



THRONE OF WOLVES

THE
**SACRED
WOLF**

MARISA CLAIRE

THE SACRED
WOLF

Throne of Wolves, Book Two

By Marisa Claire

The Sacred Wolf Copyright © 2023 by Torment Publishing. All Rights Reserved.

TORMENT**PUBLISHING**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

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

The Sacred Wolf: Throne of Wolves, Book 2

Marisa Claire

www.tormentpublishing.com

www.marisaclaire.com

Printed in the United States of America

Contents:

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

Chapter One

Wolves didn't keep pets, but Evan wasn't letting that stop me.

His smokey gray wolf crouched in a play bow on the other side of the training room, tongue lolling like one of those dopey Labradors I often saw galumphing around the corner of Central Park that was visible from the Tower Room's north window. Five weeks had passed since my first awful night at The Plaza, and I was still living in the suite meant for my twin sister's honeymoon. An event which I now knew would have rightfully been *mine* had it ever actually happened. But it had not.

It really, really, *really* had not.

For me or Kiana.

And now that Sebastian had released me from his mate claim, I had every intention of keeping it that way. Forever. If life in Manhattan had taught me anything, it was that I needed a male like—how had Charlie always put it?—like a fish needed a motorcycle. Was that right? That didn't sound quite right. But now my mind was filling up fast with infuriating images of the Sebastian I *might* have fallen in love with.

The Sebastian with the Danny Zuko jacket and the Clark Kent glasses and the Jack Kelly newsboy cap. The Sebastian

who'd secretly been sitting in the back row of the Last Century Cinema the last time all my human friends and I would ever watch *The Princess Bride*. The Sebastian who'd been ready to rumble when his shady pack mates had me cornered in the empty subway station.

But I hadn't seen any hint of *that* Sebastian since the night on the bridge when he'd bowed his head and murmured, "As you wish." Instead, on the rare occasions that I saw him at all, I saw nothing but an overpriced suit snugged tightly around the same passionless statue who had sat quietly on that wretched subway car while Evan jumped up to defend me. So yeah, I needed *that* Sebastian like a fish needed a motorcycle, no matter how many nights the one in the jacket swaggered through my dreams.

My incredibly detailed dreams...

Evan pounced, caroming off the padded wall and barrel rolling like one of those human parkour pups that used to do crazy stunts on the playground near the Bronx pack's high-rise. Impressive to watch, but foolish to try. I easily caught Evan broadside with my giant white paws, and he flew through the air in the opposite direction before tumbling to the floor like a swatted fly.

"*You got me!*" he howled, flipping onto his back and pointing four stiff legs at the ceiling. He flopped his head toward me and croaked, "*Tell my mom... tell her I love...*" His tongue unfurled onto the floor with a dramatic gasp. "*Men.*"

"*Don't do that,*" I growled, stalking over to him.

He rolled onto his chest, panting with mirth. "*Oh, right, sorry. Males.*"

"*That's not what I meant,*" I said quietly. "*Don't play—*"

I couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't make myself say that awful word for what Charlie was now. That word for what Evan would've been too if the Mark of Chann hadn't compelled me to sink my fangs into his shoulder. The word for what we *all* were to Jayla now.

“Don’t take my dark humor, Elyse.” Evan widened his bright blue wolf eyes and manic Labrador grin. *“She’s the only therapist I’ve got.”*

I lowered my head with a heavy sigh and touched my snow white muzzle to the ashy gray one I’d bestowed upon my friend. My bite may have given him back his life, but it had taken every single thing that made it uniquely *his*. The apartment full of movie memorabilia he’d shared with Jayla and Charlie... the high-paying tech job he’d thrown himself into after giving up on acting... the dream he never should have trashed just because he wasn’t the right guy to play Helena Bonham Carter’s teenage son on *Alma Mater Animalis*... and, worst of all, any hope of ever finding the right guy to spend the rest of his miraculously extended life with.

Some miracle! I turned his New York City into that backwards town from Footloose!

As if sensing my oncoming spiral, Evan gave my cheek a quick comforting lick. I didn’t have the heart to remind him right then that it didn’t matter what form we were in, tongue-based physical affection between unmated males and females was strictly prohibited. Even here in Manhattan where a lot of things were considerably less old-fashioned than they were back in the Bronx. If Evan and I ever appeared to be in danger of spontaneously mating, then Alpha Max had the right to arrange a ceremony before we gave into temptation—and not necessarily with each other. My own father had once disliked a self-made match so much that he arranged a double mating ceremony for the would-be couple—with new partners he had chosen for them.

Claim or no claim, I knew Sebastian would never let his father arrange a ceremony for *me*, but I wouldn’t put it past *him* to already be arranging a ceremony for Evan and some unclaimed, low-rank female who wouldn’t ask too many questions about my friend’s past. For a well-traveled wolf with more exposure to human culture than most, Sebastian was having a ridiculously hard time grasping the fact that yes, I

could turn a human into a shifter but no, I could *not* turn a gay man straight.

Evan himself had cautiously suggested that I take Sebastian's ignorance as a compliment, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find it the slightest bit flattering. Every time Sebastian shot a suspicious glance at my only remaining friend, I felt like the same piece of raw meat he'd pointed at during my sister's mateship ceremony. Like I was only good for one thing and so incredibly good for it that even Evan would forget who he was and become obsessed with pupping me up. Why couldn't Sebastian see that he was biting himself on the foot with this nonsense after he'd come so close to convincing me that wasn't all *he* wanted me for?

Well, the joke would be on him if he tried to make Evan take a female mate because I *would* take Evan for myself before I let that happen. There obviously weren't any shifter laws stating that mated pairs had to be genuinely attracted to each other, and monogamy had always been optional for shifter males if they knew where to find outcast females or even human women. Everyone simply looked the other way when a male's pheromone signature changed... and changed... and changed some more.

But the pheromones didn't reveal names. With me as his official mate, Evan would be able to keep pursuing his own interests, and with him as mine, I would never have to worry about being treated like a piece of raw meat again. And with enough alcohol and dark humor, the two of us could probably muddle our way through... um, changing our pheromones. But that plan was *only* in case of an emergency. I wanted Evan to be as free as he'd run away to New York City to be. As free as he'd been before the man with the bat made me take everything Evan had fought for away from him.

So, that left me with three options to consider before going nuclear. One, I could mate with Sebastian and try to use my feminine wiles to persuade him to smash the patriarchy for me. Two, I could challenge Kiana for control of the Bronx and smash it up there myself. Or three, Evan and I could just run

away to L.A. and leave all the packs in New York to smash themselves to pieces on their rancid old rules and toxic traditions.

After a month of exhausting wolf lessons with Evan and infrequent but incredibly awkward encounters with Sebastian, all within the increasingly claustrophobic confines of The Plaza Hotel... Option Two was rapidly gaining appeal.

“So.” Evan abruptly stood and fluffed out his lustrous coat. “*Would we call that waxing on or waxing off, Mama Miyagi?*”

“*Don’t do that either,*” I growled.

“*What?*” Evan blinked innocently down at me. His wolf, like his human, had a solid six inches on me. “*Drop a Karate Kid reference?*”

I flattened my ears. He knew I didn’t like it when he teased me about being his mother now, but he didn’t know it was partially because I was steeling myself for the possibility of whelping his pups if all else failed to keep him safe here. And I wasn’t about to tell him about the Nuclear Option. So, he’d gotten the idea in his head that his jokes and my protests were some sort of comedy bit we were both having fun with.

“*But you made me.*” Evan ducked into another play bow, wagging his tail over his muscular haunches. “*Aren’t you proud?*”

“*Not yet.*” I turned and trotted back to my side of the Alpha Family’s padded, sound-proof training room. Every time Evan and I made use of this private space on the Plaza’s penthouse level, which was several times daily, I had to remind myself not to read too much into the fact that I was still considered part of the Alpha Family. Because maybe I wasn’t. Maybe this was just the only training room in Manhattan where Sebastian could be sure no one would walk in on the female who’d dumped him wrestling with a strange, no-rank male who wouldn’t hide his love of movies.

Unlike Sebastian.

I wondered if that added to his jealousy—knowing Evan and I shared an interest Sebastian wouldn't admit that he shared with me. Even when we were sitting in the fancy movie theatre he'd *bought* for me. I didn't like that about him, but I understood. Alphas had their pride, but Alpha Heirs had even more. And that was probably why I'd found Sebastian more mate-worthy when I'd assumed he was Manhattan's future Beta. Now he just reminded me of my sister—never laughing, never relaxing, never letting the mask slip around anyone who might pose even the slightest threat to their ability to keep getting whatever they wanted whenever they wanted it.

Would I be like that? If Damian hadn't switched Kiana and me while our father lay weeping across our mother's torn body, would I also be an insufferable bore incapable of having fun or expressing emotion? If I claimed my birthright, would I have to give up everything I loved about myself and learn how to be Kiana the same way Evan was learning how to be a wolf? Who would teach me? Certainly not her, and my father, well, who knew if he was even—

Evan slammed into my hindquarters, knocking me into a spin that whirled me around to face him. His blue eyes widened with the realization that he'd once again made a potentially fatal mistake. Snarling, I drove my muzzle into the side of his neck, forcing him flat on his belly as I grabbed a mouthful of scruff and gave it a good shake like... well, like a mother wolf.

Mortified, I spit him out and backed away. Training Evan was not unlike training a ten-year-old pup with selective hearing and zero focus, but Evan was *not* a pup. He was a grown male, two years older than me, who had once been my first silly schoolgirl crush. Hell, he'd been my first kiss when I turned eighteen. So why did his mom jokes hit a little too close to home? Why was there a part of me that *did* look at Evan and think *mine* on some primal level? Just one of many things it would have been nice for Leto to explain in a little more detail when she summoned Kiana and me to... wherever that field of wildflowers was.

If that had ever even happened. The vision had felt so real in the moment, but now... a month later... I wasn't so sure I hadn't just hallucinated the whole thing while my sister's teeth were cutting off my air supply. The only scrap of evidence I had for believing that the Goddess of Wolves had actually called Kiana and me into her meadow to scold us for not getting along with each other was that when we'd both come, my twin had asked—

“What the hell was that?” Evan pushed up onto one hand and two knees, rubbing his slobbery neck. The look in his human eyes suggested that he didn't find the mom jokes funny anymore either. “Elyse?”

Chapter Two

My flesh and bones frantically shifted back into human formation, and I could feel my human cheeks flaming before my fur had fully receded. I ducked my head to hide behind the veil of blond hair tumbling from my scalp, but I could still the saliva dripping off the fingers he now held in front of his freaked-out face.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “It just happened.”

“Okayyy.” Evan said slowly, wiping his wet hand down the length of my arm. “But you do know you’re not really my mom, right? Though she’d *love* to pull that trick.”

I lifted my head to glare at him, wishing I could still pin back my ears. Or growl.

Bite him, my wolf prompted now that she was back inside. **Maybe it’ll fix him.**

He doesn’t need fixing, I snapped, and my eyebrows must have furrowed dangerously because Evan shrank back as if expecting me to pounce on his human neck.

He belongs with his own kind.

You’re the one who made him ours!

I didn’t know what I was doing.

I believed her. How could she have known? No wolf had turned a human into a shifter since... well, no one knew exactly when it happened last, but the Old Stories claimed it had been over a thousand years. None of those stories explained why the power eventually faded, but in my vision on the bridge, Leto claimed it had something to do with her sons, Chann and Marrak, not being able to get along. And then she claimed that if Kiana and I *could* get along, we would be able to save our kind from “the trouble that comes for us all.”

So... we're doomed.

Looks like it!

My sister and I hadn't spoken since the night she tried to murder our father and I dropped the bomb on her that her beloved “Uncle” Damian had murdered our mother. Apparently, she'd already known for years that we'd been switched us at birth so she could be the Alpha—and had no problem with it—but she'd remained blissfully ignorant to the fact that Damian had used his Beta mental powers to coerce the midwolf into ripping my mother open with her claws to get me—no, *Kiana*—out safely. And she was still blissfully ignorant to all the details of that event because she never gave me a chance to explain. She ran away.

Who knows if she even believes me?

I could understand why she wouldn't want to. I had lived with the guilt of being the violently delivered pup since our father told us the whole story when we turned thirteen—right before he moved us out of the penthouse apartment we all shared and into separate apartments on the next floor down. Now I realized that probably hadn't been Father's decision but the next step in Damian's divide-and-conquer scheme. He needed more opportunities to be alone with Kiana to fill her head with lies.

We should've killed him when we had the chance.

Next time. If Sebastian doesn't get there first.

Maybe you could do it together. Like a date...

A smile quirked my lips, imagining that scene. Hunting down the disgusting male who had murdered my mother and coerced Sebastian's fragile mother Yara into setting him free while Max and Mateo were dealing with the fall out of the subway massacre and Sebastian and I were dealing with my twin on the bridge. I could picture Sebastian's gorgeous gray wolf holding that living, breathing, struggling, screaming snake down while I ripped his quivering stomach wide open—

“Elyse!” Evan snapped his fingers in front of my nose.

I blinked as my friend leaned forward to squint at my face. “What? Stop that!”

“You stop it!”

“Stop what?!” I pushed my hands into my hair, slicking it over my ears to throw it back into a messy bun. “I'm not doing anything!”

“Not now.” Evan sat back on his human haunches. “But you were doing your tennis ball eyes. Which is fine. I'm used to it after all these years. But the smile was creepy.”

I paused with my hair bunched over my head. “My tennis what now?”

“You know. This business.” Evan darted his eyes rapidly back and forth. “Like you're following a conversation I can't hear. Between two people I can't see.” He gasped and touched one hand to his heart. “Holy shift. Elyse. Do you see dead people?”

I rolled my eyes and finished my bun. ‘Holy shift’ was Evan's catchphrase now, borrowed from the girl on *Alma Mater Animalis*, a show Evan swore he'd never watched but sure knew an awful lot about... So I wasn't sure if the question about dead people was him once again suggesting I could see things with my nose like the girl on the show, or if he was just referencing *The Sixth Sense*. Although I guess seeing things with one's nose *would* be considered a sixth sense. I sadly didn't possess one because it would've come in handy for finding Damian and rescuing Yara.

If she's still alive.

She's still alive!

“There!” Evan jammed a finger at the bridge of my nose. “You did it again.”

“It’s nothing.” I jerked away from him and jumped to my feet. “Just a twitch.”

I had learned a long time ago not to tell anyone about my conversations with my wolf. Either every other shifter I’d ever met was too embarrassed to admit it, or they really didn’t hear their wolf speak to them with human words in a growly inner voice. I had wondered if Evan might have had a similar experience, but he hadn’t asked about it, so I was pretty sure he hadn’t. He asked about *everything*.

“A twitch, huh?” He eyed me suspiciously as he joined me on two legs. “Well, you know what causes that, don’t you? Stress. I think you might need to relax.”

“Good idea,” I said quickly, moving toward the door. “What should we order and what should we watch?”

“I don’t know.” Evan fell in step beside me. “I was thinking we could go out...”

I groaned. “You know we can’t. Max says it’s not safe—”

“Well, Pack Daddy won’t be here this afternoon.” Evan pursed his lips playfully the way he always did when he spoke of our handsome Alpha, who was just one of many shifter males my friend liked to objectify behind closed doors. “And neither will Lil Pack Daddy.”

I closed my eyes. “Please stop calling him that...”

“Soooo, I was thinking. While they’re off at the All Pack Daddies meeting this afternoon, maybe you and I could—” He walked two fingers across my shoulders until his whole arm rested there. “—go see Jayla?”

“No.” I shoved his arm off and kept walking. “We can’t do that.”

“Elyse!” Evan spun in front of me, blocking the door. “What we *can't* do is just never check up on her! She probably thinks you and your boyfriend ate me!”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” I shouted. “And that’s obviously what I’m afraid of!”

“So let’s go show her it’s not true!” Evan grabbed my hands and made his eyes pup-sized saucers. “Please. I *miss* her. And I want to show her my new coat.” He waggled his brow and mimed wagging his tail.

“Absolutely not!” I dropped his hands, shaking my head in disbelief. “She can *never* know what I did! Max doesn’t even know what I did! What if she panicked and told someone shifters were biting and turning people now? They would hunt down every last one of us and wear our fur like... like that monster—” I broke off in a sob that took us both by surprise.

“Whoa! Hey, hey now, shhh...” Evan soothed, pulling me into his arms, which I could feel trembling with his own memories of the man in the wolfskin cape. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scratch the scab off. You’re not ready today. Some other time...”

I pressed my ear against his chest, focusing on the steady thump of his heart to ground myself in the here and now. It was so easy to fall back into that subway car and get stuck to the blood-covered floor.

“I miss her too.” I hugged him around the waist until he grunted. “Every day. All the time. And I always will. But we *have* to let her move on with her life. We have to accept that we can’t be in it. For her sake.”

“Nope.” Evan squeezed me tighter, gently shaking me from side to side. “Uh-uh. No way. Transaction declined. I don’t accept that. And I’m not letting you.”

“I already did.” I clenched my jaw to hold back another sob. “Look, I get that you’re going to need more time, but relationships end every day, Evan. Things happen that people

can't get past, so they become each other's past, and it sucks, but it can't be changed."

"Yeah, I get all that," Evan snapped, pushing me back a little. "Believe me. But we're not talking about our shitty families here, Elyse. We're talking about Jayla."

The door burst open before I could reply, and instead of remembering to jump away from Evan, the instant shot of adrenaline threw me up against him even as his strong arms yanked me there himself. And so it was that Sebastian found me all sweaty and ruffled with my heaving breasts smashed up against my handsome best friend's rippling pecs, locked in place by his rock hard biceps. A mortifying situation for anyone whose ex couldn't seem to grasp the concept of a male whose entire identity wasn't wrapped up in possessing a female, but one that was made a million times worse for the three of us by the fact that Sebastian wasn't wearing a shirt.

Or a shiftskin.

Only sweatpants.

And a fluffy white towel tossed over one of his light brown shoulders.

Evan and I sucked in a breath at the exact same time. Sebastian's nostrils flared, but his eyes gave nothing away. No hurt. No anger. Nothing. Which made it really hard to keep my own eyes up there instead of letting them follow the line of dark hair from just below the crux of his clavicles to just below his sternum where it then spread out over the ridges of his abs before tapering back into a line just above—

"Girl!" Evan shouted in his best impression of the sassy gay friend from a late 90s teen comedy as he shoved me out to arm's length. "*When* are you going to tell me who makes these shiftskins?! Are they Lulus?! They've *got* to be Lulus!"

"Um..." I eased out of Evan's grip entirely and glanced over at Sebastian, making my eyes large and innocent and a little bit ignorant the way most shifter males liked them. "Can

you answer that? You know I missed out on all the most classified classes. *Are they Lulus?*”

“They’re shiftskins,” Sebastian said flatly. “We make them in-house.”

“Ooooh, a design department!” Evan swished over to Sebastian as effeminately as I’d ever seen him move. “Where do I sign up? Because I have some changes I think will really slay. I’m thinking sequins, I’m thinking glitter...”

I bit the insides of my cheeks to keep from laughing. Evan could probably hack into the New York Stock Exchange and destroy the human economy before he could design a novelty T-shirt much less revolutionize millennia-old shifter fashion.

“May I have the room?” Sebastian asked curtly. “I have an important meeting this afternoon, and I need to release some tension before I go.” His lip curled into the tiniest hint of a sneer. “So I don’t bite anybody.”

Evan’s eyebrows shot up, and he pursed his lips. “Oh, well then, maybe Elyse and I should stick around and pick up a few pointers on releasing—”

“We were just going,” I said, pushing Evan toward the door. He pranced dramatically forward, going so far as to kick up one heel before he entered the hall. Then he threw his head back over his shoulder and rolled his eyes at me before relaxing back into his normal walk. I couldn’t help the smile that quirked my lips.

Sebastian growled softly and then choked it off, his stubbled cheeks pulling inward. Between that and the lopsided quality of his dark wavy mane, I was pretty sure he’d just rolled out of bed at ten a.m. like a spoiled prince. Kiana was always up by five to begin her days full of Alpha Heir duties, but I supposed Sebastian didn’t have anything to prove.

Neither did I, but for Evan’s sake, I said, “We weren’t doing—”

“What you were doing is none of my concern.”

Sebastian strode past me, and I hated myself for the way my treacherous eyes trailed after his low-slung waist band. But in my defense, I had never once claimed not to be wildly attracted to him on a superficial level, nor had I ever said that I would *never* be with him. Only that I needed some space to figure myself out. I'd naively assumed this would involve the two of us taking the time to see if we could develop a genuine friendship that might turn into something based on more than his whims.

“Unless you think your scent markers might be changing,” Sebastian grunted without so much as a backward glance. “In which case, I hope you’ll have the decency to let me know before I smell it for myself. I don’t like surprises.”

“You don’t like—” I laughed darkly, remembering *my* surprise when he kidnapped me and locked me in a tower. “Are you serious right—actually, you know what?” I shook my head in disgust and backed toward the door. “As you wish.”

Chapter Three

Explosions of midday sunlight flashed through the metal framework of the Third Avenue Bridge as my yellow taxi rattled and rocked across the Madison Avenue Bridge upriver. Black spots appeared before my eyes, forcing me to squint, but I couldn't look away from the mundane setting of the worst night of my life. How many tires had rolled right over all the bloodstains my family had left behind? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? Millions? I'd lived in New York City my whole life, and I still couldn't wrap my head around just how many humans we shared the Five Boroughs with.

We didn't bother them. That had always been the first prong of the two-pronged Rule. We didn't bother them, and we didn't become them. For as long as any of us living could remember, we had kept to ourselves and our own strange ways, and, for better or worse, we had never interfered in their affairs. Some of them believed we were really out there. Most believed we were just Big Bad Wolf fairy tales useful for keeping all their Little Red Riding Hoods in line.

Jayla had been one of the former.

Evan had been one of the latter.

And Charlie... well, Charlie had believed in *me*.

You can do this.

But should I be?

My stomach churned, and not just from the cabbie's questionable driving. I had lied to Evan about needing some alone time and then went forward with my own plan for sneaking out while pompous Sebastian and his father attended the five-borough meeting with all the other Alphas on the neutral ground of Roosevelt Island. I wasn't ready to see Jayla and doubted I would ever be, but I *needed* to see my father. And there might never be another chance like this when I knew for certain my sister wouldn't be home. She was one of the *Pack Daddies* now. She wouldn't miss her first meeting.

I swallowed the acidic guilt rising in my throat. Evan was going to be hurt that I hadn't even let him ride along. Shifter life was already isolating enough, but Sebastian and his father wouldn't let either of us leave the Plaza until our faces fell off the ever-spinning news cycle—which we weren't even allowed to keep up with. The TV had been removed from Evan's quarters before he moved in, and the TV in mine could only access the streaming platform it had been logged into when I first arrived.

So, there really hadn't been anything for us to *do* after training sessions except sit in my room staring at pictures on the screen and eating meals delivered on the Alpha Family's dime. In one month's time, Evan had brought me up to speed on all the blockbuster movies of the twenty-first century along with some indie art films that had answered a *lot* of questions about a *lot* of things. And when we finally achieved the impossible and reached fiction overload, Evan had introduced me to the mindless pleasures of competitive fashion and cut-throat cake-baking.

We'd had as much fun as we possibly could under the horrible circumstances, but honestly, it was really nice to see the sun shining on the Harlem River again. I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture for Evan right before the cab left

the bridge. It did nothing to assuage my guilt over leaving him, but bringing him just wasn't an option. If our morning training session had accomplished anything, it had confirmed my fear that Evan wouldn't last two seconds in a street fight. And me showing up unannounced on my old doorstep while my sister was in another part of the city...

There was a decent chance someone might take it the wrong way and try to kill me. Luckily, I'd learned more from training Evan over the last four weeks than I'd ever really been taught in the Bronx. Now that I knew who I *really* was, I found that I could rely on my wolf's instincts to fill in a lot of the blanks in my physical education. And now that I knew who my sister really was, it made sense that she'd needed to work so hard to become something she actually was not.

Still, I wouldn't want to meet her in a dark alley. She fought with a machine's relentless precision, totally void of the negative emotions I felt when I thought about getting hurt or hurting others. She had nearly broken our father's neck without batting an eyelash. But I held onto the delicate thread of hope I'd found in the fact that she didn't finish the job. She'd beaten him only just enough to take over.

He knew it too. That was why he'd chosen to follow her home instead of accepting Sebastian's offer to seek sanctuary with me in Manhattan. It stung that he had still chosen her, after everything that had happened, but Alpha Max had helped me understand why Father would want to return and claim his rightful role as an Elder Wolf, even though he wasn't nearly old enough for it.

He shouldn't have lost that battle.

He wouldn't have killed Kiana.

He shouldn't have had to. He should've been able to subdue her.

I know. But Damian was messing with his mind for so long... I don't think he was letting him eat properly or stick to his fitness regime. Remember his cough?

Yes. It was gross.

Thank you for that brilliant insight.

My wolf huffed and curled up under my ribs, ears pricked for danger in spite of her petulance. We were pulling up to the main entrance of the high-rise. My childhood home. I hadn't been back since the day of the mating ceremony, and the familiar black-and-white striped awning was dredging up all kinds of memories. We'd been a happy family once, and there was a part of me that wanted to believe it could happen again, but the sane part of me knew I'd told Evan the truth. Things happen. People grow apart.

But I'm the sane part of you, and I—

Don't. We're just here to find out if Father's still alive. I can't make any kind of decision about what to do next until I know how far Kiana went.

And if she killed him?

Then I guess we get strong enough to take what's ours.

And if she didn't? You just let her keep it?

You know I never wanted it.

You didn't know it was yours to want.

What difference does that make?

She didn't answer, and the cabbie was glaring at me in the rearview mirror, so I dug the fare from my jeans pocket and thrust it into his upturned palm. Then I hopped out onto the sidewalk, barely getting the door shut before the taxi shot back into the flow of traffic. We hadn't exactly been the best of friends, the driver and me, but his sudden absence pinched like a bite on the ear. I was alone. And nobody knew where.

My eyes traveled up the front of the non-descript building, past row after row of glinting windows until I found the third row below the rooftop. The northern corner of that floor had belonged to Kiana, so she could look out over our own territory in the Bronx, while I'd been stuck with the southern

corner and its allegedly inferior view of Manhattan. The top two rows of windows had belonged solely to my father, who had spent the last seven years alone in the two-story lofted penthouse with plenty of room for all of us. But surely my twin had taken the best for herself, so where would Father be now?

Six feet under?

Not cool!

Evan has his dark humor; I have mine.

Well, be quiet. I don't want anyone else seeing my tennis ball eyes.

I dropped my gaze to the double doors nestled in the shadow of the awning. I would have felt more comfortable sneaking in the service entrance like I always had before, but I knew if I got caught, it would look super shady. Walking confidently through the front doors like I owned the place would ironically make it look less like I was trying to own the place. Also, if the lobby guards tried to attack, I'd have much better odds of survival if I could just run right back through the doors.

And no, I couldn't just pretend to be my twin and say I'd forgotten something I needed for the meeting because Kiana had cut her hair and dyed it brown after the park photos went viral. I hadn't bothered altering my appearance since I'd been cooped up inside for a month, so hopefully a messy bun and giant sunglasses would be enough to blend in with humans again.

Taking a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and straightened out the defiant T-shirt I had chosen for the occasion—a loose black number with the words 'Everything I Need to Know I Learned from 80s Movies' written in famous film title fonts. If my father was alive, then he needed to know the truth about his true heir. And so would the rest of the pack if I ever came back to claim my throne.

No more hiding.

I lifted my chin, stepped under the awning, and pushed through the black wooden doors into the unassuming lobby with its brass light fixtures and old-fashioned chess board tile. Because our entire pack lived in this building rather than being spread out in single-family homes around the borough like the Manhattan pack, we saved all the luxury for the uppermost floors so the servants and other low-rank wolves wouldn't forget the difference between us. I'd always hated that—why couldn't we all just have nice things?—but my opinion had never mattered.

Imagine if it did...

Two young males with fiery red hair stood guard on either side of the elevators, keeping their smooth faces pleasantly blank just in case I was a curious human who'd wandered in off the street. I paused at the edge of the rubber mat, letting the echo of the slamming doors fade away before I stepped confidently onto the chess board. The guards tensed, noses twitching as they read my pheromones, and then their eyes widened with alarm.

Stay calm. You belong here.

Tell them that...

You tell them.

While I didn't know the name of the brawny older brother with the neatly combed hair, I recognized the lean one with the messy locks as Atlas from my elementary tutoring pack. I actually had a semi-fond memory of the two of us building a sand castle together as pups on Orchard Beach before our tutor made him knock it down as punishment for playing with a female instead of wrestling and racing and tormenting small sea creatures with all the other males. But judging from the muscles rippling under the security guard costume covering his shiftskin, puberty had led to conformity.

I removed my sunglasses, letting the legs snap together in the stunned silence before I clipped them onto my shirt collar. Both brothers raked their bulging eyes up and down my

scandalous T-shirt and jeans and then glanced at each other, mouths slightly ajar. I rolled my eyes. There was nothing remotely sexual about my clothing—even the high-waisted jeans were far less form-fitting than a shiftskin—but these males were making me feel like Sandy showing up in leather at the end of *Grease*.

“My father.” I crossed my arms over the collection of movie fonts scrawled across my chest and tilted my head. “Where is he?”

The older brother could only flutter his speechless lips, but Atlas somehow found the strength to point over his head. Relief washed over me like a cool rain, but I couldn’t let it show that I’d ever doubted Father’s survival. I gave Atlas a polite nod and then strode across the chess board like a queen who could go wherever the hell she wanted.

Not like.

We’ll see.

When I reached the elevator, I realized a single finger pointing at the ceiling was not enough information to go on, so I turned to Atlas. “Can you be more specific?”

“Your room.” His freckled Adam’s apple bobbed. “Or so I’ve heard.”

My eyebrows shot up in spite of my determination to appear non-plussed. I’d assumed Kiana would have already taken the penthouse for herself, but I wondered why she’d chosen my old room for Father rather than her own. Perhaps it was simply a matter of mine already being empty, but I couldn’t help feeling like it must have been some form of punishment for him taking my side on the bridge that night.

“Thank you.” I offered Atlas a friendly smile, which was an extremely un-Alpha thing for me to do, but I didn’t care. Add it to the long list of things I’d change in this backward borough if I ever staked my claim.

His boyish face flushed with embarrassment the same way my assigned assistant Ruby’s did any time I showed her

gratitude back home in—I felt my own face flush and quickly turned away, missing the up button with my first flustered jab and poking the wall instead. When had I started thinking of Manhattan as home instead? I had no intention of mating with Sebastian unless he dropped all the boorish Alphahole business, and maybe not even then, so there really wasn't anything there for me except Evan, and if I returned to the Bronx, he would obviously come with.

“Allow me, Your Grace.” Atlas leaned in to press the button, and a chill swept down my spine. In Manhattan, I was always having to remind Ruby not to use such silly honorifics, but no one had *ever* directed one my way in the Bronx—only at Kiana. Either Atlas had missed the memo about how Alpha Spares were treated, or...

He knows.

Chapter Four

The elevator doors whooshed open, and I all but jumped inside. My heart thudded in my ears as I mashed the button for my old floor several times in a row, willing the doors to close on the meaningful look Atlas was lasering into my soul. Finally, the slabs of metal obeyed and rumbled shut, but not before I caught a glimpse of Atlas' brother shooting him a scathing glare.

They both know.

I pressed my shoulder blades and sweaty palms against the vibrating wall as the elevator began its ascent. I hadn't known what to expect from this visit, but it hadn't been *that*. Had my father undermined Kiana right off the bat, or had one of the other three wolves on the bridge that night squealed? Cerys, Willa, and Blaze had all fled the scene while Kiana and I were with Leto, but Cerys was Kiana's helpmaid, and Willa was her personal bodyguard, so... that left Blaze as the most likely snitch.

A new fear gripped my hammering heart. What if Kiana knew and had punished him for it? He had five motherless pups to care for. Pups I would be caring for as his mate if Sebastian hadn't saved—A second flush filled my cheeks, this

one burning quite a bit hotter than the last. That was *sooo* not what happened that day. Sebastian had treated my sister and me like objects to be traded, and the only reason he'd stopped was because he'd overheard me telling Kiana that *he* wasn't an object. Otherwise, we'd be approaching our one-month anniversary just because he said so, and that wasn't heroic. That was *gross*.

So was being betrothed to a male your father's age.

Well, yeah, but...

There wasn't time to unpack all of the reasons why being the hotter of two unwanted suitors didn't make Sebastian my savior or to keep worrying about what might have happened to Blaze. The elevator dinged and jolted to a stomach-dropping stop. A moment later, I found myself staring at the awful oil painting Damian had gifted Kiana on our sixteenth birthday. For months, I believed that she'd only hung the massive gold-framed canvas in our shared hallway to torment me, but later that year on Wolfmoon Eve, when we were returning to our rooms after the feast, she had tipsily blurted the truth—she didn't like being alone with it at night.

Neither did I. Stepping out of the elevator, I paused to study the giant gory scene I'd always hurried past without making eye contact no matter what time of day. It looked like something Quentin Tarantino would paint if he'd been unlucky enough to be born as a shifter who couldn't make films, and frankly, I'd never much cared for his body of work due to all the bodies that piled up. Just like in Damian's work.

There must have been nearly a hundred human corpses littering the dark, dismal canvas in various stages of disembowelment and dismemberment. A number of dead wolves lay among them, all with their throats torn out in violent splashes of crimson, but for the most part, our kind appeared to be winning whatever battle from the Old Stories the disgusting image depicted. I'd missed Damian's explanation for the unsettling gift because I'd been too busy

trying to run away from home, and since I couldn't admit that to anyone, I'd never been able to ask any questions.

Funny how I couldn't place it on my own though. I remembered every story I'd ever seen or heard, but I couldn't recall any big shifter battles taking place around an old stone castle at the edge of a small lake... more of a pond, really. Nor could I remember any stories about Halo the Moon God coming down to fight alongside his sons, but who else could the bearded man standing in front of the castle with his arms outstretched over two identical gray wolves be? I squinted at the armored god, equally horrified and bemused. Had Damian created this story from scratch? Was he making... *fan art*?

"Well, well, well," a familiar female voice came from my end of the hallway. "Maybe you do have it in you, after all."

My head snapped toward Cerys, my sister's helpmaid. She stood outside my apartment door in the drabest version of the shapeless skirt and tunic Bronx females always wore unless they were serving in the guard. The last time we met, she had bitten my wolf on the cheek, and I had buried my fangs in her shoulder. She hadn't given me much choice, but I wasn't proud of it. Kiana had no business bringing her helpmaid to a meeting she'd always intended to turn into a battle. Doing so had most likely been a tactical move to foster a false sense of security.

My wolf's hackles rose. **Don't fall for it now.**

"Mind your tone, Cerys." I straightened my spine but didn't turn to face her because that would've left my back exposed to Kiana's old apartment where anyone could be waiting to launch a surprise attack. "I still outrank you in any pack."

The words left a sour taste in my mouth, but my sister's helpmaid was accustomed to much worse. You would think she'd be the first to support a kinder, gentler regime change, but though Cerys bowed her head in grudging deference, her watchful eyes never left my face, which was the whole point of bowing in the first place.

“Our Alpha is out right now,” Cerys said as she lifted her head. “If you’ve come—”

“I’m only here to see my father,” I said, imitating the curt tone Sebastian used with everyone these days. “May I have the room?”

“He’s not well,” Cerys said.

“Imagine that.” I gave up on guarding my back and stalked toward her, suddenly wishing I’d worn a louder, more imposing pair of shoes than my squeaky sneakers. “Open the door, Cerys. I won’t take up much of his time.”

The helpmaid’s eyes swept over my silly shirt, and her nose wrinkled with disgust, but she did as she was told and opened the door. It swung inward so she stepped through before me and then made a dramatic show of ushering me into my own home.

The second I crossed the threshold, my throat constricted and every inch of my skin beaded with sweat. My wolf whined and circled in my too-tight chest, stamping her paws like she wanted to run. Even she knew this *wasn’t* our home. We had never felt safe here. We had always been alone.

Cerys shut the door, closing us in with an unpleasant fishy odor that did nothing to ease my wolf’s anxiety. A heavy darkness filled the empty room. All of my plants, decorations, and furniture had been removed; the only thing left from my life before was the portrait of my lucky, lovestruck parents at their mutually desired mateship ceremony. Above their waltzing human figures hovered the superimposed images of their wolves, and seeing not one but two vibrant, healthy versions of my mother made my eyeballs burn with hot wet anger. She could have survived.

“Cerys?” My father’s voice slipped through the cracked bedroom door, as thin as the single ray of light cutting across the carpet. “Back so soon?”

I didn’t wait for the helpmaid to lead the way. If she jumped me from behind, she’d be sorry. I didn’t stop to knock

either, and the door, which was used to being thrown open by my sister, responded to the momentum of my push by flying back against the wall. The shell of a male resting in my old bed bolted upright with a strangled yelp, and I stumbled to a stop three feet away from him.

Cerys brushed past me and went to his side, attempting to push him gently back into a reclined position on his throne of pillows. Coughing, he shooed her away, and when she didn't listen, he batted at her hands until she backed up with both of them raised. He coughed again, spattering tiny flecks of blood onto the balled fist he was using to cover his mouth. Cerys grabbed a glass of water off the nightstand and pushed the tip of the bendable straw against his chapped lips.

What is happening?

He smells all wrong.

He really did. The fishy odor was so strong in this room that I found myself searching the folds of his comforter for signs of a sushi takeout container rather than admit it was coming from him. My wolf whimpered and covered her nose with one paw, and it was all I could do to keep my hand from doing the same. When Father was done sipping his water like an old human in a nursing home, he allowed Cerys to help him lean back after all.

The pile of soft pillows engulfed his once powerful frame, and the arms he folded over the top of his bedding were little more than bones roped with vein. He'd seemed unusually under the weather for an Alpha shifter before all of this, but now... I scarcely recognized him with his sunken cheeks and sagging neck. I couldn't stop thinking about when King Triton gets turned into one of those sad slimy squiggle creatures in *The Little Mermaid*.

It might explain the smell...

Father blinked up at me, and I could have sworn his normally bright blue irises had paled along with his hair, which had gone from dark golden blonde to drizzly sky gray

since the night he walked away from me. His gaze dropped to my shirt, and he emitted a wheezing sigh before closing his eyes.

“Leave us, Cerys,” he ordered quietly.

Frowning, she placed his glass back on the nightstand but didn't argue. I stepped aside so she could exit, and when both the bedroom and front doors had shut, I went to the spot she had just vacated. Bloody tissues littered the nightstand. It wasn't unheard of for shifters to develop human health problems as they aged, but thanks to our accelerated healing powers, they rarely lasted more than a week or two.

Father opened his eyes but kept them fixed on the ceiling. “I've never known you at all, have I?”

“No,” I said. “But I'm wondering how much I ever knew *you* either.”

He grimaced. “I wonder the same about myself every day.”

“But we can't really know, can we?” I folded myself into a childish hug. “How much he was controlling you.”

“No.” Father looked down at his skeletal hands. “It would be impossible to sort it all out. But without him around... there are a great many things I suddenly feel remorse for that I never even questioned before.”

“Like what?” I asked, unable to keep the challenge from my tone.

“Like not telling you girls more about your mother.”

I blinked. That was it? I mean, that was huge, but...

“Your sister has always been me all over again. Focused. Disciplined. Ambitious. Everything an Alpha is supposed to be. But you...” Father patted the side of the bed, inviting me to sit. “You are your mother in living color.”

My jaw clenched. “I thought you believed me. I'm the true ___”

“I know. I do.” He patted the bed again. “I’m only trying to explain why it escaped my notice, with or without Damian’s interference. Please, sit with me.”

I sank onto the edge of the bed and tried not to recoil when he took my hand with the one he’d just been coughing all over. I’d only seen illness like this in long, slow movies that ended badly and won lots of awards. But in person, his clammy skin and fragile bones felt like something from a grisly horror film.

“Dinah always loved the forbidden fruits too. Books. Plays. Movies.” He glanced at my shirt with a tiny wry smile. “Oh, yes. Your mother was a fool for fiction too.”

My mouth fell open. I must have looked like Molly Ringwald in every movie she’d ever been in. I mean, seriously, did that girl ever close her mouth? And would my mother have gotten that joke? I covered my gaping maw just before I belched out an unseemly sob because suddenly all I could think about was the night I literally ran away, ran all the way into Manhattan and didn’t stop until my superhuman lungs finally ran out of breath on the northwest corner of Lexington Avenue and 123rd and I stumbled into that grubby old theater and found a home.

“Everyone told me she was the wrong choice.” Father’s gaze sharpened. “Damian told me she was the wrong choice. But she wasn’t a choice. She was... the crux of my whole life. Everything that had happened... everything that would happen... she was the point where the universe came together. I knew it the moment we locked eyes.”

I gripped my face to keep my jaw from coming unhinged. That was almost exactly how Sebastian had described *me*. And maybe they were both just paraphrasing some old shifter poet, but... we didn’t really have poets, so it was actually easier to believe my father and Sebastian had both experienced this phenomenon for themselves. My hand slid from my jaw to my chest because now it was my heart that needed to be held.

“But she knew it too,” I whispered. “Right? She knew it too?”

“Of course,” Father said, a hint of Alpha arrogance returning. “Immediately.”

“Then why don’t I?”

I cringed as soon as the words left my mouth. My father was the second-to-last person I wanted thinking that I actually *wanted* to be fated mates with Sebastian. Or anyone else for that matter. I was pretty much over the whole cosmic romance concept now. I wanted a relationship that felt personal. Like the one I might have had with Sebastian if he’d led with, “*Hey, I saw you at the movies. Do you want to get a burger and talk about whether or not Westley and Buttercup are actually couple goals?*”

“Ah.” Father nodded slowly. “Then you’re *not* here to tell an old male he’s going to be a grandfather?”

“What? No!” I recoiled so hard I almost slid off the bed. Was that all these people... these animals ever thought about? I yanked my hand from his moist grasp and fought the urge to wipe it on my shirt. “I’m only here to see that you’re alive! Sebastian and I are not... He released his claim.”

Father sat up, anger flaring his nostrils. “That fickle whelp! How dare he—”

“Reject both your daughters?” My smirk bordered on a sneer. “It was what I wanted, Father. I barely know him, and I feel no fate bond, so how can I look past what he did to my sister?”

“I see.” Father stroked his unkempt beard. “So you’ve come home for good.”

“Home?” I looked across the bed toward the curtains covering the window that faced Manhattan. “Is that where I am, Father? Because you didn’t seem to feel that way when you were abandoning me to another pack while I was crying and begging you not to?” I held up one hand. “And don’t you dare blame it on Damian! If he’d been pulling your strings, you’d have dragged me out by the hair to keep me away from his precious Sebastian! As powerful as he is, I’m surprised he

didn't just make Sebastian, 'Oops! My bad! Nevermind!' and continue with the ceremony!"

Wait. Why didn't he?

I stopped, mouthing hanging open once more. Father tilted his head and the deep furrows that appeared on his forehead let me know I wasn't alone at the bottom of this plot hole. Had Sebastian's choice caught Damian so off guard that he couldn't think on his feet fast enough to fix the situation? Or was Damian *so* good at thinking on his feet that he'd seen an opportunity to create even more havoc by taking our pack home and turning everyone against me? But what had that accomplished? Sebastian had still rejected Kiana, and Damian had still done nothing to force his hand.

"Father, we know that Damian is strong enough to influence an Alpha, so why isn't he dealing directly with Sebastian? Why start a war rather than make one male change his mind?"

"We don't know that he didn't try." Father released a weary sigh that filled the air with fish breath. "As much as it pains me to admit this, I believe your Sebastian must be made of stronger mental stuff than your foolish old father."

"He's not my..." I trailed off because the notion of Sebastian's *mind* being too strong for Damian to handle had me feeling some kind of way. Even more than seeing him shirtless and freshly risen from the bed we were supposed to be sharing. But it wasn't quite true. "He's not immune. During the interrogation, Damian tried to make Sebastian strangle him so he wouldn't have to confess his crimes."

"But he failed."

"Yes." I doubled over and buried my face in my hands. "And now he's out there doing Gods know what to poor Yara. If he didn't just kill her."

Father coughed once onto his fist. "He hasn't made any offer to return her in exchange for Sebastian's mateship with Kiana?"

I shook my head. That was what we'd all been expecting, but—I winced with the sudden realization that I had possibly grossly misunderstood Sebastian's distance. He wasn't pushing me away; he was pushing himself away. Because if the call ever came, if accepting Kiana would save his mother's life... he would become my brother-in-law.

Father touched the top of my head, hopefully not with the blood-speckled cough hand. "Then perhaps he's gotten wind that your sister has already gotten what she wanted from the arrangement and is no longer so eager to comply with his plans for her pack."

"My pack." I sat up straight, slicking the hair back from my eyes. I still didn't know if I wanted to come back here or not, but I couldn't stand to hear my father say it like that. "If it's not yours, then it's mine. I'm your firstborn daughter. I'm the Heir."

A small smile curved my father's lips. "Then why in Leto's name are you sitting here talking to an Elder Wolf when you ought to be on Roosevelt Island?"

Chapter Five

So, we're really doing this?

We're doing something. Hell if I know what.

You won't be able to take it back.

Isn't that what you've always wanted? For me to buckle down and be part of the pack?

Part, yes. Alpha...

I pulled up so short in the middle of the sidewalk that a female human behind me nearly slammed into my back. She threw a few choice words my way, which felt somewhat deserved given that I'd almost caused her to muss her fresh blowout, so I broke the cardinal rule of Manhattan and mumbled an apology. With a huffing readjustment of her pale blue Birkin, she hustled away, leaving me with a parting shot of her surgically sculpted rear not bouncing even a little bit in black leggings that made the shiftskin under my T-shirt and jeans feel like loose pajamas.

I stepped out of the bustling foot traffic before we collided with any other ladies who lunched or tripped over one of the tiny pieces of fluff on a string—or in strollers!—they called dogs. There had been some drama with my second cab driver of the day, and I'd been dropped off near the river on the south

side of the Queensboro Bridge—several blocks from the tramway station. Now I was trekking through the alien landscape of Sutton Place mid-day, and finding that I *much* preferred the pace and atmosphere of East Harlem in the middle of the night.

Not wanting anyone to see my so-called tennis ball eyes, I feigned interest in the menu posted outside a small vegan café. *You've been going on about taking what's ours all day! Don't tell me you're doubting yourself now.*

Of course not. My wolf snorted. **I'm doubting you.**

Nice. Thanks. Another great talk.

Shaking my head at my constant companion *and* the cost of sprouts, I had just turned away from the menu when she hit me with: **You're only doing this to make Father proud.**

Yeah, well, that's what Alpha Heirs do.

For the rest of your life?

You know, you really are the Queen of Mixed Signals.

I waited a few seconds to see if that had really shut her up, and then I merged back into the flow of pedestrians moving through the shadows of the Queensboro Bridge. I'd originally planned to be on the other side of it by now, but my cabbie had taken one look at the standstill traffic overhead and suggested I take the tram or the subway out to Roosevelt Island instead of going all the way into Queens to access the narrow strip of pack-neutral land via yet another albeit much smaller bridge.

I was neither surprised nor disappointed by this delay. The old bridge had been under successive rounds of renovation for as long as I could remember. Its beige struts were one of the fixtures of the skyline from the south side of the Bronx high-rise, and on a clear day, I could even catch a glimpse of the bright red trams soaring past them. I was counting on crossing it off my bucket list to give me the shot of pure dopamine I would need in order to feel properly invincible when I reached the island and barged into the five-borough meeting to proclaim myself one of the Pack Daddies.

I think the word you're looking for is Lil Pack Daddy.

No. My father has fallen, and I'm the true firstborn. I am the Bronx Alpha

You're going to have to fight. Kiana beat him fair and square.

I don't think those words mean what you think they—.

I pulled up short for the second time in only twice as many minutes, but this time it had nothing to do with my annoying other half, and everything to do with the bizarre scene waiting for me at the base of the bridge across the street. There were a number of shops nestled in the stone footings, but it was impossible to tell what any of them held because of the hundreds of flapping yellow flyers covering them like flies on a corpse.

My wolf jumped to attention, straining the edges of my skin and lending me her enhanced senses to scan the area for danger. I didn't understand. Yes, someone had gone a little nuts with their marketing campaign, to the point that it felt like something from a post-apocalyptic thriller, but it was probably just some over-eager band or comedian, not someone trying to hurt anyone.

Look closer!

As soon as she said it, the eerie red and white eyes of the *Alma Mater Animalis* villain appeared between the flyers like a jump-scare. But I'd seen the ad often enough to know that there shouldn't be any red. My empty stomach fizzled and flipped as I hurried across the street, ignoring my wolf's protests. The closer I got the more of the underlying damage I could see, and the more I wanted to throw up.

The show's glowing list of Emmy wins had been slashed to ribbons near the bottom while the worried faces of the two female leads had been sprayed with blood-red paint. I could make out just enough of the giant letters to know someone had once again scrawled KEEP U.S. HUMAN onto a show poster, but there was a second set of letters I couldn't figure out. I

started grabbing flyers and tossing them on the ground until I revealed enough to get the gist: EUTHANIZE THE DOGS.

I stepped back and swallowed hard. *Well, that escalated quickly.*

Or maybe it's been escalating very slowly for a very long time.

In a heartbeat, I was back on the subway... surrounded by bodies and sloshing blood... so much blood... Human or shifter, it all looked like something stirred up in a Hollywood special effects lab when you spilled that many gallons of it. Unreal. Too real. She was gone...

Bile hit the back of my throat, bringing me back to the moment but not breaking my spiral of guilt. The second season of the blockbuster streaming series had aired a week after I lost Charlie and Jayla forever, so even though I'd found myself unexpectedly invested in season one, I couldn't bring myself to keep watching, knowing neither of them would get to. Charlie because she was dead, and Jayla because she was probably too traumatized by what she'd witnessed in real life to enjoy any make-believe violence.

I guess I stole her future husband too.

The cat man? My wolf snorted. **You did her a favor.**

Ignoring her attempt at dark humor, I turned my attention to the yellow poster clutched in my hand. Pushing my sunglasses onto my forehead, I read a neon-red invitation for 'humans concerned with anti-human shifter activities' to come together for a rally at a nearby church in a few days.

I crumpled the paper into my fist. *Anti-human?! They're the ones—!*

We should go. My wolf spun in a tight circle. **Your face...**

Her face.

Same thing.

I scowled, fuming once again about how my selfish twin had been photographed running through Central Park in her shiftskin. If she hadn't, if that man with the bat hadn't recognized *her* face clinging to *my* skull, then everything would be different now. Charlie wouldn't be dead. Jayla wouldn't be alone. And Evan wouldn't be trapped in a world that wouldn't accept him.

Elyse, go. Now.

Her gruff tone left no room for debate, and a second after I started walking, I heard the jingle of one of the shop doors behind me. Casting a furtive glance over my shoulder, I saw a human female leaving what I now realized was a printing store with a fresh stack of yellow posters under one arm. Our eyes met briefly, and I quickly looked away, hoping my messy bun and lack of makeup would render my true identity invisible. Her footsteps swerved in the opposite direction, but I couldn't relax.

I will never get to relax...

As I drew closer to the tramway station, my fear and fury shifted into loneliness and sorrow. Other than living in the Plaza, I hadn't had a chance to visit any of the iconic movie locations scattered all around Manhattan, so riding the tram made famous by the original *Spider-Man* movie should have been an iconic movie moment for *me*. But the preachy posters and violent graffiti had dampened my interest in any activity that didn't involve going back to the hotel and crawling under the covers to cry about Charlie. She'd never taken the time to ride the tram, Evan had mused sadly to me when he showed me the film. None of them had.

Then do it for her?

My wolf's attempt at a gentle tone warmed my heart around her. She stopped giving me a hard time about my friends or human interests after Charlie died. She carried her own guilt, I knew, for not erupting in time to take the bullet that took away the closest thing I'd ever had to a mother figure. And then losing Yara on top of that, even though I'd

barely known her... Well, it sometimes felt like my grouchy wolf was making an effort to tap into something more maternal now.

Maybe that explains the weirdness with Evan...

I hurried on to the tramway station with my shades down and my chin tucked, past all the fluttering flyers affixed to every streetlight, lamppost, mailbox, and trashcan along the way. I could only hope that the majority of human New Yorkers were more irritated with the zealots defacing property than the targets of their hatred. Maybe they were even getting sick of the hatred itself.

There had always been a small but vocal group of humans who disliked *Alma Mater Animalis* for the opposite reason of the haters—they believed it was wrong that there weren't any shifters in the writing room or on the crew. Hence the show's frustrated creator going on the morning news a month ago and saying she would listen to any shifter who showed up in her office to prove our existence. I snorted, remembering Damian's horror when I offered to go do it myself. Maybe I should. Maybe if he saw me on the news having a chat with 'that awful woman' about the realities of being a female shifter, he would get so indignant that he showed himself. And we killed him.

I humored this pleasant daydream until the tram pulled into the station. The excitement of all the tourist families crowding around me turned out to be contagious, and by the time the time the fire engine red doors finally opened, I was bouncing on my toes like a pup on her first trip outside the high-rise. I raced to the window with the best view of the Upper East Side and smashed my face against the smudged glass with the rest of the children, barely able to keep my butt from wiggling with the wagging of my phantom tail. The doors shut, and the tram lurched forward.

I held my breath as we made our languid journey upward, rising above the traffic-jammed streets and sailing past the gleaming black and silver towers lining the bridge. When we

emerged, with just the tiniest sway, over the East River, I could have sworn I felt someone's hand cover mine on the glass.

You would have loved this, Charlie.

Sun glittered on the olive water streaked with the fizzy white wakes of speedboats zipping happy tourists alongside FDR Drive. Well, I was just assuming they were happy since I couldn't really see them from way up here, but everyone in the tram was having blast, oohing and ahing over the panoramic views the wraparound windows provided. Children darted from side to side, exclaiming over landmarks on the Manhattan side—no one knew how to recognize anything in Queens.

There was one couple, however, whose lowered voices carried simmering heat rather than sweet nothings. All of the other riders appeared blissfully unaware of the tension brewing between the two, but my wolf ears couldn't help overhearing their hissed exchange.

“Would you stop worrying about that nonsense?” the male pleaded. “We're here to have a good time. I thought you were looking forward to seeing the old Smallpox Hospital?”

“I am, Ronnie, but if I'd known about this, I would have canceled the trip,” his female fretted. “I told you cities were full of monsters!”

The male banged his receding hairline against the window. “Nancy, for the last time: there are no such things as shifters. Everyone's been watching too much TV! C'mon, we've been planning this trip for *two years*! And it's not cheap! I just shelled out...”

Their voices faded as my pulse roared in my ears. I tipped my shades down and peeked at the couple from beneath my lashes. A frumpy female in a T-shirt with two wide-eyed Persian kittens on it tucked into her light blue mom jeans was waving at her balding husband, a male wearing what appeared to be a brand new—as in *still creased*—I Heart NYC T-shirt

along with khakis and colorful sandals over his grubby white socks. They looked like they could be Charlie's parents. They weren't, of course. But they looked like it. And I couldn't have them this afraid.

I opened my mouth, heart pounding.

Don't do it.

"Hey there, guys," I spoke up, my voice coming out squeakier than I'd intended. "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation."

My wolf groaned as several heads swiveled my way, not just the two I was addressing, and suddenly a dozen Midwestern gazes seemed to be seeing right through my clothes and my shiftskin to the bristling fur waiting to burst through.

I swallowed. "I'm a true New Yorker myself. Born and raised in the Bronx." I laughed nervously even though that wasn't the slightest bit funny. I swallowed again. "So, um, I can tell you first-hand that I've never seen a shifter. If they do exist, they don't bother anyone." I nodded at Ronnie. "Like that TV show."

Nancy's eyes narrowed, and my wolf lengthened into a crouch, taking up most of the space in my quickly constricting chest. *Stay down, girl.*

I don't like the way she's looking at us.

Well, I'm pretty sure I could handle her without your help, so sit.

But would you? Do that again?

I pushed down the memory of spitting out the arm that had been holding the gun that shot Charlie, that might have shot Evan or Jayla next if I hadn't stopped her. I didn't feel bad about it, but no, I wouldn't do it again on a whim. Certainly not on the Roosevelt Island tram.

"Oh yeah? Well what about this story in your own city's newspaper then?" Nancy reached into her giant purse and

pulled out a crumpled tube of paper. She thrust it into my hand, and with my heart lodging in my throat, I unrolled it.

Murderous Rampage Linked to Shifters! the headline screamed above a collage of images that shouldn't have been legal to print. The faces had been blurred out, but somebody out there had loved these ravaged bodies the way I'd loved Charlie. They shouldn't have to see them like, lying on city streets with their limbs torn off and their bowels pulled out. It was obscene, even for the Post, but I knew why they'd put it on the front page. They wanted people to know humans couldn't have done it.

“Uhhh,” my voice wavered as my long-forgotten breakfast threatened to make a second appearance. “This is the Post. You can't trust anything they print in the Post. It's a silly tabloid.”

Nancy reached for her paper like a security blanket, and my eyes scanned the story wrapped around the graphic images at breakneck speed.

—also wanted in relation to the disappearance of several pro-human activists who were last seen on station cameras boarding the 6 train at the 86th Street stop on Lexington Avenue on April 15th. NYC Transit reported finding unexplained damage to a train on that line and remnants of blood, but no bodies have been recovered. Police believe the disappearances and the attacks are likely to be linked, but are not releasing information about any persons of interest.

“Actually, do you mind if I keep this?” I asked faintly.

Nancy bit her lip and then gave a reluctant nod. “Go ahead. You need to pay more attention to what's going on around you. It's never safe out there for a pretty young woman like you.”

Woman! My wolf bared her inner fangs even as I felt a forbidden thrill—maybe *because* I felt a forbidden thrill. No

one ever called me that. I was a female to everyone in my life except my friends, and to them I was only a girl, a stray kid sister they'd picked up along the way. It was silly, but I felt like this woman who could have been Charlie's mother had knighted me.

The tram swayed as we began our descent. Ronnie wrapped his arm around Nancy's shoulder and tugged her toward the doors so no one could get to the Smallpox Hospital ahead of him. Those were the kind of problems I wished I had. Nancy glanced back at me, eyes narrowing once again, and I knew for sure she'd seen the photo of my sister. Fantastic. I was going to have to get my Bronx on and ask my sugar daddy to pay for plastic surgery, wasn't I?

Chapter Six

With the Post rolled up in my fist and plans to fix Sebastian rather than my face, I stepped off the tram and jumped on the shuttle north toward an event space called The Sanctuary, which had nothing to do with it being on pack-neutral ground and everything to do with it being tucked inside a historic human church. That's right. Anti-shifter activists weren't the only people who could hold their meetings on hallowed ground. Okay, technically, the Sanctuary was partly a bar now, but whatever.

I spent the shuttle ride stewing over the pack-wide conspiracy to treat me like a no-rank pup. This had already happened to me once before in the Bronx when my family conspired to keep me in the dark about the rising tide of anti-shiftism, and now it was happening all over again. But this hurt worse. Because the version of Sebastian I might have loved had taken the time to explain everything my family wouldn't tell me, but I knew now that was only because he'd believed we were both being coy about feeling like fated mates. Now that he knew winning me over wouldn't be easy, I wasn't even worth talking to.

You miss him.

I miss a dream I had for like two seconds, alright? But it wasn't real.

Maybe you haven't done enough sleeping...

Stop it, or I'll spank you with this newspaper!

She huffed and curled up, hopefully for a nap. Which was not what she'd been suggesting I needed. Her feelings for Sebastian the wolf weren't as complicated as my feelings for Sebastian the human, and I was pretty sure his wolf had already picked out nursery curtains in spite of his human insistence that we could wait for that part of mating as long as I wanted. I hadn't forgiven either animal for their behavior on the Third Avenue Bridge. We might have stopped Kiana from deposing Father if they hadn't stopped to *flirt*. Now I was going to have to fight her for something I wasn't even sure I wanted.

The shuttle dropped me off near the Sanctuary, and as soon as I glimpsed the crimson paint adorning both the doors and the fretwork around the stained glass, I felt grossly underdressed. I'd never been in a church before, and even though this one had reinvented itself as a business, the beauty of the architecture filled me with reverent awe. Crafted completely from large stones that looked as if they'd been quarried last century and topped by a steep slate roof, it felt cozy but not cramped—a rare feat in a city of eight million people. I could see why so many humans lined up to have their weddings here.

The thought of weddings brought up uncomfortable memories of Kiana's failed mating ceremony, reminding why I was here and who I was finally going to see. My emotions flip-flopped between anxiety and anger as I hurried up the walk, and when I reached the gorgeous red doors, my fingers tightened around the paper still clutched in my hand. Maybe I would just swat the bitch across the nose with it.

Taking a deep breath, I slammed open the doors.

Well, not entirely. They were so heavy and thick that my attempt to stride through with an assertive *BANG* turned into more of a grunting, heaving, exercise in humility. At least I made it through before they slammed shut behind me.

A male's stern voice floated into the foyer. "I'm sorry that your mate has chosen to disappear with this supposedly magical Bronx Beta, Alpha Maximo, but I hardly see how that is *our* long-term problem. We've all searched our boroughs and found no trace of them. It is time to move on to more pressing matters."

"Your concern for the well-being of my mate is duly noted, Julius," Max responded, his voice as cold as I'd ever heard it. "But these matters are one and the same. The human trouble only began in earnest after Damian escaped—"

"The same night your son was involved in the murder of four humans," a younger male voice drawled. "You don't think that might be what pissed people off?"

"Three," Sebastian's quiet voice barely reached my ears. "The fourth was *their* victim. An innocent bystander. I acted in her defense."

Too late.

I sprang into motion, pushing through the next set of heavy doors leading into the old church sanctuary. Sunlight streamed through the five-foot leaded glass windows at the far end of the room, offsetting the exposed, dark chocolate-stained wood of the ceiling beams. Max and Sebastian stood at the far end of the room, dressed to impress in full *Wall Street*-level Armani suits. The close fit of Sebastian's might have done something for me a month ago, but now it only fueled my rage.

"Sebastian!" I stomped across the room with as much force as my sneakers would allow, waving the paper. "I need to speak with you about this, like, *now*."

Seven faces turned toward me with various expressions of dismay, but only one stopped me in my furious tracks. Blaze.

My heart cleaned when our eyes met, so grateful to see him alive and well, but he quickly averted his own, clearly as flustered by this turn of events as I was. What the actual hell? Was he acting as a bodyguard? Why hadn't Father mentioned this when he goaded me into his hare-brained plan? Was this his idea of a blind date?

My alarm grew as I quickly scanned the other faces. All of the attendees were standing except for a young male and female who were clearly related and seemed to be functioning as a single unit. They had slathered themselves across a pair of armchairs as if anywhere in the world *had* to be more interesting than where they currently found themselves. Both were attired like they'd just rolled out of Bloomingdale's latest trunk sale with everything on offer.

To their right, an older black male with a gleaming shaved head modeled the ultimate in Brooklyn chic, from his silvery charcoal suit and raspberry buttoned vest to his houndstooth tie with matching pocket square. The only more modestly dressed Alpha was a willowy man in a grey linen tunic and white slacks. His long, dark hair was braided back in a utilitarian style that accentuated his high cheekbones and strong brow. I'd heard Father say that the Queens Alpha's ancestors had arrived here from China nearly two centuries ago, and after our own bloodline, no other family had reigned over a single borough for so long.

But where the fluffing hell was my sister?

I demanded to know as much out loud, forgetting to substitute the squeaky clean f-word for the other. The blood drained from Sebastian's face, but I caught the smile struggling to stay off Blaze's lips, and I knew he was thinking about the last time I'd entered a room and screamed that word, and now I was thinking about how much easier my life would be if Sebastian had never looked at me.

"And who might *this* be?" the lone female drawled with the characteristic twang of Staten Island, her garish, blood-

colored lips quirking upward as she looked me up and down. Not a friendly smile.

“Who are *you*?” I demanded. I hadn’t been expecting to see any female in this room who didn’t look just like me. Had Kiana found out she wasn’t the only female Alpha in the city after all and stormed home to pout?

“Yes, Elyse,” Sebastian growled through his teeth, “perhaps we *should* start with introductions.”

“Right, right,” I said, folding my arms over my chest. “I’m Elyse, firstborn daughter of Phelan of the Bronx, and former intended of Sebastian of Manhattan.”

Sebastian’s golden-brown eyes darkened with anger, and Max looked none too happy either, but everyone else was beginning to look delighted by my drama. Blaze had tucked his strong chin and pressed his lips together, clearly trying not to laugh.

“Indeed,” Sebastian said tightly. He gestured to the individual in the dapper suit. “This is Julius, Alpha of the Brooklyn pack.” The male tilted his head a millimeter in acknowledgment. “And Yeh, Alpha of Queens. You already know Blaze, representing the Bronx, of course. And these two,” he paused, his flush deepening at the amusement in the eyes of the siblings, “are Tony and Giovanna. The Alpha and Beta of the Staten Island pack.”

“It’s Gigi, actually,” the female corrected. “Like Hadid, but hotter.”

Sebastian’s brow furrowed with adorable confusion. I mean, confusion. Just confusion. There was nothing adorable about him now that I knew what he’d been hiding from me. But still, it was funny how he had traveled the world for five years and still remained ignorant of pieces of pop culture so ubiquitous that even *my* sheltered ass knew about them. I nodded to each of the Alphas, doing my best to rein my chaos in a little and show some proper deference.

“Nice to meet you—” I began but Tony cut me off.

“Is she serious, Sebastian?” he sneered, picking an invisible piece of lint from his oversized plaid suit. “*This* is the fated mate you blew up two packs to have?”

The unusually young Alpha’s dark eyes took in my novelty T-shirt, messy topknot, and makeup-free face with showy disdain, but I refused to be ashamed. We couldn’t all dress like we’d just stepped out of a helicopter at the Cannes Film Festival even though we’d never seen a single freakin’ movie.

Gods, I’d kill to do that. The festival, not the helicopter.

Focus, pup.

Easier said than done. I was quickly becoming what Charlie had described as *over-stimulated*, when I got so worked up that my energy started spiking outward like an exploding star and I couldn’t remember what I was saying or what I’d walked into a room for. What *had* I walked in here for? My bravado started to crumble.

Gigi couldn’t stop cackling about the idea of me being some sort of shifter Helen of Troy, her impressive chest—which substantially dwarfed my own—shaking in its low-cut Barbie-pink sequined bra top. I couldn’t look away. I’d never seen a female shifter show herself off like that. What were they doing out there on Staten Island? Why was she even here? No one else had brought their Beta.

“I’m *not* his fated mate,” I replied, putting enough ice in my tone that it could have fought global warming. Sebastian’s face went from red to purple in one second flat, but I wasn’t going to apologize for telling the truth.

Tony and Gigi eyed each other, Tony mouthing, “*Oh my,*” as he raised a hand to his mouth in feigned shock. My anger was dampened by my growing curiosity. I knew the language of inside jokes well enough to know this was some sort of pop culture reference outside of my wheelhouse. Seriously, who were they?

“Thank you *so much* for clearing that up for us, Elyse.” Sebastian’s nostrils flared. “Now perhaps we can discuss whatever you think is so important *later*? Perhaps even at *home*? You’re not even supposed to be here.”

I felt my eyes go black like the shark in *Jaws: The Revenge*. Who did he think he was? I had *every right* to be there. More than him! He was still just an Alpha Heir, second to his father, while I was already the rightful ruler of the Bronx, second to no one except a false usurper. My wolf swelled beneath my skin as my frazzled emotions climbed higher and higher, and her enhanced senses began to take over. Confusion mingled with amusement in the air, but my would-be mate smelled distinctly of fury.

“You’ve got to be kidding, Sebastian. You know damn well that I have every right to be here. I have more right to be here than her!” I pointed at Gigi, who stopped laughing. “Certainly more than him!” My glare landed on Blaze, whose abruptly downturned eyes drained some of the heat from my attack. “Sorry, Blaze. No offense.”

He waved a hand. “None taken.”

“And I sure as shit deserve to be kept up to speed on *this*.” I held up the paper, its hysterical headline and grisly images on full display. “I shouldn’t have to be finding this out from *tourists* riding public transportation, terrified that they’re going to be mauled at any moment!”

All heads swiveled Sebastian’s way, and for the first time since I’d strode into the room, the male who claimed I was his fated mate seemed to have lost his voice. I strode forward, the others parting like the Red Sea in the old human stories they used to share in this building, and stopped in front of him, placing my index finger right in the center of his chest. His broad, currently heaving so hard the buttons on his crisp white shirt... strained... the muscles in his... broad chest... heaving... furry abs under there...

Gigi snickered once again, snapping me out of the crest of my over-stimulated condition with a rush of blood up from

below and into my cheeks. Embarrassment boiled the anger coursing through my veins, and my wolf bubbled over, showing her fangs in my mouth as I awkwardly snarled, “This is the last time you treat me like a child if you ever wish to have one! You know what I am!”

A collective gasp sucked all the air from the room. Sebastian’s eyes widened, caught between a smolder and a glare. For a moment, we stood like that, locked in some kind of ocular combat while our pheromones danced around each other like our damn wolves on that Gods-forsaken bridge. He knew it. I knew it. Damn it, everyone in the room knew it. Why in the name of Leto had I said *that*?

Finally, Sebastian dipped his chin, and all of my blood rushed downward again.

“Very well, Alpha Elyse,” he breathed, his voice rough, and it was all I could do not to curl my fingers into his jacket lapel and—

“What?” Gigi and Tony erupted at the same time, each fighting to speak first until Gigi shut Tony down with a withering cock of one perfectly drawn eyebrow. “You’ve got to be kidding. *She’s* the Alpha of the Bronx pack now?” She whirled to face Blaze. “What is the meaning of this? What’s been done to Kiana?”

“Nothing—” Blaze stammered, lifting his hands. He was a strong and powerful soldier, but he was no Alpha, not even close. He had as much business in this room as Cerys had in that battle. What was my sister doing?

“Yes, will someone please explain what’s going on here?” Yeh demanded, and his quiet voice seeming to have the effect of calming the others.

“I’d like some clarity as well,” Julius added, taking a seat and crossing his legs, brushing at the crisp pleat in his pant leg. “Although, I also think that someone,” he eyed Tony, “should remind his Beta that she’s allowed to attend on our sufferance, but that she needs to remember her place.”

Gigi's overly bronzed face twisted, her mouth working as if it couldn't comprehend obedience, but she said nothing.

Good girl, my wolf snorted.

Hey. I'm not sure we should be on Julius' side here.

I don't like her.

Who would? But these boys better not think they can talk to either of us that way.

"That's better," Julius said to Gigi, his smile never reaching his eyes.

I don't like him either.

Ditto.

"Now," Julius said. "If Blaze would like to explain why he came here claiming to represent Alpha Kiana, who could not be bothered to show up herself, yet now Alpha Heir Sebastian is claiming that Elder Phelan's infamous spare daughter is the Bronx Alpha instead... I would *love* to hear it."

Blaze met my gaze, his eyes questioning. "Your Grace?"

It *was* him who snitched. Of course it was him.

No going back, my wolf warned. But it was already done.

I nodded. Blaze bowed his head.

"It has come to our attention in the Bronx," he said quietly, lifting his eyes to meet each pair in the room, "that along with all of his more recent crimes, our missing Beta was responsible for a long-held belief that Elyse was the second-born pup of Dinah and Alpha Phelan—a belief that has since been corrected. She is, indeed, the Alpha by birthright."

Chapter Seven

A lump formed in my throat at the sight of my former arranged mate explaining this to the others, his tone warm and supportive. He could have had such a different attitude toward all of this, toward *me*... but it was obvious now that whenever he had seemed angry, he had been acting under Damian's control. I had his allegiance, and it meant more than I ever could have imagined.

“Why weren't we told of all this?” Tony demanded. “And why is Kiana pretending to be Alpha, then?”

“She's not pretending,” I breathed. “She deposed our father. And I'm still...” I paused, not wanting to undermine myself so soon by admitting I had no fluffing clue what I was doing.

“Elyse has not challenged her for the throne,” Blaze added simply.

“And why not?” Yeh asked. “We can't have this kind of... disarray.”

I dropped my head, feeling Sebastian's eyes boring into me. There were many reasons why I hadn't challenged Kiana, but among them was the fact that the original plan for uniting the Bronx and Manhattan packs had obviously been scrapped.

Now, if I were to mate with Sebastian, she *would* have a birthright to the throne she'd already claimed, just as I would have had if she'd mated with another Alpha Heir without an arrangement in place. We were still females. If we mated with male Alphas, they would always come first. So I had essentially rejected him for a third time, mere seconds after implying he might still have a chance...

Now who's the Queen of Mixed Signals?

"It's complicated," I muttered. "But I understand we have to get this sorted out."

"What seems most important to me," Julius spoke up, his back ironing-board straight in his seat, "is that Kiana is not here to address this herself."

"Yes, Blaze, why *is* that?" Although Tony's tone was unnecessarily petulant, all eyes turned back to Blaze with equal curiosity, including mine. Why *wasn't* Kiana here?

Blaze raised his chin, meeting my eyes. "She has quite a lot of pack business to attend to now that she's taken over. It's not unusual for an Alpha to send a proxy to an all-throne meeting."

Despite the forcefulness of his tone, I sensed that he was trying to tell me something. Or trying *not* to tell me something. And I wondered if I needed to find a way to tell him that I'd just come from the Bronx and Kiana wasn't there either. I sucked in a sharp breath. What if he was trying to tell me she was with Damian?

"It's hardly a *common* occurrence," Julius said, rising. "And given that it was she and her father and other members of *your* pack—" He looked Blaze up and down, his gaze withering. "—presumably including yourself, who were spotted running across Central Park looking like bloody lunatics—"

"Literally," snarled Tony, stepping forward before Gigi put a hand on his arm.

"That's not fair," I blurted. "Damian was controlling—"

“Oh, yes, the omnipotent Beta.” Julius rolled his eyes. “A convenient explanation for why your pack showed themselves after voting against the rest of us being allowed to do so!”

“What say you, Blaze?” Max spoke for the first time since my arrival. “Were you acting of your own volition or not that day?”

“I... I’m not sure.” Blaze ducked his head. “It’s not mine to question the will of my Alpha, as you know.”

“But it is ours,” Yeh said levelly. “And much as it pains me to agree with these two—” He waved at the Staten Island siblings, causing Tony to wriggle free from his sister’s grasp with a growl, “—as Alphas, we have our own packs to think about, and Kiana’s recklessness has created a problem for us all.”

“Speak for yourselves,” Tony said hotly. “*We* have no problem with the humans on our *own* island.”

“And how long do you think that will last?” Yeh said, pushing his long braid over one slender shoulder with a sigh.

“Enough,” Sebastian said, coming to stand in the middle of the group.

His commanding presence was all it took to silence them, and pride stirred in me like the first flame in a pile of kindling. I didn’t care for the Alpha Heir in a domestic setting, but here among these other control freaks... with his dark mane just sweeping his crisp-as-a-new-dollar-bill collar, his strong shoulders thrown back and his left hand tucked just-so into a pocket so tight that only his fingertips were hidden... It made me want to fit against the crook of that elbow, where I could lean into him and sniff his neck.

Oh, here we go again...

As if he could hear my thoughts, he met my eyes, and for just a moment, a smile ghosted across his face, softening that strong brow. It faded again in an instant, breaking the spell, and I remembered that while I might like the commanding

Sebastian, I didn't like it one iota when he was commanding *me*.

“Damian is everything we've warned you about and possibly more,” Sebastian continued, “Suppose *he's* the one orchestrating these murders to destabilize our packs. In that case, he may be trying to destabilize *your* packs as well. That seems like the most important thing right now—that, and getting my mother back.”

“And just how do *you* propose we find your mother in the entirety of New York City, Sebastian?” Julius said, his voice growing heated. “We've already tried! Should we send *all* our pack members across the boroughs to sniff her out like a fox to our hounds? It's not like we don't have other pack business to attend to, you know.”

“And what if she doesn't *want* to be found. Didn't she run away with Damien?” Tony mused, giving his perfectly manicured nails a once over and then wagging his fingers at Max. “I heard she may have been the one to free him, which wouldn't be surprising, given her *condition*.”

Max lunged forward, stopping only when Sebastian's broad arm slammed across his heaving chest. But Sebastian's handsome mouth bulged with fangs, and the glimpse of his wolf called out to mine. She strained at my sweaty, chafing shiftskin, her fangs pushing through for a second time, begging to be set totally free. But that would be a disaster.

Down, girl. I got this.

“Think what you will, Tony,” I growled, eyeing him with the same disrespect he'd shown me. “We're telling the truth. Damien's power is beyond anything that any of us have ever seen. You'd do well to remember the threat he poses to us all, rather than making lascivious suggestions about other Alpha's wives when you don't even smell mated.”

Tony's eyes flashed black, and he took a menacing step toward me, but Sebastian swept between us, wolf hair bristling

at the edge of his suddenly pointy ears. Well, that was one hell of a look.

“Touch her,” Sebastian said, and in his anger I caught the faint trace of Yara’s accent, “and I will kill you twice for what you said about my mother.”

Gigi tugged on her brother’s arm, and he fell back, slicking both hands through his oily hair. He swore. “So, which is it? Are you two making puppies or not?”

“Mind your tongue!” Sebastian’s fingers curled into paw-sized fists, barely holding himself together. “Elyse is my f—”

His phone rang then, but I already knew how the sentence ended. If I gave him an inch, he was going to take a thousand miles. His hands returned to normal, and he reached into his jacket and pulled out his phone.

“This isn’t over.” He pointed at Tony “But this could be about my mother, so I have to take it.”

He turned away, and I stepped up beside Max, sensing he might still need a barrier between himself and the self-important male-model-wannabe smirking at us. The older male flashed a tight but grateful smile and wrapped one arm around my shoulders. He glanced down at my collection of movie fonts and shook his head with amusement. “Where *do* you do your shopping, Elyse?”

“What?!” Sebastian’s voice rose behind us, and so did my hackles. “Yes, I’ll be right there, Kenzo. Of course, yes.” He hung up, muttering under his breath, and shot a death glare at Tony. “Well, good luck controlling your humans now,” he said. “Because there’s been another attack. This time in broad daylight.”

The room erupted with questions, and Julius bounded to his feet. “Where?”

“Washington Square Park. Right by NYU.” Sebastian’s jaw clenched. “Students.”

Julius sat back down, though this time with more of a plop than a demure perch.

“How many dead?” Yeh murmured, his gaze growing distant.

“More than a few.” Sebastian covered his mouth. “Mostly freshmen.”

My stomach twisted as I pictured mangled bodies in shredded college T-shirts and bloodstained Converse sneakers lying next to backpacks stuffed to the brim for finals they would never take. A soft wail left Gigi’s lips and Blaze, usually the consummate image of propriety, used the word that made him laugh when I uttered it.

“Maybe it’s time we all worked together on this instead of bickering,” Sebastian added. “Dad, I have to go. You stay here to work this out.” He turned to me. “Elyse, you’re coming with me.”

“What? Why?” The words were out of my mouth before I gave them a thought. Why was resistance my default setting with him these days?

“Because I said so,” he growled.

Oh. That’s why.

My resistance deepened. The only one who’d ever been able to order me around like that was Kiana, and those days were now officially over. My wolf stirred again, rippling beneath my skin like an itch. Perhaps she didn’t find his wolf quite as interesting now.

“Can’t I do some good here, helping Blaze represent the Bronx?” I took a step toward my one-time beau, which turned out to be a mistake because Sebastian’s nostrils flared with blatant jealousy. Not a good look. Not like the furry ear thing.

“You *don’t* represent the Br—” Gigi said.

“Oh, give it a rest, *Beta*.” I snapped. Just who did she think she was?

“Elyse.” Sebastian grasped my arm. “Now.”

“Sebastian,” Max scolded gently, but I didn’t need his help.

I slapped Sebastian’s arm with my claw tips out, leaving four neat rips in his Armani suit. Gigi sucked air through her teeth like she’d been personally wounded. Sebastian released me, and I stalked past him toward the door. “Let’s go.”

There was nothing I wanted to do less than go see a pile of dead human pups, but I couldn’t pass up this chance to be alone with Sebastian and sort some of our own shit out. His dress shoes clacked loudly as he hurried to catch up with me, and I gauged his speed precisely to let the first set of doors slam in his face. But when I reached the massive doors that led outside, I paused and crossed my arms. All those muscles had to be good for *something*.

He dutifully complied, and together we stepped into the blinding afternoon light. Alone for the first time since our disastrous movie date. We looked at each other. The rips in his sleeve fluttered in the breeze.

“Did I hurt you?” I asked.

He rubbed his arm. “No.”

“If you’re lying, I’m sorry.” I rested my hand on top of his. “But I will *tell* you when I want your hands on me again. Not a finger in the meantime. No excuses.”

“I’m sorry too.” He lowered his head and a swath of hair fell across his forehead, potentially speeding up the timeline of what I’d just implied. “I’m just so—What if he hurts her? Or worse, what if he uses her to hurt someone else? It would kill her if she realized that after we got her away from him... *if* we get her away from him.”

“We will.” I gripped his hand. “Even if we have to search every inch of every borough ourselves. Even Staten Island.”

He laughed roughly and drew both hands to his face, pretending to be rubbing the tension from his forehead, but I

caught the way his pinkies swiped the corners of his eyes. When he was finished, he reached into his inner jacket pocket and withdrew a pair of wire-frame spectacles and slid them up his noble nose. “Alright. Let’s go.”

“Wait.” I unclipped my shades from my shirt collar and did the same. “Okay.”

His lip twitched, and he reached back into his jack and withdrew a rumpled newsboy cap. He plopped it onto his head, and then snugged it down front and back, pushing his waves into feathery curls over his ears. My breath caught in my lungs.

There you are.

Chapter Eight

Thankfully, the tram was empty this time. No middle-aged couples bickering over whether or not I existed to make me rage against Sebastian for keeping secrets. No young couples canoodling between the windows and their lifted phones to make me daydream foolish things about Sebastian's arms around me. And best of all, no human pups running around our feet to make me feel even more awkward about the incredibly awkward thing I'd said to Sebastian about having his *child* in front of every Alpha in New York City.

Okay, fine, the absence of all those people didn't actually matter. I was still angry, wistful, and mortified all at the same time. This male had been pretending he couldn't see me for the better part of a month now, but the second he put on his useless spectacles, I started looking at him like... like... Well, let's just say I was glad we were surrounded by windows not mirrors so I didn't have to face my own flushed face.

There's no shame in the urge to mate.

Stop! I barely know him.

Then ask him questions while he can't get away. Isn't that how humans do it?

Since when do you care how humans do it?

Since your obsession with their rituals started keeping me from going through with ours.

And on that note, I tuned her out and turned my attention to the towers gleaming alongside the sparkling river so as not to indulge her fixation on the male towering behind us. Looking north, I could just make out the upper levels of my old home—future home?—and looking south, I could see all the way past the UN building to Bellevue Hospital. The top of the Empire State building peeked above its neighbors, and it occurred to me that it would be spectacular to see it from this angle at night, when the spire was lit with blues and reds. In fact, an evening event at the Sanctuary would be amazing. The lights all along the FDR reflected in the swirling surface of the water.

Perhaps a sunset mating ceremony?

With an outdoor reception... I blushed and inched away from Sebastian's electric energy at my back. *Stop putting ideas in my head.*

I am an idea in your head.

What? My face scrunched up, but I quickly smoothed it out, not wanting Sebastian to catch me being quite so strange. Except... My memories of our movie date had buried themselves in brain sand after the trauma that followed, but one shyly poked its head out now. Sebastian eating popcorn from my hand like a dog and then telling me his wolf told him to do it. Telling me his wolf had bad ideas. Though it had actually been a very good idea because I found his top-secret silly side utterly irresistible.

Ask him about it.

Sebastian abruptly crossed the tram and sat on the bench facing Roosevelt Island. I worried he had caught me acting strange. Still, he immediately got up, came over to stand beside me this time, and took hold of the ceiling strap next to the one I was already holding onto. Our elbows collided as the

tram swayed, and Sebastian winced. Without opening his eyes, he switched to a strap on his other side.

Well, fine, if that's how it is...

I switched straps, not wanting to be closer to him than he wanted to be to me. Why did he come back over at all if he didn't want to accidentally brush up against each other? Not that *I* wanted to either—one of my swirling emotions was still anger—but I wasn't the one acting like a dog who couldn't decide where to do his business. He could've just stayed on the bench far, far away from my offensive elbow. Maybe I should go sit on it, and then *he* would have to feel repulsive.

I waited for my hand to let go of the strap so I could do just that, but it seemed to be taking orders from my eyes, which couldn't stop staring at the stretch of Sebastian's suit over his bicep as he adjusted his grip, or the strain of his white shirt at his waist where a bit of black shiftskin peeked through. He switched to his left hand, and the material tugged a little higher, revealing the outline of the muscle above his pelvis. My breath stopped, my knees forgetting how to be knees. My hand tightened on the strap to steady me.

His eyes opened then—of *course* they did—and the sunshine bouncing off the buildings turned his irises into pools of raw honey. I'd never seen him in this much natural light before; our hurried walk to the station had been shaded with buildings and trees, and all of our previous run-ins had occurred at night or indoors. Those glittering eyes swept down my shapeless human costume and slid away, leaving me feeling like Laura Linney's frumpy character in *Love, Actually* blowing it with her impossibly hot co-worker Carlos. Probably because Evan had specifically made me watch the Christmas movie out of season to point out the resemblance. And it *was* uncanny when Sebastian dropped his Alpha guard. The wire glasses, the fluffy hairstyle, the earnest passion simmering behind his stoic features...

“You know, you didn't have to completely humiliate me in front of all the other Alphas,” he mumbled. “When you came

in like that.”

My wolf roared to the surface, filling my human mouth with her fangs. She had her lust, but she also had her pride, and he seemed to be insinuating... Well, when we apologized to each other outside The Sanctuary, it felt like we were quietly agreeing to never mention either of our abysmal behavior inside again, so what else *could* he mean but...?

“Sorry I wasn’t hot enough for you,” I snarled around my enlarged teeth. “Maybe if I’d actually been invited like the Alpha I’m supposed to be, I would have had time to pick out something nice—”

“Elyse.” The princely authority in his tone cut off the end of my sentence as surely as if he’d brought down a sword. “That is *not* what I meant. That is so far from—”

The tram went over the rollers at the crest of our trip and swayed, slinging our bodies toward one another. He grabbed a second strap with his right hand just before we crashed. His jaw clenched, and his eyes scrunched shut—probably holding back his own angry wolf. That would be just what shifterkind needed. Two giant wolves photographed killing each other on the Roosevelt Island tram.

“I only meant—” He growled without opening his eyes. “—that it was the first Alpha meeting where my father let me take the lead, and then you barged in screaming at me like an angry mate, all while making it very clear you think I’m lying about being your fated. That’s a very serious accusation.”

I opened my mouth to retort, but the words caught in my throat. He was right, of course. No one else in that room knew the nuances of my feelings for him, and so my vehement denial had made him out to be something I knew he was not. Even at his Alpha worst, I knew he was just a pompous, privileged jerk not a predator. He had acted in good faith when he claimed me, according to our customs, believing wholeheartedly that whatever he was feeling, I was feeling too.

My fangs withdrew, and I swallowed the foul taste of my own righteous fury. “I’m sorry, Sebastian. I never meant to call you a liar. About *that*, anyway. But you have been keeping a lot from me, so when Tony and Gigi started in on the fated mates thing... I wasn’t thinking clearly. I should have played along.”

“It’s not a *game*.” Sebastian let go of the straps and lurched over to the bench again. He plopped down with a hollow plastic *thud* and buried his face in both hands, pushing the brim of his cap up his forehead. After a moment, he splayed his fingers and peeked through, saying, “You’d be hot if you were wearing a trash bag, Elyse.”

A shiver of pleasure rolled through my core. *Hot* was a human word. Hearing it from his mouth that had just been full of fangs... I crossed my arms over my burning chest and shrugged. “I’m pretty sure Gigi thought I *was*.”

“Oh, she knew you weren’t.” Sebastian pulled his fingers down his face until his chin rested on his clasped fist. “That’s why she hated you, of course. She has to dress like she just left her shift at a strip club to—”

“Don’t.” I held up a hand. “Don’t put her down to lift me up. She’s awful, but... it’s not easy being the spare.”

“She’s not the *spare* anymore.” Sebastian made a face about that word. He didn’t have any siblings due to complications from his own birth so it wasn’t a term he’d grown up hearing. “She’s a Beta. So, she couldn’t have claimed their throne even if I’d ripped Tony’s throat out.” He shook his head. “She shouldn’t have been there today. We all agreed to leave our Betas at home to be sure no one else was tampering with our brains, but those two are joined at the hip.” He wrinkled his nose. “It’s a bit unseemly, given that he’s been Alpha for three years and still no mate.”

“Well, I’m not touching *that*.” I let go of my strap to hold up both hands. “All I wanted to say is that you shouldn’t assume if two females don’t like each other. It’s about superficial jealousy. We have deeper feelings too, you know.

And I would feel pretty pissed if I had to pup-sit Tony for the rest of my life. Evan is hard enough.”

“I know you have feelings,” Sebastian said quietly, and then his face hardened. “But Tony is the reason I was so insistent that you come with me, don’t you? I couldn’t leave you alone with a male who would speak about any female with such blatant disrespect, let alone you and my mother.”

“Oh.” I pressed my lips together and looked down. “I see.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t appreciate his chivalry, it was just... I guess I had convinced myself he believed he needed me for this mission. I couldn’t imagine *why*, but I thought that maybe *he* could. But that wasn’t it at all.

Sebastian sighed and a moment later, his cap fell on the floor. I looked up sharply, thinking he had thrown it in anger, but found him leaning back against the window with both hands buried in his mane. “Everything I say to you is wrong.”

“That’s not my fault,” I said.

“What was it this time?” He straightened abruptly and rolled his shoulders. “I thought you wanted me to be more protective after...” He swallowed hard.

“I do,” I said quickly, pushing back the subway memories. “I do want that in... any male I happen to be spending time with when danger arises. Not because I can’t do it for myself, but because—”

“I know you can do it for yourself,” Sebastian blurted. “I’ve seen you fight twice, and you would’ve wiped the floor with Tony if he pissed you off enough.”

“Well, I would’ve *tried*.” I laughed. “But I wasn’t properly trained. Only just enough to, I don’t know, protect all the pups I’m meant to pop out. Not for *battle*. No, Kiana got all of that. Everything. And then she didn’t even show up for the meeting.”

“You lack Kiana’s precision,” Sebastian conceded, “but you make up for it in passion, of which she has very little.”

Perhaps even none.”

“No passion?” I was really laughing now. “How can you say that? Have you *met* her?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” He grimaced. “But passion is not the same as ambition, of which she admittedly has plenty. Or so I thought.” He rubbed his chin. “Funny that while she was missing, a bunch of humans turned up dead in a park.”

My stomach twisted, and not just because the tram was experiencing a little turbulence as the wind picked up over the river. Grasping the overhead straps one by one like a pup crossing the monkey bars, I made my way over to the bench and slumped next to Sebastian, whose knees were spread so wide I could have easily dropped onto the triangle of bench visible between them and used the solid slab of his chest as a far more comfortable back rest. But this would have been a weird time.

“I’ve had that thought too,” I whispered. “But I really don’t think she’d stoop that low. I think it’s more likely she missed the meeting because she wanted to send a message that she doesn’t need anybody.”

Sebastian shifted toward me, knee knocking against mine. He didn’t wince, so I didn’t jerk away. “We have to consider the possibility that she’s still under Damian’s influence. Maybe mentally or maybe just emotionally, but dangerous either way. I truly cannot wrap my head around his intentions, but he seems to have convinced her she can *only* mate with me, and that might lead her to extremes.”

His eyes drifted toward the window, embarrassed I supposed by the mention of mating, but then his face flushed a greenish-gray, and he practically flung his gaze onto the cap lying at his feet. He snatched it up and began wringing it with both hands.

“Extremes like bribing you with your mother’s safe return?” I asked gently.

He nodded once, and a lock of black hair flopped over his closest eye. The desire to brush it back into place and let my hand land on his broad shoulder was almost insurmountable. Almost. But not quite. I folded my arms, tucking both fists safely into my pits where they couldn't make this any harder for him.

“You would accept the offer,” I said with no need for a question mark since I already knew the answer. And hated it every bit as much as I loved him for it.

“Yes.”

The expected word fit like a key into the lock on the film canister containing the montage reel of what that would look like. Kiana in Sebastian's arms. Kiana in Sebastian's bed. Kiana in Sebastian's whelping nest. My wolf bristled with rage, and my claw tips dug into the flesh of my palms. It wasn't jealousy—okay, maybe a little—but the same righteous anger that had prompted me to deny her offer to run away unscathed and let her have him. He was a person. Not a prize stud.

“Is this why you've been avoiding me?” I asked. “Why you've kept me in the dark about all that's been happening? You didn't want me to know that you suspect my sister is still working with Damian to coerce you into mating?”

“Avoiding you?” Sebastian lifted his head, brown eyes brimming with confusion. “I'm trying to give you *space*. Remember? You said you needed time to find yourself?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“How could you do that if I were dumping all my Alpha concerns on you like some sort of...” He trailed off and shook his head. “I was only trying to protect your mental space as well, Elyse. You've got more than enough on your plate, and we can't have you losing focus and letting Evan reveal himself.”

His eyes twitched at the mention of my friend's name, and mine rolled almost to the back of my head. I considered

explaining to him, *once again*, that in spite of Evan faux-claiming me—and *Sebastian*, for that matter—Evan was never going to turn straight, but decided against it. Sebastian would figure it out eventually. The important thing for now was that he hadn't intentionally been snubbing me or treating me like a child, but had only been trying to honor my wishes.

To extremes.

I leaned my shoulder lightly against his. "I appreciate that, Sebastian, but you may have over-corrected. I only meant that I wasn't ready for any lifelong commitments, to you *or* the Bronx. I never meant I didn't want to be around you."

"Ah." He looked down at his shiny dress shoes and tugged his cap down to his eyebrows. "Duly noted."

I stared at his profile. Duly noted? I'd practically invited him to spend time with me, and that was all he could say? I understood he had a lot on his mind, at the moment and in general, but I guess I thought my confession would perk him up a little. Maybe we were a perfect match because if I were the Queen of Mixed Signals, he was definitely the reigning King.

Well, I wasn't going to throw myself at him, if that's what he wanted. I scooted a few inches down the bench, making space for Leto as the tutors used to say when teenage males and females sat too close together on the field trips. I wished the wolf goddess *would* come sit between us and tell me what to do about Kiana. How were we supposed to get along if my twin had anything to do with these murders?

My gaze traveled south past the bridge to the skyscrapers of lower Manhattan. Somewhere in those concrete canyons lay the mangled remains of an unknown number of innocent human students, but in spite of the pain and sorrow rippling through their inner circles and out into the larger world, you'd never know it from way up here. The city continued without them. Just as it had without Charlie.

“It’s such a strange place for shifters to live,” I mused to fill the awkward silence. “We say we don’t want to be like the humans, yet we insist on staying in a city where we can’t even go outside in our own skin. Just look at it, Sebastian. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful and yet completely unsuitable for a wolf?”

Sebastian responded with a strange sound not unlike a cat being strangled, and I turned in confusion. His eyes were shut tight, his hands gripping the edge of the seat.

Holy Mother of Chann. He’s scared.

The minutes since we left Roosevelt Island rewound rapidly through my mind, and suddenly his cagey behavior made perfect sense. “Sebastian, are you... are you afraid of heights?”

“No.” The word barely made it past his lips. His knuckles whitened as the car crossed over another set of rollers, making it sway. “Not specifically.”

I scooted close again and peeled his fingers off the seat. Instead of pulling away as I’d expected, he gripped my hand like it was a life ring in a stormy sea. The nakedness of his need, stripped of his usual simmering desire set my own on fire. Heat licked its way up my arm, boiling the blood in my veins.

“It’s this *thing*,” Sebastian hissed through gritted teeth.

“The tram?”

His gaze locked on the roof of the cabin. “Yes.”

My brow furrowed as I looked around the innocuous empty space. “If you’re not afraid of heights, what’s so scary about the tram?”

He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. “You’ll laugh.”

“I won’t.” My thumb rubbed the veins below his knuckles, and I wondered what would happen if I pulled it to my mouth and kissed each one.

“Oh, but you will.” He laughed darkly at himself.

“I promise I won’t.” The words came out weirdly breathy because I was really just thinking about what might happen if I leaned in and kissed him on the crinkled corner of his self-deprecating smile while my chest pressed softly into his solid side...

He took a deep breath and blew it out. “I can’t stop thinking about the damned climax of *Spider-Man*.”

“You—” Words left me as my fantasy bubble burst, releasing all my giggles. I slapped one hand over my promise-breaking mouth and gripped his fingers tighter with the other. “I’m so sorry. That’s just not what I was expecting.”

“How?” He gestured widely between the bridge and the river, and the offending scene flashed through my mind—Spider-Man’s impossible choice between saving Mary Jane or a tram like this hurtling down to the river. “How is that not *all* you’re thinking about? And don’t pretend you’ve never seen it.”

“Only recently.” I lifted our hands off the bench and pressed my knee against his. “Before all this, I’d mostly only see what they played on Friday and Saturday nights at the Last Century Cinema.”

“That explains the shirt.” His eyes lit briefly on my chest but left a weight that kept me from breathing. He knew the schedule. He knew which nights they played which decade of movies. He had been there more than once.

“Why were you watching *The Princess Bride* that night?”

“Because it’s what they were playing.” Sebastian shrugged. “I liked it well enough, except for the part where he slapped her. They should cut that out.”

My friends and I had had this conversation a dozen times, and we all agreed, but at the end of the day Hollywood wasn’t in the business of re-editing problematic old movies when they could just remake them. It was only a matter of time before there was a new Westley and Buttercup without all the gross

stuff you had to learn to ignore when you could only watch movies from another century.

“So why were you there if not to watch *that* movie?” I pressed. “And you’d better not say you were following me, or I swear to the gods—”

“I wasn’t. I do swear.” He squeezed my hand, which now rested atop his jittery knee. “I didn’t even clock you as a shifter until later. That place certainly has a smell.”

I laughed. “Okay, I’ll buy it. But why then? There must be dozens of movie theaters in your borough. Why that one?”

“Because it’s where all my happiest memories are. My mother—” His voice cracked with emotion, and when he spoke again, I could detect the tiniest trace of her accent in his words. “She loved—*loves*—my father, but she has always missed her home and wanted me to experience that part of our culture, but it was frowned upon by my grandfather when he was still alive. Wolves only have *one* culture.”

“So she took you to *El Barrio*.” That was what Jayla had always called Spanish Harlem, refusing to give in to the gentrified SpaHa nickname.

Sebastian smiled wistfully. “The pizza place on the corner by the theater used to be a Puerto Rican café. They made the most delicious mofongo you’ve ever tasted.”

“Mofongo?” I repeated carefully. “I’m pretty sure I’ve never tasted it at all, but... I’d like to try. If there’s somewhere else.”

The grin that split his face was so wide it instantly embarrassed him, and he quickly schooled his features and cleared his throat. “I know some places. But, um, anyways, we were leaving the café one day, and there was a poster out in front of the theater with this giant flying white wolf—well, that’s what I thought he was. I mean, what else was I supposed to think? I was seven. I thought it was going to be about *us*, and then when the kid had my weird name...”

“BashBux,” I blurted the username for the streaming service the TV in my room had been logged into from the moment I arrived. It was him. It had always been him. Preparing that room for *me*. “Bastian Bux.” My forehead dropped onto his shoulder, and tears stung my eyes. “*The NeverEnding Story*.”

He swallowed hard. “Now you know. We went there every chance we could up until the day I left home to search for... my fated.”

I did the math in my head, based on what Yara herself had told me about when he left. He was twenty. I was sixteen. We had just missed each other. Which was good because our age gap needed some time to legalize, but that only made it feel more like something... like something knew it wasn't the right time for us to see each other... until suddenly it was.

“Why were you there *that* night?”

“The mating ceremony was a week away.” He looked down at our clasped hands, tilting his cheek toward the top of my head without touching it. “And I knew Kenzo would want to throw me a bachelor party that weekend...” He rolled his eyes. “So I was running out of time. Once the Alpha Heir of the Bronx was in my bed...”

“No more movies,” I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut.

“No more movies.” He drew another deep breath that sounded suspiciously like a sniffle. “So imagine my surprise when we finally locked eyes, and you were the beautiful... noisy... woman from the theater.”

Oh, Gods help me. I'm going to marry this man.

Chapter Nine

Or not.

Sebastian let go of my hand as soon as the tram landed and bolted for the door. Safe from the Green Goblin at last, and shook himself like his wolf was rearranging its fur. It would have been cute, but with that shake came the instant reemergence of the emotionless, self-assured Alphahole. The jerk hustled down the stairs without so much as a “Thanks, Elyse,” or even a glance back at me. I understood the urgency now that we had some control over our speed, but... seriously?

Did you want to show up at the crime scene holding hands?

I sighed and followed, my feet dragging as I remembered what we were hustling toward. Maybe when we got there, I could just wait in the car since Sebastian had never actually needed me to come along. He just didn't want me around another unmated Alpha like Tony. Presumably for my protection, but come on, he didn't even trust me with Evan.

Downstairs, Kenzo stood in an appropriately themed black hoodie and jeans, waiting by the open door to a black Tahoe. His usual face-splitting grin was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he gave me a curt nod as I got in and then piled in after me.

The cocky but normally affable male settled into the seat beside Sebastian before I could even think about it. I scoffed as I crawled my way to the bench seat in the back.

So much for chivalry.

Before even a few seconds had passed, Kenzo was already launching into the details for Sebastian, and as I listened, my cruddy self-pity-party crashed and burned.

“...four students, all freshmen, we think. They were coming from a Greek event, some fundraiser for the victims of the shooting in Virginia, and they were attacked. The cops aren’t saying much, but Mateo gathered that the timing seems to be around one-thirty p.m.”

“In the middle of the damned *Thursday!*” Sebastian growled. He unbuttoned his jacket and yanked it off angrily, tossing it aside so he could lean in and view Kenzo’s information on his phone. He also rolled up his sleeves, revealing the rippling muscle and veins of a battle-trained Alpha, and I swallowed hard.

At least one of us was well-trained.

Who knew what we were facing if someone would willingly commit this atrocity in the middle of the day in a busy city park? While I appreciated his confidence in my ability to fight, we were both aware that I had spent most of the precious years that Alphas spent turning themselves into killing machines eating more double-buttered popcorn than *anyone*, not just Jayla, would recommend.

“We have to assume that the attackers hid here,” Kenzo jabbered, nervousness rolling off him in acidic waves that made my nose wrinkle, “and that they weren’t looking for anyone specific because there was no way to know these kids would *be* here. It was unusual for all of them because of the event, so we think it was opportunistic. They’ve got the area cordoned off, but Mateo said the Sergeant expects us, and we’ll be able to look. They know we worked with the Upper East Side for the last ones.”

Sebastian's eyes slid to briefly meet mine before returning to the phone.

Suddenly the air inside the cab thickened, and images ignited my mind like the sparks of a train's third rail. The baseball bat lifting... Evan jumped to his feet to save me... Jayla screaming, screaming, screaming... Charlie throwing herself on top of me as any mother would.

My breath quickened. Bile crawled up my throat, the lead note to a symphony of panicky nausea, and I bit the inside of my cheek. I turned away and stared out the window as the driver wove at breakneck speed between the yellow cabs and buses lining Park Avenue, gesturing and honking as he went.

It was chaos, but a hubbub of life that I had come to love—from my tower window anyway—and it helped to distract me from the darkness of my thoughts, of what we were going to investigate. I took deep breaths to clear my mind and heard little more of what Kenzo said, or *anything*, until Sebastian's voice broke through my trance.

“Elyse? Are you with us? We're here, c'mon.”

I startled and glanced over to him, standing by the open door. His head was poked in, and his brows were nearly knitting a sweater until his eyes found mine. Whatever he saw there made him stop. His brow softened, and he held out a hand.

“Here, let me help you out.”

With a gentle but firm grip, he guided me out of my encasement in the back of the vehicle, and I landed on the sidewalk, steps away from a mass of cops and caution tape. Washington Square Park was one of the verdant islands-within-the-island that made Manhattan sing. Plush lawns, bubbling fountains, and rows of benches were open invitations to the hurried citizens of the city that never sleeps to sit and stay awhile.

At least, it would be on any other day. Today it was a ghost town, surrounded by an army of whirling blue and red

lights.

A breeze snapped at the yellow tape, making the loose ends flutter. The waft took the heat from my body as it whistled through my hair and sweat-soaked clothes. I shivered. My stomach felt like a kettle ball, and my legs seemed to have committed to mutiny rather than moving forward, but somehow, with Sebastian's help, I kicked one foot out, then the other, until they were back on board with being attached to my body.

I let go of his hand, noticing for a split second that we'd each had to be each other's support today, if only momentarily, and I was grateful.

With lips pressed into a thin white line and hair whipping in the breeze, Sebastian made his way to the police and had a quiet discussion before waving us over. I moved when the wind changed direction, bringing a reeking scent of pennies and offal to my nose, and I reeled, stopping as my wolf bristled, her senses zinging, her muscles rippling in anticipation beneath my skin.

There may still be danger.

Not with Sebastian and Kenzo here.

I'm keeping watch anyway.

Good.

I continued on shaky legs to join Kenzo and Sebastian on the other side of the tape, noting the reporters snapping pictures to our left. Mateo would have to take care of those images for us, seeing as how "civvies" who could see the bodies would raise too many questions. Especially if their pictures made it to the tabloids.

My attention fell on the sad tableau of untimely death before me. If I could keep from smelling it, I might convince myself that I was just watching an episode of *Animalis Alma Mater* being filmed. The four bodies were lying in theatrical piles, as if they'd gone boneless the moment they died and simply dropped where they'd stood. Two men and two

women. All covered in blood, with lakes of it drying in wind-whipped streaks around them from the gashes to their necks.

My mind stuttered, showing me blood pouring from a head wearing a perfect pink bow, the russet staining the matching prim dress and auburn locks. My heart beat like a bird banging itself against a window, failing to understand that it was glass. A shudder began in my core, at my diaphragm, where it jittered my breath and shot outward to vibrate my fingertips.

The body was lying on the filthy floor of a subway car. That wasn't right. It shouldn't have been like that. All that pretty pinkness deserved satin and softness. It shouldn't have been—

“Elyse?” Sebastian squeezed my elbow gently. “Are you okay?”

My thoughts exactly.

Sebastian's eyes searched mine, and I nodded, hoping he couldn't feel the vibrations that shook my insides like an unbalanced washing machine.

“Fine,” I squeaked, swallowing, forcing myself to look at the bodies again. These were not my Charlie. She was already gone. These bodies were new, a bunch of helpless human kids just a few years younger than me, and if I wanted to help stop this from happening again, I needed to get ahold of myself. “What do you guys think?”

“I don't think they were killed by shifters,” Sebastian whispered, kneeling beside one male and pointing. “This wound... it's as if someone made it *look like* a bite, with the puncture pattern and everything, but the tearing is all wrong.”

I crouched beside him and clenched my jaw to hold back my personal emotions. There were what looked like four holes in the boy's next, not unlike the marks I'd left on Evan's shoulder, except there was so much tearing that it was hard to tell unless you were looking for it. What made little sense was

the *messiness* of the tears. Our fangs would have made a cleaner slice.

“I see what you mean.” I turned my head, gagging and blushing for doing so.

Kenzo came over from examining one of the female bodies and folded his arms over his barrel chest. “If this wasn’t shifters, it sure was made to look like us. I swear there are bits of fur *planted* on the bodies over there.”

“Do you think it’s anti-shifter vigilantes trying to frame us?” Sebastian stood, brushing his hands together with distaste. “They’ve been out of control since the subway, and they were certainly looking for violence then.”

“Must be,” Kenzo concluded. “Who else would do something like this?”

At the mention of the subway, the vibration that I’d suppressed to a small degree roared back to life, and I backed away from the bodies, trying to find air that didn’t carry their scent to draw into my lungs. I fought off tears, angry that my body wouldn’t stop being so damned weak, that my brain wouldn’t stop feeding it terror and heartache to feast upon.

It could still be Damien.

What?

I stopped, chest heaving. Beneath my shuddering human self, my wolf was like stone, cool and hard. More importantly, she was *right*. I turned the idea over in my mind like a rock with a hidden treasure beneath it.

“It’s Damian.” I whirled to face the males. “He isn’t influencing shifters to carry out these attacks; he’s influencing humans to frame us.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips. “That’s... actually a very interesting theory, Elyse.”

“She’s right, Sebastian,” Kenzo said slowly, surveying the scene again. “You know... the fact that it looks fake makes it

seem like activists instead of shifters to *us*, but like shifters instead of activists to the humans. It's kind of perfect."

"I'm going to have to go back and discuss this with my father and Mateo, of course," Sebastian began, and then turned to me, "but if anything could make your point that I shouldn't have kept you out of the loop, this was it."

Even though I was still taking shallow breaths so I didn't have to smell death on the breeze, I managed a weak smile for this version of him that hovered somewhere between the Alphahole who grated on my every last nerve and the cinnamon roll I wanted to devour in one sitting and lick off my fingers.

"You take the car, then," Kenzo said. "I'll work on getting this mess cleaned up. I'll text Mateo so he'll be looped in before you get back."

Sebastian looked up at the sky, his eyes narrowing. The sun was on its way down, the surrounding shadows stretching long fingers across the emerald lawns. Ribbons of cloud were tinged pink and tangerine above us.

"I don't think so, Kenzo," he said. "I'm feeling amped after all this, and I'd like to walk back. You know, get a feel for the vibe in the city." He turned to me, a small smile tugging at his square jaw. "Elyse, would you like to come with me?"

The softness in his voice and posture, that smile laced with sadness for me, knowing how I'd felt reliving Charlie's loss, and the invitation rather than the command... At that moment, I needed nothing more than to melt into him, but not so that he would bite my neck and tug my hips against his—though, the more I thought about it, the more that image filled my mind—but so that he could hold me. I craved his muscular arms around me, pressing me to his hard chest and enfolding me until I could barely breathe so that, for one second, I could just let myself cry and know that he would love me anyway.

“Thank you, Sebastian.” My voice sounded rough and strange. “I would like that.”

Chapter Ten

Strolling up 5th Avenue with Sebastian, I tried to leave the carnage and my trauma behind. The early evening was cool, but not chilly, and I relished this opportunity, however unfortunate its origin, to explore more of Sebastian's borough. Over the past few years, when I'd snuck away from the Bronx to catch movies with my friends, I'd only been able to check out the area directly around the bridge and Last Century Cinema. It was too risky to trespass further, a fact that was finally made abundantly clear to me when those Manhattan males attacked and Sebastian intervened.

Haven't seen any of those guys around...

No, I thought uneasily. And I don't suspect we ever will.

Our conversation on the tram had spawned as many questions as it finally snuffed out. He didn't just love movies; he loved the same seedy movie theater. So why had he bought me the fancy one around the corner that meant nothing to either of us instead of just taking me to the one we'd both grown up in, albeit at very different stages of our lives. And why didn't he just tell me the truth to begin with?

You weren't the only one caught off guard at the ceremony.

True. He had earnestly believed he would be mating with *me*, not Kiana, and I had proof now in the form of the username BashBux. Bastian Bux was the main character in *The NeverEnding Story*, and Sebastian had adopted the name as some sort of human alter ego. Yara, and *only* Yara, was allowed to call her son Bastian because the movies were their little secret, but on the night he met my friends, Sebastian had told them his last name was Bucks. I should have guessed it right then. Not only did he love movies, but he had one-upped me on 80s movie trivia. I was a disgrace to my shirt.

“Hey, crabcakes?” I tried, remembering our pre-show banter about another famous Sebastian. I squeezed his forearm just above the four tiny scratches that told me he’d probably been lying earlier when he said I hadn’t hurt him.

“Is that really necessary?” he groaned.

“Why were you signed into your streaming account in our honeymoon suite?” I asked, admitting for the first time that it had always been rightfully mine, not Kiana’s. “I don’t think that’s how most wolves spend their first evening together.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to be most wolves, Elyse.”

I looked up at his profile, coarse around the edges now with a five o’clock shadow that I kind of wanted to rub my cheek up against. “You didn’t want to mate?”

He ducked his head and turned it slightly away. “Elyse.”

“What?” I bumped my shoulder against his bicep. “What’s the point in being shy? We both know what was expected of us that night.”

“I just wanted to offer you an alternative activity,” he mumbled. “In case you weren’t ready right away.”

“Good call.” I hugged his arm. “Turns out I wasn’t.”

He laughed. “How long did it take you to discover it?”

“I binge watched the first season of *Alma Mater Animalis* that night.”

“Second season is better.” Sebastian wrinkled his nose. “Not so much cat man.”

“Careful now,” I warned. “That’s Jayla’s future husband you’re talking about.”

He looked at me with such starstruck surprise that I hurried to assure him it was just an inside joke, which prompted him to ask if I had future husbands, and I abruptly buttoned my lips. The last thing I needed was him getting broody and jealous during any of my favorite movies. We fell into easy, teasing conversation after that, one that warmed my cheeks in spite of the late spring breeze. A new explanation for our mismatched fated status took root in my heart.

It didn’t exist.

He believed in it because he wanted to believe in it, because the movies had filled his head with romantic ideas that had no place in shifter society where most couples mated based on rank, bloodlines, or necessity. Love was rare, and usually an afterthought, but that had never set well with either of us. He just had the Alpha male privilege to bend reality to fit his fantasy. He hadn’t clocked me as a shifter at all during the movie, but later, when our eyes finally met after all the years he’d spent searching, and he recognized me as the woman from the theater... and a Bronx Alpha Heir... of course that felt like fate. I might have assumed the same if I’d known he was the man from the theater.

I had no idea what to do with this revelation. If we both earnestly cared for each other, then I wasn’t sure it even mattered. Let us be *fated*. What were the chances that anyone else would show up to make that claim and steal us away? And what were the actual laws around that? Would we have to break up? What if it happened after we had pups? Had that ever happened to anyone? Why was I even worrying about it when I still wasn’t going to formally mate with him, no matter how much he loved movies, until he adjusted his public attitude.

Thoughts of that night always left me confused. I'd been turned on in equal measure by his attractiveness and integrity, but that moment had meant so much more to him. At least, according to *him* it did. He claimed that that was the moment he knew I was his fated match. While I wasn't in a hurry to mate and become a puppy-production machine, I sometimes wished I'd felt the same. It would have made life a lot easier.

Instead, it was *frustrating*. I wasn't sure *what* I was supposed to feel to know if he was my "fated". No one could tell me anything besides, "*You'll know when you know it,*" even Sebastian. It seemed like that must be the truth, though, because my lack of certainty about him versus his instantaneous commitment to me had convinced him I didn't feel it.

What made me more nervous about the whole thing was how *instant* it had been for him. If I hadn't experienced the same thing in that first instant, did that mean it would never happen? If I mated with him and never felt that for him, did it mean I might feel it for someone else later? And what happened then? Or what if I *never* felt it? Lots of shifters claim they never feel "fated"—the majority, in fact. Most make matches based on rank, bloodlines, and necessity, not of love or fate.

But when you've grown up without a mother because your father was so devoted to her that once she'd passed, he'd rather not have another wife or pup—after all, they *had been* fated—it was hard to want to settle for anything less. Yes, I'd been ready to do my duty and mate with Blaze... well, to be fair, I *hadn't* been ready at all, but he'd been so kind with his offer to give me time that I'd warmed to the idea enough to think I would be ready one day.

And then Sebastian claimed me, rejected Kiana, all hell broke loose, and the rest was recent history. Which left me going in circles like a carousel about this every time he made my heart race, but not melt.

For now, I was happy to have the exploration of Manhattan as a distraction from that mental merry-go-round. I'd been cooped up in The Plaza for nearly a month, and I was drinking the city in like a wastrel from the desert would water from an oasis. Just walking up 5th Avenue was an otherworldly thrill, even though we were ostensibly sussing out to what extent the citizens were on edge, jumping at shadows that might be shifters. I didn't see any outward signs that New York was on the verge of a potentially violent anti-shifter mob. The sidewalks teemed with the early rush hour hustle of workers headed home or to happy hour, heels tucked into purses and sneakers pounding the pavement. No one seemed to be jumping at shadows, although I felt like I'd seen a few people slip behind doorways or into alleys as we passed. I couldn't point to anything specific though. Most of it just flutters of movement in my peripheral vision, leaving me with that odd, between-the-shoulders sense that something was off.

But it wasn't enough for me to point it out to Sebastian, who seemed utterly relaxed. His jacket was thrown casually over his shoulder, where it swung from his index finger, glossy wingtips marking time at the Manhattanite clip. He was in his element, a young prince, hale and hearty—

I stopped dead with a squeal that on some level I wished I could take back, but I was too damned jazzed to worry about looking dorky. I pointed at the wedge-shaped building to our right, walking around to the front edge, which was insanely narrow. I'd never imagined it would look so odd in real life, but it did. More so, almost.

“This is the Daily Bugle! From *Spider-Man*!”

Sebastian cracked a too-cool-for-school grin. “What, that? Yeah. It's called The Flatiron. You know they didn't build it *just* for the movie, right?”

“And you know the Green Goblin doesn't really fly around cutting tram lines, right?” I shot back, and then wondered if I'd gone too far.

He ducked his chin as I spun, ready to apologize. But the jaded New Yorker demeanor slipped as he grinned back at me, confirming the growing suspicion that he'd brought me here on purpose. I was tempted to ask if he'd really thought it necessary to feel the city's *vibe*, or if he was just trying to impress me. I was also tempted to ask if his family owned *this* building, too, but I bit my tongue, just enjoying the moment.

“C’mon. Are you hungry?” He offered his hand. “I’m starving.”

“Always,” I answered, taking his hand, which was kind of sweaty, but I didn’t care.

He wove us between idling traffic to Madison Square Park, where we headed for the Shake Shack. The line wound around the black kiosk and down the sidewalk, but so did the aroma of fresh burgers and Shacksauce, and oh my Gods, I *was* starving. It was hard not to drool in anticipation, and I had to keep myself from ordering a double burger or a milkshake. Considering we’d decided to walk and eat—since open seating at Shake Shack was a rarer find than an open seat on the 5 train at rush hour—I settled on a single gargantuan burger and fries.

I was so busy stuffing my face that I didn’t notice the lights coming on in the buildings around us as we continued up 5th Avenue until I stopped dead again, dazzled by the structure I’d marveled at earlier that day from the tram.

I’d wanted to see it lit up...

The tiered, square sections of the Empire State building rose like an elaborate mating ceremony cake, topped by the futuristic spire and painted with soft white lighting against the velvety night sky. I half-gasped, half-choked, and then coughed as a piece of burger lodged in my throat.

My breath abruptly cut off, and my soda hit the sidewalk with a mighty splash. A second coughed tried to free my throat from its vicious captor, but all that came out was a sickly wheeze. I grabbed my stomach with my free hand.

Sebastian lunged behind me, wrapping his powerful arms around my middle, beginning to squeeze just as I coughed again. My throat opened. The errant bite of burger headed down the right pipe this time, and I sucked in a breath as big as the murderous burger had once been.

As I heaved, I realized Sebastian was pressed against me from behind, his hips against my ass, and his arms around me so tightly I could feel every muscle of his chest and abs against my back. My head had somehow nestled into his neck, and he'd tipped his down so his mouth was beside my ear.

I could feel his breath on my cheek. Also heaving. My body lit up like the Empire State building before us, and I was seized with the urge to spin in his arms and press into him, my mouth starving for his—

He pulled away, cool air rushing in where the heat had built between us.

“Sorry,” he said, his chest still rising and falling with his panting breath. “I thought you were choking.”

Between almost choking and throwing myself at him, *I* was panting, too. “I was, but... I got it.” I huffed. “Empire State got me.” I pointed.

“Ah, yeah,” he said, picking up his jacket, which he'd dropped in his heroic attempt to save my life. “Here.” He offered to take my trash.

I handed it to him, still working to slow my breath.

“And here.” He swung his jacket around my shoulders before I could protest.

It was getting cooler as night fell, and the breeze hadn't let up. I'd redone my topknot three times in a vain attempt to wrangle every strand out of my eyes and mouth and into submission. The soft fabric of the suit jacket made an ideal windbreak, and my skin turned from gooseflesh to bathwater warm in an instant.

He wiped his hands on a napkin, tossed that, and waved at the gloriously illuminated building across the street. “Would you like to go up to the top? We have a little time.”

Of course I longed to go to the top. I was *dying* to go to the top. I’d thought about nothing else from the second I’d spotted it, somehow even *while* I was choking, but that was because of *Sleepless in Seattle*, and I wanted going to the top of the Empire State Building to be special for me, too.

I realized it was childish, the dream of a moony female pup instead of an Alpha Heir, but the heart wants what it wants, and while my body definitely wanted Sebastian, I still wasn’t one hundred percent sure about my heart. Worse, though, since I’d recognized how *his* heart wanted me, I didn’t know if it would be fair to him for us to go together. Not yet.

“I, uh—”

Before I could utter another word, shadows melted into human shapes around us. Three people dressed like a cross between circus performers and this year’s “Derelict” parody fashion line surrounded us, falling to their knees at my feet.

Chapter Eleven

Sebastian flew ahead of me, and judging by the musk coming off him, his wolf was seconds from exploding out of his very expensive suit. Unfortunately, that would create a serious problem, considering we were still in the middle of Midtown just a little past rush hour, and hundreds of people were streaming by us on the sidewalk. A human river parting around the strangers at my feet.

Damian's mind-controlled minions? Could killers *really* come in harem pants and retro Steve Madden boots? Panicked, my gaze searched their hands and bodies for weapons, but all I saw were layers of beaded bracelets, trinkets, and necklaces with wolf and constellation pendants swinging at their throats.

Stay calm. Don't you smell them?

I sniffed and a wave of pheromones filled me. They were shifters. Two males and a female. All smelled of deference. The way everyone used to do when my father walked into a room. But... I frowned. Not *just* your average Alpha-directed deference. Reverence.

What the...?

As my eyes flew over these strange strangers once more, I spotted a face that I recognized and gasped, grabbing

Sebastian's arm. "Stop! I know them."

Sebastian whirled, muscles still clenched with readiness for the fight. "You do?"

"Yeah, sort of." I pointed to the oldest female, her brunette braids streaked with gray. "I know *her*, at least. They're shift..." I started, and then stopped, looking around at the crowd of pedestrians. "They're like us." I waved to them and stage-whispered. "Get up, please! You're going to draw *very* unwanted attention."

"Our apologies, Promised One," the youngest male said as he rose, gesturing to the others.

"Yes, apologies," the other two murmured, rising but keeping their heads down.

I glanced around, examining the people around us for signs of concern or recognition, but we were being thoroughly ignored. Perhaps people just thought they'd encountered a particularly odd hipster flash mob, or a wedding proposal gone off the rails. No matter how many outsiders liked to knock New Yorkers for being disinterested when weird shit went down, I was deeply grateful at this moment.

"Promised One?" Sebastian repeated dryly, the tension in his jaw relaxing just a tad. "Can you explain what's going on here, Elyse?"

I stared at the three strangers, trying to wrap my mind around what I saw. The female I had recognized from the photograph that Mateo had given me, the one of him and my mother and a small group of shifters that called itself the Children of Leto. The others I didn't know, but since I could smell their wolves—and their extreme submission—I was no longer afraid.

Confused? Yes. Surprised? Definitely. But not afraid.

"Unfortunately not, Sebastian. All I know is that she—" I pointed at the female. "—was part of a group that my mother belonged to." I turned to him, adding, "And Mateo."

“Mateo?” His brow furrowed, turning back to the shifter-hippies. “What does Mateo have to do with this?”

The three shifters looked at him blankly as if their eyes were all controlled by the same puppeteer. Part of me worried this was a sign they were under Damian’s spell, but another part of me knew he didn’t have enough imagination for this incredible costume design. Whatever they were doing, they were doing on their own.

“Hey,” I addressed the female. “You. What’s your name?”

“Ayla, Promised One,” she replied, head down. “I’m so honored to be in your presence. And this is Jasper and Monty.”

“Honored,” the two males murmured in echo.

Good grief. What under the Moon God Halo is going on?

They must know.

Know what?

About the Mark of Chann. And Evan.

Dear Gods, I hope they don’t know about Evan...

“Can we go somewhere to sit, please? I asked. “I need a minute.”

“Of course, Prom—” Ayla began.

“*Stop* calling me that,” I snapped. “Sebastian? Where can we take this party for a more suitable meeting?”

“Uh... give me some time.” He shook his head, his twitchy movements still reeking of concern. “We can go to the Monarch rooftop. It’s right off Herald Square, just a couple blocks away. I meet Kenzo there for business on the regular. They’ll set up a private area for us.” He turned to the Children and pointed a warning finger. “You three walk *behind* me, and *in front* of her. I still don’t trust you.”

Ayla’s eyes widened. “But we cannot walk before the Promised One. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Can you back me up here, please, Elyse?” Sebastian growl. I could tell that his fangs were lurking just below the surface.

“Ayla,” I said, “until we get this sorted out, I’m going to need you to do two things for me, please?”

“Of course, Promised One. Anything you command.”

I face-palmed. For real. “Okay, so, I need all of you to follow whatever I say, and whatever he says.” I gestured to Sebastian, who looked as face-palm-ready as I’d ever seen him. “And if you don’t start calling me Elyse, I’m going to wolf out and kick your asses.”

Ayla’s eyes went wide. “Understood, Prom...uh, Elyse.”

“Wonderful, now get in line behind our fearless leader and let’s all mosey over to the Monarch, shall we?”

I wonder if Sebastian can get me a drink...

Not recommended.

Party pooper.

I was tired and annoyed and completely over this insanely long day. My jeans felt much too tight after that giant burger, and worse, my shiftskin was *chafing*. I wish the mysterious magic of our rubber superhero suits prevented chafe, but it didn’t. At least the jacket was keeping me warm.

Our strange little band scurried over to the hotel where the Monarch rooftop bar and lounge were located. Sebastian in the lead; Hither, Thither, and Yon in the middle; and me at the caboose, looking oh-so-normal as I kept an eye on all of them.

They didn’t even *walk* normally, for Leto’s sake! They kind of *slunk*, as if the weight of the surrounding buildings was holding them down. Worse, they kept turning back to stare at me, then stare up at the buildings, and then back at me, as if they’d never seen anything like it all—me included—in their lives.

I was beyond perplexed. I wished Mateo's note had included *any* information about these people. What kept rattling around in my head was that my mother had been a part of this. While I'd been content to let that mystery rest before, it wouldn't stay in the background any longer.

When we emerged from the elevator to the rooftop, Sebastian gestured to an area of seats at the far end. He's spoken with the host downstairs before we'd headed up, and the "Reserved" placards were already perched on two little tables nestled against the bench seating.

As we walked out from beneath the roofed area, I stopped, frozen. The Empire State building was *right there!* And because we were now on a rooftop of our own, it felt like we were flying alongside it in one of those little biplanes King Kong would have grabbed and crushed. I turned to Sebastian, and he shrugged. I knew this hadn't been pre-planned to impress me, but it was doing the trick anyway. *This* was a place where he often came for meetings?

Lucky.

He turned to our tag-a-long friends and showed them that they should take a seat against the banquette, then pulled up chairs on the opposite side for us. It was a smart move. If for any reason they got aggressive, they'd be trapped behind the tables, and we'd be free to move. That said, I couldn't imagine a world where these three would be aggressive toward us—well, *me*. The *Eau de acolyte* hung heavy in the air as they gazed at me with looks that, were I an arrogant or power-hungry person, would probably have pleased me greatly. But as it was, I couldn't have been more uncomfortable if I were standing naked in the Sheep's Meadow.

"Okay," I said after the server had handed me a fresh, fizzy soda and left.

Looked like my older boyfriend-type-figure *wasn't* going to hook me up with something stronger, which was probably just as well because the last thing we needed was word getting out that shifters bought alcohol for underage pups.

“Ayla, why don’t you please explain why the Chil—why you and your friends are stalking me. And again,” I said, putting up a hand as she opened her mouth, “call me *Elyse*.”

She grinned. “I’m not surprised that you’ve figured out who we are. You must have heard of us, I assume from Mateo?”

“I’d say ‘heard of you’ is a bit of a stretch, but I know of your existence.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“I saw you in a photograph that he gave me,” I explained. “A photograph that included you, him, several others, and... and my mother.”

At this, Sebastian seemed to breathe in a little of his drink and sputtered, but again, he was kind enough not to interrupt, which I appreciated.

“Yes, your mother was a part of our group, praise her,” Ayla murmured, eliciting “Praise her,” repetitions from Jasper and Monty.

I sighed. I had only *thought* I was exhausted before, but now I stood corrected. *This* was *truly* exhausting.

“To put it simply, we are loyal to the prophecy of Chann and Marrak, committed to restoring power to their descendants. A few weeks ago, our leader had a vision of a young, white, female wolf who bore the mark of Chann on her left collar when in her human form, and who would restore the power of creation to our kind.”

Suddenly uncomfortable with the hint of my clavicle peeking up from beneath Sebastian’s jacket, I pulled the shoulders tighter around me. “And you think that’s me?”

I knew damn well it was me, but how did *they*?

“We feel fairly certain. The uproar around your packs aside, we’ve been following you since the blasphemy in the park this afternoon, and there have been some... indications.”

I frowned, confused. How could following me today have given them any indication of what I'd done to Evan? How did they even know I was my mother's daughter, for that matter? We bore a close resemblance, sure, but I'd been wearing my shades until it got too dark.

"What kind of indications?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Ayla smiled. "Our leader told us that this female had an overwhelming love of human movies in her vision. I heard your conversation about *Spider-Man*, and found it rather convincing."

My mouth dropped open, and I sat in silence, at a loss for words. *Spider-Man* was my giveaway?

Didn't see that coming.

"Were there any other indications? Maybe I'm just one of many movie-loving, uh," I looked around, but no one was close enough to hear me, "wolves?"

"Well." Ayla tipped her head demurely. "I don't mean to be rude, seeing as you seem intent on hiding it, but you have the mark of Chann plain as day, right there on your left collarbone. And I assume your twin sister has the Mark of Marrak on her right?"

Could a mouth drop open any farther? Because I felt like my jaw had detached at this point. Sebastian nudged my drink toward me as if fearing my tongue would dry out before we ever shared a second kiss, which was something that had previously seemed possible this evening, but not so much anymore.

"Our leader saw both of you in the vision," she added. "And the Goddess Leto. She got only bits and pieces, but it was clear what we needed to do."

"And what was that?" I murmured, rocked by the idea that anyone else could have seen our meeting with Leto. I hardly believed it had happened myself. If not for the *Evan-dence*, as my tired brain now thought of him, I would have been sure

that I'd been hallucinating. Confirmation from Kiana didn't seem like it was coming.

“We needed to find you and protect you, of course. To ensure that you were returned to your rightful place at the head of our kind. You and your sister.”

“Head of our *kind*?!” I shook my head and slapped both hands on the table. “Leto just said we have to get along. I don't even know if I want to be an *Alpha*.”

“Elyse,” Sebastian interjected softly, “I don't know about any vision, but I know about Evan. Something important is happening here, and if these shifters can help us understand it, maybe it's a *good thing* they're here.”

Ayla looked at me pointedly. “Who's Evan?”

Chapter Twelve

We rode in the car Sebastian had ordered in silence—a request I'd made of the Children because the combination of their syrupy voices and the subservient smell was simply too much all at once. Maybe handling the weirdness of the odor was part of proper Alpha training, but in my experience, Blaze's five pups showed me less submission when I used to play with them.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the only smell. My wolf kept twitching beneath my skin, not as if she sensed danger, but as if she wanted to sneeze, and I didn't blame her. The Children seemed to carry their own cloud of patchouli and sage wherever they went. I wasn't so sure it hadn't just melded onto their pheromones.

I shifted in my seat, the discomfort stemming more from my companions than the plush leather. I wished Sebastian had been a little less forthcoming with the Children, but he hadn't realized they didn't know about Evan. Now that they did, whatever level of worship I'd thought they were exhibiting before paled in comparison. I was pretty sure that if I let them, they'd carry me around on a litter like Cleopatra. It was humiliating.

Somewhere between Midtown and the Plaza, I'd have to impress upon them the need for secrecy and discretion. Implying that others finding out about Evan could put me in danger seemed to have shut them down for the moment, but at this very second, Ayla was mumbling something that sounded like a wolfy "Hail Mary." The words were inaudible, but the lyrical repetition marked them as prayer—that and the way she kept waving one of her necklace pendants around me in circles.

I sighed.

"So, everyone in the car who's a member of the Children of Leto, *please* refrain from saying anything about the purpose of your visit, as in *not one word*, when we get to the Plaza. Just let us do all the talking, okay?" I pinched the bridge of my nose. "It's up to Alpha Max to let you stay, and that will take... some convincing."

"Whatever you wish, Elyse," Ayla replied, cutting her prayer short.

At least she seemed to have finally gotten comfortable calling me by name. My wolf wasn't going to sit still for being called the "Promised One" again, and I'm not sure I'd try to stop her if she wanted to give them a lesson in actual obedience.

"And remember, no one says *anything* about Evan," Sebastian added gruffly. "As far as my pack knows, he's a friend of Elyse's from a distant pack, who came to the city for her sister's mating ceremony, and well—just be quiet."

I smiled wistfully to myself. That description had basically been true if you considered humans to be a pack. And I did. If only I could tell Charlie and Jayla about *this*...

The Children bowed their heads solemnly, and I let out the breath I'd been holding as we pulled up to the Plaza. We made our way up the elevators, crowding in and hitting the button for the floor with the Alpha Family's personal servants' quarters. In the meantime, the plan was for Sebastian to create

a story about their presence not unlike Evan's, maybe even linking them as distant relatives of my mother before introducing them to Max.

Unfortunately, when the doors opened onto the lobby of that floor, they also revealed Max and Mateo, whose faces went from serious to seriously confused in the millisecond it took them to spot the Children. My breath returned to staying inside my chest instead of coming and going.

I opened my mouth, but Max had already turned to Sebastian, his brow furrowed, nose wrinkled. As we stepped out, the herb cloud wafted from the elevator. At least Max could smell that they were harmless shifters. I didn't sense a stirring in his pheromones that would show his wolf coming to the surface, just the scent of irritation.

"Sebastian, you've brought us *more* guests?" Max looked at his son with what could only be described as affectionate outrage.

"Ah, yes," Sebastian said, forcing a smile. "I'll brief you both."

With that, he pulled Max and Mateo aside and began speaking with them in hushed tones. I had to assume he was giving them the pre-planned explanation, but judging from Max's demeanor, it wasn't going over well. Not that I blamed him. Although I thought I'd already adjusted to the Children's strangeness, I hadn't yet seen them where there was adequate light to illuminate the finer... details.

Now I could see that besides being tall and thin, Jasper's curly reddish hair was pulled back in a sloppy man-bun, tied with hand-woven string bracelets. His loose linen shirt was tucked into what looked like yoga leggings secured with a woven raffia belt and cuffed above worn leather espadrilles. Around his neck were at least ten thin leather necklaces bearing various sterling silver pendants, and a wide stamped leather cuff encircled his left wrist. Somehow, I couldn't help thinking he might be the only shifter in history to have a vegan wolf.

The blonde and medium-built Monty was at least wearing a simple T-shirt and joggers, but the T-shirt bore the phrase “Proud Peacenik” in a typeface that looked like a pup’s scribble. What I’d failed to notice until this moment was the mandolin he carried on a strap. It had been hidden behind his back before, but now he’d pulled it out and was strumming it lightly, crooning along with the warm lilt of the strings. It was too low to make out most of the words, but I was certain I heard my name, and I flushed, darting a look at Max, whose cheeks were reddening even faster than mine.

Ayla wore a soft, long-sleeved, ballet style top with lavender and teal harem pants that were cinched at the bottom by a pair of 90s style platform boots. Around her neck and wrists, a bevy of beaded jewelry tinkled as she pulled a tied bundle of herbs and a cigarette lighter from her massive patchwork cross-body bag. Before I could stop her, mostly because I didn’t know it was coming, she’d lit the herb bundle and began wafting it around me, murmuring in a language I didn’t recognize.

“Hey! Stop that—” I began, but Max cut me off.

“*Put that out!*” his voice boomed as he pushed past his son and stood glaring at Ayla, his ramrod straight spine making him tower over her. “There is no smoking in the Plaza of *any kind*,” he growled, drawing out each word as if talking to her pained him. “Whatever kind *that* may be.”

With a chagrined look at me and my ruddy cheeks, Ayla nodded. “My apologies, Alpha,” she mumbled, snuffing the herbs.

Max scanned over the Children with distaste. “My son has vouched for all of you, and while I trust *him* implicitly, you must understand that there has been turmoil in the city of late, and I’m not inclined to have strangers in my home.”

As he said this, Mateo’s gaze landed on Ayla and twitched, his eyes narrowing. She gave him a weary half-smile, but didn’t acknowledge him in any other way. This surprised me, given the smiling faces that had peered out of that photograph

from their youth. Between how long it had taken Mateo to make the connection and the obvious lack of warmth in his greeting, I suspected there had been changes since they'd all posed together. For some reason, I hadn't expected anything smacking of tension given Mateo's gentle nature and the utter lack of aggression in my newfound band of peacenik apostles.

Then again, I wasn't sure *what* I'd expected of the Children. Just a few weeks ago, I hadn't known they existed. Despite my distaste for the obnoxious hero-worship with which they showered me, I'd been looking forward to speaking with Ayla about my mother. She had to have known her. They might even have been friends, for all I knew. But after Mateo and Ayla's odd reactions to seeing one another, I realized I might have to tread carefully in asking either of them questions.

"Max," Mateo ventured in his soothing rumble, "I hadn't gotten a close look at these visitors, but I can vouch for them too now. Or at least for her." He indicated Ayla.

Max's eyebrow twitched upward. "Oh?"

"It's as Sebastian said. They're from a *distant* pack, but I've come across their relatives in the past, and know them to be harmless," Mateo explained.

"*Fine*," Max said, shaking his head. "Consider them your responsibility, then." He turned back to Sebastian. "We don't have time for these distractions, son. Elyse can get the visitors settled. I want you to join me in our office to go over your findings from the day with Mateo and me before I retire. It's been a long day."

"Yes, Father," Sebastian said, bowing his head and following the two males into the elevator without so much as a glance spared in my direction.

As the doors closed, the breath that had taken up residence in my chest squeezed free with a slight wheeze. We were off the hook—for now, anyway. Max was no longer concerned. He was just annoyed. I could work with that. His

determination to find Yara and Damien would take up his focus and give me some time to figure out what to do with the Children.

I shivered. *And I'd have time for a shower. Finally.*

“Alright, folks,” I said wearily. “This way.” I headed down the hallway, mind on the blessedly hot water that would be blasting my skin in mere minutes, and then startled as my wolf shimmied inside me.

Can't I bite them? Just a little?

My gaze swung back to the Children. They were staring at me with unabashed fervor, silly grins stretching from ear to ear like they were auditioning for the Joker in the next production of *Batman*.

For Leto's sake... I'll take it into consideration.

Chapter Thirteen

As Sebastian and I strolled along 5th Avenue, I plied him for information about our destination, but he remained mysterious, only saying with an uncharacteristically shy smile he was “pretty certain” I was going to like it, and that he “was glad I’d been willing to spend a little time alone” with him. For some odd reason, I didn’t remember the part where he’d asked me, but I must have said yes, because here we were. The last time he’d taken me on a secret date night it had been such an over-the-top *Pretty Woman* style affair that even though I’d appreciated the thought he’d put into it, I’d felt out of my element.

I felt much more like me in the Meg Ryan floral sundress and crisp white sneakers I had on now, perfect for walking in the early summer evening in NYC. And I wasn’t the only one who had taken the fantasy vibe down to Earth. Sebastian was wearing a pair of crisp dark wash jeans that hugged his tempting human hindquarters in ways I tried to ignore. Thankfully, I didn’t get too many glimpses beneath the soft dove gray linen button-down he was sporting that set off his dark hair and tanned forearms. Over his shoulder he’d slung a dark leather satchel containing who knew what, but the entire look emphasized the very non-Alpha human that I’d come to appreciate.

It was hard not to swing between pouting that he wouldn't tell me where we were going and bouncing on my toes all the way to our destination in anticipation. Both put me firmly in the *puppish* category, so I kept my pace even with his and tried to play it cool. But when the New York Public Library with its iconic lions came into view, I clapped my hands together and laughed.

"There is no Dana, only Zuul," I intoned, eliciting a light chuckle from Sebastian as well.

By now, he was well aware of my encyclopedic knowledge of 80s movies like *Ghostbusters*, along with my rather pitiful knowledge of all things since the millennium had rolled over, thought I didn't really remember the nature of all these conversations we'd been having. When Sebastian turned into the park behind the library, I ceased my attempts to avoid bouncing and began borderline bunny-hopping around him in circles.

I'd always wanted to visit Bryant Park, as it was smack-dab in the middle of midtown and surrounded by the iconic buildings I loved to pick out from my apartment in the Bronx. When we emerged from behind the library, I saw the movie screen, the hundreds of New Yorkers scattered on blankets across the grass like fall leaves, and I stopped dead.

Unfortunately, I came to a halt *directly* in front of Sebastian, and he had to do some serious two-stepping to keep from mowing me down.

"Sorry, oh my..." I exclaimed as I spun around him, and we danced smack into each other's arms to keep from biting it.

I was pressed against his chest, his powerful arms holding me up while I untangled my feet, and I looked up to find those golden brown eyes peering down at me with anticipation and what looked a bit like trepidation.

"Is this...?" I stopped, too thrilled to put it into words. My friends had mentioned this tradition, the viewing of movies all over the city in the summer, many of which were shown in

public parks. When I'd imagined my life as a pup-maker in the Bronx, any dream of being one of these lucky people soaking up cinematic Americana under the stars, had evaporated. This was entirely too good to be true.

"Tonight's showing is *Grease*," he said. "Do you like it? I know it's not as fancy as last time."

"I love it," I breathed, leaning into him, not caring about my commitment to giving myself space. I put my arms around him and squeezed, my cheek only reaching his shoulder. He was so much taller than I was. "Thank you, Sebastian," I added, pulling back and grazing his firm jaw with a feathery kiss.

He'd hugged me gently at first, but when that kiss landed, fire ignited in his eyes, his arms tightening around my waist. As the space between us evaporated, my heart pounded, and I caught my breath as I fought the urge to lean in for a deeper kiss—

But he tilted his head down and pressed his forehead to mine instead. My hair was loose and long, the ends of it tickling over his arms as he drew a hand upward, combing it through my hair and tucking it behind my ear.

"I only want to make you happy, Elyse," he said. "I know I haven't always gotten it right, but I *am* trying."

The sting of tears came to my eyes, and I fought them back. "You had me at *Grease*, Crabcakes."

He chuckled, taking the joke exactly as I'd intended: a confirmation that he'd done very well, and that instead of feeling like a claimed mate, he'd made me feel beloved. Even better, he'd made me feel *seen*. After a lifetime of being treated as the spare, of being told that everything that made me tick was wrong, I couldn't express what it meant to me to have someone do the opposite.

I'd never wanted to kiss him so badly, and this time it had nothing to do with who he was on the outside.

Eyes still stinging with the warning of tears, I wound my hands around his neck and pulled him to me. When our lips met, the kiss started softly, my desire to tell him with my touch what I couldn't with words. His lips were generous and warm on mine, and I pressed into them, into him, my breath coming harder. His hands slid to my hips, and he pulled me in. My stomach dropped, and my knees disappeared, leaving only his arms to keep me on my feet as my lips parted, seeking a deeper taste of him—

“Elyse, it's time to get up!”

I popped up in my bed as my vision came into focus. The door to my room had banged open, a flustered Ruby whirling in, red ponytail swinging as she bustled to the windows and began throwing open the curtains.

“Wha—” I sat, blinking at the light streaming in and the tornado that was Ruby darting around as she dove into my closet, grabbing things and tossing them at me.

“You *have* to get dressed,” she said, motioning for me to hurry. “We need you to come upstairs and take care of those... well, whoever those strange people are that you brought back last night. Max is beyond... *beyond*.”

The silky tendrils of the dream wafted away, though a part of me wanted to beg them to stay, to order Ruby out of my room so I might still have time to drift to that night... to that kiss...

Snap out of it.

I grabbed the soft knit boatneck sweater and fitted black Audrey Hepburn peg pants Ruby had tossed my way with a sigh. Looked like it was a grown-up clothes state of emergency. “How bad can it be? I thought I'd earned a bit of a sleep-in after yesterday.”

She stopped, her face twisting in chagrin. “I'm sorry, truly, I am.” She turned politely as I changed. “And I *will* make it up to you with a five-star breakfast later, but for now, Max is

close to blowing his top. To quote him directly, ‘Please go get Elyse so that she can make our guests stop doing whatever they’re doing.’” This was said with the addition of air quotes for emphasis.

“Leto help us,” I muttered, mind racing with all the possibilities of what the Children could be up to that would bother Max so much. Or anyone. The list seemed virtually endless. “What are they doing now? Not lighting incense again, I hope.” I yanked my hair into a topknot full of yesterday’s tangles and slipped on some shoes.

She shook her head, a grin lighting up her face before she coughed into her hand. “I’m not sure I can describe it. You’ll have to see for yourself.”

I sighed and followed her to the elevator up to the floor where the Alpha Family lived—what was left of it without Yara. When the doors opened into the foyer, I stepped out and stopped, transfixed by the most ridiculous tableau I’d ever encountered.

The Children were all in wolf form, but appeared to be engaged in some sort of... yoga? There were wolf butts in the air and paws and snouts pointed, frozen, in every direction, directly beneath the oil painting of Chann and Marrak that hung on the wall opposite the elevator bay.

Halo have mercy.

I could—

Nope. I got this.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to be calm. I would *politely* ask the weirdos to *please* take their yoga elsewhere, like *anywhere else*, and refrain from engaging in wolf-yoga in view of Max or anyone else *ever again*.

“Uh, guys?” I began, but before I got another word out, Mateo came around the corner and froze. Our eyes met, and he grimaced. I could smell the embarrassment flowing off him like a cologne of shame, and I shrugged as if to say, “*How*

about you take the lead here, since you used to be one of these freaks?”

Thankfully, he obliged.

“Ayla,” he said, with a cough, “I know Elyse would appreciate it if you’d tone it down. As would your host—my Alpha.”

The Children shifted, their permanent shit-eating grins still directed my way, but thankfully they took the hint and stood up like normal people.

“Excellent,” Mateo remarked, with what I assumed was a bite of sarcasm. “Keeping yourselves more discreet is not just our preference. It’s a matter of *safety*. I’m sure you know that there has been unrest in the city, and that right now we are facing significant anti-shifter sentiment?”

“All the more reason for us to focus on fulfilling the prophecy, wouldn’t you agree?” Jasper asked, his furrowed brow speaking of genuine confusion.

“I *cannot* see how what you were doing contributes anything of real value to that cause,” Mateo replied in a clipped tone.

“We must channel the energy of the Moon God to support —” Monty began.

“We understand,” Ayla cut him off quickly. “But I know you do too, Mateo.”

The Beta quirked an eyebrow at her insolence, huffed a sharp sigh, and then whirled on his heel and stalked back around the corner.

Oh no you don’t. It’s time you gave me some answers, Mister.

Chapter Fourteen

After rushing to my room to grab the photo Mateo had given me, I made my way back upstairs to the office space Mateo shared with Max, hoping I'd find one and not the other. For once, luck was on my side. Mateo was seated at the massive mahogany table behind the double-screens he used to monitor news, shifter communications, and, according to Sebastian, quite a lot of the family's trading portfolio. From what I'd gathered so far, he'd gotten his degree in finance from NYU and an MBA from someplace fancy—Booth, or something?

Anyway, he was way too smart to think that I was going to let this whole thing go without learning more, especially after he'd left me that picture with my mother in it. And him. Appearing, um, *close*. I just had to figure out how to keep my own secrets while getting him to reveal his own.

Though he could see me through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls, he didn't look up. And though I found that annoying, I knocked politely before entering.

“How can I help you, Elyse? Do you need more intervention with Ayla and her compatriots?” Mateo asked without breaking his gaze from his monitors, fingers flying over the keyboard.

“No. I told them how to get on the rooftop so they could sing their campfire songs.” I paused, settling into one of the charcoal velvet chairs in front of the desk and crossing my legs. “While I speak with you.”

Mateo’s fingers stopped, and he shifted in his seat, peering around the monitors.

I hoped my knitted brow was projecting exactly the determination I felt. He had to know that I meant business, not trading.

He raised a single dark eyebrow. “And what *do* we need to speak about?”

I whipped out the picture he’d left me and tossed it onto the desk so that it spun to a stop right in front of him. “This.”

“Ah.” Mateo sighed and pushed back his chair. “I assumed this would come up at some point.”

“Well, since *you* gave me the photo, you assumed right. I think I deserve a full explanation, don’t you?” I crossed my arms over my chest. “What do you know about these people, and what did my mother have to do with them?”

My tone was angrier than I’d planned. I knew that people say you lure more flies with honey than vinegar, but honey wasn’t on the menu in my family very often. Vinegar was the only way I’d ever gotten anything done.

“Alright, Elyse, fine. I suppose you have a right to know more.” He leaned back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m a Manhattanite, born and bred,” he began. “And by bred, I do mean that. My entire life plan was for me to be a Beta one day to the ranking Alpha of Manhattan, as my father and grandfather had been before me.”

“Well, that appears to have gone to plan,” I interjected, annoyed that he’d started *this* far at the beginning. “You can skip through your puppyhood for me on this journey through time.”

Mateo's mouth twisted, but he didn't protest. I was an Alpha, after all. "I met your mother when she came to the city from Boston, where she'd grown up."

Boston?

Hush! I'm listening. But yeah, that's news to me.

"I was in school at NYU," he continued. "And I met her at a gathering of shifters. It looked like the average college kegger from the outside, but it was geared toward shifters interested in our history."

I was at a loss trying to imagine my mother, the picture of composed perfection in every image I'd ever seen, attending a *kegger*. Or going to *college*, for that matter. It wasn't unusual for high-ranking males like Mateo to study something very serious and lucrative to increase pack wealth, but a female? Unheard of as far as I'd been told. Then again, the image of her leaning into Mateo with his hand casually draped against her waist hadn't fit into my worldview either. And then there was yesterday's revelation from my father that she, too, had been addicted to human fiction.

"What was she studying?" I blurted out. "And *how*? That's not..."

"Film Production," Mateo said simply. "She had a human scholarship."

My mouth dropped open, and I gripped the edge of the table. Father had certainly left out *that*.

"At the time, I knew nothing about the Children," Mateo explained. "I'd only come because a friend from our pack had suggested it. The speaker was a much older Beta from a distant pack near Chicago. Honestly, everything he was saying about prophecy and the importance of returning the strength of our kind to its roots didn't have much impact on me. I was mostly annoyed that I missed the chance to study for finals."

"So why did you stay?" I rasped, not half as interested in his side of the story as my mother's, but knowing I had to let him do this his way. "And why did you join?"

He ducked his head, his long, dark hair falling in front of his eyes. It was so uncharacteristic for him that I shifted in my chair from embarrassment as it dawned on me why he must have joined if the Children's message hadn't resonated.

"My mother."

"I saw Dinah from across the room. She was... well, she was radiant. Her face seemed to glow, and she watched the speaker with such rapt attention. To be honest, I was drawn to her immediately, and her enthusiasm for the cause was catching." He paused, steepling his long fingers and leveling his gaze at me. "Despite what Ayla and the other's antics must seem like to you, and despite my initial disinterest, I became a dedicated member of the Children of Leto. I believe that the dilution of our strength is a problem, and that one day, the powers of Chann and Marrak will be returned to us so that we may rise again."

His eyes lit up with a fervor I'd never seen in him, even when deep in his Beta duties of persuasion and control. It sent a shiver down my spine, thinking of how he would react if he ever found out about Evan. Would *he* start following me around singing and lighting incense?

"Uh, fair enough, I guess. So you joined the Children because of my mother. But based on that picture, there's more to the story—her story with *you*, I mean."

He stood abruptly, striding over to the windows behind him and peering out on his magnificent view of Central Park. A few moments passed in silence.

"Mateo?"

"There's nothing else I can tell you about the Children. You've met them. You know what they're about. The rest is personal."

"Personal?" I stood so fast I nearly knocked over my chair, hustling to where he stood and forcing myself into his view. "You know what's personal? Thinking that *you're* the one who killed your mother your whole life, only to find out it was your

pack's *Beta* who ripped her open and left her to bleed out. And growing up not with a mother, but with a shadow that hung over your whole family, your father so distraught that he never mated again—”

At that, Mateo flinched.

“Why did you give me the damn picture if you weren't willing to tell me anything about her?” I whined, and then stopped, annoyed at myself for needing this information so badly after a lifetime of not knowing anything.

“I don't know!” He ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “I think I was just so astounded by the resemblance. You and Kiana both look *so much* like Dinah... although *you* have more of her temperament. Her unusual interests.”

When he said my mother's name, his face unmistakably softened. My breath caught. I guess I'd been thinking they had a casual college fling before she met my father, which was a weird thing to add to my scant collection of facts, but this... this was earth-shaking. My parents were fated... but were they really in love?

“You *loved* her,” I murmured. “That's why you don't want to talk about it. And that's why you were so close to her in the picture. Did she—?”

“Yes, I loved her.” He cut me off. “But I don't know if she ever loved me, not truly. I brought her back from the meeting when I learned her scholarship didn't cover room and board. She didn't have a pack anymore since she'd left hers. It was all rather unusual behavior for a female, and I was concerned that no one would take her in, so we made up a story of mistreatment, and my Alpha allowed her to join our pack.”

My mind raced. My mother was from a Boston pack, but she'd *run away* to go to film school and wound up joining these crazy Children and then leaving it all behind to mate with my stuffy old dad instead. I loved him, but seriously... how had she?

“If you loved her, and, I’m assuming, wanted to mate with her...” I began and then stopped, raising an eyebrow.

I knew that his tense nod was the only response I would get to that one.

“How did she end up with my father?”

Mateo’s eyes returned to the world outside, but his gaze grew distant. “We were close to declaring our intention to mate. Neither of us had found a fated, and I was going to be instated as the Manhattan Beta soon when Max took over for his father. I would have had the means to provide her a luxurious and stable life. But there was a dispute between the packs over handling aggression from packs in northern New Jersey. They were eating into our manufacturing businesses, stealing distribution partners and agreements with the major ports downriver. We wanted to negotiate a settlement, but Phelan’s father wanted to fight them. During our meeting with the Alphas from Newark and the Oranges, the Bronx pack arrived, including your father, who was soon to be Alpha himself. There was a minor battle. Nothing but a typical shifter scuffle, but several injuries and a few casualties.”

“What in the name of Leto was my mother doing at an inter-pack brawl?”

A tiny smile flickered over his lips, there and gone. “She’d followed us because she was worried about me. She saw right away that I was fine, but she took one look at your father and...” He took a breath and sighed, meeting my eyes. “That was that.”

I leaned against the windowsill, my formerly whirling thoughts falling into place. My parents had been fated. No matter how Mateo had loved her, or what he’d done for her, he hadn’t stood a chance once they’d seen each other. Meaning that if Sebastian and I weren’t as fated as he believed, and the real thing finally showed up for him...

Shit.

I bit my lip. “You never mated.”

“No. I never wanted to mate anyone but your mother.” He said this quietly, without embarrassment. A mere statement of fact.

“Didn’t you resent my father?”

“How could I? It wasn’t his fault. Fated mates are exactly that, and I could have chosen another. I decided I could serve better as Beta on my own. Your mother lived a life of happiness... while she lived.” He paused, his eyes sliding towards me and flinching. “She used to write to me.”

I swallowed squeakily. “She did?”

“Yes. She told me how happy she was to be becoming a mother. How one day she knew her pup would love her Uncle Mateo.” His smile was warm. “That was why I gave you the picture, in the end. It was less about the Children than it was to let you know you had an ally in our pack.” He inclined his head. “I know how hard it was for you to be torn from your family.”

Tears pricked at my eyes. He was such a good male. No wonder my mother had been drawn to him before she’d met my father. And given up everything she loved.

“Thank you,” I said, standing up and covering his hand with my own before going on tiptoe to give him a gentle kiss on the cheek. “For sharing some of my mother’s story with me. I know it couldn’t have been easy.”

He shook his head, patting my hand in return. “It was long overdue.”

I turned to leave, still turning this new information over, searching for clues that would help me fill in the gaps in my story. As I got to the door, I stopped. Because I wasn’t so sure I liked the version of the story where Sebastian and I weren’t fated anymore. If someone swept in who didn’t understand him, and he had no choice but to admit I’d been nothing more than a terrible misunderstanding with the gods...

“Mateo?”

He'd returned to his desk and started to take a seat, but paused. "Yes?"

"Is there a reason one shifter would feel fated and another would not? Is there anything in our history or prophecy to explain such a thing?"

He sat heavily and frowned. "I don't think so. There wouldn't be any reason for fate to want to confuse our choices and bloodlines." He thought for a second. "But maybe someone else would."

I waited for him to say something more, but he returned to his brooding silence, and I left, pondering his words. Who would have the desire, or the power, to affect a fated bond?

Chapter Fifteen

My white wolf slid sideways, and Evan's snapping jaws just missed my right flank. Having left Mateo and his cryptic statements about fate bonds behind, I was back to pup-sitting. It was a good distraction. But I couldn't stop ruminating about what he'd said, which annoyed me. I had already solved the puzzle. Sebastian and I weren't fated, and if some gorgeous, elegant female with enormous—

Evan launched himself off the wall, as per usual, and I met him, chest to chest, sending him skidding with a puppy yelp.

I shot a glare his way. "*Don't initiate if you're not ready.*"

"*I thought I was.*" He shook himself as he got up, ears flapping loudly.

I pulled back my lips, tongue lolling in a wolf version of a grin. His smokey gray wolf was as aesthetically attractive to my wolf as his human form had always been to me. Neither of us had any desire to mate with him, but we did have eyes to appreciate his strength, which was lean and sleek rather than bulky, with a darkness around his mane that mimicked his deep charcoal-colored human hair. A *companionable* arrangement wouldn't be the end of the world on our end if Sebastian's one true love arrived and he left me high and dry.

“Well, you have to expect the unexpected.” I edged toward him. *“Your victim could choose to rush you to create surprise. Don’t let it be.”*

“Got it, boss.” He bowed, pinning his ears back in deference.

It was more gratifying instructing Evan than I usually let myself admit. Something about bringing one of my former human friends into my world and teaching them something for once was like a restoration of balance. I’d always been the weird, uninitiated one, at everything. Now, I was in my element, and he was the one who was acclimating.

“Okay. Let’s try the wrestling move again. I’ll let you get me by the neck but will roll out of it unless you can figure out how to keep me pinned...without drawing blood, get it?”

He stood, blinking his stormy blue eyes in understanding, and I readied myself. This was honestly good practice for me. Opening myself up to attack and then working to reverse the odds could only help me close the gap with other well-trained Alphas. If I didn’t end up mating with Sebastian, I’d have to challenge Kiana.

A future I didn’t relish. Maybe even less so after attending yesterday’s meeting. Did I really want to spend the rest of my life making *trade* agreements and debating whether or not we should issue a public statement over the number of bared male butts on a silly shifter streaming series?

Evan slammed into me from the side and locked his jaws on my neck.

Bastard!

Gasping, I fumbled in my effort to break free.

Did I really just tell myself this practice was welcome?

I took all four paws and shoved upward as hard as possible, but Evan smashed his full weight down onto me. Air whooshed from my lungs, and his jaws locked on my neck. I

struggled to flip, but his fangs held me down, stopping just short of tearing.

I snarled and snapped at his shoulder, but he turned, spinning me onto my other side, still without losing his grip. If this had been an actual fight, he would have torn my neck wide open by now.

“*Give,*” I whined.

“*Yeeeeesssss!*” He let go and leaped upward, twisting in the air with joy, so much like an actual pup in that moment that I chuffed a wolf-style actual LOL. He’d done well, even if I had been distracted.

“*You’re getting better at this.*” I shifted in stride and walked over to him, crouching so my nose touched his wolf’s nose. I grabbed his mane with both hands and scratched deeply, ruffling his fur.

He stretched upward like a cat in contentment and let out a soft, happy bark before shifting in my hands. I mussed his human hair and plopped down on the hard floor. Evan settled in beside me, long legs stretched in front of us, straining his shiftskin with muscles from years of dance training for his failed acting career. I thought about my mother, giving up her dreams for a life that she must have known would lead *only* to motherhood. The same fate that would await me if I chose Sebastian over the Bronx...

“That was good, yeah?” Evan swept both hands through his sweaty hair.

“It was, my friend. You keep at this, and soon no one will ever know you weren’t born a shifter.” I mock shoved him with my shoulder, still panting from the exertion.

I didn’t tell him I’d been lost in my thoughts. For one thing, I didn’t want him picking my brain about those thoughts, since I had no idea exactly what they meant yet. For a month now, I’d resisted the idea that Sebastian was my fated, but now that I’d come up with this other theory... Well, it

would be a lot easier if fate would just make this decision for me. If it was real for him, where was it for me?

I chewed on my lower lip. Had Mateo been trying to tell me that Damien might be the reason that I didn't feel the fate bond with Sebastian? We all knew Damien was obsessed with Sebastian mating with Kiana, but why? I'd originally assumed it was just because he hated me personally, but once he revealed he didn't want Kiana to mate with anyone at all if not with Sebastian...

It didn't make sense yet, but Mateo was a Beta too, just like Damien, so if he thought it was within a Beta's powers—especially one who was off-the-charts powerful like Damien—to affect a fate bond, then I had to consider the possibility...

That Sebastian might actually be our fated?

And I don't feel it because of Damien's influence?

Yes.

But how can he influence me when he's not here?

There's more than one way to influence someone.

Huh?!

"You still with me, boss?" Evan nudged my shoulder. "You're about to chew that lip off, and I don't think Little Pack Daddy—"

"Sorry. Yes, I'm here. Just a little tired." I rubbed my temples for effect. "I would say that yesterday was a *day*, but I feel like all the days are like that now. I mean, it's been what? A whole month since my world went nuclear?"

"Good thing the Plaza has a bunker," he joked, drawing a long-overdue smile from me. But it washed away under a wave of guilt. To think that *my* world had gone nuclear when *he* had somehow taken becoming a wolf in stride. Like my mother, he'd had to leave everything he loved behind to become part of a pack that would never value the fullness of his former life.

“You know what would cheer you up and get all this shifter business off your mind?” Evan stood and offered me his hand.

“What?” Without hesitation, I took it and popped up beside him, then bent for my water bottle and towel. “Pizza?”

“Jayla.”

I scowled. “Evan, no. Not this again already. You said—”

His shoulders slumped dramatically. “I know what I said, and I meant it in the moment, but then you went on this whole big adventure without me, and I get it. It’s fine. I’m not ready for a street fight, but...” He straightened up and met my eyes with big brother authority. “I’m not okay with this, Elyse. I won’t make you reach out to her, but you have to let me. For her sake, and mine. What if something had happened to you yesterday? You really think Sebastian would keep me? You really think I’d want to stay? So, where would I go if not to Jayla?”

I slung my towel over my head so I wouldn’t have to look at him. “You had other friends...”

“Not like her.” He peeled back the towel. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but we had a whole life outside of you, Elyse. We shared a *home*. Which she is either going to have to abandon or fill with new roommates, and it isn’t fair to make her grieve Charlie and me when I’m right here, alive and well.”

I flinched as memories flooded my mind, ratcheting up my heart rate to the level it had been at when I saw the final look of confusion on Charlie’s face as she lay atop me, protecting me...The terror on Jayla’s face as Sebastian threw her onto the subway platform, leaving her alone, believing Evan dead and me some kind of monster..

All that after Jayla had only recently confessed that she’d seen—or thought she had seen—a shifter attacking a human when she was younger. My stomach twisted. I had been so certain she didn’t know what she’d really seen, but now I

wasn't certain of anything. Damian certainly wasn't the first bad apple to fall from Chann and Marrak's twisted family tree.

"I won't stop you," I said. "But I won't go with you. She doesn't want to see me like she wants to see you. She knows I lived. She knows I'm out here... avoiding her... It's too late for us, Evan. But you're right. You need to take care of each other."

"You're wrong." Evan took my face in his hands. "I'm guessing she wants to see you most of all. Everyone knows you were her favorite. And if you think I'm not going to talk about you, assure her that you're still the... the female she knew and loved..."

I attempted a laugh at his awkward use of female rather than woman. He really was trying. He was trying so damn hard every single day, and I was... well, I was hiding. Hiding from my friend because I was afraid she would blame me. But so what if she did? It *was* my fault, what happened to Charlie. And whether I was going to be the Bronx Alpha or the future Manhattan Alpha's mother, I would need to be strong enough to sit with others in their pain as my three human friends had once sat with a total stranger having a total meltdown over a stupid mechanical shark.

"Okay." I closed my eyes. "I'll go. But we need a plan that won't put her in danger, and it's lurking around every single corner, so..."

The corners of Evan's lips twisted upward. "What do you have in mind, boss?"

I ran through my knowledge of the Manhattan pack's holdings. A public place would have been my first choice before the attack in Washington Square Park. Now no place seemed safe for shifters *or* humans. And the Last Century Cinema... that was over. I couldn't go there without Charlie, and I knew without needing to be told that Evan and Jayla felt exactly the same.

“I guess we could invite her to the theater Sebastian, um... bought.”

“You mean the theater he bought *for you*?” Evan teased.
“Or another one?”

Chapter Sixteen

“Ruby,” I called, as I stepped out of the shower and wrapped myself in a cloud-soft towel, a kindness that my now loofah-lashed skin deserved. I knew it wasn’t fair to take my nerves out on my pores, but at least I’d be dewy for a few days.

“Yes, Your Grace.” She hurried in from my closet with several silk tops swinging from hangers. “Now which of these lovely blouses would you like to wear for your visit with your friend?”

I glared, hands on my hips. “Ruby, please.”

“I’m sorry. Elyse.” She shook her head, flame ponytail swishing. “I’ve almost got in the habit while we’re alone, I promise.”

“It’s alright.” I sighed, deciding that Ruby was as unfair a target as my skin. “That one, please.” I pointed to a royal blue boatneck blouse that felt serious enough for the occasion without being so somber as to make our reunion feel like Charlie’s funeral.

“Excellent choice,” she beamed. “The color will make your gorgeous blue eyes pop, and the shape is perfect with these leather-look jeans and low booties.”

“Whatever you say—” I stopped before I jokingly called her boss and ruined her whole day. Although I often wondered

if that wasn't part of the whole helpmaid charade. Surely she didn't actually love being a servant this much. Surely she had complaints. Surely she went home and told her family how awful it was taking care of someone who couldn't even dress herself.

I bit back a smile. In spite of my distaste for the whole institution of helpmaids and rank-based servitude, I had to admit that Ruby's unwavering emotional support—and flawless fashion guidance—was a welcome change from my total isolation in the Bronx. Some of the tension in my gut dissipated, watching her flutter about the living area while I changed, gathering all of her hair and makeup accouterments. At least, I could be certain she *was* doing what she loved, even if she'd been assigned to it. And she was absolutely brilliant at it. Without her, I'd probably have manged.

“...for a proper night out.” She burred after plopping me down in front of the mirror. Her long fingers expertly twisted my hair up and into a soft chignon. “I've got the drivers and security arranged. They'll be in the background so that you, Evan, and your friend may enjoy yourselves, but they will make sure to keep you safe.”

I nodded, trying to concentrate on her prattle, but beyond the reassurances for our safety, I caught nothing else as my mind circled back to how Jayla would react to me. Memories of the acrid cloud of human terror filling the subway car made my stomach clench. I'd ripped off a woman's arm right in front of her and spit it out. I'd let that woman slowly bleed to death. Granted, I had been battling enough vigilantes, but it did bother me now and then, how much I still didn't regret it.

My phone buzzed on the vanity, and I reached for it as Ruby pulled a delicate three-strand choker around my neck. It was the long-awaited call from Evan, letting me know if the event I was proactively getting dressed for was actually on or not. I snatched it up and flicked the answer button before I could throw up.

“All systems ago,” Evan’s voice cracked. “She’s going to meet us.”

My eyes scrunched shut of their own accord. “Both of us?”

“Yeah. Both of us.” He sniffed as if he’d been crying. “We’re a package deal.”

I pressed one hand to my throbbing forehead. “What did she say?”

“Um... not a lot? She was obviously pretty in shock, and I had to roll out like every inside joke we’ve ever shared to convince her it wasn’t a hoax.” He paused. “She’s okay, Elyse. A little scared of you though. And she doesn’t know I’m a shifter yet, of course.”

I bit my lip, tears threatening to boil over. Jayla. Afraid of me.

“Elyse, you’ll ruin your lipstick,” Ruby protested and then stopped, probably seeing the look on my face. “Are you okay?” she mouthed.

I nodded. “Evan, maybe I shouldn’t go. Or I should go with you but not get out of the car. You could gauge if she’s ready for all this. I mean, it’s a lot, even for us. I wouldn’t want to see me if I were in her shoes.”

Ruby frowned at me in the mirror and clucked her tongue. I ignored her always-on cheerleader mode. Besides, I’d spoken my truth. If the roles were reversed, I couldn’t imagine wanting to see the person whose stupid secrets had cost me one of my dearest friends. And probably given me PTSD at the same time.

It wasn’t your fault the humans attacked, my wolf reminded me.

Oh no? Remember who drew their attention in the first place?

Kiana. It’s not your fault you share a face... and wear it better.

“She wants to see you, Elyse,” Evan cajoled. “I promise. I told her I’d be right there, and that I knew you were safe, that you were still our friend. I even told her to try to imagine what it had been like to be you all those years, having to hide who you were from the people closest to you. Like I did.”

Wow.

Tears pricked at my eyes. I’d never thought of it that way.

I didn’t deserve him.

“It’s not the same, Evan.”

“Sure it is, Elyse. Neither of us can change who we are, and half the world doesn’t want us. Believe me, it’s why becoming a shifter overnight hasn’t been that strange. I’ve got plenty of practice hiding...and fighting.”

The tears finally broke their bonds and slid down my cheeks, taking half an hour of Ruby’s hard work with them. She handed me a tissue without saying a word. I knew she wouldn’t chide me for mussing her art.

“I’m coming to get you,” Evan said. “Don’t make me throw you over my shoulder and tell everyone I’ve claimed you, starting with my mother—”

“Okay, okay.” I snort-laughed, dabbing my cheeks. “Just give me a little bit. Ruby has to start all over now.”

“Ruby? Why do you need Ruby to see Jayla?” Evan gasped. “Oh, my Gods. Do you have a crush on Jayla? I knew it. Y’all were always vibing with that junk food bant—”

“No!” I snorted again, and Ruby looked pained. “Stop! I just want to look...”

“Human?” I could practically hear his eyebrows lifting. “Newsflash, honey, you always look human. Except when you don’t. So just wash it off and get your fine ass out here. I’m almost to your door.”

“Evan, no,” I whined as Ruby took back the tissue and began blotting away her damaged artwork herself. “I have to

make a good impression.”

“Why???” His voice echoed twice, once inside the phone and once right outside my door. “We’re just going to cry when we get there and probably never stop.”

Ruby and I looked at each other. She nodded in defeat and stepped back for me to rise. With a quick promise to do better for her next time, I hopped into the booties Ruby picked out for me and threw open the door. Evan gave me a once over and wolf-whistled, which was obnoxious, but it never got old seeing him in the hall.

Without a word, he grabbed my hand and dragged me down the long narrow hall toward the elevator, so fast I could barely keep up in my unfamiliar footwear. Halfway there, he started laughing for no apparent reason, and a smile split my cheeks, knowing we were both thinking about that scene in *Titanic* where Jack and Rose run through the halls of the ship after he draws her in nothing but that big blue diamond.

We skidded to a stop in front of the shiny metal doors, and Evan lurched forward, pressing his whole hand to the down button. Once, twice, three times... I grabbed his wrist to stop him before he broke the damn elevator and trapped someone inside. And so it was that when the doors abruptly home, Sebastian and Kenzo caught us in a double hand-hold, as if we were practicing our mating ceremony vows.

“Oh!” I startled, jumping back, but Evan held on tight, flailing our arms between us like jump ropes.

“Girl, can I borrow those shoes?!” He screamed. “Let me put those on right now!”

He dropped my hands and bent over as if he were going to steal the booties off my feet. It was... overkill. Sebastian’s eyes darkened like clouds rolling in from the ocean, his anger lashing my shores. And I realized then that the more Sebastian performed stereotypical gayness for him, the more my movie-loving beau saw right through his terrible acting. He thought

Evan was pretending in order to cover up his blossoming heterosexuality.

“Going down?” Kenzo asked innocently, sticking one foot over the threshold to keep the doors open.

“No! I mean, yes. Yes.” I smoothed stray tendrils of hair behind my ears and stepped boldly into the tiny cabin with the hulking males. “We’re going down.”

Evan bounded in after me, humming an old pop song and occasionally repeating that phrase as its only lyrics. Kenzo withdrew his foot, sealing us all inside together. Sebastian’s jaw clenched so hard I thought his teeth would pop out, and all of yesterday’s warm and fuzzy feelings were way ahead of him. How could I ever consider mating with someone who treated my best friend with such willful ignorance? I glowered at him, refusing to be drawn in by the black T-shirt clinging to his torso like a second shiftskin stretched over the first.

“Where are you going?” I asked, unable to hide my aggression.

Sebastian’s cheeks sucked inward, displeased with my tone.

“We got a report from Tony.” Kenzo replied. “He said there are signs that Damien might have gone to Staten Island to stir up their pack. We want to get there before he causes any more harm.”

“What?” I looked back and forth between them, but Sebastian’s face gave nothing away but anger. “Why didn’t you say so? I’ll come with you.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Sebastian’s voice was tight. He wouldn’t meet my eyes, and a muscle in his jaw pulsed.

I laughed in disbelief, shaking my head. “Are we really doing this again? I thought you agreed not to keep me out of the loop anymore?”

“I didn’t. You’re in the loop. We told you what’s happening.” He gave a dismissive shrug. “We just don’t need

you to come with us. You obviously have plans. That you didn't run by anyone..."

My hackles rose, and my wolf reared beneath my skin, threatening to destroy Ruby's fashion choices too. "You know, I announced myself as an Alpha Heir yesterday, right?"

"Not of this borough."

Evan's eyes tennis-balled between us while Kenzo pretended to whistle and stared at the ceiling. I took a step toward Sebastian, hoping the moisture in my eyes looked like molten fury and not aching sorrow because he was never going to be what I wanted him to be. He was an Alpha born and bred, and I was starting to think I didn't want any part of this system at all.

"I'm taking Evan to my theater," I said boldly, almost daring him to stop me. Actually maybe kind of hoping he would stop me because what we were about to do was truly the most terrifying thing I'd ever done in my life. "We're meeting Jayla."

"Why would you do that?" Sebastian's voice rose to a previously unheard pitch. "Without even asking me? It's not safe, and you know it—"

"But it was safe for me to walk right up 5th Avenue with *you*?" I sneered. "Here we go again with the double standards."

"I was there to protect you," he sputtered.

"Like you did on the subway that night?"

Sebastian's featured turned to ice. I hadn't realized until that that we'd advanced on each other in the tiny space until our heaving chests were almost touching, our foreheads inches apart. It was just like in my dream, only we hated each other. But at least I had a reason.

"I don't need your permission for anything," I said. "You don't own me."

“You’re right,” Sebastian said. “I have no claim on you or your time because I relinquished it. You are a free wolf.”

“My freedom was never yours to grant.” I turned toward the button panel and jabbed the next floor we’d be coming to. I needed out. I would take the stairs. Anything to get away from him now.

The doors opened on an unfamiliar floor, and I grabbed Evan’s hand, dragging him over the threshold. Option C—running away to L.A.—was looking better and better.

“You two have fun on your date,” Sebastian huffed.

I whirled like a tornado, and caught Kenzo face-palming as the doors slammed shut. At least one of them wasn’t an idiot. Maybe there was hope for Manhattan yet if *he* became Alpha, but I no longer wanted any part of it. Evan’s hand clasped my shoulder, and I laid mine over it, a silent promise to get him out of this toxic sludge environment. At the end of the day, he was the only thing that really mattered. He was the only thing I could ever call mine.

Chapter Seventeen

A hooded figure slouched against the gold-trimmed doors of the embarrassingly named Elysium when our car pulled up. In my absence, street debris had piled up along the building's lower edges under the dark marquis, and the sun had already begun to fade the collection of Grace Kelly posted flanking either side of the entrance. Acid filled my mouth, remembering my one and only date with Sebastian. Unless we counted yesterday, which I was no longer doing because that guy had obviously been a fluke.

“Jayla!” Evan yelped, fumbling with the door handle, but the drive had yet to unlock it. I met his gaze in the rearview mirror and nodded that it was safe to do so, and a moment later, the black sedan echoed with the thump of flipped locks. Evan piled out so fast that he hit his hands and knees on the dirty sidewalk, and I worried he was going to get so excited he pulled a shift. Not uncommon with pups.

He recovered and scrambled over to her statue-still form. Fear gripped me momentarily, wondering if someone had intercepted his messages and lured us into a trap, but then her dark hands pulled back her hood, and it was her. It was Jayla. She was really here. She had really survived.

One hand and then another clasped her rapidly wrinkling mouth, and when Evan swept her off her feet and into a clunky twirl, she emitted a sound like a wounded animal. He dropped her gently and took her face in his hands, his word drooping to a murmur as she stared up at him in shimmering awe. After a moment, she grabbed his face, and twisted it to the side, her expert-in-training hands moving deftly over his scalp. She pulled back, shaking her head, and he said something that made her eyes dart toward the car, alarmed.

My heart sank. He'd lied to me. He hadn't told her I was coming at all, and now... now she was moving swiftly toward me in her chunky combat boots, anger burning in her eyes. I shrank against the leather seat, clutching my clenched stomach so as not to throw up all over her when she rounded the edge of the open door.

"Elyse," her voice cracked.

I cringed my head into my shoulders, the submissive posture I had always taken with my sister. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. So so sorry."

Jayla's boot thumped against the door as she dove into the backseat, throwing her arms around me with force that she pushed me onto my side. Her whole body shook on top of mine, and hot tears splattered my cheek, followed by a spray of wet kisses.

"I thought you were *dead*," she moaned, pushing her forehead down on my ear. "I thought the cops must have hunted you down."

"Jayla..." I wiggled my arms free to wrap them around her, clinging to her shoulders. "Jayla, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Please, you have to know..."

"Shut up," she growled. "Just shut up with that stuff, alright? It wasn't your fault. None of it was your fault." She pushed up onto her hands and looked down at me fiercely. "You think I don't know a monster when I see one? You think

I don't know when something isn't someone's fault?" Her jaw clenched. "You did what you had to do."

I blinked up at her, the corners of my mouth crumpling inward. "Not fast enough. Not for Charlie."

Jayla sat back on her knees, and I drew mine to my chest, resting my chin between them. She grabbed my head in her hands, forcing me to look into her deep brown eyes. "Charlie was a grown ass woman who knew what she was doing, and I miss her, I miss her every damn day, but don't you dare take away from her hero moment by feeling guilty for a trigger you didn't pull. If she had lost *you*?" Jayla shook her head, wiping her sweaty palms on her ripped jeans. "No way, no how. Unacceptable."

"But if I'd done something sooner—" I sobbed.

"Then you'd have got shot at sooner!" Jayla snorted. "Maybe before Charlie had time to get in the way, and I know that's what you want to have happened, but it's not what she would have wanted. I'm going to get that through your head if I have to take you to the hospital, open up your skull, and suture it to your brain by hand."

"Okay, okay." I gulped down crying saliva and wiped my mouth on my sleeve. "No more brain imagery." I rubbed the heels of my hands into my sopping wet eyes until I could see her again. "Evan said you were afraid of me."

"Hell yeah, I'm afraid of you!" Jayla laughed. "You turned into a big ass dog and ripped a bitch's arm off. I've done my cadaver classes. I know how tough bones are. But that doesn't mean I don't love you anymore."

"I would never hurt you," I sniffled. "I'm not like the wolf you saw in the park."

"I know, baby." She smoothed one hand over my cheek. "I know one bad apple doesn't mean there's something wrong with the tree."

"Oh, there is," I laughed darkly. "There's something very wrong with the tree. But I'm going to fix it. And make things

safer for all of us.”

Jayla’s eyebrows shot up, and her mouth twitched mischievously. “We’ve got a Chosen One!”

“Actually,” Evan chimed in from right outside the door, “She’s a Promised One.”

Jayla pressed her lips together. “Just tell it to me straight. Can you see things with your nose?”

“No!” I rolled my head back. “That’s just a TV show!”

“Which you’d better not be watching,” Evan scolded. “Solidarity!”

“You auditioned for the worst possible part!” Jayla shot back. “There! I said it! Now hush.” She turned to me with a smirk. “Next question. Can you hook a girl up with a hot mountain lion because I’ve got complex trauma, and I hear they can help.”

My laughter splattered my jeans with snot. “I’m sorry. But there’s only wolves.”

“Just my damn luck.” Jayla blew out a stream of disgusted air and shimmied backward across the street. “Come on. Let’s see this theater.”

“Did you bring the movie?” Evan asked in an oddly somber tone as I slid across the street and touched my booties to the street.

Jayla paused in patting her hoodie pouch to take in my unusual shoes and the rest of my outfit. “What the hell? Does that man dress you? I mean, don’t get me wrong, you look fine, but—”

“Oh my Gods!” Evan clapped his hands. “I knew you had a vibe!”

We both glared at him as I climbed from the car, and then I tugged at my top uncomfortably, wishing now that I’d gone with a T-shirt to make Jayla less worried about me changing for Sebastian.

“She has a lady’s maid,” Evan chirped. “Just like *Downton Abbey*.”

“So, you’re a lady werewolf?” Jayla eyed me skeptically.

“She’s a queen werewolf,” Evan corrected, and I wanted to slither into a crack in the pavement and come back as a weed. “She owns the Bronx. Sort of. Soon?”

“To be determined,” I muttered, suddenly feeling exposed on the street. “Let’s go inside. I don’t want to be seen.”

“Those pants say otherwise,” Jayla quipped, playfully checking out my ass as I hurried toward the front doors, struggling to pull the keys out of the too-tight pocket and proving her point.

“Mmmm, you should see our shiftskins,” Evan boasted, and from her shocked gasp, I knew that idiot had pulled up his shirt right there on the sidewalk.

“Inside, now!” I ordered, wrenching open the heavy door.

“That’s her Alpha voice,” Evan whispered behind his hand to Jayla. “She’s actually really bossy, it turns out.”

They sauntered past me, giggling, and it felt like someone had switched the pilot light in my heart back on. Warmth flooded my whole body, and I started to follow them inside, but a gentle breeze caught my hair and stopped me in my tracks. It was silly, it was spring in New York, and it was often breezy, but... I held the door open a moment longer and whispered, “After you, Charlie.”

Once the guards from the front of the car were posted up at the doors, Jayla stood by and silently judged me while I raided the fully stocked concession stand while Evan made his way upstairs to use his tech genius to set up the projector to play whatever DVD Jayla had smuggled in her pouch like a kangaroo. By the time I had prepped the popcorn, Eva had figured out, and he slung his arms around both our shoulders and guided us into the theater.

“You know, I was thinking upstairs,” Evan said, “And we actually kind of *can* see things with our noses. Not like visions, more like... help me out here, Elyse?”

“Reading people?” I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so. We can know stuff that isn’t visually obvious, like a rough idea of how someone’s feeling or—”

“Whether or not they’ve mated.” Evan beamed. This was clearly what he’d been waiting for. “And get this? Elyse’s boyfriend—”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I growled as I slid into a row of seats a little more than halfway to the screen.

“Mmmm, he kind of is,” Evan said. “Anyways, he’s a *virgin!*”

Gods, he was putting on a show for Jayla tonight. I dropped into a seat and shoved the first fistful of popcorn into my smiling face. He would get a pass this time, just to smooth the gap between old times and new.

“No way!” Jayla gaped at me. “That guy? How?”

“He’s very old-fashioned,” I mumbled.

“So, you gonna de-flower him?” Jayla sank into the seat next to me.

“No. We’re over.” I bit my buttery lip. “I don’t think I’m going back.”

“Whoa! What?!” Evan leaned over Jayla’s lap to search my face. “What the hell are you talking about? Where would we go? The *Bronx*?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe out west? I just can’t anymore.”

“Pshhh!” Evan made a face. “If this is about him being jealous of me, you don’t need to worry about it. I can handle him. I would *love* to handle him.” Evan stopped, mid-lascivious grin. “Hang on a second. Elyse... do you think... Okay, hear me out, but do you think Sebastian is smelling

what *he* does to me. Sorry, I'm only human, well, no, I'm not, and neither is he, so..."

"He smells you being horny and thinks it's over me." I stared at him, going back over all the times Sebastian had behaved the worst in the last month. Always when Evan was around. I thought he was just being a gross Alpha male, but the real him was so damn earnest...

"Could that really be it?" Evan said, his mouth quirking up. "Maybe he's never sensed another male reacting, ah, positively, to his physical gifts? Though I find that a little hard to believe. My gaydar is *popping* up in there."

The conversation came to an abrupt end as the screech of an old modem hooking up to the internet filled the theater, followed by Harry Nilsson's "The Puppy Song" taking us on a digital tour of New York City. The whole thing felt wholly appropriate.

Kind of sacred, actually.

"You guys..." My eyes filled with tears.

"It seemed right," Jayla said, her eyes shining too. "To honor her."

I nodded, unable to speak. *You've Got Mail* wasn't just Charlie's favorite. It was the reason she'd moved to New York. Evan reached an arm around both of us, squeezing us as tight as the armrests of our seats would allow. We were sitting all out of order from how we used to, but that was alright. Charlie didn't need us to save her a seat. She was everywhere now. In everything I would ever see.

I settled in to watch, sharing popcorn and Twizzlers with Evan over Jayla's lap. I wagged one of the red strings at Jayla, who was eating the blanched almonds she'd brought with a look of undying patience plastered on her face. I teased her loudly—for Charlie—that it was illegal to bring outside food to *my* theater, which resulted in her throwing an almond directly into my mouth. I coughed and spit it out. Blasphemy!

As I dissolved into the familiarity of the story, of internet-crossed lovers who could only be themselves behind the screen, it started to feel like Charlie was *really* there, lecturing me about my currently unhealthy yet potentially epic romance.

“Possibly he has to act a certain way in public,” I could almost hear her say. “Because he’s the Alpha of a very old-fashioned society. Everyone looks up at him... like Joe Fox. All of you had to carry on a certain way in public. And because you were a discounted female Alpha your whole life, you’re a literal underdog like Shopgirl. Both you and Sebastian are trying so hard to be dominant and in charge that you can’t let down your guard and just be with each other.”

To be honest, I was pretty sure real Charlie would have told me to dump him and move on, but my brain was recalibrating the conversation so that Dream Charlie had a much better understanding of pack politics. And she was right. Yesterday on the tram had been amazing when no one else was around, but that was so hard to make happen in a wolf pack. We needed some way to communicate that no one else could see, some magical invisible place where we could let down our guard and be ourselves.

Oh. Right.

I pulled out my phone and pulled up my text chats, my lips twisting as I tapped on the contact I’d labeled “Stupid Hot Alphahole.” Yeah, I guess my attitude could use a tiny reset. With that in mind, I started to type. Maybe connecting behind screens would give us an outlet that IRL just didn’t.

Hey Sebastian, I began and then erased. *Hey Crabcakes. I know we’ve gotten off on an awkward paw, ha—*

“Hey, Elyse” Evan’s elbow jostled me. “The rules?”

I rolled my eyes. “Rule #1. The movie comes first.”

“Darn tootin’.”

“Well, I gotta go pee,” I said, hopping up to head to the lobby. “That comes before Rule #1, I’m afraid”

“I supppoooooose,” Evan drawled.

The movie rules were important but so was mending fences somehow with Sebastian. I didn't really want to run away from problems, and it seemed like it might actually be possible to solve the Evan issue if Sebastian would just listen. Or read, as the case might be. As I walked, I re-composed the text. Playful was probably good but flippant, maybe not so much. Not with all that was on the line between us.

My wolf poked my insides. **Maybe we should change his name in our contacts?**

Hmm. Maybe later. We'll see how he does.

I erased what I had and began again. *Sebastian, I know everything in our world has gone sideways and with your mother missing it's hard for you to think of anything else Except how much you hate Evan, but—* I stopped and erased the last bit. *I'm sorry that I haven't been sensitive enough about the pain you must be in. I would be grumpy and moody all the time too if I were you, but it was really nice—*

This wasn't working. I tapped my way back.

We need to talk about Evan. And Us. I think it will go better than you're expecting if you'll hear me out. Perhaps we can start over. I promise to open up and not turn into a sarcastic snot all the time, if you give me some room to learn how to be an Alpha too.

Yes, I thought, pushing through the doors. Something like that sounded good.

As the doors swung closed behind me, a wave of metallic aroma hit my senses. I stopped dead, and the phone slipped from my fingers, clicking on the vintage tile floor.

Blood.

My wolf roared to life, and my fangs extended, but I held her back while I searched the room for anyone who might be looking to hunt and kill shifters without asking questions first.

And I found him.

Damien stood in the doorway, dressed impeccably as usual, with hair slicked back and a starched button-down beneath a sharp blazer. Though his face wore its usual expression of boredom, a wildness in his eyes made my heart stutter.

Behind him stood two of the mangiest looking stranger wolves I'd ever seen. Their bones were visible beneath patchy and unkempt fur... like loose bags of bone and sinew wrapped up in a wolf pelt. Both had muzzles and flanks crisscrossed with scars, tattered ears, and one was missing an eye. The skin was closed over where it used to be. I'd never seen anyone so rough in all my days in New York.

But neither the wolves nor Damien held my primary attention for long because as they stepped forward, I saw what they had been hiding... our two Manhattan pack guards covered with scarlet blood.

Chapter Eighteen

“What are you doing here, Damien?” I demanded in the gruffest voice I could manage. “You know I can have both the Manhattan and Bronx packs here in a heartbeat.”

To make my point, I swiped my phone from the floor. My heart pounded so hard, I was sure he could hear it. The thought that my fear was floating to his nostrils made my stomach turn, but even if I could get backup, it might not be quick enough to save my friends.

Please let them stay inside. I prayed to the Gods.

Damian held out his hands in a placating gesture and waved to the wolves behind him. They stopped, though the one-eyed wolf let out a low growl. My hackles rose.

“Elyse, I just wanted to talk to you.”

He made a meal of checking his cufflinks, and my anger rose.

“You could have done that without murdering anyone,” I said, keeping my feet firmly against the doors to stop Evan and Jayla if they tried to emerge. I realized it had only been seconds since I’d left so I still had plenty of time before they looked for me.

Hopefully.

“Could I?” He cocked a sandy eyebrow, turning slightly to look at the bodies lying on the red carpet at the entryway to the theater. He gave a dismissive sniff. “It seems like leaving a trail of bodies is your fate these days, Elyse.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, not because I cared but because I’d seen enough movies to know how to keep a villain talking about his plans while I made my own for getting out of this. Was there a way to keep an eye on him and text Sebastian? I pulled up our chat when Damien turned, but one of the wolves murder-eyed me.

Crap.

Focus! If you are not going to let me out then you need to figure something else out. My wolf was practically whining.

I’m trying!

“I mean,” Damien said, stepping toward me, “Haven’t you noticed that human and shifter deaths have risen since you forgot your place?” He shrugged. “If only you’d done what you were supposed to do, none of them would have had to die. Imagine if those vigilantes on the train hadn’t come across you and Sebastian traipsing about playing *human*. Would your friends have died?”

For the hundredth time, Charlie’s mouth went round and surprised in my mind.

“I could fix it, Elyse.” His tone shifted into a purr. “You know I could.”

The soothing lap of that voice was like being enfolded into my father’s massive arms when I was a pup, where all seemed right and safe. My muscles softened, and my gaze grew hazy. I wanted everything to be fixed. I did.

“And yet you know nothing of what I can do, at all,” he continued, inching toward me. “But if you could convince the packs to forgive me, to let a difference of opinion, perhaps

even a slight overreach, go, I could stop the killings. I could make the humans of Manhattan forget all about us and come up with an alternate explanation for all this nasty business. They're the most violent creatures on the planet. It would be nothing to turn them against each other instead. Leave us out of it."

The words sounded so good.

I stepped forward, forgetting the phone in my hand or the swell of my wolf as I imagined the world Damien was proposing. He had astonishing Beta powers. Maybe he *could* fix all of this.

We could go back to the way things were...

Back to...

Back to when he'd abused his Beta powers, using them to harm his own pack, to control his own Alpha.

Back to when he'd had lied and manipulated, coerced and shamed.

He'd reshaped my family into a tight and painful cage I'd had to break free of.

He'd split me from my best friend and sister and turned us into mortal enemies.

He'd ripped my mother apart, killing my father just as much. All the killing started with him. And now it was going to end with him.

Yes!

Yes.

My wolf and I came to at once, my inner Alpha reasserting herself and shaking off the icy power of his coercion. *Damien* was to blame, not me. And it was not a difference of opinion or a slight overreach.

My wolf didn't have to plead with me any longer. With a boiling river of rage rocketing through my veins, I let her free

and shifted, my claws landing on the tiles with a pattering series of clicks like a ticking clock. Damien's time was up.

"Your powers have a limit, Damien," I thought, the words laced with fury as his eyes grew wide. *"I've never been as susceptible to them or you, which is probably another reason you hated me, but that's because I was an Alpha Heir, healthy and strong. And as an Alpha, I have the right to execute you on the spot for what you've done to my family, the packs, and these poor innocent humans, including my friends."*

In an instant, Damien shifted, but his grey wolf hunched as if I'd already begun my attack. *"Please, Elyse. Have mercy! I only did what I thought was right."*

His fawning was even more loathsome than his attempt to control me. I drew back, preparing to leap. *"You did only what suited you, you coward!"*

"Please, just wait a moment," he pled. He pressed his chest to the floor, flattening his ears against his skull, and the wretched wolves behind him stepped back. *"You don't know everything yet. It's important. You...you don't want to murder the grandfather of your future pups, do you?"*

I stumbled mid-pounce, utterly confounded by what he'd just said. I shook my head as if to clear my obviously clogged ears. *"You have no mate, no pups!"*

"No mate, not really," he agreed. *"But one beautiful pup."*

We stared at each other. His tail swept the bloody floor, unable to contain his joy.

"Yara," I moaned. *"Her sickness."*

Images of Yara's fits flew through my mind like a movie on fast-forward. Her visions. The holes in her memory. The way she'd freed Damien so willingly. *Oh, Leto, help us, no!* That would mean...

"You're Sebastian's father." I accidentally allowed the impossible thought to escape.

Damien's cackle resonated in my skull, and his wolf straightened, the faux deference thrown off as quickly as the suit jacket from which he'd shifted.

"That can't be." I stamped my paw on the floor. "Yara would never! She loves Max."

"Oh, Yara, Yara, Yara!" Damien's glee was putrid. He practically pranced with self-gratification. *"What she didn't know, couldn't hurt her. Or could it?"*

His laughter turned maniacal in my head. Bile filled my mouth, and I had no choice but to open my jaws and let it all pour out and splash the tile. Coughing, I looked up at a being a thousand times more evil than I'd ever imagined.

"By Holy Leto's name, you're telling the truth, aren't you? You wanted to turn your Beta bloodline into an Alpha bloodline."

"Look who's finally using her brain cells," he hissed. *"What little your mother left you with anyway. I swear I've never met two more silly, selfish bitches. Such a shame she didn't get to you see you grow up."*

Chapter Nineteen

I leaped at Damien and sank my fangs into his throat, hungry to taste his blood on my tongue. My mind flooded with thoughts of my mother's agony, the betrayal she must have felt when the midwolf's claws ripped her apart and she left this world wondering what would happen to her babies. My wrath swirled within me, winds of fury tightening like a tornado. I longed to feel his bones shatter in my jaws and hear the final gurgle as I ended him.

"Enough, filthy female!"

A voice that rasped like glass on asphalt filled my mind. Before I could close my jaws, a one-two punch of concrete spiked with rebar knocked me loose. It was Damien's backup band coming to his defense. Their whipcord strength plowed into my side sending me sliding across the floor, my claws screeching.

Up close, I realized that my former assessment of their appearance had been charitable. There were two, one taller and broader with an ebony coat patched with scabrous lesions. This was the one whose voice had just violated my mind. The other was smaller, the scars across his chestnut flank looking like he'd been dragged through barbed wire.

Didn't these shifters get chances to heal? It made no sense.

"Stay out of it," I warned. *"This doesn't involve you."*

Damien advanced slowly with a predatory slink behind his twin skeletons.

"I'll kill you both with him if I have to!" I was a boiling avalanche of hatred sliding down a mountain to devour everything in sight. *"But I'm giving you the chance to leave."*

"You know," Damien's putrid thoughts filled me, a limning rot that turned my stomach. *"Reminding me you are the Alpha may have been a mistake."*

I threw myself forward, but the ebony wolf blocked my path. *"You'll have to go through me first wretch."*

His words left my mind raw and deepening my rage. *"Wretch? How dare you? I'm an Alpha Heir, born of centuries of my bloodline. Who the hell are you?"* I snapped the air between us. *"Come out, Damien!"* I fumed at the gray wolf standing behind his zombie-apocalypse protectors like a coward. *"Stop hiding behind these bags of bones."*

"When I kill you," Damien continued, ignoring me, *"I will have defeated the Bronx's true Alpha, given your father's ignominious defeat by your sister, who is herself just the spare."*

The ebony wolf ignored my warning. *"Let's see what you can do against this bag of bones,"* he rasped, re-engaging like some inexorable wolf-Terminator and bounding at me head-on.

I pulled back onto my haunches like a coiled spring and vaulted so hard that I flew off him, sending him slamming into the wall. Powered by the torrent of rage that lit my every pore to the tips of my bristling white fur, I crashed into Damien, rolling him, and us, through the gleaming doors of the lobby and into the darkened theater—our spines, shoulders, and hips hammering against the unyielding seat frames as we tumbled down the aisle.

“Hey, what the—!” Evan shouted, jumping up, his tall frame silhouetted against the cozy image of The Shop Around the Corner on the screen. He whirled just as our carousel of violence banged its way toward him. His eyes widened and flashed an even icier shade of blue.

Evan shifted, his charcoal gray wolf bounding toward me, but just as he was about to reach us, the ebony wolf leaped over us and met him mid-air. They clashed, snarling, front paws wrapped around each other, fangs flashing as they wrestled, muzzles seeking throats.

No! He’s not ready! My mind screamed, frantic for me to help my friend, but Damien’s jaws lashed at me, and my attention snapped back to him. I shoved upward with all four paws, and he just missed, catching my ear and slicing it, sending a rainbow of blood spatter across the seats. Pain laced through me, but I barely felt it through the terror that washed over me as the background screaming finally registered.

Jayla!

“*Help her, Elyse!*” Evan’s plea was faint, his focus subsumed by his opponent.

Damien lay atop me, snarling and fighting to pin me, but I evaded him by lashing at his wrists and leaning into his right side, where he was weaker. I spotted Jayla over his shoulder, the smaller of the two mangy wolves pacing toward her with a low rumble rippling in his throat.

“No! Stay back!” She screamed, fumbling in the depths of her purse, and pulling out a tiny bottle.

The wolf sprang, a chestnut blur, and then yelped as it met an airborne stream of pepper spray.

“Eat hot shit, you disgusting...*thing!*” Jayla yelled, triumphant for one moment.

The wolf howled, the sound cinching my chest in dread. It was a battle cry, an ululation of lupine frenzy, not a yelp of pain or intimidation.

“She only...pissed him...off!” Evan’s thoughts pelted me—a spasmodic flow like pebbles against the window of my mind—as he wrestled with his combatant.

“No!” I echoed Jayla’s sentiments as her pursuer landed atop the seats, claws rending red velvet as it shook its mane. Drool slid in glistening tendrils from its inflamed gums. I twisted beneath Damien, seeking an opening, and wriggled between his front paws. Just as the cool air of freedom enveloped me, his jaws closed on my right flank. Fiery spears delved into my flesh as his fangs found purchase, and I howled.

Now Jayla was pelting along the row of seats, her screams drowning out my bawl of pain. I searched for Evan. He was trying to escape so that he could get to Jayla as well, but each time he got an inch of freedom, the ebony wolf snapped at his legs and he’d snarl, whipping back and grabbing for ears or muzzle to free himself. If he wasn’t careful, he’d lose an Achilles tendon and be done. I couldn’t decide who needed help more.

“Evan, remember to protect your belly and rear!”

The only reply was the sound of his snarls and snapping jaws as he fought for his life. A clang from the other aisle brought my head around just in time to see Jayla, whose knee had caught on the last armrest, crumple to the floor. Her predator leaped across the top of the seats and lunged toward where she’d fallen.

“Shit!” My heart leaped into my throat. *“Leto, help us!”*

“Jayla!” Evan’s anguished cry joined my own.

Damien took advantage of my distraction and headbutted me into the seats. My ribs slammed against the metal frame with a loud crack, and my head bounced off the floor, jaws clacking shut like a sprung trap as agony erupted in my head and chest at once.

I’m going to watch another friend die. The thought was muddy, a slow eddy attempting to surface inside my buzzing

skull. *Assuming I survive.*

As I wheezed and tried to get my paws back beneath me, a snarl resounded from above. I looked up. A white wolf dropped from the theater balcony onto the back of Jayla's attacker. I shook my head, sure that I was having a concussive hallucination, but the feral chestnut shifter bellowed, and I snapped to attention.

Help—of some kind—had arrived.

A mirror image of me, but with three times the ferocity, rolled Jayla's attacker into the aisle and pinned him. Between the seats, her head rose and fell, the snapping of her jaws the melody against the downbeat of tearing flesh. The foreign shifter tried to shove her off, her back heaving upward, but his muzzle just missed latching onto hers and that miss cost him. She raised a paw and smacked, blood arcing away from her slice before her snarling bite lashed downward again.

The shifter's cries ended abruptly, leaving silence as all of us, including Damien and his remaining bodyguard, sat frozen, watching the movements of the new arrival.

"Oh, Damien!" A familiar taunting voice sing-songed. *"Come out, come out, wherever you are..."*

Over the ruined seat backs, a white tail was held high in warning, the loping sway of white shoulder blades as the victorious wolf rounded the back of the rows and turned into our aisle, growling.

Kiana! A tumult of relief, elation, and terror wove a tight cord through my chest. *Thank Leto!*

The white I'd seen was the only bit of her untouched by gore. Her muzzle, chest, and claws were crimson. Her teeth dripped with blood and saliva as she roared, her gaze locked on Damien.

"You...disgusting...murderer!" She snarled.

Her thoughts knifed through us toward their intended target, the male who had coddled and encouraged her all his

life, but who had done so only for his own gain.

The male who had lied to and manipulated her.

The male who had controlled her father and robbed her of her mother.

My chest heaved, burning with each rasping inhale against what I knew were broken ribs. The fire I'd awaited to ignite inside my sister had finally found oxygen.

And it was an inferno.

Chapter Twenty

The ebony wolf left Evan and bounded past Damien and me, heading for my sister.

“Don’t try it!” I warned, but I needn’t have bothered.

Kiana met him, jaws wide, and grabbed his throat, bearing down and twisting so that his own momentum tore his flesh wide, blood exploding over what white was left in my sister’s coat.

Oof!

Pain knifed through me, emptying me of air, as Damien thundered over my prone body, his back paws landing squarely on my broken ribs. He hurtled past Kiana up the aisle, heading for the lobby doors like a boulder shot from a catapult.

Kiana dropped her last victim and turned, bolting after him and snapping at his gray heels. My head was swimming. My chest burned with each breath like I was being branded, and blood still streamed from my back leg, but I scrambled up and chased after them, determined to help end Damien, the lust for vengeance willing me forward through the pain.

I burst through the swinging doors just as Damien crashed through the glass panes of the gold-trimmed front doors,

shoulder-first. A firework of glittering shards lit his silhouette as he shifted back into human form and rolled, his momentum carrying him almost into the darkened street.

Kiana started after him with a triumphant bark, bounding through the shattered doorway.

“Help!” Damien screamed, jumping to his feet, waving like a man possessed to the passing cars and knots of pedestrians enjoying the warm spring evening. “I’ve been attacked by shifters! Somebody please, help me!” Blood painted his sandy hair ochre and cascaded in sticky rivulets down his neck, lending grisly veracity to his apparent hysteria.

“Hey!” A man shouted, pointing at my sister. “Look! It’s true. That monster’s after that man!”

And then the screaming ensued, piercing my sensitive ears. The humans that were not screaming and running one by one started to hold up their phones. Videoing *everything* going on.

There would be no doubt after this that shifters were real.

I followed Kiana out the door and grabbed her by the mane with my jaws, tugging. “*We have to go!*”

“*I’m not leaving until that bastard is dead!*” She snarled, nipping at me.

“*I want him dead too!*” I keened, skittering away from her jaws, and holding on for dear life. “*But you’re covered in blood, Kiana. Look at yourself!*”

She stopped fighting me, and I released her, my aching jaw popping open with relief, and I gasped, shuddering. Holding her back was like trying to stop a dam from bursting. Her blue eyes darted, taking in the crowd gathering beneath the streetlights around Damien. All eyes were locked on us.

“*Can’t you smell them?*” I asked her. Suppose my breath hadn’t already been tiptoeing around the fire in my lungs. In that case, I’d hold it to block the cloud of repulsion filling the atmosphere. My sister’s nose twitched as she scented the air.

“Humans always smell disgusting.” Her fur rippled as she took a step forward.

“Kiana, no! They didn’t do anything to us. It’s all him!” I pleaded.

“Dios mio! Hay dos!” An older woman screamed, her fist going to her mouth in horror as her eyes connected with mine. *“Look at all that blood!”*

“Stay back, Elyse!” My sister ordered, stepping in front of me. *“You’re not ready for this fight.”*

“I’m not leaving you!” I insisted, shoving her.

“You’re a liability at best.” She shoved back, hard.

I yelped, overtopped by a wave of embarrassment.

“I’m stronger and you know it,” she said, adding insult to my injury. *“Now, get your filthy human friend and go!”*

“Holy shit, run!” A pair of dark-haired teenagers in matching high-waist jeans and black Converse sneakers that had been strolling down an adjoining street stopped, eyes widening at the sight of us before bolting toward the train station, shouting at people in the distance to turn and run.

“Get back!” A man yelled at a young couple pushing a pink stroller. *“Get the kids the hell out of here!”*

The mother grabbed her daughter, knocking the stroller onto its side with a clatter and sending bottles and diapers cascading onto the sidewalk as she ran, screeching. The father backpedaled, his eyes locked on us, arms wide as if to block our attack, despite the human fence forming between us in the street.

“Kiana, please!” I begged, reminded of all the phones recording. *“We can’t be seen like this!”*

The crowd members who hadn’t run for the hills were tightening around Damien.

“I called the police!” The owner of the bodega across the street shouted as he hung from his doorway, shaking his fist at

us before calling over his shoulder to someone in the store. “Manny, grab my shotgun!”

“*No!*” Kiana insisted, her lips curling high above her fangs. “*I can’t let him do this to us again!*” She took a step forward just as the mob of men moved, each of their left feet stepping forward simultaneously, like an army on parade. “*Damien’s the murderer. I can’t run from him anymore.*”

“Yes!” Damien cried, his eyes gleaming in the last rays of sundown. “We must send these bitches a message that they can’t have *our* city!”

“*It’s not your city!*” I sent my fury at Damien and stepped up to join my sister, eyeing the men in the throng.

Their faces were more slack than angry, and they took a collective step toward us. I shuddered, remembering the dead look in Kenzo’s eyes when Damien grabbed his mind. That day, Damien had been subdued by truth serum and could still attack shifters who were on guard. These humans stood no chance against his Beta powers.

“*Shit, he’s got them, Kiana. They’re doing his bidding. You can’t fight them all.*”

She cursed, unleashing a howl of anguished surrender. “*This isn’t over, traitor!*” She called. “*One day I’ll taste your blood. My face will be the last thing you see on this Earth.*”

Snarling, she turned and sprang behind my back through the lobby and into the theater. As we skidded through the door, Evan stood there in human form.

He was alive! And Kiana hadn’t seen him shift. No matter her purpose in serving as our rescuer, I knew she wasn’t ready to hear *that* news.

Or I wasn’t ready for her to hear it.

He stood in his tattered shiftskin, helping a shaking Jayla up from the floor. My eyes swept over both, sure I’d find torn flesh or shattered bone, but Evan was only covered in blood. There were a handful of shallow lacerations scattered across

his neck and torso, but he was okay. And as she tottered to her feet, I could see that while Jayla's fragile human flesh was bruised and scraped, she too was unbroken.

"Thank Leto you're both ok!" I thought, relief lapping at my jittering adrenalin.

When she saw my sister and me, Jayla's lipstick smeared mouth opened as if to scream, but then she stopped, her eyes connecting with mine.

"Elyse?" Her voice was as wobbly as her legs. Her head swiveled from me to my sister, the wolf who'd saved her life. "I...I," she faltered, her words failing upon reentry.

"Evan, we have to go, right now!" I insisted.

"Let's go, Jayla," he said, grabbing her hand and waving at Kiana. "I can explain this later. Trust me. She's on our side."

"She is on our side, isn't she?" He directed this at me, the question floating in a reek of his frustration and confusion.

My stomach tightened. I was certain that despite not hearing the words, Kiana could smell his distaste for her as clearly as I could. I prayed she wouldn't question me about it. Even though she was my sister and all that made me a shifter, I should have been on her side. I empathized with his pain. How often would my friends be subjected to near-death experiences because of *my* family drama?

"She is for now," I responded wearily, unable to say more. *"Let's go!"*

Leaping over the shredded corpses of the stranger wolves, we tore down the ruined aisle toward the emergency exit doors beside the sweeping arch above the stage. My throbbing lungs begged me to stop running while my right leg, still emptying itself of blood, lurched and planted uncertainly like a wooden marionette. This was one time when having three more was more than convenient. It was lifesaving.

A wave of outraged shouting crested as the doors behind us slammed open, unleashing a river of angry people.

“Go! Go!” I urged Evan, nosing at Jayla as they ran. Her swollen knee had hobbled her worse than my half shredded one. “*They’re not in their right minds.*” I added, hoping he’d understand, that he’d trust me. These humans wouldn’t spare her because she was one of them. Damien had given them only one order: kill.

CRACK!

A sound like an explosive reverberated in the massive room, louder than the shouts of the crowd streaming like lava down both aisles.

A hot plume of air sang just over my head, and I ducked, looking back over my shoulder confused. In the darkness, I made out a man standing, legs akimbo, arms raised with one supporting the other from beneath in a stance I’d seen in a million movies. The gun in his hand glinted in the dim light of *You’ve Got Mail*.

My stomach clenched, and I flattened my ears against my skull with each successive shot.

“*Don’t stop!*” I thought to all of them at once. “*He’s got a gun!*”

A bullet zipped by to my left, so close the air smelled singed.

I shifted right, my breath whistling through a closing throat. *Leto protect us!*

The shooter had the higher ground, but the light was intermittent, and he kept waiting for the screen to lighten to take the next shot.

The dark wood paneling of the walls by the exit door splintered on all sides as the bullets fell like rain. Evan dragged Jayla through first, and Kiana shoved me through next, turning to unleash one last yowl of outrage before she followed, and then we flew out into the dark alley behind the theater, the mob fast on our heels.

Chapter Twenty-One

A black SUV screeched to a halt at the end of the alley and two men in head-to-toe black burst from the back, sprinting toward us.

‘G.I.’ Sebastian moved like he was trying to outrun his own skin, his feet barely touching the ground as he tore my way.

“Elyse!” His voice soared on wings scented with terror.

As we reached each other, he caught me in his arms, lifting me and pulling me to him in one sweep and I wrapped myself around him like a strangler fig, leaving no room for oxygen between us.

“You’re alive!” I buried my head in his neck and drank in his scent, my hands grabbing fistfuls of his hair and shirt. Until I saw him, I hadn’t registered the thought that had emerged from the dark corners of my mind like a poisonous seedling when Damien first appeared in the theater; maybe he and his minions had already finished off Sebastian before he’d come for me. Maybe he’d been lying when he said...

“I thought I’d lost you,” Sebastian growled, his words warm upon my cheek.

“Me too,” I whimpered, wondering at the hollow ache this idea made in my chest. His rock-hard arms were like pinions around me, holding me together and I pressed into him, despite the fire lacing my side, fighting the warning of tears.

After a moment, he set me down gently, and I winced at the flare of pain from my ragged right thigh. “You’re hurt!” He frowned, reaching as if to lift me again.

“It’s ok, I’ll heal,” I reassured him, laying a hand on his arm, and then stopped when a cough came from behind me.

“I think we have more important things to deal with than whatever lovesick bullshit you two have going on.” Kiana’s tone was ice.

My spine stiffened and I reminded myself to behave like an Alpha, despite the voice shouting within me to let Sebastian take me back into his powerful arms.

“She’s right,” I said, pushing Sebastian away. “Damien’s unleashed a human mob —”

“Evan, go,” Sebastian barked, interrupting me as he returned to full Alpha Commander. “Take Elyse and the human with you. Kenzo will get you out of here.” He turned to my sister. “Kiana, we can discuss what the hell you’re doing here at all later. For now, I presume you’ll be staying to help me handle Damien?”

“You’ll be lucky to get a shot at him,” she replied hotly. “What with your mind being on your fragile little sweetie-poo over there.”

“Leave your sister out of this.” Sebastian said, his voice stone. “As you said, we have more important things to deal with.”

“Sebastian,” I said, my anxiety reigniting. “There are too many. We all need to go.”

He shook his head, turning to my sister. “Is Damien still with them?”

“Of course.” She snarled, the dried blood caking her face cracking. “You think his pet humans wouldn’t have run from us like pups otherwise?”

Sebastian turned back to me, his fangs lengthening as his full lips curled back. “We can’t miss this chance, Elyse. He’s evaded us for weeks. This needs to end.”

“Yes,” Kiana growled, her shiftskin bulging as her wolf readied itself to spring free.

“*No.*” The word escaped against my will. Inside my ruined chest, my heart ached for all of us.

Sebastian... who needed to find his unstable mother like a fire needed oxygen. Kiana... who needed to unleash her rage at the bastard who’d stolen our mother from us.

And me... for seeing the fierce perfection that would have been their coupling if fate had made it so.

Why does he want me at all?

“If both of you are staying, I’m staying,” I insisted, faking bravado against the backdrop of doubts swirling within me regarding how much I could bring to the table.

“You can’t fight anymore, Elyse,” Kiana insisted, pushing me toward the car. “Just let Sebastian and me take care of it.”

“Your sister is right,” Sebastian added. “The rest of you need to go.”

Perhaps they’re right. My wolf admitted wearily.

My panic spiked. *No! They can’t win on their own!*

As if to make my point, the back door to the theater fifty yards behind us flew open and the Beta-hypnotized army plowed into the alley. The image of Sebastian and Kiana fighting alone through this possessed mob of humans and then trying to take down the strongest Beta psychopath we’d ever known made my gorge rise.

“Look, we can’t allow him to manipulate us again!” I argued, and their heads spun, eyes meeting mine, beneath the

scrawl of twin frowns. “Kiana, you’re right that these humans would be running without his influence, and they should. Too many of them will be injured and die if they fight us... and this isn’t their fight. It’ll only make everything worse. We need to get back to Max as soon as possible.”

“She has a point, Sebastian,” Evan said, pulling a protesting Jayla toward the car. “C’mon, Jayla,” he urged. “We have to get you out of here.”

“But maybe I can reason with them,” she said, shaking her arm to wrestle free of his grip. “I’m a human too!”

“You can’t.” I said flatly, pointing at the advancing mob. “I know this is all new for you, but Damien has them under his control. Some sort of hive mentality?”

She stopped, her keen mind taking in the behavior, the coordinated movements. Instead of running at us, recklessly like you’d expect from an emotional human tsunami, they came in lockstep, advancing from the door in a steady, careful stream.

“Shit, you all have mind control *too*?” She took a step backward, hands lifted in surrender. “Uh-uh. Nope. I’ve seen *Animalis*. I don’t mess around with that shit.”

“Sebastian, I agree with Elyse,” Kenzo said, his voice low. “I want to find your mother as badly as you do...”

Sebastian grunted, his disagreement plain in his scent.

“...but nothing good can come of tearing through this group of innocent humans. That’s what Damien wants. He’s probably got some of them focused only on filming.”

“He does!” I said, latching onto the support. “He’s already got Kiana’s wolves and me on film all bloodied up. It will not look good.”

“Fine!” Sebastian sighed, his voice wrenching. “Let’s go.”

“What? No way!” Kiana protested, stepping forward, but Sebastian grabbed her arm, clasping her.

“This is my borough,” he growled, his dark eyes snapping. “We will have to fight another day.”

A sound like a transformer exploding echoed in the alley.

The gunman had made it outside, and he’d been joined by the shop owner with the shotgun.

“Shit!” Kenzo bolted for the car’s front seat and threw it into drive. “Hurry!” he called, as Sebastian ripped open the back door.

Evan and Jayla launched themselves inside, and I shoved my insane sister, who was still protesting that we should leave her—alone, no less—to tackle the mob, the gun, and Damien, as I tumbled into the back of the car after her. The backseat became a God of Shiva-like tangle of arms and legs. Evan yanked Jayla onto his lap to make room for Sebastian, who began clambering inside —

Another shotgun blast rang out, and Sebastian grunted, slumping to his knees in the wheel well, his torso crashing over my legs. Blood erupted from a hole in his shoulder. A useless scream tore from my throat, but my sister had the sense to grab his waist and haul him the rest of the way in.

“Go!” she shouted.

Another round shattered the taillight as Kenzo peeled out, the force of the acceleration slamming the open door shut as we pulled away.

“Sebastian!” I cried, my heart drumming in my chest like a hummingbird’s. He was sprawled across me and my sister, his skin graying and blood pouring from his shoulder blade like the acrid cloud of terror I was pouring from my pores. “Sebastian, talk to me.”

“I’m... I’m ok,” his voice tight. “He groaned, as Kenzo took a corner at warp speed, tires squealing. “We can only go this fast for a few more blocks, man,” he chided his best friend. “Or we’re going to have to explain a lot of crap to the cops.”

Always the Alpha. My wolf said admiringly, and not, I could tell, without an undercurrent of relief.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” I whimpered, and then gasped as we hit a pothole and caught air before landing, Sebastian’s deadweight crushing my torn-up thigh. My stomach tightened at the thought of how much worse that must have hurt him.

“Stop being a puppy bitch!” Kiana snapped. “He says he’s fine.”

“I...didn’t...exactly...say...fine,” Sebastian grunted, each word requiring a shallow breath between.

“Well, then don’t *you* be a pup,” she added, raising her chin.

Jayla squirmed, working on sitting forward where she could see better. “Can I help?” she asked. “I’m training to be a doctor.”

“He’ll be ok,” Kiana replied. “Leave him alone.”

“How do you know that?” Jayla protested. “At least let’s get some pressure on the wound.”

“We heal, human,” Kiana whispered, her eyes fixed on the back window. “He will heal.”

“Not if he runs out of blood faster than his cells can renew,” I snapped. “Jayla, please. Anything you can do.”

Jayla cast a wary glance at my twin and did a double-take, eyes widening as she finally realized this was the legendary evil twin of all my watered-down stories about life in the Bronx. But it only threw her for a second, and then she sprang into action, covering Sebastian’s wound with one hand on top of the other. Blood spurted around her fingers, and she sat up on her knees in Evan’s lap to use more of her weight to apply pressure.

“Hey.” Evan wrapped both arms around her waist so he could lay both of his hands on top of hers. “It’s just a flesh wound.”

Jayla laughed, a short bark, and then stopped. “Monty Python to the rescue,” she murmured.

Kiana’s head swiveled from her hawk-like focus on the streets flying by—no doubt scanning for potential threats—to Evan, her eyes sweeping over him and Jayla and then narrowing. Her scent swirled with outrage and confusion, a mix that choked like sulfur. Her gaze returned to me, eyes going flat.

Shit! I thought, my mind doing the math a split second after my sister’s.

The movie reference.

Jayla’s comfort with him.

The number of wolves who’d been battling with Damien and his henchmen when she’d arrived...

She knows!

Yes. My wolf agreed. **She knows we turned him. We’re the One.** She paused, and then made her own attempt at a mood-lightening joke. **She knows that we’re Neo.**

Fluff.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon!” I willed the Plaza elevator to go faster as we stood huddled in a tight crush within its mirrored walls. Kenzo and Evan—who’d insisted on helping despite Sebastian’s initial growl of protest—supported Sebastian’s sagging frame on either side. Blood glistened in a wet cascade that slurped farther down Sebastian’s torso with each passing second. And the hollow of worry inside me grew as my future mate turned the same shade of gray as his wolf.

“Hang in there, man. Just need you on your feet a little longer.” Kenzo said, his voice tight.

Sebastian’s head lolled, and he didn’t respond.

He will heal. My wolf tried to reassure me for the hundredth time since Sebastian had been shot.

We aren’t immortal.

I bit back a sob when the doors opened on the Alpha Family floor, and the guys dragged Sebastian down the hall to his room. I hurried after them as fast as my injured leg would allow, but the office door exploded outward, and Max and Mateo rushed into the hall, looking wildly around for the source of all the commotion.

“What in the Gods’ names?” Max wailed, his face twisting. “My boy!” He ran down the hall and tried to shove Evan out of the way to take over helping his beloved son himself, but Kenzo held up a hand that seemed to soothe his adoptive father.

“We’ll get him in the bed first, explain second,” Kenzo grunted. “Is the medic here?”

“I’ll call for him.” Mateo’s lips sealed in a tight, white scrawl, and then his soulful brown eyes swept over the second skin of blood coating the rest of us. “It looks like Sebastian’s not the only one who needs one.”

“We can wait,” I sobbed. “Just help Sebastian.”

“He’ll be fine.” Mateo took me by the shoulders.

He’ll be fine. My wolf insisted, her tone motherly, which was such a departure from her norm that it deepened my nerves.

What if he isn’t, though?

The hollow in my middle seemed unwilling to budge. I’d left the bodies of two shifters behind just twenty minutes prior. I knew some wounds didn’t heal, even for our kind. Images of Sebastian’s eyes fluttering closed and not re-opening filled my head and my one good leg turned to water. I reached for the wall to brace myself.

“You did well to get him back so quickly,” Mateo said, guiding me toward the open office door. “Now, let’s head to my office so you can fill in the blanks for me.” He kept one hand on my back as I limped forward, one arm stiff against the wall. “And get you off your feet.”

Thank Leto.

Yes, I thought shakily. Sitting seems like a solid plan.

Every step towards Max and Mateo’s adjoined offices was an icy burn, my leg having gone half-numb now that the adrenalin had worn off. When I settled into the massive leather

couch in the office, tears of relief sprang to my eyes. I ducked my head, embarrassed by my weakness.

“Here, Jayla,” Evan said, helping her to settle beside me, dragging a table over to prop her leg, her knee more purpling grapefruit than a human joint.

“Thanks,” she whispered, her head swiveling as she took in the backstage tour of pack life.

A tour no human had ever had before.

Mateo gestured for Kiana to sit in one of the burgundy wing chairs.

“Thanks, but I’ll stand,” she said, her jaw pulsing.

I was surprised she’d come with us at all. I’d expected her to run back to the Bronx the moment we’d gotten out of the car, but she’d insisted on coming. She looked like Ruby. Her ponytail was dyed the auburn of her victim’s blood. Her shiftskin was torn in three places, revealing ripping muscle and scabbing scrapes from the few blows the mangy wolf had managed to land.

She paced like a zoo animal while we waited for Mateo to place the call to the rarely needed medic. In the meantime, the door swung open, and Max stepped inside, looking completely unruffled compared to the distraught male we’d all witnessed just a few minutes earlier. Other than a smear of blood across the chest of his pale gray dress shirt, there was no evidence he’d been with his son at all.

Two of a kind...

“Now,” Max began, sitting in his throne-like chair behind the gleaming mahogany desk so wide it could double as a bed. “I heard this was all Damien’s doing? That he attacked without warning?”

“Yes,” I nodded, grimacing as I shifted my weight. “And I’m sorry to say that he brought some shifters we didn’t know and they, ah...they killed Martin and Jonah.”

“Damn.” Max smacked the table, the sound reverberating against the wood paneled walls, and shook his head. “But was Yara with him?”

I flinched, taken aback that he hadn’t reacted more to the news of the dead. What kind of Alpha cares so little for the lives of his loyal subjects?

That’s not fair. He cares.

Yeah, for like two seconds before he asked about Yara.

Is anything but Sebastian on our mind?

I hesitated, not wanting to admit it, but my wolf was right. Even her saying his name made me wince, like she’d pressed a finger to a suppurating wound. There was what was happening here in this room, and then there was the hollow.

No. It’s pushing everything else aside.

Then you understand.

I sighed and met Max’s pleading eyes, taking in the craters beneath them and the uncharacteristic grizzle of his unshaven jaw, clenched tight in anticipation of my response. “I’m sorry, Max, but no, she wasn’t there. Or if she was, we never saw her.”

“I hardly see how that’s the point,” Kiana interjected. “Damien almost killed Elyse, *and* your son. He’s a menace to us as long as he’s alive.”

Max’s throat fluttered as he emitted a low growl. “Well, then, pup, why don’t we get to another essential point? What were you doing trespassing in my territory?”

“Be careful with your tone,” my sister said, stepping forward so she towered over the seated Max. “I’m the leader of the Bronx pack, and the reason your son and his future bride are still alive.”

For a moment, I marveled at Kiana’s courage and presence. She was staring down the Alpha of the Manhattan

pack, a male twice her age, like he was a pup who'd misbehaved and like she was...

A Queen. You can do the same.

Since when?

You'll learn.

Mateo took a step forward, insinuating himself gently between Kiana and Max. "Why don't you just tell us what happened first?"

This was directed at me. I nodded, taking a deep breath. Ten minutes later, I'd related the entire thing, at least, what I could while skirting certain inconvenient truths. Like why Evan seemed so close with "my" human friend Jayla. And most of all, about Sebastian's true parentage.

You must tell him that eventually.

I don't think it's mine to tell. Anyway, Sebastian deserves to hear it first.

Max is the Alpha.

But it's Sebastian's life. It will be his...

Pain.

Yes.

"You did well, Elyse," Max whispered. "To stop Sebastian and your sister from attacking the humans in Damien's sway. That would have played into his hands. Sometimes restraint," he added, arching a brow at Kiana, "is the mark of a true Alpha."

Kiana huffed, stamping a foot and triggering a small avalanche of dried blood dust from her shiftskin onto the Persian rug lining the floor.

"Speaking of which," Max said, eyeing the rug archly, "now seems like a good time to get back to why, exactly, you were in my territory, Kiana."

"I was doing you a favor." Her eyes narrowed into slits.

“I can’t imagine you wanting to do me any favors, given our history.”

“Believe it or not, I was following Damien. It doesn’t matter whose territory he’s in. The damage he’s done to all of us needs to stop.” Kiana pressed her thumb into the bottom of her fingers one by one until they popped.

I studied my sister carefully while she gave this seemingly magnanimous little speech.

She’s lying.

Of course she is. She’s cracking her knuckles. I’d lived with my twin my entire life so I knew her tells.

“Hmph,” Max grunted, his mouth quirking up at the corner. “Is that so? Well, no matter the reason, you were in the right place to help. You helped. I’ll let it go this time.”

Okay, maybe it didn’t take a lifetime of observation to see through her.

He turned to Jayla, who’d stayed as quiet as a mouse beside me on the couch.

“And what, pray tell, do we do with this human?” he asked.

Jayla shrank against me, her throat pulsing as she swallowed hard.

I hesitated, my mind racing for a solution that wouldn’t involve an unpleasant end to our friendship...or my friend. I didn’t really think Max would do that, but I wasn’t too sure of what Kiana would do when we all left the safety of this room.

“Oh, I don’t know.” My twin laughed airily. “Maybe Elyse should just bite her like that other human.”

Evan gasped, giving himself away, and my heart dropped into the cradle of my pelvis, a solid weight pinning me to the chair. Kiana flashed a triumphant smirk. She’d taken a gamble on that one, and it had paid off.

“She didn’t just do that!” Evan’s thought penetrated my mind, and it was my turn to gasp. We met each other’s eyes, mirrored pools of disbelief. *“Holy crap, you heard that? But... we’ve never...is this normal?”* he asked, his inner pitch rising.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” I soothed, even though my own inner voice rose sharply.

Human-to-human telepathy was usually only available to the highest ranking wolves. Alphas, Betas, maybe the upper reaches of the guard. But Evan had no rank; if it wasn’t for me, he probably would have been assigned to the servant class or the lowest levels of the guard. Unless... no, that couldn’t be... there was no way he was showing up on the cosmic radar as... my Alpha Heir?

“It happens,” I lied, not wanting to unpack this right now. *“It’s fine.”*

“What do we say?”

It was my turn to swallow hard. *“I don’t know.”*

“What are you on about now, Kiana?” Maximo’s brow furrowed in annoyance. *“Have you gone crazy? Why would Elyse bite her human... friend?”*

Thankfully, his gaze was locked on my sister, and he didn’t seem to have noticed my dalliance with Evan in WTF-land. Still, it was only a matter of time before he caught the panic in my scent because my underarms had turned to faucets and an odd dizziness was creeping from my belly toward my head.

“By the Great Goddess Leto,” Mateo murmured, his eyes widening to full moons.

Uh-oh.

“Double shit,” Evan’s inner voice was pure fury. *“Abort mission!”*

I shoved his thoughts away so I could concentrate all my mental effort on begging the universe to change Mateo’s mind, to make him stop looking at me that way, like I was an

apparition or a sorceress or...were those freaking *tears* in his eyes?

But the universe was not on Team Elyse today.

Max's Beta, the second most powerful member of the Manhattan pack sank to his knees in his impeccable two-thousand-dollar Tom Ford suit like he was one of Ayla's hippies, his dark head bowed.

"Elyse, I am yours to command."

This is bad..

Max's head snapped toward us, and he jumped up from his chair, nearly knocking it over in his surprise. "What in the Gods' name are you doing, Mateo?!"

Double fluff.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Elyse, who the hell are these smelly weirdos?” My twin demanded five minutes later as soon as the Children of Leto filed into the room, bowing low before both of us. I would’ve thought Kiana would have been more into the whole worship bit, but occasionally, it was obvious we were cut from the same cloth. She desired very specific kinds of attention, and this... this was not it.

“Kiana, for once, could you just try to be nice?” I implored, smacking Jasper’s hand away as he reached for my collarbone.

The vegan-leather and tie-dyed cotton coterie that was the Children of Leto could not have been more out of place than in Max’s office with its kitchen-island sized desk, eight-foot windows overlooking Central Park, and scattering of Victorian-era furnishings as intentionally ornate as the handwoven Persian rug if they had been on their way to the Met gala.

“Seriously, what does bathing in a vat of patchouli have to do with prophecy?” My sister sidled closer to me and hissed beneath her breath, and for a moment, I felt a flush of warmth for this glimpse of camaraderie long ago lost.

“Mirror twins,” Ayla breathed, her eyes dreamy. “Just like Chann and Marrak. I can’t believe we’re fortunate enough to have found you.”

The only person in the room more annoyed to see the Children of Leto than my sister was Max, his nose frozen in a wrinkled position that marred his otherwise dashing visage.

“*I’d say this is a disaster,*” Evan seethed, as Monty began audibly praying in his direction. “*But it’s not. It’s a cluster—*”

“*Shut it,*” I fumed at Evan. I didn’t love Evan’s apparent open door to my private headspace. My mind was crowded enough with my wolf pointing out my shortcomings at every turn. The only thing welcome about Mateo having summoned the Children was that Ayla might have some insight into what the ever-loving-hell was happening.

“Please,” Max said, pinching the bridge of his nose and looking even wearier, if that were possible, than he had just ten minutes prior. “Explain it to me again. I’m having trouble registering this...uh, this...”

“Utter nonsense?” Kiana offered.

His mouth twisted in what I assumed from his scent was deepened annoyance that he agreed with my ever-disagreeable sister, but all he said was, “Enough. I’m the Alpha of Manhattan. All of this, *whatever* we want to call it, is happening in my territory. I need to understand it.”

Mateo cleared his throat, his gaze straying toward me with the goggle-eyes typical of the Children. “Well, Your Grace...” he began.

I rolled my eyes. I’d never heard Mateo use the honorific with Max. The power in the room seemed to have upended him.

I wanted to retch.

“...when I joined the Children, I was barely more than a pup, just in college, and the prophecy seemed like a piece of history that was never to be reborn. But what we know, if we

believe history, was that Chann and Marrak had special powers. And if what Elyse has told us is true—”

“It is,” Evan interrupted dryly. “Trust me.” He flattened himself against the wall as Monty stepped closer. “*Girl,*” He shot me a look of desperation. “*Please tell them to stop encroaching on my personal space. I will have to rearrange a few hairstyles if they don’t stop.*”

“*I got you,*” I replied, holding back a welcome smile. Now that Evan was a shifter, I had to consider what it could mean if he followed through, but I was pleased to see his wit intact, even if his dignity was in question.

“Ayla,” I said, standing as tall as my five-foot six-inches allowed, “Evan and I — and I’m going to go out on a limb and include my sister—would appreciate it if you and your friends would keep your hands to yourselves. We’re not specimens.”

“Of course,” Ayla said, startling as if from her own reverie and waving Monty and Jasper back, her hands flapping in a deranged semaphore.

This drew a derisive snort from Kiana and a sigh of relief from Evan, who had been millimeters away from melting into the jacquard wallpaper.

“As I was saying...” Mateo continued, the worship in his tone modulated back a bit.

Thank the Gods.

“...the prophecy stated,” he went on, “that one day mirror twins would arise, just like Chann and Marrak, who would hold the same powers. Knowing that Evan was a human who was transformed to a shifter by Elyse’s bite would imply that she and Kiana are those twins, and that Evan is the first shifter created from a human, since the very first shifters were created by Chann.”

All eyes slid toward Evan, even Jayla’s, huddled as she was in the couch’s corner. I didn’t need her acrid scent to tell me she wanted out of her imprisonment with an entire pack of movie-style monsters. Her near fetal crouch said it all, as if she

could become an actual couch cushion and escape notice, just by folding in on herself.

“What good is it being the twin to the *Promised One*,” Kiana spat, “if I don’t have the bite as well? Why would the Gods need a spare?”

Her stiff spine and lifted chin spoke of hauteur, but the disappointment in my sister’s voice seeped through the exterior like blood through her lacerated shiftskin. My heart squeezed. I didn’t even want the power. I wished I could just gift it to her and be done with it.

Are you sure about that? Where would Evan be then?

“Oh, but you misunderstand, fellow Promised One,” Ayla replied to Kiana, startled. “Both twins are crucial to fulfilling the prophecy.

“Before we go deeper on the prophecy,” Max interrupted, “I just want to be sure I fully understand you all correctly. So, a month ago, Evan here was a human. One of Elyse’s friends, like this one.” He waved at Jayla, who committed further to her Incredible Shrinking Woman act in response. “And you *all* were on that damned *subway*...when you were attacked by those anti-shifters who harmed Evan so badly he would have died, and then Elyse bit him, and he...changed?”

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“*Why* did you bite him, if I might ask?” Mateo’s curiosity got the better of him and he interjected.

My chest cinched as the memory surfaced like a zombie reanimating—replaying those thirty seconds in halting jerks. Evan’s head open and pulpy. His pulse weak but unwilling to stop. My stomach turned, and I fought the urge to gag.

I didn’t recall any conscious thought—in fact, my head had been splitting with pain and flashing light. I had only known that I couldn’t lose him too. After that, it was like my jaws had opened on their own...

“My wolf took over,” I said quietly. “She knew what to do.”

“Your wolf... took over?” Max looked uncertain. “I see. But why did you two feel the need to conceal this event, Elyse?”

“Sebastian told us to,” Evan interjected. “*We* were following orders.”

“We were in shock. It wasn’t like any of us had any idea what had happened or why. And with the division in the packs, Sebastian was afraid that someone would try to hurt me if they knew.”

“I still don’t see why it had to be concealed from *me*,” Max muttered, running a hand through his thick hair. “I’m not just Sebastian’s Alpha. I’m also his father.”

At this, my skin prickled.

About that. My wolf prodded me.

Now is definitely not the time.

But he’s angry that he’s been kept in the dark.

Trust me. There are only so many revelations someone can absorb at once. Besides, we agreed we needed to tell Sebastian first.

My wolf acquiesced, but her prickling agitation swirled beneath my skin.

“I think it’s important that we let the Children elaborate regarding the prophecy...” Mateo interjected, much to my relief. Anything to distract from my last secret.

Ayla waved at one of the remaining leather chairs. “Shall we all have a seat, then?”

Max nodded and everyone sat, even Kiana, although hers was more of a jiggling, impatient perch on the arm of the couch.

“The important thing to understand about the prophecy was not that those with the powers of Chann and Marrak would return, but that they would do so when they were needed, when a threat to our kind would arise that would require new strength.” Ayla began. “Leto focused on uniting the two of you, over giving you all the details. At least, where I can assume anything about the motives of the great Goddess.” She tucked her chin.

“But I’m still not clear on what I have to do with any of this,” Kiana said, her bottom lip pushing out.

“The powers are twinned, their purpose at odds. Both will be needed, to honor the Gods. The great foe is coming, with powers to fight. The descendants will perish unless we unite.” Monty intoned in a singsong, his body swaying.

“Say what?” Evan smirked, shaking his head. “Are we rapping now? Because I just kind of assumed that was off limits with every other fun thing—”

“Hush, you!” Ayla snapped. “You know nothing, pup, for all that you are a portent.”

Evan’s face fell and reddened. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Ayla, I hardly think—” Mateo began.

“That’s enough!” she retorted, and I jumped, sitting up straight. I’d never heard her raise her voice above a damned whisper and now she was nearly shouting. “Have you all forgotten your history?”

Her question practically echoed against the silence of our collective reply. Even Max looked abashed, his eyes wide, but his mouth clamped shut.

Ayla shook her head, pressing her palms to her thighs with a sigh. “Well then, let me remind you all. Prophecy states that a great foe, flanked by greed and hunger, will rise against the descendants of Chann and Marrak. In case you haven’t been paying attention, this includes all of us. And only through the balance of creation and destruction can we hope to defeat him and spare shifters and humans alike from his wrath.”

“From his wrath,” Jaspar parroted quietly, shivering, his eyes shut.

My skin crawled.

“Right,” Kiana broke in with a roll of her eyes. “As in Damien. We’re aware. And we nearly had him earlier today, if the so-called *Promised One*...” her eyes shifted to me, “... hadn’t interfered.”

An icy shudder washed over me, and it wasn’t because my sister had attempted, once again, to blame me for all the world’s ills. For the first time since Charlie had taught me the phrase, I understood what humans meant by “someone walking over my grave.” I wished I didn’t.

“Oh no, young one,” Ayla said, her voice returning to its usual softness. “The one you call Damien, though powerful from all you say, would barely be a servant to the coming foe.”

The silence deepened, the ticking of the old-fashioned grandfather clock in the corner resounding like the slamming of my heartbeat in my ears. Even Kiana shrank into herself, pensive and subdued.

“That’s why Leto implored you two to put aside your differences.” Ayla added, reaching for Kiana’s hand, and then mine, placing our hands together.

The memory of the last time Kiana and I had held hands filled my mind and I fought the prick of tears. It had been our tenth birthday, when our father had included a ceremony to honor our mother. He’d never done that before or since, claiming we shouldn’t have the “Joy of our birth overshadowed by loss,” but he’d wanted us to say goodbye once we were old enough to understand. The day had been a blur of formality and pomp that had meant little to me, except...

“Do you remember?” I murmured to my sister, staring at our hands before realizing that the words were forming.

“How could I forget?” she replied quietly.

Standing at our mother's grave with wreaths of moonflower woven with tiny violet lupine blossoms, the wind whipped our blond braids from our shoulders.

The iridescent glisten of tears on our father's cheeks... the only I'd ever seen him set free.

The thin frame of a male with sandy hair and a whisper of a smile standing close, hovering like a penumbra beneath our pain.

Hatred stirred beneath my skin like my wolf.

"If this threat is greater than Damien, sister," I said firmly, "Then we must unite." I squeezed her hand.

She said nothing, her jaw working as she digested the news. But she squeezed back.

It would have to do.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Ruby?” I called from the closet. “Do you know where Kiana is?” I pulled my now clean hair into a high pony as quickly as I could and jammed my legs into skinny jeans, hopping in a circle and cursing as I tried to work my toes through the ends with limited success.

“I believe Maximo called a car to take her home.” Ruby replied, poking her head in, and biting back a smile. “Here, let me help,” she offered, heading my way.

I made a face. “How on Earth can anyone help someone else get into skinny jeans without giving them a wedgie?”

She stopped. “Fair enough. Take this, though.” She handed me a light grey raincoat. “It’s sprinkling.”

“Ha!” I replied, as I finally freed my feet and jammed them into my favorite checkerboard Vans. “That, Ruby, can’t be true. The skies have already opened, and I’m drowning as it is.”

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as all that, Elyse,” she said as I waved to her on my way out the door. It was some comfort that she’d finally relaxed enough to use my first name, given that now everyone else I knew was starting to treat me like I

was the Empress in Sebastian's beloved *The NeverEnding Story* or something.

I hurried to the elevator, determined to corral my sister into a real conversation before she disappeared on me again. I knew she'd taken Mateo's offer to clean up before departing as Ruby had grabbed some things for her from my closet. When she'd asked what Kiana would like, I'd told her to take everything I'd declared horrific and that should do it.

When I hit the lobby and raced outside to the pavement in front of the park, I saw my sister stomping toward the darkened park, looking like she'd stepped off a runway in a tangerine silk shift over black-on-black leopard print leather-look jeans and camel stiletto booties, her now perfectly made-up face topped with a tousled cascade of *Charlie's Angels* curls. Ruby had nailed it. It was a good thing that look was departing with my sister because I'd never have pulled it off.

"Kiana!" I called as I darted across the cross walk, which was still crowded at this time of night, thanks to the start of tourist season. I pulled up to her on the other side, huffing and staring up into her pinched face. "I have...to...talk...to you," I wheezed.

She sighed, tossing a curl over her shoulder in annoyance. "Is it intentional, or are you incapable of doing normal things without making a massive scene?"

"What? I..." Stopping, I cut off the growl rising in my throat. Like I was the one who was irritating. Not Ms. Houdini who'd disappeared on me for a month after lighting our lives on fire. I took a long, deep breath in my best imitation of a guru so that I could find my inner calm. Unfortunately, the second my mind cleared, a derailed train of questions ran through it at top speed and piled up on itself.

Why had she been following me?

Why hadn't she spoken with me?

What did she think of what we'd learned from Leto?

What did she think about Evan and me and the Children and...

“How long have you been following me?” I blurted.

She tapped her toes impatiently, glancing at her phone, mostly, I assumed, so she wouldn't have to look at me. “A few weeks.” She admitted. “Basically since, you know...”

My wolf stirred, but we both must have decided to let that go, because she kept silent. No need to rehash Kiana nearly killing our only remaining parent.

“Why?” I said, after a moment. “And why didn't you just talk to me? After what Leto told us —”

“We don't understand *what* Leto told us. I'm still not convinced we didn't suffer a dual hallucination.”

I rolled my eyes. “C'mon, Kiana. You can't possibly mean that *now*.”

Holding out her nails and examining them, she shrugged. “It's as plausible an explanation as an actual Goddess whisking us away to some shifter la-la land to give us a lesson in sisterly duty.” She turned and met my eyes, her deep baby blues a mirror of my own. “Speaking of which, I have a question for you.”

I startled and took a step backward. I'd been so intent on my own interrogation that it hadn't occurred to me that she might have things to ask me. My heart stuttered now as I wondered what pileup of questions might be eating at my sister. “Okay, shoot.”

“Why aren't you and Sebastian mated yet?”

Her crimson lip curled as my face turned roughly the same color. Damn our loudmouthed pheromones broadcasting our sexual status to every shifter we met. Not that Kiana could talk. She *looked* like she knew her way around a male, but her pheromones told a different story. Just like mine.

“I mean it,” she added, her booted foot giving a tiny stamp. “You obviously care for him, so what gives?”

She makes a good point.

You can't possibly expect me to listen to you if you're going to side with her. You're just horny.

And you're in denial.

Turning out my personal Greek chorus for a moment—thank the Gods Evan wasn't here to add to my embarrassment—I looked her in the eye and told the truth I hadn't totally admitted to anyone else, not even Evan., “I like him when he's kind and thoughtful, but not when he's being a demanding, authoritarian Alpha.”

...*Hole*, I thought, followed by an immediate wave of guilt. I'd promised not more than a few hours ago that I'd try harder to understand him. And that was *before* he'd been shot.

Kiana laughed. “Gods, does that sound familiar. Poor Sebastian. He'll never be able to please you, entitled as you are.”

I stepped back as if I'd been slapped. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“I mean,” she leaned in, her eyes narrowing, “That you've never considered what it takes to be an Alpha because you never thought you'd have to be one. No one has ever put the burden of everyone's safety on your shoulders. You've never had to stare back at a roomful of eyes and make a decision that could be wrong, that could cause members of your pack to come to harm. Likability is a privilege the powerful do not have, Elyse.”

“There've been plenty of Alphas who have been beloved.” I spluttered, still stung by the entitled label being thrown at me by someone who'd felt entitled to torture me for years.

“Not by everyone in their packs!” She snapped. “Or did you just ignore everything we learned in History? Alphas rarely are in a position to make everyone happy. There are always those, just like you, who think they know better, or would do it differently, or who could somehow maintain a

happy-go-lucky relationship with everyone if only they were in charge. But trust me, it doesn't work that way."

She stopped her tirade and drew a long breath, blowing it out slowly, her eyes closed. For a moment I wondered if she were channeling whatever her equivalent of a guru might be. What would be calming for Kiana?

Kickboxing instructor?

You're hilarious.

"What you're asking Sebastian isn't fair," she said quietly. "Who he is when he's not being Alpha, the version of him that you like, I'm willing to bet that's who he really is."

I eyed her, my emotions on guard, waiting for the insult that was sure to follow. After so many years, shielding myself was a reflex. But what I saw was something new...or something I hadn't seen in so long that it was unfamiliar. She was serious. Her gaze had softened, and I looked down to see that she'd touched me lightly, on the wrist. It was borderline gentle. It reminded me of who she'd been, at times, before Damian poisoned her against me. I shivered, torn between dueling desires to ward her off and draw her close.

"I mean it, Elyse," she added. "You have a gift for allowing people to be who they are. Like your human friends. Your kindness was why they never suspected that you were anything but a simple, authentic human. But you'd never have been allowed to grow into who you are if you'd been the one training to be Alpha."

I dropped my head, fighting the ache of tears that were gathering in the back of my nose and throat. The hollow that not having a sister all these years had left inside me had never healed. I'd filled it with anger and jealousy and a lot of stupid movie retribution scenes, but that was all just paper over an open wound. When I thought of who we'd have been if things had been different, the hollow throbbed.

"If that were the case," I said, "If things were reversed, maybe you could've had the chance to be who you really were

meant to be. You could have been kind and likable too.”

Her hand fell away from my arm as she let a bitter laugh float on the breeze. “No, there’s no secret princess hidden beneath this bitch exterior,” she said, standing straighter as her black Navigator turned the corner and headed our way. “This is who I was meant to be.”

For a moment, we stood, inches apart, the wind comingling our scents, so similar that strangers often failed to tell them apart, missing the tinge of granite and pine that was her versus the talc and maple that was me. I reached forward, wanting so badly to fill that hollow, but she stepped back.

“I have to go.” She waved at the driver of the car as he stepped out and held open the door. She started to walk away and then turned back, “Oh, and no matter what’s happened, you should know that I have zero intention of giving up my leadership of the Bronx pack that I’ve literally killed myself to earn all these years.”

The hollow was growing the more her words dug into me, carving it more deeply.

Because she was right.

I’d never asked myself why she’d changed so much, what had made her into what she became. Instead, I’d just sulked and comforted myself with make believe. Like Sebastian, actually.

Shit. I’m the Alphahole.

No, darling. You’re imperfect. Like all living beings.

“Elyse,” she called as she stepped into the car. “If we’re going to unite against the ah...” She looked around at the crowds, choosing her words carefully, “...enemy, then I think you need to make it official. Give Sebastian the chance you never gave me.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

As I approached Sebastian's room, a mixture of butterflies and fire churned in my gut as I flip-flopped between anxiety and anger. When I entered, the medic was just leaving, his easy smile and thumbs up banishing my butterflies. I took a deep breath and blew it out.

"Is he awake?" I murmured.

"Yes," he said quietly. "He still needs to rest, though, and he's complaining of boredom, so I'm sure he'll be happy that you're here to visit."

He left quietly, as did the guard, while I hung my jacket, pulling the Twizzlers I'd brought from the pocket and slipping out of my shoes. I padded down the parquet hall to the bedroom. I stopped at the small wet bar on the way, snagging a soda. It did my heart good to know that Sebastian was well enough to be antsy. But since he was still being told to rest, I was sure he could use some creature comforts. I had to admit that I wasn't just relieved to know that he was recovering. I was excited to see him.

"And don't forget to bring a side of sauce with that burger, Fred, ah...oh." Sebastian's voice trailed off as he saw me, his cheeks reddening as he pulled up the sheet. "Hey, Elyse."

I nearly tripped over the thick flokati rug in surprise when I saw him. . Thank the Gods he was wearing basketball shorts, or I'd have caught my toe harder and done a full faceplant onto his bed. As it was, I was standing, slack-jawed, staring at the olive skin and taut muscles that would have been the picture of male perfection were they not marred by the ruddy bandage and violet bruising where the bullet had exited his pectoral muscle.

He was also in bed, something I'd never seen.

Except in your dreams.

Down, girl. Now is not the time.

If you say so.

My wolf faded into the background, or at least, her voice did. The instinctive tightening of my muscle as she circled beneath my skin, pacing with heat, was less easy to ignore. That said, my brain was consumed at the moment with the vision of my possible betrothed, wounded, but strong, his body propped against the chalk linen tufted headboard, his dark hair tumbling into his eyes. I smiled, doing my best to ignore the heat that had risen in my own cheeks. "So glad to see you sitting up and looking so well," I said softly.

The truth of these words hit me as they left my trembling lips. Seeing the color in his cheeks and twinkle in his eye... something in me that I hadn't even recognized I'd been gripping released, like the way you could sometimes be so cold that you barely felt it, until you finally came inside, and the warmth stole over you.

He's healing.

Yes. We weren't too late.

Until this moment, I'd been so apprehensive that I'd turn the corner to find the half-dead zombie we'd dragged across the threshold a few hours ago, that seeing him this well left me fighting the urge to melt into the bed and puddle there, gasping.

“And ordering food in the middle of the night,” I added, with a light laugh. “Shake Shack, perhaps?”

He nodded, a sheepish grin crossing his face.

“Thanks for coming to see me,” he said, grabbing a nearby tank top and yanking it over his head, wincing as it got twisted and stuck halfway on.

“Here,” I said, rushing forward to help. “You shouldn’t strain yourself.” Though he seemed about to protest, he closed his mouth and grimaced as he lost his grip on the cloth. Imagining that my hands were light as air, I pulled the rolled section, making sure not to put pressure on the wound, my fingers brushing lightly over his skin, raising goosebumps where they’d trailed. He’d be better in a day, but for him to show any pain told me that bullet wound still packed a sting that would’ve floored me.

“Much appreciated, Elyse,” he said, looking me in the eye and settling back again. “Did you come here just to check on me? I’m sure you were told I’d be fine.”

His tone become distant, trending toward the Alpha-him and the flames that had danced in my belly on my way here sputtered out.

“I wanted to see for myself,” I replied, cooling my tone to match the temperature shift in his.

“And that’s it?”

“And...” I paused, irked that he was right. I wasn’t just there to check on his health. Or rather, now that I was sure he was going to be okay, a second purpose had arisen. “...I thought we might use this opportunity to talk.”

Better than text.

Maybe.

“I thought so. Well, you have a captive audience, so...” He paused, his mouth quirking up. “Shoot.”

“Ha, ha.” I settled lightly on the bed beside him. “I’m glad to see that the bullet didn’t pass through your sense of humor. That would have been a tragedy for all.”

His smirk disappeared, and I laughed for real. “I’m teasing, not poking. But I *am* annoyed with you.”

“How could I possibly be on the shit list this time?” He pouted in the direction of his bandage. “If this were a movie...”

“I know what would happen if this were a movie,” I snapped, flustered. “But this isn’t about today. It’s about how you’ve been treating me ever since you released me.”

“Seriously?” Sebastian groaned. “We already talked about this, Elyse. You asked me for space—”

“I never asked you to bolt in the opposite direction every time you laid eyes on me, and I certainly never asked you to act jealous of my gay best friend on the few occasions you were forced to interact with me. It’s... extremely unappealing. And I think you’ve seen enough movies to know that. So, why?”

“You know why.” His jaw clenched, the uncharacteristic shadow of stubble dancing as he bit at his lip.

My heart squeezed. Maybe the question wasn’t fair.

Or maybe you’re asking it wrong.

I stared down at my jeans, tracing the seams with my fingertips rather than meet his eyes, my throat tightening. All this truth-telling was making me feel like I needed an oxygen mask to drop from the ceiling. In my family, vulnerability invited abuse, not love. I didn’t know how to ask for what I needed. Not really.

“You know how I feel about you, and you know why I believe in it, so why don’t you know why it’s been impossible for me to be around you until yesterday when... it seemed like maybe...” He paused, picking at the pearlescent embroidery on the white duvet covert. “You know, I thought when you

first told me you didn't feel the that you were lying because you were mad, or scared, just confused. But as time passed, I started to believe you."

My mouth dropped open and I clamped it shut.

"You...do?" I stammered. "Why? How?"

"I believe it because if you'd felt the fate bond, you'd be completely unable to ignore or deny it. You'd be a slave to a driving, primal urgent need to mate with me...like I am for you." He looked up, his eyes grazing over me with a dark intensity that burned through me. "And I don't want that to scare you. I would never... I am in complete control, but this... this isn't something that's happened before. Fated mates always feel the same thing. They always... mate. So, this is taking some getting used to, and it certainly wasn't anything I could get used to *around* you."

The blistering heat in Sebastian's eyes filled me from my toes to my scalp like magma welling up through a growing volcano. I tore my gaze from the length of his clavicle where it wound beneath the strap of the tank top and met the rise in his massive shoulders.

"I'd love to be able to shut that voice up..." he went on, "...and spend time with you like a normal shifter. Go on normal dates. And even do stupid mundane things together like grab snacks and watch *Alma Mater Animalis* on the couch together."

"So, Netflix without the chill?" I said, doing my best to conceal my embarrassment with a light laugh. He had no idea how much I wanted the same thing.

He reached out a hand and his fingers grazed my cheek, wiping away a stray tear.

"More like Netflix without my wolf howling, 'Claim her.'"

I leaned into his palm and closed my eyes for one second, breathing in the deep musk of desire flowing from him. I could picture it, the images coming together from the tiny moments we'd stolen on the tram, walking to Shake Shack, even in my

dream, fictional though it may have been. And as soon as I saw the possibility of our future, I knew the answer to our problem. I opened my eyes, seeing their blue depths reflected in the light of his own.

“So, claim me,” I said softly.

He blinked, once. His head gave a little shake, like he hadn’t understood me and needed to shake what he’d heard out. “Um...Did you...Are you...What?”

His chest rose and fell visibly, his breath quickening, and like a contagion, my own chest began dancing, seeking clear air in the heated cloud that was thickening around us. His fingers curled into the linens, bunching them up into roses of white satin in his fists.

“That’s the answer, Sebastian. I know it. My sister. My father. Even Charlie...they were right. Human movies *did* put ideas in my head about how love should be.” I shook my head, my thoughts growing clearer with each word, my direction surer. “But we’re *not* human, and if Kiana was strong enough to do her duty for the packs, then I should be also. I am the Alpha, after all.”

“Wow,” he said, his grip on the sheets releasing as he sat back and blew out a long breath. “That’s gotta be the least romantic Act Three speech I’ve ever heard. Seriously, would you say that to me if I were about to take off on an airplane to leave forever?”

Despite his attempt at levity, the hurt in his voice, and his scent, was front and center. I reached for his hand and scooped closer to him, placing his hand back on my cheek. “Okay, I can do better,” I said, “because I think you’re missing the point.”

His thumb traced across my bottom lip, and I closed my eyes, the lids fluttering. My wolf was right. I *did* want him. He might not be my fated, but few shifters found a fated match. There was so much else that was right. Why let this one thing be in the way? And why let the fear of losing him if we

weren't fated keep us from whatever we could have right now? Every couple in every movie I'd ever loved had to live like that every day of their fictional lives... because that's what humans *did*. We could be both.

"My point is that maybe... we can build something real once we quiet the wolves." I offered shyly and then laughed. "Because mine is getting really fluffing annoying about it too."

Sebastian sat up, his brow furrowed with concern. He leaned in and placed his other hand on my other cheek, cupping my face. His eyes searched mine. "Are you sure, Elyse? I meant it when I released you."

He was so close that I could feel the energy of his skin, the naked need pouring off him with a snapping scent like a forest fire. If what I felt was even a tiny measure of what his wolf was crying out for, then the last month must have been torture for him.

"Yes." The word left my throat in a breathy gasp as his fingers wound themselves into my hair and he pressed his forehead to mine. "Please."

"May I kiss you?" His left hand ran down my shoulder to the small of my back, pulling me closer. He hissed a little as I leaned into him.

"I'm sorry!" I pulled back quickly, but he pulled me back.

"I'll heal." He growled and then softened, repeating, "May I kiss you?"

My hands wound around him, trailing over his warm skin, and sliding beneath his shirt. Every time he moved, his muscles tightened and rolled beneath my fingertips. I could barely breathe. I smiled softly. "As you wish."

He leaned down, his soft lips meeting mine. They pressed softly against mine at first, exploring the shape of my mouth, curving around my generous bottom lip, and arcing lightly over the bow of my top lip. When they opened slightly, and he tasted them with his tongue, I moaned, leaning forward, my

mouth growing hungry, my nails combing through the hair at the nape of his neck. His breath came harder as he pulled me down to lie on top of him. I swept at my tumble of blonde hair as it cascaded over us, and I swung my right leg over him, leaning down so that the length of me was pressed into him, as his mouth wound its way down my neck.

I tugged at his shirt, pulling it up at the waist and running my hands over his furry washboard abs, my own muscles clenching. His hands found my waist and began tugging at my shirt, and then he stopped, breaking our kiss and gasping.

“Are you still sure?” He asked, his voice ragged.

“100%” I said, practically lunging at him in my hunger. My wolf wanted to devour him whole.

“Good,” he said, his words disappearing into my collarbone with his mouth. “Because I hear consent is sexy.”

I half-laughed, half-groaned as I bit his shoulder, doing my best to keep my fangs under wraps.

Sorry, girl. I thought to my wolf. Tonight is just for me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Sebastian! Kenzo says you’ve gotta come now...” Evan’s voice trailed off as he came to a screeching halt in the doorway to the bedroom.

I stopped dead in the opposite doorway, where I’d just emerged from the bathroom, my hair twisted up into a towel and wearing one of Sebastian’s oversized Nets jerseys while I waited for Ruby to bring a change of clothes.

Sebastian was dressed and sitting in one of the cream and navy brocade chairs by the window, reading through pack business briefs with one of the two steaming cups of coffee he’d ordered us that morning. On the marble table in the adjoining room was a smorgasbord of room service breakfast waiting beneath gleaming silver cloche covers. Sebastian had declared himself ravenous after last night, and while he’d found it sweet of me to bring the Twizzlers, neither they nor the Shake Shack that eventually arrived were going to fill him up.

When he’d called in the order, we’d been wrapped around one another in a state that would have caused me to die of embarrassment had Evan chosen that moment to barge in. Not that this was that much better. My friend stood transfixed with

a lopsided grin on his face, his nose twitching, merriment dancing in his eyes.

“You smell different this morning, Cherie.”

I wanted to sink through the floor, but in an attempt to save my dignity, I drew myself up and eyed him. *“Don’t judge. He’s my future mate, after all.”*

And what a mate he is!

My overheated wolf dragged a montage of steamy scenes to the front of my mind, yipping and biting for my attention like a pup, and I blushed.

“Seems more like your current mate,” Evan parried.

Yes! Current mate. Let’s mate again now!

Any sane thought I had was becoming inundated beneath the tide of my wolf’s lusty sense of urgency. I stepped forward as if tugged, my fingers drifting forward...

Seeking.

Hungry.

Ready to travel new highways of Sebastian’s flesh, not caring one whit that Evan was standing there.

Good Gods, what’s wrong with you? I half-chided, half-begged my wolf. *Get ahold of yourself!*

I swear she giggled in response. I was at a loss.

“Evan.” Sebastian responded quietly without looking up. “Seems like knocking would be a good idea in the future, yes?”

“Uh, yes, Sebastian, um, sorry, uh, sir, crap. I don’t know what to call you now.” He tilted his head. “Are you my stepdad?”

Sebastian’s brow furrowed with confusion, and as much as I wanted to kill Evan, I also just wanted to go over and lick all those little lines, which was... weird, yeah? A weird thing to

be into, but as of last night, there wasn't really anything involving Sebastian that I *wasn't* into.

"Maybe you should share why you barged in like your fur was on fire?" I prompted. "Before I set it that way myself?"

"Oh yeah! Sorry, truly. Um, Kenzo sent me because things have gotten way worse since last night. It seems Damien's human mob never went home, and now it's grown ten-fold and shut down 79th across the park by Belvedere castle in a massive anti-shifter protest rally. Max wants to see you both in the meeting room. He has a plan."

"Elyse," Sebastian said, rising, and the commanding tone no longer bothered me quite so much because there were... there were so many things he could tell me to do to him... and things I could tell him to do to me... because we were equals here alone, even if the rest of the park wouldn't see it that way. I was his, and he was mine.

Claimed.

"...join us once Ruby has brought your clothes..." Sebastian was saying, and I realized he was planning to leave without me.

"No!" I cried, so loudly that both males jumped. "Sorry," I lowered my voice, "But if you could just wait for a second," I began, stopping as I heard the whine in my voice.

"What the hell is up with you?" Evan's tone had shifted from amused to downright concerned. "*Was the experience so good that you've lost your mind?*"

Yes! My wolf exulted.

Kind of, I thought, but just to myself.

I tuned back into my body, confused, and found an aching need that screamed at me the farther I was, or would be, from Sebastian.

Just then there was a gentle knock and as Ruby entered, I sighed in relief. "See, she's here. You can wait for me."

Sebastian strode my way, and my tension eased with each step he took closer to me. “Elyse, I have to go now. If there’s any chance we can get ahead of this, we need every second. I’ll just be upstairs, okay? Come find me.”

Come find meeeeeeee.

He leaned in and gave me a soft kiss on the cheek and whirled out the door.

My emotions ping-ponged inside me like tiny Molotov cocktails of instability: frightened to watch him leave, angry that he’d leave me behind, even for a few minutes, desperate to grab him on his way out and wrestle him back down onto the bed...it was madness. I’d become my own worst nightmare—a Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

“C’mon Ruby,” I said, “No time for frills, I just need to haul ass.”

“Noted, Elyse.” She smiled primly, leaving the saucy grins to others, which I appreciated. “I’ll be speedy.”

In the ten minutes—that seemed like ten hours—that it took for Ruby to get my hair dried and contained while I pulled on the joggers, long-sleeved t-shirt, and running shoes she’d brought for the urgent occasion, my thoughts chased their tails and I grew more infuriated with myself with each moment.

What is this? I finally asked my wolf. Do you have any idea what’s going on?

No. But I feel amazing. And awful. Like I can’t focus on anything but my male.

I’m aware.

And then it hit me.

OMG. Do you think...? Is this what the fate bond feels like?

The next thing that emerged from her side of my brain was a lupine version of “He-Loves-Me-He-Loves-Me-Not.” Okay,

maybe *I* hadn't become a Manic-Pixie-Dream-Girl, but my wolf was well on her way. She wasn't going to be any help. But by now, I didn't think I needed it. I'd figured it out.

I raced out the door the second Ruby said, "Done."

That's gotta be it. This feeling is exactly how Sebastian described the fate bond. Gods, it's appalling. Something about last night must have ended any suppression that might have been left from Damien.

You've got that right.

Alright, you need to shut it for a while. Not that I needed to respond at all. She was back singing to herself in la-la-land.

I turned down the hall to the conference room, past the business aquarium that was the executive offices, and into the broadcast studio that was the security center for the Manhattan pack. As the guards dressed in crisp black suits parted, I entered just in time to see ten screens showing Damien's smug face shouting from the parapet of Belvedere Castle, Yara at his side.

I clutched the door frame, barely breathing.

Thinner by at least ten pounds, Yara's jaw was loose, and her hands clung lightly to a placard on a stick reading, "Eat shift and die!" in red, dripping letters. Though she was clearly shouting along with the crowd, her eyes were dead, shadowed and fixed on a point somewhere far in the distance.

My gaze flew to Sebastian, and his eyes couldn't have been less dead. The anguish in those dark pools made me ache all the way to my bones. I stumbled in deeper and clung to a nearby chair to stop myself from running to him and holding him so tightly that he'd stop breathing. At least now I understood what was happening to me so I could prevent myself from looking foolish in public.

And it *was* public. The conference room was jammed with shifters who were sitting, standing, and leaning against walls. In my immediate view were Maximo, Mateo, Kenzo, Sebastian, Evan, and at least seven other Manhattan shifters

who I didn't know well, but I'd seen working security details. The head muscle, I presumed. Even Ayla was there, though she'd had the sense to leave her two space-cadet shadows in their quarters. Maybe she was smarter than I'd given her credit for.

Regardless, this was a crowd and the most serious of occasions. I'd have to just find a way to push this loopy fate bond into the periphery somehow. Sebastian was Alpha Heir here, and he couldn't have me fawning or swooning over him like a fool.

"Hello, Elyse. I'm glad you're here." Max said. "I want everyone to hear the plan." His voice was firm, but his eyes darted to the screen now and again, flinching whenever the TV crews focused on Yara.

"Count me in," I said, stepping forward and placing a light hand on Sebastian's shoulder. A bolt of need shot from my fingertips to the depths of my core, and my wolf... I had the sense of her circling and digging at something... nesting...

Absolutely not! I roared. *You stop that right now!*

She did not. And I felt a prickle of mostly irrational fear. Sebastian had kept the word he gave my friends on the subway and we'd been careful... all three times... and would continue to be for a very long time. Regardless of any ideas *she* might be getting. I blushed though. What was Sebastian's version of this feeling? Did he dream of hunting buffalo on the plains, dragging a big bloody carcass back to his first litter...

"Elyse, are you listening?" Sebastian asked gently. "Father is speaking to you."

I shook my head and swallowed hard. I did not care for this *at all*. "Sorry. I'm just... distracted..." I waved at the TV screen as a cover."

"Yes, well, I know I told you otherwise yesterday," Max continued now that he had my attention, "but things have gotten considerably worse. The crowd he's commanding

contains close to a thousand humans now. We have to stop him now before he gains momentum.”

“What are you proposing?” I asked, confused.

“That we go down in force and show the humans that shifters generally can be trusted, just not *that* shifter.”

“You mean... reveal ourselves?” I said, my heart rising into my throat.

“Yes, it’s time to come out of the shadows.” Max nodded as if he was sure this would work just because he wanted it too. “We will leave them alone if they leave us alone.”

The room was silent. I looked at everyone, seeking some sort of protest, but the rest seemed resigned to follow their Alpha. It was like a dream and a nightmare rolled into one. Part of me had always wanted this, but after being attacked time and again, I had my doubts now that the humans would want to live peacefully side by side. Even without Damian’s control.

All eyes stared back at me, and it occurred to me that Max was addressing me specifically, out of all these shifters, and I was washed with a prickling sense of anxiety, my skin growing hot and muscles tense.

The air turned heavy, as if it were exerting more pressure on me from all directions. Despite the clarity that he would make the final call in his territory, the Alpha of Manhattan was asking me what I thought of his plan.

Because I was also an Alpha, the rightful leader of another pack, and a victim of Damien’s attacks, and...

Because I created Evan. I was one of the Promised Ones.

I swallowed against the dry knot in my throat.

This is what she meant.

Who? My wolf stopped her cavorting for a moment and tuned in.

Kiana. This is what she meant about pressure. What if others agree with me, that Max's plan may be flawed?

There's only one way to find out.

She was right. I shook my head. "But I thought—"

"Part of being an Alpha is being willing to change strategies when the times demand it." Maximo said. "I believe that the best strategy now is to show we mean no harm and that Damien is an outlier who we will take care of ourselves."

I stopped and considered again. What choice did we have? If we let Damien continue, he would have millions of humans hunting us by nightfall. I sighed.

"The human police may beg to differ on that last part," I replied. His brow furrowed. "But I suggest you go ahead and call the Bronx pack. If there's going to be a confrontation with Damien, Kiana won't want to miss it."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A voice buzzed through Kenzo's radio, and the words clipped. "SecPack Commander, this is Bravo pack. We've made our way to the left flank of the crowd and are in position, over."

Kenzo rolled his eyes, turning it down to a tinny hum. "I swear, man, the Security Pack has been dying to do something like this for a decade. If Mike goes any more Special Forces on us, I'm going to have to remind him who used to dunk on him in gym class."

"You mean Barry?" Sebastian quipped, his lips tight.

Kenzo snorted but didn't respond. I appreciated his restraint. You didn't have to be a lifelong friend to feel the energy rolling off Sebastian. The closer we got to his mother, the antsier he got.

"SecPack Commander." The radio whined again. "All packs are in position and awaiting orders."

My chest tightened. From our location in the stand of oaks north of the Turtle Pond, we couldn't see our forces fanned out around the actual humans, but that last update meant that the time had come.

As if to make this point, Kenzo came to a halt. "This is your stop, you *relatable* kiddos."

“Let it go, Kenzo,” I said. “It’s not our fault we were picked for this.”

“I know,” he sighed. “Just trying to lighten the mood.”

The older members of the Manhattan pack had decided that Sebastian and I should be the ones to appeal to the crowd because we were “young,” “attractive” and “relatable.” For my part, I heard “human-lovers” in the description, which was close enough to the truth to make my mind return, unbidden, to my sister’s accusations. Regardless, I was game, so long as it kept me close to Sebastian. Anything further than ten feet of distance brought something akin to physical pain, as well as incoherent howling from my wolf.

When I get a minute to think, we’re going to figure out this fate bond shit.

What do you mean? I’m in heaven.

You know exactly what I mean.

“I wish we knew if your sister was coming with reinforcements,” Kenzo said, shaking his head. “He’s got this crowd all fired up, and with the other packs refusing to help, we’re kind of out on a limb.” He paused and bit his lower lip. “Plus, she’s hot.”

“Me too,” I said and then realized how it sounded. “To the first part.”

“Both parts.” Kenzo waggled his eyebrows at Sebastian. “Speaking of *parts*...”

Yes! Let’s!

“No,” Sebastian and I snarled in perfect unison. Just as we had done certain other things last night... three times... well, actually for *me*, it was more like—

“Do *you* think she’s coming?” Kenzo asked, and I stared at him in utter confusion until I realized he was all business again.

My skin prickled with anxiety. “Honestly, I can’t predict what Kiana will do these days, but at least we know two things. The first is that she hates him as much as we do, if not more, and the second is that she loves to fight.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sebastian said, his voice low. “If the humans attack, we fight, whether she shows or not.”

With a grim nod, Kenzo turned on his heel and headed away, leaving Sebastian and me alone in the dappled light of the woods behind the Delacorte Theater. Even from this distance we could hear the cries of the crowd in front of the castle. It sounded like the end of *Titanic* when everyone was screaming in the water, and as much as I wanted this to be over, I dreaded the prospect of all those voices being silenced.

I tried not to dwell on the sheer numbers of humans in Damien’s sway. Though we’d placed platoons on all sides, surrounding them, we were outnumbered by at least twenty to one. I bounced on my toes, overflowing with nervous energy.

“I hope that they’ll listen long enough to keep people from getting hurt,” I said.

“Me too, Elyse.” Sebastian started forward, and I grabbed his arm.

“Do you think the humans are the only worry?” I asked, trying not to imagine a mangy shifter of unknown origin emerging from every shadow.

“You mean besides Damien?”

I nodded.

“Let’s hope so. It seems like he did better at trying to kill us with his crazed mob of humans than he did with the weirdo shifters you described.”

“Only once Kiana showed up.”

“But that was because you had no backup but Evan, and as brave as he’s proven to be, he’s still new at this.”

“True,” I said, my heart squeezing with the knowledge that despite being a newbie, Evan was out there with the others of the Manhattan pack, preparing for battle. I wished I could see him with his platoon. It would help me to see that *he* had backup, at least.

“Hey.” Sebastian took my hands and squeezed. “Remember, at the theater Damien had the element of surprise. Don’t you think it’s time we turned the tables?”

I nodded again, more bobblehead than Alpha Heir, my words being eaten by the stomach crawling into my throat.

“Good,” he said, releasing me. “Now let’s go.”

He crouched, creeping through the woods toward the pond and holding aside branches as I followed. Despite the pep talk, I peered over my shoulder at each step.

Keep your eyes on him. Isn’t he handsome when he crouches?

My stomach bounced between anxiety and lust in a nauseating calisthenic routine as I grappled with my wolf for control of my mind.

When he crouches? OMG, please stop! This is serious. I’m on a mission.

Mission-shmission. Let’s just take advantage of all these lovely bushes and crouch together, shall we?

“I’m starting to have more sympathy for your situation than I had in the past,” I murmured to Sebastian.

“I think if we enter the pond there,” he pointed, ignoring me, “the swim across will be shorter and lead us there.”

I considered the path he’d indicated and was impressed. It was a very tactical choice. The exit point he’d chosen on the other side of the pond had easy footholds in the rocks leading up to the back stairs of the castle. It would give us the element of quiet surprise we sought.

See. I chided my wolf. He’s focused on saving the world.

Who cares?

And his mother, your horny bitch.

She's fine! You saw her! She's waited this long!

Exactly! A new even gruffer voice entered the chat. **Come on, dude. These bushes are *lit*. Or they will be with enough friction...**

Sebastian and I stopped dead in our tracks at the same time. His eyes widened.

“Did you...?” I stopped, my eyes joining his. Had my wolf just spoken to...?

“Did *you*?” The color drained from his face.

Why are they so surprised? Sebastian's wolf chuffed at mine.

Why aren't they naked? Mine barked back.

Naked, naked, naked! Sebastian's wolf chanted, and mine howled in return, and then his started howling, and suddenly we were just standing there in the middle of the most important mission of our lives with two sexually rabid animals demanding we strip down and fulfill our procreative destiny.

Hey! My wolf yapped. **Do you have any names picked out?**

“Oh my Gods,” I mouthed, reddening from toe tips to scalp.

Indiana? Obi-Wan? Iron Man? Sebastian's wolf offered up, and Sebastian looked like he was going to throw up. He shook his head. “No. That's not...”

We stared at each other, first in absolute horror, and then... then something shifted. Luckily, not us, not on the outside anyway, but inside... I could feel her taking over, and he was all that she could see in the entire cosmos. He was everything I was headed toward, and the reason for everywhere I'd already been. He was the crux.

“Sebastian,” I mewled pitifully. “I feel it.”

He crossed the distance in a millisecond, the south pole to my north, our charged particles locking tight as he grabbed me and crushed his lips to mine.

Fire burned my skin to peeling from the inside out.

His hands snaked around my waist, pressing me to his chest as I grabbed fistfuls of his hair, my mouth seeking more, my cells insisting that they become one with his. Electricity tingled with every press of his lips as they wound their way down my neck, leaving a physical afterimage.

I may have moaned.

“Death to the shifters!”

“Burn them all!”

Furious shouts drifted through the brambles, yanking us back to the now.

I stopped, panting. “I think we should...”

“Yes.” Sebastian pulled back so hard that I stumbled. “We have to focus.”

Twin wolf howls filled me, and I shook my head. *Fantastic*. As if my wolf and Evan being in my head weren't enough, now Sebastian's wolf could speak with mine. Hadn't anyone heard that three was a crowd? Or four if you counted me, which *I* did, at least. Not so sure about my wolf anymore.

Ignoring the background yelps of frustration that danced inside both our skulls, Sebastian and I wound our way to the edge of the pond.

He turned to me with a wry smile. “We're due for a cold shower anyway, right?”

“Speak for yourself.” I smirked. “I'm looking for the muscle-soothing shower after. Together.”

The lump of his Adam's apple rose and fell as his eyes swept over me. “Gods, you have the worst timing.”

I chuckled, and we both shifted, the levity a welcome distraction, if only momentary. As our wolf bodies slipped into the pond, I shivered, though it wasn't from the water's chill. I would have him again later. As many times as I wanted. Forever. We should probably call the Elder Wolf and make it official though. What we'd done... well, that was very unorthodox. We were just lucky everybody except Evan was too focused on this to notice.

"This way," Sebastian called, swimming ahead. *"And I want you beside or behind me. Not in front. Do you understand?"*

"Yes."

Listening to Sebastian no longer felt like acquiescence or surrender. Maybe because I already had? Or maybe because I knew his command came from a desire to keep me safe. Warmth filled me, and I kicked harder, determined to stay beside, rather than behind him, if I could.

We emerged from the water in silence and shook, droplets splitting the sunlight into a scatter of rainbows. I forced myself to look away from Sebastian, given I was as drawn to his rugged wolf as I was to the movie star version of him. I followed as he ascended the mossy ledges and crept over the shelf to the grey stone stairs of Belvedere Castle. Something gnawed at the back of my mind, and I couldn't help fretting that this setting had the potential to transform from fairy tale to horror flick if we were unsuccessful.

"Are you ready?"

Sebastian's question nailed my worries to my chest with a thump. Was I ready? To attempt to convince a murderous anti-shifter mob that I was a "kinder, gentler" shifter and hope that didn't start a massacre of one or both kinds? I hesitated. Now my desire to run away and have a romp in the bushes instead of facing this ordeal didn't seem as insane.

"My child!" A female voice rang out over the loudspeaker. "These monsters murdered my only child! My son was one of

the students savaged in Washington Square Park just yesterday!”

My blood went cold at the high, childlike tone. It was Yara.

Sebastian’s wolf flinched as if struck, and the crowd’s fury ignited my own. It ran through me, hot and potent, a powerful new lust for revenge that outweighed any other. My family hadn’t been the only one flayed by this power-hungry bastard. This torture had to end. I stretched, reveling in the ripple of my muscles. Sebastian had been right when he’d said it didn’t matter what happened when we revealed ourselves, because the war had already begun. Now we just had to win.

“Yes, I’m ready.” I replied. *“Let’s go.”*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

We leapt the iron fencing surrounding the back stairs, alighting on the concrete hexagon tiles of the castle. My eyes swept over the fairy tale turrets and spires, catching on the seemingly anachronistic American flag flapping atop the medieval architecture as the chants of “Keep U.S. human! Keep U.S. human!” began to rise again as Damian’s Yara puppet wrapped up her incendiary speech. I had never wanted to wake up from a nightmare more.

Since I couldn’t, my brain did the next best thing, and for a moment, I was back in the Last Century Cinema, leaning heavily against Charlie—who had strongly cautioned me against sneaking out to see *Stepmom*—while Julia Roberts searched this very castle for her missing stepson. That was the first time I ever wished my father *had* taken a mate after my mother, someone who would frantically search for me when I couldn’t be found. But now I shuddered to think what Damian would have done to her.

I touched Sebastian’s flank with my nose, and he looked sharply over his shoulder, wolf eyes burning with untimely desire. “*Remember your promise. Stay behind me or beside me until we know it’s safe.*”

“*I will.*”

In silence, we made our way up the stairs and under the painted canopy at the edge of the main square. Now that we were close, Yara's voice grew louder, ringing out through the loudspeakers set up on all sides.

"These filthy animals," she cried, her words coming out in a halting monotone, "cannot be allowed to roam among us any longer, taking lives and spreading who knows what kind of diseases!"

"*Diseases?!*" I started to roll my eyes, but Sebastian's dark look reminded me that I was the sole carrier of what Damian was making her hint at. My tail drooped.

There were a handful of humans positioned between the speakers and us, but we didn't want to alert any of them that we were there just yet, so we prowled around them to the side where we could get a view and plan our reveal.

Standing against the opposite wall and facing outward, dressed in another impeccable suit, was Damien. A blanket of humans as thick as you'd find at any music festival covered the stairs and lawn in front of the castle listening with rapt attention to the lies Damian was spouting through Yara's helpless mouth..

"This is our city!" she continued. "Not theirs. There are millions of humans. We can't let these creatures force us to live in fear. They stole my son, but they won't get yours!"

A chorus of shouts arose as protest signs and fists were raised, a shadowy forest of anger growing against the clear blue sky. Damian stepped forward and cradled his arm around Yara's waist in what looked like support. Only from our angle I could see that his fingers were digging into her sweater, his muscles taut. If his arm had been around her neck, it would be a chokehold. The fur on my hackles rose as the acrid tire-fire scent of rage rolled off Sebastian in clouds that made my eyes water.

"Now it will be easy to prove him a liar," he sneered. "I'll just reveal myself as her living son and that will be that."

No sooner had the word *son* registered in my mind than I remembered what I hadn't told Sebastian, and my heart seized. I should have listened to my wolf and told him right away. I cursed myself and my hesitation. I couldn't let him hear that news from Damien. It would kill him.

"Sebastian," I nudged him with my muzzle. *"Wait. There's something I have to tell you."*

Damien slid his hand slowly up Yara's back to her neck, where he wound his claw-like fingers through the thick black hair she shared with their child.

Sebastian's scent metamorphosed from tire-fire to full-on forest conflagration. The stink of it rocked me as he leaped past me and charged Damien, knocking a swath of humans from the crowd into the pillars on his way.

"Get your hands off her, you bastard!"

"No!" I called. *"Stop, Sebastian. Don't give him what he wants!"*

He roared, a charging bull ignoring the spear of my words driving into his flesh, and the sound was amplified by the microphones until it became the sound of the final impossible tornado from *Twister*. Sebastian slammed into Damien's back, taking him to the ground.

A human eruption exploded around him, with shrieks both advancing and receding depending on whether the human from which they emanated was under Damien's control or not. Sebastian's lips rippled back over his slavering jaws a breath above Damien's face, his chest heaving, but my view of him was blocked in seconds as Damien's human minions surrounded them, makeshift weapons in hand. Some began beating at Sebastian with the posts of their protest signs.

Agony rippled through me as if Sebastian's pain were my own, and I howled, launching myself into their midst and shoving those hitting him back. I bared my teeth to the human zombies encircling us, my throat humming with my growl. A heavyset man lunged forward with an aluminum bat and my

mind went red at the sight of that weapon. I snapped, finding the bat's handle and ripping it from his hand, but I didn't touch his flesh. I was still focused on the mission and my determination not to kill an innocent human. These humans might want to kill us, but that wasn't their fault, just like Kiana and I being at each other's throats our whole lives wasn't our fault. It was Damien's.

The bat clattered to the ground, and the man pulled back, and then went stiff as new screams filled the air in a wide circle all around us. I peered between the legs of the nearest humans, searching for the source of the commotion and saw a flood of strange shifters pouring from the trees and street, launching themselves at nearby humans and ripping them instantly to shreds, blood spewing in burgundy torrents.

"Gods, help us. No!"

I stared in horror. The attacking shifters appeared starved and scarred.

Damien's pack of outcasts.

As I watched, more shifters burst from the shadows to face the interlopers, including one handsome charcoal grey wolf, who I knew had no business in this fight. I began shaking, torn between my desire to go help the Manhattan pack and protect Evan, and my need to stay with Sebastian. The Manhattan pack was outnumbered, not just by humans, but by Damien's pack as well.

I took one step toward them and was stopped by a force as strong as a shackle, yanking me back to Sebastian.

The fate bond.

It would never let me risk Sebastian, even if he were safer than my best friend.

Furious and frustrated, I swung my gaze to Damien, lying beneath Sebastian with a smile curling his lips. I knew then that everything had gone according to his plan. With Sebastian having made the first move, no one would ever believe this wasn't a coordinated shifter attack. Or that some shifters were

good and some bad. The humans wouldn't be able to tell the difference between Damien's murder mutts and the Manhattan pack that was now doing its best to protect the humans and take the mangy dogs down.

Three loud cracks rang out, two to the north and one to the east.

Guns.

My heart began to pound as I turned back to the crowd. A human wave of panic was cresting in every direction and anyone carrying a weapon was swinging—or firing—at the nearest shifter. Any shifter. Anything that moved, practically. I gasped as something collapsed against me and turned to see Yara, unconscious now that Damien's control was gone. She'd slumped over Damien's legs, but all of Sebastian's focus was on Damien, his jaws opening over the traitor's human throat for the kill.

"Sebastian, no!" I pleaded. *"You can't! If you kill him in front of all these people, it will prove him right! His minions will rip us apart!"*

Damien began laughing beneath Sebastian's frothing maw. "You should listen to the mother of my future grandpups, my boy."

Sebastian stopped, confused, saliva dripping onto a manic face whose similarities to Sebastian's own were few but not zero. How would I ever unsee it?

"What are you talking about?" Sebastian demanded.

An eyebrow raised, Damien looked at me. "You haven't told him?"

Snarling, Sebastian held Damien down with a massive paw, his claws slicing Damien's shirt and drawing blood. He turned to me. *"Told me what?"*

I hesitated, panic making my blood turn watery in my veins. *"I was looking for the right time..."*

“Tell me, Elyse,” Sebastian growled, his claws digging deeper into Damien’s flesh, eliciting a moan of pain from...

...his father. How could I tell him? I couldn’t even do it now while humans and shifters were dying all around me, and his mother lay nearly lifeless beside us.

I couldn’t.

I had to.

My eyes scrunched shut. I took a deep breath. *“Damien is your biological father, Sebastian. I’m sorry—”*

“No.” One simple word, not Luke Skywalker’s drawn-out scream. But then his beautiful head twisted on his mighty shoulders to look at his mother’s still form, and I watched him shrink into himself right before my eyes. “That’s not possible. My mother would never cheat.”

At this, Damien’s laughter turned to yelps of glee, despite the rivulets of blood making their way down his chest. Sebastian wrenched his head back and stared at his true sire, eyes flickering with unwanted recognition.

“Of course, she wouldn’t.” I lowered my muzzle to check that Yara was still breathing and nuzzled her cheek. *“She... she probably doesn’t even know, Sebastian. You know his Beta powers. He did something to make her...compliant.”* Acid burned my throat and mouth just thinking about it.

Sebastian shook his head, his fur standing out on all sides, his tail erect with fury. I expected him to stab his fangs through the sides of Damian’s hysterical face and rip it right off, but instead, he whirled toward *me*, his chest puffed out like a poisonous fish. I tucked my tail between my legs, and my knees shook.

“Why? How... how could you not tell me?”

I ducked lower before him as each word left his mouth, cutting me as deeply as he could have with his claws, severing the sinews of the bond, the pain like the ripping of scarred flesh.

“I just found out, Sebastian, and I didn’t know how...or when...I...”

He stood on his toes and howled with every bit of blood in his veins, the sound turning me to stone from the inside out. Without another word, he shifted human, scooping up the limp cashmere puddle that was Yara, and ran down the front stairs, dodging fighting shifters and humans on all sides.

And then I was alone.

With Damien.

And the revolver he’d just pulled from his impeccable suit.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

A massive white wolf lunged past me and clamped down on Damien's wrist. He screamed as a spray of blood took flight along with his gun, which landed on the concrete tiles with a clatter. I grabbed it and flung it over the fence into the bushes as Kiana slammed into Damien, who was still screaming as my sister shook him like a chew toy on the ground.

A blow hit me between the shoulder blades, and I yelped, crouching away in reflex. I turned to a heavysset man raising a pipe over his head for a second strike.

"There's two of them!" he shouted. "They can multiply!"

He swung the pipe, and I leaped away, snarling and tossing a glance over my shoulder at my sister. Damien's cheek was sliced, and his shirt was bloody as he thrashed beneath her snapping jaws. She sank her teeth into his flesh between his right shoulder and neck and he howled. With a grunt, she dragged him down the stairs, his legs kicking, and they both disappeared.

I dodged Mr. Pipe a second time and turned to find my sister. Her head came up roaring, and she tossed Damien over the iron fence at the back of the castle, his neck and shoulder streaming blood. I bounded to her just in time to see Damien's

body bounce off the rocks, limp and flailing like a rag doll, before he landed face down in the Turtle Pond.

Ribbons of red blood coiled around him, but he didn't move. I stared, transfixed, at the object of all our hatred and loss, floating still like a bit of scattered plastic or lost paper napkin, drifting on the water's surface.

"He's dead, Elyse," Kiana said, tugging at my mane. *"We have to get out of here."*

I looked up, momentarily jarred by what *here* meant as I took in the scene. All around us, as far as I could see in every direction, humans were fighting for their lives with Damien's shifters, who didn't seem to have gotten the memo that their putrid excuse for a leader was dead. At least the humans who'd been influenced by his Beta powers seemed to have been released, many shaking their heads or eyeing the weapons in their hands in confusion before dropping them and running.

A moment later it dawned on me that if Kiana was here...

A new wave of shifters burst through the trees and began hunting Damien's pack, leaping on backs and grabbing at haunches as the evil shifters continued their efforts to harm as many humans, or Manhattan shifters, as possible. My wolf jaw dropped as I saw Blaze followed by his eldest daughter, her teenage eyes gleaming with the exact same battle thrill.

"You brought them all?" I leaped after Kiana as she raced back to the front stairs and onto the lawn.

"Of course, I did. Besides, they wouldn't have let me come alone. This is our pack's mess to clean up."

She said this with as little love as was possible above *none*, but my heart thudded with exhilaration and gratitude anyway.

Howls rose to our left as two Bronx wolves ripped a tattered black shifter off one of the Manhattan crew who'd been in a protective crouch atop an injured human, a teen girl who was bleeding, but alive. In the trees, I heard yips of joy as

a knot of Manhattan shifters welcomed a wave of reinforcement from more Bronx shifters. Despite the chaos and blood that surrounded me, my adrenaline surged with newfound hope. Damien was dead. The cavalry was here. Maybe we could still win.

As Kiana and I headed for the hardest fighting, a clearing where Damien's group still outnumbered the others, I thought of Spot Conlon from *Newsies*, as he and the Brooklyn crew came to the aid of the Manhattan newsies just in the nick of time. If I were still in my human form, my wolf would have knocked me silly for thinking of movies at a time like this, but I couldn't help it. The inspiration—and the song now stuck in my head—made me more determined.

“No, don't!” A human yelled beside us, and I whirled.

A man threw himself between a policewoman with a gun and a limping shifter. I recognized the brown wolf as one of the Manhattan SecPack members, bleeding but safe behind the most miraculous shield I could imagine.

A willing human.

“It saved my daughter and me!” The man said, his arms spread as if they could ward off bullets, his tween daughter cowering behind him. “We didn't even know what was going on, and then one of them came at her and this one...it...it.” He stammered. “Please don't; it's already hurt.”

The policewoman lowered her gun, her hands shaking. “What do you mean?”

“Look around!” The man said. “They're not all attacking.”

She turned, raising her gun again. I followed her gaze, staring at the seemingly endless sorties scattered across the lawn and beneath the clumps of trees. The wind was rising, and the treetops dipped and fluttered above what looked like a Renaissance painting of a Greek battle—if those had included wolves—the battlefield littered with bodies that moaned and rolled in pain, or lay still. Even against this horrific tableau,

one could see that there were now more shifters battling shifters than shifters attacking humans. The tide was turning.

The policewoman lowered her gun. Her uniform was ripped at the shoulders, and blood spattered on her face, but she appeared unharmed. “Take your daughter and get out of here,” she said. “I’ll make sure no one hurts this one.”

My jaw hit the ground. Was she going to guard...one of us?

The man didn’t wait; he nodded and grabbed his daughter’s hand, running for a section of trees that was now deserted, except for the dark bundles scattered in the deepening shadows like downed tree limbs. Bodies.

“Elyse,” my sister urged, “Let’s go. We need to help the others.”

“Did you see that though?”

“How could I miss it? Seems like some of your beloved humans aren’t so stupid after all.”

We were pounding our way toward the center of the worst fighting as she said this, and I stopped short, pulling up beside the body of a young woman lying prone in the bushes. My chest cinched as I took in the cascade of brown hair, the kooky cat-eye glasses, and the nubby pink cardigan this poor human woman had chosen this morning to greet the sun. Now her life was over, dark blood drying on her cotton candy boucle, and the sun hiding behind the menacing clouds that were growing like a volcano on the horizon.

“Did you know her?” Kiana circled back to me, sniffing.

“No. But she... looks like my friend, Charlie.”

Kiana’s whiskers twitched. *“The one from the train?”*

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.” This time my sister’s tone carried with it the flinty scent of grief.

My breath came in shallow huffs as I fought off the image of Charlie bleeding out, her life ending in a senseless pile in a subway car, much like this poor thing. Then the poor thing's chest fluttered upward, a tiny hummingbird beating against the tide dragging her toward the afterlife, and I stepped forward, sniffing.

"She's alive!"

Kiana came beside me, scenting. "Yes." She swung her magnificent head so that her muzzle nudged mine. *"You know what you have to do."*

Her touch was so gentle that I almost didn't feel it. For the merest second, I leaned into her. And then I bit down on the girl, just as I'd done Evan, begging Leto to help me as my jaws sliced into her left collar. I held on for as long as felt right, and then gently released her, stomach churning at the blood bubbling from the four new puncture holes. Nothing happened.

"Let's go, Elyse," Kiana said, as I stared at the bloody sweater, willing the chest to rise again. *"There are many others you can save."*

"I don't know if I should wait to see if it works," I said, hesitating.

"We know it does," she said, tugging at me. *"So, let's get to more of them as fast as we can."*

Dragging myself away from Charlie's doppelganger with a final prayer, I followed my sister into the bushes, heading west toward the Delacorte Theater. Breathless, we bounded from one crumpled human to another, sniffing for signs of life. Fat drops began to fall from the lowering sky as we reached my fourth *patient*, as I was now thinking of them. The middle-aged man was slumped against a tree trunk, dark curly hair peeking from beneath his Mets cap, blood dried on his neck like a burgundy scarf. I stepped forward to bite his collar when a roar erupted from the bushes.

"Don't touch him!"

A grizzled man with tear-stained cheeks ran at us, his Mets jersey torn and muddy. Kiana fended him off, doing her best not to harm him as I finished my bite on the man I now saw was likely a brother, given the shared curly hair and hawklike nose. I prayed anyone who loved a sibling enough to charge a wolf without a weapon would accept him once he became a shifter.

“They don’t know you’re saving them,” Kiana said, rebuffing the man once more before we raced away. Behind us, he collapsed over his brother, sobbing. *“Stay with me so I can protect you.”*

My heart swelled, thrilled that we were working together—for the first time in our adult lives. Later, I could regret that it took an all-out war among both shifters and humans to bring it about. For now, she was my hero. I followed my twin, bounding at her heels and biting every mortally wounded human we could find with a pulse.

“Stop!” Max’s gray wolf landed in front of us, tail swishing angrily.

His mane was soaked with blood, and he shifted gingerly on his equally bloody paws, but he was alive. I yipped with joy to see him and then stopped, confused by the growl rippling his muzzle.

“Where is my son, Elyse? You were supposed to work together.”

My heart sank. Ever since Sebastian had left me behind, I’d been half-hobbled by the ache deep in my gut. If I could have transferred that sense to Maximo, he’d have known there was no way I’d have left Sebastian’s side by choice. But he’d left *me* for a reason.

A reason I couldn’t share with Max.

Not here.

Or now.

“He took Yara to safety,” I said, giving the piece to help assuage Max’s fear. *“But I haven’t seen –”*

Lightning cracked so close that my fur stood on end, and we all jumped. Max yelped as a nearby tree caught fire. We backed away, finding our way into a clearing where many of our packmates were triaging and helping those off the battlefield that needed attention.

“So, these are the pathetic descendants of Chann and Marrak?” A voice like thunder boomed so loud I assumed it held the microphone. But no...

A tall man strode from the shadows behind the castle. He wore a long grey cloak, cinched at the chest by a bronze clasp featuring two ravens, over an intricate black leather jerkin. Despite his apparent age, with wrinkled brow and long smoky hair and beard, he walked with the muscled power of a much younger man. I had the uncanny sense that I’d seen him somewhere before, but as he drew near, I gasped.

“Look at his eye,” I said to Kiana, repulsed by the open hole where one of the man’s eyes should have been.

“I can’t. It’s like a black hole,” she replied, shuddering.

My former hope that the day had moved in a better direction evaporated as the spatters of rain turned into a torrent, and lightning cracked again on the other side of the castle. I was seized by a desire to press myself to the ground and tear my gaze from the man’s terrible face. As I worked to keep my knees from shaking, two new shapes materialized flanking the interloper.

Wolves. Not shifters. Just wolves.

But each was the size of a male lion.

A growl hummed in my throat just as one started in my sister’s direction. Twin vibrations of warning beating the air like drums.

“What say you, Freki, my ravenous one?” The man said, stroking the massive grey wolf to his right. “Do you see in this

sad gathering the future of shifter kind?”

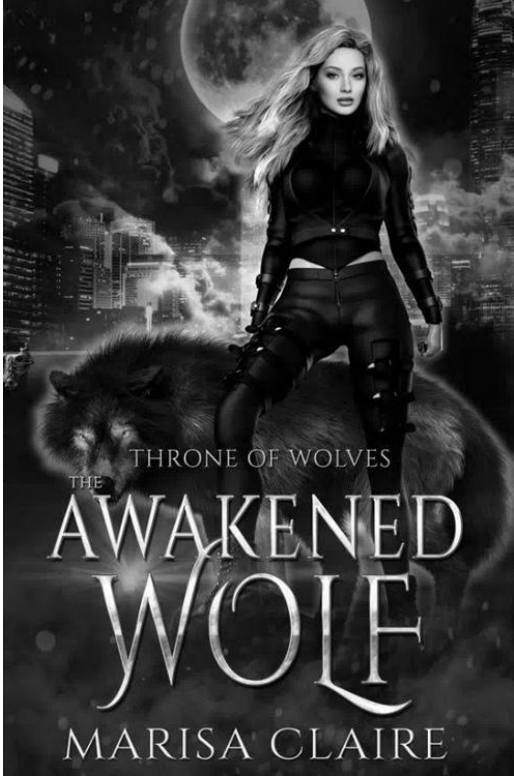
The wolf snarled and snapped, before shaking itself. The black wolf at his left gave a disdainful yowl. The man laughed, stepping forward, his bookend guardians in lockstep, heedless of the whipping wind or torrents of rain now soaking us all. I fought the urge to grovel with every fiber of my being. Whatever fear I thought I'd faced in taking on Damien and his pack did not compare to the sheer terror of beholding this stranger.

“Goddess Leto, who is this man?” I thought.

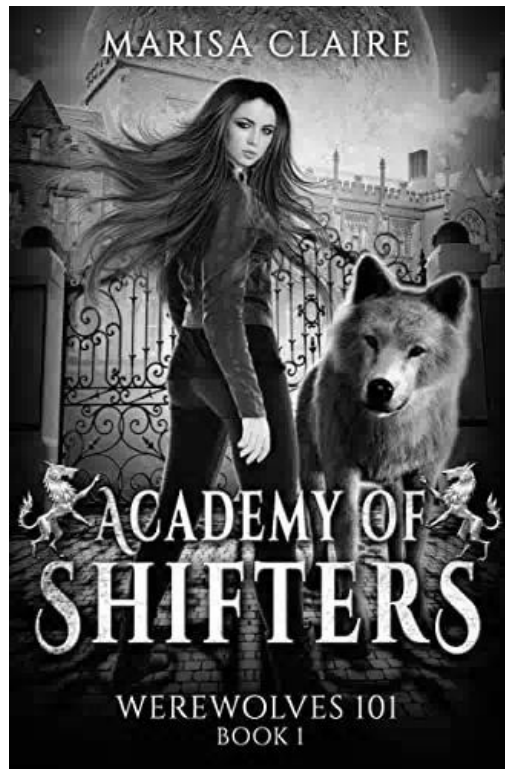
“I agree, my lovely pets. I've been away far too long.” He sneered, turning from the massive wolves onto the crowd. “It's time to bring order back to these mutts. The age of weak alphas, playing kings on meaningless thrones is over. Now, where is my servant Damian?”

End of Book Two

[Next: The Awakened Wolf](#)

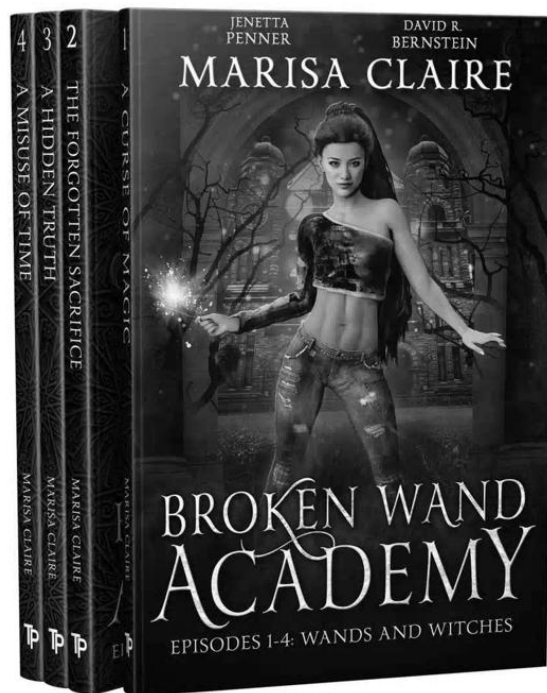


More books from Marisa Claire:



[Book One in the Academy of Shifters Series](#)

(Veiled World)



[Broken Wand Academy: Season One](#)

(Veiled World)



[The Complete Rise of the Dark Fae Series](#)

(Veiled World)

Join the Pack: Sign up to be the first to get the latest news about the Throne of Wolves series and more.

www.tormentpublishing.com

Thank you for reading The Sacred Wolf. If you enjoyed reading this book, please remember to [leave a review on Amazon](#). Positive reviews are the best way to thank an author for writing a book you loved. When a book has a lot of reviews, Amazon will show that book to more potential readers. The review doesn't have to be long—one or two sentences are just fine! We read all our reviews and appreciate each one of them!

www.tormentpublishing.com

Acknowledgements:

Special thanks to Torment Publishing! Without you this book would not have happened. I love you guys.

Thanks to all the early readers and the support of my fans.

Thanks to my family for their support!

Credits:

Chase Night – Editor