, was all about retribution.

*Twenty minutes...*

I closed my eyes.

*Twenty-five minutes...*

When I opened my eyes, both of us were awake, and both of us wanted to kill.

Metal bars bent and curved under my fingers like they were made of plastic. The screeching sound had the guards rushing down into the dungeon. By the time I stepped out of my cage, they were all in front of me, fear written all over their faces.

I recognized them as guards of the Panthera. For that reason alone, I would do my best not to kill them. “You can try to hurt me or capture me. But do not try to kill me, or I *will* kill you.” I took a step forward and they all took a step back, and it was like an impromptu dance between us.

They looked at each other, as if needing themselves to be brave as one unit before charging towards me at the same time. A minute later, and they were all groaning in the ground, their injuries rendering them temporarily immobile. Not even their shifter blood would be able to heal them quickly enough to stop me.

When I reached the surface, there was no sign of any other panthers – neither foe nor ally was around, and it only meant one thing. What Alejandro predicted had indeed come to pass, and tonight either Raoul or I would die.

I walked alone in the dark, the inhabitants of Midtown all shut safely inside their homes. Either they knew what was going on or they were sensitive enough to the undercurrents in the air and knew better than to interfere.

The first attack came the moment I stepped past the town borders. A steel arrow swooshed from the north. I caught it handily and broke it into two with a snap of my fingers. A torrent of arrows followed, together with a shower of bullets, but it was too late. I ran, too fast for them to hit me, and their own weapons became my tracking device, exposing their location like a predator finding its prey’s jugular.

They saw me coming, but that was all they could do.

See.

It was the last thing they could do.

For their eyes, all their eyes, were just like Raoul's.

Evil. Greed. Soulless.

Bones broke. Necks snapped. Spines crushed.

The second wave of attack came as soon as I eyed where Raoul hid and waited in all his cowardice. A fortress that belonged to his mother. It had been a home to warriors once, but now because of him, the place would be a mass grave.

It broke my heart to see members of my own pack rushing towards me. Venetto had loved them all. Every damn one of them, and this was how they would return his love? If they had no mercy or love for him, then I had none of the same for them.

With them, vengeance would be extra sweet.

Around us, the wind started to howl from nowhere, strong gusts of wind that had the leaves rustling, branches swaying, the sounds mingling with the screams that came from traitorous panthers whose flesh I ripped apart with my hands.

They came at me like an endless mass, hatred and desperation making them wildly violent. But they had no chance. *No chance. Not one bit.*

And bit by bit, the land underneath my feet became soft and squishy with the strips of their flesh.

The fortress' doors were barricaded, but it took me nothing to pry them out of the way.

Finally, I saw Raoul.

He was surrounded by a hundred shifters, paid assassins, and many of their faces were familiar. *After tonight*, I thought absently, *The Den would find itself suffering from a sudden shortage of fighters.*

Raoul was stupid as ever, and the proof of it was the absence of fear in his eyes. He thought he had numbers on his side, and he said as much. "More are coming this way, bitch. You can keep killing, but it will take you an entire day before

you can reach me – long enough for me to have the entire race under my reign.”

Outside, the wind howled louder, making Raoul frown as he fought against the distraction it presented.

He really was an idiot.

“Just tell me,” I said softly. “That’s all I ask. Tell me who killed Father.”

He bared his fangs in a sneering smile. “I wish I could say it was me, but unfortunately I only played a small part of it.”

The words had my dark half stirring, but I made her wait, knowing that we had to keep Raoul alive long enough for the truth to be known.

“I told him the three of us should talk privately, that you were already waiting for him at the back of the inn.”

“And?” My entire body shook at the effort I had to exert to keep myself still and not make all my dreams come true. Since the time I had left the dungeon, I had counted a hundred and thirty-five ways to torment him, and more ideas still poured into the back of my mind.

“Venetto was old. He was nothing like he used to be, even if he does act like he’s still got it. My man had his sword in a second, and he never even got to defend himself.”

I bowed my head as the truth washed over me. It hurt to hear how Venetto had died, but somehow it was also liberating, and a part of me was grateful that he had not suffered.

“Nothing to say before I kill you?”

“I do.” Slowly, I looked up at him. “Did you really think you could get away with it?”

“I already did,” Raoul bragged. “Because at this very moment, my men are killing the entire Panthera, and it will all be blamed on you.”

“No.” I stepped forward, and despite having a hundred men with him, Raoul inched back. “They’re not.”

Consternation twisted his face. “You think you can make me believe your foolish words—” He stopped speaking as a strange, loud sound interrupted him. It came from above, and unease wafted through his army of assassins as they saw the fortress’ heavy roof start to shake.

Outside, the wind howled louder than ever.

Raoul was staring at me. “You can’t be behind this,” he gasped.

I didn’t answer, knowing I didn’t have to.

A second later, the whole roof was smashed apart and dark shadows began to fall, hard and fast. And that was when they saw where the wind was coming from.

Oddly, I remembered the times Venetto would tuck me into bed and read my favorite superhero comics with me.

*It’s not a bird...it’s not a plane...*

Tears fell down my eyes as one after another, Souris flew down, and their large, strong wings were so powerful that together they had made it appear like a storm was approaching. In each of their arms was a passenger, a Lyccan or a member of the Panthera, and all of them had heard every word Raoul spoke, their presence undetected because they had come to the fortress from the skies, where no one was watching.

Raoul was shaking in fear as the realization that his defeat was imminent became clear to him. He looked at me. “Calys —”

I shook my head slowly. “You. Will. Die.”

## ALEJANDRO

The battle was a bloodbath, but it was evident from the very start which side would win. Even so, he fought his way to be close to Calys, needing to be sure that he would be there to protect her even if his help was unnecessary.

He found her with Raoul, and the younger man was on the ground, begging for his life. But one look at Calys’ face told him mercy would not be granted, and rightly so. She had

gotten her father's sword back and she slashed at the panther as she forced him to a corner.

"Please, I can tell you what the others are planning," Raoul babbled. But he ended up howling in pain as Calys' sword sliced his face, leaving wounds on both his eyes.

"I'm not your only enemy," Raoul screamed.

"I know that, Raoul," Calys answered in her singsong voice. "But you're the only enemy I want to kill right now."

And then she began to slice him into pieces, starting from his ankles, so exactly it was as if Raoul's body was like a diagram. By the time she reached his intestines, Alejandro realized that the interval was the exact distance between the steel bars of her cage in the dungeon.

Even when Raoul was long dead, Calys remained standing next to his body, unmoving. It was as if the battle taking place around them didn't exist, every bit of her concentration focused on his corpse.

He stopped a foot away from her, knowing it would be utter stupidity to approach Calys from behind when she was having a dark fit.

"Princess——"

In an instant, Calys had whirled around and her father's sword was pointed at his throat. There was nothing of his princess in those baby blue eyes. It was all her twin, all darkness and none of her light.

"You will die for hurting her." They were the only words she spoke before she lunged for him. Unlike with Raoul, she did not bother to toy with him. She was deadly serious, and he was forced to be just as serious as he tried to defend himself without hurting her.

"Don't do this." Twisting around, he grasped a sword lying on the ground just in time to parry another killing thrust from Calys.

"Why shouldn't I? You hurt her." Rage burned in her eyes at the sight of the weapon in his hand, and she became even

more aggressive, always going for spots that could maim. His head, his neck, his heart.

“You don’t want to do this—” Swords clashed.

“You hurt her. I could feel her pain,” Calys’ dark twin hissed. “It was almost like she was dying.”

He whitened at the words, and it was all she needed.

In another instant, she had him flat on the ground, her sword against his throat. She looked down at him as if waiting. Those eyes were not Calys’. Those eyes belonged to a killer, one who only knew right and wrong and nothing in between. Looking into those eyes, Alejandro tasted fear for the very first time. But it was not fear for his life.

Looking into those eyes, he knew that he could die any moment, and yet – only one memory kept playing in his mind.

*I love you. I know I do. I’ve k-known it for a long time.*

From afar, he heard Calys’ twin speaking.

*You hurt her. I could feel her pain. It was almost like she was dying.*

In his mind, he saw himself speaking, killing Calys like her dark twin had said, his every word a stab to her heart.

*Then I’m sorry. I’m sorry you feel that way.*

Above him, he heard Calys’ dark half ask, “Why have you stopped fighting?”

His gaze met hers, but all he saw was the look of betrayal on Calys’ face when he told her she was wrong to love him. If only he could take it back. If only he had the chance to talk to her before he died, then he would tell her she was right. She loved him, and he loved her.

The sword pressed harder against his throat, drawing blood. “Answer me, wolf.”

He said hoarsely, “Because I can’t take the risk of killing you if I try to escape.”

“Then you will let me kill you instead?”



“If that’s what it takes to keep you alive.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You are not lying.”

“No. I’m not.”

Her head cocked to the side. “Why did you hurt her?” Her sword pressed deeper against his neck as she spoke, a relentless punishment that told him very clearly he meant nothing to *this* side of Calys.

“Because I was a fool.”

“That’s all?”

Again, the sword pushed deeper, and he began to taste his own blood. But still he managed to speak evenly, saying, “Not all.”

Her voice cold with impatience, she asked, “Then what else?”

“If you do kill me, make her believe it was an accident. And tell her...tell her that I admitted to you that *I love her*.” His chest constricted at the words, which made him feel too goddamn vulnerable and weak. “Because I do. I love her.”

When Calys’ dark half made a move, he didn’t blink, wanting Calys’ lovely face to be the last thing he saw before he died.

But instead of killing him, her dark twin had tossed her sword to the side, bent down, and whispered into his ear, “*You must give her time to heal and be strong again. If you love her, you must.*”



# Chapter Seven



## CALYS

“**Y**our first guests have arrived,” Anastasia announced as she pushed the door wide open to my bedroom, not bothering to knock.

Her words made my heart leap in hope because one of those could be *him*. The man I had been waiting for all this time to see again. It had been more than a year – one long painful year of knowing he was near but unable to get close to him. Sometimes, I wondered to myself if I had only dreamt it. If he had really told me he loved me, and if he had really whispered that he hoped I would wait for him until he came back. Sometimes, I wished my darker and lighter halves were still separate. That way, I could demand answers from that part of myself. Why did she have to make him go away for so long? Why couldn't I heal and rediscover my strength by his side?

But of course, deep down inside I already knew the answer to that.

If I had him by my side, I would never really be able to fully earn the respect of panthers outside my pack. I had to show them that I didn't need a Cavaliere to rule, and if I did have one, then it was not because it was the backbone of my reign.

I had to become the alpha because of my own strengths and not because my Cavaliere was the strongest of them all.

After over a year of proving my worth to the Panthera, I think they were finally convinced. And now that I could be the alpha my father raised me to be, I was finally free to be with the man I loved.

Anastasia snapped her fingers in front of my face, jerking me back to reality. “Hellooooo?”

I turned red. “Sorry, I was just...”

“Daydreaming about your werewolf?”

I mumbled incoherently in reply.

“You don’t have to worry about him, you know.”

“I can’t help it,” I confessed. “It’s been a year—”

“Calys, he’s already here. I had the men at the gates report to me if they saw him.” She checked her watch. “If you watch for him by the window, I bet you could see him any moment now.”

I had already reached the windows of my bedroom before she was done speaking, making my younger sister laugh. “You really have it bad for him.”

“I love him,” I said simply.

Standing beside me, Anastasia squeezed my hand. “I’m so happy for you, Calys.”

Below us, cars started to drive into our territory, ranging from flashy sports cars to understated stretch limousines. Not counting our race, most shifters travelled in style, and such display of wealth was typical. I held my breath when the first limousine slowed to a stop and one of our guards immediately opened its door.

It was him.

Alejandro.

Before I could call out his name, I watched his handsome face break into a smile just before he offered his hand to someone still inside the limousine. A second later, he was drawing a young woman out – and into his arms as they shared a passionate kiss.

## **ALEJANDRO**

“Are you ready?” Domenico asked his younger brother as their limousine drove past the gates that secured the lands belonging to the Adelardi pack. “Do you need an inhaler perhaps or you’re still somewhat able to breathe?”

Alejandro only looked at his brother's wife. "I hate that he's got his warped sense of humor back ever since you returned to us."

Misty blushed and laughed, the sound self-conscious. Even though she and Domenico had been together for over a month now, she still found herself unused to the way everyone so casually spoke of her husband's love for her.

Domenico frowned down at his wife. "You mustn't blush at other men's words, darling."

"Domenico!" Her cheeks turned a deeper shade of red at his words.

The heir to the Moretti pack nodded in approval. "That's more like it." His gaze slid back to Alejandro's. "But seriously, brother, are you sure you're capable of breathing?"

His grin over Domenico's jealousy disappeared. "Shut up." He would rather kill himself than admit there was more than a grain of truth in Domenico's words. He *was* finding it hard to breathe, and the bow tie he had around his neck felt like it was choking him. Too much time had passed since the last time he had seen Calys. Did she still feel the same way about him? Or perhaps she had forgotten about him? Maybe one of those winged Souris had managed to steal her heart and this party was but a formality, something to get over with before she announced her engagement to another man?

It had killed him every day not to go to her, but he knew it was for the best, knew that her dark half would not have asked it of him if their separation had not been necessary.

She had so much going against her as potential alpha. Her youth, her gender, her lack of panther blood—his presence would only have made her weaker and less suitable to be a pack leader. A Cavaliere could and would always only be as strong as the woman he served. Before he could be seen as a strength, she had to prove her own strength first – and that was something she could only do on her own, away from him.

Soon, they were at their destination, and the familiar sight of the Adelardi pack's home had his heart thundering hard

against his chest. Soon, he would see her. Soon. Soon. Soon.

The next few moments went by in a blur, Alejandro simply going through the motions and counting the seconds until he could see his hellcat.

They were escorted to the rarely used ballroom of the Adelardis, and a butler at its doors announced their names. “Domenico Moretti, heir to the alpha of the Moretti pack, with his mate Misty and his brother Alejandro.”

The crowd below them clapped. They normally didn’t, but it was expected when it came to Domenico, whose name was even more prominent after the powerful speech he had recently delivered at Lyccan Hall. He had not only reclaimed his leadership of his race but he was also instrumental in forging an alliance not just with the much-elusive Faeries but the Caros as well.

When they descended the stairs, it was then Alejandro saw her. She made a breathtaking vision in purple, the deep shade of her gown making her skin appear as if it was glowing. Her hair was much longer, enough to be curled up in an elegant chignon. The sapphires sparkling in her ears were no match for either the brilliance of her gaze or the loveliness of her smile. Just one look at her, and she stole his heart. If he had his way, it would be in her safekeeping forever.

As dictated by customs, Alejandro allowed his brother to take the lead as they approached her. He kept waiting to catch her eye but she never looked at him, her smiling gaze resting only on Domenico. She stood in between her younger sister and Stefan, and the sight of the jaguar standing too damn close to his princess made Alejandro bristle.

He listened impatiently with half an ear as Domenico completed the formalities, introducing his wife with a noticeable sense of pride and finally Alejandro.

Calys was visibly reluctant as she turned towards him. He didn’t understand why and when he reached for her hand to kiss it, she said tightly, “It’s unnecessary.”

Alejandro's hand fell against his side at the unexpected and undeniable snub, one that had his brother raising a brow. Beside him, Misty was swallowing convulsively and around them, people were beginning to talk.

What the hell was wrong?

Before he could ask her, she was saying in a pointed voice, "Don't you have someone else to introduce me to?"

He said flatly, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

She flashed him an extra bright smile. "Oh, please, don't be shy. I really don't mind."

Alejandro demanded, "What the hell's gotten into you?" When she flinched, he immediately regretted his outburst. "I'm sorry." He forced the words out even though he felt like he had nothing to apologize for.

"I'm the one who should be sorry." This time, Calys' smile didn't reach her eyes, and her voice had gone back to being tight, almost to the point of rudeness, as she said, "I'm just not as good as everyone is at pretending."

Something inside him turned cold at her words. "Pretending?"

Calys looked away. "You shouldn't have bothered to come here."

Behind them, glasses crashed to the floor, eavesdropping female shifters unable to control their shocked response at Calys' words.

He wished he had a damn glass to drop as well. It would have been less painful than the reality of having his own heart crashing to the floor and his hellcat stomping all over it.

"What the fuck are you saying, Calys?"

"Exactly what I said." But still she didn't meet his gaze as she spoke.

"Look at me," he growled.

She shook her head.

“If you’re going to turn me away, then you should at least have the guts to say it to my face—”

Her head jerked up. “I wish you hadn’t come here at all,” she screamed. “Are you happy now? I can’t bear the sight of you! Do you get it now?” She stopped suddenly, as if unable to believe the words she had just uttered.

Alejandro could no longer feel.

One fucking long year of waiting, of believing that he had something to hope for, and then this.

A mocking smile touched his lips. “Crystal clear, Princess.” Without another word, he turned and walked away.

### CALYS

“I’m not sure what exactly happened.” The first one to break the painfully awkward silence that Alejandro Moretti’s departure had created was Domenico Moretti’s human wife, Misty.

“I’m not sure, either,” I whispered. I was still hurting at the sight of Alejandro leaving, and it hurt more than I expected it to. More than it should, considering the circumstances.

Misty cleared her throat. “I know it’s not my business, but I really thought you two had something going on...”

“I thought so, too...” Above us, the butler was calling out names of guests again. One of it was unfamiliar, but the person it belonged to was not. I recognized her right away, and in that moment whatever pain I felt at seeing Alejandro leave disappear.

My fists clenched at my sides. “How dare she come here?”

Domenico and his wife turned around, following my gaze, and it was clear on their faces that they knew exactly who I was glaring at.

Domenico cursed.

“I saw him,” I said bitterly. “I saw him kissing—”

The redhead actually came to us, a pretty smile to match her pretty face.



“—her!”

The girl stopped dead in her tracks as I pointed an accusing finger at her. She looked over her shoulder, as if wondering if there was someone else I was pointing at. When she looked back at me, she asked in a confused voice, “Are you, err, talking about me?”

“Do you even know who I am?” I cried out.

“The girl Alejandro wants to marry?”

I didn’t know what I wanted to do more at her words – kill her or kill myself. “If you know that, then how could you have kissed him—”

A male arm curved around the redhead’s waist, and I suddenly found myself looking at Alejandro.

Rather, I was looking at someone who appeared *exactly* like Alejandro but was not him.

He was Alessandro, Alejandro’s twin, and his tone was an icy snarl as he demanded, “Who the hell tried to kiss my girl?”

## CALYS

It was almost midnight by the time I reached Lyccan Hall, which according to Domenico was where Alejandro was currently nursing his broken heart. The werewolf prince had dished the words out without blinking, and I knew he had wanted me to feel as guilty as I could be. I had heard about the Moretti heir being ruthless when necessary, and now I knew it was true. He wanted me to learn my lesson from what happened, and I did. I didn’t think I’d ever forget this lesson, not even until the day I died.

Lyccan Hall was heavily fortified, just as what was expected from the race’s headquarters. I studied it thoroughly, and it took me about forty-five seconds to size it up. It was strong, definitely, but it was not impregnable.

The gates opened before me again, and the guard I had given my name to came out once more. “My apologies, Princess Calys,” he said stiffly. “I am afraid Prince Alejandro

will be occupied for the rest of his time here and is thus unable to meet with you.”

He didn't want to see me then.

I should have expected that, but the words hurt nonetheless. Squaring my shoulders, I told myself that I wouldn't give up just like that. I loved him. I had stupidly hurt him, but it didn't make me love him any less and he had to realize that.

But before I could do that, I had to get him to see first.

“I'm sorry,” I told the guard.

He blinked in surprise.

“Please don't consider this as something personal.”

Before he could ask me what was wrong, I had already knocked him unconscious. One down, more to go.

It was only when I had knocked out twenty Lyccan guards that the person I had come for finally appeared. He stood just a step past the gates of Lyccan Hall, a mountain of groaning, half-unconscious wolves between us. The sight of him had me swallowing, but the coldness in his eyes made me want to forget about being a warrior and just cry. From the first time we met, Alejandro Moretti had always been a passionate man. He was passionate in his fury, his happiness, in everything he did – and yet, now, there was none of that in his gaze. I had hurt him so badly that I had forced him to withdraw into himself, unable to feel but unable to be hurt as well.

When he only looked at me with a bored expression on his gorgeous face, I said almost apologetically, “I won't stop until I talk to you.”

His lips twisted. “Bloodthirsty kitten, aren't you?”

“I suppose I am.” More silence followed and I said finally, “I have a confession to make.”

Alejandro's green eyes slid towards my hapless victims. “Let me guess,” he drawled ever so coolly. “You have anger management issues.”

I choked on a nervous giggle. “Possibly.”

Again, his gaze slid back to the injured Lyccans between us. *You think*, his gaze seemed to ask.

I cleared my throat. “That’s, umm, not the confession I wanted to make, though.” Before he could make another smartass comeback and before I completely lost my courage, I blurted out, “I saw you kissing another girl.”

He stilled. “Is that so?”

“I’m afraid that’s not it still.” Swallowing, I gave him the whole, unvarnished, embarrassing truth of it. “I saw you kissing another girl – hours ago. *At my birthday party.*”

This time, he jerked in shock. “What the fuck?”

“And it turned out to be Alessandro,” I explained miserably. “Your brother. I forgot all about you being twins because I was so...mad.” I held my breath, searching his face for any sign of understanding or even anger. Anything that would tell me I had made him feel and that I wasn’t too late.

But all Alejandro said was, “Hence your bitch fit then?”

I winced. “Yes.”

“And if you hadn’t seen that...”

“I would have asked you what took you so long.” My voice caught at the last word. “B-because I missed you every day.”

“I see.”

I tried to wait for as long as I could, knowing I owed it to him to be patient. But fear got the better of me in the end, and I was the first one to speak once more. “Alejandro—”

“Thank you for your honesty. It’s appreciated.”

The rest of what I had to say died in my throat. *This was not how it was supposed to be*, I thought sickly. But then, hadn’t I made him feel the same way earlier? Hadn’t he come to my party, probably hoping for the same thing I did, but instead I had ended up humiliating him in front of everyone?

“We tried to make it work, Princess, but the two of us...”

I shook my head vehemently. “Don’t say it.”

His lips tightened, the only thing he did that told me I hadn’t completely failed in reaching him. And it was pathetic, but I hugged that clue to myself because it was my only hope. “Princess—”

“I’ll do everything you want just to show you how sorry I am.”

It was his turn to shake his head. “Nothing you do will change my mind.” Before I could protest, he stressed, “What happened between us made it very clear that you are not the right mate for me.”

The words made me flinch, but I told myself I could cry my eyes out after. But now, not when I still had to convince Alejandro to let me stay by his side. “I-if you d-don’t want me as your mate, then w-what about being your bodyguard?” I managed a smile. “You can’t deny I’d be good as one. And it can come with all the benefits you want—”

The next thing I knew, Alejandro had dragged me past the gates and into the first place with a locked door he came across. He slammed the door shut, and then he had me on my back, gritting out, “Why would you say something like that in front of so many men? Don’t you know by saying that they’d be thinking about you all the time now, fantasizing about *you* being their bodyguard—”

“But every word I said was true.” His nearness made my voice shake, and I had to curl my fingers into fists so I wouldn’t be tempted to reach out to him. I didn’t think I could bear it if he rejected me outright.

When he only stared at me, I said very clearly, “I love you —”

He spun me around.

Another second, and he had my jeans and panties down my ankles and his cock was pressing hard against my bottom.

His body slammed against my back, causing my breasts to flatten against the door. “Not going to protest?”

“I told you. I’ll do everything—” I found myself gasping as he suddenly entered me from behind. His cock slid easily into my body, my pussy made wet just by being in the same room he was in. I tried to speak, but he covered my mouth, and he prevented me from looking at him, too. We fucked in silence, his thrusts hard and deep, almost painfully rough.

It was punishment, pure and simple, a challenge to see if I meant every word. Was I willing to do everything he wanted just to make him forgive me?

I squeezed my eyes shut.

*Yes.*

Eye for an eye. It was what warriors believed in. I had hurt him terribly, and for that he had the right to hurt me just as terribly.



# Chapter Eight



## ALEJANDRO

“Your fiancée just tried to enter the premises,” Alessandro, his twin, said as he slid into the seat across Alejandro. His human partner, Kassia, was beside him, their hands entwined as always. The sight of it made Alejandro crack his knuckles. He had the strongest urge to go to The Den so he could fight his way into numbness.

The club they were in was exclusive for shifters, but because his family owned the establishment, Alejandro was able to have Calys barred from entering.

“She says she wants to be my bodyguard,” Alejandro said with a shrug. “So that’s exactly how I’m treating her.”

Alessandro shook his head. “You’re a cold bastard, you know that?”

Alejandro looked at Kassia. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but was he not the same to you in the past?”

Kassia nodded. “And he was exactly like that because he loved me.” When Alejandro flinched, she asked gently, “Don’t you think you’ve made her suffer enough? Don’t you think *both* of you have suffered long enough? You two went through so much. If anyone deserves to be happy and in love together, that’s the two of you.”

“And just in case you think it’s *not* enough,” his brother said, “you should know that when we arrived here, we saw some Lyccan boys trying to bully her and making fun of her about being a monster.”

Before he could answer, one of his men came running towards them, and the anxious expression on his man’s face had Alejandro swiftly standing up. “What happened?” he asked right away.

“It’s the Princess, Your Highness. She saw someone across the street and took off after him.”

Alejandro suddenly had a bad premonition about the whole thing, and his voice was rough with ill-concealed worry as he demanded, “Who did she see?”

“I did not recognize the man, but he had a very noticeable scar on his face—”

Alejandro remembered the last words of the vampire he and Calys had caught.

*A scarred man*, the vampire had said in description of the man who had hired him and the other fighters to kill Calys.

*Fuck.*

If something happened to Calys...

Ah, goddammit, why had he even bothered trying to lie to himself? Why did it have to take *either* of them being in mortal danger before he was forced to see the truth?

He loved her, and he would not stop loving her.

Alejandro looked at his man. “Which direction did they go?”

## **ALEJANDRO & CALYS**

“*Calys!*”

The voice was distinctly Alejandro’s, and for a moment, it distracted her from her fight with the scarred man she had caught lurking in the shadows outside the club. It was a distraction that the scarred man used quickly to his advantage, managing to kick Calys away from him when she turned towards the voice.

Calys grunted in pain, but she managed to grab a hold of the man’s ankle as he tried to get up. He tried kicking her again, managing to land one on her head, but she didn’t let go, pulling him hard. She was using all her strength now, but so was he, making it clear to both of them that whatever he was – with his distorted features and disfigured wings – he definitely possessed the same strength as a Souri that had gone dark.



“Calys, goddammit!” It was Alejandro again, the words sounding like they were muttered between gnashed teeth. And then he was suddenly there beside her and the scarred man. With one swing, he had knocked the man to the ground. Calys immediately crawled up, but when she attempted to sit atop the man to keep him from escaping, Alejandro turned to her with a snarl.

“Okay, okay!” She immediately threw her hands up in submission.

Alejandro solved both their problems by kneeling down and squeezing the man’s throat in a chokehold. “Why are you after the Princess?”

But the scarred man only spat at them. “You will never get anything from me, dog.”

Alejandro’s fingers tightened around his neck. “I’ll ask you one last time—”

“Don’t bother,” the disfigured creature snarled. “Even if you kill me, ten more will come after you. Her. All of you.” Even as his face began to change color with Alejandro choking him, he managed to let out a cackling laugh. “War is coming, and not a single one of you stand a chance of living.”

Alejandro broke his neck.

The man had died with a crazy smile on his face, and the sight of it made Calys feel ill. “You were right to kill him. He would never have given us an answer, and it was clear that he would never stop taking lives if we had allowed him to live.”

But Alejandro didn’t answer.

He was already walking away, leaving a stunned Calys behind him.

“Alejandro?”

But Alejandro didn’t stop walking.

She ran after him, managing to catch his sleeve. “Alejandro—” She fell silent in shock when he spun around to face her, and she finally caught a glimpse of his livid expression.

“W-why are you still angry? I thought...” She swallowed. “I t-thought when you came after me, it was okay.”

“The fuck it’s okay,” Alejandro roared. “I will never be okay when you’re around. If I was any smarter, I would never see you again because I’m better off without you.”

Calys could only stare at Alejandro, unable to speak. Did he really mean it this time? Did he?

He raked a hand through his hair. “This just proves it. I can’t be your fucking consort.” When Calys didn’t speak, he demanded, “Did you hear what I just said?”

Calys couldn’t believe what she was hearing. He actually wanted an answer?

“Do you understand—”

“Yes, I understand.” And she punched him right after, with all the strength her dark side possessed.

Alejandro’s head snapped to the side. “Are you insane? What the fuck are you trying to kill me for?”

“How could you even ask?” she cried out.

“Are you an idiot or what? I *can’t* be your consort and this – what happened right here – is proof of it. If I’m your consort, both of us will be trapped by our responsibilities. But if I remain your Cavaliere, I’ll be able to guard you and I’ll only be answerable to you. Just you and nobody else.”

The words came to Calys as if she was hearing it from a great distance, a part of her still finding it difficult to digest the fact that Alejandro was not refusing to be her consort because he no longer loved her.

“Calys?” He shook his hellcat hard.

She wailed in the most un-warrior-like voice he had ever heard from her, “I thought you were dumping me.”

Alejandro shook his princess harder. Maybe, if he shook her hard enough, her brain would sort itself out properly. “*I love you*. Idiot. Why would you think I’d be able to bear leaving you?”

But his hellcat didn't answer. She was too busy acting more un-warrior-like, with the way she was crying. The sound of it made his heart clench and at the same time, it made him want to smile. He hauled her into his arms, something which made her sob harder even as her arms curled around his neck.

He hugged her tightly to him, unable to believe that after all this time, he finally had her back where she belonged. This time, she would stay in his arms, because he sure as hell would never let her go.

“Princess?”

Between tears, she asked, “Yes?”

“I need you to promise you won't go *Kill Bill* on me, but I just want you to know that I took a picture of you crying. Just so you'll have a reminder of how much of a warrior you are —” He grunted in pain as Calys delivered a painfully precise jab to his ribs. “Dammit, I told you not to kill me.”

In her singsong voice, she said, “Then erase it before I kill you.”



WEEKS LATER, ALEJANDRO covered his Queen's mouth as he thrust into her.

Unable to plead for her mate not to stop fucking her, Calys could only grip the edges of the marbled sink tightly and tried her best not to slip off it.

Someone knocked hard on the door. “One damn minute, *Your Majesty*, or I'll have five-year-old cubs breaking down the door.”

Calys' eyes widened at the threat.

Alejandro grinned. Damn if that jaguar wasn't creative – *and effective* – with his threats. Bending close, he whispered to his Queen's ears, “I'm afraid I have to make you come now, *Your Majesty*.” After that, he gave it to her exactly the way her passionate warrior's body wanted it. He shoved his cock into her as deeply as he could, his hips jutting fast and wild. He covered her mouth with his when her cries became too much

for his hand to muffle, and she wrapped her arms around him, kissing him back wildly. They came together the moment their tongues fused, their semi-clothed bodies shuddering against each other as he filled her pussy with his come.

After, he laughed at the way her normally graceful fingers became clumsy in her haste to rearrange her clothes. “Relax, Your Majesty. Let me do that for you.”

A moment later, both of them were properly clothed, not a single strand out of place as they stepped out of the ladies’ room.

Stefan and Anastasia were right outside. Calys’ younger sister was red-faced while the jaguar was scowling. When Alejandro started to whistle, Stefan’s scowl became even more pronounced.

Seeing it, Calys groaned, “Alejandro, stop it.” Both of them knew he was only doing it to annoy Stefan.

Alejandro gave her an elegant bow. “Whatever you say, my queen.”

Anastasia giggled.

Stefan said coldly, “If you’re going to giggle that much, then maybe you should have stayed in the schoolroom a year longer.”

When the two left, both of them were not speaking, and Calys said worriedly to Alejandro, “He’s being too hard on her. I know it’s his way of keeping his distance, but...surely he also knows that I would readily accept his proposal if he did offer for her?”

Alejandro shook his head. “He’s not being too hard on her if you ask me. It’s *himself* he’s being too hard on. If I were him, I would have long forgotten about honor and simply went after what I wanted.”

Calys rolled her eyes. “That’s not how a warrior acts.”

“That’s *exactly* how a warrior would act when he’s after something.” The devastating smile Alejandro sent her after made Calys gulp, and she had a horrible feeling that those

smiles were one of his mass weapons of seduction – the kind that he unhesitatingly used on her to get what he wanted.

“Thankfully, you are what I want.”

“Uh huh.”

“I will slay all the dragons in the world for you if it is what you will.”

As they started walking back to the throne room where the rest of their pack awaited them, Calys said seriously, “Don’t do that. Really. If you ever come across dragons, I’d rather you breed them and give me a dragon army.”

Her eyes glowed so brightly at her words it made Alejandro laugh. At that instance, she looked more like a Pokemon master about to catch them all. “So bloodthirsty, my queen.”

She sent him an impish smile. “But you like it that way.”

He said solemnly, “I like you in every way, my queen.”

They reached the throne room then, and as Calys claimed her rightful place, Alejandro stepped back, positioning himself behind her as her Cavaliere. One glance at him and everyone would be so easily deceived by his perfectly respectful manners, none of them knowing that under his courteous and charming exterior was a deadly warrior...and a wicked husband.

The first panther in line stepped forward. “Your Majesty, I have an enormous dilemma...”

Her phone beeped as the panther went on to explain his situation. The message was from Alejandro.

*Whatever it was, it won't be as enormous as my cock.*

She choked.

The panther in front of her stopped. “Your Majesty?”

She glared at Alejandro, but he only looked at her with a straight face, wickedly gleaming green eyes promising her she would find out right after leaving the throne room just how *enormous* it was.

## **The End**

*Thank you so much for taking the time to read Taken by My Werewolf Bodyguard. If you enjoyed Alejandro and Calys' story, please consider leaving a review or even a quick rating. Feedback from readers is a huge help to indie authors like me.*

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*Until our next journey,*

*Marian Tee*

*P.S. Please flip to the next page to enjoy a bonus novella of My Werewolf Husband.*

**What if you were married to the most handsome, powerful, and strongest werewolf prince on earth – one who’s in love with you as much as you’re in love with him – when one day he suddenly doesn’t remember who you are?**

A strange twist of fate offers 24-year-old Misty the chance to save her loved ones from war, but it comes with a price.

One moment, she’s the beloved wife of a wickedly hot alpha. The next thing she knows, she’s single and broke again, and Domenico Moretti is no longer a werewolf.

Worse, he’s turned into an irresponsible playboy, a billionaire’s black sheep son, and to save both their lives, Misty has to make Domenico fall in love with her all over again.

The catch: Misty can’t tell the human Domenico who she is or who they are to each other, and she has to capture his heart...*in just one day.*



# **My Werewolf Husband**



By Marian Tee

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# Chapter One

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**A**nother typical day of his married life had begun. The thought was uppermost in Domenico Moretti's mind as he switched the shower off and reached for his phone, which he had left on top of the stall. His training practice with young shifters had been cut short when he received a message about his wife Misty almost causing a fight among the Panthera.

Domenico speed-dialed Misty's number. *Ring, ring, ring.* No answer. As expected. His wife was hiding from him, without a doubt. There wasn't a day she wasn't causing trouble and, Domenico privately acknowledged to himself, he wouldn't have her any other way.

Stepping out of the cubicle, Domenico suddenly found himself face to face with a crowd of young fighters, all of them with envy on their faces as they took in their instructor's physique. Although wolves were not the largest of all shifter races, they had always been the strongest, and this was definitely made evident in Domenico Moretti's form.

The werewolf prince's six-foot-plus form was packed with muscle, honed by years of fighting and killing vampires and rogue wolves. His face could easily be called beautiful, with the sharp, classical perfection of his angled face and blazing green eyes. But it was a beauty that had an edge, for there was no mistaking the power the Moretti pack leader's heir possessed.

When none of his students spoke, Domenico asked finally, "What is it?" He walked towards the locker room, and his brow arched up when he saw them following him.

The boys came from just about every shifter pack in the land, ranging from age 12 to 18, and all of them eager to have this once-in-a-lifetime chance to train under the legendary warrior. Many of them had thought (and feared) Domenico Moretti would be a disappointment in reality. After all, he was

one of the few shifters who successfully led a life among humans. The puny human race had even foolishly turned him into a celebrity, a billionaire whose face graced the covers of *Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *GQ* all in the same year. Also, there was the fact that he was quite the pretty boy. The prince didn't even wear his facial hair proudly, unlike most wolves. So how could Domenico Moretti be as powerful as everyone said he was?

The answer to that question was what the boys had traveled far and wide for. If he was indeed as invincible as the legends said he was, then they wanted to be like him.

Today, they had learned the truth, and their groaning and aching muscles were the answer. Domenico Moretti was possibly one of the toughest taskmasters they would ever encounter. He was a strict instructor, pushing all of them beyond their limits. Perfection was what he demanded, and they found themselves working hard to give it to him. How could they not when, upon asking them to do fifty push-ups, Domenico did a hundred? When they ran five laps, he had run ten, and the heir to the Moretti pack leader hadn't even broken a sweat afterwards.

After toweling his face dry, Domenico still found the boys staring at him. *This was all Misty's fault, too*, Domenico thought in exasperation. She had turned him into a babysitter for cubs and kittens, and all because she thought he needed to be better at P.R. in the shifter world.

Curbing his natural impulse to snarl and frighten all the kids away like a boogeyman, he asked, "What is it?"

The young shifters gulped. The tone was cold and mean, making them feel the alpha wolf was a second away from snapping all of their necks... *out of boredom*.

Someone from the back asked nervously, "Is it true you killed vampires with your own hands?"

"Yes."

*Ooooooooh*. A collective gasp of amazement emerged from the boys.

“Is it also true...you cried when your wife left you for a Faerie?”

At the question, nearly all the boys wanted to cry themselves. They were done for now. Domenico Moretti would go berserk and kill them all, also with his bare hands—

“Yes.”

This time, the boys looked like they were about to die of shock, and Domenico didn't know whether he was amused or irritated. He would make Misty pay for this. Domenico knew it would have been better to lie. Unlike other Lyccans, lying was a skill of his, something he ruthlessly used to get what he wanted. But after his last lie nearly cost the breakup of his marriage, he had developed an aversion to it and found himself being more honest than he wanted – like now.

The boys were still looking at him, disbelief written all over their faces.

“You'll understand why when you grow older,” Domenico said gruffly as he pulled on his pants. It was damn awkward to change in front of dozens of shifters all staring at him. Although he had a shower in his own private quarters, Domenico had joined his students in the barracks, not wanting them to think he was using his position and authority to enjoy privileges. But after this stupid Q&A, maybe it was better—

“Prince Domenico?”

Domenico was of a mind not to answer, but the quivering note in the boy's voice told him it had taken the student a lot of guts to speak out loud. Pulling his shirt over his head, he asked, “What is it? And this better be the last question, you little punks.” His words, uttered in a menacing tone, had everyone laughing, albeit nervously.

“A-are you even afraid of anything?”

The question had him pausing. *Something he was still afraid of?* Domenico frowned as he slammed his locker door shut. The sound had the young shifters jumping, which almost made him smile. They really were still kids.

Only one answer came to mind. “Losing my wife.” He bared his fangs. “It’s my greatest fear, but it’s also my strength because it’s what keeps me fighting...even in the darkest times.”



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Domenico still couldn’t find his wife, who had become exceptionally good at masking her scent. Catching sight of his younger brother on guard at the training field at the back of the manor, he swiftly walked towards Alejandro, unaware that by doing so the young female shifters training in the same area had all stopped to gawk at him.

Calys Adelardi, queen and pack leader of the strongest panther pack, paused in the middle of her instructions about self-defense for women. There was no point talking when every one of her two hundred students wasn’t looking at her.

She sighed. What was new? These Moretti brothers, and that included her own Cavaliere, always caused a sensation wherever they went. Cavaliere basically meant champion, bodyguard, and P.R. man all rolled into one, a role that only Alejandro Moretti could successfully play.

She glanced at the two brothers fondly, the way they looked so much alike with their ebony-black hair and green eyes. For her, Alejandro was the more gorgeous, but the others could be forgiven for thinking otherwise, Calys thought generously. He was, after all, the reason all Lyccan packs had a united front now.

“Have you seen Misty?” Domenico asked with a frown upon reaching his brother.

“Nope.”

Domenico scowled at his brother. “You know I can always tell when you’re lying, right?”

“I have been sworn to secrecy.” Alejandro’s tone was solemn, but the smirk on his lips belied it. However, his amusement became short-lived when his older brother’s gaze

narrowed, his arms crossing over his broad chest before he said, “Queen Calys?”

*Shit.* This time, Alejandro was the one scowling. Trust his sly older brother to get his Queen involved.

Calys headed towards them and bowed at Domenico.

The action had Domenico bowing back, although he did glance at his younger brother questioningly afterwards.

“When she’s in her fighting form, like now,” Alejandro explained, “she sees herself as a warrior rather than Queen. So she’s bowing because warriors,” he said in a very serious manner, “do *not* curtsy.”

“Ah.” Domenico and Alejandro’s gazes spoke of their amusement.

Calys protested, “It would look weird if I curtsied when I have a sword with me, wouldn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” Domenico agreed smoothly. “Your attention towards proper etiquette befitting warriors is to be applauded. It is more than what I can say for your Cavaliere here.”

A frown marred Calys’ forehead. “Why?”

Alejandro cursed under his breath. “Sly bastard.”

“Last night, I caught sight of him with some of the younger male shifters, and I distinctly heard him—-”

“Your wife’s in the forest. She left about ten minutes ago. If you go after her now, I’m sure you’ll have no trouble catching her.”

Without missing a beat, Domenico bowed low to Calys. “I’m afraid I’ll have to continue this next time. I must speak to my wife.”

“Oh. Of course.” After Calys’ bow, Domenico immediately turned back and walked swiftly towards the forest.

*Bastard always had to have his way,* Alejandro thought. And of course, Domenico had succeeded. How the hell had his brother known about last night? Alejandro had warned the

boys not to ever ask his Queen for any tips about fighting. It could have led to a physical demonstration, and no fucking way would he allow any shifter to lay a hand on Calys.

Of course, if Calys had known that, they would have had a fight in their hands since she would have thought it “remiss” of her if she ignored anyone asking for help. Calys thought of herself as a superhero, and superheroes *never* ignored calls for help.

Glancing at his queen, Alejandro scowled when he saw she was still gazing at his older brother. “Stop staring at him.”

The abrupt tone startled Calys into looking at her Cavaliere, and she couldn’t help but blink when she saw the hardened look on his gorgeous face. “Are you jealous?”

Alejandro took a fistful of her hair, using it to pull her close to him. It took Calys by surprise, causing her to fall against him, and just as she did, he captured her mouth in a deep, passionate kiss. When he lifted his head, he said in a low growl, “Does that answer your question?” But his hands were gentle as he helped Calys regain her balance.

She stood on tiptoes to place a quick kiss on his lips. “You know you have nothing to be jealous of. I love you,” she said seriously, “and you are and will always be the most beautiful man in my eyes. You are the strongest fighter in the land, the one—”

He clapped a hand over her mouth. “I get it.” His tone was a mixture of tenderness and exasperation. Calys had a knack of taking everything literally, and she also had a tendency to talk about him like he was *also* a real-life superhero.

Holding her shoulders, he used it to turn her around and have her facing her students. “Go back to work, my Queen. You need to remind them you’re a tough warrior and not just a woman who’s so in love with me—”

“Alejandro!” But one look at her students’ faces was enough to have her groaning, Alejandro was right, but unfortunately it was also too late to do anything.

Hands started shooting up in the air.

“Umm—”

Alejandro grinned at her even as he told the students, “Go ahead and ask.”

The girls let out an excited squeal just before the questions came at Calys in rapid-fire succession.

“What’s the best way to flirt with a Lyccan?”

“What’s the sweetest thing Prince Alejandro ever did for you?”

*Good God. Why couldn’t she have been given boy shifters to train,* Calys thought helplessly.

“What are the unofficial duties of a Cavaliere?”

Having caught the wicked gleam in her own Cavaliere’s eyes, Calys hurriedly slapped a hand over Alejandro’s mouth. “You are not qualified to answer that.”





## Chapter Two



Domenico found Misty a few miles away from the manor, crouched before a long stretch of sawgrass marsh. Most strangers to the Everglades thought the area as one filled with cypress trees, but in truth a good portion of it was made up of marshes such as the ones located within Adelardi lands.

“What are you looking at?”

Misty nearly fell on her butt at the sound of her husband’s voice and would have done so if his quick reflexes had not enabled him to catch hold of her.

She allowed him to pull her up to her feet and when he turned her around to face him, her breath caught and her heart skipped a beat. Even now, she still had trouble believing that this man belonged to her.

Then she saw the look on his face—

Misty asked meekly, “You know about the Panthera?”

Domenico only looked at his wife in answer, wanting her to squirm. It was the best and only way to punish her. Of course, it was also one of his favorite habits. Small and curvaceous, with dark hair and dark eyes, Misty was not the type to invite second glances from men. But for Domenico it had been the total opposite.

Because he had known *of* her before ever meeting Misty, Domenico had been captivated by her character, had found himself powerfully attracted to her strength and loyalty. He had never met a human woman like her, someone who had an uncanny knack of making people either love her or hate her very passionately.

Misty fidgeted, trying not to say a word in her defense, but when Domenico remained silent, she blurted out, “It wasn’t my fault.”

“That’s what you said the last time also, my love.” But the tender smile that accompanied the admonishing words had Misty sighing in relief.

“It really wasn’t my fault, though,” she insisted. “And I know Calys would have sided with me if she was there. They weren’t right to talk about Anastasia that way—”

He looked at her.

She shut up. She knew that look. It meant he saw through her – or rather, her babble. She mumbled, “I admit that I may have gotten *slightly* carried away by my emotions.”

It was difficult to keep a detached face at his wife’s mumble, but he knew it had to be done. She always thought of herself as a wimp, but when it came to the people she cared about, Misty ended up acting like the fiercest she-wolf. While her courage was something he greatly admired, he wanted her to learn to be less impulsive. It always ended up getting her in trouble, and Domenico feared the day would come when he wouldn’t be in time to save her.

“How carried away?”

“I might have, umm, said that Anastasia would never marry a panther even to save her life?”

Domenico winced. “Misty...”

“But they were talking about her like she was trash,” she said unhappily.

“And that’s wrong. I’ll be the first one to say that. However, you cannot expect thousands of years of prejudice to change overnight. The changes you want will happen. I will personally make sure it happens, even if it’s only for your sake, but you must accept that it will happen gradually.”

She leaned against him in answer, and his arm curved around her, knowing how precious this was. When they were apart, Misty had fought hard to be independent but now that they were back together, Domenico knew that she was doing her best to show him that she trusted Domenico to be her strength when she needed him to be.

Misty was rubbing her nose against his chest, like a pup wanting affection. Domenico stroked her back.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be the proper mate for you.”

“Inconsequential,” he dismissed. “I’m the only one you’ll ever have, the same way you are the only one for me.” Taking her hand in his, he drew her next to him for a walk, knowing it would help clear her mind.

Misty leaned her head against his shoulder. It was rare for them to have quiet time like this, and she cherished such moments. They walked in companionable silence for long minutes, past the marshes and deeper into the Everglades, with its ever-gray skies and twisted, lanky trees.

Although she had lived all her life in Florida, she had never even considered coming here and probably wouldn’t have if not for the fact that a large part of it made up the Adelardi pack’s territory. There was something about its eternal fog that crept her out, making Misty feel like time had no meaning here.

The silence unnerved her, too. It was a deep kind of silence, one that had shivers running down her spine. She looked at Domenico, wondering if he felt the same—

Domenico, sensing his wife’s attention on him, glanced down at her with a raised eyebrow.

*Nope.* Of course the Big Bad Wolf wouldn’t be afraid of the woods.

“Whatever it is you’re thinking, I’m certain it’s not something I’d like to hear.”

She grinned.

“Don’t even think about telling me.”

From afar, something tittered—

Misty jumped into his arms.

Domenico laughed.

“But it didn’t sound normal,” she protested even as she squeezed his shoulders so he could let her down.

“My love, you’re married to a shifter. Is that normal?”

“I’m used to fighting vampires, not...I dunno, it could be an *aswang*, you know?”

*Aswang* was a Filipino myth, one of the many mythological creatures Misty would occasionally ask him about so she would know which were and weren’t real.

Domenico only shook his head at her. As they resumed walking, the silence tempting her to cling to him, Misty blurted out, “I have a joke.”

She didn’t say anything after that, prompting Domenico to ask, “What’s the joke?”

Misty bit her lip. “It’s not kid-friendly, though.”

When he looked down at her, Domenico saw Misty’s eyes darting here and there, as if they were about to be attacked anytime. Suppressing a smile, Domenico tried to sound more concerned than amused as he asked, “Is something bothering you?”

She shook her head quickly, not wanting Domenico to think she was a wimp. Pasting an overly bright smile on her face, she said, “I can tell you the joke now.”

His lips met in a thin line. She spoke the words exactly like the kid in *Sixth Sense* as he was about to confess his ability to see dead people. Domenico thought about reminding her that he was over six foot tall, experienced in battle, and was virtually *the* strongest werewolf of his entire race. And yet here was his wife, scared of the shadows around them.

*Breathe, Moretti.* Misty would be hurt if she realized he was laughing at her fears. When he was sufficiently in control, he murmured, “Go ahead then.”

Misty said, “One day, when the mom of Little Big Dick \_\_\_”

Domenico choked. *Little Big Dick?*

Misty blinked at him. “What?”

Domenico cleared his throat. “Err, nothing. Go on.”

She tossed him an odd look – one that had him nearly choking again – before speaking. “Okay, so one day, when the mom of Little Big Dick was still pregnant with him, her husband – Little Big Dick’s father - wanted to, umm...” She paused, her cheeks turning red.

“Have sex?”

Misty looked relieved. “Yes, that. At first, Mrs. Dick refused, saying it might be bad for the baby but Mr. Dick says, ‘No, it’s going to be okay.’ So they do it, and as they make love, he tells her, ‘It feels good, doesn’t it?’ This happens several times, with Mrs. Dick saying no, then Mr. Dick insisting it’s okay.”

Misty suddenly giggled.

Domenico wasn’t surprised, now used to Misty always laughing at her own jokes even before she was done delivering the punch line. But when she kept giggling, he told her exasperatedly, “Do you mind finishing the joke?”

“Oops, sorry.” Still giggling a bit, Misty said, “The day came that Mrs. Dick finally gave birth and it was a healthy baby boy. When Little Big Dick came out into the world, he went to his dad immediately. Little Big Dick then asked—”

Domenico was startled when Misty suddenly poked his forehead several times. “What the fuck?”

As she poked her husband’s forehead, Misty said in an irritated voice, pretending to be Little Big Dick, “-Do you think this feels good, huh, Dad? Does that feel good? Huh, huh, huh?”

Domenico laughed, the deep tenor of his amusement blending with his wife’s giggles—which was suddenly cut short.

“Oh my God,” Misty whispered.

His wife had turned into a block of ice next to him, and when Domenico followed her gaze, he, too, became still.



## Chapter Three



Not looking at her husband, Misty whispered between barely moving lips, “That’s —I mean, *she’s* – what I’ve been seeing, following us all this time.” Misty gulped, unable to take her gaze off the wild-looking woman in front of them. The woman seemed naked and *not* naked at the same time, her body the shade of bronze, while her most private parts were covered with something metal-like – something that also appeared to be a part of her body.

Domenico gripped his wife’s hand tightly. *A jinn*. He wondered if Misty emitted some kind of strange scent that had all kinds of races coming to her. First there were the Faeries, who most of them had thought extinct. And now a jinn? Who knew they even existed to this day? He thought the vampires had hunted them down to extinction.

“*Do you have a wish?*”

The woman had spoken, her voice a mixture of rusty and seductive, like a rarely-played melody that was near impossible to resist dancing to.

“Don’t answer.” Misty jerked when she suddenly felt Domenico’s hot breath next to her ear. “She’s a jinn, sweetheart. Everything they offer always comes with a catch.”

Misty, still looking at the woman, whispered to Domenico, “But she didn’t come from a lamp.”

Domenico’s lips slowly compressed.

Just as slowly, the woman blinked.

Misty wasn’t as slow. It didn’t take a genius to figure out when she was being laughed at by her own husband – and that the jinn was close to doing the same thing. She said defensively, “Aladdin’s came from a lamp.”

Domenico rolled his eyes at her, unable to help it.



The woman – the jinn – remained quiet, but her gaze was even more intent, as if she couldn't determine what kind of creature Misty was. But when she spoke, all she said was, "*Wish?*"

Domenico was about to turn the woman down when the woman spoke again, and this time her next words had both Domenico and Misty reacting.

*"I can tell you about a lying wolf."* A smile both cunning and pitying curved on the woman's lips. *"The wolf was the reason the one you trusted died. If you wish it, I can give you the name of the one who betrayed you."*

Domenico's fists clenched. For years, he had tirelessly and futilely searched for answers, wanting to avenge his friend. He knew that this was his best bet, but whether he'd win it or not, Domenico wasn't sure. "If I wish it—"

The jinn shook her head, her long, twisted dark strands curling around her body as if it had a life of its own. "*It must be her who wishes it.*"

Domenico didn't even hesitate. "Never." He took Misty's hand, but his wife didn't budge when he started to turn away. "Misty?" The look on her face made his own harden. "Don't even think about it—"

Misty blurted out, "I wish it."

Domenico cursed, but the sound was drowned by the chaos of the world crashing around them. He hauled his wife to him, protecting her as best as he could while everything turned black.



MISTY OPENED HER EYES when the rumbling, crashing noise around them stopped. She gasped, instinctively moving closer towards her husband when she saw that they were no longer in the forest.

"Where are we?" she whispered.

Domenico didn't answer her, just holding her hand tightly as he led them out of the room. He had a feeling what this was

all about, and he became more certain of it as he explored the room they were in. Its classy and impersonal elegance told him that they were in a hotel. Probably the penthouse, considering how the suite seemed to occupy an entire floor.

“We’re in a hotel, aren’t we?” Misty couldn’t help but shake her head at the opulence surrounding her. She knew she should be used to such sights by now, being the wife of a wolf billionaire, but she wasn’t. The place had an informal and formal receiving area, a whirlpool bath that could fit an entire football squad, and a balcony she could comfortably throw a party for twenty in. There was also a fully stocked wine bar, an ultra-thin TV the size of a pool table, and a grand piano. At the end of the suite, another door led to—

Misty gasped. “Is that a spa? This suite comes with its own *spa*?” And it wasn’t just any spa. There was a manmade rock pond, one fashioned like the hot spring baths in Japan, with steam even rising softly out of the crystal clear waters. Luxurious massage pads were laid out on a mini-boardwalk, and on the other side rose petals were sprinkled in a Roman-styled marble bath filled with scented azure water.

Misty tugged on Domenico’s sleeve. “What’s this all about?”

When he faced her, his face was grim. “It’s our last night together.”

She almost laughed but when his expression didn’t change, Misty paled. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

Misty winced at his soft tone, a sure sign of his anger. There was also the muscle ticking in Domenico’s jaw, another sign that a volcano was about to erupt—

“YOU.”

Misty yelped as her husband began mashing her cheeks like they were dough.

“YOU.” Domenico tried to see if he could apply more pressure to his cheek-mashing, but it seemed this was the most he could do. *Dammit.*

“B-but we needed to know—”

“Not like this,” he snapped. Furiously spinning away, Domenico hit the wall behind him, his fist pulverizing the cement and creating a crater-like hole within the wall. There was no point going after the jinn – once a wish was made voluntarily, the wisher had to win the challenge for it or die. It was all up to Misty now. There was *nothing* he could do, and that was what killed him.

When he turned to face Misty, he cursed under his breath again, realizing too late he had just ended up frightening his wife. She was hugging herself and shivering. Her eyes were wide with shock, but she was visibly struggling not to let her fears show.

Domenico pulled her into his arms, wincing at how cold she felt. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.” He brushed his lips against her fragrant hair and tried not to think about how frail her bones were. What if the jinn made her fight to the death against a Lyccan?

Misty tried her best not to choke her own husband as she hugged him back. His body was rigid with tension, and she knew it was because Domenico was worried about what would happen to her. “I’m sorry, too. I know you’re worried about me.”

“Damn right I am,” he muttered. He tipped her chin up. “Why did you have to do that?”

“Because I didn’t want what happened to the Faeries to happen to us,” Misty confessed in a small voice. “So many people died. So if I could do something to avert it—”

“Lyccans are stronger and more used to warfare,” he gritted out.

“But you’re *not* immortal,” she argued softly. “You bleed, too, and I just don’t want to risk losing any one of you.” She looked at her husband anxiously, hoping he would no longer be mad—“Oww!” He was mashing her cheeks again.

“I remember the first time I found out how stubborn you were. You didn’t want to stay in my home before our marriage

—”

When he released her, she made a face. “It wasn’t unreasonable—”

“And then there was the time—”

She asked quickly, “Is there a point to all this?”

He only smiled, but the fact that it didn’t reach his eyes just made her nervous. “Yes. I wanted to remind you how your stubbornness got you through.” His tone sober, he continued, “I’m afraid you’ll be even more stubborn with whatever you’ll be facing – *without me*.”

Misty swallowed. The fact that she was going to face an unknown challenge alone was finally dawning on her.

Stepping back so he could see her face clearly, Domenico said gruffly, “Everything’s going to work out as long as you listen carefully to what I have to say.”

She nodded. “Got it.” But her voice squeaked in the end, and both of them mentally winced at it.

Taking her hands in his in hopes that he could pass his strength to her, he continued, “I’m only passably familiar with how jinns are. They’re not evil, but they’re no angels either. Granting wishes is how they keep their powers strong. That’s really all there is to it.” Rubbing his thumb over her knuckles, he continued, “She’ll come to us when we least expect it so there’s no point being prepared about it. Since you’re the wisher, you’ll be the one she’ll ask to do something – it would seem impossible, but it’s not.” He tipped her chin, stressing, “I mean it, Misty. It *may* seem impossible but it *never* is. My mother wished upon a jinn once and she’s alive now, isn’t she?”

Misty was stunned. “She really did?”

He gave her a quick hard nod. “Yes, she did.” It was a lie. Apparently he still could, given the right incentive, and that was the woman in front of him. He *needed* Misty to be strong and he didn’t give a fuck what he had to do to make her so.

Misty breathed a sigh of relief at Domenico's answer. If his mother had made a wish and hadn't died because of it, then surely there was something she could do to ensure she got out of this safely as well. "Thank you for telling me that."

He bent down, brushing his lips against her in a short, sweet kiss to reassure her. "Just remember that and you'll be fine." If she wasn't, then he'd turn the world upside down until he found a way to rescue her.

Misty's mouth opened and closed.

"What is it?"

She bit her lip.

He took a closer look at her face and because he knew her better than she knew herself, he immediately understood what she wanted but couldn't say. Without a word, he lifted her up and walked to the bedroom.

When he laid her down on the huge white bed and followed her to it, Misty asked breathlessly, "What are you doing?"

Pausing in the midst of removing her clothes, Domenico said with a straight face, "Giving you a good luck charm."

Even as she blushed, she was already wrapping her arms around his neck, a wordless answer that told him he had guessed right. She wanted this to cement her courage, and whatever she wanted, he would give it to her, even if he had to move mountains and empty oceans for it.

Misty's entire body shuddered as Domenico stripped the last piece of clothing from her, his hot gaze studying her from head to toe. When he kissed her, she returned it wholeheartedly, the tender, fierce passion of his kiss making her blink furiously. She didn't want to cry because it would mean this *could be* their last night together. And she didn't want to think that. She *refused* to believe that.

She whimpered as Domenico's lips lifted from hers and he began to kiss every inch of her. He rained kisses on her face and made her gasp when his tongue traced the delicate curves

of her sensitive ears. He sucked on her neck, long and hard, and Misty knew he was marking her yet again.

A sigh escaped Misty as Domenico nuzzled the valley between her breasts, the sound quickly turning into a breathy gasp when he plumped one pale globe and fed its pink nipple to his mouth. He laved each nipple with agonizing attention, causing her to writhe under him. But it was when Domenico rose on his knees and clasped her ankles that had Misty freezing.

Heart thundering, she lifted herself up on her elbows in clumsy haste, her wary gaze following her husband's every move. "Domenico..." Her voice trailed off in shock as she felt him pushing her legs apart into a wide V while he moved forward—

"Oh my God!" A shudder travelled through her entire frame as Domenico buried his face in her pussy. The pleasure was excruciating, driving her to the point of madness. "Oh my God, Domenico, stop..." It was too much, she needed to get away from him—

But Domenico only tightened his hold on her, his fear for Misty's safety adding a savage edge to his passion. He devoured her sweet flesh with his tongue, licking, thrusting, and when her body started to stiffen in his hold, Domenico became even more relentless, wanting her cries of pleasure to fill the room.

Misty found herself falling against the bed as Domenico's fingers joined his mouth. Each thrust, each kiss, each flick wrecked her, and Misty gripped the bedsheets as she desperately tried to hang on to her sanity. "*Domenico, please...*" He always, always made her feel this way. So lost in him with need that she didn't know how she could ever survive without him.

The ball of pleasure inside her was tightening and growing, filling her with so much heat that she felt like she was about to explode any minute—

Domenico, sensing his wife's impending release, straightened from her body.

Misty let out a moan of protest at the sudden emptiness between her legs. She opened her eyes as she felt Domenico moving—

Their eyes came into contact—

“I love you, Misty.” And then he was inside her, stuffing her pussy with his enormous cock—

Misty screamed, her eyes rolling back at the sheer blazing pleasure of her husband’s possession. She came at the very first thrust, and she was still coming as Domenico didn’t stop pounding into her. With Domenico still holding her legs wide open, imprisoned in its state with his fingers around her ankles, there was nothing for Misty to hold on to. It made her feel like Domenico’s cock was all that held her in balance, and if his cock was gone she would melt into nothing.

Hot sweat covered his body as Domenico fucked his wife as hard as he could, every bit of his concentration focused on making her come again and again. He ground his cock into her with every push, knowing how to position himself over her body so each thrust would cause the right amount of friction against her clitoris.

When their eyes met again, Misty whispered, “I love you.”

A powerful shudder wracked his body at the words. “*Misty.*” He groaned her name out loud as he came, filling her pussy with his seed until there was no space for it. Still inside of her, Domenico lowered his head to take her lips in a ravaging kiss, wanting to brand her with his taste.

Body still wrecked with the aftershocks of her release, Misty returned his kiss with equal fervor. When she was in his arms like this, it was hard to worry, hard to think that—

A familiar rumbling sound filled the air.

Misty winced. She had celebrated too soon.





## Chapter Four



When Misty opened her eyes, she and Domenico were fully clothed and standing in the middle of the suite's private spa. The jinn stood in front of them, her coloring and the backdrop of hot springs behind her making the jinn appear like a pagan goddess.

*"I hope you enjoyed your rest."* The jinn's voice was not as rusty before, but it was even more seductive.

Before Misty could answer, Domenico was already speaking, his voice cold with animosity. "What are your terms?" He drew his wife against him in a protective hold as he waited for the jinn to answer, knowing whatever she said, it wouldn't be pleasant.

*"She has to make you fall in love with her again in twenty-four hours."*

Misty blinked in confusion, but Domenico's voice remained hard as he asked, "And the catch?"

*"You won't remember who you are. She can't tell you who she is."* The jinn clasped her hands together when she was done speaking.

Mist from the hot springs began to thicken, spreading into the room like a monstrous fog intent on swallowing everything it reached.

Her wild eyes found Misty's. *"If you lose, you will die without seeing Domenico again."*

Misty was too shocked to panic. "Are you really asking me —" When the jinn only looked at her, she turned to Domenico in confusion. His grim expression was her answer, and that was when she felt hysteria start to stir inside of her.

"Domenico, I—"

The mist had reached them, and to her horror, she found Domenico fading in front of her.

She started to cry when Domenico held her hands tightly. “Remember what I told you. How stubborn you are.”

She nodded, trying to stop herself from crying when she saw the pain in Domenico’s green eyes. She knew then that he was holding on to his control for her, that he wanted to be strong for her so she could be strong, too.

Rubbing her eyes dry, she asked haltingly, “If you didn’t know me, w-what would you notice about me first?”

Domenico answered, but this time his voice had faded, too. She strained to hear him, but it was as if he was speaking from another world. What had he said?

When even his hands fell from her and Domenico was but a shadow, she cried out in fear and protest. “I can’t hear you! What did you say?”

He spoke again, and she could see he was shouting even though she could barely make out the words.

“I really can’t hear you, maybe spell it and I’ll read your lips?”

Domenico frowned at her suggestion, but he did it anyway.

Something that started with the letter V...something that ended with Y.

“I can’t hear you,” she cried out. “What are you saying again?”

Something that started with V...and ended with Y...

The rumbling sound started, drowning out all noise.

Misty’s eyes widened. “Did you just say—”

Domenico’s own eyes widened when he read Misty’s lips. “No, dammit, not—”

Everything went black.

Domenico’s entire body went cold when Misty disappeared right before him. He knew that it didn’t really

happen this way and that this world wasn't real. The jinn had only taken over their minds, and their corporeal forms were still somewhere in the Everglades, lost in a drugged slumber.

The jinn cocked her head to the side. *"What did you tell her?"*

Domenico's lips tightened as he bit out, "Vivacity." It was what he loved most about her. When Misty was with him, everything was just brighter and happier all around. She hadn't flirted with him the way other women did. She had just been her normal smiling self, and he had liked that about her, had been unable to help but notice how everyone seemed to be such sluts next to her.

The jinn asked, *"Do you think she heard that?"*

A pained expression crossed over Domenico's face. "I think...she said..."

*"What?"*

He said tersely, "Vajayjay." *God, Misty. Only Misty. Only his Misty would think he would actually say something like that.*

And then his head jerked because he heard something he thought wasn't possible.

The jinn laughed.

She had actually laughed.

And when one made a jinn laugh...

His chest eased. *Ah, Misty, thank God you haven't changed.*



IT WAS THE NOISE THAT told her she was no longer in the same world as Domenico. Loud, heart-thumping bass coming from the speakers, women shrieking while the men laughed, and the clinking of glass as people toasted. And then someone screaming at her face, "Are you just going to stand there?"

All kinds of horrifying possibilities occurred to her at that moment. *Once she opened her eyes*, Misty thought, *that was it*. She would be in another reality, and she would have to do what the jinn said or die.

“Hello? Am I talking to anyone?” the same voice demanded irritably.

When Misty reluctantly opened her eyes, she found herself staring at a familiar-looking woman. It took a while before she realized it was her ex-colleague Janice Rudely. The tall woman was dressed in a bunny costume, fishnet stockings, and sky-high heels, and she was balancing a tray of empty glasses in one hand. The woman had hated her on first sight in Misty’s real life, and it seemed she felt no differently in this alternate world.

“God, I swear you’re so weird. I have no idea why they’re still letting you work with us when you’re always like that.” Janice tossed her hair over one shoulder. “I hope you know you’re never going to be beautiful enough to be paid doing nothing.” She shoved the tray towards Misty. “So here you are. Go wash the glasses and stay there. The place looks better when you’re not around.”

Misty found herself accepting the tray involuntarily, still in shock. Looking around, she realized that she was still in the suite’s private spa, but she wasn’t alone. There were people all around her, the female guests dressed in the most provocative swimwear while the men pranced around in trunks. Circulating the room were the servers, the men dressed in leather pants and suspenders across their bare chests while the girls—

Looking down at herself, Misty bit back a surprised gasp when she realized she was wearing the exact same costume as Janice’s. Oh my God, what kind of world was this that someone as shy as her had been made to wear something like this? The only thing her low-cut bunny costume hid was her nipples, and barely even that!

“M-Misty?”

She turned around again, and this time she wasn’t shocked at all to see another familiar face. It was kind old Ed, her

former supervisor. He had been a nice but timid man in the past, and he appeared the same here. “I’m s-sorry she shouted at you.”

“It’s okay,” she said automatically. She always told Ed that back then, too. Both of them had been wimps, and she had been terrified that she would end up exactly like him when she grew old. But then she had met Domenico, and for once in her life she had thrown caution out of her window.

Misty frowned. Was that why Domenico said about her... *vajayjay*? Was he basically saying she should seduce his version in this world? She glanced down at her bunny costume. And maybe the Misty in this world was different, too. Maybe she was a go-getter here, a bold, risk-taking adventurer who wasn’t ashamed of flaunting her curves—

“Misty?”

She jerked, realizing belatedly she had zonked out in front of Ed. “S-sorry,” she stammered.

The middle-aged man gave her a worried look. “You look really stressed out. Is the work too much?” His voice took an anxious note. “I’m truly sorry I got you out here. I know it’s far from your duties as a housekeeper—”

Misty tried not to grimace as she listened to Ed’s words. *A housekeeper*. She had swapped her boring job as a technical proofreader for that of a housekeeper. There went her dreams of being a go-getter. Obviously, once a wimp, always a wimp. Apparently, in this world it was *still* up to her to change herself.

“—but hopefully, the double pay will make up for it.” Ed looked behind his back when something crashed, wincing when he saw a huge, expensive looking flower-shaped crystal had been accidentally shoved off its marbled pedestal. “Oh dear, Mrs. Moretti will kill me—”

Misty whitened and she quickly grabbed hold of Ed before he could leave. “Mrs. Moretti?” Oh my God, Domenico was married to another woman in this world? That jinn really had it

out for her. Misty didn't think she had it in her to be an adulteress.

Ed nodded fearfully. "She's only just bought that for this party, too. Her sons are going to kill me."

She repeated faintly, "Her sons?" It just kept getting worse and worse.

"Prince Danilo would of course reprimand me for allowing Prince Domenico to throw a party like this, but it's not as if I can really control the young master. And then of course Prince Domenico would be furious with me, for letting such guests get out of hand, but then they're all drunk and it's not like they'd listen to someone like me, will they?"

Misty's head was whirling. Danilo...Danilo...surely, it couldn't be...

"When you said Mrs. Moretti, do you mean the mother of Domenico and..." She swallowed. "Danilo Moretti?"

Ed looked at her blankly. "Who else would I have been talking about?"

She said slowly, "Nothing. I'll g-go to the kitchen now and get, umm, new drinks out." She hurried away, leaving behind Ed, who was shaking his head at her. She badly needed time to process what she had just learned. In the real world, Danilo – Domenico's older brother and twin – had died when they were in their teens. But he was alive here. Why? And what did it mean for her?

Inside the kitchen, a harried-looking staff member told her there were no more new glasses left. "They just about broke it all," the woman muttered irritably. She was tall and slim, her black hair tied back and her dark brown eyes hidden behind large steel-framed glasses. Shaking her head, she grumbled, "And those were expensive ones, too."

"I'll wash them then," Misty offered right away.

The woman appeared surprised. "Really? You will? Your snotty crew usually doesn't want to do anything that could break their nails."

Misty admitted sheepishly, “I’m actually the housekeeper and I’m just lending them an extra hand.” Or at least that was what Ed had told her.

“Oh, so that’s why. You really don’t look like them even when you’re all killing yourselves in those heels. For one thing, you’ve got a ton less makeup than they do.” The woman pointed to the sink. “That’s where we wash the glasses. I’ll help you to make it quicker.”

Around them, the rest of the kitchen staff was just as busy, working and gossiping at the same time. Misty started paying attention when she realized that they were talking about Domenico.

*Did you see the woman he had with him at the awards night?*

*She’s married to that oil baron, isn’t she? I bet seeing her eye-fucking him in public had Prince Danilo angry again. He’s always after his younger brother about the family reputation.*

A giggle followed the words. *One of us should really tell Prince Danilo that the reputation is safe as far as the length of their cocks are concerned.*

*Oh my God! You’ve seen the prince’s cock?*

*Both of them,* was the smug reply. *They sleep naked—*

“Which prince are you in love with?”

Misty almost broke the shot glass she was rinsing but managed to catch it in time. Thankfully, too, since the woman next to her had a scary look on her face.

“I’m, umm—-”

“Don’t bother. I can see the look on your face.” The woman was smiling at her, but Misty sensed the other woman’s disapproval.

She hedged, “It’s really nothing—-”

“Who is it?”

Shick, that look was too scary to refuse. She said weakly, “Domenico?” The look of relief that crossed the woman’s face

made Misty gasp. “Oh my God, you like Da—”

“Sssh!” She placed a hand over Misty’s lips.

She said against the hand, “Sho you weely rike—”

The woman glared at her.

Misty threw her hands up.

“I can’t believe you saw through me. I’ve been working here for years and no one knew.” Shaking her head, she offered her hand to Misty. “I’m Avery, by the way.”

Misty frowned. Something about the name was familiar, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. Taking the other woman’s hand, they both smiled as they gave each other a soapy shake. “Misty,” she said. “Are you directly working for Prince... Danilo?”

Avery nodded. “Since I was eighteen.” Her smile turned wry. “So about nine years already.”

Misty’s eyes widened. “Wow. That’s...” Did that mean Avery had also been in love with Danilo Moretti for the same number of years?

Avery laughed. “I can almost hear you asking the same question, and unfortunately the answer’s no. I’ve been in this state far longer than nine years.”

“And he never noticed?” Misty gasped.

“Nope. He’s too busy being responsible and worrying over his siblings. *Especially* Domenico.”

Misty’s brows furrowed. “That’s what I don’t get. Everyone here’s saying bad things about him—” Avery’s laugh cut her off.

“I take it you’re new to the family? Or maybe you’ve been living in the middle of nowhere for the past decade? Misty, my dear, everything the staff’s saying about Domenico Moretti isn’t just true. It’s actually not the worst.” Avery dried her hands on the towel tied around her waist. “I get it, though. He’s not completely at fault. Their father would drive a saint mad, with the way he keeps comparing the twins. And



Domenico's too proud, so instead of trying to please his father, he just keeps doing what would make Mr. Moretti mad."

Misty almost winced at the words. Apparently, Domenico Moretti's hang-up remained the same in every world. As she dried the last shot glass and placed it back on the tray, Misty asked carefully, "What about Prince Danilo?"

"Oh, he likes reprimanding Prince Domenico, too, but everyone knows – and that includes Domenico – that it's just his way of showing he cares."

The CB radio clipped to her pants suddenly buzzed and unclipping it, Avery plugged one ear with an earphone. "What is it?" She paused. "I see." She glanced at Misty. "Prince Domenico's coming up and I don't think it's safe to unleash him to this crowd. It might get him to start drinking, and we absolutely do not want that to happen, not until after the king's seen him at least. Do you think you could handle him and take him to somewhere private?"

"Somewhere...private?" Misty didn't know which she felt more: giddy or nervous. Whichever it was, the emotion was making her hands perspire and her throat dry. *Vajayjay*, she reminded herself bracingly. It all boiled down to the *vajayjay* – or her *vajayjay*, for that matter.

"We have a room reserved on the floor below. A guard's already waiting there. You up for it?" Avery's serious face softened a bit. "If you've never had a chance to make him notice you, this could be it."

Misty glanced at her wrist and only then did she notice a digital watch circling it, its display set to a 24-hour timer. Right now, it was down to 23:02. *Twenty-three hours to seduce and make Domenico Moretti fall in love with her.*

Closing her eyes, Misty mentally recited a prayer. Afterwards, she asked Avery, "What do you want me to do?"



# Chapter Five



Domenico Moretti had died and gone to heaven. That was the only thing he could think of the moment the elevator doors opened and he saw the sexiest little bunny standing in front of the elevator.

He forgot about the fact that he was here to make it to the board meeting virtually and that he had actually invited a hundred people to his penthouse suite for a celebratory party. Tonight had been his greatest coup, Domenico managing to close the biggest deal for Moretti Inc. It was his surprise that would make his father finally proud of him. Maybe this time, they could mend their fences for good. Danilo had been right, after all. None of them were getting any younger and it was time to let the past stay in the past, where it belonged.

However, all such thoughts went to the back of Domenico's mind when he saw the woman standing in front of him. Her dark hair was held back with a band that had bunny ears, and her deliciously bountiful breasts looked like they were about to spill out of her costume any second. Although she was a tiny beauty, she had the most wondrously shaped legs, the kind that made him want to kiss every inch of it.

Before he could ask what her name was, she smiled at him. One that was both naturally coy and shy at the same time. He was enchanted.

When she stepped inside the elevator, he immediately pressed the CLOSE button. Wherever she was going, he would be following. He had to have her tonight. Right this minute, preferably. He checked his watch. *Ten minutes*, he promised himself. Ten minutes to seduce her and then he would find a way to make it to his meeting.

He looked at the woman with hooded eyes, not bothering to hide his desire for her.

Misty's heart slammed against her chest. *Oh. My. God. That look.*

"Where to?" Domenico asked huskily.

It took a while for Misty to answer. "34<sup>th</sup>." Her voice came out all throaty, and by the way Domenico's green gaze darkened, Misty knew he thought she was already working on seducing him. Well, that was good. At least he didn't know her bedroom voice was because of sheer nerves. She tried her best not to stare at him, but it was hard. He was so gorgeous, but more than that, Domenico looked more...playful. Wickedly so, but still. He had none of the intimidatingly serious aura that he usually had.

*Even his taste in clothes was different*, Misty mused. In their world, Domenico was usually dressed in neutral colors, but here he was very fashionable, with his silver-lined jacket, skinny jeans, and expensive leather shoes. He wore it with such incredibly arrogant flair Misty had a feeling it was another way for Domenico to get back at his father. If Dio here was the same as he was back in their world, this kind of thing would definitely get to the older Moretti.

She couldn't stop staring at him. Did he really not remember her? She knew that was what the jinn said, but it was hard to fathom that he could forget her. She didn't mind that the others did, but...Domenico was different. Domenico was her heart, as she was his. Couldn't even the smallest part of him recognize her?

"You like what you see?" His purring had her swallowing.

"Y-yes?" God, it was hard not to throw herself at Domenico when he was being this...seductive.

"What's your name?"

"Misty." She was more than a little surprised he had to ask. She had assumed she was working for Domenico, just like how it was in their world. But apparently she wasn't, which meant...who was she really working for?

"Misty." Domenico savored saying her name, finding it strangely appropriate. She felt elusive to him, like a mist he

wanted to own even knowing it was impossible.

She thought about asking his name but didn't know if she could lie about not knowing it. In the end, she stayed silent, unable to decide what to do or say next. She glanced at her watch. 22:40. Over twenty-two hours still. No need to panic yet—

There was a sudden groaning sound, and the elevator shook to a stop before everything was plunged into darkness.

Misty screamed.

One firm hand grabbed hold of her, squeezing reassuringly. "I'm here."

"W-what happened?" Misty immediately inched closer to Domenico.

A second later, back up lights of the elevator switched into operation.

"I guess the power's gone out." Domenico shrugged out of his jacket and hung it on the rail. He did so carefully, taking his time, wanting to be certain that Misty would not realize how the darkness got to him. "I'm not sure how long before it comes back or before they figure out we're here."

"It's okay," Misty hastened to assure him, not wanting Domenico to feel he was stuck with a potential crybaby. "I'm not claustrophobic or anything."

"I see."

Minutes passed.

Misty blurted out, "Are you okay?"

"Why do you ask?" Domenico tried not to sound defensive.

She thought about telling him she knew all his mannerisms, and that Domenico shaking his hand as if getting ready to punch someone meant he was uneasy. But then if she told him that, he'd probably think she was either crazy or an obsessed stalker.

In the end, she said weakly, “You don’t, umm, sound good?”

His chilly look told her what he thought of her words.

*Riiiiight*. Domenico had always hated showing any kind of weakness, and apparently a change of worlds didn’t change that fact about him either.

As more minutes passed and Domenico’s tension grew and his pallor became pale, Misty desperately racked her brains for a way to make him relax. As far as she knew, Domenico wasn’t claustrophobic, but maybe something here had happened to make him that way.

“Umm, do you want to hear a joke?”

Domenico blinked. When it seemed what he heard was exactly what his curvy little bunny *had* said, he said slowly, “Did you just say something about a joke?”

“Err, yes? I was told that I tell really good ones.” God, what a lie. Actually, Domenico liked to tell Misty he only laughed at her jokes because he loved her.

When she gazed up at him expectantly, Domenico asked bluntly, “Are you high?”

She choked. “I’m not. I’m serious. Let me tell you a joke, and I promise you won’t be cla—” At his narrowed gaze, she managed to stop herself from saying ‘claustrophobic’. “I meant, I promise you would be *clapping* your hands in laughter.”

Domenico wasn’t amused. “That was fucking lame.”

She ignored that. “So, umm, can I tell you a joke now?”

He shrugged.

But he was also still a little pale, so Misty hurriedly said, “One day, a first-grade math teacher thought about giving her kids an oral quiz...”

*‘What do you have when you combine 16 books with 28 books, Matthew?’ the teacher asked.*

*‘Forty-four books,’ Matthew promptly answered.*

*‘Correct.’ The teacher moved on to the next student. ‘Sara, what do you get when you have 68 books and 79 books together?’*

*Sara paused before answering, ‘147 books.’*

*‘That’s great, Sara.’ The teacher moved to the third student, who had been napping the whole time. ‘Joe, wake up.’*

*‘Huh?’*

*The teacher scowled. ‘What do you get when you have 356 books and 293 books together?’*

*Joe answered sleepily, ‘A library?’*

Domenico felt a grin tugging at his lips when Misty actually burst into peals of laughter at her own joke.

When Misty caught the grin on Domenico’s face, she asked eagerly, “You’re okay now? You’re no longer claustrophobic?” As soon as the words slipped past her lips, she knew she had said the wrong thing.

She held her breath, waiting...

But the explosion didn’t come.

She peeked at his face.

Domenico’s thin, beautiful lips had curved into a self-deprecating smile.

“You’re not mad?”

Slowly, Domenico shook his head. “No. I’m not.” The elevator still felt like it was shrinking to him, but he didn’t feel as...cramped as he had been feeling earlier, and he knew the reason behind that. He looked at Misty and found himself admitting to her something he rarely spoke about. “I’m claustrophobic.” Misty nodded, and Domenico privately gave her props for trying to look like she had just discovered that about him.

“It’s a not entirely cured trauma after being kidnapped.” He unbuttoned the first button of his shirt, hoping it would make him feel less like he was being strangled by the hot air around him.

Misty didn't have to pretend she was shocked. "You were kidnapped?" In their world, Domenico hadn't ever been abducted – or at least not that she knew of.

"Part and parcel of being a Moretti," Domenico dismissed. "It's a long story, but the gist of it is that my brother managed to save me. However, in the minutes that I was locked inside the trunk of the kidnappers' car—" He stopped speaking abruptly, the weight of the memories making him feel like he was a helpless boy again.

"Owwwwww!"

The cry snatched him back to the present, and Domenico saw his curvy companion taking off her heels.

"I...t-think...I had some kind of sprain...I'm not used to wearing heels like this..." She looked up at Domenico. "D-do you think we could sit on the floor?"

Misty knew she was a shabby actress, but she had to try. The look on Domenico's face worried her, but she knew mentioning how pale he looked would only have him stubbornly refusing her plea for him to sit on the floor.

"Of course." Domenico took a seat beside Misty, and after stretching his legs, he told her casually, "You're a bad actress, by the way."

*Shick.* But out loud, she said primly, "I have no idea what you mean, sir."

He raised a brow. "Sir?"

"Did I also forget to mention the fact that I work for your family?"

Her sheepish smile enchanted him. "Yes. You did. Does that mean you'll do everything I want?"

She almost said no before she remembered something—

Domenico, telling her that her "vajayjay" was the first thing he noticed about her.

Did that mean she should make the moves on him this time? But...she had never tried to seduce anyone. She had no



idea where or how to start—

“Misty?”

She cleared her throat.

The serious look on her face sent a wave of disappointment crashing over him. That was in no way the look of a girl who was planning to come on to him. He knew she was no gold-digger or slut – Domenico could smell their type miles away – but he had been hoping all the same that he would have a chance to taste Misty’s sweet, succulent breasts.

*Domenico, you better mean what you said,* Misty thought.

Dark eyes met green. “On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate—”

Domenico let out a low, choking laugh. “Misty...” He shook his head. No one was like her. No one. Laughter was said to be the best medicine. He had never believed that, but now that this beautiful girl had actually managed to make him laugh his claustrophobia away, he damn well believed it. Only this girl would make a line from an animated movie sound so fucking suggestive, and he didn’t know whether the fact impressed or amused him more.

“Are you saying what I think you mean?”

She asked huskily, “What I mean is – what can I do to ease your pain?”

One moment they were just staring at each other’s eyes.

The next thing she knew he had dragged her onto his lap, his fingers digging through her hair. “Like this,” he growled just before pulling her head down for a hungry kiss.

Misty gasped against Domenico’s mouth. For a moment, she couldn’t even think of responding, stunned to find herself straddling his lap. She knew she shouldn’t be self-conscious. This was her husband, never mind if he didn’t remember her. But even so, acute embarrassment had Misty pressing her fists to his chest, a part of her instinctively wanting to push him away because things were happening too fast—

“You taste so good, love,” Domenico groaned before deepening his kiss. And she did, better than anything he had tasted. Sweet, exciting, and strangely familiar. It was like the sensation of boarding a rollercoaster for the nth time – the thrill was familiar, but even so it never failed to excite. Again and again—

His hunger only grew and grew the longer he kissed her, and pulling Misty closer to him, he said hoarsely, “Kiss me back, Misty.”

The sweet words had Misty closing her eyes, melting her resistance. She never could refuse Domenico when he talked to her like that. She kissed him back, her eyes closing in surrender. Her own fingers sank into his hair, savoring its familiar texture. Their tongues touched, danced, her breasts brushing against his chest. Her nipples hardened at each contact, causing her to whimper and strain against him. Under her, Domenico’s cock pulsed strongly, making Misty press her thighs closer to his. Another whimper was torn out of her as Domenico cupped her breasts.

Domenico kneaded Misty’s breasts, loving their weight. Over him, Misty was rubbing herself against his cock, making him squeeze his eyes shut at the sheer pleasure of it. Her touch felt innocent and experienced at the same time, making him wonder absently if she was still a virgin. If she was, that was it – he would never let her go. He didn’t give a fuck what that made him. All he knew was that Misty was his to taste, and he would kill any man who would dare touch her.

“Oh God, Domenico...” She moaned as he began sucking her nipple through her bunny uniform. She rocked harder against him, wanting more of the way his cock teased her clit into stiffening.

He sucked harder at her nipple, loving the way it made Misty chant his name over and over. *Domenico. Domenico. Domenico.* He wanted to hear her say it forever.

He lifted his head, rasping, “If you’re going to stop me, now’s the time to do it.”

Her dazed eyes met his. “W-what?”

His voice hard, he said, “Can I fuck you now?”

She shook her head, stammering, “W-we’re not yet fucking?”

Before he could answer, the elevator shuddered as if coming to life. Domenico had never moved faster in his life. As he got them both to their feet, even combing her hair with his fingers for her, only one thought was uppermost on his mind: no goddamn way would he allow anyone to see her with that look of desire in her eyes.

When the elevator doors opened, Misty was properly hidden behind him. And it was a good thing she was since the last people he wanted to see were exactly the ones who stood before him. His perfect twin brother Danilo Moretti and his father Dio, who was murderously furious.

“We had a meeting. Did you not remember that?” Dio’s contemptuous gaze didn’t miss the girl standing stiffly behind his son. “Or maybe you were too busy fucking your brains out like you always do?”

Domenico’s intention to explain about the elevator getting stuck, about the surprise he had for his father – all of it disappeared at his father’s derisive tone.

“Yes,” Domenico bit out. “It’s exactly as you say.” His tone was mocking, but inside he was cold. *Why? Why did Dio keep thinking the worst about him?*

Dio glanced at his other son. “I told you, Danilo. Your brother is a lost cause.” Without another word, he spun around, heading to the stairs.

Danilo shook his head. “You stubborn fool. Why didn’t you tell him?”

It didn’t surprise Domenico that his twin knew of his surprise. Aside from the family, work was the only other thing Danilo lived for. He only shrugged in answer, not wanting to risk exposing his pain with even a single word.

“I’ll try to talk to him——”

“Don’t bother.”

But his twin only shook his head again. “You two are too stubborn.”

When Danilo followed their father to the stairs, the doors swinging shut behind him, Misty tentatively touched Domenico’s back.

He turned to her right away, but it was obvious by the way he looked at her that he had forgotten she was even around.

“Domenico—”

Suddenly, everything about Misty reminded him of his every failure, every instance he had appeared weak and useless to his father. He said coldly, “That’s ‘*sir*’ to you.” The pain on her face made him want to take the words back, but he forced himself not to say anything. To walk away. To stop showing weakness, like he always ended up doing with Dio.

The words hurt, but Misty reminded herself that this had happened before. It didn’t mean Domenico didn’t care for her. It only meant he was hurt. She went after him even though every step made her feel like a slut.

“Domenico—”

He spun around. “Will you stop stalking me? Or do you want me to call security?”

She froze. “I...”

“Just forget what happened between us,” Domenico said harshly. “It won’t do you any good. I’m not a good man.”

Unable to help it, Misty whispered, “You are.”

“No. I’m not. And you want to know why?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Because right now, I’m going up to fuck my brains out, which according to my father is the only thing I’m good at.” His gaze mocked hers. “Still think I’m a good man?”



## Chapter Six



**B**ang. Bang. Bang.  
Misty wished someone had invented selective earphones. That way, she could hear everything but that.

*More! God! More!*

*Yes. Ooooooh God, yes.*

*Aaaah, Domenico, your cock...more. I want your  
coooooooooock—*

She was not new to heartbreak. This wasn't even the first time Domenico had broken her heart. But even so, it hurt, surprisingly so. Each time she heard a sound coming from the bedroom Domenico had locked himself in with three women – three, my God, *three* – she died a little.

She glanced at her watch. 20:44. She still had time left. She only had to talk to him once – had to make him see the truth, no matter how arrogant it may make her seem.

He needed her. He loved her.



“MISTY?”

She looked up, color staining her cheeks when she saw Avery, the sympathy in the other woman's gaze evident. “H-hey.”

“The party's over,” Avery said quietly. “I've been asked by Prince Danilo to clear everyone out.” The hope in Misty's eyes made her wince. “I'm sorry, Misty, but that means everyone... except those...inside.”

“I see.” Misty glanced at her watch. 18:45. It was strange, but she couldn't make herself panic at the way time was slipping past her. All she knew was that she needed just one

chance to talk to Domenico. Just one chance, and this weird, painful hell would be over.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble...” Misty sent Avery a look of appeal. “But I really need to talk to him. I promise I won’t cause him any trouble.”

“You could always come back later—” When Misty was about to protest, Avery said, “When Prince Domenico’s in this mood, it takes him a while to...get out of it.” She cleared her throat, wishing there was an easier way for her to break it to Misty. “He could go at it *the whole night*, Misty. Do you understand what I mean?”

Oh.

Misty swallowed.

Oh.

She should have expected that, shouldn’t she?

Misty mustered up a smile. “I understand. But I still want talk to him. Please, Avery?”

Avery found herself relenting reluctantly. “All right, but promise me. No hysterics. I warned you about the prince.”



*17:55 HOURS LEFT.*

She clicked on the side button of her watch, the display switching to show the current time.

It was one in the morning.

Inside, the women were still crying, but Misty knew it wasn’t the type that came with tears.

Lucky them.

She rubbed her eyes.

If only she could cry just like that, too, maybe this wouldn’t be so painful.

Misty closed her eyes, forcing herself to concentrate on the memories. The ones where Domenico knew her. Loved her.

Was married to her. She clung hard to those memories, harder every time she heard the women crying in the way she couldn't cry right now.

*Stubborn*, she reminded herself. Didn't Domenico mention how stubborn she was? She had to be stubborn, had to remember that Domenico didn't know how much he was hurting her right now.



DANILO MORETTI TIMED his call perfectly. His father's routine never changed, and in the mornings he would read the papers right after breakfast. By this time, Danilo knew, Dio would have seen the headlines and would not know what to do.

“Father?”

“What is it?” Dio's tone was brusque with suppressed emotion.

He had read it then, Domenico's successful negotiation of the most important deal for their business empire. Right now, Dio would be feeling guilty and defensive, and in the past, this meant Dio also had a tendency to say the opposite of what he felt, all to save his stubborn pride.

*Well, not again*, Danilo thought. It was time the stupid feud between Domenico and their father was put to rest. They had a traitor in their midst, and even for someone as suspicious as him, that person's betrayal had come as a surprise.

To his father, Danilo said, “You've read it then?”

“Yes.” The voice was curt and unyielding.

“You misjudged him clearly this time, Father. You should have allowed him to explain rather than jumping to conclusions.”

Dio snapped, “I may have been wrong now, but in the past \_\_\_”

“The past is in the past. We're talking about now – and you were in the wrong.” He paused meaningfully. “Would it kill



you to say ‘sorry’, Father? Would you really rather Domenico completely lose all love and respect for you because of your pride?”

One full minute passed.

Dio asked finally, “What are you suggesting?”

Danilo glanced at his watch. *Nine in the morning.* He knew, from Avery, that Domenico had once again tried to lose himself in a night of debauchery. His twin would probably need an hour or two before he could become coherent. “I’ll accompany you to Domenico’s suite. I’ll make sure you won’t choke on your apology, Father.”

Dio cursed.

“You’re welcome, Father.” He sent a text message to Avery. *We’ll be there at eleven. Make sure Domenico’s sober.*

“Waiting will just get on my nerves,” Dio said. “Let’s get this over with. I’ll meet you there.”

Dio ended the call before Danilo could speak. *Fuck!* If Dio caught sight of Domenico now...and if Domenico woke up with another hangover and a surly temper—

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Danilo was out of his office in a flash. He had to get to Domenico first.



DOMENICO MORETTI CAME out of his room and almost stumbled at a foot stuck out in front of him. He looked down, his scowl disappearing and his furious words dying when he saw exactly what was in his way.

Misty was seated on the floor, her back against the wall, sleeping. There were dark shadows under her eyes, and her nose appeared red...from crying.

His chest constricted. Why the fuck did he feel so guilty about her? She was *no one*. For all he knew, she was just one of the many women who had come to work for his family in order to milk him or one of his brothers for money.

He forced himself to move.

He had only taken one step when fingers curled around his ankle.

He looked back, and Misty was looking up at him, her sleepy eyes filled with shock and apprehension.

Again, Domenico's chest constricted, more painfully this time. "Let go." His voice was rough.

Reddening at his tone, Misty immediately released him, scrambling to her feet right after. "Y-you're awake." It was a silly thing to say, but she couldn't make herself say what was really on her mind. *Were they over then? Had he finished...had he finished fucking his brains out?*

A quick glance on her watch told her it was already eight in the morning. A little over ten hours to make him fall in love with her. Less than half a day. It could happen. It would happen. But this time, her heart wasn't as convinced as it once was.

Not when she had looked back and found the door to Domenico's room slightly ajar, revealing three naked women curled up on the bed—

Domenico swiftly closed the door when he saw where she was looking. When their eyes met, hers were glassy. There was no measuring the pain in his chest this time. Goddammit, what was happening to him? Why was he feeling like this? It wasn't like he owed her his fidelity.

"Why are you still here, Misty?"

"Because I needed to talk to you." Her voice was steady, but she couldn't keep her smile from wobbling, couldn't keep herself from blinking to stop her eyes from shedding tears.

He hated the way she made him feel. It reminded him of the countless times his own father had made him guilty and worthless.

"Let me guess. You're hurt about the way I left you?" His lip curled in scorn.

She shook her head. "Nope."

His eyes bored through hers.

“Well, okay, I was hurt, but it doesn’t matter—”

“Oh, doesn’t it?” His voice became dangerously silky. “Is it because you don’t need me to be sexually faithful? You’re good with sharing me then?” He opened the door. “You’re good with being the fourth?” When she only looked at him, he snarled, “Look at them.”

Misty shook her head vehemently. “No.”

*“Look at them!”*

*“I don’t want to—”*

He held her shoulders. She started to struggle, but he was too strong for her. A second later, and he had forcibly spun her around.

A silent, broken cry escaped her.

It had no sound, not the slightest bit, but behind her, Domenico jerked as if he had heard it all the same, her pain reaching him because even if he didn’t remember her in this world, his heart hadn’t forgotten.

“Misty—”

This time, she couldn’t stop staring. She couldn’t stop imagining. She told herself she shouldn’t think of Domenico with them, but it was useless. Their nudity mocked her. Offended her. Tore her apart. *Are you really sure Domenico loves you? Are you really sure Domenico would have fallen in love with you if he hadn’t needed you in the first place?*

The tears fell.

Was that the challenge then? The real challenge?

In their world, Domenico had worked hard to prove to her he loved her, regardless of whether she would be a help to him. But what if he had only been fooling himself? What if he had only really just gotten used to her?



## Chapter Seven

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Domenico was suddenly blocking her view. His face was white, the pain in his gaze a mirror of what she felt. “I’m sorry,” he said tautly. “I don’t know what made me do that. I’m...sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She didn’t know what else to say or think. She knew time was running out, knew that now was the time to make him fall in love with her. But somehow, she couldn’t say a word. Somehow, she felt that speaking would make her feel selfish, would force Domenico to fall in love with her *again*.

If she used her knowledge of him, of the time she spent with him, Misty knew she could make him fall in love with her again. But would it be right to do it? Would it?

There was no chance to know the answer to it, not when they heard his father’s voice interrupting them. Again.

“What the hell is this?”

*Just what he fucking needed*, Domenico thought. His father walking in on a scene that screamed orgy. His father, who was the most conservative man in the planet, whose first and only girlfriend was Domenico’s mother.

Domenico slowly spun around.

Danilo and Avery were also there. His brother’s face was grim while Avery appeared stricken.

One look at Dio and Misty knew Domenico’s father was about to say something hurtful, something that Domenico might never forgive him for, not in the mood he was in. Before anyone could speak, she charged at Domenico, swaying and stumbling as she did, like someone on a drug-induced high.

“*Did you have fun with them?*” Her voice was slurred, or at least Misty hoped it was.

Behind her, Avery and Danilo were looking at each other.

*Who the hell is she*, he mouthed.

*Misty...or at least I think she's Misty*, she mouthed back. *I think seeing Domenico with so many women made her...snap?*

Either way, the two thought it was the worst impression of a drunk they had ever seen.

Domenico was looking at her like she was crazy. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She let out what she hoped was a crazy laugh. “I drugged you and these women yesterday. If you think I’m going to let you go to your father and play the prodigal son...” She released another crazy laugh.

Domenico took a step towards her. “Misty, will you—”

She quickly took a step back. “Don’t come any closer, or I’m going to upload your video right this minute!” She glared at him, which was the easy part. Glaring made it easier for her not to cry. “If you think you can change overnight, you’re lying to yourself! I’m going to drag you down with me. I’ll make you pay for throwing me out—”

*“Enough.”*

She whirled around in time to see Dio Moretti bearing down on her, his face coldly contemptuous. But there was something in his eyes—no, she probably was imagining it.

“I’ve heard enough,” Dio said grimly. “Avery, call security and have this woman escorted out of this building. She’s never to be allowed on any Moretti property again.” His eyes returned to Misty. “I’d like you to know that every room in this building is under CCTV surveillance. Your attempt to blackmail my son was recorded. If you ever attempt to do the same thing to Domenico or any other member of my family, you will be sent to jail. Do you understand?” His voice turned steely. “I protect every precious member of my family, and Domenico is one of them. I will not let anyone – *anyone* – harm my son.”

For a moment, Misty couldn’t speak. She knew what those words meant, and a glance at Domenico’s pale face told her he knew it, too. In not so many words, his father was extending

an olive branch – an apology for how he had treated Domenico last night.

“Did you hear me, Miss?”

She swallowed, finding it hard to get back into character. She took a deep breath then said in a slurred voice, “Fuck you.”

In less than a minute, security had escorted her to the elevator. Before the doors could close, Avery was there, and she quickly pressed the HOLD button. “Misty, what was that?”

Misty started to slur her words.

Avery shook her head. “Stop it. You didn’t fall asleep drinking. You fell asleep waiting for Prince Domenico to come out.”

“Oh.” When Avery kept looking at her, Misty said helplessly, “What else could I say? We both knew what was going to happen and I just...I just didn’t want to see the same sad look in his eyes again.”

Avery’s heart broke at the words. She had never met someone as brave as Misty and it shamed her, the way Misty could do such a thing without hesitation. Misty might not have said the words, but anyone with half a brain would know only a woman in love could do something like that.

“Don’t go,” Avery said. “I can work something out—”

Misty shook her head. “It’s okay. I’m just happy things will finally work well between Domenico and his father.” She pressed the CLOSE button and the doors slowly shut.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

What was she doing?

Was she really turning her back on the chance to save herself? To save Domenico?

But somehow, it didn’t feel right—

The elevator doors slid open on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor, and her eyes widened when she saw the couple coming in. *Matteo* – he was alive here as well? Matteo had been Domenico’s friend,

the one whose murder Domenico wanted to solve, the reason she had taken the jinn's offer.

Behind him was Rafaella, the woman who had once turned Misty into a laughingstock among Lyccans, the princess Domenico had originally meant to marry.

They exchanged a hot passionate kiss before turning to Misty.

“Good job on saving the bastard's face like that,” Matteo said.

Shock robbed her of speech. He was Domenico's childhood friend in the real world. Did it mean – did it mean he had been playing a role all along?

At her stunned look, Rafaella laughed. “We saw you through the surveillance cameras, of course. Did you think only the Morettis had access to it? We would never have the balls to meet you right now if we didn't have access to it. Everyone here can be bought. You just need to know how much they want.” She then asked eagerly, “Did you mean it about the video though?”

Misty shook her head slowly. “No. It was a bluff.”

The two were clearly disappointed. “That's okay,” he told Misty. “At least you got him to trust you. Just lay low for a week and I'll find a way to bring up your name with Domenico.”

His hand curved around Rafaella's waist and he licked her ear, an action that made Misty cringe inwardly. “I told you, babe. Women are his weakness. Always.”

She laughed. “I believe you now.”

The two stepped out at the thirteenth floor, which was somehow symbolic. If she had the strength to laugh, Misty would have. About to press the CLOSE button, she stopped in time when someone appeared at the hallway.

The woman stepped inside the elevator.

When the doors slid close, Misty absently looked at her companion and froze in shock.



It was the jinn.

“Y-you.” Misty rubbed her eyes, but it really was the jinn, and she hadn’t even bothered to dress herself in human clothes. Did it mean that this entire world was under her control?

*“You made me laugh.”*

Misty had?

*“Now, I owe you a favor.”*

The jinn did?

*“Even if you do not win this challenge, I can tell your mate the truth you have discovered. Do you want me to tell him?”*

Misty had hoped she would have another kind of reward, perhaps another option to get out of this world, but a part of her also knew it couldn’t ever be that easy. Trying to ignore the sense of crushing disappointment inside of her, Misty nodded. “I’d...like that.”

*“It is done.”* The jinn’s eyes studied her. *“You only have... nine hours. Do you think you will win?”*

Misty didn’t answer.

*“You really love him?”*

She nodded.

*“But now, you no longer trust him?”*

She shook her head. “It’s not that. I’m just not sure if...if he really did love me...or he just got used to having me around.”

When the elevator doors opened on the ground floor, Misty was all alone. Walking out of the building, the first thing she saw was a copter lifting off from the building’s own helipad. It had Moretti Inc. emblazoned on its body and she wondered numbly if Domenico was inside it. If he was—

Nine hours.

If he was flying away, was nine hours long enough for him to realize who she was to him – and who he was to her?

She closed her eyes. *I love you, Domenico. I love you.*



# Chapter Eight

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Domenico told himself it was for the best. He repeated the words over and over in the entire four-hour journey, from the time they transferred to the family jet and flew to where they were meeting with their new business partners.

But when they made it to the airport, Domenico knew he couldn't just let it go like that.

“Father, I can't go with you.”

Dio stilled at the words. “Why not?”

He looked at his father. He was tired of being too stubborn, of being too proud, and being too damn stupid. “The woman you had thrown out of my suite was lying. She wasn't there to blackmail me, and she wasn't even drunk.”

“So the women in the bedroom—”

Domenico said flatly, “Because you told me I'm good at fucking my brains out, that was exactly what I did.”

Dio flinched.

“I'm not blaming you for it,” he clarified swiftly when he saw his brother shoot him a frowning look. Domenico knew if he didn't explain himself now, it would be the past all over again. “I just wanted you to know why I did it. I don't want it to be as before – both of us saying or doing things we don't mean.”

Dio said gruffly, “I apologize, too. I apologize for being too harsh on you. I know...I know I have never told you this, but it's only because I'm afraid that your wild, reckless side would get you taken away from me again. When you were kidnapped – it was the worst time of my life. Remembering it made me tougher on you. I thought if I could make you more circumspect, you would never take any kind of risk...”

“But instead I did the opposite,” Domenico finished heavily. So many damn years had been wasted, and all because neither of them had been able to be honest.

Danilo cleared his throat. “I hate to interrupt your tearful reunion—”

“Smartass,” Domenico muttered.

“I think the same many times,” Dio said under his breath.

Danilo grinned. “Oh, so you two are on the same side now, is that it?” His voice sobered. “Are you flying back to look for that woman?”

“Her name is Misty.” And as he said it, Domenico realized with a start that it was all he knew of her. That and the fact that she worked for the family.

“Misty then. I’m afraid I have bad news. I tried to have her followed, but somehow, all the cameras in our building were down. No one’s been able to pinpoint even the direction she’s headed.”

“But she was working for us. She said so. Surely we have her on our own records—”

“I already had Avery check all our records. She’s not in any of them.”

“I’ll still fly back,” Domenico said curtly. “I’ll find her, one way or another.” He didn’t know why he had to right now. All he knew was that he had to find her this very moment, the sooner, the better. Maybe it was the way she had looked at him before he had allowed security to take her away like a goddamn coward. It was as if she loved him, as if she wanted him to know that she loved him because the knowledge that he was loved was her way of saying goodbye.



MISTY SAT ON THE FLOOR of the bookstore across the Morettis’ building, watching the sun sink lower and lower as morning darkened into afternoon.

She looked at her watch. *01:01*

An hour and a second to live.

She touched her heart, but still it beat normally, her love for Domenico never wavering.

It no longer made sense to love, to keep waiting, to keep hoping.

But she did all three anyway.

*I love you, Domenico.*

The words made her want to cry, but it also made her feel stronger at the same time.

Time ticked by.

*00:56*

*I love you, Domenico.*

*00:45*

Would the jinn truly allow her to die here? Perhaps she would be like Sleeping Beauty, and maybe it would just be one long sleep for her until a prince in wolf's clothing came to wake her with a kiss.

*00:32*

Her eyes drifted closed, and pulling her legs up, she tucked her knees under her chin and bowed her head down.

*00:24*

*I love you, Domenico.*



DOMENICO'S HEART WAS beating hard, and he found it hard to breathe. He stood right outside the building his family owned and looked around him wildly. She was out there somewhere. He could feel it in his guts, like a guardian angel whispering to him what he needed to know.

He looked around again, trying to narrow down the places she could go to.

*A nightclub? No, Misty was no part-goer.*

*A coffee shop?* Not likely. Misty didn't seem to be much of a moper.

*A bookstore?*

He stilled.

Yes, he could see her doing that.

She was a dreamer. Only dreamers wore their hearts on their sleeves like Misty did.

The thought had him breaking into a run, and he nearly shoved the people who blocked his way as he burst through the bookstore's doors. His entire body shuddered with relief when he found her on the floor, looking like a little kid taking a nap.

He fell to his knees across her.

Her eyes slowly blinked open. "*Domenico?*"

God, she sounded so frail. Somehow, he knew that was his fault.

"Who else?" He tried to sound teasing, but the words came out uneven.

"I saw you... fly away."

"You did."

"But you're here now."

"I came back as fast as I could." He tucked loose strands of her hair behind her ears, unsurprised to find his hand shaking.

"You turned into a werewolf?"

"A what?"

"You're a wolf. I know you're a wolf."

If she didn't sound so drowsy, he would have thought her insane. "No. I'm not. I'm a prince, a billionaire, an ex-playboy, but I'm not a werewolf."

"Oh."

He inhaled sharply. "Misty... I know I have no right to ask this after the shitty things I did to you, but I'm going to ask it

anyway.” He looked into her eyes. “Will you be mine?”

“Not for...sharing?” Her voice broke, and it still sounded so weak it terrified him.

He said hoarsely, “Never again. If you take me, I’m yours...only yours.”

She touched his face. “D-do you think you’re in love with me?”

He shook his head.

She looked like she was about to cry.

“I’m going to sound as crazy as you are,” he whispered just before hauling her into his arms, “but I *know* I love you.”

Their lips touched.

When Misty opened her eyes, she was still in Domenico’s arms, but they were back in the forest and the jinn was standing in front of them.

Domenico began shaking her. Then he embraced her, tightly, just before shaking her again, as if unable to make up his mind about what he wanted to do more. “You idiot,” he grated. “You goddamn, lovable idiot. You actually thought of letting yourself die—” The words had him cupping her face and kissing her hard.

When he pulled away, Misty was stunned to find Domenico’s face was white with pain. “Domenico—”

“How could you even think I just got used to you?” he whispered starkly. “Are you really an idiot? I love you, Misty. I love *you*.”

She said shakily, “You were very nasty as a human.”

Laughter rocked his strong body even as he brushed his lips against her tenderly. “I’m sorry.”

She hugged him tightly. Her body trembled hard against his, and she knew it was out of relief. She had been so close — so darn close to dying. “The ‘vajayjay’ worked though,” she whispered to him.



He didn't say a word.

“Thank you also for telling me about your mom's wish coming true. I think that helped me, too.”

Domenico still didn't say a word. The best of marriages, he told himself, were founded on the most critical secrets.

She pulled away. “But you know one thing I really liked about you in that world?”

He asked incredulously, “You actually found something to like?”

Misty nodded. “I love how you were so fashionable. You actually wore *skinny* jeans there. I saw it in one of the magazines when I was trying to...distract myself.”

Domenico winced.

“And you were so playful, and you weren't working all the time—”

He said testily, “I don't want to hear any more.” But his hold was gentle and careful as he helped his wife to her feet.

Misty's eyes widened. “Are you...*jealous*?” She tried not to smile, but it was no use. “Are you jealous...of *yourself*?”

“Shut up.” Domenico looked at the jinn. “Our agreement?”

“*She already knows.*”

The words made Misty's smile fade. When Domenico looked at her, she nodded. She did know and it weighed on her because the knowledge, she knew, would hurt a lot of people and reopen old wounds.

Domenico scooped Misty up in his arms. Looking at the jinn, he said frankly, “No offense meant, jinn, but I hope never to see you again.”

Misty gasped. “Domenico!”

The jinn's face remained expressionless. “*That is always how it is.*”

Misty said hurriedly, “Don't listen to him—” She frowned. “What *is* your name? I don't think you ever told us.”

The jinn slowly cocked her head to the side, as if unable to understand why Misty even had to know. *“Do you wish to know my name?”*

“Never mind about that,” Misty said nervously. “I just mean...you don’t have to be a stranger.”

“She has,” Domenico argued.

“No, she does not.” She looked back at the jinn. “You should come back and visit. I promise to tell you lots of jokes.”

The jinn looked...mildly interested.

“That’s it,” Domenico said determinedly. “We’re going back before you end up wishing for something again.” He said over his shoulder, “Jinn, go away and never come back. No offense meant.”

*“None is taken. But I may be back.”*

Domenico pretended not to hear the last words. It would only give him nightmares.

When the jinn disappeared from view, Misty said, “You were very rude—” The rest of her words was lost in a gasp as Domenico suddenly lowered her to her feet and guided her hands to a medium-sized tree trunk, one which she could wrap her arms around. “Umm, Domenico?”

“I’m going to fuck you,” he said calmly.

“Here?” she squeaked. “Now?”

“Yes.” He palmed her butt, and just the gesture alone had her squirming with desire.

“But—”

“I need to erase his smell on you.” The next second, he had ripped her jeans away.

Misty turned red all over, but it wasn’t just because of embarrassment. “Domenico...” Her voice came out as a weak protest, and she found herself interlocking her fingers around the trunk tightly, her body tensing in anticipation of his possession.

She tensed even more when he leaned over her, his hard chest pressing against her back as his rigid cock nudged against her aching flesh. “When I fuck you,” he whispered, “I want you to scream...”

His whispered words made Misty’s eyes widen. “Are you serious—”

Domenico thrust into her without warning.

She hugged the trunk tightly, her breasts bouncing under her at the strength of his thrusts.

“Say it now,” he growled.

“But...”

“Say it or I’ll stop.”

When he started to withdraw his cock, she panicked. “I’ll say it.”

Domenico turned her face to him and kissed her possessively, his lips devouring hers, his tongue laying claim to her sweet, delicious mouth. “I love you, wife.”

When he released her, he was satisfied to see her eyes hazy with desire, her cheeks pink with embarrassment, and her lips swollen from his kiss. Holding her hips, he pushed forward, balls-deep into her.

Misty whimpered. “Oh my God—”

“Say it.”

As his thrust rocked her body, his cock making her eyes roll back, she cried out, “I love you, my *werewolf* husband.” It was the only way to distinguish the Domenico in that world from the Domenico in this.

“Not enough *stress* on the word,” he growled, still jealous as hell over the way she had practically glowed while describing him in the jinn’s alternative world.

Domenico fucked her harder, grinding his cock into her as hard as he could—

She screamed, “I love Domenico Moretti, my WEREWOLF husband—”



BACK IN THE TRAINING field of the Adelardi pack, all movements came to a screeching halt when they heard the human wife of Domenico Moretti scream.

Before her, Calys’ two hundred students were divided between shock and infatuation.

She looked at her Cavaliere, her cheeks red. “Why is she saying that?”

Alejandro said honestly, “I’m almost absolutely certain my brother made her.”

“Why?”

His eyes took a lazy, seductive gleam. “I’m not sure of that either, but it sounds good. Do you want to give it a try later, my Queen? You could scream ‘my werewolf Cavaliere’ instead.”

“*Alejandro!*”

THE END